



Nordic Council
of Ministers

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DOES THE NORDIC LANGUAGE COMMUNITY EXIST?

The mutual intelligibility of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish has long been a connecting force in the Nordic Region. Is this still the case today? The Nordic Council of Ministers has asked over 2,000 young people aged 16-25 from across the Nordic Region about their language skills and attitudes towards language and culture.

Contents

Foreword	3
Summary	4
Introduction	6
Research has demonstrated weakening language comprehension	9
Language skills and attitudes towards language	11
Cultural experiences and language learning	21
Selected results in different countries	24
Conclusions	28
Annex 1: Tables	33
Annex 2: Methodology	41
Annex 3: Future skills – the Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research	42
Annex 4: Nordic agreements on language	43
Sources	44

Foreword

There are many things which unite the Nordic countries, including shared values and similar social systems. Community of language and culture has also been pointed out as central to Nordic co-operation. Historically, it has been assumed that most speakers of the closely related Nordic languages Danish, Norwegian and Swedish can learn to communicate with one another relatively easily, and that the closeness of these languages helps build transnational community.

Mutually intelligible languages are also found elsewhere in the world. What makes Nordic co-operation unique is political investment in language as a means of strengthening regional identity and cohesion.

However, the Nordic language landscape has changed greatly over the past 60 years. Young people have grown up in a globalised world in which English is omnipresent, and the Nordic languages may seem to be losing relevance. This is why the Nordic Council of Ministers has commissioned a survey asking more than 2,000 young people across the Nordic Region about their views on language, culture and perceived mutual comprehension of Scandinavian languages.

The Nordic Council of Ministers' vision is to make the Nordic Region the most sustainable and integrated region in the world. One adopted objective is to increase knowledge of neighbouring languages and cultures among children and young people. It is vital to remember that languages are learned and used by individuals, and that efforts to strengthen language and cultural understanding in the Nordic Region will therefore always remain necessary. The results of this survey of national differences, interest in different languages and cultures, and links between language skills and attitudes towards language indicate weakened Scandinavian language comprehension among young people, and thus also where investment is needed.

The report is authored by Andrea Skjold Frøshaug and Truls Stende from the Nordic Council of Ministers Secretariat's analysis and statistics unit. The questionnaire was administered by Novus on behalf of the Nordic Council of Ministers. Norstat conducted the interviews in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland and Åland. In the other countries, interviews were conducted by Gallup (Iceland), DMA (Faroe Islands) and HS Analysis (Greenland) on behalf of Novus/Norstat.

Copenhagen, December 2020

Paula Lehtomäki

Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers



Photo: Johnér

Summary

The ability to communicate in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish has long been a connecting force between people in the Nordic Region. However, the linguistic landscape is evolving constantly. A new generation has grown up in a globalised Nordic Region in which English is part of daily life. This has motivated the Nordic Council of Ministers to ask more than 2,000 young people aged 16–25 from across the Nordic Region about their language skills and their attitudes towards language and culture.

In summary, the survey shows that young people's experienced comprehension of Scandinavian languages varies greatly across the Nordic countries, and between the different languages. In some countries, a high proportion of respondents disagreed with the statement that it is easy to understand one or more of the Scandinavian languages. The survey results highlight a number of complex questions concerning the Nordic Region and language:

- What consequences will weakened language comprehension have for so-called *Nordic integration*, i.e. cross-border links between Nordic populations and countries? For example, what impact will this development have on opportunities to work in other Nordic countries?
- How will *Nordic identity* – i.e. the extent to which individuals feel themselves to be Nordic – be impacted by language comprehension challenges?
- How can the Nordic Council of Ministers help strengthen language comprehension and knowledge of the languages used in the Nordic Region going forward?

Language comprehension and knowledge

We asked young people about their comprehension and command of different languages, with an emphasis on the Scandinavian languages.

- In the Nordic Region as a whole, 62% of young people find Norwegian easy to understand. The same proportion stated that Swedish is easy to understand, while far fewer respondents – 26% – said the same about Danish. The Nordic average (where the results for each country are weighted according to population size) conceals substantial national differences.
- The highest proportions of respondents who find it easy to understand Scandinavian

languages were recorded in the Faroe Islands and Norway.

- In Finland, Greenland and Iceland in particular, a fairly large number of young people disagreed that it is easy to understand one or more of the Scandinavian languages.
- Looking at the Scandinavian countries, it is clear that language comprehension between Swedish and Danish is challenging, with just 23% of young Swedes finding it easy to understand Danish and only 40% of young Danes saying the same about Swedish.
- Almost all of the young respondents from the Nordic Region (95%) find English easy to understand. The influence of English is generally strong. Overall, 65% of respondents reported sometimes finding it easier to express themselves in English than in their native language, while 62% stated that English has a strong influence on their own language.
- Nevertheless, two-thirds of the respondents agreed that understanding Scandinavian languages is an important aspect of Nordic community.

Choice of language

Young people in the Nordic Region can only maintain a vibrant language community if they use Scandinavian languages when they meet. Accordingly, the survey asked which languages the respondents use in different contexts, and why.

- The proportion who use a Scandinavian language when meeting someone who speaks a different Scandinavian language is approximately the same as the proportion who opt for English – around 60% in both cases. (Respondents could give multiple answers.) The results varied considerably from country to country, and the survey results suggest that choice of language is context-dependent.
- Young Norwegians make least use of English when meeting someone who speaks another Scandinavian language, with 36% stating that they do so.
- Just over 90% of young people in the Nordic Region reported using the main national language on social media, while around 60% also use English.
- The primary factors influencing choice of language on social media were that the message should be understood by as many people as possible and that friends use the chosen language. Culture and identity appear to be less important.

Cultural experiences and language

The Nordic language community and the Nordic cultural community are often referred to collectively, and a further aim of the survey was therefore to examine which languages the respondents encounter when consuming cultural products, and what they consider helpful in the context of language learning.

- Almost all of the respondents (96%) had consumed English-language cultural products in the preceding two months, while just under half had consumed cultural products in a different Nordic language than the main national language.
- Most young people choose to consume cultural products in other Nordic languages because they are interested in the content (63%) or because the products are entertaining (42%). Fewer choose cultural products because they want to learn a particular language (23%).



Photo: Jakob Boserup

Introduction

In the Nordic Region, the traditional consensus is that the Nordic language community strengthens cohesion between residents of the region. Mutual comprehension of Norwegian, Swedish and Danish has facilitated communication, cross-border mobility and trust. The language community has been a crucial factor in the development of a closely integrated Nordic Region and extensive Nordic co-operation.

Persons who understand another Scandinavian language have better opportunities to study in the Nordic Region and easier access to the regional labour market. Moreover, previous studies have shown that the opportunity to work, study or live anywhere in the Nordic Region is considered one of the greatest benefits of Nordic co-operation.¹

Mutual language comprehension has also shaped Nordic identity – the sense of feeling Nordic and of being part of the Nordic Region. Further, the Scandinavian languages have a special status in the context of official Nordic co-operation, where the working languages are usually Scandinavian and English is avoided.

Official Nordic language co-operation has long focused on children and young people and their comprehension of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish. Comprehension of the Scandinavian languages among young people is particularly important, not least because these young people will be leading Nordic co-operation in future.

However, the linguistic landscape has changed over the past 20 years. Studies from the 2000s show that young people have poorer comprehension of Scandinavian languages and significantly better command of English than previous generations (see next chapter). The influence of English, new technologies and social media have altered how young people communicate, use language and consume culture.

The Nordic Council of Ministers has conducted a study of young people in the Nordic Region to investigate language comprehension and attitudes towards language and culture. The survey asked young people how well they understand different languages, how they use languages and which languages they encounter in the context of different cultural experiences. This report also covers current topics relevant to young people's use of language: the influence of English, new

1. Andreasson, U. & T. Stende, "Ett värdefullt samarbete", in *NMR Analyse 2017:3* (2017)

technologies and social media. It additionally examines young people's attitudes towards language in the Nordic Region, including whether young people consider the Nordic language community to be important. The questionnaire, in the form of a telephone interview, was administered to over 2,000 young people aged 16–25 in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland.

This report begins with a brief review of relevant research. It then discusses the results generally before moving on to more detailed discussion of the individual countries in the Nordic Region. The conclusion focuses on how language comprehension can impact future Nordic cohesion.

About the languages spoken in the Nordic Region

In the Nordic Region, all languages have equal status, but different roles. In this report, the term *main language* refers to Danish in Denmark, Finnish in Finland, Norwegian in Norway, Icelandic in Iceland, Swedish in Sweden, Faroese in the Faroe Islands, Greenlandic in Greenland and Swedish in Åland.

The Nordic language community comprises the closely related and mutually intelligible neighbouring languages Danish, Norwegian and Swedish. Various national minority languages and sign languages have special status in the Nordic Region. The languages spoken in the Nordic Region also include several non-Nordic languages brought to the Nordic Region over time.

The main languages listed above belong to three different language families. Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Icelandic and Faroese all belong to the North Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family. Danish, Norwegian and Swedish (including Finland Swedish) are so closely related that they are mutually intelligible. Icelandic and Faroese also have many similarities, both with one another and with the three Scandinavian languages, but do not have the same level of mutual intelligibility. Finnish (and the Sami languages) are Finno-Ugric languages in the Uralic language family. These languages are not immediately mutually intelligible. Greenlandic, an Inuit language, belongs to a third language family.

There are major differences between the different language families in terms of grammatical structure, pronunciation and vocabulary. As a result, residents of the Nordic Region have very different starting points in terms of how easily they can understand neighbouring Scandinavian languages. While some people can understand the three languages thanks to a closely related native language, the participation of others in the Nordic language community is dependent on their foreign language skills. The history of these languages also influences their viability as means of communication in the Nordic Region.²

Survey methodology

The survey was carried out by Novus on behalf of the Nordic Council of Ministers. Norstat conducted the telephone interviews in Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Åland, while Gallup was responsible for Iceland. DMA and HS Analysis covered the Faroe Islands and Greenland, respectively (on behalf of Novus/Norstat).

The survey took the form of telephone interviews conducted in the period December 2019 to February 2020, covering a total of 2,092 young people aged 16–25. In Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, approximately 400 interviews were conducted per country. Around 200 interviews were carried out in Iceland, and around 100 interviews each in the Faroe Islands and Greenland. Only 78 interviews were conducted in Åland, which has a population of just under 3,000 young people aged 16–25. This total is small compared to the other countries, but it proved impossible to recruit additional respondents. The replies nevertheless represent a sufficient proportion of the total population to generalise the data.

