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Article

Boundary-work and social closure in academic recruitment: Insights from the transdisciplinary subject area Swedish as a Second Language

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Abstract

This article explores practices of evaluation in academic recruitment in Swedish as a Second Language (SSL), an expanding and transdisciplinary subject area. As is common elsewhere, Swedish academia relies on a tradition of external expert review intended to ensure a meritocratic process. Here, we present an analysis of 109 written expert reports concerning recruitment to 57 positions in SSL during 2000–20. Because SSL lacks institutional autonomy, and is spread across several sub-disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, the material encompasses experts with diverse academic backgrounds. The SSL reports are broadly characterized by qualitative assessment. In contrast to other fields, the SSL experts seldom use quantitative proxy measures. Instead, they mainly rely on received conceptions of the boundaries of SSL as a means of justifying their inclusion and exclusion of candidates. This dominant regularity consists of attempts to define and delimit SSL and its core research areas, to locate the candidates in a core-to-periphery scheme with respect to these boundaries, and to rank them accordingly. This mechanism of *social closure* serves to restrict access to SSL to candidates with qualifications that conform to the experts' own conceptions of SSL. As we show, the experts' internally ambiguous conceptions of SSL tend to be constructed in relation to their own scientific habitus and investments. Beyond evaluating applicants' possession of scientific capital, their distinctive style of reasoning around research qualifications and skills thus involves power-laden boundary-work, which leaves ample room for individual, yet habitus-specific arbitrariness.

Keywords: academic recruitment; practices of evaluation; Swedish as a Second Language; scientific habitus; boundary-work; social closure

1. Introduction

Recruitment is an integral part of academic life, and because it involves making judgments, it can serve as an illustrative example of how research agendas are produced, ordered and sustained, and how practices of evaluation become established and socially situated (Lamont 2009, 2012). In the research system that we explore in this article—Swedish academia—most universities are state-governed, and thus are subject to a constitutional law dictating that appointments to state positions must be based on objective criteria only, such as qualifications and skills (SFS 1994:260 1994). To ensure the realization of these meritocratic ideals, Swedish academia, like other contexts, relies on a tradition of using external expert review (e.g. Nilsson 2009; Gunvik-Grönbladh 2014; Hammarfelt, Rushforth, and de Rijcke 2020). For each advertised position, the hiring institution or the recruitment board appoints 1–3 external and independent expert reviewers, each of whom has the task of writing a report in which they evaluate and rank the candidates. The written reports, together with ensuing interviews and sometimes trial lectures, form the basis for the hiring decision. The experts base their reports on the formal criteria and requirements stated in the job announcement, but also—as we stress here—on the candidates' perceived profile in relation to the academic sub-field in question.

The strong emphasis on objective criteria is probably better suited for academic disciplines with a high degree of consensus about what should count as indicators of academic qualifications and skills. For example, when experts in Economics evaluate research qualifications, they tend to see the quality of scholarly work as residing not so much in the work itself, but rather in its publication outlets, as expressed in rankings and indexes of journals, which are conceived of as quantifiable proxy indicators of productivity and recognition (Hylmö 2018). This discipline-specific style of reasoning around research qualifications is widely accepted among scholars active in the field in different national contexts (e.g. Reymert, Jungblut, and Borlaug 2021).

Other disciplines or sub-disciplines may, however, be characterized by less standardized publication cultures and a lesser degree of consensus. Here, notions of quality and reward-systems may be less explicitly codified and be entangled with other priorities (see also Reymert, Jungblut, and Borlaug 2021). This will be exemplified in this article, where we examine practices of evaluation in academic recruitment processes within the subject area *Swedish as a Second Language* (henceforth SSL). As further discussed below, SSL is a relatively new and expanding subject area in Swedish academia. We term it a 'subject area' rather than a discipline because it lacks institutional autonomy. Correspondingly—and importantly—SSL is also transdisciplinary in the sense that it is spread across several disciplinary sub-fields in the humanities and social sciences, and is also populated by agents with diverse academic backgrounds. These circumstances make recruitment processes within SSL interesting to scrutinize, as they can make

visible the tensions arising when agents with differing academic backgrounds engage in the evaluation of research qualifications. While it is well known that disciplines tend to cultivate their own quality cultures (e.g. Lamont 2009; Nilsson 2009), little is known about the struggles and strategies that such cultivation entails in institutionalized yet transdisciplinary subject areas. Hylmö (2018: 144), for instance, claims that 'greater differences in background lead to actors with more heterogeneous scientific habitus'; that is, their practical sense of scientific reasoning may become less conformist and predictable (see also Langfeldt et al. 2020: 116). While most earlier studies take an interest in evaluation practices in well-established academic disciplines that are accorded high value, such as Economics, Biomedicine, and History (e.g. Hammarfelt 2017), we will give a detailed account of how evaluation is enacted and narrated in a less well-established and less valued subject area, in which publication cultures are also less well-known.

The objective of the present article is to account for disciplinary reasoning in SSL. We present an analysis geared towards discovering what Bourdieu (1991: 20) terms 'the crisscrossing censorship that represents the constitutive reason of the field'—in this case, the subject area SSL. Centering on research qualifications and skills, we use expert reports as an empirical inroad for probing the evaluation of candidates' qualifications. In doing so, we seek to disclose the logic according to which some candidates are preferred over others in the competition for academic positions, and the role of disciplinary boundary-work in the expert reports (cf. Hammarfelt 2017). To this end, we pose two research questions:

> RQ 1: What characterizes practices of evaluation of research qualifications and skills in SSL, and how do these relate to what has been found in previous research on academic recruitment?
> RQ 2: What decisive regularities are present in the SSL expert reports, and how might these be accounted for theoretically?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Practices of evaluation

The present study adopts an understanding of evaluation as a *practice* in the sense of it being the outcome of socialized agents acting in, and in relation to, value-laden spaces. Theorizing this logic, we draw on Bourdieu's sociology of science (e.g. 1975, 1991, 2004), in particular his thinking tools (scientific) *field* and (scientific) *habitus*.

