

Is English still a foreign language in Denmark? A question of collective linguistic identity

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Since the middle of the 19th century the Danish speech community has been characterized by a strong national language ideology. From this perspective, the idea of a shared Danish national identity is closely tied to the Danish language: Danish is seen as the natural language in Denmark, and Danes can be recognized by the language they speak, namely Danish. However, Denmark has always been a multilingual society, and this is also the case today. A minority of the population primarily or exclusively use languages other than Danish, and a large part of the population master one or more languages in addition to Danish. For the past 50 years, the most prominent of these other languages has been English. Today, English is so common in Denmark that it is relevant to ask whether English has in fact changed from being a lingua franca used only in certain domains to being a commonly accepted and perhaps even widely required second language in Denmark. In this article we discuss whether the identity of the Danish speech community has changed from the end of the 1990s until today. Has the Danish speech community, ideologically speaking, moved – or is it in the process of moving – away from a monolingual identity and towards a multilingual one in which English sits alongside Danish as an unofficial second language? We base our discussion on an analysis and synthesis of materials related to five areas: 1) Official language policy initiatives; 2) Public service media; 3) Pre-tertiary education; 4) Universities; 5) The business sector. Methodologically, we rely on critical readings of key texts within the five areas (primary sources as well as previous scholarly work), in some cases combined with quantitative studies of discursive practices.

KEYWORDS: language and national identity; sociolinguistic change; English in Denmark; language ideology; language policy