

# Challenging understandings in pluralistic societies

Language and culture *loose* in school *sites*  
and *losing sight* of democratic agendas  
in Swedish education?

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This article highlights dominant and selective traditions vis-à-vis language and culture in terms of how schools and academics are organized, curricula and syllabi are structured and what is made explicit in social practices in education. Selective traditions allow language to be organized and “naturalized” in concepts that are *linear*, *relational* and *geographical* and in terms of *horizontal* (i.e. different language codes) and *vertical* (i.e. different learner categories) divisions such that communication and meaning-making potentials of education remain unexploited. Currently available metaphors vis-à-vis culture build upon static constructions of Self and Other. This article discusses important policy paradoxes and calls for the need to give visibility to complexities in school sites. Juxtaposing traditions of operationalizing language and culture in educational settings through selective understandings regarding learning and development creates, it is argued here, a challenge for democratic experiences within institutionalized education.

## Introduction

‘Culture’ has run astray. And it is now being used helter-skelter to promote all kinds of special interests ... Culture is no thing with an objective, material existence. It is just an idea, a word that can be filled with various kinds of contents depending on one’s vantage point<sup>1</sup> ... ‘Culture’ has become a new concept of race in that it functions in a reductionist manner to make ‘them’ lesser human beings than ‘us’ (Wikan 1999, pp. 57–58).

In this article I go beyond issues of linguistic and cultural rights and situate language and culture in the realm of democratic agendas – both at the local Swedish level and on the global stage. I do this by focusing upon the context of education, where schools are not merely seen as operational sites for national and international level policies with a bearing on multilingualism and diversity. Schools, I argue, are sites where we privilege certain understandings vis-à-vis “language” and “culture” and repress other understandings. Schools are also sites that are normatively understood as being the locations where learning occurs. A shift in understandings where schools can be seen as *one of many sites or locations* where children are socialized into their primary languages – i.e. “ways with words”<sup>2</sup> – and primary cultures – i.e. ways of being – allows us to understand the problems inherent with more narrow selective positions vis-à-vis learning. Such a shift in positions, I will argue, has the potential to contribute towards furthering our understandings regarding pluralistic societies and throwing light on “the ongoing tension of the multilingual balancing act” in education (Hult 2004, p. 196).

Inspired by the engaging critique of issues regarding race and culture in Norway by social anthropologist Unni Wikan,<sup>3</sup> professor at Oslo University, my aim is to draw attention to the fact that in addition to culture, language too is loose in school sites in Sweden. My aim is also to simultaneously raise issues that can revitalise democratic potentials of language education in pluralistic societies like Sweden.

This article can also be understood in terms of a conversation between pluralistic cultural and linguistic experiences from a variety of positions. These positions can be seen as having arisen from different intellectual and life journey’s and roles that I have had the opportunity to participate in. While I refrain from explicitly using private life spheres to illustrate the positions that I juxtapose here, I wish to acknowledge the not so trivial bearing that these life experiences have had in shaping and raising questions vis-à-vis hegemonic conceptions of identity and language learning.<sup>4</sup> While these life journey experiences remain in the background, a position that I draw upon explicitly in this conversation pertains to research that my colleagues, students and I have conducted in the areas of multilingualism, culture and identity within and at the crossroads of the academic fields of Communication Studies, Literacy Studies, Deaf Studies and Migration and Ethnicity Studies during the last two decades. Here I also draw upon experiences as a faculty member involved in teacher education. These experiences and this body of research and the issues that arise from it can be situated within frameworks such as sociocultural theory, postcolonial perspectives and critical ethnogra-

phy. Conversations between these perspectives and positions here enable challenging understandings in pluralistic and diversifying societies with the aim of re-framing issues related to culture and language in society at large and in educational settings in particular.

Language and culture cannot, for a number of reasons, be viewed as separate entities. They are enmeshed in one another in very significant ways. Discussions that focus these two central areas weave into one another in the four different sections of this article. They are for heuristic purposes, however, focused upon under seven intertwined sub-themes in section three (Cultures of language sciences and discourses in culture: positions and paradoxes). Here issues related to learning and development are initially focused and exemplified through the areas of language studies in school sites. Another theme in this central section focuses recent research in the language sciences. Issues regarding identities and Swedish culture are elaborated upon as the final themes in section three. Issues related to the educational sciences and challenges in Swedish education today are reflected upon finally in the fourth, concluding section of this article. The next section (section two), touches upon issues that highlight how short term goals (albeit with noble intentions) regarding learning and human identity have democratic implications within school settings and the world at large.

## Issues regarding the Other and issues regarding language learning – a reflective note

A for Angola  
B for Burundi  
C for Côte d'Ivoire  
D for Darfu  
E for Eritrea  
F for Falluja  
G for ...  
H ...

The above could well be lines from a new ABC-reader for Scandinavian and European children starting preschool in preparation for their future roles in a global society gone hay-wire. A new ABC-reader developed on the basis of the access and familiarity to the distanced horrors of massacres that mass media in our complex society makes available to our young citizens in the cosiness of our homes. A reader that can be seen as an introduction to reading and writing and as a preparation for these children's future jobs in curbing global terrorism and conflicts.

