

# How to adapt tone for the Nordic market

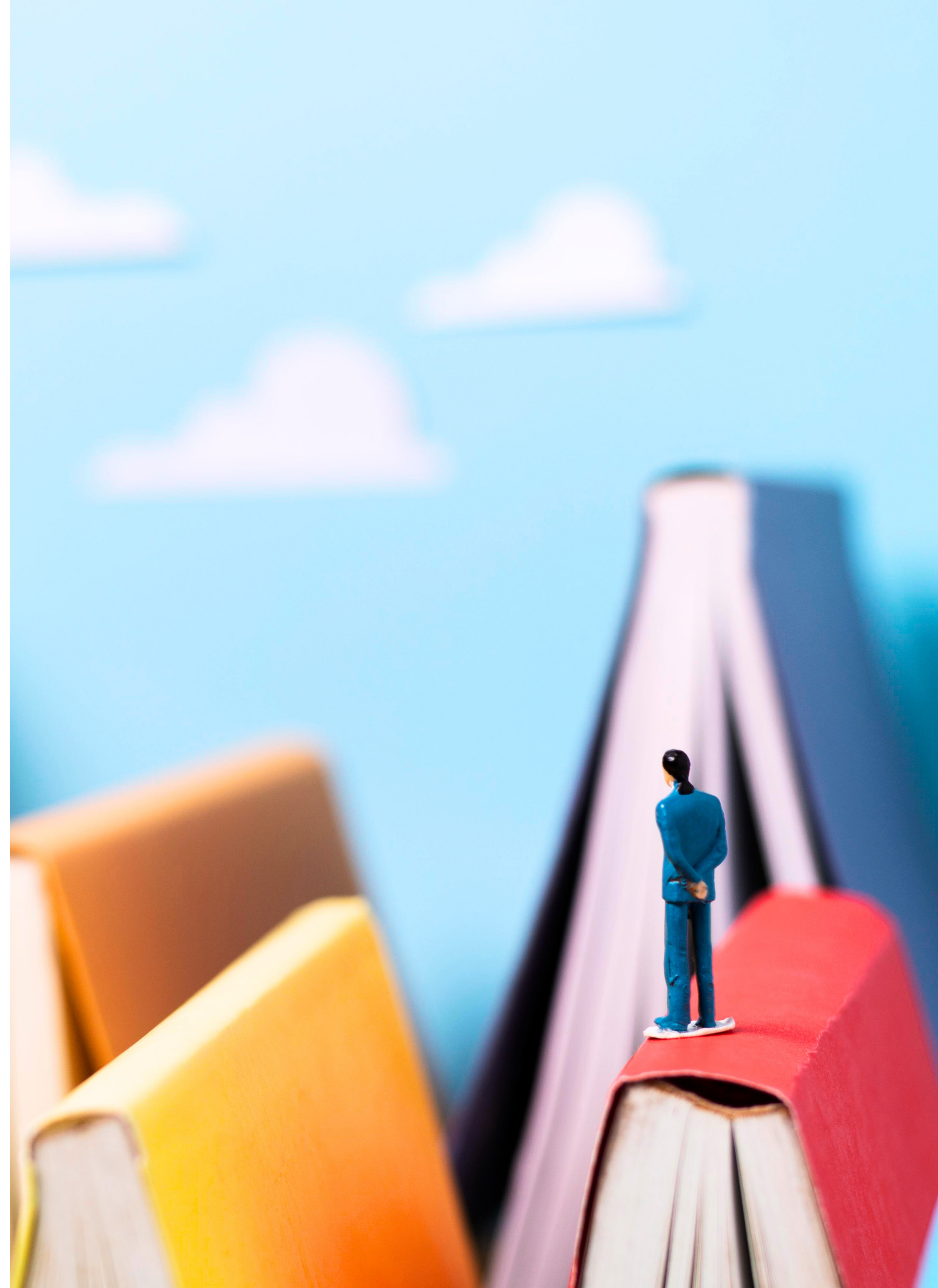
Let me tell you a localization story — one involving the most famous fantasy world ever imagined.

I read the Finnish translation of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* as a teenager and fell in love with Middle-Earth. When later visiting the library to take out *The Hobbit*, I was stunned to discover that Tolkien's world in that book was almost unrecognizable. Whereas the Finnish LoTR appeals to anyone from teenagers to adults, *The Hobbit* was localized for children under 10; it made the two parts of the epic tale largely incompatible for their mutual readerships, and this still reminds me of how localization choices can both exclude and include some readers.

