Community interpreting in Denmark: Training programmes and tests, or lack of the same

1. Introduction

The public sector in Denmark has required the assistance of interpreters since the 1970s, and every single day interpreters are used in legal, healthcare or social settings. However, Danish governments have always shown limited interest in interpreter training and certification, and instead of establishing interpreter training and certification programmes at a national level, the governments have continuously left it up to Danish institutions and local authorities to deal with the need for interpreting services at an institutional or local level. As a result, interpreting services are mainly provided via a register of interpreters approved for interpreting in the institutions within the Ministry of Justice and a number of interpreting agencies. Moreover, due to the lack of a certification programme, the majority of the interpreters provided have never properly documented their qualifications or passed an interpreting test. Also, the languages most in demand are Arabic, Farsi, Pashto, Somali, Turkish and Urdu, and there is no training programme in these languages which test interpreting and language skills. Consequently, the majority of community interpreters in Denmark have received limited or no interpreter training and/or language training, and they have never passed an exam in interpreting and/or languages. In other words, specific measures, such as training and certification, need to be implemented to achieve quality in community interpreting services.

2. The interpreting situation

Back in the 1970s, when interpreting started to be required frequently by Danish institutions and authorities, Danish-speaking foreigners were asked to act as interpreters for their non-Danish speaking relatives or friends. However, simultaneously with the increasing number of non-Danish speakers in Denmark came the awareness that the use of friends and relatives as interpreters caused psychological harm not only to users of interpreting but also to the interpreters themselves, especially when these were children. In addition, friends and relatives struggled with the interpreting role and were often unable to translate properly and maintain neutrality and confidentiality. Unfortunately, the problem was not solved by creating training programmes for interpreters, but by hiring those who had been interpreting for friends and relatives and instructing them to interpret for other people’s relatives and friends instead of their own. This was the situation until the mid-1990s (see 4 below).

For some reasons, Danish governments have always shown little interest in the issue of community interpreting. They seem to have more or less treated the need for interpreters as a problem that would “solve itself”, possibly labouring under the mistaken belief that the need
would diminish over the years because immigration would decline or all non-Danish speakers would have learnt to speak Danish. Over the years one or two politicians did take an interest in establishing interpreter training or certification programmes, but they were unable to acquire the support of their colleagues, and other political issues caught their attention instead.

Moreover, a major reason why the situation has not progressed since the 1970s is two prevalent myths: (1) An individual born in Denmark whose parents were born in a foreign country, or an individual born in a foreign country who came to Denmark as a child or an adult, who speaks Danish to an adequate degree, will be qualified to interpret between the language(s) of the foreign country and Danish. Similarly, an individual born in Denmark who has lived in a foreign country for a number of years will be qualified to interpret between the language(s) of the foreign country and Danish. (2) If you are bilingual, you are also a translator and/or interpreter.

Of course, the myths may be a result of political slackness, rather than the other way round. In any case, they are often presented as facts by users of interpreting, politicians and journalists, who are not easily persuaded otherwise.

3. Categories of Danish interpreters

Danish community interpreters\(^1\) are either state-authorized translators and interpreters (statsautoriserede translatører) or certified interpreters (statsprøvede tolke), or they hold an Academic Profession Degree in interpreting (akademitolke) or an MA or BA in languages, but not in interpreting, or they have limited or no training at all.

3.1 State-authorized Translators and Interpreters

There are three roads to authorization\(^2\):

(1) An MA LSP degree (cand.ling.merc.) in a foreign language which may only be obtained at Aarhus University or Copenhagen Business School\(^3\). Presently, the only languages offered are English, French, German and Spanish. Aarhus University offers all four languages, but only English is offered (and for a limited number of years) at Copenhagen Business School. Moreover, the intake of students is very low, especially in French and Spanish, ranging from 1 to 15.

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\(^1\) Sign-language interpreters are not included in this paper, as they constitute a separate and much respected profession in its own right. Training programmes for sign-language interpreting were established about 40 years ago and made available at two schools, one in Copenhagen and one in Aarhus. Traditionally, the three-year training programmes were not offered at university level and were not research-based programmes. However, in 2008, a BA programme in sign language interpreting was established at the two schools, replacing the earlier programmes.


(2) A translation and interpreting exam *(translatøreksamen)* in a foreign language. The exam takes place at Copenhagen Business School[^4], and in any language. However, preparing for this exam is very difficult without supportive training. Also, the total price for this exam amounts to a minimum of DKK 10,000.