The violence, massacres and atrocities that we witness in the mass media and information technology age are presented to the public as occurring far away in the distance and among groups of people who in our views are less mature and less informed. For it is not here in our midst that the untold horrors of war and poverty unfold in the new millennium. This collective understanding of “ourselves” as more informed Europeans, Scandinavians and Swedes and the boundaries that we draw against these less fortunate and less developed “others” has a very long history (Bhabha 2002, Ericksson, Ericksson Baaz & Thörn 2002, Said 1978/2002, 1981). The euro-centrism (including US-centrism) and naivety of many of the ideas that contribute to such boundary marking are so well entrenched in our collective consciousness and collective identities that we become nonplussed when we are reminded that not only can Europe, from a historical perspective, be held responsible for what we conceive of as chaos in the Southern nations but that many untold atrocities are being committed within our own national and European contexts even today (compare for instance Wikan 2002, 2004).

However, it is not the explicit horrors that come to mind when spaces like Angola, Burundi, Côte d’Ivoire and Darfu in the South or racial tensions in spaces like Ireland, Denmark and Srebrenica in Europe and Trollhättan, Salem and Sjöbo in Sweden are focused upon in this article. In other words, what I am attempting to explore here is not the distanced and macabre sites of unspeakable atrocities (that is a very important task in its own right), and racial eruptions and tensions in nearby countries and cities. The aim here is to explore and focus upon the mundane and much closer sites of present day schools in the Swedish context; sites where we attempt to socialize the coming generations into humanistic ways of thinking and democratic ways of being; sites that are also commissioned to teach the “3 R’s”<sup>5</sup> including the “ABC’s” of language and culture.

It is my contention, however, that the atrocities and wars that we witness both through historical narratives and through the mass media continue to be fought because of our socially constructed collective understandings of who we are, our constructions of the Other and boundary marking processes that enable these understandings. In addition, an ABC-reader – irrespective of whether it conjures up images of mundane entities like Apples, Balls, Cats and Dolls or more terrifying images from Angola, Burundi, Côte d’Ivoire and Darfu – represents a particular tradition that has dominated our understandings of communication generally and language learning particularly. In other words, the ways in which we understand both “language” and “culture” contribute and play a prominent role in constructions of Self and Other and the ways in which we talk about

learning language and learning culture. However, this *talking about learning to converse* is at odds with how we *learn to converse*. Thus, similar understandings regarding language and culture can be seen as being at the roots of “distanced atrocities” and as inhabiting our own school sites.

It is these understandings regarding language and culture that are discussed in the next central section in this article. The contention being that particular understandings vis-à-vis language and culture have gained currency both in society at large and in school sites with the concomitant result that the potential for democratic agendas and experiences in educational arenas have become marginalized.

## Cultures of language sciences and discourses in culture: positions and paradoxes

### An introductory note on language and development

Language is not only the most powerful of our human “inventions” and artefacts but it is also the unique cultural tool that makes us human (Bachtin 1986, Halliday 1978/90, Linell 1998, Säljö 2000, Wertsch 1998, Wittgenstein 1958). Language permeates our entire lives; it is as invisible to us as is the air that surrounds us; we require both air and language to exist and thrive.<sup>6</sup> While there is a concrete physical world “out there”, it is *use of language* that allows us to give meaning to this world and thereby create our realities. And languages change keeping pace with our changing needs. While this understanding of language has found prominence in recent paradigmatic shifts in the human sciences, its essence has been recognized and intrigued philosophers and scholars in different parts of the world for many centuries. The current prominence accorded to the meaning-making and social practices positions accorded to human language and communication, notwithstanding, there appears to exist a “great divide” between these more recent social-constructionistic and sociocultural perspectives, and the ways in which many branches of the language sciences are conceptualized. For present analytical purposes one could differentiate between a dominant perspective in the language sciences where form, structure and monological approaches flourish, and newer communicatively oriented perspectives that challenge the above hegemony. In the latter, the language sciences are approached from dialogical points of departure (see for instance discussions in Dysthe 2001, Linell 1998, Säljö 2000). Linked to this divide is a particular perspective on

human development that has contributed strongly to dominant views regarding learning generally and language learning specifically.

Our understanding of development – regardless of whether it is societal or ontogenetical development that is focused upon – is dominated by a linear construct. Societies are viewed in terms of “developing–underdeveloped–developed”. While these terms are related to assumptions vis-à-vis economic welfare, two issues can be raised for present purposes. Firstly, these terms are arbitrary and reductionist “where the less-to-a-more developed progression ... perspective fails to view development in terms of both time and space” (Bagga-Gupta 1995, p. xix). Secondly, education is viewed as playing a pivotal role in bringing about both ontogenetical and societal development. At the individual level, we understand ourselves as living linear lives where conception or birth are viewed as starting points and death is an end point. While a linearity in development in the biological sense needs to be acknowledged, (visible) physical changes in a human being between birth and death has lead to a rational transfer to other areas of human development. Linear trajectories are however perhaps not the most appropriate ways to understand human intellectual development in general and human language development in particular. For instance, the human capacity or “brain as container” metaphor has close semblance to the dominant and reductionistic understanding related to language development and learning. A few examples are in order here to illustrate these issues.

