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Who is an expert? A corpus-assisted analysis of the expert in Swedish Covid-19 discourse¹

This article explores a prevalent thematic strand of the Swedish public discourse on Covid-19 pandemic strategies. Analyzing the construction and role of the expert as it has been played out in the news media coverage of Covid-19 in four leading Swedish daily newspapers throughout the first two months of the pandemic in 2020 (February and March), the contribution asks who counts as a trustworthy expert, and to what extent such ascriptions are used in debates about the Swedish coronavirus strategy, which has aroused much interest and criticism. One of the important findings is the concept of a reliable and rational expert who is, primarily, a Swedish epidemiologist. Also noteworthy is the fact that the role of the expert and the very word *expert* seem to be under negotiation. This contribution is situated within the framework of discourse linguistics and explores segments of discourse understood as collectively shared knowledge. A partly corpus-assisted methodology is used. The study aims to link linguistic utterances on the expert's role in the pandemic with the level of important social actors in the course of the pandemic in Sweden.

Keywords: Covid-19, pandemic, discourse, corpus, experts, pragmatics

Wer ist ein Experte? Eine korpusgestützte Analyse des *Experten* im schwedischen Covid-19-Diskurs

Dieser Artikel widmet sich einem zentralen Subthema des öffentlichen Covid-19-Diskurses in Schweden. Er setzt sich mit der Frage auseinander, wie ExpertInnen dargestellt werden und wie die Expertenrolle in der Pandemie verhandelt wird. Untersucht wird dieses Thema anhand von vier überregionalen Zeitungen in der Frühphase der Pandemie (Februar und März 2020). Es wird gefragt, wer als glaubwürdige(r) ExperteIn gilt und inwieweit derartige Zuschreibungen in der Debatte

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um die Corona-Strategie zum Tragen kommen. Aus der Studie geht u. a. das zentrale Resultat hervor, dass ExpertInnen sehr häufig schwedische EpidemiologInnen sind. Als weiteres Ergebnis hat sich gezeigt, dass sowohl die Expertenrolle als auch die Bedeutung des Wortes *Experte* im Diskurs verhandelt werden. Diese Studie versteht sich als ein Beitrag im Rahmen der Diskurslinguistik, indem sie Diskurssegmente als Träger kollektiven Wissens untersucht. Methodisch wird ein z. T. korpusgestützter Ansatz bemüht, um sprachliche Aussagen mit der Ebene der sozial Handelnden zu verquicken.

Schlüsselwörter: Covid-19, Pandemie, Diskurs, Korpus, Experte, Pragmatik

Kim jest ekspert? Analiza korpusowa *eksperta* w szwedzkim dyskursie kowidowym

W niniejszym artykule analizie poddano jeden z wątków dyskursu publicznego na temat Covid-19 w Szwecji. Postawiono pytanie o to, w jaki sposób przedstawiani są w dyskursie pandemicznym eksperci oraz w jaki sposób negocjowana jest rola eksperta w tym dyskursie. Ponadto badano, komu przypisuje się cechy wiarygodnego eksperta i jakie są strategie negocjowania tych cech w dyskursie. Analizę przeprowadzono na podstawie czterech gazet krajowych we wczesnej fazie pandemii (luty i marzec 2020 r.). Jednym z kluczowych wniosków z badania jest to, że ekspertami bardzo często są szwedzcy epidemiolodzy. Na uwagę zasługuje również fakt, że rola eksperta, a tym samym znaczenie samego słowa ‘ekspert’ wydają się być przedmiotem ciągłych negocjacji. Niniejsze opracowanie stanowi o tyle wkład w rozwój lingwistyki dyskursu, o ile bada dyskurs jako nośnik wiedzy zbiorowej. W pracy wykorzystano również częściowo metody badań korpusowych, by powiązać wypowiedzi językowe z płaszczyzną aktorów społecznych.

Słowa kluczowe: Covid-19, pandemia, dyskurs, korpus, eksperci, pragmatyka

1. Introduction

As in many other countries throughout the world, the coronavirus pandemic in Sweden was accompanied by a public debate on how to handle a new and frightening situation. Furthermore, the pandemic aroused interest in the question of who might count as a reliable expert in the context of virus control, and on what grounds. All of a sudden, concepts and denominations emerging from life science and infection control found their way into public debate; *state epidemiologists*, *herd immunity*, *r-values*, *social distancing*, and *PCR tests* became linguistic nodes of a *Denkstil*, a thought style, that broke away from its narrow context of transmission control, thereby undergoing a transformation from an esoteric to an exoteric thought style (see Fleck 1980; Andersen et al. 2018).

The relationship between politics and expertise, and specifically between politicians and experts, became prevalent in public debates on measures taken to handle the virus. Nagel/Schäfer (2020) show with specific reference to the Covid-19 discourse in Germany that the centrality of experts was amplified in

the first months of the pandemic. There are good reasons to assume that this also holds true for Sweden. Pierre (2020: 489) concludes:

In Sweden, the message from senior Cabinet ministers very early in the pandemic was they would take advice from the experts, i.e. the PHA and NBHW staff, on key issues, not least whether to lock down or continue to allow movement while maintaining social distancing.

One prominent example in this regard is a claim by the nowadays world-famous state epidemiologist Dr. Anders Tegnell of the Swedish Public Health Agency (PHA, or *Folkhälsomyndigheten* in Swedish) at the dawn of the outbreak. In an interview with the evening tabloid *Aftonbladet*, concerning the fact that neither Sweden nor Great Britain had (yet) issued a general lockdown, and that they both seemed to be aiming for herd immunity by natural infection, Tegnell said: “These are two nations that deviate a bit from the others, at least in our opinion, since we stick more to a research-based policy. The balance between politics and research is a bit different here than in some other nations.” (Larsson 2020)² Such initial statements make the case for an exceptionalism which, in fact, has proven vigorous as a position in the Swedish Covid-19 debate (cf. Giritli Nygren / Olofsson 2021).

The role of the expert in Sweden, as it is touched on in the above section, does seem not only to adhere to a certain perception or an ideal, but is moreover justified by how policy-making is actually performed in Sweden. Petridou (2020: 154) has analyzed the Swedish pandemic response from this angle and thereby identified one important feature of Swedish political institutions and policy-making:

The Swedish response is also characterized by the prominent role of experts and an articulated focus on expert knowledge. The problem-solving oriented policymaking process in Sweden privileges the gathering of information and knowledge ahead of policy formulation. This feature, coupled with the character of this crisis that necessitates science-based solutions, resulted in the prominence of the state epidemiologist in public discourse.

The issue of experts, however, is relevant not only in the sense that expert agencies and administration exerted so much influence on politics, but it also becomes a compelling task for linguistic research since the expert also constitutes

² In Swedish: “Det är två länder som sticker ut i att vi, tycker vi i alla fall, håller en lite mer vetenskaplig linje i detta. Balansen mellan politik och vetenskap hos oss är lite annorlunda än i en del andra länder.”

All translations of Swedish extracts into English are made by the author. They serve only the purpose of conveying the meaning and do not strive for stylistic or aesthetic equivalence.

a social actor who becomes visible through discursive configurations. As Spitzmüller (2021: 3) stresses in an analysis of the *expert* and the *layperson*, these two social roles are mutually dependent, i.e. “*ko-konstitutiv*: Laien gibt es nur, wo es Experten gibt, und umgekehrt”. Furthermore, *expert* and *layperson* are gradually scaled concepts within a certain context or field, i.e. one is always a layperson or an expert with regard to a specific competence, ability or set of knowledge. The configuration of expertise vs. laymanship is, moreover, embedded in structures of power; analyzing the appearance of expertise linguistically therefore means paying attention to *agency* and *voice*. (Spitzmüller 2021: 5)

In this article, I will address and attempt to answer the overarching question about who was, discursively, depicted and construed as an expert, in the sense of being someone to rely on and to listen to in the Swedish Covid-19 public discourse. This paper therefore seeks to grasp the features attributed to experts. To what extent is the expert’s position endorsed or contested? Who are the experts? From what fields of expertise do they emerge, i.e. what scholarly field or position are they connected to? What institutions are they affiliated with? The paper also investigates the way in which the role of the expert was negotiated during the first two months of the pandemic. One underlying assumption, which will be elaborated below, is that the expert as such enjoys an elevated position not only during a pandemic, but perhaps even more at such a time. According to this assumption, one point of departure of the study is that the basic position ‘experts are reliable’ forms an enthymeme, i.e. an implicit warrant serving context-specific statements and arguments in discourse (see Wengeler 2015: 695).

The empirical data analyzed for this purpose comprise media texts from the four Swedish dailies with the widest scope in terms of circulation numbers, Dagens Nyheter (DN), Svenska Dagbladet (SvD), Expressen (Exp), and Aftonbladet (AB), during the first two months of the pandemic (the data and the research methods are described in section 4).

2. Covid-19 in Sweden

As Ludvigsson (2020), Pierre (2020), Giritli Nygren / Olofsson (2020, 2021) and others have underlined, Sweden’s management of the pandemic differed from that of many other countries in not enforcing a general lockdown, keeping large spheres of society, such as primary schools, shops and restaurants, open, and relying to a great extent on individual responsibility. However, Sweden’s policy deviated from that of several other countries in other respects as well. One of the differences was that the measures taken did not account for pre-symptomatic virus transmission; another one was the lack of face mask recommendations (which

was not encouraged by the official agencies until January 2021). Therefore, the Swedish approach to tackling the pandemic incited much interest and dispute internationally. Pierre (2020: 479) identifies the controversies around Sweden's strategy as "[o]ne of the more contentious debates during the COVID-19 pandemic".

