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The Tense System of Swedish

1. Introduction

The Swedish tense(-aspect) system does not in any drastic way differ from those of the other Germanic languages. The descriptions found in Fabricius-Hansen (1994) and Thieroff (1994) will therefore to a large extent be applicable also to Swedish. However, there are a number of major and minor points of divergence that should be pointed out. I will also discuss some phenomena that may be common to several languages but which have not received adequate attention so far in the literature.

2. Notes on verb morphology

Traditionally, there are four verb conjugation types, three “weak” (using suffixes only) and one “strong” (using also ablaut alternations), as illustrated in the following table, which shows the major inflectional forms, the Infinitive, the Present, the Preterit, the Present and Past Participles, and the Supine (the use of these forms will be explained below):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Preterit</th>
<th>Infinitive</th>
<th>Present Participle</th>
<th>Supine</th>
<th>Past Participle</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st conj.</td>
<td>kalla-r</td>
<td>kalla-de</td>
<td>kalla</td>
<td>kalla-nde</td>
<td>kalla-t</td>
<td>kalla-d</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd conj.</td>
<td>köp-er</td>
<td>köp-te</td>
<td>köp-a</td>
<td>köp-ande</td>
<td>köp-t</td>
<td>köp-t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd conj.</td>
<td>tro-r</td>
<td>tro-dde</td>
<td>tro</td>
<td>tro-ende</td>
<td>tro-tt</td>
<td>tro-dd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th conj.</td>
<td>skriv-er</td>
<td>skrev</td>
<td>skriv-a</td>
<td>skriv-ande</td>
<td>skriv-it</td>
<td>skriv-en</td>
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</table>

If the -a- in the 1st conjugation is assumed to belong to the stem, all the endings in the weak conjugations may be regarded as phonologically conditioned variants.

3. The inflectional tenses

Like in most other Germanic languages, two tenses are distinguished inflectionally, the Present and the Preterit (traditionally called ‘presens’ and ‘imperfekt’), as in (1) and (2), respectively:

(1) Pelle skriver ett brev.
    Pelle write:PRS a letter
    ‘Pelle writes/is writing a letter’

(2) Pelle skrev ett brev.
    ‘Pelle write:PRET a letter
    ‘Pelle wrote/was writing a letter’
Fabricius-Hansen (1994) notes four points in which the tense systems of Danish and Norwegian agree with that of German: the generic, future time reference and historic uses of the Present and the use of the Preterit forms in so-called ‘erlebte Rede’. In all these respects, Swedish behaves in the same way. Some remarks on the last-mentioned concept are in order, however. The example of ‘erlebte Rede’ provided by Fabricius-Hansen, translated below into Swedish, is a paradigm example, where someone’s thoughts are reported in main clause form (that is, in principle one could supply something like ‘Anna thought that’):

(3) Anna föll i tankar utanför huset. För många år sedan hade hon bott här någon tid, och nu skulle hon flytta in igen redan i nästa vecka! Det såg egentligen inte så illa, allt som allt. Det var sannerligen tur att hon hade sett annonsen dagen innan.

‘Anna was musing in front of the house. Many years ago she had lived here for some time, and now she was to move in already next week! It did really not look so bad, in all. She had really been lucky to see the advertisement the preceding day.’

However, there are also uses of Preterit tenses which may be seen as extensions of ‘erlebte Rede’ although they are less clearly connected to a reported speech act or mental act. These are the examples where the Preterit tenses are motivated not so much by the time when a state-of-affairs holds as by the time when the information was obtained or could be obtained. Consider for instance the following real life example:

(4) [Uttered by a woman at the Stockholm Central Station the second after she boards a commuter train, to a fellow passenger who has entered the train at the same time. The train has not yet left:]
Gick det här tåget till Södertälje?
go:PRET this here train:DEF to S.?

‘Did this train go to Södertälje?’

The relevant point in time here is the moment when the speaker and the addressee passed the electronic signboard on the platform where the destination of the train was stated.

Similar uses are possible in other Germanic languages. Robin Lakoff (1970) discusses examples like the following as evidence that the point of view of the speaker is important for the choice of tenses in English:

(5) The boy I spoke to had blue eyes.