(3) A degree from a foreign university which corresponds to (1) or (2) above.

Authorization is obtained by application to the Danish Business Authority *(Erhvervsstyrelsen)*[^5]. Applicants must declare that

- they are legally competent, not placed under guardianship and not in reconstruction or bankruptcy proceedings;
- they will perform the translation and interpreting tasks honourably and faithfully, with care and accuracy, and that they will faithfully fulfil their obligations as translators and interpreters; and that
- they give permission for the Danish Commerce and Companies Agency to acquire information from the police regarding whether the applicant has a criminal record or is listed in the central criminal register, or whether there is any other reason to withhold authorization.

Unfortunately, the number of state-authorized translators and interpreters is limited, especially in the languages mainly required by the public sector. Presently (January 2012), the Association of Danish Authorized Translators *(Translatørforeningen)*[^6] and Danish Authorized Translators and Interpreters *(Danske Translatører)*[^7] list the following number of members:

**Table 1: Number and languages of state-authorized translators and interpreters**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Association of Danish Authorized Translators</th>
<th>Danish Authorized Translators and Interpreters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch/Flemish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English/Swedish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finnish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French/Romanian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Icelandic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwegian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[^4]: http://www.cbs.dk/Videreuddannelse/Masteruddannelser/MBA-Uddannelser/Translatøreksamen
[^5]: http://www.erhvervsstyrelsen.dk/translatører_og_tolke
[^6]: http://translatorforeningen.dk/
[^7]: http://www.dtfb.dk/
Members of the two associations are mainly self-employed state-authorized translators and interpreters who work as freelance translators and/or interpreters, since those who are employed by others tend to have little interest in membership. Consequently, the total number of state-authorized translators and interpreters is higher than the 310 listed in table 1. However, it is presumably less than 500. Also, non-members are mainly state-authorized translators and interpreters in one of the major European languages. State-authorized translators and interpreters in other languages, such as Turkish and Arabic, are typically few in number and intent on working as freelance translators and interpreters (having gone to the trouble of passing the translation and interpreting exam mentioned above), which make membership of one of the associations advantageous.

As per the information on the websites of the two associations, only about 100 of the estimated 500 state-authorized translators and interpreters accept interpreting jobs. The majority of the 100 interpret for the police and the courts only.

3.2 Certified interpreters

Certified interpreters have successfully completed a two-year Open University programme in community interpreting, which was established in 1996 and closed again in 2002.

The programme amounted to a total of 60 ECTS. During the first year, students attended courses in interpreting and translation in healthcare and social settings, and, in their second year, they specialized in legal interpreting, healthcare interpreting or business interpreting. The languages offered were Arabic, Farsi, Serbo-Croatian and Turkish.

Based on a conversation with Nina Hamerick, who established the programme at Copenhagen Business School, it encountered a number of problems which led to its closing:

- Students had to pay a relatively large fee.
- Few applicants were able to meet the admission requirement which was an upper secondary school leaving exam (studentereksamen) in Danish, level A, and an equivalent level in the foreign language, or, failing that, a written and oral admission test in Danish.
- 12 students were required to form a language class.
Interpreters could not find work after completing the programme, because users of interpreting services did not respect their qualifications or did not want to pay for their services.

Also, the program was established only at Copenhagen Business School. Attempts to establish it at Aarhus University were unsuccessful, because an insufficient number of applicants failed to meet the admission requirement.

According to Nina Hamerick, about 141 students successfully completed the first year of the programme, and about 48 of them went on to complete the second year and become certified interpreters. However, of the 141, only about 40 still work as interpreters.

In 2006, attempts were made to revive the programme, but there were no applicants.

### 3.3 Interpreters with an Academy Profession Degree

Interpreters with an Academy Profession Degree have completed a one-year further education programme. The programme was established in the autumn of 2010 and according to the study guide it consists of six modules of 10 ECTS each. A module lasts approximately six weeks. The admission requirements are

1. an upper secondary school leaving exam (studentereksamen), a vocational secondary education (erhvervsuddannelse), a basic adult education (GUV) or any education corresponding to the one of the other three, and
2. an admission test in Danish and in the relevant foreign language

The six modules are made up of four obligatory modules, one special module and the final project. The four obligatory modules are: The interpreter’s role (interpreting ethics and techniques), social interpreting, healthcare interpreting and police and court interpreting. The special module may be conference interpreting, business interpreting, mental health interpreting or a second interpreting language.

