

Danish culture and Danish values

By Vagn Særkjær

Everybody working with some form of instruction or guidance of refugees and immigrants has to acquire multicultural competences. The same applies to persons travelling to another country to work and live there.

Part of a multicultural competence is to know one's own feelings and the reactions they produce. As the culture in which we have been brought up is a determinant factor for our feelings, it will be suitable to focus on the aspects of culture for a while.

Sometimes Danes working in immigrant communities take over the culture of these communities. Also, Danes who are stationed in foreign cultures sometimes adopt the customs, values and ways of living of the foreign culture in question. They become like the natives. In a way, this is exactly what we have wanted the immigrants in Denmark to do for many years - to give up their original identity and become Danes. Part of the reason why we are gradually abandoning this way of thinking is growing recognition that we disable people by depriving them of their culture. When we as teachers/counsellors take over the customs, values and ways of living of foreign students or foreign guidance seekers, the excitement, spirit, dialogue that create development in the involved parties disappear.

A precondition for being capable of maintaining our identity as Danes when working with persons with another cultural background is that we have a clear consciousness of the Danish culture, in which we were raised.

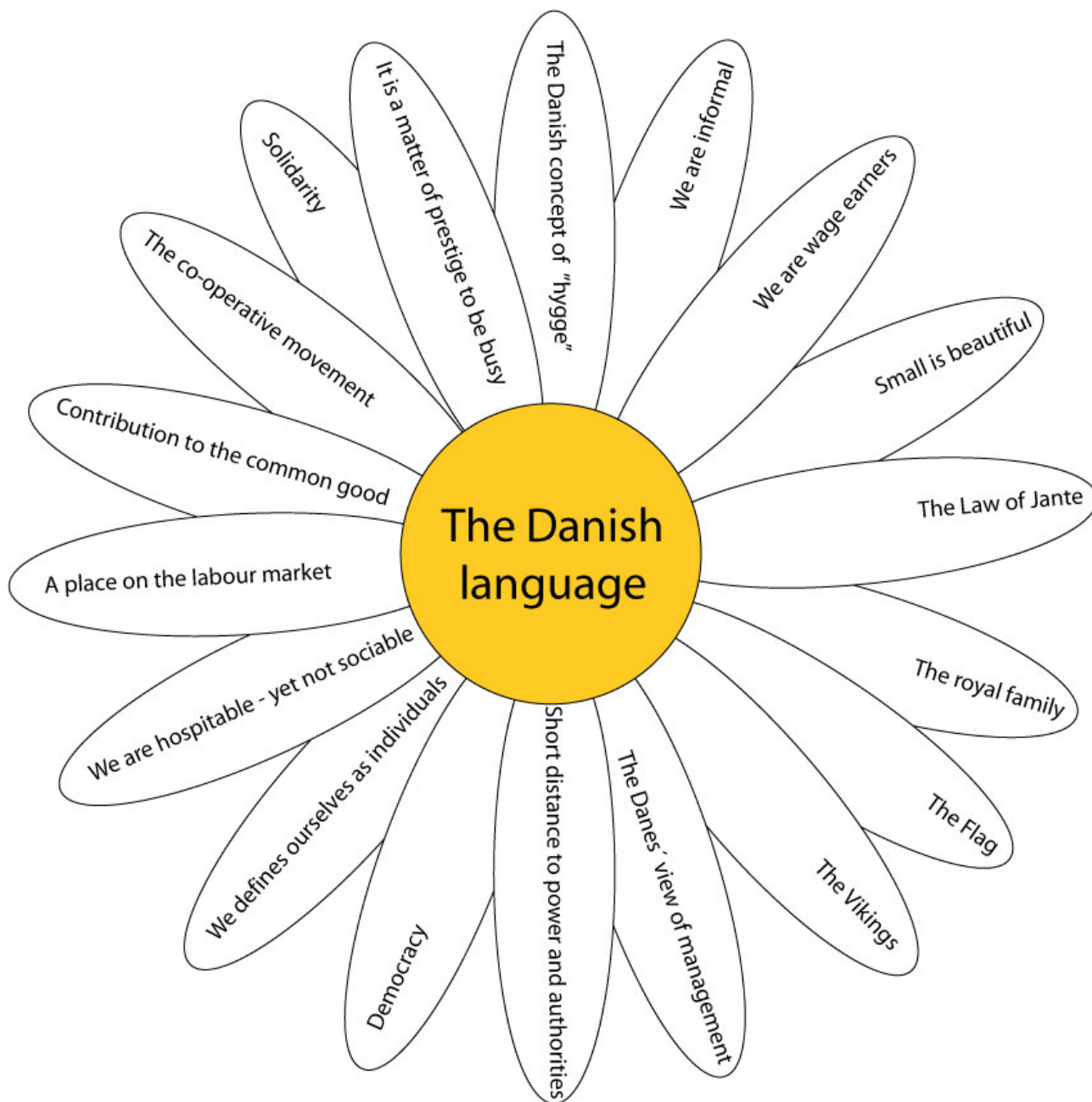
Culture - a definition

Culture is customs, says Hartvig Frisch in the preface of his work *Europas Kulturhistorie* (Europe's Cultural History) first published in 1928. He is, beyond doubt, onto the crux of a definition of the concept of culture; I would, however, like to broaden the definition so as to also include customs like values and rules, which govern the relationships between people. Customs, values and rules are not static. They are ever-changing. Nature, religion, political, economic and technological circumstances affect customs, values and rules along with historical occurrences which influence our self-understanding.

Culture is not floating freely in space. Every single person is a bearer of cultural values. What characterises a Dane is indeed that s/he is a carrier of Danish culture, that s/he lives by a set of Danish customs, values and rules.

The debate about Danish values

