

## REPORTS:

# Language Policy and Competitiveness in Business – A Danish Symposium

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On October 2 2002, the Danish Society for LSP and Professional Communication organised a symposium at the Copenhagen Business School on the role of language policies in a business environment, especially from the point of view of improving the competitiveness of Danish companies. The symposium was oriented towards people with interest in the topic from the fields of business, politics and higher education. It was intended as the first in a line of activities of the society in connection with the ongoing general discussion in Denmark on a possible national language policy.

The symposium consisted of two major parts:

- A section with papers presented by experts from different fields connected to the topic of the symposium
- A round table discussion with practitioners from companies with experience in implementing a language policy in a business environment

The limited space of this report does not permit an ample presentation of the papers and the discussion. Instead, I have in the following gathered the central points of the different presentations in order to give the reader a short insight in the content of the symposium.<sup>1</sup>

### The experts' section

The first speaker in this section was *Professor Niels Davidsen-Nielsen* from the Copenhagen Business School, who is also a leading member of the Danish

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<sup>1</sup> All presentations and the round table discussion may be heard at the address <http://www.dsff-lsp.dk/centres/dsff/Symp2002/>.

Language Board. His presentation was centred around the general influence of English on modern Danish and on modern Danish society. The most imminent problem here is the influence of English on modern Danish society, where there are beginning signs of domain loss for Danish in the areas of for example natural science and computer science. Niels Davidsen-Nielsen suggested a parallel strategy to encounter this danger. This strategy consists in accepting the role of English as a global language and the characteristics of modern science and culture as at least international, if not global, on the one hand, and in strengthening the role of Danish alongside the global language, on the other hand. This strategy should cover all areas of society, among them also business, television and universities.

The next speaker was *Bjarne Lundager Jensen*, Head of the Division for Research and Higher Education of the Confederation of Danish Industries. His central view was that multiculturalism plays an increasing role even in smaller Danish companies. This means that they will have to apply at least English and in many cases also other languages, apart from Danish, in their everyday work. Especially English as a global language is a prerequisite, which means that a national language policy with relevance for business must focus on how the communicative competence of Danish citizens in foreign languages, above all in English, may be strengthened. In his view, it calls for a change in the position of foreign languages in the school system, opening also the way for using foreign languages as teaching medium outside the foreign language classes.

From the point of view of the European Union, Head of Department *Svend Bech* from the Translation Service of the European Commission showed an example of how a language policy backing up multilinguality may be set up. In the administrative organisations of the European Union, full multilinguality (= all official languages may be applied) is restricted to selected areas, primarily those concerning communication with citizens or parliamentary debates, whereas certain limitations are introduced in other settings. However, a certain degree of multilinguality is always present. This means that in the realms of the European Union, Danish is actually not an endangered language, although it is naturally not as central a working language as for example English, French or German. And the ideology of the EU will guarantee that this situation is not going to change within the next many years.

Prof. *Björn Melander* from the University of Uppsala in Sweden presented highlights from the report that came out of the work on a Swedish national language policy that he has been heading for the last two years. The Swedish situation is very similar to the Danish, with important influences from English, to the extent that Swedish is beginning to lose some domains, with a certain element of multilinguality and multiculturalism in the culture (which as opposed to the Danish situation is a traditional feature in the Swedish culture), and with a growing need for higher competences in foreign languages. As an answer to the challenges from this situation, the commission Björn Melander headed suggests three goals to work for: 1) to keep Swedish as a complete language to be used in all parts of

society, 2) to give everybody the right of speaking in his or her mothertongue, and 3) to give everybody access to acquire foreign language skills in order to be able to manage modern life, also in business settings. The school system and the systems of higher education will have an important role to play in achieving these goals, and generally a parallel strategy, supporting Swedish *and* foreign languages (especially English) is necessary.

From this point of view, the presentation by Vice-rector *Karen Margrethe Lauridsen*, Aarhus School of Business, fitted smoothly into the picture. Her presentation was on language problems in higher education at Danish universities. Graduates from the universities must be able to function in a globalised world, but must at the same time be able to function for example as high school teachers in a national contexts. Furthermore, graduates must have up-to-date knowledge, which also implies the necessity of acquiring information from sources all over the world. Therefore, also the universities have to follow a parallel strategy and to find out, what subjects have to be in Danish and what subjects in a foreign language. This is even more the case in the light of the Bologna process that has as its goal to make it easier for students to study at universities all over Europe. Danish universities have to meet this challenge, too, in order for them to be able to attract students and teachers and in order for them to keep on educating first class graduates for companies in Denmark.

The last presentation in this section was by *Christian S. Nissen*, Director General of the national radio/TV station “Danmarks Radio”. He talked about the language policy (or rather policies) implemented in his organisation. The plural is adequate, because apart from an overall general language policy with relevance for all of the organisation actually different language policies are developed for the different channels, according to the prospective group of addressees. Christian S. Nissen showed some examples of the differences between some channels from the point of view of language and thus gave a good insight in the consequences of actually working consciously with a language policy within an organisation.

### **The practitioners’ section**

The experts’ section was followed by a round table discussion featuring practitioners from five different Danish or Nordic companies with experience in the field of company language policies (Grundfos, MAN B& W Diesel, CCI Europe, Nordea and TDC). “Language policy” in this connection is primarily a policy as to quality, explicit quality standards and measures, and guidelines as to how especially written communication has to be structured, less a policy as to what languages are necessary for what purposes. The work on a language policy in the different companies was presented, partly in the form of short statements, partly in the following discussion with the audience (in which were also practitioners with relevant experience). A common experience of all practitioners was that they had to work fairly hard to make the management aware of the problem, but that examples with financial consequences (lost customers, lack of prestige, communication breakdown) ended up being convincing. Another important and recurrent factor

consists in the problem that language is seen as a very personal thing by its users. So employees do not want anybody to interfere in their communication. Therefore, a major factor in the success of a language policy in this sense of the word is the extent to which people in the company are aware of the usefulness of a language policy. This awareness may be created via seminars, leaflets, websites, etc., but a very useful tool here, applied by a couple of the represented companies, seemed to be to appoint “language ambassadors” in the different sections of a company. These ambassadors have as their main task to pass on the ideas of the language policy, to see to it that the ideas are understood and followed, to answer questions from employees, and to collect knowledge about unforeseen problems. But still, getting through with this kind of language policy requires a lot of idealism on the part of the language workers.

The general impression of the arrangement was that there is a vivid interest in problems of language policy (in the different senses of the word) also in the business environment in Denmark. This comprises policies concerning language quality as well as policies concerning language choice, domain loss, foreign language competences, etc. Thus, we can hope that also representatives from business and higher education will take part in the discussions about an official national Danish language policy starting in these days.

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