

ERIK HANSEN AND LARS HELTOFT:

Grammatik over det Danske Sprog I-III.

Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab, Syddansk Universitetsforlag,
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Grammatik over det Danske Sprog (GDS) completes the ‘project’ in recent decades of producing a modern comprehensive ‘reference grammar’ for each of the mainland Scandinavian languages (Danish, Norwegian and Swedish), written in the native languages. The Norwegian and Swedish grammars appeared at the end of the 1990s, while grammatical enthusiasts had to wait more than a decade longer

for the Danish contribution. In terms of length, it slots in neatly between the shorter, one-volume *Norsk referansegrammatikk* (1997) with its ca. 1200 pages and the enormous *Svenska Akademiens grammatik* (1999) in four volumes, covering ca. 2800 pages. According to the authors, it was written over a 12-year period between 1992 and 2007 (*GDS* I:12). So there were a few lacunae in the composition – and there is also a considerable gap between the alleged completion date and the publication of the work in 2011; the date of the ‘forord’ (preface) is given as ‘June 2009’ (*GDS* I:13).

There is no doubt that this Danish grammar is an impressive achievement. The presentation is extremely attractive, with a plethora of examples and figures clearly set out, though resulting in little actual text on the average page, and both paragraph and sub-paragraph headings appear in red. There is every reason to congratulate both the authors and the publishers on this feat. Hansen and Heltoft (H&H) place their work in the tradition of ‘four predecessors’ (Høysgaard, Mikkelsen, Wiwel and Diderichsen), whereas Aage Hansen’s 3-volume work *Moderne dansk* (1967), specifically mentioned in DSL’s Preface to *GDS* as the last comprehensive treatment of Danish grammar in Danish before the present work (*GDS* I:9), is somewhat surprisingly excluded from this ‘tradition’, though there are a number of references to it along the way. Presumably, H&H did not find anything of theoretical inspiration in it.

GDS is intended as both a theoretical and a descriptive work; the former because it aims to provide a ‘coherent and novel description [!] of Danish on a functional and largely semantic foundation’, and the latter because it is also meant to be a reference work (*GDS* I:11). This dual purpose is not unproblematic (see below), and H&H are forced to admit that they have prioritised a coherent theoretical approach over the more practical exemplification and the philological aspects (*ibid.*). One consequence of this is that the division into three volumes does not represent a consecutive treatment.

In Vol. I (pp. 1-416) H&H introduce the key elements of the terminology and the various topics that are expanded and exemplified in the last two volumes. Thus in Ch. I ‘Sprogvidenskabelig indledning’ (Linguistic introduction) (pp. 15-150) they explain the theoretical

underpinning of the grammar, and in Ch. II 'Morfologisk og syntaktisk oversigt' (Morphological and syntactic overview) (pp. 153-342) they present a range of grammatical topics, such as word classes, inflections, word-formation, syntactic constructions, word order phenomena and syntactic stress, which are analysed in much greater detail in Vols. II and III.

Vol. II (the longest, pp. 417-1168) deals primarily with nominal and verbal constructions, but there are also chapters on the function and syntax of minor word categories, while Vol. III (pp. 1169-1842) focuses on the sentence, including types of construction, clause types and topology (word order), offering a new and more elaborate version of the kind of sentence schema originally conceived by Paul Diderichsen.

It is obviously impossible to give more than a vague flavour of a work of this magnitude and complexity in a short review, and the selection of material for this will always be subjective. One can easily lose oneself (also in the sense of getting lost) in the myriad of details and examples. This can indeed be very rewarding since there is much new material to admire and come to grips with and many fresh angles to view it from, but when one goes on to study aspects of Vols. II and III it is necessary to be constantly mindful of the terms and definitions introduced in Vol. I, and that is asking a lot even of specialists, never mind the general reader.

Among the fundamental principles of this grammar the following ones should be mentioned. First, it is a descriptive, not a normative grammar. This may be a view held in principle by the vast majority of linguists nowadays, if not always acted on in practice, but it is not uncontroversial in a work of this kind. Thus the norm of Danish championed here is characterised by H&H themselves as comprising 'alt nutidigt dansk' (all contemporary Danish) (*GDS* I:22), and they stress that only practicalities prevent them from including dialect material everywhere in their treatment. This 'norm' is even extended to the dialectal varieties found among second generation immigrants, without any reservation. That is rather a broad canvas which strongly implies that the notion of 'correctness' is not relevant for a grammatical description. It would be difficult to uphold that view in grammars aimed at foreign learners, and it is significant that many examples in

H&H are marked with an asterisk as being ungrammatical, irrespective of whether someone might have uttered them.

Another basic structural approach in H&H is that all syntactic structures must be analysed at two levels: form (expression) and content (meaning). This is *not* the norm in grammars generally, but here it is done consistently (perhaps it should not surprise us too much; it is after all Hjelmslev's homeland). This frequently leads to two different analyses of the same example, but there are undeniably some gains along the way.

H&H further claim that the grammar is functional and has a pragmatic basis so that, unlike most others, it makes explicit fundamental pragmatic distinctions such as types of speech acts, deixis, relevance and other concepts usually dealt with in pragmatics.

When one adds to this H&H's penchant for using new terminology, it can easily lead readers to the conclusion that the authors may have bitten off more than they can chew and that they have been a little too ambitious in their aims. I must confess that I find some of the terminology introduced by H&H simultaneously challenging and exasperating. Unlike their Norwegian and Swedish counterparts, who adopt a fairly traditional terminology, the two Danish authors almost go out of their way to be different and, I suppose, 'innovative' (to use this dreadful but sadly fashionable term). In their defence, they usually explain and argue for the new terms they employ, and at the end of each section there is a brief passage called 'Forudsætninger' (Prerequisites) in which they inform the reader of writers and works that have influenced them.

It is important to stress that this is first and foremost a theoretical work rather than a reference grammar. Indeed, to call it a reference grammar at all is close to being a breach of the trades description act. It is certainly not for the faint-hearted, and even professional linguists may at times struggle to grasp the points made while checking back to Vol. I. Previous reviewers¹ have pointed to flaws and inconsistencies, e.g. in the treatment of the genitive (which for H&H is not a grammatical case) (cf. Therkelsen in NyS 2011:126-9), or the desirability of certain analyses such as the double analysis of prepositional phrases (PPs), on the one hand as a 'katatagme' when the PP is an 'object' but on

the other hand as a 'hypotagme' when it is a locative (adverbial) (*GDS* I:272-3, 280; cf. Platzack in *NyS* 2011:109-10). I share these and other misgivings and have also found some (though not many) typological and other errors. For example, the term 'syntagme' appears on p. 85 and again on pp. 93ff, but without any definition (unlike 'katatagme' and 'hypotagme', which are defined on pp. 93-4, respectively), and it does not even appear in the Index at the end of Vol. I. Are all readers supposed to know this term?

However, no work of this magnitude can be perfect or satisfy everybody. This is unquestionably the most comprehensive treatment of Danish grammar for more than a generation and, not least because of its novel approach, it will almost certainly remain so for decades to come. It has already made itself indispensable for anyone with a keen interest in this subject, but it does require a very good knowledge of Danish to benefit from it as well as some familiarity with linguistic terminology, even if that is often challenged along the way. But it is not for the general reader without any familiarity with grammatical concepts or understanding of linguistic analysis at a fairly advanced level, and it is of course confined to people who can read Danish.

¹ See, for example, the reviews of different parts of *GDS* by four Scandinavian linguists in *NyS* [*Nydanske Sprogstudier*] 41, 2011: 93-177. It should be mentioned that these reviews are written in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish.

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