In the large body of scholarly work on the pandemic there is also substantial research from a linguistic point of view. Hess-Lüttich (2020) examines – and calls for – discourse ethics in the news media coverage on the pandemic, Semino (2021) critically highlights the use of metaphors when referring to the new virus and its effects, Bubenhofer et al. (2020) examine, by means of large corpus data, how the pandemic is covered in Swiss-German news media, and Piller / Zhang / Li (2020) approach the pandemic from the angle of multilingualism in crisis communication. These are only a few examples of published research that set out from the notion that a pandemic undisputedly also constitutes a communicative and discursive event.

Returning to the specific case of Sweden, Seiler Brylla (2020) reflects on the pandemic as a communicative event, considering, for instance, how daily press briefings with situation reports turned into ritualized events, and how the measures taken internationally were conceived of as “das schwedische Experiment” (Seiler Brylla 2020: 178). Johansson / Vigsø (2021: 156) underline that the televised press briefings constituted an important part of the official crisis communication, but also point to the harsh debates in social media:

Daily broadcasted televised press conferences were a central part of the government's and the authorities' crisis communication, while public debate took place on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media during the whole phase. It is hard to estimate the effects of this at the present stage, but what is clear is that the public debate on social forums has been agitated, both in favour of and in opposition to the official policy.

In an unpublished student essay, Johansson (2021) analyzes a set of German newspaper pieces on the Swedish pandemic strategy, arriving at the conclusion that the coverage appears to be centered around the topics of exceptionalism (*Sonderweg*), trust and responsibility. Westberg's (2020) work examines vague speech acts in public guidelines on how to slow the virus spread, and compares them with their recontextualization in an ironic social media account as a case of affective practice. Giritli Nygren / Olofsson (2021: 7) analyze ideological aspects of the Covid-19 debate and crisis narratives in the Swedish major daily, DN, from the angle of Critical Discourse Analysis, and provide evidence for the notion that Swedish exceptionalism – its uniqueness when it came to tackling the pandemic – constituted an important ideological perspective.

As far as the stages of the pandemic itself are concerned, Nagel / Schäfer (2020: 247f.) distinguish four phases in the period covered by their analysis of German Covid-19 discourse, i.e. from January until May. The first phase ranges from late January until mid-March and is characterized by the recognition and public addressing of a new, hitherto unknown coronavirus. This stage is in line with the first critical pandemic period in Sweden. In the second phase, from mid-March until mid-April, political measures taken from early March onwards took effect, while the third and the fourth phases entailed exit strategies such as the relaxation of containment measures, as well as the emergence of conspiracy theories and a growing discontent in the population about the German coronavirus policies. The first and the second phases are largely equivalent, in terms of the times involved, to key events and measures taken in the Swedish pandemic response, as can be seen in the chronology by Ludvigsson (2020: 2461f.) and in the time-lines with discourse-relevant events by Johansson/Vigsø (2021: 157f.) and Ghersetti / Odén (2021: 9f.). Chronologically, the present study engages with the first phase and approximately the first half of the second phase, i.e. from late January until the end of March. This was a period of much uncertainty and confusion. Infection cases began to rise dramatically in March, and before long the numbers of fatalities also started increasing. The peak of the first surge occurred in April (see Ghersetti / Odén 2021: 16).

3. The expert in the discourse – some theoretical considerations

This paper aims to analyze the role of the expert, albeit not in terms of the factual impact exerted by experts on policy-making, but in terms of the expert as a discursive phenomenon. This means that experts appear, are evoked and referred to in texts, utterances, debates et cetera as sources of information and points of reference to make arguments and lines of reasoning credible, plausible or reliable, i.e. as sources of legitimation and justification (see van Leeuwen 2007, Mackay 2015). As Spitzmüller (2021: 13f.) argues, expertise as a discursive phenomenon is generated in communicative acts of positioning, whereby the layman is configured as the desired opposite:

Das heißt, dass nicht nur Laien Expert*innen (zur Lösung bestimmter Problemstellungen) benötigen, sondern dass auch Expert*innen Laien benötigen, die ihnen ihren Expert*innenstatus überhaupt erst zusprechen bzw. ihrer Expertenfigur ein Auditorium geben. Daher sind Laien als ‚begehrende Figuren‘ ihrerseits bei Expert*innen begehrt.

(Spitzmüller 2021: 4)

We can assume from recent societal developments that the expert as such has become an important social and discursive actor with regard to legitimation, acting in very different fields of action and knowledge areas: “In the age of professionalism, expertise has acquired authority in many domains of activity that had previously been the province of families, for instance child rearing, nutrition, and eventually even sexuality.” (van Leeuwen 2007: 95) Politics and policy-making rely on and incorporate scientific evidence and expertise to an increasing extent. As far as the Swedish context is concerned, late public health professor Hans Rosling and his posthumous bestselling book *Factfulness* (Rosling / Rosling / Rosling Rönnlund 2018) should be mentioned as a prominent example of the elevated position of the expert. Another example of this kind of endorsement, albeit on a rhetorical level, is young climate activist Greta Thunberg’s emblematic slogan “Listen to the scientists” (see Bjereld / Demker 2020: 48). With a specific bearing on epidemic discourse Vasterman / Ruigrok (2013: 439) point to the fact that experts take center stage in epidemics. In their analysis of the Dutch media coverage of the A/H1N1 pandemic in 2009, they conclude that “[t]he expert sources and the public health officials played a dominating role in the coverage, although the variety in sources was limited, comprising only a few well-known experts” (Vasterman / Ruigrok 2013: 450).

A pandemic in a modern society is therefore also a matter of discourse; just like other phenomena, it is filtered through the lens of wordings and conceptualizations. The concept of discourse underlying this claim translates as a collection of utterances about a specific macro-topic that exert some sort of influence on people’s thinking and acting and are situated “within specific fields of social action” (Reisigl / Wodak 2009: 89). In Gardt’s (2007: 30) words, discourse is “handlungsleitend”, or action-guiding, and is therefore always embedded in and reinforces structures of power and ideologies. Discourse is thus also a social practice. As far as the Covid-19 pandemic is concerned, this means that the way it is referred to in discourse affects how people respond to it.

As Spitzmüller / Warnke (2011: 32ff) argue, one feasible way to operationalize a discourse for investigation is to analyze it in the materialized form of a corpus. Although there are substantial differences between typical research interests in corpus linguistics and some branches of discourse linguistics such as qualitative oriented Critical Discourse Analysis, discourse linguistics can benefit from a corpus orientation in the sense that it is based on the qualitative criteria of exhaustivity, intersubjective verifiability, and an orientation towards frequencies and context (Spitzmüller / Warnke 2011: 36f.). This methodological approach has been adopted in the present study.

Even if the front door to the discourse studied in this paper is newspaper texts, the actual core of interest lies in the specific utterances where experts

occur, are evoked or are referred to. These can be understood in terms of an “Aussagengeflecht” (Jung 1996: 461), as a ‘braid of utterances’, which emphasizes the unity of discourse analysis as being utterances rather than texts in extenso. This assumption is derived from the basic idea in discourse linguistics that utterances, for instance in the objective form of texts, are intertextually linked to each other within a discourse (Reisigl / Wodak 2009: 90). Besides their intertextuality, discourses themselves are linked to each other as well, meaning that boundaries between discourses, branches of discourses or sub-discourses are fluid – a phenomenon which is accounted for by the concept of interdiscursivity (Reisigl / Wodak 2009: 90). As far as the object of the present study is concerned, the Covid-19 discourse on experts is assumed to perform a sub-discourse or a discourse-strain relating to, at least, (1) the macro-topic of Covid-19 in Sweden, and (2) other expert-related discourses. Thus, we can expect elements from other discourses to be recontextualized in the Covid-19 discourse studied.

Related – and highly relevant – to the expert discourse is the aforementioned research question regarding how the position and the status of the expert as a social actor (see van Leeuwen 1996) is negotiated. This topic occasionally entails a discussion about what actually constitutes an expert, thereby encompassing the question of how the word *expert* is to be defined and understood. In order to analyze this the concept of *metapragmatics* appears helpful, meaning any utterance referring to and valuing language and language use (cf. Spitzmüller 2013: 264f.; for a discussion on the related concept of *Sprachkritik* or language criticism, see Kilian / Niehr / Schiewe 2016). Put differently, metapragmatic stances regarding the word expert, its meaning and usage will be analyzed as part of the expert discourse relating to Covid-19.

