



From all over the world... The sign of a compas and flagmaker's workshop, Copenhagen, Denmark

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The thinking behind this dictionary is highly relevant to many nations in the world in which immigrants have problems with learning the national language of the 'host country'.

...// 153 ...

**MAKING A BASIC DICTIONARY FOR ADULT IMMIGRANTS:
PRACTICAL AND LEXICOGRAPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

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This article discusses the principles, planning and practical work behind *Dansk Grundordbog*, a *Basic Dictionary of Danish* which was published in late 1994.¹

The article is inspired in no small degree by the incisive, but fair and not necessarily unkind, criticism to which it was subjected by Henning Bergenholtz (1995).²

Given the nature of the target audience of the *Basic Dictionary*, as well as the limitations in its size, no long discussion of the ideas behind it could be given in the Dictionary itself. This article is therefore the first comprehensive presentation of many decisions made in the planning and the making of the dictionary. I submit that some of the ideas have a validity beyond this particular realisation of dictionary work. I also posit that, being largely an outsider to lexicographical work,³ I may make some points, perhaps even controversial ones, without being suspected of having vested interests.

The concept of 'learner dictionaries', 'Lehrnerwörterbücher', has been discussed exhaustively Ekkehard Zöfgen (1994) with a general application to the major European languages and the foreign language learners' use of them. Ekkehard Zöfgen amply demonstrates that the FL needs in major speech communities are largely catered for. This does not apply to most minor speech communities, except for Sweden, which, perhaps because immigrants now make up more than 15% of the population, has seen the creation of the monolingual Swedish *Lexin* comprising nearly 30,000 lemmas.⁴

The aspects I shall discuss here therefore command a certain paradigmatic interest: today's world is not only multicultural and multiethnic, but also multilingual. Furthermore, although some wealthy nations, publishers and interest groups do have the resources to go to the cutting edge of dictionary research, there will in all countries - and especially in small ones such as Denmark - be minority groups which are so marginalised that no major effort in dictionary work will ever be mounted solely on their behalf.

The history of our dictionary started at a purely personal level. I used to have a young lodger, an intelligent and well-educated Somalian man, whose Danish was good. At one stage he began to work day and night amid his type-writer and papers, an unusual occurrence. So, naturally, I asked him what he was doing, and he told me that he and some friends ...// 154 ... were making a word-list for the c. 150-200 Somalians in Denmark who knew no Danish. He showed me how they were going about it.

They used a dictionary (*Gjellerups gule ordbog*) of which a sample page is shown in Illustration 1.

Illustration 1

- blind, blindt, blinde**
= som ikke kan se; »kattens killinger er blinde de første par dage«
- blindtarmsbetændelse, blindtarmsbetændelsen, +, +**
= sygdom i blindtarmen (som er en lille tarm der ikke fører nogen steder hen, altså er blind - ligesom en blind vej)
- blink, blinket, blink, blinkene**
»stop for blink!« = stands når lamperne blinker
- blinke, blinker, blinkede, blinket, blinkende**
- blitz, blitzen, blitz, blitzene**
= kraftigt lys (til fotografering)
- blive, bliver, blev, blevet, blivende**
- blod, blodet, +, +**
- bloddonor, bloddonoren, bloddonorer, bloddonorene**
= én der giver blod
- blok, blokken, blokke, blokkene**
1) »en tegneblok« = et bundt tegnepapir der er limet sammen
2) »en klippeblok« = et stykke af en klippe (et bjerg)
3) »en husblok« = et stort hus med mange lejligheder



blokade, blokaden, blokader, blokaderne
= spærring, forhindring

This they transcribed and then inserted whatever (few) Somalian equivalents they could find (Illustration 2).

Illustration 2

blink, blinket, blinke, blinkene = sangallo
« stop for blink; stands, når lamperne blinker » 1staaq blinke laydika Bekafiyd
blinke, blinker, blinkede, hvor blinket = sangallo
blokade, blokaden, blokader, blokader, blokaderne =
== spærring; forhindring = joojidi kaviwooyid

This was clearly inadequate. The so-called dictionary of Danish which served as the basis for the

Even to my non-lexicographical eye this was inadequate. The so-called dictionary of Danish which served as the basis for the Somalian word-list was a dictionary for the third to the sixth grade, that is for 9 to 12 year-old Danish school-children. In the first place, many of the areas which are naturally of interest to adults will not appear in a book of that calibre at all. Secondly, it was difficult, indeed impossible to see any consistent criteria for the selection of the Danish words selected. ...// 155 ... Thirdly, the book was geared towards a native audience, not learners of Danish as a foreign language. The purpose of this dictionary is not clear,⁵ but it is used extensively by Danish teachers for learners of Danish as a foreign language. At the time, of course, I did not know this. The

Somalian efforts came to naught, as key members found jobs and moved to different parts of the country.

