**Language and Culture Show and Tell: Danish**

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**Transcript**

**Introduction**

In 2016, Oxford Dictionaries included the Danish word ‘hygge’ in their English dictionaries.

As Word of the Year in 2016, Oxford Dictionaries chose ‘post-truth’, but had ‘hygge’ on their shortlist. The same year Collins English Dictionary had also declared ‘hygge’ the runner-up as its word of the year, second only to ‘Brexit’. The Danish word made an odd contestant in competition with neologisms such as ‘alt-right’, ‘Brexiteer’, ‘Trumpism’ that otherwise marked 2016. The dictionaries’ testimonies to the inclusion of the word ‘hygge’ in English parlance came after multiple popular publications which had focused on the Danish concept, but perhaps the Danish word also filled a linguistic space to counter the political and societal instability of the time.

In the present day, examples of Danish words being accepted and introduced into the English language are few and far between. Language debates in Denmark currently focus on the opposite, on the fact that the English language is invading the linguistic landscape in Denmark and Danes are adopting more and more English in their everyday speech.

But if there had been dictionaries 1000-1200 years ago, we would have seen a different picture with words from across the North Sea entering the languages of the British Isles in force and with great impact.

When the Vikings from Denmark and Norway came to colonise, trade and sometimes settle in what is now England and Scotland, they brought with them not only goods and ways of living, but also their language (Old Norse). Many words from Old Norse entered Old English then and still remain in use today. Common words such as ‘egg’, ‘knife’, ‘window’, ‘cake’ and ‘husband’ stem from that time and still also have equivalent words in Danish: æg, kniv, vindue, kage, husbond.

**Prince George of Denmark**

We are now going to zoom in on a different period in the history of cultural and linguistic exchange between Denmark and England. In one of UCL’s many art collections and libraries – the UCL Art Museum, which is part of UCL Culture – we find this engraving of Prince George of Denmark from the early 18th century. Prince George was born in 1653 at Copenhagen Castle and died in Kensington, London in 1708. He was married to Queen Anne who reigned over England, Scotland and Ireland and who is remembered for the Union of England with Scotland in 1707. Prince George is buried next to his wife, the Queen, in Westminster Abbey where you can still see their memorial in the Lady Chapel.

We are going to look closer at what the linguistic situation in Denmark was like at the time of Prince George and Queen Anne. But before we do this, I am going to give you a little taster of what Danish looks and sounds like.

What you see here is a small description of the portrait of Prince George from the UCL Art Museum. I’ll read the sentences aloud to you, and after I have done this, you can pause the video and answer the questions on the worksheet.

* Her er et portræt.
* Det er en illustration af en mand.
* Portrættet har en oval form.
* Mandens navn er George, og han er aristokrat.
* George er også prins.
* Han kommer fra Danmark.
* Han er Dronning Annes husbond.
* Han har langt hår.
* Georges hår er en paryk.
* Portrættet kommer fra universitetets kunstmuseum.
* Portrættet er fra cirka 1700.

If you have paused the video, then welcome back.

The sentences here serve as examples of the similarities between Danish and English, and you probably found yourself being able to understand quite a bit – if not everything – by using your knowledge of English. But your ability to understand this text is also due to the fact that both English and Danish underwent a period of linguistic influence from French.

At the time of Prince George and Queen Anne, the language of the aristocracy and royal families in Denmark was French – and German. English had also been influenced by French language and culture. So, in both Danish and English, we find an abundance of loanwords from French which still exist in the two languages today.

We find French loanwords particularly in the domains of law, government and nobility – some examples are: *parlament, jury, baron, baronesse, prins, royal*.

We also find French words in the domain of military: *artilleri, kaptain, kompagni, sergent, ammunition.*

French words are not surprisingly also found in the domain of cooking: *bøf, grill, menu, restaurant, nougat*.

In the domain of culture there are words such as: *café, teater, skulptur, klarinet, litteratur, portræt.*

French words in the domain of fashion also entered the Danish language at this time. Some examples are: *satin, parfume, elastik, paraply.*

Finally, in the domain of architecture and urban planning, there are also many French words: *balkon, boulevard, butik, tunnel, park*.

The areas into which French loanwords were incorporated bear witness to the fact that French was the language used by the wealthy and dominating classes who could afford education and were dominant in political and cultural life. At the beginning of the 18th. century Danish was the language spoken by poor and un-educated people.

In aristocratic circles, the linguistic landscape in Denmark at the time of Prince George was complex and different languages were spoken in different settings.

In this poem written by Christian Wilster, a Danish poet and translator, we find a description of the status of the different languages spoken in high society. I’ll read it in Danish to you, and you can see my approximate translation below:

Hver Mand, som med Kløgt gik i Lærdom til Bund,

Latin paa Papiret kun malte,
Med Fruerne Fransk, og Tydsk med sin Hund,
Og Dansk med sin Tjener han talte.1

Every man, who with wit went to the bottom of knowledge

Painted only Latin on his paper

With the ladies French, and German with his dog

And Danish with his servant did he speak

So, the learned sections of society (the scholars in the Church and at the University of Copenhagen) conducted their research in Latin, French was the language of cultural sophistication, the native language of much of the aristocracy was German – many families were in fact German – and Danish was at the bottom of the language hierarchy.

The stanza is from a poem written in 1827, which is a homage to the Danish-Norwegian playwright Ludvig Holberg – who was a temporary of Prince George. Holberg – who is the Scandinavian equivalent of the French playwright Molière – wrote most of his plays in Danish, which was unusual at the time. The rest of the poem is about the change in the language in Denmark and the movement to give Danish a higher status.

At the time of Prince George things are beginning to shift and during the 18th century the linguistic landscape changes fundamentally with the emergence of a more powerful bourgeoisie. While the aristocracy spoke French and German, the bourgeois class chose Danish, and the local language became part of a nationalist movement which was to a large degree connected to questions of power. Holberg – the playwright – played a central role in the creation of a feeling of national identity in the circles of the bourgeoisie.

Here near the end of my talk, let’s go back to our Danish text and look at some of the words. The words marked in red here have French origin. While some of these words originate in Greek or Latin (like for example ‘aristokrat’ or ‘portræt’), they entered Danish via French. Other words have Old Norse origin – here marked in blue. The yellow words have entered Danish directly from Latin, and finally we have a word marked in green, which entered from German.

To conclude, languages do not develop in isolation, but sit on a grid of influences from other languages and cultures determined by periods of encounters and exchange. Political power plays an important role in this, but softer cultural currents also influence the way words are imported into a language. The reasons why Danish and English are close to each other are not only down to the fact that the Vikings brought their language with them when they came to the British Isles around the turn of the first millennium, or that Danish in the 20th and 21st centuries has adopted many English words. Latin, Greek, German, French as donor languages to both Danish and English play a significant role in the development of both languages as well; this makes Danish easier to access for English speakers than you might expect.

That all for me now. But before I let you go, I have included some useful resources, if you want to learn more about English words in Danish or about the Vikings’ conquest of England. If you are interested in learning more Danish, I have included a link to an online language course.

Finally, if you would like to see the engraving of Prince George featured in this session, or other works of art from the renowned UCL Art Museum, please visit their website, where you can make an appointment using the link in the video.

All there is left to say is thank you – or in Danish ‘tak’.

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