The Swedish Dialect Dictionary – a presentation

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Abstract

The most recent dictionary covering all dialects of Swedish, was published in1867 by Johan Ernst Rietz. Hence, the need for a modern dialect dictionary is considerable and in 2003 preparations for the *Swedish Dialect Dictionary* (*Svenskt dialektlexikon* or *SDL*) were initiated at the Department of Dialectology and Folklore Research in Uppsala. The *SDL* will be directed to the general public and the overall aim, apart from providing information about dialect words, is to stimulate people's interest in dialects.

The *SDL* is to be published as a one-volume dictionary comprising app. 500 to 600 pages. It will be based on the dialect collections kept at the department, which comprise more than 7.3 million paper slips, each describing a single word from a single parish. The *SDL* will only include a small proportion of the dialect words in these collections and in the preparatory work, the key issue was therefore to establish inclusion policies. A very strict selection of words is essential and there was a need for clear guidelines in order to speed up the selection process and to prevent a purely subjective choice of words. Based on the presumed needs of our target audience, the most important aspects were found to be the degree of 'dialectness' and the geographical distribution of the words, the number of examples and the age of the source material.

1. Introduction

The most recent dictionary having the ambition to cover all dialects of Swedish, was published in 1867 by Johan Ernst Rietz (1815-1868), a clergyman from the south of Sweden. His dictionary, *Svenskt dialekt-lexikon. Ordbok öfver svenska allmogespråket*, comprised 859 pages. Rietz based his dictionary mainly on the vocabulary he found in local dictionaries and on the primary material he collected through correspondence and whilst travelling in Sweden.

It is no exaggeration to say that Rietz did not pay much attention to the question of accessibility. Locating words in his dictionary is often quite troublesome, since his choice of headwords reflects his own theories of etymology and words are rather frequently presented within entries without any references to them. Hence a separate register was published in 1955 by Erik Abrahamson to make all words readily accessible. Another drawback is the uneven geographical distribution of his sources. Nonetheless, Rietz's dictionary has been valuable to the knowledge of Swedish dialect words and was reprinted in 1962.

In 1914, the first dialect archive in Sweden was established in Uppsala. Right from the beginning, systematic collecting of dialect material was carried out with the intention of compiling a dictionary of Swedish dialects. These plans were soon abandoned and it was not until 1954 when the *Royal Gustavus Adolphus Academy* in Uppsala initiated such a dictionary, *Ordbok över Sveriges dialekter* (*OSD*), that things got under way seriously. Aims were set high. This new dialect dictionary was to form a counterpart to *Svenska Akademiens ordbok* (the *Swedish Academy Dictionary*), which deals with the Swedish standard language in literary sources.

Before actual writing of the *OSD* could commence, source material had to be assembled. No collection of primary material was performed. Only already existing, hand-written or printed sources dating from the 17th century and onwards were excerpted or copied. Today, this material consists of more than 7.3 million paper slips held at the Department of Dialectology and Folklore Research in Uppsala. Each slip describes a single word from a single parish.[1]

The responsibility of the *OSD* was handed over to a predecessor to the current *Institute for Language and Folklore* in 1984. Work progressed and in 1991 the first volume (*a-andtäppt*) emerged. Two more volumes (1994 and 2000, spanning *andvarpning* to [2]*back*) were to be published before the project was discontinued in 2003, due to lack of resources. Instead, preparations for a popular, concise dictionary – the *Swedish Dialect Dictionary* (*Svenskt dialektlexikon* or *SDL*) – were begun.

2. The Swedish Dialect Dictionary

It was clear right from the start that this new dictionary would differ profoundly from the *OSD* in terms of size, target users and time allowed for editing the dictionary. One thing that remains the same, however, is the source material. A digitizing project has recently been launched at the Institute, but until work has progressed further, we have to make do with the good old paper slips.

All planning for the *SDL* had to be made from scratch. Rietz's dictionary, being the most recent previous dialect dictionary, could not serve as a model to us.

The *SDL* is intended to attract a broad audience and will mainly be oriented towards the general public. Linguists are not part of our target user group. They may well find the *SDL* useful, but the dictionary will by no means present a complete dialect vocabulary. Researchers will have to rely on using the source material, which is made increasingly available by the on-going digitization.

Apart from providing information about dialect words, the overall aim of the *SDL* is to stimulate people's interest in dialects. Hopefully, the dictionary will promote people's awareness of their own dialects, so that they take pride in speaking them and pass them on to their children.

To start with, the *SDL* will be published as a print dictionary in the form of one single volume comprising app. 500 to 600 pages. The book format is preferred since we believe that those who look up a dialect word are probably more inclined to browse the pages hoping to find other words of interest. Just like meeting old friends they have not seen for a long time, they will re-encounter dialect words they (almost) forgot they knew. Scrolling up and down entries on a screen does not give the same experience. But in the future the *SDL* may well appear in a transformed web-based version.

