

American English and Higher Education in Sweden

Marko Modiano

Halmstad University

In the post-war period English has become the most sought after second language among Swedish educators and students. After German fell from grace, English became the fashionable mode of communication, not only as a written language, but also as a spoken medium. England, with its charm, cozy pub-life, and high educational standard, has always been admired in the Nordic countries. One could say that the British Isles are close to the Scandinavian heart. For those Swedish academics educated in the 1950s and 1960s in the fields of English Literature and Linguistics, there was never any doubt that British English was the standard. The hyperlect was modified, so that the acrolect, or unmarked Received Pronunciation (most prevalent in the south-east of England), became the order of the day for English language teachers in Swedish schools, colleges, and universities.¹ Standard British English (BrE) is, to my ear, similar to unmarked RP, but the label encompasses a more general definition of the English language as it is spoken in the UK.

Because language learning is closely related to the assimilation of culture, the implications of learning BrE encompass not only grammatical and pronunciation standards, as well as a vocabulary, but also a distinctly British interpretation of the world, the British customs and norms. Thus, it can be said that in an effort to learn BrE, Swedish scholars attempt to imitate a distinctly British demeanor. Quite naturally, features of the Swedish language and culture are also present. Furthermore, the

¹ Here I use the terminology as it is defined by John Honey in *Does Accent Matter?* (1989; rpt. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1991).

Swedish teacher speaking BrE is a role model. For many Swedish scholars and educators who presently speak BrE, this model is a good rendition of the British lady or gentleman. It is one reason people outside Scandinavia often express their opinion that Swedes are highly proficient in English.

Some English teachers who assume that BrE is the educational standard look down their noses at any deviation from this norm. People from Scotland have, for example, failed pronunciation exams at Swedish universities. American pronunciations, on the other hand, are usually acceptable. At the same time, there is often an unspoken understanding that American English (AmE) is less "correct" when compared to BrE. While it has been stated that "for teaching purposes, i.e., when certain norms and standards are needed, it is customary to use two particular varieties of English—North American English or British English," in practice BrE dominates the Swedish educational scene (see below).² When AmE is allowed, teachers are quick to advise students not to mix variations of the language (and this is especially the case with spelling). This posture on the behalf of the instructor is not based on any empirical study. In respect to the spoken language, for example, it is becoming more difficult to insist that students keep variants separate. If American expressions are popular in a multitude of cultures the world over, why should one assume that the British are excluded from this trend? Many American terms are commonly in fashion in the UK. Is the native speaker who uses such terminology speaking the language incorrectly? Fay Weldon provides a good example of a schizophrenic attitude toward AmE. After having used the term "parenting," she apologizes parenthetically with the statement, "An American term, I'm sorry. But it has a precise and valuable meaning."³ While many guardians of the English language in the UK are critical of American usage, the average person in Britain readily uses American terms, expressions, and proverbs without the least concern. Occasionally, this is also true in respect to spelling and pronunciation.

For many people the notion of a mid-Atlantic usage is becoming more established. Not only do many native speakers mix features of

2 As stated by Gunnel Melchers, author of the chapter entitled "The Story of English" in *A Common Wealth* (Stockholm: Liber Hermods och Utbildningsradion, 1990), p. 14

3 Fay Weldon, *Letters to Alice*, on first reading Jane Austen (1984, rpt. Falmouth, Cornwall: Hodder & Stoughton Paperbacks, fourth impression, 1991), p. 47

AmE and BrE, many English teachers unknowingly do as well. It is expected, and should be permitted, that students follow this trend. In practice, the idea of BrE/AmE segregation is absurd, except in respect to spelling. The insistence on keeping the two languages apart is the result of prejudice against AmE. Such ethnocentricity is tiresome at best. In its most vulgar form it becomes a front for instilling in the minds of others the notion that America is somehow inferior in other respects as well. Pitting BrE against AmE is another method for insisting that European culture is the more refined and superior of the two. This Euro-centric attitude is not viable. Europeans are eager to pursue American cultural phenomena, as well as, for example, the development of US high-technology, and it is natural that language also plays a part in the progress of such phenomena. An example of this is the vernacular of the computer sciences.

