



Internationalization of Higher Education and Research:

Language of instruction and publication in Sweden

Report 2024:1 i Chalmers Studies in Communication and Learning in Higher Education

© Language of instruction and publication in Sweden, 2024

Cite as:

Malmström, H. & Pecorari, D. (2024). *Language of instruction and publication in Sweden*. (Chalmers Studies in Communication and Learning in Higher Education 2024:1)

<https://doi.org/10.17196/cls.cslhe/2024/01>

Contact:

- Hans Malmström, The Department of Communication and Learning in Science, Chalmers University of Technology, Hörsalsvägen 2, 412 96, Göteborg (mahans@chalmers.se)
- Diane Pecorari, University of Leeds, School of Education, Woodhouse, Leeds LS2 3AR, United Kingdom (D.Pecorari@leeds.ac.uk)

Background

The Department of Communication and Learning in Science, Chalmers University of Technology, carries out regular updates on the languages used for teaching and scholarly publication in Sweden (with a focus on the use of English and Swedish). The content of this report is based on statistics from the Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR) and SwePub (a division of the National Library of Sweden's country-wide union catalogue). For details of the methodology, see [Malmström, H. & Pecorari, D. \(2022\). Language choice and internationalisation: The roles of Swedish and English in research and higher education.](#) The data in this report were collected and verified in May of 2024; UHR's principles for reporting data have altered marginally compared with the previous report of 2022.

The focus of the present report is the development between 2019 and 2023 (the period since the most recent major investigation), but some earlier data are presented in order to enable comparisons over time. The choice of **language of instruction** (within both degree programs and individual courses/modules) and **language of publication** (for doctoral theses and research articles) is presented primarily through graphics, with a summary and concluding discussion. Data are presented for all subject areas collectively and, where available, broken down *by subject area*.

Summary

The overarching trend which was observed in the 2022 report—that the use of English at Swedish universities is increasing, in both teaching and publishing—is confirmed by this follow-up, particularly with regard to the use of English as a language of instruction, but on a year-on-year basis, changes in the extent to which Swedish and English are used can be small, and should not be given too much weight; it is the overall trends which are more telling.

Within **degree programs**, the relationship between Swedish and English is nearly unchanged since 2019; for both undergraduate and master's-level programs, the use of English has increased by just one percentage point. Swedish remains the dominant language at undergraduate level (95% of degree programs were taught in Swedish in 2023) while English is more widely used on the master's level (in 62% of programs). See figure 1.

For individual courses Swedish is also most widely used at undergraduate level; English is the language of instruction in only 20% of courses, but an increase of three percentage points can be noted between 2019 and 2023. For courses at master's level English has established itself as the most

common language of instruction; in 2023 English was used in 58% of courses, representing an increase of six percentage points since 2019. See figure 2.

A closer look at **course offerings by discipline** shows that the use of English has increased in *all* subject areas, although the increase in some disciplines is limited to either undergraduate or master's level and in some cases is marginal. The largest changes in the 2019-2023 period are within technology and natural sciences, with an increase of six percentage points on both undergraduate and master's levels in technology. The single largest increase took place within natural sciences on the undergraduate level, with the use of English as language of instruction growing by 14 percentage points between 2019 and 2023. See figures 3 and 4.

English continues, unsurprisingly, to be the dominant language for **doctoral theses** and **research articles**. The proportion of English language theses remains relatively constant, with 94% written in English. Over this four-year period a very small increase can be observed in the proportion of research articles written in English; in 2023, 95% were published in English. See figure 5.

A closer analysis of doctoral theses by subject area shows that the proportion of theses in English remains essentially constant in the natural sciences, technology, social sciences, and medicine and healthcare. Within two areas – natural sciences and technology – only a handful of these are written in Swedish. An observation is that in the humanities, there was a decrease in the proportion of theses written in English, from 73% to 70%, from 2019 to 2023. It is important to note, though, that the number of new doctoral theses in the humanities each year is relatively small and subject to significant fluctuations from one year to the next. Apparent short-term changes to the proportion of English and Swedish may actually be reflective of factors such as the specific subject areas contributing new theses in a given year. More telling is the overall trend, which is upward from 2011, despite small downward dips in individual years. See figure 6.

