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How to choose between pronunciation goals when teaching Swedish as a second language

In second language education, we often find that adult learners do not reach a native-like pronunciation. For English it has been argued that we must accept varieties/accents of English that do not sound like RP or Standard American, partly since English is learned worldwide and often without native speech as input. If the sole acceptable goal is “perfect native” pronunciation, all phonological features must accordingly be acquired, but recent research has suggested some phonological properties to be more crucial to intelligibility than others. These have been called core features.

A substantial immigration to Sweden during the last 50 years has made the issue relevant also for Swedish as a second language. In Swedish L2-education a shift is taking place from a traditional view that only native-like central standard Swedish is acceptable, towards an expected outcome that may show clear traces of the first language, provided that the remaining foreign accent does not disturb the communication.

For Swedish a tonal word accent and a peculiar rounded voiceless fricative are traditionally considered exotic and hard to learn, and have therefore received much attention in Swedish L2-education. It is however shown that neither of these phonetic features is crucial to the intelligibility of spoken Swedish. The word accent contrast is absent in some dialects and it has varying tonal correlates in different parts of the speech community. The fricative is an allophone that alters with another allophone similar to English “sh” and German “sch”, and is therefore not a crucial feature.

As yet the only phonological contrast that has proven crucial to intelligibility of Swedish is stress allocation, and the present contribution will discuss the appropriateness of regarding stress allocation as a core feature in Swedish pronunciation. Empirical findings concerning acoustic and perceptual correlates will be presented and potential educational benefits will be discussed.

### Summary

The priority among phonological features in second language education is not trivial. Adults often end up having a persistent foreign accent that should nonetheless be intelligible. The present contribution will discuss priority among Swedish phonological properties – particularly prosody – in the light of teaching experience and empirical findings.