English with an accent

A study of attitudes among Swedish adolescents regarding British and Middle Eastern varieties of English

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Abstract

This study examines the attitudes of adolescent Swedes towards speakers of British and Middle Eastern varieties of English. Due to the ongoing wars in the Middle East and elsewhere, and thus the stream of refugees seeking sanctuary in Sweden and other European countries, many children from diverse backgrounds have been and will be enrolled in Swedish schools. Considering their right to democratic, humane and inclusive education, it is of importance to identify and oppose possible prejudice and preconceptions towards foreign languages, cultures and religions at an early state. This study aims towards this goal. The study, carried out among Swedish teenagers, is based on a matched-guise test in combination with an Osgood scale. The pre-recorded speakers were from Iran, Syria, and Britain.

The results of the study prove that there were preconceptions regarding Middle Eastern varieties of English, yet they can be both positive and negative. It is evident that the majority of the informants perceived the Middle Eastern speakers of English negatively with regard to traits that may be related to education, economy and intelligence, yet they rated the same speakers positively with regard to traits that may be correlated to emotional and social capacity. Interestingly enough, the study also provides evidence to suggest that British speakers of English are perceived favourably with regard to traits that may be related to education, economy and intelligence, yet negatively with regard to traits that may be correlated to emotional and social capacity. Overall, the study mainly provided results that confirm findings of previous research within the field.

Keywords: language perception, Sweden, sociolinguistics, Middle Eastern English, non-standard varieties, language and culture, matched-guise tests, Osgood scale
# Table of contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... 2  
1. Introduction ................................................................................................................ 1  
   1.2 Aim of the study .................................................................................................... 2  
   1.3 Research questions .............................................................................................. 2  
2. Background .................................................................................................................. 3  
   2.1 English as a foreign language in Swedish upper secondary schools .................. 3  
   2.2 Accents, dialects and sociolects – Reviews and definitions ............................... 4  
      2.2.1 The standard variety – a definition ............................................................... 4  
      2.2.2 A historical review of dialects and sociolects ............................................ 5  
      2.2.3 A modern review of dialects and sociolects .............................................. 6  
   2.3 Mapping attitudes: A brief introduction of the matched-guise test .................... 8  
   2.4 Previous findings within the field of attitudinal linguistics ............................... 9  
3. Method ....................................................................................................................... 13  
   3.1 Participants .......................................................................................................... 13  
   3.2 Material ............................................................................................................... 13  
   3.3 Procedure ............................................................................................................ 15  
   3.4 Ethical considerations .......................................................................................... 15  
4. Results and discussion ............................................................................................... 16  
   4.1 Speaker assessment in relation to the variety spoken ....................................... 16  
   4.2 Ethnicity and geography .................................................................................... 26  
5. Conclusions, critique and outlook ............................................................................ 29  
   5.1 Conclusions ........................................................................................................ 29  
   5.2 Method discussion, critique and further research ............................................. 29  
References ..................................................................................................................... 32  
Appendix 1 .................................................................................................................... 35  
Appendix 2 .................................................................................................................... 36  
Appendix 3 .................................................................................................................... 37  
Appendix 4 .................................................................................................................... 38
1. Introduction

Language reflects who we are. Unconsciously, language varieties may reflect the regional and social backgrounds of the individual speaker, i.e. where we are from and with whom we associate. When groups of people spread across the world, they bring their culture and their language with them (Janson, 2010; McColl Millar, 2015). People have moved across the continents for various reasons during the history of humankind, and one of those reasons is often war. Upon arrival in a foreign land with an alien culture, people both tend to assimilate to the new culture and, in return, spread their culture of origin. An example of this is the spreading of the English language, which is mainly due to war and colonialism (Crystal, 2003; Deumert, 2006). In the best of worlds, refugees are welcomed into the new society, and culture, history, religion and other aspects of people’s backgrounds would be shared in harmony. However, this is not always the case. Historically, studies have shown that people speaking a language variety that is different from the norm are often perceived negatively by other individuals (e.g., Ellis, 1967; Rudell & Graves, 1968). These negative perceptions often regard socio-economics, i.e., the educational and economic backgrounds of the speakers.

From the early 2000’s, people have been driven from their homes due to the wars and turmoil in the Middle East. Conflicts such as the Arab-Israeli tensions, the Arab spring, the occupation of Iraq, the Syrian civil war and others have claimed the homes of many. Countries in Europe have received over a million of refugees in 2015 alone (Eurostat, 2017; UNHCR, 2015). Apart from being seriously affected by fleeing from a war, these are some of the people that would risk being judged based on the way they speak e.g. English. This, in turn, could possibly lead to segregation, stereotyping and racism. However, it is argued by Rakić, Steffens & Mummendey (2011), among others, that such occurrences can be prevented through research and the dissemination of knowledge.

Mostly as a consequence of the past and ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, about 240 000 people sought asylum in Sweden during the years 2014 and 2015, according to the Swedish Migration Agency (Migrationsverket, 2018). Refugees under the age 18 have the right to attend school, even if it is not deemed as compulsory as it would have been for Swedish children (Migrationsverket, 2013). Furthermore, the curriculum for upper secondary school in Sweden states that education should be equal, democratic and accessible to all children, regardless of background (Skolverket, 2011). The curriculum also states that the education should respect the cultural, historical and geographical background of all students.
and, to the highest possible extent, incorporate these factors in all aspects of the ongoing education (Skolverket, 2011). As for the subject of English as a foreign language, which is compulsory up until upper secondary school, the curriculum clearly states that the teaching should strive towards implementing English as a world language, and problematize and discuss historical matters, cultural matters and living standards in all places of the world where English is spoken. The teaching of English should also include attitudes towards varieties of English and the English language overall status and spread across the world (Skolverket, 2011).

Based on this, it would seem foolish not to take the opportunity to investigate, evaluate and problematize the use of and attitudes towards various varieties of English in Swedish upper secondary school. It is important from a moral point of view, as we have become a host-country for so many people and speakers of English. It is also important from an educational point of view, where we have a responsibility to teach English not only as a foreign language, but as a bearer of culture, history and social codes and values.

