

When words of wisdom are not wise

A study of accessibility in museum exhibition texts

ANNA KARINA KJELDEN & MATILDE NISBETH JENSEN

Abstract: *This article presents a study of the linguistic accessibility of Danish museum exhibition texts. The point of departure is the well-established paradigm shift in the international museum field proclaiming that today's museums should strive to give physical and intellectual access to all visitors regardless of their social, cultural and intellectual backgrounds. The study explores to what extent Danish museums provide broad linguistic accessibility in their exhibition texts through the analysis of 33 texts from ten Danish museums. The results show that in relation to some elements (e.g. text length, use of paragraphs and straightforward writing style), the museums write in an accessible manner. However, several other elements (e.g. excessive use of jargon, officialese and compounds and unnecessary use of passive voice) are of great detriment to the overall accessibility of these texts. The article concludes with a range of operative recommendations for museum professionals who wish to write accessible texts.*

Keywords: Museum, exhibition text, label, museum communication, accessibility, comprehensibility, readability, learning, visitor.

Museums today are for all. Historically, culturally and politically, this has become a cornerstone in the role museums play in society (Macdonald 1998, Galla 2013). As Bennett states, “members of all social groups should have equal practical as well as theoretical rights of access to museums” (Bennett 1995:9). However, despite this inclusive foundation, historically, critical voices have repeatedly disputed whether this broad accessibility is more of an ideological proclamation than

an actual practiced reality (Bennett 1995, Macdonald 1998). This is exemplified in Bourdieu & Darbel's (1969) critique of the modern art gallery, a critique later extended beyond art museums to all types of museums by Bennett (1995) and recently re-addressed by Burton & Scott: “There is overwhelming evidence, substantiated by research across the globe, that a limited sector of the population regularly choose to visit museums. Most visitors to museums are well-educated, affluent

92 and versed in deciphering the museum code” (2007:50).

Consequently, museum scholars and practitioners internationally have united around the notion of *inclusion* (Dodd & Sandell 2001), thus renewing the agenda of opening museums to a broader public (e.g. Weil 1999, Anderson 2004, Simon 2010, Galla 2013):

Essentially since the end of the 1980s we talk of a real ‘turn towards the public’ in museal action [...] the public has been extended to cover the whole of the population (ICOM 2009:72).

This agenda is rooted in the acknowledgement of the fundamental role museums play in society, which Macdonald (1998) articulates in relation to museums in general, and museum displays in particular, describing them as

sites in which we can see wider social, cultural and political battles played out. [...] agencies for defining scientific knowledge for the public, and for harnessing science and technology to tell culturally authoritative stories about race, nation, progress and modernity (Macdonald 1998:19).

As a result, museums today need to embrace all potential visitors, as claimed by e.g. ICOM (2009), because they hold a powerful key to both individual and societal learning and growth, to insight and power, and thus to the shaping of society (Macdonald 1998, Weil 1999, Sandell & Janes 2007, Black 2012).

MOTIVATION BEHIND THE STUDY: ACCESSIBILITY DISPLAYED

In line with this widely established agenda of inclusion in today’s international museum field, this study aspires to investigate whether museums are actually accessible to the diverse

range of individuals who are the public. We suggest that in order to investigate whether the individual museum succeeds in including everyone, we have to pay special attention to the communication platforms used in the museum, and explore whether they are accessible to the intended receivers (cf. Hooper-Greenhill 1994/1999). *Accessibility* can be defined and operationalised in many ways, such as practical and physical accessibility (Serrell 1996), intellectual accessibility (Henning 2011) and cultural accessibility (Hein 2011). Here, we focus on communicative accessibility, in particular the linguistic accessibility of the exhibition text. In recent years, the demand for accessible communication has led to the widespread introduction of social media, interactive and differentiated communication platforms in museums worldwide (Simon 2010). However, as demonstrated by Samis & Pau (2011), most visitors today still gravitate towards more traditional communication platforms, especially the exhibition text. Thus, we have chosen to examine the exhibition text, as this is a central example of the interface between the museum professionals and the public (Kanel & Tamir 1991), and thus where accessibility – or lack of it – will materialise.

Exhibition texts have been studied using e.g. stylistic, literary and narrative approaches (Misfeldt 2000, Uldall 2001, Bennicke 2011). While we acknowledge the importance of such approaches in relation to the reception of the texts, we argue that a crucial first step, regardless of the communicative choices made, is that the reader is able to linguistically decode the text. Accordingly, we explore whether exhibition texts can be said to be linguistically accessible for all; firstly, because the exhibition text is one of the most widely used forms of communication in museum exhibitions (Ravelli 2006), and secondly, because the

exhibition text arguably carries a particular demand for broad accessibility as it is a case of mass communication consequently intended for all types of visitors at once (Hooper-Greenhill 1994/1999). As such, exhibition texts provide a critical case (Neergaard 2010) for exploring whether today's museums succeed in being accessible to all.

THE EDUCATIONAL ROLE OF MUSEUMS

According to Hooper-Greenhill, "museums have been active in shaping knowledge over (at least) the last 600 years" (Hooper-Greenhill 1992:191), and today, their *raison d'être* remains this "educational purpose" (Hooper-Greenhill 2007:29). Especially from the beginning of the 18th century and onwards, European museums became crucial in the ongoing development of the democratic society and the continuous education of the individual (Larsen, Nørskov & Tegllhus 2008). Since the 1970s, this responsibility has been voiced with growing intensity within the international museum field e.g. when the American Association of Museums in 1991 declared that "education – in the broadest sense of the word – [is] at the heart of their public service role" (Weil 1999:234, AAM 2012).

However, *the public* is heterogeneous and diverse and embracing and engaging everyone, independent of their educational, social or cultural background, remains a widely discussed challenge in the international museum field (Simon 2010, Black 2012).

