Sociolects in a central Swedish town. Is it possible to distinguish a person’s social identity from a short sample of speech?

It is well-known that differences in pronunciation, word formation, word inflection, vocabulary and syntax play an important role in conveying information about a speaker and his or her social status. Of course there are individuals who speak differently from what you would expect, but as Chambers (1995:101) concludes: “What we do know for sure is that, for the most part, people sound the way you would expect them to sound given the facts about their class, sex, age and region.”

Continuity and change in present-day spoken Swedish. Eskilstuna revisited is a study of language change in real time. It replicates Nordberg’s earlier investigation of the social variation of Swedish in the medium-sized town of Eskilstuna, using data collected in 1996, 29 years after the original study. I have studied seven morphological and morphophonological variables. The commonly held opinion in Sweden that the seven variables are in the process of more or less rapid change towards the standard forms of the written language cannot be supported by my data. Although the use of the standard form has not increased much on average, there have been changes in the relationship between social groups, between men and women and between age groups.

Social class is a factor that influences the choice of variant to a great extent in 1996 as well as in 1967. On both occasions there is a high score of standard forms in the highest social group and a distinct interval between the groups. This difference is significant, but it was more pronounced in 1967 than in 1996. But a relevant question is if the varieties are as identifiable and social significant as they were in the 1960’s.

In this paper I will discuss the results of an investigation performed in the autumn of 2004. From my interviews with 72 informants I have chosen eight informants, one man and one woman from each social group. 26 students in Eskilstuna and 26 students in Uppsala have listened to about one minute from each of the eight recordings. I asked the students to choose an occupation for each informant from a list of 16 different occupations, and I also wanted them to give linguistic reasons for their guesses. Preliminary analyses of the answers show that they give a lot of information on attitudes to spoken language (and to different jobs!). I will also test a group of people in Eskilstuna who are older than the students, as I want to compare my results with a social identification test that Nordberg (1970) based on his recordings from 1967.