### Divisions and boundaries in the language sciences: some examples

A basic conceptualisation in the language sciences can be exemplified in the organisational and administrative division between *different language codes* eg. Swedish, English, French, Hindi, Turkish, Swedish Sign Language, British Sign Language, etc., and *different codes for different learner categories*. The latter administrative and organizational set of categories can be exemplified by the following subjects in the Swedish national syllabi: Swedish (for ethnic Swedes), Swedish as a second language (for ethnic minorities or immigrant students in schools), Swedish for (adult) immigrants, Swedish as a second language for the deaf, English as a second language (for ethnic Swedes and ethnic minority Swedes), French as a foreign language (for ethnic Swedes and ethnic minority Swedes), Turkish as a home language (for ethnic minority or immigrant Swedish students), etc. These two primary ways of organizing language can be

called the *horizontal division* (i.e. different language codes) and the *vertical division* (i.e. different codes for different learner categories) in the language landscape of the Swedish educational system.

I have argued elsewhere that concepts in the language sciences with a *numerical* connotation (eg. first, second, third, bilingual, etc), *relational* signification (eg. my language, your language, their language, mother tongue, native language) or *geographical* emphasis (eg. national language, home language, foreign language, etc.) contribute to creating simplistic and reductionist boundaries (Bagga-Gupta 2003). It is here significant to recognize that these numerical, relational and geographical concepts in the language sciences are also pushed by a selective individual centred tradition vis-à-vis human learning and development.

The concept “bilingualism” can, in this context, be seen as being a central (and slippery) term in the language sciences. “Few areas of linguistics are surrounded by as many misconceptions as is bilingualism” (Grosjean 1996, p. 20; see also Bagga-Gupta 1995, 2003, Cromdal 2000, Cromdal & Evaldsson 2003). The term bilingualism has a close bearing to a flora of related concepts. The latter include language subjects like “Swedish as a second language”, “Swedish as a second language for the deaf”, “first language”, “home language”, “mother tongue”, “foreign language”, etc. Recent studies of everyday language use in Swedish school sites indicate that bilingualism can no longer be understood in terms of competencies in two language codes. While a growing number of researchers situated within new paradigms in the human sciences acknowledge that a competencies view of two language codes is an idealization, *the misleading nature* of this conceptualization is more seldom highlighted. Monolingualism continues to be – incorrectly – understood even in the research literature in many parts of the North as the human norm, despite the growing awareness that the majority of the people in the world are in fact plurilingual.

Thus, taking the monolingual native ethnic Swede as a given point of departure, and particular understandings of language learning and human development has given legitimacy to other areas of language in the curriculum. This naturalization process has become further cemented within academia with the institutionalisation of highly narrow research chairs in different areas in the language sciences at some universities. In other words, the horizontal and vertical divisions in language education flourish both as administrative categories in Swedish school sites and within higher education. However, and that is my point, all these terms exist in relation to an assumed static, correct and desired point of departure, i.e. “Swedish”, and/or in relation to particular understandings of how (language) learning occurs.

### Further examples: miscalculations in the maths of language in school sites

Applying primary school knowledge of mathematics on the one hand and the often neglected theoretical points of departure which profess that the language we use (including the language that we use in academic discourses) creates in a very potent sense our realities, there is, I will emphasize, a need to question the recurring use of the concept “bilingual” in everyday life, in the mass-media, in policy documents and in our academic writings when reference is made to human beings and societies that are in fact multilingual and plurilingual (see also above). For instance, we continue to reduce multilingual human beings in Swedish society and present day Swedish educational settings to “bilingual” human beings. An administrative/organisational logic requires that school sites offer “Swedish as a second language” to ethnic minority Swedes (i.e. immigrants and/or indigenous minorities) despite the fact that many of them are already at least bi- and trilingual. In addition, offering “third generation immigrants” (sic) the possibility to study the subject “Swedish as a second language” is not only difficult to understand (see also Myndigheten för skolutveckling 2004) but categorizing human beings in terms of generational backgrounds is highly contentious and defies basic democratic doctrines. A further anomaly pertains to the administrative and organisational logic that allows the present system to offer the subject “English (as a second language)” to both ethnic Swedes and ethnic minority Swedes. As I have illustrated and discussed elsewhere, the complexity of such administrative and organisational categorical thinking is particularly evident in school sites in Sweden that are reserved for audiologically deaf and hearing impaired students.<sup>7</sup> The tensions between giving recognition to deaf students’ language minority situation<sup>8</sup> in the post 1980s national school curricula and syllabi on the one hand, and the continuing organisation of school sites for this student group on the basis of their hearing levels on the other, disregards basic democratic rights and principles (see for instance Bagga-Gupta 2004). The current school law – School Law 1§6 – that regulates the segregated school form for deaf and some hard of hearing students stipulates that:

Special schools exist for children who *on account of* deafness or hearing impairment cannot attend comprehensive school or equivalent school sections for the developmentally delayed (SFS 1999:886, my translation, emphasis added).

