

FACTSHEET DENMARK

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LANGUAGE

Denmark has joined the EU internal market - with the intensified exchange of goods and services which followed in the wake. As far as language is concerned, the idea has largely been realised throughout the thousand years Danish has existed as separate from all other languages in the Nordic countries. Danish has adopted words from other languages, especially European ones, and Danish is itself a manifestation of a Nordic, Germanic and Indo-European speech community.

The Germanic languages differed from the other Indo-European languages by a series of special developments within vocalism, consonantism and stress (dynamic accent). Today, 500 million people have Germanic languages as their mother tongue and far more master another (generally English) as well. They include the languages Afrikaans, Danish, English, Frisian, Faeroese, Icelandic, Dutch (with Flemish), Norwegian, Swedish and German.

A NORDIC LANGUAGE

Nordic (North Germanic) is distinguishable from other Germanic languages from around 200 AD and documented in for instance many runic inscriptions. During the Viking Age (750-1100) and early Middle Ages, the Nordic-speaking area included various dialects rather than different languages. This area extended to parts of Ireland, the British Isles, the Shetlands, the Orkneys and Normandy.

Icelandic is the language which in its written form is closest to the ancient language. From the end of the 9th century up towards 1000, it can be regarded as a West Norwegian emigrant language, but today it is structurally different from Norwegian, especially Norwegian 'bokmål', which developed on the basis of written Danish. The Norwegian and Icelandic sagas, many of which take place around 900-1100, were written down a couple of centuries later, but reflect the long communication radius of the Nordic speakers.



The history of the Danish language can be traced back for more than 1,000 years. However, the letters æ, ø and å, which many regard as characteristic of Danish, were only introduced later; for instance å did not enter official orthography until 1948. Drawing: Ib Spang Olsen.

The language had no established name, but Danish tongue was used, in Sweden as late as the 13th century. This language is related to Old English, which it strongly influenced during the Viking Age. Words such as *fellow, husband, they, them, their, sky, window, live, die* were introduced into English from Scandinavia and hundreds of English place names have the same origin. The main reason why Danish came to influence English was that the Vikings conquered and settled in three of four Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the second half of the 9th century and later conquered the whole country after new Viking raids.

Since the Middle Ages, the Nordic languages have been affected by broadly similar influences from other European languages, from the

Classical languages and especially German in the Middle Ages and subsequently to a lesser extent French and Italian. From the second half of the 20th century, all the languages have mainly been influenced by English. Among the languages in the geographic North, Finnish, Samian and Greenlandic are not Indo-European.

A LANGUAGE IN TOUCH

Danish has found its form through interaction; its vocabulary contains centuries of material and cultural deposits which capture the meeting of native and foreign, old and new. Many words are historically related to words in the other Indo-European languages: *mand, sove, æde, drikke, far, mor, øje, hoved, finger, jord, hus*, etc (man, sleep, eat, drink,

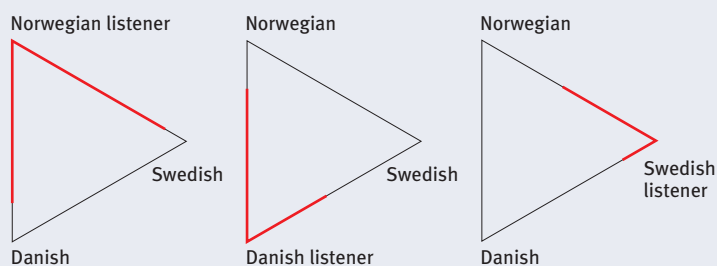
MODERN NORDIC LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION

People with Danish, Norwegian and Swedish as their mother tongue can understand and speak with each other. A secure language comprehension requires some habituation, but at Nordic conferences and meetings the delegates normally speak their own language and within a few days most will have become used to the languages of their Nordic neighbours.

The core vocabulary is largely the same in the Nordic languages, but Swedish sometimes goes its own way. On the other hand, Danish is different with regard to pronunciation. The Norwegian-speakers are in the best position in inter-Nordic communication. It is more difficult for Swedes to understand spoken Danish than for Danes to understand Swedish. Danes often have problems distinguishing between Norwegian and Swedish.

Finns normally decode Norwegian or Danish through the medium of Swedish and find spoken Danish extremely difficult; Finnish is not an Indo-European language and thus in linguistic terms not a Nordic language. The Finns' Nordic communication handicap has resulted in some pressure to introduce interpretation or the use of English at Nordic meetings.

An examination of the spoken language comprehension among Danish, Norwegian and Swedish speakers has the following result:



Faeroese and Icelandic school children have Danish lessons, but Danish is no longer the natural choice as first neighbouring language. Finnish school children have Swedish lessons.

father, mother, eye, head, finger, earth, house). Some Danish words are only shared with one or more Nordic languages: *bonde, skov, fattig, elske, han, hun*, etc (peasant, wood, poor, love, he, she). The introduction of Christianity resulted in new expressive needs - and thus in new words, often from Old Saxon or Old English, such as *kristen, kirke* and *kloster* (Christian, church, monastery).