A COMMUNICATIONS-ORIENTED AGENDA

Striving to address and include diverse audiences is not a new phenomenon (cf. Bourdieu & Darbel 1969, Bennett 1995). It has been a key focus point in the museum

field, both among practitioners (e.g. Wallace Foundation 2009, Bloch Ravn 2013) and scholars (e.g. Dodd & Sandell 2001, Simon 2010, Black 2012) for some time: "The last century of self-examination – reinventing the museum – symbolises the general movement of dismantling the museum as an ivory tower of exclusivity and toward the construction of a more socially responsive cultural institution in service to the public" (Anderson 2004:1). This reinvention accelerated when e.g. Hooper-Greenhill (1992, 1994/1999), Falk & Dierking (1992, 2000) and Hein (1998) set a new communication-oriented agenda in the 1990s (Black 2012). The museum was opened to the surrounding society (Anderson 2004), the approach to learning became constructivist (Hein 1998) and contextual (Falk & Dierking 2000), and the principal motivation behind this paradigm shift (Anderson 2004) was a turn from focusing on collections, and inward-oriented, preserving activities, to focusing on visitors and exhibitions and outward-oriented activities. Thus, the visitor has today become the user, and the realisation that these users are active, distinct individuals with differentiated agendas and backgrounds has fostered a widespread recognition of an obligation to differentiate the way the museum communicates in order to reach, engage and cater for them all (Simon 2010, Drotner *et al.* 2011, Black 2012).

VISITORS WANT TO LEARN!

Studies of why people visit museums list *learning something* new as one of the most important motivational factors (Doering 2007, Black 2012). Thus, in order for museums to both meet this expectation and fulfil their educational role in society, they must make sure to give each individual visitor the opportunity

94 to learn. Several prominent scholars (e.g. Hein 1998, Falk & Dierking 2000) have pointed out that the premise for free-choice learning and participation (Simon 2010) in museums is to enable a balance between the visitors feeling comfortable and able on one hand, and being challenged and pushed slightly out of their comfort zone on the other (Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson 1994/1999). When transferred to the exhibition text, it means that the text has to both make the reader feel sure of his/her ability to read and understand it, but it also has to introduce something new and unknown to the reader. What needs to be known and familiar and what can be new and unfamiliar may, arguably, apply to both form and content. However, the reader risks feeling overly challenged if both form and content are unfamiliar and challenging, and the tools to familiarise oneself with them are not provided (Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson 1994/1999). In other words, if the text poses too many challenges, the reader's confidence risks being broken, ultimately resulting in no learning at all. The reader will leave the text feeling less able and self-doubting, a scenario that has repeatedly been problematised in relation to museums.

A BALANCE OF SKILLS AND CHALLENGES

Among scholars and practitioners in the museum field, there seems to be consensus that exhibition texts must be accessible. As early as 1939, Howard argues that "the simplest possible vocabulary must be used. The general public seems to be capable of considerable feats of intellect, provided it understands the words" (Howard in Miller 1990:88). Interestingly, studies of museum texts have concluded that this balance between skill and challenge is often not sufficiently taken into account. Miller

argues that visitors are offended by "fuzzy or pompous prose, slang, arcane terminology, complicated explanations, or unwarranted assumptions of knowledge" (Miller 1990:87). Along the same line, Alter & Alter (1988) state that if the reader is expected to understand too many unfamiliar words, the text might as well not be there (in Miller 1990). In 1996, Ravelli argues that "[o]ften [...] the texts produced by museums for their visitors are problematic" (367), one reason being the degree of accessibility. Evidence points to the production of museum text as a difficult feat:

It is because the museum has to bridge the gap between expert knowledge and public comprehension that label writing becomes so important and so difficult – important because it is the link between the curator and the public, and difficult because it means more than translating the results of modern research from the jargon in which it is often recorded into the language of the layman (Williams 1960:26).

Thus, exhibition text production is not an easy feat; weeding out jargon and replacing it with simple terms would not lead to successful museum communication. Instead, the production of exhibition texts is an intricate balancing act for the following reasons. On one hand, an elitist, inaccessible style must be avoided. On the other hand, the text, contrary to e.g. texts written for the lowest common denominator, such as medical texts (Askehave & Zethsen 2003), should indeed pose a challenge or the opportunity to learn something new. Therefore, when writing exhibition texts, the writer should write for what Serrell has called "the commonest common denominator" (Serrell 1996:95) in order to cater for the majority of museum guests (Dean 1994, Uldall 2001) while ensuring that they learn something new.

In the following, we investigate whether present day exhibition texts in ten Danish museums enable their readers to learn. We do this 1) by examining the linguistic accessibility of the texts, by analysing whether the texts are written in a way that ensures that most museum visitors will feel able and skilful when reading them, and 2) by discussing whether the texts succeed in providing a balance between being easy to read and presenting their readers with something new and/or challenging. Before we move on to our research design, we first present our definition of exhibition texts.

DEFINING EXHIBITION TEXTS

Museum exhibitions include a range of different types of texts, from labels, wall texts and catalogues to exhibition design, guided tours and audio guides. According to Ravelli (2006), the notion of text in relation to museums can be approached on at least two different levels: “Texts in museums” and “museums as texts” (Ravelli 2006:1). In this article, we focus on one particular type of text in museums: the written exhibition text (cf. Dean 1994, Ravelli 2006). As the museum literature uses various names for exhibition texts – such as “master labels”, “introductory labels”, “subject labels” and “explanatory labels” (Miller 1990:85) and “explanatory text”, (Ravelli 2006:2) – with slight divergences as to the meaning of these, we see a need to explicitly state our definition. For the purpose of this article, exhibition text is defined as the longer passages of text, traditionally placed on walls or posters either within the exhibition or in close proximity to it. These texts often introduce or outline the exhibition, the theme or approach behind it, or they unfold and explain central topics

and perspectives throughout the exhibition. We thus exclude labels, catalogues, brochures and website texts from our analysis.

The reason we focus on exhibition texts has to do with what Bennett has referred to as their inherent demand for being accessible to all (1995). The exhibition texts are, along with the objects, the layout and design and the exhibition title, the basic elements of most museum exhibitions (Ravelli 2006), and as such, the exhibition text is a basic element of communication that all users of the exhibition meet, regardless of their preferences and backgrounds, and it is still the preferred source of information for most museum visitors (Samis & Pau 2011).

Recently, a number of new communication elements have been introduced into museum exhibitions such as apps, audio guides and interactive tours (Simon 2010, Drotner *et al.* 2011). Combined with e.g. catalogues and guided tours, these new elements of communication are optional additions to the basic set-up in the exhibition; elements that the individual user can actively choose to supplement his/her museum experience with, and thus, to some extent, tailor a communication mix that suits his/her level of interest (Simon 2010, Black 2012). However, because the exhibition text still remains one of the most widely used communication platforms in museum exhibitions, it seems obvious that contrary to all the new communication elements that enable differentiation of the communication in order to reach diverse audiences separately, the exhibition text must do just the opposite. It must reach and function for all the different types of users simultaneously and be accessible to every single person entering the exhibition, no matter what educational, social or cultural background he or she may bring.