When the language of publication for research articles is examined by subject area, it is clear that English dominates across all areas. Within the natural sciences, technology, and medicine and health care, there has been essentially no change in the relative proportions between Swedish and English because English has been almost exclusively used for some considerable time, with very few exceptions. Within the social sciences, a marginal increase in the use of English can be noted, from 84% to 85%. The proportion of articles written in English in the humanities has had a somewhat larger increase, from 63% to 67%. See figure 7.

Language of instruction

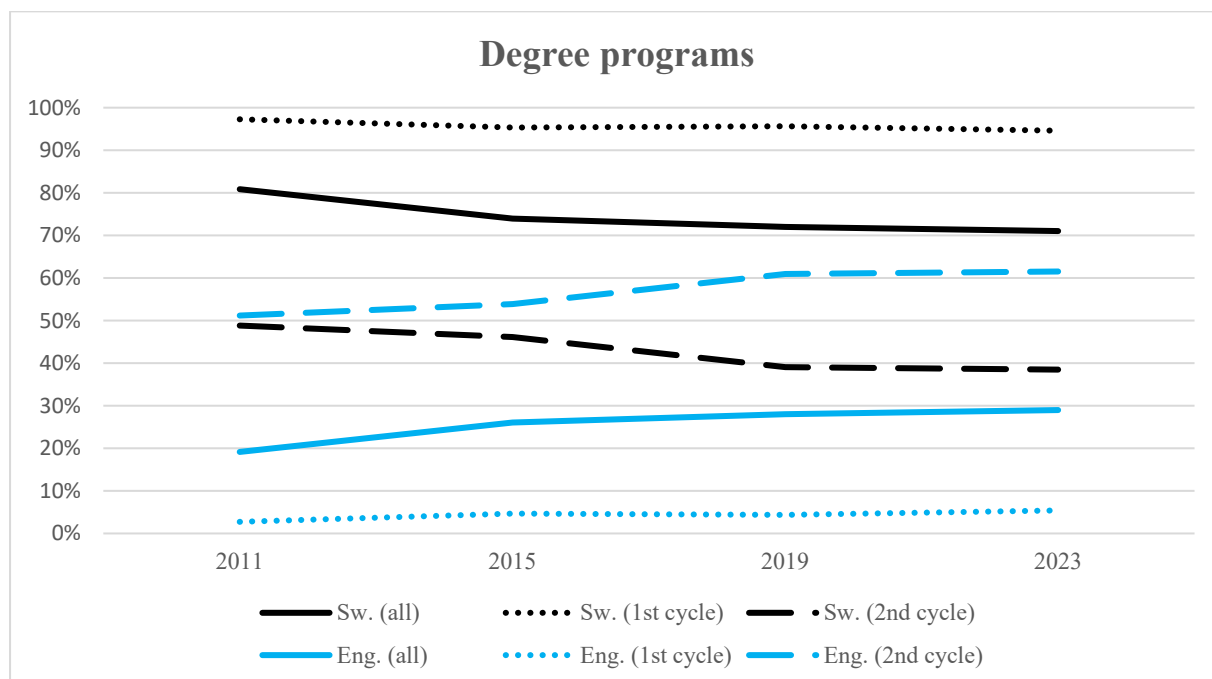


Figure 1. Proportion of Swedish and English of (i) degree programmes irrespective of level (solid lines), (ii) 1st cycle/undergraduate level (dotted lines), and (iii) 2nd cycle/master's level (dashed lines).

