

Benefits of Vocabulary of Latin Origin for the Learners of Swedish and Danish

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Abstract

Latin and Greek are primary donor languages to Swedish and Danish, which do not belong to the Romance but Germanic languages. The present study conducted a vocabulary survey to examine the advantage of frequently used Swedish and Danish vocabulary of Latin or Greek origin and their English equivalents for learning Swedish and Danish. The Oxford 3000 list was used as the primary reference of high-frequency English words. As a result, 556 loanwords of Latin or Greek origin are included in the most frequently used 3,000 Swedish and Danish words and approximately 430 loanwords can be used with a similar pronunciation in English. Therefore, the present study concluded that knowledge of most used Swedish and Danish vocabulary of Greek or Latin origin could help speakers of English learn Swedish and Danish.

Keywords: Swedish; Danish; English; Latin; loanword.



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1. Introduction

1.1. Advantages of Sweden and Denmark

While Sweden and Denmark are the 57th and 134th countries in size, they have maintained two of the most successful education systems in the world, according to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an international pedagogical research program conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018). Additionally, these countries provide Swedish and Danish nationals with a comprehensive social welfare system. Analyzing the Swedish and Danish languages is essential to understand the education and social systems of both countries, especially for people of other countries, who are interested in the development of these systems.

1.2. Characteristics of Swedish and Danish

Swedish and Danish languages belong to the North Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family (Crystal, 2010). Therefore, the vocabularies of the two languages retain phonetic and semantic similarities. For instance, Swedish and Danish words with identical spellings are *brun* (brown), *finger* (finger), *hus* (house), *salt* (salt), and *vinter* (winter). Swedish and Danish words with slightly different forms are *fot* and *fod* (foot), *snö* and *sne* (snow), and *sommar* and *sommer* (summer) (Hille, 2011). Between Swedish and Danish, there are minor differences in spellings, e.g., the Swedish *ambulans* and the Danish *ambulance* (ambulance), the Swedish *finans* and the Danish *finance* (finance), and the Swedish *konferens* and the Danish *conference* (conference).

However, many terms originate from Germanic languages and are completely different from English words of Latin origin, such as the word “language.” The Swedish *språk* and the Danish *sprog* (language) retain a phonetic similarity to the German *Sprache* (language). The Swedish *huvudstad* (capital city) consists of *huvud* (head) and *stad* (city), a structure similar to the German *Hauptstadt* (capital) originating from *Haupt* (head) and *Stadt* (city). The Swedish *sjukhus* (hospital) consists of *sjuk* (sick, ill) and *hus* (house) (Hille, 2011). Its German equivalent *Krankenhaus* (hospital) includes *Kranke* (patients) and *Haus* (house) (Clark and Thyen, 2013). Nevertheless, there are also many similar pairs between basic Swedish and English verbs, such as *dricka* (drink), *komma* (come), *se* (see), and *sitta* (sit). Moreover, similar verb pairs between Swedish and German include the Swedish *läsa* and the German *lesen* (read) and the Swedish *skriva* and the German *schreiben* (write). Due to these similarities, German speakers appear to learn fundamental Swedish vocabulary with ease.

1.3. Objective

This study aims to propose an efficient approach to learning Swedish and Danish words of Latin or Greek origin. The method is primarily oriented toward native English speakers who are interested in learning basic Swedish and Danish. However, the findings of the study will also help speakers of French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese languages because these also include many words of Latin and Greek origin. For instance, the Swedish and Danish nouns *natur* (nature), *kultur* (culture), and *filosofi* (philosophy) correspond to the Italian *natura* (nature), *cultura* (culture), and *filosofia* (philosophy), respectively (Bulhosen et al., 2013). Other basic words of Latin origin, which remain similar phonetically as well as semantically, are the Swedish *fönster*, the German *Fenster*, the Italian *finestra*, and the French *fenêtre*, all of which mean “window,” originating from the Latin *fenestra* for window (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013). The primary references for Latin and Greek vocabularies are the *Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Morwood, 2005) and the *Pocket Oxford Classical Greek Dictionary*, respectively (Morwood and Taylor, 2002).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Finnish Vocabulary of Latin or Greek Origin

