

Danish Accent of English

PREFACE

Denmark is a little larger than Maryland (#9 smallest U.S.) and smaller than West Virginia (#10). It's low and flat with gentle rolling plains.

Danish serves as the native language to almost 6 million people in Denmark as well as a minority language in Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Schleswig-Holstein (the northernmost state of Germany). While there are relatively a small number of speakers, there are numerous dialects found throughout the country, broadly categorized as Insular Danish (*øsmål*), Jutlandic (*jysk*), and Bornholmsk dialect (*Bornholmian*).

STANDARD DANISH

Rigsdansk [ˈʁisˌdæˀnˀsɡ̊] is the common name for Standard Danish. Although commonly defined as “a Danish that does not reveal from where the voice comes from,” this definition does not prevent the *højsprogsvarianter* (“high variant of Danish”) spoken in Copenhagen from being closely associated. For decades, Standard Danish served as the only variant of Danish allowed in broadcast media until the 1970s.

In modern times, Standard Danish as an accent continues to evolve, while its use and spelling is regulated by the *Dansk Sprognævn* (“Danish Language Committee”), the official committee charged with overseeing the language’s development, answering questions about the language, and establishing/updating the official Danish spelling dictionary. Pronunciation continues to shift even as the written language is maintained.

Several decades ago, there were more dialects of Danish when the rural population was larger and more spread. In the last few decades, particularly with the ease of travel and access to world-wide forms of communications, a more common variety of Danish is becoming prominent as both a dialect and accent. There have even been recent attempts to record fading dialects by the national media.

LEARNING ENGLISH

With that in mind, it might be concluded that with more people starting from the same Danish dialect as the basis, the accent of English would also begin to be standardized. But this is not necessarily so. Various accents of English are heard throughout Denmark, from formal instruction to mass media to international visitors and travel.

While primary school English instruction is based on British English phonology, cultural influences are North American. Also, depending on a particular instructor’s mastery, a teacher may teach from their own Danish accent. This may explain why often Danish accents of English are hybrids of both British and North American.

Learning English begins early in elementary school, beginning from the first grade and throughout a Dane’s schooling. In the university system, there is also an emphasis in using English for its international opportunities. A large number of courses are taught exclusively in English, and not for international students. There have even been studies that have tied the effectiveness of a professor to his/her own fluency and mastery of English.

Movies and television often aren't dubbed like in many other European countries. In Denmark, they are subtitled, so the ear gets used to hearing North American English at home as well socially. North American accents are also commonly heard in popular music, resulting in Danes also singing in English.

In general, Danes are relatively fluent in English, not surprising with the emphasis placed on its future value on the international stage. When choosing to learn a foreign language in school, the question becomes what third language to pursue. As a result, many of features of the Danish accent of English can be very subtle rather than extreme

DANISH SPELLING

Danish is not a phonetic language in that orthography indicates pronunciation. Often, there are letters in the spelling which are treated as silent. Sometimes, this may affect the pronunciation of English.

The Danish alphabet also consists of all the letters existing in the English alphabet. However, more than most languages, Danish spelling is not phonetic, in that there can be substantial amounts of reduction or assimilation from spelling into actual pronunciation. As one Dane commented, it's almost impossible to read Danish text aloud without previous knowledge of the actual words.

In the Danish alphabet, there are three additional letters that follow "z" that also have the upper case/lower case distinction. They are in order:

- Æ / æ – the "ash," while also the IPA symbol for the sound [æ], is a ligature that could represent the sounds of the IPA symbols of [æ] [e] or [ɛ]
- Ø / ø – the "slashed o" as a Danish letter is usually representative of the sounds of the IPA symbols [ø] and [œ]
- Å / å – the "a with a ring" as a Danish letter is synonymous with "AA / aa" in spelling. The IPA symbol representing this sound is essentially [ɔ].

ORAL POSTURE

There is a minimal amount of movement in the jaw as well as less lip rounding. The jaw stays relatively low and free, allowing the sensation of space in the mouth, as if there was a *hot potato*. This open space encourages a parting of the lips.

