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# THE SEMANTICS OF GRAMMATICALIZATION: A CASE STUDY ON THE DANISH VERB *PRØVE* ‘TRY’

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## Abstract

The primary meaning of the Danish verb *prøve* is “to use one’s best ability to do a certain activity or to reach something; make an attempt”; nevertheless, it is also used about activities that do not require one’s best ability. In these cases, it can be argued, the verb has been grammaticalized. The first aim of this paper is to describe the relationship between the literal and the grammaticalized meanings of the verb using NSM (natural semantic metalanguage), based on corpus examples and speaker judgements. Data have shown that the grammaticalized meaning of *prøve* is reduced when used in the imperative, because it does not contain the assumptions of the speaker as does the non-grammaticalized meaning. On the other hand, the grammaticalized meaning has acquired a new pragmatic feature, namely the friendly attitude of the speaker. The second aim is to describe how the grammaticalized meaning of *prøve* is related to the Danish “meaning universe”. The analysis has shown that the grammaticalized meaning of *prøve* includes the element “the speaker wants the conversational partner to feel something good”, which is in accordance with Danish cultural values.\*

**Keywords:** semantics, *prøve*, polysemy, grammaticalization, politeness, Danish cultural values, natural semantic metalanguage (NSM)

## 1. Introduction

According to the most well-known Danish dictionary, *Den Danske Ordbog* (DDO) (Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab n.d.-a), the Danish verb *prøve* has approximately the same meaning as English *try*: “use one’s best ability to do a certain activity or to reach something; make an attempt” (my translation). Nevertheless, when

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Danes speak English, they tend to overuse *try* when talking about activities that actually do not make it necessary to use one's best ability. The reason for this frequent lexical transfer is that the Danish verb *prøve* has developed over time and can be used in contexts that do not require "one's best ability". Fenyvesi (2021) analyzed the meaning of the Danish verb *prøve* based on corpus data from spoken (Sprogforandringscentret n.d.) and written (Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab n.d.-b) Danish, and found that the construction *prøve at + V* meets several criteria for grammaticalization. One of the criteria is being a part of a frequent syntactic construction (Bybee 2011). The analysis of Fenyvesi (2021) has shown that this verb is used in the construction *prøve at + infinitive* in 50% of the cases in the spoken and 80% of the cases in the written corpus. It is most frequently used with verbs of speech, such as *sige* 'say' and *snakke* 'talk', and perception, such as *se* 'see' and *høre* 'listen' in both corpora. Another criterion is semantic reduction or bleaching of meaning components (Bybee 2011). Fenyvesi (2021) has shown that the *prøve at + infinitive* construction can be considered to be grammaticalized in the cases where it is semantically bleached compared to the literal meaning of *prøve*. Semantic bleaching in this case means that the elements "use one's best ability" and "make an attempt" are absent and occur most frequently in the imperative but also in the infinitive after a modal. A third criterion is addressability described by Boye and Harder (2012). The analysis of the addressability criterion has shown that it is possible to refer back to *prøve* with a subsequent question like "How *prøve*?" when it is used in its literal sense, but not when it is grammaticalized.

The aim of this paper is twofold. Its first aim is to describe the relationship between the literal and the grammaticalized meanings of *prøve* when used in the imperative. Secondly, it examines how the grammaticalized meaning of *prøve* can be related to Danish cultural values such as dedramatization (Levisen & Waters 2015), anti-authoritarianism (Levisen 2019), and wanting others to feel something good instead of motivating them through fear (Alexander & Sandahl 2016).

For both aims, the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) framework, which is presented in detail in the introduction to this special issue, seems to be an excellent tool. If the grammaticalized meaning is viewed as one of the meanings of a polysemous word, so-called reductive paraphrases written in NSM can show how the literal

and the grammaticalized senses are connected. Furthermore, NSM paraphrases can show how the meaning of *prøve* is related to the lexical meaning of another Danish lexical unit, *lige* ‘just’ approximately in the sense of “could you please just do this, this is not difficult”, frequently used in the same contexts as *prøve* (Levisen & Waters 2015). NSM is often used to analyze the meaning of untranslatable culture-specific words (Wierzbicka 1997). The Danish verb *prøve* is not an untranslatable, but the grammaticalized use of the imperative of the verb seems to be unusual in other languages. At least, it is unknown in other Germanic languages like English and German and even in the closely related Swedish and Norwegian.

