International aid organisations, voluntary associations, social science and neo-liberal reform programmes have in the last decade turned out to use more or less the same vocabulary. Buzzwords such as ‘empowerment’, ‘participation’, ‘mobilisation’, ‘civil society’, ‘capacity building’, ‘local knowledge’, ‘community-based’, ‘ownership’ etc. convey in different ways emancipatory ambitions to involve citizens or beneficiaries of aid to more actively take part in decisions and policy-making, and to share power and responsibility. In this chapter I will discuss some of these words in their use as organisational cultural capital and moral emblems.

The chapter is organised in three parts. It starts with a general discussion of the moralisation of development discourse and of the ambiguous nature of policy language. This is followed by a presentation of some concepts pertaining to the overarching relations between developers and their assumed beneficiaries. Finally, I will discuss concepts denoting the hopefully emancipating nature of the involvement of beneficiaries in development activities.

The terminology and linguistic forms of international development is increasingly homogenous, but the uses and readings of certain terms always articulate with national cultures, often in revealing ways. Therefore, reference will mainly be made to the Swedish aid discourse, though recognising that it is heavily influenced by an international language of development. An attempt will be made to trace the ambiguities of meaning of some terms that allow seeming political opponents to share the same discursive tools, and to identify how the terms reflect basic underlying notions of differences in the distribution of knowledge, agency and moral worth.

Here, the definition of morality used should not be taken as normative in itself. The chapter attempts to make morality an object of a distancing ‘epoché’ (cf. Husserl 1913/1949: 63). I will take as my point of departure the idea that what is moral is what is socially constructed as moral. This is nothing unexpected in anthropology, but still needs to be said as most of what is written on the topic of morality is written from a moralist standpoint.

I will also leave aside the issue of how efficient the motivational force of moral language is, i.e. whether moral terms or judgments themselves have a force to motivate the believers also to act on them. I am not so much concerned here with whether contemporary developmentalists are being moved to ‘act good’ by certain precepts, nor with how they situationally use moral exhortations to address particular others, or make moral judgements about the latters’ behaviour. Instead, I am interested in the capacity of language to convey a favourable impression about the speakers’ own moral identity, and mainly concerned with collective, organisational speakers. Morally loaded terms are mobilised to give accounts for action, to claim positions and present identities. Such claims demand an audience. Hence the notion of intersubjectivity enters, a necessary and defining element of culture. Claims are meaningless if they do not resonate with the precepts of the audience. In traditional ‘moral science’, the social processes forming moral positioning is relatively underelaborated.
Morality is seen as based on either universal, natural rules of morality or on the rational deliberations of an autonomous individual over what is right or wrong in a particular situation. However, at least for analytical purposes, morality can also be regarded as socially constructed and historically and culturally contingent. Morality is both expressed in and reproduced by language use.

**Moralism and development**

Notions of morality are central to activities of international development. Anthropologists have long analysed the role of Christian mission in preparing ground for colonialism. Reforms of personal morality, body discipline and time handling were part of western expansionism. Similar aspects are presumably relevant to current interaction between donors and receivers of international aid, but have largely disappeared from official organisational discourse, which has become increasingly sensitive to accusations of desultory ‘othering’. Morality has taken on a new clothing, expressed in calls for the development of ‘social capital’, ‘responsibility’, ‘trust’ and ‘agency’, even if the moralising dimension of such talk is easily concealed by the fact that bureaucratic culture defines itself as value neutral. There are both similarities and differences between missionary discourse on e.g. Africa and modern, secular development discourse. As Karp (2002) notes, the differences mainly relate to how explicit the moral coloration is. For example, ‘discipline’ in colonial rhetoric has its correspondence in the idea of ‘social training’ and the ‘development of social capital’, e.g. to create trust, trustworthiness, social commitment and similar values as necessary parts of development work. Much development work is in itself still focussed on transforming the individual, not only in terms of knowledge and skills but also morally, as a way of transforming society. With the breakthrough of the ‘good governance’ discourse and the increased importance of NGOs in international aid, the scope is widened for explicitly normative frameworks of interaction. The distinction between missionary/religious activities and ‘secular aid’ is not all that clear, particularly when, as in Sweden, mission organisations channel substantial parts of the bilateral help.

In Karp’s analysis, development discourse ties up with orientalist and colonialist thinking by the way it defines the ‘other’ in terms of agency, morality and personhood. Yet, he argues, it has a particular twist by doing so by implications and assumptions rather than by outspoken stereotyping. Modern development discourse works not by simply exoticising the ‘others’ but by defining them as exceptions to the universal rules that govern human history.

> Development discourse [...] can not explicitly exclude or marginalize the very agents whom it addresses and strives to transform. Instead it defines the subjects of development as exceptions whose very exceptional nature is the problem that development theory seeks to understand and development practices seek to transform. (Karp, 2002)

The truth of this solidifies with the increased awareness of the moral hazards of discourse itself, leading to a decreased use of terms which are explicitly denigratory. However, images of differences in moral quality are important explanatory assumptions in the interpretations that various ideologies offer of patterns of history – ‘blaming the victim’ is a widespread temptation. It is a realistic worry that older master narratives of development discourse, as well as more popular versions of an orientalising cultural heritage, may remain a silent potential backdrop to modern talk of international cooperation.

The social field of development work actualises moral issues at a number of levels. Staff who in their daily work embody the interface between international bureaucracy and local norms
are classic carriers of moral dilemmas. Moralised interpersonal conflicts evolve over
trivialities in everyday encounters with representatives of unfamiliar social settings, and in the
structurally unequal situation of expatriate ‘helpers’ with local counterparts of various
positions, around the nature of the exchange and of the involved roles. Is the aid worker a
solidaric friend, a protective patron or a bureaucrat with disinterested integrity? Are people
givers and receivers or equal partners (cf. Eriksson Baaz 2005)? Does the client or partner
claim human rights or the status of a deserving case for alms? Perceived failures to change
may be explained by donors or receivers by lack of morality in the counterpart. To qualify as
good receivers, recipients may have to adapt to moralised schemes involving demonstrations
of e.g. self-restraint, humble behaviour, time consciousness, develop-mindedness, eco-
awareness or freedom from sexism. People involved in such encounters relate to each other as
individuals, but also as representatives of macro-level categories.