1.2 Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to investigate attitudes among three groups of Swedish adolescents’ towards Middle Eastern speakers of English in comparison to British speakers of English. By investigating spontaneous reactions, and in extension attitudes, toward different varieties of a language, it may be possible to locate and prevent negative outcomes such as segregation and stereotyping. Looking at the current situation regarding refugees and immigration in Sweden, with such vast number of refugees that have the right and the need to be integrated, it is of importance to counter the possible problems that may emerge due to language differences. Schools in Sweden have a fundamental responsibility to strive towards integration and inclusion, which makes it a vital arena to investigate whether prejudices can be identified and, if so, be discouraged.

1.3 Research questions

- Within the selected groups of Swedish adolescents, are there any traceable differences in attitudes towards Middle Eastern speakers of English and British speakers of English?

- If there are differences, can any patterns be identified?
2. Background

The following section presents definitions of concepts used in my study, as well as some previous research findings. Some of this research may seem somewhat aged (e.g. Ellis, 1967; Rudell & Graves, 1968; Light, 1974), yet the sources provide some relevant information regarding how matters, which they will help define, may have been perceived in the past. However, these sources will also be counterbalanced by more up-to-date ones.

In order to clearly connect the aim of this study to the Swedish school curriculum, section 2.1 will present some important aspects of the subject of English as a second/foreign language. Section 2.2 will present definitions and reviews, historical and modern, regarding accents, dialects and sociolects. The section will also help to define the concept of a standard variety. Section 2.3 will present a brief presentation of the matched-guise test and its importance within sociolinguistic research, and finally, section 2.4 will present similar attitudinal research and its findings within this field of sociolinguistics.

2.1 English as a foreign language in Swedish upper secondary schools

The Swedish school curriculum states that the school should instill democratic values in every subject, as well as it should aim towards implying the ethnical, geographical and cultural background of each individual student into the actual education. Apart from the general aim towards a democratic and including school, the subject of English as a foreign language demands that the students are made aware of living conditions, attitudes and moral and cultural values in all places in the world were English is spoken. The students should also be aware of the English language, its spreading across the world and its status in the various places where it is spoken (Skolverket, 2011). On the basis of this, working with varieties other than traditional British or American ones is of utmost importance. The students in Swedish schools should be made aware of world varieties of English, their status, the attitudes towards various varieties of English and the impact it may have on social, cultural and political relationships we have with other inhabitants of this world. Not only is it important due to the disturbances in the world today, however important, but also from a linguistic point of view.
English is a world language, and learners of English as a foreign language needs to be presented to it as such.

2.2 Accents, dialects and sociolects – Reviews and definitions

While there are thousands of languages in our world, there are also uncountable varieties of every language. These varieties depend on, amongst other things, geography, sociology, and culture. Specific variations in language, which will be vital in this study, are accents, dialects and sociolects. Yule (2010) describes accent as "restricted to the description of aspects of pronunciation that identify where an individual speaker is from, regionally or socially" (240). The term dialect on the other hand comprises grammar and word use in addition to pronunciation (Yule, 2010:240). A dialect too may be impacted both by regional and social aspects.

2.2.1 The standard variety – a definition

The standard variety differs from regional dialects and sociolects in so far as it does not reveal one’s geographical background (Yule, 2010). A standard variety is often associated with academia and formal situations. According to Yule, Standard English is the variety usually taught in English-as-a-second language classrooms (240). Rakić et al. (2011) describe the concept of a standard variety as follows: “During the history of language development, many languages undergo a series of changes, called standardization, so that among many varieties within this language usually one is established as the standard one, while others become non-standard” (Rakić et al., 2011:870).

The idea of a standard variety is often critized. Lippi (1997) among others questions the status of a standard variety and the idea of one ideal version of a language. The author claims that non-standard language use and variation should be seen as indications of expansion and the progression of integration and cultural exchange rather than undesired consequences of one’s background, claiming that linguistic progression is the result of the human tendency to “make or borrow what we do not have” (Lippi, 1997:8). In other words, we both adapt to and adopt features of every language variety we are exposed to. Yule (2010) supports this in so far
as he claims that a standard variety or language is somewhat of a myth since all speakers have accents, both regional and social ones (240).

2.2.2 A historical review of dialects and sociolects

A sociolect can be described as a variety of language depending on various social aspects (Yule, 2010:254). Older research within the field of sociolinguistics (see Ellis, 1967; Rudell & Graves, 1968; Light, 1974) tended to claim that the socioeconomic background affects and influences every individual speaker, often related to limited education among the lower social classes. According to Barber, as paraphrased by Ellis (1967:432), various social groups produce similar speech regardless of ethnic background, age or sex. The differences that appear in the spoken language are considered to be a direct consequence of the speakers’ educational levels, and would thus reflect the speakers’ socioeconomic status. Barber accordingly claims that the use of correct grammar within groups of high socioeconomic status is a “product of their superior education” (432). Rudell & Graves (1968) also state that people of lower socioeconomic backgrounds in most cases suffer the consequences of an inadequate education. The authors claim that the children in question would also, in all probability, lack role models speaking a standard variety. According to the authors, such a role model would be necessary in order to develop a correct use of language. Nardy (2014) supports the idea of education being a major factor for language use by stating that children from families of higher socioeconomic backgrounds do communicate in a more standard variety of English (275). Both Rudell & Graves (1968) and Nardy (2014) base these claims upon studies which were carried out in different neighbourhoods un the US, where English is the native language and the varieties referred to can be considered as native, yet non-standard.

However, more than half a century ago already there were voices claiming that sociolects are dependent on more complex social contexts than education only. Ellis (1967) states that “It seems logical to assume that the speech qualities which reveal social status are not a product of anything so simple as amount of education, but are rather a product of the speakers’ total environment” (435), including the human need to adapt to the people whom one shares an intimate relationship with. Light (1974) also claims, in accordance with Ellis (1967), that the social varieties within the English language are mainly a product of social interactions and social contexts rather than levels of education.
To summarize, even though a “standard” variety should not reveal one’s geographical background, the dialects and accents of several groups of people have, historically, been related to their socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. The manner in which one speaks has been seen as an indicator of one’s social heritage, and thus a marker of one’s social status. Despite the early protestors against these social patterns, it can be assumed that historically: the more standard the talk, the higher the social status.