The report's results concerning the opinions of young people across the Nordic Region are based on weighting of the national results according to the number of young people aged 16–25 in each country. Sweden thus has the greatest impact on the results for the Nordic Region as a whole,

2. Sletten, I.S. (ed.), *Nordens språk med rötter och fötter*, in *Nord* 2004:9 (2004)

while Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland have the least impact. This approach was chosen to allow investigation of the young population in the Nordic Region while ensuring that the opinions of all the young people carry equal weight. The results have also been weighted to take account of age and sex. See methodology annex for further information.



Photo: Unsplash

Research has demonstrated weakening language comprehension

The 2005 report *Håller språket ihop Norden?* is the most comprehensive and well-known language survey of the Nordic Region. This research report authored by Lars-Olof Delsing and Katarina Lundin Åkesson describes actual comprehension of the neighbouring languages Danish, Norwegian and Swedish, as well as comprehension of English, among upper secondary school pupils aged 16–19 across the Nordic Region. Around 850 pupils in Denmark, Norway and Sweden were tested, along with 450 pupils from elsewhere in the Nordic Region. A small number of parents were also included in the study to enable comparison with the older generation's level of language comprehension. The survey compared the test results for the young respondents with those of their parents and a study of young soldiers carried out in 1972 (the Maurud survey). The study concluded that the Nordic Region had seen a decline in mutual language comprehension between Danish, Norwegian and Swedish among young people over the preceding 30 years. A further interesting finding was that Norwegians were the best at understanding neighbouring languages among Danish, Norwegian and Swedish speakers, while in the Nordic Region as a whole Faroe Islanders were clearly the best at understanding Danish and Norwegian, and second-best at understanding Swedish.³

The study also showed that English comprehension was good throughout the Nordic Region. Strong English skills have been cited as a ground for questioning both the need for and future of the Nordic language community. Moreover, Delsing and Åkesson also pointed out that comprehension among young speakers of Danish and Swedish had declined noticeably in the space of one generation. This finding is supported by the *Dansk og svensk – fra nabosprog til fremmedsprog?* questionnaire administered by Robert Zola Christensen and Mari Bacuin in 2012–2013, even though that questionnaire measured young people's experiences related to mutual language comprehension rather than actual comprehension. The questionnaire was completed by almost 450 Danish and Swedish pupils aged 16–18 living in the Øresund Region.⁴

3. Delsing, L.-O. & K. L. Åkesson, "Håller språket ihop Norden? En forskningsrapport om ungdomars förståelse av danska, svenska och norska", in *TemaNord* 2005:573 (2005)

4. Christensen, R. and M. Bacuin, "Dansk og svensk – fra nabosprog til fremmedsprog?", in *Språk i Norden*, (2013) pp. 67–82

The 2016 pilot study *Man skal bare kaste sig ud i det* was based on interviews of 31 young people from across the Nordic Region. All of the respondents had worked or studied in a neighbouring country in which a Scandinavian language is spoken. Like Delsing and Åkesson in 2005, study author Eva Theilgaard Brink concluded that Faroe Islanders and Norwegians are best at understanding neighbouring languages, and that Norwegians are the easiest speakers to understand. Brink also found that English was most frequently used in situations where the speaker wanted to prevent loss of face – for example in work situations to avoid misunderstanding others or being misunderstood. While English was felt to be more efficient because it is a language spoken by all parties on equal terms, young residents of the Nordic Region did not necessarily speak English with one another all the time. They were more likely to speak Scandinavian languages in less formal social contexts where they have more time and confidence to clarify any misunderstandings. Several study respondents claimed that using English resulted in more formal and less free conversation, and thus a certain distance between the participants. Several young people also stated that they risked exclusion from social circles if they were unable to communicate with speakers of neighbouring languages. Many respondents therefore preferred to speak a Scandinavian language, either learning the local language or speaking the Scandinavian language they speak best, potentially with some adjustments. In this context, language is used to build relationships, functioning as a type of social glue.⁵

In summary, these studies show that mutual language comprehension between Danish, Norwegian and Swedish – and between Danish and Swedish in particular – has weakened among young people in the Nordic Region, and that the level of English comprehension is high.

Like the above studies, this report examines how well young residents of the Nordic Region understand the Scandinavian languages and English. The report provides an updated picture of the situation and supplements previous findings.

5. Brink, E.T., "Man skal bare kaste sig ud i det – En interviewundersøgelse af unge i Nordens nabosprogsforståelse i praksis" (2016)



Photo: Unsplash

Language skills and attitudes towards language

This chapter discusses the questionnaire results.

To survey the language skills of young people in the Nordic Region, the respondents were asked which languages they speak and/or write in addition to the main national language.⁶ The respondents' level of language proficiency is unknown beyond their own statement that they speak and/or write the languages. In other words, in this context possessing language skills is not synonymous with perfect command of the language in question. Figure 1 illustrates selected results.

6. In this survey, the main languages in the Nordic countries are defined as: Danish in Denmark, Finnish in Finland, Norwegian in Norway, Icelandic in Iceland, Swedish in Sweden, Faroese in the Faroe Islands, Greenlandic in Greenland and Swedish in Åland.

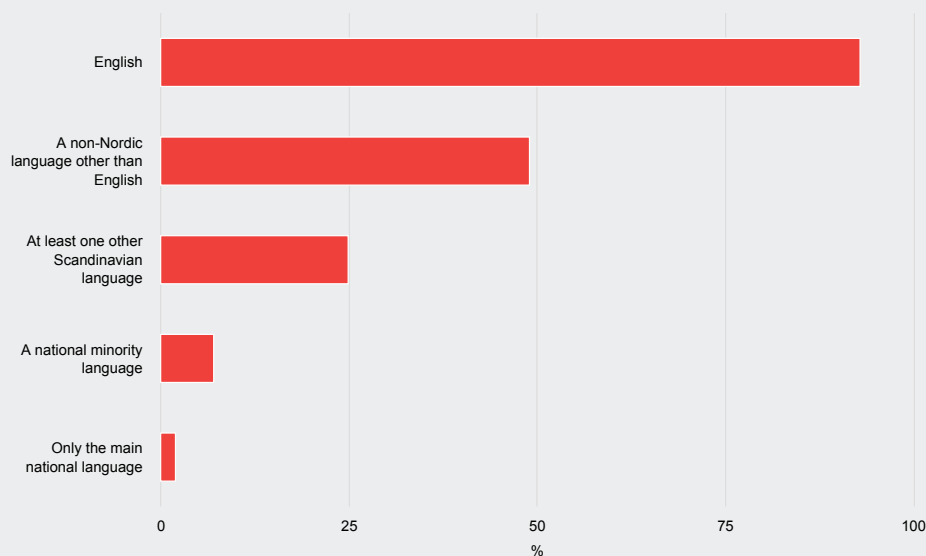


Figure 1: Which languages other than the main national language do you speak and/or write?

As in earlier research reports, it is clear that the majority of young people in the Nordic Region (93%) consider themselves to have strong English skills. This was a consistent finding in almost all the Nordic countries. Breaking the figures down by country shows that a somewhat larger number of young Icelandic respondents stated that they speak and/or write English (98%), compared to the rest of the Nordic Region. The lowest proportion was recorded in Greenland (78%).

Figure 1 shows that half (49%) of young respondents in the Nordic Region reported speaking a non-Nordic language other than English. The highest number of such respondents was recorded in Denmark (57%), followed by Sweden (54%).

One out of four young people in the Nordic Region speaks or writes a Scandinavian language in addition to the main national language. Broken down by country, the figures reveal that this finding primarily relates to the countries which do not have a Scandinavian main language and where the additional language is taught at school. In Finland, 72% of respondents said that they speak Swedish, while 97% of young Faroe Islanders, 71% of young Greenlanders and 55% of Icelanders reported speaking or writing Danish.⁷ In the Faroe Islands, a fairly high percentage of respondents also stated that they write or speak Norwegian (43%).

Moreover, 7% of young people in the Nordic Region stated that they speak "a national minority language".

Just 2% of young people in the Nordic Region only speak the main national language. In total, well over half (62%) of young people in the Nordic Region speak or write three or more languages, while 36% speak or write the main language plus one additional language.

Some 75% of respondents who were born abroad or who have at least one parent born outside the Nordic Region stated that they speak a non-Nordic language other than English. One reason why so many respondents reported speaking a non-Nordic language other than English is that these languages are taught at school.

7. Around 5% of the Finnish population speak Swedish as their native language. The survey does not distinguish between these respondents and respondents whose native language is Finnish.

Large variations in Scandinavian language comprehension

Several studies have shown that young people in the Nordic Region understand Norwegian, Swedish and Danish less well than before, and it is commonly believed that some young people in the Nordic Region switch to English when they meet other Nordic residents.⁸ What is the situation in 2020?

The survey presented the respondents with a number of statements and asked them whether they agreed or disagreed with these. One of the questions was whether the respondents found it easy to understand each of the Scandinavian languages. (The respondents from Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Åland were not asked how easy it is to understand the main language in these countries.) In other words, the question examined whether the young people themselves consider the languages easy to understand, rather than actual language comprehension. Young people's language comprehension may therefore be better or worse than they themselves believe. For example, the *Man skal bare kaste sig ud i det* survey showed that initial exposure to a neighbouring language can be a shock to young people because they believed the differences between languages to be smaller than they are. This was true of young residents of the Nordic Region who moved to a neighbouring country to study or work.⁹ In addition, the survey conducted by Christensen and Bacuin indicated that persons with experience of neighbouring languages had a lower expectation of understanding them.¹⁰

Across the Nordic Region as a whole, 62% of young people found Norwegian and Swedish easy to understand, while considerably fewer respondents (26%) stated that Danish is easy. This average conceals substantial differences between countries. These differences are due to the fact that young people in these countries have widely differing starting points for understanding the Scandinavian languages. It is therefore helpful to break down the results by country and language; see Figure 2.

