

Interviewing foreign students at the Humanistic Faculty

A report from the *Interview Group*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and aims

The background of the present report is a correspondence between the Department of Linguistics and the Humanistics Faculty, at the Göteborg University. It was agreed upon that an investigation would be carried out by the Department with the aim of studying the communicative and linguistic skills, and possible related problems, of the Faculty's foreign students. Thus three groups of graduate students, attending the *Field Methods* course at the Department, were assigned to perform the actual data collection. This report is the summing up of the work done by the Interview Group; the other two groups being the Questionnaire Group and the Observation Group. A further Analysis Group will subsequently take over to work on the Grande Finale.

As noted, the main objective of the overall investigation is to enquire about the communicative and linguistic skills of the Faculty's foreign students. This yields, in particular, three important questions that need to be further scrutinized (each of which will be pursued separately further below):

1. What exactly is it that we want to know?
2. Who are the foreign students?
3. How are we to get the desired information?

1.2 What follows below

What follows below, then, is first some theory and then some practice. Thus in section 2, we will give some answers to the three stated questions above, including some theoretical preliminaries required for the proper understanding of section 3, in which we will describe and explain the actual data collection process. In section 4, finally, we will present our main conclusions of the report, with some hypothetical comments inserted here and there, plus some hopefully useful suggestions for any similar studies done in the future.

2. Theoretical preliminaries

2.1 What do we want to know?

The issue of interest is, as mentioned, communicative and linguistic skills of the foreign students at the Humanistic Faculty. This fairly broad and general issue can quickly develop into an enormous task if not further defined, or delimited in some sense. Thus in order to define more clearly the focus of our interest, we need to ask ourselves exactly what is it that we would want to know about the foreign students' communicative and linguistic skills. One way of delimiting the area of study might be to focus on language proficiency, either through formal language tests (grammar and/or pronunciation) or perhaps some or other kind of self-evaluation test (speakability and/or understanding). However, to delimit the concept of communicative and linguistic skills to language proficiency is, from our point of view, of no major interest. We have decided to take another approach in which we will focus mainly on the "communicative" part.

The foreign students are likely to engage in various social activities and situations in which they interact and communicate with native Swedes, as well as other foreign student of course. Depending on the individual skills/proficiency in Swedish language, their acquaintance with the Swedish culture as well as many other things, specific individuals are likely to experience various communicative and/or linguistic problems, small or large, in the activities they are participating in. However, we all experience problems of various kinds and degrees in communicating with other people, whether we are foreign to the social setting and culture or not. What we see to be of particular interest for the present study, however, is if specifically foreign students experience problems that are different from what native Swedes experience. Such a study, of course, cannot be done without a control group consisting of Swedes, which we do not have access to (for various reasons; mostly practical). Thus, faced with being without a control group, we have to attack the problem from another perspective, namely if there are any particular problems that the foreign students themselves relate to the fact that they are foreign students, or to the (possible) fact that they consider themselves insufficiently proficient in Swedish communicative patterns. That is, assuming there are perceived communicative problems of some sort that the foreign students relate to their situation as foreign students, what do they

attribute these problems to. Thus, what we have decided to be the main focus for our report is the informants' own definitions and conceptualizations of any possible problems related to communicative and linguistic skills.

2.2 Who are our informants?

Anthropologists know these cliches: "my informant said", "informants say", "informants argue", "informants believe", "the informant stressed that", "informants could not explain", "informants denied", "it was pointed out by informants that", "informants were concerned to", "informants describe", "informants recalled". Yes: in this narrative form we see not this person in particular or that one, but rather nameless, faceless, sexless, ageless, colorless, impartial witnesses and specialists uncontaminated by who they are, precisely, or why they said what they said to us, precisely.¹

Before we can go any further, we need to ask ourselves who it is that we want to interview. Thus: exactly who are the foreign students? So far we have assumed that this is a straight-forward category, which is far from accurate.

Considering the fact that it is the Humanistics Faculty that is sponsoring the overall project of investigating the linguistic and communicative skills of the foreign students, and has thus shown an interest in possibly making use of the information yielded by that investigation, it is reasonable to take as a starting point the following question: Who does the Humanistics Faculty consider to be foreign students? If the Faculty already has a pre-defined category 'foreign students', then it would be reasonable to start with this and see if that holds up for theoretical scrutiny. Unfortunately, the issue seems to be rather complicated, since the Faculty does not seem have any pre-established simple category that can be labelled 'foreign students'. Thus we were forced come up with a definition ourselves. After some discussion between the three collector groups, we finally decided that *those students who had been accepted as such on the merits of a non-Swedish degree would be counted as foreign students*. Through LADOK,² we were able to receive a list of 194 students, all of whom satisfied the above criteria. These 194 students thus constitute our *population*.

¹ Thus aptly put by Herdt & Stoller (1990: 44-45).