96 **CHALLENGES RELATED TO THE
CONTEXTUAL SETTING OF EXHIBITION
TEXTS**

The exhibition text is a unique type of text, because the contextual setting for reading it provides a number of obstacles:

An exhibition text has to put up with more competition than most other written material. It has to compete for people's attention with all the other material and tends to be the last thing to catch their eye when they stand in front of the exhibits. They have to read the text *standing* [...] and it is impossible to vary the reading angle as with a book or newspaper. We are up against great odds, and the only way to overcome these obstacles is to make the text *easy to read* (Ekarv 1994/1999:201).

Furthermore, the reading situation is unique as the text is read in a possibly noisy (Carter 1994/1999), poorly lit (Gilmore & Sabine 1994/1999) environment. Even though readers might reread some parts of the text, they will not spend much time rereading the entire text to understand it (Ravelli 1996), especially because most people visit museums in groups, and thus, the texts are read while interacting with others (McManus 1989). Therefore, the text may never be read as a whole. Because of space limitations and considerations for exhibition design and aesthetics, the texts are also often condensed and fitted into pre-defined spaces, which might also affect accessibility.

**CHALLENGES RELATED TO THE
PRODUCTION OF EXHIBITION TEXTS**

The exhibition text is, however, not only a complex text genre because of the reading situation; the complexity is also linked to the fact that it is mass communicated to a

heterogeneous audience, and it must convey information across a knowledge asymmetry between the expert text producer, typically the curator, and the lay receiver. The latter can be problematic as experts and lay people use different languages, and experts are often unaware of what poses problems for lay people, and therefore, might overestimate the knowledge of their receivers (Hinds 1999). This might also be at play in the museum context: "some of the writers, particularly the scientists, are rather loathe to let go of the highly written style with which they are familiar from their academic training" (Ravelli 1996:382), which could be a symptom of a more or less intentional desire to maintain their powerful, knowledge position. This inherent power to either include or exclude has been linked to the museum institution for a long time (Bourdieu & Darbel 1969).

**RESEARCH DESIGN: ANALYSING
ACCESSIBILITY**

Many factors must be taken into consideration to ensure the accessibility of the exhibition text, such as legibility (font size), how the text is related to the exhibition objects, how the text interacts with the exhibition design and how the text presents itself as genre (e.g. Ekarv 1994/1999, Bennicke 2011); but in this article, we focus on the accessibility of the language of the exhibition text. In the following, we present a literature review of previous approaches to linguistic accessibility in the museum context.

Various methods for the analysis of linguistic accessibility exist, and these are usually divided into three main categories: 1) numerical or formula-based, 2) outcomes-focused and 3) elements-focused methods (Schriver, Cheek & Mercer 2010). For our analysis, we use the third category for the following reasons:

The first category mainly covers numerical readability formulas such as the Fry readability formulas used by Carter (1994/1999). In the Scandinavian context, the most used formula is LIX. These formulas count sentence and word length, which means adopting the approach that accessibility is only connected to these parameters, which are not the only, and maybe not even the best, predictors of text accessibility. In the museum context, these quantitative approaches have been discredited by Carter (1994/1999) and Ravelli (1996), who argue that they are simplistic and often inaccurate.

The second category, outcomes-focused methods, includes user-testing of the text, for example by use of focus groups or interviews. This type of approach has previously been used in the museum context (McManus 1989, Kanel & Tamir 1991); however, conducting such tests can be difficult due to financial and temporal constraints, especially for small museums. The third category, the elements-focused method, includes the use of checklists or elements assumed to influence linguistic accessibility such as the avoidance of expert jargon, passive voice etc. They are aimed at giving writers advice on linguistic, stylistic or graphic features of texts. Accordingly, we find the elements-focused method most suitable for our purpose for the following reasons: Firstly, it is possible to make a detailed analysis of which specific elements of the text affect accessibility. Secondly, this method includes linguistic elements assumed to make a text more or less accessible, which in turn makes it a valuable and relevant tool for the optimisation of accessibility for future producers of exhibition texts.

We have two main goals in producing our analytical framework: we aspire to produce a framework that 1) incorporates research and

recommendations on the main elements of accessibility in exhibition texts, and 2) can be used by future exhibition text producers. We acknowledge that most text producers in the museum have other main skills than linguistic competence, and we want to avoid the criticism put forward by Serrell (2008) in her review of Ravelli's book, that "I am afraid, however, that the difficulties in understanding all parts of the book may keep it from being a well-used resource in practical situations" (118).

In the following, we present a literature review of elements said to influence museum text accessibility, which simultaneously forms the basis for our analytical framework.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Fig. 1 shows our framework, which is based on previous research on museum exhibition texts and recommendations for museum text production. The framework includes accessibility elements on *word*, *sentence* and *text levels*, and we aspire to create a framework that includes the *most important elements* to avoid a framework consisting of hundreds of elements of accessibility. The selection of the most important elements is based on consensus in the literature, i.e. elements most extensively cited to be relevant for accessibility in the linguistic literature (e.g. Nisbeth Jensen 2013), and in the museum literature (see below). By focusing on the most widely accepted elements rather than including every single element mentioned, museum professionals are hopefully able to use the framework to guide their future text production.

Text level

Exhibition texts should not be too long; however, there is no quantitative way to establish the exact appropriate length. To aid reading, texts

Linguistic elements	Source
Text level	
- Avoid long texts	Dean (1994), Williams (1960), Serrell (1996)
- Use paragraphs	Ekarv (1999), Serrell (1996), Williams (1960)
- Avoid hyphenation	Ekarv (1999), Serrell (1996)
- Texts must be cohesive	AAM (2012), Ravelli (1996)
- Offer differentiated entries	Simon (2010)
Sentence level	
- Use short and simple sentences	Dean (1994), Ekarv (1999), Ravelli (2006)
- Use active voice / use “we”	Dean (1994), Ekarv (1999), Simon (2010)
- Avoid nominalisation	Ravelli (1996, 2006)
Word level	
- Avoid jargon / use simple words	Dean (1994), Ekarv (1999), Howard (1939, in Miller 1990), McManus (1989), Serrell (1996), AAM (2012), Williams (1960)
- Use explanations of jargon	Ekarv (1999), Ravelli (1996)

Fig. 1. Review of existing literature on accessibility in museum exhibition texts.

should be divided into independent paragraphs with one main idea per paragraph. When dividing the text into lines, the division of words into syllables should be avoided. Finally, the text should be cohesive, i.e. it should be meaningfully structured with a clear logical progression of ideas, and clear references back and forth in the text. Cohesion also relates to consistent word use; thus, synonymy should be avoided if there is any chance that the reader will not know that the text speaks of the same thing. Finally, texts should preferably offer and indicate differentiated entries for various levels of accessibility, e.g. different languages, different perspectives on the subject or different competence levels.