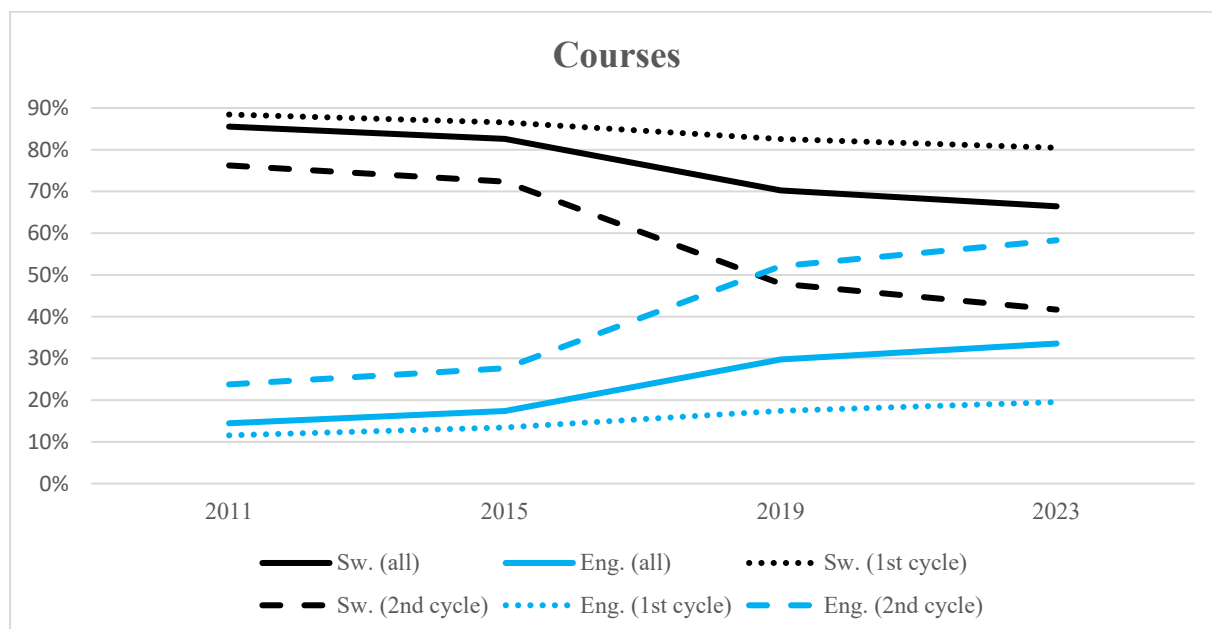


Figure 2. Proportion of Swedish and English of (i) courses irrespective of level (solid lines), (ii) 1st cycle/undergraduate level (dotted lines), and (iii) 2nd cycle/master's level (dashed lines).

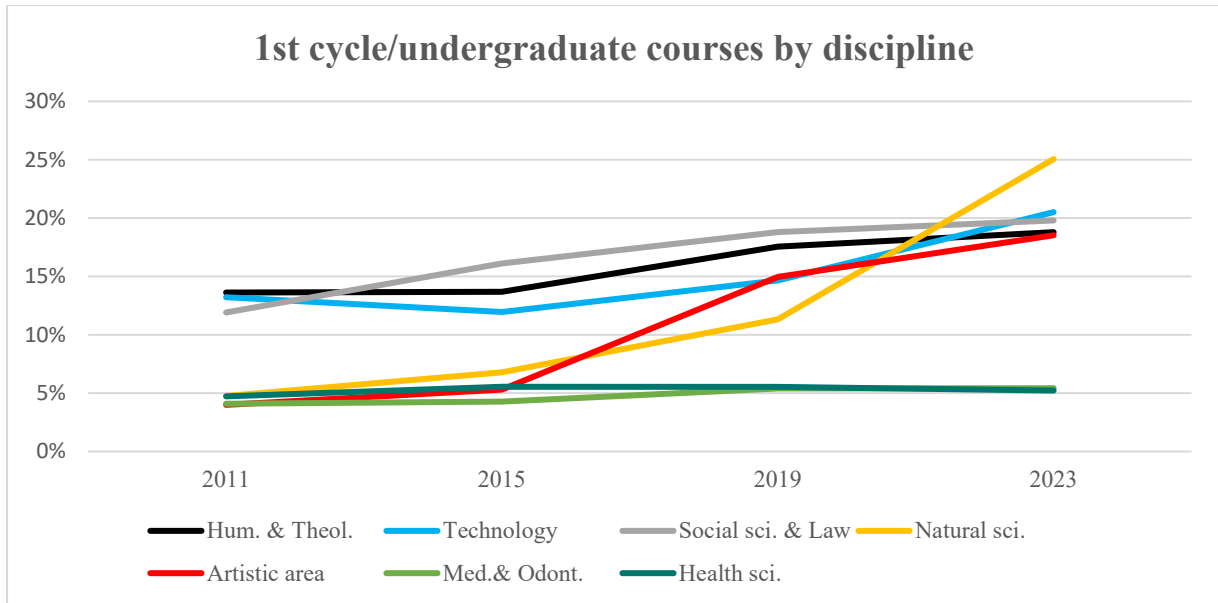


Figure 3. Proportion of courses at *undergraduate* level with English as the language of instruction for seven subject areas.

