'Empty' texts or the backbone of professional practice? Value-texts from public authorities in Sweden

A defining feature of contemporary public authorities in Scandinavia and elsewhere is the production of texts labelled platform of values (Swedish "värdegrund", see attached image), core values or the like. Previous research has pointed to at least three factors contributing to the rapid increase in the production of these types of texts: an intensified interest in issues of ethics in the public sector; new forms of management and control; and the importance of external promotion of public authorities. These changes in the textual landscape as well as in professional practice form the background to the research project The archaeology of a new genre: Vision and values texts of public authorities in Sweden (financed by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond/The Swedish foundation for humanities and social sciences) which aims at gaining a critical understanding of these texts as social actions in the public sector. Our presentation will revolve around two themes. The first one has to do with the concept of critical as in Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g. Fairclough, 1993) and Critical Genre Analysis (Bhatia, 2015, 2017): our initial data of 230 'platform of values' texts from 2016 (again, see attached image), representing 154 different Swedish public authorities invited to a CDA/CGA inspired approach centring on 'soft' power and hegemonic control (cf. Mulderrig, 2011). However, two recently gathered sets of data – a focus group with senior HR officers and a quantitative survey to civil servants – point in a partially different direction: control is downplayed in favour of 'ethical' aspects, collective goal achievement, and ongoing dialogues. How does this affect our critical approach to 'platform of values' texts and practices? The second theme of our presentation is more text-oriented: we discuss how the positive values presented in 'platform of values' texts can be categorised and related to systems of values at other levels in society (cf. Wæraas).

Short biographies

Anders Björkvall is Professor of Swedish at the School of Humanities, Education, and Social Sciences (HumES) at Örebro University, Sweden. His research interests range from multimodality, social semiotics, and discourse analysis to the ethnography of artefacts and texts. Anders has also published in the fields of literacy and learning, often with a focus on children's semiotic uses of technology.

Catharina Nyström Höög is Professor of Swedish at the School of Humanities and Media Studies at Dalarna University, as well as guest professor at the Department of Scandinavian Languages at Uppsala University, Sweden. Her main research interest is written discourse, and previous research covers writing in school contexts as well as professional writing and text comprehensibility in the public sector. Other research interests, and themes of publications, are language planning and language policy.



'Platform of values' of the Swedish Geotechnical Institute