The other obvious level where moral discourse in development work is actualised is the one
of organisational debate and text production. Development organisations are prone to
mobilise moral language. They are public organisations, supported by taxes rather than direct
payments from consumers. Their benefit to the taxpayers is formulated largely in moral rather
than material terms (Hannigan and Kueneman 1977), even if Swedish legitimating rhetoric
increasingly emphasises ‘enlightened self-interest’ as a supplementing reason for Sweden to
engage in programmes for global development. This can for example be seen in ‘Partnership
for Africa’ (1997) and ‘For a Just World without Poverty’ (2002), two major policy-
elaborating parliamentary commission reports.

Contested buzzwords and the rhetoric of development

‘Development discourse’ as a general category comprises many different kinds of utterances,
ranging from individual statements on an ad hoc basis during the work in the organisation to
carefully authored texts outlining a policy or presenting the organisation to various audiences.
At the interpersonal level, speech is generated as we talk along. One can analyse the functions
of such spontaneous improvisations along different dimensions. Speech both pushes various
instrumental goals, describes the world and states something about the speaker. These aspects
do not exclude each other but exist simultaneously. The degree of conscious and reflexive
deliberation over the language choices involved in interpersonal talk is somewhat
problematic, even if the speaker at some level is always adapting to the audience.
A reflected use of words is a more unquestionable characteristic in policy text production and
organisational self-presentations. The authorship for a policy document is not always easy to
pin-point, since in many cases the document is created by a long series of consultations and
negotiations. Similarities in the vocabularies and basic arguments with what is found in other
documents, in similar organisations within the same field, or with the public debates of the
surrounding society arise out of conscious organisational strategising in relation to what are
the hot issues of today. They may also arise from individual strategies by the participants in
the authoring process to perform as timely, informed and moral persons to beneficiaries,
clients, partners and taxpayers. The report as a final product both reflects some of the
discursive fads of its time, and functions as a kind of normative model, to which subservient
organisational levels and also individuals may adjust their vocabularies.

In these performances, ‘buzzwords’, ‘keywords’ or ‘fad-words’ appear to play a particular
role. Many external observers as well as staff members have noted the predilection found in
Sida, the Swedish government authority dealing with international aid, for catch-words which
follow each other in a steady stream, always promising a radical break with whatever is seen
as a problem of former policies. (In fact, this seems to be an established part of the
organisation’s self-image). The slogans tend to change over time with political exigencies. As
all political rhetoric, they are abstract in the sense that they allow for extended interpretation and multi-layered references, based on the need for enrolling large support by linking specific issues to encompassing programmes. Arguments about their vagueness or difficulties of definition are common. They are words such as ‘participation’, ‘empowerment’, ‘partnership’, ‘sustainable development’ and ‘integrated rural development’. Some emanate from the idiom of public and media discourse, others from the international development lingo, yet others from the applied sub-branches of varying disciplines. Social science is by no means immune to the temptation to adjust to fashionable public debate, in order both to get financed and to appear socially and morally relevant. Surprisingly enough, what is not always evident to those who take an interest in development discourse is the close parallels between the terms applied in international aid and those used in social work. Some of them abound in social science and in radical politics of recognition and identity. Although their prominent place in development discourse is undeniable, the assumption that such words flourish more in the international aid business than in other contexts perhaps needs to be investigated. One could nevertheless argue that international organisational conversation, even more than national debates, tends to promote depoliticised key symbols that can work as bridges between different contexts. Alternatively, it is only essentially neutral or ambiguous value terms that survive processes of common policy formulation. In these processes, each phrase or sentence is adjusted and polished to suit everybody’s political agenda in the home base. The ambiguities of such words underline the old truth that words do not have fixed meanings, but must be understood in their particular contexts. However part of my argument is that the very span of possible semantic interpretations is part of the magic of such buzzwords. Among those who have worried about the ambiguities of words, is the political scientist W. B. Gallie (1956), the originator of the term ‘essentially contested concepts’. His argument was that certain political terms – that is words, rather than cognitive concepts – cannot be narrowly defined for the purpose of analysis and/or correct usage, as they are basically open to normative contestation. They are terms which, as terms, all political actors appear to agree on, but which each side tries to hijack for their own purposes, operationalising them in very different ways. Gallie held that the meaning of such words is by necessity informed by the political ideology of those who use them. They can thus not be narrowly defined, and only by considering how they are mobilised by politically and existentially differently positioned actors, can one improve their usefulness as analytical terms. Political science texts, where the concept of ‘essential contestedness’ is used, tend to see the problem of the interaction between normative and analytical terms as a methodological problem rather than a social fact that needs to be analysed. Our approach is to look at how such terms work, at the role of words as social phenomena in themselves. At the core then is not just to take notice of their vagueness, but to problematise how new terms enter dominant public debates and what makes certain terms more prone to be used. Looking closely at any of the terms I have mentioned, dispute is likely to be discerned. There is in ‘empowerment’ the tension between being given tools to legally and politically combat oppressive structures, and being given strength by self-confidence gained from autonomous action and from rejection of subjugating discourse. There is in ‘participation’ (and in ‘democracy’!) the tension between definitions which emphasise the technical process and those which put weight on substantial issues of influential involvement. There are those who see ‘participation’, and the more recently popular term ‘civil society’, as the bases on which good states can be built, and those who see them as a civil counterbalance to a necessarily oppressive state. There are those who see the ‘partnership’ discourse as the final chance for the representatives of the South to get listened to, and there are those who see it as a way to put strength behind the demands from the West on recalcitrant Third World states.
In the contestation over buzzwords, competition takes place over their meaning – launching perhaps, under the same form, different political, philosophical or cognitive concepts. However, struggles also take place over the claim to be associated with a value-loaded word as an identity label. Why do people want to hijack these words and why do contradictory political interests rally around such words in a seeming agreement? Why not just use a new word if the connotational content of an old one does not fit? In the first instance, it is certainly the ambiguity that creates their potential appeal – these are words which seemingly offer ‘the lowest communication factor’ to be used in organising ‘the experiences of the listeners so that they see their interests as reflected in the words of the speaker’ (Parkin 1984: 353; Paine 1981; also cf. Callon 1986). As it seems, for the word to become really popular, it has to be incontestable in form but contestable in terms of content and ownership. It must resonate well with trends in the surrounding cultures. Explanations of the appeal of a particular symbol, from an anthropological point of view, often relate to side connotations. In this case they do not relate to the precise definitions that are subject to contestation, but to complex semantic fields, cross-cutting societal spheres and often loaded with identity politics. An anthropological issue of interest in this context is the way for example political oratory or public rituals are part of the charging process. Basically, however, a monolithic power perspective cannot be used in order to explain why a certain verbal key symbol becomes pervasive. Its form is cemented by the fact that different groups fight over the interpretation of meaning. Concepts survive through the very practice in which different interest groups use them and give them a value – a process which does not necessarily reflect hegemony but rather perhaps a contest over power. While ‘discourses define the terms of their own counter-discourses’, they continuously refer to and thereby confirm the symbol. That may also be the process that makes a buzzword preserve its ambiguity and retain its efficiency as capable of broad mobilisation. If some party was able to monopolise the term, it would in the long run be compromised. Goal concepts that are at the surface apolitical lend themselves particularly easy to become ‘essentially contested concepts’ tied to opposite strategies and interests of action. The use of new terms is furthermore marked by fashion trends, where a new term can be used to mark exclusivity and identity while this capacity is emptied over time. This stimulates the continuous flow of new buzzwords. There are however also processes which lead to inertia in the system, or if you like, to the cementation of a temporally fashionable catchword in organisations and texts which by inter alia their sheer materiality are less prone to change. Value terms with a definite form can thus be related to different normative contents, if we with norm mean a preferred way of looking at the desirable value. In fact, there are many situations when such keywords function to gloss over paradigmatic conflicts by reference to higher values. The argument here lies close to Parkin’s views on the relation between symbolic form and meaning in situations of rapid change. Parkin draws our attention to the possibility for the connotations of a symbol to change under persistence of form and vice versa. His concern is with how formalised political language, based inter alia on the repetition of key verbal concepts, can gloss over cultural change and its inherent tensions. In the phrasing of Parkin, quoted by Stade (1999), ‘retaining an unchanging form, they can smuggle new meanings into the cultural context of which they are a part. That is, the keywords of cultural debates go through semantical changes, some of which may be apparent and contested, but some of which may occur at the level of what seems self-evident and therefore pass unnoticed.’ Far from just expressing neutral, instrumental values, as popular stereotypes of bureaucratic rationality would have it, bureaucratic language mobilises virtues and values. It does so with temporally contingent terms, which offer an idiom in which both timeliness and moral value can be claimed. The balance between technicality and moral value has however to be
carefully guarded. In development discourse, important concepts often have a double reference, where a purely technical definition coexists with a much more obviously morally loaded meaning. ‘Commitment’ has double references to a technical financial promise and to an intense involvement. ‘Ownership’ has a sense of legal responsibility and another one referring to an emotional undertaking. ‘Partnership’ has senses of contractuality and of companionship. The meaning of ‘participation’ ranges from being given the chance to take part in the increasingly formalised and standardised routines of Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRA) to having a sense of social sharing. The moral charge of the mentioned terms is obvious, particularly when they refer to the relations between development activities and the presumed beneficiaries. Other words that in academic writing can be relatively neutral and descriptive, such as ‘identity’ and ‘community’, are in development rhetoric almost always positively loaded. ‘Local knowledge’, for example, can be used as an easy and neutral way of saying ‘cognitions situated in or pertaining to a particular spatial location’, but its elements, both ‘local’ and ‘knowledge’, have strong overtones of value. These overtones sometimes resound also in academic anthropology, but do so in a more obvious way in development discourse. Though vocabularies of academic writing and development policy texts often overlap, the value load of a term appears to be stronger in policy texts.