However, I had become curious and checked with educational bodies and publishing houses. These inquiries brought to light some interesting information.

In Denmark, there are nationwide something like ten to twenty groups of immigrants who conceive the idea of making a dictionary every year. Most groups never get beyond this stage. A few reach a stage at which they will contact organisations which offer language teaching for people outside the orthodox educational system.⁶ They may also contact a publisher. One or two gain something concrete out of the exercise, normally a modest word-list, most often known only to insiders. In one case which had generated interest and money, work had led to the making of a large dictionary whose only drawback was that it did not cover the average target users' needs: it was too academic.

A cursory check revealed that there were no adequate word-lists in Danish available for foreigners which

(a) took into account the fact that some of the potential users might be unfamiliar with dictionary usage in general,

(b) paid heed to the very important fact that Danish pronunciation has developed independently of Danish orthography for nearly 400 years and that the foreigner facing Danish must essentially learn *two* foreign languages (and not one), and

(c) were based on frequency lists of Danish.

Additional problems are:

(a) that no one group of immigrants seemed large enough to make a separate word-list or dictionary a viable undertaking,

(b) that no body or organisation seemed willing to foot the bill for an all-out effort, and

(e) that no word-list or dictionary focused on covering the needs of foreigners attempting to become integrated into Danish society and culture.

There was, in other words, a genuine need for a word-list or a small dictionary, but there were also definitely problems galore. I therefore decided to rectify this situation, but set a strict limit on the amount of time allotted: it must take no more than one year, including the planning. Information was collected and planning began. In due time, Ms Inge Padkær Nielsen joined me and we received some small but crucial grants which meant that, at the end of the line, there was a publisher who was willing to accept the financial risk.

Serious talks with the publisher started immediately and concentrated on the identification of the target group. The figures for exotic foreign national immigrants could be drawn from official statistics, but, in the process, it also dawned on us that potential groups might also involve learners of Danish in other contexts, for instance Erasmus students on brief stays in Denmark, ...// 156 ... learners of Danish at Nordic departments of foreign universities or on courses at

the (relatively few) Institutes for Danish Culture. Although this realisation affected the actual form of the dictionary in so far as we gave English equivalents (a point to be discussed below), it did not substantially influence thinking behind the dictionary: the basic premises still remained as follows:

(a) The dictionary must be a small manageable pocket-sized edition which could be used in the initial stages of learning the language and culture of Denmark;

(b) For this reason it must comprise only 3,000 words. This vocabulary is not enough for a foreigner to survive on a long-term basis, but it would suffice to give the essential basis for Danish. The dictionary would thus have an inbuilt inadequacy of which we were fully aware;⁵

(c) it must comprise both the written form and the pronunciation of the Danish words listed.

(d) it must include fields in which knowledge of the correct words is absolutely essential.

Having set up these premises, we started to check other works, first and foremost dictionaries and word-lists, including the Swedish *Lexin*, but to our surprise there was precious little that we could use. So, in addition to common sense, we found only two main points of departure, namely frequency lists (to which I shall briefly return) and cognitive approaches to generalist situations.

(a) The latter are presented in what I shall here term 'thematic lists'. They were based on everyday life contexts and their associated words. The publisher informed us that it would be easy and cheap to get drawings which could direct the users to the appropriate thematic lists when they needed words from that context. Our main problem was therefore to make these lists as precise and as relevant as possible. We did, in fact, check a number of phrase-books, not only for Danish, but also for other languages. They furnished us with a few ideas, but, since most essential elements in basic linguistic contexts, such as the order of numerals, are beyond dispute, thematic lists involving these issues require more or less the same effort no matter whether they are copied or made from scratch. These phrase-books therefore served mostly as a control in some areas.

Others themes, for instance shopping lists, were made up and supplemented as we mentally and physically went shopping while keeping the dictionary at the back of our minds.

These lists were placed in one section of the book. I think they are worth further comment. Illustration 3 lists national and religious holidays.

