

The language policy of the language teacher¹

Modern societies are characterised by a high degree of linguistic complexity. Firstly, if we take a country like Denmark as an example, the Danish language is complex: it occurs in many various forms according to who is using it (sociolects, dialects, gender language, youth language, child language), and the purpose to which it is being put (whether it is used for teaching, selling, managing, chatting, etc., and whether it is used in spoken or written form). The Danish language is not only used as a native language by ethnic Danes but also as a second language by language minorities, and as a foreign language by visiting foreigners who have learned Danish abroad or perhaps are just making use of a Danish phrase book. Like all other languages, the Danish language is a mixed language seen from a historical point of view. The 'Danish' vocabulary includes words that come from many other languages, and not only English, which commands the most attention at present. When immigrants use Danish as a second language, they introduce words from their own native languages into Danish, and something similar occurs when foreigners speak Danish as a foreign language.

Secondly, many languages are spoken in Denmark. The exact number is difficult to determine, but it is somewhere around 120 languages. The following is a list of the languages that are, or have recently been spoken in Denmark as a first language/mother tongue; some by many people, others only by a few:

Abkhasian, Akan (among others Fante and Twi), Albanian, Amharic, Arabic (several regional languages), Armenian, Assyrian, Azerbaijani, Azeri, Bahdini, Bambara, Bengali (Bangla), Berber, Bielorrussian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Burmese, Catalan, Chin, Croatian, Danish, Danish Sign Language, Dari, Dutch, Edo, Esperanto (yes, also as a first language learned in childhood), Estonian, English, Faroese, Farsi, Finnish, French, Frisian, Fulfulde (Peul, Fulani), German, Greek, Greenlandic (Kalaallisut), Gujarati, Hakka, Hassaniya, Hausa, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Igbo (Ibo), Indonesian (and Malay), Irish, Icelandic, Italian, Japanese, Kabyle, Kazakh, Khmer, Kikongo, Kirundi, Korean, Krio, Kurmanji, Latvian, Lingala, Lithuanian, Luganda, Mandarin Chinese, Macedonian, Malinké, Mandinka (Mandingo), Min, Moldavian, Nepalese, Norwegian, Oromo (formerly Galla), Pashto, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Rohingya, Romani, Rumanian, Russian, Serbian, Sindhi, Singhalese, Slovakian, Slovenian, Somali, Soninké, Sorani, Sorbian, Spanish, Susu, Swedish, Swahili, Tagalog (Filipino), Tamil, Tatar, Tchèque, Thai, Tigré, Tigrinya, Turkish, Turkmen, Ukrainian, Urdu, Uzbek, Vietnamese, Wolof, Wu, Yue (Cantonese), Zaza (Kirmanjki) (Risager 2006: 99) (for more information on these languages, see the website Ethnologue. Languages of the World)

The languages have different roles and statuses in Danish society, as have their speakers, where they can be described as constituting language hierarchies. One such hierarchy would for instance, rank English and Danish at the top, followed by (other) languages taught as foreign languages in school, such as French, German and (recently) Chinese (standard Mandarin), followed by large immigrant languages such as Turkish, Urdu and Arabic. All the other 100 languages are thereby placed at the bottom, and are more or less invisible in public debate and policy formation. Here one can speak of a linguistic landscape: the shifting local landscape of languages in Denmark, carried and performed by the people who use them and identify themselves and others by them. Local linguistic landscapes can be associated with a state, as in this example, but we also see local linguistic

¹ This is an updated version of Risager 2001.

landscapes in institutions and organisations, such as the education system or in the individual language classroom, in which speakers of several languages may be present.

Thirdly, one can observe many language mixtures that go much further than the use of loan words. First and foremost, code-shifting is very common among younger Danes, who when speaking, alternate between Danish and English (Preisler 1999). Code-shifting also occurs, for example, in conversations between people from different language communities in Denmark, who alternate between Danish as a second language (their Danish ethnolect) and their first languages (Møller et al. 1998, Quist & Ailin 2010). In addition, one can see more conscious, creative use of language mixtures in ads and the like (e.g. 'Buy some petit souvenir aus Dänemark'), and in a Danish TV programme like 'The Julekalender' (Risager 1993). In the foreign language classroom one can often observe language alternation between the target language and the national language in the country of learning in order to enhance students' understanding of linguistic and cultural matters.

This complex linguistic situation in Denmark is not unlike that found in most countries. It is not a new situation, as there are plenty of examples of population migrations and language mixtures from earlier times. What is new is rather that the intensified globalisation process since the 1970s has created a counter-movement of localisation efforts to try to make linguistic differences and identities visible. This has also meant that the diversity of linguistic communities and language encounters is becoming more visible, especially in the large cities. This diversity, or complexity, is of course not simply 'chaos': it is socially organised, with the various individuals and groups using it for their own purposes in their identity politics and struggle for recognition.

The language teacher

Language policy has to do with how far and how one is to act in relation to this complexity. Language policy does not only take place at the macro-level: in international organisations, transnational companies, states, etc., but also at the micro-level; in the interaction between people. Everyone contributes, by virtue of his or her concrete language use and language choice, and by virtue of the language attitudes they express, to the overall practice. In the following, I intend to focus in particular on the language teacher as a language player in the midst of this vast linguistic complexity.

