Multilingual Denmark

This issue of Sprogforum has been published on the occasion of 'The European Language Year 2001' - a campaign initiated jointly by the European Council and the EU. 'The European Language Year 2001' focuses on the multilingual nature of Europe and on the importance of everyone having a knowledge of several languages - at least two others than the native language. Some people may perhaps ask whether we need such a campaign in Denmark. After all, we know Danish and English, and most of us also have German in school.

Such a view is far too modest and takes no account of the actual situation in Denmark and the world. In actual fact, Denmark is a multilingual society - the Danish population speaks a total of somewhere between 100 and 140 languages! If, for example, we take a look at the Municipality of Copenhagen, it is certain that 129 nationalities are at present represented, corresponding to the high number of languages mentioned above (this has to remain an estimate, since Statistics Denmark has never carried out a survey). By virtue of these languages, Denmark has a very broad communications interface with the rest of the world. There is untapped potential here that is just wait-

ing to be properly exploited at both a personal and a societal level - in the general sense of the term. To take an example from ICT:

What was it the Danish Prime Minister stated in his recent New Year speech on television? "I would like to see a Denmark which is, quite simply, the best ICT nation in the world." Since this is what the Prime Minister would like to see, let us follow his line of thought for a moment. He would like all of us in Denmark to have access to the Internet and to e-mail. What is meant exactly by 'access'?

It is possible to concentrate on technical and general skills access to the Internet: being hooked up to, or connected in some way to the necessary hardware, a knowledge of the technical possibilities of the Internet, training in how to use it. General *computer literacy* is, of course, a prerequisite.

The next prerequisite has to do with language competences. At this juncture, We would like to quote from Bente Maegaard's article in this number: "It is generally accepted that even though more and more information is becoming available, also in English, on the Internet, the percentage of Internet

pages in English is on the wane." In other words, an increasing number of 'domains' are appearing in languages other than English and, it should be noticed, these are not exclusively in major languages of communication. Multilingual communication is taking place in virtual space, with the Internet certainly in future going to reflect the linguistic diversity of the world - depending on who has the technical access. This multilingualism has implications for both knowledge and culture. In the words of Hartmut Haberland: "Behind the surface of the global discourse, which people assume is exclusively taking place in English, lurk discourses in other languages and it is possible to sense that exciting things are taking place there." (see Karen Sonne Jakobsen's article, p. 2ff).

In this situation, the only correct policy for Denmark is to mobilise the linguistic resources of the entire population, to maintain them and to further develop them.

It is obvious that it is an advantage for people in Denmark to be able to speak as many languages as possible. A Greek-speaking person in Denmark can communicate without problems at a personal and subtle level with a Greek-speaking businessman in Australia via e-mail. An Arabic speaker in Denmark can exchange creative ideas about multimedia with people in Morocco. A German speaker can chat with German-speaking friends in Japan. An English speaker in Denmark can exchange ideas on global developments with an English-speaking Attac supporter in France, etc.

The world is multilingual - and the same applies to Denmark. The Danish population already fulfils all the most important conditions for developing Denmark into a fully conscious, multi-faceted communications interface with the rest of the world. It is a question of a language policy that still involves advanced competences in English but which also is aware of the limitations involved in Danes' making themselves dependent on global information in one language. If, for example, Denmark is to be 'the world's best ICT nation', it calls for efforts that are based on and that develop the linguistic resources of the population.

The initial challenge is to make the multilingual nature of Danish society visible to the country's own population and to take advantage of international communication. Some industrial companies have already begun. It may also well prove to be a farsighted policy to support experiments and workshops that extend the range of linguistic and cultural studies in Denmark. These could take the form of alternative teaching, e.g. distance education or tandem education, in the major European and international languages (German, French, Spanish, Polish, Arabic, Russian, etc.) and in many other languages that are spoken by a varying number of people but which, under all circumstances, are spoken throughout the world because of migration and international cooperation (Chinese, Japanese, Turkish, Urdu, Greek, Kurdish, Esperanto, etc.).

Naturally, it must be made clear that this development of resources must

not be at the expense of competences in Danish and English in Denmark. To be able to participate as a citizen in Denmark it is a vital to be able to make use of Danish at a high level - and no one in Denmark can dispense with English. But we already happen to have the other languages into the bargain and this is an asset which we ought not to neglect.

By making long-term efforts to achieve a consciously multilingual Denmark we will achieve two things at the same time, i.a. on the expanding Internet: better communication in breadth, by virtue of the use of many different languages spoken around the world, and better communication in depth, by virtue of addressing people in their own native language, which - in some cases at least - produces better results!

We begin with an article by **Karen Lund** and **Karen Risager**: 'Danish in the middle', which deals with our linguistic hierarchy, with Danish as a majority language and a minority language and with the paradoxes that arise when values change according to the perspective. **John Trim**, in 'The common European frame of reference', describes the work of the European Council in creating a tool to help in decision-making in language courses. In 'The native language of bilingual children: What is important in their education?', **Jim Cummins** presents research results concerning the importance of the native language for the general and educational development of bilingual children.

Karen Sonne Jakobsen, in 'The other

languages - on language subjects and language courses', discusses the new patterns of choice that exist in language courses and the drop in those opting for a second and third foreign language. **Michael Herslund**, in 'Language policy and language policies', argues for the protection and strengthening of the Danish language. **Anne Holmen**, in 'Linguistic diversity', stresses the language year as being a good opportunity for making visible and further developing the linguistic resources that already exist in Danish schools. **Bente Maegaard**, in 'Danish language technology', gives an account of what Danish language technology is actually able to achieve.

Jógvan í Lon Jacobsen, in 'Føroyskt – Faroese', gives an outline of Faroese language policy. **Karen Margrethe Pedersen**'s article 'Danes with Danish as a second language' looks at the language model of South Schleswig, proposing it as a possible model for Denmark and Europe.

In 'The intercultural language user', **Kirsten Jæger** analyses what competences are involved in this role model. **Karen Risager**, in 'Language policy in the classroom', focuses on the teacher as a player in language policy. Finally, **Karen Lund** and **Michael Svendsen Pedersen** ask 'How does one guarantee good language teaching?'

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