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## **Can official websites be accessible to all? A Swedish language policy perspective**

**Abstract: Kan offentliga webbplatser göras tillgängliga för alla?  
Ett svenskt, språkpolitiskt perspektiv.**

Enligt språklagen (2009:600) ska offentlig information och service finnas tillgänglig på svenska för alla som bor i Sverige. Språket i offentlig verksamhet ska vara enkelt och begripligt. Enligt lagen om nationella minoriteter och minoritetsspråk (2010:724) har de nationella minoriteterna i Sverige rätt att kommunicera med myndigheterna på finska, meänkieli och samiska i särskilda geografiska områden. Myndigheterna ska främja och synliggöra alla nationella minoritetsspråk, också romska och jiddisch. Motsvarande gäller det svenska teckenspråket. För att nå ut till nyinflyttade med viktig information behöver myndigheterna också använda på flera andra minoritetsspråk.

Ansvaret för uppföljningen av språklagen ligger på Språkrådet. Som en del i det arbetet har vi undersökt språksituationen på internet i Sverige (Domeij 2010) och tittat på hur språkteknologi kan användas för att möta medborgarnas språkliga behov på nya sätt (Domeij m.fl. 2011). Utifrån det har vi utarbetat en vägledning med praktiska råd till myndigheter och andra organisationer om hur de kan arbeta med flerspråkig webbinformation (Språkrådet 2012). Vi har också utforskat metoder för att undersöka den flerspråkiga tillgängligheten på myndigheters webbplatser (Domeij & Spetz 2012) med utgångspunkt i vägledningen.

I artikeln redogör vi översiktligt för detta arbete och de resultat det gett hittills.

### **1. A multilingual perspective on accessibility online**

How do Swedish public authorities communicate with the population of today's multilingual and multicultural society? How should texts in Swedish and in other languages be designed to reach as many people as possible? Are authorities living up to the Language Act's requirement of comprehensibility? If not, what should they do in practice? It is an extremely important and topical issue that we at The Language Council of Sweden need to examine in order to evaluate the accessibility of information and services on public authority websites. This is both as part of the Language Act (2009: 600) follow-up and as a basis for recommendations.

Having accessible public authority texts for the entire population does not mean the same thing today as it did a few decades ago. Over one million Swedes now have a foreign background, and many of them have a mother tongue other than Swedish (Parkvall 2009). It is estimated that there are between 150 and 200 languages in Sweden today. Despite the changes in the composition of the

population, web accessibility has so far been considered almost exclusively from a monolingual perspective, focusing on people with disabilities and the elderly. Very little has been done to improve web accessibility for people with a mother tongue other than Swedish (SIKA 2008).

However, the emergence of a language policy over the past decade has strengthened requirements so that state and municipal authorities are also responsible for accessibility from a linguistic perspective. For example, the Language Act states that public authorities should use language that is simple and comprehensible. Furthermore, the Act (2009:724) on National Minorities and Minority Languages states that people who belong to national minorities have special rights to use their own language.

Despite the increase in requirements and the need for language accessibility, our experience is that there is a lack of knowledge and common principles for how authorities should tackle communications from a language policy and multilingual perspective. It is not just a question of which public authority information should be translated into which languages, but also how the information in Swedish should be designed to include people with other mother tongues.

The Language Council of Sweden has been working on putting together and formulating these kinds of principles and methods for some years. In a previous project we carried out an initial survey of the accessibility of public authority websites from a multilingual perspective (Domeij, 2010). To give support to authorities and public organisations in their work with multilingual accessibility, the publication *Vägledningen för flerspråkig information* [*Guide for multilingual information*] (2011) was drawn up as a result of this project, with guidelines on how authorities should manage information and services online with regard to different people's linguistic needs and rights.

The next step has been the development of methods to evaluate the multilingual accessibility of public authority websites. The results from this method project will be presented and discussed below with a special focus on Swedish from a multilingual perspective.

