

Excuse me, but can you tell me where the Nordic House is located? Linguistic strategies in inter-Nordic communication in Iceland illustrated through participant observation*

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Abstract

In Iceland, Danish is taught as a foreign language parallel to English. One purpose for this is to promote inter-Nordic communication since Danish is generally held to be intercomprehensible with both Norwegian and Swedish. Assuming the role of tourists, field workers who were native speakers in either Danish, Norwegian or Swedish approached Icelandic adolescents (aged 15–20), asking in their native language for directions to the Nordic House in Reykjavík. The investigation was conducted at three different time periods (1983, 1999/2004 and 2006) and showed that the proportion of young people understanding the question thus posed to them decreased from two thirds (1983) to a little less than 40% (2006). At the same time, the number switching to English while answering the question increased. In 2006, a large majority (80%) was inclined to do so, while only one third did so in 1983, roughly 25 years earlier.

1. Introduction

In the early 1980s, I came to spend a year in Iceland, and took the opportunity to gather material for my graduate work. This resulted in a report entitled *Språkförståelse och språkstrategier vid internordisk kommunikation på Island* [‘Language comprehension and linguistic strategies in inter-Nordic communication in Iceland’] (Börestam 1984). The work consisted of three sub-surveys — one of them performed through participant observation. The field work (completed in 1983) was carried out in central Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland, where I pretended to be a Swedish tourist with no knowledge of Icelandic, trying to find my way to the Nordic House situated about a 15 minute walk from the center of the city. I approached 40 young people aged 15–20 years and asked them all the same question in Swedish: *Ursäkta, men kan du säga var Nordens hus ligger?* [‘Excuse me, but can you tell me where the Nordic House is located?’] I then wrote down their reactions as soon as possible in a notebook I kept in my pocket, noting two aspects: whether the question had been understood at all and in which language they chose to answer. Had they managed to understand and did they continue in a Scandinavian language or switch languages, presumably to English? The study was later expanded with the help of two fellow students, a Dane and a Norwegian, who agreed to ask the same question in their native language. Thus, I had the opportunity to compare the outcome of interviews in all three of these Scandinavian languages.

Iceland is an island country west of the Scandinavian Peninsula with a population of about 300,000, highly concentrated to the Reykjavík area. The country was first inhabited in the late 9th century by people from the western part of Norway. Thanks to an early written tradition, Old Norse has survived with many of its ancient traits to the present day, forming the base for modern Icelandic. The Icelandic Sagas, famous around the world, consist of stories that take place during Iceland’s early history when it was an independent country. It later came under Norwegian rule and in 1380 when Norway came under Danish rule, so did Iceland. Iceland

belonged to Denmark until 1918, for over 500 years, after which it continued as a constitutional monarchy in a personal union with Denmark until 1944.

When it gained its full independence in 1944, Iceland had been in close contact with the Danish language for a very long time. This notwithstanding, after independence it gradually became clear that in spite of everything, Danish is still a foreign language for Icelanders and must be taught as such (Hauksdóttir 2001: 154–155). In the forties, school regulations were issued requiring instruction in a foreign language; that Danish was chosen as the first foreign language was justified by school administrators on the grounds that it provided a link to the past (Hauksdóttir 2001: 186). Later, in 1960, the general Nordic connection was added as a reason (Hauksdóttir 2001: 145, 157). In the 1974 Education Act (Lög um grunnskóla 1974 § 42), we read that the objective of the choice of foreign languages is to “*varðveita tengslin við uppruna þjóðarinnar og norræna menningu og hins vegar að opna Íslendingum leið til samskipta við sem flestar þjóðir*” [‘preserve the link with the nation of origin and with Nordic culture, and to facilitate Icelanders’ contact with as many nations as possible’]. To reach these goals, both Danish and English are taught.

For a long while, Danish was the first foreign language and English came later, but on the instructions of the central education authorities, the order of introductions was progressively reversed during the period, 1999–2002. Since this development was expected to dramatically change conditions for communication between Icelanders and the rest of the Nordic countries, it seemed appropriate to repeat my earlier experiment. Having now done so, one can conclude that while it was not a particularly easy task, it was still very fruitful and definitely instructive. Altogether some 400 people were asked to explain the way to the Nordic House. This article will both report on what they said and on some of the other things we learned along the way.

This article first provides a brief outline of the conditions for inter-Nordic communication in Iceland and then describes the field survey as it was originally carried out in 1983. After this, are discussed the experiences from the first attempt (in 1999) to update the study, and thereafter the later experiences from 1999/2004 and 2006. In all, the study has been run four times: first in 1983 followed by updates at three points in time. When relating the results, there is special focus on the contrast of the first study with the second update (conducted in 1999/2004) and the third (completed in 2006). Experiences from the first update (in 1999) will be discussed because it was a valuable source of learning, but the data from that first follow-up is excluded from the analysis and therefore only 300 of the interviews will be considered in the analyses. These 300 interviews were performed by a total of six field workers, all of whom were instructed to use standard language and to speak as clearly as would be normal when you want to be understood by a foreigner. All field workers in the second follow up in 1999/2004 as well as in the third in 2006 were undergraduates or graduate students.

2. Prerequisites for inter-Nordic communications in Iceland

The Nordic countries have much in common, and even though different languages are spoken, the concept of a *Nordic language community* is often used, based on the notion that those who speak Danish, Norwegian or Swedish should be able to understand each other. This type of receptive bilingualism has often been referred to as *semicomcommunication* in accordance with Haugen (1972) [1966]. For a discussion on this phenomenon, see Braumüller 2008, Rehbein et. al. 2011. However, the term “language community” is somewhat problematic and there is little consensus as to a definition (see Hudson 1996: 24–30, Wardhaugh 1998: 116–129), nor to the usefulness of the term. In this article, I would nonetheless like to consider the concept in relation to inter-Nordic language planning, as something that can be achieved through

acquisition planning.¹ Viewed from that point of view, Danish is taught in Iceland as a way to promote the Nordic language community. Icelandic is a Nordic language, just like Danish, Norwegian and Swedish. However, a Dane, a Norwegian or a Swede cannot spontaneously understand Icelandic and vice versa. In this article, only Danish, Norwegian and Swedish are meant when referring to “Scandinavian” languages (see Vikør 1995: 15 on Nordic vs. Scandinavian).

Depending on the conditions for intercomprehension, the language community can be divided into *primary* and *secondary* groups (according to Dahlstedt 1975: 23–24). In the primary language community, we find those who have Danish, Norwegian, or Swedish as their mother tongue, for which the intelligibility of each other’s languages is assumed to be more or less spontaneous. In the secondary language community are included Nordic residents who have mother tongues other than one of these three. Nowadays, this includes a growing number of relatively recently-arrived second-language speakers, in contrast to when Dahlstedt drew up his distinction dealing primarily with native speakers. Some of these native groups now have the status of indigenous minorities and many are bilingual. Nordic citizens belonging to the secondary language community referred to above are the Faroese, Greenlanders, and Icelanders, who are taught Danish in school, and the Finns, who are taught Swedish. In inter-Nordic contexts, these languages, Danish and Swedish, are supposed to function as their *Nordic contact language*. As in Iceland, the choice of Nordic contact language depends on historic background.

In the early ‘80s when this study in Iceland was carried out for the first time, pupils there began to study foreign languages at the age of 9 or 10, first Danish, then English two years later. This meant that when pupils graduated, they had studied Danish for 5–6 years and English a year or so less. For more information on Danish in Icelandic schools, see Hauksdóttir (2001).²

As already mentioned, the system was changed around the turn of the 21st century, and now English is Icelanders’ first foreign language in school. As of 1999, schools were given three years to implement the change and according to Auður Hauksdóttir, Associate Professor of Danish at the University of Reykjavík (personal communication), this was done in different ways and at different speeds from school to school. At the same time, Danish was still to be taught and the number of hours spent on Danish was not to be reduced. It is also theoretically possible to study Norwegian or Swedish, but in practice this is only for children who have grown up in either country or who have parents who speak the language in question.

By tradition, Icelanders have spoken what is commonly called “Scandinavian,” in this case what Vikør (1995: 129) refers to as an institutionalized variant, unlike the mainland “Scandinavian” that occasionally arises between speakers of Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish. The pronunciation patterns of Icelanders’ “Scandinavian” emerged at a time when language teaching was dominated by reading exercises, with a background in what Haugen (1981: 133) characterizes as “*dansk talt på islandsk lydsubstrat*” [‘Danish on an Icelandic sound substrate’]. Anna Helga Hannesdóttir (2000: 36, 43) rejects the idea of Icelandic Scandinavian as institutionalized, arguing through authentic examples on the individual level that it is Danish spoken with Icelandic interference rather than an established form of language. In light of the sociocultural context in which Icelandic Scandinavian arose, one might also suspect that the Icelanders at that time used their variant as a means of expressing a certain opposition to the sovereignty of Denmark (see Hauksdóttir 2001: 131–137). Regardless of whether it is legitimate to speak of Scandinavian in this context as a separate variety, it was a strategy that allowed people to speak Danish and to dissociate themselves from the language and the foreign rulers at the same time (cf. Börestam and Huss 2000: 55 on

disintegrative language learning). Danish was a language they were forced to learn, but the speakers did not identify themselves as Danes or associate themselves with them.

