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Autor(en): **Millar, Sharon / Cifuentes, Sylvie / Jensen, Astrid**

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# The perception of language needs in Danish companies: Representations and repercussions

**Sharon MILLAR, Sylvie CIFUENTES & Astrid JENSEN**

Institute of Language and Communication, University of Southern Denmark,  
Campusvej 55, DK-5230 Odense M, Denmark  
smi@language.sdu.dk, sylvie@language.sdu.dk, astrid@language.sdu.dk

Cet article a pour objectif d'explorer les besoins des entreprises en ce qui concerne les langues, comment ces besoins sont perçus par la direction et les employés dans différentes entreprises internationales au Danemark. En utilisant autant des données quantitatives issues d'une enquête par questionnaire auprès de 19 entreprises que des données qualitatives de 12 entreprises, les besoins linguistiques seront identifiés non seulement en tant que langues spécifiques mais encore en tant que compétences et niveaux de compétences des ces langues. Nous nous concentrerons sur la construction des besoins linguistiques par les personnes et pourquoi elles les construisent de la façon donnée. Cet article n'a donc pas l'intention d'être une analyse des besoins comme tels mais vise plutôt à comprendre les processus représentationnels participants à la production du savoir sur les besoins linguistiques en entreprise. Le cadre théorique mis en œuvre est celui des représentations sociales, étant donné que celles-ci s'occupent de la production contextualisée des connaissances de tous les jours. Nous soutiendrons que les représentations de l'anglais et des compétences linguistiques en général alimentent les perceptions des besoins et des stratégies des entreprises et la façon d'y faire face. Les répercussions de ces besoins perçus et les connaissances sociales qui les sous-tendent en ce qui concerne la diversité linguistique et le plurilinguisme individuel dans le contexte des entreprises au Danemark sera aussi discuté.

## **Mots-clés:**

représentations sociales, besoins linguistiques, langue d'entreprise, compétences linguistiques, stratégies des entreprises, plurilinguisme

## **1. Introduction**

In recent decades, there has been a growing interest in the issue of language(s) in the corporate sector. The language factor has been examined from varying perspectives and in a wide range of contexts, be this the use of English as a lingua franca in internal communications across multinational companies (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Rogerson-Revell, 2008), multilingual practices in multinational teams (Goodall & Roberts, 2003; Hendersen, 2005), questions of language choice and power (Andersen & Rasmussen, 2004; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999), corporate language management strategies (Feely & Harzing, 2003; Frederiksson et al., 2006; Harzing et al., 2011) or the impact of language on global operations (Welch et al., 2001). There has also been an interest in language needs analyses, sometimes as part of linguistic audits (Feely & Harzing, 2003; Koster, 2004; Reeves & Wright, 1996; Thomas, 2008) and sometimes linked to national contexts, such as the language needs of British, Finnish etc. business (Hagen, 1988; Huhta, 1999). For example, different EU member states contributed to

an EU project on European Language and International Strategy Development in SME's ('Elise') which focused on use, needs and language/cultural barriers (Jørgensen, 2001). Such needs analyses always involve to some extent the perception of need on the part of individuals, who may be taking a corporate, divisional or individual perspective. So, for instance, Huhta (1999) considers an HR manager to be representing the company and thus he/she is categorised as an employer, while administrative or sales staff are categorised as employees. However, this is a rather static conceptualisation of roles, not taking into account that people may continually change perspectives in the course of an interview, or indeed a questionnaire.

Vandermeeren (2003, 2005) has devised a classificatory system of language need, which encompasses objective need, subjective need, objective and subjective unmet need and unconscious need. These types of need are accompanied by various indicators, e.g. a company's actual frequency of contact with a country is an indicator of objective need, a manager's ideal of competence levels in the foreign language use of staff is an indicator of subjective need, a company's lack of use of language x when it has contact to country x is an indicator of objective unmet need. Whilst a laudable attempt at systematisation, Vandermeeren's classification assumes a clear-cut distinction between objective and subjective needs, which is not always easy to establish since the former also seem to involve people's perceptions of linguistic activities. Moreover, it inevitably predefines in a decontextualised way what a need is; for instance, a company may not itself consider that the use of language x in country x is a need, be this met or unmet. A simplified version of this classification forms the basis of a Danish study on perceptions of language needs, and attitudes towards languages, in the corporate sector (Verstræte-Hansen, 2008). This quantitative study considers current and future demand for foreign languages, as well as the perception of a "language barrier" in communication, in the light of educational policy issues in Denmark. Its main conclusions include the effect the size of the company has on perceptions of need; SME's, for example, demand a greater need for French and German, but a lesser need for Russian, than do the larger companies. A majority of companies (60%) rely solely on English for communication and a minority (31.5%) experience lack of competences in foreign languages as a hindrance to their activities on the international market. Problems occur particularly with China, France, Germany and Russia. Despite difficulties, companies see no need for increased emphasis on foreign languages (other than English) as a general competence and do not anticipate a greater need for foreign language graduates.

Unlike Verstræte-Hansen (2008), this article does not aim or claim to be a needs analysis as such given that the research it reports was not conceived in these terms. Rather the aim is to consider the issue of needs from the

perspective of social representation, in other words through the lens of the everyday, embedded social knowledge which helps explain why people view phenomena as they do. In this way, we hope to combine a description of needs with social psychological explanation. Unlike Vandermeeren (2003, 2005), this article understands needs as subjective constructions, being perceived and given substance by actors in context. However, like much language needs analyses research, needs are operationalised in terms of use/demand as well as competence levels.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The analytical framework is that of social representation theory (SRT) which can be viewed as a theory of social thinking, what Kalampalikis and Haas (2008, p.449) refer to as "a map of social thought". It deals with knowledge and in particular everyday or common sense knowledge relating to social objects and activities e.g. issues of health, climate, culture etc. Jovchelovitch (2007, p.160) argues that knowledge is contextually embedded and reliant on representational processes, involving the "'who', 'how', 'what', 'why' and what for" of knowledge production.

