

# English in Denmark: Friend or Foe? Use of English, domain loss and perceived bilingualism in an EFL country

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## Abstract

*The last two decades have seen the rise of an academic and political debate in Denmark about the growing influence of Global English in many contexts of society. Some measures were taken to limit the consequences of such influence, especially the loss of domain in higher education, research, and business. However, Danes are usually considered, at home and abroad, to be extremely proficient in English, to the point of being deemed bilingual, and the attitude towards English is generally positive in Denmark. The purpose of the survey in this paper was to determine the extent of use of English in four social practices, as well as the attitude towards learning English, language death, and bilingualism. The results found that Danes generally do not perceive their language to be at risk, at least not in the majority of contexts. They consider English an important language to learn for study and work, but Danish still seems to be in a dominant position in everyday life.*

## 1. Introduction

The present paper draws inspiration from the research I carried out for my master's thesis, which is currently under development. However, it takes into consideration only a part of the data I gathered for my dissertation. The latter deals with English in Denmark as a whole, whereas this paper deals with English in a much more restricted area.

During my time as an exchange student at the University of Copenhagen I prepared a questionnaire, which was used to determine the Danes' perception of a rather burning and yet unresolved issue in Danish contemporary society, namely the loss of domain caused by English at the expense of Danish. Denmark is by no means the only country in which this problem is felt, as it is more generally a by-product of the expansion of Global English, sometimes called English as a lingua franca (ELF).

As I mentioned above, the part of the survey presented here focuses on the answers given by informants in the area of Copenhagen, which is indeed not representative of the population of Denmark as a whole. Nevertheless, Copenhagen is the capital city and arguably the most internationally oriented. Moreover, the population of the urban area and the city of Copenhagen combined, as of the 1st January 2020, was 1,342,498 people out of a population of 5,822,763

people<sup>1</sup>, which accounts for about 23.1%. This means that any survey carried out in this area potentially represents almost one fourth of the Danish population.

The main purpose of the survey was to investigate the attitudes and opinions of a sample of Danish people towards some key issues of English in a Danish context – though to a very limited extent. How important is learning English to the Danes? Since Denmark is usually considered a highly proficient EFL country (English as Foreign Language), do Danish people think of themselves as bilingual? Is English a threat to the survival of Danish? Furthermore, some additional data analysed how learning and using English is carried out in Denmark (though this paper is limited to Copenhagen). The study is anything but thorough, yet its aim is that of having a general idea as to whether it still makes sense to talk about domain loss and bilingualism in Denmark. The issue is treated more extensively in the dissertation this paper is based on.

The choice of Denmark for this investigation is not only justified by my personal experience in this country, but also by a ‘special’ position English seems to have in Denmark. In an article published almost thirty years ago, the Danish linguist Paul Christophersen (1991) reported that the explicit aim of a guide for Danish teachers dated 1976 was to make Denmark a bilingual nation, with English as the second most proficient language after Danish. The same author stated (Christophersen, 1991, p. 9): “In due course, no doubt, Denmark will become a fertile field for the study of the characteristics of a bilingual society. Everybody will know some English, but there will be differences in competence and preference”. Despite the positive attitude of the author in that article, he had to admit that “The two languages will be to some extent in competition” (ibid.). Therefore, Denmark is indeed a ‘fertile field’ for the study of bilingualism and of issues such as domain loss.

Moreover, the Danish discourse on the influence of English is part of a wider Nordic debate and cooperation (though with obvious differences among the individual policies of the different countries), which makes it interesting from a linguistic and political point of view. There also seems to be an interest in preserving mutual comprehension between the Nordic languages (when possible), instead of using English as a lingua franca, as well as implementing policies based on the parallel language use principle, i.e. the local language(s) and English should coexist ‘peacefully’ in the Nordic countries (more on that in section 1.2). Most other countries in Europe tend to deal with this issue separately, i.e. developing their own policies, even if their national languages share a linguistic family or a geo-economical area. For example, French, Spanish, Italian and Romanian are all Romance languages, but there is no ‘Romance Language Council’ that deals with this issue, at least not to the same extent that the Nordic Council does. “Nordic exchanges of experience, guidelines and, in many cases, Nordic skills-development and resource building programmes mean that the Region could relatively easily become a world leader in this growing field” (Gregersen et al., 2018, p. 8).

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from the website *Statistics Denmark*. <https://www.dst.dk/en/Statistik/emner/befolkning-og-valg/befolkning-og-befolkningsfremskrivning#> (accessed on July 29th, 2020).

### 1.1 *The concept of domain*

The concept of ‘domain’ in sociolinguistics was coined in the 1970s by Joshua Fishman (Haberland, 2005), who made reference to the studies carried out forty years earlier by Gerhard Schmidt-Rohr<sup>2</sup>. The latter identified nine contexts of bilingual language use, which he named ‘elements of dominance configuration’: the family, the playground and street, the school (sub-categorised in language of instruction, subject of instruction, and breaks between classes and conversation), the church, literature, the press, the military, the courts, and governmental administration. In bilingual areas every speaker uses one of the two available languages in different situations. For example, in Südtirol<sup>3</sup> the variation in Schmidt-Rohr’s study was between the local German dialect (Auslandsdeutsche) and Standard Italian. In the element ‘family’, the main language was the German dialect, but in public institutions such as the school (in any of the sub-categories) the main language was Standard Italian.

Despite being an influential study for those scholars who later defined the concept of ‘domain’, several imperfections in Schmidt-Rohr’s theory led academics such as Haberland (2005, p. 230) to describe it as naïve. It is indeed impossible for a researcher to determine what language choice is made in every element of the configuration, since some of them, such as the language of instruction, are regulated by law and are easier to determine, but others, such as the language used in a familial setting, may only be determined empirically or barely supposed. It follows that what a researcher, such as Schmidt-Rohr, may do in the latter case is only to determine empirically the language choice, but they cannot conclude that a specific ‘element’ belongs to one language, as the choice may vary from one family to another. Thus, it is not correct, in the example above, to state that the language of the element ‘family’ is the German dialect, but one might only say that the majority of the subjects in the study chose this dialect to communicate within the element of family.

