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Jens Axelsen: *Dansk–engelsk Ordbog. Undervisning* (Gyldendals røde ordbøger), Gyldendal, Copenhagen 1990, 703 pp.

A Contemporary Danish-English Dictionary

Jens Axelsen's *Dansk–engelsk Ordbog. Undervisning* (DEU) is a new lexicographic venture. It is an attempt to provide a Danish-English dictionary specifically aimed at the needs of native speakers of Danish who are learning or using English as a foreign language. But it is much more than that. Above all, it is the only truly contemporary Danish-English dictionary currently available.

Format and structure

Dansk–engelsk Ordbog. Undervisning comes in the familiar and attractive format of the 'red' Gyldendal series, in an improved layout and larger print, which makes it very friendly to the user's eye.

Axelsen says in his Preface that the dictionary has been designed so that it would be easy to use. Thus a mere seventeen abbreviations and ten symbols have been employed to provide linguistic and other necessary information. Only when it is required from a contrastive consideration of Danish and English does the dictionary give grammatical information. Axelsen relies on the user's ability to draw on his or her intuition of Danish to construe the lexical form of words. Thus the reader is expected to know, or to be able to construe, that *bæver* (*beaver*) is not a form of *bæve* (*tremble*), and that *beton* (*concrete*, n) is not a form of *betone* (*stress*, v). Word-class information is given only in the case of homographs representing two or more different word-classes. The noun *bølge* (*wave*), marked "(no.)" for "navneord" (noun), is a separate entry from the verb *bølge* (*wave*), marked "(uo.)" for "udsagnsord" (verb).

A pedant will observe that homographs are not dealt with entirely consistently. Sometimes they have separate entries, sometimes not (see e.g. *adskilligt* and *affejende*). Here, concise presentation has been given priority over consistency. Similarly, homographs belonging to one word-class are sometimes given separate entries (e.g. *gang*¹, *gang*², *gang*³), sometimes not (e.g. *bøsse*). These very minor inconsistencies do not in any

way make the dictionary less easy to use, and by saving space they allow more information to go into the 703 two-column pages of the dictionary.

Often, as one would expect, more help is given than is normally the case in Danish-English dictionaries. For instance, the reader is reminded throughout that many Danish forms in *-isk* (*grafisk, fantastisk, kunstnerisk, musisk*, etc.) are translated differently depending on whether they are “(to.)” (adjectives) or “(bio.)” (adverbs). This is very useful to the learner, though if assistance is required in such instances, one wonders if help might not also be needed with a form like *hurtigt* when used as an adjective. There are separate entries for *hurtig* (*quick*) and *hurtigt* (*quickly*), with no indication of word-class. The likelihood of a learner looking up the adjectival form *hurtigt* under the correct entry, which is *hurtig*, not *hurtigt*, would no doubt have been greater if word-class identification had been supplied here.

Systematic help is also offered in such notorious problem areas as number, irregular conjugation, the gerund, the progressive and adjectives occurring in predicative position only. Irregular plural formations and countability differences between Danish and English are indicated in the appropriate places; all irregular verbs are asterisked and listed at the end; expressions that take the gerund in English are marked “+ing”; verbs that do not take the progressive form are marked “-udv”; and adjectives occurring in predicative position only are identified. In addition, there is much *ad hoc* help, such as: ‘(NB in front of a **that**-clause an indirect object is required...)', ‘(NB **ignore** and **disregard** cannot be followed immediately by a **that**-clause)’ or ‘postposition only’ [my translation].

Many of these explanations require more space than we are used to seeing in dictionaries. This is the only drawback of Axelsen’s decision to use as few abbreviations as possible, since it forces him to write grammatical terms like “datids tillægsform” (past participle), “henførende sætning” (relative clause), “genstandsled” (object), and several others in full each time they occur.

The grammatical detail in the individual entries may not make the dictionary easier to use. It certainly is not the most economical way of presenting such information either, but it offers the dictionary user who is not a grammarian but would still like a translation to be syntactically correct very valuable and efficient assistance.

Sources

Any good dictionary is dependent on earlier dictionaries. Axelsen was a key figure in the compilation of the second edition (1966) of the stan-

dard Danish-English dictionary, Vinterberg and Bodelsen's *Dansk Engelsk Ordbog* (VB2) and responsible for the supplement (1973) printed in the later issues of VB2. The very extensive revision and updating of the ninth edition of the 'red' *Dansk-engelsk ordbog* (1984) was also his work. Naturally, therefore, many of these entries have been reused.

What is remarkable, however, is Axelsen's readiness to abandon old definitions and examples painstakingly found or formulated for the earlier dictionaries — if they do not serve his present purpose. Clearly, the aim has been to create a dictionary which would help Danish learners find current and idiomatic English equivalents. More than a third of the entries in the 1984 'red' Danish-English dictionary have been sacrificed. Instead, new words and expressions culled mainly from newspapers and contemporary fiction have been included. Axelsen does not tell us what principle of selection has been used. We are told that Politiken's *Nudansk Ordbog I-II* (1986), *Synonymordbog* (1988) and *Slangordbog* (1986) have been consulted, along with *Retskrivningsordbogen* (1986), of course, but it is fair to assume that the chief guiding principle has been Axelsen's own good judgment.