## **2. Politeness, dedramatization and anti-authoritarianism in Danish**

A classic understanding of politeness by Brown and Levinson (1987) describes politeness as the avoidance of face-threatening acts towards an interlocutor. In a study on politeness expressions in Japanese and American English, Rilliard and colleagues (2014) propose NSM explications for two types of politeness in the Japanese context: courtesy and sincerity politeness. In courtesy politeness the interlocutor is on the same social level as the speaker, while in sincerity politeness the interlocutor is socially above the speaker. An important difference in the NSM explications is that in courtesy politeness the speaker wants the interlocutor to feel something good, while in sincerity politeness the speaker wants the interlocutor to know that the content of his/her utterance is true. In Danish culture, speaker and interlocutor are typically on the same social level because it is primarily a society with a flat hierarchy; nevertheless, my hypothesis is that an NSM explication of politeness in a Danish context could be inspired by the Japanese courtesy politeness scenario and contain the element “the speaker wants the interlocutor to feel something good”, which seems to be frequent in a Danish context (cf. Alexander & Sandahl 2016).

Expressions for making polite requests are different in different languages. While Japanese uses prosodic elements (Rilliard et al. 2014), polite requests in English usually contain the word *please*, similar to German’s *Bitte*. Levisen and Waters (2015) point out that, in Danish, this politeness marker is missing and that *høflighed* ‘courtesy, politeness’ is not a keyword of Danish culture. Nevertheless, there are some Danish words that overlap with some uses of English *please*, although they are used in much narrower

contexts and are less frequent: for example, the word *venligst* ‘kindly’ is used in public directives and other formal contexts, and *værsgo*, etymologically ‘be so good’, also in some formal contexts. Other ways of expressing polite requests, similar to the English use of *please*, are the modal construction *vil du være sød* and the modal verb *kunne*, such as in (1) or (2) (Levisen & Waters 2015:250).

- (1) *Vil du være sød at lukke døren?*  
‘will you be so sweet as to close the door?’
  
- (2) *Kunne du åbne vinduet?*  
‘could you open the window?’

My hypothesis is that the construction *prøv* + infinitive has a similar function. To my knowledge, the verb *prøve* as a politeness marker has not been studied so far.

In the description of the meaning of the Danish modal particle *lige*, Levisen and Waters (2015) describe how *lige* expresses the trivialization of a request. While the pure imperative in (3) expresses a command, the same sentence with the addition of *lige* (4) expresses a milder form of a request (Levisen & Waters 2015:246):

- (3) *Luk døren!*  
‘Close the door’
  
- (4) *Luk lige døren!*  
‘Close *lige* the door’

(4) is a milder form of a request, which includes elements of trivializing the action requested from the person addressed. The element of trivializing is expressed by the elements (b), (c), and (d) in explication [A]:

**[A] *Luk lige døren* ‘Close *lige* the door’ (Levisen & Waters 2015:253)**

- a. I say: “I want you to do something now (to close the door)
- b. this is not something big, you can do this in one moment
- c. it can’t be bad for you to do it

- d. people do many things like this at many times”
- e. because of this, I think like this: you will do it after this

Unlike requests expressed with English *please*, which expresses a request while showing respect for the other person, the requests with *lige* emphasize that the requested action is not a big thing, and it will not require much effort from the person addressed. The sentence adverb *lige* often occurs together with the verb *prøve* when used in the imperative form to express requests (5).

- (5) *Prøv lige at høre her!*  
‘try *lige* to listen to this’

Combinations of two expressions with the same content are called “harmonic combinations” by Lyons (1977). Lyons’ example is the modal verb *may* and the adverb *possibly*, which express the same degree of modality. We assume that the verb *prøve* and the adverb *lige* have some common meaning components, which are analyzed in Section 4, and can therefore be considered a “harmonic combination”.

Levisen (2019), in his conference presentation on the Danish expression *hvis det er* ‘if it is’, describes the phenomenon anti-authoritarianism, which is also related to the concept of politeness. Levisen explicates *Hvis det er* like in [B]:

**[B] *Hvis det er* (Levisen 2019)**

- a. I don’t say: “I want you to do this”,
- b. I say: “I want you to know something”,
- c. Maybe you want to do something after this because of it
- d. I don’t want you to do anything because of me

Element (d) expresses a kind of modesty towards the interlocutor and that the speaker does not consider him- or herself socially above them.

In Section 4, the meaning of *prøve* and *lige* and the possible connection between *prøve* and anti-authoritarianism as described by Levisen (2019) will be further explored.

### 3. Methodology of data collection and analysis

The NSM explications for the non-grammaticalized uses of *prøve* proposed in this article are based on the definitions in the monolingual Danish dictionary *Den Danske Ordbog* (DDO).