Language and moral cleansing

A significant trend in public discourse in the 1990s and early 2000s has been the emphasis on discursive morals, revealing structures of ideological subjugation and leading to a search for policies of recognition. In Swedish development aid, the concern with how to achieve a socially and morally appropriate language in talking about social issues was not new, but it gained momentum when insights from the social sciences, where discursive and constructivist trends had made headway already in the 1980s, filtered into policy formulation and organisational self-representation. Sida has a long record of attempts to establish a less condescending way of talking about the ‘other’ and to achieve more egalitarian relations with the recipients of international aid. There is thus a kind of moralising self-reflection over the language used, adding to the evident need for organisational self-representation and public relations concerns.

The awareness about linguistic strategies of power has been raised not only among social scientists, but also among the subjects and superordinates involved in such games. Moral sentiments around linguistic practice are often part of the culture of both professional and recreational groups in modern society: the choice of wording is an important part of group identity practices. The substitution of innocent or morally more acceptable expressions for words that are tainted by past praxis is most common. As we shall see further on, we find in the development context a gradual change from talking about ‘aid’ to talking about ‘partnership’ (Dahl 2001) as if this would imply a radical social reconstruction of the basically unequal relation between rich donors and poor recipients. The words that most clearly stimulate to reflection over the ‘othering’ force of language and the morality of language itself appear to be words that categorise other people. This is where I suggest that Karp’s observation was right: official development discourse has become more circumscribed than before. It is based more on universalist categories that on the surface treat all human beings as subjects to the same evaluative criteria. There are no more ‘natives’, only ‘citizens’, no ‘tribes’, only ‘ethnic groups’.

My aim is not to enter into the moral debate about which linguistic forms may be more or less correct, but rather to treat this phenomenon as an ethnographic fact. However, I would like to draw attention to the difficulties that the analyst by necessity has in writing about contemporary discourse in her own society. As one has to distance oneself from common
words to be able to look at them, one cannot use the very same words as analytical tools. How can one write about the effect that certain labels have on our perceptions of certain phenomena, without using the very same labels to denote them? In writing this, I am myself at loss of how to label the activities addressed by the Swedish government, through Sida and voluntary organisations towards resource-poor countries and their inhabitants. Although I do as a private person have my own preferences, I would not like to reproduce the connotations of the discourses at hand in my analysis, appearing to take a stand. Nor do I wish to trap myself into incomprehensible neologisms. How shall I name the partakers in these activities without myself implicating the different levels of activity or passivity, hierarchy, moral virtue and accountability that I claim that the terms refer to? The problem is not limited to the moralised context of international assistance, but holds valid whenever we try to analyse linguistic forms that come close to the forms that we need to use for our analysis. Furthermore, whatever is peculiar to our time is often so self-evident (‘doxic’ in Bourdieu’s terminology (1977)) that it appears trivial. In due time, our own modes of expression as well as the discourse we look at will appear outdated, and their temporal contingency becomes transparent. The reader will have to bear with this present triviality and take it as an attempt to put current usage into perspective.

