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SPEAKING DANISH, BEING DANISH?

**REFUGEE PERSPECTIVES ON
LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND
BELONGING IN DENMARK**



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Refugee Perspectives on Language, Identity, and
Belonging in Denmark

Maaria Mueen Kanwar

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in Denmark

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1. INTRODUCTION

Much research has examined refugees, particularly their integration and participation (or lack thereof) in Danish society (Bech et al., 2017; Holmen, 2025; Vitting-Seerup, 2017). While integration has become an omnipresent buzzword in political and public discourse, the concept itself remains “exceptionally unclear” (Rytter & Ghandchi, 2020, p. 188). Nevertheless, it has evolved into both a “political ambition” and a “desirable imagined horizon” (Rytter & Ghandchi, 2020, p. 189) – an ideological abstraction disproportionately imposed on refugees compared to other immigrant groups (Kirilova & Lønsmann, 2020, p. 43,52). Thus, integration is not just encouraged but required, and Danish is constructed as the primary means of achieving it (Kirilova & Lønsmann, 2020, p. 51).

The ideology that “in Denmark we speak Danish, and only Danish” reflects a broader belief that language, territory, and nationality are inseparably linked, reinforcing the idea that Danish holds the highest societal value as the national language while positioning all other languages, including English, as secondary or insufficient (Kirilova & Lønsmann, 2020, p. 50). As a result, integration is not only measured through language but also narrowly defined by it.

Refugees are expected to learn Danish, as surrounding discourse positions Danish acquisition as a moral and symbolic obligation (Kirilova & Lønsmann, 2020, p. 43). As Øhrstrøm (2010) argues, it is worth asking how many would learn Danish if they were not socially or institutionally expected to. This rests on the ideology that “if you live in Denmark, you must speak Danish,” and as a result, many refugees believe – or have been made to believe – that mastering Danish is the path to a normal life and full inclusion in Danish society (Øhrstrøm, 2010, p. 100).

Danish is therefore not only a means of communication in Denmark but also a crucial element of the nation's social and cultural identity. As Kirilova and Lønsmann (2020, p. 38) argue, Danish is framed as the linguistic foundation of Danish national unity, with refugees' proficiency in the language functioning as an index of their social and cultural integration. However, English has become a lingua franca and has de facto gained a status beyond that of a mere foreign language in Denmark (Lønsmann et al., 2024). Yet, as this study will show, for refugees language use is not just about effective communication; Danish remains central to their experiences, often representing a critical symbol of inclusion and 'Danishness.'

Within language psychology, this study explores how refugees perceive and experience the Danish language in relation to identity, inclusion, exclusion, and belonging. To examine these dynamics, this study draws on three theoretical frameworks: Social Identity Theory, Membership Categorization Analysis, and Social Capital Theory. The central research question guiding this study is:

How do refugees in Denmark perceive and navigate the Danish language as a social boundary, and how do their experiences with it shape their sense of identity, inclusion, exclusion, and belonging in Danish society?

2. THEORY

I will first provide a brief introduction to language and Danishness, along with the historical background that forms the basis for understanding the societal and political dynamics of refugee integration in Denmark. This will provide important context for the subsequent discussion of the three theoretical frameworks.

2.1 Language and Danishness: Constructing Identity and Boundaries

Denmark is widely perceived by Danes and non-Danes alike as ethnolinguistically homogeneous (Jenkins, 2016c). This notion is deeply ingrained and consistently reinforced through various representations of Danish society within political and educational institutions (Jenkins, 2016c). The Danish national identity has historically been framed around the idea of "one nation, one people, one language," reinforcing the interconnection between the Danish language and cultural belonging (Vitting-Seerup, 2017). More than just a means of communication, Danish serves as a key marker of national identity, or 'Danishness' (Jenkins, 2016b). However, this homogeneity is as much an idealized construct as it is a lived reality (Jenkins, 2016b; Lindequist & Lindequist, 2020). Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities helps contextualize this; nations like Denmark are not timeless entities but social constructs built on shared narratives of culture, language, and belonging (Lindequist & Lindequist, 2020). The resulting ideology, that "We should all be the same," became more powerful as it became increasingly taken for granted (Jenkins, 2016a). While these ideologies create a sense of national unity, they also create boundaries that exclude those who do not meet the perceived criteria of Danishness.

However, this widespread perception of Denmark as an ethnolinguistically homogenous nation neglects the deep internal stratification that existed long before the arrival of non-Danish-speaking immigrants (Jørgensen, 2008; Pedersen, 1996). Danish has historically been divided into distinct dialect regions, each tied to geographic and social hierarchies, with the Copenhagen variety emerging as the high-status and hegemonic "standard" legitimized through its grammar and pronunciation (Pedersen, 1996, p. 79). All other classical dialects of Danish were largely eradicated in the second half of the 20th century, and what is now perceived as linguistic homogeneity was, in fact, the result of

a systematic, state-driven process of erasure (Jørgensen, 2008, p. 112). The ideological notion of “one language” and only one “correct” way to speak it, remains deeply embedded in Danish society, despite lacking any linguistically objective foundation (Jørgensen, 2008, p. 37). The internal linguistic hierarchy that already existed among Danes only intensified with the arrival of immigrants and refugees. In a society marked by monolingualism and monoculturalism, the languages spoken by refugees and immigrants were placed at the very bottom of a symbolic hierarchy, with Danish at the top, followed by high-prestige European languages and minority languages consistently devalued in public discourse, education, and policies (Jørgensen, 2008, p. 116).

Denmark has never had a strict language policy, historically maintaining a *laissez-faire* approach (Holmen, 2025; Jørgensen, 2008, p. 112). While an official policy enforcing Danish may not exist, a strong language ideology persists; “The ‘one nation, one language’ ideology: ‘We speak Danish because we are in Denmark’” (Jørgensen, 2008; Lønsmann, 2014, p. 108). This ideology, which specifically emerged due to the arrival of refugees in Denmark, fundamentally influences their reception and integration in the country (Kirilova & Lønsmann, 2020). The construction of Danish speakers versus non-Danish speakers creates social hierarchies, marginalizing those who do not yet speak Danish (Kirilova & Lønsmann, 2020). The ideology further assumes that everyone in Denmark *should* speak Danish, positioning those who do not as outsiders who do not belong in Danish society (Kirilova & Lønsmann, 2020). This binary framing excludes refugees linguistically and symbolically, reinforcing the idea that language proficiency is synonymous with national identity and cultural belonging.

2.2 From Demographic Shift to the Rise of Integration Debates

2.2.1 Historical Context – From Homogeneity to a Multiethnic Society

Although the perception of ethnolinguistic homogeneity in Denmark was the product of internal linguistic erasure, this constructed sense of unity faced significant challenges with the demographic shifts of the late 20th century (Faingold, 2023; Jørgensen, 2008; Togeby, 1998). With the exception of Greenlanders, Denmark had experienced very little non-white immigration before this period (Fair, 2008; Togeby, 1998). Foreign citizens were almost nonexistent, and small groups such as the Jewish community and the German minority living near the German border were considered well-integrated into Danish society (Togeby, 1998). For much of its recent history, Denmark was primarily closed to immigration, with the only legal means of entry being guest workers, asylum seekers, refugees recognized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), or through family reunification (Fair, 2008).