Under the current “one school for all” guiding principle in Swedish education, the continuing negative point of departure in the organization of

special schools for a particular group of students raises issues that have not been considered in previous discussions. This segregated school form builds upon category thinking wherein regulations view deaf students as bilingual. Legitimacy is granted to the segregated school form because of the “students’ needs” vis-à-vis their two languages, i.e. “SSL as the first language (of the deaf)” and “Swedish as a second language for the deaf”. In other words, the vertical organisational division is seen as naturalizing the need for a segregated school “for the deaf”. This type of reductionist division loses sight of democratic potentials in language education in the Swedish “one school for all” system, not least because the division is here based upon hearing levels. A re-interpretation of language and culture in this situation would focus attention on the fallacy of “different language codes for different categories of learners” and allow for the emergence of a school form where SSL and Swedish are the primary languages of learning and instruction for all students irrespective of their hearing status.<sup>9</sup>

The specific, dominant traditions that allow us to categorize languages in numerical, relational and geographical terms build upon the “brain as container” model where it is believed that one’s “mother tongue” or “home language” (in singular) should naturally form the basis for learning any other language/s.<sup>10</sup> Such euro-centrism disregards global human realities and the large numbers of ethnographic descriptions in the research literature that highlight the fact that the majority of the worlds human beings are multilingual, language competencies develop throughout the life span and that languages tend to be domain specific in the lives of most plurilingual human beings.

### Situated language use and discourses in the language sciences: some research examples

The newer, pluralistic and dynamic understandings of communication, discussed above, have in part grown from studies of *language use* with an empirical ethnographically inspired approach to the study of human practices in and outside institutional settings (see for instance Erting 1994, Heath 1983, Lave 1988, Scribner & Cole 1981, Street 1984). This shift has also been enabled by analyses of discourses in and the rationalities that underlie the language science areas.

Focusing upon language classifications, the structure of language, language as “stuff to be learnt” and language as “mirroring reality” emerges from theoretical positions where ideological understandings of correctness

and purity are highlighted. However, paying attention to the complex layers of issues involved in the *communities of users of one or more languages* whether it is a group of villagers in Iran (Street 1984) or a Mexican community in northern California (Vasquez, Pease-Alvarez & Shannon 1994) or a group of women working in an Indian NGO that provides services for migrant children and communities (Bagga-Gupta 1995), or Deaf and hearing members of school communities in Sweden (Bagga-Gupta 2002, 2003) or Deaf home communities in north-eastern USA (Erting 1999, Erting, Thumann-Prezioso & Benedict 2000) or members of pluralistic hearing settings in Sweden (Carlsson & Bagga-Gupta 2001, Cromdal 2000) throws light upon the distributed, collective, chained ownership and evolution of languages. In other words, insights derived from this body of literature emerges from research that has studied how human beings use oral, written and Signed Languages in different settings and what discourses are dominant and/or latent in the language sciences.

Such research also has the potential to raise important issues vis-à-vis organizational practices with regards to languages in school sites. Here recent research on communication-practices in Swedish institutional contexts can be illustrative. Results from interactional studies conducted in special schools, national upper secondary schools for the deaf and at preschool institutional settings for (hearing) children who do not use Swedish as a primary language in their home spheres indicate that a demarcation is maintained between the formal teaching of language skills in language focused lessons/activities and uses of languages in other lessons/activities (where language is itself often not in focus).<sup>11</sup> Differences between focusing upon the form and function of languages is so clear cut that it appears that students unwittingly are afforded more meaningful and dialogical ways of participating in languages in the latter settings. This has, it has been argued, important implications for learning. These results are in line with the findings of a large scale evaluation project that studied classrooms in one percent of all Swedish preschools, schools and upper secondary schools recently (Skolverket 2000). In particular, the results from these different studies and projects seem to suggest that there is a tendency for language practices to become traditional and monological if and when students, for any number of reasons, are viewed as deviating from normal monolingual ethnic Swedish students. Thus for instance, multilingual immigrant students, Deaf students in bilingual school settings, ethnic minority Swedish students learning Swedish, all appear to receive more traditional language instruction if and when they are experienced as being weaker in the target language. Such studies continue to demonstrate the dominance of a monological-formalistic bias and the dominance of a traditional and narrow view of languages in school sites.

While research that has focused Swedish regulation texts during the post World War II period suggests that the first couple of national curricula clearly emphasized issues of language skills and acquisition, a slightly changed direction can be discerned in the more recent national curricula from the 1990s (Tornberg 2000, 2004). In other words, a small shift in focus towards meaning-making processes in everyday communication and cultural awareness is discernible in educational policy more recently. At the same time the dominant underlying assumptions that continue to guide discourses in language instruction, particularly in “foreign language pedagogy”, have been called “the impediment or curse of language instruction” (Tornberg 2000, my translation; compare with Linell 1993). This impediment or curse has been articulated as follows:

The assumption that language must *first* be developed *before* it can be used is one of the curses of language instruction, because it results in that ... language instruction primarily becomes a matter of the development of skills and because the communicative linguistic actions and the pluralistic meanings that could be enabled in educational situations are left untouched (Tornberg 2000, p. 265, my translation, italics in original).

I will suggest that Ulrika Tornbergs’ insights from her work in the area of foreign languages can be extended to other areas of language sciences in Sweden. It is also interesting that Jan Thavenius (1981) indicates that traditions in the area of Swedish language education during the 19th and 20th centuries can be traced back to the Middle Ages when Latin and Greek were status marked languages. He shows that language pedagogy that pertained to the “foreign languages” Latin and Greek were preserved even when curricular shifts occurred and enabled the introduction of “mother tongue” Swedish for ethnic Swedish students in the educational system.