Another objection moved to this ‘naïve concept’ by Fishman (quoted in Haberland, *ibid.*) is that the elements, which he calls ‘domains’, cannot be established beforehand, but only determined when there is a pattern of behaviour in a specific setting, and that they are different in each multilingual group. His work gave rise to what Haberland calls the ‘classical domain concept’. Furthermore, the classical concept is different from the naïve in that it focuses on the microlinguistic aspect, as well as the macrolinguistic; that is, the former is interested in analysing the connection between concrete language behaviour as performed by the users and the rules and standards in a given society (Haberland, 2005, p. 231). This classical concept, despite having been improved in time by further studies, even by Fishman himself, is not free from criticism (Haberland, p. 232). Firstly, a domain is not something a language ‘has’, and therefore cannot lose. Domains are rather elements of

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<sup>2</sup> All the information used here is retrieved from a summary of Schmidt-Rohr’s dominance configurations ideas in his book *Die Sprache als Bildnerin der Völker* (1932) provided by Haberland in (Haberland, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Südtirol (South Tyrol) is part of the Italian region of Trentino - Alto Adige/Südtirol. The name Südtirol is the German version of the Italian *Alto Adige* (literally ‘High Adige’) and refers to the Austrian federal state of Tyrol. In Südtirol the majority of the population is German speaking both in Standard German and other German dialects, although Italian and Standard German are both official languages.

dominance configurations<sup>4</sup>, thus abstract concepts. Secondly, dominance configurations are closer to the actual experience of bilingual language users, since one does not perform language according to the domain one finds oneself in, but rather makes a choice based on the context, the setting, the interlocutors, and so on.

A definition that better suits the previous consideration is that given by Preisler (2005, p. 244): “a domain is an area of social practice that can be identified on the basis of the nature and special characteristics of the practice, its localization in time and place, and its domain-specific role relationships”. However, Preisler also maintains that “when it comes to investigating a concept such as ‘domain loss’, in relation to the influence of English on EFL (English as a Foreign Language) societies, a structural description<sup>5</sup> is not particularly useful or interesting” (Preisler, 2009, p. 14). Even if a language choice is made in a particular recurring context (a domain), that choice is not necessarily related to broader socio-cultural norms and expectations, but rather to particular “pattern of linguistic competence at the level of individual verbal encounters” (ibid.). In other words, language choice between two competing languages in an EFL society is often made on the basis of the personal competence of the interlocutors or of the specific situation, and not according to a social norm. An example is given in Mortensen’s study (2014) of three groups of students at Roskilde University. Even though the official language of their course was English, during their group work they sometimes switched to Danish or codeswitched between Danish and English, especially when there was direct reference to something ‘outside’ of the university context. This led Mortensen to the conclusion that students find their own ‘policy’ depending on the specific situation or topic, regardless of the official policy. Another instance is the use of English as a corporate language in Danish multinational companies, reported, for example, by Lønsmann (2011). English is used – especially with foreign colleagues – during professional tasks, but Danish – or any other language spoken within the company – is used for informal conversations with people who are fluent enough in Danish (or other languages). Here again it is not the official norm (English as a corporate language) which guides the language choice, but rather the contextual needs (fluency in Danish). Preisler thus suggests that in cases like the ones exemplified here, an alternative to the domain concept would be more appropriate, namely ‘(social) practice’. His definition of ‘practice’ is as follows: “[...] a particular type of identifiable sociocultural behaviour/activity (whose manifestations include characteristic role relationships, transactional categories and topics, perhaps a special linguistic register, etc.)” (ibid., p. 15). In other words, a ‘practice’ is not an area of language use, where the language choice is determined beforehand, but a linguistic behaviour,

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<sup>4</sup> Elements of dominance configuration include, for example, the proficiency of a speaker in a language, the cultural value given to a language, the emotional involvement in the language, and so on. These elements contribute to determine the status a language has for a bilingual or a multilingual (Weinreich, 1953 cited by Nwahunanya, 1988), and consequently the language choice they make in a given context. For instance, a Danish speaker might choose English to write their paper, because it is considered a prestigious scientific language; by the same token, they could choose Danish to speak with their Danish-speaking friends, simply because all those involved are sufficiently proficient in this language. In the case of ‘domains’, one could say that they do not belong to a certain language, but language choice depends on the aforementioned elements of dominance configuration.

<sup>5</sup> That is, a description of domain characterised by “a high degree of correlation between a cluster of ‘congruent situations’ [...] and language choice and topic” (Preisler, 2009, p. 14).

specific to a given context or situation. Therefore, practices cannot be lost, like a domain, but represent a particular trend of linguistic variation.

## 1.2 A bilingual nation?

In the introduction it was mentioned that in 1976 there was a clear intent to make Denmark a bilingual nation. The same intent had already been expressed two years before in another teaching guide (Folkeskolens Læseplansudvalg, 1974). Could it be said, more than forty years later, that this is the case? During the last decades some Danish scholars have tried to study how proficient the Danes really are, sometimes coming to disappointing conclusions (for instance Preisler, 1999). Fritz Larsen ended one of his articles (Larsen, 1994) stating that “[d]espite the unrivalled position of English as a dominant language, and despite all the effort invested in language teaching, Denmark is not a bilingual country, and nothing points to the next generation being in doubt about what is the mother tongue” (p. 42). He continued: “[...] only a minority [of Danes] have a level of proficiency in English (or any other foreign language) which allows more than basic transactions with foreigners”. Therefore, he concluded that “[a] situation where the Danish language really loses ground as the internal means of communication of the nation is not inconceivable, but there is no indication that such a situation is in sight” (ibid.). Indeed, few arguments against the position of Danish as the official language of Denmark could be presented today. In the context of family, unless there is some sort of bilingual situation (including Danish-German in Northern Schleswig or immigrant families), Danish is still, arguably, the language of choice. Besides, Larsen’s article was issued more than twenty years ago, so his observations might as well be dated, especially in relation to the Danes’ language proficiency. New generations of Danes, who have experienced compulsory teaching of English since an early age, have now reached adulthood. They also live in a world that is arguably more ‘international’ than twenty-six years ago and where the chances of exposure to a foreign language are higher.

