

A SIMPLE GUIDE TO THE NORDIC LANGUAGES by Rory Wilson

The following is intended to help when using a dictionary to translate bits of Scandinavian text. It concentrates on Danish and Swedish, with some comments on Norwegian. In Norway there are two variants: this sticks to Bokmål (also known as Riksmål), which is the one that is mainly used in books etc., while Nynorsk or Landsmål is mainly limited to the west of the country. Except for the alphabet and numbers I have avoided Finnish, which is a Finno-Ugric language with a completely different grammar and structure. The three Nordic languages use a grammatical gender, but the rules governing the choice of this gender, such as they are, are not sufficiently obvious or clear and it will be necessary to check each word individually. After a while some patterns - as given in the larger dictionaries - should start to become clear.

ALPHABET

All four languages use the same letters as English, but all have extra letters which follow Z in the dictionary (that's why you had trouble finding Åbo, Åmål, Åndalsnes and Århus in the timetable's index of stations). The order is: Danish and Norwegian: Æ/æ, Ø/ø, Å/å; Finnish: Ä/ä, Ö/ö; and Swedish Å/å, Ä/ä, Ö/ö. Aa/aa can appear in Danish person, place and business names as this is the pre-1948 spelling of Å/å; there are similar archaic spellings elsewhere, such as Wexjö for Växjö. There are also the different Finnish and Swedish spellings in Finland: Åbo is the Swedish name for the city that Finnish speakers call Turku.

WORD ORDER

This is generally similar to English, but has slightly stricter rules.

The first element of the sentence is normally the subject: this can be anything from a single word to a long phrase (*The driver of last Thursday's seven thirty-five a.m. train from Avesta-Krylbo to Høje Taastrup's new girlfriend's elderly aunt's former doctor's tortoiseshell cat's stockbroker* is all a single concept). This is followed by the finite verb (the *started* in *The train started to move* or the *had* in *The train had just started to move*); with a few exceptions, the finite verb will be the second element in the sentence. The rest of the sentence then follows with the adverb, if any, which may be a negative (or at least the first word when they come in two parts: *ikke nogen/inte någon/ikke noen* etc.); the participle etc. (if any); the second part of the negative and then the rest. If the subject does not come first, which is usually because something else needs to be stressed (compare the bare statement *I will do it tomorrow* with *Tomorrow I will do it*, which stresses tomorrow, not today or three weeks next Wednesday), then it comes immediately after the finite verb. The two main cases when the verb comes first are orders and questions not using an interrogative (Why, When etc.): *Give me that brake-valve!*; *Have you found the traction-motor?* The verb may also come first in wishing or similar (the dear old subjunctive tense which you remember with such affection from school French lessons: *would that I could*).

PLURALS OF NOUNS

This is too complicated to fully explain here, but there are several main forms and it is possible for the noun to stay unchanged or keep the same ending, but with spelling changes within the word. Many plurals in Norwegian and Swedish can be predicted from their gender and singular endings, although there are enough exceptions and idiosyncrasies to cause problems, but Danish is more of a

problem. The most common plural endings are *-e*, *-er*, *-n* and *-r*, sometimes - mainly in Swedish - with changing of the vowel immediately before or doubling of consonants. A small *-s* is occasionally used for plurals, but is usually an indication of a possessive.

ARTICLES

The indefinite article (*a* or *an*) is either *en* or *et* in Danish, and *en* or *ett* in Norwegian and Swedish: the choice is based on the grammatical gender of the noun; there is also *ei* in Norwegian, but this is a largely obsolete female variant. The definite article singular is formed by adding *-en* or *-et* (not *ett*) to the end of the word; usually just *-n* or *-t* is added if it already ends in a vowel. In Danish or Norwegian the definite plural is formed by adding *-ne* or *-ene*, while in Swedish *-a*, *-en* or *-na* is added. When an adjective precedes the noun, *den*, *det* (both singular) or the plural *de* comes before the adjective, with the normal definite ending still on the noun in Norwegian and Swedish, but not in Danish, where only the *den*, *det* or *de* are used and the definite noun ending (*-n*, *-t*, *-ne* or *-ene*) is omitted. An adjective declines according to the gender and number of the noun: the following example using the Swedish *stor* (big) and *vagn* (coach) should make this clear:

en vagn - a coach
en stor vagn - a big coach
vagnen - the coach
den stora vagnen - the big coach
vagnar - coaches
stora vagnar - big coaches
vagnarna - the coaches
de stora vagnarna - the big coaches

Note that in *den stora vagnen/de stora vagnarna* there is an article both before the adjective and on the end of the noun, but the Danish equivalents are *den store vogn/de store vogne*, i.e. no article on the end of the noun. Otherwise the three languages follow the same basic pattern. Also that *vagn* is common gender: with neuter gender the first three items for *tåg* (train) would be *ett* *tåg/ett stort* *tåg/tåget*.

POSSESSIVES

A noun adds an *s* to form the possessive case (*vagns/vagnens/vagnars/vagnarnas*) and there is normally no apostrophe, but they can be used after a word ending in *-s*, *-x* or *-z*: *Lars' tog* (but not in *Jans tog*). Possessive adjectives also decline according to the gender and number of the noun (e.g. *min/mitt/mina* are the two singulars and the plural of Swedish for 'my'). In Norwegian it is possible for the possessive adjective to follow the noun, which will be in the definite: *vagnen min/den store vognen min*.

VERBS

Verbs do not decline as in many languages: in each tense the verb is unchanged whatever the subject (I, you (singular), he/she/it, we, you (plural), they); even in English we add an *s* to the third person singular. There are quite a few strong verbs i.e.: ones where the spelling within the word changes for different tenses (*I write, I wrote*). When dealing with the future it is more common than in English to

use the present tense together with some indication of time, as in *I am doing it tomorrow*, rather than one of the future tense constructions.

ADVERBS OF MOTION

Many adverbs have different forms depending on whether they indicate location or motion. Here in Swedish can be *Jag är här* (I am here), *Jag kom hit* (I came (to) here) or *Jag går härifrån* (I am going (away) from here): Danish and Norwegian have similar constructions. This is a major trap as usage varies between the languages.

COMPOUNDING

Compounding, which is particularly common in Swedish, is the joining together of two or more words, to form a single concept, most often a noun or verb. *Godståg* and *motorvagn* are simple examples of this, but I have seen one railway term made up of six words totalling thirty-nine letters.

APOSTROPHES

In addition to their limited use in possessives they can be used in the definite of an acronym or similar: tv'et, wc'et.

NUMBERS

All four languages use a comma instead of a decimal point: 3,7 is three point seven. Except in Danish thousands are shown by a space: 37 000 000 is thirty-seven million; in Danish a dot is used: 37.000.000. It should be noted that, particularly in Swedish, *mil* (mile) can mean 10 km, although it can also mean an Imperial (or similar) mile. A similar confusion can appear around the Swedish *foot* (foot), which is about 7 mm. less than an Imperial one. In Swedish dates can be shown YYYYMMDD: the Titanic was lost on 120414.

I would welcome any suggestions or corrections: it is over twenty years since I studied grammar in any detail.

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