² That is, Lokalt ADB-baserat Dokumentationssystem. Our contact was Lars Samerstedt.

2.2.1 The population

With the information available in LADOK's documentation, we can make a kind of characterization of our population.

LADOK seems to divide the students in our population into four main categories, based on their prior merits, namely if the degrees which they have been accepted for have been taken in *Finland*, another *Nordic country*, a *non-Nordic country* or if they have been *accepted by exemption*. For the sake of brevity, the first two categories (*Finland* and *Nordic country*) will henceforth be treated as one (i.e. as *Nordic country*). A further *unspecified* category has been added by us (see below). LADOK does not list more specific information about the nationality of our population, at least not in the documentation that we have received copies of. Anyway, 49 students, or c. 25.3% of the population, have been accepted on the merits from another *Nordic country*. 7 of these are specifically categorized as *Finnish* but will henceforth be counted as *Nordic*. 108 students, or c. 55.7% of the population, have been accepted on the merits of a degree from a non-Nordic country, with no further specification. 34 students, or c. 17.5% of the population, have been accepted by exemption, a category which typically includes exchange students and immigrants.³ For 3 students, or the remaining c. 1.5% of the population, the LADOK documentation is somewhat unclear: one student is categorized as non-Nordic as well as Nordic, another student is simply categorized as "foreign", and a third is not categorized at all.

With regard to sex and age of our population, 127 (or c. 65.5%) are females and only 67 (or c. 34.5%) are males; and with regard to age, the oldest student was born 1926 while the youngest was born in 1976; or, more precisely, 1 student was born during the 1920's, 1 during the 1930's, 10 during the 1940's, 34 during the 1950's, 69 during the 1960's and the remaining 79 during the 1970's. The latter two age groups constitute 76.3% of the total population. From this, we can safely conclude that the population is clearly biased towards females and/or students in the ages between 19 and 35. The female/male-ratio is

³ Of these, 4 students have been accepted through the ERASMUS programme while 23 are (presumably) immigrants; these latter have no other listed prior degrees than *Swedish for non-Swedish students* (SVISS). For 7 students, there is no specified reason why they are accepted by exemption.

furthermore evenly distributed between students born before 1960 and those born 1960 and later.

Perhaps more interesting to our study is the apparent level of education of the students. This is particularly interesting from the viewpoint that, in LADOK's documentation, we can actually see how many students in our population have some or other degree in the Swedish language, which definitely must be considered a strongly influencing factor when it comes to investigating communicative and linguistic skills. However, the information regarding the prior education seems to be far from complete, especially with regard to the specification of the foreign degrees. Only the degrees completed in Sweden are listed by LADOK.

With regard to degrees taken in the subject "Swedish language", then, 92 students (or c. 47.4%) have none such listed, 19 students (or c. 9.8%) have a Gymnasium degree, 32 students (or c. 16.5%) have a Komvux degree, and 61 students (or c. 31.4%) have a University degree.⁴ Also interesting to note is that 47 (or c. 25%) have gone through prior extensive education in Sweden, with which we mean, for instance, a complete teacher training for primary/secondary school.

Thus, accepting our population as constituting the category 'foreign students', we can characterize it as mainly non-Nordic,⁵ largely female, mainly between 19 and 35 years of age, either with no degree in Swedish (47.4%) or a University degree (31.4%), and possibly with a prior extensive education in Sweden (c. 25%).

⁴ These figures include: 3 students with a Gymnasium and a Komvux degree; 1 student with a Gymnasium and a University degree; 4 students with a Komvux and a University degree; and 1 student with a Gymnasium, a Komvux as well as a University degree.

⁵ That is, if we add the category *non-Nordic* and *accepted by exemption* (most, or perhaps even all, are in fact from a non-Nordic country); these two categories together constitute c. 73.2% of the total population.

2.2.2 The pre-sample and the sample

There are various ways of drawing a sample from a population. Ideally, of course, it would have been best to interview the entire population, but this would not have been possible to do within a reasonable amount of time. Thus, a sample is necessary. From a theoretical point of view, the sample drawing should be correlated with the defined purpose of the study. If, for instance, we want to describe the distribution of experienced and/or perceived problems related to communicative and linguistic skills among the total population, then a random sample (of some kind) would seem best suited for a representative outcome. However, if, as we believe, the entire investigation (that is, including the work done by all three collector groups; see above in §1) is to be utilized in some concrete sense (e.g. with a "problem-rectifying" programme of some sort), then our main focus should be to interview those that actually do experience problems, in order to get a good picture of what those problems are (or perceived to be).