Anyway, what does it mean to be bilingual? A simplistic definition of ‘bilingualism’ would be “Ability to speak two languages; the habitual use of two languages colloquially”<sup>6</sup>. The concept is more complex than this. There is no agreement on the level of proficiency one must reach to be considered bilingual - for example whether a general command of two languages is enough or there needs to be a near-native competency in a second language. Harder (2008) made a simple yet useful distinction between ‘bad’ and ‘good’ bilingualism. A similar idea was expressed by Larsen (1994, p. 41). He calls ‘unstable bilingualism’ what Harder calls ‘bad bilingualism’. ‘Good’ bilingualism is when speakers have complete access to two language communities, because they have full command of the two languages. When this is not the case, speakers develop ‘bad’ bilingualism, because they are not fully functional in every domain in both languages. Anyway, ‘bad’ bilingualism is not a consequence of the acquisition of two languages, as it was once held, but depends on the way speakers have access to a certain domain in both languages. If a person does not access a domain in either of the two languages, they will never exploit that language in its entirety in that domain (ibid.). This is perhaps the consequence of domain loss that causes the most

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<sup>6</sup> According to the definition on the Oxford English Dictionary Online.

concern in higher education. Teaching a subject in a foreign language would not guarantee that the students develop an equal competence on that subject both in their native language and the foreign language. Moreover, the quality of the first, local language (in this case Danish) might in time suffer from an increasing prestige given to the ‘dominant’ language (in this case English), to the point that the local language could be considered unfit for certain ‘prestigious’ purposes in society (such as higher education, research, literature, and so on) (ibid.).

A growing trend of ‘Englishisation’ of Nordic societies (especially, but not exclusively, in higher education and research) was reported between the end of 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium on several reports from the Nordic countries. Perhaps one of the most influential in the Danish context was Pia Jarvad’s *Det danske sprogs status i 1990'erne med særligt henblik på domænetab* (2001). The title clearly refers to domain loss (domænetab). Concerns about domain loss started a discussion in Denmark about the need of a language policy that would guarantee that the country preserve its national language without lessening the focus on internationalisation (and therefore on the widespread use of English). The strategy that was proposed was based on the principle of ‘parallel language use’ (parallelsproglighed)<sup>7</sup>. Aim of this strategy (Kulturministeriet, 2003; Sprogudvalget, 2008 & 2009; Dansk Sprognævn, 2012) was to implement several measures which could help preserving the domains that Danish was losing (mainly higher education, school, research, business world) by making sure that English and Danish evolve at the same pace<sup>8</sup>. In other words, there was a need to create a situation of “balanced domain-specific bilingualism”<sup>9</sup> (Harder, 2008). The description of the strategy is not explanatory, in that the actual measures that had to be implemented were (and are) a matter of discussion. Some measures were taken since the publication of said reports (in Denmark and the Nordic countries in general), but these will not be discussed here. Besides, any language policy could be said to influence, at best, ‘English from above’, but not ‘English from below’<sup>10</sup> (Preisler, 2003). Nevertheless, ‘parallel language use’ is perhaps the strongest evidence that Denmark never abandoned the purpose of becoming bilingual. The difference is that now there is an increased awareness that to be ‘good’ bilinguals the Danes must find a balance that damages neither their mother tongue nor their knowledge of the international language.

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<sup>7</sup> Hultgren (2014, pp. 68-69) suggests that ‘parallellingualism’ would be a more accurate translation of the Danish word. Besides, she argues, the emphasis on ‘use’ does not reflect the fact that this is an ‘ideal’ linguistic situation.

<sup>8</sup> However, Gottlieb (2009, p. 69) argued that a situation of parallelism between two languages is an illusion. In the case of Danish, he maintains that an increasing use of English by the Danes will accelerate the influence of this language on Danish on the one hand, while Danish users will inevitably add features of their native language in their English, thus creating a form of Dano-English. Therefore, he suggested that a more fitting name would be something along the lines of ‘converging language use’, as there is a situation of convergence rather than parallelism between Danish and English.

<sup>9</sup> Preisler (2009) prefers the term ‘complementary languages’ instead of ‘parallel languages’, since English and Danish are not used in exactly the same contexts twice, but rather complement each other for specific communicative needs.

<sup>10</sup> “By English ‘from above’ I mean the skills and attitudes relating to the use of English that are due to English being promoted by the institutions of the dominant society” (Preisler, 2003, p. 110). English ‘from below’ is the influence that English has on Danish through Anglo-American popular culture and youth sub-cultures (Preisler, 2003, p. 121).

## 2. The survey

The survey was in the form of a web-based questionnaire sent via instant messaging (Facebook or Whatsapp) to the respondents, who were in turn encouraged to share it. The 30 participants answered a total of 19 questions, subdivided into three sections: the first one was concerned with personal details, including some questions about the acquisition of English; the second was about the everyday use of English; finally, the third was about the perception of the English language. The formats of the questions were multiple choice, checkboxes, and linear scales. Some optional questions were left open for those who wanted to briefly elaborate further on some of the key topics of the investigation.