A central concept within SRT is of course that of social representation: "the stock of social knowledge which people share in the form of common-sense theories about the social world" (Augoustinos et al., 2006, pp.36-37). A social representation is then a knowledge structure, born, disseminated and transformed in social interaction within a group, operating as a kind of social orientation system that allows individuals to understand the world around them and to function successfully as members of the group. Although consensual and normative in nature, social representations do permit dissent and conflict, precisely because they are a situated product of communicative dynamics and power relations, and are a *structure* consisting of a variety of different meanings. The structural notion of the 'representational field' attempts to accommodate consensus and conflict in social representation, allowing argument and debate to occur against a backdrop of "consensual reality which forms the common ground of historically shared meanings within which people discuss and negotiate" (Rose et al, 1995, p.4). It is indeed out of contention and argument that a social representation arises or is transformed.

Social representations are generated by two related processes: anchoring and objectification. Anchoring concerns naming and categorisation and is the means by which unfamiliar knowledge is compared and possibly integrated into existing knowledge. Objectification is the process by which the unfamiliar is made concrete or material through, for instance, the use of images or metaphor (e.g. language barrier). For the most part, we will focus on anchoring rather than objectification in this paper.



### 3. Data and method

The data consists of a questionnaire survey, which was intended as a mapping exercise to provide information on which to base the main data collection instrument, that of qualitative interviews. The questionnaire survey, which was contemporary with the survey which provided the data for Verstræete-Hansen's 2008 study, was conducted online with 160 employees from 19 Danish companies, one of which was an affiliate of a German multinational. 9 of these companies (including the aforementioned affiliate) also form part of the interview sample, which consists of 12 companies in total. With the exception of one, a translation company, these companies are industrial, involving the manufacture and/or distribution of products. The interviews were conducted with 37 informants, who have a range of job functions, all of which can be classified as white-collar. For purposes of confidentiality, companies in the interview sample have been given pseudonyms based on random colour terms; individual informants are identified by company colour and a number. Anonymised details of the 12 companies and the informants can be found in the appendix.

The interview type selected was that of the episodic interview (Flick, 2006; Flick et al., 2000), which combines personal and situated narrative, an experiential mode and more structured questioning that asks for theorizing and argumentation on the part of interviewees.

The questionnaire responses were analysed quantitatively (using basic descriptive statistics) and qualitative comments were noted. Interviews were subjected to a content analysis using ATLAS.ti software, a program developed specifically for qualitative analysis of textual and multimodal data. The content analysis permitted the development of a taxonomy of the themes that appear in the discourses of the interviewees, a procedure suggested by Buschini and Kalampalikis (2002) when studying social objects that are not new as such, but constructed within an established knowledge system, such as is the case with languages.

## 4. The need for specific languages

### 4.1 Questionnaire results

We will first consider the results of the questionnaire survey in relation to use of languages, including frequency of use (see Table 1). Not surprisingly, English leads the frequency table, with high reported use on a daily or weekly basis. Few informants report only monthly or a rare use of English. German reveals varying patterns of use, but notably the highest score is for seldom usage. French is used more than Spanish, but both languages are reported to have rather low frequencies of use. The Nordic languages, i.e. Swedish and Norwegian, are used slightly more frequently than the Romance languages,

but a surprising result is that of Chinese which is reported to be used more frequently than, for example, Spanish.

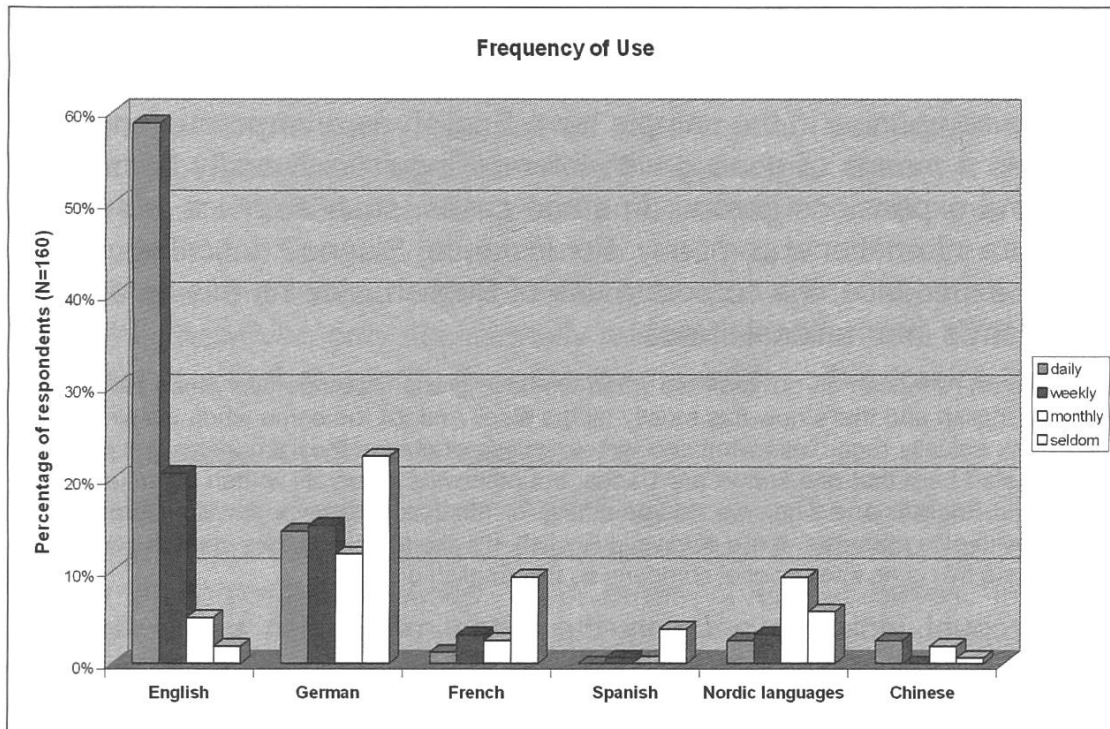


Table 1 Frequency of Language Use

Respondents were also asked whether they would like to learn other languages for work purposes and, when relevant, to list which language(s). More than half of the respondents (56%) expressed a wish to learn more languages. In order of greatest frequency, these languages were Spanish (33%), French (27%), Chinese (22%), German (13%), Italian and Russian (just over 5%), Polish and Swedish (4%), Czech, Greek, Hungarian and Norwegian (2%). Korean, Finnish, Japanese, Portuguese and Vietnamese were chosen by single informants. The interest in learning these languages was usually given in terms of being able to communicate with customers, suppliers and colleagues, improving relations with colleagues, individual market responsibilities and the lack of English language skills of the 'other'.