Research that focuses upon the *everyday lives* of human beings who *use two or more languages* has in addition to challenging dominant images in pluralistic societies (especially in the North) also started changing our understandings of literacy and identity issues (see for instance Bagga-Gupta 1995, Heath 1983, Street 1984). Such research illustrates how adults and children develop the language/s they use to the level of competencies required in different domains and arenas in life. While these types of research findings from the areas of Language Pedagogy, Communication Studies, Literacy Studies and Deaf Studies suggest broader ways of understanding human communication, learning and development, it is important to ask whether these newer understandings have in any way shaped the very institution that is seen as having responsibility for the teaching and learning of languages and literacy (compare with Skolverket 2000).

### Moving *from* language *to* communication in schools and society

In addition to highlighting what is understood as the “curse of language instruction”, there is a need to recognize the “language policy paradox” of the 20th century within education. This paradox allows us to “squander our ethnic language resources more generally while lamenting our lack of foreign language resources” (Hornberger 2002, p. 47). This language policy paradox is highly salient in the North where current efforts attempt to give visibility to “heritage languages” in northern America, “community languages” in Australia and “ethnic indigenous languages” in Europe, so that these can survive the onslaught of current interpretations of globalization and market forces that emphasize our lack of “foreign language” resources. Shifts from the “language-as-a-problem” to the “language-as-a-human-right” perspective in the 1980s and 1990s notwithstanding, the language policy paradox continues to make itself felt in our midst.

And here we should ask ourselves what, if any, place “immigrant languages” like Turkish, Greek, Persian, etc., have in the education landscape of the Swedish language curricula in comparison to “foreign languages” like Spanish, French, German, etc. Such a question brings to center stage, assumptions inherent in both the language policy paradox and the curse of language instruction situations. My intention here is not to create an either-or situation between so called immigrant languages and so called foreign languages. Rather my point is to highlight the need to recognize the current situation in the language curricula landscape in Sweden and its mismatch with the realities in society at large. Such recognition can be seen as the first step towards implementing policy changes such that languages used in Swedish society are given a legitimate place in the language curricula.

As discussed above, the “skill focused” and “signal focused” conceptualisations of human communication are under critique in more recent research on languages and literacies. Sense-making, meaning-creation, situatedness of meaning, the social as a pivot, the need to focus practices, attending to membership issues, taking into account the representative and interpretive nature of language, etc., make up some of the complex – though nevertheless important – issues that arise on the educational agenda in the newer positions. Individual psychological processes are here viewed as having their basis in the social, and these processes are understood as having (socio)historical roots (Linell 1998, Vygotsky 1934/1986). That is why *communication-practices*, and not merely *language codes* become analyt-

ically interesting. The Swedish concepts “språk” and “språkande” can be used to differentiate between the monological and dialogical positions discussed here. This distinction builds upon a previous pair of concepts that have been used to operationalize different theoretical positions vis-à-vis learning – “inlärning” and “lärande” – in the Swedish literature (Säljö 1992). Scholars working in different areas interested in issues of language, literacy and/or identity often take a sociolinguistic point of departure, and emphasize that the epistemological sense of the term “communication” is often forgotten in traditional perspectives.

### Identities and diversity: a matter of maths or a sense of change?

Implicit and central in the discussions above is that processes of globalisation and multilingual and cultural pluralistic diversification within Swedish society, have together contributed to changing (what is commonly understood as being) the former monolingual Swedish school into settings where a large number of languages are spoken and pluriculturalism is seen as becoming dominant. In fact, one can be overwhelmed when one shifts focus from issues of language to how culture is conceptualised. For instance, recognizing and supporting human linguistic and cultural diversity are not prioritized agendas when one compares humankind's efforts vis-à-vis biological and environmental diversity. In this context, demographic and mobility statistics play an important function. However, while such statistics constitute one type of social indicator of any given society or nation state,<sup>12</sup> there is need to reflect upon data of this kind, situate them in socio-historical and socio-economical contexts (see for instance Dyring 1994, Reinans 1995) and also recognize the fluidity of national boundaries in the new millennium.

Swedish society, for instance, has been a diverse space for a very long time and the meetings of peoples from other spaces with a multitude of linguistic and cultural backgrounds has contributed to and shaped popular images of what we today consider to be *the* “original and authentic” homogenous Swedish culture. Mass media and IT revolutions during the last quarter of the 20th century have re-vitalized, in both positive and less than positive ways, our understandings of this original, core culture and the concomitant understandings of the more recent diversifying processes in the Swedish national context. In other words, the explosive access to contemporary media has given rise to specific understandings where recent diversifying processes are viewed as being more dramatic

and as having created a more heterogeneous society. These popular understandings also seep into the academic literature. However, some critical literature suggests that these understandings of recent diversifying processes in Sweden is a *myth*:

Sweden might best be characterized as a *multilingual polity with a monolingual image*. Though the stereotype of Sweden as homogenous is widespread, its historically homogenous monolingual culture is as mythological as the gnomes and orges who were said in folklore to inhabit the nation's forests. The social topography of Sweden is, in fact, quite complex ... *Although Sweden has a long history of both linguistic and cultural diversity dating back to antiquity, the Swedish language has been, and indeed still is, central in shaping what it means to be Swedish* (Hult 2004, p. 181, emphasis added).