8. As supported by empirical data in the case of Norwegians and Danish; see Language Council of Norway article "Unge snakkar engelsk med danskar"

9. Brink, E.T. (2016)

10. Christensen, R. and M. Bacuin (2013)

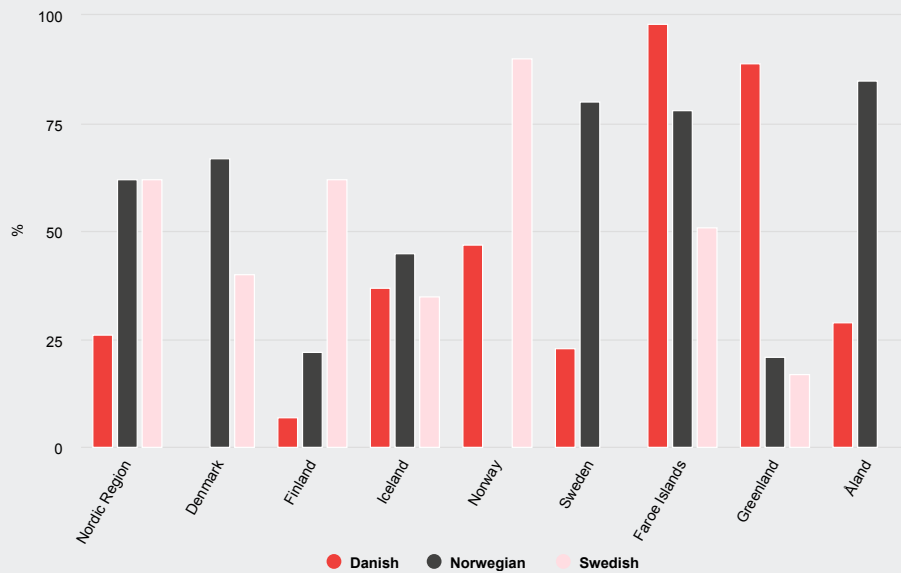


Figure 2: Proportion of young people who agree that it is easy to understand Danish, Norwegian or Swedish

NB: The respondents from Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Åland were not asked how easy it is to understand the main language in these countries. The above figure therefore excludes these columns.

Some 62% of young people in the Nordic Region stated that Norwegian is easy to understand. The largest proportion stating this was found in Åland (85%), closely followed by Sweden (80%) and the Faroe Islands (78%). In Denmark, 67% of the young respondents said that Norwegian is easy. The majority of young people in Greenland and Finland considered Norwegian a difficult language.

As in the case of Norwegian, 62% of young people in the Nordic Region stated that Swedish is easy to understand. Almost all (90%) of the respondents from Norway agreed with this statement. This was the highest percentage recorded in the Nordic Region. Danes, on the other hand, find Swedish far more difficult to understand, with just 40% agreeing that the language is easy, compared to 62% in Finland and 51% in the Faroe Islands. The majority of young people in Iceland (63%) and Greenland (83%) did not agree that Swedish is easy to understand.

Danish appears to be the Scandinavian language which respondents find most difficult to understand, with just 26% of young people in the Nordic Region identifying it as an easy language. In all countries other than the Faroe Islands and Greenland, the majority disagreed with the statement that Danish is an easy language. As shown in Figure 2, 47% of young Norwegians, 37% of Icelanders, 23% of Swedes and 7% of Finns included in the study stated that Danish is easy to understand.

Previous studies have concluded that the unusual nature of Danish phonology – with its uncommonly large number of vowels and weak consonant sounds – makes it difficult to identify where one word ends and another starts and which inflected form is being used. In other words, it is the pronunciation of Danish words which makes the language difficult to understand.¹¹

11. Bleses et al., "Early vocabulary development in Danish and other languages; A CDI-based comparison", in *Journal of child language* 35:3 (2008)

The survey also shows that Norwegians and Faroe Islanders understand the Scandinavian languages best. This finding supports the results reported by Delsing and Åkesson in their 2005 study of actual language comprehension.¹² In-depth interviews conducted as part of Brink's 2016 study also support the conclusion that Norwegians understand neighbouring languages better. Brink's study showed that non-Norwegian Nordic respondents living in Norway reported a greater degree of comprehension than respondents who had moved to Denmark and Sweden.¹³

While there are widespread similarities between Norwegian and Danish in terms of vocabulary, Norwegian pronunciation has more in common with Swedish. As a result, Norwegians have a better basis than Swedes for understanding Danish vocabulary and a better basis than Danes for understanding spoken Swedish. Danes and Swedes have to work harder to understand each other's languages.¹⁴

It may be that Norwegians enjoy good Scandinavian language comprehension because they are used to a broad range of national dialects.¹⁵ One explanation of why Norwegians understand Swedish relatively well may be that many Swedes live in Norway's largest cities, and many Norwegians are therefore used to hearing Swedish. Norway also shares a long border with Sweden, and many Norwegians travel to Sweden for leisure purposes.

Faroe Islanders also rank highly on Scandinavian language comprehension. Possible reasons for this include that Faroese shares much of its vocabulary with the Scandinavian languages, that teaching occurs in Danish from an early age and that Faroe Islanders are open to the inclusion of loan words, primarily from Danish.¹⁶

While Greenlanders understand Danish well, they find Swedish and Norwegian very difficult. Unlike Faroe Islanders, Greenlanders have a non-Nordic native language, and therefore cannot use their own vocabulary to guess the meaning of Scandinavian words which are not found in Danish. In Iceland, between 35% and 45% of respondents stated that Norwegian, Swedish and Danish were easy to understand. Like Faroe Islanders, Icelanders have a Nordic native language. On the other hand, Icelanders have a strict attitude towards loan words and only learn Danish as a foreign language, rather than experiencing it as a language of instruction.¹⁷

Young Finnish respondents who do not have Swedish as their native language have the weakest basis for understanding the Scandinavian languages. They speak a non-Nordic native language, do not have a Scandinavian language of instruction and learn Swedish as a foreign language. As a language, Finnish is sufficiently large to be self-sufficient in terms of literature and cultural production.¹⁸ The survey results reflect this, with just 7% of young Finns reporting that they find Danish easy to understand. The figures for Norwegian and Swedish were 22% and 62%, respectively.

The respondents were asked whether they regarded understanding Danish, Norwegian or Swedish as an important aspect of the Nordic community.¹⁹ In the Nordic Region as a whole, 66% of the respondents agreed with this. The survey demonstrates a link between this statement and Scandinavian language comprehension. The largest percentages of respondents who agreed with this statement were found in Norway and the Faroe Islands (83% and 90%, respectively) – the two countries where young people understand Scandinavian languages the best.

12. Delsing, L.-O. & K. L. Åkesson (2005)

13. Brink, E.T. (2016)

14. Delsing, L.-O. & K. L. Åkesson (2005)

15. Brink, E.T. (2016)

16. Delsing, L.-O. & K. L. Åkesson (2005)

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. The languages included in the question varied from country to country.

Young people use both English and Scandinavian languages in their interactions

The respondents were asked which language they use when meeting people who speak a different Scandinavian language.²⁰ Just over 60% of the young people stated that they would use a Scandinavian language, while 59% said they would use English. Since multiple answers were permitted, some respondents stated that they would use both English and a Scandinavian language. See Figure 3. Just under 20% of the respondents indicated that their choice of language would depend on the particular situation (not shown in the figure; see annex).

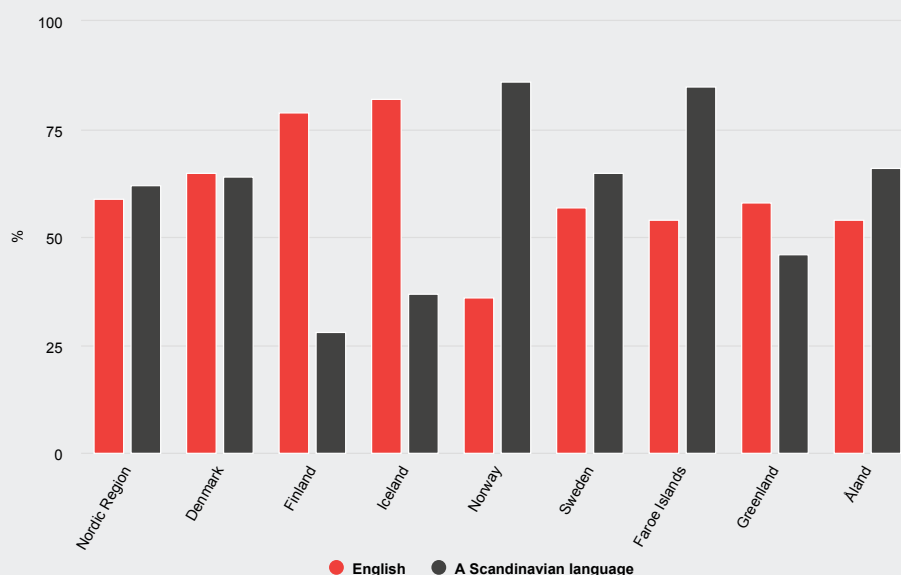


Figure 3: Which languages do you mainly use when you meet someone who speaks another* Scandinavian language? The proportions of persons who answered English or a Scandinavian language (both options could be chosen).

* "Other" was only included in the question in the countries where the main language is a Scandinavian language.

As the figure shows, the proportion of young Norwegians who would speak a Scandinavian language (86%) – mainly Norwegian – is far higher than the Nordic average. Norwegians are also least likely to speak English. Once again, similarities are apparent between young Norwegians and young Faroe Islanders, with some 85% of the respondents from the Faroe Islands stating that they would speak a Scandinavian language (mainly Danish). More Icelanders, Finns and young Danes stated that they would use English.

The young respondents were also allowed to state that they would use a mix of Scandinavian languages. In total, 6% indicated that they do this, with the highest figures being recorded in the Faroe Islands (35%), Denmark (16%) and Iceland (10%). This may reflect language adaptation based on the assumption that other residents of the Nordic Region find Danish pronunciation difficult to understand.

There appears to be a link between comprehension of Scandinavian languages and young

20. The respondents from Finland, the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland were asked which language they would choose if they met someone who speaks a Scandinavian language.

people's decision to opt for either English or a Scandinavian language. The proportion of respondents who used English was greatest in Finland and Iceland, where the number of young people who find Scandinavian languages difficult to understand was also relatively high. On the other hand, the proportion of respondents who use English was lowest in Norway and the Faroe Islands – the countries with the highest rates of Scandinavian language comprehension. The fact that a relatively large number of young Danes choose to speak English may be linked to the fact that many people in the Nordic Region find Danish difficult to understand. This is supported by the fact that the Danish respondents were also most likely to base their choice of language on the situation (38%), and the fact that a relatively large percentage (16%) of young Danes opt for a mix of Scandinavian languages (see appended table).

