“Completely Headless”
Modification of adjectives in
Swedish advanced learners’ English

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Abstract

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This is a corpus-based, empirical study, which investigates Swedish advanced learners’ written and
spoken English with regard to modification of adjectives, both reinforcing (e.g. totally different, very nice) and attenuating (e.g. kind of false, somewhat cynical). More specifically, it aims to clarify
to what degree and in what ways Swedish learners differ from native speakers of English as to
frequency, choice of modifier and collocations with adjectives. Possible reasons are suggested for
the differences found and are discussed in relation to second language learning. The investigation
is based on comparable learner and native-speaker corpora, from which quantitative data are
drawn and used as a point of departure for a more qualitative approach. Differences in
comparison with the native-speaker corpus are referred to as “overuse” and “underuse”,
respectively.

As matters of ambiguity or vagueness may interfere with definitions of linguistic categories, the
study discusses and exemplifies a number of such cases, involving, e.g., semantic blends, variable
scope and context-dependent function variation, all of them related to the process of selecting
relevant data from the corpus material.

The investigation shows that the Swedish learners overuse both adjectives and modifiers in
their written texts. This applies especially to “all-purpose”, relatively informal modifiers, such as
the reinforcingers totally, very and really, and the attenuators quite, fairly and more or less. Underused
modifiers are of the type that combines with a smaller set of adjectives, viz. all (e.g. all important,
all female) and directly (e.g. directly applicable), pointing to a lack of experience in formal writing
among the Swedish students. Examples of unidiomatic usage are also found, e.g. scarily clear
and completely headless, suggesting transfer from Swedish expressions.

The comparison of the spoken corpora shows many similarities in modifier use. There are also
differences, indicating over-hedging and underuse of emphatic expressions such as just amazing
and absolutely brilliant, as well as the modifiers quite and really.

Adopting a somewhat wider perspective, the study concludes with a discussion of the
increasing degree of informality in written language, as well as the relevance of being nativelike in
oral production of L2 English. Some pedagogical implications in this connection are the need to
increase Swedish students’ awareness of different genres, especially as regards formal written
English, and, for spoken English, to make special note of certain frequently used expressions as
well as changes and recent trends.

KEYWORDS: Swedish advanced learners, written English, spoken English, degree modification,
adjectives, modifiers, reinforcingers, attenuators, collocation, learner corpora, learner English, formal
register, informal speech, genre awareness, academic writing, comparative study, contrastive
interlanguage analysis.