Illustration 3

højtid = religious feast:

jul = Christmas
 påske = Easter
 pinse = Whitsun

hellig = holiday:

juledag = Christmas Day
 påskedag = Easter Day
 pinsedag = Whitsunday
 Kristi himmelfartsdag =
 Ascension Day
 bededag = fourth Friday
 after Easter

Grundlovsdag = Constitution Day (5 June)

1. maj = Workers' International Day

Other lists comprised numerals, weekdays, seasons, months, times, meals, directions, etc, but they are limited to those that we considered central. Therefore there are no lists of areas which we foresaw would explode the number of words listed and of areas where users would have to obtain more information from other sources than we could offer with our limited space. This, for instance, is the reason why there are virtually no words concerned with the complex Danish educational system.

Being a woman, a mother and my junior by twenty years, my colleague Inge Padkær Nielsen naturally introduced a few items which I (as a male) would not have considered, such as 'pregnant', 'blood pressure', 'antenatal health course':

Illustration 4.

Illustration 4

FØDSEL = BIRTH

gravid = pregnant
 graviditet = pregnancy
 svangerskab = pregnancy
 jordemor = midwife
 undersøgelse = examination
 menstruation = period
 blodtryk = blood pressure
 vægt = weight
 fødselsforberedelse = antenatal health course

In addition, we introduced a few central cultural features which are highly charged in Danish contexts. As shown in Illustration 5, these include, for instance, the names of the largest islands, the best known places of historical, cultural and social importance, and then the words for features in the countryside and weather which are most eminently characteristic of Denmark:

Illustration 5

**DANSKE LOKALITETER =
LOCALITIES IN DENMARK**

- København = Copenhagen
- Århus
- Ålborg
- Odense
- Skagen = The Skaw
- Grenen
- Vesterhavet = The North Sea
- klitter = dunes
- fiskeri = fishing
- fiskekutter = fishing boat
- Rebild Bakker
- Rold Skov
- Himmelbjergel
- Jelling
- Århus
- Den Gamle By = The Old Town
- Legoland
- Dybbøl
- Odense
- H.C. Andersens hus = H. C. Andersen's House
- Helsingør
- Kronborg
- Hillerød
- Frederiksborg Slot
- Roskilde
- Roskilde Domkirke
- Kongegravene = The King's Tombs



A Chinese tourist sees Danish (immigrant?) children at the royal palaces

... // 158 ... In the course of our discussions, we also realised that it would be wise to have a list of taboo words, which the unwary learner should be warned about:

Bandeord og ord der ikke bør bruges = swearwords and words to avoid

Her er de mest almindelige bandeord på dansk. Vi fraråder brugen af dem, fordi bandeord på et hvilket som helst sprog altid virker mere stødende og mere socialt deklasserende, når de bruges af personer, der er i færd med at lære sproget og endnu ikke taler dette lig så flydende som en indfødt.

fanden	sgu
fandeme	skide
fandens	eddermaneme
saian	røvhul
sateme	pis

The 'thematic lists' were then supplemented with a critical selection from frequency lists, especially that of Henning Bergenholtz (1992), which essentially supplied us with 1,200-1,400 of the most common Danish words, thus bringing the total to 3,000 words.

Illustration 7

blindtarm ['blen,tɑ: 'm], sub. en -,
 -en ['blen,tɑ: 'mən],
 -e ['blen,tɑ: mə],
 -ene ['blen,tɑ: mənə] = appendix
blinke ['blɛŋgə], verb.
 -r ['blɛŋgɐ],
 -de ['blɛŋgəðə],
 har -t ['blɛŋgəð] = twinkle
blinklys ['blɛŋg.ly: 's], sub. et -,
 -et ['blɛŋg.ly: 'səð],
 -,
 -ene ['blɛŋg.ly: 'sənə] = indicator
blive ['bli: (v)ə], verb.
 -r ['bli: 'vɐ el. bli: 'ɛ],
 blev ['ble: '(v)],
 er blevet ['ble: (v)əð] =
 stay / become
blod ['bloð'], sub.
 -et ['blo: 'ðəd] = blood

These 3,000 words were then listed in alphabetical order, and we decided to give the full conjugation of each word as well as the pronunciation of each conjugated form, as seen in Illustration 7. The decision to give the full inflections may seem excessive, but we chose to do this simply because Danish pronunciation is tricky: in other words, as we were geared towards an audience which might comprise many users unfamiliar with grammar rules, our guiding principle was 'safety first'. We shied away from the ...// 159 ... condensation advocated elsewhere in this volume by Herbert Wiegand, and, we believe with good reason: Illustration 2 showed that, to the Somalians, the conjugated forms were important; it is telling that the Swedish *Lexin*, which is meant for immigrants, also lists the conjugated forms: in the intersection between lexicography and language acquisition, people with experience as foreign language teachers will favour

extension at the expense of condensation.