There was no clear indication as to the age group (although the minimum age was 18) or the professional area the research was aimed at. However, considering the context in which the survey was carried out, it could be speculated that the majority of the informants were students. In any case, the purpose of the investigation was not specifically to categorise the different answers according to a diastatic criterion, i.e. not according to the social, professional and educational position of the respondents on the social scale. Furthermore, it was not deemed necessary to differentiate between female and male informants, since it seemed irrelevant for the purpose of this survey.

This questionnaire does not have the presumption of being a complete sociolinguistic study of the reality of English in Copenhagen, but the data gathered were used as a comparison with previous research on the subject.

### 2.1 The questions

The first section began with the question ‘What is your age group?’ (Q1), to which the following age range groups were possible answers: 18-25, 26-34, 35-45, 46-55, 55+. The first interval was chosen to represent the (first) years of university or work, the second to represent the later years in the same contexts, 35-45 is the interval that includes people approaching the middle-aged years, 46-55 are middle-aged people, and 55+ are mature and elderly.

The question ‘What is your first language? (If you're bilingual, what is the language you use the most on a daily basis?)’ (Q2) was left open, so as not to exclude any language. As mentioned above, there is no clear definition of bilingual; however, this question used ‘bilingual’ in the broadest sense of ‘someone who speaks two languages’, with no reference to the respondents’ proficiency in any of the two languages. They were left free to determine whether or not they considered themselves bilingual. Besides, it was impossible to determine the actual proficiency using this survey.

‘How long have you been studying English?’ (Q3) aimed at establishing the supposed familiarity of the informants with the English language, or even if they were native speakers. Since the survey was open to people not originally from Denmark, where the teaching of English is compulsory from primary school onwards, there was also the option of 1 to 3 years. The shorter intervals of years were also left for those who are not actively studying English anymore or those potential 55+ people who might not have received compulsory education in English.

‘Have you ever taken an English language certificate test (TOEFL, IELTS, Cambridge, TOEIC, etc.)?’ (Q4) and ‘If the answer is yes, what CEFR level (Common European Framework of Reference) was your certificate?’ (Q5) aimed at determining whether the informants’ proficiency had ever been assessed in some way.

‘What is your current level of education? (Including incomplete degrees)’ (Q6) had the purpose of determining whether the informants were or had been in higher education, a domain in which the process of internationalisation has been continuing in recent years, since many courses are now offered in English (Haastrup, 2008).

‘Where did you grow up?’ (Q7) and ‘And where do you currently live/study/work?’ (Q8) were asked to determine whether there is a pattern between the area one grew up and currently lives (major cities or smaller towns) and the extent of the use of English.

The last question (Q9) in the first section allowed the informants to indicate what situations, behaviour or strategies helped them achieve their current level of English.

In the second section, the informants were asked to rate on a scale from 1 (Never) to 7 (Every day) the frequency of their use of the English language in four different ‘practices’, which I named ‘social circle’, ‘family’, ‘work and education’, and ‘entertainment and media’. Here the term ‘practices’ was used, in accordance with the definition given by Preisler (2009) and cited above. Moreover, ‘domain’ would not have been an appropriate term to use, since contexts traditionally belonging to different domains were grouped here into a single practice. A domain is an area of social practice which entails specific rules and conventions (and therefore may be ‘lost’ by a language in favour of another), whereas a social practice is a behaviour that depends on the situation. For instance, the ‘domain’ of higher education includes the language used as a medium of instruction, which may or may not be determined by law, but which is clearly definable. The ‘practice’ of higher education studies may include several different languages used in different situations, e.g. English used during classes, Danish used for informal communication by Danish-speaking students and teachers, also during group work (see Mortensen, 2014). The reason for this decision was that the language choice that users make in comparable contexts could be supposed to be similar: for example, the use of a certain language in a work milieu and an education milieu could be claimed to be similar, since in both contexts people have the chance to interact with people from abroad, or at least come in contact with a foreign language. Besides, these ‘practices’ do not pretend to be comprehensive, but are mere indicators of patterns of language behaviour in a particular societal setting.

The third section began with the very generic question “Do you believe that learning English is important in contemporary Denmark?” (Q14), followed by the chance to elaborate the answer (optional). The next question was also focused on language learning: “Do you have a preference when it comes to learning the different varieties of English? (e.g. accent, vocabulary, etc.)” (Q16). This is only one aspect of the attitude towards the different varieties (and accents), since one might learn a given variety of English during one’s education (e.g. Received Pronunciation, RP) and use another when performing the language in a real life setting (e.g. Standard American English, SA).

The reason for asking what variety the respondents preferred when learning is that the present survey was not face-to-face. Even if a further question about what variety they preferred to use had been added, there was no guarantee that the informants would answer with the actual used variety, i.e. there was no way to prove whether they were actually using RP or SA.

“Do you think that learning English is a threat to the survival and the prestige of other national languages (e.g. Danish)?” (Q17) included the words ‘other national languages’ because, as stated by Phillipson (2001 and elsewhere), it is not only the national language (Danish in this case) that could be threatened, but also other minority languages spoken by a part of the national population. It was hypothesised that respondents with a first language other than Danish might consider their own mother tongue as a national language. Moreover, the question gave the respondents freedom to interpret the threat as more generalised (that is, to all other national languages and not only to Danish). The verb ‘learning’ was supposed to shift the focus to education, but the majority of the interviewees seem to have interpreted it as ‘using’. The term ‘threat’ is deliberately vague, so as not to limit the answers to any particular social practice, unless the informants believed one was more threatened than others. A subsequent question allowed those who wanted to elaborate their answer.

The final question (Q19) “Would you say that English is an unofficial second language in Denmark?” aimed at investigating whether Danes perceive themselves as bilingual.