The major monolingual English dictionaries used for reference are the best in the field for contemporary English: Collins' *COBUILD English Language Dictionary* (1987), the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1987) and the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (1989).

Selection of words and expressions

The main emphasis in DEU is on contemporary and commonly used words and expressions, including recent coinages such as *gensplejset* (*gene-spliced*), *det indre marked* (*the single (European) market*), *vindmøllepark* (*wind farm*), *iltsvind* (*deoxygenation*), *rygsækturist* (*backpacker*).

The total number of headwords is only 30,629. Even so, the dictionary manages to include a large number of commonly used contemporary words that have not found their way into other Danish-English dictionaries.

Thus, only in DEU do we find equivalents for the above recent formations and several of the key terms that have filled newspapers over the past ten or twenty years. Words such as *drivhuseffekten* (*the greenhouse effect*), *joggingdragt* (*track suit*), *fosterskade* (*congenital malformation*); *bredbåndnet* (*broadband network*), *dialyseapparat* (*kidney machine*),

dialysebehandling (dialysis treatment), faxe (fax, v), hybridnet (multi-use cable network); arbejdsløshedsdagpenge (unemployment benefit), asylsøger (asylum seeker), BZ'er (squatter), betalingshospital (private hospital), betalingskort (debit card), brugerbetaling (user's fee), børnepasningsordning (childcare arrangement), bådflygtninge (boat people), fratrædelsesgodtgørelse (severance pay; golden handshake); EF-domstolen (the European Court), EF-kommissionen (the European Commission), EF-parlamentet (the European Parliament), fangstkvote (catch quota), fiskekvote (fishing quota).

Likewise, in the area of more everyday or even colloquial vocabulary, DEU has excellent coverage. Here we find words like *brugervenlig (user-friendly), discountvarer (cut-price goods), dynejakke (quilted jacket), fetast (fetta cheese), gelé [til håret] (gel), herpes (herpes), kontantthjælp (cash benefit), medborgerhus (community centre), muzak (Muzak),* and many more.

DEU also finds room for a fair number of contemporary colloquial and presumably more ephemeral formations like *bvadr (yuk), dummeren [tv] (the idiot box), hovsa(løsning) (ad hoc solution), hovsaproblem (a problem out of the blue), humørbombe (live wire), piveskid (softy, crybaby; whiner) and pjækkerøv (truant; shirker).*

Similarly with phrases and idioms. We find sayings like *en by i Rusland (something completely unknown), han har fået så hatten passer (he's had plenty), sætte en havkat i hyttefadet (put the cat among the pigeons), ånde ham i nakken (be breathing down his neck).* Axelsen also sensibly includes the politicians' cliché *være på forkant med (be at the forefront of).*

Not all the words one would have liked to find have been included: Thus, *børnefamilie, deltidspension, fejlkøb, håndfri (telefon), markedsudvalg, miljøkrav, momsregnskab, narkoluder, realrente, rentefradrag, skattekrone, skattesæk* and *socialforskning* will have to wait till the next edition.

Sense discrimination

The true value of DEU is not only the comprehensive selection of contemporary Danish words and phrases. It is also the clarity with which sense discrimination is made within the entries. The editor is never satisfied by the familiar potshot approach of older dictionaries: the accumulation of near misses and very impalpable hits arranged on the seek-and-ye-may-find principle. Axelsen's aim is to be constantly helpful to the

Danish user by painstakingly discriminating and listing the relevant senses of a given word or expression, and then going for one perfect hit in each case.

Thus, for the verb *hale* DEU has: **1.** haul (*fx* haul a basket up by a rope), (*mindre kraftigt*) pull; **2.** (*slæbe*) drag (*fx* drag a heavy trunk out).

No item appears to be too small for Axelsen to find and list its different senses. This, for instance, is his brilliantly informative entry for *fnadder*:

fnadder (*uldent*) fluff; (*vådt*) slush; (*klæbrigt*) goo, gunge.

Where there is no need for subdivision of the meaning of a word, Axelsen usually gives only one equivalent.

Thus, *plakatfuld*, according to DEU, is *plastered*, and the closest equivalent for *hængehoved* is *drip*.

Current English equivalents to match current Danish meanings

Axelsen's concern to cover current Danish comprehensively, his determination to let the user know as exactly as possible what sense of a word is equivalent to the sense of a given English word, and the accuracy with which he chooses the closest current English equivalents for contemporary Danish make DEU into an exceptionally useful dictionary.

Such a judgment is notoriously difficult to substantiate, however. It depends on our intuition of the degree of currency of words and expressions, and in the case of bilingual lexicography it is doubly difficult, since two languages are involved.

In the end, therefore, dictionary users will have to judge for themselves, but by comparing the entries in DEU for words like *bøf*, *børnemishandling*, *grovbrød*, *hilse (på)*, *hjemmefødsel*, *katalysator*, *kommunaldirektør*, *samleje*, *sammenbragt(e) børn*) and many, many more with the entries for the same words in other available dictionaries, they will soon appreciate the very superior qualities of this dictionary, I'm convinced. For its size, DEU is outstanding. It is the first Danish-English dictionary to take us into the 1980s and 1990s, and it must be congratulated for the way it helps us find a contemporary voice. These qualities make it unrivalled and therefore indispensable, not just to secondary school learners, but to university students and all the rest of us who would like to go on learning.