Although AmE is gaining in importance, BrE is still the educational standard. At the same time, many students no longer harbor an appreciation for things British that many teachers cling to, nor are they as willing to pattern their linguistic behavior upon British role models. The ideal of an English gentleman or lady is no longer as fashionable as it once was. On the other hand, there is every reason to assume that students will become more interested in "sounding" American. For this reason, the standards of English as a second language should be revised.

If we assume, as we rightly should, that the goals of language training are to produce competent speakers of a language, to promote good writing skills, and to encourage students to present themselves as well mannered and educated, then the grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary of the language should live up to these standards. On this account the BrE that is taught in Swedish schools meets the mark. However, incorporated into the fabric of BrE is an intricate set of signals that say much about class, education, political affiliation, and outlook on life. These signals are often unknown to the student. This is especially true in respect to the upper-class forms of BrE (which can be referred to as RP). While it is true that RP has declined in the marked form, it is still influential. Commenting on RP in *The Story of Language*, C. L. Barber notes that "RP has itself lost some of its prestige in the present century, with the rise of democracy and the consequent loss of the monopoly in

power and education formerly enjoyed by public-school men.”⁴ There are Swedish educators who speak RP, and we can assume that they find it acceptable, both as a standard for their own speech and as a prescriptive educational model. Furthermore, those who advocate the teaching of either marked or unmarked RP meet with little resistance. They also enjoy support from some native speakers from the UK who hold teaching positions in Swedish educational establishments. Other voices, such as the attitudes of American scholars, are not heard.

The world in which we live is changing at a rapid pace, and the once dominant BrE as an educational standard is now forced to accept parity with AmE, at least as far as the international community is concerned. Also, there is every reason to assume that an erosion of the influence of BrE will continue taking place in Sweden. For some, AmE will become the preferred variant of the language. For others, a new variant of the language, mid-Atlantic, will become the standard. Some Swedish educators have failed to recognize this trend. As a result, there are students who find formal education in English less stimulating than it could be. As the Swedish educational system becomes more "consumer conscious" in the years ahead, an attempt to make English language studies more appealing to the studentconsumer will take place, and the first step in such a direction is to remove BrE from its unchallenged position and instead replace it with a system of optional choices in respect to pronunciation, vocabulary, and "social register" (in effect, the Oxford dictionary becoming an "advisor" instead of an authority). This is not to say that standards should be relaxed. On the contrary, AmE, as well as mid-Atlantic, are as difficult to master as any other variant. One important aspect of mid-Atlantic is that it demands of its practitioner a knowledge of the differences between AmE and BrE. Before further discussing mid-Atlantic, however, I would like to explain what in my opinion constitutes the pejorative attributes of RP.

The system of signals that denote the social prestige of RP is only fully distinguishable to people who have grown up in the UK. No amount of reading or study will produce an individual who is able to interpret this social register. RP, the variant of the English language that is promoted in public schools such as Eton, Rugby, and Westminster, and very much so at Cambridge and Oxford, denotes a peculiar pro-

4 C. L. Barber, *The Story of Language* (1964; rpt London: Pan Books, 1977), p. 262

nunciation and usage. It is an aristocratic language. The intonation, rhythm, and melody of RP, that is to say, the sound of RP, is distinct in the sense that it generates an air of superiority. The fact that the features of RP are constantly being modified has little bearing on its prestige. While usually seeming "old fashioned" and "Victorian" to people on the outside, for those in the game, speaking RP is deadly serious. It can often make the difference between success and failure in a person's career. Thus, what distinguishes RP more than anything else is the effect it has on people. It carries a great degree of social prestige and implied educatedness. It instills in the listener the feeling that the speaker is informed and reliable, has impeccable taste and manners, and is familiar with the fine arts. The number of people in the UK who have mastered RP is estimated to be around one million, or approximately two per cent of the population. It should be mentioned, furthermore, that as least as far as British people are concerned, this is an accent that must be acquired at a young age through exposure. One cannot imitate marked RP without taking great risks. Efforts to "put on" RP cause listeners, at least in the UK, to consider the speaker to be asinine. Moreover, inept speakers are often totally unaware of the effect their "RP" elicits.