This began to change with the arrival of the first guest workers from Turkey, Pakistan, and Yugoslavia in the 1960s, followed by the influx of war refugees in the 1980s and 1990s from countries such as Iran, Somalia, the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Syria, transforming what was once considered a homogeneous nation into a multiethnic society (Faingold, 2023; Togeby, 1998). Over the decades, the arrival of immigrants, refugees, and their families has significantly changed the social dynamics between "native" Danes and "outsiders" (Fair, 2008).

One evident aspect of this demographic shift was that these foreigners were 'visible strangers,' differing from ethnic Danes in appearance, cultural norms, and language (Faingold, 2023; Vitting-Seerup, 2017). Although refugees had been arriving in Denmark for some time, they were

neither widely considered nor discussed as integral members of Danish society (Vitting-Seerup, 2017). As their presence became more prominent and they gained recognition as long-term societal members, challenging the longstanding notion of Danish unity and homogeneity, they emerged as a political issue requiring integration into Danish society (Faingold, 2023; Vitting-Seerup, 2017).

2.2.2 Language: A Tool for Inclusion and Exclusion in Denmark

The demographic development towards a multicultural society marked the beginning of a political emphasis on language as essential to integration, with public discourses frequently invoking terms like 'Danishness' and 'Danes', particularly in discussions about 'the foreigners', to maintain a unified national identity (Fair, 2008; Lindequist & Lindequist, 2020; Togeby, 1998). Denmark's growing focus on integration was formalized in the 1999 Integration Act, which emphasized alignment with "the fundamental values and norms of Danish society" and institutionalized integration as a structured, legal process (Faingold, 2023, p. 67). The language rules established by the Act have since been expanded and made stricter and tougher in subsequent years (Faingold, 2023, p. 72). Refugees, upon receiving asylum are immediately placed in an integration program, where they must sign an integration declaration affirming that Danish language acquisition is "the key to a good and active life in Denmark" (Kirilova & Lønsmann, 2020, p. 43). As a result, Danish has become widely perceived as the *only* pathway to employment and social inclusion, reinforcing the idea that linguistic assimilation is critical for integration (Kirilova & Lønsmann, 2020).

2.2.2.1 Varying Expectations for Language and Integration in Denmark

The expectation to learn Danish is not evenly distributed among different groups of foreigners. While refugees are required to learn Danish, highly educated immigrants are

merely encouraged to do so (Kirilova & Lønsmann, 2020; Lønsmann, 2014). This distinction positions refugees as burdens on the welfare state, reinforcing the idea that they must 'earn' their place through linguistic and economic assimilation, whereas self-sufficient workers are viewed as valuable contributors to economic growth and human capital (Kirilova & Lønsmann, 2020, p. 38).

Furthermore, refugees are not only expected to learn Danish but to also demonstrate a willingness to integrate through language acquisition (Lønsmann, 2020). Refugees' willingness to learn Danish is perceived as more important for social integration than their actual linguistic proficiency, as it is regarded as both crucial and positively valued, symbolizing a willingness to integrate into Danish society (Lønsmann, 2014). As a result, refugees have internalized a perceived need to learn Danish (Kirilova & Lønsmann, 2020; Lønsmann, 2014).

The 'one nation, one language' ideology reinforces processes of exclusion by positioning Danish as the only natural language in Denmark and creating boundaries between 'Danes' and 'refugees,' as well as between refugees who show interest in learning Danish and those who do not (Lønsmann, 2014). Refugees are held to different standards, reflecting a broader societal emphasis on language not only as a practical tool for communication, but also as a means of enforcing cultural and linguistic conformity (Faingold, 2023; Lønsmann, 2014). By tying social and economic participation to language acquisition, the Integration Act underscored Danish as both a practical necessity and a symbolic marker of belonging (Faingold, 2023).

However, this singular emphasis on language as the sole determinant of integration overlooks other structural barriers to inclusion. Refugees who meet linguistic requirements may still struggle to find employment or social inclusion due to their appearance, accents, or cultural differences (Kirilova & Lønsmann, 2021). While Danish remains framed as the key to successful integration, it often fails to deliver on its promise of inclusion, reinforcing the

paradox that even full fluency does not guarantee acceptance.

2.2.3 Visible Strangers: Barriers Beyond Language

The notion of 'visible strangers' refers to individuals who are perceived as standing out due to visible or audible markers, such as non-white skin, speaking with an accent, or wearing culturally distinct clothing like a headscarf (Vitting-Seerup, 2017). These markers are not inherent qualities of an individual but reflect how surrounding society perceives and positions them (Vitting-Seerup, 2017). Such ascribed characteristics, often shaped by assumptions and prejudice, can only be resisted within certain limits, as some factors are simply unchangeable (Øhrstrøm, 2010). Yet language offers a means for refugees to challenge these perceptions by expressing identities that extend beyond being categorized as a 'foreigner' (Kirilova & Lønsmann, 2020; Øhrstrøm, 2010).

2.2.3.1 Us and Them

However, there is a dominant perception rooted in public discourses and societal ideologies that creates an 'us' versus 'them' dynamic through an ethnocentric narrative (Nassri, 2018). 'Us' refers to those who resemble and sound like 'the Danes,' while 'them' are categorized as different and, therefore, as outsiders (Nassri, 2018). These 'outsiders' are further marginalized through linguistic and visible markers, such as religious symbols, ethnicity, or accent, which reinforce their perceived 'otherness' (Nassri, 2018). These barriers are further reinforced by the broader ideology of Danishness, which is rooted in the historical conception of Denmark as a nation-state that presupposes a one-to-one-to-one relationship between culture, people, and language, while viewing ethnic identity and culture as static entities (Nassri, 2018). As a result, this perceived otherness makes it increasingly difficult for refugees to identify themselves as 'Danish,' as linguistic and visual markers continue to reinforce their position as outsiders.

Another key barrier refugees encounter is the ideology of "perfect Danish" (Kirilova & Lønsmann, 2020). However,

the standard for what qualifies as “good enough” Danish remains ambiguous and perpetually unattainable for many refugees (Kirilova & Lønsmann, 2020). Accents and dialectal variation are often socially penalized, and refugees are frequently described as “poor” or even “unwilling or unable” learners of “proper” Danish (Jørgensen, 2008, p. 115). Some refugees internalize this ideal to the extent that they view their own Danish language abilities as insufficient, even when they are already fluent (Kirilova & Lønsmann, 2020).

Language becomes a double-edged sword in this context. On the one hand, it offers refugees a way to counter ascribed identities and show that they can align with and belong to the ‘us.’ On the other hand, linguistic and visual markers continue to define who is and is not considered Danish. Refugees, despite their efforts to integrate, remain subject to societal perceptions that categorize them as outsiders, ensuring that their inclusion remains conditional and incomplete. These dynamics illustrate how language policies serve as mechanisms of control and exclusion, shaping integration on the terms of the dominant culture.

2.2.4 Previous Research on Language Ideologies among Refugees in Denmark

A recent thesis by Navntoft (2023), “English is the Key: Language Ideologies and Language Choice among Refugees in Denmark,” examines how refugees navigate existing language ideologies regarding Danish and English in their everyday lives. Through interviews with six refugees, Navntoft identifies two coexisting ideologies: “Danish-because-we-are-in-Denmark” and “English-is-the-key.” While the former reflects the perception that speaking Danish is the “respectful” and “right thing to do,” the latter frames English as a practical tool that grants immediate access, opportunity, and independence in Danish society (Navntoft, 2023, p. 55). Navntoft concludes that both languages can enable or limit social inclusion and career advancement, yet factors such as appearance, education, and cultural background also shape refugees’ social positioning.