In recent years, politicians, bishops, journalists and numerous other opinion formers have carried on a lively debate over the existence of specific and exclusive Danish values. Apart from the language, our search for exclusively Danish cultural features will quickly bring us to a standstill. Every time we point out a custom, a value or a rule applying to Danes, we find that it also applies in one or more places outside the range of Danish culture. In our search, we therefore have to identify the common set of customs, values and rules which, put together, form the particular Danish culture.



The marguerite symbolises Danish culture. The Danish language is the essence of Danish culture, the only feature that we do not share with others. The petals show the customs, values and rules which are part of Danish culture, and which are also part of other cultures, to a varying degree.

The Danish language

The Danish language has a special meaning, a special value, to Danes. Danes speak Danish. We define ourselves by the language. It gives us an identity as Danes. We can express our feelings in Danish in a way which is not possible to us in another language. The language is the essence of Danish culture. We must guard our Danish language. Within the last 100 years, the population on earth has become 500 languages poorer.

The royal family

Ever since King Gorm den Gamle, who reigned in the middle of the 9th century, Denmark has been a kingdom. His son, Harald Blaatand had Denmark's certificate of baptism carved into the Jelling rune stones. Denmark is the longest-living kingdom on earth, and we are still proud of our royal family. Quite large parts of the Danish population enjoy keeping themselves informed on the lives of the royal family. Abolition of the monarchy is not in the offing. Even politicians on the far left wing recognise that the monarchy is presently the best form of governance for Danes. If they say something else, they will not be re-elected to Folketinget (the Danish parliament).

The Flag

Dannebrog, the flag with a white cross on a red background, is the oldest state flag in the world. Legend has it that it fell from heaven on 15 June 1219 during the Danish king Valdemar Sejr's crusade towards Estonia. At Tallinn, the Danish warriors gathered under the flag and won the battle over the Estonians.

The Danish flag is the people's flag. In many countries, the flag belongs to the state and is used on government buildings and by public authorities. In Denmark, all house-owners with a garden have a flagpole, on which they hoist the flag on holidays, birthdays, the first of May and whenever an opportunity arises. Walking into a residential area on a Saturday morning, the small flags placed by the roadside show where the inhabitants are preparing a party.