Thus we would need to select informants that we know, or think we know, experience the things that we want to interview them about. The obvious problem here is that in order for us to find out who experience problems, we have to interview them all.⁶ Hence we seem to be stuck with doing a random sample anyway. On the other hand, since LADOK's documentation contains a number of certain characterizing features, we can use these to do, not a random sample, but a *quota sample*. Admittedly, a quota sample does not, in any way, help us in getting at those particular informants that we suspect experience problems of the sort we are interested in studying. But, in drawing a quota sample, we can hopefully correlate any disclosed problems to some or other relevant characteristic. Had we drawn a "real" random sample (the lottery way, that is) then we could have faced the problem that some or other relevant characteristic would not have been satisfactorily represented.⁷

⁶ Or use the information obtained by the Questionnaire Group. However, since all collector groups conducted their studies simultaneously, we could not do this without losing valuable time.

⁷ Actually, we did do it the lottery way (more or less). However, that was followed by an adjustment in order to ensure the representativeness.

In our sample drawing, we first draw, what we will call, a *pre-sample*. This we do so that it will be characterizable with the same "average" features as the entire population. However, due to the fact that some individuals were not willing to be interviewed at all, while others were not even available for enquiry to begin with, the actual *sample* came to constitute a lower number of individuals than the pre-sample. Out of the 46 in the pre-sample only 26 were actually interviewed. Thus the distinction between the pre-sample and the (actual) sample is important to make, particularly when dealing with quota samples, since an ideal quota sampling presupposes a, at least, two-step selection process. The first step is when selecting individuals from the population in order to fill up the quota (the first time), while the second step is when considering the drop-outs and re-filling the pre-sample with new individuals. The second step can, of course, be iterated various times.

Characteristics		Population	Pre-sample
Number of individuals		194	46 (c. 23.7%)
Category	Non-Nordic	55.7%	54.3%
	Nordic	25.3%	32.6%
	Exemption	17.5%	13.1%
Degrees in Swedish	None	47.4%	43.5%
	Gymnasium	9.8%	13.1%
	Komvux	16.5%	10.1%
	University	31.4%	32.6%
Born	Before 1960	23.7%	26.1%
	1960 or later	76.3%	73.9%
Age	Male	24.5%	30.4%
	Female	65.5%	69.6%

However, given the restricted time schedule at hand for the present study and the fact that the second step of re-filling is a time consuming process (since it can only be done after the drop-outs have actually emerged), we decided to stick with the pre-sample as it was, and hope that the drop-out rate would not distort the representativeness too much. Nevertheless, as can be seen in the above table, the chosen pre-sample is, we think, satisfactorily representative of the total population (that is, based on the features present in LADOK's documentation).

The only features that might be considered unsatisfactorily met are the category *Nordic* (25.3% in the population but 32.6% in our sample); the category *Exemption* (17.5% vs. 13.1%); Gymnasium degrees in the Swedish language (9.8% vs. 13.1%); and Komvux degrees in the Swedish language (16.5% vs. 10.1%). Excepting these possible flaws, we feel our pre-sample meets the criteria of quota sampled representativeness quite well.

2.3 How are we to get the information?

Now that we know what it is that we want to investigate, and also who it is that we want to interview, the next important question to be answered is how to get to the desired information; although the name *Interview Group* has, presumably, already killed any excitement with regard to the answer to this question. Nevertheless, we still need to examine what type of interview would suit us best, and why. Here, it should be noted, we will only look into some theoretical issues connected with doing interviews. A more detailed discussion of the actual interviews that we conducted is pursued in §3.

2.3.1 The degree of "structured-ness"

One of the basic dichotomies with regard to types of interviews is that between *structured* vs. *unstructured* interviews. An extreme form of a structured interview is the formal questionnaire, with a finite set of pre-defined questions and answers. On the other extreme of the dichotomy, we find, for instance, a kind of interview sometimes pursued by Freudian psychoanalysts, in which the patient is encouraged to speak of whatever comes to mind, with the interviewer, or in this case the psychoanalyst, plotting in questions and comments only to keep the patient talking. Between these two extremes we can find a variety of interview types, based on the pre-determination of questions (and answers); thus not forming a "pure" dichotomy but rather a continuum.

As will be evident further below, we favour neither extreme, but have instead chosen a form of interview that is basically unstructured, but still slightly structured. Since we do know what we are interested in (i.e. problems related to communicative and linguistic skills), our aim is to steer the interview towards that topic, which we do with the aid of an interview guide consisting of a set of general and open-ended questions (see also further below); a set of

questions which by means is to be taken as finite.⁸ Our interviews are thus structured with regard to the choice of topic and subtopics and the order in which these are introduced; the progress of the actual question-making, on the other hand, is unstructured. This is highly reminiscent of a method favoured by the sociologists Robert K. Merton, Marjorie Fiske and Patricia Kendall, who term it *the focused interview*. They describe it as follows:⁹

First of all, the persons interviewed are known to have been involved in a *particular situation* --- Secondly, the hypothetically significant elements, patterns, processes, and total structure of this situation have been provisionally analyzed by the social scientist. Through this *content or situational analysis*, he has arrived at a set of hypotheses concerning the consequences of determinate aspects of the situation for those involved in it. On the basis of this analysis, he takes the third step of developing an *interview guide*, setting forth the major areas of inquiry and the hypotheses which provide criteria of relevance for the data to be obtained in the interview. Fourth and finally, the interview is focused on the subjective experiences of persons exposed to the pre-analyzed situation in an effort to ascertain *their definitions of the situation*.