Navntoft's findings highlight how English can function as both a symbolic and practical resource for refugees in their early stages of integration, allowing them to participate in Danish society despite limited Danish proficiency. The present study builds on and extends this perspective by examining refugees who are further in their integration process, where they are already fluent in English, engaged in employment or education, and navigating Danish as a social and symbolic boundary in their pursuit of inclusion and belonging.

This shift from English as an entry point to Danish as a marker of belonging highlights how language ideologies are not static but evolve in relation to refugees' social positioning and lived experiences. The contrast between English as "the key" and Danish as "the boundary" will be revisited in the discussion, particularly in relation to integration stages and researcher positionality.

2.3 Theoretical Frameworks

Having outlined the broader context, I will now present the three theoretical frameworks mentioned earlier. Social Identity Theory explores how language influences inclusion and exclusion, shaping in-groups and out-groups while affecting refugees' efforts to belong in a society where "perfect Danish" is often expected, but rarely achieved. Membership Categorization Analysis examines how social categories, such as 'Dane' and 'Foreigner,' are constructed and reinforced through language, shaping perceptions of integration and belonging. Finally, Social Capital Theory examines symbolic capital, resources that refugees possess through academic knowledge, professional competence, or language, but which only function as capital if they are socially recognized as valuable. Together these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing how language, identity, and societal expectations interact to shape refugees' experiences with language use in Denmark.

2.3.1 Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner, defines social identity as an individual's understanding of their belonging to certain social groups, along with the emotional and value significance of that membership (Turner, 1982, pp. 17–18; Van Knippenberg, 1984, pp. 561–562). According to social identity theory, individuals actively construct their identities through self-identification and self-categorization by identifying with specific social groups (Turner, 1982, pp. 15–16). These groups are defined as in-groups (those we identify with) and out-groups (those we perceive as different) (Turner, 1982).

In relation to the nature of individuals, society, and their interrelationship, social identity asserts that society is made up of social categories that are defined by power and status relationships (Hogg & Abrams, 1990b, p. 13). 'Social category' refers to the division of people based on nationality, race, religion and so forth, while 'power and status relations' refers to the fact that some categories have greater power, prestige and status in society (Hogg & Abrams, 1990b, p. 13). Categories cannot exist alone as they are defined through contrast with one another. A category like 'Danish speaker' is only meaningful in contrast to its opposing category, 'non-Danish speaker'. It differentiates those who are perceived to belong to the group with greater power and status in society from those who do not, thereby reinforcing social boundaries and shaping inclusion and exclusion based on language.

Tajfel's work demonstrated that even arbitrary group membership is sufficient to generate in-group identification, leading to behaviors of favoritism toward the in-group and prejudice against out-groups (Hogg & Abrams, 1990b; Turner, 1982; Van Knippenberg, 1984). This dynamic is evident in the Danish context, where linguistic proficiency is often viewed as a prerequisite for social inclusion. However, the level of proficiency required, such as "perfect Danish," may impose unattainable standards on some refugees, reinforcing their exclusion from the in-group. Language

therefore functions as a powerful tool for in-group favoritism and out-group marginalization. Yet, as social identity theory highlights, individuals are not passive in this process.

While social identity theory emphasizes the importance of in-group identification and how members strive to maintain a positive social identity, it also recognizes that individuals may attempt to leave their group in pursuit of a more satisfactory identity (Hogg & Abrams, 1990a, p. 48; Van Knippenberg, 1984, p. 563). In this process, some may work to redefine their group in a more positive light by contrasting it with negative traits of the out-group, while others may distance themselves from stereotypical representations to challenge how their identity is perceived by the majority. However, as social identity theory illustrates, group membership is not neutral and is deeply tied to social comparisons and the boundaries of belonging. Even individuals who strive to align with the dominant group, for example by learning Danish, may still face rejection due to language ideologies like “perfect Danish” or the enduring perception of “Once a Foreigner, Always a Foreigner.” These pursuits are much harder to achieve in practice, as such attempts do not always lead to acceptance in the new group, resulting in a sense of marginality (Hogg & Abrams, 1990a, p. 47). This suggests that language alone does not guarantee full inclusion; other social and cultural factors also determine whether individuals are recognized as legitimate members of the in-group.

The observant reader will notice that these points closely mirror my earlier discussion on how language impacts inclusion and exclusion within the historical and societal context of refugee integration in Denmark. What social identity theory provides, however, is a theoretical lens to formalize these dynamics, highlighting the complex interplay between individual efforts to belong and societal ideologies. It explains how categories such as ‘Danish speaker’ and ‘non-Danish speaker’ become central to defining inclusion and exclusion in Danish society.

While social identity theory focuses on *why* we categorize ourselves into groups and the dynamics of in-group and out-group identification, Membership Categorization Analysis shifts the focus to *how* social categories are actively constructed in interactions to assign meaning and identity.

2.3.2 Membership Categorization Analysis

First introduced by Harvey Sacks in the 1960s (Sacks, 1995c), Membership Categorization Analysis is a methodological approach that examines how social categories are constructed and understood by people in talk and text to describe themselves and others (Whitehead et al., 2024; Whittle & Mueller, 2022). A membership category refers to the classification of a person as a member of a social group, such as refugee, Danish-speaker, well-integrated, Muslim etc. (Sacks, 1995c, p. 41; Whittle & Mueller, 2022). These categories are not fixed but are under constant reconstruction (Martikainen, 2022, p. 706). For instance, categories such as 'refugee' and 'Dane' are actively negotiated based on what people consider relevant distinctions in a given context. While language or nationality may be meaningful in one context, skin color may be more salient in another. These shifting distinctions illustrate how categories are fluid, context-dependent, and shaped by social interaction.

Sacks' well-known example, "The baby cried. The mommy picked it up.", helps understand how categorization operates in practice (Sacks, 1995a, 1995b). A Membership Categorization Device is a component within membership categorization analysis that groups related social categories and connects them to shared assumptions about how their members interact (Sacks, 1995a, p. 238; Whittle & Mueller, 2022, p. 198). Even without an explicit explanation, the relationship between the 'baby' and the 'mommy' is readily inferred because they belong to the broader membership categorization device of 'family' (Sacks, 1995a, p. 238; Whittle & Mueller, 2022, p. 186). Membership categorization devices

shape how we interpret identities and relationships by linking social categories such as 'baby' and 'mommy' to expected behaviors, responsibilities, and rights (Martikainen, 2022; Whittle & Mueller, 2022). These classifications influence what we consider normal, valuable, or inappropriate while reinforcing broader social expectations and obligations (Martikainen, 2022; Whittle & Mueller, 2022). For example, a baby is expected to cry, while a mother is expected to comfort her child.

Within membership categorization analysis, 'category predicates' refer to the socially expected attributes, actions, or obligations tied to a specific category, shaping how its members are expected to behave (Martikainen, 2022, p. 708; Sacks, 1995a, p. 240). If the mother does not pick up her crying baby, she may face social judgment illustrating how category predicates shape expectations and define what is considered appropriate behavior within a given category (Whittle & Mueller, 2022, p. 186). However, categorizing the same person differently, as a shopper, a police officer, or a homeless woman can radically change how the act of picking up the child is perceived. A police officer picking up a child might be seen as an act of protection, while a homeless woman doing the same could be viewed with suspicion. This demonstrates that category predicates do not just shape attributes but also influence how actions are interpreted based on the assigned category.