Since the grammaticalized use of *prøve* is not included in DDO, the NSM explications of the grammaticalized use are based on two other data sources. The first data source is some frequent examples that seem to represent typical but different uses of *prøve* from the spoken Danish corpus (Sprogforandringscentret n.d.). Since the grammaticalized meaning is most frequent in the imperative (Fenyvesi 2021), only examples in the imperative—the construction *prøv at*—were used. From the 1,299 occurrences in the STK corpus, examples (11)–(24) were analyzed qualitatively. The examples were chosen in order to cover the most frequent uses of *prøv*, regarding the semantics of the verb after *prøv at*, and to cover more and less ambiguous contexts. The most frequent semantic verb classes *prøv* was combined with in the STK corpus were speech verbs, such as *sige* ‘say’ and *beskrive* ‘describe’, and perception verbs, such as *høre* ‘hear, listen’ and *se* ‘see, look’, which are all represented in the examples together with some other frequent verbs, such as *tænke* ‘think’, *tage* ‘take’, and *vente* ‘wait’.

The second source was an online written questionnaire which has been filled out by eight Danish native speakers. The questionnaire was shared in a Facebook group on Danish linguistics and the informants were members of the group, mainly Danish language enthusiasts, who volunteered to fill in the survey anonymously. The questionnaire was used to shed light on possible meaning nuances that are not revealed by the corpus examples. The respondents were asked about ten sentence groups consisting of four sentences each, like (39)–(41). The sentence groups looked like (6)–(9). In each group, the first sentence contained a so-called bare imperative, meaning only the imperative form of the main verb, the second sentence contained *prøv at* + infinitive, the third contained *prøv lige at* + infinitive and the fourth contained imperative + *lige*. The sentences with *lige* were included in order to uncover possible connections between the use of *prøve* and *lige*.

- (6) *Sig lidt mere!*  
‘Say a little more!’

- (7) *Prøv at sige lidt mere!*  
‘Try to say a little more!’
- (8) *Prøv lige at sige lidt mere!*  
‘Try *lige* to say a little more!’
- (9) *Sig lige lidt mere!*  
‘Say *lige* a little more!’<sup>2</sup>

Informants were asked, about each sentence group, whether they would use these four sentences and whether there was a meaning difference between them, and, if so, what the difference was. The respondents had free room to write their answers in text.

#### 4. Analysis and NSM-explications of the uses of *prøve*

In this section, first the non-grammaticalized meaning of *prøve* mentioned in the DDO is analyzed and paraphrased by an NSM explication; this is followed by the analysis and the NSM explication of the grammaticalized use.

In the DDO definition, the verb *prøve* has the following five meanings:

- (i) *efter bedste evne søge at udføre en bestemt handling eller opnå noget; gøre et forsøg* ‘make an attempt to carry out a certain activity or to reach a goal; make an attempt’
- (ii) *underkaste noget en prøve* ‘subject something to a test’
- (iii) *lade en domstol behandle en sag* ‘let a law court hear a case’
- (iv) *opleve, gennemleve, få erfaring med* ‘experience, go through, gain experience with’
- (v) *afholde eller deltage i en prøve i et teater eller lignende* ‘arrange or participate in a rehearsal in a theatre or similar’

It is meaning (i), “make an attempt to carry out a certain activity or to reach a goal; make an attempt” that is interesting in the context of this paper, as it is the basic meaning that is closely connected to the grammaticalized use. Meaning (i) of the verb *prøve* in DDO, as shown in (10), can be explicated as [C].

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<sup>2</sup> All sentences used in the questionnaire can be found in Appendix 1.

- (10) *Hun prøvede at smile, men det blev kun til en lille ynkelig trækning ved munden*  
'she tried to smile, but it only turned into a small, pitiful twitch at the mouth'

**[C] someone is trying (*prøver*) to do something**

- a. someone wants to do something X
- b. this someone thinks like this: maybe I can do this something X
- c. this someone does something for some time because of this
- d. after this, it can be like this:
  - something happens as this someone wants
  - something does not happen as this someone wants

After giving the explication of the basic literal meaning of *prøve*, let us turn to the grammaticalized use, whose syntactic frame is identical with the non-grammaticalized meaning (i) “make an attempt to carry out a certain activity or to reach a goal; make an attempt”. Because of the identical syntactic frames, the disambiguation of meaning (i) and the grammaticalized meaning requires semantic and contextual information. In the following, we look at examples (11)–(24) with *prøv at* + infinitive from the STK corpus, in order to systematize under what circumstances we find the non-grammaticalized meaning (i) and the grammaticalized meaning. Since the extracted corpus examples do not contain the detailed context, the use of the verb is often ambiguous between the two meanings. The examples have been grouped in the following way:

Reading 1: it is likely that there is a need for making an attempt because the context indicates that there is a difficulty that has to be overcome, but it is possible that there is no difficulty (meaning (i) is highly probable, but the grammaticalized meaning is possible as well)

Reading 2: in some contexts there is an obstacle to be overcome, in other contexts there is no obstacle (meaning (i) and the grammaticalized meaning are both possible)

Reading 3: it is highly unlikely that there is an obstacle to be overcome, the grammaticalized meaning is most probable.

