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# Towards more languages for more students at the University of Copenhagen: The interplay between local and global drivers of change

## Více jazyků pro více studentů na univerzitě v Kodani: vzájemné působení lokálních a globálních hybných sil

Sanne Larsen and Anne Holmen

**Abstract:** This paper discusses the initiation and implementation of a new language strategy at the University of Copenhagen. The strategy targets diverse foreign language competence in students across the University and is based on needs analysis. Advocates and barriers of change are identified at different levels of the university organization.

**Key words:** language planning, higher education, multilingual strategy, needs analysis

### 1 Introduction

Across non-Anglophone Europe, many universities have responded to internationalization with language policy and planning that addresses the interplay between one or more local languages and English. In 2008, the University of Copenhagen (UCPH) followed suit with several other Nordic countries in adopting a parallel language policy aiming at a balance between English and the national language Danish. However, the University has also recently decided to make a five-year investment in the development of a new language strategy that introduces several other languages as potentially relevant for students in their academic programs and in their subsequent efforts to target the Danish or the international labor market. The decision to launch such a multilingual language strategy sets UCPH apart from the majority of European universities. Many of these teach foreign languages in language programs and have increasingly introduced English as medium-of-instruction as an alternative to the national language(s) to attract more international students (Extra & Yagmur 2012: 59–60). However, only rarely do they set aside resources to teach other languages than English and the national language(s) to non-language students (one exception is the Language Profiles at University of Roskilde, Daryai-Hansen et al. 2016).

The UCPH strategy of *More Languages for More Students* (<http://cip.ku.dk/english/strategicinitiatives/languagestrategy/>) has funding and mandate 'from above' to carry out a university-wide needs analysis that draws in the perspectives of students, lecturers and members of study boards; in this way, the strategy aims to identify the languages and the language skills relevant for students in different academic communities at the university. At the same time, involvement 'from

below' is facilitated by seed money that allows for the initiation of a substantial number of pilot projects where different ways of integrating languages and language skills into academic programs and courses can be tried out, evaluated by the participants involved and, if possible, eventually embedded in the local environments. Collectively, these pilot projects also constitute a knowledge base from which qualified recommendations for future language policy can be made. In that sense, the UCPH strategy represents an instance of language planning with the potential to feed back into language policy. In this paper, we analyze the interplay between these top-down and bottom-up processes of planning and implementation, identifying the central barriers and facilitators of change that have manifested themselves so far in the process of developing the new multilingual language strategy.

In addition to Spolsky's (2004) distinction between 'policy from above' and 'policy from below', the analysis draws on perspectives from the field of language-in-education with its focus on language planning for acquisition (Baldauf 2012). Language-in-education deals with the planning and implementation of language activities which further the acquisition of relevant languages or relevant dimensions of language (e.g. specific skills) in specific domains. In our case, the domains are study programs with their differentiated language needs for students across the University. To identify which languages are relevant or which dimension of language proficiency to focus on, needs analyses are carried out among students as well as among representatives of study programs. Ideally, the identified language needs are subsequently met with language teaching activities. However, the strategy does not function in practice if the needs are not recognized and promoted by the local context. As Spolsky (2004) states, 'language management remains a dream until it is implemented, and its potential for implementation depends in large measure on its congruity with the practices and ideology of the community' (217–18). Thus we argue below that as an instance of 'language planning in local contexts' (Hult & Källkvist 2015: 6), the UCPH strategy must take into account not only language needs and resources, but also institutional governance and individual agency.

We start by describing UCPH and its general language policy of parallel language use (section 2), providing a background for the analysis of the new multilingual language strategy as an initiative from above (section 3) with innovation from below (section 4). We show how this unusual procedure of combining a top-down initiative with local agency has led to the identification of student language needs that are largely confirmed by the results of large-scale surveys conducted with students across the university (section 5). We end with a discussion of the meso-level of the institution as both driving and preventing change instituted under the new language strategy.

