**Language and Culture Show and Tell: Swedish**

**Annika Lindskog**

**Transcript**

1.

Once upon a time there was a little boy, who was called Nils. He was very unkind to animals – and people – and as punishment he was transformed into a small elf and ended up flying with some geese all across Sweden, from south to north.

This is the boy you see on the back of the goose here. The story, “The wonderful adventures of Nils Holgersson”, is actually a schoolbook, written by Nobel prize winner Selma Lagerlöf at the beginning of the 20C, and it seems to have been deemed famous enough, or important enough, to end up on one of the Swedish banknotes, which is the image you can see here.

The school-book was of course written to teach geography. But it was also a story, what we could call a “narrative” about the country.

Before we go on, let’s pause for a moment and consider: what is actually a country? It usually has a name, right, but what does that name stand for? Its borders, geography, landscape, people, language, history, or its culture?

Well, it’s all of those really. A ‘country’, or our understanding of what a ‘country’ is, can be said to be all these things – geography, landscape, language, culture, history. How these can combine to shape the identity of a particular country, is what we are going to look at a little here today. I am Annika Lindskog, lecturer in Swedish at UCL, and I’m going to take you through some of the reasons for why I think Swedes have ended up being such nature-lovers, and why they sometimes see nature as something important not just for themselves, but also on a communal, or collective, level.

2.

This portrait here, from the UCL Art Museum collections, is of man called Carl von Linné, or Carl Linnaeus in the Latinised version. You might have come across his name in other contexts, as he is regarded as the “father of taxonomy”, that is the naming of plants, and hugely important for the botanical discipline. When he was 25, so a bit younger than here, he rode out from Uppsala, near Stockholm in Sweden, to go and ‘discover’ ‘Lapland’ - here referring to the northernmost parts of the Scandinavian peninsula.

This was in 1732, and Linnaeus was at this point still a student at Uppsala University, a young botanist who wanted to start making a name for himself. So, why is this relevant here? Why might he not ride to ‘Lapland’ and collect some flowers hitherto un-catalogued?

3.

Well, it’s just that collecting some plants is not all he did, nor all the people paying for his journey – which was the Science Academy of Sweden – wanted him to do. No, they wanted him to a) discover lots of natural treasures Sweden could be proud of, b) discover lots of natural resources Sweden could exploit and become rich from, and c) document as much as possible of the life of the Sami people, as a kind of curiosity, and so that Sweden could be proud of them too.

This was, as said, in the 18C. Science had started to become incredibly important then, in order to understand the world better, but also to utilise it better. All the explorative voyages from western powers to distant shores were to possibly claim new territories, make new scientific discoveries, *and* to find ways to make more money from trade. Sweden thought it might do something similar in Lapland.

4.

So, off Linnaeus went. To document it all, he wrote down what he encountered in a diary. It’s a great read – he is totally indiscriminate and jots things down more or less just as they occur to him (or rather as they appear before him), mixing Swedish, Latin and his childhood dialect, often remarking on things in a kind of wondrous amazement. Here are some examples. (Occasionally he also draws, sometimes rather hilariously badly.)

Linnaeus never published this diary – and the original version is actually in a vault here in London, Piccadilly – though it got published and translated later. But Linnaeus still spread his stories of what he had seen and experienced in Lapland in other ways, often quite subjectively.

Here is for example a book called “Flora Lapponica”, an account of some of the plants Linnaeus had found on his journey. But at the start of the book is this picture. If you look at it, you can see that it depicts Linnaeus sitting comfortably in a rather majestic and exotic-looking mountainous landscape. This is a good example of Linnaeus’ rhetorical way to present the region: the mountains are quite a lot higher and ‘peakier’ than in reality, and so are the trees – much of this area is actually above the so called “tree-line” and only have knee-high growth. And the reindeer look rather “intelligent” and far more elegant than the ones you normally encounter in real Lappland. Linnaeus himself is sitting comfortably in the middle of this landscape, in Sami costume and with one of their magical drums. By the Sami’s own tradition, Linnaeus should not have been allowed near any of these objects, but here Linnaeus presents himself as a rightful part of this landscape, as if it is *his*, looking very much at home, and in this way asserting his authority over it. This is a landscape that is now “owned” by Linnaeus, and his way of presenting it to others will influence how they think of it.

5.

And although this is all a while ago now, the attitudes and rhetoric Linnaeus had, have been quite influential. You see, for a while Sweden had held a bit of political power across various parts of Europe. It counted Finland as a territory for a long time, and parts of the Baltic coast, as well as Norway. But various military defeats and political circumstances saw that power steadily diminish from 1718 onwards. And in 1905 the last blow to this northern ‘super power’ came when the Norwegians decided that they too would rather look after themselves, thank you very much, and Sweden had to let them go. For this now somewhat decimated country, the nature and landscape of what if did have left, now became more important and something to build renewed national pride around.

6.

So this is where the schoolbook comes in, written precisely around the years Norway separated from Sweden. It does not just impart geographical details of the country though, it also tells the readers how great it is through the experiences Nils has of it, and through the statements of others he meets. And one of the reasons it *is* great, is because of its vast and diverse nature, just as Linnaeus had tried to tell everyone earlier. And just like with Linnaeus, the North gets a particular write-up here too.