Readings 1, 2, and 3 can also be viewed as a continuum, where the occurrence of the grammaticalized meaning is most context-dependent in reading 1 and least context-dependent in reading 3.

### Reading 1

In this reading it is likely that there is a need to make an attempt because there is an obstacle or a difficulty to overcome. Two examples for this reading are (11) and (12):

(11) *prøv at tænke på hvor vildt det må være*  
'try to think about how wild it must be'

(12) *prøv at tænke hvis du kaldte din mor en luder*  
'try to think if you called your mother a whore'

In (11) and (12) the speaker asks the interlocutor to think about something. It is possible that there is a kind of obstacle the interlocutor has to overcome, because these are rare situations and therefore difficult to imagine. In this case, the speaker wants to convince or encourage the interlocutor to imagine this situation. If there is no obstacle then the speaker simply expresses a friendly request. In spoken language, the pronunciation of the sentence might help to disambiguate the sentence between the two possible readings. In the grammaticalized reading *prøv* tends to be pronounced shorter and the infinitive particle *at* tends to be more assimilated to *prøv* than in the non-grammaticalized reading.<sup>3</sup>

### Reading 2

In this reading there can be an obstacle or difficulty to be overcome in some contexts while in other contexts there is no obstacle. In the English translation of these sentences, 'try' seems to be somewhat odd, but it would be possible in contexts where *prøv at* is used in the non-grammaticalized sense. Some examples are (13)–(18):

(13) *prøv at beskrive dig selv*  
'(try to) describe yourself'

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<sup>3</sup> This is a personal observation that has been confirmed by two Danish linguist colleagues, but more evidence might be needed.

- (14) *prøv at give et eksempel på det*  
'(try to) give an example for this'
- (15) *prøv at sige lidt mere*  
'(try to) tell a bit more'
- (16) *prøv at lade være med at snakke*  
'(try to) stop talking'
- (17) *prøv at oversætte den igen*  
'(try to) translate that again'
- (18) *prøv at bare snakke almindelig*  
'(try) just (to) speak as usual'

(13)–(18) are different from (11) and (12) because in (13)–(18) it is less likely that there is an obstacle or a difficulty to overcome in order to carry out the activity that the speaker asks the interlocutor to do. It is very much dependent on the context whether there is an obstacle or not. For example, in (13) it could be difficult to describe oneself if the person who is asked is a child or not aware of his or her characteristics. In (14) it depends on what the interlocutor is asked to give an example for. Giving an example for a complex phenomenon can be difficult. In (15) it can also require effort to tell more about a subject if it is difficult to remember. On the other hand, there could be situations where these obstacles do not exist. For example it could be fairly easy to stop talking (16) or to speak just as usual (17). Nevertheless, the verb *prøve* can be used in any case. In (13)–(18) two interpretations are possible: the speaker either knows or assumes that it is difficult for the interlocutor to do what has been requested, or the speaker simply asks the interlocutor to carry out the activity.

### Reading 3

In this reading it is highly unlikely that there is an obstacle to be overcome like in (19)–(24). In these sentences the English translation with 'try' would be odd.

- (19) *prøv at høre her!*  
'listen'

- (20) *prøv at høre du skal ikke kunne det dér*  
'listen you don't need to know this'
- (21) *prøv at se her!*  
'look!'
- (22) *prøv at se her så skal du bare lige ...*  
'look then you just have to ...'
- (23) *prøv at vente jeg skal lige hurtigt låne saksen*  
'wait I just have to borrow the scissors fast'
- (24) *prøv at tage mikrofonen og ret den lidt ned*  
'take the microphone and turn it a little downward'

(19)–(24) all seem to be parts of utterances in situations where there is absolutely no need to make an attempt in order to carry out the activity, such as to listen (19)–(20) or to look (21)–(22). In these cases, the speaker does not think that it can be difficult for the interlocutor to do the requested activity. A possible explanation for why the speaker uses the verb *prøve* would be that the speaker assumes that the interlocutor may find it difficult to carry out the requested activity, although the speaker finds it easy, and wants to convince or encourage the interlocutor. Another explanation would be that the speaker simply expresses a request.