For Bourdieu, science is a *field*, a demarcated subspace of society imbued with its own values, rewards, forms of capital and logic of functioning, and is populated by human agents as well as institutions that struggle over something that is recognized as being of mutual value and interest (e.g. Bourdieu 2004). The *scientific field*, for Bourdieu, is a locus of struggle over the monopolization of scientific authority and the distribution of forms of capital (Bourdieu 1975). Under certain conditions, sub-fields can be formed within the confines of a larger field. Mature academic disciplines provide a case in point and can accordingly be apprehended as sub-fields embedded within the scientific field (Bourdieu 2004: 64ff). It follows that the overarching scientific field is an assemblage of subfields—disciplines and sub-disciplines—each of which develops its own concepts, boundaries, and practices of evaluation (e.g. Lamont 2009; Nilsson 2009; Langfeldt et al. 2020; Reymert 2021).

At stake within such subfields is not only the accumulation of capital—that is, qualifications—but also the concomitant struggle to establish the value of such qualifications. Peers, ultimately, are at once colleagues and competitors for positions, research grants, and other assets (e.g. Bourdieu 2004). Any subfield is accordingly also a space of competition 'where agents or institutions who work at valorizing their own capital—by means of strategies of accumulation imposed by the competition and appropriate for determining the preservation or transformation of the structure—confront one another' (Bourdieu 1991: 6–7).

By Bourdieu's logic, the values that socio-historically have accrued to scientific fields and sub-fields are embodied within the socialized individuals—academics—who have learned to think and act therein. Hence, to say that 'a scientist is a scientific field made flesh' (Bourdieu 2004: 41) is to posit that social agents, through enduring inculcation, come to incorporate the values of the social worlds they inhabit and that dispositions thus vary according to disciplines. This is the chief insight captured by the notion of habitus, the 'embodied history' that social agents owe to their socialization in fields and sub-fields (Bourdieu 1981). A scientific habitus, then, is a system of durable professional dispositions that ultimately guide scientific thinking, reasoning, and practice (e.g. Hylmö 2018). Practice, Bourdieu posits, is an encounter between history internalized in bodies and history in objectified things (Bourdieu 1981: 313). Being relationally enacted, practices are born from the interaction between the values of fields and the values incorporated in habitus. Practices of evaluation accordingly arise when socialized agents, guided by a practical sense incorporated into their scientific habitus, act in conjunction with the fields to which they relate. This is not to suggest that negotiations about research quality are developed solely out of the encounter between embodied history and external field history. While scientific habitus inclines evaluators to reason and place judgment in historically probable ways, it is susceptible to change as novel forms of capital enter the evaluative practice. Durable, albeit not fixed, habitus is 'a system of open mechanisms that can be constantly subjected to experience, and by the same token transformed by these experiences' (Bourdieu and Chartier 2015: 57).

2.2 Reproduction and social closure

One of the most salient features of fields is the inherent tension they contain between newcomers and established agents (Bourdieu 1975, 1993), something that comes to the fore in practices of evaluation. Scientific fields and sub-fields constitute the social universes that job applicants—typically more junior social agents—seek to enter in the pursuit of reward-bearing positions. For them to be granted access, however, their qualifications must be favorably assessed by the expert evaluators who gatekeep entry to the fields (see also Lamont 2012).

Like all social agents, expert evaluators are products of history, shaped by their engagement with the scientific field as well as the path of their experience within their specific subfield. As senior scholars, they are by definition consecrated by their fields—recognized as legitimate agents of scientific

authority and therefore fit to assess those who seek access to their fields. Thus, broadly viewed, evaluators are selected to reproduce the field. More specifically, through their practices of evaluation, they reproduce their fields' inculcated views on scientific quality and similar matters (Lamont 2012: 207), ultimately by virtue of the power vested in their position to impose their system of preferences, in disguised, taken-for-granted forms on the deeds of newcomers (Salö 2017: 90).

While reproduction is not necessarily enacted deliberately, it nonetheless remains an important facet of practices of evaluation (Lamont and Molnar 2002; Lamont 2012). As Hylmö (2018: 200) notes, 'peer review is a central mechanism for the reproduction of thought collectives'. It follows that the regulation of access to scientific fields and sub-fields is rife with mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. To grasp such dynamics, Weber (1968) introduced the notion of *social closure* to denote the process by which social groups seek to maximize rewards by confining access to a controlled circle of eligible persons. At work here is the task of justifying the exclusion of ineligible outsiders as a means of monopolizing opportunities to pursue reward-bearing positions (Weber 1968: 342). While closure can operate within a system of outright discrimination (e.g. Brubaker 2015), the concept as such is designed to also encompass less dubious exclusionary processes. For example, stating that educational credentials or a certain degree is required for a particular job—the rule rather than the exception in the job market—is to restrict access to job opportunities to a limited circle of eligibles (Collins 1975; Parkin 1979: 44).

For Murphy (1988), Weberian closure theory resonates with Bourdieu's theorizing of the scientific field, which he sees as 'a special theory of closure—the analysis of the special case of the scientific field in terms of social closure' (p. 20). In the scientific field, like elsewhere, practices of monopolization and exclusion are often based on the requirement of possessing particular types of knowledge, and this is used to regulate access to fields and positions (Murphy 1988: 17). From the viewpoint of candidates, professional advancement hinges on the accumulation of forms of capital. Success depends on candidates' ascribed value vis-à-vis the field they seek to enter. Expert evaluators have a decisive impact in these processes of capital conversion, ultimately because they have the authority to exercise a form of censorship, affirming or denying that candidates' qualifications are valuable (Bourdieu 1975).

As we seek to highlight here, strategies of justifying closure are in one sense a part of expert evaluators' tool-kit. Yet, expert evaluators act not by adhering—calculatedly, rationally, or even consciously—to the rules of their fields. The strategies in their practices of evaluation are rather grounded on a practical sense akin to having a feel for a particular social game, and their scientific habitus incarnates that game (Lamaison and Bourdieu 1986). As Bourdieu states, 'One can speak of a game in order to say that a group of people participate in a regulated activity, an activity which, without necessarily being the product of obedience to rules, *obeys certain regularities*' (Lamaison and Bourdieu 1986: 113). Evaluators, then, are guided by a sense of the academic game that has been instilled in them through their long-term engagement with the type of scientific reasoning and quality judgment that pertains to their scientific field or sub-field. This logic becomes particularly palpable in the reasoning about a transdisciplinary subject area; as Murphy notes:

> In disciplines where there is no consensus concerning the acceptance of one all-embracing paradigm, there is struggle among groups to impose their preferred perspective upon the discipline and avoid subordination to a different perspective. (Murphy 1988: 18)

It is of great importance to our argument, then, that SSL is shared by several disciplinary sub-fields in the humanities and social sciences, and that it is populated by agents with differing backgrounds or paths of scholarly socialization, a state of affairs that stems from the historical formation of SSL.

