

The voices in older literature speak differently today

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When we read a text, we hear a voice talking to us. Yet the voice changes over time. In his new book titled *Poesins röster*, Mats Malm, professor in comparative literature at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, shows that when reading older literature, we may hear completely different voices than contemporary readers did – or not hear any voices at all.

'When we read a novel written today, we hear a [voice](#) that speaks pretty much the same language we speak, and that addresses people and things in a way we are used to. But much happens as a text ages – a certain type of alienation emerges. The reader may still hear a voice, but will not understand it fully and therefore risks missing important aspects,' says Mats Malm.

In his book, Mats Malm has chosen to focus on a number of examples from different time periods and language areas, and addresses a number of aspects of voices in poetry. In all studied cases, he shows how the voices of the texts have changed.

He spends one whole chapter analysing Swedish poet Georg Stiernhielm's poem *Hercules* from the mid-1700s, which is well-known among modern readers for its enjoyable language. The language was enjoyable also in the 1600s, but what the modern reader misses is that the language used was associated with bodily pleasures and immoral conduct.

'Back in the day, the language used in Hercules was also perceived as dangerous and even appalling. Stiernhielm and his contemporaries heard an entirely different voice than we do,' says Malm.

Thus, the reason why we do not perceive the language in a poem like Hercules as problematic is that our notions of morality and [language](#) are different today than in the 1600s. But the voices of poetry can also change when a new edition is published.

One example is Anna Maria Lenngren's poem Några ord til min k. Dotter, i fall jag hade någon, where it has been discussed whether or not the advice given in the text is expressed with irony. 'In several modern editions, the poem is clearly written with irony – it's almost sarcastic. But if we study the original text from 1798, a completely different voice emerges, despite the fact that the wording is the same. The explanation is that, compared to the modern edition, the original text had few exclamation marks and typographically marked pauses but a large number of semicolons, giving the text a peaceful and rational touch where the irony is more ambiguous.

In the book, Malm also addresses the fact that people often read texts aloud until the late 1700s, even when they were alone. So the recommendation to read older literature aloud in order to understand it better is given for good reason.

'We who are more accustomed to silent reading are not as sensitive to the tone of voice as people were in the past. We simply cannot hear the voice very well. But the voice of a [text](#) is always important, just think of all the smileys we have started using to add clarity to texts,' says Malm.

Mats Malm is also the author of the book *The Soul Of Poetry Redefined*.

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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