The analysis of the questionnaire data gives us further cues to interpret the use of *prøve*. The questionnaire included altogether ten examples (Appendix 1). Two examples were taken from each of the above described three readings (examples (11), (12), (15), (17), (19), and (20)), three additional examples from Levisen and Waters (2015) in a reformulated version (*prøv at betale regningen*, *prøv at sætte dig på toilettet*, and *prøv at lukke døren*). Finally, a sentence group is based on the imperative sentence (25):

- (25) *Pas på!*  
'Be careful!'

usually used as a warning in public places, for example to draw attention to the fact that the floor is wet. I included this sentence group because I hypothesized that this sentence would be typically used with a bare imperative, as opposed to the other examples where I hypothesized that the bare imperative would typically not be used because it would be too unfriendly.

The results of the questionnaire are evaluated primarily in terms of defining the pragmatic function of *prøv*. Two respondents in the sentence groups I, IV, V, and X, three in sentence group II, four in sentence group III, and five in sentence group VI answered that the meaning of the four sentences was either the same (e.g. (26)–(27)) or approximately the same (e.g. (28)–(31)):

- (26) *Ingen betydningsforskel.*  
'No meaning difference.'
- (27) *Samme betydning, samme brug.*  
'Same meaning, same use.'
- (28) *Ingen stor forskel.*  
'No big difference'
- (29) *Jeg synes ikke der er den store forskel her. Alle fire kan bruges i samme kontekst*  
'I don't think there is any big difference here. All four can be used in the same context.'
- (30) *“lige” forstærker i begge tilfælde. Men der er ikke egentlig betydningsforskel.*  
'“lige” is intensifying in both cases. But there is no real meaning difference'
- (31) *Der er minimal forskel, som jeg ikke rigtig kan forklare.*  
'There is a minimal difference that I can't really explain.'

Formulations like (28), (29), (39), and (31) support the assumption that *prøv* and *lige* do not change the content of the proposition but there are some subtle meaning differences.

In case of the sentence group I (“Try to imagine if you would call your mother a prostitute!”), several informants wrote that they would not use any of the sentences. These are indeed rather impolite because of the content.

In sentence groups II, III, and X, two respondents, in group IV three respondents, in groups V and VII five respondents expressed that the sentences containing *prøv* were more polite, more friendly, or less offensive than sentences without *prøv*. Three respondents formulated the following politeness scale for the four sentences, from most polite to least polite: sentence with *prøv lige*, sentence with *prøv*, sentence with only *lige*, and sentence with only imperative. Two respondents indicated that the sentences with *prøve* were friendlier than the sentences with bare imperative and imperative + *lige*. An informant has written (32) about several of the sentence groups. (33) was written by another informant about the sentence group *Hør her!* ‘Listen!’.

- (32) *Ikke egentlig betydningsforskel, men forskel i hvor høflige formuleringsmåderne er: 3 er den høfligste, dernæst 2, så 4 og så 1.*  
‘No real meaning difference, but a difference in how polite the formulations are: 3 is most polite, after this 2, then 4 and then 1.’
- (33) *3 er den høfligste, dernæst 2, så 4 og så 1. Jeg bruger nok sjældent 1, men jeg kunne nok finde på det efter flere mere høflige og forgæves forsøg på at råbe børnene op.*  
‘3 is most polite, after this 2, then 4 and then 1. I probably use 1 very seldom, but I could probably use it after several more polite and unsuccessful attempts to get the children’s attention.’

The sentences with a bare imperative were characterized as a command or an order, as in (34), which an informant wrote about the sentence group *Luk døren!* ‘Close the door!’ or (35), written by

another informant about the same sentence group. The sentences with *prøv*, on the other hand, were described as friendly instructions or requests, for example “do it if you can” about the sentence group *Betal regningen!* (36).

- (34) *1 og 4 er ordrer. 2 og 3 er en opfordring til afprøvning af døren, måske efter en smøring eller en reparation.*  
‘1 and 4 are orders, 2 and 3 are invitations to try the door, possibly after an oiling or a reparation.’
- (35) *1 er en ordre, 2 venlig ordre, 3 venlig ordre, 4 ordre*  
‘1 is an order, 2 is a friendly order, 3 friendly order, 4 order’
- (36) *1 og 4 er en ordre. 2 er mere blød og opfordrende med et usagt ”hvis du kan”.*  
‘1 and 4 are orders. 2 is softer and inviting with an unsaid “if you can”.’

About sentence group *Oversæt den igen!* an informant wrote (37) and another informant (38).

