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The Dialects of Bohuslän. Thoughts on a Database

Abstract

In 1935 a dictionary for the dialects of Bohuslän was planned and some work was carried out. In recent decades the work has been sporadic and the dictionary has never been concluded. Interest in sociological and gender aspects on language has opened new fields for the dialectologist. New data must therefore be collected with this in mind. The development over the last years in computer technology makes it self-evident that new work on the dialects of Bohuslän has to be aimed at creating a database and not primarily a traditional dictionary. In this paper we present the material and sketch out a project to develop a database based on the material from Bohuslän.

1. Introduction

In 1935 the task of making a dialect dictionary for Bohuslän was challenged by scholars and laymen in Göteborg. The work was based on the collections in *the Institute for Dialect, Place-name and Folklore Research in Göteborg (Dialekt-, ortnamns- och folkminnesarkivet i Göteborg*, henceforth refered to as DAG). The excerption for the articles was carried on over the years with delays and today the letter H is "concluded" and the material from the letter I to N has been partly excerpted. From A–F the dictionary includes about 11 000 entries.

The initiative behind the work with the dictionary was held by the farmer and layman dialectologist Erik Larsson from Ytterby in the south of Bohuslän. In a memo from the middle of the thirties he wrote that the work with the dictionary should be concluded as soon as possible and the dictionary published. The only result that came out of the work, however, was a preprint in 1942.

Except for the excerption for the letter N, no work has been done on this dictionary during the last two or three decades. Lack of educated scholars to do the work and economic realities have put the work with the dictionary on the list of future projects.

2. A dictionary or a database?

If one began by selecting and ordering the material from Bohuslän, would it be realistic just to start up from where Erik Larsson left off? Hardly, we would say. The change of focus in dialectology and linguistics and the development of powerful computer programs for handling the material make it impossible to carry on from the same point. Today it would be irresponsible not to use computers and not to establish a database for the material. Just writing traditional dictionary articles on every word would be a terrible waste of time.

The material that is collected in DAG is of course of interest in any study of the dialects of Bohuslän, and it would in the future be of great importance to make it computer-readable. At this point our interest will, however, turn in another direction. The living language in Bohuslän has not been studied or collected in any organized form over the last decades and it is therefore important to start our work with collecting new data.

It is important to stress, that it is not primarily a new dictionary for Bohuslän we wish to make. It is far more important to establish a database that can be used by scholars, not only in Göteborg but nationally and internationally. A database can, of course, also be used to write a traditional dictionary, printed and delivered to the public in book form. With modern technology there is no contradiction between the two. But unlike the written dialect dictionary, with all its phonetic transcriptions which are difficult to understand for a non-dialect speaking reader, the database offers vast opportunities of audiovisual assistance. Moreover, the lack of space of the printed book does not create the same problems in a multimedial database.

3. The collection of new data

Modern dialectology has quite a different point of departure than traditional dialectology. The emphasis is no longer put on the oldest stage of the dialect and its implications on the history of language, but rather on development and social, political, cultural factors and phenomena such as change between generations and differences depending on sex (e.g. Trudgill 1986; Sandøy 1993). All these factors must of course be taken into account when making a modern database for the dialects of Bohuslän. It must also be possible to establish relations between the different factors and link to one or many different factors in every entry.

The collecting of data has traditionally been a male occupation. A study carried out in Norway recently points to the fact that almost all material from the 19th century was collected by male researchers and that the informants to a very high degree were men (Venås 1995). It is not until recently that women entered academia and interest in traditionally female areas of society is insufficiently represented in the older material. We wish to stress the importance not only of taking into consideration areas traditionally seen as predominantly female and collecting data from female informants, but also to recognize the need to have both men and women collecting the data. This is important especially when you enter areas such as *pregnancy and birth*, *health*, *death and funerals* etc., where informants can feel embarassed by an interviewer of the opposite sex.

In 1920 Hjalmar Lindroth published an article on the dialects in Bohuslän where he established two main groups of dialects, one north of Gullmarsfjorden and another south of this fjord (Lindroth 1920). This has been the basis for the ordering of the Bohuslän dialects since Lindroth's day. When establishing new data, however, it is of importance to note that today there are also tendencies towards a line of distribution that extends from the north along the coast, and distinguishes between coastal areas and farming areas (Ernby 1992). This distinction ought to be taken into consideration when collecting new data.

There have also been signs that a young generation, mainly men, in the coastal region tend to turn to the dialect for their social confirmation. This phenomenon has been discussed by William Labov in a number of studies from American milieus (Labov 1963; 1965; 1980). The material collected in Bohuslän must be representative as to gender and generation to give information about these kinds of relations.