As stated above, language choice is context-dependent. Previous research has shown that English is mainly used when young people wish to avoid misunderstandings, or to avoid losing face in situations where it is important that everyone understands the message. Scandinavian languages, on the other hand, are used when the aim is to develop closer social relationships.²¹

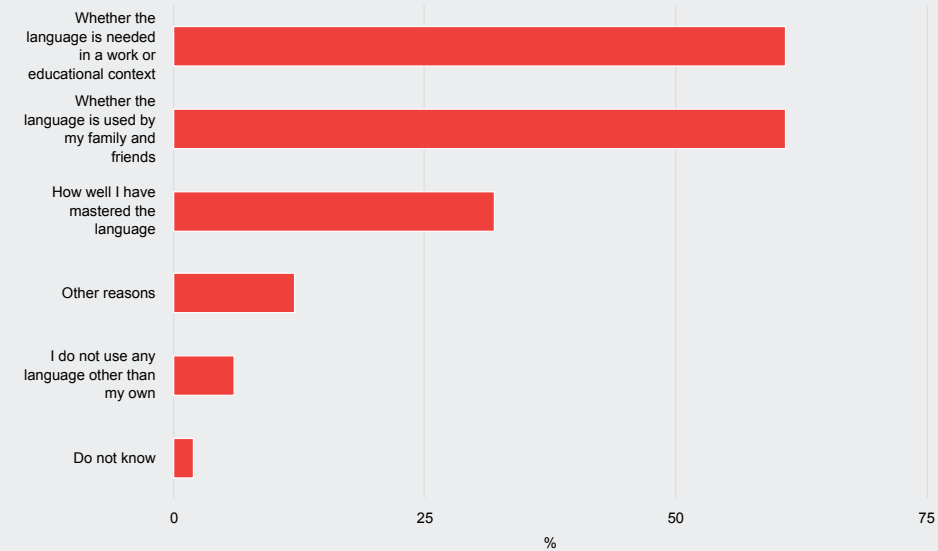


Figure 4: What decides which language you use on a daily basis?

21. Brink, E.T. (2016)

Which languages do young people use in daily life?

The questionnaire also asked about the factors which determine language choice in daily life. Figure 4 illustrates the results for the Nordic Region as a whole (multiple answers were allowed).

The most commonly given reasons were that the language is used in a work or educational context (61%) and that it is used by family and friends (61%). A slightly smaller percentage of the respondents (32%) replied that the key factor was how well they have mastered the language.

The media habits of young people have changed dramatically over the past 10 years, with social media now playing a central role in daily life. In response to the question of which languages they use on social media, 90% of the respondents stated that they use their main national language, although some 63% stated that they write in English (both alternatives could be selected). The results varied greatly from country to country. See Figure 5.

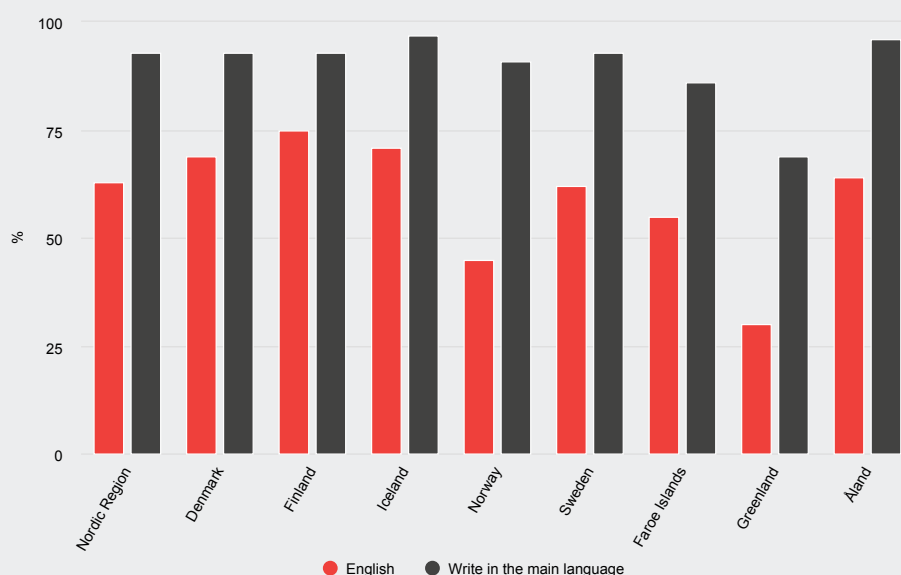


Figure 5: Proportion of young people who use the main national language and English on social media

English is used least by young people in Greenland (30%) and Norway (45%). In Finland, however, 75% of respondents reported using English on social media – the highest proportion in the Nordic Region.

The lowest number of young people who use the main language was found in Greenland. Breaking down the figures further (not shown in the figure) reveals that a large proportion (37%) of young Greenlanders choose to write Danish. Many Faroe Islanders also opt for Danish (33%). Iceland and Finland also had some young people who use a Scandinavian language occasionally (around 10%). In Finland, this means Swedish (the native language of approximately 5% of Finns), while in Iceland the figure included Danish (6%), Norwegian (2%) and Swedish (2%). In the other Nordic countries, young people primarily use the main national language or English.

Communicating with others and being understood are key factors in young people's choice of

language. In reply to the question of what determines their choice of language on social media (with multiple answers allowed), the majority of the young respondents (58%) stated that comprehension by as many people as possible is decisive. The language used by friends is also a significant consideration (54%). A slightly smaller number of respondents indicated that their choice of language is determined by their command of the language (27%), by whether the language is part of their identity (25%) and by whether the language is part of their culture (24%).

Young Finns were most likely to say that their choice of language on social media is guided by the desire that as many people as possible should understand the message. This is consistent with the majority choice of English.

English has a strong influence

The debate about whether English is impacting the Nordic languages is a longstanding and ongoing one. The questionnaire presented the respondents with four statements about English and asked them to indicate their agreement or disagreement. See Table 1.

Table 1: Proportion of young people who agree with the following statements:

Statement	Nordic Region	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Faroe Islands	Greenland	Åland
It is easy to understand English	95%	96%	93%	95%	95%	95%	93%	78%	99%
It is sometimes easier to express myself in English than in my native language	65%	70%	58%	49%	67%	64%	40%	71%	61%
English has a strong influence on my native language	62%	72%	46%	55%	64%	62%	60%	69%	75%
It is sufficient to understand English as the only foreign language	57%	49%	54%	38%	58%	64%	28%	46%	53%

Unsurprisingly, almost all of the young respondents stated that English is easy to understand. Explanations of Nordic young people's strong English skills include that the language is taught at school from an early age, that young people hear English online and in media products, and that the Nordic languages are increasingly borrowing English words and expressions.²² As stated above, many young people also use English on social media, thereby possibly helping to normalise its use and thus lowering the threshold for using English in other contexts.

Well over half of young people in the Nordic Region agree that English has a strong influence on their native language and that it is sometimes easier to express oneself in English than in one's own language. This gives an indication of the extent of this influence and how good young people have become at speaking and understanding English.

However, at the same time as young people are increasingly being influenced by English, 84% of the respondents stated that it is important to have strong proficiency in the majority language of their country in order to function in society, studies and working life (not shown in the table). The young Nordic respondents were generally in agreement on this point, across the region.

22. Christensen, R. and M. Bacuin (2013)

In the Nordic Region as a whole, 57% of the respondents agreed that English is sufficient as the only foreign language, although there were substantial variations at the national level. Swedes were most likely to agree with this statement, while Faroe Islanders agreed the least.

Young people are not prioritising the Nordic language community

The questionnaire asked the respondents to identify the most important areas of co-operation in the Nordic Region, and allowed respondents to specify as many areas as they wished. Culture was mentioned by 6% of the young people, and language by just 3%, putting language bottom of the list of 21 co-operation areas mentioned.²³ Climate and the environment was identified as the most important area of co-operation. Nevertheless, there are indications that young people consider Nordic language comprehension to be important, as two-thirds of the respondents agreed that understanding Scandinavian languages is important for the Nordic community. This suggests that language comprehension remains an important marker of Nordic identity.

A different Nordic questionnaire administered in 2017 showed that young people in the Nordic Region believe that other factors than the language community tie the Nordic Region together. One of the questions asked what respondents considered to be the most important reason for pursuing Nordic co-operation. Of the respondents aged 16–30, 38% mentioned shared values, 28% mentioned similar social systems, 18% mentioned cultural similarities and just 6% mentioned good comprehension of each other's languages.²⁴ However, many young respondents in the same study identified the opportunity to move around within the Nordic Region as the greatest benefit of Nordic co-operation.

There are many potential reasons why young people are not prioritising language and culture in the context of Nordic co-operation. One is that they consider it less important to communicate in Scandinavian languages when so many people understand English anyway. Another is that many young people overestimate their command of neighbouring languages, and therefore believe it unnecessary to co-operate on something they consider a non-issue. Moreover, language and culture are not as prominent on the daily agenda as concerns like the environment, climate change and health. Finally, language may be deemed to be of declining importance for Nordic co-operation as comprehension of Scandinavian languages weakens.

23. The results are not specified in the table annex. See Frøshaug, A. and U. Andreasson, "Democracy and climate engagement in the Nordic region: same direction, different solutions" (2020), which discusses – among other things – the co-operation priorities identified by the population of the Nordic Region.

24. Andreasson, U. & T. Stende, "Ett värdefullt samarbete" (2017)



Photo: Unsplash

Cultural experiences and language learning

The reasons given by young people for learning a new language are interesting. The questionnaire presented the respondents with four statements concerning language learning. Figure 6 illustrates how many young people agreed with these.

Some 90% of young people in the Nordic Region agreed that TV programmes, films, theatre productions, music and books in other languages increase their interest in learning a new language. A slightly smaller percentage (82%) agreed that having family and friends who speak different languages increases their interest in learning additional languages. Young people believe that parents should teach their children the different languages spoken within the family, with 85% of the respondents agreeing with this statement.