2.2.3 A modern review of dialects and sociolects

Anne Fabricius (2006) conducted an attitudinal study where two native British speakers of English were evaluated by a group of informants. According to a linguistic evaluation performed beforehand by the author, both speakers could be labelled as RP, short for Received Pronunciation, the term for the type of variety which have historically been perceived as standard in the United Kingdom (111). Based on the results of the study, the author concluded that the male speaker was perceived as “a somewhat boring and socially aloof character from a privileged background, somewhat intelligent but clearly less attractive in social terms.” (2006:118), whereas the female speaker was perceived much more positively. Fabricius (2006) discusses the possible reasons behind these differences alongside the apparent shift in how speakers of a standard variety are perceived, and discusses that the possible changes may be a result of how, among other things, the sociolinguistic landscape has changed over the past decades (118). The author argues that:

social change in the course of the twentieth century has moved Britain from being culturally working-class dominated towards being culturally middle-class dominated, and in consequence, earlier vertical class distinctions have moved towards horizontal middle-class meritocracy, where career competition is with peers on the same social level. (Fabricius, 2006:118)

This would, according to the author, in all probability have had a high impact on the shifts in the sociolinguistic climate in the United Kingdom. This could lead to the conclusion that the standard variety of English in the U.K is not what it used to be, at least when speaking of the general reception of it. RP, the (traditional) standard variety of British English, cannot as easily be assumed to be accepted or perceived as standard today as it could have been 50 years ago.
Young and Walsh (2010) conducted a study where the main focus was to investigate how teachers of English as a foreign language perceived the idea and concept of appropriate varieties of English and less appropriate varieties. The teachers were asked to reflect upon both their teaching of English and how they themselves had been taught English as a foreign language. The study showed that a majority of the participants had been taught local varieties by their own teachers, and some of the participants were critical towards their own teachers’ ability to model an appropriate variety of English which would, according to the participants, be British or American English (130). As to which type of English they teach as teachers themselves, most informants responded that they teach a variety somewhat close to the American English. However, the study also provided a general impression of British English being perceived as the most formal and/or standard variety of English, as it was considered by the teachers as more prestigious than other varieties (Young & Walsh, 2010:131).

Furthermore, the study provided evidence to suggest that the participants were positive towards the conceptual idea of English as an international language, i.e. an idea of the English language with substantially larger margins when it comes to local variations of various linguistic features such as grammar, word-order, and vocabulary and so on. Interestingly enough, not many of the participants were as keen on actually teaching English as an international language, or EIL as the author refers to it (133). Despite being made aware of EIL and the concept of English as a world language, none of the participating teachers expressed that they would teach English with a more global stance in the future. All of the participants expected themselves to continue teaching mainly American English, this in relation to the expressing of a need for a more formal or standard variety of the language (135).

Bernaisch and Koch (2015) discusses language, more specifically the English language, from a global point of view. Evading the term “standard” when discussing varieties, the authors conducted a study which proved that there are some varieties of English that are perceived as more proper to use than others. However, the authors still discuss English as a world language, with varieties which need to be seen, apprehended and interpreted in their own right. Every variety of English, perhaps more so the varieties spoken in the colonised areas of the world, needs to be evaluated and interpreted with regard to the cultural and historical input that would be of relevance to the spoken and written language. As the study conducted by Bernaisch and Koch (2015) do prove an overall positive attitude towards the local varieties of English, it is possible to argue that attitudes towards what historically would have been perceived as non-accurate or non-standard varieties has shifted. The study
conducted by Bernaisch and Koch (2015) seem to suggest a social acceptance of local varieties, yet British English is still perceived as more proper or formal (or standard).

To summarize this section, one could claim that the idea of a standard or more proper variety of English is not what it used to be. Firstly, the standard British English cannot be presumed to be the same today as it was 20-50 years ago, if one could even argue that one single standard variety of British English even exists today. Furthermore, it is interesting to view English from a more global perspective. English is a world language, with countless varieties throughout the world. Every circle of English has its own varieties which are locally, considered to be more or less standard, formal or proper to use. It is also interesting to take the possible standardization of indigenous varieties of English into account. However, according to the authors presented in this section, British English is still considered to be the most amiable variety when it comes to second and/or foreign language learners. In short: local, indigenous varieties of English are socially accepted today, in some cases even preferred, but British English varieties are still considered to be the most standard and amiable ones for speakers of English as a second/foreign language to learn.

2.3 Mapping attitudes: A brief introduction of the matched-guis test

To investigate attitudes towards different varieties of a language, it is common to use so-called matched-guis tests in conjunction with an Osgood scale. The matched-guis test was introduced by Wallace Lambert in the 1960's and is one of the most common method to use in order to determine attitudes towards linguistic differences. The test measures, often based on a series of pre-recordings, the spontaneous reactions of the listener towards the speaker in terms of education, job, social skills, and other aspects (Labov & Harris, 1986:18). Put differently, the test was intended to document "the stereotypic personality traits that listeners associated with particular language varieties" (Graff et al. 1986:48). In order to measure the reactions of the listeners, it is common to use an Osgood scale, or semantic differential, where they can indicate their estimation of the social and educational backgrounds of the speakers (see Appendix 2 for an example). An Osgood scale normally provides a range of options, e.g., from very good to very bad, such as the 7-item sequence very good, good, somewhat good, neither good nor bad, somewhat bad, bad, and very bad. Using such a scale, informants can provide the researcher with information regarding how they perceive the matters presented to them (Osgood, May & Miron, 1975).
Loureiro-Rodriguez, Boggess and Goldsmith (2013) discuss the matched-guise test and the fact that it is often criticized from a mentalistic point of view, as attitudes in general are of a more complex nature than can be measured on simple scales. Attitudes are not always as clearly positive or negative as the test might lead one to believe (136-137). With this in mind, results deriving from the use of a matched-guise test should not be trusted blindly, but rather recognized as contributing to possible mappings of attitudes.