At the same time one can discern an increase in collective reflections over “Swedishness” in recent day writings.<sup>13</sup> What does it mean to be “Swedish” in the 21st century? This question appears to engage many in society today not merely as a result of the post World War II immigrations and concomitant demographic changes in Sweden but also because of the recent outcomes of national referendums for joining the European Union (whereby Sweden has joined the EU but voted to remain outside it's economic framework). The geographical and mental space that we call Sweden has been witness to various types of both immigration and emigration through the ages (Norström & Svensson 1995; see also references in endnote 12). And while there has been both an in and out flow of human beings, the last century has seen an increase in the national population as a result of improved social services, health care and immigration.<sup>14</sup>

In the area of schooling, the 1960s have also witnessed the evolution of a new institution regulated by the first national curriculum for the compulsory comprehensive school level. This meant that for the first time a common school form encompassed *all children* in society and for a longer time period. The parallel changes in demographics thus became visible and needed to be attended to in the new evolving school sites during the 1960s. In addition, increasing possibilities to travel and the changing mass-media and IT landscapes during the last few decades have literally opened up new horizons for youngsters who are members of school sites:

Students in the Swedish school are today increasingly a part of the world. Many have foreign backgrounds. Students meet different languages and cultural manifestations in the school. Through trips abroad, school contacts with other countries and not least through the TV, they are more oriented internationally and globally in comparison to all previous gene-

rations of students. The world is drawn into the classroom via computer technology. Here students can have contact with other students from all parts of the world with the assistance of data bases. ... Hundreds of schools have more than twenty different nationalities represented within them. *Many [Swedish] schools are a world in miniature form* (Oscarsson 1995, p. 11, my translation, emphasis added).

In other words, the *sense of ongoing changes* in Swedish society is a result of complex social phenomena and cannot be solely and directly attributed to the traditional understandings of culture or multiculturalism.

### Other conceptualizations of culture in and outside school sites

A flora of different metaphors is commonly used in the research literature and mass media when discussions occur vis-à-vis movements within and movements of spaces towards what is called multiculturalism. Some have interestingly pointed out that the term multi-culturalism<sup>15</sup> is itself a metaphor that upholds a static view of essentialistic cultures that exist side by side. The same pertains to the essentialism inherent in Swedish and Norwegian concepts that allure to “cultural meetings” and “cultural collisions” (see for instance SOU 1996:143: “Clash or meeting. On the multicultural school. Part report from the national school committee”). As Wikan argues:

#### *Cultures Don't Meet, People Do*

... Cultures cannot meet, for ‘culture’ has no agency. It is just a word, a concept, and concepts do not meet. So talking as if cultures could do this or that – meet, collide, or clash – begs the question of what drives people. It is people, not culture, who have the power to act. And it is people, not culture, who can change life for better or for worse (2002, p. 83).

Some other common metaphors used when discussing multiculturalistic societies include the “melting pot”, “mosaic”, “kaleidoscope”, “salad bowl” etc. Inspired by urban ideologies in the United States in the early 19th century, Swedish theologian Hans Ingvar Roth (1998) has more recently offered the metaphor of a “garden park” when discussing what he sees as dramatic changes in the ethnic landscape of Sweden. These different metaphors at the core suggest collective and individual level identities that are static. They also take as points of departure identities that are represented by ownership and boundary marking. In other words, these commonly available metaphors in the literature contribute to un-

derstandings of “culture” that get reduced to ownership terms like “my culture”, “your culture”, “our culture”, “their culture”, etc., and where construction of Self and Other lies at the heart. Tornbergs (2000) analysis of the discourses of “culture” in curricular texts pertaining to foreign languages in Sweden further suggests the dominance of two positions that are problematic. The “culture as a fact fulfilled” position enables a view of culture closely built upon national definitions<sup>16</sup> and the “culture as a future competence” position both encompasses a skills perspective vis-à-vis learning and the idea that knowledge about a given culture is static and can be reduced to a given number of factual bits that can be learned (see also Wikan 1999). There are two other concepts that flourish in the popular and academic literature when discussions of issues related to culture take place. These are “background” and “roots”. Both these concepts make salient our obsession with the past in our attempts to describe and understand who we and Others are. More recent discussions in the educational literature have started challenging these types of reductionisms. For instance, inspired from philosophical perspectives, Tornberg offers a potential third hybrid position in terms of an “encounter” that allows us to focus upon the present and the future, so that *processes vis-à-vis ways of being* are highlighted when culture is discussed.

Understanding culture in terms of ongoing processes and re-negotiated human ways of being where (i) communication plays a central role and (ii) human beings are active allows us to give up some dimensions of the obsession that essentializes culture. Focusing the present and the future, i.e. *what we do* and *where we are going* (and not only our past, i.e. *where we come from*) when attempting to understand human identities and cultures are ways that enable a shift in positions.

The point that is important in the present context is the need to highlight different conceptualizations and the dominance of traditional ways in which culture gets operationalized in school sites. Thus for instance, it is selective interpretations that allow school sites to focus upon either (i) human attributes, behaviour, dress codes, food habits etc., or (ii) an elitist interpretation where literature, theatre, etc., are canonized when culture is discussed, celebrated or seen to be at stake.