The assumptions tied to a category shape expectations of behavior, known as category-bound activities (Sacks, 1995a, p. 241). These are actions that are commonly associated with a membership category, reflecting the norms assigned to its members (Martikainen, 2022, pp. 707–708). Just as 'mommies are nurturing' is a category predicate, the assumption that 'mommies comfort crying babies' is a category-bound activity.

Membership categorization analysis provides a theoretical framework for analyzing how refugees categorize themselves in relation to language, integration, and belonging. It highlights how they construct, negotiate, and

assign meaning to social categories in their everyday interactions. To ensure a thorough membership categorization analysis, Stokoe (2012, p. 218) outlined ten key concepts that provide clear analytical steps grounded in Sacks' categorial and sequential principles. Of these, this study particularly draws on the role of membership categorization devices, category predicates, and the inference-rich nature of categories. This study examines how refugees position themselves within or outside categories such as 'foreigner,' 'outsider,' and 'Dane,' revealing how language and social expectations shape their experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

These processes of inclusion and exclusion are not only socially negotiated but also structurally reinforced. The value assigned to one's language, education, or cultural background can shape who is afforded recognition and legitimacy within Danish society. To understand these unequal distributions of value and recognition, the following section draws on Social Capital Theory.

2.3.3 Social Capital Theory

One of the founding theorists of Social Capital Theory, Pierre Bourdieu (1986), was among the first to systematically define the term, highlighting its unequal distribution and role in maintaining power structures (Häuberer & Jerabek, 2011, p. 35). Bourdieu's focus on social capital is deeply connected to his broader sociological concern with power, domination, and privilege (Field, 2017, p. 3). At the core of his theory is the concept of capital, which he defines as the various resources and attributes individuals possess and utilize in social life (Bourdieu, 1986; Rosenmeier, 2007, p. 13).

Bourdieu distinguishes between four main forms of capital; economic, social, cultural and symbolic (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 242–243). Of these, only economic capital is physical or material, whereas the others are immaterial and embedded within social structures (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). Social capital refers to the resources, advantages, and power

that individuals or groups gain through strong and durable social networks, such as family and friendships, which provide support, security, access to opportunities, and help in overcoming challenges (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249). Cultural capital refers to resources individuals possess such as skills, competencies, and knowledge that are valued within a specific social context (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 244). Lastly, symbolic capital, which derives from other forms of capital (economic or cultural), only gains power when it is recognized and perceived as valuable by others within a social context (Bourdieu, 1986; Lebaron, 2023). This makes symbolic capital distinct, as it reinforces social hierarchies and power structures through what is recognized as legitimate or valuable (Bourdieu, 1986; Lebaron, 2023).

Among Bourdieu's forms of capital, cultural and symbolic capital are particularly central to this study. Refugees may possess cultural capital in the form of professional competence, academic knowledge, or language proficiency, but these resources may not convert into symbolic capital unless they are recognized as legitimate and valuable. Within this theoretical framework, refugees can have and lack symbolic capital simultaneously, as symbolic capital is not simply held but contingent upon social recognition and perceived utilitarian value.

Social capital theory provides a theoretical framework for analyzing how refugees perceive exclusion as a power play, experiencing language as a means of reinforcing social boundaries when their resources or utilitarian value are unrecognized or questioned.

3. METHOD

In this section, I first present my methodological approach, followed by the process of data collection, including

recruitment strategies and both practical and ethical considerations. I also reflect on my role as an interviewer, including how my cultural and linguistic background shaped the interview dynamics. I describe the strategies I used to create a natural and conversation-like flow, and how this raised important ethical reflections. Lastly, I describe how I analyzed the data using thematic analysis.

3.1 Methodological Approach

I aim to investigate the significance of Danish for refugees in Denmark. My focus is on how refugees perceive and experience the Danish language, the contexts in which they speak it, and how other languages, such as English, fit into their experiences. To gather my data, I conducted qualitative interviews, as this method seeks to understand the world from the interviewees' perspectives and uncover their lived experiences before applying theoretical explanations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015a).

3.2 Data Collection

In order to find interviewees, I wrote a short post and shared it in two public Facebook groups, '*Active Refugees in Denmark*' and '*Foreigners in Denmark*'. Five refugees responded and expressed their willingness to participate. They all initiated contact and self-identified as refugees willing to contribute to my research. A key advantage of using Facebook was that it allowed interviewees to approach me on their own terms, without institutional pressure or third-party involvement – an important factor given that discussing their experiences could be highly sensitive. Refugees might feel uncomfortable discussing their experiences with a stranger or worry about facing potential repercussions while living in a state of uncertainty regarding the Danish government and public institutions, such as refugee centers.

I wanted to make sure that potential interviewees never felt uncertain about the purpose of the research or their participation. The post was written in English and Danish and kept as short and straightforward as possible to prevent misinterpretation. I structured the Facebook post to present the study, guarantee anonymity for the interviewees, and invite them to ask questions or raise any concerns. To avoid unintentionally excluding any experiences and to remain open to a wide range of perspectives, I deliberately chose not to set out too many criteria regarding whom I was looking for in terms of age, gender, background, or language proficiency. Everyone who reached out and met the criteria for my research was interviewed.

3.2.1 Shifting the Research Focus: From English to Danish

I first posted in Active Refugees in Denmark, where I initially stated English as the primary focus of my research, particularly in relation to their use of Danish and their native language. However, from the first two interviews, it became evident that interviewees were far more interested in sharing their experiences with Danish. Their reflections highlighted deeper themes related to language, identity, and integration, making Danish central to their narratives. As I was still seeking more interviewees, I modified my second Facebook post in Foreigners in Denmark to explicitly mention both Danish and English as my area of interest, remaining open to the possibility that future interviewees might still prioritize English. However, the interviewees consistently centered their reflections around Danish, reaffirming its central role in their lived experiences. I adapted the research focus accordingly, ensuring that their perspectives remained at the core of the research.

3.2.2 Recruitment Through Facebook: Access, Self-Selection, and Anonymity

The use of Facebook inevitably influenced the type of refugees I gained access to. In particular, the group Active

Refugees in Denmark likely attracted refugees who were already more settled and socially engaged. The word “active” signals self-categorization, implying agency and a sense of ongoing engagement in Danish society. In this sense, the group name is analytically significant, as it reflects how refugees in this group align themselves with a socially engaged refugee identity, representing a specific subgroup of refugees who are not newly arrived or institutionally dependent, but in a more stable phase of their integration.

The second group, Foreigners in Denmark, offered a broader reach but also blurred the boundaries between different types of members, as it included migrants, expats, and refugees. Both groups were open in the sense that anyone can request to join, without needing to verify their refugee or foreigner status. Posting in both groups created a balance between a group defined explicitly around refugee identity and one that encompassed a broader, less clearly defined category of migrants, expats, and refugees.

The fact that all interviewees contacted me voluntarily adds an additional layer of self-selection bias. Those who reached out were likely to be more reflective, communicative, and comfortable sharing personal experiences than others in less stable or secure circumstances. This inevitably means the interviewees do not represent all refugees in Denmark, but rather a specific subgroup, those already in a position to reflect on and articulate their experiences. Interestingly, this also aligns with how my research focus shifted from English to Danish. The interviewees’ emphasis on Danish over English suggests that they were already operating within Danish-speaking environments to an extent that made Danish salient in their daily lives, another indication of their relative embeddedness in Danish society.