3. Historical overview of Swedish as Second Language

SSL first made inroads into Swedish academia in the late 1960s. It emerged as a practical response to the rapid increase in migration that was taking place in Sweden at the time. Large numbers of adults and children needed to learn Swedish, and Sweden had no previous practical experience of working with second language teaching and learning, and limited scientific knowledge to build on (e.g. Hyltenstam 1990, 1997; Hammarberg 1992). These events, as well as the societal changes they brought about, offered Swedish universities important incentives to begin to invest in SSL. In the 1970s and 1980s, this burgeoning area came to engage a growing number of Swedish scholars, mostly with a disciplinary footing in General Linguistics, but also in Scandinavian Languages, and in other language disciplines (Hyltenstam 1990). Early SSL research tended to focus mainly on aspects of Swedish second-language acquisition, and was often preoccupied with 'practical and specifically Swedish issues' (Hyltenstam 1990: 206).

Two important historical milestones for SSL were its incorporation, after years of political struggle, into the Swedish teacher education programs in the late 1980s, and its inclusion as an independent school subject, alongside Swedish, in compulsory and upper-secondary education in the mid-1990s (Tingbjörn 2004). An important marker of that process was the establishment of the Institute for Swedish as a Second Language (ISA), at the University of Gothenburg (GU) in 1997, and the first doctoral program in SSL, founded at ISA a few years later. This continues to be the only program leading to a doctoral degree specifically in SSL. Doctoral dissertations on different aspects of SSL are, however, also produced at other Swedish universities, within programs in the fields of Bilingualism, Language Education, Scandinavian Languages, Swedish, Pedagogy, and Educational Science (see also Hedman and Lubińska 2022).

In the mid-1990s, Hyltenstam (1997) described SSL as a university subject without a solid institutional basis, which he argued hindered its expansion and knowledge accumulation. He conducted a small national survey showing that between 15 and 20 people were employed to work with SSL at Swedish universities at the time. Today, by comparison, more than 70 senior lecturers and professors work within SSL. Despite this expansion, SSL continues to lack institutional autonomy. It tends to form a more or less integrated unit within departments of Swedish/Scandinavian Languages, or departments of (Language) Education. In comparison to many other subject areas, there is high demand for senior lecturers in SSL across Sweden, and there are still few people with a doctoral degree in SSL. Accordingly, agents active in the SSL subject

area have diverse scientific backgrounds, which is vital to our argument here, as it explains the disciplinary breadth of SSL, which, by extension, also explains the different positions taken by the expert evaluators and the practical sense on which they rely in their evaluations.

4. Material and methods

For this study, we contacted the registrars at fourteen state-governed Swedish universities with a request for all expert evaluation reports written between 2000 and 2020 in connection with advertised positions in SSL. In Sweden, there is a tradition of so-called transparent governance, which means that all documentation sent to state-governed institutions must be registered, stored, and made available to the public upon request, in line with the so-called 'principle of public access to official documents' (Sw. *Offentlighetsprincipen*). Hence, the expert evaluation reports used in this study, as well as the decisions of the university appointment boards, are all *public documents*, a state of affairs that likely affects the way the reports are written, since the evaluators know that they will be available to the applying candidates and to others who may request them.

Our request resulted in 57 recruitment cases, advertised as positions in *Swedish as a Second Language*, or as positions in Swedish, Bilingualism, or Language Education, *with a specific focus on Swedish as a Second Language*. The majority, 44 (77%), of job announcements sought a Senior Lecturer (Sw. *universitetslektor*), seven (12%) an Associate Senior Lecturer (Sw. *biträdande lektor*), and six (11%) a Full Professor. These are the three nationally regulated positions in the Swedish academic system that require a doctoral degree (SFS 1993:100 1993). All but five cases contained two reports each, written by two independent experts, leaving us with 109 reports in total. The length of these varies widely (3–24 pages), the average being around 10 pages. 105 of the reports were written in Swedish or another Scandinavian language, while four were written in English,[1] a strong indication that SSL has a predominantly national focus.

As is common in Swedish academia, many of the external experts appear in several recruitment cases (see also Hylmö 2018). Hence, the total number of different experts was 59. Of these, 39 were women (66%) and 20 men (34%), which is reflective of the gender imbalance of the subject area in general. At the time of writing the reports, the majority held the title of either Professor or Associate Professor (Sw. *docent*).[2] As can be seen in Table 1, the experts have varying disciplinary backgrounds, the most common of which are Swedish/Scandinavian Languages, Bilingualism, or General Linguistics (in that order). Only two experts have a background specifically in SSL. Twelve of the experts are established scholars in one of the neighboring countries in the Nordic region.

Table 1. The experts' disciplinary backgrounds.

Swedish/Scandinavian Languages	22
Bilingualism	12
General Linguistics	7
Swedish as a Second Language	2
English	1
Finnish	1
Pedagogy	1
Natural language processing	1
Scholars active in one of the other Nordic countries	12
Total	59

In total, 231 candidates applied for the 57 advertised SSL positions: 184 women (80%) and 47 men (20%).[3] For each position, there were between one and 11 candidates, the average being four. This relatively low number of applicants points to the favorable job market in SSL. Around half of the candidates had defended their thesis less than two years prior to the application. Like the experts, they came from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. Only four held a doctoral degree specifically in SSL. Instead, the majority had a doctorate in Bilingualism, Swedish/Scandinavian Languages, Linguistics, or Language Education (in that order). There are also occasional applicants with doctoral degrees in Pedagogy, Phonetics, Literature, Finnish, English, German, Romance language studies, Semitic Languages, Korean studies, and Psychology. This diversity is something that many of the external experts comment on in their reports:

> Extract 1:
> The subject Swedish as a Second Language is new as a third-cycle subject area in Sweden. The number of people who have defended their theses in SSL is low, and it is therefore to be expected that the positions are sought by individuals with rather diverse backgrounds. (SU 2013, evaluator with a background in Swedish/Scandinavian Languages)

Most reports are structured in a similar way (see also Hammarfelt 2017; Hammarfelt, Rushforth, and de Rijcke 2020). They begin with a short description of the advertised position and the evaluation criteria, followed by a short presentation of each candidate. This is often followed by a judgment of whether or not the expert considers the candidate to be qualified for the advertised position and worthy of further scrutiny. Hence, this first step in the process of denying or granting access to the subject area is based on credentials and experience. Then comes a thorough description of the candidates, usually in alphabetical order. Each description contains information about the candidate's academic degrees, current and previous academic positions, research qualifications (with a primary focus on publications), teaching qualifications (with a primary focus on the total number of teaching hours and the types of courses taught), administrative qualifications, and other relevant skills. The description of each candidate commonly ends with a summarizing assessment according to the selected evaluation criteria, and a statement and justification concerning whether or not the expert thinks the candidate qualifies for the shortlist. The final section of the report is dedicated to a close comparison of the shortlisted candidates. Finally, the report often ends with a ranking of the candidates.[4]

While we do not have access to the evaluators' scientific habitus, we make the assumption that the reasoning manifested in their reports indicates the systems of durable professional dispositions that shape their scientific thinking, reasoning, and action. To be able to discern what characterizes practices of evaluation in SSL, we have used insights about evaluation practices in other disciplines as our analytical contrasts, with Economics providing a particular case in point (e.g. Hylmö 2018; see also similar approach in Hammarfelt 2017). Our main method of analysis has been to

read and reread the expert reports (cf. Hylmö 2018) and code them thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006). To facilitate this procedure, we used the QSR NVivo software for qualitative data analysis.

After noticing in the first round of readings that most of the SSL experts explicitly and extensively engaged in disciplinary *boundary-work* (e.g. Gieryn 1983, 1999; see also Lamont and Molnar 2002), and that this was often used as their primary evaluation device (see Results), we decided to focus on this in later readings. In similarity to Hammarfelt, Rushforth, and de Rijcke (2020) we thus focus mainly on how evaluation and disciplinary boundary-work is performed, enacted, and narrated in the expert reports. We also coded the experts' use of bibliometric indicators and 'markers of quality assessment' (Nilsson 2009: 44, our translation), that is, the specific words and descriptions that they used to denote and underline that certain qualifications and qualities were considered of high or low value.

4.1 Notes on ethics and reflexivity

Despite all the documents being public, in order to protect the integrity of experts and candidates we have decided not to use their names or specific pronouns when presenting examples from the material (see also Hammarfelt and Rushforth 2017). Certain details about their research focus and academic backgrounds have not been omitted, however, since this information is deemed relevant to the interpretation of the results. The extracts from the reports have been coded using an abbreviation of the hiring university, the year that the report was submitted, and a note on the evaluator's disciplinary background (henceforth referred to as EB).

It is important to clarify that both authors of this article have been active in SSL for a number of years, have doctoral degrees in Bilingualism, and appear as candidates in recruitment cases included in the material. We have both acted as appointed expert evaluators for academic positions, and the first author figures as an external expert in four of the cases included in the study. To a certain degree, the analyses presented here thus represent a form of self-reflexive analysis of the dominant evaluation practices in our own field. Our knowledge of SSL, its history, and the agents populating the area affords us a particular vantage point and expertise, which we use to analyze and discuss how notions of research qualifications and skills are constructed, ordered, and historically sustained within this situated subject area.

5. Results

5.1 Research qualifications assessment

As found in many other studies of academic recruitment (e.g. Nilsson 2009; Brommesson et al. 2016; Hylmö 2018; Hammarfelt, Rushforth, and de Rijcke 2020), the SSL experts tend to pay considerably more attention to the candidates' research qualifications than to their teaching qualifications and skills. The SSL experts' evaluation practices are mainly characterized by qualitative judgments, based on their close reading of the candidates' CVs and full text publications. The reviews tend to take on a narrative format, and the experts often give rather lengthy assessments of individual publications (see also Hammarfelt 2017; Hamann and Kaltenbrunner 2023):

> Extract 2:
> The thesis is a monograph, an independently written text, in which NN shows that s/he is well versed in international as well as Swedish second language research, and in which s/he uses various different methods to analyze the use of grammatical metaphors in text (national tests) written by mono- and multilingual adolescents in Sweden. (SU 2011, EB: Swedish/Scandinavian Languages)

In comparison with what has been found in studies of evaluation practices in Economics (Hylmö 2018; Reymert, Jungblut, and Borlaug 2021), and Biomedicine (Hammarfelt, Rushforth, and de Rijcke 2020), however, the SSL experts use strikingly few bibliometric proxy measures for research qualifications and skills. They often mention the total number of publications as an indicator of a candidate's productivity. Most of the experts also mention whether or not a candidate has published internationally, but they rarely distinguish between different international publishing outlets, or comment on the relative prestige of journals or book series. For most of them, it suffices to mention that a candidate has published internationally, without any need for further specification:

> Extract 3:
> NN's research production is large, and a significant number of the titles are published internationally, and in most cases these are peer-reviewed. (GU 2008, EB: Bilingualism).

The experts often also specify whether a candidate has been successful in receiving external funding, but they rarely distinguish between larger research grants and smaller stipends.

Notably, in comparison with Economics and Biomedicine, there is not a single mention of the *h-index*, a quantitative metric for evaluating the cumulative impact of a researcher's scholarly output and performance (Hirsch 2005), and few SSL experts even refer to numbers of citations. Journal rankings or impact factors are brought up in only three reports. What the few SSL experts in our data who pay somewhat more attention to bibliometric indicators have in common is that they have a background in Bilingualism and have published quite extensively in prestigious international journals. Langfeldt, Reymert, and Aksnes (2021) argue that reviewers who themselves would score high on bibliometric indicators tend to regard these as better proxy measures for research qualifications and to be more prone to use them. Furthermore, bibliometric indicators are often seen as more relevant for assessing the work of senior than junior academics (Langfeldt, Reymert, and Aksnes 2021; see also Reymert, Jungblut, and Borlaug 2021). This may partly explain our results here, since earlier studies of academic recruitment have often focused solely on the evaluation of candidates for the position of full professor. The SSL reports evaluating candidates for the position of professor include slightly more bibliometric indicators. They also focus more on evaluating the candidates as research persons (in terms of, for example, being 'successful and productive', 'sharp and original', or 'having a well-rounded research profile'), while the evaluation of candidates for the lectureships tend to focus more on individual publications and the candidates' research skills as reflected in them.