Something also needs to be said about the difficulties of translation at a more simple level. Words do not always have one-to-one translations, and some offer stronger resistance to translation than others, illustrated for example by ‘partnership’ and ‘empowerment’. ‘Partnership’ is difficult because ‘partner’ was until recently a more emotionally cold and businesslike word in Swedish than in English. Words that share form over languages may not share the same connotations. ‘Empowerment’ creates even greater problems since the word ‘power’ has two different translations in Swedish like in German – suggesting ‘influence over’ (‘makt’) and ‘energy’ (‘kraft’). Furthermore, ‘empowerment’ has the additional sense of a legal transference of rights to do something, which in Swedish is translated by ‘befullmäktiga’, containing the root ‘makt’ only in a rather intransparent way. Because of the unwieldiness of any translation, the word is therefore imported in its English form. For the purpose of legibility, I have in this chapter limited the use of Swedish word forms to cases where there exists a particular Swedish connotation.

**How to frame Swedish aid**

The social field in which Swedish development discourse is elaborated consists mainly of the political system and the governmental bodies concerned, i.e. pre-eminently the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Sida. However, it also includes a number of consultancy firms and the national organisations representing prominent NGOs and voluntary organisations. Between Sida and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a considerable degree of staff circulation has taken place over time, and the structure of project financing tends to turn not only consultants but also NGOs into clients of Sida. The total value of aid conveyed by Swedish NGOs and voluntary associations was 1,1 milliards in 2004 (Sida 2006) In 1979, Sida introduced a rule whereby they would add four times the sum that a voluntary organisation offers for international projects, after a further adjustment referred to as the 10/90 rule. About a tenth of the Sida funds is spent in this way. Consultancy work is widely drawn on for information gathering and auditing, but also for implementation. A lot of ‘outsourcing’ is thus going on especially at project level, intensifying the circulation of buzzwords.

It has also been claimed that the very future-orientation of the development concept means that it constantly projects the evaluation of actual results of development-labelled activities into the future. However, it is evident that the basic catchwords of such activities are often changed. This goes not only for those very general and overarching terms which define the
field of activity and with which I am concerned in this chapter, but also more specific terms indicating methods and sub-goals. ‘Development’ is a near-synonym of ‘modernity’. Apart from more technically social scientific uses, ‘modernity’ as a folk-concept refers to a time-oriented value that emulates what is supposed to lie nearest in the future on a linear stream of progress. Modernity in this sense is certainly not dead in Sweden, and in itself creates a demand for new and inspiring buzzwords. The meaning of an idealising buzzword over time absorbs some of the connotations of the shortcomings that always pertain to practice. By changing the buzzwords, a sense of achievement is reached. Narratives of improvement of organisational virtue are also created by devaluing former policies.

In order to address the direction of change, one must first identify some factors that have historically constrained the Swedish developmental practice and discourse. These are the central position of popular movements (‘folkrörelser’) in the creation myth of the Swedish welfare society, the social engineering tradition of social democratic Sweden, and the heritage from various mission organisations and their particular links to developing countries (Rosander 1992; Tokura 1994). More recently, there is the influence of emotional charges of environmentalist and gender-equality discourses, which form strong elements of the Swedish self-image. Such constraining frames, however, have not made impossible the use of international keywords like the abovementioned ‘empowerment’ and ‘partnership’. Rather, the Swedish context allows alternative understandings and uses of international words, which are reinterpreted as Swedish in ways which, in turn, often conceal the transnational origin and diffusion of key concepts, and the modes of their circulation. Of particular interest are the terms that are used to denote the international aid activity as a whole, the basic categorisation of the relations and statuses involved.

The term most commonly heard in Sweden for international assistance is presumably ‘bistånd’ (assistance). The literal, etymologically based translation of this term would be ‘by-standing’, somehow suggesting support given from somebody standing at the same level. When it was introduced in the 1970s, the purpose was to substitute it for ‘u-hjälp’, a term which is however also still widely in circulation. While ‘hjälp’ is ‘help’, the ‘u-’ ambiguously and conveniently stands for the two words ‘utveckling’ (development) and ‘underutveckling’ (underdevelopment, in its two semantic meanings ‘de-development by exploitation’ and ‘deficient in progress’). When the concept ‘u-hjälp’ was criticised, it was because of the potential paternalistic tune of ‘help’, as well as the suggested derogatory notion of being underdeveloped. ‘Assistance’ (‘bistånd’) was initially conceived of as more neutral and egalitarian, but is now regarded as sharing the humiliating connotations of passive recipiency, and in fact treated as more or less synonymous with both ‘u-hjälp’ and the negatively loaded term ‘välgörenhet’ (‘charity’). In the 1990s, the expression ‘development cooperation’ gained a place. Because of its relative un Wienliness and because it is often considered, rightly or wrongly, to be too complicated for the average layman to handle this expression has not been able to oust the terms ‘u-hjälp’ and ‘bistånd’ from the discourse, despite that it is frequently repeated by Sida that the previous terms are outdated. According to the official Sida homepage (2004), the concept ‘development cooperation’ stands for

a process that takes a more holistic approach, is more far-sighted and marked by a different level of insights about mutual usefulness than what was comprised by earlier ‘u-hjälp’ and ‘bistånd’. (my translation from Swedish).

Correspondingly, the preferred expression for the other party to the relation was changed from ‘recipient country’ to ‘country of cooperation’. The Sida homepage emphasises that these words express “jämboädighet” (equal social rank) and also a far-sightedness far from the “u-
“hjälp” of old times’, adding that ‘in the increasingly global society we expand the concept and talk about a Policy for Global Development (PGU)’.