#### 4.2 Interview data

Turning to the interview data, we can delve more deeply into the question of the use of, and need for, specific languages.

##### 4.2.1 The need for English

The predominance of English is confirmed by the interview data and is an expected result. English is unequivocally constructed as a linguistic necessity for international business:

"the only one that is actually that is a must is English" Beige1

"I think it is simply a necessity" Pink1

"We just have to like submit to the superior power and accept that English is like a principal language" Purple1

"Nobody gets employed at Red company if they haven't got English" Red4

Seven of the companies in the sample have English as a corporate language, introduced as a means of dealing with internal linguistic diversity because of takeovers and expansions abroad. In some cases, such a choice is seen as obvious for an international company. For instance, Sienna2 describes, on the basis of her experience, the corporate use of English, viewing this as a signal of the company's international status:

"We have an American on our team so when we have group meetings everything takes place in English and that's how it is mostly all the time. And it's the same when we write and I think actually regardless what one writes, unless of course they are internal mails between staff here that one knows are Danes, but otherwise nearly all written communication is in English. And when we do something for other departments and sometimes help HR with elite materials, that's always in English. It's like the signal they want to send out because this is an international company so it is English one uses"

Such an account indicates not only the extent of English usage, but the symbolic value that the corporate language brings in its wake. In a similar fashion, but from the opposite perspective, Purple1 explains that the company does not have English as a corporate language because the company is a Danish concern with an exclusively Danish board of directors and a majority of Danish employees, although there are affiliates in England, Germany, Eastern Europe and France.

Regardless of the use of English as a corporate language, there is an overwhelmingly consensual anchoring of English as an international language and a linguistic must for business. However, within this consensus, one significant nuance relating to job function is in evidence: knowledge of English is not expected from certain types of employee, for example, production workers or those without any responsibilities at all for decision-making (as is noted in, for example, Yellow, Orange, Blue, Brown companies). For instance, Yellow1 explains, from a corporate perspective, a bilingual implementation of English as a corporate language in terms of inadequate language skills of production workers:

"We have sales teams in Malaysia, India, Egypt etc. and that means that when there is anything to do with sales – instructions – so that's always in English so that everybody can read it. Whereas on the production side we don't have quite the same need because the people you have to talk to are production operators here and they can't necessarily understand if it's in English – some of them can but not all. So it's more of an advantage to send it out in Danish"

Sienna7, also speaking from a company perspective, similarly notes that not all employees are expected to know English, but nonetheless claims that the

company is close to expecting that all employees regardless of job function should have some level of English:

"I don't think we would go so far as to say that everybody should know English to a certain degree, but it's getting close"

One unexpected benefit for other foreign languages that may result from the anchoring of English as a necessity is a perception that English is no longer any form of particular or extraordinary advantage. Sienna4, for example, believes that while English has been an advantage for him, this is no longer the case for the younger generation as "a 20-year old he can speak really good English but so can everybody else at that age". This mundaneness of English is, however, only occasionally referred to in the data so it is difficult to ascertain its effect, if any, on the perceived need for other foreign languages.

#### 4.2.2 The need for other languages

The need for languages other than English may be expressed in general terms that relate to the nature of Denmark and/or Danish identity, in reports of use or of corporate practices, or in terms of unmet needs. In relation to Denmark, there is a prevalent social representation of the country as small (Millar & Jensen, 2009) which feeds into a social representation of the national group, Danes, as multilingual:

"given that we are a little country we are forced to be open and know many languages"  
Beige1

"people like Norwegians and Swedes and Danes and the Dutch we are generally better at languages than a lot of others because we simply really have to" Blue1

"we have a better basis in that we are a little country which always has been forced outwards...we have always been more extrovert linguistically. I mean nothing impresses customers more than "you speak 3,4,5 languages, my word"...that is something most of us traditionally do, my friends and acquaintances speak 2 and 3 languages, all of them"  
Purple1

What is striking about the discourse that constructs Danish identity as multilingual is the notion of force and obligation – this is not a matter of choice but of circumstance. Hence, if circumstances change, the nature of Danish multilingualism may change accordingly. Reforms of the Danish educational system, for instance, have assigned optional rather than obligatory status to foreign languages other than English, meaning that fewer students are choosing to learn languages. Indeed, Purple1 notes that "it would be nice if younger people could manage more than English when they come".

In contrast to the more abstract idea of Danish multilingualism, it is very clear from the data that English (and Danish) are the most prevalent languages in the workplace in Denmark. However, individual and corporate uses of other languages are reported and, as was also evident from the questionnaire results, this is particularly the case with German. For instance, Blue1, who himself uses German a great deal in the workplace, observes from a corporate



perspective that German is important in the Danish head office in order to manage external communications with the German-speaking market, English being primarily needed to deal with colleagues in the British affiliate.

"here we are much more targeted towards Germany, Austria and Switzerland and to some extent France and the rest of Scandinavia so for the people who work here it is actually more important that they know German and Swedish than English except in relation to information searches and dialogue with our English colleagues. So it's not so straightforward to say that English is an advantage. Actually, I would say that for those here it's better that they have perfect German and adequate English"

Carmine<sup>1</sup> likewise uses German regularly and, as the CEO, he also expects his employees to be able to communicate with their German agent in Germany (who lacks abilities in English):

"preferably German and what does preferably German mean? That is that they can at any rate talk to our German sales representative and he can understand them fairly reasonably in some sort of broken German"

When considering reported usage as an indicator of need, various issues have to be taken into account, in particular the possible effect of corporate strategy. One common practice among the larger Danish multinational companies is the outsourcing of language needs (with the exception of English) from the head office to native-speaking affiliates and agents, or to affiliates perceived as having linguistic expertise. This may mean that those employees who are based in the Danish head office and who have relevant language skills have fewer opportunities to use them. Brown<sup>1</sup> notes precisely this development since the company assigned multilingual tasks to their affiliate in Luxembourg.

