

The Swedish word for wheelbarrow is *skottkärra*. How this relates to this essay will be clear at the end. So, if you have any curiosity about that, I guess you will have to read this little composition all the way through.

We don't really have dialects in American English. We have different accents depending on what part of the country we grow up in, and we have some differences in vocabulary that can tell others, if they have an interest in such things, where we are from. But, we don't have real dialects. This is what the experts say. I am just repeating that common belief.

But, this isn't about American English. This is about how I learned Swedish and how much of that language I really acquired.

Where Runo was born and grew up, and where we lived in the first year we were together was in a border area of Sweden. The Norwegian border was visible from the highest hills. We had family on both sides and often crossed the border to the west.

I learned Swedish by "immersion." Nobody in the household—Runo's parents, two brothers, grandma, or Runo himself, could speak English. I had acquired the ability to make myself understood in Swedish, because I had been fortunate enough to have had an "enrichment" course in the language taught by a physics professor whose parents had been Mormon missionaries in Sweden years earlier.

But, my ability to speak Swedish was basically nonexistent, and I could understand much less than was necessary to function well in everyday life. I learned by listening, questioning, and spending a lot of frustrating time wishing I could better express myself.

But, was it really Swedish I was learning? I could read reasonably well, and it sometimes occurred to me that what I read in the newspaper or even heard on the TV news wasn't exactly what I was learning to speak.

I saw signs in some places of business that puzzled me. The English translation would be akin to seeing, in a store here, "Gladly speak Michiganese." So, if it wasn't Swedish I was hearing and learning to speak, what was it?

Much of it was, of course, the local dialect. Dialects are, in my opinion, richly enhanced language. Not bound by the strictures of the schoolbook language that is proper, general, and understandable throughout a country, dialects explain who one is,

where one lives, and what kind of life that is.

The dialect spoken where Runo grew up—at least at that time — was really a “border language” of Swedish, local expressions, and Norwegian. There were words and pronunciations that were so local that a difference could sometimes be heard in speech from one side of the narrow lake Töck to the other. Once, when we were on a trip in Sweden after moving to America, we visited the old folks’ home where Runo’s sister worked in the therapy department. They were talking about her work—she set up looms for weaving as therapy—when an old gentleman said, in Swedish, of course, “I hear an east-of-the-lake voice!”

There was also a lot of Norwegian in that border language. I am still learning that so many words I thought were Swedish when I was trying to become fluent in that language were really Norwegian.

To me, this border language is a rich blend. And the mix that it is had, and still has, the ability to puzzle some people, even though they believe they have grown up with the same language.

When Runo was a little boy, he ran into the neighbor’s wheelbarrow and cut his leg enough that he needed to go to the doctor and, as it turned out, have stitches. The local doctor was off duty at that time, and someone from “away” was covering the clinic. That doctor asked Runo what he had done. “I ran into the *trillebår*,” he answered. The puzzled doctor turned to a nurse. “Oh, he ran into the *skottkärra*,” she told him. “*Trillebår* is Norwegian for *skottkärra*.” Runo told his mother when he came home, “That doctor didn’t know anything. He didn’t even know what a *trillebår* is.”