Icelandic Scandinavian is usually regarded in high esteem in the other Nordic countries, and held by many to be more easily understood than genuine Danish (Vikør 1995: 130). However, nowadays, it is clear that genuine Danish is what pupils are expected to acquire in school as is explicitly stated in the curriculum (Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla 1999: 33). Thus, the conditions for Icelandic Scandinavian have changed fundamentally, and Vikør (1995: 130) is no doubt right when he says that on this point marked differences are likely to arise between generations of Icelanders. At the same time, there is much to suggest that English is replacing Danish as the Nordic contact language for the younger generation; this is something we will return to later in this article. Throughout the Western world there is a positive attitude to English — Iceland is no exception.

Interestingly enough we have a recent study on inter-Nordic comprehensibility published by Lars-Olof Delsing and Katarina Lundin Åkesson (2005). Their report is based on testing done in 2003–2004 in which a total of 1806 high school students from the different Nordic countries took part. Most of the participants were between 16–19 years of age; the same age as the informants in my field studies. Both listening and reading comprehension were tested in English as well as the Scandinavian languages. Questions designed to measure attitudes towards the languages were also included.

In Iceland, 214 high school students in two different towns participated (Delsing and Lundin Åkesson 2005: Table 4:2, cf. Table 2:2–3). Most of the students came from Reykjavík. The test was performed twice and two languages were tested each time using different test versions. On the first occasion, all 214 pupils were tested in Danish and in either Norwegian or Swedish. The following semester, one third of the group was tested in English in addition to either Norwegian or Swedish, depending on which language they had been tested on the first occasion.

The first question of interest in connection with this study is whether there are differences in how Danish, Norwegian and Swedish are understood in oral form. According to the researchers themselves (Delsing and Lundin Åkesson 2005: 46–47, 94), the most reliable portrayal of this is obtained from the section of the test where a radio news program was simulated. Here the result shows that Danish and Norwegian are understood equally well, while Swedish came out a little worse (Delsing and Lundin Åkesson 2005: 73, Table 4:19). The students scored 33% in Danish, 35% in Norwegian and 26% in Swedish.³ The figures are mean values based on the outcome of two different test versions, using two different texts. Regarding the result for Swedish, the difference between the outcomes of the two different versions is very large. For one of the texts, Swedish came out best (42%) while the pupils performed very poorly on the other text (9%). This low level of comprehension might be related to one single word (that for *frog*) that was essential to understanding the second text. Therefore, this author is not convinced that Norwegian and Danish are understood better than Swedish, nor that Norwegian is understood better than Danish. Instead, one might conclude that these three languages are understood equally well by young Icelanders — a surprising result since it is Danish that is studied in school.⁴

The second issue of interest is whether English is understood better or worse than the three Scandinavian languages. According to the results (Delsing and Lundin Åkesson 2005: 94, table 4: 30), it is obvious that most young people understand English much better. From the above figures on comprehension, we can calculate a mean value for the three Scandinavian languages as 31%, while the corresponding test in English had a mean as high as 79%. The difference is huge, and even if active competences were not measured, the likelihood that

young people will choose English instead of Danish appears to be high. If we also consider attitudes towards the different languages, English is considered to be more “beautiful” than any of the Scandinavian languages (Delsing and Lundin Åkesson 2005: 109). At the same time, English is thought of as a language that is easier to understand than the other three (Delsing and Lundin Åkesson 2005: 112).

3. Other research using participant observation

The inspiration for my original field survey was taken from Labov’s classical study (1966) of department stores in New York, where he not only tested the social significance of a given language variable (whether an “r” sound was pronounced or not), but also tested a whole new method of field study. The focus of the study (Labov 1972 [1966]: 44), was whether “rapid and anonymous speech events could be used as the basis for a systematic study of language.” Labov himself pretended to be a customer in three different stores, asking for goods he knew were to be found on the “fourth floor.” A total of 264 informants were addressed and the data could easily be quantified. Immediately after each observation, he stepped out of sight and noted down if “fourth” was pronounced with an “r” sound or not. He also noted personal information such as gender and approximate age of the informant (1972: 49–50). The stores were located in different neighborhoods and in accordance with the hypothesis, the results showed that the variable indicated social stratification. Labov suggested (1972: 50) that the technique could be regarded as a form of *elicitation*.

However, the idea for my own field study was not to study details of this particular sort, but to try to capture elements that might be of more relevance for the Inter-Nordic communication. First, I wanted to examine whether young people displayed *comprehension* of a question in a Scandinavian language (*Excuse me, but...*). A second goal was to find out which *language choice* the young people themselves would make when they had to continue the conversation. Interestingly, the organization of this study has a good deal in common with a study performed in Tunisian streets by Sarah Lawson-Sako and Itesh Sachdev in the early 1990s, where as many as 909 respondents were asked for directions to the post office. Just as with Iceland, Tunisia is a former colony, liberated from France in 1956. In contrast to Danish in Iceland, French still has a clear standing, alongside two types of Arabic: Tunisian Arabic (TA) and modern standard Arabic (MSA). The relation between these two variants of Arabic can be described as diglossic (Lawson-Sako and Sachdev 1996: 62), with MSA as the high variety and TA as the low variety: “TA, considered the ‘low’ status variety relative to MSA, has high solidarity value in that it is central to definitions of self and other as Tunisian ([...])” (Lawson-Sako and Sachdev 1996: 62). Most people have TA as their first language, and only a small percent of the population have French. However, in the public sector French has a strong position alongside MSA, and there is a high degree of bilingualism. Given this diverse linguistic landscape, the study “was designed to explore how Tunisians actually use and alter their language(s) in face-to-face interactions” (Lawson-Sako and Sachdev 1996: 63). The field workers were both male and female and also of different ethnicity (Arab Tunisians and white Europeans). Later, a black African male was also engaged. The languages used for posing the question were TA and French, and half of the interviews by each field worker were done in each language. The informants were randomly chosen and only Arab Tunisians were approached (Lawson-Sako and Sachdev 1996: 66). After asking and receiving an answer to how to get to the post office, the field worker also asked if it was possible to phone from there. When asking this second question, the field worker would either converge or diverge to the language used by the informant when answering the first question (Lawson-Sako and Sachdev 1996: 68). The alternatives when replying to the two questions were to either converge or diverge, but it was also noted whether people used code-switching in their

replies. Code-switching was considered to apply even if only a single word was used in another language. Just as with Labov's study, the one by Lawson-Sako and Sachdev is of a quantitative nature.

Their finding was that when the field worker began speaking in TA, it was much more common to converge as compared to the French interviews, when there were many more instances of code-switching and divergent language choice. In other words, there was a tendency for people to dissociate from the former colonial language. If the question was posed by a woman, this tendency was stronger than if by a man (Lawson-Sako and Sachdev 1996: 71, Fig. 4). When the black African researcher was added, the highest rates of divergence occurred, and informants clearly disassociated themselves from him, regardless of which language he used. In this relatively stable multilingual context, the researchers also conclude that linguistic competence is not what determines the linguistic choices. Instead it is identity that is emphasized: "Subjects' linguistic choices were identity choices, varying systematically as a function of the language, ethnicity and gender of the researcher." (Lawson-Sako and Sachdev 1996: 75–76)

4. On the structure of field investigation

Compared to the study by Lawson-Sako and Sachdev (1996), the number of people queried in my study was considerably smaller, which of course affects the possibility of statistical treatment. One must also remember that Reykjavík, despite being the capital of Iceland, is a small town with only about 200,000 inhabitants. It is also a town where people come in close contact with each other and too many questions about the Nordic house in a short period of time could have raised suspicions. Therefore, it was also important to move around so that the interviewers would not be recognized; this would have jeopardized the entire project. The field worker was instructed to target young people aged about 15–20 years. The range of age was chosen to provide as wide an array as possible, but we all know that in practice it is difficult to estimate age and that different people tend to make different judgments. Our target audience was "people on the street," and the speech act in question involved anonymous encounters between strangers and foreign tourists in an urban area often visited by tourists. A major difference between my study and the one by Labov is that our informants were not obliged to help us, while in principle, clerks in department stores are so obligated. Therefore, a great deal of politeness was required. First, the person addressed had to identify the situation as such ("stranger addressing me"), and then find out more exactly what the stranger wanted. In a situation such as this, there are a limited number of options. In this context, I can mention that an elderly man once told me what time it was instead of giving me directions.⁵ It was not the correct response, but it was a good guess. To help the stranger to orient correctly, the question we chose was the equivalent of "Excuse me, but can you tell me where the Nordic House is located?" in one of the three Scandinavian languages. This sentence has an information structure where the important information (The Nordic House) comes at the end and has been prepared through a long series of words before, all put in a polite and indirect way. Many of the responders needed further consideration and therefore asked to have the relevant information confirmed ("The Nordic House?") or the question repeated ("What?"). In addition, we always repeated the question when the informant didn't seem to understand. The field workers were also told to avoid excessively noisy environments and to exclude those who said they were unfamiliar with the Nordic House because they were not from Reykjavík.