- (37) *Generelt kan man sige: 1 er en ordre, 2 er en venlig ordren, 3 er endnu mere venlig, 4 er en ordre, men ’lige’ blødgør ordren.*  
‘In general you can say: 1 is an order, 2 is a friendly order, 3 is even more friendly, 4 is an order, but “lige” softens the order.’
- (38) *Alle fire er opfordringer. Forskellen ligger lidt i stilleje, hvor 2 og 3 er mindre bastante.*  
‘All four are requests. The difference seems to be in the register, where 2 and 3 are less crude.’

About the sentence group *Sig lidt mere!* One respondent wrote (39):

- (39) *1 og 4 er mere direkte, 2 og 3 er mere venligt opfordrende.*  
‘1 and 4 are more direct, 2 and 3 are more friendly requests.’

None of the respondents mentioned that the sentences with *prøv* in contrast to the sentences without *prøv* would mean that the speaker is in doubt whether the interlocutor can carry out the action.

In the case of sentence group *Pas på!* ‘Be careful!’, the infinitive was interpreted as a warning, while *prøv* and *prøv lige* were interpreted as irritation or reproach—see (40) and (41). The sentence *Pas lige på!* was interpreted as a simple warning by some informants, (e.g. (41)) and as irritation or reproach by some others ((40) and (42)).

- (40) *1: simpel advarsel. 2, 3 og 4: irritation over at nogen generede én.*  
‘1: simple warning. 2, 3 and 4: irritation about that somebody annoyed oneself’
- (41) *Sjovt nok opfatter jeg her 1 og 4 neutrale. 2 og 3 virker nedladende, prøv, men du kan nok ikke.*  
‘Funny enough, here I understand 1 and 4 as neutral. 2 and 3 sound condescending’
- (42) *1. er den akutte advarsel – her er det lige ved at gå galt og man skal bare skynde sig at advare nogen om det. 2 er mere stilfærdig, men jeg er ikke helt sikker på at jeg nogensinde siger sådan. 3 og 4 forestiller jeg mig sagt surt/bebrejdende mellem voksne, fx til en der går ind foran en anden e.l.*  
‘1. the acute warning—here is an immediate danger and one has to hurry and warn somebody about it. 2 is more unobtrusive, but I am not quite sure that I would ever say this. 3 and 4 I imagine as grumpy/reproachful between adults, e.g. to someone who goes in front of another person in line or similar.’

As the informant in (42) points out, *prøv* is seldom used with *pas på*. This is perhaps due to the fact that there is typically no time or possibility for politeness or friendliness in such contexts where *pas på* is used. The informants who understand it as irritation or reproach, most likely understand this as an ironic use of *prøve* where the speaker assumes that it must be easy to be careful and gets irritated at the interlocutor if he or she is not.

From the above analysis of the examples and the questionnaire data, we can conclude that in the construction *prøv at* + infinitive, the meaning of *prøv* in many cases deviates from meaning (i) described above. In such cases, the interlocutor does not have to make an attempt to reach a goal, because there is no obstacle to overcome. *Prøv* in these cases expresses politeness and friendliness in the request.

In the following, an NSM explication for the grammaticalized use of *prøv* is provided based on the analysis of the corpus examples and the questionnaire results. We take our starting point in the non-grammaticalized meaning (i), which we repeat here:

**[C] someone is trying (*prøver*) to do something**

- a. someone wants to do something X
- b. this someone thinks like this: maybe I can do this something X
- c. this someone does something for some time because of something X
- d. after this, it can be like this:
  - something happens as this someone wants
  - something does not happen as this someone wants

The next step is to reformulate the literal meaning (i) explicated in [C] as an imperative. In the imperative, the frame changes from a third-person to a first-person perspective, which is reflected in [D]:

**[D] try (*prøv*) to do something (non-grammaticalized)**

- a. I say: “I want you to do something X now”
- b. I know that you can think like this
  - “this is something big,
  - maybe I cannot do this now”
- c. I think like this:
  - maybe you can do this,
  - maybe things will happen because of this

A shared element in the non-grammaticalized and the grammaticalized meaning is (a) “I say: I want you to do something now”. The differences between the non-grammaticalized and the grammaticalized meanings are as follows: In the non-grammaticalized meaning, the speaker assumes that the interlocutor may think that it is difficult to

carry out the activity (b) and assumes that the interlocutor may be able to carry out the requested action but is not sure whether or not he/she can. In the grammaticalized meaning, however, the speaker does not have these assumptions. Therefore, the explication of the grammaticalized meaning cannot contain the elements (b) and (c) compared to [D]. A possible explication is [E]:

**[E] try (*prøv*) to do something (grammaticalized)**

- a. I say: I want you to do something X now
- b. I think like this:
  - I don't want you to feel something bad because of this
  - I want you to feel something good because of this
  - it can't be bad for you to do this something
  - you will do it after this

Element (b) in [E] expresses the friendliness or—as some informants call it—politeness of the request. The speaker in the grammaticalized meaning probably has a general assumption that the interlocutor can carry out the requested action, but this is not considered to be a part of the explication, because it is not relevant, just like other possible assumptions, such as whether the action is possible to carry out. If the speaker had a specific assumption such as “I know that you can do this” in the sense of an encouragement, the informants probably had mentioned this, but none of them did.

As we have seen, the sentences with *prøv* can be used together with the sentence modifier *lige* (Levisen & Waters 2015). The question is now how the difference between *prøv* and *prøv lige* can best be explained. According to some respondents of the questionnaire, the sentences with *prøv* and with *prøv lige* are both friendly, but the version with *prøv lige* is even friendlier than the sentence with only *prøv* (e.g. quotes (32) and (33)). Some other informants wrote that there was no big difference between the two sentences (e.g. quotes (34) and (35)). According to Levisen and Waters (2015), *lige* expresses trivialization of the request and is not analyzed as a politeness marker. A combination of explications [A] and [E], where *prøv* is used together with *lige*, is explication [F] below, which contains both the elements of trivialization (c), (d), and (e)), the element of friendliness and encouragement (b):

**[F] try (*prøv*) *lige* to do something'**

- a. I say: "I want you to do something now"
- b. I think like this:
  - I don't want you to feel something bad because of this
  - I want you to feel something good because of this
  - it can't be bad for you to do this something
  - this is not something big, you can do this in one moment
  - people do many things like this at many times"
  - because of this, I think like this: you will do it after this

Based on the questionnaire results, we can assume that the sentences with *prøv lige* have something extra compared to the sentences with *prøv*. This extra would be trivializing, expressed by (c), (d), and (e) and expectation, expressed by (f). On the other hand, according to some other informants, the sentences with only *prøv* and *prøv lige* are very similar, which is reflected in the explications, because both include the elements "it can't be bad for you to do this something" and "I think like this: you will do it after this". The fact that *prøv* is so often used together with *lige* could be the effect of a so-called harmonious combination (Lyons 1977).

Table 1 below shows the relationship between [D] and [E].

	<b>[D] literal imperative</b>	<b>[E] grammaticalized imperative</b>
<b>request</b>	I say: I want you to do something X now	I say: I want you to do something X now
<b>assumptions of the speaker</b>	I know that you can think like this – this is something big, – I can't do this now	–
<b>attitude of the speaker</b>	–	I think like this: – I don't want you to feel something bad because of this – I want you to feel something good because of this – it can't be bad for you to do this something
<b>expectation of the speaker</b>	I think like this: – maybe you can do this, – maybe things will happen because of this	I think like this: – you will do it after this

*Table 1: The relationship between [D] and [E]*

Table 1 shows that the intention and the request of the speaker is identical in the literal and the grammaticalized imperatives. The difference between the two meanings is in the assumptions, the attitude of the speaker, and the expected outcome. In the literal imperative, the speaker assumes that the interlocutor can think that this is something big and he/she might not be able to do it. The explication of the grammaticalized meaning, however, does not include these assumptions. The expected outcome in the non-grammaticalized imperative is that the interlocutor can possibly carry out the requested action, but it is not certain. In the grammaticalized meaning, the expectation of the speaker is that the interlocutor *will* carry out the action. The missing assumption in the grammaticalized meaning is compatible with grammaticalization theories saying that in the grammaticalized meaning of a word or a construction some elements of the literal meaning are bleached (Bybee 2011). On the other hand, the grammaticalized meaning also contains an additional element compared to the non-grammaticalized meaning: the friendly attitude of the speaker. This is also in agreement with grammaticalization theories stating that grammaticalized meanings often comprise a new pragmatic function compared to the non-grammaticalized meaning (Bybee 2011).