Firstly, the teacher naturally plays an important role in connection with the actual use of the target language in the learning environment (in the classroom, on study trips, etc.), its pronunciation, orthography, vocabulary, syntax, textual organisation, spoken and written language genres, etc. It is part of the teacher's job to intervene in the students' use of the target language and to make decisions as to what is correct and what is incorrect in their oral and written use of the language. In certain cases, it is simply a question of following the instructions that have already been prescribed in the spelling dictionary, etc.. In others, however, it is a question of the language teacher himself or herself making that decision, e.g. in connection with correcting written work, and, not least, in connection with translations, where there are normally no 'rules' for the right translation as soon as one gets beyond the near-equivalents ('hund' corresponds to 'dog', 'flagermus' corresponds to 'bat', etc.) If one is to take account of culturally specific connotations (cf. the dog's symbolic meaning in various cultural contexts) and genre conventions, the complexity is very large, and translation depends to a large extent on a personal determination of the possible meanings. Here the teacher cannot avoid, from time to time, being the judge of which personal alternatives are 'best'.

Choice of language and attitudes to various languages

Secondly, the teacher plays an important role in relation to the choice of language and the attitudes to various languages and dialects. Which varieties of the target language are chosen, e.g. as a point of departure in language teaching? It is important here to distinguish between the language varieties the students are presented with for listening and reading comprehension and those which they learn to produce themselves. In English, students can derive considerable benefit from trying to understand the target language as spoken by children of well-off families (how many do not become au pairs?), or as spoken as a foreign language by many different nationalities (how many do not become back-packers and will need to use the language as a *lingua franca*?). The English language is incredibly diverse; there are many national, regional and social varieties spread out across large areas of the world. The decision as to which of these are suitable to meet students' needs is first and foremost one that the teacher makes.

The choice of the language the students are to learn to produce themselves is not simply a matter of course. To stick to an upper middle-class variant of British English is only one of the possibilities, of course, and it has more to do with people's conceptions than with realities. Here, the teacher can normally get no help from the teaching guidelines. The actual implementation is the teacher's own responsibility. There is probably an intuitive consensus in the subject as to what 'English' means in practice, as the whole issue of choice of language is not dealt with systematically within the subject debate, except for the sporadic discussion about whether one ought to choose British or American English. The teachers' freedom of method thus also comprises the freedom to define what is 'the right language' in their teaching. This is, of course, fine, as long as the teachers have been trained to think about sociolinguistic issues, however this is not normally the case.

When the class is on a study trip or an exchange to one of the 'target language countries', e.g. England, they will in most cases get to experience the linguistic complexity of the local area. They will meet the language in many guises: the language of men and women, social and subject-related varieties. Often they will meet the language both as spoken by native speakers and by second-language speakers, i.e. the local ethnic minorities. The students will listen to all of them, talk to them, and perhaps try to imitate their pronunciation.

The question is: are there language varieties that one ought to warn the students against using? What criteria are relevant in that respect? Once again, the responsibility is that of the teacher, and it is definitely his or her view of language, culture and society – and his or her expectations concerning the requirements of the coming examination that are taken into consideration. Are the students to be allowed to speak English as they hear various language minorities do so in England, or are they exclusively to try to imitate native-language speakers?

The question of models has become topical in recent years in connection with the criticisms raised of *the native speaker model* (Kramsch 1998). In practice, the most important model is the teacher himself or herself, and in foreign language teaching the teacher does not normally speak the language as a native language, but as a foreign language. So it is surely reasonable that students allow themselves to be influenced by people in England who speak English as a second language? Or why not people in Australia who speak English as a second language?

Awareness of ‘the target language country’ as a multilingual society

One thing is the choice of language norms, another is the choice of the images conveyed by the language teaching of the so-called ‘target language countries’, the countries in which the target language is spoken (implicitly: as first language). The language teacher represents the target language and it is understandable that he or she concentrates on ‘his’ or ‘her’ language. The language teaching naturally has to focus on the students’ acquisition of the target language and not other languages. However it is a drastic reduction of reality if the target language countries appear to be monolingual. Here, too, the teacher is left to his or her own devices: Are all the other languages to be ignored? It would be interesting to have this notion clarified.

Once again, study trips and exchanges can help to make the linguistic reality of the target language countries more visible. The students will perhaps meet these other languages which, in most cases, they will be unable to understand; yet they are able to register the fact that other languages are being spoken than their target language. There may be students in the class who can actually understand these languages because they are their own first languages: maybe Urdu, Turkish, various Arabic dialects, etc. Here, the bilingual students can be valuable mediators of culture and language.

In the target language countries there will also be examples of various types of hybrid languages. Depending on which environments one comes into contact with, there are, for example, loan words and code-shift phenomena in connection with English. This is particularly characteristic of the multilingual environments among the ethnic minorities in the large cities. Once again, the language teacher is left with the choice: Are the students to be introduced to this, or are they only to be exposed to ‘proper’ English? Consequently, does such a form of English exist at all?

Language-ecological awareness

There is much talk about the necessity of working with language awareness in language teaching. It is important to stress that this both has to do with insight into the structure and use of language in various communicative situations, and with an awareness of language choice and language attitudes. One could use the expression ‘language-ecological awareness’ in this connection.

Language-ecological awareness comprises an awareness of the diversity of languages in the world and the relations between them. At the global level, we are dealing with the linguistic world-system: the global hierarchy between languages and the development of this hierarchy. Especially on the lower rungs, the comprehensive language death is taking place; and on the top rungs there is the struggle between the major languages, with English as the strongest. At the local level, e.g. in the target language countries, we are dealing with insight into the fact that there is a great linguistic diversity or complexity. This is due to the fact that both individuals and groups influence their respective language-ecological context, since they choose languages and use them in the ways they do, and by the values they attach to the various languages.

Language teachers help to educate tomorrow’s decision makers and opinion formers regarding language policy; they give them the tools to develop their linguistic and cultural competence. Ought not language teachers to have language-ecological awareness as one of their assignments? In my opinion they should, but it calls for language teacher environments in general to tackle their monolingual ways of thinking. Teaching one language must not be synonymous with ignoring all the others.

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