We therefore assumed, in accordance with what a Scandinavian tourist would have reason to expect, that the Icelandic addressed would be able to understand and make him or herself understood in either Danish or "Scandinavian". There are many methods of approaching

language comprehension, and given that it is a non-static multilayered human phenomenon, there is no single “correct” way to “measure” it. What people know or do not know is hard to tell. Therefore, it might be better here to speak of *displayed* understanding. In reality, languages are used to perform tasks, and high motivation will sometimes make it possible to achieve an objective despite a low degree of understanding, and vice versa. Since the context conveys much of the information needed, complete understanding is seldom required. To this should be added that communication is not a solitary achievement and the task is almost always performed in cooperation with others. One’s entire behavior will also be guided by what can be expected from earlier experiences as well as from socialization, which includes normative patterns for language choice. At this level, attitudes toward languages and stereotypical images of “others” could affect the result (cf. Lawson-Sako and Sachdev 1996). We were not interested in linguistic correctness, but only in pragmatic competence, and in real life most tourists are likely to view the success of the conversation in the light of whether or not they achieved their goal. The goal we intended to ask for had to fulfill several demands. It had to be a plausible tourist destination, and it had to be so well known that virtually everyone in Reykjavík would be expected to know about it. Furthermore, the name itself had to offer a linguistic challenge. If, for example, we had asked for *Tjörninn* (a small pond in the center of the city) with a more or less accurate representation of the Icelandic word, it would have sufficed if the respondent identified that single word. We would never have been certain that the informant actually understood the language in which the question was put.

Therefore, the place to ask for would ideally have a Scandinavian name, and I finally chose *Nordens hus* [‘the Nordic House’]. The name is basically the same in Icelandic [‘Norræna húsið’] and the Scandinavian languages [‘Nordens hus’], but with different, genuine, pronunciations. For the sake of standardization, I chose not to vary this target, and therefore the question was always the same. Unfortunately, during data collection for later updates of the report, it turned out that many young people are no longer familiar with the Nordic House; therefore, asking about it became a question that could have a negative answer. However, everyone being asked still understands that a stranger is not interested in knowing the informant’s familiarity with the Nordic House — but that he or she is indirectly asking for help. To reinforce this, in 2006 the field worker brought a map with her and added that she had heard that the Nordic House was supposed to be in the vicinity of the university. In this way, she tried to keep the conversation going, and when the matter was thus discussed more thoroughly, many respondents, regardless of their familiarity with the Nordic House, did manage to perform the task.

Regarding the first part of the data collection form (see appendix), we took notes on whether the informant understood the question, misunderstood, or gave up. When it came to the second matter of interest, namely the respondents’ strategies, we registered their choice of language. Sometimes, people gave up despite having first displayed that they understood the question. A few times, a simplified version of Icelandic was used in the response. It also happened that people followed us on our way so that we reached a spot where the building could be seen. Care was taken to record the result immediately after each interview. Having walked away in the designated direction, the field worker ducked into a doorway or went around a corner. The recording system employed a separate sheet for each person interviewed and notes were made using check marks for a number of items. Each sheet was numbered, which was as close we came to naming the informants. Two minor additions (1.D and 1.F, marked with bold), were appended to the registration form, after the first update of the study to clarify a few points that had only been implicit earlier. They were still counted in the same way. In the form, there was also room for comments from the field workers — notes which were especially valuable since I was not myself able to be present during the updates.

With regard to the Scandinavian languages, the alternatives noted as responses were “Danish” (2A), “Norwegian” (2B), “Swedish” (2C) and “Scandinavian” (2D), but the first three, and especially 2B and 2C, were reserved for those Icelanders who truly spoke one of the languages. These were usually people who had at one point been to the country in question. We verified this by praising them for their pronunciation, which normally led to their giving us the further information we needed. In 1983, we generally marked “Scandinavian,” but it could be discussed whether, even then, we should have chosen “Danish” instead. In the later updates, “Scandinavian” became rare. One of the people who later (in 2006), was praised for his Danish replied that “it was natural [for him] since he had studied it at school.” In other words, he had no special experience of using the language, but was a shining example of how his education had been useful. Still, the intention was never to make a micro-analysis of the informants’ answers, but to take down such information as could easily be assessed, and thus more reliably recorded.

Since it is very difficult to determine whether a person speaks Danish (with interference) or is aiming at “Scandinavian,” no attempt was made to further distinguish the Scandinavian alternatives from each other, but to simply code it as “one of the Scandinavian languages.” Such an analysis could only have been carried out using recordings, but none were made.

5. The first field survey in 1983

In the spring and summer of 1983, a total of 120 young people who happened to be in the center of Reykjavík were approached by one of several strangers asking for directions to the Nordic House. These foreigners — field workers carrying out our survey — all came from other Nordic countries and each one used their native Scandinavian language. Each field worker was instructed to approach 40 people, with an equal distribution between sexes. The following languages were represented.

Danish was spoken by a woman in her mid-20s. She grew up in Copenhagen, but moved to Jutland at the age of 15. As an adult, she lived in Odense.

Norwegian was spoken by a man of approximately the same age (25). He was from Trondheim and his language, according to himself, was one of the standard varieties from eastern Norway.

Swedish was spoken by a woman who at the time was 29. She (=me) came from Dalarna in central Sweden, which was slightly recognizable in her manner of speech.

As for comprehension, the notes made it possible to distinguish between whether people understood the question immediately or after confirmation (The Nordic House?) or after repetition (What?). In Table 1 below, the choice was made to only distinguish between comprehension and non-comprehension, since asking for confirmation or repetition is a normal procedure whether you understand or not. Likewise no distinction is made here between the sexes (neither for respondents or field workers), since no significant differences were found. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Comprehension in 1983 among 120 young people in Reykjavík when addressed in Danish, Norwegian, or Swedish. Percentage figures in brackets. Significant at the 0.01 level.*

Language	Comprehends	Does not comprehend	Total
Danish	17 (42.5)	23 (57.5)	40 (100.0)
Norwegian	29 (72.5)	11 (27.5)	40 (100.0)
Swedish	32 (80.0)	8 (20.0)	40 (100.0)

TOTAL	78 (65.0)	42 (35.0)	120 (100.0)
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If we begin by studying the overall performance for all languages at the bottom of the table, we can conclude that about two-thirds of the adolescents managed to understand the question, while a third of them did not. Regarding the outcome for the different languages, Danish, paradoxically, is the language that came out worst. The majority of respondents addressed in Danish did not even show that they had understood the question. Those addressed in Norwegian or Swedish did better, with Swedish ending up slightly better than Norwegian.

The difference between the two languages, Swedish and Norwegian, is not large and it seems reasonable to view the performance of Swedish and Norwegian as one group, which then could be contrasted with the results for Danish. It is also uncertain whether the ordinary "Icelander on the street" can distinguish between the two languages, given that the prosodic patterns are very similar. It should be pointed out, for instance, that people from Denmark often cannot distinguish whether what they are hearing is Norwegian or Swedish. Sometimes, the field workers were asked about their nationality, a question that in itself suggests uncertainty about in which language they were being addressed; the respondents' guesswork was sometimes a similar indication. For instance, when asking the question in Swedish, I once received the following answer in English: "I'm sorry, but I don't speak Norwegian."

The second objective of the survey was to find out the further reaction of the young people. Would they be able to continue in "Scandinavian" or would they even want to? Or would they switch to English? As above, I chose not to separate the Scandinavian alternatives. The result is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *The Icelandic adolescents' strategies in conversation with a Danish, Norwegian, or Swedish-speaking person in 1983. Percentage figures in brackets. No significant differences.*

STRATEGIES:					
Addressed in:	One of the Scandinavian languages	Icelandic	Gives up	English	Total
Danish	10 (25.0)	–	18 (45.0)	12 (30.0)	40 (100.0)
Norwegian	16 (40.0)	1 (2.5)	11 (27.5)	12 (30.0)	40 (100.0)
Swedish	14 (35.0)	1 (2.5)	9 (22.5)	16 (40.0)	40 (100.0)
TOTAL	40 (33.3)	2 (1.7)	38 (31.7)	40 (33.3)	120 (100.0)

If we start by considering the total of the first column in Table 2, we see that a third of the young people chose to continue the conversation in one of the Scandinavian languages. Usually, they spoke in what we at that time identified simply as "Scandinavian." Equally many chose to speak English, some after having started off in "Scandinavian." Sometimes, the speakers' skills in the two groups of languages, English vs. "Scandinavian," appeared to be similar, still English was preferred.

Often, the adolescents switched language using the words, "Oh, do you speak English?" The sentence was often followed by an embarrassed smile, alluding to a common understanding of the reason for switching. My impression was that what embarrassed them was not having to change language, but having to speak Danish or "Scandinavian." Almost half of the interviews conducted in Danish resulted in failure, while about a quarter of the Norwegian and Swedish ones did so. Looking at the results for each of the three languages, it is thus most discouraging where Danish is concerned, but as noted above, there were no significant differences between outcomes for different languages.

Respondents' willingness to give up can be explained in several ways. In the initial study, it was hoped that non-linguistic factors such as attitudes might be uncovered, but there was never any evidence to show such an effect. In other words, it was not possible to discern a negative attitude to Danish or speakers of Danish. Those addressed in Danish were every bit as friendly as the others, but they just shook their heads. Perhaps we can see the outcome as an expression of "blocking," in that they simply did not expect to understand Danish, or that they didn't want to. Such attitudes and expectations tend to determine a listener's attentiveness. Some people could also have felt inferior when expressing themselves in front of a native speaker of Danish. From a Nordic point of view, the interviews in Norwegian were those that evolved in the best way. Forty percent of those addressed in Norwegian completed the encounter in a Scandinavian language, as compared to 35% for Swedish. The difference is not large, and in the Swedish group slightly fewer people gave up. However, it should be noted once again that the difference was not statistically significant.

