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To Be Perfectly Frank | Lingua Danica or Lingua Franca?

ADMIN

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Those of you who are more-or-less regular readers of The Copenhagen Post cannot have failed to notice the burgeoning of exhortations to learn Danish that now festoon these hallowed pages. There have of course always been ads for Danish

lessons, but of late they have mushroomed to the extent that they now appear throughout the Post, often filling entire pages. There is clearly money in the business, reflecting a substantial rise in the numbers of foreigners coming to Denmark to work or study. One of these ads goes so far as to suggest that its method of teaching is so effective that the next time you read a newspaper it could be a Danish one. Remembering how long it took me to master the language sufficiently to be able to understand the Danish press, I'm not sure that isn't bordering on the misleading. In any case, it's downright cheeky: encouraging the readers of the paper you're advertising in to read something else instead!

On the face of it, of course, it's quite reasonable and understandable that services should be offered to help people learn the language of the country in which they live (albeit perhaps temporarily). All things being equal, that is. But the fact is that all things are not equal. According to Politiken newspaper, all 305,000 foreigners who came to Denmark in the last five years to study or work were met with information from their kommune written exclusively in Danish. Their tax return was in Danish, as was information on schools and kindergartens and on how to use the NemID system and the Borger.dk website – “your gateway to the public services”. Even the invitation to their first Danish language course was in Danish! So the (largely private) business community, which needs to attract foreign expertise, is stymied by a public service sector that doesn't see the need to communicate effectively by using a language that newcomers to the country can understand.

The excuse of course is the usual one: a lack of resources. It's used every time there's criticism that can't otherwise be rebutted with a good explanation. But I

firmly believe in the good old English proverb: ‘Where there’s a will there’s a way.’ The fact is there just isn’t the will, political or otherwise, to make things easier for non-Danish speakers in Denmark. Witness, for example, the lack of signage in anything but Danish. As Politiken also notes, even the sign to The Little Mermaid – perhaps the only place of interest in Denmark known to tourists – is only in Danish. That surely can’t be because of a lack of cash!

“What?” I hear you say. “No political will to welcome foreign students, workers and tourists? We hear nothing but that from the government and the Copenhagen authorities.” This is true, and a lot of money is no doubt thrown at this noble cause, but public proclamations of intent and what actually happens are notoriously fraught with contradiction. The fact is that for some, the integration mentality is so ingrained that any thought of using a foreign language is almost anathema. It is apparently unthinkable that people coming to live in this country for three years or so should not make an effort to learn the language and ‘integrate’.

There are of course always newcomers who will embrace an opportunity to learn more about the society they find themselves in. But equally there are those who expect they will be able to communicate adequately, if not in their own mother tongue, then in some major language – a lingua franca – which is usually English. For these people, struggling to master a minority language (and a difficult one at that) that will be of no use to them in the future is close to futile. It’s like being invited to join a club, only to find that you will not be considered a full member until you have undergone certain rituals à la Freemasons and been considered suitable.

If Denmark really wants foreigners to come here and enjoy its lille smørhul, then it needs to prove that it does by welcoming them wholeheartedly rather than giving them the impression that they are just something to exploit. ‘Them and us’ doesn’t work in the modern world, and certainly not in a western European democracy with (albeit qualified) membership of the EU.

More on this next time, and perhaps with just a hint of a silver lining ...