Thieroff (1994) quotes the following example from Wunderlich (1970: 139), characterizing it as “eine ganz typische Verwendung des Präteritums”:

(6) Wir kamen über die Autostrada nach Florenz, das in einem breiten Tal lag.

The Swedish normative grammarian Erik Wellander (incidentally, a professor of German) would not agree to this judgment, however. His example of an ‘incorrect’ use of the Preterit is as follows:

(7) I somras voro vi i Budapest, som var en mycket vacker stad.
last_summer be:PRET:PL we in Budapest which be:PRET a very beautiful city

‘Last summer we were in Budapest, which was a very beautiful city’
He comments (my translation): "Budapest is still beautiful, one should thus write *which is a beautiful city*" (Wellander 1939: 279). The sentence is perfectly natural in Modern Swedish, but Wellander’s reaction suggests that it may not be a prototypical example of the Preterit after all.

Another idiosyncratic use of the past is the ‘affective’ one also found in the other Scandinavian languages (Fabricius-Hansen (1994: 58, fn.10)), illustrated by the following examples:

(8) Detta var en härlig utsikt!
   *this be:PRET a gorgeous view*
   ‘(lit.) This was a gorgeous view!’

(9) Det här smakade bra!
   *this here taste:PRET well*
   ‘(lit.) This tasted good!’

These are not in general possible in English and German, although parallels can be found in other languages.

4. The perfect tenses

In addition to the inflectional tenses, the system contains a second major component, viz. the periphrastic perfect construction, which is the base for two so-called complex tenses, the Perfect and the Pluperfect (‘perfekt’ and ‘pluskvamperfekt’ in Swedish grammars). While these tenses are used in roughly the same way as in the neighbouring languages, the formation of the perfect tenses differs at least in three respects from that of the corresponding forms in the other Scandinavian languages.

i. To start with, the main verb takes a special form, traditionally called the ‘Supine’ (‘supinum’). This form for most verbs looks just like the neuter form of the Perfect Participle (e.g. *kallat* ‘called’ from *kalla* ‘call’), which it also historically derives from, but for strong verbs there is a (somewhat subtle) differentiation: the ending of the supine is -it, as in *druckit* ‘drunk’ (from *dricka* ‘drink’) while the neuter form of the participle ends in -et (e.g. *drucket*). The historical background is that the paradigm of the Perfect Participle during one period exhibited an alternation *e:i* between the non-neuter and the neuter forms, that is, the form *druckit* served also as the neuter form of the participle. By analogy, *e* was generalized to all forms of the paradigm, but in the Central Swedish dialects this process did not extend to the neuter forms when they were used in the Perfect construction. In this indirect way, then, a new form was created in the morphology of those dialects and was accepted as the standard, although many speakers e.g. on the West Coast of Sweden use the *e* forms also in the Perfect construction, as do Standard Danish and Norwegian.

ii. The second difference is that Modern Standard Swedish is like English in only acknowledging one perfect-forming auxiliary, viz. *ha(va)* ‘have’. In Older Swedish, a construction *vara +* agreeing form of the Perfect Participle was widely used with verbs denoting motion and change, but this was probably never equivalent to the Perfect with *ha* but was used as a resultative in the sense of Nedjalkov et al. (1988) (see Johannisson 1945). Some dialects have retained the older system.

iii. The Perfect auxiliary may be omitted in subordinate clauses, e.g.
(10) Han said that he talked to everybody who was there.

This is not common in spoken language but quite normal in written Swedish. Historically, this seems to be an influence from German, which had a similar rule during one period.

The Swedish (Present) Perfect sides with the other Scandinavian languages and English in being a “true” perfect rather than one which has expanded to encroach on the territory of the Preterit, like the German. In addition, it shares the reluctance of the Danish, Norwegian and English perfects to combine with definite time adverbials, although the borderline between what is acceptable and unacceptable is rather fuzzy. Thus, like in English, temporal adverbials referring to periods which go up to the point of speech may be combined with the Perfect. This condition is rather liberally understood. A statement such as (11) might e.g. be acceptable if uttered by the speaker when he arrives at his job (and has been out of his bed for a couple of hours already) although it might not be normal later in the day:

(11) Jag har sovit dåligt i natt.
I have slept badly tonight

Like in the other Scandinavian languages and English, the Perfect in Swedish is the natural choice in sentences such as (12):

(12) Jag har bott här i fem år.
I have lived here for five years

If the preposition sedan ‘since’ is used, the Present is at least equally possible:

(13) Jag bor här sedan fem år.
I live here since five years

To judge from the data presented in Fabricius-Hansen (1994), this may be a point where Swedish differs from the other Scandinavian languages.

