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Do answers to a questionnaire give reliable data?

Within the pan-Nordic research project "Moderne importord" a general questionnaire was made in the spring of 2002. Most questions in this questionnaire were easy to adapt to the different Nordic countries and to translate into the different languages. One question, however, did cause discussion within the project. This question was originally meant to get at peoples attitudes towards dialects vs. the standard norm of the languages used in broadcast media – that is, to measure the tolerance of the interviewees towards non-standard variants of their language. One problem was that the word ‘dialect’ could not be used in the Danish and in the Icelandic questionnaire, because the national investigators felt that in these countries practically no one speaks a dialect. The result of this discussion was that (in the Finland-Swedish version of the questionnaire) this question received the following wording: "Employees on radio and television do not always follow the same Swedish norm. What do you think about them using their own ordinary spoken language instead of standard Finland-Swedish (‘högsvenska’) in the broadcasted programs?"

My expectations of the responses to this question were clear: those who are most positive towards the ordinary spoken language would live in dialect-speaking Ostrobothnia and the most negative would live in Helsinki, where most Swedish speakers speak ‘högsvenska’. The results, however, surprised me: Ostrobothnians were as negative as the people in Helsinki towards the use of ordinary spoken language on the radio and television. How is this possible?

In my presentation I will show that the Ostrobothnians and those from Helsinki did not answer the same question. The Ostrobothnians understood ‘ordinary spoken language’ to mean dialect, and the Helsinki speakers understood it to mean common, colloquial language, slang and code-switching into Finnish, a language variant that from the Ostrobothnians’ point of view probably would count as standard Finland-Swedish.

Methodologically, the study brings up for discussion two issues:

- 1) the paradox that contrastive and comparative sociolinguistic studies always face: how far can we stretch equivalence in the form of instructions and still retain equivalence in meaning; and
- 2) what is, really, one and the same language?