6. The first update of the field survey in 1999

Just before the turn of the 21st century, the question arose of updating the study from 1983. The general feeling was that the use of English in Internordic communication in Iceland had probably increased, but an even more urgent issue at the time was that English was about to be introduced as Icelandic schoolchildren's first foreign language. It would take some years before adolescents at 15–20 years old would be affected by the change and there was an interest in capturing information about the situation before this happened.

Through the Nordic Language Council, who initiated the update of the study, I came into contact with a couple of Scandinavians who at the time were living in Iceland: a Norwegian man, who used *nynorsk*⁶ as his written standard language, and a woman who was from Stockholm. The idea was for them to either recruit field workers or take on the role of field worker themselves. When I came into the picture, they had already chosen the latter option, and since both were about 55–60 years old, the second batch of interviews was to be done by people who were considerably older than the original interviewers. This turned out to be a serious mistake. However, since I was unable to travel to Iceland myself, I copied the standard form from the first survey and sent them the report from 1984 as my only instructions. After that, we had no further contact — another fact I later regretted.

Studying the results, I was surprised to see a large discrepancy between the respondents' comprehension of Norwegian and Swedish, languages that young people in 1983 seemed incapable of distinguishing. For example, I was taken for a Norwegian in 1983, which incidentally the older Swedish field worker also experienced a few times during the second survey. She (Swedish field worker SFW), made the following notes after putting her question to a female informant (ICE):

(1)

SFW: *Ursäkta men kan du säga var Nordens hus ligger?*

'Excuse me, but can you tell me where the Nordic House is located?'

ICE: Do you speak English?

SFW: *Förstår du inte när jag talar?*

'Don't you understand me?'

ICE: I'm sorry, I don't speak Norwegian.

It should be added that there is no record of guesswork in the other direction — of Norwegian being taken for Swedish. Nevertheless, there were considerable differences in comprehension of Norwegian and Swedish. When addressed in Norwegian, more than 80% understood the question per se, while only a third of those addressed in Swedish appeared to do so. It is

possible that it was my instructions that were at fault, but an important clue as to why the picture developed as it did can be found in the replies of the males and females.

Only two young Icelandic men out of 20 addressed by the Swedish woman were found to understand the question, and my suspicion is that they simply did not care to make an effort when they were addressed by a woman her age. The young Icelandic women, on the other hand, addressed by the same Swedish field worker, fared significantly better, with 12 of them (60%) understanding the question. The result is remarkably poor for the use of Swedish, while those who were addressed by the male Norwegian field worker showed a positive result that was equally remarkable in the other direction. In terms of percentage, 90% of the young women displayed an understanding of the question in Norwegian and 75% of the young men.

The difference compared to the interviews carried out in Swedish is so large that one wonders if the picture as described is reliable. Another possibility is that this Norwegian field worker may have spoken a variety of Norwegian that was considerably easier to comprehend than the Swedish variety used by the woman from Stockholm. It should be added that Norwegian in spoken form shows considerable variation, as it is common to use “a dialect for speech and one of the standards for writing” (Vikør 1995: 54). Since Nynorsk has an intimate connection with the dialects in western Norway, this could imply that the variety of Norwegian spoken by this particular interviewer had more in common with Icelandic than one would at first think, in spite of what has earlier been said about the similarity between Norwegian and Swedish. Einar Haugen’s view (1981: 133) has already been cited that Icelandic “Scandinavian” can be characterized as Danish spoken on an Icelandic sound substrate, but I would also like to add the continuation of that quote, namely: “*det har alltid minnet meg sterkt om en norsk vestlending som prøver å tale riksmål.*”[‘this has always strongly reminded me of a Norwegian from the western part of the country trying to speak riksmål.’]⁷ (Cf. Example 19 below.)

Another factor possibly affecting the outcome could arise if the two field workers made very different age assessments. The Norwegian himself wrote in an accompanying letter about possible sources of error that, *Kanskje er gjennomsnittsalderen betydeleg høgare enn 17.5 år* “the average age might be significantly higher than 17½ years.” If the Norwegian often chose to interview older subjects than did the Swedish woman, this may mean that he spoke to people who were more mature and thus had better language skills. There are also indications that the Norwegian field worker sometimes insisted that the conversation be carried out in a Scandinavian language, which he himself indicates in reference to his own strategy as another possible source of error: *Smertefullt å oppleve aggresjonen hos enkelte unge islendingar når eg i spørjesituasjonen ikkje ville gå over til engelsk. Alt kroppsspråk synte: Kva for underutvikla fåne er du som ikkje talar engelsk i vår moderne tid???* “[It was) embarrassing to experience the aggression of some of the young people when I didn’t want to switch to English. Their whole body language signaled: What kind of underdeveloped idiot are you not to speak English in these modern times???”]

Whatever the reason, fewer people switched to English when they were addressed by the Norwegian man (50%) than by the Swedish woman (73%), and there were more respondents who continued the conversation in “Scandinavian” after being asked the question in Norwegian (25% compared to 13% for Swedish). Concerning one of the boys who chose to continue in English, even though he understood the question in Norwegian, the Norwegian man wrote, *Virket som om 34 følte ubehag ved å bli spurt på norsk. Kroppsspråk...* [‘Seems like number 34 felt uncomfortable being addressed in Norwegian. Body language...’]. Both field workers also made observations that suggest that by this time (1999), attitudes had become fairly visible. Another note from the Norwegian says, *Virker som 38 snakker godt skandinavisk, men han insisterer på å tale engelsk* [‘Number 38 seems to speak good

Scandinavian, but he insists on using English’]. Perhaps it was so that the generational differences came to accentuate the question of language. The following quote is taken from the Swedish field worker’s notebook: *Enda svar tillbaka* “Speak English!” [‘The only answer back was “Speak English!”’]. After that the girl proceeded without even listening further. This meeting almost appears to have been charged and for a number of reasons (see above), I chose to ignore the repetitions these older field workers made of their question. However, the experience was most interesting as was the notes they made. For the two subsequent updates of my study, I chose to give the field workers much more detailed instructions, but most of all, I decided to use field workers of the same age as in the first study. The field workers were also all women.

Another thing modified vis-à-vis the first update was that the field worker was instructed not to approach people in pairs or in groups. Earlier, I hadn’t thought much about this, but the older Norwegian commented that it was difficult to find young people who are alone. I know that this was also the case in 1983, and that some of the interviews were done in pairs or even groups at that time. In the Norwegian field worker’s view, it would be the leader who spoke in such cases. It is likely that he is right in that it affects the situation and no matter who is talking, accommodation becomes a more complicated thing (cf. Giles and Powesland 1975: 179–180). It is also likely that pressure to follow the norms of the group would be strong. Since English is likely to have the highest prestige among young people (Delsing and Lundin Åkesson 2005: 109), one would therefore guess that there would be an increased tendency to speak that language and to avoid “Scandinavian.” Most respondents in 1983 were alone, but since some of the interviews were done in groups, we can assume that even back then, we received slightly more English answers than we would have gotten otherwise. At the same time, I believe that young people in couples are more talkative and that it is easier to enter into a conversation with them, so there may have been some compensation from that point of view.

7. Second update of the field survey around the turn of the 21st century

The unsatisfactory experience of the first update (in 1999) led me to do the survey again, but as mentioned, with people of roughly the same age as the original field workers and in addition, all three field workers were women to avoid differences due to the sex of the interviewer. In connection with this choice, I had become aware that according to Labov, young women are actually ideal field workers, apparently because they present no threat of loss of face, since they rarely have much power in society.⁸

The instructions were refined for the second update, including a registration form with additions to make it easier to complete, (but without changing anything of substance). The interviews were conducted in the autumn of 1999 by a Danish woman and a Norwegian woman; unfortunately no Swedish woman was available just then. It took almost five years before I was able to continue the study and gather the remaining interviews in Swedish. These interviews were done by a Finland Swedish woman in the summer of 2004. The Finland Swedish variety of Swedish is spoken by a Swedish minority in Finland (see Vikør 1995: 78–85).

There is every reason to question whether the two points of time, 1999 and 2004, are comparable, but the results (as related to the third update in 2006) suggest that they could very well be so, and that even in 2004, the new situation for Danish had not yet quite broken through. It should be added that at the time (2004), there could be considerable variation between people born in different years. If the field worker had more or less consciously only chosen people who were approximately 20 years-old, this would mean that she spoke mainly

with people who had studied Danish as their first foreign language whereas the opposite would have been true if she had chosen people around the age of 15.

A short characterization of the field workers is as follows:

- *Danish* was spoken by a 26-year-old woman who was originally from Bornholm, but who lived in Sweden for most of her school years (ages 7–19). After high school, she returned to Denmark and studied at the University of Copenhagen, but was in Iceland for study in 1999.
- *Norwegian* was spoken by a woman who was approximately 20 years-old and coming from the eastern part of Oslo. She says she normally uses “slang” but that she used a more standardized form of language when addressing people on the streets of Iceland. Like the Danish woman, she was in Reykjavík as a student.
- *Swedish* was spoken by a 25-year-old woman from the Turku area in the southwestern part of Finland. She used Finland Swedish, a variety of Swedish that in inter-Nordic communication is often considered easier to understand than standard Swedish, perhaps due in part to the lack of tonal accent or other features related to pronunciation.⁹ At the time, she was looking for work in Reykjavík after having received her university degree in Finland.