5. Future time reference

The means used in Swedish for marking future time reference differ from those of the other Scandinavian languages insofar that the verb vilja ‘want’ has only its original meaning and cannot be used as a future auxiliary (as is the case in Danish and Norwegian). The most common ways of indicating future time reference is the auxiliary skall ‘shall’ and the construction komma att + Infinitive (lit. ‘come to do’). Like Fabricius-Hansen (1994), I refrain from taking a stand here as to the exact status of these future marking devices. The following points may be noted:

i. Skall is normally used only when there is an element of intention, planning or obligation. It is not important if an action is intended by the agent of the verb or imposed on him by an ex-
ternal authority. (14) thus does not tell us who took the decision that Pelle is going to bed early, it may be he himself or his parents, but it cannot be used e.g. in the context indicated by (15).

(14) Pelle ska lägga sig tidigt ikväll.
    Pelle will lay:INF himself early tonight
    ‘Pelle will go to bed early tonight’

(15) Pelle är för trött idag för att se nyårsfyrverkeriet och orkar säkert inte
    Pelle is too tired today for to see the_new_year_fireworks and is_able surely not
    stanna uppe även om han gärna vill.
    stay up even if he much want:PRS
    Han kommer att lägga sig tidigt i kväll.
    he come:PRS INFM lay:INF himself early tonight
    ‘Pelle is tired today and will certainly not be able to stay up to see the New Year fireworks even if he
    would like to. He will sure go to bed early tonight’

ii. Like in some other Germanic languages (see Ebert (forthcoming), for similar facts in
Fering), some modals in Swedish may be used without a main verb when followed by an
adverbial expression indicating location or direction. Skall is among these, together with vilja ‘to
want’ , måste ‘must’ and böra ‘ought to’ (but not e.g. kunna ‘be able to’ or fd ‘be allowed to’).
Cf.

(16) Jag skall till stan.
    I shall to town:DEF
    ‘I’m going to town’

iii. In many Germanic languages, there is a strong tendency to use inchoative constructions
to express future states. This issue has been somewhat neglected in the literature, although it is
often mentioned that the verb bli ‘become’ (and its counterparts in other languages) tends to
play the role of the future tense of vara ‘to be’. Of course, it seems quite natural that the distinc-
tion between being and becoming should blur with respect to the future, since the proto-
typical situation involves both the state itself and the event that marks its beginning. Thus, the
sentences You’ll soon be a big boy and You’ll soon become a big boy are equivalent in most
contexts. However, the use of bli in Swedish goes significantly further than this. Consider a
sentence like the following:

(17) Det blir kallt imorgon.
    it become:PRS cold:N tomorrow
    ‘It’ll be cold tomorrow’ (FTRQ:52)

What is notable here is that there is no implication of change. (17) can be used even if it is cold
when it is uttered (it sounds even better if ocksd ‘too’ is added). Notice that in English, It will
get/become cold tomorrow is not natural in such a situation, and It will get cold tomorrow too
hardly makes any sense at all.

Consider now an example like the following:

(18) Den här festen blir nog trevlig.
    this here party become:PRS surely pleasant
    ‘This party will be pleasant’
This clearly does not mean that the party first is unpleasant and then becomes pleasant. Rather, what it means is that the party will display the quality of being pleasant when it takes place. A possible translation into English would be *The party will turn out pleasant.*

(18) represents what could be seen as a prototypical example of this extended use of *bli*. An essential feature seems to be that the property concerned is one that the entity in question acquires when it comes into existence, or develops. This makes it natural for the subject of such sentences to denote events and similar types of entities. The borderlines are rather fuzzy, and a detailed discussion would take us rather far away from the topic of this paper. It should be noted, though, that while *blir* is quite frequent as a translation of English *will be*, and in some genres (e.g. weather forecasts) is even the most common counterpart of it, there are too many restrictions on the use of *blir* for an analysis of it as a future tense of *vara* to be possible. Consider e.g.