The "particular situation" which our informants have been and are involved in is, basically, the totality of all the situations in which they use communicative and linguistic skills. More specifically, the relevant situation for us is that in which our informants are foreign students at the Humanistic Faculty communicating, or otherwise interacting, with other foreigners and/or natives at the Faculty. This issue was already touched upon in the previous section, as was what in the above quote is termed "content or situational analysis". Thus we need not pursue the matter any further here; instead, we can move to the interview guide.

⁸ Its main function is more that of a memory-aid to the interviewer, than a questionnaire. It also provides a good help if the interview comes to a halt.

⁹ In *The focused interview* (The Free Press, New York, 1956); quoted in Sjoberg & Nett (1968: 213).

2.3.2 The interview guide

The interview guide is divided into three main sections based on topic, namely (i) social and cultural background of the informant; (ii) the informant's stay in Sweden; and (iii) the informant's studies at the Faculty.

The interview guide does not, however, consist of a finite set of questions. Its main function is to provide the interviewer with a memory-aid. It also provides a good helping hand when the interview seems to come to a halt, either due to a non-talkative informant or when follow-up questions do not seem pop up easily to the interviewer. Also, the informant is allowed to interrupt and ask question him-herself at any time throughout the entire interview.

With regard to our choice of open-ended questions: formal questionnaires, with pre-established choices, are often claimed to enhance the reliability. We do not want to dispute this, but we feel that it is not really a fair claim to make without some further explanation. It is true, of course, that a highly structured question, with pre-established answers, would make it easier for different analysers to agree upon a common interpretation of the answers (and thus enhance the reliability). This, however, easily leads to an overestimation of the feature 'reliability', since the only thing the choice of a structured question really does is to make the answers "manually" easier to handle. While a structured question requires main theory-application when *stating the question*, an open-ended question requires main theory-application when *analyzing the answers*.

In a formal questionnaire then, since the main theoretical framework has already been applied when the analyser does his-her job, it more or less automatically leads to consistency between different analysers. Thus, reliability is enhanced only due to the fact that the analysers have been steered towards a certain pre-established interpretation. With open-ended questions, on the other hand, when different analysers analyse the same answer, they are presumably using different theoretical frameworks, and are thus more likely not to arrive at a consistent interpretation with one another.¹⁰

¹⁰ However, reliability can be thought of as various things; see more on this in §4.

THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

General background of the informant

- Name
- Sex
- Student category (Graduate/Undergraduate/Other)
- Where do you come from?
- What is your educational/cultural background?

About the informant's stay in Sweden

- How long have you been in Sweden?
- How long do you intend to stay in Sweden?
- How do you finance your stay in Sweden?
- What do you think about Swedes and Swedish culture?
- What did you find different when you first came to Sweden?
- What were your expectations?
- Is there anything in particular that you find to be a problem (in relation to Sweden/Swedes)?
- What do you consider the reasons to be?
- How do you think those problems could be solved ?
- Do you think it's a problem to communicate with Swedes?
- Why do you think that is?
- Do you think the problems could be solved in any way?

About the studies at the Faculty

- What do you study?
- Why did you chose that?
- What do you think about the Swedish University?
- Are there any particular problems in your studies?
- How do you think they could be solved?
- What language do you use together with the teachers?
- What language do you use together with the other students?
- Do you think language/communication is a problem for you in your studies?

Another negative feature of highly structured questions is that they make it easier for an informant to streamline his-her answers according to the framework presupposed by the interviewer.¹¹ This we want to avoid as much as possible, since we are mainly interested in the informants' definitions and conceptions. Thus, we feel, open-ended questions are better suited for us.¹²

¹¹ Another reason to expect greater consistency between different analysers.

¹² We are not claiming that open-ended questions are theory-less; far from it. The pre-defined purpose of the interview/study, whether disclosed to the informant or not, together with the choice of questions and topics, as well as the behaviour of the

With regard to the actual disposition of the topics, the first subtopic (general background of the informant) is more of a prelude to the latter two subtopics (about their stay in Sweden and about their studies at the Faculty), which in a sense constitute the "actual" interview. Within these, we decided to "move from the large to the small", i.e. we start by asking questions about fairly broad and/or general issues, before specifically focusing on problems related to communication. At all times is the informant allowed to ask questions himself, either to clarify the question and the intention of the interviewer or whatever.