At this point, the position of the author of this paper needs to be addressed. I have, since the outbreak of the pandemic, been critical of parts of the Swedish Covid-19 response, but even more so of certain features of public debate, as well as of the way the crisis was communicated by authorities such as the PHA. My impression was that the Swedish strategy, at least initially, was legitimized by means of a binary understanding, i.e. as solely based on scientific evidence, whereas critical voices were often framed as alarmist, irrational, populist and hostile vis-à-vis evidence. In a critical essay, Lappin (2021) holds a similar view, and elaborates how crucial actors in the pandemic such as state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell have outlined the Swedish pandemic response in binary terms as fact-based, versus other countries’ measures as an outcome of ideology. Leaning on a quantitative study of how the pandemic was covered in the news in Sweden during the spring of 2020, Gherseti / Odén (2021: 57) suggest that leading news media might have reproduced the views of the government and official authorities

to a large extent and thereby partially fallen short of critical investigation. On a more polemical note, commentators such as Wennström (2020) have described the media coverage of and the public debate on the pandemic during the spring in terms of an *åsiktskorridor* or a ‘corridor of opinions’, meaning that critical voices were peripheral or absent.

The term *åsiktskorridor* was coined in 2013 by political science scholar Henrik Ekengren Oscarsson, who, in a blog entry that soon went viral, claimed that certain positions were impossible to voice without being placed outside of a virtual corridor accommodating a set of acceptable and normal opinions (Ekengren Oscarsson 2013). Seiler Brylla (2019: 30) explores how the idea of an *åsiktskorridor* has been enacted in the field of migration debate in Sweden and shows that it is semantically based on the conceptual metaphor THE PUBLIC DEBATE IS A ROOM. In an essay on knowledge formation at the heart of political debate, Bjereld / Demker (2020: 43f.) link the concept of an opinion corridor to the Foucauldian concept of discourse, claiming that each society has its regulations and power relations with regard to political positions. According to their account, the interesting question is not so much whether such corridors exist, but rather how wide or narrow they are in certain areas of political controversy.

Whether the notion of an *åsiktskorridor* is accurate in relation to the initial phase of the Swedish pandemic discourse in general goes beyond the scope of the present study. Nonetheless, it gives impetus for a related aspect, namely the extent to which it is possible to detect attempts at establishing a regulative norm for the discourse on the pandemic, i.e. metadiscursive positionings. This aspect of investigation is embedded in the research question about how the expert is conceptualized. The claim that much media reporting initially seems to have been biased in favor of the PHA (and other official agencies) is supported, to some extent, by Johansson / Vigsø (2021) and findings by Gherseti / Odén (2021: 57). It remains to be seen if such traits can also be detected in the discourse on experts. Johansson / Vigsø (2021: 162) summarize:

Even if some experts criticised the chosen strategy, the general media frame portrayed Tegnell and the PHA as a sensible, calm, scientific representative of the Swedish way. Swedish media reported how governments in neighboring countries acted contrary to the advice of their own scientific expertise when deciding on a lockdown, and reports of other countries’ criticism were generally framed as a lack of understanding of how things ought to be done.

4. Data and method

4.1. Data

The data analyzed in this study comprises media texts from the four major Swedish dailies Dagens Nyheter (DN), Svenska Dagbladet (SvD), Aftonbladet (AB) and Expressen (Exp). These newspapers constitute the four single largest dailies in terms of scope and numbers of readers. Data is collected from the period of 31st January to 31st March 2020. The outset date is based on the day the first Covid-19 case was confirmed in Sweden. In accordance with the timeline sketched above, February can be seen as a time of uncertain forebodings, whereas March, both in Sweden and elsewhere, was the first month of uncontrolled virus spread and of a full-blown media debate on the appropriateness of different pandemic responses.

Dagens Nyheter can best be described as a left-liberal morning paper housing some of Sweden's leading journalists and columnists. From the outbreak of the pandemic and thenceforth, DN claimed a central role in reporting and commenting on crucial aspects of the coronavirus, not least in its science section and editorials. Measured by its circulation numbers, i.e. a daily average of 1,174,000 readers (digitally and in print), DN was the largest single morning daily within the period of January to April 2020 (see Kantar / Sifo 2020: 3).

As a national morning daily with general coverage, the liberal-conservative leaning SvD poses the only competitor to DN in terms of scope and ambition. Its circulation numbers from the same period as above, i.e. 759,000, shows a more limited outreach capacity (see Kantar / Sifo 2020: 3). Apart from DN, SvD is the only other broadsheet print newspaper with national coverage. Especially the conservative editorials of the paper were often critical of the Swedish pandemic response from March 2020 onwards.

Aftonbladet (AB) is the largest evening tabloid in Sweden with a circulation number amounting to 3,714,000 (see Kantar / Sifo 2020: 4). Its editorial section, framing the political profile of the paper as independently social democrat, has to a large extent been affirmative of the Swedish Covid-19 response measures. AB's (left-)liberal counterpart is the evening tabloid Expressen (Exp), which has a circulation number of 2,936,000. Its editorials, especially, have directed criticism against the Swedish pandemic response.

Since the data analyzed in this paper entails recently published articles, they have not yet been processed and made available in corpora. For this reason, the data has been retrieved from the Swedish media archive Retriever. By inserting the search string **expert**, all lexemes containing this exact series of graphemes, irrespective of their grammatical form, could be collected, i.e. all compounds with **expert** either as the determining or as the determined constituent; all

derivations based on *expert*; and all simplexes of the word *expert*. Based on a total amount of 1942 tokens, all texts were screened manually and all tokens of *expert* unambiguously appearing without any reference to the ongoing pandemic discourse were removed. The remaining 804 discourse-relevant tokens, occurring in 469 individual articles including front-page captions and headlines, formed the basis for the subsequent analysis, which will be detailed below. The 469 articles containing the instances of *expert* form a broad spectrum of journalistic text-types, including news reports, interviews, essays in the feature sections, and opinion pieces such as op-eds and political editorials, and constitute nearly 349,000 tokens of word units.

4.2. Methodological procedure

The analysis proceeds in two steps. First, all instances of the search string *expert* are presented in an overview. In this quantitatively oriented section of the analysis, the single most frequent type, i.e. the lexeme *expert*, with 525 hits, is selected for an in-depth study with regard to the textual embedding of each and every token, including the following semantic/conceptual properties: field of expertise/expert profile, nationality of the expert(s) being referred to, and, when mentioned, social actors such as individually named experts or institutions (see van Leeuwen 1996). These categories of analysis and their conceptual fillers have been developed bottom-up, which means that they have emerged and been adjusted throughout the analysis. Additionally, the free corpus software Lancsbox (Brezina / Weill-Tessier / McEnery 2020) was used to run collocates/co-occurrences with the word *expert*, i.e. words that typically co-occur with it. This move provides us with a network of words (collocates) indicative of other (background) discourses that have been recontextualized in the Covid-19 expert discourse. *Expert* originates from the Latin word *expertus* and means, in contemporary Swedish, “person med stor sakkunskap inom ett område” ‘person with great knowledge in a certain field’ (Svensk Ordbok 2009).

Second, within the body of texts containing the aforementioned tokens there are 30 individual, thematically focused articles commenting on the role of experts, primarily in the specific context of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also to some extent with a general bearing on the role and position of experts in modern societies. These texts, all of which are opinion pieces (editorials, essays, op-eds etc.), are analyzed in order to provide a qualitative account of discourse-relevant positions on the topic of the expert. Some of these texts have probably exerted much influence on the subsequent debate and might, from the perspective of intertextuality, be considered pioneer texts (see Spitzmüller / Warnke 2011: 189).

With respect to this semasiological procedure, there is one epistemic constraint that is important to bear in mind. The expert discourse is not restricted to hits of

the word *expert* nor to its contextual embeddings. This study, then, is able to cover strands of discourse on the topic of experts as part of the larger Covid-19 discourse, but not its totality.

5. Analysis

The lexical unit **expert**, neither as a lexeme nor as part of other lexemes, does not necessarily function as a political keyword (see Schröter 2015), although it often exerts a high symbolic value in discourses in which the formation, distribution and legitimization of knowledge takes center stage. In the data studied in this analysis, there are instances of **expert** possible to interpret as keywords, first and foremost those occurring in texts where the role of experts is at stake and the word's semantic properties are metapragmatically negotiated (see Spitzmüller 2013).³ There are occurrences of **expert** without the keyword status as well, which is not to say that these can be deemed neutral with respect to stances or positioning; every linguistic act entails conceptualization and perspectivization. Regardless of the different modes of use, a slight increase in the number of articles entailing **expert** in the four newspapers can be observed in February and March, as shown in figure 1 below. The figure covers all instances of **expert**, i.e. not solely the ones occurring in the topical field of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Medieexponering över tid, totalt 1772 artiklar: **expert**

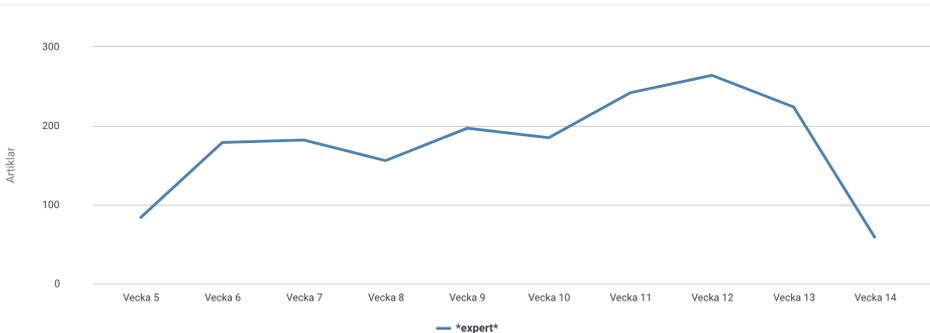


Figure 1. Number of articles containing **expert** between 31 January and 31 March in AB, DN, Exp and SvD (source: Medicarkivet Retriever).