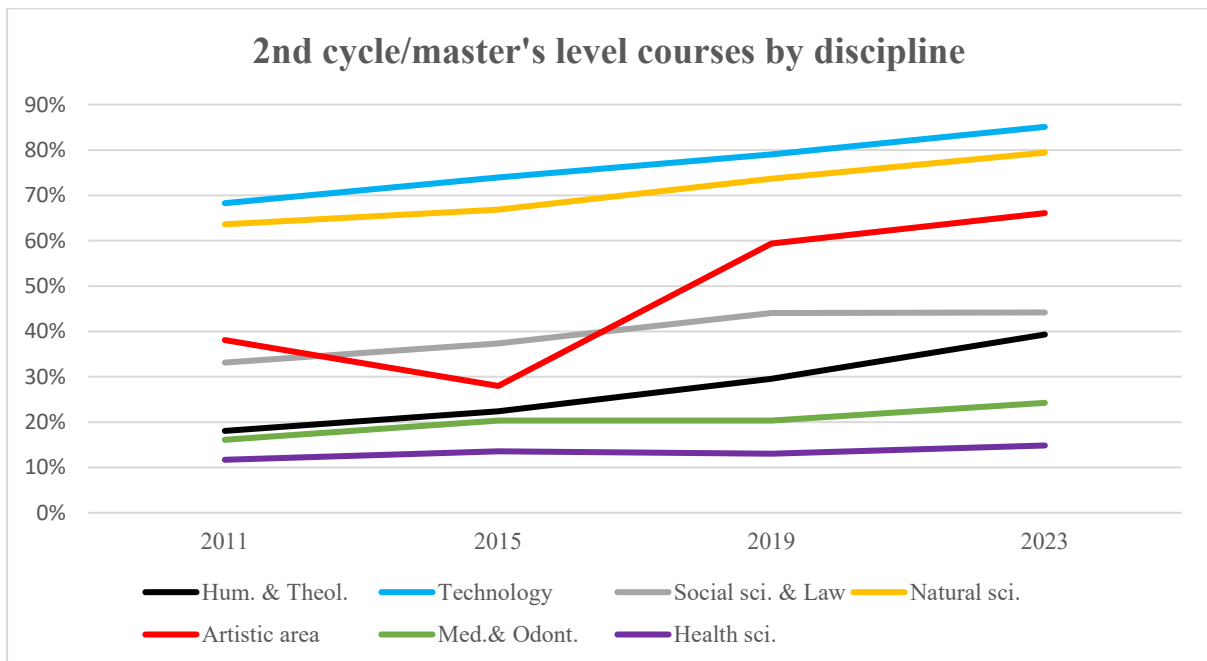


Figure 4. Proportion of courses at *master's* level with English as the language of instruction for seven subject areas.