The Vikings

Every Dane learns about the Vikings. We regard them as our ancestors. We know very well that they pillaged and burned down farms and monasteries, yet we are very proud of them. They were great shipbuilders, sailors, warriors, traders and adventurers.

The Danes' view of management

In 855, the city of Paris was surrounded by Vikings. At that time, the city was situated on the island in the Seine, where the Notre Dame Cathedral now stands. After some days, the inhabitants of the besieged city were starving. The archbishop and the mayor decided to invite the besiegers to negotiate. Therefore, they went to the edge of the island and shouted across the river: "Where is the leader? Where is the leader?" In reply, they heard a loud and clear: "Here", "Here", "Here", "Here" all the way around the city. All the Vikings saw themselves as a leader. The same applies to Danes today. We are all leaders. We want to decide for ourselves. For this reason we voted against the Euro at the 2000 referendum. Not because of our currency, but because we will not accept any supranational influence, which might prevent us from being our own boss.

Short distance to power and authorities

The distance between the Danes and power and authorities is short. For instance, we say *our* Folketing (Parliament), *our* government and *our* council, even if we disagree politically about some of the laws adopted by the Folketing or maybe dislike the current prime minister. In many other countries, people have a quite different attitude towards power and authorities. A "you and us" attitude. The state is "theirs", and it is "they" who are responsible, not ordinary people.

Democracy

Democracy within the Danish political system began when on 5 June 1849 the Danish king signed the first constitution which ensured that all Danish laws would be passed by representatives elected by Danish voters. Since then, the political democracy has been extended to include all Danish citi-

zens who have attained the age of 18. Since 1849, we have developed our perception of democracy to extend to almost all contexts, in which Danes come together. We hold elections for parents' councils in kindergartens, elementary school committees, the committees of homeowners' associations, bridge clubs and sports clubs. To us, democracy is not merely a question of choosing representatives. Our perception of democracy includes the right to interfere, to ask questions, to be heard. We expect to be catered for and treated fairly even if we belong to the minority.

We define ourselves as individuals

We define ourselves as individuals and not as members of a group. Maybe we define ourselves in terms of our work, our job function or our level of education. We do not define ourselves in terms of our family or another group affiliation. My name is Vagn Særkjær. I am the manager of the international department at Aarhus Technical College. If I assigned importance to the family or the group affiliation, I would say: "My name is Vagn. I belong to the Særkjær family. I am a social democrat and a member of the friends of the community centre in Brabrand." We are individualists and not in the least prepared to adapt ourselves to the premises of the community.

We are hospitable - yet not sociable

We are hospitable. Nevertheless, we are not sociable. We willingly help refugees, if only they flee on. We do not like people who settle down. We like people who pack up. We want the Germans to come and rent our holiday houses on the West coast, but they should not be permitted to buy them. This is where we draw the line. When we have visitors, we say: "It *was* nice to see you." We prepare ourselves for the visit not to last too long. When pouring the second glass of red wine, we ask: "Are you driving?" We would rather not contribute towards making the visit last longer than absolutely necessary. We want to be on our own. We want to have time to ourselves. We prefer not to have visitors. Many foreigners regard us as being reserved and cold. We keep our distance.

A place on the labour market

It is really important for Danes to be on the labour market. We identify with our work. We position ourselves in relation to other people by our job. One of the first questions we ask when meeting a new person is what kind of work and position s/he occupies in the corporate hierarchy. We know from numerous surveys among unemployed persons that soon after the loss of job, they develop a feeling of minority as well as a feeling of guilt.

Contribution to the common good

It is essential to Danes to be able to contribute by doing his/her share in the family, in the association, at work, in society, in the community. It is not acceptable to free-wheel, to sponge, to be a burden. "There is work for everyone who wants it", the Danish entertainer Niels Hausgaard once said in a parody. Many people think that the likely reason why a person is unemployed and living on unemployment benefit or social security benefits is that something is wrong with him/her. Even to retired people, it is important to contribute to the family with child-minding, cash contributions to families with children or with holiday trips for their grandchildren.

