

WORD REPETITION IN DANISH: "JEG MENER 'SKÆG' IKKE 'SKÆG'" (I MEAN 'FUNNY' NOT 'BEARD')

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A notable feature of language is the use of the same word to communicate different meanings. The first example that comes to mind in English is *still*. I am aware of at least three meanings: (1) when something is motionless or at rest, (2) apparatus used to distill alcohol, and (3) the adverb *still* which means 'as yet' or 'up to this time' (for example, 'are you still there?').

Danish is a language noted for its relative lack of words in comparison to English. Why is this so? The Danes, a quirky bunch, are able to use their language to express whatever feeling they want, from 'coziness' through 'nice, pleasant and disgusting' to 'gee, the weather's bad today'. So why do they need a large number of words, anyway? Maybe the Danes are searching for efficiency in language. My thesis: context is the key. But for your everyday language learner in Denmark, a 'beard' may not exactly be considered 'fun', or it may come as a surprise that the Danish words for 'Christmas' and 'wheel' are pronounced exactly the same.

This brief analysis will first tabulate various examples of what is called *word repetition*. Examples worth mentioning will subsequently be discussed with the aim to formulate and speculate towards an understanding as to why such repetition may occur. The following table is based on Jens Axelsen, *Dansk-Engelsk Ordbog* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1984).

Word Repetition Examples and their English Translations

Danish Word

English Translation

1. en bøsse (noun)
2. en bøsse (noun)
3. en bøsse (verb)

a gay, queer, poof
a money box
a gun, pistol

1. en frø (noun)
2. et frø (noun)

a frog
a seed

1. et kær (noun)
2. kær (adjective)

a pond, pool, marsh
dear, beloved, sweet, cherished, darling

1. et køn (noun)
2. køn (adjective)

a sex, gender
pretty, good-looking

1. en led (noun)
2. et led (noun)
3. et led (noun)
4. led (adjective)
5. led (preteritum of 'lide')

a side, direction
a joint, link, generation, term, unit
a gate
disgusting, odious, loathsome
suffered (past tense of 'to suffer')

1. en svale (noun)	swallow (bird)
2. en svale (noun)	(external) gallery
3. at svale (verb)	cool (as in 'to cool down')
1. et skæg (noun)	a beard
2. skæg (adjective)	funny
1. et skær (noun)	a cutting edge, ploughshare
2. et skær (noun)	a gleam, glimmer, glare, tinge (of light)
3. et skær (noun)	a sunken rock, skerry
4. skær (adjective)	pure, tender, clear, bright

The above table could go on almost unlimitedly. An aspect worth noting is that your average Dane is not even aware that there is so much repetition in his language. But when his attention is drawn to this fact, he usually concedes.

So how can a 'frog' and a 'seed' share the same spelling independent of their indefinite article? And what about 'a gay who collects money in a money box while he carries a gun'? This could be translated as 'en bøsse, der indsamler penge i en bøsse imens han bærer en bøsse'. Let us now turn towards some possible explanations for this word repetition.

Lexicon, population and the environment

A factor worth noting when comparing Danish to English is the number of people who speak the language. Approximately five million people speak Danish while more than one hundred times that number speak English as a mother tongue or as a second language. Hence it would be expected that a notable gap should occur between the two languages' ability to create and use words—more people usually mean more words. A language with a relatively small group of speakers will, then, depend upon other factors for distinguishing and describing—the most important in the case of Danish being context. I speculate that it would be quite difficult for a native speaker to confuse 'a gay, 'a money box' and 'a gun' associated with their word 'en bøsse'.

Geographically, Denmark is placed in a rather opportune position (or inopportune, depending on your opinion). Furthermore, it is not an environmentally varied country with great differences from north to south or from sea level to the sky. Using this premise and the work of Peter Mühlhäusler dealing with biological diversity and linguistic diversity (see, for example his *Language Ecology: Linguistic Imperialism and Language Change in the Pacific Region* (London: Routledge, 1996)). I arrive at my hypothesis: a general lack of environmental and biological diversity in Denmark is a contributing factor to the lack of linguistic diversity in Danish—that is, there exists a lot of word repetition. This is, of course, a subject for further investigation. Danes repeat. Let us not repeat (or repent for!) them.