GERMAN

Danish was subject to the strongest external influence in the period 1200-1500. The North German language of the Hanseatic towns was able to spread because the area came to dominate the entire Nordic and Baltic area commercially and economically for several hundred years. There were large German-speaking population groups in the major Danish towns and Low German was not as different from the Nordic languages of that time as German is from contemporary Scandinavian

languages. Therefore German could more easily influence Nordic. It is obvious from the vocabulary. The influence was partly direct, partly indirect, as most of the Romance and Classical loans have also been mediated through this language.

Many of the words are related to trade, crafts and urban life, but quite a few enter the core vocabulary, for instance *angst, lykke, magt, blive, straks, jo* (fear, happiness, power, become, immediately, after all). Danish has adopted at least 1,500 words from Middle Low German alone. After the Reformation, the import of loanwords from the south continued. German remained the main supplier, but High German, Luther's German, increasingly replaced Low German as the source of influence. Easily recognisable are words with the prefixes *ge-* and *er-* such as *gespenst, gemen, erfare, erhverve* (ghost, vile, learn, obtain). Within crafts and trade, the flow of loanwords continued and numerous ordinary words with no particular

connection with a specific sphere were added: *billig, slyngel, flot, pludselig, munter*, etc (cheap, villain, smart, sudden, jolly). As in Germany, most designations of occupation at the new university in Copenhagen were Latin: *student, professor, magister*. Maritime terms were Low German or Dutch, for instance *matros, pynt, dæk, fartøj*, etc (able seaman, point, deck, vessel).

FRENCH AND ITALIAN

In the 17th and 18th century, the nobility introduced a number of French words such as *baron* and *respekt* (baron, respect), but this influence was also wide-ranging: *atelier, kulisser, silhuet, premiere, konkurrence, chef, direktør, fabrik, industri, patrulje, korps, ammunition, korset, klinik, ambulance, karantæne, bandage, kanyle, dessert, souper, bouillon, bøf, kotelet, kompot, garderobe, toilet, alkove, salon, sekretær, avis, redaktør, journalist, annonce*, etc (studio, set, silhouette, premiere, competition, boss, director, factory, industry, patrol, corps, ammunition, corset, clinic, ambulance, quarantine, bandage, hypodermic needle, dessert, supper, bouillon, steak, cutlet, compote, wardrobe, toilet, alcove, salon, secretary, newspaper, editor, journalist, advertisement).

Italian loans include *fallit, inkasso, saldo, konto, bankerot, andante, piano, cello* (ruin, debt collection, balance, account, bankruptcy, andante, piano, cello). Italian also provided *kartoffel* (potato).

Like the other European culture languages, Danish includes large contributions from Greek and Latin.

ENGLISH

Most recently, Danish like most other European languages has been strongly influenced by English/American. The influence is particularly noticeable within areas such as science, technology, trade, advertising, sports, entertainment and political journalism, but the English fingerprint on the vocabulary is still far smaller than the French, German and Classical. Nonetheless it is striking how rapid the influence has been. It is also characteristic that within certain scientific and educational areas, the mother tongue is being rejected in favour of English. In addition, large parts of the youth culture are influenced by English-language texts and loans from English/American.

Some even believe all neologisms within the vocabulary are English.

This is by no means the case. English is the most dominant loan-supplying language, but the lists of neologisms still contain more native constructions, especially new combinations of familiar elements (*lommeregner* for pocket calculator).

This selection of words introduced in the mid 1990s gives an impression of the types of neologisms: *Afrodansker*, *cd-rom-brænder*, *dummy*, *etisk regnskab*, *emaile*, *euro*, *fødevareminister*, *grøn afgift*, *homebanke*, *light*, *netavis*, *poll*, *returtnast*, *site* (Afro-Dane, CD-rom burner, dummy, ethical accounts, emailing, euro, minister for food, green tax, home banking, light, internet newspaper, poll, return key, site).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DANISH LANGUAGE

Many foreign observers of spoken Danish have noticed something unique about the pronunciation. A 16th century Swedish statement claims that Danes press out the words as though they are about to cough. The word 'cough' must be a reference to the Danish glottal stop, a means of expression which is extremely rare in other languages, but in Danish is used in the pronunciation to distinguish between numerous words which would otherwise be identical, for instance: *anden* (second) - *anden* (the duck); *kørende* (driving) - *køerne* (the cows/queues); *møller* (miller/mills) - *Møller* (surname); *parret* (combined) - *parret* (the pair).

The glottal stop is a powerful braking of the vibrations of the vocal cords, approaching closure, and this may undoubtedly sound discordant, staccato-ish, like a kind of brief, dry cough. Danes avoid glottal stops in art song.

Altogether many non-Danes find it very difficult to decode Danish pronunciation. Danish is a very vowel-rich language, with important distinctions between for instance *mile*, *mele*, *mæle*, *male* (dune, flour, voice, paint) and *ugle*, *Ole*, *åle*, *årle* (owl, proper name, chaff, early). The final sounds in *hav*, *leg*, *bær*, *flad* (sea, game, berry, flat), which are very common, can also cause problems.