In addition to Swedish and Danish, Finnish vocabulary includes loanwords originating from Ancient Greek and Latin. Uni (2018) analyzed the percentages of loanwords of Latin or Greek origin in Finnish, selecting approximately 3,100 of the most frequently used Finnish words. According to the Oxford 3000 word list—a list of approximately 3,000 basic words used to define entry words in the Oxford Dictionary—those words corresponded to the 3,000 most frequently used English words. The study discovered 191 loanwords, which equals approximately 6% of the selected vocabulary. For instance, the Finnish *filosofia* (philosophy) is a loanword from the Greek and Latin *philosophia* (philosophy).

2.2. Advantages of Cross-linguistic Vocabulary Similarities

Nation (2001) suggested that there are the benefits to learners' first language(s) in teaching English vocabulary. Nation and Webb (2011) highlighted the advantages of using English words that share the same origin in teaching English vocabulary. A specific example is demonstrated with the words *fact*, *factory*, and *feasible*. The origin of these words is the Latin verb *facere* (do, make) (Stevenson and Waite, 2011). Sanders' (2017) study provides comprehensive analyses of Germanic languages spoken in Northern European countries. A linguistic similarity in the vocabularies of the studied language enables speakers of other European languages to become more aware of the shared vocabulary of Latin or Greek origin, which benefits their vocabulary learning.

Koda (2005) advocated the efficacy of explicit vocabulary learning without contexts. According to her, second-language learners who already possess the cognitive ability to use first-language vocabulary equivalents of the target language can rapidly develop their second-language comprehension skills. She also emphasized that comprehension abilities of learners through incidental vocabulary learning would significantly determine learning success levels. In other words, decontextualized vocabulary learning is more effective than implicit learning.

Swan (1997) chose the English words *tree*, *wood* (as a material), *wood* (as a small forest), and *forest* in order to compare them against their French, Swedish, and Danish equivalents. The French equivalents were *arbre* (tree, arbor), *bois* (wood as a material and also a small forest), and *forêt* (forest); the Danish counterparts were *træ* (tree; wood as a material) and *skov* (forest); and the Swedish equivalents were *träd* (tree), *trä* (wood as a material), and *skog* (forest). The semantic distinctions between the English and French terms are almost identical for the listed cognates, but the Swedish and Danish words for *forest* are not as similar to their English and French equivalents. Additionally, the English *forest* and the French *forêt* (forest) originate from the Latin *forestis* (outside) (Stevenson and Waite, 2011). The semantic and morphological similarities between English and French may benefit both English-speaking learners of French and French-speaking learners of English.

Similarly, a study by Odlin and Jarvis (2004) compared English texts written by Finnish and Swedish learners of English. Swedish participants were found to use the English preposition *for* with more accuracy than Finnish learners because the Swedish cognate, *för*, is similar to the English word. In Finnish, the ending *-lle*, which is connected to nouns and the relevant qualifying adjectives, has a similar function as the English *for*, but it has no morphological similarity to the English preposition. Studies such as that of Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) note that it is sometimes difficult to identify the exact reason for the errors made by language learners. However, the absence of a similar word in the Finnish participants' first language may have negatively affected their production. Moreover, Odlin and Jarvis (2004) observed a distinct difference between Swedish and Finnish students' usage of *what*, which has a Swedish cognate (*vad*) but no morphologically similar counterpart in Finnish. Therefore, Odlin and Jarvis suggested that the presence of Swedish equivalents helped the Swedish learners to produce the aforementioned English words.

