

Niels Davidsen-Nielsen

Danish language policy in comparison with the language policy of the European Union

Abstract

I rapporten fra Danmark slås det fast at dansk sprogpolitik på et afgørende punkt er i uoverensstemmelse med EU's sprogpolitik. Den officielle danske sprogpolitik fra 2004 promoverer nemlig snarere tosprogethed (engelsk og dansk) end flersprogethed. Hvis flersprogethed skal fremmes i Danmark, er der ifølge rapportøren brug for følgende ændringer i uddannelserne:

I folkeskolen bør undervisning i fremmedsprog nr. 2 igangsættes tidligere end i 7. klasse (som det er tilfældet i dag) og være obligatorisk.

I gymnasieskolen bør sprog som tysk og fransk gives en stærkere stilling end de har i dag, og det samme gælder for spansk og italiensk på de skoler hvor der undervises i disse sprog. På de videregående uddannelser bør man afskaffe systemet hvorefter størrelsen af statens bevillinger til universiteterne afhænger af hvor mange eksaminer deres studerende består, for dette system truer med at kvæle andre fremmedsprog end engelsk.

Det anbefales at ændringer som disse bliver drøftet i det sprogudvalg som den danske regering i 2007 anmodede om at stille forslag til en revideret dansk sprogpolitik [og dette har efterfølgende fundet sted].

In order to provide a proper background I will begin with a brief sketch of *how Denmark got an official language policy*.

In the 1990s it gradually became clear that the linguistic situation had changed in Denmark. Three factors were at play:

- 1) As a result of globalisation the use of English had increased markedly.
- 2) As a result of influx of immigrants and refugees Denmark could no longer be regarded as a homogeneous language society.
- 3) As a result of transition to the information society the demand for language skills had increased.

In this new situation the Danish language needed strengthening. In March 2003, consequently, a debate on language took place in the Danish Parliament. Four members of the Social-Liberal party asked the Minister of Cultural Affairs the following question:

What concrete initiatives is the Government going to take in order to strengthen and develop the Danish language so that it can retain its culture-bearing function also in future?

In his answer the minister announced that he had set up a *committee* to work out a *proposal* for a Danish language policy. In this proposal, which was published in September 2003, a number of recommendations were put forward. *Legislation* was not proposed, however, for the committee found it difficult to see what *sanctions* to propose in case such legislation was not respected.

On the basis of the committee's report the Danish government published its *language-policy statement* in January 2004. In the parliamentary debate on the Government's language policy, spokesmen for the opposition argued that the lack of linguistic legislation was likely to create problems in that universities and business companies could go on doing what they had done so far if they found that that was to their advantage.

1. The language policy of the European Union

As you know, it is the declared policy of the Commission to promote multilingualism. The aim is *a plurilingual citizenry in a multilingual Europe*. On 22 November 2005 the European Commission passed its first announcement on multilingualism, and one year earlier Mr Ján Figel had been appointed the first commissioner with special responsibility for multilingualism.

In this announcement the importance of linguistic skills for the freedom of movement for workers and for the competitiveness of the EU is emphasised. The Commission suggests that the member states should now pass national action programmes to promote multilingualism. The member states are also asked to report – in 2007 – on the measures they have taken to promote multilingualism. Reference is made to a meeting held in the European Council in Barcelona in 2002 where it was recommended that *at least two foreign EU languages should be taught very early* to schoolchildren.

The Commission's *aim* is that all EU citizens should have practical skills in *at least two EU languages* besides their national language. In the announcement it is pointed out that there is an increasing tendency to equate 'foreign language teaching' with 'learning English'. Here the caveat is added that "English is not enough". National plans are now needed, it is stated, which can guide and coordinate actions to promote multilingualism. Attention is also drawn to *technological tools* that may promote multilingualism, for example online dictionaries, automatic translation systems, artificial speech recognition and speech synthesis. Finally, it is pointed out that improved language skills can contribute to a competitive EU economy. With respect to a more mobile work force, command of more than one foreign language is obviously desirable.

Since this announcement on multilingualism was made the Commission has started developing an *indicator* for language competence in order to *benchmark* the competence of pupils in two foreign languages at the end of their primary education. In this investigation the schoolchildren's ability to read, listen and write will be tested. I have been informed by the Danish Ministry of Education that Denmark will in all likelihood participate in this large-scale project, which is scheduled for 2010.

This language indicator – a kind of foreign language PISA investigation – is described in a document produced by the Commission in September 2007 on the implementation of the national action plans to promote multilingualism. Multilingualism has also been strengthened in that a commissioner has been appointed for this area exclusively, Mr Orban from Romania.

On November 15 2007 – in just a couple of days – the European ministers of education will hold a meeting where one of the points on the agenda is ‘towards a multilingual Europe’. So there is no doubt that the EU is keeping the multilingual pot boiling. This can also be seen from the fact that the Commission has set up an expert committee on multilingualism, with eight members.

2. How does the Danish language policy relate to the policy of the European Union?

The goal of *plurilingualism* is not reflected explicitly in the official Danish language policy from 2004. The only statement that refers to plurilingualism is the following on the *Nordic languages*: “The Nordic language community should be imparted through language teaching from school to university.” But this statement is rather free of charge for the Government, for the Scandinavian languages – Danish, Norwegian and Swedish – are so closely related that the teaching of them to Scandinavians can hardly be said to represent a major challenge.

