

Words are funny things. It seems strange, when we look at the squiggly characters we call handwriting, or the stylized symbols produced by a computer, that these little marks can actually convey ideas. Then, when we consider that there are countless languages in this small world, it seems even more incredible. We do know, though, that sometimes, as sophisticated as they are, these symbols for ideas do a very poor job of getting our meanings across to other people. Maybe that is one reason that there is so much conflict in the world; perhaps, our languages are too imperfect to keep us from avoiding misunderstanding.

But, on another level, languages and words are just plain interesting. I teach a small, informal class in Swedish as a benefit for our local library. Since there are no grades, no exams, and no pressure on either students or teachers, we often find ourselves examining the peculiarities of both Swedish and English.

Prepositions, those small words that convey so much, are a stumbling block in both languages. Is there a difference in meaning if we say that someone is "at school" or "in school?" Sometimes, there could be. Swedish has a nice preposition "på." It can mean "on, in, at, by, onto, during, for, after," and many other words. But, that does not mean that one can use "på" instead of other prepositions that have those meanings in English. Everything revolves around the notion of special uses. So, "gång på gång" means "time after time," but there is also a word "efter" that means "after." To "ligga på sjukhus" means to "be in the hospital," but there is a Swedish word for "in" as well. It is "in." Though, sometimes, it is "i." And, in some circumstances, it is "inne."

Slang and colloquialisms are also a problem. We cannot translate them directly from one language to another and assume that we are understood. The old expression "it is raining cats and dogs" would mean nothing in Swedish. It is best to stay with standard English when writing to another someone for whom English is a second language.

Then, there are the words that have two meanings in one language or another. For example, Swedish has the word "brev" to mean a letter we write to someone. There is also the word "bokstav" that means a

letter of the alphabet. They are not interchangeable.

Languages change all the time, too. New words are coined, added from other languages, and made to express something that is new to the society. When my grandfather visited his birthplace after many years in America, he wrote letters to his niece, Anna, while he was on the ship coming home after his trip. He sometimes described the meals that were served on the boat. He said, in one letter, that he had eaten "turkiet" and "frysen grädde." Turkey, which is "kalkon" in Swedish, and ice cream, "glass" in Swedish, were unknown to him as a boy in Värmland in the late 1800s. So, he improvised, using the English words and meanings as a guide. They probably understood the "ice cream," but "kalkon" doesn't have much similarity to "turkey." Immigrants do this often, changing the language they grew up with and the one they adopted in the process.

Words and languages are endlessly fascinating. The way we express ourselves is not only interesting; it is also important. A misunderstanding can be painful, and a total lack of communication can be particularly frustrating. But, there are those times, too, when we have a "meeting of the minds" with another person. When this happens, every thought, every expression, every single word, is comprehended immediately and fully. If we could attain this state among nations, we might be able to avoid much of what makes life today uncertain and unpleasant--at best--for much of the world's population. Whether the imperfect beings that we humans are can ever hope to reach such a level is doubtful, but striving toward it is a goal that is worthy of the best in all of us.