2.4 Previous findings within the field of attitudinal linguistics

Loureiro-Rodriguez, Boggess and Goldsmith (2013) describe the standardization of a minority language, pointing out that stigmas and preconceptions regarding language varieties are a consequence of politics, culture, and education. Galician is a language spoken in Galicia, located in the north-west of Spain, where it is the official language alongside Spanish. Loureiro-Rodriguez et al. (2013) describe Galician as “once a linguistic variety of low prestige associated with lack of education and low socioeconomic status” (2013:137). However, the authors also describe how the variety gained popularity and status through a change in the political system, which celebrated the variety and implemented it in areas such as educational ones. This example suggests that attitudes towards various varieties do have a connection with education. In a study conducted by the authors, Loureiro-Rodriguez et al. (2013) investigated attitudes towards standard Spanish as well as vernacular and standard Galician. The authors chose to focus mainly on adolescents, due to reports showing that this age group is the one where a significant percentage of Galician speakers distance themselves from the language in favour of Spanish (137). A modified matched guise-test was used where informants were to assign certain attributes to speakers of Spanish speaking origin and speakers of Galician speaking origin. These attributes regarded matters such as personal appeal, social correctness, progressiveness and capability (Loureiro-Rodriguez et al., 2013:143). The result of this study proved that there are noticeable differences in attitudes towards the different varieties investigated. The authors claim that even though standard Galician is perceived as superior in relation to Galician vernacular, the standard Spanish variety is still the variety viewed as most socially correct. The authors also claim that a standardization of Galician has been, and still is, in progress. However, despite the success in standardizing the Galician language, many of the adolescent native speakers favoured the Spanish language, suggesting that Galician remains somewhat stigmatized and that it “has yet to achieve the social acceptance that Spanish enjoys in urban areas” (Loureiro-Rodriguez et
al., 2013:150). That said, Standard Galician is perceived as socially more acceptable than Galician vernacular, which is perceived as somewhat unsophisticated.

Puah & Ting (2014) conducted a similar study among Chinese speakers in Malaysia, where the authors investigated differences in attitudes towards a standard variety, Mandarin, compared to the non-standard varieties Foochow and Hokkien in relation to age, sex and socioeconomic background (463). The authors claim a lack of studies investigating "how socioeconomic status interacts with age and gender to influence language attitudes" (452), and that similar studies almost always present evidence that speakers of standard varieties are perceived positively with regard to traits such as competence, status and intelligence, i.e. traits that may related to socio-economic background and education. However, speakers of non-standard varieties are perceived positively with regard to traits such as solidarity, and negatively on socio-economic related traits. Furthermore, Puah & Ting (2014) argue, as did Loureiro-Rodriguez et al. (2013), that elder speakers are often more sympathetic to their ethnic language or non-standard variety while younger speakers are inclined to use a more standard variety of language. In the study conducted, a matched guise-test combined with an Osgood scale were used. The results show that the standard variety was positively rated by the informants on all 15 traits examined, regardless of the informants’ dialectal background. Some of these traits were educated, high social status, intelligent and rich (2014:463). The other dialects, however, were rated somewhat negatively regarding various traits:

Stereotypes of dialect speakers are negative on some traits: Foochow people are loud; Foochow men are less educated, impolite, not intelligent, informal and rough; Hokkien men have low social status, and Hokkien women are informal. These negative traits attributed to dialect speakers point to education level as an indicator of their social standing as well as how refined and clever a person is. The Chinese community in Malaysia view education as a means for upward mobility and invest in their children's education so that they have better jobs and income, which in turn determines their socio-economic status. (Puah & Ting, 2014:463)

The authors of this study also present results that indicate that male informants reacted more favourably towards their own sex than towards women. However, the reactions differed depending on age, where the younger participants reacted more positively towards the female speakers than the older ones.

Rakić et al. (2011) also claim that the attitudes towards different varieties are directly linked with the perceived social status of the speaker. According to the authors: “Following
the implicit social pressure to use standard language, it acquires superiority on various dimensions (e.g., status and prestige) that seem to be generally accepted and used by those speaking that language (or any of its varieties)” (Rakić et al., 2011:870). The authors present evidence to support the claim that the perception of language and speech is a significant contributor to the human need to categorize and catalogue objects, impressions, other human beings, sensory experiences and other phenomena which we are exposed to. In order to catalogue other human beings, the human brain registers various types of information, among other things about language use (Rakić et al., 2011). According to the authors, understanding what makes us place other people in different categories may help prevent issues such as stereotyping and discrimination (2011:869). However, they also ask why minority varieties of language still persist when a standard comes with as many social benefits as it does. The authors claim that dialects and accents persist mainly because they mark social affiliation. Based on earlier research, Rakić et al. (2011) discuss that while a standard language conveys a higher socio-economic status, a non-standard language may convey a much higher social capacity. In other words, while speakers of a standard variety may tend to be perceived as competent and intelligent, they would not be perceived positively with regard to traits such as loyalty, integrity and credibility, and vice versa (Rakić et al., 2011:871). The authors summarize their own investigation as follows:

Our experiments show that the mere presence of a regional accent influences stereotypes activation and possible discrimination against the speakers. It seems that different accents are linked to different sets of norms/knowledge (e.g., indicating in-group or out-group members and their status) that influence people's perception. Up to now much research in social and cognitive psychology has focused on visual information about targets. Our data show that also auditory information is highly informative and should therefore play a larger role in studies on person perception. (Rakić et al., 2011:879)

The study conducted by Rakić et al. (2011) suggests, in line with the previously mentioned ones, that speakers of a standard variety of German are perceived more favourably than speakers of a non-standard variety of German. This study, too, was based on an experiment using a matched-guise test and a modified Osgood scale, and the individual traits were collected and summarized under three main categories: competence, hireability and socio-intellectual status. The authors found that speakers of a more standard-German were perceived as more competent and hireable and that than speakers of non-standard German (Rakić et al.,
2011:874), confirming the general idea that speakers of a standard variety are perceived in a more positive way regarding socio-intellectual and social-economic status.

In the study conducted by Bernaisch and Koch (2015), previously mentioned in section 2.2.3, the attitudes within a group of Indian English Speakers towards their local English varieties, American English, British English and Sri Lankan English were investigated. The study was performed using a matched-guise test and proved that the participants, although generally positive towards their local varieties of English, perceived British English as more favourable or “proper”. The participants were most negative towards Sri Lankan-varieties of English, a result which is hypothesized by the authors as “an indication of what could be labelled mutual attitudinal demarcation between SLE and IndE speakers” (Bernaisch & Koch, 2015:128). The authors also presented interesting results regarding solitary attributes such as “humble” and “friendly”, where the informants seemed to perceive local variety speakers of English more favourably than speakers of British varieties of English (127). Much in line with the results presented by Loureiro-Rodriguez et al. (2013), the study seems to prove that some sort of standardization of local, indigenous varieties of English has taken place. As the informants appears to be generally positive towards their local varieties of English, one can assume that this is the case. However, it is still interesting to note that the study also provides information to suggest that the informants, much like the ones in the study conducted by Rakić et al (2011), still seem to favour British varieties of English. The study suggests that the informants found British English more proper or formal, or in the very least, more amiable than local varieties. This could possibly lead to the conclusion that even though local, indigenous varieties seem to undergo (or have undergone) some sort of standardization, there are still varieties of English which are considered to be the amiable ones, the proper or “standard” ones.
3. Method

The method used in this study is of a predominantly quantitative type, as a sizeable group of 45 informants were asked to fill in a survey comprising several Osgood scales to mark their spontaneous reactions towards a group of pre-recorded speakers of English (see Appendices 1 and 2).