*The Hobbit* (1937) was translated into Finnish in 1973. The localization strategy included replacing all character and place names with Finnish

alternatives and using existing Finnish fairy tale vocabulary for creatures such as orcs and goblins. *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) was translated into Finnish around the same time as *The Hobbit*, but by a different person. Tolkien was more exacting about the localization strategy of LoTR and issued strict instructions for handling names — only the English names were to be translated and all others left in the languages they represented.

The disparity between the two tales in Finnish remained until 1985, when *The Hobbit* was translated for a second time, this time to match the fantasy-esque style that *The Lord of the Rings* had become known for. The dwarf called Ukonnuoli in the first translation became Thorin, and the elf Keijukas emerged as Elrond. New Finnish words *örkki* and *hobitti* were aptly adopted for orc (previously *mörkö*) and hobbit (previously *hoppeli*).





## Brand voice and localized tone of voice

My teenage tale illustrates how pliable a brand can be when localized, and how significant localization decisions are in reaching the right audiences. A brand that does not have detailed guidelines for its style and tone of voice leaves itself open to interpretation. In a multilingual and multicultural setting, a universal brand guide should come with market-specific guidelines that cover the cultural differences between regions and allow for a range in the brand's register and voice in different languages.

*For localization managers, the task of keeping up with the shifting perceptions in each of their languages is constant. Furthermore, they need to communicate the importance of these changes to the stakeholders in their organization. This article offers assistance by highlighting four areas a localization manager should be aware of when taking their brand to Nordic audiences.*





## Communication in the Nordic countries

To an outsider, the Nordic region can seem like an amalgamation of small, similar Scandinavian countries. In reality, they are some of the richest, most successful societies on Earth, with exceptionally high levels of education, healthcare, and safety. Sometimes its societies are described as “feminine,” reflecting the importance of equality, inclusivity, social welfare, and mutual care as core components of our social structure. They are also said to have the lowest hierarchies in the world.

*So, how do these populations communicate? There are national patterns: Swedes like to reach a consensus, Danes want to feel comfortable, Norwegians get straight to the point, and as for the Finns ... Finnish communication rules can be summed up as follows:*

If you speak, say something that is worthy of everyone’s attention. This may come across as reticence, but it simply signifies a Finn not wanting to state the obvious. In doing so, they convey respect and trust in the other person’s expertise and understanding.

Don’t bring up contentious or questionable topics. There is a tendency for Finns to avoid conflict and confrontation. Their conversation is functionally focused, though; they speak frankly, and if they must address a conflict, they will do so directly.

Commit personally to what you are saying. All Finns share an expectation of honesty. They aim at saying what they mean and meaning what they say.



## How to be polite

Nordic people generally aren't rude, but can seem rude. They don't use language as a primary means of conveying goodwill in the same way as English speakers. They are polite in their own way: formal courtesies matter less, but the underlying intent of kindness, consideration, and respect mean a lot.

*In general, the English tone of voice is more polite than that of the Nordic languages. When localizing, Nordic people often remove words like please, thank you, sorry, and unfortunately — they don't feature in their speech as frequently and can thus sound unnatural in written translations too.*

None of the Nordics have a one-word equivalent for “please.” They convey politeness in requests with phrases such as “be so kind” as well as with the conditional mood of verbs. Or they leave it out: “Please, try again” simply becomes “Try again.”

In Danish, you can express a polite request with constructions such as kunne du “could you,” kan jeg få dig til at... “could I get you to...,” må jeg bede

om “could I ask for,” and vi håber, at du vil... “we hope that you will...” Danish does have the word venligst “kindly,” but it's considered rather formal and only used in written correspondence from the authorities.

The word vennligst “kindly” in Norwegian is similar in tone and could even be interpreted as passive-aggressive — as if you're being overly polite to make a point. Instead of saying, “Please send us your information,” you can say, “Can you send us your information?” But even that level of politeness is optional, because it would be fine to just write, “Send us your information.”

In Finnish, “please” can be expressed elegantly with verb constructions like Vastaathan “you'll answer, won't you” and Olethan yhteydessä “won't you be in touch.”

It's also not common in the Nordics to apologize frequently, certainly not as much as in British culture.

“Sorry” is often expressed in a verb form vi beklager “we regret” in Danish. Many organizations avoid serious messages and prefer a friendly tone.

Recently, for example, a Danish company apologized for not requiring any action from the recipient: Undskyld vi forstyrrer dig med, at du nok ikke skal gøre noget

“Sorry to disturb you with the fact that you don't have to do anything.”

In Norwegian, the slightly more formal beklager is more common in writing than the informal unnskyld, which is mostly used for apologies between two individuals. You would be unlikely to receive unnskyld from a company unless it's from a specific individual in that company who personally messed up.







## How to address people

Language registers vary in their degree of formality, often defined by the era the person lives in, the region they are from, the social class they belong to, the audience they are addressing, and the topic at hand. Most scholars identify three levels of register: “informal,” “neutral,” and “formal.”

