

Speaking Scandinavian

From the Classroom to the Lunch Room

LUKE JOHN MURPHY

Introduction

Moving to a new country is hard enough if you already speak the language. Moving somewhere with a totally different language is even harder! Fortunately, most Scandinavians have a good grasp of English, and at universities the level of English is often exceptional. Your new colleagues can likely slip effortlessly between languages the instant you walk through a door, without interrupting their debate on obscure scholarly topics. Most Scandinavian academics regularly publish and attend international conferences held in English, so you'll be able to communicate (relatively) easily with even more senior staff. However, not every department is the same and you might find different levels of the international *lingua franca* in different places.

It is perfectly possible to complete a PhD in Scandinavia without learning more than a few words of the local language, but there will always be contexts where locals will speak their own language amongst themselves, be that on coffee breaks or in specialist Scandinavian journals. Other areas of the university—particularly the humanities—tend to have far fewer foreigners, making the pressure of learning the local language all the greater. There is also off-campus life. Maybe your landlord, bank teller, or doctor's secretary doesn't speak *your* language, or their English leaves something to be desired. This chapter is for those aiming to move

to the Nordic regions for PhD study—Denmark, Sweden, or Norway, as well as Finland, Iceland, or Faroe Islands.

Fortunately, learning a Scandinavian language is pretty straightforward. Scandinavian countries have a reputation for welcoming others, and local authorities often offer language courses, and will sometimes even pay some or all of the costs involved. In some places, you might even have access to courses aimed at highly-educated immigrants like scholars. Scandinavian languages are also relatively accessible. Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian are grammatically straightforward, although pronunciation is sometimes a bit challenging. (Finnish and Icelandic are different matters entirely). Before you dive into the world of Øs, Ås, and Æs, however, there's a fundamental question to answer: Should you really bother?

To Learn, or Not to Learn

Scandinavians, like most people around the world, generally want immigrants to learn their language. Doing so is admittedly a huge investment. Learning a new language takes a *lot* of time, PhD students already have heavy workloads, and any international move entails some ongoing emotional stress. Speaking a language you don't know well is also difficult for the people you're speaking to, and English is always there as the academic *lingua franca*.¹ However, Scandinavians are very receptive to foreigners learning their language, and there are significant benefits to learning even a basic level of the language.

There are arguments that immigrants anywhere in the world should attain at least a basic level of the local language, if only so they can access basic services like healthcare. Even if your field is dominated by English-language publishing, there will almost certainly be some level of academic discourse in the local language, from large conferences to small seminars or casual discussion during (culturally important) coffee breaks. Given the informal work culture at Scandinavian research institutions—which often operate on a first-name basis—a great deal of important departmental business gets aired, or even worked out, when people meet at the coffee machine or over the lunch table. While some of this won't be important for a PhD student only at the department for three or four years, missing out on these conversations means being less aware of issues at faculty or university level, and may also mean missing out on opportunities like teaching, conferences, or funding, or even just passing discussion of an interesting new book.

Looking beyond just the three or four years of your PhD, there are also significant long-term advantages in learning Scandinavian. Not only will speaking another language, even just at conversational level, look impressive on your CV for any future job (inside academia or not), it might also qualify you for specific

post-doctoral positions or funding. Even if you're already qualified for a position, speaking Scandinavian also signals your commitment to the local milieu, (hopefully) improving your chances of getting hired within Scandinavia. Your demonstrable willingness to integrate and engage with local culture will similarly benefit you elsewhere.

There are also non-academic dividends to learning the local language. While it is perfectly possible to lead an active social life in Scandinavia without speaking the local language, the tough process of finding friends and establishing yourself socially—already tougher than in much of the world due to the reserved nature of Scandinavian culture—will be slowed by not learning some of the language. As such, you can generally build up your 'social capital' with even relatively minor investments (Field, 2003). This, recent research suggests, can in turn improve your language acquisition (Smith, Giraud-Carrier, Dewey, Ring, & Gore, 2011). Whether your reasons are principled or pragmatic, there are lots of reasons to speak Scandinavian.