"I work a lot with English and to some extent with German but it's like this, our office in Luxembourg has taken over all the exciting jobs because they are so good and know a lot of languages. They know 5, 6 languages down there and so we have sort of skidded off the bend a little"

Outsourcing may also lead a company to no longer employ at head office people with language skills other than English, as is the case with Red company which handles language issues in the relevant affiliate. Carmine company (above) is something of an exception in desiring employee abilities in German in order to speak to the German agent; however, this seems to be due to the acknowledged and accepted lack of English skills on the part of the agent concerned. Most companies use English as the means of communication between an affiliate/agent and the Danish head office, although, as we will illustrate, this can cause problems. Interestingly, in the one company in the sample that is itself an affiliate (Beige), there is little indication of language outsourcing from the German head office to the Danish affiliate. Information that is required in Danish is produced in Germany because of strict legal requirements governing medical documentation.

Language outsourcing then is a strategy through which some companies endeavour to meet their language needs, be these in relation to internal or external communications. From a social psychological perspective, it appears



to rest on a social representation of language competence that involves a perfection or in-depth knowledge which is characteristic of the native speaker: linguistically and culturally, native speakers have the edge. Carmine1, for instance, sees the significance of his German agent in these terms:

"When we come to Germany or France, we aren't what you would say locals, and that's why one takes a local along ..because that's like our guarantee as okay you have a local who is able to deal with my language and when I ring, because it's just as much we shouldn't forget, it's just as much the opposite direction – it's our communication, but it's just as much the customer's communication to us. They shouldn't be meeting some Dane somewhere, I mean, so we have our German"

Red5 reports the regular use of affiliates for translation purposes where local linguistic knowledge, including technical know-how, is vital for the accuracy of the written text.

"We have to come across continually as one of the best providers in the business and that applies to everything – right down to the instructions that come with the product, no matter if it is Russian or Spanish or whatever. It has to be right and that's why it is the individual countries that help a lot with translation. It can be that we send something to be translated to a translation agency here but it always is sent to the country, to the function there. If it's administration guidelines, it may be that our technical people down there read it through. It's just that we have to write it a bit differently – a purely technical reason but also when it's the formulation of it"

Perhaps more unusually, Purple1 reports using customers for language purposes:

"We use translation agencies and we use our customers a lot. If I have a text that needs translating so as a rule I get it translated by an agency to some language or other but I always send something for proof-reading in order to make it real spoken language. No matter how often you ask a translation agency to write a text, they never capture the industry's language, that way we talk, even though they are the correct words etc. They never get the way we talk and that one can leave to the customers"

Exploiting the native speaker has become easier as more companies have expanded to become multinational, resulting in a workforce that encompasses varying native languages. However, language outsourcing also depends on the social representation of English itself as a common, international language that, hence, allows for communication between the local affiliate/agent and head office. It is within this latter social representation that tensions are apparent. As noted in relation to the questionnaire data, the need for languages other than English is sometimes grounded in the perceived lack of English proficiency of the 'other', challenging the notion that English is common to all. In the interview data, this is also very apparent in relation to particular national groups. For instance, Red company, an outsourcer of language par excellence, has very obvious communication problems with its French affiliate. The perceived cause is the lack of English skills among French employees, often seen as characteristic of the national group as a whole. Hence Red5 would like to have abilities in French as "if you look at the regi of Red, then French would probably be able to help us the most".

Similarly, Red3 sees a work-related need for better language skills in French (a language she learnt at school) and Spanish.

"I would say already now that it would help if I could do more because sometimes now and again we have difficulties communicating with our French colleagues although they ought to be able to speak English but the reality is unfortunately something different. And the same applies to Spanish. It would also be a big help if I just knew a little Spanish"

Just as a lack of English skills can cause problems for language outsourcing as a strategy of dealing with linguistic needs, so it can create difficulties for the implementation of English as a corporate language. A number of interviewees note that their companies have had to be flexible regarding the policy because of inadequate skills in English in certain parts of the world. Beige2 observes that Latin America cannot be dealt with using English so Spanish is used:

"the Spanish language is the only one that hangs outside. They don't write in English, they don't always understand it"

Orange2 reports the difficulties encountered when the company took over a new German affiliate that did not want to have English as a corporate language because

"many of the employees in the company were not so highly educated that they actually knew English at a professional level so that we could communicate with them in English. So as a result we – what can one say – chose to have English as a corporate language in the Nordic countries and Germany is a little out on its own"

Generally, the solutions in relation to implementation problems with English as a corporate language are pragmatic, but the power dimensions remain, bearing in mind that the corporate language deals with internal communications. Note how Beige2 and Orange2 both paint a metaphorical picture of inside and outside, where certain affiliates are in some ways out on a limb, not fitting in with standard company expectations regarding English as the necessary language of business. The representational field of English may involve conflict around the role of English as a common language, but the attribution processes surrounding, for example, who can be held responsible, are clear. It is those company employees who lack English skills that bear the blame, not those who lack skills in French, Spanish or whatever the local language may be.

Turning to language needs in a different context, that of external communications, Carmine company provides an interesting example of language restricting market activities. Carmine1, explaining a hypothetical desire to learn Spanish in market terms, raises the issue of "language barriers":

"It should be Spanish because it is a big area and we don't deal with it so much because of language barriers so purely professionally again it should be Spanish"

He notes that the company has had considerable communication problems with Spain because of poor skills in English on the part of the Spanish ("huge language barriers"), but they found a somewhat ad hoc solution via French. A sales manager in Denmark who has some skills in French deals with the

Spanish contact in French. The result has been better communication and increased sales. There seems to be no plan to employ someone with abilities in Spanish or to initiate targeted language training since the company's language needs are perceived as met.

## **5. The need for better competences in languages**

We have already seen how lack of competence in English on the part of the 'other' can create a perceived need for other languages. In this section, we will consider language competences in relation to the self and the perceived need, or not, to improve these competences.