Another aspect of the teaching of RP is that it assumes that students do most of their dealings with people who both understand and appreciate this variant. This is quite often not true. First, many contacts will be with other second-language speakers. Here, both BrE and AmE are suitable. If we accept the argument that many contacts will be with speakers of AmE (here we can include many people in Canada, as well as the US, for a total of nearly 275 million people, or seventy-five per cent of native speakers worldwide), apparently BrE is not always the best mode of communication. Not only do some native speakers of the English language find BrE to be difficult to understand in respect to pronunciation, they are often not familiar with many common lexical items. Many Americans, for example, do not know what a "lorry" is, or for that matter "chips," "crisps," or "tea." When communicating with Americans, or with people who speak AmE as a second language, one should refer to a "truck," "French fried potatoes," "potato chips," and "dinner."

In respect to class distinctions, there is also much to discuss. Sweden is a democratic society where class designations are less a matter of birth than of education, occupation, and social behavior. In Sweden

there is no system of "public schools" or of elite educational establishments. While the universities in Lund and Uppsala carry a certain amount of prestige, advanced degrees from all of the Swedish universities are considered adequate for the making of a career. Furthermore, there is no variant of the Swedish language that assures its speaker a special place in society. Riks svenska (Standard Swedish), used by newscasters, is not socially admired or frowned upon. While there are many accents and dialects in Sweden, most of them are considered equally permissible. The Stockholm accent that is spoken by people who live in the center of the city, (which is very close to Standard Swedish), has, for some people, a special status. Few people, however, strive to acquire this accent. While the Swedish language has no variant that can be compared to the role of RP, it is also true that many people in education, in government, and even among the small but respected aristocracy, speak Swedish with features of a regional accent.

Standard Swedish, which is spoken in *Uppland* and other areas of central Sweden, as well as by many people throughout the country, has little influence. This is also true of Standard American. In both North America and Sweden the use of a standard variant is not associated with membership in the upper classes. This is one reason why some Swedish language instructors have failed to realize the implications of RP. Having nothing to compare it with in their own language, they have simply assumed that because RP sounds highly cultured, is associated with prestigious educational establishments, and is considered the standard in England, importing it to Sweden is then taken as a given. Furthermore, the fact that few people in Britain speak RP has not been taken into consideration.

Little effort has been made in Sweden to establish a standard for AmE. One reason for this is the reluctance among many Swedish educators to accept AmE. Standard American, like RP in the UK, lacks regional features and is understood by everyone throughout the country. Like BBC English, it is used by many radio and television broadcasters, but unlike prestigious forms of English spoken in the UK, Standard American is spoken by a large number of Americans. As is well known, there are far fewer regional dialects and accents in the USA than in the UK. In a certain sense, the idea of a national standard lacking regional characteristics is true of RP, AmE, and Standard Swedish. The difference, quite naturally, is that RP promotes and clarifies class distinctions.

Acting as an effective barrier, the "upper crust" in England can exclude people who do not have roots in this tradition. The "old boys club" is still alive and well, and has considerable power in government, the arts, education, finance, and industry. This small group of influential people, along with some members of the aristocracy, control the country today in much the same way as they wielded control over Britain and the colonies in the past. Their attitudes are inherent in their way of speaking. To pass on such a legacy to unaware Swedish students whose ambitions in life hopefully extend beyond the vision of Britain's upper classes is, I think, an unfair practice.