5.1. Quantitative overview

Table 2 below summarizes the findings from the search run with **expert**. As the table shows, there is one lexeme that dominates quantitatively over all the

³ One such example is excerpt (9) in the subsequent analysis.

others, namely the simplex *expert*, whereas a few other types are represented in numbers that are likely to be discourse-relevant, since they occur rather frequently and convey information on crucial topics in expert-related Covid-19 discourse: *expertis*, *expertmyndighet*, *smittskyddsexpert*.

Type	Tokens
expert ('expert')	525
expertis ('expertise')	67
expertmyndighet ('expert agency')	49
smittskyddsexpert ('disease control expert')	41
hälsoexpert ('health expert')	12
expertgrupp ('expert group')	10
expertkunskap ('expert knowledge')	10
virusexpert ('virus expert')	9
expertområde ('expert area')	5
folkhälsoexpert ('public health expert')	4
detaljhandelsexpert ('retail expert')	4
expertråd ('expert advice')	3
expertstyrning ('expert governing')	3
Kinaexpert ('China-expert')	2
reseexpert ('travel expert')	2
krisexpert ('crisis expert')	2
krishanteringsexpert ('crisis management expert')	2
coronaexpert ('corona expert')	2
expertsynpunkt ('expert view')	2
folkrättsexpert ('international law expert')	2
aktieexpert ('stock market expert')	2
expertuppfattning ('expert opinion')	2
myndighetsexpert ('agency expert')	2
fotbollsexpert ('soccer expert')	2
expertutlåtande ('expert statement')	2
WHO-expert ('WHO expert')	1
läkemedelsexpert ('pharmaceutical expert')	1
hälsoexpertis ('health expertise')	1
expert- och politikerstyrning ('governing by experts and politicians')	1

Table 1 (cont.)

Type	Tokens
expertkompetens ('expert competency')	1
epidemiexpert ('epidemics expert')	1
Asien-expert ('Asia expert')	1
politikexpert ('political expert')	1
expertstöd ('expert support')	1
vaccinationsexpert ('vaccine expert')	1
expertdoktor ('expert physician')	1
Vi-gör-vad-som-helst-så-snart-experterna-säger-till ('we-do-anything-as-soon-as-experts-tell-us')	1
expertmakt ('expert power')	1
pensionsexpert ('pensions expert')	1
kommunikationsexpert ('communications expert')	1
expertkunnande ('expert know-how')	1
expertrapport ('expert report')	1
FN-expert ('UN expert')	1
sjukvårdsexpert ('health care expert')	1
expertröst ('expert voice')	1
pandemiexpert ('pandemics expert')	1
expertsvar ('expert answer')	1
CDC-expert ('CDC expert')	1
expertmotiverad ('justified with the help of experts/expertise')	1
coronaexpertisbaserade ('based on corona expertise')	1
favoritexpert ('favourite expert')	1
ekonomi- och hälsoexperter ('economics and health experts')	1
expertisdiskurs ('expert discourse')	1
expertvälde ('expert rule')	1
biotech-expert ('biotech expert')	1
expertteam ('expert team')	1
expertroll ('expert role')	1
expertkommitté ('expert committee')	1
lungexpert ('pulmonary expert')	1
arbetsmarknadsexpert ('labor market expert')	1

Type	Tokens
vårdhygienexpert ('health care hygiene expert')	1
teknikexpert ('technical expert')	1
hobbyexpertis ('hobby expertise')	1
TOTAL	804

Table 1. All lexemes entailing *expert* represented in the singular basic word form (English translation in brackets)

A few observations are to be made here. First, most hits of *expert* occur in personal nouns, which indicates that the semantics entailed in *expert* first and foremost is a role, a feature or a quality attributed to (groups of) persons in this discourse. However, there are notable lexemes denoting abstract entities (*expertis*, which can certainly also be used as a personal noun), collectives (*expertteam*), or institutions (*expertmyndighet*).

Second, although the lexemes retrieved represent a broad spectrum of fields of social action in a modern society (stock market, pensions, politics), most of them emerge from the fields of medicine, virology, disease control, and epidemiology, that is, from different strands of life science. We can conclude that the expert in the Covid-19 discourse studied, in so far as he is designated as some kind of *expert*, to a large extent is connected with these fields of professionalism and knowledge.

Third, there are single lexemes with *expert* pointing to the negotiation of the expert role that is to be explored in section 5.3 below. These lexemes are highly relevant to strands of meta-discussion and metapragmatic negotiation in the Covid-19 discourse since they convey critical engagement with the expert role from different angles. Words indicating this meta-perspective are compounds such as *expertmakt* and *expertvälde*, but also *hobbyexpertis*.

Fourth, two of the most frequent types, i.e. *expertmyndighet* and *smittskyddsexpert*, ranking as numbers 3 and 4 just after the simplexes *expert* and *expertise*, are through their co-occurrences closely connected to specific, individualized social actors (see van Leeuwen 1996: 48). First, *expertmyndighet* serves as a hypernym for a group of public agencies providing other agencies and official authorities with data, analyses, and assessments. PHA belongs to these agencies of expertise and was, during the course of the pandemic, often framed as an agency representing profound knowledge and expertise in the field of epidemiology. 19 out of the 49 hits of *expertmyndighet* in the corpus refer explicitly to PHA, while in 15 to 20 cases the word is used plurally with a non-specific reference, which, in all probability, due to contextual factors, entails PHA in several cases.

Out of 41 occurrences of *smittskyddsexpert*, 20 refer to Johan Giesecke, who formerly worked as the Swedish state epidemiologist and served as a consultant for both PHA and WHO during the first months of the pandemic (Karlsten 2020, WHO 2021). He made many media appearances during the spring months and, by virtue of his expertise as a senior, internationally renowned epidemiologist, is to be considered a central *ideology broker* (Spitzmüller / Warnke 2011: 179f.) in the first months of the Swedish pandemic discourse.

5.2. The lexeme *expert* and its textual embeddings

Turning to the lexeme *expert* and its 525 tokens, we can consider table 3 below, which summarizes national affiliations of experts (explicitly mentioned as well as derived from the text) as these emerge in the corpus. As shown in the table, there are numbers in the right column that exceed the total number of the tokens in some categories. This is explained by the circumstance that some tokens simultaneously refer to divergent kinds of experts with different national affiliations and that they are thus coreferential. This means, for instance, that one case of *expert* in the category of medicine/epidemiology/pharmacology simultaneously refers to Swedish and American expert(s). In the following extract, *experter* has both Björn Olsen (Swedish) and Stephen Morse (American) as co-referents:

- (1) Björn Olsen receives support from *experts*⁴ who say that existing antivirus drugs can be modified. In an interview with the American science site Livescience, Stephen Morse, professor of epidemiology at Columbia University, says that great progress has been made with antiviral drugs only in recent years. He also considers these a key in the fight against the coronavirus. (SvD 09-02-2020)

Björn Olsen får medhåll av andra *experter* som säger att man kan modifiera redan existerande antivirusmedel. I en intervju med den amerikanska vetenskapssajten Livescience berättar Stephen Morse, professor i epidemiologi vid Columbia University, att det har gjorts stora framsteg med antivirusmedel bara de senaste åren. Han ser också dessa som en nyckel i kampen mot coronaviruset.

For this reason, the figures in brackets in the horizontal total column refer to the total number of tokens in the category.

The assignment of individual tokens to fields of expertise and to nationality is sometimes immediately evident and explicit, for instance by attributes such as *Swedish*, yet in many cases it is the result of textual analysis. Thus, the semantic-pragmatic features of the occurrences of *expert* are composed of textual semantics.

⁴ Here and henceforth emphasis in the extracts is added by the author. All numbered extracts from the corpus begin with the English translation followed by the Swedish original.

Profile of expertise	National. affil.										Total (Tokens)
	Swed.	Other Scan.	Other Eur.	Amer.	Asia/ ME	Undefined intern.	Unspec.	Other			
Sports	1										1 (1)
Statistics	1										1 (1)
Security and defense	1										1 (1)
Outer space						1					1 (1)
Crisis management	1										1 (1)
Medicine/epidemiology/ pharmacology, History	1										1 (1)
Medicine/ epidemiology/ pharmacology, Politics					1						1 (1)
Economics, politics	1			1							2 (1)
Economics, China	1										1 (1)
Security, Unspecified				1							1 (1)
Other									1		1 (1)
TOTAL	198	7	27	28	17	16	260	4			557 (525)

Table 2. Profile of expertise and nationality among expert lexemes.

The single largest category among the expertise profiles is medicine/epidemiology/pharmacology with 204 tokens. These, in turn, have a Swedish national affiliation in most cases, or they are unspecified in this regard. Among other fields of expertise, economics (under which both personal finance and political aspects are subsumed) turns out to be the single largest category. Other expert profiles reflect different strands of society and walks of life affected by the pandemic (personal health, politics, climate, travelling), but they amount to very small numbers.

With respect to national affiliation, Sweden presents, not surprisingly, the largest numbers, followed by American and other European. The largest category, nevertheless, is unspecified, i.e. occurrences of *expert* that are underspecified as far as this semantic feature is concerned.

