

When a Swede says 'Oi!'

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This is a public service announcement. Many Swedes, including me, have a reflex reaction when bumping into someone or stepping on someone's foot in a crowd—we say "Oj!" This is pronounced very similar to "Oi!" in British English. In Swedish, "Oj!" is not the most polite apology, but it is the equivalent of "oops" and in the context it's usually short for "Oops, I'm sorry!" It's an acknowledgment that you've bothered someone somehow. If you step on someone's foot in a London subway and exclaim "Oi!", it means pretty much the opposite. (Something like, "What the hell are you doing?") That could easily be the start of some trouble. In short, Swedes are a hazard in crowded spaces on the British isles. I've known this for years, ever since I made this mistake in a London subway decades ago. But reflexes are reflexes—they are not deliberate acts nor easily untrained. So, on my recent trip to Scotland, I did it twice, bumped into someone in the street and said "Oj!", and received some very dark looks from the person I was reflexively trying to (sort of) apologize to. But you can't really stop people in the street and start explaining to them what "Oj!" means in Swedish. There would be no end to the apologies then. Hence this public service announcement. And that is all.

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