How to Learn

Once you've decided to learn the local language the next decision is how you're going to do so. A key point here is that *there is no one way to learn a language*. Just as people learn languages for different purposes, so too there are many, many tools and methods available to the modern learner, from books and traditional classrooms to online courses and apps. Find whatever method (or combination of methods) works for you. Unless you have extensive language-learning experience, this will likely be a trial-and-error process. It's worth planning with the knowledge that the lifestyle of most PhD students, especially those moving to a new country, can be erratic, making regular dedicated study-time a luxury.

Regardless of the tools you decide to employ, your attitude to learning Scandinavian should be 'slow and steady wins the race'. Don't try to become conversational in a single semester. It's not impossible, but doing so would leave little time for your day job, let alone anything else in your life. Try setting milestone goals for yourself as a way of both tracking your progress, and of mitigating the frustration of moving more slowly than you might like to. Your goal for one semester may be to be able to have a basic conversation with a colleague over coffee; while a later milestone might be to attend (and understand) a lecture in Scandinavian. You might aim to become conversational, or even fluent, over the course of your PhD, and work towards that alongside your studies. Good final milestones might be giving a conference paper of your own, or even publishing a short text before the end of your studies.

Such steady work obviously requires a good deal of perseverance, but it should also *leave room for adaptability*. For some people, this will mean finding a set rhythm of classes and study, and sticking to it, come what may. Others may find it easier to work intensely for a while, and then cut back at busier times. Allow yourself to take breaks if you need to. Most of the people you'll encounter at the university understand the pressures on PhD students, and taking a hiatus in your language learning to concentrate on getting a chapter drafted or completing a taught course can be the difference between burning yourself out on learning Scandinavian and sticking with it for the long haul. Making learning enjoyable makes it easier to keep at, so don't be afraid to shop around for interesting books or fun classes. One way is to find an app or podcast that you enjoy, and use it during your commute, or when you exercise—little and often is better than a once-a-week marathon.

Similarly, *start small*: don't aim to explain the details of your research in Scandinavian anytime during the first few semesters of your PhD. Aim for everyday conversations with colleagues over coffee or lunch. These will give opportunities to discuss simple topics you'll probably cover early on in language classes, such as food, the weather, or hobbies. You can also use these contexts to demonstrate your progress to colleagues, and to sound out who amongst them is a kind listener, the sort of person who can modulate their language to your level and help you express yourself.

Of course, PhD students are academics, and most academics *learn by reading*. Use that strength. Pick up a newspaper on the bus, or buy a novel in Scandinavian. Assuming you're learning with the eventual goal of discussing your research with colleagues, find out what texts are set for first-semester undergraduates in your department and read them. You'll know the material, and will be able to pick up a concentrated dose of important vocabulary. You can then move on to short journal articles like conference reports or book reviews, which are particularly good if you were at the conference or have already read the book.

That said, don't neglect the oral component of language. Use apps or podcasts to expose yourself to spoken language at your own pace. TV programmes and films are also great, but try not to become over-dependant on subtitles—conferences don't provide them. Research in second-language acquisition also suggests that hobbies with social settings are great at boosting language learning (Isabellí-Garcia, 2006), and will also expose you to more everyday language than you might hear at the university. Don't worry about not learning the wrong sort of Scandinavian—not only are the Scandinavian languages characterised by small differences in register (Haugen, 1976), learning context does not appear to play a significant role in the overall success of language learning (Collentine & Freed, 2004). Joining a club or volunteering will also widen your social circle, giving you more people to practice with, and help get you out of the office or lab and integrate into your new community. Few Scandinavian academics work

the long hours more common elsewhere, and Scandinavian culture is much less work-based than many others around the world.

When and Where Should You Speak Scandinavian?

Now that you're learning Scandinavian, it's time to consider when and where to speak it and when you're better off sticking to English. Most language-learning advice suggests that a learner should take every opportunity to speak their new language, but PhD students have needs beyond just language acquisition, so it's worth thinking things through carefully.