Sentence level

Sentences should be kept relatively short, and simple clauses without excessive subordination are preferable. The word order should be straightforward and sentences must not start with new or unfamiliar information. Generally, active voice is preferred to passive voice, so it

is clear who the actor is. Especially the use of pronouns such as “we” can make the text active, identify an actor and indicate a subjective interpretation, which further welcomes the reader’s own interpretation, all supporting the overall accessibility of the text.

Word level

On word level, it is repeatedly stated that jargon should be avoided, and that simple words should be used instead. *Jargon* is not really explained in the museum literature, but we assume that this covers technical terminology related to museums, art, history, archaeology etc. (cf. the Merriam-Webster 2015 dictionary definition of jargon as: “the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group”). However, a total rejection of museum jargon would clash with the educational role of the museum; therefore, exhibition texts should unquestionably contain jargon, but understanding must not be presupposed. Instead, all jargon should be explained. Furthermore, in line with the

concept of *balance*, excessive jargon should be avoided; the text should not attempt to teach the reader several new terms at the same time.

CASE MUSEUMS AND TEXT SAMPLE

In the following, we will present our dataset and then our results. Before we do so, in line with Serrell (2008:117), who argues that “when a museum chooses to adopt a visitor-friendly voice (e.g., informal, nonauthoritarian texts) it need not abandon its integrity and status”, we want to stress that producing a text which is linguistically simple is not the same as *oversimplifying* a message, and it can be done without any distortion. Furthermore, the described elements should not be seen as definitive rules of accessibility: a text with a few instances of passive voice and one long sentence is not necessarily in-accessible; the problem arises if the text contains numerous elements which hamper accessibility.

We chose to study Danish museum’s exhibition texts for two reasons. Firstly, to our knowledge, the linguistic accessibility of Danish exhibition texts has not previously been studied. Secondly, studies have concluded (e.g. Nisbeth Jensen 2013) that Danish, along with the other Scandinavian languages have distinctive problems in relation to accessibility, specifically the use of compounds, which make words become very long, and thus challenge the accessibility of the texts further.

The museums and texts have been sampled using two main criteria: 1) we wanted to ensure geographical coverage, and 2) we wanted to include texts from both cultural history museums and art museums in order to analyse possible category-related patterns. Furthermore, we wanted to ensure a random selection in order to avoid any researcher

bias. The data collection ran August-October 2014, using controlled snowball sampling (Neergaard 2010). We asked our network, and subsequently their networks, to photograph 5–10 exhibition texts the next time they visited a museum. The only instruction they received was to photograph the longer passages of texts that they noticed and send the photographs to us. We had to supplement the sample with some museums and texts that we collected ourselves, in order to get a satisfactory number of texts from both museum categories. In these instances, we did not read the texts prior to photographing them, again to ensure that the sample was as random as possible.

From each museum, we selected two to five examples of texts depending on their length, thus ensuring a balance between the ten museums and the amount of text they represent in the collective sample. The sample includes 33 exhibition texts from 10 museums collectively, 12 texts from four different art museums (AMs), and 21 texts from six different cultural history museums (CHMs).

RESULTS

Text level

The results related to the text level show a clear improvement in text length and the use of paragraphs in comparison to earlier studies (see fig. 2). This mainly relates to the cultural history museums, whereas three of the four art museums write exceptionally long texts (300–800+ words; cf. Uldall 2001). However, there are still problems on text level, especially related to hyphenation, cohesion and differentiated entries.

Sentence level

As seen in fig. 3, on sentence level, we see a general improvement compared to the existing

Linguistic element - Text level	Results	Examples from data
Text length	Only 3 museums (all AMs) write very long texts:	3 museums (AMs): texts of 300-800+ words 7 museums (6 CHMs +1 AM): texts of 50-300 words
Paragraphs	7 museums use good paragraphs 3 museums have problems:	2 museums use paragraphs that are too long 1 museum does not use any paragraphs in one text, in another, they use too many paragraphs
Hyphenation	9 museums use hyphenation	
Cohesion	6 out of these 9 part the word incorrectly or inappropriately: 3 museums write texts without any cohesion problems	den-drokronologi, de-res, fotogra-fiapparat, hi-stories, mi-niature, ska-belsesberetning, so-ciale, tan-kegods, udstillin-gen
	6 museums have problems with cohesion: 2 have extensive problems:	Primary problems: - Use of different words for the same thing (synonymy) Secondary problems: - References back and forth across several paragraphs - Shifts in tense (e.g. from present tense to past tense) - Jumpy style of writing (e.g. from colloquial language to complex written language)
Differentiated entries	All 10 museums offer differentiated entries related to language: None of the museums have differentiated entries in relation to linguistic accessibility	9 museums offer English translations 1 museum offers both English and German translations

Fig. 2. Presentation of results on text level; column 1: linguistic element, column 2: overall results, column 3: results explained examples (black font) from data (grey font).

knowledge in relation to sentence length and simplicity of sentences. We also find further signs of a difference between the art museums and the cultural history museums, here regarding the use of voice. Finally, we find general problems with nominalisation.