Judging from its self-presentations, Sida takes a considerable pride in its change of labelling practices. Describing this discursive history, the Sida homepage optimistically claims that never before have the conditions been so favourable for improvement as now: there is

a global consensus that we are all interdependent. The Swedish involvement in international issues and assistance has contributed. The work that was started by Christian missionaries in the 19th century was developed to expert help, further to ‘u-hjälp’, ‘bistånd’ and development cooperation up to the present-day Policy for Global Development (my translation from Swedish).³

The last concept refers to a recent commission report, ‘Towards a More Equitable World Free from Poverty’ (En rättvisare värld utan fattigdom, SOU 2001: 96), referred to as the ‘Globkom Report’, outlining the basis for a Swedish ‘Policy for Global Development’. This report states that all policy fields, not only that of international aid, should be streamlined in their implications for international development.⁴ The Globkom Report requested inter alia that more of Sweden’s efforts of international cooperation should go into multilateral work for the protection and improvement of ‘global public goods’ (see the chapter by Gun-Britt Andersson in the second volume of this book).

In an article on the Swedish policy on the country’s relation to Africa, launched in 1997, I have discussed the concept of ‘partnership’ (Dahl 2001). ‘Partnerskap’, obviously imported from international development language, was launched as something that would radically change Swedish policy: the notion that it was supposed to change was that of charity (‘välgörenhet’), which has rarely acted as a mobilising buzzword in Swedish aid. In the materials preparing for and promoting the policy proposal, little mention was made of solidarity (‘solidaritet’). This term has, in contrast, historically had a strong motivating resonance in Sweden, a country that in the 20th century was ruled for 40 years consecutively by the Social Democratic Party. The word has been prominent in the context of international aid, particularly in the voluntary organisations that talk about international aid as ‘solidarity work’. Together with ‘jämlikhet’ (equality, equitability, see Rabo 1997) and ‘trygghet’ (security), ‘solidarity’ was for many years a key political slogan, yet became gradually less frequently used over the 1970s and 1980s (Boreus 1994). When the commission report ‘Partnership for Africa’ in 1997 referred to ‘charity’, rather than ‘solidarity’, as the value that lamentably had characterised earlier international assistance, it could be seen as a rewriting of the past in a derogatory way, in order to strengthen a story of moral improvement. I will return to the negative value of charity below.

In fact, the values that new terms such as ‘development cooperation’ and ‘partnership’ are supposed to convey, figured prominently already in earlier versions of Swedish development discourse. This can be illustrated for example by the slogan ‘assistance at the conditions of the recipient’, launched in the 1970s (Wohlgemuth 1976). Contemporary official Sida discourse puts strong emphasis on the value change implied by a shift to ‘cooperation’ and ‘partnership’, tuning down the fact that a concern for the recipients’ own wishes has been part of Sida self-presentations for decades.

Another positively charged word is ‘dialogue’, which is supposed to mean a discussion, leading to a synthesis rather than one party imposing its will on the other (see Edgren 2003a). The terms ‘partnership’ and ‘dialogue’ can be used to emphasise demands and views on both sides. While they are often used in the marketing of development assistance to the Swedish public to put a stress on the care for the counterpart’s wishes, they are also often used
internally to actually criticise Sida for having a too laid-off attitude: of being too passive in enforcing Swedish wishes.

Making good use of the policy dialogue entails walking a tightrope between passivity and intervention, and in order to ensure national ownership Sida may have been erring on the passive side. A clear policy directive that explains the roles and legitimate concerns of the partners may be required (Farrington et al. 2002).

Thus counter-narratives to what the change of terms implies also occur. One of the staff at the Swedish embassy in Hanoi argued that development based on ‘partnership’ is an improvement from ‘assistance on the conditions of the recipient’, because it allows the Swedish partners to make more explicit demands. The vagueness of the concept of partnership certainly allows for such an interpretation, which resonates with the international emphasis on aid conditionality that was contemporary to the launching of this term as a buzzword. However, popular presentations of Sida work, addressing the Swedish public rather tell the story of a new concern for listening to the objects/beneficiaries/partners, a growing moral insight put to practice. My point here is that sometimes little is new, if a reading is made in terms of the value that a discarded concept had when it was minted. While underlying values may remain the same, the linguistic vessels supposed to convey them become tainted by time: ideals can always rest in the future, but history is evaluated by what was actually achieved. A demand is created for untainted substitutes whose realisation still lies in the future.

**Sida and its clients**

Sida’s client organisations in their self-presentations often echo the concerns of the former body for linguistic straightening-up. Each of them have their own twitch depending e.g. on whether it is an organisation for the functionally impaired, a Christian charity etc. So for example, the National Sports Association (Riksidrottsförbundet) writes on its homepage about talking about ‘international cooperation’ instead of ‘assistance activities’ in order to emphasise egalitarianism, cooperation and two-sided engagement. The Swedish Mission Council (Svenska missionsrådet, SMR) in its handbook for development assistance elaborates on how to engage in development cooperation ‘based on honest dialogue and partnership rather than notions of passive recipients (Svenska missionsrådet 2003; my translation).

A homepage text (*Hela världen ska leva. En rapport om utvecklingssamarbete*) presented by the Center Party University Organisation (2004, ) illustrates this close relation between the Sida discourse and the discourse of client organisations, but also the limited effect that an express wish to change the terms of discourse may have on actual phrasing. The text heralds the change of terms:

> Assistance is help that is not necessarily mediated between two equal partners, while development cooperation builds exactly on the thought of cooperation and partnership. The Center Party University Organisation considers the development from ‘help’ to ‘assistance’ to ‘cooperation’ to be correct. The primary purpose, disregarding the choice of words, has been the same all the time: that is, to help people who have worse conditions than we have (my translation from Swedish; Centerpartiets högskoleförbund 2004).
As the last sentence indicates, the explicitly made choice of a particular preferred policy term does not change the way people spontaneously express themselves even in the immediate context of the proposed change. Neither have any attempts succeeded to change the terms ‘donors’ and ‘recipients’, although ‘donorship’ (in English) has recently been launched as yet a term with derogatory implications (Edgren 2003b).