## 2 UCPH and its general policy of parallel language use

UCPH is a research-based, public university with six faculties (Health and Medical Sciences, Humanities, Law, Science, Social Sciences and Theology) and altogether approximately 38,000 students (at BA and MA level) and 7,000 employees (faculty, PhD students and administrative staff). UCPH was founded in Medieval Copenhagen in 1479, and was never officially a monolingual, bilingual or multilingual university. However, it has always been 'a site of multilingualism' (Preece 2011) by virtue of the multilingual background and practices of its staff and students. As the only university in Denmark until 1928, it attracted students from all parts of the country, including the Nordic regions that had been or still were under Danish rule at the time (parts of Schleswig, Norway, Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands). Even during the development of the smaller monolingual nation state in the 19th century, the Danish population was not monolingual; multilingual individuals could be found among migrant groups, among professionals and in the academic elite in Copenhagen (Maegaard & Jørgensen 2015). Since then, European university collaboration and global mobility have brought speakers of many different languages to Denmark and UCPH. By 2009, almost 14% of all full-degree students and 12% of all newly recruited faculty members at UCPH had an international background, and both numbers have gone up since then (Hultberg 2014). Jürna (2014), in a study on international faculty at UCPH, identified 34 languages in use among her 150 informants, only 26 of whom reported having English as their first language.

Of course, English has taken on a key role in internationalization in general at UCPH, including in attracting and communicating with international staff and students. English appeared for research purposes from the 1950s and English-medium instruction and communication was introduced from the 1990s. Before English was introduced, UCPH was a Danish-medium university for 100–150 years with few exceptions (i.e. the teaching of foreign languages, classical as well as modern European, and the use of French and German for research publications alongside Danish). During the rise of the Danish nation state from the middle of the 19th century, UCPH was considered a national institution with a Danish-only policy (on the language history of UCPH, see Mortensen & Haberland 2012). Today, Danish has maintained its role for instruction alongside English and is the dominant language in most programs at the BA-level. Danish is also used for most administrative purposes, and international students and faculty are offered Danish tuition as part of efforts to keep them in Denmark. This stronghold of Danish as a medium of instruction has to some extent been continued under the auspices of a parallel language policy.

Breaking with a long tradition of laissez-faire approach to language issues, UCPHs first strategy, *Destination 2012*, established the principle of parallel language use – or parallelingualism (Hultgren 2014) – as the basis for the language policy at

UCPH. The concept was introduced around the turn of the century, appearing for the first time in an official document in the Nordic Declaration of Language Policy in 2006. Here it refers to the simultaneous use of two (or more) languages in a geographical area, an institutional space or a functional domain. The assumption is that a successful parallel language policy will stabilize and develop the languages involved so that one will not abolish or replace the other. In the Language Declaration, the concept is applied to many different language combinations in different domains, but it has become particularly relevant as a framework for understanding the roles of English vis-à-vis the Nordic national languages in higher education and academia. Since the 1990s, Nordic universities have gradually increased the use of English-medium instruction to attract international students and to profit from international members of faculty as lecturers. Nordic universities are now viewed as among the European 'leaders in introducing English-medium instruction' (Wächter & Maiworm 2014). In a recent report on parallel language use at Nordic universities, Gregersen (2014) shows that university management is often hesitant about implementing strong language policies, but also concerned with the clash between the discourse of internationalization through the use of English as lingua franca and the discourse of maintaining the use of the national language(s) for academic purposes. Some Nordic universities seek to deal with this clash by promoting the concept of parallel language use in policy papers as 'a kind of idealized linguistic power balance' (Hult & Källkvist 2015) with no follow up activities. However, when the Board at UCPH decided to refer to the 'principle of parallel language use' in *Destination 2012*, it also decided to establish and fund the University's Centre for Internationalisation and Parallel Language Use and later to initiate and fund the multilingual language strategy *More Languages for More Students*. The principle of parallel language use was maintained in the University's next strategy, *Strategy 2016* (issued in 2012) and followed up by the establishment of a cross-faculty and central office committee to look into parallel language use in administration and in internal communication at UCPH (e.g. between international researchers and students and support staff). At the same time, a number of local initiatives were taken to implement different aspects of the language policy at various levels of the university organization.

