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Domain Loss: The rise and demise of a concept

Anna Kristina Hultgren

The Open University

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1 The concept

A concept which has been salient in investigating English in Europe is *domain loss*. While the concerns it encapsulates are found in many places, the term itself is partly a Nordic coinage. It refers to the idea that the growing use of English in key transnational domains, notably higher education and multinational corporations, will lead to the official national languages (Swedish, Danish, Finnish/Swedish, Norwegian and Icelandic) ceasing to develop, losing status and eventually not being used at all. The first element of *domain loss* ('domain') is probably attributable to the American sociologist of language, Joshua Fishman (1970), though Fishman himself credits the linguist Georg Schmidt-Rohr (1890–1945) (Haberland 2005). Perhaps because Schmidt-Rohr has later become unfondly remembered for his scholarly contributions to Nazi 'race science' (Cameron 2007), Schmidt-Rohr is rarely if ever acknowledged. In contrast to Fishman, who worked with the notion of domains as a way of theorizing language choice, the Nordic debate has reified it, using it to designate physical entities which are perceived to be at risk of encroachment from English. The Nordic debate on domain loss consolidated itself just after the turn of the millennium in a string of language policy initiatives within each nation state, culminating in a joint Nordic Declaration on Language Policy in 2007 (Nordic Council 2007).

While at some levels concerns about domain loss have not been plucked from thin air but resonate with well-documented sociolinguistic phenomena and processes including borrowing, diglossia, attrition and language shift, the Nordic debate has generally been poorly informed sociolinguistically. The way the concept has been used in Nordic language policy discourse has varied 'from the vague to the nonsensical' (Preisler 2009: 10). Having attracted a fair amount of criticism (Hultgren 2013; Preisler 2009; Haberland 2005), some researchers have begun to talk about the irrevocable demise of the concept (Haberland 2011). The degree of sophistication has varied across

the Nordic community with the Swedish debate possibly being the best informed (Phillipson, personal communication), having been led primarily by bilingualism scholars writing from a stance that acknowledges the value of bilingualism. Like most terms, the meaning of domain loss is highly variable and perhaps this variability has been exacerbated by the debate having had such varied participants, spanning from lay people, renowned linguists, politicians and media commentators. In the next section we consider two of the most important meanings in which domain loss has been understood — lexical borrowing and language shift—and consider their merits.

2 Domain loss: lexical borrowing or language shift?

Part of the confusion over domain loss might stem from some commentators, particularly but not exclusively lay people, using it to refer to increased lexical borrowing from English. In an opinion piece in the Danish national newspaper *Berlingske Tidende*, Niels Davidsen-Nielsen, Professor of English at Copenhagen Business School 1985–2005 and then chair of the Danish Language Council, responds to a prior opinion piece by Professor of Biochemistry, Peder Olesen Larsen, writing about specialist terms in the natural sciences, who asks that the Council ‘make a systematic effort to integrate these [many thousands of new words] into the Danish language’ in order to ‘avoid a mixture of Danish and English’ (Olesen Larsen 2005: NP). David-Nielsen, chair of the Danish Language Council, responds:

[W]hat is requested [must] be an adaptation of the words so they are spelled, pronounced and conjugated in Danish and thus cease to become foreign-sounding. One example of such a loan word adaption might be *klorid* (cf. e.g. English *chloride* and Italian *cloruro*) [...]. The Language Council is happy to provide guidance on how specialist terminology might be assimilated, but we do not have the scientific requirements to address the problem on our own; the Council is primarily concerned with everyday language and only in a limited way with language for special purposes (Davidsen-Nielsen 2005: NP).¹

This view rests on three assumptions, which have underpinned particularly the Danish domain loss debate: 1) that lexical borrowing in the sciences is in need of urgent intervention from the Danish Language Council; 2) that the words which are felt to contaminate Danish are indeed borrowed from English; and 3) that scientists need guidance as to how to go about assimilating these English loan words into Danish. All of

¹ [D]et der efterlyses, [må] vel være tilpasning af ordene så de staves, udtales og bøjes på dansk og dermed ophører med at være fremmede fugle. Et eksempel på et således tilpasset fagord kunne være klorid (jf. fx engelsk *chloride* og italiensk *cloruro*) [...]. Sprognævnet bidrager gerne med vejledning i hvordan fagord på disse tre måder kan assimileres, men vi har ikke naturvidenskabelige forudsætninger for at løse denne opgave alene; nævnet beskæftiger sig først og fremmest med almensproget og kun i begrænset omfang med fagsprogene (Davidsen-Nielsen 2005).

these three assumptions have been found to be unwarranted upon further examination. Let's consider them one by one.

