To learn, or not to learn Danish: that is the question

International researchers’ linguistic practices and dilemmas at the University of Copenhagen (KU) as a workplace

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layout

- Linguistic
  - landscape at KU as a workplace
  - practices of the internationals
  - dilemmas for the internationals
study

- How are the linguistic practices realised regarding the scientific work and social settings at the University of Copenhagen (and outside) by the international academic staff
data

WHO?
- International academic staff at KU
  Mainly from the natural sciences and health sciences (127 out of 151)

HOW?
- 231 respondents to an electronic questionnaire
  ◦ 158 completed
  ◦ 73 partially completed
- 14 individual interviews
- 3 case studies
148 respondents have noted their first language.

34 different first languages represented.

26 respondents with English as their first language.
• This means that not only Danish, but also English is a foreign language for the vast majority of the internationals at KU
Respondents’ languages in numbers (n=150)
What language(s) do you use at work? (n=198)

- Danish: 32% (64)
- English: 95% (189)
- Other (please specify): 14% (28)
What language(s) do you use at work? (n=151)

- HEALTH (n=23)
  - Danish: 100%
  - English: 96%
  - Other: 34%

- LIFE (n=48)
  - Danish: 35%
  - English: 19%
  - Other: 20%

- SCIENCE (n=44)
  - Danish: 92%
  - English: 23%
  - Other: 8%

- PHARMA (n=12)
  - Danish: 100%
  - English: 50%
  - Other: 58%

- HUM (n=12)
  - Danish: 92%
  - English: 8%
  - Other: 8%

- LAW (n=5)
  - Danish: 100%
  - English: 20%
  - Other: 20%

- SOC (n=5)
  - Danish: 100%
  - English: 60%
  - Other: 0%

- THEO (n=2)
  - Danish: 100%
  - English: 50%
  - Other: 0%

- Total
  - Danish: 34%
  - English: 50%
  - Other: 17%
english language working environment

- PhD position was announced in English
- my job interview was in English
- so for me it’s an English working environment
  (PhD-student, German L1)
english language working environment

- it was at least made very clear implicit that this position can be an English only position (Professor, German L1)
this institute has a very high proportion of foreign staff ... so we are very much in a bubble I mean I could almost not be working in Denmark because the institute language is English because our group is so mixed you know some are from China Italy my boss is Danish one of the PhD students is Danish the other guy is English so everybody speaks English in the lab all the communications from the administrative staff is in English and all the institute notices are in English so you could almost be in any country you know in any international scientific institute

(Postdoc, English L1)
blended language environment

- German is rather my private language … and now we had all of a sudden this Austrian girl so I came into the lab spoke Danish with this technician that likes altså the Danish technician who appreciates me speaking Danish turned around spoke English to my Dutch technician and then German to the Austrian student there I was tired haha for a week or so and then it was fine again I just had to get used to the fact that I also would speak German at work

(Lecturer, German L1)
blended language environment

- Professor, Finnish L1
  All together in command of 8 languages
  Uses 4 of them at work
    Danish
    English
    Swedish
    Finnish

- Lecturer, Spanish L1
  Uses English and Spanish at work, no Danish
• Read in Danish
• Write in English
• Slower when writing in Danish
• Style differences
when I write whatever PhD-administration and I write something in English I would always have the by the way I do understand Danish it’s just so much faster for me writing in English and then they reply in Danish

(Lecturer, German L1)
@

**FL:** så det var en blanding og det var et godt eksempel at når jeg diskuterer science med DC så snakker vi engelsk så fordi jeg ved han forstår engelsk engelsk meget godt men øøø men at øøø ellers taler vi dansk? næsten dansk?

[so it was a mixture and it was a good example of that when i discuss science with DC we speak English so because I know he understands English very well but øøø but øøø otherwise we sepak Danish? almost Danish?]

**DC:** no we dont sometimes you e-mail me in English and I respond in Danish because you understand

**FL:** because it’s faster for you to write in Danish

**DC:** yes much faster

**FL:** and it’s faster for me to write in English

**DC:** but normally our correspondence would be in English

FL = Lecturer, Finnish L1
DC = her Danish Colleague

case study (selfrecording)
@ - if in Danish, what do you do?

- Long e-mail only in Danish – I don’t read it
- Short e-mail – I skim for keywords
- Newsletter – I skim it
- I expect the important information to be given in a language I understand, e.g. English
- I get help from Google
- I get help from colleagues
CP: it’s like this when they think everyone should know everyone should know this this is very important they will have a two version e-mail

M: mh

CP: but if they think it is only for the natives or it is just only in Danish

M: ok

CP: if I see e-mail like that I know this is not important to me I don’t know how to read it

M: ok you just disregard it you don’t read the letters that are only in Danish

CP: aa sometimes when I think there is something interesting I because now I can know a little bit of Danish I can guess from the title from the first three or four sentences ok maybe some interest or maybe I should know what’s going on then I use google translate

CP = Chinese Postdoc
M = me
… if it’s something I don’t understand then I ask some of my colleagues to … I sort of can grasp quite often is it something they want from me is it something general … I’m touching very much on the scale of importance or urgency and so on and dismiss other things but this doesn’t mean that this is the only right way to deal with those non-English correspondence because for instance like a lot of social things could come across which because I can’t read them I have to just skip

(Professor, German L1)
@ in Danish

- the e-mails that are sent out by the administration are very often only in Danish and sometimes it’s really important information that concerns everyone and then I’m a bit annoyed and send out an English translation because come on someone should be able to translate this to English

(PhD-student, Swedish L1)
• How do you know that all the important information is also available in English?
• Who decides what is important?
teaching
Do you teach courses or give lectures at the university? (n=173)

- Yes: 65% (113)
- No: 35% (60)

If yes, what language(s) do you use as the medium of instruction? (n=119)

- Danish: 19% (23)
- English: 94% (112)
- Other (please specify): 5% (6)
teaching first year students

- ok what would you like to know about …
- what did you discuss I kan sige det på dansk
- hvis l vil what did you discuss

(Professor, Finnish L1)
The professor talks about the content matters in English, but the practical comments says sometimes in Danish (fx you can say it Danish).

