

**IF TARZAN COULD DO IT, SO CAN YOU: A PRACTICAL AND POSITIVE
APPROACH TO READING MORE OF THOSE POLAR AND SUB-POLAR
LANGUAGES**

Jonathan L G Pinhey
Scott Polar Research Institute
Lensfield Road
Cambridge, CB2 1ER
England

ABSTRACT: "The archive past" that we are reminded not to forget includes journals, books and other written material in languages that we do not yet know, or hardly so. From experience I point out some ways in to reading them, ways that are open to all.

KEYWORDS: Languages, grammars, dictionaries, archives, libraries

Tarzan - Lord Greystoke - is a fine example to those of us who wish to dabble in languages. He taught himself to read from the children's books in his cabin, and later learnt to speak several languages, including Latin in a fortnight.

I am interested in reading languages, particularly those that we get in Polar libraries. My examples are taken from Norwegian and Finnish - one that is very like English, and of course similar in its structure to other Indo-European languages, the other from a different family but usually expressing the same ideas from a common culture. I shall give some examples at the end.

A very useful start is using parallel texts (see examples), which may mean just titles or captions to illustrations, or it may mean studying an article that has abstracts in two languages. It may be a whole book in two language versions. Of course the New Testament is excellent for this, and the new language can throw new light on a passage. We get useful bilingual weather reports from Sweden and Finland at the Scott Polar. References at the end of an article and the contents of verbal tables will often give clues to the article's themes. They may even refer to the same article in another language. Culture-bound words are another fascination of reading foreign languages, and we can spend hours browsing in a dictionary, finding out customs and special interests - I think of reindeer herding here, but the list includes fishing, graduation, cooking, marriage celebrations and so on. The problem with some of these is finding a good translation, even when we understand what is written.

Starting off, the big problem is vocabulary. It takes time to get to know the major part of a sentence without looking up, but when we get there we have made the first breakthrough. This is where short things like titles and captions come to our aid. For translation, and for precision, we have eventually to get to grips with grammar, but not

all at once. Beware of irony or ways of negating that are not just “no”, or in Finnish the “verb of negation”. Idioms are fascinating, and often guessable.

Our own knowledge of the subject matter is an enormous help. We can guess the theme, the things that are likely to be said about it, and if it is on a scientific or environmental topic, we can even recognise many of the words. But beware: “also” in German does not mean the same as in English.

Although Finnish is in a different language family, its verb forms are quite like Latin or French “-imus - -emme” and “-itis - -ette”. Where English and French use “-s” in the plural, Scandinavian languages have “-r” and Finnish has “-t”.

Scandinavian and Finnish follow the German habit of combining words. You will have found many examples in Reykjavik. The problem is to know where to break them. Usually the first, or all but the last words in a multiple compound, have not been changed much. Not all compound words are long: “polisen” in Norwegian breaks as: “pol is en”, “polar ice the”. (Breaks are shown in the examples by “/”.)

Some words just need a lot of looking up. Sometimes I find myself looking up for the third time a word (usually abstract) that I first met ten minutes ago. It helps to have written the translation, however ungrammatical, but we can't always predict such mental blanks.

Key passages, if we can recognise them, will often save looking so closely at other passages, unless we are aiming at translating the whole thing. Anyone with abstracting experience will have developed a sixth sense in this direction, and will usually be right! Proper names can be a guide to the subject matter. At the start of a sentence, they may waste a lot of time as we try to look them up. Most of the languages that we are trying to read use capitals less than English does. Even book (committee, publishers') titles may have only the first word in capitals.

Prefixes, prepositions and postpositions (yes, they exist too) can convey important aspects of meaning, and prefixes can change the meaning drastically. Usually we can get the main effect of such items, but nothing is more idiomatic than a language's use of “in”, “with”, “at” or foreign (supposed) equivalents.

I call my next topic self contradictions. Norwegian “nedlegge” or “slå” mean so many things, that we need to spend some time choosing the right one, out of so many apparently contradictory meanings. At least we shall meet these words a lot.

Text books, readers, grammars, dictionaries. Of course, the more of these the better. I have found a book How to Read German, and there may be others like it. The bigger and more complete the dictionary that we use, the less frustrated we will be. I find Berlitz's little dictionaries very helpful at the beginning, as they give the common words, and save

plunging into the big one all the time. I have used the Teach Yourself books for reference a lot. The newer editions tend to go more for speaking the language, and are not so easy to use in this way. I can give the titles of those I use for particular languages via e-mail: jlgp101@cus.cam.ac.uk. That means Greenlandic, Icelandic, Norwegian, Swedish, Saami, Finnish, Polish, German, Dutch, French, Italian and Spanish. I don't claim expertise in these, but I have wrestled with all of them in the ways mentioned above, using both dictionaries and grammars, and can manage half of them quickly. I end as I intend to finish the talk: with Queen Victoria, a real person, who set out at the age of sixty eight to learn Hindustani/Urdu, and made good progress, besides making very loyal friends of her "munshis."

Examples

grauta í málum = dabble in languages - Ic

juuri/kaas = root gas (welding); juuri/kas = beetroot - Fi

oudasta kulkijasta ihmiseksi - (26 letters, 11 syllables)

= from a wandering stranger to a human being - (35 letters, 13 syllables) - Fi

Rauman-Kokemäen seudun maa/perä = Deposits in the Rauma and Kokemäki map-sheet areas - Fi

Isoja hirvaita vai/ko urakoita poron/hoidessa? - Fi

= Stor/bukk eller små/bukk i rein/drifta? - No

= Large or small bulls in reindeer herding?

"Ohoh seppo Ilmarinen! Taos rautaiset talukset, Tao rauta/rukkahiset, Paita rautainen rakenna!"

= "Smith Ilmarinen forge iron footwear forge iron gauntlets make an iron shirt!"

(from the Kalevala) - Fi

Touko/kou alussa vallitsi hyvin lämmin, loppu/puolella viileä sää

= The weather was very warm at the end of May, but cool at the end of the month - Fi

Trekk og over/vintring hos norske makrell- og rod/nebb/terner

= Migration and over-wintering among Norwegian common and Arctic terns - No

Svalbard - Vårt nordligste Norge = Svalbard - Our northernmost Norway - No

Seismisk aktivitet og fiske/fangster - Analyse av innsamlede fangst/data

= Seismic activity and fish-catchers - Analysis of collected catch data

Går under pol/is/en med atom-ubåt = Goes under the Polar ice in nuclear submarine