This particular posture facilitates a rapid rhythm of speech with slight variation in stress and tone.

The overall sound placement tends to focus towards the mid to back of the mouth.

METHODOLOGY

Standard lexical sets as invented by phonetician John Wells in his book *Accents of English*. I used the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) are used to describe the qualities observed.

VOWELS

Monophthongs

DRESS → [e]. Raise the front of the dorsum towards [e]

- hem [hɛm]

STRUT → [ʌ]. Open the space in the back of the mouth into [ʌ]

- above [ə'baʃ]

TRAP → [ɛ̃æ]. Beginning from a closed and forward position [e], the front of the tongue lowers into [æ]. This diphthong quality is brief, with the main emphasis of the sound being [æ]. This sensation is bright and vibrant.

- can [kʰɛ̃æn]

CLOTH → [ɒ]. There is a tendency to lift the back tongue and lessen lip rounding towards the direction of [ʌ] when sounding the [ɒ]. However, the sound remains closer to [ɒ].

- [ɒ] leans towards [ɔ] – long [lɔŋ]

LOT / CLOTH usage. Danish speakers will use [ɒ] following British phonology.

- Odd [ɒdʰ]

Diphthongs

PRICE → [aɪ], very short [ɪ]. The [ɪ] is particularly short, in that the diphthong almost sounds like a monophthong.

- lime [laɪm]

GOAT → [əʊ]. Leans towards [əʊ̃].

- old [əʊlʰ]

MOUTH → [aʊ]. Leans towards [aʊ̃].

- how [haʊ̃]

CONSONANTS

Generalizations of a Danish accent of English:

- Most consonants should be articulated very lightly, without much pressure or tension
- Voiced consonants tend towards becoming unvoiced.
- Most fricatives are lightly touched and unvoiced.
 - [z] → [s]
 - [v] → [ʋ]
 - [ʒ] → [ʃ]
 - [t] → [t^s]

Initial Positions

VET → [ʋ]. The bottom lip and top teeth are almost close enough to form the fricative [v], but are not close enough to create turbulence resulting in [ʋ]. Or if they do touch, turbulence is brief and becomes voiceless as [f].

- vet [ʋet] or [fet]

THIS / THIN → [θ̥] / [θ̥]. With labio-dental fricatives (both voiced and unvoiced) are realized by placing the tongue blade behind the front teeth. Instead of allowing vibration to occur in the manner of a fricative, it is articulated as a plosive.

- these [θ̥is]
- thin [θ̥ɪn]

RED → [ɹ̥]. Many Danish speakers have learned to articulate the alveolar approximant [ɹ]. However, particularly in older speakers, the initial R is realized toward the rear of the mouth as a light uvular fricative [ɹ̥].

Medial Positions

MEDIAL PLOSIVES – With medial plosives [p, t, k, b, d, g], use minimal plosion, almost gliding over the forceful release of air.

MEDIAL T – Continuing with the idea of medial plosives, [t] sounds dentalized into [t̥^s]

- hotter [hɒt̥^sə]

MEDIAL FRICATIVES – Turbulence in the medial fricatives [f, v, θ, ð, s, z, ʃ, ʒ] is frequently light or minimal. This also contributes to the note on elisions below.

- brother [brʌð̥ə]

ELSIONS – On multi-syllabic words (of more than 2 syllables), I noticed a tendency to elide or eliminate unstressed medial syllables. If it was pronounced, the stress was very weak.

- California [ˌkæɪˈfɒnjə]

MEDIAL -NG- – For words with a medial “ng”, the [ŋ] is not articulated. Whereas native English speakers might, depending on the word, include the [ŋ] following the [ŋ].

- English [ˈɪŋlɪʃ]

Final Positions

RHOTICITY– Likely because of British English instruction in school, there is either an absence of rhoticity or a light rhotic quality for vowel-r clusters, whether in mid- or final positions. When heard, it will take the form of the [ɹ] as a light uvular fricative.