Almost 90% of young respondents agreed that the simplest way of learning a new language is by meeting people who speak a different language. Most studies examining comprehension of neighbouring languages in the Nordic countries have emphasised the importance of meeting physically to improve comprehension, ideally over an extended period of time. The 2016 study by Brink mentioned above showed that comprehension of neighbouring languages increased significantly in the first two months of a stay in a neighbouring country, with Finnish-speaking Finns and Icelanders requiring a little more time to build comprehension (three to six months).²⁵

25. Brink, E.T. (2016)

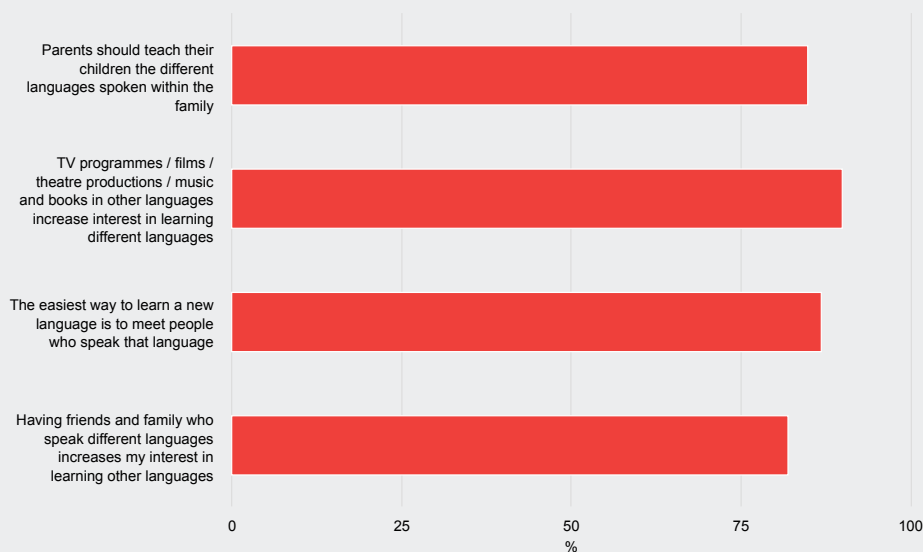


Figure 6: Proportion of respondents who agreed with four statements concerning language learning

English dominates in cultural products consumed by young people

As stated in the previous chapter, 90% of young people agree that TV programmes, films, theatre productions, music and books in other languages can increase interest in learning additional languages. Further information on the languages encountered by young people in cultural products is therefore of interest, and the respondents were asked about this. Figure 7 shows the percentages reported for selected answers.

It is unsurprising that 96% of young people in the Nordic Region reported encountering English in cultural products in the preceding two months. Half of the respondents stated that they had consumed cultural products in a non-Nordic language other than English.

On average, 46% of young Nordic people reported consuming culture in a different Nordic language than the main language. Further analysis shows that this was common in the Faroe Islands, Finland and Iceland, with 90% of Faroe Islanders, 80% of Finns and 60% of Icelanders stating that they had consumed cultural products in another Nordic language. Finns primarily consumed Swedish products (76%), while the highest consumption of Danish was found among young people in the Faroe Islands and Iceland. The proportion of respondents who had consumed culture in another Nordic language was lowest in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, where the figures were 41%, 34% and 39%, respectively.

There is a clear link between consumption of culture and language comprehension. Among the respondents who speak at least one Scandinavian language in addition to the main national language, some 78% had consumed cultural products in at least one other Nordic language than the main national language in the preceding two months. The study does not provide answers to the question of whether consumption of cultural products builds strong language skills or whether strong language skills result in consumption of culture.

The young people were then asked why they choose to consume cultural products in another Nordic language. Some 60% stated that they were interested in the content, while 40% said that the content was entertaining and 20% that they wanted to learn the language. In addition, 18% stated that they were looking for new cultural inputs.

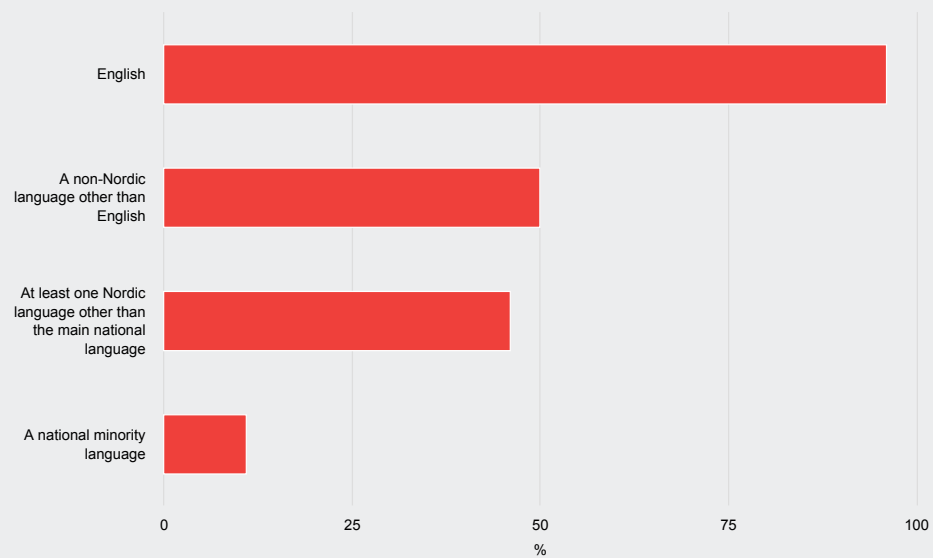


Figure 7: Which languages have you encountered in films, TV programmes, streaming services featuring moving images, computer games, theatre productions, literature, magazines or newspapers in the past two months?



Photo: Mads Schmidt Rasmussen

Selected results in different countries

This chapter presents selected results for each country, with an emphasis on young people's comprehension of Scandinavian languages.

Denmark

Just under half of young Danes – 40% – find Swedish easy to understand. Norwegian is considered easier, with 67% of the Danish respondents stating that it is easy to understand. Comparison with the other Scandinavian countries shows that a smaller proportion of Danes than Swedes find Norwegian easy to understand, and a much smaller proportion of Danes than Norwegians find it easy to understand Swedish. Moreover, Danes rate their comprehension of Norwegian and Swedish higher than Norwegians and Swedes rate their comprehension of Danish.

The fact that some Danes experience problems with their own and others' language comprehension may explain the fact that some 65% of Danes reported speaking English when they meet someone who speaks another Scandinavian language, while 56% stated that they speak Danish in such situations (as stated, multiple answers were allowed to this question). In this regard, the results for Denmark differ from those for Sweden and Norway, where the majority choose to speak their own language. However, Danes are flexible in their communication strategy, and adapt. Just under 40% of young Danes stated that they choose which language to speak based on the situation, and a relatively large percentage – 16% – would opt for a mix of Scandinavian languages.

The study suggests that English has a strong position in Denmark. Denmark recorded the second-highest proportion (70%) of respondents who stated that it is sometimes easier to express oneself in English than in one's native language. Roughly the same proportion of young people said that English has a strong influence on their native language. This is a fairly high number.

Just under 20% of young Danes reported speaking a national minority language. The strong

position of the German language in Denmark may be relevant in this regard. Half of the Danish respondents said that it is insufficient to speak only English as a foreign language – a figure which is approximately 10 percentage points above the average for the Nordic Region. Denmark also had the highest proportion of respondents who speak a non-Nordic language other than English (57%), and a relatively large percentage of young people who speak three or more languages (69%).

Finland

Some 70% of the survey respondents from Finland reported speaking Swedish. Some of these have Swedish as their native language (applicable to approximately 5% of the Finnish population as a whole). Most Finns learn Swedish at school, as a foreign language. The questionnaire did not distinguish between native speakers of Finnish and Swedish. Although many Finns stated that they could speak or write Swedish, only 7% said that it was easy to understand Danish, and 22% that it was easy to understand Norwegian. This may indicate that many young Finns' command of Swedish is insufficient to understand Danish and Norwegian. A clear majority (79%) of Finns choose to speak English when they meet someone who speaks another Scandinavian language.

Approximately half of the young respondents in Finland agreed that English has a strong influence on their native language. Compared to the rest of the Nordic Region, this is a low percentage, and the reason for this may be that Finland is restrictive regarding the inclusion of foreign loan words.²⁶ However, despite the relatively clear boundaries between English and Finnish, 75% of the young Finnish respondents said that they sometimes use English on social media. This figure is well above the Nordic average of 63%.

Some 75% of young Finns reported consuming cultural products in Swedish in the preceding two months. This is the second-highest figure in the Nordic Region, after Sweden.

Faroe Islands

The Faroe Islands are an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark. Young Faroe Islanders have very good Scandinavian language comprehension compared to the rest of the Nordic Region, with almost all of them speaking Danish. In addition, 80% stated that Norwegian is easy to understand, and almost half said that they speak the language. Just over half of the respondents find Swedish easy to understand.

The high level of Nordic language comprehension is reflected in the fact that 90% of young Faroe Islanders stated that understanding Danish is an important aspect of the Nordic community. In contrast, 66% of the respondents in the Nordic Region as a whole stated that understanding Scandinavian languages is an important aspect of the Nordic community. A large proportion of Faroe Islanders (85%) would use a Scandinavian language when meeting someone who speaks Danish, Norwegian or Swedish. This figure is also well above average.

In the Faroe Islands, 90% of the respondents reported consuming cultural products in a Scandinavian language in the preceding two months. It was more common to consume Danish cultural products (88%) than Faroese (80%). Young Faroe Islanders' primary reason for consuming cultural products in other Nordic languages is entertainment value (78%).

Greenland

A clear majority (89%) of the young respondents from Greenland stated that Danish, which is used alongside Greenlandic, is easy to understand. The opposite is true of Norwegian and Swedish, with just 21% of respondents stating that Norwegian is easy to understand and 17% finding Swedish easy.

The proportion of young people who only speak the main language (12%) is markedly higher than in the Nordic Region as a whole, for which the corresponding figure is just 2%. In addition, many

26. Delsing L.-O. & K. L. Åkesson (2005)

young Greenlanders use only the main language on a daily basis (19% compared to 6% in the Nordic Region overall). More respondents reported writing or speaking English (78%) than Danish (71%).

Danish and, most of all, English cultural products dominated among young Greenlanders, with 48% and 95% of the respondents stating that they had consumed cultural products in those languages in the preceding two months. A small proportion (27%) had consumed cultural products in Greenlandic, a figure which may be linked to the availability of such products.