4. The building of a database

Erik Larsson's entry on the word *hummerkupa* 'lobster-pot' in the DAG collections can serve as an example of some of the factors that will be of interest in a database for the dialects of Bohuslän. The example shown is Larsson's handwritten transcriptions of different pronounciations of the word and a description of the object. These notes are only used here for our demonstration. In our database this excerpt would of course be replaced with new information.
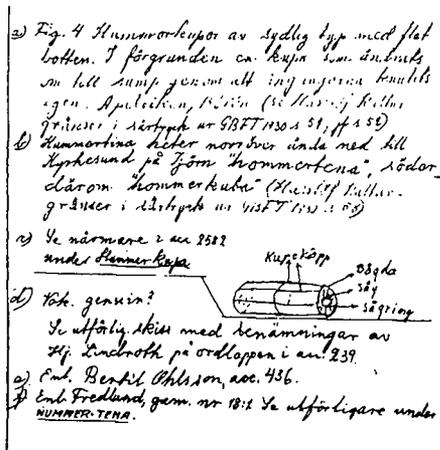
Figure 1. Erik Larsson's notes on *hummerkupa* 'lobster-pot' p. 2.

The semantic field of a word will be one of the possible ways to search the database. In the case of *hummerkupa* the semantic field will be *fishing*. Other possible semantic fields are, for example, *health*, *human relations*, *weather* and *farming*. The user of the database should be able to start from any point within the field and get information about a single word or clusters of words within it.

There will be geographic data for every entry. The word *hummerkupa* can be found only in the south of Bohuslän. A reference is therefore made to its equivalent in the north: *hummertena*. This kind of information is of importance not only in connection with the dialects of Bohuslän, but also in studies of dialect geography; the dialects of Bohuslän, being situated in the border area between Sweden and Norway could possibly elucidate the relation between national language, regional language and dialect. The difference between coastal and inland areas mentioned above, in contrast to the traditional north/south grouping established by Hjalmar Lindroth (Lindroth 1920), will also be possible to study in a database, where we can see the distribution of isoglosses on maps linked to the material.

There will also be information on cultural connections, i.e., in the case of the lobster-pot, rules for lobster-fishing, boats and equipment, and economic importance for the region. The historic importance of lobster-fishing, as well as its importance in modern times will be treated.

Recordings of the pronounciation made in relevant parts of Bohuslän can be made available as well as the word in context in a couple of

sentences. For objects like, e. g., tools or fishing vessels there will be pictures linked to each lexical unit and clusters of pictures showing parts of complex objects. This kind of information should work both ways: if a user starts from a lexical unit, he should be able to get a picture of the actual object, and from there it should be possible to get information on synonyms in different areas, and so on.

Collecting new data ought, of course, to be done by undergraduates with a special interest in dialectology and language change, allowing for students to write bachelor exams within the project. In connection to this it is important to stress that the collection of new data has to be carried out with the database in mind and with an aim at making the material in the database as representative as possible for the dialects of the area. Therefore all work has to be supervised by expert dialectologists.

The creation and administration of the database ought to be handled by *Språkdata* at the *Department of Swedish Language* (*Institutionen för svenska språket*). As we have pointed out, there have to be possibilities established for complex searches of semantic fields, social, political, cultural connections, age groups and sex, and geographic data. For the moment a group of undergraduate computer linguists are working on a prototype for a multimedia database for the dialects of Bohuslän. This prototype will show examples taken from the semantic field *fishing*.

We believe that the rich material in DAG ought to be made available in a computer-readable form which could be connected to our database. This database, however, can only be created in cooperation with DAG and its national organisation, the *Institute of Dialectology, Onomastics and Folklore Research* (*Språk- och folkminnesinstitutet*, SOFI). In the DAG collections, dialect material from the beginning of this century on to our own time is available, either on paper or on records and tape, and there is the *Bohuslänsk ordbok* in excerpts and articles by Erik Larsson. There are experts on dialectology at the archives and at the *Department of Swedish Language* at Göteborg University who would be able to create the necessary milieu for research and collection of new data. At the *Department of Swedish Language* we also have all the experience needed to establish a database and make it useful for research.

4. Conclusions

The dialects of Bohuslän are interesting as dialects in their own right, but also in a national and regional perspective. The study of regional varieties of the national language, such as sociolects and varieties depending on generation and gender, has developed rapidly over the last decades at

the same time as the study of traditional dialects has changed from being purely historical to a focus on the principles of language change. In the work sketched out above all these developments will have to be taken into account and therefore it ought to be of interest not only in a narrow regional perspective, but also in a national and, perhaps even more so, international and theoretical perspective. Different aspects of dialectology will be included in the studieswhich will be needed to prepare the material for a database, such as sociolinguistic, cultural, and historical factors.

The use of computers will not solve all our problems. Perhaps it is sometimes more correct to say that it will create a whole lot of new problems. For the study of dialects and regional varieties the use of computers is of course still just in its beginings, but we can already see a lot of new possibilities. Sound, picture and text can be linked in completely new ways. The problem of what ought to be included because of space limitations can, if not be forgotten, at least be put aside for more important decisions, and, perhaps most important of all, the data can be easily transmitted and used by researchers at universities and research archives without limits set by time and geography.

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