The following examples of the local implementation of the policy of parallel language use are based on our in-house knowledge from implementing *More Languages for More Students* at UCPH and show the diversity of decision-making related to parallel language use: Faculty of Science has decided on a new policy concerning medium-of-instruction with a sharp division between Danish-medium BA-programs and English-medium MA programs, whereas the other five faculties have maintained that decisions about medium-of-instruction should be made at departmental level – which in some cases means that a decision is made in specific programs or by individual lecturers.

All in all, more MA programs are now announced as English-medium, but it is not clear to what extent they are also taught through English. There is a growing concern in study boards and among program coordinators about language issues related to evaluation of students and consequently about quality of studies as well as drop-out rates. Some research centers and departments have decided on an English-only communication policy, others have developed a bilingual approach, but a majority of departments have made no policy decisions about this. Some units and fora refer to Danish as the natural medium of communication, whereas other units use English as the default language. Since the establishment of the Centre for Internationalisation and Parallel Language Use in 2008, there has been a growing demand for English and Danish language classes for members of teaching and administrative staff.

Some of the initiatives reported here are top-down decisions made at faculty or departmental level, while others are driven by bottom-up incentives or individual needs for language competence or communicative practices. In implementing initiatives, the level of local management (study boards and heads of departments) seems to have been particularly powerful rather than the central management (Rector's office). Some of the initiatives have been successful and others have been met with criticism or neglect, but compared to 20 years earlier, there is clearly an increased focus on language issues and a new balance between Danish and English at the University; however, it is also clear that the interface between the two languages is dynamic and takes many local forms depending on the function of the specific unit (teaching, research, communication, and administration) as well as disciplinary differences and traditions. This view of UCPH as a complex organization with a certain investment in 'the principle of parallel language use' at many levels and guided by many, sometimes conflicting, interests forms the background for understanding the launching and implementation of the University's multilingual strategy, *More Languages for More Students*. A major challenge for the strategy is qualifying the decision-making concerning the current implementation of a parallel language policy as it relates to student needs whilst at the same time expanding the focus to other relevant languages.

### **3 Launching the language strategy: An initiative from above**

The decision to launch and fund the language strategy was taken by the Board at UCPH in 2012 based on recommendations from a cross-faculty committee report on language needs for students. The committee had been set up by the Rector's office to establish a common ground for a new language strategy and to assess its relevance from different local perspectives. By appointing members at associate dean or study board level from all six faculties and from the two most relevant departments at Humanities in addition to student representatives, the Rector signaled that the committee represented a high-level combination of faculty interests

and language expertise. The committee referred to the fairly broad understanding of 'the principle of parallel language use' introduced in *Destination 2012* in 2008. In the action plan approved by the UCPH Board, the focus on Danish and English was supplemented with the following paragraph:

UCPH shall profit from the special opportunity of already carrying out research and teaching in a number of languages. Students must be given easily available opportunities to acquire competence in another foreign language and another culture than the Anglo-Saxon (our translation)

This paragraph refers to the 40+ languages already taught through the University's language programs or as elements of other study programs (e.g. Ancient Greek in the study of Theology or Philosophy). These languages are seen as potential resources because of the availability of teaching competence at UCPH, but also as potentially relevant for students outside language studies. The decision to include a diversity of languages in the language strategy sets UCPH apart from many other European universities which are mainly concerned with the introduction of English-medium instruction and the balance between English and local language(s). Without stating this explicitly, the strategy seems to follow up on the recommendations to promote citizens' plurilingual competencies put forward by the European Union and the Council of Europe (see overview in Extra & Yagmur 2012: 13–18). The decision to include more languages than English and Danish in the University's strategic document from 2008, *Destination 2012*, and to refer to this in its successor, *Strategy 2016*, was made at the top level of the University's management and confirmed by the Board. The initiative to follow up on this by setting up a committee to investigate faculty interests in the language policy was also taken at this level as was the decision to fund a five-year project. Thus the launching of the strategy was a top-down initiative. However, the strategy would probably never have developed into an action plan if it had not also corresponded to local needs and interests and met with individual agency at many levels of the University. However, as we shall see later, this was also where some of the barriers can be identified.