3. Selection of words and meanings

When planning the dictionary, the key issue was to establish inclusion policies. Considering the vast source material, it was clear that a very strict selection of words was essential. There was a need for robust, easy-to-apply guidelines in order to speed up the selection process and to prevent a purely subjective choice of words. So what should these guidelines be based on? After careful consideration based on the presumed needs of our target audience, the most important aspects were found to be the degree of 'dialectness' and the geographical distribution of the words, the number of examples and the age of the source material. These aspects can be formulated as three rules that we apply:

(1)   the word or meaning(s) of the word should appear only in dialects (as opposed to standard Swedish)
(2)   the word has to be attested at least ten times in disparate sources *or* from three provinces

(3)   the word must not exclusively appear in old sources ('old' here meaning older than 1867, the year Rietz's dictionary emerged)

To enter a simplex word in the *SDL* normally all three have to be fulfilled. For compound words the first and third rule are just as relevant, whereas the second rule is applied less strictly. Instead, the semantic transparency of the compounds is much more focused (see below).

These rules may seem simple and clear-cut enough to follow and as far as the second and third rules are concerned, they normally are. There is one important exception to the second rule, though, which has to do with the fact that our sources are unevenly distributed geographically. There is an abundance of material from the south of Sweden, whereas material from some provinces further north is much more scarce. To compensate for this, we sometimes enter words that do not fully meet the requirements of the second rule.

In the first rule, meaning is highlighted as an important feature to consider in the selection. Meaning – and we say this from personal experience – is what most people want to find out about when they put questions about dialect words to the Institute.

The first rule is by far the most complex to apply and some of this complexity will be addressed and discussed in the following sections. Certainly, there are many words that appear only in dialects, in the sense that they are not mentioned in dictionaries of standard Swedish. Provided that these words fulfil the other two requirements, they are often included in the *SDL*.

Quite a large number of words exist in both standard Swedish and dialects displaying no differences in meaning. These words are almost always excluded, even if they may be closely connected to pre-industrial society or represent an older language in general. Words like *björk* 'birch', *jul* 'Christmas', *ok* 'yoke', *sot* 'illness, disease', *änne* 'forehead' and *öl* 'beer' will not be found in the *SDL*.

A feature not mentioned in the rules is pronunciation. It could be a determining factor for inclusion in the *SDL*, but if differences in pronunciation alone would suffice for inclusion, not many words would be ruled out. On rare occasions though, we do include such words if we think that people would expect to find them in a dialect dictionary and if their pronunciation is very difficult to decipher (i.e. etymologically non-transparent) from a user's point of view. Hence words like *fähus* ('cowhouse', pronounced *fjös, fus,* etc.) and *dagvard* ('second breakfast', pronounced *döggöl, daggel, davra,* etc.) will most likely be included.

Sometimes, morphological or phonological variants of words carrying the same meaning occur in dialects and standard Swedish. In many cases, the dialectal variants will presumably be understood by a native speaker and are therefore omitted. (see figure 1).

Dialect	Standard Swedish	
pylta på sig	*bylta på sig*	'bundle up'
pleta	*plita*	'pimple, spot'
danera	*dana*	'create'
uslig	*usel*	'lousy, miserable'
yrsla	*yrsel*	'dizziness'

Figure 1.

It is of course not always the case that words existing in both standard Swedish and dialects share all their meanings. On the contrary, it is quite common that special meanings have developed (or been preserved) in dialects, meanings that do not exist (any longer) in standard Swedish. Provided that these meanings differ enough, they may be integrated in the *SDL*. One

example is the word *artig*, which in today's standard Swedish means 'polite', but in the dialects also carries meanings like 'nice, easy-going' and 'odd, strange'. Another example is the noun *björnbär* 'blackberry, Rubus subg. Rubus'. As is often the case in the folk taxonomy of plants, *björnbär* is also used in the dialects to denote other species of berries. Both these words will probably be included in the *SDL* along with their non-standard meanings, but what about the meanings they have in common with standard Swedish? Should 'polite' and 'blackberry' be mentioned or left out? It can be argued that leaving them out may give users the impression that they do not even exist. On the other hand, if all other standard Swedish meanings are omitted, why should these be included? In an attempt to find a suitable compromise, we have tried out various ways of indicating the existence of additional meanings other than those mentioned, but no adequate alternative has presented itself. Hence, 'polite' and 'blackberry' are simply left out for the time being.

There is one group of words which to a high degree co-exist in standard Swedish and dialects. This group consists of the most common function words. Even if we are aware that these words almost always carry dialectal meanings and have grammatical functions that differ from standard Swedish, they will be left out. Subjunctives like *att* 'that' and *om* 'if' and prepositions like *efter* 'after' and *på* 'on' will all be omitted. The same applies for verbs like *bli* 'become, be', *ha* 'have' and *vara* 'be'. The major reason for omitting them is that we do not expect our target users to be particularly interested in them. Another reason is that the actual editing of these complex words would be very time-consuming. Too much time and effort would be spent on words that few would want or need to look up.

Sometimes dialect words appear in forms that differ noticeably from their etymological counterparts in standard language. Their meaning may or may not differ from standard Swedish. Words of this kind are often included in the dictionary with their special forms used as headwords. Figure 2 shows some examples.