This awareness also raised ethical considerations about whether naming the groups could pose challenges for protecting interviewee anonymity. Given the large membership of both groups, I assessed the risk of identification as minimal. As part of preparing this material

for publication, I deleted the original posts and ensured that no identifying information or interactions have been retained. For these reasons, I have chosen to keep the group names in this book. They carry analytical value by highlighting the categories through which the interviewees were found, and how they identified themselves.

3.3 Interview Guide

The second phase of an interview research is design, which involves developing an interview guide to ensure that the intended research focus is effectively covered (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015b, p. 154). A research interview can exist on a continuum from unstructured, with few planned questions to highly structured, with many predetermined questions (Tinggaard & Brinkmann, 2020, p. 39). My goal was to get the interviewees to tell stories in a way that felt naturally evoked. Therefore, I opted for a semi-structured and a conversation-like approach. While no interview is ever entirely unstructured, since the conversation is always guided by the research focus (Tinggaard & Brinkmann, 2020, p. 40), I deliberately avoided asking a fixed set of questions to allow flexibility in how the stories unfolded (see Appendix A).

3.3.1 Themes and Approach

My interview guide was structured around three central themes that shaped the interviews. The first theme focused on the refugees' experiences with English, Danish, and their native language(s), exploring how they navigate between these languages in their daily lives. Although their native language(s) were not of primary interest to my research, I still considered it necessary to remain open to the possibility that a wide range of other topics and experiences could be related to it. The second theme explored refugees' relationships with these languages, focusing on the emotional, social, and practical significance. This included how language influenced their sense of identity, shaped

their interactions with others, and served functional purposes in their daily lives. The third theme considered how refugees' experiences of their use of different language varied across different contexts, particularly in professional settings such as work and education, compared to social interactions with friends and in everyday situations.

To ensure a common thread across interviews, I considered factors and elements that could apply to all interviewees, allowing them to draw on everyday experiences they would naturally encounter. For instance, this included their experiences with speaking English and Danish at work, in educational institutions, and in professional and social settings. I also took into account that each interviewee was different, with varying journeys, backgrounds, careers, language proficiencies, and comfort levels during the interview. I was particularly mindful of how I framed language-related questions. I deliberately avoided asking, "Are you learning Danish?" or "Do you speak Danish?" – questions that refugees are frequently asked and that often carry an implicit expectation. These questions could feel more like an assessment than a genuine inquiry, subtly reinforcing the pressure that learning Danish is not just encouraged but assumed. Instead, I opted for the more open-ended and neutral phrasing, "How many languages do you speak?" This allowed the interviewees to list their languages freely, without feeling judged, pressured, or obligated to account for their progress in Danish. Additionally while I had prepared a set of questions under each theme, I had no intention of rigidly following them. They served as a backup in case I got stuck. My approach was interactive and spontaneous, allowing questions to emerge from the interviewees' stories while still being anchored in the core themes of my interview guide. As a result, the order and wording of questions varied across all interviews. However, one aspect that remained consistent was that I always began by describing the research focus and what I aimed to gain insight into.

3.4 Interviewees

The data for this study consists of five interviewees, ranging in age from 27 to 45 years old. As previously mentioned, I did not inquire about their legal status or other personal details, as I considered this unnecessarily intrusive and of little value to the research. Their self-identification as refugees was sufficient. To provide a clear but concise overview of the interviewees, just enough for the reader to contextualize their perspectives, I have compiled a table summarizing the relevant details.

Pseudo nym	National ity	Year of Arrival	Languages	Profes sional Back ground
Ahmad	Syrian	2019	Arabic (Native), English (Fluent), French (Limited)	Electronic s Engineer
Nadia	Syrian	2015	Arabic (Native), English (Fluent), Danish (Fluent)	Studying to become a social worker; holds a psycho logy degree but was unable to practice in

				Denmark
Dina	Syrian	2014	Arabic (Native), English (Fluent)	Bachelor's student in teacher education
Farah	Iranian	Not stated	Persian (Native), English (Fluent)	Industrial Engineer
Arif	Bangladeshi	2021	Bangla (Native), Hindi (Fluent), English (Fluent)	Omitted at interviewee's request

Table 1 Overview of the Interviewees

3.5 Conducting the Interviews

All five interviews lasted about an hour and ten minutes. To respect the interviewees' time, I aimed for one-hour interviews, which I also found sufficient to cover the key topics and have relatively in-depth conversations. Four of the five interviews were conducted in person. The interview with the Bangladeshi refugee was conducted online because he was at a refugee center in North Jutland. Only one of the four interviewees who participated in in-person interviews suggested a meeting location, which led us to meet at a café of her choice. Since none of the other three interviewees had preferences, I suggested meeting at public libraries

closest to them, aiming for a quiet and neutral environment. Although there were occasional background disturbances, they did not cause any disfluencies or disruption to the flow of the interviews. The seating arrangements also varied across all locations. I sat directly across from the interviewee in one of the interviews, which worked perfectly fine but was not my preferred position. I sat diagonally across or almost beside the other three interviewees, facing directly toward them. The intention was to convey a sense of friendliness and attentiveness. Furthermore, it helped establish a conversational atmosphere rather than an interviewer-interviewee dynamic. Both positions worked well in my experience.

The semi-structured and conversation-like approach worked better for some interviewees than others. In the in-person interviews, I could easily read interviewees' reactions and adjust through nonverbal cues such as nodding or smiling, which helped maintain a spontaneous, conversational flow. In contrast, during the online interview, I noticed that the interviewee frequently paused, seemingly expecting a more formal structure. The interviewee called me directly on Facebook Messenger without video, and I chose to respect his choice by keeping my camera off to avoid seeming intrusive. At the beginning of the interview, the interviewee said, "Don't mention my name." I reassured him, and when he replied "Ok," I gently confirmed, "Ok. Good?" pausing to give him time to think and respond before continuing. I therefore made a conscious effort to verbally affirm what the interviewee said and to clearly signal when it was my turn to ask a question or his turn to respond and as the interview progressed, I learned to leave longer pauses. The interview became less conversation-like and more question-answer based, but it remained unstructured and guided by the interviewee's own interests. These experiences made me more aware of the need to adapt my approach based on each interviewee's expectations and level of comfort.

3.5.1 Language Choice for the Interviews

The language choice for each interview was guided by how the interviewees first reached out. I assumed that the language of their initial contact would be the one the interviewees felt most comfortable speaking, and I therefore conducted the interviews in that same language. Since one of the Facebook groups, Active Refugees in Denmark was in Danish, I shared my post in both Danish and English, assuming that potential interviewees might feel more comfortable or only be able to communicate with me in Danish. This proved useful, as one interviewee reached out to me in Danish and appeared both comfortable and keen to continue in that language. Of the five interviews, only one was conducted in Danish and the rest were conducted in English. Beyond the choice of interview language, my own linguistic and cultural background also likely shaped how the interviews unfolded.

3.5.2 Researcher Positionality and Language in the Interviews

3.5.2.1 Building Rapport Through Shared Otherness

My profile picture and name clearly signaled that I was not Danish, which may have been the first cue for interviewees to feel a sense of connection in our shared *otherness*. My multilingual and cultural background inevitably became part of the data collection process, shaping how interviewees engaged with me and what they chose to share. This became evident when they asked questions they likely could not and perhaps would not have asked a Dane. All but one interviewee explicitly brought up my background, some during the interview, and one even before it began.