Greenland reported the highest number of young people who use another Nordic language on social media, with some 37% using Danish. Danish is the second most frequently used language on social media, after Greenlandic.

Iceland

Less than half of young Icelanders stated that Scandinavian languages are easy to understand: 45% in the case of Norwegian, 37% in the case of Danish and 35% in the case of Swedish.

However, 60% of the respondents said that they speak and/or write a Scandinavian language. Icelanders learn Danish at school, as a foreign language, and 55% stated that they write or speak Danish. Nevertheless, 63% do not find Danish easy to understand. Just over one-third of the respondents would opt for a Scandinavian language when meeting someone who speaks Danish, Norwegian or Swedish.

Only 45% of young Icelanders considered that understanding Danish is an important aspect of the Nordic community. Further, only young Faroe Islanders disagreed more with the statement that English is sufficient as one's only foreign language. Some 70% of Icelanders reported using English on social media, slightly above the average for the Nordic Region as a whole.

A relatively large proportion of young people – around two-thirds of the respondents – had consumed cultural products in a different Nordic language than their own. Half stated that they had consumed cultural products in Danish, while 32% had consumed cultural products in Norwegian and 25% in Swedish. The primary reasons for consuming cultural products in another Nordic language were entertainment value and/or interesting content, but like the young Finnish respondents many Icelanders (36%) reported doing so to improve their language comprehension. Compared to the rest of the Nordic Region, significantly more people in Iceland (25%) stated that they consume cultural products in a Nordic language because they have links with that country.

Norway

Compared to the other Nordic countries, it appears that many young Norwegians understand Swedish and Danish well, with some 90% stating that Swedish is easy to understand. Just under half find Danish easy to understand. Norway is also home to the Nordic Region's largest proportion of respondents (80%) who stated that they would speak their own language when meeting someone who speaks Danish or Swedish. Just 36% would choose English, compared to the Nordic average of 59%. Norway also reported the second-lowest proportion (after Greenland) of young people who use English on social media (45%).

A relatively large percentage (83%) of young Norwegians stated that understanding Danish and Swedish is an important aspect of the Nordic community. However, only one-third of the Norwegian respondents reported consuming cultural products in another Nordic language in the preceding two months – the lowest proportion in the Nordic Region. In other words, there was no link between deeming the language community important and seeking out cultural products in other Nordic languages.

Sweden

Only just over 20% of Swedes find it easy to understand Danish. This is the second-lowest

percentage in the Nordic Region, after Finland. However, 80% of young Swedes find it easy to understand Norwegian. When communicating with someone who speaks Danish or Norwegian, 60% of the Swedish respondents would opt for Swedish, with a slightly lower percentage using English. This is close to the Nordic average.

Swedish young people are more likely than young people in the rest of the Nordic Region to deem English sufficient as their only foreign language, with 64% taking this view.

Just over half of the Swedish respondents stated that they speak or write a non-Nordic language other than English – the second-highest percentage in the Nordic Region. This may be why Sweden has the highest proportion of young people who use a non-Nordic language other than English on social media (12%). Most Swedes use Swedish on social media, but a large proportion also use English. The open answers given by the young Swedish respondents indicate that they adapt their language use to their audience.

Åland

Åland is a self-governing part of Finland where the official language is Swedish. A majority of the respondents from Åland stated that Norwegian is easy to understand (85%), but the figure for Danish was much lower (29%). A substantial proportion of the respondents reported speaking Finnish (41%). Around 60% of the young people said that they would speak Swedish when meeting someone from Norway or Denmark. Around half also stated that they would use English.

Young people in Åland were most likely to agree that English has a strong influence on their native language (75%).

Almost all the young respondents from Åland use Swedish on social media, and almost none reporting using Finnish (or another Nordic language). A majority (64%) of the respondents sometimes also use English on social media.



Photo: Johnér

Conclusions

The Nordic language and cultural community has created close ties between the Nordic countries. However, the linguistic landscape is constantly evolving. Young people have grown up in a globalised world in which English is a natural part of everyday life for most people. This study asked more than 2,000 young people from across the Nordic Region about their language skills and attitudes towards language and cultural experiences. This chapter discusses the conclusions reached on the basis of the study, and includes some comments on the results.

Language comprehension is weak in some countries, but not everywhere

Studies conducted in the 2000s have shown that comprehension of Scandinavian languages in the Nordic Region has worsened.²⁷ The results of this survey confirm that many young people in the Nordic Region find the Scandinavian languages difficult to understand. The lack of earlier comparable surveys makes it difficult to conclude whether language comprehension has declined in recent years. However, there are strong indications that it has not improved. Just under 40% of young people in the Nordic Region stated that Norwegian and Swedish are not easy to understand, and some 70% of the respondents found Danish difficult. The Nordic average conceals strong variations at the national level. In Finland, Iceland and Greenland in particular, many young people stated that they found it difficult to understand Scandinavian languages. Looking at the Scandinavian countries alone, it is clear that comprehension of neighbouring languages is particularly challenging in the case of Danish and Swedish, as shown by earlier studies. The status of language comprehension is better in Norway and the Faroe Islands.

At the same time as many young people in the Nordic Region reported finding Scandinavian languages difficult to understand, almost all the respondents considered English easy to understand – an unsurprising finding in light of previous studies and the broad international usage of English. This study shows that English generally has a strong influence. Many respondents stated that English has a strong influence on their native language, and that it is sometimes easier to express oneself in English than in one's own language. In other words, English has become an everyday language for young people.

27. Delsing L.-O. & K. L. Åkesson (2005)

Around 60% of the respondents said that they would communicate in English when meeting someone who speaks a different Scandinavian language. Assuming that the continued existence of a vibrant and real language community among young people is dependent on their use of Scandinavian languages among themselves, this figure is high. The survey also revealed a link between language comprehension and choice of language, with the likelihood of choosing English being higher in countries where a large proportion of young people find it difficult to understand Scandinavian languages.

Even though many of the young respondents stated that they would use English when meeting someone who speaks a different Scandinavian language, slightly more would use a Scandinavian language (the respondents were allowed to give multiple answers to this question). This indicates willingness to communicate in Scandinavian languages.

Young people appear to take a pragmatic approach to their choice of language on social media. Almost two-thirds use English, although almost all of the respondents also use the main national language. Several respondents stated that it is more important that as many people as possible understand the message than that the language is part of their identity and culture. This pragmatism is also evident in Brink's survey results, which showed that young people choose to use Scandinavian languages when seeking to build closer social ties, and English when it is important to be understood, for example in the work context.²⁸ Scandinavian languages and English may therefore supplement one another when language choice is based on situation and need. This functional linguistic parallelism between English and the Scandinavian languages may represent the most robust strategy for ensuring the long-term survival of the Nordic language community.

Cultural experiences

Cultural experiences in other Nordic languages can foster language comprehension and build ties between the Nordic countries. It is therefore encouraging that quite a large proportion (just under half) of the respondents reported consuming cultural products in another Nordic language in the preceding two months. Moreover, almost all of the young people agreed that experiencing culture in other languages increases interest in learning new languages. However, the number of young people who consciously consumed cultural products in other languages in order to learn those languages was quite small – their primary reasons for choosing those products were interest in the content and entertainment value.

Further, many young people stated that having close contact with a language can increase interest in and knowledge of it. Most of the respondents considered that languages spoken within the family should be learned, and that the easiest way of learning a language is to meet people who speak it. This provides some indication of the motivational factors which foster an interest in languages.

What consequences can be expected for the Nordic Region?

This study confirms a number of previously observed trends. Young people's comprehension of Scandinavian languages varies greatly across the Nordic Region, with some countries having large numbers of respondents who find Scandinavian languages difficult. However, almost all the respondents understand English. These results raise a number of difficult questions. Historically, the idea that the language community and mutual comprehension between Danish, Norwegian and Swedish are important has been an unspoken assumption in the context of Nordic co-operation, as has the belief that this community ties much of the Nordic Region together. How true is this today?

A further question which arises is what poor comprehension of neighbouring languages could mean for practical ties between the populations of different Nordic countries – so-called **Nordic integration**. For example, it is difficult to imagine that there will be no consequences for flexibility in the common Nordic labour market. Persons who understand another Scandinavian language also have better opportunities to study in the Nordic Region. A study conducted in 2017 showed

28. Brink, E.T. (2016)

that residents of the Nordic Region considered the opportunity to work, study and/or live anywhere in the region to be one of the primary benefits of Nordic co-operation.²⁹ Weaker Scandinavian language comprehension may reduce mobility among residents of the Nordic Region, and slow or reverse Nordic integration.

Further, what will weaker language comprehension mean for **Nordic identity**, i.e. people's identification with the Nordic Region? Historically, the language community has been important in this regard, with mutual language comprehension building ties across Nordic borders and fostering Nordic co-operation in many fields – especially before English usage became so widespread. However, this may also be changing. The 2017 study showed that while the Nordic population supports Nordic co-operation most of the respondents did not see language as the primary reason why the Nordic countries should co-operate. Rather, they pointed to factors such as similar social systems and shared values as links between the Nordic countries.³⁰ In other words, Nordic residents do not appear to regard the language community as a crucial factor in Nordic co-operation, at least not in the short term. This is also true of young people. Nevertheless, two-thirds of the young respondents in this study stated that understanding Scandinavian languages is important for the Nordic community.

Today, Danish, Norwegian and Swedish are the official working languages of **official Nordic co-operation**. Most political meetings of the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council are held in Scandinavian languages, with interpretation into Icelandic and Finnish. As of 2020, the status of Finnish and Icelandic as working languages of the Nordic Council has been strengthened (approved in 2018).³¹ English is spoken in exceptional cases, for example when providing interpretation is considered inexpedient. The discussion whether the time has come to adopt English is not new. Although the present study focused on young people – a slightly different target group to most people participating in and working on official Nordic co-operation – young people will eventually take over responsibility for such co-operation, and their language comprehension is therefore relevant. It is important to consider whether Nordic co-operation should reflect the linguistic practices of young people, and whether many young people could lose interest in Nordic co-operation if it occurs in languages they do not understand. Over time, there is a risk that A and B teams – those who do and do not understand Scandinavian languages – could develop in the context of Nordic co-operation, making participation in formal co-operation difficult for some people. At the same time, it is clear that Nordic co-operation will lose some of its unique character if English becomes the working language.