Firstly, in a study comparing the proportion of lexical borrowings from English into spoken everyday Danish and spoken scientific Danish, it was found that the proportion of loans was exactly the same, i.e. 0.6 %. The spoken scientific domain, in other words, operationalized as the talk produced by lecturers in undergraduate teaching in chemistry, physics and computer science at the University of Copenhagen, is not more influenced by English loan words than everyday spoken Danish (Hultgren 2013). It is of course also worth noting here that the overall proportion of loans from English, in both the everyday and the scientific domain, is slight, at 0.6% of words.

As regards the second assumption, i.e. whether these words are 'English', this arguably depends on how far back in history one goes. For the study reported here, English loans were operationalized as having entered into Danish after 1850. Most 'new' specialist terms have Greco-Latin origins: for example, *dissociative electron attachment*, *solid state ionics* and *orthogonal synthon*, begging the question of whether they should be considered as English at all (Hultgren 2015).

Finally, as to whether these loan words are assimilated into Danish, which has often been seen in the Danish domain loss debate as a test of their 'Danishness', this seems to be overwhelmingly the case. Morphologically, they are assimilated through combining an English element unproblematically with a Danish one as in *C++-beregning* [C++ calculation], *Javadoc-kommentarer* [Javadoc comments] and *ASCII-alfabetet* [the ASCII alphabet]. Phonologically too, they are pronounced according to Danish conventions with one main stress (for a more comprehensive analysis, see Hultgren 2013) leaving it questionable as to whether top-down guidance from the Danish Language Council is indeed necessary, let alone possible.

To be fair, it must be pointed out that the conflation of domain loss with increased lexical borrowing from English has probably been a minority view, and this brings us to the other main way in which domain loss has been understood, i.e. not as lexical borrowing, but as language shift. Such as conceptualization is made explicit in a key report by the Danish Ministry of Culture:

It is less of a concern to track the import of English words than to keep an eye on the situation of language use and domains which transition from being Danish-language-dominated to being English-language-dominated. Among such domains are scientific genres. There is evidence that more and more researchers primarily or exclusively write in English. In addition, Danish faces competition as a medium of instruction, particularly in higher education (Danish Ministry of Culture 2003: 10).²

As discussed elsewhere, such concerns about the wholesale shift from the national language to English also often oversimplify the situation and ignore the fact that English and the national Nordic language can be said to be in a complementary relationship, each being used to different extents for different communicative purposes. Like

² Det er mindre væsentligt at følge indvandringen af engelske låneord end at holde øje med de sprogbrugssituationer og domæner, der kan overgå fra at være dansksprogede til at blive engelsksprogede.

concerns about lexical borrowing, they too overlook historicity and the fact that before English came to be dominant as a language for research publication in the Nordic communities, the dominant language of publication was German (Ammon 2001).

Salö and Hanell make some interesting observations about how a Swedish computer scientist goes about ‘constructing’ the scientific register of computerese in Swedish, having got limited access to previous instances of this type of language. As the researcher writes, they patch ‘together [patterns] from similar Swedish and English texts and from prior events in oral academic language use’ (2014: 27). These prior events can be ‘written or oral, in Swedish or in English, formal or informal, and anchored in computer science or elsewhere’ (2014: 13). Such observations challenge a key assumption underpinning the notion of domain loss, that of *complete and society-bearing language* [komplet og samfundsbærende sprog] (Nordic Council 2007). The notion of a complete and society-bearing language assumes that the national language is *a priori* endowed with, and should continue to be so, the required linguistic resources, lexical, grammatical and stylistic, to be fully functional. The connection to domains is obvious: for a language to be society-bearing it has to be used in all domains. This, of course, is an illusion when you redirect your attention from language to register, as has been argued by Agha (2007), Blommaert (2013) and many others. Indeed, as Laurén et al. put it [i]t is a fact that no language covers all possible domains at all LSP [language for specific purposes] levels (2002: 25), thereby implicitly acknowledging that no language is ever at any one time ‘complete and society-bearing’.