During the interviews, Ahmad explicitly asked questions like “Where are you from by the way?” followed by “You live here?” and “And you speak Danish as well?,” while Nadia asked, “Hvad er dit modersmål [What is your mother tongue]?” and “Er du født i Danmark [Are you born in Denmark]?” I did not make the conversation about myself,

but I did take a moment to elaborate on when I came to Denmark and which languages I spoke, implicitly signaling that I was not born here either. This was not to center my own experience, but to create a sense of shared ground. By sharing small details about my background, I wanted to signal reciprocity and encourage interviewees to continue their own storytelling, using me as a point of comparison or recognition. In that sense, I became part of their storytelling, but the story was never about me. This became evident in how some interviewees drew directly on my background when reflecting on their own experiences. In response to my answers, Ahmad said, "Yeah, so I completely understand. I mean your background culturally is also very close to mine." Farah similarly remarked, "So you're originally from Pakistan? (...) Because you look different, so like that's why. I think that like this experience is so similar to my daughter's experience (...)." These exchanges subtly shifted the interview dynamic. My appearance and multilingual background created an immediate sense of familiarity and mutual understanding with the interviewees, giving them the impression that I knew what they were talking about.

3.5.2.2 Building Rapport Through Shared Language

Dina was the only interviewee who did not ask about my cultural or linguistic background. Having already seen in earlier interviews that such exchanges helped build rapport, I made sure to hint that I had also learned Danish when the opportunity arose, knowing that this kind of insight and acknowledgment could make a difference. Early in the interview, Dina did not yet know that I spoke Danish, so she made sure to explain the terms she used. She said, "Yeah, when we first came, we had English on some days, and some schools have – or some kommuner [municipalities] have – the modtagerklasse [reception class], 'receiving or welcoming' class (...)." I made sure to say that "I am familiar with modtagerklasse [reception class]" and mentioned that I had learned Danish there as well. She immediately confirmed by saying, "In modtagerklasse [reception class]?"

From that point on, she knew she could use Danish when she wanted, which she might not have done otherwise. Later in the interview, she used words like “urørlighedszone [untouchable zone]” and switched mid-sentence, saying, “They always would ask ‘hvør er du egentlig fra [where are you actually from]?’ and you have to answer that question, you know. Okay, ‘jeg er oprindelig fra Syrien [I am originally from Syria].’” This allowed her to maintain her natural narrative and expressive flow without stopping to translate or find English substitutes. She could speak Danish when she wanted, and I would follow. Making my own linguistic background known thus encouraged her to speak more freely, allowing a more natural flow and richer data. This familiarity also shaped how interviewees navigated language choice. In one case, it extended to actual code-switching.

3.5.2.3 Negotiating Language Choice in Practice

Arif began speaking partly in Hindi, saying, “I mean like when you say in Urdu or in Hindi ‘dai maa [midwife]’, you know (...),” a word I understood because Urdu and Hindi are mutually intelligible. I instinctively responded “Haan [yes]” and then immediately added “yes” to bring the conversation back to English. He later switched to Hindi again, but I deliberately continued in English. While allowing him to continue in Hindi might have increased his expressive ease, I decided to maintain English as the main interview language to ensure that the nuances could be accurately captured and compared across interviews. That said, my instinctive response of “haan [yes]” was likely enough to signal that I could understand him in Hindi. It provided a subtle cue that he could draw on Hindi when he found it necessary, which he did, without losing his expressive or communicative clarity, and perhaps more importantly, without needing me to explicitly switch with him. Beyond code-switching, he went a step further by drawing on my background to make his point. He used Pakistani cities to illustrate his example, saying, “When you go around, like think like you were in Pakistan, you have Karachi, Lahore, or Sialkot (...) It’s the

same in Denmark,” placing his experience within a cultural frame he likely knew I would recognize.

These moments reflect how language and identity shaped the interviews far beyond the exchange of information. My appearance and multilingual background positioned me as someone partially recognizable as “one of us,” distinct yet not completely outside their experiences. My researcher positionality likely made it easier for interviewees to speak openly, as our shared linguistic and cultural background influenced what they shared and how they chose to share it.

3.6 Interview Strategies: Challenges, Lessons Learned, and Improvements

While I made several deliberate decisions about how I wanted to conduct my interviews, I find it necessary to reflect on the unforeseen challenges that emerged. Before addressing these challenges, I will first outline my overall interview strategies.

I was fully aware that choosing to conduct semi-structured conversational interviews, where I asked questions based on the interviewees’ stories would require more effort and attention than a strictly structured approach. However, I believed that the benefits outweighed the challenges. My primary goal was to create a comfortable and natural environment, eliminating as many factors as possible that could remind the interviewees they were in a formal interview setting. I simply considered that, as refugees, they might be more reserved and need a friendlier approach to feel comfortable.

A crucial part of achieving this atmosphere was building rapport early on. I actively engaged with interviewees’ stories by responding naturally – laughing when they intended something to be humorous, making occasional comments that aligned with their interests, and offering small affirmations. For instance, in one interview, an

interviewee expressed doubt about her Danish proficiency. In response, I deliberately praised her pronunciation, which made her smile and gave her a boost of confidence, prompting her to affirm it by replying with a sentence in Danish. Small moments like these played a role in making the interviewees feel more comfortable and willing to share their experiences in more detail.

Another key strategy was to create an environment where interviewees could share their stories freely, with me as a listener rather than someone steering the conversation toward the themes outlined in my interview guide. This meant deliberately asking follow-up questions that, while not always directly relevant to my research, signaled my genuine interest in them as individuals. Had I dismissed stories they found personally relevant, it could have disrupted the flow and made them lose interest in sharing their experiences in detail. To avoid this, I remained flexible, allowing their narratives to unfold naturally.

At times, I further reinforced this sense of connection by establishing shared interests. For example, when one interviewee mentioned an ECCO shoe store, I responded, "They're the best." My response was not just about expressing personal preference; it was about creating rapport. He immediately agreed, and replied, "Yeah, exactly." What mattered was the effect – it created a sense of similarity and common ground. I aimed to establish this feeling as early as possible in each interview.

3.6.1 Challenges and Lessons Learned

One of the biggest challenges was having less control over the interview. Some interviewees spoke extensively before I could intervene, sometimes shifting away from the themes I wanted to explore. However, their stories were rich in detail, and despite the free-flowing nature of the interview, they still touched upon all key themes I aimed to explore – their experiences with different languages, the contexts in which they spoke them, and their experiences navigating between them. Interestingly, some interviewees were aware of how

much they spoke. At the end of our interview, Farah asked, "Do you have any more questions? (...) I was just talking and talking." Similarly, Ahmad asked, "Are you satisfied?" This revealed two key insights: first, I gathered the insights I needed without having to redirect them; second, they did not feel like they were being interrogated – they were the ones who got to talk.

A particularly conscious decision was to eliminate as many visual reminders of an interview setting as possible. The phone I used for recording was on the table, and I informed the interviewees about it. However, since their phones were also on the table, it quickly blended in. Instead of seeing a list of questions, they only saw me with a blank sheet of paper. I used this approach strategically to encourage storytelling. Whenever an interviewee began telling something that aligned with my research focus, I avoided audible excitement or agreement that might interrupt their flow. Instead, I would visibly express excitement and start eagerly noting it down. This subtle nonverbal cue signaled that their story was interesting, encouraging them to elaborate without disrupting their natural narrative flow.