I conducted a survey of twenty Swedish colleges and universities in 1992.⁵ The purpose of the study was to get a better understanding of the mother tongue of teaching members of the faculty who were involved in English language and literature studies. Of 156 posts (Professor, Associate Professor, Foreign Lecturer, and Lecturer), one hundred positions were filled by Swedes, who have greater representation in the more prestigious tenure positions. Over eighty-four per cent of the Professor and Associate Professor posts were filled by Swedes. Of the fifty-one Adjunct posts (Lecturer), forty were Swedes, nine were British, and two were American. In the category Foreign Lecturer, of the thirty-five posts, twenty-five were British, nine were American, and one was Australian. In all, of 156 positions currently filled at Swedish colleges and universities, sixty-four per cent were filled by Swedes, twenty-four per cent by British people, nine per cent by Americans, and three per cent by others. If one assumes that the Swedes, as well as the British, speak what would be considered BrE, then nearly ninety per cent of the teachers currently offering instruction in the English language at the college and university level in Sweden speak and most likely teach BrE. Reservation should be made here for the mid-Atlantic varieties that sometimes occur. Nevertheless, it is clear from the statistics that BrE is the dominant variant of the English language in higher education in Sweden. Furthermore, there is every reason to expect the percentages to be even higher at the

5 The institutions of higher education that participated in the survey are: Borås University College, Chalmers University of Technology, Eskilstuna/Västerås University College, Gothenburg University, Halmstad University College, Karlstad University College, Kristianstad University College, Linköping University, Luleå University College, Lund University, Royal Institute of Technology, Skövde University College, Stockholm University, Stockholm Institute of Education, Sundsvall/Härnösand University College, Umeå University, Uppsala University, Växjö University College, Östersund University College, and Örebro University College.

primary and secondary school level, where the number of Swedish instructors is proportionally greater than at the colleges and universities. Children or college students who wish to pursue AmE, or mid-Atlantic, may be at a disadvantage in the Swedish educational system.

To get a better view of the attitudes of Swedish students in respect to the teaching of BrE and AmE, a questionnaire was passed out to 125 students attending English courses at Halmstad University. The survey was distributed on the very first day of instruction, before the students could gain a clear understanding of what variant of English was spoken by the instructor, or the preferences of the teacher. Thus, the very first task for a newly assembled group of students was to fill in a form. The only instruction given was that they were to answer all of the questions as honestly as possible, and to define BrE and AmE as common standards devoid of the features that characterize regional dialects or accents. The students stated their name, sex, first language, and age. Those students who did not speak Swedish as their first language were removed from the study.

The first question, "In your opinion, does the English you speak sound more like British English or American English, or something else?" was followed by three possible answers, British English, American English, and Something else. Of 125 answers, fifty-six answered that they felt that they spoke BrE, fifty-three that they spoke AmE, and sixteen that they spoke something else. One would assume that a majority of Swedish students consider their accent to be more like BrE. Here the findings indicate that this is not the case. Furthermore, based on my personal experiences with the students, I found that only a small number spoke what I would consider to be BrE. While an equal number spoke what I would define as AmE, the vast majority of the students spoke what was to my ear Swedish English with slight traces of BrE and AmE. I propose that although students may feel that they speak BrE, their usage is something else to the trained ear. It is also interesting to note that a British colleague told me she considered the students, for the most part, to be speaking AmE.

The following question was "In your opinion, which of the following variants of English is most pleasing to your ear?" The four possible answers were British English, American English, Australian English, and Some other variant. Sixty-four students found BrE to be more pleasing, forty-five chose AmE, eleven chose Australian English, and five listed

some other variant. Here we see that BrE is still considered a desirable variant of the English language to many students. A group of secondary school and gymnasium teachers of English in Halland was also surveyed. As was to be expected, when asked, "In your opinion, which of the following variants of English is most pleasing to your ear?" 100% of the participants stated "British English." BrE also receives high ratings internationally. There is a difference, however, between finding something pleasing to listen to and attempting to speak in a given manner. There are students who like listening to BrE but prefer to speak AmE, and there are also students who prefer AmE over BrE across the board. Evidently, the attitudes of the teachers are different from the attitudes of some of the people they deal with in their professional lives, and their services, for this reason, may not always be appreciated by some of the students who are dependent on these people for their education.