The second and third section focused on the main points of this investigation, i.e. the use of English in everyday life and the perception of the ‘problematic’ influx of English. Is Danish actually losing domains to a foreign language? Is English indeed considered a foreign language in Denmark?

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1 Demographics and English Language Learning

The majority of the informants (53,3%) were aged 18-25, which is unsurprising, given the fact that the social network (university students and their acquaintances of any age) where the questionnaire was shared was mainly composed of students in higher education (though there was no guarantee that all of them were students at the time of the survey). Another significant part (26,7%) were aged 26-34, whereas only 2 informants (6,7%) for each other age group answered the questionnaire (2 aged 35-45, 2 aged 46-55, and 2 aged 55+). This characterises the remainder of the question as representing mainly the view of young adults.

The first language of 86,6% of the informants was Danish, while 2 informants declared it was English and 1 Arabic. One of the respondents declared both Danish and Farsi as first languages, but it would have been interesting to see if the level of proficiency was the same for both in all the social practices. Anyway, since Q2 asked about the language used the most on a daily basis, the respondent was most likely thinking about two different contexts, the family (arguably Farsi-speaking) and the social circle (perhaps mostly Danish-speaking).

The English native speakers were 3, despite only 2 claimed English was their most used language. Almost half of the interviewees (46,6%) had been studying English for more than 10 years. Since 5

out of 10 of those who answered 4-10 years were older than 26, it is likely that they did not consider their primary school years as relevant for their English learning. It could also be that they did not receive education in English as children but that could be possible only if they grew up outside of Denmark, where English is a compulsory subject since primary school. One informant answered 1-3 years, but their first language was Danish, so it is likely they interpreted the question as “How long have you been studying English at University or in a course?”. All the conclusions are at best speculative, since there is not enough data to draw them.

English language certifications do not seem to be very popular among young Danes in this survey, since the majority of the small percentage (16,7%) of those who answered Q4 affirmatively were aged at least 26, but there were also 35-45 and 46-55 years old people. It could also be argued that those who received a certification at least once needed it to study at international institutions, since for the most part they were C1/C2 level certifications.

The majority of respondents received or were receiving further education (50% Master’s degree, 30% Bachelor’s). Two of them claimed they had/were receiving a Doctoral degree. Four respondents (13,3%) answered ‘Secondary School degree or lower’, but they all belonged to the age range 18-25. Therefore, it is possible that they were still in secondary school and could be considering further education in the future.

Most respondents (60%) grew up in a small, provincial town, 26,7% in a major city. The informants were free to interpret ‘small town’ or ‘major city’. In fact, the other respondents were less clear: 1 answered “Suburb in a major metropolitan area”, so they could consider it as a small town or as part of a larger city; another could not really define one area where they grew up (“everywhere in dk. mainly the largest cities but also the countryside”); one answered “countryside”, so presumably a small town. The last one considered Ringsted to be something “in between”. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the informants (76,7%) said they were currently living or studying in a major city (perhaps Copenhagen, but there is no data to support this claim). The informant who grew up in the suburbs was still living there. The others (20%) were living in a small town.

According to the respondents, the activities that mostly helped them achieve their current level of English proficiency were watching English-speaking media (80%), reading books, newspapers, websites in English (73,3%), study at school/language courses (63,3%), and travelling abroad (53,3%). A 2012 survey (European Commission, 2012) found that Danes were the most likely in Europe (84%) to use their first foreign language (which, as found by the same source, is for the most part English) while on holiday abroad. The difference in percentage found in the present survey (besides the reason that the sample population is considerably smaller) could mean that the informants perceive their English not as much as a skill they may develop by travelling abroad, but as a skill they may exploit to communicate abroad.

Less than half the respondents believed that study at university (43,3%), living abroad (40%), or self-study (36,7%) had helped them with their English language learning. Four respondents chose ‘living in a bilingual family/area’, but curiously enough none of them stated English was their first language, but rather Danish. This raises the question whether they believe that Denmark could be

considered a bilingual country or if they simply live in a bilingual family, where Danish is the main language. Anyway, since there are not enough details about their personal life, this is only speculation. The other options were too irrelevant to draw any conclusion (only one respondent chose each of the options).

### *3.2 Use of English in four social practices*

The informants were more likely to use their English skills to communicate with friends and acquaintances (social circle) than with their family. 50% of them answered 6 or 7 to the question on their frequency of use with their social circle, while 53,4% answered 1 or 2 to the same question in the practice of family. This is unsurprising, since only 2 respondents considered English their first language, and therefore the language presumably spoken with their family members. Since the question specified ‘with your family or partner’, it remains to be seen whether the 4 who answered 7 are part of a bilingual couple, where English functions as a common language: 2 of them declared English was their first language, while 2 stated it was Danish.

Generally speaking, the trend seems to show that English is not part of the household environment of most Danes. The Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2012) found that only 22% of Danes used English to communicate with family: such result roughly corresponds to the sum of the informants who answered 5, 6 or 7 in the Likert scale about the practice of family in the present survey (29,9%). In any case, the ‘domain’ of family does not seem to be lost to English in Denmark. This also suggests that there is no strong bilingualism in this context. It could be argued that some of the respondents interpreted as ‘use’ of English with their family what was simply code-switching.

Two out of three respondents used English every day at their workplace or place of study. No one answered 1 (never). Concerns about the pervasive use of English in the world of work, higher education and research were raised as early as twenty years ago (Jarvad, 2001), and the situation does not seem to be changed. There is no reason to believe that all the informants study an English-related subject (including subjects with an international vocation) or work in an international corporation. Thus, it seems easy to conclude that Danes come into contact with English on a daily basis during their job or their education. This was the concern that led to the creation of the concept of ‘parallel language use’ cited above. Anyway, this does not mean that the use of English is not balanced with the use of Danish. Even Jarvad (ibid.) acknowledged that in corporations English is indeed not the only language used. As pertains higher education and research, further and more detailed research would be needed to investigate the actual use in these practices, especially in the context of classes with international students (an example might be the above-mentioned study by Mortensen, 2014). Besides, this survey was carried out in Copenhagen, a city with a large number of international students, workers, and tourists, where English is arguably more used in the considered contexts than in other parts of Denmark (although international companies and universities are certainly in the whole country).