The survey results also give reason to consider whether, and if so how, the Nordic Council of Ministers should co-operate in the field of language going forward. Young people do not rank language and culture highly on the co-operation agenda for the Nordic Region. They primarily want the Nordic countries to focus on climate and the environment.³² It appears that young people's primary concern is productive co-operation on important topics, not which languages are used within the Nordic Region and when meeting other Nordic residents.

In this context, it is important to note that asking people to rank the importance of language co-operation in comparison with more specific areas of co-operation like the environment, climate and health is problematic. In this comparison, the language community may appear a less urgent co-operation priority. However, the language community can also be regarded as a lubricant of Nordic co-operation, including in areas such as the environment, climate and health. Moreover, as stated above many young people consider comprehension of Scandinavian languages important to the Nordic community, potentially indicating that they find the topic important *in itself*, but do not consider it a *co-operation* priority.

In other words, it can be questioned whether the Nordic language community primarily has intrinsic value in terms of its symbolism and function as a marker of identity, or whether mutual language comprehension serves to facilitate Nordic co-operation and Nordic integration.

29. Andreasson, U. & T. Stende (2017)

30. Ibid.

31. Norden.org: "Finsk og islandsk får en stærkere stilling i Nordisk Råd". <https://www.norden.org/da/nyhed/finsk-og-islandsk-far-en-staerkere-stilling-i-nordisk-rad>.

32. Frøshaug, A. and U. Andreasson (2020)

What can the Nordic Council of Ministers do to improve comprehension of Scandinavian languages?

The results of this study raise two particular questions. First, what has led to the decline in Scandinavian language comprehension and, second, what can the Nordic Council of Ministers do to improve comprehension? Some possible answers are discussed below.

Globalisation is a critical factor. Political and economic membership of the EU and EEA has shifted the focus from the Nordic Region onto Europe, where the primary languages are English, French and German, rather than Scandinavian languages. The rest of the world has also become more accessible to many Nordic residents in recent decades. For example, while Nordic neighbours were natural travel destinations in the past, many Nordic residents now holiday all over the world. The same applies to study abroad. Overall, residents of the Nordic Region are probably less exposed to Scandinavian languages than before. In addition, immigration to the Nordic Region has resulted in a growing population of persons with insufficient knowledge of one Scandinavian language to be able to understand the other two.

Globalisation and European integration are far-reaching, powerful trends beyond the influence of the Nordic Council of Ministers. However, the Council of Ministers does have several support programmes which promote mobility within the Nordic Region and thus strengthen Scandinavian language comprehension. Stronger cultural understanding and language comprehension foster mobility and cohesion across national borders. Language comprehension and mobility activities are mutually reinforcing. Nordplus, a Nordic-Baltic support programme focused on mobility, education, language and lifelong learning, is one example in this regard. Nordic agreements in the educational field also facilitate mobility in the Nordic Region.

English is encountered everywhere in fields such as popular culture, social media, new technology, internet, higher education and business. To some extent, the spread of English entails the displacement of Nordic languages – both the three Scandinavian languages and others.

While this represents a global megatrend on which the Nordic Council of Ministers has limited influence, the Council of Ministers is pursuing various initiatives to strengthen language comprehension in the Nordic Region through cultural experiences. Nordisk Film & TV Fond is one example in this regard. The Nordic Council of Ministers for Culture, five Nordic film institutes and 16 Nordic TV stations are partners under the fund agreement. To qualify for support from the fund, projects must be distributed in at least two Nordic countries. The support programme Volt is another initiative to increase the involvement of children and young people in cultural and language projects. In addition, the Nordic countries can share strategies for reinforcing national languages.

Knowledge of neighbouring languages and cultures appears to have lower priority in the educational system. Language policy and education policy are national responsibilities falling outside the mandate of the Nordic Council of Ministers. Inter-governmental co-operation projects like Nordic co-operation therefore have limited scope for influencing developments in these areas, such as the increasing focus on English instruction rather than learning a Scandinavian language. There is also a trend among universities and university colleges to offer programmes in English, meaning that students from neighbouring countries do not experience the local language to the same extent as before. Thirdly, many teachers lack sufficient skills to teach neighbouring Scandinavian languages. In 2011, the Language Council of Norway published a survey showing that just 35% of teachers felt that they were sufficiently qualified to teach neighbouring languages.³³ Similar results were reported in a study conducted by the National Union of Teachers in Sweden in 2012.³⁴ In this context, the Nordic Council of Ministers can assist with experience-sharing, co-operation between teacher training programmes and specialist Nordic language institutions at universities, efforts to strengthen teachers' skills and support for the development of teaching materials and other language-related projects.

33. Language Council of Norway: "Unge snakkar engelsk med danskar". <https://www.sprakradet.no/Vi-og-vart/hvaskjer/Aktuelt/2019/unge-snakkar-engelsk-med-danskar/>. Published 28 March 2019

34. National Union of Teachers in Sweden – "Nordiska språk i svenskundervisningen – en promemoria från Lärarnas Riksförbund" (2012)

The expansion of English usage and the resulting reduced exposure of Nordic residents to the Scandinavian language community and the languages of the Nordic Region is a powerful trend, and largely outside the control of the Nordic Council of Ministers. However, as stated above the Council of Ministers does have various instruments for improving Scandinavian language comprehension at its disposal. One question which goes beyond the scope of this report is what effect such measures have on comprehension of Scandinavian languages in the general population, and how strong an impact scaled-up efforts would have.

Ultimately, the future orientation of Nordic co-operation on these issues is a political question. What is certain, however, is that the population of the Nordic Region considers Nordic co-operation important in an increasingly turbulent and uncertain world.

Annex 1: Tables

Responses received in survey of the Nordic Region, total and by country

1: "I will now read a number of statements. Please state whether you agree or disagree with each statement." The table shows the number of respondents who agreed with each statement.

Statement	Nordic Region	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Faroe Islands	Greenland	Åland
It is easy to understand Danish	26%	-	7%	37%	47%	23%	98%	89%	29%
It is easy to understand Norwegian	62%	67%	22%	45%	-	80%	78%	21%	85%
It is easy to understand Swedish	62%	40%	62%	35%	90%	-	51%	17%	-
It is easy to understand English	95%	96%	93%	95%	95%	95%	93%	78%	99%
It is sometimes easier to express myself in English than in my native language	65%	70%	58%	49%	67%	64%	40%	71%	61%
English has a strong influence on my native language	62%	72%	46%	55%	64%	62%	60%	69%	75%
It is sufficient to understand English as the only foreign language	57%	49%	54%	38%	58%	64%	28%	46%	53%
You need a good knowledge of the majority language in your country to function in society, studies and working life	84%	83%	84%	83%	84%	85%	87%	89%	79%
TV programmes, films, theatre productions, music and books in other languages increase interest in learning different languages	90%	91%	91%	95%	88%	90%	92%	98%	88%
The easiest way to learn a new language is to meet people who speak that language	87%	89%	81%	83%	89%	89%	93%	96%	89%
Parents should teach their children the different languages spoken within the family	85%	79%	89%	68%	88%	85%	90%	95%	89%

Having friends and family who speak different languages increases my interest in learning other languages	82%	86%	68%	84%	84%	85%	90%	93%	93%
Understanding Danish/Norwegian/Swedish* is an important aspect of the Nordic community	66%	59%	66%	45%	83%	61%	90%	66%	66%

* The languages included in the question varied from country to country: Swedish in Finland, Danish in the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Iceland, Danish and Norwegian in Sweden, Swedish and Norwegian in Denmark and Danish and Swedish in Norway.

2. "Which languages in addition to the main national language do you speak and/or write?"

	Nordic Region	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Faroe Islands	Greenland	Åland
Danish	4%	-	2%	55%	6%	2%	97%	71%	1%
Finnish	0%	1%	-	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	41%
Icelandic	1%	1%	0%	-	0%	0%	11%	0%	2%
Norwegian	6%	14%	2%	12%	-	7%	43%	2%	2%
Swedish	19%	11%	72%	10%	12%	-	17%	1%	-
Faroese	0%	1%	0%	4%	0%	0%	-	0%	0%
Greenlandic	1%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	-	0%
English	93%	94%	92%	98%	93%	94%	96%	78%	97%
A national minority language like Kven, German, Meänkieli, Sami, Yiddish, Russian or Romani	7%	18%	10%	1%	2%	2%	1%	0%	2%
A non-Nordic language other than English	49%	57%	36%	40%	46%	54%	18%	3%	33%
Only speak the main national language	2%	1%	2%	1%	2%	2%	0%	12%	1%
Net: speak at least one Scandinavian language (DK, NO, SE)	94%	100%	72%	61%	100%	100%	97%	72%	100%
Net: speak at least one Scandinavian language other than their own (DK, NO, SE)	25%	18%	72%	61%	13%	8%	97%	72%	2%
Net: speak no Scandinavian languages	6%	0%	28%	39%	0%	0%	3%	28%	0%

3. Number of languages the respondents speak and/or write

	Nordic Region	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Faroe Islands	Greenland	Åland
Only main language	2%	1%	2%	1%	2%	2%	0%	12%	1%
Main language plus one language	36%	29%	21%	27%	48%	43%	5%	25%	38%
Three or more languages	62%	69%	77%	72%	50%	55%	95%	63%	61%

4. "What decides which language you use on a daily basis?" Multiple answers were allowed.

	Nordic Region	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Faroe Islands	Greenland	Åland
Whether the language is needed in a work or educational context	61%	78%	60%	60%	52%	57%	56%	41%	54%
Whether the language is used by my family and friends	61%	65%	61%	64%	55%	63%	58%	32%	61%
How well I have mastered the language	32%	44%	30%	49%	30%	25%	36%	25%	31%
Other reasons	12%	12%	5%	9%	16%	14%	9%	2%	9%
I do not use any language other than my own	6%	4%	7%	9%	7%	5%	11%	19%	2%
Do not know	2%	1%	1%	0%	2%	2%	0%	1%	3%

5. "Which languages do you mainly use when you meet someone who speaks another Scandinavian language, Danish, Norwegian or Swedish*?" Multiple answers were allowed.

