

PIA JARVAD. *Nye ord – hvorfor og hvordan?* [New Words: Why and How?] Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1995. Pp. 346.

Reviewed by FRITZ LARSEN

Quite a number of linguistic topics command popular interest, and this is one: what is happening to my language right now, where do all these new words come from, do we need them? The fascination has to do with the rapid turnover rate of vocabulary; here is an area of language where no one can help observing change. But there is more to it than that. It is in vocabulary development that language as a reflection of culture is revealed, and reactions to language change tend to become intertwined with reactions to cultural change. The ensuing debates often engender more heat than light.

A book that explains the mechanisms of vocabulary change to the general public is to be welcomed, and for Danish no one is better qualified to write it than Pia Jarvad. She was the compiler of a dictionary of new words in Danish in the period 1955-75 (Petersen 1984), a standard reference work for all with an interest in this field. She is currently working on an extension which will cover the period up to 1995. As one studies the copious exemplification in the book (no less than 3,000 words are cited) one cannot help being impressed by how closely she follows developments in a wide range of fields, from computers to cookery, not to speak of the ever-changing manifestations of youth culture.

Jarvad is a senior researcher with *Dansk Sprognavn*, the official body one of whose tasks is to monitor and register vocabulary developments. The Introduction to the book has thus some information about the practical work at *Dansk Sprognavn*, including an explanation of why this kind of registration still has to proceed largely by old-fashioned human scanning followed by cutting and gluing.

The Why of the title is dealt with in Chapter 2, fairly briefly but sufficiently to make it clear that vocabulary change reflects cultural and social change. We obviously need new names for new products, and the existing vocabulary commonly gets realigned as a result, thus e.g. the Danish word *garage* becomes restricted in use with the importation of *carport*; *makaroni* and *spagetti* become specialized with the introduction of *pasta*. In addition to this obvious motivation for change, the author rightly stresses the less prosaic

vehicles, such as euphemism, creative play, and the wish to signal group identity.

The bulk of the book consists of Chapters 3-5 on borrowing and Chapters 6-8 on word formation, with a shorter Chapter 9 on semantic and syntactic change.

Borrowing at present is of course predominantly from English, and the book reflects this: two chapters (one third of the book, in fact) are devoted to English influence on Danish. (English influence is a topic that has been much debated in recent years, in Denmark as elsewhere. Most of the literature, naturally enough, is in Danish. A survey article in English is Sørensen 1986; indirect loans and cultural dominance are treated in Larsen 1994.)

Many authors have attempted to set up classificatory systems for loans. To my mind, the fairly simple categorization Jarvad uses in her treatment of English influence on Danish is quite appropriate, and I shall reproduce it here:

(1) Direct loans (*team*); (2) indirect loans (examples later); (3) pseudo-loans, i.e. words made up of English elements but not by native speakers of English (*bigshopper* about a big shopping-bag); (4) syntactic loans (transitive use of *gro* on the pattern of English *grow*).

Indirect loans are subclassified into loan-translations (*posedame* from *bag lady*); hybrids, i.e. part-translations (*backinggruppe*); semantic loans (*virus* in relation to computer programs). She rightly points out how in practice it may be hard to distinguish between the various subcategories; for example, is *varm kartoffel* (about an unpleasant problem) a translation of the English idiom *hot potato*, or has the existing Danish expression been given a new meaning, i.e. have we rather got a case of semantic loan from English?

The integration of English direct loans is dealt with fairly briefly, but again I think sufficiently to give an impression of the main mechanisms. A treatment like that in Sørensen 1973, the standard work on English loans, could easily have become too technical here.

Two interesting pronunciation developments are mentioned, the spread of /w-/ in preference to /v-/ in loanwords like *weekend*, and the chaotic battle between substitution of Danish back /r/ (commonly heard in e.g. *rock*) and retention of English front /r/ (*rock and roll*). A similar treatment could have been given to the establishment in Danish of the diphthongal phoneme /eɪ/, as in *baby*, *tape*, *grapefrugt*, and the battle between front and back /a/ in words like *camping*. To the few examples of adaptation to Danish orthography

one could add *tjek* for *check*. (Additional information about current developments may be found in Jacobsen 1994.)

Not all borrowing is from English, and Chapter 5 surveys some of the contributions made to our present-day culture by an amazing range of languages. There is, for example, a delicious treatment of new food terms. Incidentally, this list must present a daunting problem for linguistic purists. Imagine wanting to banish all these defiling foreign words and to find good Danish expressions for everything from *couscous* to *tzatziki*. I console myself with the thought that even if it did come to puristic excesses, the banning of foreign words is unlikely to stem the cultural tide and resurrect traditional Danish cuisine.