The results in terms of comprehension in 1999/2004 are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. *Comprehension in 1999 and 2004 among 120 young people in Reykjavík, when addressed in Danish, Norwegian, and Finland Swedish. Percentage figures in brackets. Significant at the 0.01 level.*

Language	Comprehends	Does not comprehend	Total
Danish, 1999	24 (60.0)	16 (40.0)	40 (100.0)
Norwegian, 1999	28 (70.0)	12 (30.0)	40 (100.0)
Finland Swedish, 2004	36 (90.0)	4 (10.0)	40 (100.0)
TOTAL	88 (73.3)	32 (26.7)	120 (100.0)

If we begin, as previously, by studying the line at the bottom (Table 3) that summarizes the results, we can see that almost three-quarters of the young people seem to have understood the question per se, while the remaining quarter did not. The result is actually better than for 1983, when the ratio was two-thirds who understood and one third who did not. Also this time Danish is somewhat less well understood than the other two languages, but much better than last time; in 1983, only 48% understood the question in Danish, now the figure is up to 60%. In 1983, the difference between Danish on the one hand and Norwegian/Swedish on the other was much greater; now the boundary goes between Finland Swedish and the other two. As for the first update conducted by older field workers, I find it difficult to explain this result. It could be that the field worker’s Finland Swedish variety made her easier to comprehend, but it could also be something in her personality that made her especially suitable to motivate people to use their skills in Scandinavian languages. Of course this could also apply for the older Norwegian man in the first update (see Section 6).

So, how did the adolescents handle the situation this time? What is the role of English now, compared to 15–20 years earlier? The results are shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4. *Adolescents' strategies in conversation with a Danish, Norwegian or Swedish-speaking person in 1999 (Danish, Norwegian) and 2004 (Finland Swedish). Percentage figures in brackets. Significant at the 0.01 level.*

STRATEGIES:					
Addressed in:	One of the Scandinavian languages	Icelandic	Gives up	English	Total
Danish	8 (20.0)	–	3 (7.5)	29 (72.5)	40 (100.0)
Norwegian	15 (37.5)	5 (12.5)	4 (10.0)	16 (40.0)	40 (100.0)
Finland Swedish	20 (50.0)	–	4 (10.0)	16 (40.0)	40 (100.0)
TOTAL	43 (35.8)	5 (4.2)	11 (9.2)	61 (50.8)	120 (100.0)

If we begin by deciphering the bottom line (in Table 4), we can conclude that over a third of the young men and women chose to continue the conversation in a Scandinavian language, which is approximately the same proportion as in 1983. However, we find a marked difference from the previous study in the proportion of those who give up, which no longer occurs as frequently. In 1983, almost a third gave up, now it is only a tenth. More than half of the respondents switched to English, which is a substantial increase compared to 1983. As was the case then, the informants sometimes start off in a Scandinavian language and then switch to English, but it also happens that the informants first say something in Icelandic. A few times, for example, they ask for confirmation by translating *Nordens hus* ['The Nordic House'] into Icelandic ['Norræna húsið?'], but as the field worker was not expected to understand Icelandic he did not catch the thread. However it was proof enough that the person did understand, even if he or she wasn't able to continue in the same vein. Ultimately, this means that more languages were spoken, even if English often crystallized as the choice of preference. The following comments from the field workers (FW) illustrate this process. The text in square brackets indicates which alternatives (1.A-F and 2A-G) the field worker registered in the field notes (see appendix). Generally the comment concerns the second question, the one on language choice. (Different languages are abbreviated by their first letter so that N stands for Norwegian, FS for Finland Swedish and D for Danish and so on. Number refers to the informant as well as sex.)

(2)

NFW, No. 16 female

[1B. Understands after confirmation.] [2E, 2A, 2F.]

Først islandsk, deretter litt dansk og til slutt engelsk.

'First Icelandic, followed by a little Danish and finally English.'

(3)

DFW, No. 22 male

[1C. Understands after having asked for repetition.] [2E, 2F.]

Börjar forklara på isländska, men byter över till engelska.

'Begins to explain in Icelandic but switches to English.'

(4)

DFW, No. 17 female

[1C. Understands after having asked for repetition.] [2F.]

Förstod efter dansk upprepning. Svarade på engelska.

'Understands after repetition in Danish. Answered in English.'

(5)

NFW, No. 25 male

[1A. Understands directly.] [2A, 2F.]
Vil heller snakke engelsk. Fortalte meg selve veien på engelsk.
 ‘Prefers to speak English. Gave me directions in English.’

(6)

DFW, No. 32 male
 [1A. Understands directly.] [2D, 2F.]
Han sagde tre ord på dansk, sen brøt han over i engelsk.
 ‘He said three words in Danish, then he switched to English.’

(7)

FSFW, No. 13 female
 [1C. Understands after repetition.] [2D, 2E].
[Skandinaviska med] småord på isländska, till exempel hérna och og.
 [Speaks Scandinavian] ‘with a few minor words in Icelandic, for instance *hérna* [‘here’] and *og* [‘and’].’

(8)

FSFW, No. 31 male
 [1A. Understands directly.] [2C, 2F (most).]
Han frågade på tydlig svenska om han får tala engelska. Jag fortsatte dock att tala svenska. Kompletterade på den goda svenskan, och han sa att föräldrarna hade bott en gång i tiden i Sverige och att deras intresse för språket hade gått i arv till barnen!
 ‘He asked in clear Swedish if it would be okay to use English. However, I continued to speak Swedish and complimented him on his language skills. He said that his parents had once lived in Sweden and that their interest in that language had passed on to the children!’

(9)

FSFW, No. 37 male
 [1C. Understands after repetition.] [2D (most), 2F.]
Blandar in engelska ord [i skandinaviskan].
 ‘Mixes in words in English [in Scandinavian].’

(10)

FSFW, No. 40 male
 [1A. Understands directly.] [2D.]
Talar mycket med händerna.
 ‘Talks using his hands a lot.’

As becomes clear from the notes, the choice of language was not always that easy or clear-cut, and the registration form only gives a hint of the processes taking place. Often, the passage to English has been more gradual than direct. People have sometimes been able to say as much in one of the Scandinavian languages as they later do in English, and once the Danish field worker commented, *50% engelska, 50% danska (danska först)* [“50% English, 50% Danish, Danish first.”] Twice, a field worker marked “Danish” as the language of choice, but added a note: *Mest dansk, lidt engelsk til sist* [“Mostly Danish, a little bit of English at the end.”] The main impression is that the choice of language was a question of negotiation, and sometimes the informant explicitly asked if it was okay to use English. This can be taken as a sign of respect, but at the same time it brings up the question of norms. It is very likely that Icelandic adolescents are aware of the role of Danish in the school system as a key to other Nordic countries. But being aware of the norms is not the same as following them. Field workers were naturally asked to be sensitive to the language choice of the informant, and not to insist on speaking their own Scandinavian language if the informant preferred English. It would have been extremely interesting to study the interaction through a recording, as the categorization imposed by the questionnaire definitely does not give the full picture. However, for ethical reasons recordings were not made, giving the respondents complete anonymity.

The differences in reactions to Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish are also pronounced, and as we see in Table 4, most people who switched to English did so after first having been spoken to in Danish. Here, the figure is over 70%, compared to only 40% for the Norwegian and the

Finland Swedish speakers. The tendency to say a few words in Icelandic was mainly recorded by the Norwegian field worker; interestingly, this was also reported by the older Norwegian man who did his interviews earlier the same year (see Section 6). According to him, it sometimes happened that a person who probably believed he or she was speaking “Scandinavian,” was in fact, speaking Icelandic. Another comment from the Norwegian man also indicates that what is known as “foreigner talk” was sometimes used: *Meget dyktig å forklare på pidgin-islandsk, isl. for utlendinger...* [‘Very good at explaining in pidgin-Icelandic, Icelandic for foreigners...’]. Therefore we shouldn’t think of all of those who chose Icelandic as necessarily giving up, even if that occurred as well. For instance, sometimes Icelandic was used in connection with pointing and gesturing. Of course non-verbal strategies could also be applied when other languages were spoken, as experienced by the Finland Swedish field worker (see Example 10). This is also why we were always careful to initiate the encounter in a place where you couldn’t actually see the Nordic House, because that would have made it possible for the respondent to simply point and remain silent.

8. The third and final updated survey

According to the interviews in 1999/2004, it had become more common to use English, but not (as compared to 1983) at the expense of the Scandinavian alternative. The proportion who understood the question was even slightly higher, and about the same number of people as in 1983 chose to complete the task in a Scandinavian language. The order of introduction in school between Danish and English had switched, but the new situation was not likely to have had an effect on the results yet. First from 2004 and thereafter would we expect to begin meeting 15-year-olds who had studied English in school before studying Danish.

As mentioned in the brief characterization of the young field workers from 1999/2004, the Danish woman grew up in Sweden. In subsequent contacts, it developed that she was completely bilingual in Danish and Swedish, and even if Danish was her dominant language, her Swedish was almost entirely correct idiomatically and she sounds completely like a native-speaker. Thanks to a travel grant, this field worker was able to make a return visit to Iceland in the summer of 2006. While there, she willingly helped me make an update of the investigation once again, this time in both Danish and Swedish. Ideally, she would have asked 80 people, 40 in each language, but it was not possible for one person to carry this out in such a short time (two weeks). In addition, the risk of disclosure would have made it too risky. Nonetheless, she spoke to as many as she could, given the time restraints, yielding a total of 60 interviews, 28 in Danish and 32 in Swedish.