## **2. Research by observation and survey**

In our efforts to evaluate public authorities' linguistic accessibility online, we wanted to gain knowledge about both the results of work on accessibility and the processes behind it. By gaining better insight into how any preparatory work is structured, there is the opportunity to examine if the efforts to improve the website are adapted to the target group. Such a perspective is particularly important for authorities with local target groups, for example municipalities where population composition, linguistic needs and rights can vary greatly in different parts of the country.

Against this background, we chose to make a detailed observation of three public authority websites (Arbetsförmedlingen, Skatteverket and Försäkringskassan) according to an established chart, and to send out a survey on multilingual work on the internet to 23 selected authorities. Most of the selected authorities have a broad national target group and are authorities we presume many people will encounter in their daily lives. Some authorities were included because they had special assignments in connection with the County Administrative Board of Stockholm and the Sami Parliament's monitoring of the Minority Act.

In addition to finding out more about the authorities' accessibility work, we wanted to examine how suitable observation and survey is as a tool for periodically evaluating official language accessibility online.

### **3. Easy-to-read Swedish, not for people with other mother tongues**

Because the survey's focus was on public authorities' multilingual information, a large part of the survey results relate to information in languages other than Swedish. But through the survey we could also collect information on how authorities deal with information in Swedish from an accessibility perspective. Among other things we asked the authorities if they use texts in easy-to-read Swedish which are particularly adapted for persons with a mother tongue other than Swedish. None of the twelve authorities who replied to the survey did, but all except one authority replied that they had texts in easy-to-read Swedish on their website which are aimed at a mixed target group, including people with reading difficulties that have Swedish as their mother tongue and people with mother tongues other than Swedish (regardless of reading ability).

When it comes to the public authorities' working processes there was only one authority which appeared to have conducted a user survey: CSN (the Swedish Government authority in charge of financial aid for studies). Two test groups were involved in the research: one group of people with Swedish as their mother tongue who have dyslexia, and another group of people with mother tongues other than Swedish who do not have dyslexia. Both groups had to search for information on the authorities' websites using texts in easy-to-read Swedish, among other things. The results showed that there were some differences in how the groups understood the easy-to-read texts. One such difference is the experience of the "phrase adapted line break", i.e. the short lines that characterise texts in easy-to-read Swedish. The short line breaks seemed to work better on the Swedish native speakers with dyslexia who thought that the short lines made the text inviting and easy to read, while on the other hand the test group with a mother tongue other than Swedish felt that line breaks made it more difficult to achieve coherence in the texts.

Even though CSN's survey was conducted on a small scale and would need to be supplemented with additional and more comprehensive surveys, it can be seen as an indication that there is good reason to examine the needs of people with other mother tongues when it comes to public authority information in Swedish and, where the needs are all different, what the consequences are for the design of texts aimed at various groups and at the population as a whole.

As mentioned above, user surveys were unusual among the authorities who replied to the survey. Some, however, had used other types of input in connection with their multilingualism work. These involved, for example, statistics from the authority's ordering of interpreters or information from the telephone exchange about callers. Such input is useful to determine what languages other than Swedish are requested by the authority's target groups. However, it does not say anything about the need for easy-to-read texts in Swedish for the same audiences.

#### **4. Isolated information without context**

The three authorities whose sites we observed were Arbetsförmedlingen (the public employment service), Försäkringskassan (the social insurance agency) and Skatteverket (the tax agency). We examined a number of things including which languages the authorities used in their communication on the internet, what information they offered in different languages, and which services and communication channels they offered in the different languages. We also looked at the form in which the information is presented: in writing, speech or pictures, in special easy-to-read format (Lundberg and Reichenberg, 2008) or in other so-called alternative formats. We noted if there was a speech synthesiser for speech output and an automatic translation function on the website, and looked at how the pages in different languages were made visible and structured. In this article, we mainly focus on how the Swedish language is used to reach as many people as possible from a multilingual perspective.