In a report from a course in communicating about issues of international assistance (Gunnarsson et al. 1999), the authors similarly note that many organisations claim that they do not want to use the word ‘assistance’, but still do so in their information materials. Some of the NGO communicators interviewed argue that the same applies to Sida, rejecting the word ‘assistance’ but encouraging NGOs to apply for support to ‘assistance projects’. Words connoting help, aid and giving are difficult to dispose of. What is actually said in different situations is obviously constrained by the opportunities that everyday language offers for a simple and precise communication.

**Communion and exchange**

The different words that are summoned in the self-presentation of Sida can be elucidated by relating them to the two basic forms of interpreting human cooperation that are well-known in anthropology.

One is transactional and based on reciprocality and exchange between two autonomous and distinct units or carriers of agency, be they individuals or social groups. The other form of cooperation is based on solidaric sharing between people defined as belonging together on the basis of some form of spiritual or material con-essentiality. This basic form ranges from the relation between a mother and her children, at the most concrete level, to ideological claims for universal human solidarity, at the most abstract level.

Simmel who uses the term ‘organic solidarity’ for the latter type of con-essentiality juxtaposes such organic solidarity – which he claims to give more secure rights to the poor – to help that is given with ‘suitability’ or an instrumental purpose in mind, even if the instrumental purpose is to achieve an abstract religious value (Simmel 1971: 153, see Johansson 1992: 185 for a discussion). Divine blessing enters a force outside the particular link between the giver and the recipient, and the relation has nothing to do with human reciprocity. Help which is motivated by external rewards or suitability should thus make up a third category of cooperation, what moral philosophers define as ‘enlightened self-interest’, a term which we shall return to below. There is of course a fourth possible frame of interpretation – that of exploitation. For obvious reasons, this is not part of the vocabularies of self-presentation by the actors of development aid/assistance/cooperation, and will therefore not be considered here.

The principles of rightful sharing versus exchange versus ‘enlightened self-interest’ are important points of departure when considering the changing moral over-tunes of international assistance or social work within modern society. In the present context, they should not be seen as exclusive and absolute categories of cooperation, but rather as paradigms of interpretation, between which the various ideological readings of assistance may be swerving, offering alternative arguments to the involved partners. Their limits are not clear-cut and the situational use of one term does not necessarily compromise the use of another term in another context for exactly the same transaction. In particular, the distinction between con-essential sharing and reciprocity is additionally blurred by the fact that the acceptance of a gift in itself involves inferiority and loss of agency and power (Mauss 1990: 74, Blau 1964: 28). Read with inverse signs, this is transfer of hierarchical status, gratitude and prestige which may be seen as reciprocal compensation.
An example of how these understandings are expressed in the context of international aid is provided by the handbook of the Swedish Mission Council:

The concept reciprocal is used to describe a relation between different parties. [---] A sound and genuine reciprocity demands clarity and an expressed own identity. Reciprocity does not depend on having no opinion or on subordination, but on partners being distinct (my translation from Swedish, Svenska missionsrådet 2003).

The same source however also defines solidarity with a definition that it literally shares with other organisations such as the network of voluntary organisations Forum Syd or ‘The Africa Groups’, the leading Swedish solidarity association that used to deal with South African issues in apartheid times:

Solidarity stands for a shared responsibility and for deeply defending other people’s rights. Solidarity means to be able to identify with exposed people and let their situation influence one’s own action. [---] Humanity is one, and it is all about a rightful management and sharing of the resources of the earth. Many problems are global and threaten us all, therefore we need to find common, reciprocal solutions based on a rights perspective. (my translation from Swedish, Svenska missionsrådet 2003).

The debate on whether we are talking about ‘aid’ or ‘assistance’ or ‘solidarity work’ reflects the possible ambiguities of interpreting international development activities. Partnership may in this context be seen as a new rhetoric alternative to ‘solidarity’. It has ideological connotations of equality but no element of suggested identity or shared membership in any larger collectivity. Instead, it suggests a contractual relation based on reciprocal exchange, and limited to the time that such conditions are met. ‘Solidarity’ too is supposed to suggest equality, but in the form of egalitarian sharing within a larger con-essentiality. Which unit is implied, is not always spelt out, but at the general level, where Swedish aid organisations offer self-presentations, the explicit reference is often to humanity as such, like in the above quotation. In a report on development cooperation, published by the Center Party University Organisation, the author quotes a poem by Saadi (1215-1292).

All humans are members of the same family sharing origin in Creation if one limb is aching the others are caught by worry If you are not hurt by other people’s suffering you do not deserve the name of human

‘Collectivism’ is sometimes juxtaposed with ‘individualism’ as its conceptual opposite. Swedish culture, although often claimed to be ‘collectivistic’ by external observers, is not particularly collectivistic at the level of everyday interaction: on the contrary, it can be claimed to have an extreme emphasis on the autonomy of the individual, for which collectivism at the state level is a precondition. Sweden has a tradition of giving political influence to strong membership organisations within the labour movement, the teetotallers movement and the ‘free churches’. Many of these organisations however currently struggle with problems of reproduction, of recruitment of new generations and of engaging the
members in their activities, reflecting that personal collective commitment beyond the nuclear family is becoming weak. On the level of official development discourse, globalism or humanism are often used as rhetorical resources. Overt nationalism has become more widespread and accepted in Sweden than since before the Second World War, but the rejection of nationalism as harmful and anachronistic is also widespread. Official Swedish self-presentation reflects the paradox that even internationalism can be launched as a symbol of national pride.

**Utopias of involvement**

So far I have mainly discussed concepts that relate to the frame of interpretation, intended by governmental bodies to be used for the relation between Sweden and the counterparts in its international cooperation with poor countries. There are however another set of interesting concepts that relate not to the relation as such, but to the expected quality of recipient involvement in particular aid activities. Of these terms, I will take a closer look at the three terms participation, ownership and empowerment.

