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Dear friends

In the middle of August, when newspapers are traditionally desperate to find something to write about, a proposal to make English Denmark's second official language managed to find its way into the national headlines – and seemingly immediately provoked a storm of discussion in the press for at least twenty-four hours. But is it really just a “silly-season” idea? And what would it take to turn it into reality?

The proposal to make

## **ENGLISH THE SECOND OFFICIAL LANGUAGE IN DENMARK**

The idea that English should become Denmark's second official language was put forward by the Radical Liberal Party. Business organisations, like the Confederation of Danish Industries and Danish Trade and Service were quick to support the plan, while the Conservative Party and others immediately condemned it as a threat to the Danish language.

### **The threat to Danish**

English is a world language – by far the most important means of international communication in both commerce and science. More books, films and pop songs are written in English than any other language, and it dominates the Internet. Any threat it may pose for the existence of the Danish language will still be there whatever the politicians may decide.

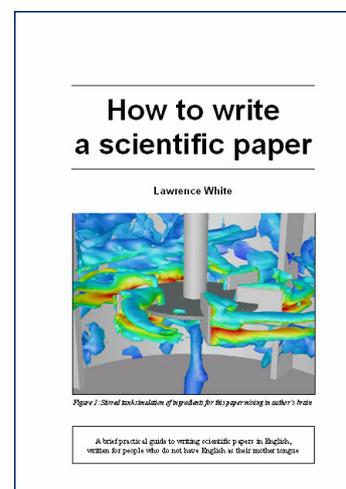
Making English an official language would mean that all official communication would be in both English and Danish. That would make it easier for many foreigners to get by in Denmark without having to learn Danish, but there is no real reason why it should mean the end of Danish.

### **The plus side**

On the contrary, not only is it unlikely that Danes will give up speaking Danish in the foreseeable future, but making English an official language would help make Denmark even more visible on the world stage. As Bjarne Jakobsen from Danish Trade and Service says, “It is a matter of being qualified for a globalised world”. Many large Danish companies, like Novo Nordisk, already use English as their company language for the same reason.

The ultimate aim is for all adults to have a really good command of English. A fully bilingual population would be more open to the world and more competitive in a globalised market.

Not a bad plan, but what would it take to make it work?



Scientific papers published in English reach a world audience

## How to make English the second official language

Of course, one view would be that it is just a matter of legislation – a vote in Parliament and that’s it! But to make it real, much more would be required. Here are some suggestions:

### 1. A certain degree of modesty

As Dee Shields wrote (see *News & Tips* no.12), “Danes generally have a tendency to overestimate their own ability to speak and write correct English”. But that is probably because English speakers in general have a tendency to compliment all foreigners on how good their English is. ☺ And most Danes *do* speak English quite well, but very few come anywhere near native-speaker competency.

This is not a criticism of Danes, Denmark or the Danish education system. On the contrary. *No one anywhere speaks a foreign language like a native.* But how can we get closer?

### 2. A raising of standards

The very first thing to do, and it should be being done already, is to check the books and materials being used in schools for teaching English. As a parent and a teacher I have seen far too many examples of what I call “danglish” in schoolbooks, and I even came across a university professor teaching that the titles *Mr, Mrs, Miss, etc.* can be written with small letters in English (see *News & Tips* nos. 16-18). The Government should institute a quality check on all text books – using native-speaker linguists.

### 3. Recruitment of native-speaker teachers

Another place native speakers should be used as much as possible is in the actual teaching.

Every school should have *at least* one native-speaker of English, but more would be better. Any country that wants to raise the quality of the English spoken by its citizens should be in the market for native-speaker teachers!

### 4. An early start

And children should start learning English very early. The human brain is much more plastic in relation to learning languages in the early years, which is why most of us have no difficulty learning one language before school. Yet most current education systems (all over the world) wait until children *stop* being really good at learning languages before teaching a second language – which is, of course, bizarre. We all know that children exposed to two languages from their early years can grow up fully bilingual. And if that’s what we want, we need native-speaker kindergarten teachers, too!

### 5. The bilingual workplace

Many Danish companies already have English as their official language, but this does not mean that the English is good. Nor does it mean that all the employees use it or even understand it. Far from it! Better would be to aim at *the bilingual workplace*, where all essential information is available in both languages. “Essential information” should include safety-at-work notices and legislation, much of which is only available in Danish.

Clearly such an ambitious plan would require serious commitment from the Government. And it would also involve the recruitment of large numbers of native-speakers at all levels in the education system and in industry. Many of these people could be found among English speakers already living in Denmark, but whose language skills are not yet tapped (see point 1 above).

If our children grow up surrounded (as far as is practical) by the natural language of two sets of native speakers, are taught (as far as possible) in both languages, and see that both languages are used in Danish workplaces, many more will end up much closer to being fully bilingual as adults.

Then the idea of two official languages might not look quite as daft as perhaps it seems at first sight. ☺ But what do YOU think?

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# From the workshop...

