

Pizza Danish, Franglais and Policing Language

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The late Singaporean leader Lee Kuan Yew was always adamant that his countrymen speak proper English. It was his formal training, and somewhat idiosyncratic readings of culture and race that suggested as such. To be successful, Singapore had to retain Asian values while speaking in Received Pronunciation. With Lee's voice in the background, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong launched the Speak Good English Movement on April 29, 2000.

Such policing never worked when locals banded together and lapsed into the famous lingo of "Singlish", a language perforated with expressive "lahs" and a singsong defiance of formal authority. As with any instruction manual that comes from above, from a ministry, or from the executive, defiance assumes form in language.

Ministries of Language have their work cut out in terms of policing the language of their brief. The French continue to fight a losing war against the little invasions mounted by English, the inroads made by that insidious form Max Rat in 1959 termed "franglais". Being an affaire d'état, an otherwise organically, rebellious evolution is kept in cryogenic storage, only to thaw by state decree and a linguist's judgment. Such efforts are impressively manic as they are old - the Académie française's battle against the encroachments of Italian in 1635 still stand out.

A national crisis occasionally erupts on the subject, such as the cocky attempt in May 2013 of *Libération* to rile its readers with an entire front page in English. "Let's do it," went the banner headline. The subject, fittingly, was a new bill that would amend the 1994 Toubon law and allow some university courses in France to be taught in English. Hardly that stunning, unless it is an admission that the language policing isn't going too well.

The paper editorialised that their compatriots should give up the shield of pure language and embrace the reality of change. Stop, went a striking line, "behaving like the last representatives of a besieged Gaulish village."

Even more strikingly, the battle being waged is against the incursions of American English, rather than more neighbourly intrusions from across the Channel. As Andrew Gallix notes, "American expressions are often adopted with far more enthusiasm in France than across the Channel." [1] The enemy continues to lodge within.

Which brings us to the latest round of language scuffling, this time in Denmark.

The headline getting Alex Ahrendtsen of the Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party) made it to the *Washington Times* with his speculations on the subject of "pizza-Dansk" or "pizza-Danish".

The beef of his comments on the Danish broadcaster DR in August were immigrants in

pizzerias who use a profusion of terms, some of them non-Danish, to communicate. This might be more appropriately termed speckled Danish, but Ahrendtsen is somewhat humourless on this subject. "It's just because they can not figure out how to properly talk Danish."

The Dansk Folkeparti has more anxieties than a hypochondriac, but rattled the establishment sufficiently in recent elections to make a more enduring mark on Danish politics. On the issue of language, it is fighting the unwinnable war. For Ahrendtsen, language is not merely identity, but possession. Like other possessions, it can be prized away, squirreled away into dark and undermining pizzerias. "Without the Danish language we are no longer Danes." [2]

The Danish minister of culture, Bertel Haarder, has his eye on the subject, and rolling in the money to give teeth to the guard dogs of the Danish language. Being of the centre-right Venstre Party (yes, it is a political oxymoron), Haarder already made himself conspicuous in 2002 as Refugee, Immigration and Integration Minister. "Foreigners today represent a net burden on society. They cost more than they give back. This must be changed." [3]

For Haarder, in writing an enthusiastic defence of the Christian nationalist Søren Krarup in 2001, it was, and is inconceivable that young Muslims in Danish political parties could ever actually be Danish, however disposed they were. Far better to rely on the solid "people of southern Jutland, who invested themselves so much in defending the homeland of the Danes." (For many Danes, the Danish spoken in Jutland poses a formidable, anti-establishment challenge that would irritate any language Academy.)

The illusions thrown up around language can be touching. But they remain distinctly that. While some parliamentarians fear the ruthless ravishing being inflicted on the body of Danish by the pizza-Danes (or "New Danes), the language is undergoing its own transformation on the streets.

In Copenhagen's Amager, hashish pipe smoking takes place a few doors down from the traditional Café 5-øren pub, filled with rosy-cheeked regulars and their Tuborg or Carlsberg companions. The Danish differs in its colloquialisms, depending on whether you are taking the pipe with the Syrians, or knocking back a few Tuborg Classics with the locals. Contrary to popular wisdom, one can become less fluent, rather than more, after a heavy session of either. Grammarians would cry.

If it was just kept to the issue of coffee-table chat about language forms, it might be a more civil affair. But linguistic anxiety can also translate into patriotic insensibility. Denmark is becoming a foot soldier of reaction in the refugee debate. Even as refugees are streaming into Sweden, their seemingly inexorable flow is being stemmed in Denmark. Train lines are being closed. Dissuading statements are being issued. All the more reason to ease Danish out of the traditionalist's study.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/may/23/language-french-identity>

[2] <http://www.b.dk/nationalt/dansk-folkeparti-presser-paa-nu-maa-sprogets-vagthund-vise-taender>

[3] <https://migration.ucdavis.edu/mn/more.php?id=2561>

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