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Language Policy en Danish Companies

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1. Context and background

The focus on language policy in Danish companies is a relatively new phenomenon. It is a spin off of the recent development of different contextual circumstances – like technology and globalization of trade.

The need for managing the linguistic aspects of corporate routines is evident. However, it is just as evident, that there is a lack of coherent and theoretically and empirically-based language-managing tools.

Meanwhile, the public sector has a longstanding experience in coping with language problems in one way or another and does thus offer - to a certain degree - a starting platform for the elaboration of corporate language management.

We shall look at the relevant approaches to language policy from a Danish point of view.

2. Language policy – different approaches

Policy, according to Longman: Dictionary of English Language is understood as:

(1) an overall plan, embracing general goals and procedures and intended to guide and determine present and future decisions

or

(2) definite course or methods of action selected from among alternatives and in the light of given conditions

Policy, according to a Danish dictionary is defined as:

(3) *De aktiviteter hvormed nogen (fx en regering) søger at styre el. påvirke udviklingen inden for et område*
= the **activities** by which **somebody** (e.g. a government) tries to **control** or **influence** the **development** within a **certain area**

If we combine the characteristic features of the different definitions, when it comes to **language policy** and its different versions, the division lines are drawn according to the answer to the following questions:

what area is being **influenced**
by whom and
in which circumstances- and what are the **overall plans**, i.e. the **general goals** and **procedures** or **activities** of guiding or determining between **which alternatives**.

As to the **who's** there is a clear-cut distinction between

- the public sector or public authorities, and
- the private sector or private companies

As to the **area of influence** we might distinguish between

- the macro level = potential influence on the **national language(s)**, and
- the micro level = potential influence on the **language codes** within a specific national language

The **goals** and **measures** as well as the **alternatives** offered vary, as we shall see, according to these variables.

3. The Macro level

Public sector: choice between language alternatives

In Denmark, like in other monolingual countries, focus on the protectionist aspects of language policy has increased, both in terms of the loss of domain of the Danish language as such and in terms of attacks on vocabulary.

As to the loss of domain-problem at the national level, i.e. the choice between Danish and other languages, the question is particularly relevant in terms of higher education and scientific articles. In this case, an increasing amount of knowledge is communicated in English without any Danish version being obtainable.

The attack on the Danish vocabulary is particularly obvious in areas such as information technology, music and music publishing, and advertising. Here English is rapidly gaining ground, in some cases bordering exclusion of Danish. Linguists characterize this situation, too, as a “loss of domain”. (Hjarvad 2003).

However, unlike our Nordic neighbours, the Danish authorities have been open to the influence of English and have made no attempt to warn against this “invasion” by for instance imposing national substitute words for English terminology or phrases at the national language level, cf. ...

At the macro level, no explicit attempts have been made by the Danish authorities to intervene in the natural development of the language given the circumstance of growing internationalization and globalization. The attitude is openness to influence and natural development, which can be illustrated by a quotation from the language policy of The Danish Public Service Radio and Television:

“The Danish language has always been exposed to foreign influence. It would be foolish to try to avoid the English terminology of e.g. technology. We have to live with the incorporation of words like harddisk, software and e-mails as parts of the Danish vocabulary.”

Language Policy in Private Companies

For the Danish companies, globalization involves an communication in foreign languages as English, German, Spanish and French. Many Danish companies have the strategy of

communicating in the language of their business relations and consequently there is an increased need for language competences at different levels.

Furthermore, during recent years, mergers and acquisitions have affected the Danish companies in the sense that many of the national companies have become members of an international group, either as a parent company or a subsidiary.

This has meant that many Danish companies have a declared strategy regarding the choice of language. Thus, increasingly, there are settings in Denmark in which English has replaced the Danish language as the common language of both top executives and staff of the company.

It has been argued that the use of English in day-to-day business between the Danish members of the staff constitutes an unnecessary complication of everyday life in the companies. Also, it has been estimated that the shift of national language implies – besides the loss of domain – loss of performance, temporarily or permanently. (Jørn Lund, p. 37.)

The globalization naturally implies the necessity of world wide communication in English – to business relations, to the large group of stakeholders as well as to the public in general. In many Danish companies the language strategy has led to the English version being the only available choice. Again, you can speak of a loss of domain with focus on the bottom-line and at the expense of the non-native English-speaking Danish stakeholders interested in different aspects of the company.