Word level

Our study shows extensive and differentiated

problems with word level accessibility (see fig. 4). Word level is both where we find the greatest problems, where differences between the museum categories manifest themselves most vividly, and where we find that our study can offer a new and more nuanced approach to writing exhibition texts. Through our analysis, we have discovered that the recommendation *use simple words* in the framework, is much

Linguistic element	Results	Examples from data
- Sentence level		
Short and simple sentences	7 museums use short and simple sentences:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "En fod, billede af guden eller et æble. Etruskerne ofrede forskellige gaver til guderne" - "Hvorfor ser fx et fængsel ud, som det gør? Eller et hospital?"
	3 museums use long, complex sentences:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Kvindeviden om fødsel og barsel, sundhed og sygdom eller lindring og ekstase gennem urter og afkog, som var opbygget gennem årtusinder, kom til kort overfor de naturvidenskabelige principper, som søgte årsags-virkning forklaringer" - "Indfiltret i et fælles rodnet er alle personer forbundet med hinanden, til de fælles stamtræer og dermed til fælles rødder – helt tilbage til kampen i Teutoburgerskoven, Hermanns-slaget, i hvilket den tyske hærfører Arminius (senere kaldet Hermann) i år 9 e.Kr. slog den romerske hær"
Active voice / "we"	6 museums demonstrate good use of active voice, and 3 even use "we"/"us":	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Vi ved det ikke" - "Gaverne giver os nogle gange en idé om, hvad bønnen handlede om" - "Det kalder vi en kronologisk fremstilling" - "noget vi kalder kunst"
	AMs use "we" markedly more than CHMs	
	All museums use passive voice, 7 use problematic passive voice, 2 of them excessively:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Med Frants Henningsens levende og realistiske tegninger sættes fokus på..." - "Urnerne hensættes i kanten af ældre høje" - "Ligestillingen fulgtes af, at kvinder tilpassede sig det mandlige look"
Nominalisation	All museums use nominalisations	
	5 have excessive use:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Titlen skaber umiddelbart <i>forventning</i> om en traditionel retrospektiv <i>præsentation</i> af en kunstnerisk <i>produktion</i>" - "Amuletter besad kraft og <i>virkning</i>, som kunne bæres til <i>forebyggelse</i> og <i>helbredelse</i>"
	Especially problematic when the nominalisation is also jargon or a difficult word:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Derefter forskydes fokus i retning af <i>forvrængning</i> eller <i>psykologisering</i> som det centrale <i>mellemværende</i>" - "den historiske <i>indfældning</i>"

Fig. 3. Presentation of results on sentence level.

102 more complex than it presents itself, as “un-simple” words cover a range of different types of words. Subsequently, on the basis of our study, we are able to develop and qualify the recommendation *use simple words*. Therefore, we give this part of the analysis particular attention and provide examples, arguments and advice related to word level problems in the following discussion of the results. But first, we look at the overall results related to jargon.

JARGON IS NOT JUST JARGON...

As the *above* presented results on jargon suggest, jargon is a much more complex linguistic element than the original framework implies. Undeniably, exhibition texts should contain jargon. This is a way for the museum to live up to the educational role, e.g. introducing a word like “kunstinstallation” [art installation] to visitors who are not familiar with this concept. However, as we will demonstrate below, some

types of jargon are easier to understand than other types, and an overload of jargon will make the text inaccessible. A good rule of thumb is to limit the jargon to only one piece per paragraph. This way, the reader will find the rest of the text easy to read, thus allowing him/her to take on the challenge of understanding the unknown word (cf. *balance*). Another way of using a piece of jargon in a positive way is to explain it. If the explanation comes first, followed by the piece of unfamiliar jargon, as is the case in the first example in fig. 4, the reader will be helped as much as possible.

In our sample texts, we see a large amount of unnecessary jargon. Some is needlessly abstract: for example “skærende redskaber” [cutting instruments] is rather unspecific and also a complex concept, while “knive og sværd” [knives and swords] would give the reader a much more precise idea. Some words are difficult because they are Latin/Greek-based (anakronisme [anachronism], kronologi [chronology] etc.), and we see a

Linguistic element – Word level	Results	Examples from data
Jargon	<p>All museums use jargon:</p> <p>All museums use unnecessary jargon</p> <p>6 use a large amount of jargon</p> <p>4 use an acceptable amount of jargon</p> <p>Of these, 2 also use explanations of jargon</p>	<p>abstrakte, afgravning, amuletter, arkæologi, barok, barselsfonde, bebyggelse, befalingsmændene, bosættelser, brikvæv, bronzestøbning, brud, brænding, brøndkasse, commandoraid, cromagnontype, dateringer, dendrokronologi, disharmoni, efterkrigskunst, enevældens, etruskerne, f.v.t., figurige, fortolkning, fortællekunst, franker, fund, gother, gravskikken, grubehus, guldalderen, hedenske, hekseri, helgendyrkelse, helligdomme, homo, hovedværkerne, hånden, ildstål, illustrationer, indigo, installation, interiører, jernalderen, kalksten, kejsertid, kiler, kipervævning, klæberstenskar, koder, kompositioner, kore, kouros, kronologisk fremstilling, kultursyn, kunstakademiet, kunstform, kunsthistorie, kunstinstitutioner, kunstnerisk praksis, kunstnerisk skole, kurator, kvindeoprør, kyse, lerflakoner, ligestilling, makrofossiler, marmorrelief, motiver, mumiebind, national idealisme, neandertalerne, oldtiden, performancekunstnere, planteekstrakt, pollenanalyse, portræt, reformationen, renaissance, retrospektiv, rundvævet, rytterstatue, scenografi, selvbiografisk, skildringer, skærver, tekstilfund, tempelskulpturerne, tomten, trenden, udgravet, uvundet, velbevaret</p>

Several categories of jargon are used in the texts	- Elitist or Latin-based jargon:	anakronisme, barokagtig, biennaler, darwinistisk, en miniature, formreducerende, Genesis, genremaleri, installationskunst, kuratorisk greb, monumentale, naturalisme, nationalliberalisme, realisme, retrospektiv, sakrofagrelief, urbane, værktøjspraksis, wunderkamre
	- Self-explanatory jargon (Danish-based):	bronzealder, efterkrigs-kunst, hornkam, klædedragt, kvindedragt, naturvidenskab, rytterstatue, spiralringe, tekstilfund, udgravning, vikingetiden
	- Proper noun jargon:	Akropolis, Capua, Cezanne, Elmgreen & Dragset, Etrurien, Frants Henningsen, Giacometti, Goya, J. C Dahl, Kierkegaard, Korinth, Lene V. Hau, Léon Bonnat, Louise Bougeois, Naxos, Neapolis, Newfoundland, Normandiet, P. S. Krøyer, Partherne, Picasso, Plinius den Ældre, Praestene, Rhinlandet, Schlemmer, Shilpa Gupta, Velázquez
	- Unnecessarily abstract jargon:	billedrammen, brænding, de store fortællingers sammenbrud, hovedværkerne, interiører, kunstform, kunstinstitutioner, kunstneriske positioner, kvindedragt, kvindemodeller, moderskab, motiver, oplag, skildringer, skærende redskaber, smedning, statuariske, tematisk kronologi, tematiske tråde, vegetation
	- Explained jargon:	"den nøgne yngling (kouros) og den fornemt klædte unge kvinde (kore)" "enkelte ord har fundet vej til andre sprog, for eksempel ordet Phersu, som på latin blev til persona (betyder maske) og på dansk til person"
	AMs use more Latin-based jargon (less accessible):	"I lyset af dette fremstår det <i>kronologiske greb</i> som en <i>anakronisme</i> " "som en af syv dage i <i>Genesis</i> " "har de <i>kuratoriske greb</i> været baseret på..."
	CHMs use more Danish-based jargon (more accessible):	"I løbet af <i>bronzealderen</i> ændres <i>gravskikken</i> fra <i>skeletbegravelser</i> i store kister til <i>ligbrænding</i> "
Simple words	All 10 museums use unnecessary, complex words that make the texts less accessible:	These words can be divided into two main categories: Officialese and compounds We elaborate on this below (<i>tables 5 & 6</i>)

