

## **EDITORIAL:**

In April 2007, the Danish government set up a committee (the third since the beginning of the century) to report on the state of the Danish language and developments since the last parliamentary debate on language in 2003/2004. Taking into account initiatives since that time, notably the declaration of Scandinavian ministers in 2006, the committee is to draw up a balance sheet of the situation of the Danish language in the public sector, in schools at every level, in higher education, in the field of science (including the terminology of LSP), in trade and industry, in cultural life, and even in the EU.

The committee is also to pronounce on what legislation should or could be adopted in the field of language and propose measures to strengthen the position of the Danish language in all fields.

The problems that have led the Danish government to take this new initiative, however, are not specifically Danish, a fact which justifies our dwelling on them in an international context. They have been apparent in varying degrees in other European countries for many years, and we have taken them up several times in this journal: the domination of English in the name of globalisation, the danger of the impoverishment of national languages, particularly in the field of science, and the marginalisation of those in the population that do not speak English.

We do not know the committee's conclusions, but we note with satisfaction that its creation encouraged the launch of a number of interesting initiatives, notably two important conferences that took place recently: the one on the survival of LSP in Danish<sup>1</sup>; the other, more general, on the language policy challenges facing Denmark<sup>2</sup>.

Both conferences exposed current trends that threaten the national languages and run completely counter to the EU's official language policy.

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<sup>1</sup> "How can we defend LSP in Danish – and should we?", DSFF (Dansk Selskab for Fagsprog og Fagkommunikation), Copenhagen, 11 October 2007

<sup>2</sup> "Language policy challenges for Denmark: how can research findings be used?", Department of International Language Studies and Computational Linguistics, CBS, Frederiksberg, 5 December 2007.

Referring to the numerous well-known examples of national languages that have been “murdered” by another language, one prominent expert in the area<sup>3</sup> went so far as to call English a “killer language” and warned against an evolution that could happen more quickly than anyone expects if no action is taken.

Among the threats to the national language, especially in the field of LSP, one could mention the introduction of English as a teaching language in Danish universities. Already as much as 50% of teaching is given only in English, to the exclusion of Danish.

Apart from the absurdity of forcing Danish students who can hardly speak English to follow courses given in English by Danish teachers who do not master the language either, it is not difficult to foresee the consequences for the national language even in the short term.

Both conferences also discussed foreign language teaching in schools. In Denmark, the law stipulates two obligatory foreign languages: English right up to pre-university level and German or French (free choice) from the sixth year of school (12-13-year-olds) to the ninth year.

Nevertheless, the worrying fact is that for various reasons (shortage of teachers and lack of interest amongst students) the percentage of students who leave school with no knowledge of German or French is rising rapidly.

This should make us focus on society’s real needs in the field of foreign languages. That is what a recently published enquiry by the Confederation of Danish Industries has done<sup>4</sup>.

The enquiry’s conclusion, which apparently came as a surprise to some, is that, even though one cannot do without English in our part of the world, this one foreign language is far from sufficient for commercial dealings with other countries.

Nevertheless, companies declare that what they particularly need are employees who can not only manage a foreign language, but also have specialist knowledge of a technical or commercial kind. To solve more complicated language problems (legal, technical, etc.), “one can simply go to a translation agency”.

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<sup>3</sup> Dr Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, specialist in linguistic human rights.

<sup>4</sup> “More [than] language”, an enquiry prepared by the Confederation of Danish Industries in collaboration with Assistant Professor Lisbeth Verstraete Hansen of Copenhagen Business School.

This is, of course, a brilliant solution – and one foreseen for many years by the universities and by students who are abandoning the study of languages in favour of the many new combined-subject programmes: language(s) + another subject. Only it seems to have been forgotten that real language specialists are needed to teach these students and also to man the translation agencies needed to service the companies. In view of the speed with which language faculties properly so-called are disappearing, these specialists will be very hard to find in a few years' time.

So action is urgent if the situation is to be rectified!

The Editorial Board