Rather than aiming at plurilingualism the Danish language policy promotes *bilingualism*, for the languages singled out for special attention are clearly Danish and English. The following is stated about the role of *Danish* in tertiary education:

Considering that students are trained to handle a number of responsible tasks in society, it is the opinion of the Government that Danish should maintain a place in tertiary education as the main language of instruction.

At the same time the significance of *English* is also expressed enthusiastically:

As part of the endeavour to make Danish universities attractive to foreign students it is absolutely crucial that courses and educations can be offered in English... [It is] gratifying that the universities have followed Parliament's request to increase the number of foreign language educational programmes. [for ‘foreign language’ read ‘English’!]

In *primary education* the dominance of English as a foreign language is very clear: English is studied as an obligatory subject from the 3rd grade to the 9th grade. *German* can be studied as an optional subject from 7th to 9th grade, i.e. at a very late stage; and instead of German it is also possible to study *French* from grade 7 to 9. As compared with the situation not very long ago, German and particularly French have been weakened considerably.

It should be added, though, that primary schools have to teach at least two foreign languages, and although it is not obligatory for the pupils to study another foreign language besides English unless they wish to proceed to secondary education, most of the pupils do in fact study another foreign language besides English. Multilingualism is also involved in primary education through a requirement that there should be instruction in our neighbouring Nordic languages, Swedish and Norwegian, as part of the instruction in Danish. But among the many subjects taught this does not take up much room.

In *secondary education* the pattern with English as the dominating foreign language is largely the same. Through a major reform, natural-science and social studies subjects

were recently strengthened at this level of the educational system, and although that may have been justified, the price which was paid for it was largely paid by foreign languages other than English. This particularly goes for French, for as this language is only taught in a minority of primary schools, it usually has to be studied as a beginner's language for three years in secondary school. German, on the other hand, does not normally have the status of a beginner's language in secondary school and therefore only requires two years of study here.

In addition to English, German and French, the following languages are taught and can be studied in secondary schools in Denmark: Spanish, Italian, Chinese (which is quite popular), Russian and Arabic. Latin, on the other hand, is on its way out and only survives in a new introductory course on general principles of language.

The interest among young Danes in studying foreign languages other than English – and to a certain degree Spanish – at *university level* has fallen dramatically. Here are some facts and figures:

At the Copenhagen Business School (CBS), Italian and Russian are being closed down owing to lack of customers, for if a university has only a few students within a specific subject it gets very little funding from the state, and therefore it cannot afford to continue offering this subject.

The interest in studying German and French has also decreased dramatically. In spite of the fact that German is the largest language in the EU and that Germany is clearly Denmark's largest trading partner, the number of students wishing to study German had in 2006 dropped by 50 per cent at the University of Copenhagen since the year 2000.

The figures for French are even worse. While in the year 2000 106 students of French enrolled at the University of Copenhagen, 39 at the University of Aarhus and 13 at the University of Southern Denmark at Odense, the figures had in 2006 dropped to respectively 35 in Copenhagen, 16 in Aarhus and 0 in Odense. And at the University of Aalborg French was dropped entirely in 2006.

Has no one drawn attention to the weakened position of other foreign languages than English in Denmark and to the gradual movement from multilingualism to bilingualism? The answer to this question is yes, namely the Danish Language Council, but it should be added that our words of warning have apparently fallen on stony ground. In 2003 the Council published its proposal for guidelines for a Danish language policy. We put forward a four-point plan, and the fourth point was a recommendation that the teaching of foreign languages should be strengthened. Let me quote from our proposal:

Although English is today the world language, other languages are important as well. It should be possible to receive instruction in large foreign languages such as German (one of our neighbouring languages), French, Spanish, Russian, Japanese and Chinese. Furthermore, it is important that immigrant languages like Turkish, Arabic, Farsi and Urdu are taught in Denmark. Knowledge of these languages is an important asset, and at a point in time when strong forces influence us in the direction of decreased linguistic and cultural variation, it is important to be aware of the value of linguistic diversity and to try to retain this diversity.

3. Conclusion

If we are to promote multilingualism in Denmark, the teaching of other foreign languages than English needs to be strengthened. In order to bring that about a number of changes are required in the Danish educational system, particularly the following:

In *primary education* a second foreign language should be introduced earlier than in the 7th grade, as it is today, and it should be obligatory.

In *secondary education* languages like German and French should be given a stronger position than they have today, and the same goes for Spanish and Italian in schools where these languages are taught.

In *tertiary education* we need to shelve the system whereby universities receive funding according to the number of exams passed by students, for this system is strangling other foreign language educations than English. In this connection a *public debate* on the economic and cultural value of multilingualism would be useful. Such a debate did in fact take place recently when it became known that the CBS had to close down Italian and Russian, and that French and German might soon follow suit. In this debate the Confederation of Danish Industry entered the stage and expressed the view that the lack of graduates in German was a major drawback for Denmark, Germany being Denmark's largest trading partner.

Changes such as these could be discussed in a language committee which was set up recently by the Government to propose a revised overall Danish language policy. The reason why language policy was taken up once again, so shortly after the Government had published its policy in 2004, was that in December 2006 one of the political parties proposed that Parliament should enjoin the Government to prepare a language act with proper legislation. In formulating the legislation required, importance should be attached, it was pointed out, to the four-point-plan proposed by the Danish Language Council in 2003. In now remains to be seen (in 2008) whether such a language act will be passed and whether multilingualism will be one of its goals.

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