



**VALODAS
KONSULTĀCIJAS
TRADĪCIJAS UN
MŪSDIENU TENDENCES**

**LANGUAGE
CONSULTATIONS
TRADITIONS AND
CURRENT TRENDS**

**Valodas konsultācijas.
Tradīcijas un mūsdienu tendences**

**Language Consultations.
Traditions and Current Trends**



Latviešu valodas
aģentūra

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Language consultations of the Danish Language Council

Eva Skafte Jensen

Danish Language Council

The Danish Language Council (*Dansk Sprognævn*) (hereinafter – the Council) is a public institution affiliated with the Danish Ministry of Culture. This paper gives a presentation of the institution and its consulting activities. Apart from a brief introductory description of the origin of the Council, its tasks and the academic profile of its staff, the paper focuses on the consulting work of the Council. The Council provides different kinds of consulting. In addition to well-known consulting channels such as dictionaries, websites, and public appearances in the media, the Council offers one-on-one consulting to anyone from the public seeking consulting on (Danish) language. The paper gives a general account of the different kinds of consulting provided by the Council as well as illustrating examples.

1. The Danish Language Council

Denmark is predominantly a monolingual country with a population of approximately 5.9 million people. It is estimated that Danish is the native language of more than 90% of the population (Jørgensen 2003; Lützen 2005). There is no actual Danish language act making Danish the official language of the country, but there is a large body of legislative text on what language to use in different domains of society, de facto making Danish a required language in Denmark (Breivik 2015; Andersen & Mørch 2022; Holmen 2024).

The Council (*Dansk Sprognævn*) is a public institution affiliated with the Danish Ministry of Culture. It was established in 1955 inspired by similar institutions in Norway (*Norsk Språknemnd*, est. 1952, the predecessor of *Norsk Språkråd*) and Sweden (*Nämnden för svensk språkvård*, est. 1944, the predecessor of *Svenska Språkrådet*) (Skautrup 1956; Jacobsen 2005, 9). The Council is commissioned to concentrate on the Danish language.¹

According to the Law on the Danish Language Council (*Lov om Dansk Sprognævn*), the institution has three main tasks:

- to issue the dictionary of codified Danish orthography (*Retskrivningsordbogen*);
- to monitor language development and linguistic change;
- to provide language consulting.

¹ In 2014, an office on Danish Sign Language (DSL) was added to the Danish Language Council as a separate department. Specialists on DSL are employed to carry out the work in this department.

The three tasks interact with each other, and the day-to-day work often involves all of them in one way or another. The focus of this paper is the consulting aspects of the work. The other tasks are integrated in the account when relevant to the consulting aspects.

The Council is a research institution, and all work, including the consulting, is based on scholarly obtained knowledge and research; the qualifications of the research staff match those for the universities. Research results are disseminated through the same channels used by the research staff of the universities, i.e. linguistic conferences, journals, and publishing houses.

The Council employs approximately 15 full-time persons plus a continuous flow of students working part-time. Apart from the students, almost all of the staff has at least a Master's degree in a linguistic subject, i.e. a degree in Danish language, in general linguistics, in data-linguistics, in phonetics, or in another relevant linguistic field. The students' profile is similar to that of the permanent staff; they all study some aspects of linguistics.

2. Mass dissemination and collaborative projects

The consulting offered by the Council takes a variety of forms. *The Dictionary of Orthography (Retskrivningsordbogen)* is one such form – very traditional and mono-directional. First and foremost, the dictionary provides directions to correct spelling. Additionally, it gives directions to certain issues not strictly orthographical, such as punctuation and some morpho-syntactic matters (see Section 4 for examples). The dictionary has been the Council's responsibility since 1955. Over the years, the number of persons and institutions obliged to follow the directions of the dictionary has steadily increased (Jacobsen 2010). As of 2024, all public institutions in Denmark, including public education (which in Denmark amounts to almost the entire educational domain) and all public administration, must follow the directions described in the dictionary.

The dictionary still exists as a printed book, but most people consult the online version. It is accessible via a number of sites (e.g. dsn.dk, sproget.dk, ordbogen.com). For the year 2021, the dictionary received an estimated half a million hits daily (cf. Annual report 2021, 22–23). The most recent version of the dictionary was released in November 2024; it is available online as well as in print.