Again, a number of problems are connected with this programme:

- Though it focused on important aspects, it promises much too much. Each module lists a number of specialized areas which cannot possibly be covered in six weeks. Also, anyone slightly familiar with conference interpreting knows that it takes more than a 6-week module to obtain the necessary qualifications.

- The study programme includes little practical interpreting training, but focuses on interpreting settings. Teachers are healthcare staff, social workers and lawyers rather than language or interpreting teachers.

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8 http://www.phmetropol.dk/Videreuddannelser/Akademiuuddannelser/Tolk
• Students’ language and interpreting skills are not tested properly.

• The qualifications of admission test assessors are dubious.

• Students have to pay a large fee. Presently, the price is DKK 42,500.

• Those who complete the programme have no guarantee of more work and/or better pay.

4. Interpreting services in legal settings

Since 1994, the office of the National Commissioner of the Danish Police (Rigspolitichefen) has kept an official list of translators and interpreters approved for carrying out interpreting and translation tasks within the jurisdiction of the Danish Ministry of Justice. The list is continuously updated (in theory, see below) and sent to the Ministry of Justice, all Danish courts, police districts and all other institutions under the Ministry.\(^9\)

The police stations are instructed to use only interpreters who are registered on the official list, unless they cannot find one in the required language.

For criminal and some civil cases\(^10\) (family and enforcement cases), the courts are also required to use interpreters who are registered on the official list. But some courts establish their own list of interpreters, some of whom may not be registered on the official list. Other courts consult interpreting agencies instead. Finding an interpreter in a required language who will be available at the designated time can take a lot of time and efforts, especially for some languages, and some courts prefer to outsource the task. Again, the interpreter provided may not necessarily be registered on the official list.

Interpreters who want to appear on the official list must apply in writing in Danish and sign a declaration promising confidentiality and impartiality. State-authorized translators and interpreters, certified interpreters and holders of a Danish MA or a BA in a foreign language are automatically added to the list following their application and signing of the declaration.\(^11\) Other applicants, and these are by far the majority of applicants, can also be added to the list if they are native speakers of the relevant foreign language and speak and write Danish.\(^12\) In reality this means that the applicant will be summoned to his or her local police station for an interview with a police officer who will assess the applicant’s personal appearance, understanding of interpreting and knowledge of Danish society. The police officer will also ask the applicant how many years the applicant has lived in Denmark and what the applicant has done to maintain the foreign language. Finally, the police officer is supposed to assess the applicant’s ability to speak Danish, though, as a

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10 Interpreters assisting in civil cases (excluding family and enforcement cases) are hired by the lawyers representing the parties to a case and not by a court.

11 Section 6 (1) of the Regulation no. 571 of 28 May 2008 (BEK nr 571 af 28/05/2008).

12 Section 6 (2) of the Regulation no. 571 of 28 May 2008 (BEK nr 571 af 28/05/2008).
rule, the police officer has no language or interpreting skills and no qualifications enabling him or her to assess someone else’s language skills, or interpreting skills for that matter. The applicant’s written Danish is not assessed in the interview, but presumably by studying his application and any ensuing correspondence.

However, the fact that most interpreters on the official list have not been asked to document their language and/or interpreting skills properly or take an interpreting test is only one of the problems connected with the list. Another, and also very significant problem, is the fact that the list is not kept by an independent authority, but by one the two parties in criminal proceedings, the prosecution service, which is an institution within the National Police. Moreover, only the institutions under the Ministry of Justice have access to the official list. In addition, though the office of the National Commissioner is supposed to update the list, there have been examples of interpreters appearing on the list years after their retirement or, in some cases, death. Finally, having the exclusive right to the official list, the office of the National Commissioner ultimately decides who may or may not appear on it. Thus, some interpreters have been removed from the official list either by mistake or because a judge, a lawyer or a police officer became dissatisfied with their services. Being the exclusive holder of the official list, the office of the National Commissioner is not obliged to inform interpreters of a decision to remove them, and therefore the interpreters in question received no notification of their removal or the reason for it, and, if they needed to, they were unable to defend themselves or present their point of view.