However, the Swedish affiliation is only rarely an explicit feature of the word's narrow context; there are only two cases where the adjective *svensk* is directly attributed to experts: "svenska experter" 'Swedish experts' (Exp 19-03-2020) and "de svenska experterna" 'the Swedish experts' (AB 30-03-2020). Instead, the assignment to Sweden can be derived from common knowledge of the referents at hand, and/or from text semantics. This becomes obvious in the following extract (2), where the risk of a general spread of the virus is addressed after the first Swedish Covid-19 case had been confirmed. The experts in question are explicitly linked to the referent PHA.

- (2) *Experts* at the Swedish Public Health Agency emphasize that the individual case does not indicate any risk of the spread of infection in Sweden. (DN 01-02-2020)

Experter på Folkhälsomyndigheten understryker att det enstaka fallet inte indikerar någon risk för smitt-spridning i Sverige.

In the subsequent extract (3), the ascription of Swedish nationality is given by common knowledge of the two referents, namely professor of bacteriology Agnes Wold and the aforementioned Johan Giesecke. The expert role, however, is attributed to them only by the nomination *experter*, which occurs in the headline and is not repeated in the course of the text:

- (3) *The experts*: This is what you can still undertake despite the crisis (Exp 21-03-2020)

Experterna: Det här kan du fortfarande göra trots krisen

As demonstrated in table 2, several cases of *expert* cannot be attributed unambiguously either to a specific expert domain or to a national affiliation, although contextual clues might indicate certain interpretations in this respect. This referential opacity becomes evident in the following extract (4), in which Swedish prime minister Stefan Löfven answers a question from a journalist on the topic of how many Swedes might get infected by the virus:

- (4) So, would it be possible to ask a question that might make you say that 25 percent will get sick here too?
– No, because it is the *experts* who make such statements. The government is not an *expert* on public health and infection control. And our *experts* do not want to speculate about this. The important thing is that you get prepared that things might get worse. (DN 05-03-2020)

Skulle jag alltså kunna ställa en fråga som kan få dig att säga att 25 procent kommer att insjukna även här?

–Nej, därför att det är *experterna* som ska uttala sig. Regeringen är inte *experter* på folkhälsa och smittskydd. Och våra *experter* vill inte spekulera om detta. Det viktiga är att man tar höjd för att det kan bli värre.

The last occurrence of *experter* unambiguously refers to Swedish experts, and most probably experts affiliated with Swedish public agencies such as PHA, since the prime minister uses the word with the possessive pronoun *våra* ‘our’. This suggests that the first case *experterna* in the statement most likely refers to Swedish experts, although such an interpretation is not beyond uncertainty. For this reason, the occurrence has been considered unspecified concerning nationality, but undoubtedly as belonging to the expert domain of medicine/epidemiology/pharmacology. The example points to a tendency, throughout the corpus, with regard to the many cases considered unspecified in terms of nationality in expertise profile; they are often used in contexts where they oscillate between semantic under-specification and the possibility of pragmatic disambiguation by means of contextual features.

As can be seen above, table 2 displays categories in the column with profiles of expertise that do not qualify as competencies or areas of expertise: self-proclaimed experts and “not an expert”. These categories actually constitute the very opposite of ascribing social actors the expert status in the sense that they deliberately negate the expert role in an ironic way by reversing the literal meaning of the word (cf. Attardo 2000). Although relevant studies on the discursive use of suchlike ironic meaning reversals (self-proclaimed experts) and hedgings (“not an expert”) are missing in the context of expert discourse, these findings might

indicate characteristics of the Swedish pandemic discourse, since they highlight and contest the role of experts. They will be explored in more detail below (5.3.).

Arriving at the issue of social actors and their representation in the corpus, we should recall a theoretical distinction. The social actors as they are discussed in the subsequent analysis were (and still are, this being written in the winter of 2020/2021) certainly relevant to the pandemic from the perspective of policy-making and exerting influence on the public debate. However, when engaging with their representations in the corpus they are social actors by virtue of their appearance in discourse – and are treated as such, namely as actors embodying discursive positions with respect to the pandemic. In order to sharpen the focus in the following, the scope of analysis is narrowed down to social actors (1) represented by proper names (human beings or institutions), and (2) affiliated to the expert area of medicine/epidemiology/pharmacology.

There is reason here to recall the observation that the Swedish pandemic news coverage at least initially seems to have been biased in favor of the official Swedish Covid-19 policy as brought forward by PHA (see Johansson / Vigsø 2021). However, before delving into the analysis of certain social actors and their affinity with positions in the debate, it should be noted that a vast majority of the experts are Swedish, as is displayed below in table 3:

Nationality	Number of individually mentioned social actors
Swedish	137
Other European	16
American	11
Undefined internationally	6
Asian/Middle-East	3
Asian/ME	3
Other Nationalities	3
Unspecific	2
Other Scandinavian	1
TOTAL	182

Table 3. National affiliation of social actors from the field of medicine/epidemiology/pharmacology designated with the lexeme *expert* (number of tokens in each category)

As shown in table 3, there is a clear numeric dominance of experts of Swedish affiliation over foreign experts or those who are unspecified with regard to nationality (45 with a non-Swedish affiliation, 137 Swedish). If this mere

quantitative ratio can be seen as an overt manifestation of a Swedish-centered focus in the coverage, then the finding seems to support a conclusion drawn by Ghersetti / Odén (2021: 5), namely that the media reporting was centered around Sweden during the initial phase of the pandemic. The centrality of this Swedish frame of reference might furthermore bolster another point of criticism that has been raised towards the official Swedish pandemic response (and debate), i.e. that it has been devoid of expert knowledge from outside Sweden and would therefore constitute yet another case of Swedish exceptionalism. In historical retrospect, Pierre (2016: 1) explains Swedish exceptionalism via, inter alia, the following characteristics:

[A]n active foreign policy defined by non-alliance and international solidarity; exceptional levels of institutional and social trust; and a high level of political mobilization defined primarily by social class. Some would also probably add consensualism, rationality, high taxes, and a big public sector to the list.

As Pierre (2016: 2), with reference to the political scholar Bo Rothstein, also concludes, “profound changes” in Swedish politics seem to have put an end to the era of exceptionalism. That is not to say that exceptionalism is not still productive as an ideologeme or a vehicle for national imagery. Giritli Nygren / Olofsson (2021: 12) derive from an inquiry into editorials, opinion pieces and chronicles on the coronavirus published in DN that exceptionalism formed a key feature of debates on pandemic measures: “Our analysis showed how the struggles over legitimacy in the handling of COVID-19 dealt with Swedish exceptionalism versus the world, centralization versus decentralization and herd immunity versus herd humanism.”

However, the difference in numbers between Swedish and foreign experts could also, or possibly alternatively, indicate the local angle, which is a well-known principle for news selection in the media. Simply put, if the local angle plays out in the Swedish media coverage and debate on a global pandemic, Swedish perspectives are likely to dominate at least to a certain extent. To what degree the “Swedishness” of the experts present in the corpus can be explained by Swedish exceptionalism and/or the evocation of the local angle remains an open question and calls for further, large-scale textual analysis.

As far as the social actors are concerned, there is a broad spectrum of categories possible to utilize for analysis, as van Leeuwen (1996) shows. Here the construction of social actors in terms of proper names takes center stage, but “personalisation” and “individualisation” (van Leeuwen 1996: 59, 48) are but two textual or discursive features of social actors. To be more specific, the social actors to be discussed here are all individualized, i.e. they are represented by

their proper names either as individual human beings or as institutions. Table 4 shows the individual Swedish experts from the fields of medicine/epidemiology/pharmacology occurring in the data, and the number of occurrences.

Social actor	Number of occurrences
Björn Olsen	21
Anders Tegnell/PHA	15
Agnes Wold	11
PHA	9
Johan Giesecke	8
Jan Albert	6
Johan von Schreeb	6
Fredrik Elgh	6
Niklas Arnberg	6
Joacim Rocklöv	5
Emma Frans	5
Erik Salaneck	4
Mikael Berg	3
Jorma Hinkula	3
Karin Tegmark Wisell/PHA	2
Cecilia Söderberg-Nauclér	2
Läkemedelsverket/SMPA	2
Mikael Sandström	2
Anna Mia Ekström	2
Peter Ulleryd	2
Åke Gustafsson	1
Bo Lundbäck	1
Marit Vaagen	1
Gunilla Hasselgren	1
David Eberhard	1
Mouna Esmaeilzadeh	1
Stefan Einhorn	1
Margareta Böttiger	1
Johan Carlson/PHA	1
Ali Mirazimi	1
Åsa Melhaus	1

Table 4 (cont.)

Social actor	Number of occurrences
Rafael Ahlskog	1
Anders Wallensten/PHA	1
Soo Aleman	1
Jonas F- Ludvigsson	1
Otto Cars	1
Staffan Normark	1
TOTAL	137

Table 4. Social actors of Swedish nationality designated with the lexeme expert.