Fig. 4. Presentation of results on word level.

tendency to use these more often in the texts from the art museums than the cultural history museums. Some jargon is so deeply rooted in the respective academic tradition that most visitors will not be able to understand it ("store fortællingers sammenbrud" [the collapse of the

great stories], "tematisk kronologi" [thematic chronology]). Finally, we found proper noun jargon where it is presupposed that the reader knows certain individuals (typically artists or historic figures) or places. Here, we recommend always explaining who these people and places

104 are, because this will never offend those who already know, but it will help those who do not. One text mentions Kierkegaard and J.C. Dahl. A description in front of each of these individuals could easily be added (“the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard” etc.).

WHEN WISE WORDS ARE NOT WISE

As seen above, we find excessive accessibility problems on word level. But looking into the different types of difficult words in these texts, we find a need to differentiate further what difficult words may be, other than jargon. This stems from the discovery of an extensive use of two other types of difficult words than jargon; words that challenge the reader of these texts even further and perhaps more needlessly. Therefore, we argue that the framework we developed from the existing literature is not fine-masked enough to encompass these nuances, as, firstly, we have discovered excessive use of what we term *officialese*, and secondly, we see a widespread use of compounds. Both are likely to be of detriment to accessibility.

OFFICIALESE – THE ELITIST TONGUE

While jargon relates to a specialised area of expertise, *officialese* has to do with the use of formal, bureaucratic, old-fashioned expressions or foreign-sounding expressions. Such expressions have been said to make a text less accessible (Jensen 2007) as they hamper comprehension if they are not understood by the receiver. These words are often rooted in the tradition of bureaucratic or academic writing, and they give a text “an aura of rigid and pompous language, and they are often longer than the corresponding normal expressions” (Jensen 2007:47; our translation).

We found a large amount of *officialese* (see

fig. 5). Generally, *officialese* is unnecessary because these words are not linked to the knowledge or the disciplinary area of the museums, as is the case with jargon. However, sometimes, it creates a certain atmosphere, e.g. setting a historic tone: “kostbar” [precious], “vor tid” [our time, old-fashioned “our”] or setting a literary tone “skaberværk” [creation], “fortvivelse” [despair]. These examples do not always threaten accessibility. For example, when rooted in the Danish language, they are often self-explanatory. But other types of *officialese* found in our study are both unnecessary and complicate the text to such an extent that it becomes less accessible.

COMPOUNDS – BREAK THEM UP

We also found an extensive use of compounds in the sample texts (see fig. 6). This category was not found in our literature review and was thus not represented in the analytical framework; no doubt because they are unique to the Danish language (and other Scandinavian languages) as according to Danish spelling rules, compounds must be represented orthographically as one word. It has been recommended that compounds be split up using several words (Jensen 2007). The use of compounds first and foremost makes a text visually difficult to read, and this is often worsened in the exhibition texts, as the long words are then subsequently divided across lines (cf. *hyphenation*). However, some compounds, as shown in the figure, are rooted deeply in our language and cannot be replaced by equivalent separated phrases (e.g. *bronzealder* [bronze age]). But others can and should. For example, “træbeklædte vægbænke” [wood-boarded wall benches] could easily be rephrased: “bænke på væggen, som er beklædt med træ” [benches on the wall which are boarded with wood], which would

Linguistic element	Results	Examples from data
- Word level		
Officialese	<p>All museums use <i>officialese</i>:</p> <p>8 use an extensive amount of <i>officialese</i></p> <p>AMs use more <i>officialese</i> compared to CHMs</p>	<p>adskillige, afspejle, al verdens, almenmenneskelig, almindelighed, almindeligvis, alsidig, anden dødelig straf, anlægge, anonymt, begribe, begyndende, bekender, besiddelse, bestående, bevisførelse, bevægelsesfrihed, blotlagt, bød, daværende, defineret igennem, dertil, dikterende, driver oplevelsen fremad, dødelig, efterfølgende, eksklusion, elektronisk industri, endvidere, enhver, eufori, fiktive, flertydig, flow, foregående, foretrukne, forgangne, forholder, forskydes, fortrængningsmekanisme, forvrængning, fraværende, fremstillet, fremstår, frygtmekanismer, grunderfaring, grundidé, grundstruktur, havde bud efter, henseende, hensyntagen, hensættes, heriblandt, hermed, herunder, homogene, husgeråd, husholdningsredskaber, høj som lav, i lyset af, i stort omfang, i takt med, idealiseret, imidlertid, indbefatter, indblik, indfældning, indførelse, indgået, individets, individuel, indplaceret, institutionelle miljøer, isoleret, kollektiv, kom til gode, kompleks, koncept, korridorer og gange, kosmologisk, kosmos, kost, kulturgeografisk, kunstfærdig, kønede, kønspolitisk, magthaverne, magtpolitisk, medfører, mellemværende, naturafhængighed, nærværende, omfatter, omfattende, omsorgsinstitutioner, ophav, opstod, overleveret, permanent, pine og straf, pionerer, præg, prægede, præsenteres, psykologisering, påbegyndt, påfaldende, radikalt, rekonstruerede, relativt, ressourcer, resterende, rettergang, samt, samtid, sandsynligvis, sideløbende hermed, skildrer, skyldsspørgsmål, slægtskab, sociale strukturer, spind, stod centralt, står i relation til, systematisk, således, tekstiler, tidens tanke, tilberedte, tilbøjelige, tildanne, tærsklen, udbredte, udførte, udviklede, umiddelbart, universelle, velhavende, visioner, væsensforskellige, ægteskabsindgåelse, åbne for fortolkninger</p>
Different types of <i>officialese</i> are found	Mood-setting, old-fashioned <i>officialese</i> (more in CHMs):	ganske som, gjaldt, hjemkomst, hjemlig, husgeråd, kostbar, lokker, rekrut, tapper landsoldat, ve og vel, vor tid
	Mood-setting, literary, poetic <i>officialese</i> (more in AMs):	afgrund, brydningerne, en evig søgen efter, ene og alene, fortvivelse, melankoli, menneskehedens, skaberværk, tankegods, uigenkaldelig, universelle, vor