Given the problematic nature of the previous results, where a single field worker represented each language, this new way gave us a better opportunity to keep factors other than language under control. Of course, it would have been optimal to have this woman approach the same person twice, but that was impossible for obvious reasons. This can be done in a laboratory with voices in recorded form using the Matched Guise technique (see Lambert 1972 [1960]).

Besides being able to compare the outcomes for Danish and Swedish in 2006, we were also able to compare the Danish interviews from 2006 with those done in 1999, since those interviews were done by the same field worker. To be sure, the latter comparison is not unproblematic since she was slightly older, but the difference would nonetheless be considerably smaller than if various other people had been involved. Moreover, she was still in the same approximate range as the previous field workers during the first interview series — in 1999, she was 26 years-old and in 2006, 33 years-old.

The results for comprehension are shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5. *Comprehension in 2006 among 60 young people in Reykjavík when addressed in Danish or Swedish. Percentage figures in brackets. No significant differences.*

Language	Comprehends	Does not comprehend	Total
Danish	10 (35.7)	18 (64.3)	28 (100.0)
Swedish	13 (40.6)	19 (59.4)	32 (100.0)
TOTAL	23 (38.3)	37 (61.7)	60 (100.0)

When spoken to in Swedish (see Table 5, left column), a few more people understood the question (41%), compared to Danish (36%). This was an outcome well in line with earlier results. Still, the difference is very small and not significant. This differs from the results in 1983 and in 1999/2004, when there were such differences. Unfortunately, there is the disadvantage that fewer people were asked for directions this time, since this reduces the ability to find statistical significance. In spite of this, we must conclude that this time there were no differences between how the young people in Reykjavík understood and reacted to people speaking Danish and Swedish. Danish does not come out worse, and it even looks as if the ability to understand authentic Danish has improved considerably over the years.

Considering this result, we might also question the earlier differences found among the three Scandinavian languages; it is possible that differences other than language have determined the outcome. If we recognize that factors like personality, age, and possibly sex of the field worker affected the result, then the experiences from the two older field workers in the first study update (see Section 6) might not be so odd after all. The same goes for the Finland Swedish field worker in 2004 who obtained results that were equally difficult to account for. Both she and the older Norwegian field worker registered a rate of comprehension that was as high as 90% and one cannot ignore the possibility that the language varieties they used really were easier to comprehend. Still, with respect to the first question, regarding comprehension, it might be wiser to conclude that it is better to treat the Scandinavian languages as one, as I will do in the summary. It would only have been possible to safely answer the question about differences between the languages with a larger sample than only 40 informants for each language.

In any case, compared to 1999 when the same bilingual field worker made her first visit to Iceland, there are significant differences.¹⁰ Thus, it is safe to say that in 2006 there were fewer (36%) that understood the question in Danish than in 1999 (60%) (see Table 3). If we instead compare this bilingual field worker's Swedish interviews (2006) with the Finland Swedish ones only two years earlier, the distinctions are much greater. When asked for directions in Finland Swedish, as many as 90% understood the question, which is more than twice as much as for the Swedish interviews in 2006.

Comprehension of the Scandinavian languages appears to have decreased dramatically. Through the notes from 2006, we get a somewhat more complete picture of how the informants behaved; I will therefore quote some of them below. First some quotes after the field worker (FW) posed the question in Danish (D). Since the field worker is bilingual in Danish and Swedish some comments are written in Swedish, others in Danish.

(11)

DFW, No. 4 female

[IC. Understands after confirmation.] [2A.]

Säger undskyld på danska. Vet inte vad Nordens hus är.

'Says "Excuse me?" in Danish. Does not know what "the Nordic House" is.'

(12)

DFW, No. 6 male

[1D. "Understands" after repetition in English.] [2E, 2F.]

Mycket nära att ge upp. Talar först isländska Norræna húsið? Jag upprepar på danska två gånger, och han byter till engelska. Känner till The Nordic house men vet inte var det är.

'Very close to giving up. Speaks first Icelandic "Norræna húsið"? ['The Nordic house'.] He switches to English after two Danish repetitions. Is familiar with "the Nordic House" but does not know where it is.'

(13)

DFW, No. 9 female

[1D. "Understands" after repetition in English] [2F.]

Säger What? Visar vägen till Norræna félagið [Föreningen Norden], men förstår när jag förklarar vilket hus jag menar.

'Says "What?" Shows the way to "Norræna félagið" ['The Nordic Association'], but understands when I explain what house I mean.'

(14)

DFW, No. 17 female

[1D. "Understands" after repetition in English.] [2F.]

Säger Sorry English. Hon hämtar en väninna och tillsammans kommer de fram till att The Nordic house är Norræna húsið.

'Says "Sorry, English." She gets a friend and together they decide that "the Nordic House" is "Norræna húsið."

(15)

DFW, No. 1 male

[1C. Understands after repetition.] [2A, 2F.]

Siger Nordens hus, hvad er det? Resten engelsk. Han vidste ikke hvor det lå, men genkendte det. Jeg brugte et kort.

'He says "The Nordic House, what is that?" The rest in English. He didn't know where it was but recognized it. I used a map.'

The following notes were made after addressing people in Swedish (SFW):

(16)

SFW, No. 5 male

[1C. "Understands" after repetition in English.] [2F.]

Säger What hus? Känner inte The Nordic House men vet vad det är när jag säger att det ligger nära universitetet.

Says "What hus?" ['house']. Not familiar with "the Nordic House" but knows what it is when I say that it is near the university.

(17)

SFW, No. 8 female

[1C. Understands directly.] [2F.]

När jag säger att hon är bra på att förstå svenska säger hon att det är lika isländska och att de lärt sig danska i skolan. Har inga svenska kontakter.

'When I say that she is good at understanding Swedish, she says that it is similar to Icelandic and that they have learned Danish at school. Has no Swedish contacts.'

(18)

SFW, No. 12 female

[1C. "Understands" after repetition in English.] [2F.]

Säger I don't understand what you say. Känner inte The Nordic house.

She says "I don't understand what you say." Not familiar with "the Nordic House".

(19)

SFW, No. 21 male

[1C. Understands after confirmation.] [2A.]

[Talar danska] med mycket brytning, men han försöker. Det låter norskt och när jag frågar om han är norrman säger han att han har lärt sig danska i skolan. Visar vägen till Föreningen Norden.

[Speaks Danish] 'with a heavy accent, but he tries. It sounds like Norwegian and when I ask if he is Norwegian, he says that he learned Danish at school. Shows the way to the Nordic Association.'

(20)

SFW, No. 32 male
 [1C. “Understands” after repetition in English] [2F.]
Säger What? English please.
 ‘Says “What? English please.”’

The comments indicate that this was a difficult task for these young people, which wasn’t made any easier if they didn’t know what the Nordic House was to begin with. Still, it is clear that there were more people who understood the question in Danish and Swedish than were able to continue in Danish. Their receptive skills, in other words, were better than their productive ones. Many of them apologized, sometimes in Danish, but usually in English. When people cannot help, they are often eager to offer an explanation, many saying that they don’t know the answer, at least at first. Surely, this is not just a statement of fact, but also a face-saving strategy and sometimes a polite way to get rid of the stranger without having to put up with her for too long. The field worker, however, continued to explain where she wanted to go, since her task was to keep the conversation going. Another situation was when people explicitly said they didn’t understand the language they were being addressed in by saying something like: “Sorry, I don’t speak Danish.” In doing this, they also signaled that they might be willing to continue the conversation in English. Of course, linguistic shortcomings are also the implied reason when, after a few stumbling words of Scandinavian, you are finally released to speak English — sometimes after having asked for approval. This does not mean that young people are always so very good at English, either, which the older field workers from 1999 both mentioned in their notes.

So what language choices did people make this time? The responses are shown in Table 6, and the notes above have already made it clear that quite often it was English.

Table 6. *Adolescents’ strategies in conversation with a Danish-speaking vs. a Swedish-speaking person in 2006. Percentage figures in brackets. No significant differences.*

STRATEGIES:					
Addressed in:	One of the Scandinavian languages	Icelandic	Gives up	English	Total
Danish	3 (10.7)	–	2 (7.1)	23 (82.1)	28 (99.9)
Swedish	5 (15.6)	–	1 (3.1)	26 (81.3)	32 (100.0)
TOTAL	8 (13.3)	–	3 (5.0)	49 (81.7)	60 (100.0)

Interpreting the results in Table 6, there seems to be no indication of a difference regarding in which language you are addressed. Overall, we note that far fewer people chose to continue in a Scandinavian language, a proportion that is drastically lower than in previous surveys. Just over 10% chose a Scandinavian option this time, and it was Danish, not “Scandinavian,” that the field worker marked in the questionnaire. An overwhelming majority switched to English, and the proportion is the same regardless of which language they were addressed in. As before, it was common to use several different languages, although in the end, mostly English was chosen (see Example 11–20).

Compared to the interviews done by this same field worker in 1999, the proportion switching to English has increased by over 10%. In 1999, 70% switched to English after being addressed by her in Danish. The difference is not very big and confirms once again that using the same field worker reduces the variation. There is a much greater difference between the Swedish interviews in 2006 and the Finland Swedish interviews in 2004, but since these interviews were not done by the same person, one must be cautious in interpreting how people

speaking these languages varieties differ in performance. Naturally, it might also be that it was in this particular time (between 2004 and 2006) that the results of the school reform came to the fore.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the results from 1999/2004 and 2006 differ from the first study in one fundamental aspect, which is that considerably fewer gave up in the later studies, with the smallest proportion of all in the last study. This is gratifying, of course, since it makes it more likely for Scandinavian tourists to actually make their way to the Nordic House. Still, as a friend of mine put it, when these people now arrive at the Nordic House, it somehow feels less Nordic, as if some of the original idea behind the visit has been lost. Language comprehension is of vital importance to the idea of a Nordic community as such.