Similar results emerge from the answers to Q13. Two out of three respondents (66,7%) claimed they used their English skills when watching films, TV series or shows. A similar figure emerged

also from the Eurobarometer (71%). Indeed, watching English-speaking media was one of the most favourite learning strategies, according to the question above. This is not surprising in a country such as Denmark, where dubbing exists practically only for cartoons and other products targeted at children (Preisler, 1999). Figure 1 shows a summary of the illustrated results.

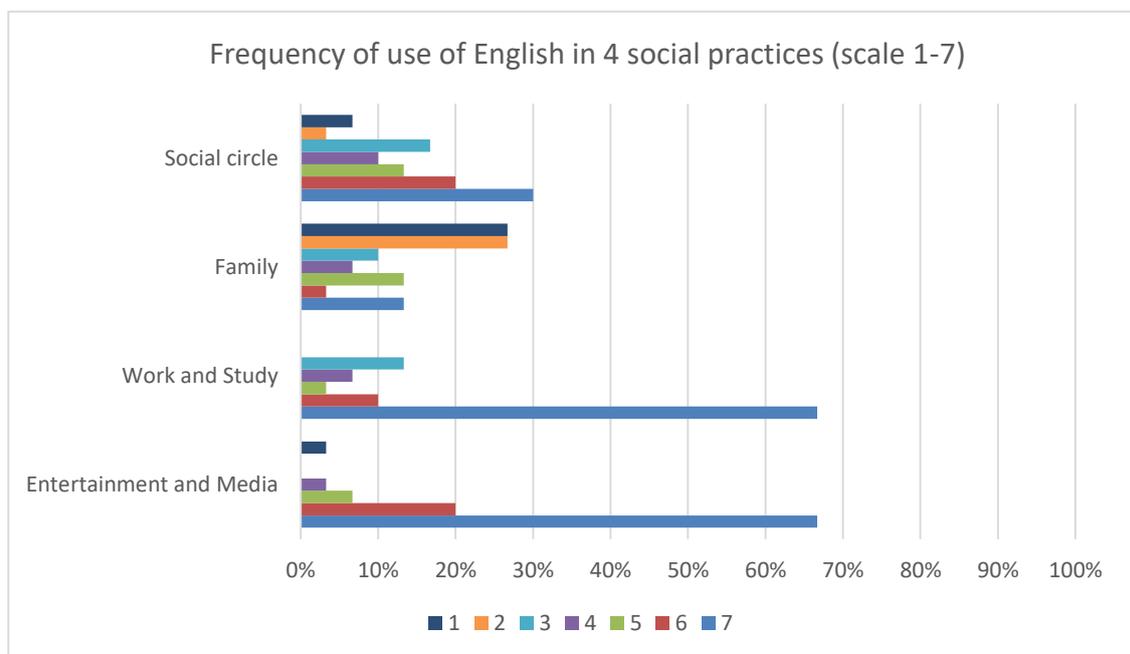


Figure 1

### 3.3 Perception of the English language

Almost all the informants (96.7%) maintain that learning English is important in contemporary Denmark. The only different answer was 'Maybe', but unfortunately no further explanation was given (figure 2). The result is in line with the Eurobarometer, according to which 92% of Danes believed English was the most useful language.

The majority of the respondents gave the following reasons:

1. Denmark is a small country and Danish is a small language, so English is needed to communicate with the rest of the world
2. English is needed to work and study
3. English is the language of the world economy and of entertainment

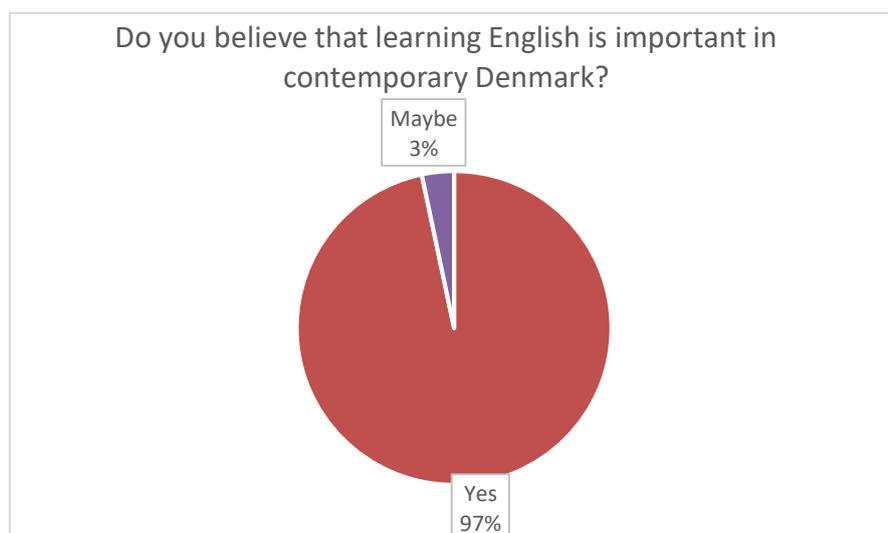


Figure 2

A few informants complained about the insufficient attention given to learning languages other than English. One answer referred to the social prestige attached to English and, conversely, the stigmatisation of those who do not speak it. Already more than two decades ago (Preisler, 1999), 92% of Danes believed that the presence of English was “a practical consequence of increased internationalisation” and 89% that it was “useful because it helps improve people’s English”. Moreover, Danes had the most positive attitude towards English loanwords, English as corporate language, and English as the global mother tongue in a study of seven Nordic speech communities (Kristiansen, 2005). These are all signs of great prestige given to English in Denmark, which does not seem to waver twenty years later. Perhaps this is also a persisting ‘symptom’ of a sense of inferiority of Danish on the international scene.