In collaboration with The Danish Society of Language and Literature (*Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab*), the Council operates a website called sproget.dk. This site gives access to a number of dictionaries (*Retskrivningsordbogen*, *Den Danske Ordbog*, and *Ordbog over det danske Sprog*) and to a vast number of advisory texts on grammar and language usage. Sproget.dk also contains features on topics such as dialects, swearwords, onomastics, and pronunciation,

and in addition, fun facts and small quizzes on language. The aim of the site is to be educational as well as enlightening and entertaining.

The journal called *Nyt fra Sprognævnet* (*News from the Language Council*), presently issued three times a year, contains features on current linguistic topics in addition to edited versions of some of the questions put to the Council that are considered of common interest. Features on current topics are often the result of independent research conducted by the staff of the Council, sometimes in collaboration with researchers outside the Council (predominantly researchers working at the universities). An example of this are the results of a study on spelling proficiency of the journalists of Danish newspapers (October 2023). An example of a published question concerns the inconsistent spelling of the related words *sex* ('sex' – spelled with -x) and *seksualitet* ('sexuality' – spelled with -ks-), and how this inconsistency came to be (May 2023).

The consulting services of the Council also take the form of involvement with external projects and institutions. The Council has a permanent seat on the Board of place names (*Stednavneudvalget*). Presently, a staff member is on part-time loan to the work on the next authorised Danish Bible translation. Several staff members were recently involved in a large project on language technology – all lemmas in the dictionary of orthography were given a unique identification number in order to facilitate the fast-growing industry of large language models, LLMs (*Nyt fra Sprognævnet*, October 2022; and web1, web2).

In addition to the aforementioned, anyone who wishes to ask about (Danish) language may do so by way of individual consulting. The next section is dedicated to this service.

3. Consulting one-on-one

From the very beginning in 1955, it has always been possible for anyone to contact the Council. In the first promulgation concerning the Council, it was explicitly stated that the Council should be 'at service to public institutions, the press and private citizens with information and with the answering of linguistic questions'² (Jacobsen 2005, 12).

Until 2005, inquirers could either write or telephone their inquiries. At that time, the system for directing inquiries was adjusted. Many questions are much faster dealt with on the telephone and with no less accuracy than in a written correspondence. Therefore, nowadays, all inquiries must initially be directed to the inquiry telephone (*Sporgetelefonen*). Written replies are given upon request; sometimes the issue of an inquiry is complex and benefits from a written account

² The translation of 'stå til tjeneste for offentlige institutioner, pressen og private med oplysninger og med besvarelse af sproglige spørgsmål'.

in reply; sometimes an inquirer is in need of the authority of the Council to convince someone else (perhaps a superior) that something is either right or wrong. Occasionally, the Council is consulted on linguistic issues with judicial implications; in these cases, the consultations are always confined to the issue strictly pertaining to the linguistic aspects.

The Council does not encourage one-on-one consulting via social media channels such as Facebook. The expectations for platforms like these are that replies are given swiftly – almost immediately – and the Council is not staffed to have someone on SoMe-call at all hours. Furthermore, the anticipation of speedy replies in SoMe is not in harmony with the expectation of the Council to never err in proficiency and accuracy.³

At intervals, the Council conducts surveys on the profile of the inquirers (Bojsen 1988; Kjærgaard, Mørch & Jensen 2007, 124–125; Andersen 2014; cf. also Jacobsen 2005, 144–145). The typical inquirer calling the inquiry telephone is a professional woman⁴ aged 30–60 asking questions in connection with her job. In many companies and organisations women are responsible for the communication internally and externally. This profile fits 60–70% of the inquirers; still, many different kinds of people call the inquiry telephone, most of them in some professional capacity, but some people call simply for the opportunity to talk about language.

All linguistic staff of the Council participate in the task of answering linguistic questions on the inquiry telephone. The telephone is open four days a week and is always staffed by teams of two people. The following table shows the numbers of inquiries in a six-year period (cf. Annual reports for 2022 and 2023). It should be noted that due to lockdown, the number of inquiries in 2020 and 2021 are anomalous.⁵ The level at approximately 5,000 inquiries per year is more representative.