If we turn to officers representing the PHA or strongly advocating the Swedish pandemic response (Anders Tegnell/PHA, Karin Tegmark Wisell/PHA, Johan Giesecke, Johan Carlson/PHA, Anders Wallensten/PHA) compared with experts distinguished as outspoken critics of the Swedish Covid-19 strategy (Björn Olsen, Joacim Rocklöv, Cecilia Söderberg-Nauclér, Fredrik Elgh, Åke Gustafsson, Bo Lundbäck, Stefan Einhorn, Merit Vaagen), there are 36 occurrences of *expert* in the first group and 38 in the second group. Adding to the first group a number of important voices that have, by and large, conveyed a sympathetic view of the Swedish measures, Jan Albert, Emma Frans, Agnes Wold and Johan von Schreeb, another 28 instances of *expert* can be included. This numeric dominance still does not reveal much about how the discourse was conducted, for instance in terms of intertextuality or what the experts' statements actually implied.

A comparison between the two most frequently occurring experts, Anders Tegnell and Björn Olsen, can bring to light some differences in their discursive roles. First, the former appears in very varied textual functions; in some cases he brings forward and defends the official lines of reasoning and analysis of PHA, and in a few other cases he performs an assessment, for instance in an interview (DN 29-02-2020) claiming a lack of evidence for the use of face masks as a means of preventing the general spread of a virus. Hence he performs different speech acts ('defending', 'informing', 'assessing'), but he also appears in contexts where he is not so much the source of knowledge and justification as he is the subject of discourse. It should be noted here that Swedish discourse on the controversial Covid-19 strategy is closely linked to Anders Tegnell, the influence he has exerted on the Swedish pandemic response and his considerable presence in the media (cf. Ghersetti / Odén 2021: 31f.). He has gained recognition, both in Sweden and internationally, as well as facing severe criticism for his way of handling the pandemic and of outlining the measures. Björn Olsen, on the other hand, does not enact this discursive function. His appearance in the corpus is most frequently

connected to advice or assessment on Sars-Cov-2 symptoms, antiviral treatments and the pandemic situation. One example is his claim that more and more evidence points to pre-symptomatic transmission of the virus (Exp 18-03-2020); another is the statement that loss of taste or smell might be a Covid-19 symptom (AB 27-03-2020). One should bear in mind that a group of then 22 researchers, Björn Olsen among them, later to become known as *Vetenskapsforum Covid-19*, intensified their joint criticism of the Swedish strategy later. Their first common opinion piece, of which Olsen was one of the signatories, appeared in DN in mid-April and “completely rejected the Swedish way of managing the pandemic and called for more stringent measures and lockdowns” (Giritli Nygren / Olofsson 2021: 7). Nevertheless, even at this early stage Olsen occasionally directs criticism against the Swedish pandemic response, as in the following extract:

- (5) The Public Health Agency’s way of dealing with the outbreak of the coronavirus is being harshly criticized.
 – It seems that they are downplaying this at all costs, and I really do not understand that strategy, says Björn Olsen, professor of infectious diseases. On the contrary, he believes that it sends the wrong signals. (DN 24-02-2020)

Folkhälsomyndighetens sätt att hantera utbrottet av coronavirus får hård kritik.
 – Det verkar som att man vill tona ned det här till varje pris och jag förstår verkligen inte den strategin, säger Björn Olsen, professor i infektionssjukdomar. Han anser tvärtom att det skickar fel signaler.

Although Olsen appears more frequently than Tegnell as a referent for the word *expert*, there are, beyond this, more occurrences of their proper names to be found in the corpus. There is a total of 46 instances of Olsen’s name, whereas Tegnell occurs 137 times throughout the corpus texts. This finding seems to correspond with one important result advanced by Gherseti / Odén (2021: 32f.) in their study of selected Swedish news media in the spring of 2020: Anders Tegnell is the single actor who appears most frequently, far ahead even of prime minister Stefan Löfvén, when measured by the number of occurrences.

These findings neither confirm nor refute the existence of an *åsiktskorridor* in the first two months of Swedish public discourse on the pandemic. At first sight, they rather seem to emphasize a plurality of voices in the four newspapers studied, at least with regard to the usage of *expert*. On the other hand, there are also tendencies towards a certain preeminence of official positions over criticism of the Swedish strategy, at least judging by the number of occurrences. Another way of demonstrating the embeddedness of *expert* is to run the word through a collocational analysis (with a threshold value of 5.0). Figure 2 shows collocates

for *expert* in its singular form. Noteworthy is the fact that the most frequent collocates are small grammatical words such as the preposition *på* ‘on, at’, the first person pronoun *jag* ‘I’ and the conjunction *och* ‘and’. This is in essence no surprising result, since function words often rank very high in collocation runs. There are, however, some notable details to touch on. The high frequency of *på* is probably to be concluded by the common collocation *expert på* ‘expert in’. Also, considering the relative frequency of the aforementioned construction ‘I’m no expert’, which typically occurs in the singular form, the rather high score for the negator *ingen* ‘no; not a(n)’ seems plausible.

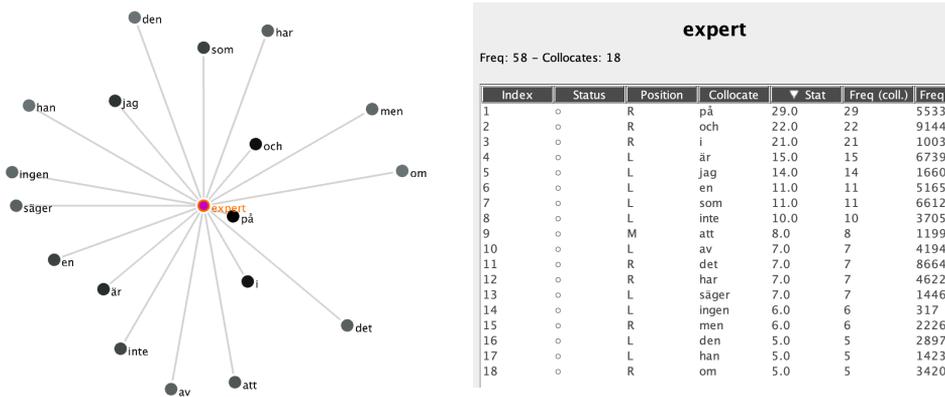


Figure 2: Collocates of *expert* (singular form) retrieved from Lancsbox

Running the word *expert* (threshold value of 5.0) in its plural forms widens the scope as far as collocates are concerned, since the plural is much more frequent than the singular. Figure 3 shows how the lexeme *expert* is more obviously imbricated in discourse(s) on the Covid-19 pandemic. As the table (right) shows, many grammatical function words appear among the collocates, similar to the outcome of the collocation run with *expert* in the singular form, but the network visualization to the left below clearly shows some nodes indicative of relevant discourses, among them *Folkhälsomyndighetens* ‘PHA’ (with the possessive *s*), *smittspridning*, ‘transmission of disease’, and *forskare* ‘researchers’. Also, the table to the right displays *myndigheter* ‘official agencies’ as the statistically strongest collocate among the autosemantic words, which probably points to further discourse-relevant meaning: experts discursively associated with official agencies and authorities.

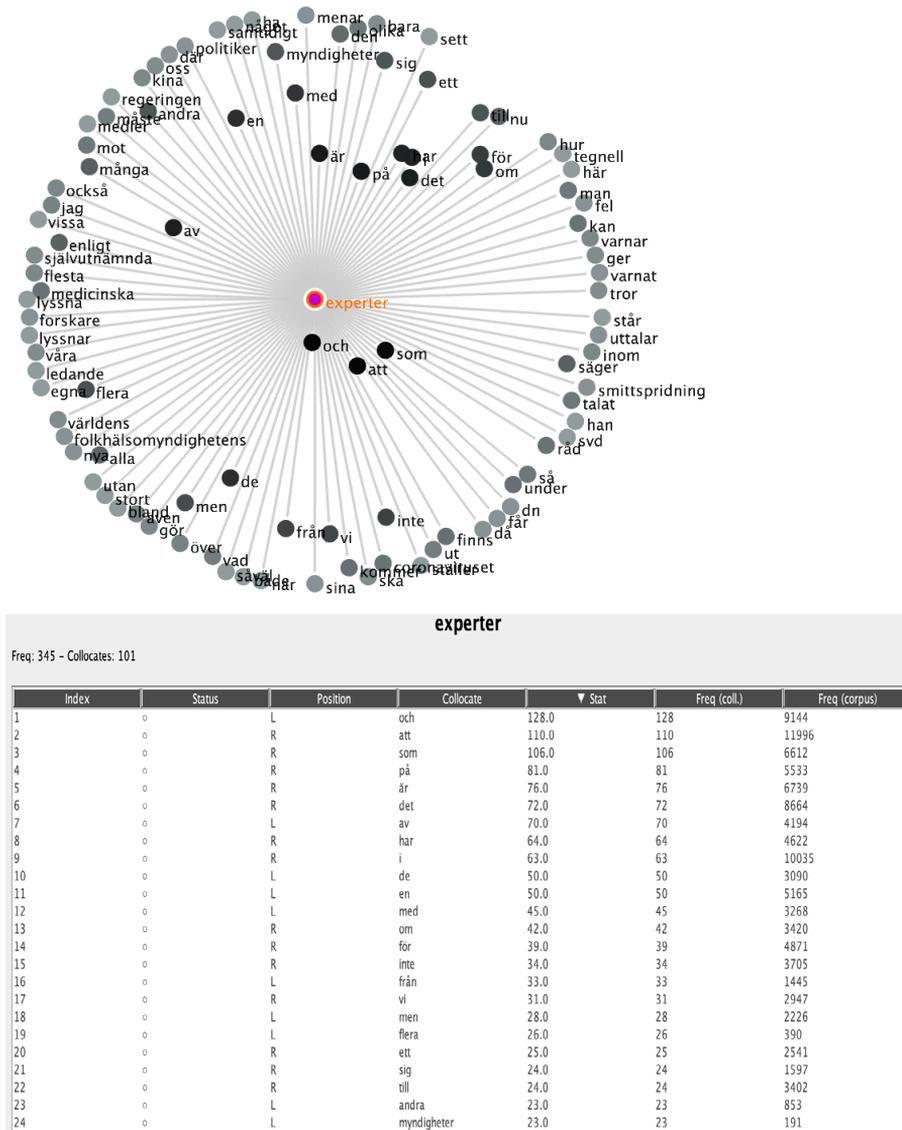


Figure 3: Collocates of *expert* (plural form) retrieved from Lancsbox

Before turning to the body of 30 texts from the corpus in which the expert’s role is negotiated, we will analyze two categories from the table 2 above, namely “self-proclaimed experts” (18 tokens) and “not an expert” (17 tokens).