The phonetic system we used deserves comment, too. It has been developed specifically for Danish by Peter Molbæk Hansen, and our choice of it was dictated by pragmatic reasons: the author was willing to do some programming and supply us with the appropriate pronunciation at a reasonable price. Since it is not identical with the International Phonetic Alphabet, we tried it out ourselves first and concluded that it could be mastered in an hour; in this context it is not irrelevant that the international phonetic alphabet is, after all, not known to very many people and hence only to a few of our potential users.

By this stage, we had discussed the book with many people who offered their ideas about the dictionary, and - with some difficulty - Inge also interviewed potential users to establish their needs. This latter operation was not a success, for they were merely delighted to meet a Dane and they were not interested in our questions.

Nevertheless, these contacts as well as the publisher, raised the question of the use of other languages than Danish in the dictionary. Inge suggested that a grammar would be useful. In connection with this work, we concluded that we would keep to the Latin - not the Danish - grammatical terms because they were more universal and might be known to educated users of our dictionary.

After much discussion (and soul-searching on my part) we also decided that in all likelihood many users would come to Danish via English. We therefore made the most sparing glosses, supplying the Danish words with only one English lexical approximation, in order to emphasise the fact that the dictionary is not a bilingual one.

The publisher agreed with us that these English equivalents would serve as a key to the location of Danish words in the dictionary, because, roughly speaking, the complete core Danish vocabulary (which derived from frequency lists) would be found only once (namely in the alphabetical list), whereas 'content' words would be found both in the alphabetical and in the thematic lists. Somehow or other this index never materialised, which was bad. However, a disaster befell when the book was ready for publication and it turned out that the price for the illustrations we had counted on for signposting the thematic lists was not modest but astronomical. A stop-gap solution provided illustrations for certain 'thematic lists'. However, there are admittedly long lists of lemmas without sufficient pictures for the guidance of users.

So the *Basic Dictionary* now comprises three parts: an alphabetical listing of all 3,000 words with their pronunciation, a grammar, and a content section with thematic lists of words.

In hindsight, we can see that we have made errors. Some of them are laughable, as when we list a plural form of 'sexuality'.

Some of our English equivalents are definitely open to challenge.

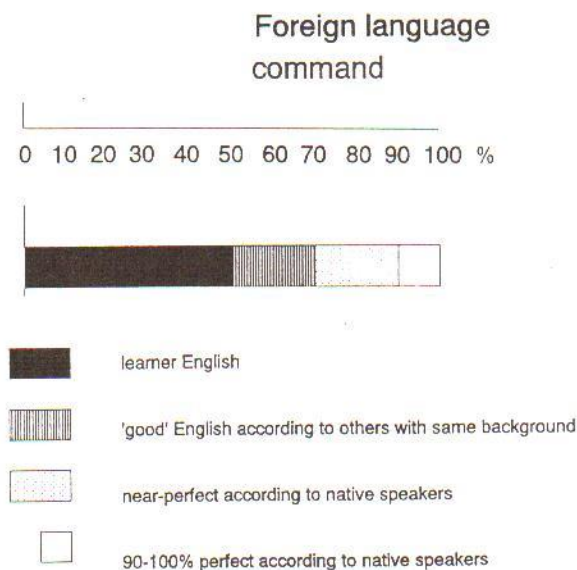
It was an error in terms of consistency to add sentences.

It was unwise not to include a brief description of Danish word-formation in the grammar.

Nevertheless, I suggest that this modest dictionary contributes to metalexigraphy by expanding on or adding something to the traditional concept of the learner and consequently to the concept of learner dictionaries, 'Lernerwörterbücher', because of the specific historical, social and political reality that inspired it and because the dictionary is an attempt to meet a new need in the field of dictionary use.