Our hope is, of course, that the informants themselves will bring up any issue of problems, although there are good reasons to assume that many informants would not do that, e.g. tact, the formality of the situation, preconceptions about the reasons for the interview, amongst other things. However, the opportunity is provided, mainly by starting with questions of a general character (such as: What do you think about Swedes/Swedish culture/the University?; What did you find different when you first came to Sweden? What were your expectations?). If the informant does not bring the subject up, then the interviewer will specifically have to ask questions about it instead (such as: Is there anything in particular that you consider to be a problem, with regard to your stay in Sweden/your interaction with Swedes/your studies at the University?).

3. Finding our sample and doing the interviews

Initially, we decided to do face-to-face interviews with all the chosen informants. But, as time grew short and every other activity grew abyss, we decided instead that we should do most interviews over the telephone, and only a handful face-to-face. However, as with most other things in life, minor and major problems arose. Thus below, we will describe and explain the actual process of finding our informants and the conducting of the interviews; what was good about it and what went wrong. Any major conclusions and/or lessons derived from the below discussion will be dealt with in §4.

interviewer, not only influence what the informants believe the interview is (or should be) about, but is at same time also a kind of theory-application. However, we would still want to claim that the *main* theory-application is done when analysing the answers, not when stating the questions (as is the case with formal questionnaires).

3.1 Getting hold of, and approaching, our informants

LADOK's documentation includes valuable information regarding resident addresses and most often also telephone numbers. Fortunately, all informants in our pre-sample had listed telephone numbers. Thus we decided that we should phone them up and ask them to participate in an interview; either directly over the phone or in a later face-to-face interview. However, to get hold of our chosen sample, or pre-sample, turned out to be anything but a penny-plain task. In fact, 19 of the 46 in the pre-sample were never even approached with an inquiry to be interviewed since we could not get hold of them at all.

Thus, for those 27 who did answer our calls, we explained that we were majorly interested in issues relating to communicative and linguistic skills, but did not explicitly mention the issue of possible problems related to those. 1 individual had no time when we called, and also failed to honour later appointment. Thus, we were left with an actual sample of 26 informants.¹³

It should be noted here that one of the first problems that we stumbled upon, was with one informant who consistently rejected to being categorized as a *foreign* student, but rather a *guest* student. Thus, some time was spent on convincing him that since we had adopted the definition that we had (see §2), he was by definition included. Although this does not pose any "real" problem to us, it raises an interesting theoretical question, namely what kind of "existential status" a chosen sample can be claimed to have. Our population, as defined in §2, does not constitute a *group* of people in any sense, but rather a *category*. There is, for instance, no inherent recognition of the "group" as such among the foreign students themselves nor is there any "we-feeling" present. Had we instead allowed all the students at the Faculty to label themselves as some or other kind of student, it is unlikely that we would have got a grouping identical to the one that we have defined as 'foreign students'. Nevertheless, it is our firm belief that our population is not too far away from any "actual" groupings. It was, after all, only one informant in our sample that explicitly rejected the label 'foreign'.

¹³ With regard to the 'quota sampled representativeness' (see §2.2) for the actual sample of 26 informants, we are still confident that our sample is representative of the entire population.

3.2 Conducting the interviews

Conducting interviews can be easy, but they can also be extremely difficult, as the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard so eloquently has demonstrated:¹⁴

Nuer are expert at sabotaging an inquiry and until one has resided with them for some weeks they steadfastly stultify all efforts to elicit simplest facts and to elucidate the most innocent practices --- The following specimen of Nuer methods is the commencement of a conversation on the Nyanding river, on a subject which admits of some obscurity but, with willingness to co-operate, can soon be elucidated.

- I:* Who are you?
Cuol: A man.
I: What is your name?
Cuol: Do you want to know my *name*?
I: Yes.
Cuol: Do you want to know *my* name?
I: Yes, you have come to visit me in my tent and I would like to know who you are.
Cuol: All right. I am Cuol. What is your name?
I: My name is Pritchard.
Cuol: What is your father's name?
I: My father's name is also Pritchard.
Cuol: No, that cannot be true. You cannot have the same name as your father.
I: It is the name of my lineage. What is the name of your lineage?
Cuol: Do you want to know the name of my lineage?
I: Yes.
Cuol: What will you do with it if I tell you? Will you take it to your country?
I: I don't want to do anything with it. I just want to know it since I am living in your camp.
Cuol: Oh well, we are Lou.
I: I did not ask you the name of your tribe. I know that. I am asking you the name of your lineage.
Cuol: Why do you want to know the name of my lineage?
I: I don't want to know it.
Cuol: Then why do you ask me for it? Give me some tobacco.

I defy the most patient ethnologist to make headway against this kind of opposition. One is just driven crazy about it. Indeed, after a few weeks of associating solely with Nuer one displays, if the pun be allowed, the most evident symptoms of "Nuerosis".