	Nordic Region	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Faroe Islands	Greenland	Åland
Danish	15%	56%	0%	25%	3%	3%	76%	46%	1%
Norwegian	21%	6%	0%	5%	83%	7%	19%	0%	4%
Swedish	30%	6%	28%	5%	6%	61%	9%	0%	61%
A mix of Scandinavian languages	6%	16%	1%	10%	2%	5%	35%	0%	5%
English	59%	65%	79%	82%	36%	57%	54%	58%	54%
Another language which both persons speak	4%	10%	0%	8%	0%	4%	1%	0%	2%
It varies/depends on the situation	18%	38%	7%	23%	3%	18%	1%	6%	5%
Do not know	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%	1%	1%	5%	2%
Net: Use at least one Scandinavian language (DK, NO, SE)	62%	64%	28%	37%	86%	65%	85%	46%	66%

** Danish and Norwegian in Sweden and Åland, Swedish and Norwegian in Denmark, Swedish and Danish in Norway, and Danish, Norwegian and Swedish in the other countries. "Other" was also omitted from the question in the countries where the main language is not a Scandinavian language.*

6. "Which languages have you encountered in films, TV programmes, streaming services featuring moving images, computer games, theatre productions, literature, magazines or newspapers in the past two months?"
Multiple answers were allowed.

	Nordic Region	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Faroe Islands	Greenland	Åland
Danish	33%	80%	15%	52%	21%	20%	88%	48%	19%
Finnish	20%	4%	85%	7%	2%	6%	5%	1%	35%
Icelandic	5%	2%	4%	85%	3%	4%	12%	0%	5%
Norwegian	37%	28%	24%	32%	67%	32%	41%	6%	26%
Swedish	58%	27%	76%	25%	30%	85%	26%	3%	71%
Faroese	1%	2%	0%	3%	0%	0%	80%	0%	0%
Greenlandic	1%	3%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	27%	0%
English	96%	96%	98%	98%	93%	96%	95%	95%	96%
A national minority language like Kven, German, Meänkieli, Sami, Yiddish, Russian or Romani	11%	14%	28%	1%	3%	3%	3%	0%	5%
A non-Nordic language, regardless of which, other than English	50%	57%	55%	47%	35%	53%	20%	2%	48%
None of the above	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Net: At least one Scandinavian language (DK, NO, SE)	82%	85%	77%	63%	72%	88%	90%	48%	75%
Net: At least one Nordic language	85%	85%	96%	92%	72%	88%	92%	51%	78%

7. Consume cultural products in at least one other Nordic language (question 6)

	Nordic Region	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Faroe Islands	Greenland	Åland
Yes	46%	41%	77%	64%	34%	39%	90%	48%	52%
No	54%	59%	23%	36%	66%	61%	10%	52%	48%

8. "What led you to choose films, TV programmes, streaming services featuring moving images, computer games, theatre productions, literature, magazines or newspapers in other Nordic languages?" Multiple answers were allowed.

	Nordic Region	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Faroe Islands	Greenland	Åland
The content interests me	63%	59%	69%	61%	53%	65%	51%	35%	51%
It is entertaining	42%	56%	40%	68%	38%	35%	78%	44%	34%
Learning to understand these languages	23%	25%	34%	36%	20%	10%	18%	23%	33%
Gaining new cultural impressions	18%	30%	16%	34%	16%	14%	18%	4%	18%
I have a personal connection with the country	9%	12%	10%	25%	8%	6%	12%	4%	14%
Other reasons	15%	15%	6%	6%	27%	19%	12%	2%	12%
I only choose films, TV programmes, streaming services featuring moving images, computer games, theatre productions, literature, magazines or newspapers in languages I understand	3%	4%	3%	1%	4%	1%	3%	10%	2%
Do not know	2%	2%	1%	1%	4%	3%	1%	0%	2%

9. "Which languages do you use when writing on social media? Feel free to give several answers if you use different languages in different contexts."

	Nordic Region	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Faroe Islands	Greenland	Åland
Danish	22%	93%	0%	6%	0%	0%	33%	37%	0%
Finnish	18%	0%	93%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	6%
Icelandic	2%	1%	0%	97%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Norwegian	19%	2%	0%	2%	91%	1%	3%	0%	0%
Swedish	36%	1%	11%	2%	0%	93%	1%	0%	96%
Faroese	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	86%	0%	0%
Greenlandic	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	69%	1%
English	63%	69%	75%	71%	45%	62%	55%	30%	64%
A national minority language like Kven, German, Meänkieli, Sami, Yiddish, Russian or Romani	1%	1%	2%	1%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%
A non-Nordic language other than English	9%	10%	5%	7%	7%	12%	0%	0%	4%
I do not use social media	2%	2%	1%	1%	1%	3%	1%	2%	2%
Net: Use at least one Scandinavian language (DK, NO, SE)	76%	93%	11%	9%	91%	93%	33%	37%	96%
Net: Write in the main language	93%	93%	93%	97%	91%	93%	86%	69%	96%

10. Use at least one other Nordic language on social media

	Nordic Region	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Faroe Islands	Greenland	Åland
Yes	4%	3%	11%	10%	1%	1%	33%	37%	7%
No	96%	97%	89%	90%	99%	99%	67%	63%	93%

11. "What decides which language you use on social media?" Multiple answers were allowed.

	Nordic Region	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Faroe Islands	Greenland	Åland
That as many people as possible should understand what I write	58%	61%	66%	60%	50%	53%	59%	57%	67%
That my friends use it	54%	62%	59%	62%	47%	48%	71%	30%	43%
How well I have mastered the language	27%	39%	25%	44%	24%	20%	24%	10%	11%
Whether the language is part of my identity	25%	38%	27%	31%	22%	15%	30%	10%	11%
Whether the language is part of my culture	24%	39%	21%	36%	21%	17%	35%	17%	9%
Whether it is technically possible	21%	32%	20%	34%	18%	14%	17%	7%	7%
Other reasons	14%	15%	6%	13%	18%	17%	5%	3%	10%
I do not use any language other than my own	2%	1%	1%	3%	2%	2%	7%	0%	1%
Do not know	2%	0%	1%	1%	5%	2%	2%	0%	0%

Annex 2: Methodology

The overall results for the Nordic Region have been weighted based on the populations of the various countries.

Country	Proportion
Sweden	35,8%
Norway	20,4%
Denmark	22,7%
Finland	19,1%
Iceland	1,5%
Åland	0,1%
Faroe Islands	0,2%
Greenland	0,2%

The margin of error at the aggregate level has been calculated based on two outcomes: a) a 20/80 outcome, where the margin of error has been calculated as 1.8%; and b) a 50/50 outcome, where the margin of error has been calculated as 2.2%. In the countries where 400 interviews were conducted, the margins of error were 3.9% for the 20/80 outcome and 4.9% for the 50/50 outcome.

Margins of error:

2,092 interviews	400 interviews
With 20/80 outcome: 1.8%	With 20/80 outcome: 3.9
With 50/50 outcome: 2.2%	With 50/50 outcome: 4.9

Number of interviewees:

Country	Number of interviews
Sweden	400
Norway	405
Denmark	403
Finland	400
Iceland	205
Åland	78
Faroe Islands	101
Greenland	100

Annex 3: Future skills – the Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research

The Nordic Council of Ministers aims to help equip all residents of the Nordic Region for a complex future. The Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research is concentrating on the development of future skills. Language is an important focus area in this regard. Implemented initiatives are designed to reinforce mutual comprehension between neighbouring countries and build knowledge about the official, minority and sign languages used in the Nordic Region. Children and young people are a key priority.

Mobility is a further focus area. The Nordic Council of Ministers' mobility initiatives reflect the belief that language and cultural understanding increase interest in and motivation to study or work in a neighbouring country, and that there is thus a natural symbiosis between mobility measures and language-related projects. Young people confirm this. In December 2019, young people from all over the Nordic Region gathered in Iceland to discuss language. Following three days of debate, their message to politicians was clear, with calls for innovation in the field of language teaching and increased opportunities for physical interaction. The young people stated clearly that meeting other Nordic residents their own age could help break down language barriers. They also proposed more exchange opportunities and work placements in neighbouring countries as ways of building mutual understanding.

The support programmes run by the Nordic Council of Ministers, Nordplus and Volt are designed to promote cross-border movement in the Nordic educational sector, whether among secondary school pupils, students in higher education or teaching staff. Mobility is a high priority on the Nordic agenda, and is an element in the Nordic Council of Ministers' vision to become the world's most integrated and sustainable region by 2030.

The future does not develop arbitrarily, but is created. In today's unpredictable world, Nordic co-operation may be more important than ever before. Preserving aspects of culture that strengthen cohesion is therefore crucial.

Annex 4: Nordic agreements on language

Numerous Nordic agreements recognise language as an instrument for improving mobility, interaction and integration in the Nordic Region, and for promoting cohesion, solidarity and a Nordic identity.

In 1962, the Helsinki Treaty laid the formal foundation for Nordic co-operation. Language, education and culture were already considered an important aspect of co-operation at that time. Article 8 states that:

"Educational provision in the schools of each of the Nordic countries shall include an appropriate measure of instruction in the languages, cultures and general social conditions of the other Nordic countries, including the Faeroe Islands, Greenland and the Åland Islands."

When the Nordic countries entered into the Agreement concerning cultural co-operation in 1971, Article 3 of the agreement affirmed the centrality of language and education in this context, with the parties agreeing to encourage instruction in the language, culture and social conditions of the other Nordic countries.

The 1987 Nordic Language Convention concerns the right to use one of the five convention languages when dealing with the authorities of another Nordic country while staying there.

The 2006 Declaration on a Nordic Language Policy sets out objectives for Nordic language policy, including that all residents of the Nordic Region should be able to communicate with one another, primarily in a Scandinavian language. Implementation of the non-binding declaration is a national responsibility, meaning that legislation, public commitments, priorities and financing may vary in the five Nordic countries, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland.

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Nordic co-operation

Nordic co-operation is one of the world's most extensive forms of regional collaboration, involving Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland.

Nordic co-operation has firm traditions in politics, the economy, and culture. It plays an important role in European and international collaboration, and aims at creating a strong Nordic community in a strong Europe.

Nordic co-operation seeks to safeguard Nordic and regional interests and principles in the global community. Shared Nordic values help the region solidify its position as one of the world's most innovative and competitive.

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This report examines the attitudes of young people towards language and culture in the Nordic Region. The report has clear links with the Nordic Council of Ministers' vision for 2030, which includes the objective of increasing knowledge of neighbouring languages and cultures among children and young people.