Language of publication

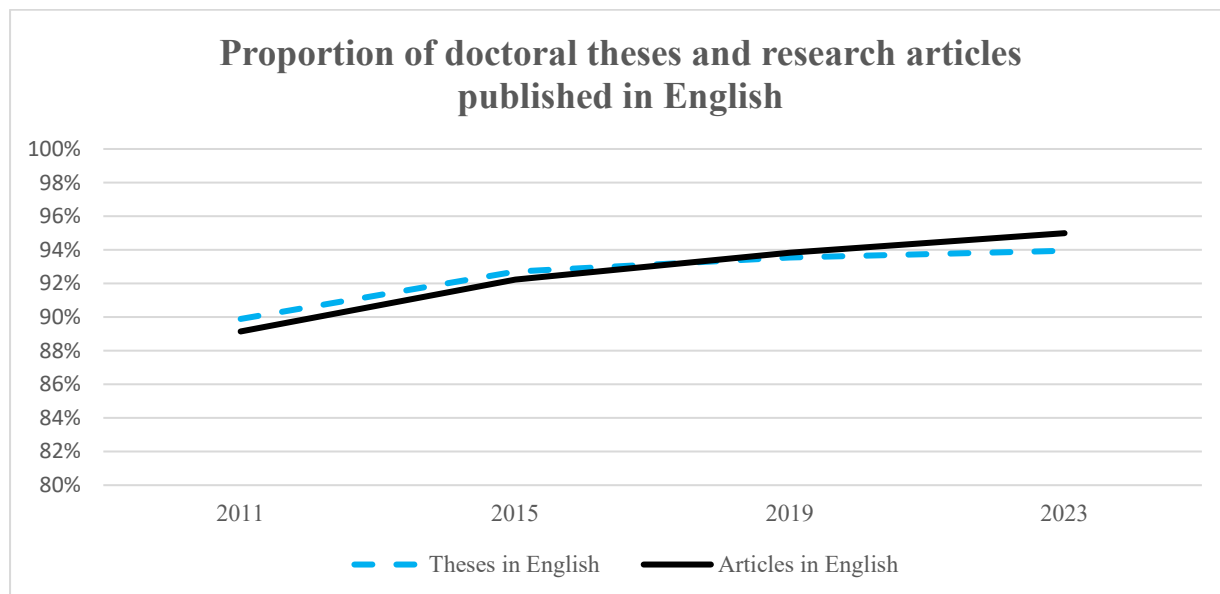


Figure 5. Proportion of doctoral theses and research articles published in English.

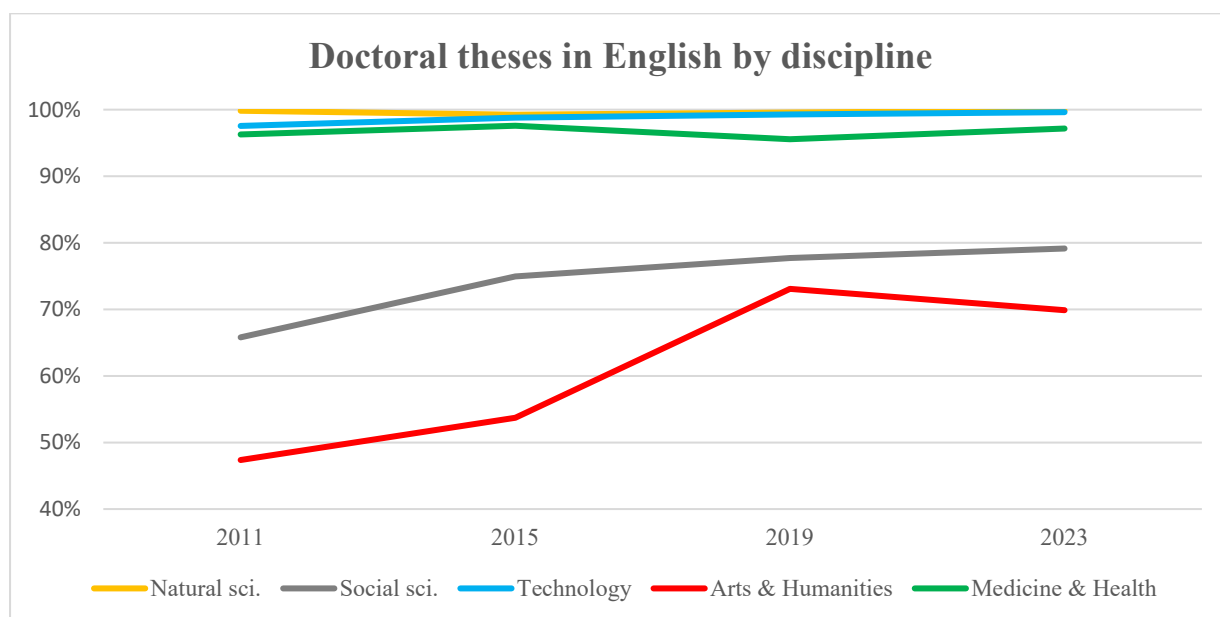


Figure 6. Proportion of doctoral theses published in English by discipline.