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 45 18-19-year-old students at an upper secondary school in a medium-sized city in Sweden, corresponding to my focus on teenagers and educational contexts. The specific age group of 18-19-year olds was chosen due to the informants not needing any guardians’ consent to participate. In other words, this was a convenience sampling. The choice regarding which students in particular would participate in the study was mostly left to the school board and the students’ teachers. When the school board had approved the request regarding the study, they contacted the teachers of the school, asking for volunteers. The teachers who felt that they had the time to help then contacted me in order to set an appropriate date to carry out the investigation.

The informants were not asked to reveal ethnicity, geographical background or gender, however, all of the groups that took part in this study were perceived by me as quite homogenous, with almost exclusively Caucasian, middle class participants.

3.2 Material

The recordings that were used in the matched-guise test had been found at the International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA, n.d.). Each speaker read the same passage from the text *Comma gets a cure* (Appendix 3) by Jill McCullough and Barbara Sommerville (IDEA, n.d.), a fictional text chosen by the people behind the IDEA website because of its suitability for language analysis. According to the website, the text uses words corresponding to all of J.C. Wells’ standard lexical sets, allowing the dialect researcher to examine a reader’s English pronunciation across a wide variety of phonemic contexts (IDEA, n.d.). The recordings were chosen based on the speakers’ geographical origin: three were from the Middle East, more specifically from Iran and Syria, and two of the speakers were from Great Britain. As the two
British speakers both derives from parts of London, they cannot be seen as representative for British English in its entirety. The same can be said about the Middle Eastern speakers, as they can be seen as exemplifying various Middle Eastern varieties of English, yet not as being representative for the Middle Eastern English in its entirety. However, limitations of time and space restricted the opportunity for a more exhaustive study where more pre-recorded speakers could have been presented. The choice of pre-recorded speakers was based on the intention to see whether the informants would react differently to different varieties of English, with a focus on varieties spoken by people with a background similar to that of a large share of the recent immigrants in Sweden (cf. Eurostat, 2017). Even though there are linguistic variations within the two groups of speakers as well (British speakers and Middle-eastern speakers), the generalisation felt needed in relation to the size and circumstances of this study. The informants which took part in this study were not informed of the various backgrounds of the pre-recorded speakers and it cannot be assumed that they had any previous linguistic knowledge regarding the varieties that were presented. As this may have had an impact on the study and its results, the matter is further discussed and problematized in section 4.3.

The group of pre-recorded speakers consisted of two females and three males with different heritages. The speaker BRITAIN 1 is a female from North London, BRITAIN 2 is a male from South London. The speaker IRAN 1 is a male who was born in Iran, no records of his current whereabouts are available. However, the speaker has resided in the U.S during several years of his adult life. The speaker SYRIA 1 is a female who was born in Spain but who resides in the U.S since several years back. The speaker has spent some years living in an unspecified part of the Middle East. The speaker SYRIA 2 is a man who was born in Saudi Arabia but has spent his adult life in the U.S. All of the pre-recorded speakers are educated on a collegial level or higher.

The questionnaire or the Osgood scale that was used in this study (see Appendix 2) was based on a scale presented by Sundgren (2004). The scale worked well in this study as it has a good mix of traits that can be related to socio-economic background/status and traits that can be related to the socio-intellectual capacity. At the end of the questionnaire, a glossary of the traits was attached (see Appendix 4). This glossary were also presented orally before the study took place, in order to make sure that the students understood the scale at hand.
3.3 Procedure

The data collection took place during several English lessons. The students were informed of the procedure and given the option to decline participation. They were also informed that they would remain anonymous and were not asked to specify their gender. It was only after the data collection that they were informed of the purpose of the study, so as not to influence their answers by revealing too much beforehand.

After the students had confirmed their willingness to participate, data was collected on several occasions, in different classes. The informants were given booklets containing information about how the study would be executed and about the Osgood scales on which they were to mark their answers. The informants were then presented with five pre-recorded speakers of various linguistic origin, both male and female. The order in which the recordings were played was randomized, meaning that the order in which the recordings were played differed from group to group. The informants were instructed to listen to these recordings and to mark their answers based on their first, intuitive reaction. The informants listened to each speaker for one minute and marked their answers according to the scale they were given (Appendix 2). When the survey was finished, the booklets were collected and the students were informed of the purpose of the study, how to contact me if they had any further questions, and where to find the project report after its publication.

The data was processed manually in three steps. The numbers were computed twice by me and organized in charts, both in absolute numbers and in percent. Following this, the procedure was repeated first by me and then a last time by a teacher from the school where the study was conducted, in order to minimize the risk of miscalculations.

3.4 Ethical considerations

This study was planned and conducted in accordance with the criteria listed by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2014:7-14). The criterion regarding approval has been met, as the participants were informed that participation in the study was not compulsory but voluntary. Confidentiality is ensured as well, as participation in this study was completely anonymous and therefore no collection of personal data was needed. With regard to the information requirement, the participants were informed of the study and its purpose by me, and had access to the information during the execution of the study.
4. Results and discussion

In section 4.1, the results from the investigation are presented in the form of charts, and the results are discussed directly in the text. First, results regarding the informants’ assessment of the speakers will be presented, together with some comments. In 4.2, a discussion of the result in relation to ethnicity and geographical background will follow. Finally, some comments regarding the gender aspect will be added.

4.1 Speaker assessment in relation to the variety spoken

Figure 1: Assessment of speakers in terms of soft vs. hard (in percent).

Figure 1 shows that the Middle Eastern speakers (represented by the blue bars) were predominantly perceived as very soft, somewhat soft or neutral. There was noticeable variation within the blue group, however, with speaker SYRIA 2 being considered much softer on average than the other two within that group. It is also noteworthy that a) the alternatives from very soft to somewhat hard received approximately equal shares of the answers in the case of the Iranian speaker, and b) that all alternatives were ticked by some informants with regard to the two Syrian speakers. In other words, there was a considerable range of opinions among the informants.
Figure 1: Assessment of speakers in terms of *nice* vs. *mean* (in percent).