Everybody is agreed that monolingual dictionaries are useful for native speakers and for advanced students of the foreign language. The sooner the foreign learner can move from a bilingual dictionary to a monolingual target language dictionary the better. ...// 160 ... But bilingual dictionaries are also needed in some form or other for everybody involved with binary language pairs, ranging from the beginner to the bilingual translator. However, the implicit understanding behind these views is that one starts with an L1 and then gradually moves closer to an L2 along a fairly clear-cut axis, through various stages of proficiency [for a detailed discussion, see no. 172 on this homepage]

Illustration 8



This axis of learning between any binary language pair is unique and any teacher of a foreign language in any country will know what types of interference errors to expect from students.

However, this does not apply to immigrants and refugees in Denmark and other small countries. In these countries, immigrants and refugees will have no teacher speaking their own language. They are not going to move through a leisurely progression during which they are always within reassuring distance of

their mother tongue. If they have teachers at all, these will be Danes who speak Danish throughout. If they have no teachers, they must muddle through. The Yugoslav and Turkish guest workers of the 1960s expected to go back home and therefore had little motivation to learn the languages of the nations in need of their manpower and which therefore had an interest in seeing them survive. There was no real, or at least no perceived, problem. On the other hand, similar situations have probably always existed, but have just been overlooked, certainly in Northern European countries, from which (as mentioned) we found no useful antecedent material, but also in all likelihood in the rest of Europe, where the intersections between language acquisition, language mastery, bilingualism and lexicography have been heavily influenced by Eurocentrism. The world is now changing and more and more often we will meet people who cannot return to their native countries and who have no decision-makers speaking their language in the country in which they now live.

There is, simply, a new type of learner. These people are not even learners, in our traditional, Eurocentric sense, for their learning process does not involve an L1, evident throughout the teaching process. ...// 161... To them teaching involves only one language which is hardly an L2, since there is no natural point of departure. These learners do not come from a well-defined 'outside', but start to exist 'inside'. The learning process it starts and ends in the language which the learners are ultimately expected to command, and we might accordingly term it the 'host language'. It is not one which they come to understand by means of a slow process of comprehension and assimilation into their personalities, but it represents a totally alien world in which they are, as it were, starting from scratch, with a 'tabula rasa'. This may be a kind of rebirth, but is more adequately likened to a feeling of waking, with all memory of the past lost, or to a time traveller who gets stuck in an alien period of time.

It will be understood from these comments that the users we had in mind and who swayed our thinking were not Erasmus students, who can make phone-calls to Mum and Dad, but rather the Somalian refugees who have nowhere to turn but to the host nation when they try to establish a footing. But it will also be understood that Eurocentric ideas affected the *Basic Dictionary*, most obviously in the use of English equivalents. They are placed at the end of the entry, a point which has also been criticised (Bergenholtz 1995). This placement was adopted both because it would still allow for writing in equivalents in other languages because it would emphasise that the *Basic Dictionary* was no bilingual dictionary.

The question of English equivalents is tricky, and I shall keep to the ideological points here. The situation in which Danish teachers teach Danish to newly integrated guest residents is not really comparable to two other situations which might come easily to mind. The first is the fairly recent idea of using only L2 in the classroom, so that teachers of English in, for instance, the Arab world and many European countries, including this one, speak English only. Firstly, this is not

due to ignorance on the teachers' part: on the contrary, it can be argued from a pedagogical point of view that the non-native teacher reinforces some (mother tongue) interference errors. Secondly, neither teacher nor students are cut off from the L1: they easily return to their L1 environment, and may indeed do so in class. Thirdly, this approach is based on a Eurocentric approach, which may be appropriate in European contexts, but is definitely not so outside that context.

Bergenholtz (1995) cites the former usage of Latin as the *lingua franca* of dictionaries as a comparable situation. But the situation is not comparable in that the elitist users of the 17th and 18th century dictionaries were educated and would have known Latin well. In a modern context neither of these presuppositions can be taken for granted.

The persons for whom our dictionary is ultimately intended must go through an initiation, leading to immediate comprehension of parts of the host language and culture. Otherwise they will be human jetsam on the tide of history, cast ashore on an alien island.

Despite the sales talk on the blurb (which we wrote ourselves) the target group is limited: what I see on the streets and in the shops of Denmark are often middle-aged men who are not keen to learn Danish and who gladly leave social contacts to their wives who in turn frequently rely on interpreting carried out by a child. They are indeed jetsam, and normally so by choice. The target group for our dictionary are young people, aged c. 16 to 35, who come Denmark and really want to become integrated into a society which they may not have heard about until a few days before arrival.