Two of the web sites (Arbetsförmedlingen and Försäkringskassan) offered information in easy-to-read Swedish in a special format, with line breaks after each phrase. All of them had a speech synthesiser for speech output in Swedish, and on Arbetsförmedlingen's website it was possible to order the fact sheets and brochures in an alternative format produced to order (easy-to-read, Daisy, MP3, Braille, sign language or other specified format).

The scope of the web pages that are available in an easy-to-read format and in languages other than Swedish is very limited in relation to the quantity of information and services on the website as a whole. It is usually a case of one or a few pages with basic information about the authority and how you can contact them and links to more specific information on a given subject or a given case, often in the form of downloadable fact sheets and brochures. Försäkringskassan offers information in easy-to-read Swedish only in downloadable format. Arbets-

förmedlingen has easy-to-read information and information in other languages both on the website and in downloadable format. These types of web texts are often only in written format, in contrast to other pages on the website where text is usually combined with images. This applies particularly to the easy-to-read pages, which almost invariably consist of written information in easy-to-read Swedish in a special format with line breaks after each phrase.

Links and references to other information, services and contacts do not work in practice, since these are rarely available in the current language or in the easy-to-read format. A translated instruction on how to request an introduction guide may, for example, refer to a service that is only available in Swedish. The same applies when the authorities provide links to each other's websites in matters relating to the establishment of new arrivals. In this process Arbetsförmedlingen and Försäkringskassan (as well as Migrationsverket) have complementary services and support. Despite this, the links did not work from a linguistic point of view from one authority's website to the other at the time of the observations. This indicates weaknesses in user adaptation and collaboration between the authorities in their multilingual accessibility work which cannot be entirely blamed on the general difficulty in managing multilingual information and services.

In general, a few individual texts are "translated" into easy-to-read Swedish or other languages, instead of a more thorough design of the whole website bearing in mind that large parts of the population are in need of information and services in a more accessible and comprehensible format.<sup>1</sup> The translations that have been done are not always justified by a target group's need for the service; a clear example we saw was information for new arrivals in Meänkieli (a national minority language only spoken in the north of Sweden, formerly known as Tornedal Finnish). Such shortcomings make the texts seem like disjointed shards of information that reach for the wider context, all too often without success. Links and references to other information, services and contacts do not work in practice since the content referred to is rarely available in the current language or in the easy-to-read format. This raises questions about multilingual access to information and services about authorities, and how it can be improved.

Despite the observed shortcomings, we found several good examples of how websites work with multilingual accessibility in a way which corresponds well to the recommendations in the *Guide for multilingual information*. A significant example is Försäkringskassan's multilingual telephone service, where people can book calls in 11 different languages on the internet. Those who prefer to ask their questions in writing can do so via Facebook, not just in Swedish but also in English, Arabic, Finnish, Polish and Spanish.

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<sup>1</sup> 25% of the population are estimated to have such extensive reading difficulties that they cannot assimilate the contents of a typical news story in full accordance with the requirements in class 9 (the end of compulsory schooling) according to The Swedish National Agency for Education's report 115 from 2006.

## 5. Swedish for all?

Arbetsförmedlingen's website clearly stood out as the most ambitious in terms of both the number of languages and the accessibility adaptations, as well as the scope of the material. At the same time we can observe a clear example here of a working practice where simple and comprehensible information was created in Swedish from the beginning, taking into account the linguistic needs of the whole population, including people with Swedish as second language. Simultaneously, digital media's multimodal possibilities and resources are used to increase comprehension and make content as available as possible (see e.g. Holsanova 2010). Information in other languages is offered in parallel to Swedish as a complement and alternative that is directly accessible from the Swedish text.

In Figure 1 there is an example of an introductory text in Swedish which clearly, simply and effectively presents the content in a bulleted list. The text is presented in a comprehensible context with related texts that are sorted into subjects under different tabs and menu choices. The text, which is directed at people that are new to Sweden, informs them about what Arbetsförmedlingen can help with and refers to a film where graphic images are combined with speech and text to communicate information in a concrete, instructive and straightforward manner that speaks to all of the senses and takes account of different linguistic needs. The same text is also offered in translation in nine languages where the choice of language is well justified on the basis of the current migration trends: large contact languages like English, French and Arabic are used, as well as Somali, Farsi and other languages spoken by large groups of newcomers.