9. Conclusion

Iceland is a vital part of the Nordic community, with close links to Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The connection to Denmark is especially close, since Iceland was once ruled by that country. As a result, the Danish language has a long tradition in Iceland, which is why, following Icelandic independence in 1944, it held the position as the first foreign language taught in schools. English came second, but over the period 1999–2002, the order of introduction was reversed. The role of Danish in Iceland has not only been to maintain Iceland's connection to Denmark and to the past, but also to uphold the link between Iceland and the other Nordic countries. Knowledge of Danish is generally assumed to provide an understanding of Norwegian and Swedish as well, since the three languages are held to be mutually comprehensible. According to a study in 2005 (Delsing and Lundin Åkesson 2005), this can also be applied to the Icelandic situation. At the same time, the 2005 study shows that English is better understood and therefore young Icelanders are probably less reluctant to communicate in English.

The study presented here deals with inter-Nordic communication in Iceland focusing on how easy or difficult it is to make use of Danish, Norwegian, or Swedish in carrying out a short conversation with young people in the capital city of Reykjavík. By taking on the role of tourists, we were able to approach Icelandic adolescents (aged 15–20) using the several languages in question. The aim of the study was, first, to find out whether the young people appeared to understand the Scandinavian language being used and, second, to identify the linguistic choices they made to keep the conversation going. Not only linguistic competence, but also attitudes toward the different languages as well as social norms concerning their use appear to have influenced the outcome. Also factors like age and sex might have had an effect on the interviews, as may be documented in the first update done in 1999 by the older field workers. Since I wanted at least to control the age factor, the interviews done by the older field workers were omitted. The investigation was conducted at three different time periods and therefore has a longitudinal perspective. In the summary below, the focus will first be on the longitudinal dimension, after which I will return to a discussion of the method as such and how it was used.

The first question addressed by the study was whether Icelandic adolescents would show comprehension of one of the Scandinavian languages, Danish, Norwegian, or Swedish. It would also be interesting to find out whether there were differences in this between the three Scandinavian languages. In our case, the study shows that in 1983 and 1999/2004, there are differences that cannot be attributed to chance. In 2006, when the comparison was only between Danish and Swedish, there are no such differences between the languages when spoken by the same bilingual field worker. Unfortunately, she was not able to approach as many people as the other field workers in each language. Even so, there is nothing to indicate

a difference between Danish and Swedish in 2006. This is also well in line with my interpretation of the study by Delsing and Lundin Åkesson (2005), referred to above. Whether this only applies to that point of time is impossible to say. Attitudes towards languages, especially Danish, may have changed. I will return to this question further on.

Another issue is that the analysis was made in quantitative terms and that a sample of 40 people addressed by each field worker (=language) is simply not enough. Therefore, it may be better to summarize the results by grouping the three Scandinavian languages together, making the result more reliable in statistical terms. Then, instead of 40 interviews at each point of time, we will have 120 each in 1983 and in 1999/2004 and 60 in 2006. In other words, all together there are 300 interviews. In Figure 1, we can see how the displayed understanding of all three Scandinavian languages, grouped together, developed over the years.

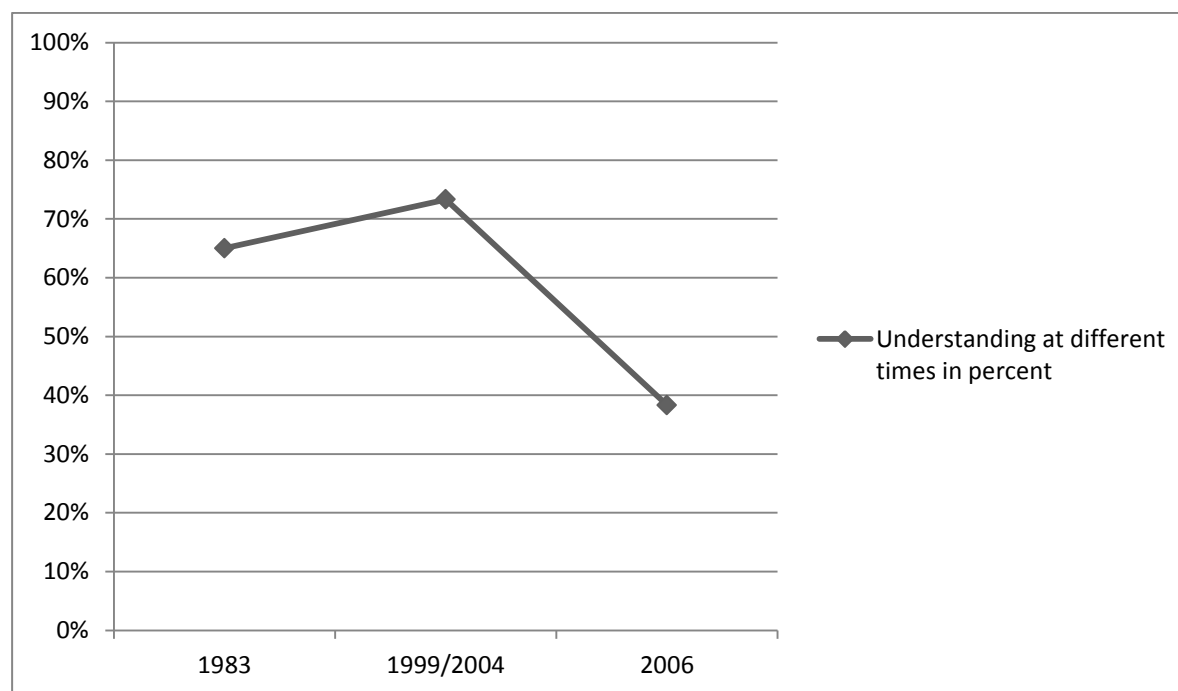


Figure 1. *Displayed understanding of all three Scandinavian languages at three points of time. Mean value in percent. (For raw data, see Tables 1, 3, and 5.) Significant at the 0.01 level.*

As we can see from the diagram (Figure 1), the proportion of young people who understood the question posed to them in one of the Scandinavian languages has decreased. Reduced understanding seems plausible, but the development has not tapered off gradually and the adolescents actually performed best at the turn of the 21st century, when 73% understood the question. Between the first study in 1983 and the next at the turn of the century, comprehension of Scandinavian languages increased, probably as a result of better ability to understand Danish. After that, comprehension deteriorated down to 38% by 2006. These differences are statistically significant.

The second objective of the survey was to find out what language choices were made by the young Icelanders, and on this point as well, the result is quite clear: English has gradually gained ground on the expense of the Scandinavian languages, but also as an alternative to giving up. The main trends are summarized in Figure 2, where interviews in all three Scandinavian languages have been brought together again, as in Figure 1.

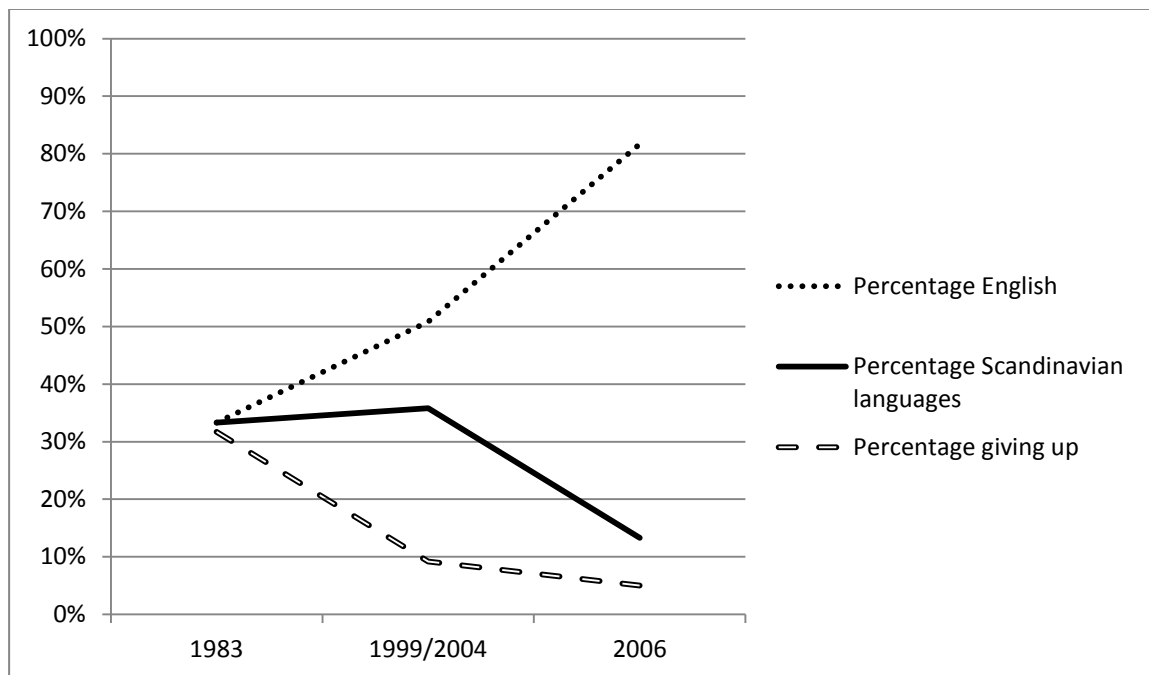


Figure 2. *Different strategies when replying to the question posed in one of three Scandinavian languages at three points of time. Mean value in percent. (For raw data, see Tables 2, 4, and 6.) A small percent answering in Icelandic has been left out in the figure. All three developments significant at the 0.01 level.*