While having an international profile is ascribed value in the SSL expert reports, it is also clear that SSL is a nationally embedded field. The role assigned to *Swedish* accordingly

stands out as another important dimension in the assessment of the candidates' qualifications and skills. Relatively many of the experts, especially those with a background in Swedish/Scandinavian Languages and in General Linguistics, claim that to be eligible for a position in SSL, one's qualifications need to include a specific focus on the acquisition of *Swedish* as a second language and the characteristics of *the Swedish language* from a learner's perspective, or primarily be concerned with linguistic and didactic issues relevant to *the Swedish context*. A candidate whose profile falls outside such areas can consequently be dismissed as unqualified for the position, despite having other relevant and highly regarded research qualifications:

> Extract 4:
> Clearly, NN is highly competent in a field that is relevant to the subject area. [. . .] but in my opinion, one has to be able to demonstrate significant and comprehensive research that directly involves Swedish as a second language to be considered competent in this subject area. Relevant research that does not involve Swedish should also be weighed in, and can in principle be awarded significant weight, if one can also demonstrate significant research in the specific subject area. (SU 2017, EB: Linguistics)

The centrality of the Swedish language is also made relevant in relation to the evaluation of international qualifications. While Swedish universities normally pursue an agenda of actively increasing the internationalization of research and education, they also ascribe ample value to national matters and to Swedish (Salö 2017). In the SSL material, an international profile is accordingly seen as an asset only insofar as the candidate can *also* certify that s/he has sufficient knowledge of and interest in Swedish and the Swedish context.

Responding to RQ1, the SSL experts rely mainly on qualitative assessment in their reports. In comparison with current practices of evaluation in Economics (Hylmö 2018), or Biomedicine (Hammarfelt, Rushforth, and de Rijcke 2020), which are predominantly based on codified values and explicit rules, the corresponding practices in SSL seem rather to be based on the evaluators' dispositions and sense of the game (Lamaison and Bourdieu 1986: 114).

5.2 Boundary-work and social closure

In the absence of mutually accepted objective criteria to evaluate the candidates' research qualifications and skills, the SSL experts turn to other decisive value attributions. In the early SSL publications, the authors often claimed that the recent establishment of SSL in Swedish academia made it necessary to clearly define its focus and core content areas, and to demarcate it from other neighboring areas, such as Swedish (as a first language, e.g. Hammarberg 1992). Similar arguments are made in many of the expert reports:

> Extract 5:
> The advertised position is in Swedish as a Second Language at university level, and although there is always a need to discuss what pertains to a particular subject area, this is probably even more justified here, due to the relative novelty of SSL. We can probably all agree that the core of SSL includes a focus on the acquisition of Swedish as a non-native language, or as one of several mother tongues, as well as including a focus on the description of the Swedish language from a learner's perspective. (GU 2003, EB: Swedish/Scandinavian Languages)

> Extract 6:
> My evaluation starts from the assumption that Swedish and Swedish as a Second Language are two separate subjects that only partly share their knowledge fields. They are separate subjects with separate syllabi and knowledge content in school as well as in higher education. In order to be considered qualified for the position of Senior Lecturer in Swedish as a Second Language, the candidate therefore needs to demonstrate research and teaching qualifications within the knowledge area Swedish as a Second Language. (MIUN 2019, EB: Swedish/Scandinavian Languages)

The experts' statements of their viewpoints on these topics serve to lend transparency to their practices of evaluation. By using particular ways of reasoning, they 'tend to disclose themselves as *reasonable*' (Bourdieu 1991: 9), but in fact these viewpoints relate to the experts' previous investments and to other dispositional regularities that make up their scientific habitus. This constitutes a decisive feature of the mechanisms at play in the selection of appropriate candidates (Bourdieu 1975: 34). The task becomes particularly intricate here because, for historical reasons, few of the candidates in the material took their doctorate specifically in SSL. Therefore, the experts cannot use this as an objective requirement, or screening tool, for deciding who is eligible for an academic position in SSL (as they do in History, e.g., see Hammarfelt 2017). Consequently, many of them engage in extensive reasoning about how they define SSL, and what they regard as relevant or irrelevant qualifications based on this definition:

> Extract 7:
> [. . .] it can be difficult to draw a line between relevant and irrelevant subject areas in this context. I have chosen a wide conception of relevance, at the same time as I distinguish between different degrees of relevance. As most relevant, I deem a doctoral degree with a specific focus on Swedish as a Second Language, especially if it is also of a didactic character.[5] Thereafter comes a doctoral degree with an orientation toward multilingualism, with a preference for didactic perspectives. As less central, but still relevant, I regard linguistic doctoral degrees in other languages than Swedish and in Swedish as a first language. A doctoral degree in literature is regarded as irrelevant for this position. (SU 2018, EB: Linguistics)

This urge to 'draw a line between relevant and irrelevant subject areas' (Extract 7) is a paramount example of *boundary-work* (Gieryn 1983, 1999), in that it discursively constructs symbolic boundaries and contrasts in a way that renders them visible and explicit to the receiver (see also Lamont and Molnar 2002; Lamont 2012). In fact, the most dominant regularity found in the SSL reports is that the experts assess *if*, and *to what degree* the candidates' qualifications were acquired within what is constructed as the limits of SSL, and whether or not their research focus is sufficiently close to what is defined as SSL's *core* or *central* research areas. Importantly, many of the experts in the material produce similar arguments using a similar form of reasoning around boundaries, centrality, and relevance, and these are found in

Table 2. Examples of disciplinary boundary-work.