The most important thing to consider here is the context you're communicating in. Just how precisely does your audience need to understand you? Weigh the potential gain of both linguistic experience and social capital against the risks of being misunderstood, or not being able to express yourself clearly. This requires some calculating, and can feel artificial at first, but it will become second nature with time. Don't be afraid to hesitate before speaking to work out what you want to say, which language would be better, and how to express yourself. Few people hold someone thinking before answering against them, particularly in academia.

Some of the different contexts you might want to consider ahead of time can include meetings, seminars, supervisions, and even e-mails. There is nothing wrong with deciding before you even walk through the door that today is an 'English' day. Think about the formality of the setting. If you're meeting a colleague for coffee, or your supervisor for a meeting, that should be a relaxed, low-risk opportunity to strut your Scandinavian stuff. Scandinavian societies are more egalitarian than many other cultures, so even relatively formal one-on-one settings like meeting a Department Head or Dean will be just another meeting with someone who will give you their full attention and engagement, without fear of your grammar being judged.

Informal group settings like coffee breaks and lunches can be a bit tougher in some ways—a mix of voices and accents, multiple simultaneous conversations—but in other ways they are easier, allowing you to sit back and let the conversation move around you, with only the occasional comment needed on your part to signal you're still involved. Formal group settings like seminars can be even easier than informal ones. There's a built-in excuse to take a break from contributing (one speaker at a time), and the chair will often work out a list of who's speaking next. Take this time to work out what you want to say, and then start preparing your opening salvo. Listen to what the others are saying, and don't be afraid to repeat terms, or even whole phrases. Not only will it be correct, it will demonstrate you're

an engaged listener. This sort of setting is usually medium-risk, but can have the highest rewards of all.

Writing e-mails is a somewhat different process, but the same considerations apply. Is it a formal or informal conversation? Are you writing to one person, or participating in a group chain? Informal correspondence is a great way to work on your written Scandinavian without fear of embarrassing yourself—if you're unclear, the person you're writing to can ask for clarification. Even more official one-on-one exchanges (with an unknown colleague in a different department, for example) are comparatively relaxed affairs in most parts of Scandinavian academic culture. Group e-mails can be a bit tougher, as it's harder for people to ask you directly if they can't puzzle out your meaning. Stick to short sentences (even for important concepts), and don't be afraid to use dictionaries and other sources to work out how to say your piece, even if it slows you down.² There is a lot of pressure in modern Western society to respond to e-mails *now*, but don't let that stop you from taking your time. Your correspondents won't notice a ten-minute difference, even if it feels like an aeon to you.

Once you've decided you're speaking Scandinavian, whatever the context, the first thing to do is to relax. When you do speak, speak slowly. Give yourself time to think if you need it. Use short sentences, and go easy on relative clauses, so you keep your grammar simple. It might not sound completely natural to your listeners, but better a bit stilted than so wrong they struggle to follow. If you're not sure of a word, drop the English term into a Scandinavian sentence. As a fellow Germanic languages with many similar loan words, there is a surprising amount of overlap between Scandinavian and English (Haugen, 1976). Of course, this risks your Scandinavian audience switching their conversation to English. While this can be deeply frustrating, it is never meant disparagingly—they're just trying to make your life easier. You don't have to follow their lead, there is nothing wrong, or rude, about sticking to Scandinavian when a native speaker switches to English. A couple more exchanges are typically all that is needed to signal that you want to speak *their* language and have them switch back. Sometimes a short 'I'd like to speak Scandinavian' might be needed to prompt them. If they can't follow you and prefer English, they'll tell you. Having said that, don't be ashamed of taking an offered out if you need it.

Maximising Your Mileage

Once you've learnt more Scandinavian and have started speaking it at the university, how do you convince others you're doing a good job of it? Having a proven track record in the Scandinavian scholarly milieu will impress the people who

will write your references, display your dedication to a difficult extra-curricular, and form a CV-worthy demonstration of your international network and scholarly engagement. As a PhD student looking at continuing in academia, you need to think about how your CV demonstrates your abilities.