**Participation**

‘People’s participation’ figured prominently in Swedish development discourse of the 1980s, linked with social democratic ideas that, in line with a century-old tradition, cherished political influence through popular associations, yet certainly did not rule out the idea of the good state. Rosander (1992) has described the difficulties that policy-makers in Sida had in conveying to field staff that the expression was not used as simple rhetoric, but had a relevance to how work was to be carried out. Nevertheless, at the level of rhetoric, the concept was an important part of Sida ideology throughout the 1980s. Within Sida, many officers interpreted the term mainly in the ‘instrumental means’ mode, but its central position in official ideology and self-representation is more likely to have its roots in the ‘ends-in-itself’ dimension, legitimising development practice to notions central to Swedish values of equality and democracy. When the World Bank took the concept to its heart in around 1990, this was heralded in Sweden as a breakthrough of Swedish influence. However, it appears more realistic to place the international flourishing of the concept in the context of neo-liberal international streams of thought, linked to views of state influence as primarily hampering individual initiative, and of ‘civil society’ as the proper location of participation, mutual support and influence. Though such cultural differences in the model of the good state may appear evident once they are explicitly formulated, for most people partaking in development debates, they are presumably confined to the silent taken for granted. Today, participation, like democracy, are emphasised by Sida to be both an end in itself and a means to achieve more efficient aid.

Participation, like other fad-words, is notoriously vague in its reference, to begin with because it wavers between being seen as a goal in itself, a tool of achieving higher efficiency, and a tool of mobilising the support of (‘co-opting’) a population by making people identify with a project and feel accountable for it. At the most general social level, the concept becomes synonymous with that of social inclusion. Henkel and Stirrat (2001: 172) write about the term:

> On the one hand it refers simply to people taking part in decision-making [---] On the other hand, however, ‘participation’ has much more far-reaching connotations involving a specific vision of society as ‘communitas’ and, at times, of evangelical promises of salvation.
Already in the 1970s and 1980s, researchers remarked that it is often unspecified to what part of a process of planned improvement the term participation refers – data supplying, problem formulation, decision-making, practical implementation, cost splitting and so on (Paul 1987; Cohen and Uphoff 1977).

The use of the term has also inspired several development researchers to reflect upon the discrepancy between the assumed ideological content of the term and its different de facto functions in various local contexts, for example as an instrument of recruiting cheap labour for infrastructural projects (Chambers 1995: 37; Peters 1996). An early critique came from Cardozo (1982, cited in Wolfe 1983) who warned that participatory efforts usually were too confined to solving problems at a narrow local scale, distracting from the concern with popular influence at a more significant national level. Participation has furthermore been seen as a general instrument to circumvent the issues of how to create a functioning formal political democracy. The relation between ‘participation’ and the concept ‘democracy’ is arguably unsettled (Abrahamsen 2000). The two concepts often seem to belong to separate discursive spheres. Participation, it is said by its critics, is considered to be something that takes place in the de-politicised sphere of local development projects, run either by official international development agencies or increasingly by NGOs, while official aid withdraws from local engagement and concentrates on macro issues. Participation in such contexts is not conceptualised in terms of democracy, perhaps because development agencies and NGOs do not usually self-identify as part of power structures. Rather than strengthening democracy within the framework of the state, the discourse of participation is thus part of what Ferguson has termed ‘the anti-politics machine’ (1990). Among the silent issues of participation, rarely raised in the present international ideological regime, is that of workers’, customers’, neighbours’ and suppliers’ participation in production decisions within enterprises, or beneficiary participation in the internal decision-making of NGOs beyond particular project concerns. The notion of popular participation implies ideas about the ‘people’, a category normally separated from the speaker, often conceived of as a particular category of mainly rural-based persons for whom exclusion from planning issues is a major problem – mainly categorical exclusions from influence on planners and planning. The agenda usually remains silent on issues of decision that refer to economic control and differentiated access to land and other bases of production, which are protected by the notion of unalienable property rights as central human rights enjoyed by the formal owners. In the neo-liberal model, the participating people are further not conceptualised as citizens that form part of a state, but in opposition to the state (cf. Trägårdh 1999). Exclusion can in this way almost be seen as part of the definition of the ‘people’, turning the idea of ‘people’s participation’ into a moving target, one of these utopian values which can never be an end state. Such excluded ‘people’ are seen as people who have knowledge and a potential, yet unrealised capacity for action. That is, they are not seen as people who now have real agency, but as people whose agency must be liberated. This limited recognition of agency reserves a role for the external intervener, that of a catalyst creating new spaces for community discussion and encouragement. Development aid at the project level has increasingly become a matter for NGOs. Their solution has often not been to strengthen the ‘people’s’ participation as citizens of a state, but rather to solve local problems bypassing state structures, or at best enabling the ‘people’ to negotiate with the state and with each other.

The emphasis on local participation has, somewhat paradoxically, been matched by a decrease of international interest in local projects, at least by governmental aid organisations. This is in fact what has left a scope for NGOs to step in. Another dimension which is not spelt out in the concept itself (but always assumed) is that participation takes place in a local context.
Ownership

A concept related to ‘participation’ that also became common internationally and in internal Sida talk in the 1990s is ‘ownership’. The term is normally given in English rather than in Swedish (‘ägarskap’). It is formally translated as ‘the exercise of control and command over development activities’ (Edgren 2003b; Weeks et al. 2002). Nonetheless, it is often used in the sense of a sincere emotional commitment to a project from the stakeholders concerned, a desirable stance taken rather than the exercise of formal rights. Such a commitment is expected to involve a sense of responsibility for the project, even when it has been conceived elsewhere, and it can thus be seen as an intensified level of desired participation. ‘Ownership’ discourse links up with some traditions of ‘participation’ which can be traced back to school of psychologically oriented industrial managerialism founded by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s, stressing that people are more ready to change if they have themselves taken part in identifying problems and deciding on solutions. ‘Ownership’ should thus not be taken in the sense of proper proprietary rights. One can however reflect that its lavish use as a metaphor contributes to reinforce ideas of property and sense of responsibility as inalienably related (e.g. Hardin’s classical article on the ‘tragedy of the commons’ 1968).