### **5. The place of *prøve* in the Danish meaning universe**

From a cultural point of view, the grammaticalized meaning of *prøve* is most interesting since the other meanings are also present in other languages in equivalent verbs. In this section, the grammaticalized meaning of *prøve* will be analyzed in relation to Danish values described by Alexander and Sandahl (2016), Levisen (2012) and Levisen and Waters (2015). The questionnaire results in this paper show that the verb *prøve* in the imperative form can be used to express polite or friendly requests. The question is how to understand politeness and friendliness. Element (b) in [E] does not match the politeness concept of Brown and Levinson (1987), which focuses on face-saving, but it is in line with the explication of Japanese courtesy politeness, described by Rilliard and colleagues (2014), since their explication also includes the element “the speaker wants the interlocutor to feel something good”. According to Levisen (2012), Danish norms of communication are characterized by *lighed* ‘equality’ and *selvstændighed* ‘independence, autonomy, self-dependence’. Levisen and Waters (2015) suggest that a cultural script for dedramatizing directives is more characteristic for Danish than the

concept of politeness understood as facework (Goffman 1955). The main characteristics of a *lige*-based script is that when the speaker wants someone else to do something, the speaker trivializes the requested action: this is not a big thing, it is easy, it can be done fast. The speaker does not want to disturb the other person with a big request. The grammaticalized use of *prøv* fits very well into this meaning universe because of its compatibility with *lige*. The non-grammaticalized meaning (i) (explicated at [D]) contains element (b) “I know that you can think like this: this is something big, maybe I cannot do this now”. In the grammaticalized meaning this element is omitted, which means that the speaker does not assume that this is something big. On the other hand, the elements “I don’t want you to feel something bad because of this”, “I want you to feel something good because of this”, and “It can’t be bad for you to do this something”, which occur throughout the explications, add information about the friendly attitude of the speaker. This kind of friendly attitude, similar to Japanese courtesy politeness (Rilliard et al. 2014), works in a scenario where the interlocutor is on the same social level as the speaker, unlike in an authoritarian culture, where a speaker who makes a request could be above or below the interlocutor. This seems to be in accordance with Levisen’s (2019) suggestion that Danish culture is anti-authoritarian. According to the famous Danish parenting book by Alexander and Sandahl (2016), wanting people to feel something good is one of the most important values Danish parents pass on to their children. This is in line with the element “I want you to feel something good because of this” in the explication of the grammaticalized meaning of *prøv at*.

## 6. Conclusions

The first goal of this paper was to describe the relationship between the non-grammaticalized and grammaticalized meanings of the Danish verb *prøve* using the NSM methodology, based on dictionary definitions, corpus examples, and a questionnaire. The analysis has shown that the grammaticalized meaning of *prøve* is reduced compared to the basic literal meaning of the verb used in the imperative, since it does not contain the same assumptions of the speaker. It has also shown that the grammaticalized meaning reveals a new pragmatic feature: a friendly attitude of the speaker. The second aim was to describe how the grammaticalized meaning of *prøve* is related to Danish cultural values. The expression of a friendly attitude in the grammaticalized version of *prøv*, where the speaker wants the

interlocutor to feel something good, is in line with the basically anti-authoritarian Danish culture, where there is usually equal standing between speaker and interlocutor.

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## Appendix 1

- I.
  1. Tænk hvis du kaldte din mor en luder!
  2. Prøv at tænke hvis du kaldte din mor en luder!
  3. Prøv lige at tænke hvis du kaldte din mor en luder!
  4. Tænk lige hvis du kaldte din mor en luder!
- II.
  1. Hør her!
  2. Prøv at høre her!
  3. Prøv lige at høre her!
  4. Hør lige her!
- III.
  1. Se her!
  2. Prøv at se her!
  3. Prøv lige at se her!
  4. Se lige her!

- IV.           1. Luk døren!  
              2. Prøv at lukke døren!  
              3. Prøv lige at lukke døren!  
              4. Luk lige døren!
- V.             1. Oversæt den igen!  
              2. Prøv at oversætte den igen!  
              3. Prøv lige at oversætte den igen!  
              4. Oversæt den lige igen!
- VI.           1. Tænk hvor vildt det må være!  
              2. Prøv at tænke på hvor vildt det må være!  
              3. Prøv lige at tænke hvor vildt det må være!  
              4. Tænk lige hvor vildt det må være!
- VII.          1. Sig lidt mere!  
              2. Prøv at sige lidt mere!  
              3. Prøv lige at sige lidt mere!  
              4. Sig lige lidt mere!
- VIII.         1. Pas på!  
              2. Prøv at passe på!  
              3. Prøv lige at passe på!  
              4. Pas lige på!
- IX.           1. Betal regningen!  
              2. Prøv at betale regningen!  
              3. Prøv lige at betale regningen!  
              4. Betal lige regningen!
- X.            1. Sæt dig på toilettet!  
              2. Prøv at sætte dig på toilettet!  
              3. Prøv lige at sætte dig på toilettet!  
              4. Sæt dig lige på toilettet!