

# *So close, yet so far away—yet the closest?*

A reflection on moving to Sweden as a Swedish speaker

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It is August 2023 and I have given in. I have left Paris and moved to Gothenburg, Sweden, to begin my bachelor's degree. Sweden wasn't what I had hoped for, but I couldn't afford to stay in Paris, I missed the entrance exams for Bologna, and I was not ready to go back home to Helsinki. I had spent a year learning French and was proud of the progress I had made. Sweden, a country whose language I already spoke, therefore felt like a defeat, not enough of a challenge. There I was regardless, in Gothenburg, with big dreams but no expectations. Little did I know that this decision would be nothing short of life-changing.

## A personal reflection

The language of the majority in Finland is Finnish, but in addition, Swedish is also an official language and my family's native language. Since most schools in Finland are public and it is required to offer education in both national languages, I attended Swedish-language schools and therefore never properly learned Finnish. Language may be the most important pillar to culture. If we can not recognize each other through communication, we can not build a sense of community, which in turn builds culture. I therefore think the Finnish-speaking Finns and the Swedish-speaking ones (the Fenno-Swedes, if you will), not only speak different languages but also partly live within different cultures. For that reason, I want to emphasize that I am not speaking on behalf of all Finns, nor for even all Fenno-Swedes, but solely on behalf of myself and my own experience.

## Linguistic borders

Upon arrival in Gothenburg, my dejection turned to excitement. On my first day in my new home country, I went to the grocery store and I understood everything. Signs, instructions, what people were saying. It was all in Swedish. I was amazed. A couple of days later I went to buy a new computer for my studies, and I got great advice from the salesperson, without any doubts or clumsy wordings, because both him and I were able to speak in our common native language. Logically, I had expected everything in Sweden to be in Swedish, but I had not anticipated just how much the language would come to mean to me. On the bus back home from the computer shop I remember having this exact thought: *is this what it's like being a part of society for real?* At 21, in a foreign country, I felt for the first time that I truly belonged.

The beauty of Europe lies in its multicultural and multilingual character. I recognize that the experience of being a linguistic minority is not unique, but allow me to express how liberating it feels to be able to speak the language of everyone around me. Whether at social gatherings, at work, or even at the tax office, I always understand what's going on and I can assume that I am understood. This has brought me something deeper than mere comfort: a profound sense of calm, freedom and safety. This is not to say I haven't felt this elsewhere, because with my family and dear friends in Finland, of course that means home and safety to me as well. Home in Sweden means something different, because of this sense of belonging on a societal level, which I haven't experienced quite as strongly before. It is a feeling I imagine many people with international experience may recognize: the moment you return home and realize how effortless it suddenly feels to live in a society again.

The reality of living as a linguistic minority means constantly relating to the language of the majority. While this has at times led to lingering, gnawing feelings of social and political exclusion in Finland, it has also provided me with an enriching intercultural, though not international, experience from an early age. Navigating between two linguistic and cultural spaces has taught me how to interpret, adapt, and read between the lines. These skills have proved valuable, not least in my studies. Whether in seminars, group projects, or everyday encounters, being able to understand what someone is trying to express, even when they struggle to find the right words, is crucial for successful collaboration and mutual understanding.

I have noticed that this intercultural sensitivity is particularly strong among my fellow Fenno-Swedish friends in Gothenburg, as we have been practicing this form of cultural and linguistic translation since childhood. I do not mean to suggest that lacking these skills is inherently negative; rather, it is simply a reflection of how language shapes experience. For many, language may be taken for granted, whereas for us, it has never been "just language", but something that carries both social and cultural meaning.

## Closeness and contrasts

The shared official language underscores how close Sweden and Finland are as neighbours, geographically, politically and culturally. Growing up speaking Swedish, I have always had strong cultural ties to Sweden through pop culture and literature. Because of this, I expected

little cultural surprise when I moved, and on a surface level, I was right. Finns and Swedes greet each other similarly, enjoy much of the same traditional cuisine, and the legal and political systems as well as the environments are comparable.

On a practical and socio-cultural level, Finland and Sweden are indeed quite similar, so to identify the most significant differences, we must dig deeper. My first real experience of cultural surprise occurred early in my studies, during a group project on Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Working with four Swedish students, I was struck by the way they, and later other classmates, spoke about Russia. I realized I had a different perspective on war, especially Russian war. While I am struggling to pinpoint exactly what revealed this difference, it felt as though war was a distant, almost abstract concept for them. This likely stems from Sweden's two centuries of peace and the geographical distance from Russia. Therefore peace and security may be perceived as a stable and unquestioned condition, rather than something dynamic and potentially under threat.