Understanding culture as non-categorised potential ways of being, therefore, allows us to see the processes that evolve in human encounters in different institutional settings. This shift simultaneously enables us to see how and why culture becomes reduced either to the dress codes or food habits of different ethnic or other sub-groupings in society or to the elitist canonization of selective traditions in the literature and the arts. Current celebrations of multi-culturalism in school sites, discussions re-

garding the legitimacy of culturally appropriate dress codes and the status accorded to pre-ordained fine and high status artefacts are therefore not only reductionist, but they in a real sense lose sight of democratic potentials that are possible thanks to the presence of difference in present day education.

In addition, here we can discuss a “cultural policy paradox” that, in my view, resembles Hornberger’s “language policy paradox” (see above) in that we currently focus our needs pertaining to international cultural resources while we at the same time either ignore or belittle and look upon our ethnic cultural resources in terms of a problem (compare Skolverket 1995). Issues related to the cultural policy paradox and the reductionism inherent in currently available metaphors of culture are, in my view, closely linked to the problems inherent in the language policy paradox and the curse of language instruction situation discussed under the different sub-headings in this section. The fourth and final section of this article brings together salient ideas that have been discussed above and places these against the background of more overarching issues vis-à-vis the educational sciences and challenges in present day Swedish education.

## Challenging understandings and some concluding reflections

This paper has attempted to challenge some fundamental conceptualizations in pluralistic societies. From the vantage point of a researcher and teacher educator, I have also attempted to offer critical reflections on the often unacknowledged role that research discourses and the organization of academics themselves play in the maintenance and reproduction of selective understandings of language and culture. The academic area of educational sciences is young in the history of science generally, and in the administrative and allocation of research resources in the Swedish context more specifically (Vetenskapsrådet 2003). The areas of language and culture that have been focused upon in this article are central to any present day conceptualisations of the educational sciences. They are also areas that exemplify multidisciplinary in that a number of other scientific domains have focused their energies into studying them. In addition, these areas are illustrative if we focus the educational sciences and attempt to rescue them from the throngs of reductionistic methodologies.

We can, irrespective of our disciplinary backgrounds and special areas of research focus, at one level agree that science in general deals with the production of knowledge and facts. This production is also intimately

related to an openness in terms of critical questioning, re-researching and re-thinking processes. Despite the status related hierarchies of different areas of sciences, there is need to reiterate an important and often overlooked issue: an area of science and research in that area only make available partial and preliminary results that will be questioned, confirmed, discarded, re-interpreted by future researchers situated in the same, different or newer paradigms. This is the case in both the (so called) hard natural sciences and the softer human sciences.

I have, in this article, highlighted that knowledge generated during the last few decades regarding the social nature of languages have seriously questioned the reductionistic ways in which language is understood generally and language learning particularly. Researchers interested in language and communication in the new paradigm are, for the most, acutely aware of the fact that the only tools available to them are linguistic ones. In other words, a principle premise within this position is that use of language always presents a given perspective of the world – rather than mirroring the world. This premise creates an interesting situation for researchers who focus language in that language is both their tool and their focus. This and some of the other theoretically driven assumptions about the nature of language discussed in this article have fundamental consequences for conceptualizing both language development ontogenetically and issues related to language learning and instruction. Much of this kind of thinking has led to the theoretical orientation that is, both in the international and in the Scandinavian contexts, commonly known as sociocultural and culturalhistorical perspectives.

Further more, inspired from a postcolonial perspective, human and societal identities can be further understood in terms of re-negotiated processes and co-constructions in different everyday and textual practices, rather than on the basis of categories and attributes. This means that it is problematic to understand identities in terms of fixed ideological differences that exist on the basis of gender, place of origin, ethnicity, sexual orientation, functional disability, religion or other human attribute. While many within the new paradigm have challenged the naivety and inherent reductionism that builds upon essentialistic ways of understanding such human attributes, issues related to the “language and culture policy paradoxes” discussed in this article and the ways in which language and culture are operationalized in school sites (including for instance teacher education and research areas), are more seldom highlighted.

The critique raised vis-à-vis traditional understandings of language and culture in this article brings to the forefront aspects of the common “monolingual and monoethnic bias” that many of us within academics

have brought to the field of language pedagogy, especially in the post World War II period. Classifying languages in terms of a horizontal division, i.e. different language codes, in the educational curricula is, it can be argued, important from an institutional and administrative point of view. In other words, curricula, syllabi and the organisation of time and space in school settings require that one pays attention to a differentiation between different language codes. But, furthering this classification and maintaining it in terms of essentialistic categories and in terms of different student groups' different learning abilities (i.e. the vertical division) is a problematic contention. These latter conceptualizations draw upon particular assumptions related to views about "how language learning is conceptualised as occurring" and "what language and culture are". There is need to challenge such categorization (not least within academics and research itself) since it is argued here that (i) human attributes become meaningful within the context of everyday interactions and in situated everyday and textual practices, and (ii) language categories need to be freed from the constraints of traditional learning theories and the constraints of human categories themselves.