5. Interpreting services in healthcare settings

A structural reform took effect on 1 January 2007, which replaced 13 counties with 5 regions and consolidated 207 municipalities into 98 larger units. One of the primary tasks of the 5 regions is the administration of the Danish health service. Consequently, also in 2007, each region invited Danish interpreting agencies to tender for interpreting services to Danish hospitals. The objective of the tender was to secure a steady supply of interpreters at the lowest possible price, and the tender was won by all interpreting agencies who could meet that objective.

To my knowledge, the tender did not require interpreting agencies to document the skills and qualifications of their interpreters.

All hospitals received notification of which agencies in their region won the tender, and they were instructed to use interpreters from those agencies only. Some of the agencies have closed since 2007, but the rest is presumably still used by the hospitals as well as by general practitioners, health clinics, etc.

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13 I was added to the official list upon graduating from Aarhus University in 1994 and was removed again ten years later by mistake. I only learned of my removal when a judge at the local district court told me that my name was no longer on the list. I had to reapply to be added to the list again. An interpreter friend was removed, because he had a run-in with a prosecutor who wanted him to confirm that a translation made by another (untrained) interpreter was correct, though it was in fact incorrect. He learnt of his removal from another prosecutor, but had no possibility to object or defend himself.

14 Section 17 and 18 of Regulation no. 571 of 28 May 2008 (BEK nr 571 af 28/05/2008).

15 http://www.sum.dk/Indenrigs/Kommunalreformen.aspx

16 Personal communication with healthcare staff at Aarhus University Hospital, Skejby, Denmark.
6. Interpreting services in social settings

The rationale behind creating larger municipalities was to improve their ability to handle the increasing number of municipal tasks, such as environmental control, adult education, social service activities and employment activities.

The 98 municipalities have dealt with the interpreting issue by establishing their own interpreting agencies or by using interpreters from local interpreting agencies (like the hospitals, etc.). Again, to my knowledge, there has been never been a requirement that the agencies document their interpreters’ language and/or interpreting skills.

7. Interpreting Agencies

Most of the Danish interpreting agencies are owned or run by people who have no qualifications or skills in languages and/or translation and/or interpreting. Also, the agencies generally claim that they require their interpreters to document their translation and interpreting skills or pass an interpreting test. However, research projects\textsuperscript{17} and personal communication with interpreters have revealed that this is rarely the case. Moreover, though many agencies claim that they provide training, the reality seems to be that interpreters are only offered a couple of short courses, usually in interpreting ethics. Finally, the interpreters work freelance and are paid a relatively low fee per interpreting hour.

Also, because they have no real knowledge of the skills required for interpreting, having never been trained for it, some interpreters claim that they are qualified to interpret in a multitude of languages. Their claim is generally taken at face value by the agencies, and by Danish institutions and authorities. Being none the wiser, interpreting users generally trust the interpreters and believe that statements of qualifications and skills are true.

8. Conclusion

The majority of Danish community interpreters have limited or no training and have never been properly tested, and at the moment there are no definite plans train or test them. Moreover, politicians and authorities have limited understanding of the consequences of improper interpreting assistance and tend not to be interested in changing status quo; whereas interpreting users, lawyers, doctors, nurses, social workers, etc., many of whom have experienced the consequences at first hand have no power to improve the situation. Finally, it is extremely difficult to get funding for interpreting projects and therefore almost impossible to document properly what goes on every day in courts, hospitals, job centres, etc.

What is needed is (1) a national training programme for community interpreters, preferably at BA level, but at least one that focuses on language and interpreting skills, (2) a national certification

\textsuperscript{17} The lack of documentation was revealed in two studies carried out by B. Jacobsen in 2010. One was a survey of court interpreting in Denmark and the other was a pilot study of healthcare interpreting at Aarhus University Hospital, Skejby. The results of the two studies have not yet been published.
programme for translators and interpreters which list their skills and specialty areas (court interpreting, healthcare interpreting, etc.), (3) a national register of certified translators and interpreters, and (4) a requirement that public institutions and authorities use only certified interpreters.

The implementation of one of these measures alone will not improve the present situation. Adequate training programmes cannot be established for all languages, and a certification programme is needed, therefore, to provide users of interpreting services with information of interpreters’ qualifications. Furthermore, a national register of interpreters will enable the users to check levels of certification and specialty areas. Finally, if users of interpreting services are not required to use only certified interpreters, community interpreters will have little incentive to train or achieve certification. In other words, all four measures need to be implemented to secure qualified community interpreting services for non-Danish-speaking citizens.

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