Although we did not meet with any behaviour that would evoke anything similar to "Nuerosis" (or whatever), we did stumble on problems (as well as

¹⁴ In *The Nuer* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1940); quoted in Sjoberg & Nett (1968: 218-219).

positive experiences) while conducting our interviews. Below follows some of the more noteworthy points in relation to various aspects of these interviews that we find important to further scrutinize.

Out of a total of 26 conducted interviews, 23 were done over the phone, while 3 were done face-to-face. Two of the latter were also tape-recorded. Considering the low number of face-to-face interviews, we are cautious with regard to observations based on the mode of interview (i.e. telephone vs. face-to-face); thus, we cannot say much about this issue. However, the discussion below will to a large extent be based on the distinction between these two modes.

3.2.1 Time

When comparing the time spent in the telephone interviews with the time spent in the face-to-face interviews, we are not sure whether or not there are any significant differences. Two (of three) face-to-face interviews extended to almost 35 minutes, while most telephone interviews took about 20 minutes. On the other hand, one of the face-to-face interviews included an informant with some difficulties regarding proficiency in English, and thus explanations of questions required extra time (see also below). The other face-to-face interview took place in a highly informal setting (a cafeteria) with outside interruptions which caused the interview to expand in time. Thus any differences in time seemingly stem from other factors than mode of interview; language used and setting.

3.2.2 The setting

With regard to the telephone interviews, the informants were all at home when they answered our calls, and, presumably, the informants felt most comfortable; being in a fairly familiar setting.¹⁵ This, we feel, was also reflected in how most of these interviews proceeded, i.e. seemingly easy and relaxed. However, also the face-to-face interviews went rather easily and relaxed. The two recorded face-to-face interviews started out in a very relaxed manner (i.e. before the tape-recorder was set on), but when the actual interviews started, and the tape-recorder set on, the informants became more hesitant and cautious.

¹⁵ At least as comfortable as can be expected; they are, after all, assumed to be foreigners.

The unrecorded face-to-face interview was conducted in a cafeteria, which might have been somewhat counter-productive, since this caused quite a few interruptions from outsiders, and thus, besides lengthening the time spent on the interview, it also had the effect of hampering the progress of the interview. This latter interview was hampered somewhat also by the informant and interviewer trailing off track from the interview procedures and engaging in social and personal issues. This, however, was (in the interviewer's view) necessary to keep the momentum going. Perhaps if the interview had taken place in a more isolated area and/or a more formal setting, the interview might have proceeded more according to a presupposed "agenda".

3.2.3 Language used

In cases where the interviewer and the informants did not have a common mother tongue, the interviews were conducted in English. This did not pose as much problem as we initially expected; although in a few interviews, some time had to be spent on extra explanations due to the informants' difficulties in understanding English. If such difficulties grow too large, as we suspect was the case in at least one interview, it would be reasonable to assume that the possibilities of interpreting the achieved answers are seriously, or at least to some degree, "damaged". However, most informants seemed to understand/speak English extremely well, and most problems that arose during the interviews did not, from our understanding, seem to stem from any lack in (English) language proficiency; although, as mentioned, one of the interviews conducted in English was with an informant who had clear problems with coping in English (as well as Swedish). She also readily admitted that she had some lack in language proficiency but at the same time said that she managed to communicate "somehow". The interview was also somewhat prolonged with regard to the others, since the questions required additional explanations and clarifications.

A handful of interviews were also conducted in Chinese; a language that both interviewer and informant had in common as mother tongue. Consequently, these interviews suffered from no difficulties caused by problems with language proficiency.

It would have been interesting to have conducted some of the interviews entirely in Swedish and compared the answers provided through that with those achieved through interviews conducted in English. However, this would have caused us to redefine the overall aim of our study. Since we are interested in finding out about possible problems related to communication as perceived by the informants, it is desirable to conduct the interviews in a language that facilitates the information flow between interviewer and informant as much as possible. To "force" the informants to speak a language in which they might feel less confident would be counter-productive to our present aim.

3.2.4 The interview guide and the questions asked

One question in particular, we feel, might be considered somewhat odd in relation to the issue we were interested in quering about, namely that of financial means of subsistence. Although none of the informants (except the two that were being tape-recorded; see below) seemed to mind this question (at least no more than any other question), it might still seem odd to relate money matters to problems in communication.

Two informants were very keen on actually interviewing the interviewer before allowing to be interviewed themselves. If this is due to their unwillingness of accepting the fixed role relations an interview situation normally gives,¹⁶ or if they were just being inquisitive about the reasons and motives behind the interview(er), is an issue that cannot be pursued in any depth here; but it is worth noting nonetheless, at least from an ethical point of view, since while constructing questions, or an interview guide, one should ask oneself if one would be willing to answer the same, or similar, questions.