I have grown up in what is likely in the safest, most peaceful and most independent decades in Finnish history. Yet, despite this relative stability, Finland's 1,340 km shared border with Russia, coupled with the constant narrative in history books and general discourse portraying the Russian regime as powerful and unreliable, has meant that war has never felt far away. When having grandparents who grew up in the 1930's and 1940's, whose brothers were fighting the Russians, war has not only never felt far away, it has even felt close. Even closer then, when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. Sweden's stance on the question of Russia aligns with Finland's. However, in my experience, Swedes see Russia more as a geopolitical issue, while for Finns, the threat feels much more immediate. I am, of course, generalising when I speak of "the Swedes." The conversations I refer to have been with white Swedes whose families have lived in Sweden or the Nordic region for generations. I am sure that if I were to talk about war with some of my Swedish friends with immigrant backgrounds, the conversation would be different.

Despite there being wars in recent history and ongoing around the world, I had never thoroughly reflected on my personal perception of war until I moved to Sweden. Because Russian aggression has always felt close, I had assumed that the Finnish perspective was not universal, but at least common across the Nordics. This group project opened up for a new intercultural discussion that uncovered a generational, geographical and international

dimension of how Finns and Swedes relate to questions of safety, war, and their respective positions in the world.

## Life in Gothenburg

In my bachelor's programme in Global Studies, I have found myself among people who share my interests of society, culture and travel. This has sparked many intercultural and international exchanges, since most of my classmates are Swedish and I am an international student. In Finland, there is a common stereotype that Swedes discuss everything extensively, and in many cases, I have found this to be true. This space for discussion has been invaluable for me, both socially and in terms of integration. Our conversations have ranged from school systems, dialects and idiomatic words and expressions, to music, alcohol habits and other cultural and national traits. Looking back, I realise that these interactions weren't only about learning facts about Sweden, but also subconsciously learning the norms of Swedish society and how to fit in. Moreover, I have learned that the Swedes in general, at least in Gothenburg, do not seem to know much about Finland. Therefore I have felt that I can bring something valuable to the conversation, as others can learn from my perspectives and experiences as well. Through these conversations, I have developed a deep understanding of Swedish society and found my place in it, while still maintaining my Fenno-Swedish cultural identity.

One conclusion to be drawn from these discussions is that societal norms seem more flexible to people in their 20's. Many begin higher education later and take time to travel or work after upper secondary school. In my programme, students range in age from 19 to 30, and this is considered entirely normal. In Finland, however, I think this kind of path is less common. While it is usual that people take a gap year or two to work, travel or do the military or civil service, there is often an expectation to transition into work or studies soon after.

On a less serious note, I quickly discovered that beer is cheaper in Sweden than in Finland, and while barely anyone smokes, a majority uses "snus" or nicotine patches, which are typically Swedish. Sweden also tends to have stricter norms around promoting alcohol. For instance, commercials for alcoholic beverages are illegal, and while it's acceptable to suggest that people *may* bring alcohol to a student gathering, it is against the student union's bylaws to frame it as an imperative; "bring alcohol!". In Finland, drinking is, of course, not mandatory either, but the way alcohol is discussed seems somewhat less regulated. This, in

turn, may contribute to a stronger social pressure to drink, although I am not entirely sure how this discursive difference plays out in practice. These small cultural details are surprisingly relevant for student life, as many social events outside the classroom involve alcohol, both in Finland and Sweden.

## Being, becoming and belonging

In hindsight, I realize how privileged I was for thinking that pursuing my bachelor's degree abroad in Sweden meant giving in. Being a citizen of the EU and the Nordics has allowed me to study outside of Finland and expand my horizons in new intercultural and international contexts. In the EU I do not need a visa, and in the Nordics I was spared language tests or the need to "translate" my Upper Secondary School grades into the Swedish equivalent. The relative ease of obtaining such an opportunity is an immense privilege. In my situation, "giving in" simply meant I didn't have to work as hard to overcome barriers. And that, in many ways, is the essence of privilege: having access to rights and opportunities without facing the same obstacles as those who lack such advantage.

I have found it, and continue to find it, incredibly enriching to live between two cultures and societies as similar as Finland and Sweden. I believe it is in these encounters that we best uncover the core pillars of our own cultures and countries: how geography, history, and international politics shape our responses to global events, and how differing norms influence the life paths people choose. Through conversations made possible by a shared native language, I have discovered a country that is not my native one, yet where I have learned how to belong. A place where I feel like I *do* belong. This is much thanks to my background and life experience from Finland, which add a layer of appreciation and attention that even makes going to the grocery store feel meaningful.