The screenshot shows a webpage titled "En plan för din väg mot jobb i Sverige" (A plan for your path to work in Sweden). On the left is a navigation menu with items like "Ersättning vid arbetslöshet", "Få extra stöd", "Ny i Sverige?", "Arbetslös länge?", "Har du en funktionsnedsättning?", "Lämnat sjukförsäkringen?", "Flyttningsbidrag", "Allmän information", "Jobbcoachning", "Platsjournalen", "Blanketter och broschyrer", "Uppgifter om dig i vårt register", and "Nyheter/Arkiv". The main content area features a heading "Tillsammans hittar vi ett jobb till dig" (Together we find a job for you) and a bulleted list of services: "hitta lediga jobb", "lektioner i svenska", "utbildning", "prova på yrken för att veta vad du kan", "berätta om hur det är att jobba och bo i Sverige", and "ge förslag på var i Sverige du har chans att hitta ett arbete". Below this is a video player with a play button and the text "Välkommen till Sverige" (Welcome to Sweden) and "Starta filmen" (Start the film). At the bottom, there are language selection options: "Mer material på andra språk" (More material in other languages) and a grid of language icons including Arabic, English, French, Russian, Somali, and Tigrinya.

Fig. 1: Example from Arbetsförmedlingen's website

Looking at the film referred to in figure 2, you can clearly see how the agency approached multilingualism in several ways to make information as accessible as possible. On the one hand different modalities were used (text, voice and image) and comprehensibility adjustments (easy to read) were employed to reach out to as many people as possible in Swedish. On the other hand, the user was given the option to change the language as necessary at the same time.

This example shows how the possibilities of multilingual communication can be used and explored in a way that corresponds well to the *Guide for multilingual information*. It is not just about translating individual texts into other languages, but about starting with a Swedish text which can be understood by as many people as possible through different accessibility adaptations, in parallel with texts in other languages. The good example from our observation shows that some of our authorities are already on the right path with this work. But it is still unclear how useful the results of this work are. There is an urgent need for studies on this to increase knowledge about multilingual accessibility, evaluate the results of the ongoing linguistic accessibility work and provide a basis for better recommendations.



Fig. 2: Different languages and modalities

## 6. More research is needed

The central question is how authorities' information and services should be designed to be comprehensible and accessible to as many people as possible, taking into account the diverse linguistic needs and conditions of the population in today's multilingual and multicultural society. We need to know more about how the multimodal texts, accessibility adaptations and tools that are available con-

tribute to increased comprehensibility and accessibility for different user groups. See Domeij/Karlsson (2013) and Domeij et al (in press); see also Kress (2003) and Warschauer (2003).

As we saw in the survey, it is hoped that the specially designed easy-to-read texts that many authorities use will work just as well for people with learning disabilities as for people with different mother tongues who are learning Swedish as second language. There is very little research into how useful these texts are for different groups, and the few user surveys which have been done give no clear answer (Forsberg, 2012 and Funka Nu, 2006). It is therefore urgent that more studies are done about which groups need specially-adapted easy-to-read texts and how these texts should be designed to better meet their needs. It is obviously not only about text design, but also about clarifying which information and services different groups find useful in accomplishing their tasks.

In the same way, it is hoped that various language technology tools – such as text reading with speech synthesis, speech recognition and automatic translation – will contribute to greater accessibility, but few have examined the matter in user studies (see e.g. Eskenazi 2013). On the contrary, user problems related to technical limitations, false expectations, and poor interaction design are reported, especially regarding automatic translation and speech recognition where technology development has not come as far as automatic speech output (see e.g. Domeij et al 2011). When it comes to automatic speech output, which is a useful and appreciated tool for many dyslexics when reading on the web, more research is needed on how usability can be improved and how texts should be designed to suit both written and spoken versions. The density of information available in most official written texts on the web today is not suited particularly well to speech output, whether a human or a machine is reading. In many cases the impression is that these tools are used on government websites as a simple way to formally meet the demands of increased accessibility without much thought.