The co-operative movement

Following a long period of production and export of grain, the Danish agricultural sector encountered a quite serious crisis when world market grain prices dropped in the 1870s. The fall in prices was caused by excess production and more efficient means of transportation, e.g. railroads and steam-driven ships. The crisis resulted in the setting-up of the first co-operative dairy in the village of Hjedding in 1882. Seven years later, Denmark had 600 co-operative dairies. Ever since the co-

operative principle of sharing something has taken firm root within Danish culture. New co-operative societies are continuously established.

Solidarity

Most Danes find the tax level too high. However, if asked whether they are willing to reduce the staff in child care centres or introduce cuts in the treatment of cancer or in the number of hip surgeries, the answer is a convincing no. We want to show solidarity with people in need of help. We are in fact willing to pay to it. Also, we have a pronounced sense of solidarity when it comes to schooling of children. Even private independent schools, which people can choose on basis of ethnic, religious or political wishes, are almost fully financed by the solidarity account, taxes. Similarly, we share the expenses for further and higher education via the solidarity account, and we do this to an extent which is only equalled by very few countries.

It is a matter of prestige to be busy

"We gather you are busy," my friends ask me. "Yes," I reply. Any other reply would require a lengthy explanation, which my friends are actually not interested in hearing. Maybe we also signal busyness as a kind of protection, but anyhow, the Danes are busy. Busyness is a habit. It has become a habit to such an extent that most people are busier in their retirement than during their time on the labour market. It is a matter of prestige to be busy on the job, and it is also a matter of prestige to be busy as a pensioner.

The Danish concept of "hygge" (cosy togetherness)

It is very Danish to "hygge". We get together with good friends and family in our home. We put food on the table, light a large number of candles and chat about the weather, tv and the politicians. We confirm each other's views. Conflicts are kept out. A "hygge" get-together is not expected to produce a result, an outcome or a conclusion. "Hygge" is when we are at peace with ourselves, the taxman, the bank, our wife and our internal organs.

We are informal

It is Danish to be informal and modest. Danes do not care about manners. We forget the business card, the tie, the neat jacket, the presents, the flowers, the introduction of ourselves, the other participants and the programme. We skip all that and start talking about content, possible solutions, activities and output before the others have come to know us. We are not polite. From time to time, we are done and go home before our hosts had time to find out who was visiting.

We are wage earners

To most Danes, it is of great value to be employed - and to have a secure income. We are not the ones to first run the risk involved in setting up for ourselves. Outside the agricultural sector, the desire to run one's own business is by and large non-existent. We feel better as wage-earners.

Small is beautiful

In 1864, we lost North Schleswig to the Prussians. E.M. Dalgas, the initiator of the Danish Heath Society in 1966, made up a slogan "What is lost externally shall be won internally". In accordance with this slogan, we cut off the outside world and directed focus towards ourselves. Maybe we even became a little self-centred. The loss became a national trauma, which we are still struggling to overcome as on that occasion, it became crystal-clear to us that we live in a small state, a Lilliputian country, where we are forced to adapt to the will of the large countries. Following the loss of North Schleswig, we have developed the attitude that small is beautiful. On an international scale, most

Danish companies fall into the categories micro and small. We prefer to be in small groups. We always side with the little guys, when the big ones are scolded.

The Law of Jante

In Denmark, we have a Law of Jante. Like the Law of Moses, it has 10 commandments, and it is used to adjust the behaviour of the Danes. The Law of Jante was formulated by the writer Aksel Sandemose in 1933, and it still applies. The first commandment goes: "Do not think you are something." The commandment is used by the community, the group, to keep the individual close to the average conduct. Rich Danes do not show off their wealth. They do not want to run the risk that the media and the taxation authorities or other supervising authorities spoil their business. Clever Danes who display their genius are met by the third commandment of the Law of Jante: "Do not think you are smarter than us." For this reason, we do not really have an intellectual elite in Denmark. The best Danish brains leave the country to have their scientific or artistic breakthrough abroad. The only exception is talented football players. They enjoy the status of national heroes at the same exalted level as our Queen.