Both of the two informants that tape-recorded during the face-to-face interviews, were, in contrast to practically all other informants, very hesitant and cautious in answering questions that could be thought of as delicate, e.g. questions about financial means of subsistence and how well they considered

¹⁶ "An interview in western society is a clearly defined and quite common speech event to which a formal speech style is appropriate --- one participant (the interviewer) controls the discourse in the sense of both selecting topics and choosing the form of questions. The interviewee on the other hand, by agreeing to be interviewed, has contracted to answer these questions co-operatively --- People are generally quite well aware of the behaviour appropriate to these roles, and of their implications in terms of unequal distribution of rights to talk" (Milroy 1987: 41).

themselves to be (allowed to be) integrated into their respective departments. They showed no similar caution during a preliminary discussion, preceding the actual interview, and which was not being recorded.

3.2.5 The handling of the data

24 interviews (all the telephone- plus one of the face-to-face interviews) were not being tape-recorded. Thus the recording of data was solely by means of note-taking. This admittedly puts a heavy load of responsibility on the shoulders of the interviewer and, if unexperienced (as we were), puts certain time-limits on how long one can physically cope; becoming a good note-taker takes some practice. Nonetheless, we did manage quite well with regard to this point (the interviews extending only to approximately half an hour), and since the interviewer does actually have some command of the progress of the interview, it is relatively easy to construct follow-up questions in order to fill up seemingly lost, or unnoted, information.¹⁷

4. Some conclusive comments

4.1 Some comments on the answers given

With regard to what the informants actually said, one general theme very clearly emerged, namely that more or less all our informants experienced problems of a social nature rather than a communicative/linguistic one. Only one informant confessed to problems caused by lack in Swedish and English language proficiency. Several informants, particularly the ones that had been in Sweden for several years, claimed no particular problems at all.

Our informants' judgements about Swedes and Swedish culture ran from "cold" and "fearing competition" to "pretty open" and "honest". Not unexpectantly, they gave varied and individual answers, but most informants agreed that Swedes are, generally speaking, nice but reserved and cautious in their relations towards foreigners. Some even went as far as claiming that Swedes have a "very cold attitude" towards foreigners, and do not want to "admit them

¹⁷ This, however, presupposes that the interviewer immediately, or at least sometime during the interview, realizes that the note-taking has "gone bad", which is not always the case.

in their midst". On the other hand, others claimed that Swedes are open-minded and no more self-centered than any other people.

No one claimed to experience social or communicative/linguistic problems in relation to their studies. They all seemed very happy in that sense. Those problems that they did explain, typically had to do with administrative matters, e.g. the strange Swedish bureaucracy, too much red tape. One informant preferred a campus system, e.g. she considered the University to consist of too many separate departments. Only one informant confessed to being severely displeased with how her studies had been organized (e.g. a chaotic course plan). It should also be mentioned that many informants did not disclose any problems with regard to their studies.

Turning specifically to possible communicative/linguistic problems, several informants claimed to experience no such at all (typically the ones that spoke Swedish fluently). Still, several of our informants actually did exemplify problems of a communicative/linguistic nature, e.g. one informant sometimes had difficulties in finding the right words (when speaking Swedish), another informant said that Swedes sometimes had difficulties realizing that she was not being serious when she was in fact joking, another informant complained that Swedes are reluctant to take an initiative to communicate. Many of these could be claimed to be caused by the foreign students not being fully "attuned" to Swedish pragmatic rules. However, an overwhelming majority of our informants explicitly claimed to have no problems what-so-ever with regard to *communicating* with Swedes, neither in general or at the Faculty, but rather they experienced problems in *socializing* with Swedes. Thus, from our informants' perspective, the problems that they claim to experience/perceive are more of a social nature rather than a communicative/linguistic one. The obvious objection to such a generalization, of course, is that many of the exemplified social problems are in fact to a large degree of a communicative nature, or more specifically, pragmatic. However, this would be to impose an analyser's theoretical framework on the "social facts" explained by our informant. That is, our informants claim no particular communicative or linguistic problems in relation to the Swedes; but they do claim social problems. This is the distinction made by them.

4.2 Some comments on reliability and validity

Are our interviews reliable? First of all: what is 'reliability' anyway? We touched on this issue above, when discussing the interview guide (see §2.3), and will now further probe into this matter.

J. Kirk & M. Miller (see Silverman 1993: 145) distinguish three types of reliability, namely *quixotic*, *diachronic* and *synchronic* reliability. With regard to diachronic reliability, we cannot say anything since our study is not a longitudinal one. Neither have we been able to compare our interviews with similar interviews conducted at an earlier time. Synchronic reliability, on the other hand, we could be able to say something about, though not until we have compared the outcomes of the other two collector groups (i.e. the Questionnaire and Observation Groups).