(19) Bamen kommer att vara mycket sömniga när pappa kommer.
   child:PL will INFM be:INF very sleepy when Dad come:PRS

   'The children will be very sleepy when Dad arrives'

In (19), substituting *blir* for *kommer att vara* ‘will be’ changes the interpretation: it would mean that Dad’s arriving makes the children sleepy, or at least that they become sleepy when he arrives, whereas (19), as it stands, is naturally interpreted to imply that the children were already sleepy when he arrived.

The verb *bli* (older form: *bliva*) derives from Middle Low German *bliven* ‘remain, become’, and the older sense ‘remain’ is still possible, although it is felt to be slightly old-fashioned, where the prefixed version *förblis* is more common. The ‘remain:become’ polysemY seems to be a ‘Hanseatic’ isogloss, found in all and only the languages in the sphere of influence of Middle Low German (Dahl & Koptjevskaja-Tamm 1992). It might be tempting to speculate that there is a connection between this development and the use of *bli* for future time reference – in some cases above a ‘remain’ interpretation is quite possible, but this is contradicted by the fact that the area where verbs meaning ‘become’ are used for future time reference does not coincide with the ‘remain:become’ isogloss. Thus, Finnish tulla ‘come, become’ is used very much like the Scandinavian *bli* although its origin is quite different; Estonian *jääma* on the other hand does not have the same use although its original meaning is ‘remain’. Also, it turns out that extended uses of verbs meaning ‘to become’ similar to the ones talked about have a very long tradition in Germanic. In grammars of Gothic, the use of the verb *waipən* ‘to become’ for ‘will be’ is regularly mentioned, and some of the examples found in the texts are intriguingly analogous to the Swedish ones. Cf. e.g. *appan bidjāp ei ni waipədī sa plaūhs izvar wintrāu* ‘and pray ye that your flight be not in the winter’ (Mark 13:18).

6. Conditional and counterfactuals

In contradistinction to the situation in Danish and Norwegian, the Subjunctive is still alive in Swedish, at least to some extent. According to traditional grammar, there are two tenses of the subjunctive: the Present and the Preterit. The Present Subjunctive, which takes the ending -*e*, is not really a productive form but is used mainly in fixed constructions such as *Leve kungen!* ‘(Long) live the King!’. It could perhaps be better called an optative. The Preterit Subjunctive
differs from the Preterit Indicative only for strong and (some) irregular verbs. It also takes the ending -e, together with idiosyncratic ablaut alternations of the stem vowel, as in *drucke*, the Preterit Subjunctive of *dricka* 'drink'. Like in English, the most vivacious Subjunctive form is the one formed from the verb *vara* 'be', *vore*, which is still relatively frequent in daily speech, whereas the Subjunctive forms of other verbs sound a bit stilted even in the written language. The Preterit Subjunctive is used a) in counterfactual conditionals, b) in the complements of verbs of wishing etc., c) in *as if* - constructions. The Subjunctive is not normally used in indirect speech except in extremely formal language.

Marking of counterfactuality thus differs from that of Danish and Norwegian in that the Preterit Subjunctive is still possible, at least to some extent, and that the only possible modal auxiliary in these contexts is *skulle*. In counterfactual conditionals, the protasis takes the Preterit Subjunctive, the Preterit Indicative or the Pluperfect, and the apodosis takes any of these forms or one of the Conditionals. The distinction between the forms with and without *ha* is traditionally described as one of time reference: the forms without *ha* would have present time reference and those with *ha* would refer to the past. It seems, however, that another possible distinction is that between implausibility and counterfactuality proper. Thus, in the following sentence pair, both sentences are interpreted as referring to the present time, but (20) is understood as expressing an implausible rather than an impossible condition:

(20) Om han vore hemma, skulle ljuset vara tänd.
    if he be:SUBJ home should light:DEF be:INF lit
    ‘If he were home, the light would be on’

(21) Om han hade varit hemma, skulle ljuset ha varit tänd.
    if he have:PRET be:SUP home should light:DEF have:INF be:SUP lit
    ‘If he had been at home, the light would have been on’

7. Progressive constructions

Aspectual distinctions are marked only in a rather scanty way in Swedish, like in the other Scandinavian languages. There are a couple of progressive or maybe pseudo-progressive constructions, the most important one being *hdilla på att tlock* + Infinitive. Coordinated constructions with postural verbs are also used. (There is no exact counterpart to the Danish/Norwegian *være ved alt* construction).