Nordic people typically address each other by their first name. Titles like Mr. and Ms. are rarely used in Danish, apart from in very formal legal correspondence. Companies tend to use the very informal Hej “Hi” which can be followed by either a first or full name. They also use Kære “Dear,” but usually only in official correspondence. Alternatively, it’s fine to omit the name and/or title altogether.

Norwegian follows suit — recent email correspondence from a government organization began with Hei “Hi” without a name, and it’s common to omit the greeting as well and get straight to the point, as is using Kjære or Kære “Dear” followed by a name.

*“Hi” + “first name” is the most common way to address people in Finland, expressed as Hei [name], or sometimes just Hei.*

All Nordic languages use the informal second person singular pronoun when addressing the reader. It’s useful to note that where an English source text might refer to the sender of the message as “I,” the Nordic translation would avoid getting too personal by changing that to “we,” like using the personal pronoun vi instead of jag in Swedish.



## How to express excellence

A brand's tone of voice goes beyond formality and incorporates communication to build connections with its audience. The tone of voice can be simple or complex, cautious or assertive, respectful or irreverent, enthusiastic or matter of fact, and so on.

The Nordic languages tend to adopt a more neutral tone of voice than English, particularly US English. A good rule of thumb is to avoid exaggeration and superlatives. In these cultures, modesty is a virtue, and singing your own praises is seen as tasteless bragging. Choose clarity over laudatory arguments and remember that less is more, as in the hypothetical example below:

US English: "This amazing, special product makes you feel fabulous and better than all your friends! You'll love it, call now, don't miss out, get it for free!"

Norwegian: "This is a nice product. You might enjoy it."

*Nordic localization often means toning down, "You will love this," in ads and replacing it with, "We think you are going to like this," although there is a growing tendency towards a more excitable tone of voice on Nordic social media.*





## How to communicate inclusivity

There is an increasing focus on how to use language to include those that might otherwise be marginalized. Two topics that have received lots of attention in recent years are race and gender. References to race and ethnicity are more common in English texts, particularly US English, than in the Nordics. Mentioning skin color/ethnicity tends to be avoided if it's not specifically relevant in the context.

Did you know that the nonbinary pronoun 'they' was Merriam-Webster's Word of the Year in 2019 because of the significant increase in its lookups?

*Language that avoids bias towards a particular sex or social gender can certainly have an impact both in terms of gender neutrality and gender fluidity.*

All Nordic languages are working towards gender-neutral job titles: politibetjent "police officer" instead of politimand "policeman" in Danish, or esihenkilö "supervisor" instead of esimies "foreman" in Finnish.

In Norway, there was even a great debate on whether jordmor "midwife" should be changed, but it was eventually left untouched.

In Sweden, the official dictionary was updated in 2015 to include a third, gender-neutral pronoun. The new pronoun hen was added alongside han "he" and hon "she" to refer to those of unspecified gender or where gender is deemed irrelevant.

A neutral third-person singular pronoun hen or høn was also introduced into Danish, but how well it's been adopted is difficult to say.

It's not yet in the Danish dictionary, nor is it acknowledged as a pronoun by the Danish language advisory Dansk Sprognævn.

But not writing gender-neutrally may give offense. If using the new pronoun feels artificial, you can write han/hun "he/she" or use the word vedkommende, which is gender-neutral, but sometimes difficult to incorporate into a sentence. Simply using personen "the person" is also an option.

Norwegian takes a similar approach to Danish — the use of "he/she" has been common, as has vedkommende in formal communication. The new neutral pronoun is hen. The national language authority Språkrådet recommends using hen for those who wish to be referred to as such. But it adds it's not yet widespread enough for them to recommend it beyond this purpose. However, even the national broadcaster NRK has started using it sporadically.

Where English texts use "they" for the purpose of gender neutrality, your brand style guide should specify whether your brand wishes to use hen in the Scandinavian translations, or to specifically to avoid it for now.

In Finnish, none of the personal pronouns are gender specific, so the existing gender-neutral third-person singular pronoun "hän" continues to be appropriate in modern usage.



## Authorities in appropriate language use

All Nordic countries have a government organization or language advisory that safeguards the local language(s) and disseminates information about the best contemporary practice.

- ✓ Denmark: Dansk Sprognævn
- ✓ Finland: Kotimaisten kielten keskus
- ✓ Norway: Språkrådet
- ✓ Sweden: Institutet för språk och folkminnen

However, it is increasingly common for brands to deviate from this authoritarian approach to language and instead opt for measuring quality from their audience's perspective instead. This allows the brand to develop a local tone of voice that may be less "correct" but more distinctive and appealing to their followers.



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