Quixotic reliability can, from our point of view, be quite uninteresting. It is doubtful that one should seek quixotic reliability when dealing with how people conceptualize their situation and social experiences, since, in a sense, it more or less only shows how streamlined the informants, the questions and/or the analysers are. This does not, however, mean that we aim to oppose any quixotic reliability. If an investigation regarding "social facts" produces the same result over and over again, then it could suggest that there really is such a "social fact" out there somewhere. But, this is a question of interpretation: if one can readily claim that the *informants* say the same thing over and over, then one should pay attention to quixotic reliability. If, on the other hand, the identical, or near-identical, results stem from the analysers' theoretical frameworks, then one should be less inclined to pay attention to quixotic reliability. With this said, the answers that we received from our interviews can actually be claimed to be quixotically reliable (allowing a certain degree of abstraction); we used a single method (interviewing) which yielded an almost unvarying measurement (most informants perceived problems of a social nature rather than a communicative/linguistic one). This quixotic reliability, we feel, does not stem from any theoretical framework of ours¹⁸ but can

¹⁸ That is, except for the distinction between problems of a social nature vs. problems of a communicative/linguistic nature, which is a theoretical taxonomy (or perhaps part of). This was reflected in our interview guide, and thus also our abstract "agenda" for the interview. However, the distinction was never questioned by our informants; neither did we explicitly express any distinction of this kind (which, on the other hand, the informants did).

unhesitatingly be claimed to be derived from what the informants themselves experience and/or perceive.

Now, turning to validity: is our study valid? Using the distinction between the so-called Type 1 and Type 2 errors, we can, with regard to the former, say that practically all our informants experienced problems of a social nature. It is, in our view, "true" that our informants experience such problems. Hence we are, so to speak, rejecting the null hypothesis. It should be noted here that we are not making any claims of *causality*, i.e. we do not claim that being a foreign student causes a particular type of experience. The only thing that we are claiming is that there is a *correlation* between the two. Hypothetically speaking, had we interviewed a control group consisting of Swedes, we could equally well have obtained the same kind of answers; that is, that Swedes also experience problems of a social nature in interacting with fellow students. Anyway, we are confident in that our study is not flawed with any Type 1 error.¹⁹

4.3 Things that could be done better: suggestions for the future

As for things we did not do but perhaps should have, we can note the following:

In addition to our pre-sample, we should have prepared a "buffer-sample" from which to add so as to at least lower the drop-out rate; 20 non-available potential informants from a pre-sample of 46 is a rather high number (43.5%). On the other hand, a highly positive experience was the fact that only 1 of those that we did get hold of declined to be interviewed; we would hardly have been surprised had this number been higher. As for the choice of pre-sample, we could actually have been able to chose that on the basis of the answers provided in the questionnaire (distributed by the Questionnaire Group). Thus, we could have dismissed quota sampling all together. However, only about 50% of the total population did receive a questionnaire.

With regard to the setting: as the unrecorded face-to-face interview (which took place in a cafeteria) might indicate, a certain degree of formality ought to

¹⁹ As for Type 2 errors, since we are not supporting the null hypothesis, we are not prone to this kind of error at all.

be desirable, in order to ensure the progress of an abstract "agenda". Even in a less structured interview, some kind of presupposed abstract "agenda" is helpful; at least from our point of view. A formal setting, on the other hand, has the negative effect of rendering a discussion-like nature more difficult to pursue. However, a formal setting in a for the informant neutral and/or comfortable setting (e.g. at home) could render the interview situation less stiff.

More care could have been taken in the handling and recording of data. Note-taking has its limits and puts an enormous responsibility on the interviewer. However, tape recording has its drawbacks as well; for instance, it limits the choice of setting, affects the willingness of informants to answer certain questions, etc.

With regard to the interview guide, we might have added questions on how well they consider themselves to know/understand the Swedish language, and if they consider themselves to be foreign students. Also, the one question that could have been deleted was the one on means of financial subsistence, since this, we later realized, has no apparent bearing on the main subject matter.

If time would have allowed it, we could have correlated our interview guide with the answers provided by the Questionnaire Group; e.g. by preparing questions about problems explicitly mentioned in the answers to the questionnaire, provided that the questionnaire raised questions about problems related to communication in the first place.

4.4 A few last words

Most of the above "should-have-dones" could have been avoided had we been allowed a more generous time schedule; or perhaps, had we taken better care of planning and more wisely budgeted our time. However, time schedules are most often a basic fact of research; thus restricted time schedules, bad planning, etc., are likely to happen whether this had been a time-limited course assignment or not. This, of course, is not an excuse, but a note-worthy point nonetheless.

Considering the fact that this is a course assignment in *Field Methods*, we feel confident that we have faired well, and despite some minor flaws, we feel that

we have learned a great deal about field work, particularly about interviewing. Thus, next time we know what to expect and how to deal with that.

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