In short, the macro level private sector is characterized by:

Initiative: Executive level

Circumstances: Globalization, Mergers and Acquisitions

Goals: Better performance

Measures and tools:

Declared strategy of shift of code from Danish to English in certain areas

Implementation by staff

4.1. Micro level – public sector

In 1981, the Danish State Information Service published a booklet, the title of which could be translated as “**Plain Danish, please**”, targeted at the employees in the public administration. Here, the circumstances were the preference of a ponderous **bureaucratic style** in all sorts of communication to the citizens.

The information was characterized by excessively complex hypotactic sentence structures, heavily loaded noun phrases and long and infrequent words. One of the examples in the booklet was the following message - which I will not translate but just comment on as to its structure..

I et med stiftsøvrighedens erklæring af 30. oktober 1963 (i. nr. M.J. 256/56) hertil tilbagefulgt andragende har Gunnelev sogns menighedsråd anholdt om godkendelse af, at meningsrådet modtager det hoslagt i tilbagefølgende, af den i anledning af anlægget af en

C1: Main clause (level 1)

NP: underlined premodifier 17 units

C2: subordinate clause (level 2)

<p>motorvej over Fyn nedsatte ekspropriationskommission den 26. september 1963 afgivne forligstilbud, hvorefter der for afståelse af den del af den Gunnelev kirke tilhørende ejendom, matr. nr. 1 r af Gunnelev by og sogn, hvorpå kirkens parkeringsplads er beliggende samt for ulemper betales 1000 kr., hvorhos motorvejsanlægget uden udgift for menighedsrådet reablerer parkeringspladsen ved under denne at inddrage det overfor kirkegården beliggende areal af den eksisterende vej.</p> <p>no. of words: no. of words > 7 characters: no: of sentences: 1 (lix 93)</p>	<p>NP: underlined premodifier 22 units</p> <p>C3: subordinate clause (level 3) NP: underlined premodifier: 7 units</p> <p>C4: embedded clause (level 3)</p> <p>C5: subordinate clause (level 4)</p>
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What made the text heavy and extraordinarily bureaucratic was a very hierarchical sentence structure, heavily pre-modified noun phrases and the use of a lot of departmental - and for the general public - rare words. The texts from the Administration really needed a switch from the heavily complex to a more simple and modern language structure.

The booklet of 1981 provided advice as to make the information readable. The principal linguistic elements in this connection were:

- short words
- common words
- sentence limit: 22-25 words
- average limit: 15-18 words
- no pre-modifiers

A pivotal element used later on in the modernisation process has been the so-called Lix-index - a readability index developed by Bjornsson from Sweden, which combines the length of the sentence with the content of long words, according to the following formula:

Lix formula

$$\text{Lix} = \text{wds/sent} + 100 * (\text{wds} \geq 6 \text{ char}) / \text{wds}$$

The lix-classification is as follows:

- 55 < + Very difficult, e.g. specialist literature of an academic level, law texts
- 45 -54 Difficult, e.g. specialist literature, popular science, academic writing
- 35 - 44 Average, e.g. newspapers and magazines
- 25 -34 fairly easy for trained readers, e.g. magazine short stories (= ugebladslitteratur), adult novels
- 24 > Easy for all readers, childrens' literature

As a comparison, the lix score of the example of the booklet was 93.

In 1997, a Danish committee on Public Information Policy appointed by the Ministry of Science, published a white paper with specific recommendations on language politics and strategies in the public sector. The paper showed that although the situation had improved since 1981, there was still room for improvement in this area.

This was based on the fact that:

- 6 out of 10 Danish citizens claimed that they did not understand the information from the Administration
- A user survey made by the Danish State Information Service showed that a half of the respondents did not understand or could not explain single words typically used in texts from the public sector, for instance words like *compromise, compensation, certify, and prioritise*.

The report concluded that in the last two decades a lot had been done to shine up the bureaucratic style, and the communication with the citizens was now expressed in a modern, friendly and clear Danish with focus on the recipient.

The means have been user surveys, user panels and courses of communication for the employees (50 to 70 per cent of the public staff have attended communication courses over a twenty-year period) and in some cases elaboration of language guides or manuals.

A brilliant example of achievements accomplished by the Danish administration is the Danish Central Customs and Tax Administration. During the period 1994-1997, the information policy was radically changed.

Until then, the attitude was that the information itself was valuable as it was and often even used as an **alibi** in order to be able to refer to their having complied with the obligation of information. (Heinesen Report, Appendix 6).