## People often ask...

People often ask why I write “danglish” with a small “d”. Shouldn’t it have a capital letter? Well, yes – if it were a real language, it certainly should, because words made from proper nouns (e.g. *Londoner*) usually take a capital letter (cf. *News & Tips* No. 9). But I am being deliberately perverse here – sorry about that! The words *English* and *Danish* are so often written with a small letter that I couldn’t resist doing the same with my made-up word, “danglish”. ☺

## Professional and vocational

Some care needs to be exercised when using the word *professional*. There is some overlap in meaning with *vocational*, but its core meaning applies to *people* and is *engaged in an activity for a living*, e.g. *a professional dancer*. Sometimes it has a clear meaning in other contexts, e.g. you might have a *professional qualification* or join a *professional organisation*, but many universities and colleges in Denmark and other parts of Europe advertise something they call a *professional bachelor* degree, which sounds like a course in how to make your living as an unmarried man!

*Vocational*, on the other hand, is much more commonly used of things like training, courses, degrees, colleges, etc. and is not used of people. Its core meaning is *related to an occupation, trade or profession*. The contrast can be well illustrated by the difference between *vocational guidance* and *professional guidance*. The former means guidance about choosing a career, while the latter refers to guidance (about anything) from a person who gives such guidance for a living.

*And this is what you might call a gathering of professionals ...*

**KOMMUNIKATIONS- OG SPROGFORUM 2006**

**Tuesday, 26 September, Porcelænshaven, CBS Copenhagen**

Information and booking: <http://www.kommunikationogsprog.dk/Forum/>

Tel. 33 91 98 00 or e-mail: [forum2006@kommunikationogsprog.dk](mailto:forum2006@kommunikationogsprog.dk)

*See you there!*

## Appreciate

Another word that requires care for quite different reasons is “appreciate”. Except in the sense of “increase in value” (e.g. *my shares appreciated last month*), this verb always requires an object. You cannot say, “*I would appreciate if you would ...*”; you must say, “*I would appreciate it if ...*”

But there is also another potential problem. People often write things like. “*I would appreciate to receive your reply as soon as possible*”. This is not correct. The object can be a verb, but then it must be an *ING*-form: “*I would appreciate receiving your reply as soon as possible*”.

The word “appreciate” can also be followed by a “that”-clause, but only when it has a different meaning. If I say, “*I appreciate that you came in early this morning*,” it does not mean that I am grateful that you did so, but merely that I accept or agree that it is true that you came in early. If I wished to express gratitude, I would say, “*I appreciate you(r) coming in early this morning*”.

## Accuse, charge and criticise

Each of these verbs is typically followed by a preposition plus an *ING*-form. You might *accuse someone of doing something*, *charge them with doing it*, or *criticise them for doing it*. The key thing here is to choose the right preposition for the verb in question. Note that if we use the word “attack” instead of “criticise” here, we also use “for”: *attack someone for doing something*.

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*Please turn over!*

## Able and capable

Used alone, these two words mean much the same. If a man is described as “able”, he might also be described as “capable”. They mean he has talent or skill of some kind. But “able to do” and “capable of doing” are different. First note the difference in construction. You cannot say “able of doing” or “capable to do”. But there is also a subtle difference in meaning, because “capable” has a more limited application than “able”.

To illustrate the difference, let us suppose I am accused of murder. If I was in another country at the time, then I perhaps I can prove that I was not *able* to do it, no matter how *capable* of murder I might be. On the other hand, I might have been *able* to do it (I was on the spot), but not *capable* of doing it (not being the murdering type).

So using the word *capable* focuses on the capacity of the subject in question, whereas *able* can just mean that it was literally possible for the subject to have done it. My computer might be *capable* of downloading very large files very fast, but is only *able* to do so when it is switched on.

## Teachers!

– Do you sometimes have to go through complex equations for your students in English?

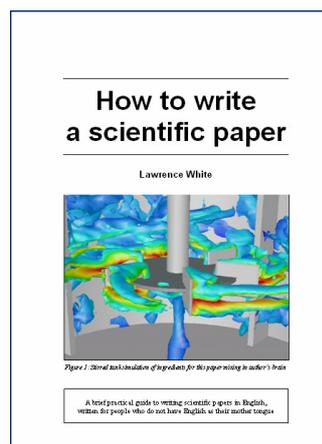
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## So-called

Watch out for this one! Non-native speakers often make the mistake of thinking it means exactly the same as “known as” – used to introduce a perhaps more popular substitute for a technical word. But “so-called” is always potentially pejorative. If I speak of “so-called experts”, I mean that some people may call them experts, but I wouldn’t. Just how pejorative the word is depends on the context in which it is used. Use with caution!



## Booklet for science researchers

*“How to write a scientific paper”, is an excellent guide – even for the experienced author of scientific articles and reports. It is easy to read and gives good advice about the structure of such papers, the writing process, and a number of the many linguistic traps that authors who do not have English as their mother tongue tend to fall into.*

Published by *English support*

Kurt Lauridsen, MSc, PhD  
Danish Decommissioning

*English support* will have a stand at the **Communication and Language Forum** in Copenhagen on 26<sup>th</sup> September (see box on previous page).

We look forward to seeing you there!

Best wishes

Lawrence White

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