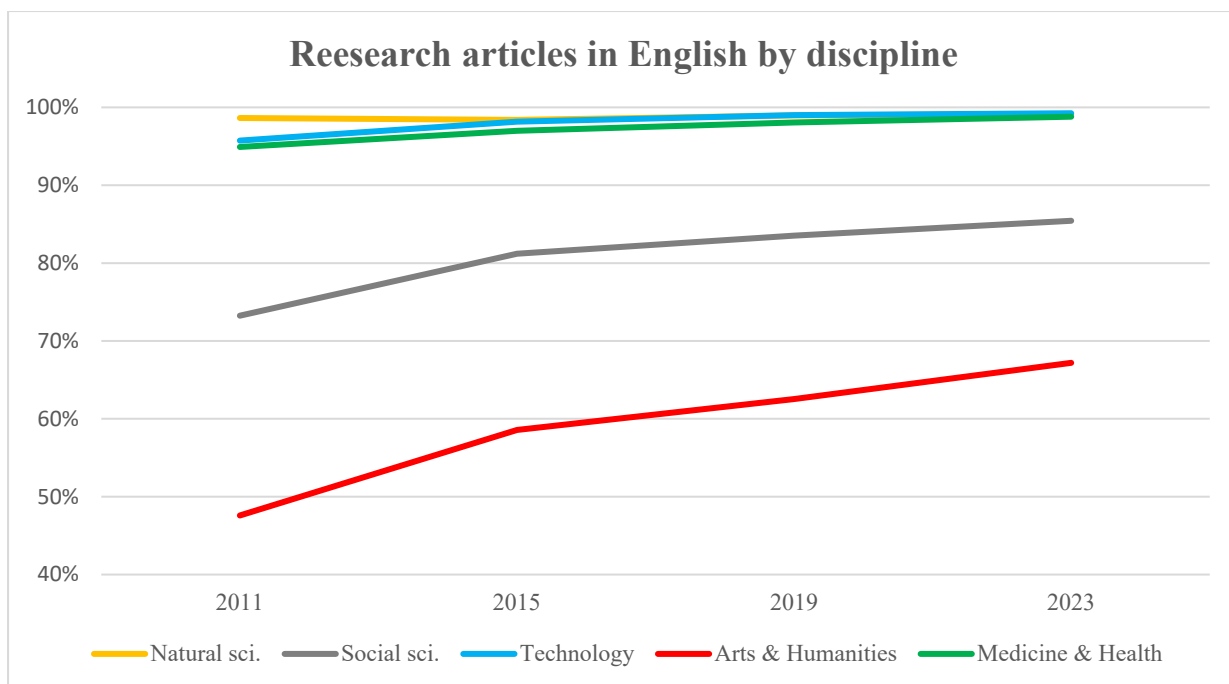


Figure 7. Proportion of research articles published in English by disciplines.

Concluding discussion

Except for one domain—doctoral theses within the humanities—since 2019 the use of English in Swedish higher education has increased in every domain and subject area. Given that Sweden has an explicitly expressed language policy objective of parallel language use—i.e., that English and Swedish should co-exist—in higher education (as well as other areas of society), it is important to understand what this situation means for the balance between English and Swedish.

The observed increase in the use of English is part of a larger pattern of expansion in higher education. In 2023 universities offered more individual courses and degree programs at both undergraduate and master's level than in 2019. Similarly, there were more new doctoral theses and research article publications in 2023 than in 2019. These findings do not, therefore, indicate that Swedish has come to be used less in Swedish higher education during the 2019 to 2023 period. However, the proportion of the expanding higher education pie claimed by Swedish has diminished in this period.

In our 2022 report, we observed that “English gains at the expense of Swedish.” These new statistics lead to the same conclusion. It can also be observed that the expansion in the use of English has been heavier in some domains and subject areas than others. One reason for this is that in some cases there is very little room for expansion; an example is the case of research articles, which have been published almost exclusively in English for over 25 years. In the 2022 report, we used two concepts to interpret the results: the point when English is used to a greater extent for a given purpose than

Swedish (which we have labelled the “cross-over point”); and the point when English becomes dominant, which we have set (somewhat arbitrarily) at 90%. Well before 2022, English was dominant in research articles and theses, and the cross-over point had been reached for courses and degree programs at master's level. Based on these new statistics, it can be seen that undergraduate courses and programs still have not reached the cross-over point, but almost every subject area has come closer to it. A striking example is in the natural sciences where, as noted above, in 2019 11% of course offerings were in English, a figure which had risen to 25% in 2023.

It is important to acknowledge that there are insufficient data to permit hard conclusions about trends to be drawn. Information about language of instruction and language of publication cannot be regarded as complete. Nonetheless, the present figures give reason to suspect that the language situation in Swedish higher education is not characterised by balance between English and Swedish; nor yet is it characterised by fluctuations which see the two languages rising and falling in relationship to each other. Instead, there appears to be a steady trend toward a decrease in the role and relative position of Swedish as an academic language.