Linnaeus himself also gets a re-discovery at this time, and his travel journals, including the Lapland one, gets re-published in new editions. And a whole host of other activities take place on national level to encourage Swedes to be proud of the country they have (left), and to build that pride at least partially on its nature. Things like:

* a tourist organisation encouraging the citizens to go out and ‘get to know their country’, their slogan that we can see on the stamp here
* national parks – areas of landscape, often ‘wild’ landscapes, which are given protective status to preserve them
* and the open-air museum Skansen in Stockholm – containing representative houses and animals from the whole country so that the city-dwellers too can see and experience its diversity – all come from this time.

As does the famous Swedish ‘right to roam’, which underlines that this is for everyone: “**allemansrätten**” in Swedish means that ANYONE can go ANYWHERE, and have access to the entire country.

7.

And it is the legacy of this ‘campaign’, if we can call it that, which is still around today. It is embedded in a kind of ‘sense’ for nature, an awareness that it is there, and a general idea that it is close to us and represents something good.

You can see it in some famous brand names: the furniture and home goods giant **IKEA** is keen on light and open spaces and natural materials; food companies use close links to nature as a USP, like the dairy producer **Arla** here, and the now very popular **Fjällräven** brand was once started to develop equipment for sustained outdoor activities – even if their rucksacks now get a lot of use also in urban spaces.

8.

And sometimes this comes through in the language used about the country as well. A few years ago, one of the main newspapers did a survey on what words people thought of when they thought of Sweden. The list ran something like this:

As you can see, they all relate to the natural geography of the country, and how it feels to be in it.

Then they asked the Swedes what their favourite words were. Here are some of the top scoring ones. Can you guess the meaning of any of these?

Yes, “sommarvind” is indeed ‘summer wind’. And if you know some German you might spot the next one too: it is ‘sky blue’ – “himmel” is sky (as in Norwegian as well) and “blå” the colour blue. We can see also from this that Swedish is quite good at forming new words by putting several of them together. So far we have had two, now we actually have three: “soluppgång” means ‘sunrise’: sol = sun, upp = up, and ga = ‘go’, or here rise.

9.

Another place where we can see this nature-focus embedded, is in common family names. Not everyone is named after landscape features, but quite a few. Look at, for example, Freddie Ljungberg, quite a successful footballer. “Ljung” actually means heather, and “berg” mountain – so he is really “Freddie Heathermountain”. Or Ingmar Stenmark, once one of the best downhill skiers in the world. His name means stone and ground – so “Stoneground”. Or Sarah Sjöström, a currently competing and successful Olympic swimmer – whose name actually means “Lakestream”, from “sjö” for lake and “ström” – quite a common second part – meaning stream or a small river.

10.

Let’s see if we can spot some more nature names in other Swedes you might have heard of.

How about the tennis ace and underwear designer Björn Borg? Well, it’s a little bit of a false friend, as “borg” means fortress, or burgh, and is different from “berg”, which we had earlier. But “björn” his first name, does mean ‘bear’.

What about the children’s author Astrid Lindgren, whose most famous figure Pippi you might have come across? Yes, this is definitely a nature name: “lind” is a tree – the linden or lime tree in English – and “gren” means branch, so the whole name is a “linden tree branch”

What about the author of the Millenium trilogy, Stieg Larsson? Ah no, there is no nature here. But it is still a very common family name type: it means ‘Lars’ son’, as you might have guessed, and quite a few Swedes have names that mean ‘someone’s son’.

What about Greta then? Yes, nature here too. You recognise ‘berg’ now, for mountain. ‘Thun’ has no good direct translation though, but it is actually the same root as still survives in some English place names, as in Hampton, or Southhampton. It means, broadly, a place where you dwell or a homestead, so Greta’s name could perhaps be translated as ‘dwelling on the mountain’.

And lastly, what about Zlatan? No, this is of course not Swedish nature, this is of Yugoslav origin. But Zlatan is a very good representation of names from other cultural heritages which are now also very common in Sweden. Zlatan apparently means gold, or golden, btw in Serbo-Croatian – not entirely inappropriate for one of the highest earning footballers in the world…

11.

Anyway, now you perhaps know a little more about why nature features quite large in some parts of the Swedish imagination. Linnaeus was important enough to end up on a banknote too, and got the 100 crona one. Hundred in Swedish, btw, is “hundra” – so not all that different from English. In fact, numbers often look quite similar across languages. If you want to learn some easy Swedish, perhaps look up the numbers and start with one to ten? (There is also an exercise for this on your work sheet.)

How we define our countries are then a mixture of many things. We can perhaps say that how we understand them and their landscapes is a mixture between what we have learnt or heard from others, and our own interpretation of them. And these interpretations are not necessarily fixed or possible to see in just one way, as the quote here from Neil Oliver, a British nature presenter, highlights. Linnaeus himself was quite certain that it was for him to tell others what the landscape was, as we can see from this first quote here – which he may or may not have said, but which is regularly attributed to him. *Res ipsas noce* is his own motto though, and underlines that he thought that only by naming things can we truly know what they are.

12.

I’ll leave you with a picture of a flower that Linnaeus named after his mentor, Olof Rudbeck, and which is common here in Britain as well. And one last word from that list of ‘favourite Swedish words’: smultron. It means ‘wild strawberries’, and is a favourite summer word, as it conjures up being outdoors, in nature, eating its wild berries, and being generally content and at ease with the world. Swedes sometimes talk about their own “smultronställe”, ‘wild strawberry patch’, a metaphor for a place they are particularly fond of, be it in nature, in a favourite café, or anywhere else they feel particularly happy and at ease. Perhaps you have one of those too?

On the next slide are a few places you might go if you want to think further about any of the topics here. Thanks for listening to the end and enjoy your own summer – wherever it is!