### *5.1 Questionnaire results*

Respondents were asked to rate their oral and written language competence in a number of foreign languages, but for present purposes we will focus on those languages that appear in Table 1. In view of the frequent use of English in companies, it comes as no surprise that the vast majority of respondents evaluate their own competences in oral and written English positively; only 1% rates their competence negatively (N=160). German reveals somewhat different self-evaluations (N=153). While the majority rate their oral and written skills positively, few consider their skills as 'very good' and, compared to English, the number of respondents who view their German skills in a negative light are high. The situation is even more negative for French and Spanish (N=83 and 54, respectively). Only a minority rate their French skills positively and even fewer consider their Spanish skills to be at the positive end of the scale. Very few respondents evaluated their competence in Chinese (N=41), but those that did so were negative (a 'not good' categorisation). Tables 2 and 3 provide a schematic overview of the self-evaluations for written and oral competence.

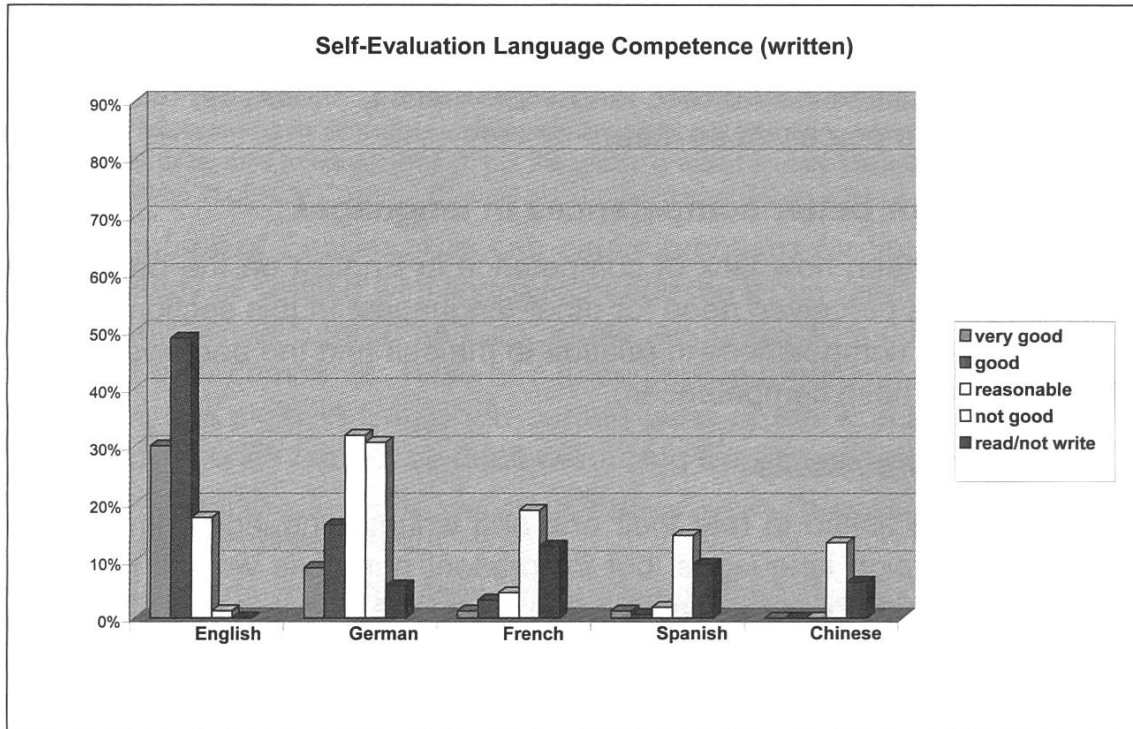


Table 2 Self-Evaluation Language Competence (written)

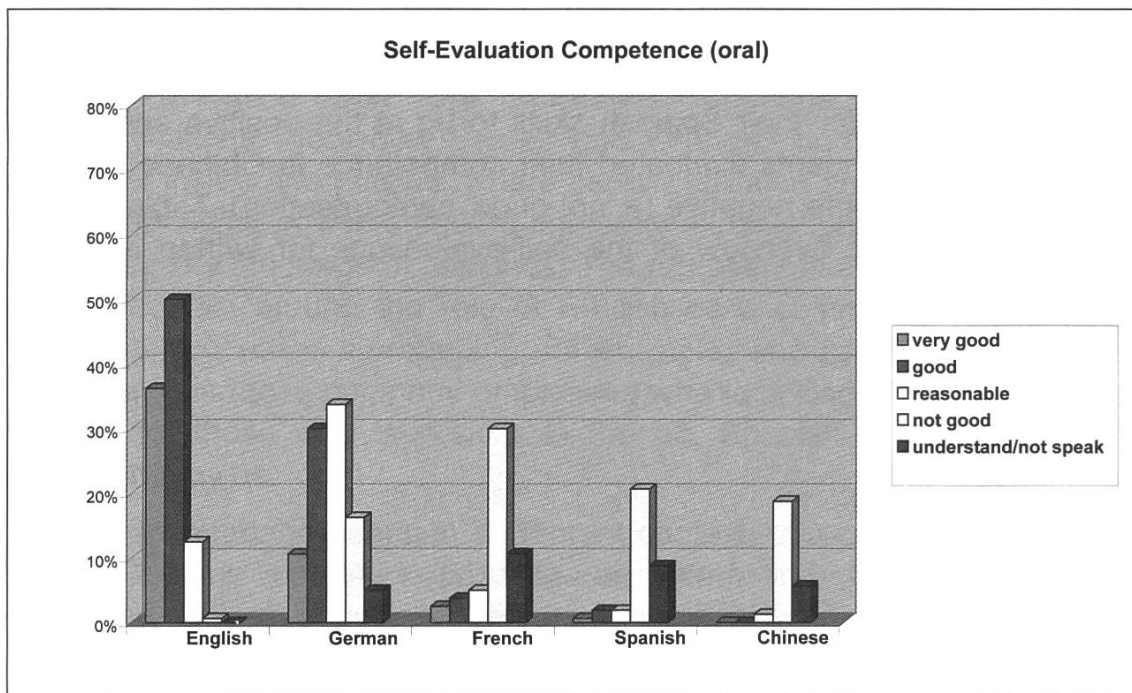


Table 3 Self-Evaluation Language Competence (oral)

The Nordic languages – Swedish and Norwegian – were not on the list of languages presented to respondents for self-evaluation of competences. They were, however, mentioned under the category 'other' by a number of respondents, all of whom were Danish. Given that the Nordic languages

(Swedish and Norwegian) are reported as being used in the workplace, it is illuminating to consider how people evaluate their competences. For both languages, oral competence is evaluated more positively than written. What is noticeable is that respondents refer to greater receptive competences in the languages, particularly in relation to reading; for both languages, approximately 50% specify that they have skills in reading but not writing.