Bringing democratic agendas to center stage in Swedish education, requires therefore understanding dimensions of the current language and culture paradoxes including explicitly recognizing the plurilingual and pluricultural nature of Swedish schools today. As Hult reminds us,

A number of different languages are present in the linguistic ecology of Sweden including Swedish; sign languages; English and other foreign languages; regional languages or varieties of Swedish; "neighbour languages" like Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic, etc.; national minority languages; and the immigrant and refugee languages of those who have come to live in Sweden (2004, p. 183).

There is need to both make visible and also recognize that these languages contribute to complexities in Swedish classrooms. At the same time there is need to understand that this scenario is far from unique or peculiar to Swedish school sites. The rise of English as a global language and the concomitant shift in status for nationally dominant languages together with the rise in status of regional or ethnic or heritage or community languages at national levels, are two significant forces that have more recently seriously questioned the one nation-one language myth (Hornberger 2002, Hult 2004). In addition, pitting the number of nation-states (ca 250) against the most recent estimates of the number of human languages (ca 6000) puts to rest this widespread myth. The complex nature of

classroom diversity requires that research itself attends to the concerns that professionals experience in institutional settings by both *reframing these concerns* and also through *critical re-searching activities* such that analytically new issues can be raised and positions can be shifted. As Hornberger decisively points out:

The challenge of negotiating across multiple languages, cultures, and identities is a very real one in classrooms all over the world, one not to be lightly dismissed. Yet, on the whole, educational policy and practice continues blithely to disregard the presence of multiple languages, cultures, and identities in today's classrooms (Hornberger 2002, p. 43).

Thus, it is giving prominence to dimensions of diversity in classrooms and the curricula (including the language and culture paradoxes) that will enable important shifts in positions that have a bearing on everyday life in school sites. This, I have argued, will allow attention to be paid to challenges in current conceptualisations of language and culture and allow for democratic potentials in education to come centre stage.

#### Notes

1. In other words, any understanding of 'culture' occurs through the use of language.
2. Heath (1983).
3. See for instance Wikan (1999, 2002). See also Wikan's (2004) more recent nuanced analysis of so called honour killings of ethnic minority women in Sweden.
4. I am inclined to maintain that life experiences inevitably have a bearing on shaping research journeys. They explicitly and/or implicitly seep into and shape our agendas and these often, in return, have a bearing on our lives outside research arenas. The first life journey position that I draw upon, and in a sense one that can be counted as particularly enriching (and challenging), is that of primary caretaker of a teenager and a young school student, both of whom are multilingual and, following the rugged lives of their researcher parents, have studied in schools in Sweden and the United States. Another position that I bring to this conversation is the life journeys of my grandparents and parents in the aftermath of the division of the Indian sub-continent. Yet another vantage point that implicitly feeds into this conversation is that of my own growing up years and subsequent experiences as an Asian-European faculty member within higher education in different linguistic and cultural contexts.
5. 3 R's = Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic.
6. Language, similar to air, allows us to thrive and function in social collectives. It is in this sense that it makes us human.
7. See for instance Bagga-Gupta (2003, 2004).
8. And here we should note that deaf students in Sweden are considered to be "bilingual but monocultural", irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds. Their bilingualism is defined categorically in terms of SSL (Swedish Sign Language) as a first language and written Swedish as a second language.

9. As I have argued previously (see Bagga-Gupta 2004) this is far from an utopian idea in that both entire societies have existed and individual schools have and continue to be organised where such “visually oriented” bilingualism is not reserved for deaf and hard of hearing human beings (see Teruggi 2003 for an interesting present day example of such a school form).
10. Least I be misinterpreted, there is need to highlight that childrens’ (and even adults’) primary languages need to be understood in terms of parallel multilingualism, rather than “additive bilingualism”.
11. See for instance Allard (2003), Bagga-Gupta (2002, 2003), Carlsson and Bagga-Gupta (2001); Compare also with Skolverket (2000), Skoog (2001).
12. For changes in Sweden’s population (births, deaths, immigration, emigration, marriages and divorces) during the period 1749-2003, see SCB (2004a), [http://www.scb.se/templates/tableOrChart\\_\\_\\_26046.asp](http://www.scb.se/templates/tableOrChart___26046.asp) (August 2004); also see The Statistical Year Book of Sweden, SCB (2004b), [http://www.scb.se/statistik/OV/OV0904/2004A01/OV0904\\_2004A01\\_BR\\_A01SA0401\\_EN.pdf](http://www.scb.se/statistik/OV/OV0904/2004A01/OV0904_2004A01_BR_A01SA0401_EN.pdf) (August 2004).
13. See for instance Johan Tell (2004) and contributions in Alf Johansson (2001). My use of the concept “diversifying and/or pluralistic societies” relates to this collective consciousness regarding these more recent processes.
14. Immigration has been regulated in Sweden since 1967 (Arbetsmarknadsdepartementet 1995). The 1960s are characterized in terms of an economic boom, mobility both from outside the country and within the nation and an explosion of images of the wider world via television (Arnstberg 1993). While immigration has dominantly occurred from other parts of northern Europe, wars in the periphery of the European continent, some parts of Africa and South American have resulted in an increase in immigration from these spaces as well.
15. And inter-culturalism.
16. Tornberg traces this dominant view back to the period of Enlightenment and the rise of national states and Europe’s colonialization of different parts of the world during the 18th and 19th centuries.

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