The obvious step is to make sure your language skills are certified. If you've not studied through a language school, get in touch with one and ask about certification. Then think about giving a conference paper, or even publishing in Scandinavian. Obviously, these are huge tasks, but you'll have three or four years to reach the appropriate level. Look at your CV, and pick one—maybe the area most in need of development, or the one you're most secure in—and aim to produce a Scandinavian-language bullet by the end of your PhD.

A conference paper (or poster) is a great way of demonstrating your linguistic prowess and engagement with academic discourse in Scandinavian. Many institutions will have regular local and relatively informal events. Speaking in front of a familiar audience, particularly on a topic you know well (such as your own research), is a great way to feel secure in speaking a foreign language. Even if it's not common practice in your discipline, use flash cards or even a script. The audience will understand if you deviate from the set format a little so you can engage with them in their own language. Practice your paper, and have a friendly colleague listen to it (and check your slides). On the day, you're in control: if you want, talk very slowly, stop and take a few seconds to double-check a word, or even go back and repeat a section you made a mess of. Questions and Answer sessions are probably the hardest part. Don't be afraid of asking a questioner to repeat themselves, or explain what they mean more clearly. People do that in their native languages, too. Lean on the chair or organiser for support as they can mediate between you and your audience if necessary.

Publication is probably the most impressive demonstration of your Scandinavian academic credentials. Disciplines where co-authorship is common have it more difficult than those where lone-authorship is still the norm, as readers will assume any Scandinavian co-authors were responsible for the wording. For lone-author disciplines, attempting even a short journal article is a huge undertaking that will eat up weeks of time you might not be able to afford. As such, look for smaller, lone-authored texts in your field's journals, such as book reviews, conference reports, project descriptions. Your first text in Scandinavian doesn't have to be peer-reviewed to show up on your CV, just published. Write in Scandinavian rather than writing in your native language and translating—translated texts often read oddly. Have a colleague proof-read it for you.

God arbejdslyst!—‘Good Luck!’

Whichever Scandinavian language you’re learning, however you’re going to go about it, remember not to let your work suffer for it. Take things slowly, work steadily, consider when to speak which language, and remember to plan for the extra time doing things in Scandinavian will take. As disheartening and frustrating as learning a new language can be, doing so in a professional setting can be hugely rewarding, and simply trying at all in Scandinavia will win you a lot of respect and open the door to new career possibilities, experiences, and friendships. Enjoy the process, and ‘god arbejdslyst’ (good luck)!

Notes

1. There has been some movement towards Scandinavians from different countries speaking ‘blandinavisk’ to each other: from ‘blande/blanda’ (to mix) and ‘skandinavisk’ (Scandinavian), literally ‘mixed Scandinavian’, this is when Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians each speak their own languages in the same conversation. (If spoken clearly and perhaps a little slowly, these three main Scandinavian languages are mutually intelligible, even to reasonably-fluent foreigners!) However, this has generally been confined to fields where Scandinavian languages already play a significant role, like Scandinavian history, literature, and culture.
2. Be wary of Google-translating your answer, however. It’s a great tool for comprehension, but its output in Scandinavian can be wrong in ways that are difficult for a new learner to spot.

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The Nordic PhD

Surviving and Succeeding



Christopher McMaster, Caterina Murphy,
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The Nordic PhD

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The Nordic PhD: Surviving and Succeeding is an edited book written for prospective and current doctoral students by a mix of doctoral students and those who have recently completed their doctorates. The premise is simple: if you could go back in time and talk with yourself when you began your studies, what advice would you give? Isn't hindsight a bonus? If only I knew then what I know now!

The Nordic PhD: Surviving and Succeeding follows editions focused on study in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, the U.K., U.S., and South Africa. What sets *The Nordic PhD: Surviving and Succeeding* apart from many others on the market is its down-to-earth and practical approach. Furthermore, its originality also lies in the fact that it is grounded in the context of doctoral studies in the Nordic countries.

"This book provides essential advice for navigating the possibilities and difficulties of doing a PhD in Nordic countries. From understanding the informal work culture to the evolving relationship with one's supervisor, it offers first hand accounts of how to make the most of the Nordic PhD experience." —*Prof. Brady Wagoner, Aalborg University*



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