FINAL L/LL – Final [l] takes on a more forward quality, although the articulation is made in the back, with the back of the tongue rising to meet the velum as the tip remains behind the lower teeth.

DEVOICING FINALS

- [-v] → [f]
- [-gz] → [-ks]
- [d̥] → light [d] or [t̪]

FINAL PLOSIVES - Glottal stop quality [ʔ] are often used for final plosives [p, t, k, b, d, g]. If the final plosive is articulated, the effect can be very light.

-ED ENDINGS – Past tense forms of verbs ending with “-ed” tend to disappear, either into a light plosive, glottal stop, or nothing.

-ES ENDINGS – In plural or possessive forms of nouns and present tense forms of verbs, the articulated [-əs, - əz, -ɪs, -ɪz] disappears.

- chooses [tʃʊs]
- juices [tʃʊs] ([tʃ]) would be lighter than it might be for “choose”)

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

GENERATIONAL OBSERVATIONS

There is a detectable difference in the Danish accent of English between generations. In general, Danes born in the late-1960s and after tend to follow a North American accent while those born prior speak with a more British sound. This is important to note in the overall quality of the speech, affecting such prominent differences in the accents as the BATH lexical set and prosody.

STØD

The stød is a suprasegmental feature occurring in some dialects of Danish used to distinguish certain words, a phonemic feature occurring as either a glottal stop or as

creaky voice. This particular type of coming together of the vocal folds does not replace consonants, but functions as a brief stress. For some Danish words, this laryngeal participation differentiates words that would otherwise be pronounced identically.

This sound is also carried lightly over into English, occurring mostly in stressed syllables or monosyllabic words, happening between the vowel and consonant, or sometimes after the consonant or vowel at the end of the word. It would be more pronounced when the last sound of the word or stressed syllable is a plosive [p, t, k, b, d, g].

In IPA notation, the stød is represented as a superscript “ʔ”, transcribed as a suprasegmental feature of the sound preceding it. The voiced alveolar plosive with the stød feature would be transcribed as [dʔ]. This symbol should not be confused with the obstruent [ʔ].

STRESS AND RHYTHM

Particularly when fluent, the rhythm is quick and even. Not unlike Danish itself, ends of words commonly get chopped off. This might also explain why some consonants are light, glided over, or not articulated.

The levels of stress tend to range from mid-level to very weak, with few strong stresses. In fact, those two qualities (mid-level and very weak) are the dominant stresses, without much variation in between. In a sentence, the first words would be mid-level and the rest would weak, almost trailing off. For example:

- I AM GOING TO THE STORE to buy some bread and milk.

Interesting to note, because Norwegian and Swedish languages *can be* (not are) mutually intelligible with Danish depending on the speaker/listener, the Danish speaker may consciously pronounce all sounds in the spelling when speaking in order to facilitate understanding. Whereas many sounds would simply be dropped or chopped off when speaking exclusively with Danes. Accordingly, one person described this as approaching a different language called simply “Scandinavian.”

TONALITY / INTONATION

Overall, Danes speak from a lower register in their voices without much pitch variation. It can be described as almost unmelodic, musically even-leveled.

Just as in North American English, statements end in a downward inflection. However, particularly younger speakers, intonation phrases within larger sentences commonly end in upspeak, or rising inflections.

- I AM GOING TO THE / STORE to buy some bread and milk.

PROMINENT DANES

Born mid-1960s and younger

- Malou Ejdesgaard – b. 1991 – tennis player
- Caroline Wozniacki – b. 1990 – tennis player
- Jan Magnussen – b. 1973 – race car driver
- Nicolas Winding Refn – b. 1970 – film director
- Mads Mikkelsen – b. 1965 – actor

Born mid-1960s and older

- Brigitte Nielsen – b. 1963 – actor
- Susanne Bier – b. 1960 – film director
- Lone Scherfig – b. 1959 – film director
- Lars von Trier – b. 1956 – film director
- Victor Borge – b. 1909 – pianist, humorist