It is the third question, however, which provides the most provocative insight. The question posed was "When you read English, do most of the texts come from Britain or the USA? (include here both casual reading as well as work-related and study-related materials)." The possible answers were, Britain, USA and About the same. In response to this question, seventeen students indicated that they read more BrE, forty-nine students indicated AmE, and fifty-nine students stated that there was parity between the two. Clearly, at least in written form, material from the United States is the most common. This also holds true when one observes publishing statistics. Fifty per cent of all scientific research is conducted in the US. The mass of educational material and scientific texts originating in the US clearly dominate academic life in both Sweden and Europe.

If we assume that BrE will decline as a model for second-language learners, what will come along to replace it? First, AmE will continue to become more influential. The educational elite in Sweden will allow AmE a larger piece of the pie. If we look at Norway and Denmark, members of NATO, which have had good relations with the United States since the end of the war, adequate room has been allotted to both RP and AmE. In Sweden, there is only one professor's post reserved for American Literature, at Uppsala University, where there is also an associate professor, a post-doctoral research post and a few foreign lecturer posts. Please note, however, that Uppsala University has a greater number of faculty positions in British Literature. In English Linguistics, BrE

is dominant. In the rest of Sweden the appointments, technically, are in English (British) Literature and English (British) Linguistics, (there are several "Foreign Lecturer in English" posts situated outside Uppsala University where the holder of the post is American, and there are also a few Foreign Lecturer posts allocated for American Studies). The organization of English studies is quite different in the other Scandinavian countries, where it is more common that English language and literature encompass both America and Britain. One example is the University of Oslo, which has a Department of British and American Studies. In the past the political posturing of the Swedish government has created conditions that have made a similar process difficult. At any rate, there was a shift in attitudes in Sweden during the latter half of the 1970s, with a gradual acceptance and greater interest in AmE, and this movement gained momentum in the 1980s. Now that the present Swedish government has made extensive efforts to improve relations with the United States, there is every reason to assume that greater resources will be allotted to AmE. Many students go to the US to attend high school, and the number of undergraduate and graduate students travelling to the US is increasing. Overall, contacts with American educational establishments are on the rise. In time, Sweden will join its Nordic neighbors in providing more language instruction in variants of English other than BrE.

At the same time there is an internationalization process going on throughout Europe, as well as the rest of the world. The number of non-native English speaking people who speak English proficiently is increasing. Mid-atlantic will provide second-language speakers with a model which opens doors throughout the world. Speakers of this language will strive for pronunciation and lexical choices that are understood by the listener, whether he or she is a native speaker or a second-language speaker. Communication will become more important than meeting the demands of prescriptive grammatical and lexical models. Understanding that many Americans are unsure of the meaning of the word "solicitor," the speaker will use the word "lawyer." Modes of communication which sound unnecessarily formal will be avoided. Instead of adopting the British style of "understatement" or the American tendency to exaggerate, foreign speakers of English will strive to superimpose their own national styles of behavior onto the English language. Accents such as the French, Swedish, or German variant will

be acceptable, as long as an adequate level of clarity is achieved. The idea of patterning English usage after RP will become a thing of the past for many people. As one generation of Swedish educators go into retirement, they will be replaced by people less inclined to speak BrE. Quite often, this shift in preference will take place on an unconscious level. A new system of pronunciation will be implemented more as a result of environmental factors than because of a conscious effort to speak a variant of the English language closer to mid-Atlantic. While standards such as the *Longman Dictionary*, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Webster's*, and the *American Heritage Dictionary* will continue to be used in certain parts of the world, we will see an upswing in the importance of dictionaries, such as the editions published by Random House and Collins, which are geared to meet the needs of second-language speakers who are striving to learn mid-Atlantic. At some point in the future, many second-language speakers will speak a variant of the English language that is far more similar to an international standard than is the case today.