3. Materials and Methods

In this study, the primary reference for high-frequency English words was the Oxford 3000 list. The author of the study counted Swedish and Danish words of Latin or Greek origin within the scope of the Swedish and Danish equivalents of the English list. The selected Swedish and Danish words were then sorted according to their origins. The first category was the vocabulary of Latin origin; the second was that of Greek origin.

4. Results

In total, 556 words of Latin and Greek origin were included in the study's list of basic Swedish and Danish vocabulary equivalents to the most frequently used 3,000 English words. The number of loanwords was equal to 18.5% of the total number of words in basic Swedish and Danish vocabulary. Approximately 430 loanwords can be used with a similar pronunciation in English. The total number of Latin loanwords was 474 (e.g., *universitet* "university" and *station* "station"), and that of Greek loanwords was 82 (e.g., *geografi* "geography" and *kategori* "category").

5. Discussion

5.1. Swedish and Danish Words Ending in *-i*

Table 1 demonstrates several Swedish and Danish words ending in *-i*.

The English equivalents end with the suffix *-y*. Among the listed words in Table 1, only the Swedish *ekonomi* and the Danish *økonomi* (economy) have different spellings owing to the etymology of the word *economy*; its

Swedish and Danish equivalents is the Greek *oikonomia* (economy, household management) (Morwood and Taylor, 2002).

Table-1. Examples of Similar Words in Swedish, Danish, and English (1)

S.: Swedish D.: Danish			
S./D. <i>energi</i> (energy)	S. <i>ekonomi</i> D. <i>økonomi</i> (economy)	S./D. <i>filosofi</i> (philosophy)	S./D. <i>geografi</i> (geography)
S./D. <i>industri</i> (industry)	S./D. <i>kategori</i> (category)	S./D. <i>teknologi</i> (technology)	S./D. <i>teori</i> (theory)

5.2. Swedish and Danish Words Ending in *-isk*

Table 2 presents several Swedish and Danish words ending in *-isk*.

The listed English equivalents end with the suffix *-ic* or *-ical*. Other similar Swedish and English words are *akademisk* (academic), *grammatisk* (grammatical), and *kritisk* (critical). Among the listed words in Table 2, only the Swedish *ekonomisk* and the Danish *økonomisk* (economic) have different spellings for the aforementioned reason.

Table-2. Examples of Similar Words in Swedish, Danish, and English (2)

S.: Swedish D.: Danish			
S./D. <i>automatisk</i> (automatic)	S./D. <i>dramatisk</i> (dramatic)	S. <i>ekonomisk</i> D. <i>økonomisk</i> (economic)	S./D. <i>elektronisk</i> (electronic)
S./D. <i>fysisk</i> (physical)	S./D. <i>klassisk</i> (classical)	S./D. <i>kemisk</i> (chemical)	S./D. <i>logisk</i> (logical)
S./D. <i>organisk</i> (organic)	S./D. <i>politisk</i> (political)	S./D. <i>romantisk</i> (romantic)	S./D. <i>teknisk</i> (technical)

5.3. Swedish and Danish Words Ending in *-tion*

Table 3 presents Swedish, Danish, and English words that end with *-tion*.

The suffix *-tion* partially retains its original Latin form *-tio*. The spellings of these Swedish and Danish words remain similar to their English equivalents. This similarity benefits Romance language learners who speak Swedish or Danish.

Table-3. Examples of Similar Words in Swedish, Danish, and English (3)

S.: Swedish D.: Danish			
S./D. <i>definition</i> (definition)	S./D. <i>funktion</i> (function)	S./D. <i>nation</i> (nation)	S./D. <i>proportion</i> (proportion)
S./D. <i>reaktion</i> (reaction)	S./D. <i>produktion</i> (production)	S./D. <i>station</i> (station)	S./D. <i>tradition</i> (tradition)

5.4. Swedish and Danish Words Ending in *-itet*

Table 4 presents several Swedish and Danish words ending in *-itet*.