All hits of *expert* with the specific semantic feature “self-proclaimed”, which reverses the word’s literal meaning, refer to persons with the allegedly false belief

in themselves as experts. In approximately half of the cases they are not directed towards any specific community of opinions with regard to the pandemic, but the other half are aimed at persons voicing criticism of the Swedish coronavirus strategy and thereby at least in parts disagreeing with the official policy. One noteworthy finding is that there is no single occurrence where an allegation of self-proclaimed expertise is explicitly directed towards those in charge of or advocating the Swedish strategy. Another noticeable detail in this regard is that in four of the cases, the allegation emerges from the state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell; yet another is voiced by professor of medicine Johan von Schreeb. One of these usages takes place in an interview where Tegnell answers a critical question from a journalist:

- (6) It has also been questioned why discouraging travel to northern Italy was not proposed until last Friday. But Tegnell opposes the criticism.
- There are self-proclaimed *experts* with no experience in the subject who believe that they know more than authorities who have worked with this for decades. (AB 09-03-2020)

Det har också ifrågasatts varför man inte föreslog en reseavrådan till norra Italien förrän i fredags. Men Tegnell motsätter sig kritiken.

– Det finns självutnämnda *experter* utan erfarenhet i ämnet som tror att de vet mer än myndigheter som har arbetat med detta i årtionden.

Another prominent piece of evidence arises from a column in DN with several ironic layers, where the author positions himself as a layman lacking profound knowledge about pandemics. Nevertheless, he recognizes the state epidemiologist as a real expert and contrasts him with *nyblivna* ‘brand new’ experts in the field of virus control, which is an ironic way of depicting these social actors as self-proclaimed experts:

- (7) By not following the example of many other European countries, state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell has almost been accused of public health treason. But according to my humble point of view, so far he has done exactly the right thing.

Despite the times of infection, I would, now that the thunder is roaring, rather hold his hand than all the brand new *experts* on how to counteract a certain virus. (DN 19-03-2020)

Genom att inte följa många andra europeiska länders exempel har statsepidemiologen Anders Tegnell snudd på kommit att anklagas för folkhälsoförräderi. Men enligt mitt lekmanamässigt ödmjuka synsätt har han än så länge gjort helt rätt.

Jag håller, trots smittotider, hellre honom i handen nu när åskan går än alla alldeles nyblivna *experter* på hur man motverkar ett visst virus.

Another case, unlike the ones quoted above, is more specific as far as the virus-controlling measures are concerned. The extract, originating from a text authored by an independent columnist for AB, explicitly addresses one of the measures that was taken in other countries but never introduced in Sweden – the general closing of primary schools. Here the criticism is directed partly at states imposing such measures and partly at self-proclaimed experts who call for even more stringent measures, presumably in Sweden:

- (8) Instead of locking in and protecting the weakest, the economies and people worldwide have now been shut down and locked up. Borders, workplaces and high schools have been closed. The young and healthy stay at home. The self-proclaimed *experts* cheer and incite: close the primary schools as well. (AB 23-03-2020)

I stället för att stänga in och skydda de svagaste har hela världens ekonomier och människor nu stängts av och in. Gränser, arbetsplatser och gymnasieskolor har stängt. Unga och friska stannar hemma. De självutnämnda *experterna* hurrar och hetsar: stäng grundskolorna också.

The second category to disclose here is the one called “not an expert”. This expert, just like the self-proclaimed expert, is a non-expert, but the word rather constitutes a self-designation that serves to hedge statements on the pandemic. The typical construction for the “not an expert”-expert can be paraphrased with a main clause succeeded by another main clause beginning with the contrastive conjunction *but*: “I am not an expert, but ...”. The label thus affects the illocutionary force of the statement and modifies its epistemicity. The construction might point to an interesting and to a certain extent paradoxical feature of the Swedish pandemic discourse: the acknowledgement of the expert’s elevated position on the one hand, and the desire to make claims about the expert’s highly specialized knowledge areas on the other. In extract (9) below, the author, a sports columnist commenting on the decision to cancel the subsequent ice-hockey season, uses *expert* three times, with the “not an expert”-interpretation applicable only in the first case. The second constitutes another use of expert with the meaning ‘self-proclaimed expert’, and the last one refers explicitly to “real experts”. The use of an attributive adjective *riktiga* ‘real’ modifying the meaning of the word could be interpreted as signifying a kind of semantic fluidity that is indicative of keywords (see Schröter 2015: 316).

- (9) To begin with, I must clearly point out that I am not an *expert* on pandemics. Social media are suddenly overflowing with *experts* on this subject matter who talk about what real *experts* and politicians should do now or should have done a long time ago. (Exp 16-03-2020)

Till att börja med ska jag tydligt poängtera att jag inte är någon *expert* på pandemier. Sociala medier är plötsligt överfullt av *experter* på området som talar om vad riktiga *experter* och politiker borde göra nu eller borde ha gjort för länge sen.

Other occurrences of self-negated expertise are performed without accompanying stance-takings on how to tackle the pandemic, as demonstrated in extract (10) below. Here, the manager of a Swedish soccer club comments on the question of whether the players, after having participated in a competition, should quarantine or not:

- (10) – But this is very difficult. We are no *experts* on how to deal with such a thing. (AB 17-03-2020)

– Men det är jättesvårt. Vi är inga *experter* på hur man ska tackla en sådan här sak.

An intriguing occurrence of *expert* is located in an opinion piece by the managing editor of the cultural section of Aftonbladet, Karin Pettersson (see extract 11). In this text she criticizes the managing publisher of DN, Peter Wolodarski, for expressing strong opinions on how to handle the pandemic in Sweden – he had pushed for a lockdown in his weekly Sunday column on March 13 (see Wolodarski 2020). The hedging is followed by a subsequent warning for those who “shout out” very strong opinions. The statement is to be interpreted not so much as evidence of the existence of a corridor of opinions, but rather as one of several attempts at defining an allegedly normal, reasonable position:

- (11) Let me make one thing clear: I’m not an *expert*. I do not have any own strong opinions about whether schools should be closed or kept open, or whether borders should be closed. I try, like many others, to understand the communication from the Public Health Agency, which sometimes appears unclear. [...] But what is not needed are strong voices that, on a very weak basis, shout out very strong criticism. (AB 17-03-2020)

Låt mig göra en sak klar: jag är ingen *expert*. Jag har inga egna starka åsikter kring om skolor ska stänga eller hållas öppna, eller om gränser ska bommas

igen. Jag försöker, liksom många andra, förstå kommunikationen från Folkhälsomyndigheten som ibland framstår som ottydlig. [...] Men vad som inte behövs är starka röster som på mycket svagt underlag skriker ut tvärsäker kritik.

5.3. Negotiating the role of the expert

We shall now consider some positions regarding the expert's role as they were voiced in 30 texts in the corpus. These pieces originate from all four of the newspapers analyzed and are in most cases authored by political commentators or columnists, or they are op-eds by actors explicating their stance towards the role of experts in the pandemic, as well as in society and politics at large. The subsequent analysis and observations are topically focused and hence move away from the focal points of the above inquiry, i.e. lexis and textual embeddings. The positions represented in the texts can be summarized along the lines of endorsement and support for an elevated expert position on the one hand, and skepticism and criticism against such a function on the other. These are displayed below in table 5. It should be underlined that the categorization along this line of conflict does indeed perform a simplification. One position assigned to the critical side, that experts must not trespass the boundaries of their own expertise, could just as well be interpreted as an endorsement of the expert's role, albeit accompanied with constraints. However, the general tendency that the debate on experts and their role in the pandemic seems to be centered around the positions identified below stands out as rather clear in the data analyzed.

Endorsement and support:	Skepticism and criticism:
Political decision-making in a pandemic should be guided by experts with profound knowledge.	The Swedish government has refrained from political decision-making and responsibility, and hides behind its expert agencies, first and foremost PHA.
The prominent role of experts in Sweden's policy-making secures a pandemic response without populist moves.	Experts have been given too much power in the course of the pandemic.
Evidence-based policy-making is opposed to (foremost rightwing) populism and authoritarian measures.	Politicians, not experts, are ultimately responsible for the pandemic response and for the political development generally, and should therefore spearhead policy-making.
Critical voices opposing the evidence-based pandemic response should pay more respect to established knowledge.	Experts should not, in their public commentary and advice, transgress the boundaries of their specific knowledge areas.

