

# Bog anmeldelse af *Sprogløse verdensborgere. Om en uddannelsespolitik, der forsvandt*

Language-less world citizens. On educational policy that disappeared.

Lisbeth Verstraete-Hansen and Per Øhrgaard. 2017. København: Djøf (Jurist- og Økonomforbundets Forlag). 97 pages.

This is a book that everyone with an interest in language policy should read. It documents in depth that graduates of CBS (Copenhagen Business School) may well develop good English, but this will not be enough for future employment. Profound competence in other languages is a necessity for Denmark. By neglecting language policy, Denmark's capacity to function well in key European and Asian languages, and to understand cultures worldwide in depth, has been disastrously cut back.

This is a national crisis: half of university degrees in languages in Denmark have been closed down. It is also a local one at CBS, which has abolished translator and interpreter training, despite there being major needs in the EU system and the commercial world. CBS has failed to maintain a critical mass of teaching and research in any foreign language. The survivors are on a slimming diet that amounts to a death sentence. English has been reduced to purely instrumen-



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tal functions. American Studies, European Studies, and the study of languages as integral to national histories, have all gone. The foundations for well-qualified intercultural understanding and interaction have been undermined.

There is something rotten in the state of Denmark, as Shakespeare noted centuries ago. Sprinkled throughout the book are examples of how alarmingly incompetent recent Danish policies have been. This was not the case in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as is richly exemplified in the book. The two authors explain how Danish language policy evolved, the role of foreign languages in general education (*dannelse*, *Bildung*), and openness to key foreign influences, Germany, France, and later English, and a wide range of other languages.

Both authors have been employed at CBS and at Copenhagen University and have had attachments to foreign universities. Øhrgaard is Denmark's most distinguished expert in German studies. Verstraete-Hansen has wide experience in French and Francophone studies. She has also published research on the Danish business world's need of languages other than English. She has also, in a study undertaken with a CBS colleague, Mette Skovgaard Andersen, identified serious weaknesses in how Danish government departments function in foreign languages.

Their 'debate book' aims at both institutions and decision-makers recognising that there is an acute need to rescue a wide range of foreign languages in higher education in Denmark. This would also strengthen diversity in school foreign language learning.

The first part of the book is a general analysis of national educational reform in recent years, the over-emphasis on English, universities being seen as factories, and subordinate to an exclusively economic rationale. It is paradoxical that internationalisation has seen foreign languages disappearing, despite the need for these in research and international affairs. The systematic coverage of a range of reports commissioned by the government or business is complemented by examples of English-only blindness, a sickness that has infected all levels of the education system.

For instance, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs has advertised positions as 'innovation attachés' in Germany, Brazil, and China without competence in German, Portuguese, or Chinese being a requirement. How can one interact professionally without understanding local forms of language, culture, and behaviour? It is impossible for Danes to relate effectively to German, French, and other EU partners if everything is filtered through English.

There are many reasons for poor leadership in national and insti-

tutional language policy. One is a lack of understanding of what high levels of language proficiency require, and how this was achieved throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Excellent examples of this are cited. A second is the false belief that language is merely an instrument that can be easily added to professional expertise of some sort. Dansk Industri (Confederation of Danish Industry) has failed to understand this basic point. It ignores how language is embedded in distinct forms of experience. Advertisements for jobs seldom demand competence in languages other than English.

The idea that all research is published in English is also simply incorrect. Monoculturalism and monolingualism are environmentally unsustainable. Official Denmark behaves as though muddling through in English is what Denmark can rely on, whereas there is substantial evidence to the contrary. There are several revealing examples of this in the book. It makes specific recommendations for informed policy-making that can meet the country's long-term needs.

At CBS students can now study for a 'HA in European Business' without any proficiency in the relevant foreign languages. How can the business world, which knows that foreign language competence is a decisive parameter, and which has strong representation in the board (*bestyrelse!*) of CBS, passively endorse the elimination of the supply chain on which its activity depends? Has the issue ever been discussed at board meetings, and if not, why not? This is seriously puzzling when the regulations (*Vedtægter*) stipulate that the board should ensure that CBS conducts teaching and research at the highest possible level in business languages (*erhvervsprog*) as well as economics.

Is it too much to hope for that those in management positions at CBS – the board, *direktionen*/management, heads of department, research directors et al. – will read the book and be convinced that new policies for foreign languages are needed, in Denmark as a whole and at CBS? Can we be content with educating 'Language-less world citizens'?

## Postscript

This review was initially published in an online CBS publication, *WIRE*, soon after the publication of the book.

After the demolition of foreign language degrees at CBS became complete in 2018, the regulations (*Vedtægter*) were changed and the reference to business languages (*erhvervsprog*) removed. The elimina-

tion of foreign languages was carried out in defiance of the regulations. The board (*bestyrelsen*) has a duty to see that the regulations are followed, which they patently did not. I pointed this out in an article in *Politiken*, “Universiteterne sjofler fremmedsprogene” on 25th October 2016: [politiken.dk/debat/debatindlaeg/article5648211.ece](http://politiken.dk/debat/debatindlaeg/article5648211.ece)