1.	'NN1 and NN2 meet the general requirements of having a doctoral degree and pedagogical qualifications from higher education, but they have no or only limited qualifications *in the central parts of the subject area*.' (GU 2003, EB: Swedish/Scandinavian Languages)
2.	'*Central areas to the research field* are the relationship between the individual learning a second language and the new language, the societal and language-political orientation, and an orientation toward education and teaching. The strongest qualification is, in my opinion, to have a dissertation that falls *within the bounds of the subject*.' (VXU 2008, EB: Bilingualism)
3.	'NN's work is a solid contribution to the newer research, but even if the research has a connection to Swedish as a second language, it is *not central enough* to make her/his research production relevant for the position.' (UU 2009, EB: from one of the neighboring Nordic countries)
4.	'Taking into consideration that the focus of the position is on Swedish as a second language, the theme of his/her thesis on attitudes to language and bilingualism as a social phenomenon *is relevant, although not central*.' (SH 2009, EB: Swedish/Scandinavian Languages)
5.	'Her/his research competence is mainly in the linguistic field, but the doctoral courses s/he has taken *include the central areas of the knowledge basis for Swedish as a second language*.' (MDH 2011, EB: Bilingualism)
6.	'The dissertation falls completely within the areas language learning and multilingualism; it thus deals with *typical and very central queries* (such as transfer and universal developmental stages) in international second-language research, and therefore has *direct relevance for the subject area Swedish as a Second Language*.' (LNU 2014, EB: Bilingualism)
7.	'NN1 is the most qualified researcher in terms of publications and total amount of external funding received, but NN2's research deals with topics that are *more central to Swedish as a second language*.' (LNU 2016, EB: Bilingualism)
8.	'Most of her/his later research is *not as central to the core areas of Swedish as a Second Language* as NN's latest research.' (SU 2016, EB: Linguistics)
9.	'At the same time, most of the research is *relatively peripheral to the position*, since it is about Turkish, not Swedish. That is not to say that it is irrelevant, however.' (SU 2018, EB: from one of the neighboring Nordic countries)
10.	'This area is relevant, but *not central to the position*.' (DU 2019, EB: Linguistics)

reports produced over the entire twenty years studied (see Table 2, italics added throughout):

What we see here are statements produced by dominant agents, all of whom are engaged in defining the boundaries of SSL by imposing their definitions and negative definitions of the subject area. The effect of this dominant practice of evaluation means that candidates possessing strong capital in terms of academic titles and extensive lists of publications are sometimes deemed unqualified for an academic position in SSL, because those qualifications are judged to fall outside the produced limits of SSL, or to be too far from its center:

> Extract 8:
> What is more problematic is to evaluate the extent to which the research falls within the subject area Swedish as a Second Language. [. . .] Parts of the research could possibly be categorized as a form of multilingualism research and are therefore relevant to the position. [. . .] The fact that NN has been judged to fulfill the qualifications needed to be appointed *docent*[6] in intercultural pedagogy proves that s/he is scientifically qualified within those research areas. However, these do not include Swedish as a Second Language. [. . .] In my evaluation, the research does not sufficiently deal with Swedish as a Second Language for her/him to be considered competent in this field. (KAU 2016, EB: Linguistics)

What the assigned SSL experts primarily do, then, is to assess the fit between the candidates' qualifications and their own conceptions of what constitutes SSL (see also Reymert, Jungblut, and Borlaug 2021, who noted a similar practice among experts in Physics in Norway). As a result, we argue, they put less emphasis on other ways of assessing research qualifications and skills, as they shift the focus from assessing research qualifications and skills in general to assessing whether they are produced 'within the remit of SSL'. Through this practice, one could argue that the focus on meritocratic evaluation is thus overshadowed by the priority of safeguarding SSL's boundaries. Here, following Weber (1968), declaring that a given candidate's research profile is peripheral becomes a way of justifying the exclusion of a perceived outsider (see also Lamont and Molnar 2002; Lamont 2012). This mechanism works as an instrument of social closure, in that it monopolizes advantages and ensures reproduction (cf. Murphy 1988).

However, although many of the SSL experts in the material use similar reasoning in the reports, internally they vary with respect to *how* they actually define and demarcate SSL. The judgments are thus rife with ambiguity. There are certain areas, such as second language acquisition, second language teaching/didactics, and the Swedish language from a learner's perspective, that most experts seem to agree are central to SSL, irrespective of their own disciplinary background and academic socialization. In general, they also agree on the areas deemed irrelevant to SSL, for example, onomastics, literature, syntactic theory, stylistics, and runology—to name a few of the subject areas explicitly defined as 'not relevant to SSL'. However, while some experts consider research on topics such as children's bilingual development and migration-related language variation to be clearly core to SSL, others regard these as relatively peripheral to SSL. Likewise, while some experts consider contrastive and cross-linguistic studies and studies on first-language acquisition to be relevant to SSL, others regard these research areas as too peripheral to enable a candidate to be considered competent in SSL. The experts thus differ with respect to how narrowly or widely they draw the boundaries of SSL. In general, experts with a background in Bilingualism, as well as experts whose own research focus would likely be categorized as peripheral to SSL by many of the experts in our material, often have a wider conception of what SSL is or could be. Nevertheless, once they are at the point of having to rank the candidates, even they fall back on the same way of reasoning around the subject in terms of core and periphery. Accordingly, candidates positioned more centrally within the SSL subject area are promoted over those positioned in the periphery:

> Extract 9:
> It could be argued that these publications are not strictly within the field of 'Swedish as a Second Language'. Having said that, I am against the policing of academic fields. [. . .] Therefore, I believe that NN1's research production can be included into the broader remit of Swedish as a Second Language.
> [. . .]
> Both applicants should be considered for the position of (Senior) Lecturer in Swedish as a Second Language. They both have the required research and teaching qualifications for this position. However, NN2 should be ranked first for the following reasons. First and foremost, his/her research is a perfect fit with the subject area 'Swedish as a Second Language'. In contrast, NN1's work is less centrally located within the field. (DU 2017, EB: Bilingualism)

Thus, not only does the evaluators' boundary-work hinge on the imposition of definitions and negative definitions, but a salient regularity in their reasoning is that the standpoints they take tend to correspond to their own positions and dispositions. It is here worth recalling that 'the dominant agents are those who have the power to impose that definition of science according to which the most accomplished science consists of having, being, and doing what they themselves have, are, and do' (Bourdieu 1991: 14).