Chapter 6 gives a concise and very informative survey of the basics of word formation. Many different types are distinguished and exemplified, without losing sight of the fact that half of all new words are of one type: the noun+noun compound. A substantial part of the chapter is devoted to a treatment of selected prefixes and suffixes.

In the next chapter, a chapter that abounds in perceptive observations, Jarvad goes on to consider those cases (and they are not rare) where the borderline between free root and bound affix is crossed. Her solution is beautifully symmetrical: she operates with a category of bound roots (e.g. *bio-* with the meaning 'biological'), which she calls 'crypto-roots', and a category of free affixes, which she calls 'closet affixes', the word *skabs-* ('closet') being itself an example.

'Crypto-roots' are technically affixes, but their meanings are as well-defined as those of free roots. Some of them are highly productive, e.g. *euro-*, *-tek*, *multi-*. 'Closet affixes' are roots that, usually quite suddenly, have entered into such a multitude of compounds that they seem to be developing into new affixes. An example is *-syndrom*. The meaning of the new affix often deviates from that of the original root, thus *budget-* in some recent compounds has the meaning 'cheap', as in English.

The proliferation of abbreviations is dealt with in Chapter 8, where a good coverage of the various types is given. And in Chapter 9 we turn to syntactic and semantic change. As to the latter, the examples in this well-documented chapter testify to of a high degree of creativity in the figurative use of language.

As I hope this summary has shown, the book demonstrates the ongoing revitalization of the Danish language, through borrowing

and through word formation – including the creative use of English elements. The impression one gets is of a language that is very much alive, and one would have thought that the message of the book – and a fitting conclusion to this review – would be the jubilant announcement that here is a language destined to survive because it exploits all available mechanisms to adapt to changing circumstances. Not so, alas. The tone of the book is pessimistic.

The culprit is the English (or 'American'¹) language. To understand why, we have to go back to Chapter 4, entitled 'English influence – conflict or harmony?'. It is obvious, from this chapter and from the conclusion, that the author sees it as a conflict, and a conflict that is potentially deadly. Let me quote from p. 101:

The question is whether, with the new world community with the world as a global village and with Denmark's position in the European Union, it is possible for our language to remain Danish, with Danish dialects, a Danish written language, school teaching in Danish, Danish literature and law-making in Danish, or whether we shall have to face and prepare for the new world order with a new mother tongue for at least some of the functions that a language has.

This dire scenario is repeated elsewhere in the book; the rout of the Danish language as the result of English dominance is presented as a real possibility. Note the use of *or* in the quotation. It is assumed that there is an exclusive choice between these two options, and that interpretation pervades the book and underlies its pessimistic conclusions. Either we stand up and fight English or Danish is doomed.

Jarvad's fear of the impact of English may have been strengthened by the results she obtained in an investigation of Danes' contact with English, attitudes to foreign languages, and attitudes to English loans. The questionnaire used (printed as an appendix) is a short version of the one used by Magnus Ljung when he charted the use of and attitude to English among Swedes (Ljung 1988). The 169 responses given by Jarvad are a small sample, but there is no reason to suspect that they are wildly unrepresentative. Here are some of the more interesting results:

Contact with English is very common. The language is of course used in conversation with native speakers of English, but it is used as

much with other foreigners. More than anything English is a lingua franca.

Isolationism finds no support among Danes. The answer to the question about whether it is important to know foreign languages, is a unanimous Yes. And 97 per cent point to English as the most important.

When it comes to loans from English, there is a high degree of permissiveness. Established direct loans (e.g. *sweater, weekend, carport*) are accepted by practically everybody. The use of some recent expressions (e.g. *you name it; take it or leave it*) finds some opposition, but the majority accept. A majority rejection is found in some cases where a direct loan from English competes with an existing word, e.g. *blame* (verb) for *bebrejde*, *coach* for *træner*. But the reaction is not consistent, thus *design* is vastly preferred to *formgivning*, *mountainbike* to *bjergcykel*. These results give an indication of the difficulties a puristic movement would face.

Is this acceptance of English influence a danger? No one can deny that Danish, like many other languages, is influenced by English, and some have misgivings about it, but few would go so far as to say that the importation of loanwords threatens the Danish language. Jarvad does (p. 135). But it is a mystery to me why. I find the argumentation on p. 136 almost impenetrable. It seems to hinge on identity between language, nation and state as a prerequisite for survival. I quote:

The frame around e.g. the Japanese language is the Japanese nation and its power to hold together the State of Japan and keep enemies out – it is the nation as a unity that makes it meaningful to talk about a Japanese language. That holds true for us, too.