Fig. 5. Presentation of results on *officialese*.

make the text much easier to read, with no loss of the intended meaning. The same goes for e.g. “ægteskabsindgåelse” [marriage entering] which could easily be reformulated “indgåelse af ægteskab” [entering into marriage] or even better “blive gift” [get married]. Finally, the third type of compounds that are linked to jargon are even more difficult to access, because, contrary to the previous example,

where the reader can decipher the separate words in the compound, this is not the case for this type. The compound “wunderkamre” [cabinets of curiosities] presupposes that the reader knows and understands both “wunder” (German word) and “kamre” (old-fashioned word for rooms). Furthermore, the compound is art-related jargon as it refers to a specific, historic type of museum, which, supposedly,

Linguistic element	Results	Examples from data
- Word level		
Compounds	<p>All museums use compounds:</p> <p>8 out of 10 museums use complex and/or unnecessary compounds</p> <p>AMs use more compounds, and more complex compounds</p> <p>Not all compounds are problematic</p>	<p>almenmenneskelige, arbejdsdeling, arbejdsmetoder, bagvedliggende, barokagtig, befalingsmændene, bevægelsesfrihed, billedfeltet, billedtitel, bogudgivelser, bronzealderkvinde, bronzenegenstande, bronzestøbning, buskstepper, børneinstitutioner, commandoraids, danskfødte, dobbeltarbejde, dobbeltitel, dødsøjeblikke, efterkrigsperioden, fiskermiljøer, flyinstrumenter, forklaringsmodeller, formreducerende, forretningsmand, fortællekunst, fremadstormende, genremaleri, gravkultur, grubehus, grunderfaringer, grundstrukturer, græsningsarealer, guldalderkunst, halmsengen, handelspladsen, handelsvare, helgendyrkelse, hensyntagen, herskerportrætter, hovedværkerne, hulemalerier, husgeråd, husholdningsredskaber, hverdagsscener, hændelsesforløb, højkonjunktur, håndværksmæssige, håropsætning, idealfamilie, illustrationskunstner, indvandrerdrøtrens, indvandrerfamilier, jernalderen, jernbanearbejde, jernforekomster, karseklipping, kirkegårdsmuren, klæberstenskar, kompagnichefen, kulturstrømninger, kunstinteresserede, kunstnerduoen, kunstoplevelsen, kvindemodeller, kønspolitiske, landskabsskildringer, lidelseshistorie, lærredsvævning, løsningsforslag, magtpolitiske, magtstrukturer, mesterskulptører, nationalliberalisme, naturvidenskab, opstadsvæven, perle fremstilling, persongalleri, personmosaik, planteekstrakt, refleksionsrum, røgelseskar, råmaterialer, sammenslyngede, selvbiografisk, skabelsesberetning, slægtstavler, skaberværket, skeletbegravelser, skibsteknologi, skulptursamling, soldaterkejsernes, stemningsbillede, stenredskaber, synliggøre, tempelskulpturerne, tilhørsforhold, tredimensionelle, uddannelsesboomet, verdensbilleder, vesteuropæisk, vikingebebyggelsen, væsensforskellige, væveteknikker, årtusindskiftet</p>
We find different types of compounds	<p>Unproblematic / born compounds:</p> <p>Problematic compounds (complex or unnecessary):</p> <p>Problematic compounds (because linked with jargon):</p>	<p>arbejdsmarked, bronzealder, dødsriget, helligdomme, kvindeoprør, kunsthistorien, radioaktiv, sammenhæng, sesamfrø, skulderpuder, spadseredragt, udgravning, verdenshistorien</p> <p>dybdeboring, fortrængningsmekanisme, frygtmekanismer, kulturgeografiske, museumskolosser, naturafhængighed, omsorgsinstitutioner, retfærdighedssamfundet, skyldsspørgsmål, træbeklædte vægbænke, udendørs skulpturen, ægteskabsindgåelse, årsags-virkningsforklaringer</p> <p>kunstinstitutioner, lerflakoner, marmorrelief, makrofossiler, mumiebind, performancekunstner, pollenanalyse, ruminstallationer, sarkofagrelief, skulpturkroppene, tekstilfund, udstillingsarkitekturen, værkpraksissen, wunderkamre</p>

Fig. 6. Presentation of results on compounds.

few visitors will know. So even if the reader succeeds in deciphering the surface meaning of this compound, the intended meaning may very well remain hidden.

DIFFERENT MUSEUM CATEGORIES – DIFFERENT PROBLEMS?

Overall, our study shows a difference in these exhibition texts related to the museum category. Seen as a group, the cultural history museums use jargon less problematically compared to the collective group of art museums. Whereas the art museums use more Latin/Greek-based jargon, the jargon found in the texts from cultural history museums predominantly stems from Danish, thus making the word easier to understand even though one might not initially know it. Furthermore, we see that the art museums as a group use both more jargon and more officialese than the cultural history museums do. In addition, the art museum texts are generally much longer – some over 800 words – compared to the cultural history museum texts. So generally, the art museum texts are less accessible than the texts from the collective group of cultural history museums.

The only exception is when the cultural history museums write about their own discipline, especially when medieval archaeology museums write about excavations etc. Here, we see more jargon, more officialese, a tendency to switch into passive voice, and using the Danish “man” [one] or using nominalisations. On the other hand, the art museums as a collective group use the active “we”, which is only seen in one cultural history museum text. However, all museums use passive voice, but some as a way of marking what could be termed an *institutional voice*. When used in this way, arguably, passive voice or even better the use of the Danish “man” is a way for the museum to indicate

clearly for its visitors when they are presenting objective knowledge or scientific facts. Perhaps this is why we find more use of “we” among the art museums, and more frequent use of “one” among the cultural history museums. Art museums have a more inherent tradition for approaching their subject as interpretation, while some of the cultural history museums traditionally approach their subject as a matter of presenting scientific facts.