If we compare perceived competence with the perceived job-related needs for language competence, some interesting results emerge (Table 4). For English, German, Swedish and Norwegian, competence matches needs for the majority of respondents. As always, English leads the field with competence overwhelmingly matching needs (N=148). For German, the heterogeneity found in the self-evaluations of competence is again visible: the majority feel their competence is good enough for what they need, while 29% see a mismatch between competence and needs (N= 113). The majority of respondents view their competences in Swedish and Norwegian to be suitable for their needs, but the number of respondents is low (N=13 and 7, respectively). The opposite scenario is found for French and Spanish, where most respondents find their competences insufficient for needs (N=29 and 5, respectively). A clear perception of a mismatch between competence and needs is noticeable for Chinese, where all of the respondents (N=7) feel unprepared to meet the needs of the job.

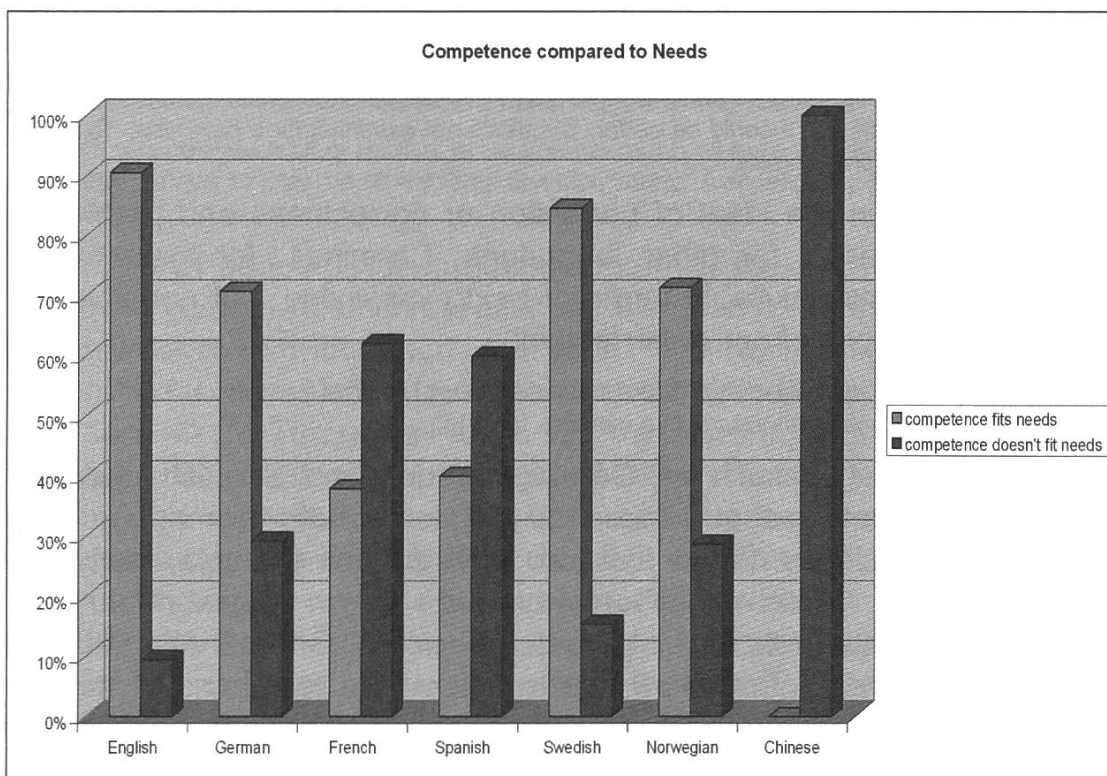


Table 4 Competence compared to job-related needs



## 5.2 Interview data

The qualitative data will be used to identify the main aspects of a social representation of language competence and to consider how any need to improve competences is dealt with, if indeed any such need is perceived to exist.

### 5.2.1 Understanding language competence

The qualitative data confirms the overall satisfaction with one's own competences in English and the perceived match between competence and job demands. So what may lie behind such apparent confidence? A major factor at play is one relating to a social representation of language competence. We have already noted in relation to language outsourcing that language competence has a dimension of native speaker perfection and knowledge, but the representational field is divided between perfection (often expressed as an ideal) and pragmatism in practice. This tension between the two is illustrated by Green1, who has clear concerns with correctness, but at the same time knows, and has been told, that his English is "good enough":

"I was in an office in Pennsylvania for 3-4 months and there I said that I would like to get some proper English [...] and they said 'why do you want that? The English you have is damn well good enough'. But I would like to learn when, for example, I should use whom and who and a lot of those native speakers just looked at me in complete astonishment. 'For heaven's sake, we don't even know that'"

Similarly, Sienna6 notes her improved grammatical skills in English, constructing this in terms of becoming and needing to be "better", but at the same time emphasises the priority of the message over the form:

"I think my grammar has got a lot better so that's why I've become more confident about just firing something off, but it could be better. But that's not essential for a business. It's the message before being correct"

This interplay between the ideal of perfection or correctness and pragmatic practice is also apparent for other languages. Carmine1, for instance, is content with his German skills, in terms of being intelligible, but nonetheless frames this within notions of native perfection:

"I manage in German actually okay. It's not perfect, I mean I'd never pass for a German [...] but I can make myself understood in a sensible fashion"

However, with languages such as German, French and Spanish, there is greater acknowledgement that skills may be too weak to manage any adequate form of business communication. Sienna1, for example, reports a lack of productive skills in German and very context-dependent comprehension skills that rely on a slow rate of speech. Green2 differentiates between oral French skills that allow him to talk on the telephone at "tourist level", but are simply inadequate for any form of business negotiations. Part of the problem is attrition in language competences attributed by interviewees to infrequent use and infrequent exposure to these languages, a situation which does not apply to English (as can be seen in Table 1).