The language policy of the Customs and Tax Administrations has been refined ever since – to-day with a nice language manual and guide to written texts to be used by the employees. It's starting point is the following comparison between departmental language and common language:

Traditional departmental language:	Common language:
Abstract	Concrete
Complicated	Simple
Passive tense	Active tense
Formal	Informal
Impersonal	Personal

It **does not** recommend a drastic **switch of language** from a use of the features of the traditional language to the use of those of the common language. However, it recommends that the users **borrow elements** from the common language to make the departmental text easier to read.

The recommended readability score on the lix-scale is:

- 1) information for the citizens: 30-40
- 2) information for professional recipients: 40-50

Another example of checklist of “dos and donts” comes from the language guide of a Danish municipal authority.

The employees should

➤ avoid	➤ use
heavy words smart words foreign words bureaucratic words passive constructions & impersonal style superfluous words	concrete words verbs instead of nouns short sentences (15-20 words on an average)

In short, the language policy of the Danish Public Sector concerning the relevant parameters of the whos and the whats etc. is as follows:

Initiative: top-down-initiated research, campaigns and courses

Circumstances: badly need for switch of language code towards a more simple and modern communication

Goals: 1) Improved understanding of information by the public

2) Better response or quicker reactions from the public on information given

Measures & tools:

- 1) user surveys
- 2) user panels
- 3) courses of communication
- 4) language manuals with guidelines for linguistic simplifications and modernizations

4.2. Micro level: Private Companies

Going back to the early 80'es – the written communication in the company was handled by a group of language professionals employed as secretaries and translators, who ensured the quality of the material. Now, the communication is often in the form of between the engineer or salesman and his business partners – and very often there is no time or no willingness to have the written material checked by the language experts. Thus, the sender-recipient channel has taken on a new profile, as the group of senders has become heterogeneous in terms of language competences - both the national and foreign languages - and the code or language used for the communication is consequently of varying quality. This refers to both the national language and the foreign languages

The reaction to this loss of awareness of the language issue has recently led to the introduction of a language policy in some of the largest Danish companies.

In 2001 – the European Year of Languages - The Danish Association of Business Language Graduates (EsF) organised a project with several partners with the aim of raising awareness of the importance of learning languages in enterprises as a professional means of communication in an internationalised world. In this connection, companies were targeted in order to draw attention to the importance of having a language policy.

In October 2002, the EsF organization and the other project partners organised a conference on language policies called “Business Life, Language Policies and Competition”. The debate constituted the basis of a white paper on the subject.

The two actions of the professional organization had a catalyzing effect on the professional language staff in the companies who had watched with preoccupation the average quality loss in the communication of the company.

Consequently, steps further steps were taken by the linguistic staff to implement language policies focussing on the language structure.

At this point, between 10 and 20 of the largest Danish companies have implemented a language policy focusing on the use of the national language. They have introduced a language guide which contains the overall guidelines of the written communication for the staff as such. The individual guidelines are very much alike – and seem to follow the steps taken by the public sector on its path towards a modernization of the language.

The following is a comparison of the elements of the language guides, to which we have had access. We have split it up according to a B2B and a B2C concept, based on the hypothesis that the recipient would have influence in the language structure (or register) used in each case.

The result is the following:

Contents of the Language Guidelines of Danish firms:
Features of language structure:

	B2B	B2B	B2B/B2C	B2B/B2C	B2C
	Production sector	Production sector	Production sector	Financial sector	Insurance company
Short sentences	15-20 words/sent	x	15-18 words/sent.	20-25 words/sent	x
Short words	x	x	x		x
Plain words			x		
No foreign words		x	x	x	
Active tense	x	x	x	x	x
Verbs instead of nouns	x	x	x	x	

In short, the panorama of the private micro level policies is the following:

Initiative: Staff

Circumstances: globalization & decentralization of communication

Goals: better performance & better coherence between corporate values and language

Measures and tools: language manuals/language policies & peer assessment

5. Language policy in private companies: discussion

Apart from the peer assessment (language ambassador-scheme, for instance), the only tool used to implement their goals is a language manual or language guide.

The manuals or guides contain brief comments on rhetoric and tone-related strategies and genre distinctions, and focus is mainly on the linguistic structure.

The corporate language guides operate with exactly the same parameters as have been indicated for the public sector, including advices on lix-scores.