Thus, concepts such as *domain loss* and *complete and society-bearing*, irrespective of whether they are invoked to raise concerns over lexical borrowing or a wholesale language shift, ignore the historically emergent, practice-based nature of language use we observe in the rest of this book, and rest on ‘overly static conceptualizations of discrete and linguistically uniform domains’ (Salö and Hanell 2014: 13). They obscure development and dynamism and the need for language users to adapt and respond to social and technological changes particularly at the lexical level (Winford 2002). As such, domain loss seems an ill-fitting term because it assumes that these domains allegedly at risk of being lost clearly exist. If anything, *lack of domain gain* would be a more apt way of conceptualizing the processes at work.³ While concerns about lexical borrowing have often been brushed aside as trivial and as misguided in the Nordic debate, it could be argued that they are no more so than domain loss in the sense of language shift. Given the research evidence that has begun to emerge, it is arguably remarkable that debates about language, epitomized in coinages such as *domain loss*, take up so much place in society. I will conclude by proposing three further explanations for this.

3 Demise

Firstly, both conceptualizations of domain loss rely on an implicit and unchallenged ideology that there is a one-to-one correspondence between nation state and national language (Duchêne & Heller 2007; Joseph 2004). Key policy documents in each nation

³ I owe this point to Olle Josephson.

state have taken for granted that the national language should continue to occupy the status and role it has occupied hitherto despite, or perhaps because of, the arguably extreme intensification of transnational and translanguing communication in the past few decades. The historical perspective, in accounts of domain loss, in other words, only stretches back to the days of romanticism and the construction of the nation state in 19th-century Europe. This is not to say that many aspects of globalization cannot and should not be challenged, an issue to which we return briefly below, but nor is it to say that because things have been like this for the past centuries they have to remain that way. However, it is recognized that policies of change may be a lot harder to implement than policies of conservatism.

Secondly, Salö (2014) has analysed the Swedish domain loss debate in terms of the powerful attempting to protect their privileges. Drawing on Bourdieu's notions of capital and field, he argues that those who have constructed and legitimized 'domain loss' as a concept have their own interests, not necessarily consciously, vested in this. One example which may serve to illustrate this is the introduction of new criteria for rewarding publications in the university and college sector. Several Nordic countries have introduced bibliometric performance indicators akin to those implemented by the Higher Education Funding Council for England in the UK. This promotes publication in prestigious, *de facto* English-medium, journals, thereby profoundly perturbing current value and reward systems and threatening the position and privileges of established, senior scholars, who may be habituated to different ways of producing and disseminating knowledge. It tends to be established and senior scholars who been among the most critical of the use of English (Jensen et al. 2010), presumably partly because they have grown up and developed their careers in a context where possessing English proficiency wasn't a tool of the trade.

And finally, as linguistic anthropologists have long known, debates about language are seldom only, or even primarily, about language (see also Cameron 2012a).

In any given time and place, the most salient forms of verbal hygiene will tend to be linked to other preoccupations which are not primarily linguistic, but are rather social, political and moral. The logic behind verbal hygiene depends on a common-sense analogy between the order of language and the larger social order, or the order of the world. The rules of language stand in for the rules that govern social or moral conduct and putting language to right becomes a sort of symbolic surrogate for putting the world to right (Cameron 2012b: transcribed from an oral presentation).

In other words, debates about language are in effect proxy debates about other underlying societal issues which are rarely to do with language. Evidence in support of this theory is that the domain loss debate in Sweden flourished at a time when Sweden were debating entry into the EU (Milani 2007), whereas in Denmark, it has been partly appropriated by the right-wing Danish People's Party to feed into a nationalist and at times xenophobic agenda (Thøgersen 2009). Thus, battles fought in the political domain

become battles fought in the linguistic domain. Or perhaps rather, linguistic battles are a reflex of other higher-order political battles.

It is worth considering the extent to which language debates centred on dubious notions such as domain loss detract attention away from more fundamental debates to be had about how neoliberal processes dramatically restructure the ways in which higher education and research is organized. While domain loss is certainly a concept that has had rhetorical value to politicians, journalists and other commentators, domain loss may well prove to have been a red herring.

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