The tension surrounding competence as perfection and competence as pragmatic use is, however, highly context-dependent, varying according to text genre, e.g. email versus legally-binding document or ice-breaking small talk versus high-powered negotiations. Interviewees are not disposing of perfection, but questioning it in certain contexts.

Questions of competence in the Nordic languages are of a slightly different nature and merit special consideration given notions of mutual intelligibility in the pan-Scandinavian context that form part of both popular and expert, e.g. sociolinguistic, knowledge. There is a social representation of Nordic identity that has linguistic dimensions and which holds considerable sway. Certainly, many interviewees note that they use pan-Scandinavian strategies that rely on receptive competences in Swedish and Norwegian and active competences in Danish; so, for instance, an email in Swedish is read and understood and replied to in Danish:

"We get mails in Swedish or Norwegian but they're readable..I talk to my boss from retail who is Swedish so he speaks Swedish and we answer him in Danish but that's no problem either" Sienna2

However, some interviewees do not find the situation so rosy and admit to having difficulties when confronted by other Scandinavian languages: a form of 'lost without translation'.

"Norwegian and Swedish, that's hard for us to understand. There's something in the culture I think and it may well be in the process of changing, that one ought to be able to understand so every Norwegian, Swede and Dane we think should understand each other when we meet because it's like that little bit polite. I don't understand a bloody word. Yeah, I understand 'hello you' – it can well be that one understands 2 words but as soon as they begin to talk, we don't understand anything" Carmine1

"It reminds you a bit of Danish, at least some of it but I have forgotten everything about it and I have trouble understanding Swedish today. I speak English if a Swede rings" Brown1

A number of people refer to adaptations they make in language production, and even give the resulting product its own name; for instance Beige2 refers to "an inter-Nordic language" that is a "little Norwegian, Swedish, Danish"; Green2 describes himself as "speaking Scandinavian, changing word order and such like"; Turquoise1 talks of "my Nordic language" which involves "using my Danish base [...] changing a lot of words [...] altering the Danish a little". Such hybridisation strategies might suggest that mutual intelligibility sometimes requires support. The very fact that Danes learn the other Scandinavian languages would also indicate the limitations of relying solely on receptive competences. However, it is clear that many of the interviewees see absolutely no need to learn either Swedish or Norwegian. If mutual intelligibility fails, the solution is simple - English.

### 5.2.2 Improving language competence

From the perspective of needs, a mismatch between competences and the demands of the job would require some form of attention, be this from the individual concerned or the company. The most obvious course of action for a company would be to facilitate the improvement of language competences by providing opportunities for language training. Indeed, 63% of the questionnaire respondents report that their company offers such training and 42% have availed themselves of the opportunity. The qualitative data reveals that language training is generally not approached strategically or proactively by companies in the sense that they identify a need and coordinate the appropriate action. Rather, companies adopt a passive role, reacting to requests from employees about language competence needs. Whilst this bottom-up approach has advantages – in taking the initiative themselves, employees are likely to be engaged and motivated – there is a danger of inertia. Some interviewees report that they would like to improve their competences, for instance in German, French, English, but lack of time prevents it or a lack of strategic purpose. Red2, for example, notes how a desire to improve her French, sparked by a sales meeting in France, lost impetus because she was not assigned further tasks in relation to the French market:

"if I had thought that from now on I would have a lot more to do with the French market, I would have done it. I would have negotiated with my boss and said one of the things I want in my contract is that I get courses in French"

Given that all 5 interviewees from Red company describe serious communication problems with the French affiliate, it is *prima facie* surprising that the company apparently has no strategy to deal with what is a linguistic problem except an insistence that all new employees in France take obligatory courses in English. However, bearing in mind the consensual social representation of English as the international language of business and the fact that social representations have normative force (e.g. English is the language of business and you should therefore be able to use it), Red's strategy, or lack thereof, is perhaps more expected than surprising. In fact, the only evidence from the interview data of any form of strategic approach on the part of companies towards language training is in connection with the introduction of English as a corporate language, where particularly employees in foreign affiliates have been offered courses.

Lest language training be seen as the panacea for all language competence ills, it should be pointed out that interviewees report dissatisfaction with language courses, usually for reasons of ineffectiveness or irrelevance. Again, this may suggest that companies need to be less *laissez faire* and take a greater interest in types of language training and how these can be best matched to the needs of the individual and the organisation.

Finally, the perceived need to improve competences may well be affected by the social representation of competence itself. For instance, the ideal of perfection (noted above) seems to be driving Sienna 4's ideas about improving his skills in German:

"I would prefer that my German became perfect than that I learnt to speak a quarter Chinese [...] I have actually considered in connection with my training here that I move to Hamburg [...] so I could freshen it up. I don't think I'd have to use a lot of time to become, what will I say, almost perfect in German. Or at any rate to be as sure about it like in English"

In contrast, if people view competence as pragmatic use and experience communicative success because of alternative strategies (e.g. use of multimodal channels of communication and hybrid forms, or use of linguistic brokerage), then there will be less perceived need to enhance existing competences. Hence, creative tactics of muddling through or making do (cf. De Certeau, 1988) may actually serve as a means of meeting language needs.

## **6. Discussion**

The discussion will address the repercussions of perceived needs and the social knowledge that underlies them on language diversity and individual foreign language skills in the corporate sector in Denmark. The strong social representation of English as the necessary and common language of business has no doubt had effects on the language diversity within Danish companies. English predominates in terms of frequency of use and satisfaction with competences, and it is the focus of the few strategic approaches to language that exist, e.g. the use of a corporate language, top-down language training. But this is, in many ways, old news. What is perhaps less appreciated is the normative force of the social representation, which permits others to be held responsible for not possessing the necessary skills. In Denmark at least, English comes with a moral imperative. Nonetheless, there is tension within the representational field surrounding the commonness of English and this creates a perception of need for other languages among employees, if not necessarily top management. The lack of commonness of English does lead, however, to corporate solutions concerning the implementation of English as a corporate language. These solutions differentiate between particular groups within the multinational organisation (national, occupational) and can lead to these groups being perceived within the Danish head office as marked in some way; for instance, some companies simply factor particular groups out of the corporate language equation as a means of solving language problems. In other words, they are treated as exceptions to the norm, but ultimately the social representation of English is unchanged – English remains the necessary and common language of business.