#### **4 Implementing the language strategy: Innovation from below**

After the language strategy was launched, a project team was established, including the authors of this paper. It has been a focal point of our work to develop new learning activities which address students' language needs as these are experienced by the students themselves and by the local boards responsible for their study programs. The project team also identifies activities already running within specific programs based on the assumption that these may also be seen as responses to language needs among students. Thus the language needs in focus are both present and future needs, experienced by students as well as their lecturers,

but also seen through the lenses of curricular traditions in the specific domains and priorities made in formal documents.

So far the project team has had approximately 50 meetings with study boards, program directors and faculty representatives from across the University. One recurrent topic in the meetings is the underlining of the strategy's concept of language competence as a set of skills related to language use in specific academic domains. The skills mentioned are both the four classic language proficiency skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, but also the competence to interact with other students and lecturers, to participate in classrooms, laboratories or field work, and to access and produce knowledge via language. Thus, the dialogue has often focused on what is meant by 'language' in the language strategy, giving the project team the opportunity to explicitly address the holistic and normative views on language competence often found among non-linguists. These views seem to derive from the traditional foreign language curriculum in Danish primary and secondary school. As an alternative, it is stressed that the language strategy is informed by a focus on subdivisions of language competence and on processes of language use and language learning rather than on linguistic products. This often paves the way for a dialogue that can lead to the identification of the relevant subcomponents of each language in question as well as the selection of languages (Arabic, Danish, English, French, German, etc.). In that regard, an important starting point for the strategy has been Mike Long's warning against seeing language needs as a 'one-size-fits-all approach'. This applies both to the conceptual framework of what constitutes language needs, in which it is crucial to consider 'the specificity of the tasks, genres and discourse practices that language learners encounter in the varied domains in which they must operate' (Long 2005: 1) and to the methodology used to uncover the relevant aspects of language needs.

The outcome of the meetings is both the identification of relevant language needs as seen relevant from the perspective of a study board and the identification of local actors who are willing to go beyond dialogue into cooperation with the strategy to work out ideas for responding to language needs through new teaching activities. These are developed as pilot projects, which receive funding from the strategy if a set of criteria concerning academic quality and relevance are met. All pilot projects are evaluated and, if needed, adjusted in content or form. Successful projects will be run at least twice, and, if possible, they are then embedded in the regular study programs. Thus the main idea is to use the project funding to identify language needs, assist the local environments in developing linguistically appropriate teaching responses to meet those needs, evaluate them and further develop and describe them and finally to fit them into the local structures. To a very large extent, the procedures for implementing the strategy are thus based on user needs and priorities.



So far, 31 pilot projects have been developed and carried out, targeting more than 4,000 students, and involving all six faculties. 14 of these projects concern Academic English, whereas 16 projects involve other languages (Ancient Greek, Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Latin, Spanish, and Danish as a second language) and one project cuts across languages at Humanities. 12 of the 31 projects focus exclusively on reading comprehension, and three projects focus on spoken language for field work. All the English projects explicitly deal with written language, predominantly linked to the students' writing of assignments or exam papers and to some extent to their reading of scientific texts in English. The Danish projects focus on meeting the requirements in students' written exams. The German and French projects also focus on written language, but only in reading, and they are all concerned with giving the students access to primary sources in French or German. The two Spanish and Arabic projects are both motivated by the students' need for spoken language to carry out field work, and the Chinese project differs from the other pilot projects by having a fairly small language component embedded in a broader cultural approach on health issues.