BALANCE?

When we look at how these texts work as unities, there is a huge difference in the overall accessibility of the individual texts. Here, we return to the idea of creating a balance between something new and challenging and something known and easy in order for the reader to learn from these texts. Two museums have produced texts that present quite difficult jargon, officialese and compounds, or quite long sentences without losing balance, because they either explain the jargon, keep the jargon to a minimum or write using such a straightforward style that the reader feels well aided to meet the intended challenges in the text. These texts are therefore able to balance challenge and accessibility:

Etruskisk er ikke i familie med andre europæiske sprog. Enkelte ord har fundet vej til andre sprog, for eksempel ordet Phersu, som på latin blev til persona (betyder maske) og på dansk til person. Alfabetet var inspireret af det græske alfabet, og vi kan læse alle indskrifterne, men ikke forstå alle ord

[The Etruscan language is not in related to other European languages. A few words have found their way into other languages, for example the word Phersu, which in Latin became persona (means mask) and in Danish person. The alphabet was inspired by

108 the Greek alphabet, and we can read all inscriptions but not understand all words]

Contrary to this, four museums have produced texts with an immense overload of jargon, officialese, compounds and nominalisations, clearly losing their balance:

Renæssancens udfoldelse i Danmark efter reformationen hyldede individets fri udfoldelse. Fornuften blev gradvis dominerende over tidligere tiders naturafhængighed

[The unfolding of the Renaissance in Denmark after the Reformation paid tribute to the individual's free development. Reason gradually started dominating the nature dependence of earlier times]

En række forskellige forklaringsmodeller – sociale, økonomiske, kønsmæssige – bruges til at forstå den skabende kraft bag noget, vi kalder kunst. I lyset af dette fremstår det kronologiske greb som en anakronisme. Og alligevel giver det mening

[A series of various explanatory models – social, economic, gender-related – are used to understand the creative power behind something we call art. In the light of this, the chronological approach appears as an anachronism. And still, it makes sense]

Finally, we find text passages in a few museums which are written in such an abstract, esoteric way that the passage remains quite inaccessible, even though on the surface, some sentences are short, individual words are relatively easy to understand and jargon and officialese not used excessively:

De seneste 20 år – sideløbende med de store fortællingers sammenbrud – har de kuratoriske greb været baseret på en grundidé eller et tema, der bliver det styrende koncept for udstillingen

[The last 20 years – concurrently with the collapse of the great stories – the curatorial approach have been based on a basic idea or a theme which becomes the controlling concept for the exhibition]

This emphasises why our framework has to function as a guide rather than rule – and as a unity. A few problematic elements may not make the combined text lose its balance and avoiding jargon entirely will conversely not ensure balance. But we can say that this study indicates that special attention needs to be paid to the word level, as all of the less accessible texts display extensive problems here.

HOW ACCESSIBLE ARE EXHIBITION TEXTS IN DANISH MUSEUMS ANNO 2014?

Looking at our texts collectively, it is evident that in relation to some isolated elements in the analytical framework, these Danish museums succeed. The majority of the texts are short, and use paragraphs well. We see many examples of short and simple sentences, of active voice and attempts to explain difficult words and concepts. Especially two of the ten museums have produced texts that are genuinely accessible when the texts are read as a whole. However, there are still problems. This leads us to the overall conclusion that most of the museums, when we look at all of the linguistic elements in interplay, still have problems producing accessible texts. Especially the extensive use of complex words – in particular jargon, officialese and compounds – causes this conclusion. Also the use of passive voice and nominalisation contributes to these texts being less accessible. Further, the use of hyphenation, which may seem as an insignificant detail, disturbs the reading of some of the texts to an extent that obstructs accessibility.

So, in conclusion, we have not seen the long,

elitist, self-absorbed and absolutely inaccessible texts that previous studies have problematised. These museums have seemingly taken the first steps towards writing in a more accessible manner, as all texts have shown isolated attempts to tailor the text for the visitor. However, despite these attempts, most of the texts, when viewed as a combined whole, still prove quite difficult to read and understand.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The exhibition text is a central form of communication and a potential source of knowledge. For this reason, writing accessible texts should be a prioritised process. A good text can lift the combined experience to new heights; a bad one may leave the reader feeling incapable, self-doubting and alienated. Our study has shown that in relation to some accessibility elements, Danish museums have become good text writers, but for other elements, there are still major improvements to be made.

Writing both accessible and thought-provoking exhibition texts is no easy undertaking, but based on our study, we make the following recommendations:

Simple recommendations:

- Write short texts; remember that visitors are standing up, often alongside other people; therefore long texts should perhaps be placed in the catalogue.
- Use paragraphs; divide the text into smaller, cohesive sections and use the rule of *one learning objective per paragraph*.
- Avoid hyphenation; assign greater weight to content rather than aesthetics, and if hyphenation cannot be avoided, at least make sure to divide the word correctly.
- Split compounds if possible; yes, it may

make the text a bit longer, but it will definitely make it more accessible.

Elaborate recommendations:

- Keep jargon to a minimum; well-dosed jargon is essential in exhibition texts; excessive jargon will hamper accessibility.
- Avoid officialese, unless for setting a certain mood.
- Use active (especially *we*) and passive (institutional) voice purposefully.
- Remember to whom you are writing; you are not writing to your peers, and ideally, you should cooperate with communication experts and/or test your texts on the actual audience.

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- Anna Karina Kjeldsen, Ph.D., Assistant Professor*
annakk@bcom.au.dk
Aarhus University
School of Business and Social Sciences
Department of Business Communication
Jens Chr. Skous Vej 4
DK-8000 Aarhus C, Denmark
<http://au.dk/en/annakk@bcom.au.dk>
- Matilde Nisbeth Jensen, Ph.D., Assistant Professor*
matnj@bcom.au.dk
Aarhus University
School of Business and Social Sciences
Department of Business Communication
Jens Chr. Skous Vej 4
DK-8000 Aarhus C, Denmark
<http://au.dk/en/matnj@bcom.au.dk>