However, keeping the interview guide "hidden away" also posed a challenge for me. Since I had maintained eye contact throughout, looking at the list of questions would have been too obvious, potentially breaking the buildup of the natural flow I had established. This required me to stay fully present and rely on memory, making the interviews more demanding but ultimately reinforcing a natural and engaging dynamic.

Conversely, one interviewee responded differently to this interview structure. She repeatedly offered to meet again or to send her my questions so she could answer them via text. While I had already gathered the necessary insights, her response suggested uncertainty about when the "official" interview had actually started. This highlights an important takeaway – while some interviewees embraced

the informal, conversation-like approach, others may have expected a more conventional, structured interview format.

3.6.2 Improvements and Reflections

Looking back, I would not change my overall methodology, as I believe the semi-structured conversational approach led to richer and more authentic data. However, I recognize that there were areas where I could have made small adjustments, particularly in finding a better balance between allowing interviewees to take the lead and ensuring that I gather the insights I need. Another key takeaway is that different interviewees have different expectations of an interview setting. Ultimately, my biggest takeaway from this process was the importance of adaptability. Since I was not working from a hypothesis, I had the flexibility to learn from the interview process and adjust accordingly.

3.7 Ethical Reflections

After gathering my data and reflecting on my interview strategies, two key ethical questions stand out. Did my semi-structured, conversation-like approach lead interviewees to share more than they otherwise would have? Should I at certain points have reinforced that the interviewees were “on the record”? There is no single right or wrong answer, as the outcomes of my approach are endless and complex. But researchers before me have found that interviewees sometimes forget they are being recorded and share more than they intend to or would have otherwise (Boas & Rørbæk, 2025).

That said, I find ethical peace of mind in knowing that all but one interviewee expressed interest in reading my findings once they were completed. This suggests they were fully aware that their participation had a purpose and that their experiences would contribute to my research. It may also explain why they were eager to share their perspectives

in such depth. My strategies simply helped them feel more at ease.

Ultimately, while this remains an important ethical consideration, I believe my approach allowed interviewees to speak on their own terms, reinforcing their agency rather than restricting it through an overly formal structure.

3.8 Thematic Analysis

To analyze my data, I conducted a thematic analysis, which is a flexible and systematic method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). This approach is particularly effective for exploring experiences, thoughts, and behaviors across a dataset (Kiger & Varpio, 2020, p. 847), making it well-suited for my research.

3.8.1 Data Transcription and Analytical Approach

All five interviews were manually transcribed in full and verbatim, including filler sounds such as “uh,” “uhh,” and “umm,” but without correcting grammar, adding implied wording, or tidying up fractured sentences. These elements were essential to preserving how the interviewees naturally conveyed their thoughts. Their storytelling was often fragmented or nonlinear, reflecting the complexity of their experiences. I did not systematically include long pauses, laughter, or intonation, since my analysis focused on perceptions and experiences rather than prosodic features. To reflect the natural rhythm of the interviewees’ speech, I used commas to mark pauses in a way that preserved their narrative flow for the reader.

Beyond the technical process, transcribing the interviews in full ensured that I worked from the entire narrative rather than pre-selected excerpts. This was both an analytical and ethical choice. Analytically, it prevented me from prematurely deciding which passages were significant and allowed me to revisit earlier sections as new patterns

emerged. In some cases, I only recognized important themes or connections later in the process, and having the full transcripts at hand enabled me to return to the interviews with new perspectives. Ethically, because it ensured that no quotes were taken out of context and that each interviewee's story was represented as accurately and holistically as possible.

This same approach also shaped how I handled the multilingual aspects of the interviews. I transcribed each interview in the primary language chosen by the interviewee, keeping any switches into English, Danish, or Hindi that occurred across the interviews. These switches were kept to reflect the multilingual reality of the interviews and how interviewees naturally moved between languages. In the original transcriptions, I provided English translations only for Hindi code-switches. In this book, I include translations for both Hindi and Danish. For terms such as "modtagerklasse [reception class]" and "urørlighedszone [untouchable zone]", I cross-checked my translations across Danish dictionaries to ensure cultural and contextual accuracy. For all Danish-to-English translations, I have aimed to remain as close as possible to the original wording, with a few deliberate exceptions to ensure readability and idiomatic accuracy.

In sum, the process of repeatedly listening, writing, and revisiting the recordings became an integral part of the analytical process. This early engagement with the data marked the beginning of theme generation, as initial ideas and recurring patterns began to emerge, laying the groundwork for the thematic analysis described in the following sections.

3.8.2 Conducting a Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 86-93) describe thematic analysis as a flexible process guided by the researcher's focus and data. They highlight that analysis begins as soon as the researcher starts identifying meaningful patterns and areas of interest within the data (2006, p. 86). Having already

begun this process during transcription, I will now proceed directly to describing my process of defining and naming themes.

3.8.3 Identifying themes

My approach was immersive and iterative. As I read and re-read my interview transcripts and conducted word searches, emergent patterns became increasingly apparent. Despite the interviewees' storytelling unfolding in varying orders due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, I noticed a consistent progression in the points they made. This underlying narrative thread, which surfaced across all interviews, was further refined and is now reflected in the theme identifying process and the structure of my analysis section.

Theme 1: What Does It Mean to Speak Danish?

A key observation was that all interviewees initially downplayed their proficiency in Danish – none, except one, explicitly listed Danish as a language they spoke. As I reviewed the transcripts, I noticed that interviewees revealed a more complex relationship with Danish as the interviews progressed. A quick word search confirmed this pattern; some explicitly stated, "I don't speak Danish," yet later provided nuanced explanations of their linguistic abilities in Danish. This discrepancy became a crucial entry point for theme development, highlighting how self-perceptions of linguistic proficiency evolved throughout the interview. Their reflections suggested that proficiency was not a binary but context-dependent. This theme is particularly relevant as it underscores the complexity of language identity. This dynamic is crucial for analyzing how interviewees navigate language-related expectations, integration, and belonging in different contexts.

Theme 2: Us and Them

I noticed that interviewees frequently used third-person pronouns such as "they," "them," and "their" when referring

to Danes, either positioning themselves as outsiders or perceiving that others positioned them that way. A word search confirmed that these pronouns appeared consistently across interviews along with mentions of "Danish people" and "Danes". This theme is relevant as it reveals the underlying power dynamics that shape social belonging, illustrating how the "us" and "them" divide is omnipresent in interviewees' experiences of language use and integration.

Theme 3: Danish as Essential for Integration

One of the most evident and consistent patterns across interviews was the perception that learning Danish is essential for integration. Interviewees repeatedly mentioned Danish not just as a practical necessity but also as a societal expectation. This theme emerged through explicit mentions of "integrate," "integration," and "you have to speak Danish". A word search confirmed that interviewees frequently used words such as "have to," "must," "need to," and "important" when discussing learning Danish. This theme is particularly relevant because it highlights how language is both a communicative tool and a symbol standing in for broader social meanings.