Figure 2 shows how the Middle Eastern speakers are perceived mainly as *neutral* or *somewhat nice*, whereas the British speakers are perceived mainly as *neutral* or *somewhat mean*. However, there are some individual differences within this group. The Middle Eastern speakers were similarly rated on the trait *very nice*, yet the ratings differ quite heavily with regard to the trait *somewhat nice*. The perception of the Middle Eastern speakers varies heavily with regards to this trait.

The group of British speakers where rated quite similarly in this figure. The most noteworthy difference between the two groups would be regarding the trait *mean*, where the British speakers were perceived as such by quite a large part of the informants when compared to how the Middle Eastern speakers were perceived.
Figure 2: Assessment of speakers in terms of sympathetic vs. unsympathetic (in percent).

Figure 3 shows quite a variation regarding the perception of the British speakers. The curve within this group peaks between somewhat sympathetic and neutral, whereas the curve within the group of Middle Eastern speakers peaks at the trait somewhat unsympathetic. In other words, the Middle Eastern speakers are perceived as more sympathetic on average, even though the perceptions do vary within each group.
Figure 3: Assessment of speakers in terms of considerate vs. inconsiderate (in percent).

Figure 4 confirms the general picture which can be seen with regards to Figure 1, 2 and 3. SYRIA 2 was perceived as considerate to a noticeably larger extent than the other Middle Eastern speakers. It would seem that SYRIA 2 is consistently perceived somewhat more positively than the other Middle Eastern speakers.

The British speakers were rated quite similarly in this figure, peaking between neutral or somewhat inconsiderate.
Figure 4: Assessment of speakers in terms of powerful vs. weak (in percent).

Figure 5 shows, in contrast to Figure 1, 2, 3 and 4, how the Middle Eastern speakers are clearly represented most heavily on the right side of the scale, which may be considered as negative, and the British speakers to the left side of the scale, which may be considered as positive. In the group of British speakers, BRITAIN 1 appeared to be perceived as clearly more powerful than BRITAIN 2.

Figure 5: Assessment of speakers in terms of thorough vs. sloppy (in percent).
Figure 6 shows the perceptions of the Middle Eastern speakers peaked around the alternative somewhat sloppy. However, a difference could be seen with regards to the trait very sloppy, where SYRIA 1 was perceived as such by quite a larger share of the informants than the other Middle Eastern speakers.

The British speakers were, as with regards to the previous figures, perceived somewhat differently. BRITAIN 1 was perceived as very or somewhat thorough to a greater extent than BRITAIN 2.

Figure 7 shows that the Middle Eastern speakers were mainly perceived as neutral or somewhat unsuccessful, whereas the British speakers were perceived mainly as neutral or somewhat successful. However, both groups were perceived over the entire range of traits, from very successful to very unsuccessful.

The British speakers were mainly rated as neutral or somewhat and very successful. However, there was a difference between the perception of BRITAIN 1 and BRITAIN 2. BRITAIN 1 was perceived as very or somewhat successful to a somewhat greater extent than BRITAIN 2.
Figure 7: Assessment of speakers in terms of intelligent vs. unintelligent (in percent).

Figure 8 shows somewhat similar results as Figure 7. SYRIA 2 appears to be the speaker that was perceived most negatively by the informants, as 67 percent rated this speaker as somewhat or very unintelligent. Deviant from the previous result, SYRIA 2 appears to be perceived negatively by a larger share of the informants than the other Middle Eastern speakers.

The numbers show how, much like in the previous figures, BRITAIN 1 was perceived far more positively than BRITAIN 2. BRITAIN 1 peaks at the trait very intelligent, whereas BRITAIN 2 peaks at the trait somewhat intelligent.
Figure 9 shows that in the group of Middle Eastern speakers, SYRIA 2 was perceived more positively than speakers SYRIA 1 and IRAN 1.

The British speakers were rated somewhat inconsistently, especially BRITAIN 1. It is interesting to note how divided the opinion of the informants seem to have been. BRITAIN 2 was rated somewhat more consistently, with 53% of the informants perceiving the speaker very or somewhat safe.

With regard to this specific trait, it is noteworthy that safe and unsafe may have been apprehended differently between the informants, as no further explanation of the trait was given part from the provided glossary (see appendix 4).
Figure 9: Assessment of speakers in terms of active vs. passive (in percent).

Figure 10 portrays a wider range in perception than the former ones. The distinction between the Middle Eastern speakers and the British speakers is not as sharp as in the previous figures. Within the group of British speakers, it is interesting to note that SYRIA 1 sticks out compared to the other Middle Eastern speakers. It appears that SYRIA 1 was rated mainly on the right side of the scale (= neutral, somewhat and very passive), whereas the other Middle Eastern speakers were rated mainly as neutral or somewhat active.

The British speakers were rated completely different from each other with regard to this trait, with BRITAIN 1 being perceived mainly as very or somewhat active, in contrast to BRITAIN 2 being perceived mainly as somewhat or very passive.
Figure 10: Assessment of speakers in terms of outgoing vs. shy (in percent).

Figure 11 shows that the Middle Eastern speakers were all rated as somewhat or very shy by about three quarters of the informants.

There is a greater difference between the individual British speakers than between the individual Middle Eastern speakers. BRITAIN 1 was perceived mainly as very or somewhat outgoing, in contrast to BRITAIN 2 being perceived mainly as somewhat or very shy.

Figure 11: Assessment of speakers in terms of reliable vs. unreliable (in percent).
Figure 12 shows some diversity in the group of Middle Eastern speakers. IRAN 1 and SYRIA 1 were rated mainly as somewhat or very reliable, whereas SYRIA 2 was rated mainly as neutral or somewhat unreliable. It is once again interesting to note how SYRIA 2 is perceived rather differently from the other Middle Eastern speakers, this time leaning towards the right side of the scale, which may be perceived as the negative one.

BRITAIN 1 was rated mainly as very or somewhat reliable, whereas BRITAIN 2 was mainly rated as neutral or somewhat reliable. The difference between the individual British speakers are visible, but not as sharp as in some of the previous studies.

