

## REVIEWS

***The Languages of Scandinavia: Seven Sisters of the North.*** By Ruth H. Sanders. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2017. Pp. ix–211. Hardcover. \$35.00.

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For linguists and nonlinguists alike, *The Languages of Scandinavia: Seven Sisters of the North*, by Ruth H. Sanders (2017), presents an engaging overview of language development, contact, and change in Scandinavian languages. The book does not aim to provide in-depth historical accounts or linguistic analyses. Instead, Sanders provides a “narrative [...] informed not only by linguistics but also social history, archaeology, anthropology, and human genetics” (p. 10). The book explores the history of the mainland Scandinavian languages—Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, and Sámi, as well as the insular Scandinavian languages Icelandic and Faroese. These languages—and the peoples who speak them—share a tightly intertwined history. Sanders writes:

The focus is on the crucial intersections, sometimes amounting rather to collisions, among the seven languages and their speakers. I tell the story of their shared past, their continuing contact with each other, and how the languages have influenced each other’s development. (p. 9)

Sanders is Professor Emeritus of German at Miami University of Ohio. Her interest in the Scandinavian languages began during a sabbatical year in Helsinki nearly 20 years ago. She applied her knowledge of German linguistics to a similar project in 2010, her book *German: Biography of a Language*. This experience with linguistic and historical research is apparent here in what is a thoroughly researched book about the Scandinavian languages.

Chapter 1, *Prologue to History*, begins around 20000 B.C.E. and traces the history of the region up to the start of the Viking age, around 600 C.E. The chapter is largely built upon archaeological findings and historical research on the migration of the hunter-gatherer societies that eventually settled in the region. Once the stage has been set, the following chapters

then tell the story of each language. Chapter 2 focuses on Faroese and Icelandic together, and their development from Old Norse, and details the settlement of the two island countries. Of particular interest in this chapter are the details about life on the Scandinavian islands and the sagas that have preserved that information. Chapter 3 explores Danish and Swedish, the East Norse languages. This chapter discusses the split that began in 1300 B.C.E., which was potentially pushed along by influence from German through trade. Chapter 4 continues with Swedish and its interaction with and impact on Finnish. The chapter comes to a refreshingly positive conclusion, with the perseverance of Finnish despite Russian and Swedish domination to arrive at a state of coexistence with Swedish. Chapter 5 discusses Norwegian and the impact of the Black Death on the Norwegian population, the impact of Danish rule, and the development of the two varieties that officially exist today, Nynorsk and Bokmål. Chapter 6 returns to Faroese and its official differentiation from Icelandic. Sanders discusses Sámi and its contact with the other mainland Scandinavian languages in chapter 7. Sanders briefly concludes the book by touching on modern day influences on the Scandinavian languages.

Sanders strikes a balance between a colloquial style for nonlinguists and an academic style for specialists. The narrative she constructs incorporates the right amount of humor and drama to keep the reader engaged, and the stories are told in broad strokes to keep information flowing. For the casual reader, linguistic jargon is kept to a minimum, and always well explained. Nevertheless, she provides a number of details and linguistic examples cited from current research that even nonlinguistic readers can understand. This gives the linguistic readers a point of departure to dig deeper into the topics and examples they find most interesting.

This balance is both the strength and the weakness of the book. As mentioned earlier, Sanders creates a narrative out of the historical events that is well-written and engaging. However, in the interest of the narrative, some potentially interesting examples are left out. For instance, in chapter 3, she states that the Swedish variety Elfdalian is so different from Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish that some linguists consider it to be its own language. She cites a source for interested readers, but a brief example of the similarities between, say, Swedish and Danish and how they both differ from Elfdalian would not have been amiss.

Additionally, Sanders points readers to a number of outside sources, such as websites, where sample texts of the languages can be read and listened to, or videos on the internet with examples of speech, songs or traditions. For this reviewer, these suggestions have led to several hours watching videos on Scandinavian languages, all of which have been educational and enjoyable. I acknowledge that sound cannot be integrated into a book, but written examples could have been provided in the text, even as short excerpts. This jump from book to web and back to book that Sanders expects of her readers provides the opportunity to follow up on what is interesting to the individual reader, but quickly becomes distracting. Moreover, websites are not permanent fixtures. Videos get removed and websites are not always maintained, which underscores how important it is to incorporate examples directly into the book.

Despite this shortcoming, *The Languages of Scandinavia* achieves its goal of being an introduction to the history of the Scandinavian languages for a wide variety of readers. There is a lot to learn from the book. It is easy to read and to understand, and it provides a number of sources for additional research. The book is well suited for those with a personal interest in the history and languages of Scandinavia, but also as reading material for a college-level course on the history of Scandinavian languages, provided that it be supplemented with additional examples and secondary texts. Overall, Sanders has provided an engaging overview of the languages of Scandinavia, but it leaves this reader wanting more. There is enough information to get an overall picture, but not enough to truly satisfy my curiosity.

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