Table 5 (cont.)

Endorsement and support:	Skepticism and criticism:
It's important to distinguish real experts from self-appointed experts.	Experts arrive at different conclusions, and their advice can and should be questioned, even in a situation of severe crisis.

Table 5. Positions taken on the role of experts

As the points above illustrate, very different stances are taken with regard to the expert’s role. There are, as we have seen above, positions promoting a prominent status for experts in handling the coronavirus. In extract (12) the columnist even states that counterclaims from critics run the risk of causing more confusion and panic. These critics are here designated with the pejorative *förståsigpåare* ‘know-all’, with the literal meaning ‘someone who believes himself to possess knowledge about things that he knows nothing or very little about’.

- (12) Whatever I think about the actions of the government or the authorities, no matter how much I am in panic, I know for sure that all these contradictory messages and know-alls who overturn decisions only create even more confusion and panic. (AB 17-03-2020)

Vad jag än tycker om regeringens eller myndigheternas agerande, hur panikslagen jag än är, så vet jag med säkerhet att alla dessa motstridiga budskap och förståsigpåare som skjuter sönder alla beslut bara skapar än mer förvirring och panik.

Furthermore, there is another piece authored by a political commentator acknowledging the expert’s involvement in policy-making. The text warns against politicians engaging at a detailed level with the pandemic response, concluding with a comparison with the neighboring countries Denmark and Norway, which imposed more stringent measures than Sweden did (extract 13). Here the advice given by expert agencies is clearly separated from political action, these two parts of a policy-making process being depicted in a binary way:

- (13) The mass closures of schools, or more targeted relocations such as home-schooling, will certainly only be done after recommendations from expert authorities.
But there is a risk that it will be a political issue and that the current government will eventually succumb to the demands of the political opposition.
That would be downright bad.

Then it can be like in Denmark and Norway where the governments have exerted themselves so that they almost vomit. (AB 20-03-2020)

Masstängningarna av skolorna, eller mer riktade flyttningar av undervisningen till hemmen, ska visserligen göras först efter rekommendationer av expertmyndigheter.

Men risken är att det blir en politisk fråga och att sittande regering till sist dukar under för oppositionens krav.

Det vore direkt dåligt.

Då kan det bli som i Danmark och Norge där regeringarna tagit i så att de nästan kräks.

A few examples have already been disclosed above in this section; however, there are more hits indicating attempts to establish norms for allegedly appropriate or acceptable criticism. In extract (14) below the experts at PHA are compared to firefighters struggling to put out a fire – and critics portrayed as bystanders trying to give advice from a layman’s position:

- (14) There is a streak of mistrust and questioning of the Public Health Agency, the agency that houses the *experts* who are particularly competent about the spread of infections.

[...]

So why in the world do people whine so much about them? It’s a bit like people getting involved when firefighters try to put out a fire. (SvD 13-03-2020)

Det finns ett stråk av misstro och ifrågasättande av Folkhälsomyndigheten, den myndighet som hyser de *experter* som är särskilt kunniga på smittspridning.

[...]

Så varför i hela friden gnälls det så mycket på dem? Det är lite som om folk skulle lägga sig i när brandmän försöker släcka en brand.

Nonetheless, what is often omitted in such statements acknowledging the allegedly unique role of PHA and its experts, and simultaneously dismissing critical voices, is the notion of dissent within the scientific community. As could be seen above, there were noteworthy scientists, epidemiologists and virologists included, who took a critical stance towards the Swedish measures. Pierre (2020: 479) clarifies:

The debate on whether a less restrictive regime would be more efficient than a strict lockdown has also been intense among experts, politicians and laymen in Sweden.

The medical-epidemiologist community remains deeply divided on this issue, as shown by highly critical op-eds authored by more than 20 professors or senior physicians who have questioned the containment strategy designed by the PHA [...].

This notwithstanding, lines of reasoning such as in the extracts 12, 13 and 14 above rather seem to imply a rift between reasonable experts sharing one and the same position and panicking politicians. They also imply that countries deciding upon other measures than the ones imposed by the Swedish government had a less evidence-based policy than Sweden had.

On the other hand, there are also pieces of evidence for a different view on the expert. In (15), which forms part of an elaborated analysis carried out by a professor in political science, the argument is put forward that experts should not be in charge of making decisions since they do not always agree with one another, and furthermore they are not in the political position of conducting overall assessments. This piece constitutes a questioning of what was probably conceived of as a common position in the Swedish public debate on Covid-19:

- (15) It seems that some commentators, and possibly even politicians, have a naive belief that “*experts*” should rule. They ignore, firstly, the fact that *experts* do not always agree and, secondly, that there are many areas of expertise where the expert views of one area may conflict with those of other areas. Only the political system can weigh such conflicts against each other. (SvD 23-03-2020)

Det tycks hos vissa debattörer och opinionsbildare, och möjligen även hos politiker, finnas en naiv övertro på att “*experter*” skall styra. De bortser för det första från att *experter* inte alltid är eniga och för det andra från att det finns många expertområden där det ena områdets expertsynpunkter kan komma i konflikt med andra områdets. Endast det politiska systemet kan väga sådana konflikter mot varandra.

Here we shall emphasize that the word *experter* has been put in quotation marks, which is an indication of metapragmatic negotiation, the appropriateness of the word’s literal meaning being questioned and negotiated (see Spitzmüller 2013). This is but one example of implicit comments on the meaning of *expert*, which also points to a related phenomenon in the Covid-19 expert discourse: the strivings to define what constitutes real experts in order to distinguish them from other social actors. In the corpus there is one text dealing explicitly with the question of what defines a real expert. The author of the piece, the renowned science journalist at DN Karin Bojs, suggests that a search of the database PubMed can help sort out those who are not real experts; if the “expert” in question generates

a hit, then he or she can be considered a real expert. In this text, again, as is shown in extract (16) below, quotation marks are used to negotiate the word's meaning metapragmatically:

- (16) There are tools for deciding who is an *expert* and who is an “*expert*”. Information in scientific and medical matters can undergo quality assurance. Let me reveal some professional tips. (DN 22-03-2020)

Det finns verktyg för att avgöra vem som är *expert* och vem som är “*expert*”. Information i vetenskapliga och medicinska frågor går att kvalitetssäkra. Låt mig avslöja några yrkesknep.

6. Conclusion

This study embarked from the notion of the expert as a prominent social actor in the Swedish public discourse on the Covid-19 pandemic. By utilizing a mixed methods corpus-assisted research design it was possible to detect where the *expert* appears and how this denomination is discursively embedded. The expert turned out to be, in many cases, a Swedish expert and, to the extent to which such features formed part of the textual meaning, preferably a person drawing on knowledge from epidemiology, virology, pharmacology, or medical sciences in general. On the one hand, the expert appears as a prominent social actor in discourse, but he or she also performs a crucial task and exerts much influence in the actual process of policy-making.

When divulging social actors as they appear in the role of experts, there is a bias in favor of those who are sympathetic towards the official Covid-19 policy of Sweden, and, among them, those spelling out and justifying this policy as agency officers. This conclusion goes in line with scholarly observations made by Johansson / Vigsø (2021), Pierre (2020) and Ghersetti / Odén (2021). However, it does not entail the notion of a hegemonic situation in which deviating opinions are hardly noticed or are even silenced; on the contrary, the broad spectrum of social actors in the pandemic discourse emphasizes a plurality in terms of positions being voiced. The same can be concluded with regard to opinion pieces negotiating the role of experts. Different, and in some cases conflicting, perspectives and positions are frequent.

Nonetheless, several attempts at de-normalizing criticism of the Swedish epidemic controlling measures could be observed. Such discourse-regulative acts do not substantiate evidence for the existence of a narrow *åsiktskorridor*, but they are certainly indicative of a discursive bias, since allegations in the data of

someone not being a real expert were directed towards critics of the Swedish Covid-19 measures, and never towards the experts affirming this policy. Again, we can recall Spitzmüllers (2021) disclosure of how expertise is discursively established: the expert needs the layman in that he, quite simply, is dependent on the existence of an alleged opposite, a non-expert or a lay person. The process of constructing the layman in linguistic acts of positioning becomes apparent in the analyzed data. Further studies on this subject matter could widen the scope in this respect and provide valuable insights into constancies and discontinuities of metadiscursive positioning and construction of expertise in the Swedish Covid-19 debate.

Globally seen, what has been considered the Swedish experiment has been at the heart of the debate about strategies to tackle the pandemic. The time for evaluation and analysis post-coronavirus will come, and since the pandemic is also a discursive, linguistic phenomenon to such a large extent, a broad assessment of the Swedish way – as well as of other countries' crisis management – has to account for linguistic aspects, including crisis communication, patterns of argumentation, the influx of scientific concepts into public debate, and much more. This study is an early attempt to map out some features of discourse segments related to the role of experts and expertise in the pandemic. Besides providing evidence for how experts and expertise were endorsed and contested, and how allegations of defying an axiomatic ideal of adhering to expert knowledge were directed against critics of the Swedish strategy, it shows that the specific discursive roles of experts as social actors call for further analysis. The (discourse) linguistic engagement with the Covid-19 pandemic has probably just begun.

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