Collectively, the pilot projects display the diversity of language use across faculties and disciplines. They have all been developed and carried out in practice through an unusual procedure of combining a top-down initiative (in terms of setting up and funding the vision in *Destination 2012*) with local agency and institutional influence. In practice, this means that the meetings between study boards and the project group set up to inform about the strategy and identify potential language needs are considered mandatory, but that the needs identified are only responded to in the form of pilot projects when there is a local interest in this and local agents can be identified. Furthermore, the choice of language and of language skills in each project as well as the decision to link this to one or the other study unit is a local decision.

## 5 Students' language needs

The meetings with representatives from the particular fields of study have been supplemented with a number of wide-scale surveys with students and one survey with lecturers. So far students from three out of UCPH's six faculties (Theology, Social Sciences and Law) have been invited to take part in surveys on their present experience with and future needs for languages, and so have students from across UCPH during their study-abroad period. The response rate varies considerably (between 14 and 87%), but taken together 2,505 out of 13,509 students in the relevant categories have responded. In general, the results of these surveys confirm both the choice of languages and the choice of language skills presented above.

About 30% of the students across the surveys feel that they need a better command of written academic English in order to meet the requirements in their

current field of study. This applies to students at BA- as well as MA-level (PhD students have not been included in the surveys so far, but a survey targeting this group is underway). Some students also express concerns about their general level of English, as this student of Anthropology:

When we have English-speaking lecturers, I do not have sufficient English skills, both in terms of academic terminology and in general, to be active in class. I have been able to stick to Danish all through my BA, and although this has been convenient, [it is a problem that] I do not feel capable of coping in English in professional contexts, during exchange, at the labor market or at English-medium courses at UCPH

In general, the students are aware of the gap between the English competence they have acquired in secondary school and the academic competence required of them during their studies. Compared to non-Anglophone, European standards, Danish students are considered fairly high level and fluent speakers of English as a second language (Rubio & Lirola 2010; European Commission 2012). But apparently, the literary focus of English in secondary school does not provide the students with a sufficient bridge to the genres of Academic English required in higher education.

In addition, about 10% of students mention that they have experienced problems during their studies because of their limited competence in other languages than English and Danish. A student of Theology focuses on the study value of being able to access text material in its original language:

I think you should expect of the students' German language skills to be at a much higher level from the beginning, so that texts by Nietzsche and Luther are not handed out in English. As a Danish Lutheran theologian, it is my opinion that it's a great loss not to have access to the German academic tradition.

This student refers to a curricular tradition in some of the study programs based on students having acquired a sufficient level of reading competence in German and French during secondary school. However, due to changes in the Danish secondary school system after a reform in 2005, this language competence can no longer be taken for granted. Nevertheless, the reading activities are still relevant during some studies at university level, and now it is left to the students themselves to catch up language-wise or make do without the primary sources.

Some students also comment on the role of language in the labor market that they intend to target, e.g. competence in French for students of Political Science or Law who orient themselves towards employment in European organizations. Law students, for example, list several foreign languages as relevant for their employability. More than 90% mention English, whereas French and German are

referred to by more than 50% of the 603 students taking part in this survey. Danish, Chinese, Spanish, Swedish, Arabic, Norwegian and Portuguese are all mentioned by at least 10 students. The Law survey also includes responses from 71 Law lecturers, who confirm the value of the listed languages for their students' job opportunities. Even students at the Faculty of Science, which has traditionally been more open towards introducing English as medium-of-instruction than Law, report the need to include more languages than English and Danish to improve their chances in the global labor market. A student of Mathematics, for example, notes that it would have been more relevant for his future job plans to go on an exchange to Germany, but that he had decided to apply for Australia instead because he lacked German language skills:

No doubt it would have opened more doors if I had been able to communicate in German and not only in English. Taking part in research projects and looking for work [within my line of interest] has not really been a possibility [while in Australia]

The results of the survey not only suggest that a substantial number of students at UCPH see a value in foreign language competence, but also that they are willing to put an effort and money into acquiring this; out of the 953 Social Science students who responded to the survey, 180 had taken part in foreign language classes during their studies, about 50% in private classes (i.e. against a fee paid by the students themselves).