Figure 2 shows three lines, each illustrating a major trend: the relative role of English (dotted line), the relative proportion of convergence to Scandinavian languages (solid line) and the relative proportion of informants giving up (dashed line). All developments are statistically significant. If we first consider the solid line in the middle, we note that fewer and fewer young people over the years have chosen to continue the conversation in a Scandinavian language. From the field workers' remarks, we see that the informants often made it clear that this was because they *couldn't*. To be sure, many respondents simply don't *want* to, and a switch to English was quite common, with a counter-question in English such as: "Sorry?" or "What?" The results therefore suggest that the proportion of those who speak Danish or "Scandinavian" has decreased, but the real change is visible only in the results from 2006. In 1999/2004, there were even slightly more respondents (36%) than previously (33% in 1983) choosing the Scandinavian option. This result is consistent with the trend presented in Figure 1. Even back in 1984, I wrote (Börestam 1984) that some of the young people seemed embarrassed to speak "Scandinavian" and chose English instead. Embarrassed or not, it is clear (dotted line) that the proportion of those choosing English has gradually increased and that it is a language that young people are *not* uneasy about speaking. Roughly 25 years ago, in 1983, one third chose English, while in 1999/2004, the figure was about half. By 2006, a large majority (80%) was inclined to do so. A small handful (seven out of 300; 2%) chose Icelandic, and some of them actually managed to explain the directions by using simplified language, coupled with pointing and gestures. Finally, it is also important to note that the proportion of young people who gave up steadily decreased, as can be deduced from the dashed line at the bottom. By comparing data from 1999/2004 with data from 1983, we can also see that the English was not primarily used at the expense of the Scandinavian languages, but as an alternative to not helping the stranger at all, i.e., to giving up.

In looking back on work with this study, it is possible to see that I wavered between various designations such as *experiments*, *interviews*, and *field study*. There is no doubt that the study was carried out in the field, but the several terms used reflect a range of research traditions and varying perceptions of what the field workers — including me — actually did. The starting point was that the field workers were assisting in a controlled experiment, which in turn required that I had control over a number of factors. When performing the experiment I was inspired by Labov's classical study from 1966 of department stores in New York. Labov himself thought of the exchanges as a form of "systematic elicitation" (Labov 1972: 50). Reality, however, is no laboratory. From the partial failure of the first update, I learned how difficult it is to control reality, and the results indicated that both the field workers' sex and age had an effect greater than that which I really wanted to measure: the differences in comprehension of the different languages. Thanks to a bilingual field worker, it was possible during the very last update (2006) to keep the individual differences in check. The differences between the languages then decreased, although the trend was the same, namely, that Danish was understood slightly less well than Swedish. This difference was not statistically significant, but it might have been with a complete series of interviews.

Still, the field worker is not a neutral instrument, indeed not an instrument at all but an individual with unique features. Every time a person is addressed, a mutual encounter is begun and the outcome is interactionally achieved by both parties. For example, it is obvious from the notes that the choice of language was a matter of negotiation. Lawson-Sako and Sachdev (1996: 75) are definitely right when saying that "language choices appear to be normatively determined at the beginning of a conversation, but [...] motivational and attitudinal considerations may become more salient as the conversation progresses". Unfortunately, I cannot follow this interesting process in detail as there were no recordings. However, the notes made by the field workers clearly indicate how fascinating this is. Sometimes, people politely asked if it was okay to switch languages, at other times, they were less polite. Obviously, the language switch was also something the respondents often felt they had to explain, which shows an awareness of the fact that they were violating expectations. When acting as tourists, we started off from a normative basis by using our respective mother tongues, thus expecting people to make use of a language they had learned in school. This may well have made some of the adolescents eager to rebel, which they did by divergence. In using English, young people could refer back to their identity as citizens of the world — only time will tell if this also means that they will one day exclude their Nordic identity.

In conclusion, the intent was to conduct a controlled experiment, albeit in the field, and I have frequently used terms like field workers and field investigation. These words reflect the tradition of social anthropology by which *participant observation* is the foremost tool. It is also the label I prefer to use for the experiment as a whole, but we must not forget the element of *participation*. Every encounter requires a mutual effort, and every exchange of ideas, however short, is built on a relationship. Even during a short period of time, both parties create images of each other. This act of co-creation also applies to different types of *interviews* in scientific contexts, and it is commonly said that "you get the answers you asked for," i.e., the researcher becomes an inseparable part of the research. In this study, I have tried to apply methods from research disciplines that are highly qualitative and then fit the results into a quantitative paradigm. With qualitative methods, one more or less emphasizes the uniqueness of every event, and possibly the uniqueness of every field worker. But a quantitative paradigm involves a search for recurring patterns, and its reliability depends on standardization and homogeneity, as well as on ensuring that the number of observations is sufficiently large. For anyone working in the anthropological tradition, it is also important to have detailed knowledge of the culture and the social relevance of the speech act that is being

researched, which I feel I had the first time around. However, this does not apply to the subsequent updates, when I could neither participate in the field work nor even be present in Iceland. If I had been able to do so, perhaps I would have found it unwise to continue asking about the Nordic house. But I will end here, passing this question on to someone more familiar with the Icelandic situation of today.

Appendix

Notation form (one page for each informant)

Two minor additions (1.D and 1.F, marked with bold), were appended to the registration form, after the first update of the study to clarify a few points that had only been implicit earlier.

When analyzing the result 1.A-C was counted as “understanding” of the Scandinavian language in question, and 1.D-F as “not understanding”

SEX: Male () Female ()

FÖRSTÅELSE [‘UNDERSTANDING’]:

1.A. *Förstår direkt* [‘Understands directly’]: ()

1.B. *Förstår efter att ha bett om bekräftelse* [‘Understands after asking for confirmation’]: ()

1.C. *Förstår efter att ha bett om upprepning* [‘Understands after asking for repetition’]: ()

1.D. **”Förstår” efter engelsk upprepning** [‘Understands’ after repetition in English’]: ()

1.E. *Missförstår* [‘Misunderstands’]: ()

1.F. ***Ger upp*** [‘Gives up’]: ()

STRATEGI [‘STRATEGY’]:

2.A. *Talar danska* [‘Speaks Danish’]: ()

2.B. *Talar norska* [‘Speaks Norwegian’]: ()

2.C. *Talar svenska* [‘Speaks Swedish’]: ()

2.D. *Talar “skandinaviska”* [‘Speaks ’Scandinavian’]: ()

2.E. *Talar isländska* [‘Speaks Icelandic’]: ()

2.F. *Talar engelska* [‘Speaks English’]: ()

2.G. *Ger upp* [‘Gives up’]: ()

ÖVRIGT [‘OTHER NOTES’]:

3.A. Date, time, place

3.B. Comments

*

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¹ Language planning is part of the general Nordic Cooperation, see www.norden.org. In particular, see the *Declaration on a Nordic language policy*, 2008.

² During the 20th century, introduction of Danish has been done at different grade levels and the number of hours spent with Danish has varied (see Hauksdóttir 2001).

³ In contrast to the authors of the report, I have chosen to present the results as a percentage of the amount of points achieved and to round off the figures so that, for example, 3.29 points (out of ten) becomes 33%.

⁴ In fact, the results give no clear indication on which of the three Scandinavian languages was best understood in spoken form. Based on results for the video test omitted above, it is Danish, but based on one of the two versions of the radio news test (the frog text) it was Norwegian, and on the other version (the kangaroo text), it is Swedish. There is no room here to further consider the results in details, but it is worth mentioning that the word for *frog* in Norwegian (*frosk*) is similar to *froskur* in Icelandic while in Swedish it is *groda* and in Danish, *frø*.

⁵ In the first study (1983), I included a reference group of older adults, 20 male and 20 females, all of whom were addressed in Swedish by me. For purposes of clarity, I have left this part of the material out of this article. However, the comparison showed that older people's comprehension of Swedish, the only Scandinavian language used in the study, was much better and that they were less likely to switch to English than younger people.

⁶ In Norway there are two written standard languages; *Nynorsk* [New Norwegian] and *Bokmål* [Book language]. *Nynorsk* is used by a minority of the Norwegian people and it is based on Norwegian dialects, mainly the Western and Central ones (Vikør 1995: 55). *Bokmål*, on the other hand, has a background as a Dano-Norwegian language (see Vikør 1995). Just as the Icelandic "Scandinavian" it originated from Danish spoken with a local accent, mainly by people in the cities.

⁷ "Riksmål" is an older name for *bokmål*, but also the designation for a conservative form of *bokmål*.

⁸ The statement was taken down several years ago by Prof. Inge Lise Pedersen during a lecture held by William Labov at the University of Copenhagen. I am grateful to Prof. Pedersen and to Pernille Folkmann for pointing this out.

⁹ See for example Vikør (1995: 39–40) on the toneme system.

¹⁰ The difference between how Danish was understood in 1999 and in 2006 is significant at the 0.05 level, i.e., at the lowest accepted level.

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