There was no clear preference for any of the three proposed varieties of English<sup>11</sup> (British, American or Australian). No preference was expressed for Australian English and there were more respondents who preferred American English (36,7%) to British English (26.7%), but all in all no variety stood out. On the contrary, 30% of the respondents expressed no preference. There was also no relevant pattern between age and preferred variety. A comparison with previous studies shows some differences. More than twenty years ago, Danes considered British English more prestigious, correct, efficient and clear than American English, despite the impact of pro-American youth culture on society (Ladegaard, 1998). A subsequent study (Ladegaard & Sachdev, 2006) found that even those who expressed preference for Standard American used RP when they spoke. General appreciation for American culture did not correspond to preference for American English. The

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<sup>11</sup> Here ‘variety’ is used as an umbrella-term to include all the diatopic (i.e. geographical) and diastratic (i.e. regarding the position on the social scale) variations found in the three countries.

school system, where RP is usually taught in EFL classes, probably played a role in that. Nevertheless, a higher number of informants who preferred American English in this survey could be explained by an increased influence of American popular culture during the last decades (though it could be argued that it had already peaked twenty years ago). However, it is hardly possible to make a comparison between this study and the other, more thorough investigations cited above. Besides, one third of the informants had no preference, and the question asked for their preference ‘when learning’ and not ‘when using’ English. Anyway, the choices could as well be owed to personal reasons, e.g. one of the respondents stated that they chose American English because it suited more to their voice.

Despite having expressed the inadequacy of Danish for international – and, to an extent, intranational – communication, 56,7% of the informants maintained that English is not a threat to the survival of other languages (Danish, for instance).

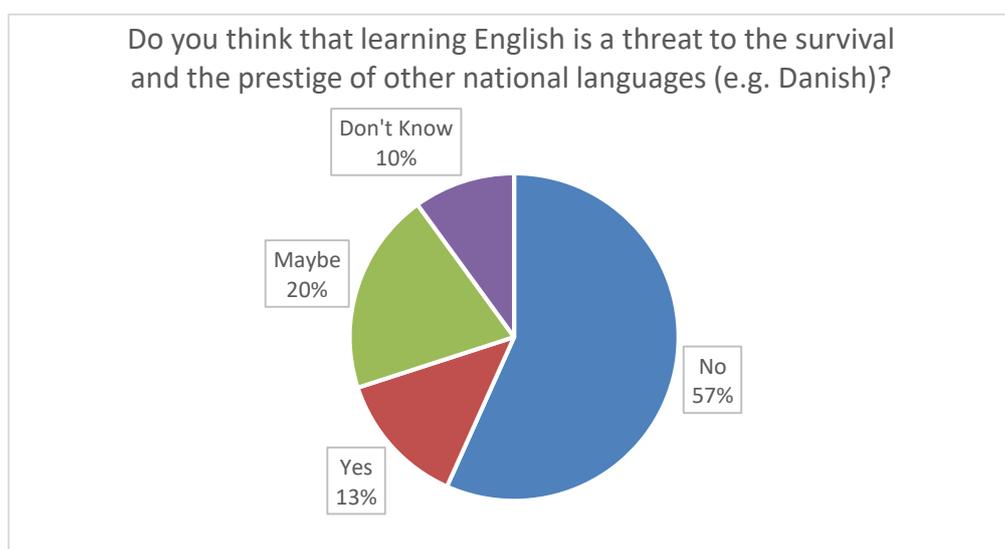


Figure 3

However, as figure 3 shows, there were many informants who were either unsure or answered in the positive. Those who answered ‘yes’ gave the following reasons:

1. Danish is a small language and foreigners do not even bother to learn it
2. Languages which lack usage end up dying
3. English threatens small languages, but Danish has a larger base, therefore it is not under threat
4. Academic Danish is losing domain

The answers are rather inconsistent, but only two state that Danish is at risk (1 and 4). However, one of them refers explicitly to the academic context, which means that the informant did not necessarily think that Danish as a whole is threatened. This leaves only one informant (answer number 1) believing that English is a threat to Danish, but only as a language to communicate with foreigners. The second answer is vaguer and could refer to languages other than English in general.

The informants who answered ‘maybe’ gave the following (summarised) motivations:

1. If no one preserves a language, there could be a threat. However, Danish is not at risk
2. English has replaced many Danish words, especially for the younger generation, but this is not a real problem
3. English has threatened other languages only when there was a specific British colonial purpose behind its expansion
4. If a language replaces another it is only the natural and historical evolution
5. English cannot express the same nuances of other languages

No one expressed concern for the status of Danish, except answers like number 5. In this case the problem seems to be the lack of vocabulary of English (presumably intended as Global English) compared to the expressiveness of one’s mother tongue.

The reasons of the respondents who answered ‘no’ are very similar to the ones presented by the other groups of respondents. One interesting difference is that English is not considered a threat because it is very similar to Danish (“and that is also a reason that we’re so good at it” wrote one of the informants). Learning English, according to the ‘no’ group, is a bonus, and Danish, which is an old and well-established language, will always be the language in which they will express themselves better (in the words of a respondent, “when I say ‘I love you’ it doesn’t feel the same as if I said ‘jeg elsker dig’”).

