

Scientific and ideological constructions of 'the alien' in Scandinavian linguistics 1939–1979: the case of Elias Wessén

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Language plays a crucial role in the construction of nations as imagined communities. Thus, also the scientific study of national languages has inevitable relations to the establishment of national identities. Linguistic research contributes to the image of 'us', the speakers of a certain language, and specifies the boundaries to 'the alien', i.e. foreign languages as well as foreign language elements. This study focuses on the construction of the 'alien' in Scandinavian linguistics, a discipline which is noticeably *not* the study of the languages of Scandinavia, which would have included e.g. Sami and Finnish, but the study of the Germanic languages in the region: Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Icelandic, and Faroese. The main data for the study consists of the seventeen editions of the best-selling Swedish introductory textbook *De nordiska språken* [The Scandinavian languages] (1939–1979) written by Elias Wessén, who held the first chair in Scandinavian Linguistics at Stockholm University. The analysis is informed by Benedict Anderson's (2006) theory about nation and national identity, which understands a nation in terms of three social practices: the representation of the borders that include citizens and exclude non-citizens ("the Map"), the recording of information about these citizens ("the Census"), and the narrating of a shared history ("the Museum"). The analysis shows how Wessén's linguistic description of the Scandinavian languages and their history, construes a language-based Census, Map and Museum of the Swedish nation through a constant slide between language and people. It also shows how Wessén, in later editions, argues that Swedish citizens with other first languages than Swedish constitute a threat against the national language. The result is discussed against the background of Wessén's political statements, e.g. in favour of a stronger military defence (Holmberg 2020). We also discuss how the post-war crisis for nationalism has opened for new perspectives on Scandinavian languages as an object of study.

References:

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