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Count	5110	4617	6042	6531	4993	5144

³ It has been argued that consulting on SoMe-channels such as Facebook would ensure an outreach to young people, i.e. teenagers and young adults. However, the said groups use a multitude of platforms – Facebook is not one of them – and they constantly move on to new, different platforms.

⁴ Interestingly, when it was still possible to write to the Council, the majority of inquirers using this option were men (Kjærgaard, Mørch & Jensen 2007, 125).

⁵ Many people did not have a colleague at hand with whom to discuss linguistic questions. Furthermore, they had a better opportunity to seek consultation on matters for which they might not otherwise find uninterrupted time.

Once, there were more one-on-one questions per year,⁶ but since the internet became the preferred source of information, the number of inquiries put directly to the Council decreased.

Some inquiries are of particular interest in that they call for reflections on how to answer. Perhaps they represent a type of question that is new and therefore requires some investigative work; perhaps the question is not new, but in need of updating. These inquiries are logged in a database for internal use. This contributes to consistency in the replies.

The database also contains the collected body of all written replies from 1955 to 2005. Thus, it not only functions as a convenient tool for the present-day staff, it also functions as an archive of the consulting service for the first half a century of the Council's existence.

4. Typical questions

Most of the telephone enquiries are very specific, such as 'where do I put the comma in this sentence?'; 'should this word be written with a hyphen?'; 'does the word "chance" always have a positive meaning?'. Some questions are more general, e.g. 'why does language change?'; 'does the way we use language affect the way we perceive things or is it the other way around?'; 'is Danish a large or a small language?'.

All questions are logged and categorised in a spreadsheet. The breakdown of numbers into categories for 2023 is as follows: punctuation (26%), orthography (19%), syntax (17%), morphology (8%), vocabulary (8%), semantics (6%), referrals to other institutions (5%), miscellaneous (3%), etymology (2%), pragmatics (2%), linguistic variation (2%), phonetics (1%), layout (1%), cf. Annual report 2023, 22. Most of the categories on the list are self-explanatory, but a few of them deserve some elaboration.

There are more questions about punctuation than any other category. Most of the questions in the category of punctuation concern the placement of comma. In Danish, the placement of commas is based on grammatical principles, and, in particular, the rules concerning where to place the so-called 'start comma', i.e. a comma before a subordinate clause, present many problems. The Council has been campaigning for years for a set of rules allowing people to refrain from using start commas, but the majority of people writing in Danish insist on having them. It appears to have become a signal of prestige – if you master the start commas, you are considered a skilled person. From a sociolinguistic point of view, this is, in fact, very interesting, but in everyday life, it is just a troublesome complication.

⁶ For example, in 2005, there were 14,700 written and telephoned inquiries, cf. Annual report 2005, 11.

Sometimes it is difficult to ascertain into which category a question fits. This is relevant by the two categories of syntax and morphology. Some questions are purely syntactic, e.g. what kind of pronoun to use in reflexive constructions, or purely morphological, e.g. whether the preterit of *sværge* 'swear' follows the strong or the weak conjugation (the answer is both *svor* and *sværgede*). However, some questions in these categories (syntax and morphology) could be considered morpho-syntactic. A case in point is whether to add a *-t* to adverbs in certain functions, e.g. in functions of emphasis – *han var rigtig(t) bange* 'he was really afraid'.

Similarly, the categories of semantics, vocabulary and etymology more or less all concern different aspects of lexicon making it difficult to decide in which category a question should be logged. Someone asking about the polysemy of the word *epicenter* (the geological meaning versus the more recent meaning of 'somewhere central') and how this polysemy emerged would ask a question that could be placed in either or all of these three categories.

Over the years, the profile of the types of questions put to the inquiry telephone has slowly shifted. Once, it would not be uncommon to ask simple spelling questions on the telephone. With the advent of the online dictionary, these types of questions have decreased considerably. In a survey from 1984–1985 (Bojsen 1988), 40% of the questions concerned orthography (spelling, uppercase/lowercase letters, one or more words, hyphenating). In the 2023 counts reported above, the same category only represented 19% of the questions.