Such a positive attitude towards English in Denmark could lead to the assumption that Danes have no problem in being considered bilingual. This might apply only to English-Danish bilingualism though. As pointed out by Larsen (1994, p. 42), “cultural identity is felt to be closely connected with one language, preferably a language not shared with other societies, and bilinguals may consequently be regarded with suspicion, as potential traitors”. In the case of Denmark, English is deemed a ‘prestigious’ language, and therefore Danes might have a more positive attitude towards English-Danish bilingualism than towards the bilingualism found in many minority communities. Although this was not the purpose of this paper, it would have been interesting to compare the (generally) positive attitude towards English-Danish bilingualism expressed by the respondents vis-à-vis their opinion towards – for example – bilingual speakers of Danish and Arabic or Polish, which in Denmark were spoken (as of 2019) by approximately 66000 and 48100 people respectively (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2020). In any case, only 56.7% of the respondents maintained that English is an unofficial second language in Denmark. Of the 33.3% who answered ‘no’, the majority had also stated that English is not a threat (figure 4). Therefore, there does not seem to be linguistic purism or national pride behind such answers. Perhaps the respondents realised that English plays in Denmark the same role of lingua franca that it has in the whole Western World. Besides, one of the respondents claimed: “Danes are not as good at English as they think they are”. That might be true or not, but nevertheless more than half of the respondents in this survey considered English a second language in Denmark. If one adds that 41% of the Danes declared they use English every or almost every day, and 44% rated their English skills as ‘very

good' (European Commission, 2012), it is easy to conclude that Danes are certainly not afraid of English.

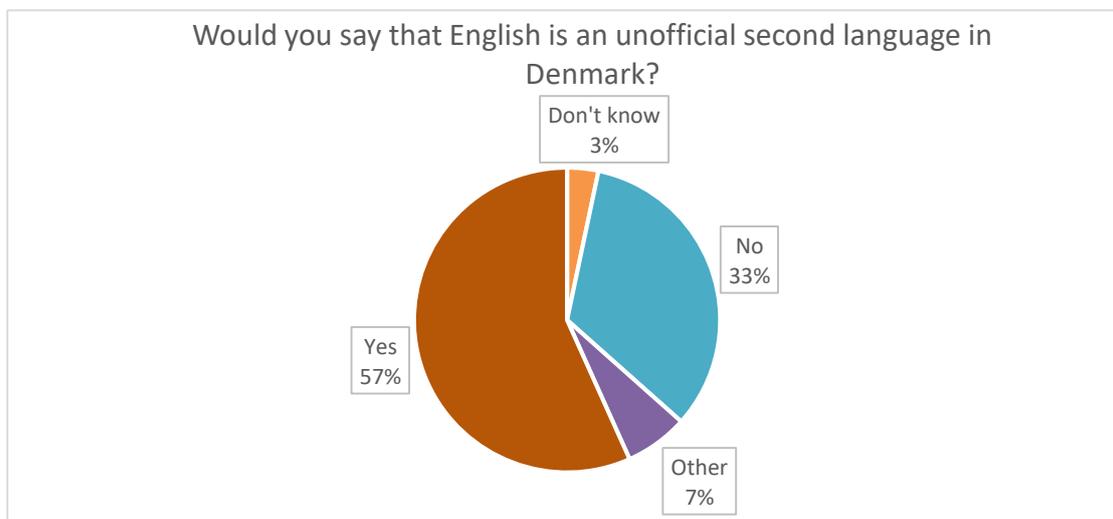


Figure 4

#### 4. Concluding remarks

English is indeed an important part of life in Denmark. Great prestige is attached to learning and using the language, which is seen as the means of communication with the rest of the world and essential to work and study. Most Danes use English in their place of study or work, or to watch English-speaking media. The latter seem to be also a favourite mean of language learning, as are travelling abroad and studying at school.

It might be true that several 'domains' are more and more affected by the presence of English, but most Danes do not seem to mind it. Some even see this process as the natural evolution of languages. Therefore, it seems that some of the concerns that led to strategies such as 'parallel language use' are still relevant. However, if one considers language choice in each practice (or domain) not as dictated by a norm, but as determined by the situation in which communication takes place, it appears understandable why English has become dominant in certain contexts. The majority of the respondents made frequent use of English especially when working or studying, or when watching English-speaking media. That is hardly surprising, given that the business world, higher education, and popular entertainment are dominated by English for different reasons – e.g. English is the language of international research, and most papers that students read at university are in this language; or, a significant amount of TV series, TV programmes and songs' lyrics are in English (especially in a country which avoids dubbing, such as Denmark). Danes use their English skills because it is necessary, and because it makes understanding and communication easier.

Therefore, it is indeed true that English dominates in certain contexts of society, but this is not automatically because Danish is deemed inferior by Danish people. Danish is seen as a small

language internationally, but it still plays an important role, for instance, in the context of (Danish speaking) families. Many informants believed they could express themselves fully only in their mother tongue. If a language can survive only when it is felt as useful for a variety of purposes (Larsen, 1994), then Danish is definitely alive and well. Anyway, since a language remains useful and vital if it is allowed “to adapt to changing circumstances” (ibid.), the importance of strategies to regulate language use in some key contexts is still felt. Danish and English seem to coexist peacefully at the moment, but this could change in future times if the wrong language policies are adopted. A future in which Danish becomes a ‘kitchen language’ (Gottlieb, 2009) – i.e. a language suited only for the household and for ‘lesser’ purposes – does not seem to be around the corner, as it is still the official language of public administration (in Denmark proper) and of the Royal Family, just to cite two prestigious examples.

Denmark does not seem to be a bilingual country yet (if one excludes all the minority languages, which were not relevant for this article). It must be born in mind that the participants to this study all had a level of command of English, but this cannot be presumed to apply to the entire population. Besides, 30 respondents are hardly a relevant sample of nearly six million people. Nevertheless, if Denmark is to become a bilingual country, it must be hoped that the strategies and policies hitherto adopted will guarantee that Danish survives alongside English and prospers in as many contexts as possible.

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