The experts' internally ambiguous conceptions of SSL do not necessarily lead to disagreement over who should be ranked first. Only in eight recruitment cases did the two independent experts rank different candidates in first position, although they often disagree over the other positions. When two experts disagree, they usually come from different subdisciplinary backgrounds and have differing views regarding what is (most) relevant to the SSL subject area. The experts' internally ambiguous conceptions of SSL occasionally lead to opposing views regarding a candidate's eligibility for a position in SSL. For example, in Extract 8 above, one expert (with a background in General Linguistics) concluded that the candidate, an associate professor in intercultural pedagogy, was not eligible for a position in SSL. The other expert (with a background in Bilingualism), however, concluded that the candidate was indeed qualified for the position:

> Extract 10:
> NN is well qualified for the advertised position, especially in terms of research production. His/her focus on Koreanology and race and migration studies is relevant for working as a Senior Lecturer in Swedish as a Second Language. (KAU 2016, EB: Bilingualism)

Responding to RQ2, then, the most obvious regularity present in the SSL expert reports consists of attempts to produce and delimit the boundaries of SSL, to locate the candidates on a scheme of core-to-periphery with respect to these boundaries, and to rank them according to this logic. This mechanism of social closure tends to overshadow other ways of assessing the candidates' research qualifications and skills.

6. Discussion and implications

Whereas earlier research on practices of evaluation in academic recruitment has studied mostly well-established academic disciplines, we have here focused on practices of evaluation in a relatively new, expanding and transdisciplinary subject area in Swedish academia, and on how processes of evaluation and notions of research quality are enacted and narrated within it. As the analysis has revealed, the SSL experts' practices of evaluation are mainly characterized by qualitative assessment, in the sense that scientific quality is seen as residing, as it were, within the research as such, rather than in the outlets where it is published. This is similar to what has been observed also in more established disciplines in the humanities, such as History (e.g. Hammarfelt 2017), German Studies (Hamann and Kaltenbrunner 2023), and Literature (Nilsson 2009). In comparison with expert evaluators in Economics (Hylmö 2018) and Biomedicine (Hammarfelt, Rushforth, and de Rijcke 2020), however, the SSL experts rarely use bibliometric indicators as proxy measures for research qualifications and skills. They give little attention to the ranking of journals where the candidates' work has been published or to the recognition they have received in other contexts. Rather than upholding such distinctions, the reports reveal other regularities of decisive value attributions, the most significant being whether or not they consider the candidate's research focus and research qualifications to lie within the envisioned boundaries of SSL and sufficiently close to its core. The experts thus primarily engage in demarcating the field (cf. Bourdieu 1975; Gieryn 1983, 1999) and seek to guard the points of access to desirable positions within the SSL sub-field (cf. Brubaker 2015: 36). Accordingly, we view this tendency as a mechanism for creating a justifiable pretext for excluding applicants deemed ineligible (Weber 1968: 342). Similar processes of boundary-work have also been observed to some extent in previous studies of academic recruitment (e.g. Hammarfelt 2017, in History and Economics; Reymert, Jungblut, and Borlaug 2021, in Physics), but here we have given a more detailed account of how this boundary-work is accomplished, in an area in which neither codified bibliometric indicators (as in Economics, e.g. Hylmö 2018), specific research competencies (as in Biomedicine, e.g. Hammarfelt 2017) nor PhD-training (as in History, ibid.) can easily be used to separate insiders from outsiders. Having said that, while the expert reports tend to have a great impact on the final decision (e.g. Levander 2022), it must be added that they constitute but one piece of the overall recruitment process. Our sole focus on the expert reports is thus a limitation of the study—but also an invitation to future research. Age and gender dimensions are, likewise, additional components that would be worth inquiring further in the power-laden processes of social closure explored here (e.g. Reay 2004).

The insight that academic recruitment is vested with forms of power and control should not surprise anyone inclined toward understanding academia from a Bourdieusian vantage point. On the contrary, it aligns well with Bourdieu's view of academia as a locus of struggle rather than a unanimously recognized system of norms and values (Bourdieu 1991). As we have argued accordingly, the act of appointing the external experts assigns them the authority to regulate access to the area and to define what should count as measures of research qualifications and skills within it. Practices of evaluation thus illustrate how dominant agents hold 'a volume of capital sufficient to enable them to wield *power over the capital* held by other agents' (Bourdieu 1991: 13)—in this case the job applicants. Admittedly however, a potential shortcoming of Bourdieu's conflict-infused framework is that it risks underestimating the 'morals and manners' of evaluators, who

may well wish to grant privilege to the meritocratic ideals of academia rather than to simply reproduce their own sub-fields and interests (Lamont 1992; see also Hylmö 2019). Yet, while Bourdieu's view undeniably runs counter to the idea of a peaceful 'scientific community', it must be stressed that he conceptualizes academic life as a *regulated* struggle—not as a site of head-to-head battle between agents with conflicting self-interests (Bourdieu 2004: 62–71).

Seen in this way, the view of expert evaluation as a purely bureaucratic affair, void of social and institutional conditions affecting the involved agents (Bourdieu 1981: 312), is naive at best. Whereas social closure is a broad mechanism for controlling access to academic positions and resources, our case pinpoints intra-field closure (Murphy 1988: 17). The construction of SSL's boundaries and the designation of the candidates on a core-to-periphery scale with respect to these boundaries is a way of justifying the exclusion of ineligible candidates. Hence, candidates whose profiles do not accord with the experts' own ideas of what is central, relevant, and desirable in SSL can, purportedly, be excluded on rational and legitimate grounds, despite their having strong research qualifications and skills in other regards. Within the Bourdieusian framework utilized here, such practices of evaluation do not adhere to rules, but unfold within a game of regularities, where judgments are produced in regular ways (Lamaison and Bourdieu 1986: 114).