The students talk both in Danish and in English.

The professor summarises or reflects on the students’ comments in English, both when they are said in English and in Danish, so all the content information in the lecture she talks about in English.
Teaching first year students 2

There are no language requirements in her employment contract.

**L:** but the reason why I was offered a job as a teaching assistant was because I could speak Danish.

**M:** and you should teach bachelor students.

**L:** yes so thanks to Danish competencies I got my first job and my special task was to teach bachelor students in the laboratory work.

**M:** but you say you also teach in English.

**L:** yes I have done both and the very first lecture I have slides in Danish and I speak English.

**M:** and who are the students Danes?

**L:** yes

**M:** but why do you choose to speak English?
L: /pause 6s/ I don’t know I feel sometimes that it is easier in communication with them
M: even if they are Danes and you can speak Danish
L: yes but they don’t have the terminology in Danish in connection with the profession that they are studying here they don’t know anything about these things and they have some books or textbooks in English and therefore when I speak English and I have slides in Danish it is easier for them when I use some terminology in English I show [on the slides] how it is called in Danish so that they can make a connection [between these two] for themselves

(Lecturer, Estonian L1)
• She uses Danish and English in parallel and prepares the students for working in these two languages in their chosen field.

• She uses English orally in order to be proactive about maintaining authority and avoiding losing face.
  - I have sometimes experienced that when you speak in English they respect you more than if you speak maybe a little faulty Danish.
Which of your job tasks require Danish?

- None really ... my job tasks is like to do research and write articles and the people I interact with apart from those at this institute are in other countries so there Danish is completely unneeded and I speak English to my supervisor and he seems to be fine with that so it’s more of the administrative parts and social parts that it’s useful but not completely necessary

(PhD-student, Swedish L1)
motivation 😞

- As I am only appointed on a contract basis for 3 years, it doesn't make sense to learn Danish. Danish lessons take too much time. /…/ I rather work on my academic career than learning a language that I'll never use once I leave Denmark. I really think the official business language should be English.
motivation 😊

- I am a PH.D. student with a contract for three years, long enough time to create a "home" here. I just want to integrate and fit in ... settle a bit and therefore it is necessary to at least have a basic understanding and speaking ability. It would be a shame to miss out on the opportunity to REALLY getting to know people here - I think that is very much coupled to the mother tongue.

- Since I'm doing a 3 year PhD in Copenhagen, I believe that is "natural" and polite to learn Danish, even if it is not necessary. Moreover, it is always useful to know a language, or at least try to manage it.
Danish, or not?

- I’ve been thinking since you raised the issue I’ve been thinking about Danish or not Danish and I think I thought it doesn’t really make sense for me to take this Danish class and I thought if I had to pay for it myself or had only had to choose for example between a course of English, maybe improved scientific English written English or Danish I think I would go for English actually so the Danish it’s like an extra but it’s not really needed for my PhD

   (PhD-student, German L1)
Danish not in the focus in the beginning of one’s stay in DK

- *I mean anyway I will learn Danish sooner or later it’s just not the main focus at the moment … I think when everything is more settled here I think I’ll start learning a bit better and more Danish*  

(PhD-student, German L1)
When does Danish become relevant?

- I think that as soon as there would really be a need then I would start ... but I would need the stimulus of like say my child would go to school or ... a longer job perspective or a group the work group where people would struggle with English where I felt it would really be helpful but I haven’t experienced that yet if you go to the supermarket at the university everywhere in the train everybody speaks English so so far I didn’t really need Danish

(PhD-student, German L1, has been in DK for a few months and is learning Danish)
When does Danish become relevant?

- I intend to go back [start learning Danish again] because I find myself in more situations where I am the only non-Danish speaker and that didn’t really happen as much before so now it’s starting to annoy me and plus I’m planning to stay here so … maybe time to stop being a tourist we’ll see

(Postdoc, English L1)
face keeping

- everybody speaks English I took the habit of working in English here and after one year when you start to learn the speaking of Danish you start to be very uncomfortable and somehow very ashamed you know to try to speak what you know is not a very good language

(Lecturer, French L1)
Conclusions

- English for scientific work
- Danish for administrative work and social purposes
- Need for Danish arises with the time spent in DK and in case of a longer/permanent job perspective
conclusions

• that’s probably the trap in Denmark the fact that everybody speaks English
• English as a mutual disadvantage
• Danish is often useful, but not exactly necessary
conclusions

In case the international researchers at KU themselves do not feel the need to learn Danish, but the university as an institution finds that they need to know and use Danish, then KU has to make it explicit to the internationals before or from the start and prepare them for working in Danish by creating reasonable facilities for integrating Danish language learning to the job.
Thank you for your time
Tak
Tānan
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Questions?
Comments?
Thoughts?

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