4.2 Ethnicity and geography

The results show that the Middle Eastern speakers of English were rated somewhat more negatively in comparison to the British speakers with regard to the traits weak, sloppy, unsuccessful, unintelligent, unsafe, passive and shy. However, the Middle Eastern speakers were rated more positively with regard to the traits nice, sympathetic, and considerate, whereas the British speakers were rated more negatively on the same traits. These results also agree with the previous research presented in this study: In general, the results show, in accordance with the studies conducted by Rakić et al. (2011), Loureiro-Rodriguez et al. (2013), and Puah & Ting (2014), that the speakers who were rated positively on the traits that correlate to educational and economic background tended to be rated negatively on the traits that correlate to social qualities (and vice versa). However, it is interesting to note the differences that occurred between the individual speakers within each group.

The Middle Eastern speakers tended to be rated similarly on eight out of twelve traits. The traits with more varied results were nice, considerate, successful and active. IRAN 1 and SYRIA 2 tended to be rated more or less positively on the trait nice, whereas SYRIA 1 tended to be rated as more neutral or very nice. IRAN 1 and SYRIA 1 tended to be rated mainly as neutral or somewhat considerate on the trait considerate, whereas SYRIA 2 tended to be rated mainly as neutral or somewhat considerate. SYRIA 1 and SYRIA 2 tended to be rated more or less negatively on the trait successful by most informants, whereas IRAN 1 tended to be perceived as neutral or somewhat unsuccessful in this respect. Finally, IRAN 1 and SYRIA 2 tended to be rated rather negatively on the trait active, whereas SYRIA 1 was generally rated more positively. As interesting as these deviations may be, no clear patterns emerge. Whether
or not these differences are random would require further and deeper research within the field.

The two British speakers tended to be perceived quite differently from each other. Although they were rated on the same side of the scale (more or less positively or more or less negatively) on a majority of the traits, i.e. 7 out 12, there were some significant differences in the percentage of informants who gave them a specific rating. The biggest differences regard the traits *outgoing*, *powerful*, *intelligent* and *reliable*. When it comes to *outgoing*, a majority of the informants rated both speakers more or less positively. However, the speaker BRITAIN 1 was rated as such by 88 percent whereas BRITAIN 1 was rated as such by only 35 percent, a difference of 53 percentage points. The difference in the perception of the individual British speakers was thus greater for this specific trait than the difference between the two groups, British and Middle Eastern speakers. With these tendencies, this study cannot suggest a clear pattern as to how British speakers may be perceived in general. If one were to assume that the British speakers would represent a more standard variety of English, much like what was discussed by Bernaisch & Koch (2015) and Young & Walsh (2010), these results are quite interesting in relation to previous findings within the fields. Almost all of the previous research mentioned in this study suggests that a standard variety would be perceived favourably by a majority of listeners. In this study, similar patterns are not found. However, one must of course take into account that someone can be a native speaker of English with a non-standard variety, while a non-native speaker can perfectly represent a standard variety, regardless of one’s regional background.

That said, the study does give an indication of speakers from the Middle East being perceived differently compared to British speakers, especially when it comes to traits that could be related to education, work, economy and/or intelligence. This would be in line with the results presented by Rakić et al. (2011), Loureiro-Rodriguez et al. (2013), Puah & Ting (2014), Bernaisch & Koch (2015) and Young & Walsh (2010). However, there are so many differences between the individual speakers that it is impossible to recognize any other patterns that may be connected to ethnicity and/or geographical background. Had the design of the study been somewhat different, patterns may as well have emerged (Possible changes in research design are further discussed in chapter 5.2). Especially the British speakers were perceived differently, as they often received ratings across the entire scale. This leads to a possible conclusion that attitudes towards a language or variety as whole is hard, or even impossible, to measure with accuracy. A suggestion to further develop this, or similar studies, could be to use a greater variety of pre-recorded speakers, and/or that the informants’ own background could have been related to their answers, in an attempt to detect patterns in
broader and/or more in-depth studies.

In relation to the democratic aim of the Swedish school curriculum, the results of this study may be somewhat problematic. As Swedish schools should strive to be inclusive, integrative and democratic (Skolverket, 2011), it would seem somewhat troubling that the upper secondary students perceive the non-native speakers of English who were evaluated in this particular study (more specifically, speakers of various Middle Eastern varieties of English) as poorly educated or less intelligent. One should keep in mind, however, that the study also presents evidence to suggest that students in upper secondary school also perceive Middle Eastern speakers of English positively with regard to other traits, such as *nice*, *sympathetic*, and *considerate*. In relation to the subject of English as a second/foreign language, it is interesting to find that there actually are differences in how we perceive different varieties of English. Such matters should very much be integrated in the teaching of English, discussed and further problematized. This could be done both on a teacher level, where teachers could actively work to include more varieties of English in the teaching material, but also on a student level, where students themselves could highlight Englishes of the world in various contexts. A conclusion to be drawn from this is that there is room in the actual teaching of English as a second/foreign language to work with such matters, and possibly that there is room for developing less biased attitudes in Swedish schools, at least concerning the perception of Middle Eastern speakers of English (and Swedish, for that matter). Then again, this depends on whether or not the perception of Middle Eastern speakers as poorly educated and less intelligent is, in itself, bad. It may be argued that such a conclusion could be logical, in the sense that the Middle Eastern speakers in this study come from a part of the world where education is not something which is guaranteed or can be taken for granted anymore, considering the ongoing conflicts in the region. Therefore, perceiving such speakers as poorly educated may not be a product of deplorable prejudices, but rather a conclusion based on the information one might have regarding the Middle Eastern speakers’ possible country of origin.
5. Conclusions, critique and outlook

5.1 Conclusions

It can be concluded that this investigation has provided answers to the research questions, though they may not necessarily be as expected. The study confirms that there are, in fact, differences in how speakers of a language are perceived by others depending on whether they are British or Middle Eastern speakers of the language in question. However, these differences were not all to the Middle Eastern speakers’ disadvantage. Even though the Middle Eastern speakers tended to be perceived more negatively when it comes to traits that might be correlated to education, intelligence and economy, they were generally perceived more positively with regard to traits that might be correlated to emotions and/or emotional capability. The problem of negative preconceptions regarding educational background could of course be problematized and consciously dealt with, both in school environments and otherwise, yet it is a source of some satisfaction to note that a large share of the perceptions were in fact rather positive. The study does not, however, suggest any significant patterns with regard to the gender of the pre-recorded speakers.