The listed English words end with *-ity*. The majority of English speakers learning Swedish and Danish may recognize the listed words as cognates. Additionally, the majority of people who know basic vocabulary of an Indo-European language may understand these Swedish and Danish words without additional instructions.

Table-4. Examples of Similar Words in Swedish, Danish, and English (4)

S.: Swedish D.: Danish			
S./D. <i>aktivitet</i> (activity)	S./D. <i>elektricitet</i> (electricity)	S./D. <i>identitet</i> (identity)	S./D. <i>kvalitet</i> (quality)
S./D. <i>kvantitet</i> (quantity)	S./D. <i>nationalitet</i> (nationality)	S./D. <i>prioritet</i> (priority)	S./D. <i>universitet</i> (university)

5.5. Swedish and Danish Words Ending in *-iv*

Table 5 presents several Swedish and Danish words ending in *-iv*.

The listed English words end with *-ive*. Despite minor differences in spellings, the listed words remain almost identical to their English equivalents.

Table-5. Examples of Similar Words in Swedish, Danish, and English (5)

S.: Swedish D.: Danish			
S./D. <i>aktiv</i> (active)	S./D. <i>alternativ</i> (alternative)	S./D. <i>initiativ</i> (initiative)	S./D. <i>konservativ</i> (conservative)
S./D. <i>negativ</i> (negative)	S./D. <i>objektiv</i> (objective)	S./D. <i>positiv</i> (positive)	S./D. <i>subjektiv</i> (subjective)

5.6. Swedish Words Ending in *-ell*

Table 6 presents several Swedish words ending in *-ell*. The Danish and English equivalents end with *-el* and *-al*, respectively. The endings of these words are similar to their French equivalents, such as *formel* (formal), *individuel* (individual), *industriel* (industrial), and *culturel* (cultural). The spellings of the Danish, French, and English adjectives *international* and *national* remain identical.

Table-6. Examples of Similar Words in Swedish, Danish, and English (6)

S.: Swedish D.: Danish			
S. <i>finansiell</i> D. <i>finansiel</i> (financial)	S. <i>formell</i> D. <i>formel</i> (formal)	S. <i>individuell</i> D. <i>individuel</i> (individual)	S. <i>industriell</i> D. <i>industriel</i> (industrial)
S. <i>internationell</i> D. <i>international</i> (international)	S. <i>nationell</i> D. <i>national</i> (national)	S. <i>kulturell</i> D. <i>kulturel</i> (cultural)	S. <i>traditionell</i> D. <i>traditionel</i> (traditional)

5.7. Swedish and Danish Words Ending in *-ur*

Table 7 presents several Swedish and Danish words ending in *-ur*.

The listed English words end with *-ure*. Speakers of English and most other European languages may be able to identify the meaning of these Swedish and Danish words with ease.

Table-7. Examples of Similar Words in Swedish, Danish, and English (7)

S.: Swedish D.: Danish		
S./D. <i>arkitektur</i> (architecture)	S./D. <i>kultur</i> (culture)	S./D. <i>litteratur</i> (literature)
S./D. <i>natur</i> (nature)	S./D. <i>struktur</i> (structure)	S./D. <i>temperatur</i> (temperature)

6. Conclusion

This study examined the utility of basic Swedish and Danish words of Latin and Greek origins while preparing a Swedish and Danish equivalent to the Oxford 3000 list. As a result, 556 Swedish and Danish words originating from Latin or Greek were observed among the approximately 3,000 most used Swedish and Danish words. The majority of these words remain phonetically similar to their English equivalents. This is one of the primary advantages of the shared loanwords. The findings indicate that the selected Swedish and Danish loanwords assist English speakers in learning basic Swedish and Danish words.

Future studies should focus on other linguistic features that retain similarities among Swedish, Danish, English, and other European languages. Such studies could help learners of Swedish and Danish deepen their knowledge of the target languages.

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