So we were clearly guided by ideas about how people try to orient themselves, both in terms of space, such as 'up' and 'down' (as shown in Illustration 9, as well as in terms of positioning on the map, shown in Illustration 4 (above) and so on. ...// 162 ...

Finally, I wish to return to the fact that we found precious little antecedent work of any use. The Swedish *Lexin* was far too complex for the need we were trying to meet. In fact, the closest approximation found was a word-list in Danish and Arabic and in which we recognised some features close to our own ideas, although the author was not consistent for long. I have also pointed out that phrase books were as close as we ever came to antecedents.

The reasons for this state of affairs are obvious. The need identified is not really visible to academics, because the people with these needs are not within shouting distance of academia. Secondly, even academics who are aware of the need, are so only to a degree: I suggest that it requires some personal experience (often at a low social level) involving total 'immersion' in a foreign culture whose language one does not know, to appreciate how handicapped people are without a knowledge of the language. Thirdly, it is not academically rewarding to do such work.

So dictionary work for the new type of learners, with only a well-defined 'host

language' and no L1 to depart from in language teaching, is left to amateurs and idealists who can be taken to task by specialists such as Henning Bergenholtz (1995). Our grandiose statements about European users were imposed on us by market forces, by the need to legitimise the publication of the dictionary. The need to learn the basics of a language without any contrastive teaching (and background), however, does exist, and presumably, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, much more so in minor speech communities like Denmark than in bigger ones. In addition, Danish has the problem of comprising two languages, namely an oral and a written version, which are light-years apart. So by suggesting some solutions in that context alone, we believe that our work is worthwhile. If it can offer ideas about bridging the gap between the spoken and the written language in dictionaries from other societies, so much the better.

I claimed that the work was of paradigmatic interest: the errors are obvious and should be avoided by others; we will make up for them if ever we are given a chance to revise the dictionary. Yet the idea of making a dictionary which arranged according to themes of importance for full-fledged survival in an alien host society and combining this with a corpus-based frequency list is sound.⁸

At all events, the final point is that there is a need for a kind of dictionary which is not bilingual, and not monolingual in the traditional sense, but is made for the immediate and thorough understanding of host languages and societies in today's multicultural world.

Notes

1. I am indebted, first and foremost, to Inge Padkær Nielsen, co-author of the dictionary. In addition, there have been numerous people in Denmark who have proffered information. I also wish to thank 'Dronning Margrethe og Prins Henriks Fond', 'Overretssagfører L. Zeuthens Fond', and 'Georg Bestle og Hustrus Mindelegat' for grants which were essential to the successful completion of the dictionary.
2. The editors of *LexicoNordica* graciously offered space for a reply to Henning Bergenholtz's review, thus setting a fine standard for scholarly debate. Our answer - in Danish - was, however, fairly brief, and the present article covers a host of questions which our 1995 reply left unanswered.
3. My main areas are translation studies, foreign language teaching and reader response.
4. The thinking behind *Lexin* coincides with ours in giving all conjugated forms, but the entries are, we believed, far too cumbersome. Nevertheless, the *Lexin* dictionary is now making a profit (private information from Henning Bergenholtz).
5. There is no preface to account for its existence although the names of the authors are given (Johan Brinth & Niels Holst).
6. These organisations typically organise evening classes ('AOF', 'FOF') and are

autonomous, albeit heavily subsidised.

7. BASIC and similar limited word-lists are not promoted by serious foreign language teachers. The 3,000 words in the *Basic Dictionary of Danish* do not constitute a sufficiently large store for complete integration into Danish culture and a comprehensive command of Danish, although this seems to be assumed by Kaas & Riiber (1996: 26): in a study of individual vocabularies in English as a foreign language, we (Dollerup & Glahn & Rosenberg (1984)) concluded that, once a foreigner knows 5-7,000 words of English, there will be no problems in understanding written English. The reason is presumably that a vocabulary at this level and above also embeds information about word-formation and will always provide sufficient contextual clues to allow for the decoding of an 'unfamiliar word'. I believe the number of words needed for a command of written Danish is much the same for learners of Danish and indeed for most European languages.

8. The *Basic Dictionary* had sold slightly above 1,000 copies (in a country with 5.2 million people of which c. 150,000 are of non-Danish origin) in April 1996 (after 16 months). This figure is very close to the publisher's expectations and also involved a marginal profit.

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Cherry trees in bloom, Langelinie,
Copenhagen, Denmark