5.1. Problems

Since the circumstances and the goals are different from those of the public sector, the choice of the same linguistic structure could be problematic in more than one sense:

The claim for **active voice** instead of the **passive voice** is problematic. For one thing the *raison d'être* of the non-passive-mantra is that the active voice is easier to understand. However, the recipient of the texts in the business world – and especially in the B2B sector - should be able to understand a construction formulated in the passive tense. Moreover some text genres, e.g. technical instructions or a description of accounting policies require the passive voice – like for instance the following example:

“Expenditures for major additions, improvements, flight equipment modifications and certain equipment overhaul costs are capitalized when such costs are determined to extend the useful life of the asset. Maintenance and repairs are charged to expense as incurred, except for certain aircraft-related costs on one of our aircraft fleet types, which are capitalized and amortized over their estimated service lives.”

http://www.fedex.com/us/investorrelations/2004annualreport/pdf/FedEx%202004_ar_financials.pdf

For one thing, it would be totally useless and waste of time to keep indicating who is the agent of these manoeuvres. In addition, in some genres the thing or the process in question comes naturally as the theme (and the subject) of the sentence. This is what the passive voice is for.

The need for **short(er) sentences** in the public sector was imperative because of the prevailing heavy bureaucratic style. Communication in the business world has never suffered from the defect of illegible texts. Thus, the **general** average parameter of lix-scores around 20 seems a bit exaggerated.

The same argument holds true for the use of **verbal nouns**. In specialized texts there is a predominant use of verbal nouns – and a popularization of these constructions by making all the process words verb phrases would be nonsense. Again the intended reader of the document would be quite able to read these words.

The search for simplicity - in the way it is exposed here - is problematic in business life where, for one thing, you have a lot of genres requiring different language codes and a target group which in no way require texts on the level of childrens' literature.

Furthermore, when the issue is communication in a foreign language, the simplicity could be even more problematic when you communicate with the Latin cultures.

An investigation made by colleagues at the Copenhagen School of Business on the contrastive aspects between Danish and Italian points to the fact that at least two of the indicated simplicity parameters offer great difference between the languages. According to my observations, this fact could be extended to all Germanic and the Latin languages.

In fact, a general characteristic of Latin languages, e.g. Spanish, is their hypotactic structure and nominal style – and a consequently high lix-index, whereas the characteristic of the Germanic languages, e.g. Danish, is their paratactic structure and a verbal style

I have studied a set of parallel texts with exactly the same content in Danish and Spanish annual reports.

I have examined the auditor's report in 5 Spanish companies and compared them with those of 5 corresponding Danish companies. The genre in itself appeals to a higher readability index than that of for instance advertising texts. However, the different language conventions furthermore show a marked difference between the two sets of texts:

Company	Readability score – lix
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	index
A.P. Moeller (DK)	62
Carlsberg (DK)	51
Coloplast (DK)	54
Danisco (DK)	50
ISS (DK)	54
Amper (ES)	81
Arcelor (ES)	81
Sniace (ES)	78
Recoletos (ES)	81
Grup sher (ES)	80

It might be wise to consider, why the claim for simplicity has been generalized to such an extent. I would like to quote a consideration from a debate on the Internet, which supports this preoccupation:

"There's a trade off: short paragraphs LOOK faster, but breaking the text into short paragraphs sacrifices development, makes the work superficial, simple-minded, even empty. Similarly, long lists of many short paragraphs makes it easy to lose position when reading. "

5.2 Suggestions

Corporate language policy need further elaboration. There is a need for

- 1) more research on the connection between genres and language code
- 2) more research on the differences of language codes between specific language
- 3) more courses of communication in the companies
- 4) more user surveys
- 5) corporate dictionaries

This requires the benevolence and cooperation of the executive staff and the allocation of financial resources.

The mapping of the specific language codes relating to the specific genres and the specific cultural conventions needs to be reflected in a refined language manual.

Furthermore the corresponding mapping could be anchored in the corporate dictionary, which could conveniently be used to register the linguistic features of any specific text genre by means of an number of illustrative examples.

In the term bank of the Nokia group there have been made distinctions between different target groups by means of means of modifications of the language structure. The Bluetooth example shows differences in complexity according the recipient being an expert or not.

- **Bluetooth**
- **Technical definition:** technology designed to be embedded in electronic devices in order to provide wireless and seamless connections over short distances, thus providing an alternative to cable-based interfaces currently in use to link computers and computer peripherals
- **Public simplified definition:** A technology that provides short-range radio links to allow mobile computers, mobile phones, digital cameras, and other portable devices to communicate with each other without cables. A Nokia mobile device with Bluetooth support allows the user to connect wirelessly to another compatible Bluetooth device within a short range.

6. Conclusion

Further development of language policies needs funds, support and commitment from the top executives. That is what has made the language crusade in the public sector a success.

Meanwhile, it also needs commitment from the researchers in finding a coherent tool for the formulation of language policies to make the texts correspond to the sophisticated products and methods of commercialization employed by the Danish companies.