A further effect of the social knowledge surrounding English is the way in which other languages are made dependent on English; for example, the need for other languages may be defined in terms of the absence of English skills or competence in other languages may be compared to competence in English (e.g. German skills as good as or not as good as skills in English). In this way, English can subtly saturate everyday thinking about languages.

Leaving English aside, the need for other languages, as perceived by the Danish head office, is met in many cases through language outsourcing to native speakers of the languages or to speakers viewed as linguistically expert (cf. Andersen & Rasmussen, 2004). This strategy relies on a social representation of language competence as native perfection and it is seen as obviating the need for Danes in head office to have foreign language skills other than in English, with the subsequent effects this has on recruitment and training. The companies in our interview sample, for instance, require only that new recruits have abilities in English (cf. Verstræte-Hansen's 2008 findings concerning companies' lack of anticipated need for greater numbers of language graduates). While English has a role to play in language outsourcing as the facilitating language, it may not be the dominance of English that is in this case threatening the extent of individual multilingualism in Danish companies, but rather the pervasiveness of the native speaker ideal in notions about language competence. Processes of globalisation have provided companies with the opportunity to exploit what is seen, at least in certain contexts, as a valuable linguistic and cultural resource – the native speaking employee/agent. We have labelled the strategy as language outsourcing since our perspective is from the Danish head office, but for a multinational company, it may simply be viewed as linguistic resourcing within the company. The implications of such a strategy for the company are not altogether clear, however. Certainly, problems can occur in the communication between Danish head office and an affiliate if, for example, relevant language skills are inadequate (as has been observed for France in Red company here and in Andersen and Rasmussen's (2004) study of communication between a Danish company and its French subsidiary). Questions of power within the company may also be in play; as noted by Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999), competence in a language can permit those with such competence to be gatekeepers of information and knowledge. In this view, some multinational companies are, perhaps unwittingly, transferring power from the head office to their affiliates since Danish management and employees will not necessarily be able to follow or contribute to what is being communicated to other employees, suppliers or customers in French, Spanish, German, or whatever the local language may be.

Despite a corporate inclination towards monolingual solutions to deal with multilingual realities, foreign language skills (other than English) do exist in



Danish companies and are seen as needed. Moreover, in relation to use, the social representation of competence as native speaker perfection is being contested by a more instrumental idea of pragmatic use, at least in certain contexts. Such pragmatism can open up spaces for language use in that people feel freer to use the language skills they have, often in creative ways that prioritise communication over linguistic perfection. Engaging in optimistic speculation, one might even suggest that a greater pragmatism in relation to competence might make language learning less daunting and encourage people to learn languages. A more gloomy reality is that relatively few languages are being used with any regular frequency in most of the Danish companies sampled, at least in the head offices. Although people express a need for languages or better competence in languages, turning this expression of need into actual language learning and use will require greater strategic thinking about languages and their organisational status and role than is apparent in companies today. As observed by Thomas (2008, p.323), there is a "need to develop creative and enlightened language planning to improve both the quality and value of intercultural communication". From a social representational perspective, the first step requires that companies perceive this need themselves.

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**Appendix: Corporate database**

<b>Company Acronym and Sector</b>	<b>Number of employees (approx.)</b>	<b>Informants</b>
<b>Red</b> Production of sport and leisure facilities	700	<b>Red1</b> Draw and Design Coordinator
		<b>Red2</b> Research Coordinator
		<b>Red3</b> Support Coordinator
		<b>Red4</b> Specialist in Knowledge Management
		<b>Red5</b> Product Manager
<b>Green</b> Production of machines for food processing	270	<b>Green1</b> Sales Manager
		<b>Green2</b> Senior Vice Director
		<b>Green3</b> Developmental Director
		<b>Green4</b> Project Manager
<b>Brown</b> Production of machines for the beverage industry	900	<b>Brown1</b> Managerial Secretary
		<b>Brown2</b> Office Assistant
<b>Turquoise</b> Processing of fruit juices	200	<b>Turquoise1</b> CEO
<b>Beige</b> Production of medical equipment	20 (in Denmark) 35,000 (globally)	<b>Beige1</b> Marketing Coordinator <b>Beige2</b> Sales Agent
<b>Pink</b> Translation Cross-cultural courses	20 + 400 freelancers worldwide	<b>Pink1</b> Project Manager <b>Pink2</b> Project Manager <b>Pink3</b> Project Manager <b>Pink4</b> Language Department Manager <b>Pink5</b> Technology Department Manager
<b>Blue</b> Production of convenience food	320	<b>Blue1</b> Commercial Director

<b>Orange</b> Distribution of pharmaceutical products	900 (350 in Denmark)	<b>Orange1</b> Production Manager
		<b>Orange2</b> Language Associate
		<b>Orange3</b> HR Consultant
		<b>Orange4</b> Business Developer
<b>Sienna</b> Production in the clothing sector	13,000	<b>Sienna1</b> Graduate Trainee
		<b>Sienna2</b> Trainee
		<b>Sienna3</b> Staff Trainer
		<b>Sienna4</b> Trainee
		<b>Sienna5</b> Business Development Manager
		<b>Sienna6</b> IT Trainee
		<b>Sienna7</b> Corporate Staff Training Manager
		<b>Sienna8</b> Chief Information Security Manager
		<b>Sienna9</b> Group HR Manager
		<b>Sienna10</b> Product Development Manager
<b>Carmine</b> Production of machinery for the agricultural sector	75	<b>Carmine1</b> CEO
<b>Purple</b> Manufacturing of products for the automobile industry	600	<b>Purple1</b> Sales manager
<b>Yellow</b> Production of fresh fruit products Transfer of technology and know-how	170	<b>Yellow1</b> Project and administrative manager