It is difficult to deduce the pronunciation from the written word. *Vejr*, *hver*, *var*, *værd* (weather, each, be, worth) are thus pronounced identically as are *hjul* and *jul* (wheel, Christmas). *Seks* (6) is pronounced 'sex', *seksten* (16) 'sajsten'. The way

from spoken to written word can also be difficult to predict. The diphthong 'aj' can be written *ej*, *eg*, *aj*, *ig* as in *sejl*, *regn*, *maj*, *sig* (sail, rain, May, oneself) - and in even more ways in words of foreign origin. The Danish *t* is different from other *t*-sounds in being slightly sibilant.

Apart from the use of glottal stops and other characteristics of pronunciation, Danish differs from the other Scandinavian languages in the so-called weakened stops. In the Middle Ages, the Nordic *p*, *t*, *k* after a vowel became *b*, *d*, *g* in written Danish and even weaker in the spoken language. *Tapa* became *tabe*, *gata* became *gade*, *kaka* became *kage* (lose, street, cake), etc. These examples also show how Danish weakened the vowels in unstressed syllables to *e*, pronounced *ø* or merged with the surrounding sounds.

The written language is characterised by letters with limited or no usage outside the Nordic countries: *æ*, *ø*, *å*. Norwegian also uses *æ* and *ø*, while *å* is found in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish.

DECLENSION AND SYNTAX

As in the other Nordic languages and in English, the number of declensions has been reduced during the history of the Danish language. Thus there is nothing in the form of the words which reveals what is subject, object or indirect object in a sentence such as *manden rakte drengen skeen* (the man handed the boy the spoon). The information about the relationship between the members of the sentence is largely provided by their order and understood from the words' syntactic placement.

It is characteristic of Danish and the other Nordic languages that the definite article is ecliptic. While English, German, French and other Romance languages indicate definiteness by a preposed element, Nordic languages have a suffixed definite article. In Danish *the house*, *das Haus*, *la maison*, *la casa* is *huset*. The indefinite form is *hus*.

Another characteristic of Nordic languages is the possibility of creating passive tense by appending a particular ending, for instance *s* in Danish, Norwegian 'bokmål' and Swedish. The passive tense of *boghandleren sælger bogen* (the bookseller sells the book) is *bogen sælges af boghandleren* (the book is sold by the bookseller).

THE EXTENSION OF THE LANGUAGE

More than five million Danes have Danish as their mother tongue and Danish is an official language in both the Nordic countries and the EU. The Faeroe Islands have several thousand inhabitants with Danish as their first language and it is the second language of the remaining approx. 45,000 Faeroese. Danish was also the second language in Iceland until 1999, but since 1999 English has taken over this position. Danish is an official language on Greenland alongside Greenlandic and for many Greenlanders Danish is still their second language. In addition, Danish is the mother tongue of over 10,000 Danes in South Schleswig, but the second language of far more.

THE DANES AND THEIR LANGUAGE

Today, Danish is the Nordic language with the most rapid pronunciation changes from generation to generation and during the last century the phasing out of dialects has happened faster than in most other countries. From being rich in dialects, Danish has become dialect poor. On the other hand, there are still regional differences in the standard pronunciation of people from Zealand, Funen and Jutland.

Many Danes find Danish in its modern form less beautiful than for instance French, Italian and English.

The Danes are conservative as far as the written language is concerned. Even modest changes to the norm can result in strong reactions.

From a bird's eye view, Denmark is a very homogeneous speech community. Well above 90% speak Danish, which has no competition as the national language. Nonetheless many Danes are concerned about language distinctions in the Danish society. A couple of decades ago, it was mainly the influence of the modern Copenhagen vernacular on the conservative spoken standard language which exercised people, but now at the turn of the millennium the debate is mainly focused on language conditions in school and society for immigrants and refugees and the fear that English will oust Danish. In reality, the immigrant languages have had no demonstrable influence on modern standard Danish - and of course there are over 100 different ones. But the Danish society has no recent experience of handling minority languages and is uncertain about



The pre-Christian runic stone at Glavendrup on North Funen stands almost two metres above the ground and the runic inscription is the longest known in Denmark. Photo: Biofoto/Erik Thomsen.

many of the emerging language issues.

As far as English is concerned, it is a question partly of a considerable import of words and expressions, partly of a domain loss within research, education, entertainment and commercial language. Much research, much business life, many educational matters and much entertainment know no frontiers, so this development is not unnatural in an open society like the Danish. Thus, as long as research is also published in Danish, a national terminology in the mother tongue is also developed and a national education

culture and national entertainment are also cultivated, there is no cause for concern. For Danish is among the hundred largest of the 6,000 - 7,000 languages in the world, measured by the number of native speakers. It may be close to number 100, but considering that the country has a thousand year old tradition of Danish as the dominant language, a well-developed educational system, a large public sector with Danish as the administrative language and a well-described and standardised written language, there are no cogent reasons for strong language protectionist initiatives.

As the Danish-Norwegian Enlightenment and comedy writer Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754) wrote: 'Just as a nation sometimes needs the goods of another, so a language also needs the words of another language'. Holberg combined this openness with considerable arrogance on behalf of the Danish language. His example can still serve as a model.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

Denmark's Official Web Site
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