Across the surveys, one gets the impression that students at UCPH acknowledge the role attributed to English in the parallel language policy, but that a substantial part of them have experienced problems when meeting the requirements for academic English, in particular in relation to their own writing. Problems with their mastery of academic Danish are also mentioned along the same lines (see Holmen 2015 for a discussion of this). Furthermore, some of the students show an interest in other foreign languages for different purposes: to access textual material in languages central to their field of study, to prepare for field work or study abroad outside Anglophone countries or to be able to target a wider labor market as graduates.

## **6 Discussion – the role of the meso level**

If we look at the first 30 months of developing and implementing the language strategy of *More Languages for More Students* through the perspective of language needs for students during their study programs, including studies abroad and/or field work, we find a widespread and diversified interest. A large group of students from across disciplines are concerned with their competence in Academic English, especially in their own writing. German and French are seen by many students as necessary to access text material, to select the most relevant desti-

nations for studies abroad or to improve their future employability. A number of other languages appear equally important for smaller groups of students. Some students even seem willing to invest time and money in obtaining the needed language competence, and the pilot projects developed so far have been positively evaluated. But we do not know if students are interested in prioritizing language competence over other parts of their study program. If we look at the implementation of the language strategy through the lens of organizational change, we can identify drivers of change who actively promote the intentions behind the principle of parallel language use as well as the paragraph in *Destination 2012* saying that 'Students must be given easily available opportunities to acquire competence in another foreign language and another culture than the Anglo-Saxon'. Besides the Rector's office and the Board, who took the original initiative, these are individual program directors who approach the project team, apply for funding for pilot projects and evaluate and further develop the projects. In some cases, they have even taken the first steps to adjust their local study program to encompass the language component on a permanent basis. Their colleagues in other study programs are either more disinterested or explicitly hostile towards embracing language issues, especially when these fall outside the use of English. As gatekeepers of the study programs, they are reluctant to include language elements because they see this happening at the expense of core elements. One response to the reluctance to include language components have been for the project team to include projects focusing on a specific skill (e.g. reading) and linking this closely to the core content (e.g. through the textual material already in the curriculum). This may be seen as a local version of the European concept of content-and-language-integrated-learning (CLIL, Coyle et al 2010) in so far as the projects have a dual focus on language and content learning. However, they are also limited in their linguistic scope and the assessment only relates to the content area.

## 7 Conclusion

Universities in non-Anglophone Europe vary greatly with respect to the language planning and language policy that takes places in response to internationalization. When UCPH decided to promote parallel language use in its wider language-diverse sense, a new focus on the role of languages for study programs, study abroad periods and labor market related competencies opened. The needs analyses show that students in general seem to be aware of the need to develop languages with their academic discipline, but that there is some resistance towards addressing these needs by the local stakeholders. Thus we have seen that barriers of change are mainly located at the meso-level of the organization, i.e. among disciplinary representatives in local study boards and directors of study programs. Appointed as spokesmen of the specific field of study and the research area this is based on, they are both individual agents (identified by name and position) and represent the professional field and the local institution (e.g. a department).

However, at this level of the organization we have not only met the gatekeepers, but also the drivers of change who use their individual agency and representative power to include the language strategy in their subject area. Whether the projects will eventually succeed or not depends to a very large extent on what happens at the micro-level, i.e. in the specific classrooms and with the learning processes of the students involved (cf Marilyn-Martin-Jones 2015). In the short run, the criterion for success is the development of pilot projects which are well-evaluated for their high quality and relevance. In the long run, the main criterion for success is that the pilot projects will later be embedded in the ordinary study program through the local forces claiming ownership or – if that is not possible – that permanent funding is set aside for language teaching independently of the study programs.

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