Reversely, in a survey from 1975 (Jacobsen 1976), only 5% of the questions concerned punctuation, whereas in the numbers reported above for 2023, this category was at the very top of the list of questions asked, amounting to 26%.

Some conversations take longer than others. The questions concerning the codified parts of language – spelling, punctuation, etc. – do not take long. People typically want to know what is correct (and perhaps why), and that is promptly dealt with. Conversations concerning general topics of more sociological, historical, or cultural nature, sometimes with political or ideological implications, take longer time. Popular topics for longer conversations are the mechanisms of linguistic change, rude language and profanities, the language of journalists and politicians, and many more. Two topics attracting much attention are 1) Anglicisms and the English influence on Danish in general, and 2) politically correct language, especially the so-called inclusive language concerning gender-neutral terms and terms for people with different kinds of mental and physical challenges.

The inquiry telephone is of mutual benefit to the public and the Council (Jacobsen 2005, 15). It provides a service to the public. At the same time, the inquiries provide valuable insights into linguistic problems and topics at many

different levels, and as an effect, it provides insight into the types of problems and topics where the public might be in need of consulting. The inquiries also provide an opportunity to adjust consulting (including the kind provided in dictionaries and on websites) in order for it to be more accurate, advisory, and in tune with contemporary Danish.

In addition, the inquiries give rise to linguistic studies and research. In the past few years, the debate on gender-neutral language has regained strength, and the Council is often asked about how to use gender-neutral pronouns, and gender-neutral terms for functions and jobs. This area has inspired many studies over the years (e.g. Jarvad 2014, 219–234; Kirchmeier 2021). Most recently, a survey conducted in 2023 by Rathje & Isen on the Danish language users' attitude towards different gendered and non-gendered terms for functions and jobs was published in the October 2024 issue of *Nyt fra Sprognett*.

Another example of linguistic research prompted by the inquiry telephone is a collection of studies on morpho-syntactic change slowly taking place in the course of the past few centuries, resulting in variation and ensuing confusion and problems in modern Danish (Jensen & Schack 2024). The exemplary question on adverbial *-t* mentioned above is one of these studies. This project was instigated by reviewing the most frequent morpho-syntactic questions directed at the inquiry telephone. In the case of adverbial *-t*, the study has resulted in adjustments to the directions on the matter in the latest issue of the dictionary of orthography published in the fall of 2024, thus emphasising the cyclic nature of consulting and linguistic research.

5. The Council and the public

Being 'at service to public institutions, the press and private citizens with information and with the answering of linguistic questions', as cited in Section 3, also takes the form of public appearances. The academic staff of the Council give interviews to the press and participate in podcasts and panels concerning language. The Council also appeared regularly in the radio program *Klog på Sprog* 'Wise to Language', a program aired on a weekly basis featuring linguistic perspectives on sociological or cultural topics. As part of the program, listeners were invited to ask linguistic questions.

Unlike some other countries' Language Councils (e.g. those in Iceland, The Faroe Islands, Norway, and Sweden), the Council is not authorised to prescribe anything beyond orthography and punctuation. Upon request, the Council suggests Danish alternatives to Anglicisms, and some of the suggestions succeed, e.g. *folkesundhedsvidenskab* 'people-health-science' for *public health*, some do not, e.g. *e-post* for *e-mail*. However, the success or failure of a given suggestion entirely depends on the acceptance by the Danish people. The Council cannot

demand that Danish alternatives are used instead of Anglicisms. Similarly, the Council can neither demand nor forbid the use of gender-neutral pronouns such as *hen* (a gender-neutral personal pronoun inspired by the *hen* used in Swedish and, to some extent, Norwegian) and singular *de* 'they', and it cannot demand that people, either privately or publicly, refrain from using gendered employment titles such as *bestyrelsesformand* 'chairman'. This is to the great disappointment and dismay of some people who would prefer the Council to be a language *police*, not a *council*.

Still, the Council has always promoted an attitude to language and language consulting that is based on principles of tolerance and pragmatics. The language is community property, and language users would do well in accepting this (Jacobsen 2005, 150–155). To fully embrace these principles on tolerance and pragmatics, knowledge of the usage and development of language is required. The task of the Council is to provide the necessary groundwork in order to make such knowledge accessible to the public.

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