The mind boggles. Does this mean that it is not meaningful to talk about a Kurdish language? I suspect that I may have missed some implied steps in the reasoning, but in any case, what is the connection between this and the provenance of the vocabulary?

Danish has a long history of borrowing, from Latin, Low German, High German, French. The story is told on pp. 15-17, and without a hint of tragedy, I am glad to report. The composition of the vocabulary is the accumulated result of changing cultural dominance, but it now reflects the cultural heritage that we take for granted and call Danish. Why should English loans be lethal? Returning to food, is the word *squash* (p. 154) a threat to the Danish

language? Is it less threatening if we call the vegetable *courgette* or *zucchini*?

The author is on much safer ground when she points to domain loss as a threat to the existence of a language. But even here I must take exception to the way that a far-fetched scenario is presented as a problem for today. The scenario is (p. 150) that Danish becomes the language of the private sphere, a language spoken at home, while English becomes the common language, not only for international use, but within Denmark in education, legislation, business and among the powerful. The risk, according to Jarvad, is that the Danish population becomes zero-lingual rather than bilingual, and that those who only know Danish are relegated to the bottom league.

I do not recognize my own snug, predominantly monolingual, country, now or in any reasonably foreseeable future. Certainly competition from one language may lead to problems for another, but the use of a second language in certain domains – if it comes to that – is not equal to the eradication of the first language. The extent of the problem depends on *how many* and *what* domains are given up. We need a realistic assessment of the likely developments.

It is not very revealing to note that Danish is not used in situations where there is no real choice – when one of the partners in a conversation does not understand Danish, or if you are trying to reach an audience some of whom do not read Danish. What was the alternative for those medical academics (p. 141) who wrote 82 per cent of their articles in English? Hardly Danish.

The crucial cases must be those where Danish is dropped in favour of another language among communicators who all understand Danish. Does this happen to any noticeable extent, except in the make-believe situation of foreign-language teaching? Much of the exemplification simply documents consequences of the fact that Danish is not an international language and is not often learned as a foreign language abroad. There is nothing new in this.

What is new, however, is the way that English dominance is linked to Danish membership of the European Union. The Union appears in the book as the supranational monster which threatens Danish and promotes English.

Now, the monster certainly has an internal language problem in its bureaucracy and in its political bodies; and the fate of the smaller European languages, whether inside or outside the Union, needs serious consideration. (A good starting-point is the collection of

articles in Coulmas 1991, e.g. one by Harald Haarmann on the national language doctrine. Haberland 1993, in German, focuses on the position of Danish.)

The identification of the Union with the English language, however, is bizarre and obscures the real issues. The status of English in the Union, as opposed to the world at large, is not impressive, and the future is far from settled. The prime language of the bureaucracy is French, but more interestingly: there are 100 million speakers of German, and German is in the process of reestablishing its role in Eastern Europe. That is, in a number of prospective member states of the Union. It may very well reassert itself as an important contact language for a country with the geographical location and traditional cultural orientation of Denmark.² In any case, we are talking about what may be the best bet as a second language for the Danes. A second language they must have. Bemoaning that Danish cannot be used for all purposes is like grumbling about the weather.

The reader may find that I have devoted too much space to this ideological aspect. But it does loom quite large in the book, which concludes with the scary scenario of Danish being pushed out by English among the elite.

The possibility that bilingualism may work is not considered at all, that it may be possible to retain links with the traditional roots of one's culture without retreating behind the blinkers of monolingualism. A knowledge of English – or any other second language – does not wipe out one's knowledge of Danish.

The fact that I do not share the author's *patrie en danger* vision should not, of course, deter anyone from reading the book. The factual description of what is happening to the language is excellent. The style makes for easy reading, and the illustrations are well-chosen, often humorous. The book ought to attract a wide readership.

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Notes

1. It is a minor irritant that the language spoken in the USA or Australia, unlike the language spoken in Britain, is not called English. On p. 56, for example, *engelsk* is said to borrow from *amerikansk*. This terminology is not an invention of Jarvad's, but why perpetuate the confusion? We would not, I hope, want to announce to the general public that people in Austria speak Austrian, and people in Belgium Belgian?
2. On p. 137 Jarvad speculates about Danish being given up in Southern Jutland as contact will increasingly take place more across the German border than with the rest of Denmark. Danish given up in favour of *English*, that is! I think it is about time that we began to recognize the actual and potential status of German in Europe.

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