(22) Kalle håller på att städa.
    Kalle keep:PRS on INFM clean:INF
    ‘Kalle is cleaning’

(23) Jag har suttit och arbetat sedan i mornse.
    I have sit:SUP and work:SUP since in morning
    ‘I have been sitting (and) working since this morning’
8. Sequence of tenses

Sequence-of-tenses in oratio obliqua functions similarly in Swedish as in the other Scandinavian languages and English. However, there are some peculiarities with regard to future time reference. When the matrix verb is in the Preterit, and the verb in the subordinate clause refers to a point in time which is future relative to the reported time of speech, the auxiliary skulle - morphologically the Preterit of skall - is normally obligatory, regardless of if skall, kommer att, or the Present is appropriate in the corresponding sentences with a Present matrix verb. Cf.(24):

(24) Pelles mamma sa att Pelle var trött och sätter skulle
Pelle:GEN mother say:PRET that Pelle be:PRET tired and certainly would
somna tidigt.
fall asleep early
‘Pelle’s mother said that Pelle was tired and certainly would fall asleep early.’

The simple Past is in general not used as a shifted counterpart to the Present with future time reference. Exceptions are some ‘scheduling’ cases:

(25) Min bror sa att tåget gick klockan sju.
my brother say:PRET that train:DEF go:PRET clock:DEF seven
‘My brother said that the train left at seven’

Norwegian is much more liberal here. Cf. the following example from the EUROTYPO material:

(26) Broren sa i går at han kom hit i dag.
brother:DEF say:PRET yesterday that he come:PRET hither today
‘My brother said yesterday that he’d / he’ll come here today’

In Swedish, one would have to say:

(27) Min bror sa igår att han skulle komma hit idag.
my brother say:PRET yesterday that he would come hither today
‘My brother said yesterday that he’d / he’ll come here today’

Turning now to the kommer att construction, we find that it does not have a Preterit form at all. Here again, Swedish differs from Norwegian, where we find examples like the following, which would simply be ungrammatical in Swedish:

(28) Broren min sa i går at det kom til å være
brother:DEF my say:PRET yesterday that it come:PRET to INF:INF be:INF
kaldt i dag.
cold:N today
‘My brother said yesterday it would / it’ll be cold today’

Cf. the most natural Swedish translation, with skulle and bli ‘become’:

(29) Min bror sa igår at det skulle bli kallt idag.
my brother say:PRET yesterday that it would become cold:N today
‘My brother said yesterday it would / it’ll be cold today’
9. Notes on dialects

The Swedish dialectological literature does not have much to say on the topic of tense and aspect, and it is not clear if this is because dialectologists have not been interested in it or because there is nothing interesting to say. One or two dialectal phenomena should be noted here, though.

i. Negated perects or 'not yet'-tenses. In some North Swedish dialects, the prefix o-, which corresponds to English un-, has a much wider use than in the standard language. Among other things, it is used to form a peculiar negated perfect:

(30) Jag har o-lit.
     I have:PRS un-eat:SUP
     'I have not eaten yet'

It differs from the combination of the ordinary negation int(e) and the Perfect by implying that the event is expected to take place. From the typological point of view, special negated Perfects with a similar semantics are not uncommon (they are e.g. found in many Bantu languages).

ii. ‘Begin’ as a future auxiliary. In the Swedish dialects spoken in the Finnish province Ostrobothnia (Österbotten), the verb börı ‘begins’ is sometimes (probably as a result of Finnish influence) used to signal future time reference, as in

(31) E börı rein ikveld.
     it start:PRS rain:INF tonight
     'It’s going to rain tonight'

10. Conclusion

Swedish has a tense-aspect system which is fairly typical of Northern Europe (see Dahl, forthcoming) with, among other things, the following characteristics: a high degree of grammaticalization of past time reference with an inflectional past and a periphrastic perfect derived from a possessive construction, no grammaticalization of the perfectivity/imperfectivity distinction, and a low degree of grammaticalization of future time reference. In spite of the close similarity to the other Scandinavian systems, a closer look reveals a number of minor divergences, some of which have been neglected in traditional treatments.

References