

10 Top Mistakes Danes Make in English

Danes speak beautiful English, yet there are a few small mistakes they make over and over again.



TALKING ABOUT 'MY PRIVATE ECONOMY'

An economy, in English, is a large-scale thing, with many moving parts – the Danish economy, the Internet economy. Occasionally, you'll hear discussion of microeconomics, if you hang out with people in the aid-to-developing-nations sector. But there's no such a thing as a private economy, at least in commonly spoken English. Your bank accounts, credit cards and investments make up your **personal finances**, or **family finances**.



CONFUSING 'FUN' WITH 'FUNNY'

Both fun and funny are covered by **sjov** in Danish, which can make it difficult for Danes to figure out which one to use in English. *Fun* lines up with general enjoyment – **vi har moret os** translates to **We had fun**, not the often-heard **We had a very funny time**. *Funny* refers to a humorous person or thing. **He's a funny comedian, and it was a very funny movie**. *Fun* refers to an experience. **We had fun watching it**.



THINKING 'COMPETENT' IS A COMPLIMENT

To say someone is **kompetent** is praise in Danish; it is faint praise in English. *Competent* in English sounds like someone who can do a job, but just barely, and it is never a glamorous job. You hear about *competent* secretaries or *competent* plumbers, but no one is ever a *competent* scientist, movie star or U.S. president. (Although a U.S. president is likely to be called *incompetent* by her political opponents.) **Skilled** is one way to compliment a worker in English. On the same note, **kompetencer** is fine in Danish, but *competencies* is clumsy English; **skills** is better.



MIXING UP CUSTOMER AND COSTUMER

This mistake always surprises me, because **kunde** is a lot closer to the correct English **customer** than its perennial doppelgänger, **costumer**. A **costumer**, folks, is a professional who sews actors into retro suits or fancy Shakespearean costumes at a theater. I have edited entire documents in which big financial institutions discuss improving **costumer service**. Perhaps they see an important target group among ladies with measuring tapes draped over their shoulders and pins between their lips. If that's not your client, use **customer**.



ADDING 'ETC.' TO EVERY SINGLE LIST

The Danish writing style, like Danish culture, shies away from conflict, which is why every list of more than one or two items ends with **bl.a.** or **m.fl.** as a way to avoid offending anyone by leaving their favorites off the list. When translated to English, adding 'etc.' to every list makes you sound like you lack confidence. If you really want to make it clear that your list may be incomplete, use **include** – for example, "The heroes of Denmark's 1992 EM victory **include** Henrik Larsen and Peter Schmeichel." That's less likely to offend fans of, say, Brian Laudrup.



SAYING 'I'VE TRIED' TO DESCRIBE UNPLANNED EXPERIENCES

When Danes show empathy with someone in trouble, they often say they've had the same experience. For example, **I've tried breaking my leg**. This translation of **jeg har også prøvet** doesn't work in English, unless it's something you tried to do and failed. **I've tried finding a husband, but every guy I've asked has turned me down**. For unfortunate events that were unintentional, like the broken leg, you can show empathy by saying **That's happened to me, too**.



SPELLING 'LOSE' WITH TWO 'O'S

In English words like *balloon* and *choose* and *moose*, the oooo sound in the middle is spelled 'oo'. An intelligent Dane might assume that the translation of **at tabe en sag** would be **to loose a case**. In the jungle of English spellings, that intelligent Dane would be wrong. You **lose a case**, or **lose a customer**, or **lose an eye**. You can also **lose weight**, after which your trousers will be loose, a word that rhymes with goose. And don't confuse *lose* with *drop*. You only drop something if it physically falls to the ground. You **lose money**, or **lose a tooth**.



USING 'ALREADY' TO DESCRIBE A FUTURE EVENT

In Danish, **allerede** can be used to describe something in the future that will happen more quickly than expected. **Tærten kan allerede være færdig om fem minutter** makes sense in Danish. In English, *already* is used in the past tense only. **The pie is already finished, and I have already eaten a piece**. To combine the two – **The pie will be finished already in five minutes** – is Denglish. **As soon as** is a good substitute: **Our pie company could be bankrupt as soon as next month**.



CONFUSING LEARN WITH TEACH, OR LOAN WITH BORROW

At lære is flexible enough to cover both teacher and student; **jeg har lært at spille, hun har lært mig at spille**. In English, this flexibility disappears: the usage is broken into *learn* and *teach*, and they are not interchangeable. **She taught me to play golf. I learned to play golf**. The same applies for **at låne**, which in English is split into lend and borrow. I can't **borrow you my golf clubs**. **I can lend you my golf clubs** or **you can borrow them**. Interestingly, the direct translation *loan* can be used either way – **I can loan you** twenty bucks for drinks at the clubhouse after golf, or **you can loan** twenty dollars from me.



TRANSLATING 'DERFOR' AND 'HERMED' DIRECTLY

Derfor is an ordinary part of Danish, but its direct English translation *therefore* is stiff and pompous. It makes you sound like a bald professor explaining chemistry. Instead of **Therefore, she jumped off the bridge**, use a modern construction like **That's why** she jumped off the bridge. Just as stuffy are direct translations of **hermed** like **herby** and **herewith**. Both are real English words that won't set off your spell-check, but they're rarely used outside of legal contracts. **I hereby send today's presentation** can be simplified to **'Here's today's presentation'**.

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