We are not suggesting that the mechanism of closure is enacted intentionally and deliberately. Rather, we view it as a logical outcome of the experts' practical sense, acquired through their long-term activity within the SSL subject area. Despite coming from different academic backgrounds, the SSL experts seem to have developed similar practical senses of what needs to be evaluated and how this ought to be accomplished; in short, they have developed a shared practical sense of how the academic game is played. However, while most of the SSL experts use this distinct mode of evaluation, and produce a similar form of reasoning, they vary internally with respect to how they practically define SSL and construct its boundaries. As shown, the experts tend to favor conceptions of SSL that conform to their own scientific habitus, thereby reproducing their sub-field's inculcated views on what is academically most relevant. Hence, they utilize their ascribed power to impose a definition of SSL that mirrors their own investments and the priorities inherited from their sub-fields (cf. Bourdieu 1991: 14). Correspondingly, experts with a background in Bilingualism maintain a broad conception of SSL that includes various aspects of bilingualism/multilingualism, experts with a background in Swedish/Scandinavian Languages foreground the centrality of Swedish, and experts with a background in General Linguistics stress the importance of having a linguistic research focus. The experts' scientific habitus also affect their inclination to use bibliometric indicators as proxy measures for research qualifications and skills. These results thus highlight the important role of the processes behind the selection and appointment of the expert evaluators, something which stands out as a major topic for future research (see also Langfeldt and Kyvik 2011).

The SSL experts' construction of the subject area as clearly separable from other neighboring research areas also needs to be understood in relation to its institutional history. The early proponents fought hard for SSL to be recognized as a subject area in its own right, separate from Swedish, both at university level and within compulsory and secondary education (e.g. Hyltenstam 1990, 1997; Tingbjörn 2004). Hence, the SSL experts' strategies to protect these boundaries are probably related to their worries about what might happen to SSL if this constructed division were to be blurred or dissolved. Another reason might be the great educational expansion of SSL over the last twenty years, and thus the need for candidates who are trained in SSL and are able to teach it at university level. Nonetheless, it is always part of the logic of social closure that the exclusionary processes employed are perceived as necessary and inevitable by those who use them (Weber 1968).

For the SSL candidates, the dominant practice of evaluation revealed here means that the assessment of their capital resources may differ greatly from one expert evaluation to another. A central problem for them, then, is the difficulty of predicting their chances of being hired, as the criteria on which the experts base their evaluations are neither transparent nor objective (as required by the constitutional law). This tendency is also problematic because the work of the evaluators is implicated in shaping 'the social definition of positions and the rewards that are attached to them' (Brubaker 2015: 41); hence, those who are selected for a job because their profile matches the evaluator's preconceptions of the core and periphery of the subject area will later go on to evaluate others, reproducing the same arbitrary boundary-work in their practices of evaluation (cf. Lamont 2012). We have evidence of this in our material. There are individuals who figure both as candidates and as expert evaluators—first being subjected to the effects of the dominant evaluation practices in SSL and then later employing them in their own evaluation reports.

Importantly, we do not suggest that these practices of evaluation are unique to SSL. Rather, access to, and hence reproduction of, a given field will *always* involve social closure. This is also the case in fields where proxy measures outweigh professional judgment. The burning issue is how differences across fields unfold as distinct logics in the practices of evaluation. In Economics, for example, it would seem that the power to produce social closure resides more within the field as such, and the role of the evaluator is to execute the logic set by the field in ways that do not allow much room for arbitrariness. Having published in key, top ranked journals in Economics, for example, suffices for a candidate to be recognized as an insider to the discipline (Hammarfelt 2017). In SSL, on the other hand, the lack of field-based control and regulation makes practices of evaluation more reliant on the dominant agents' professional judgment, which opens up for arbitrariness as a window of opportunity for social closure.

The pressing issue is how the power to produce social closure should be regulated within a system founded on merit and skill. While acknowledging that objectivity may well be a fiction in struggle-laden settings where agents essentially work to valorize their own capital (Bourdieu 1991: 6–7), we first and foremost insist on the value of seeking to discover the decisive regularities of the censorship at play. Our own position is not that SSL ought to mimic or endorse the proxy-laden practices of evaluation prevalent in many other fields, and we do not disregard the value of allowing academic workplaces to have a say—formally or not—in recruitment processes. At the same time, however, we maintain that the individual, yet habitus-specific, arbitrariness found in the SSL expert reports creates a situation where perhaps too much power is given to the individual experts, and too much trust is placed in their professional judgment. A responsible use of

some bibliometric indicators (e.g. the indexing and ranking of journals and books, citation numbers, and perhaps altmetrics) could arguably counterbalance the power to only reproduce the subject area. Such indicators do say something about the candidates' productivity, recognition, and other indices of symbolic capital, and could, therefore, supplement the experts' in-depth readings of their work. Moreover, distinguishing only between national and international publications, or peer reviewed and non-peer reviewed publications, as dialectical oppositions, overlooks the fact that some outlets are more demanding and prestigious than others.

The most important conclusion to be drawn from the results of our analysis is, however, the importance of fostering reflexivity around practices of evaluation, especially in newer, expanding and transdisciplinary subject areas. It is important to make evaluators aware of their own practices of evaluation and the strategies unfolding within them, and to find ways of reducing the degree of ambiguity. In SSL, we encourage discussions about what constitutes research quality within the area, apart from having a research focus and research qualifications that lie within one's own envisioned boundaries of the subject. A reflexive understanding of the social mechanisms of monopolization and exclusion in expert evaluation, we argue, has purchase in the project of reinvigorating meritocracy in academia. As Murphy puts it:

> Cultural theorists cannot avoid seeing their own strategies, as they perceive the strategies of others—in terms of usurpation and subversion, monopolization, exclusion, and conservation—in short, in terms of closure. (Murphy 1988: 38)

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Notes

1. Please note that for this article, the examples that were not originally in English have been translated into English by the first author.
2. In Sweden, *docent* (~Associate Professor) is an academic title not a position, the second highest in the academic system.
3. Please note that this does not indicate a number of unique individuals, since many of them appear in several recruitment cases.
4. Sometimes the guidelines instruct the experts to form and motivate a shortlist, but to refrain from ranking the candidates, thus allowing the appointing institution more discretion for decision-making.
5. Note that this position was advertised as "Senior lecturer in Swedish as a Second Language with a didactic orientation."
6. See footnote 3.

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