Dialect	Standard Swedish
birk 'birch'	*björk* 'birch'
paschasa 'anecdote, funny story'	*passage* 'passage'
uka 'week'	*vecka* 'week'
åpen 'gluttonous; greedy'	*öppen* 'open'

Figure 2.

As mentioned above, the selection of compounds differs somewhat from that of simplex words. Since compounding is an important way of forming new words in Swedish, there is an abundance of words in this category. Luckily – to a lexicographer at least – a large proportion of the compounds are relatively transparent in meaning and can therefore be excluded.

Most compounds place themselves somewhere along a scale of transparency. Take a dialect word like *pannjärn* 'frying pan', for example. You cannot find it in a dictionary of standard Swedish, but it is made up of elements known from standard Swedish: *panna* 'pan' and *järn* 'equipment or tool made of iron', used in words like *strykjärn* 'flat-iron' and *våffeljärn* 'waffle iron'. This word will probably be included, since the existence of the homonymous standard Swedish word *panna* 'forehead' adds to the non-transparency of the dialect word. Other compounds may consist of at least one component that is purely dialectal. The word *ekbange* 'large oak branch' contains the standard Swedish noun *ek* 'oak' and the dialect noun *bange* 'large branch'. Since the last element has the same meaning as a simplex and as such will be included in the dictionary, *ekbange* is left out.

One effective method we use to limit the number of words in the dictionary is to let just one or a few words represent a whole group of related words. The noun *aga* 'fear, worry' is

included, whereas the verb *aga* 'induce fear or worry' is left out. The included words have to be good representatives of the omitted ones in terms of semantics, geographical distribution and so on. Another somewhat related method we often apply is to exclude dialectal derivatives that can be understood by a native speaker. A dialect verb like *jakta* 'to hunt' can be understood from the standard Swedish noun *jakt* 'hunt'. The normal standard Swedish verb is *jaga*.

4. Micro-structure of the *SDL*

When designating the micro-structure for the *SDL*, we have aimed at a clear and non-hierarchical structure, suitable to our target audience. In the following, we focus on some aspects of the micro-structure that are characteristic to our dictionary. Figure 3 shows two examples of articles, the adverb *passe* '(just) enough' and the noun *ugg* 'fringe; bristles'.

passe adv. lagom; tillräckligt Dalsl Värml. *Ä sji:a passe stor?* Är skeden lagom stor? Dalsl. *Dä jämt passe va:rt härrine no,* det är allt lagom varmt härinne nu Dalsl.
ugg m. [äv.: *o-*] lugg (i håret) Västg; äv.: nackhår, borst (på hund el. katt) Värml. *Han tittar unner ogg* Västg.

Figure 3.

In the *SDL*, the headword presents the dialect word in standard Swedish orthography, that is as the dialect word would have been spelt, had it existed in standard Swedish. By doing this, etymologically identical words with various pronunciations are kept within the same entries. References from pronunciations will be included to help all users who may only have heard a certain dialect word being said. In some cases though, when a dialect word is very well known in a certain form, we do use a headword that reflects this. Words that are closely related and similar in form and meaning are often presented in the same entry with separate headwords.

Pronunciations are only mentioned when they differ quite distinctly from the headword(s). A simple sound notation is used, based on the ordinary alphabet. Only a few special characters are used. The definitions are presented in as clear and lucid a manner as possible. Many of the meanings are illustrated by examples, which in general are translated into standard Swedish.

In a dialect dictionary, it is of course essential to inform about the geographical distribution of various features of the words. In the *SDL* we provide this information for meanings and examples, and sometimes for each headword when there is more than one within the same entry. Abbreviated forms of the names of provinces or regions are then used.

5. The current situation

Until today, manuscript has been compiled for all the vowels and the consonants *b, d, j,* and *p*. One of us has edited all the words beginning with vowels and *j*, the other one the words beginning with the explosives *b, d,* and *p*. This arrangement enables us to work as efficiently as possible, as it ensures a high level of correctness and consistency in editing.

Later this year, before work has progressed too far, we are planning on mustering a group of people representing various backgrounds, ages and interests to take a look at our articles from a user's perspective. Before meeting them, we have to determine suitable methods of finding out what they may find troublesome in our manuscript.

6. Conclusion

This paper has presented the on-going project, the *Swedish Dialect Dictionary.* The aim of this project is to publish a concise dictionary directed to the general public. For editorial reasons, including restrictions in time, the *SDL* will only comprise a small proportion of the dialect words in our archive collections. Therefore the key issue in the planning process has been to establish rules of word selection. These rules focus on the degree of 'dialectness' of the words, along with the geographical distribution, the number of examples and age of the source material. In this paper, we have presented ample evidence of what kind of rules we apply. Currently, we find that they serve their purpose of extracting relevant words as well as the right number of words.

Editing is now well under way and as a next step we will present our manuscript to a group of prospective users. Hopefully, they will give us additional advice on how we can fulfil the needs of our target audience to an even larger extent.

Note

[1] The former head of the *OSD*, Vidar Reinhammar, presented the project in two articles (1972, 1986). In an article from 1998 on Rietz's dictionary, Reinhammar draws attention to the man behind the work and the process of the compilation. Furthermore, he provides a source-critical study of the entries and information in the dictionary.

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