Empowerment

Empowerment started to appear in international development discourse around 1990, and soon spread also to Swedish texts on development. In the mid-1980s, new policies for social welfare were launched in several western countries by political leaders of the New Right, such as Thatcher and Reagan, drawing their inspiration from economists like Hayek and Friedman. A number of studies (e.g. Stewart and Taylor 1995; Hyatt 1997) by critical sociologists and anthropologists particularly in Britain mention the ‘empowerment’ idiom as part of the ideological draping of urban renewal programmes in Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Neo-liberal reform programmes of the belt-tightening mode were sold by a rhetorical emphasis on client choice, responsibility, partnership and empowerment, while frequently a reality of responsibility, workload and the carrying of costs was pushed over to hesitant, economically and educationally disadvantaged clients.

The state that empowerment is expected to redress can be read in contrasting ways. The English language here appears to gloss over distinctions that Scandinavian language would make between lack of power, powerlessness and effeteness. In Swedish, the concept ‘maktlöshet’ (powerlessness) suggests a conscious actor with a defined, already explicit preference that cannot be fulfilled, indicating a subjective experience of being victimised. Lack of power need not be the same as powerlessness, nor lack of energy. However, these states are conflated in relation to ‘empowerment’. The concept thus has reference to two types of ‘power’ – power seen as resting in the nature of a relation between different actors or an actor and his/her environment, and power seen as energy, a force inherent in the individual actor. This basic ambiguity makes it possible to talk about empowerment both when the agent structurally lacks a range of action due to external constraints, and when the lack of agency and influence relates to personal weakness. While the first version may call for tools such as legal rights, knowledge and skills, the second version sees self-confidence and positive thinking as central goods to deliver – nothing bad in themselves, as long as they do not distract from structural considerations. However, like the ambiguities implied in the ‘partnership’ notion, the empowerment idiom is entangled in a neo-liberal overvaluation of individual choice and agency which opens for ‘blaming the victim’ by implication.
**Conclusion**

Swedish discourse on development work puts a strong emphasis on siding with the underprivileged. In the Globkom Report this is expressed as ‘taking the southern perspective’ and presented as a radical rethinking, although from the point of rhetoric, it is nothing new. However, having become a member of the European Union, Sweden is no longer autonomous from the perspective of foreign relations policy. When in around 1990, the term ‘popular participation’ was taken up as a major developmental buzzword by the World Bank, Swedish development thinkers took it to be a success for Swedish thinking, based on the particular national myth that Swedish democracy was built on the close link between government and popular movements. Buzzwords circulating in the international arena can still be picked up and read as if they stood for autonomous national values. ‘Partnership’ was in this way launched as a term with a particular Swedish meaning of egalitarianism (Dahl 2001). That the adoption of international terms is seen as an expression of national traditions also occurs in the context of ‘civil society’ and ‘NGO’ discourses, where references of civic engagement resonate with the image of Swedish associational life as it figures in the national myth rather than in contemporary reality. In an international perspective, many terms used in the neo-liberal discourse on development coincide with words, which also have a basic appeal to social movements and voluntary organisations engaged in emancipatory work, and which (for different purposes) also have a basic anti-statist attitude. The financial dependence of Swedish voluntary organisations on official support, and the dependence of Sida on NGOs to implement much of its international engagement, contribute to blur the boundaries between discursive fields. The general ambiguity of buzzwords contributes to making such syncretism unproblematic.

The moralisation of language in development work takes different forms. It is expressed in subtle ways by the selective and preferential use of certain words, which point at moral values with which the speaker wants to be associated. Such less explicit moral aspects of language serve the purpose of individual or organisational moral impression management, but do not necessarily involve any conscious reflection over the vocabulary as having moral dimensions. Yet, the normative aspects of buzzwords are continuously endorsed by their frequent repetition. At a more conscious level, verbalised arguments about the morality of language use have become more common, and led to a continuous turnover of vocabulary as practice fails to meet the ideals, and as the idea of an ongoing improvement or imminent change to the better must be maintained.

The terms that regulate the contemporary morality of recognition (Honneth 1995) carry inherent and apparently insolvable paradoxes. For example, the emphasis on recognising agency also contributes to reinforcing the notion that degrees of activity can be used as moral rods of measurement for the evaluation of subordinated and disprivileged groups. ‘Empowerment’ is thought of as something that is given to you and defines a place for external agents to act as catalysts. Projects of emancipation cannot escape the inequality inherent in notions of assistance, making the project of linguistic cleaning hopeless. Chambers, the international prophet of the participatory movement, presents these methods primarily as reversals of the direction of dominance in planning and research, but also as techniques that ‘enable local people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act’ (1995: 45). This quote provides an example of the difficulties of discursive emancipation. It can be read as yet another example of denigrating othering, a statement that ‘local people’ before access to the technique lacked the capacity to share and analyse their knowledge.

The ideological strands that activists and establishment developmentalists represent do not make up independent and coherent units, but have fuzzy edges. In this field of blurred boundaries and diffuse and moralised terms, the discourse of power more and more comes to
use terms which look like those of the supposedly intellectually critical discourse of social science or political language of activism. Power uses signal terms that convey the same commitments as critical discourse does – commitment to the morals of recognition, fair distribution, non-interference and freedom. Language then becomes less and less transparent semantically. At the same time, the implications and consequences of political language can never be evaluated only from a semantic analysis, but only post-hoc and seen in its practical context.

References
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1 This text emanates from a research project funded by Sida, concerned with the social biography of words in development discourse, undertaken together with Ronald Stade
2 Parallel to this new emphasis on discursive morals, a corresponding public silencing arose on issues of distributive justice. This was linked to the fall of eastern European regimes, whose ideological draping, if not governmental practice, was ultimately based on distributive morality.
3 Curiously, the presentation leaves aside the important role of the popular movements.
4 In 2006, one can conclude that this streamlining has not yet been accomplished, as Swedish restrictions on foreign imports are still at odds with the purposes of international poverty reduction.
5 More narrow con-essentialisations are of course also done by some organisations, perhaps on the definitions made by the struggle for a common goal, which motivates the helper’s presence and structures how she/he defines and labels the recipients. Given that the original mobilisation in NGO activities is often based on some kind of moral cause, the recipient is often expected to stand for the values which ideologically motivate the assistance. Perhaps it should also be mentioned that among young Swedes, there is an increasing recognition of a unit larger than humanity as animal rights pro-activism and veganism are strong. This has not had any discernible impact on Swedish development discourse so far.