The need for research on how different forms of communication and tools contribute to increased accessibility in user situations is great. We need to learn more about whether and how an easy-to-read text, a translation or an automatic speech output function really contributes to increased accessibility. Nyström Höög (2009) asks in the anthology *Medborgare och myndigheter* [*Citizens and authorities*] for “new research that charts online reading and designs information about clear language advice from this knowledge” (Höög 2009: 11) and refers to the few studies of comprehensibility conducted on the use of websites by various groups of citizens (Hanell 2009; Salö 2009). In the same anthology, Olle Josephson emphasizes the importance of such research: “Anyone who seriously explores this tangle will have much of substance to say about how a society like Sweden steps into multilingualism – what future language historians will in all likelihood describe as the most important change in 2000s in Sweden”.



## **7. A model for the evaluation of linguistic accessibility**

The purpose of our study, as mentioned above, has been to develop methods to evaluate and monitor the accessibility of public authorities' websites from a linguistic perspective over time. We think that the combination of methods that we have tried – survey and observations – could be used as part of a model for regular monitoring of authorities' web accessibility. It is important that assessments are carried out over a broad base of government agencies and at regular intervals in order to be able to monitor results over time, point to trends and be able to set them against the language policy of the authorities they relate to. Through regular assessment it is also possible to identify the specific support needs of authorities in their multilingualism work.

The survey and the observations we used complemented each other well. Through the survey we could get answers to questions about preparatory work, quality work and follow-up work while through our observations we could examine the results of this work in detail. Through the observations we were also able to see how authorities work with language accessibility via other modalities such as images and film, as well as how the information was structured on the website.

To get an in-depth understanding of the authorities' work processes it would be necessary to add to these methods by using interviews with the authorities as a follow-up model. The follow-up should also include methods for assessing the text quality of the authorities' texts, in Swedish and other languages, starting with the authorities' responsibility for plain language. To get a clearer understanding of how useful texts are, the assessment would need to be completed with user surveys and usability tests where the texts are tested on the target groups. In exploring the quality and usefulness of authorities' texts there is, as we pointed out earlier, a great need for cooperation with and between universities and colleges.

In conclusion, a model for monitoring authorities' linguistic accessibility needs to include a number of different aspects. This means that the model needs to involve agencies who are experts in the relevant areas. This includes, for example, people with knowledge of different languages, plain language reviewers, experts in easy-to-read texts and user experts. Studies in these areas already exist by a number of agencies, but there is a need for a collaborative model that can ensure a consistency of approach between the various agencies' evaluations so that results are more comparable than they are today.

Another type of cooperation that needs to be developed is between authorities in the same sectors. For example, in the web observations it became clear that Migrationsverket, Försäkringskassan and Arbetsförmedlingen all have a responsibility to receive people who are new to Sweden, which constitutes an important part of their web accessibility work. These authorities would have much to gain from collaborating to develop multilingual information and services for these

groups on the web. At present different choices are made, and authorities refer to each other in texts in a language which is on one website but not on the other. If we could see this work in a wider perspective from the starting point of the target groups' needs, there is great potential for coordination gains and improved services.

The purpose of measuring authorities' multilingual accessibility, in addition to raising the question of linguistic accessibility in itself, was to provide certain quantitative metrics to make measurable comparisons over time. Given that accessibility will primarily be measured with respect to the authority's specific target groups, however, the regular measurements should not put too much emphasis on the quantitative aspect. Instead, one way to illustrate and help authorities to increase their accessibility is to highlight good examples within the different groups of authorities, such as municipalities, county councils and government agencies. There are authorities that are already working from a multilingual accessibility perspective as an integral part of their information work, which bodes well for the future.

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