



Sten Vikner

Method in the madness

Many Danes find irregular German verbs hard to learn, but when it comes to their own language, there is not really a great difference between Danish and other languages around the world. Associate Professor Sten Vikner, the Institute of Language, Literature and Culture at the University of Aarhus, is trying to find a common system behind the diversity in the different languages.

By Jakob Kehlet

People who have lost the ability to speak because of cerebral haemorrhage may find it easier to learn to speak again, and students may find it easier to learn foreign languages.

Associate Professor Vikner emphasises that he works with basic research and that concrete goals are rarely within reach. On the other hand, it is not impossible that the two scenarios mentioned above may become a reality as a result of his research.

“If we can discover where the languages are similar and where they differ, we will have a good tool for assisting people who find it difficult to learn their own or foreign languages,” says Associate Professor Vikner. “The more you discover about the differences between English and Danish, for example, the easier it is to teach people to learn the foreign language.” However, as is the case with most basic research, the driving force behind his work is just as much a fundamental curiosity about how languages are structured as it is an expectation that his findings can be used in practice.

When language is puzzling

As a member of staff at the Department of English, his research focuses on the Germanic languages (including English, German and the Scandinavian languages), but he also ventures into comparisons with other languages.

“I usually begin by analysing the sentence structures because something puzzles me. Why do we say, for example, ‘as I actually know the book’ in Danish, Swedish, Norwegian and English, whereas in French, Icelandic and Yiddish, this is ‘as I know actually the book’? My hypothesis is that, in the second group of languages, you need to pay more at-

ention to the person of the subject in order to conjugate the verb correctly. That is why verb and subject are right next to each other,” Associate Professor Vikner explains.

His explanation is to some extent supported by the fact that the Danish was “as I know actually the book” until the beginning of the sixteenth century. In fact, until then, verbs were also conjugated in the first, second and third person in Danish, just as they still are in French, Icelandic and Yiddish.

Reason for the differences

If you look for a system behind the differences, it is interesting to compare languages that are closely related, such as the Germanic languages. Just as in other sciences, it is necessary here to isolate the phenomena that are to be studied.

“If you wish to understand where the verb goes, it pays to study Faroese and Icelandic,” says Associate Professor Vikner.

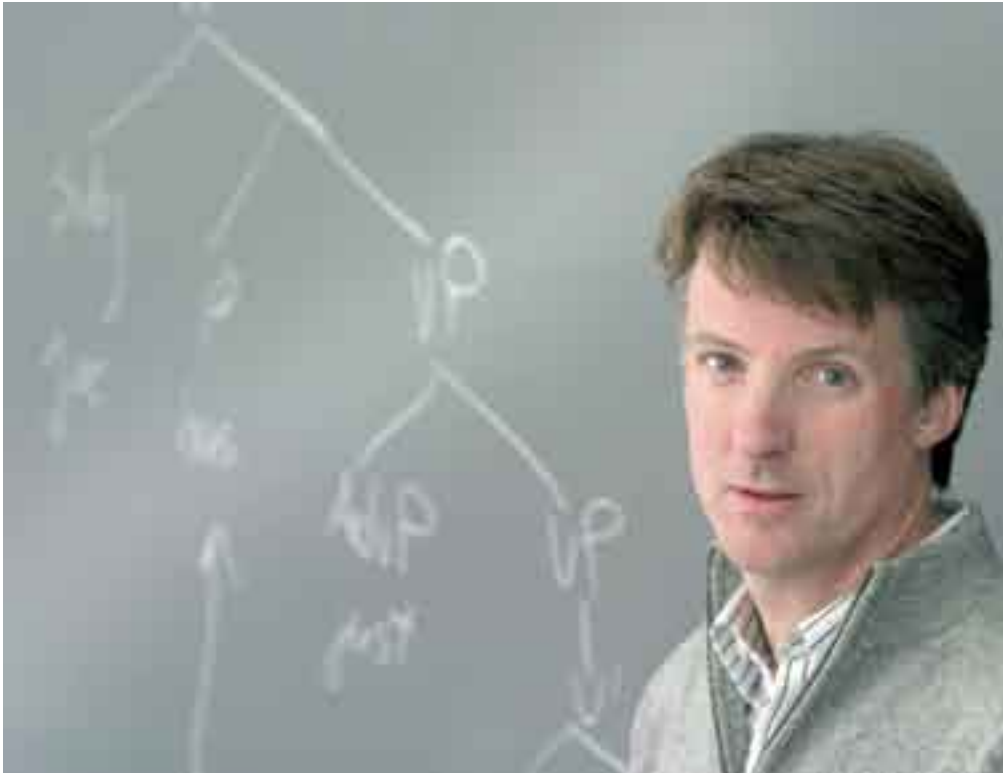
These two languages are closely related and have many features in common. That makes it easier to spot the other differences between the two languages that play a role in determining the position of the verb.

“In a wider perspective, the goal is to map the ways in which the languages differ and the ways in which they don’t.”

The days of Jutland dialects are numbered

Of all forms of language, dialects are probably the ones that are most closely related. However, as communication and infrastructure reduce the distance between the different parts of Denmark, the dialects are gradually disappearing. Associate Professor Vikner and a number of colleagues in the Nordic countries are therefore working on a major study of the sentence structure of dialects.

“This study is urgent because the dialects are disappearing. Previously, you could hear language differences between areas that were geographically quite close, but major differences are hard to find today. The Jutland use



Sten Vikner analyses sentence structures in different languages and compares word order, etc.

of the word *hans*, where Eastern Danish uses *sin* – two words that both mean ‘his’ – is definitely on the way out,” says Associate Professor Vikner.

Danish is doing well

Dialects like those found in Jutland may be on the way out, but standard Danish is doing well. Over the years, it has been exposed to much stronger external influences than the American and British slang expressions that currently invade the language used by the younger generation.

“Danish was under serious pressure from the German language about 600–700 years ago. At that time, we imported some elements that completely conflicted with our language system, such as the use of the unstressed prefixes *be-* and *er-*, but Danish nevertheless survived,” says Associate Professor Vikner.

He rejects the idea that Danish will die out because of foreign slang creeping into the living room from television channels. Danish

already contains a large number of foreign words that have been adopted and integrated over the centuries.

“If everyone in Denmark chose to adopt English in a large part of our daily lives, I would become a bit worried,” Associate Professor Vikner admits, but he sees no indications that this is about to happen.

“The perception that Danish is a small, threatened language is not true. Danish is one of the hundred most frequently spoken languages in the world, and there are many other minor languages that are more endangered,” says Associate Professor Vikner.

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