Overall, the results are somewhat in line with the outcome of similar studies within this field, leading to the conclusion that preconceptions and general attitudes show a certain degree of consistency. This consistency is positive in the sense that it facilitates the discussion and planning of efforts to prevent stereotyping and negative consequences of it, especially in school environments.

5.2 Method discussion, critique and further research

In her study in which she examined dialectal recognition, Natalie Braber (2015) problematizes the general design of attitudinal studies regarding accents, dialects and sociolects. She claims that the main problem would be that researchers tend to assume that the informants are familiar with the language varieties presented and, by listening to their speech only, have some intuitive linguistic knowledge regarding the regional and/or social background of the speakers (16). In relation to this, my own study could be problematized. The informants that took part in this study were not presented with any information regarding the background of the pre-recorded speakers. In other words, there were many assumptions on my behalf regarding how familiar the informants were with different varieties of English. In hindsight, I
realize that the study would have benefited from a more detailed review of the pre-recorded speakers, their regional (and possibly social) background, and a somewhat more detailed briefing of the linguistic differences between their varieties. This could have been enabled by an additional study, similar to the one conducted by Braber (2015), where the informants were asked to locate on a map where they thought that the pre-recorded speaker originated from.

The study could also have been further completed by using a model similar to the one presented by Fabricius (2006), where a phonetic analysis of the examined speakers was performed. The speakers were analysed based on numerous occurrences, for example: “creaky” (113) voice, a “smoothing across the diphthong in I in the sequence I absolutely” (113), and “Before a vowel, /t/ is realised as either aspirated [th] in sort of, lot of different, or as glottal stop [?] in it is, a lot of things.” (113). My study could have benefitted from such an analysis of the pre-recorded speakers, however, such an analysis would have been difficult to conduct with regards to my own lack of competence within the linguistic field. Had this essay been written on an advanced level or higher, such an analysis would probably have been more justified.

One of the possible problems with using a questionnaire is of course the risk of informants answering untruthfully. One cannot guarantee that the answers are 100% honest. Another issue is that the study only shows ‘shallow’ facts, with no opportunity to further investigate the responses using a more qualitative follow-up method of investigation, due to the anonymity of the participants. Had it not been for the time constraints, some of them could have been interviewed, for example. Also, the number of recipients could have been increased for more reliable results.

As all of the pre-recorded speakers were educated on a college level or higher, measurements regarding the perception of their speech in relation to education and/or a lack thereof of could not be realized, though it would certainly have been interesting. As to gender, it would have been interesting to see if any differences could be detected if the study had taken the gender of the participants into account, not only the gender of the pre-recorded speakers. Since the previous research presented is somewhat divided regarding the importance of gender when it comes to the perception of language varieties, it would be beneficial to conduct further research with this in mind. It would also be of interest to further develop this study by expanding the group of informants, with regard to age. As was the case in Puah & Ting (2014), it is possible that differences in attitudes would emerge between different age groups. Such findings could be of importance when working with the possible prevention of
negative preconceptions regarding non-standard varieties of language and their speakers. Lastly, it would, of course, be of interest to make a similar investigation with regard to other spoken languages. Swedish comes to mind, as part of the backdrop of this study is the ongoing immigration from Middle Eastern and other countries to Sweden.
References


Appendix 1

INFORMATION ABOUT SURVEY

This test is part of a study conducted in order to research sociolinguistic aspects of the spoken language. This study will result in a degree project at the Teaching-program at MDH university.

The results of this test will be discussed and, if needed, problematized in connection with previous research within the sociolinguistic field. This discussion and problematizing will be available to everyone in the MDH database of degree projects once finished.

Participation in this study is completely anonymous. The test will in no manner be traceable back to you as an individual.

You will be presented with five pre-recorded speakers. You will be asked to rate the person speaking on a scale which is presented below. Based on your first, spontaneous impression, you will rate the speaker as you see befitting your impression. This survey is highly dependent on your spontaneous answers, and there are no right or wrong ones.

EXAMPLE

Speaker x

<table>
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<td>x</td>
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<td>safe</td>
<td>x</td>
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</table>

HOW TO

Circle the answer alternative you think corresponds most closely to your first impression of each speaker. For example, if you perceive the speaker as ‘hard’, then circle one of the x’s on the right side of the scale. Please differentiate between whether you find the speaker to be ‘very hard’ (first x from the right) or ‘somewhat hard’ (second x from the right).

If you do find the recorded speaker as neither ‘hard’ or ‘soft’, for example, please circle the x in the middle.
### Speaker 1

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Appendix 3

*Comma gets a cure* (McCullough, J. & Sommerville, B., n.d.)

Well, here’s a story for you: Sarah Perry was a veterinary nurse who had been working daily at an old zoo in a deserted district of the territory, so she was very happy to start a new job at a superb private practice in North Square near the Duke Street Tower. That area was much nearer for her and more to her liking. Even so, on her first morning, she felt stressed. She ate a bowl of porridge, checked herself in the mirror and washed her face in a hurry. Then she put on a plain yellow dress and a fleece jacket, picked up her kit and headed for work.

When she got there, there was a woman with a goose waiting for her. The woman gave Sarah an official letter from the vet. The letter implied that the animal could be suffering from a rare form of foot and mouth disease, which was surprising, because normally you would only expect to see it in a dog or a goat. Sarah was sentimental, so this made her feel sorry for the beautiful bird.

Before long, that itchy goose began to strut around the office like a lunatic, which made an unsanitary mess. The goose’s owner, Mary Harrison, kept calling, “Comma, Comma,” which Sarah thought was an odd choice for a name. Comma was strong and huge, so it would take some force to trap her, but Sarah had a different idea. First she tried gently stroking the goose’s lower back with her palm, then singing a tune to her. Finally, she administered ether. Her efforts were not futile. In no time, the goose began to tire, so Sarah was able to hold onto Comma and give her a relaxing bath.

Once Sarah had managed to bathe the goose, she wiped her off with a cloth and laid her on her right side. Then Sarah confirmed the vet’s diagnosis. Almost immediately, she remembered an effective treatment that required her to measure out a lot of medicine. Sarah warned that this course of treatment might be expensive-either five or six times the cost of penicillin. I can’t imagine paying so much, but Mrs. Harrison-a millionaire lawyer-thought it was a fair price for a cure.
## Appendix 4

### Glossary

## Glossary

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