

On Danish and Swedish Numbers

It is a fact well-known to most Swedes that have enjoyed Danish culture, that the Danish number system is *jätteforvirrende*. I can assure you, however, that there is some sort of logic to it.

For readers unfamiliar with Danish and Swedish numbers, these are the numbers from 1 to 9 along with the multiples of 10 as they are written in Danish, Swedish, and English.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Swedish	en, ett	två	tre	fyra	fem	sex	sju	åtta	nio
Danish	en, et	to	tre	fire	fem	seks	syv	otte	ni
English	one	two	three	four	five	six	seven	eight	nine

	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90
Swedish	tio	tjugo	tretio	fyrty	femtio	sextio	sjuttio	åttio	nittio
Danish	ti	tyve	trediv	fyrre	halvtreds	treds	halvfjerds	firs	halvfems
English	ten	twenty	thirty	forty	fifty	sixty	seventy	eighty	ninety

Note that all multiples of 10 up to 100 (with the exception of 10 and 20) are in Swedish just written as a number between 1 and 10 followed by the *tio* suffix.

Let us as an example consider the number 52. In Swedish, this number is written *femtitvå*. Add some dashes to that and you get *fem-ti-två* – literally *fifty-two* or even *five-ten-two*: five tens plus two. In Danish, the number 52 is written as *tooghalvtreds*, or with dashes: *to-og-halvtreds* – literally *two-fifty*. Note that in Swedish, numbers are written left-to-right (as in English), e.g., *femti-två*: 50-2, whereas in Danish, numbers are written right-to-left (as in German), e.g., *to-og-halvtreds*: 2-50. By now, you might complain: “*The Danish way is clearly not as clean as the Swedish one! How is ‘halvtreds’ (50) even connected to ‘fem’ (5)?*”

Let us take a further look at the Danish writing of the number 52 before we throw the language away and declare Swedish the ultimate Scandinavian language for counting numbers below 100. The number *to-og-halvtreds* can actually be reduced further. If we translate *halv-treds* to English a bit literally, we get *half-treds*, whatever a *treds* is. Looking closely, we can see that we also have a half *fjerds* (70) and a half *fems* (90).

The key for understanding all of this is the old Danish word for a number of 20 (like the word *dozen* in English denotes a number of 12): *snes*. We can now see that the number 60, *treds*, actually is a shortened form of *tredje snes*, meaning *third snes*: 3 times 20. The number 50, *halv-treds*, is but half a *snes* from the third *snes*, and so we see that *halv-tredje snes*, *half third snes*: a half *snes* until the third *snes*. And so we see that the number 52, *to-og-halv-treds* is actually just *two and half third snes*.

In the light of this amazing, new discovery, you might be thinking that the Danish number system is a bit odd or archaic since nobody counts anything in *snes* anymore. If you think so, I will gladly agree with you. The Danish language has quite a few antiquities hidden in plain sight – sometimes it’s a bit of a museum – but more on that some other time.

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P.S. Den alternativa titeln til denna text var “Hur fan räknar de i Danmark?”