Theme 4: Danish as Essential for Building Social Relations

In the third section of the interview, I asked interviewees about their experiences with speaking Danish in different social and professional contexts. When they explained their use, I observed how interviewees seemed to connect the use of Danish with the ability to build deep personal connections. This theme emerged through explicit statements, such as "If you want to make relationships, you have to speak Danish". A word search confirmed frequent mentions of words such as "relationship(s)," "friendship," "feeling," "understand," and "emotional(ly)," reinforcing the idea that Danish fluency extends beyond mere communication and requires a different kind of linguistic proficiency in social contexts. This theme is relevant because

it highlights how Danish is not just a tool for communication but a key to forming deeper social relationships.

Theme 5: Danish as Secondary in Professional Contexts

I recognized a recurring pattern that English became most useful in professional contexts, taking precedence over Danish. This theme emerged through explicit statements, such as "Once they understood that you can actually help them, even the language becomes secondary" and "So they want me in their group because they know they need the knowledge I have." A word search confirmed frequent mentions of words like "work," "job," "professional," and "value", reinforcing the perception that being able to communicate was enough to make Danish secondary. This theme is relevant because it reveals how language expectations in professional settings are flexible yet precarious.

Theme 6: Speaking Danish Does Not Make You Danish

Another recurring pattern was the perception among interviewees that speaking Danish does not automatically lead to full inclusion in Danish society. This theme emerged through both explicit statements, such as "The people in front of them know that they are not Danish per se," "Jeg er fremmed her [I am a foreigner here]," "Jeg er ikke dansker [I am not Danish]," and "They don't see me as Danish in Denmark." It also appeared in implicit patterns, where interviewees reflected on how their identity remained tied to their background rather than their language skills. A word search confirmed frequent mentions of words such as "accent," "look(s)," "where are you from/hvor er du egentlig fra [where are you really from]," "not Danish," "tørklæde [headscarf]," and "culture," reinforcing the perception that social belonging is shaped by more than just linguistic ability. This theme is relevant because it highlights how social belonging is influenced by more than just language proficiency.

4. ANALYSIS

The following analysis examines how the interviewees reflect on their language use in everyday life across various contexts. The analysis is structured thematically, and while each theme stands on its own, together they reflect a broader picture of how language is tied to identity, inclusion, exclusion, and belonging in the interviewees' experiences.

4.1 What Does It Mean to Speak Danish?

This section explores the interviewees' perceptions of what it means to speak Danish. Their varying perceptions highlight that speaking Danish is not just a matter of fluency but a socially constructed and negotiated experience. This complexity is evident throughout the analysis, where the interviewees are neither fully 'Danish speakers' nor entirely 'non-Danish speakers'.

4.1.1 Knowing Danish vs. Speaking Danish

Dina initially clearly states, "I don't speak Danish," but immediately clarifies, "but it doesn't mean that I don't know Danish. Knowing the language is different from speaking the language." Dina's distinction highlights her perception that language proficiency is more nuanced than a binary of speaking or not speaking. She elaborates, "I know Danish on an academic level, but when it comes to small and simple conversations, I really struggle through that." By "knowing the language" at an "academic level," she refers to a structural understanding of Danish, while "speaking the language" implies fluency in everyday conversations. Dina's "struggle" with "small and simple" conversations highlights how "speaking" Danish requires a different skill set – one

that involves ease in informal contexts. This distinction between “knowing” and “speaking” illustrates how her self-assessment of Danish competency shifts depending on the context. However, when Dina acknowledges “knowing the language,” she reveals a level of competency that contrasts with the complete lack of proficiency in Danish she initially implies.

4.1.2 Understandingly but Not Speakingly

Like Dina, Ahmad initially did not list Danish as a language he could speak. He states, “I speak Arabic, English, a little bit of French, but yeah, that’s it.” He later states, “It’s like I know understandingly but not speakingly.” This distinction between knowing Danish “understandingly” but not “speakingly” captures his perception of Danish proficiency as divided between comprehension and verbal expression. By “understandingly,” Ahmad refers to his ability to follow conversations, as he states, “I can understand a lot of the discussions in front of me.” Ahmad reflects how in smaller group settings, this understanding allows him to participate, as he states, “if two of them are talking in Danish, I can reply in English (...) because I understood what they were talking about.” Here, “understandingly” is sufficient for functional participation.

On the contrary, by “speakingly,” Ahmad refers to a separate skill set, stating, “I cannot speak yet, pronunciation is very difficult.” Despite initially excluding Danish from the list of languages he can speak, he later acknowledges, “I can say a casual sentence,” suggesting some level of fluency. For him, “speakingly” requires more than a casual sentence and a higher level of fluency. In larger groups, he perceives his lack of verbal fluency as a barrier, stating, “But it becomes difficult when more than two people are talking, like three or four people.” In these situations, “speakingly” becomes more critical as his difficulty with Danish limits his participation.

4.1.3 Danish Is Also Body Language

Like Dina and Ahmad, Arif also did not initially list Danish as a language he could speak. He states, “Well, yeah, I speak

English, I speak Bangla. Bangla is my first language, English – and I speak Hindi.” However, as the interview progresses, he provides a more detailed self-assessment, stating, “You can say that I can speak 40 percent of Danish at this moment out of 100.” By quantifying his fluency, Arif frames it as a work in progress rather than an absolute.

Unlike Dina and Ahmad, Arif perceives speaking Danish as more than verbal fluency, it also includes body language and cultural cues. This is evident as he states, “If you are speaking Danish and showing your body language in English so people will understand you wrong.” For Arif, adapting his non-verbal communication to align with Danish cultural cues and body language is just as important as linguistic proficiency. Arif provides an example to illustrate his point, he states,

“You like uh tap on the back of the person near the shoulder like appreciation in an Asian country, right? But if you tap in European country somewhere, it means that you are stupid. It’s part of the body language also.”

This example highlights his perception that cultural misalignment in body language can lead to misunderstanding. To Arif, ‘speaking Danish’ means embodying Danish, mastering both the verbal fluency and the cultural subtleties embedded in non-verbal communication.

4.1.4 Speaking Danish but Not “perfekt dansk”

Nadia is the only interviewee who explicitly lists Danish. She states, “Tre, min morsprog arabisk, jeg taler dansk og engelsk [Three, my mother tongue is Arabic, I speak Danish and English].” Her inclusion of Danish suggests a level of confidence in fluency that contrasts with the other interviewees. However, Nadia undermines her linguistic proficiency when she adds, “Jeg snakker dansk, men (...) jeg ikke perfekt til dansk [I speak Danish, but (...) I am not

perfect at Danish].” Despite conducting the interview fluently in Danish, she does not consider her Danish “perfekt [perfect].”

The distinction between “jeg taler dansk [I speak Danish]” and not “perfekt dansk [perfect Danish]” reflects her perception of societal or personal standards for speaking Danish like a native, which she perceives she does not fully meet. This is evident as she states, “ordstilling og accent ja. Det træls for mig (...) [word order and accent yes. That is frustrating for me (...)].” She perceives her “accent og ordstilling [accent and word order]” as barriers to achieving “perfekt dansk [perfect Danish].” This is evident as she adds, “Ja mine børn de snakker perfekt dansk ligesom danskere, 100 procent [Yes my children they speak perfect Danish like Danes, 100 percent].” Her use of “perfekt [perfect]” and comparison with “ligesom danskere [like Danes]” highlights her perception of an external standard of fluency she ascribes to Danes, reinforcing her perception that her “accent [accent]” and “ordstilling [word order]” set her apart from this ideal.

All four interviewees share one common perception – speaking Danish is not a binary concept but a fluid, context-dependent experience. They distinguish between knowing, speaking, and embodying Danish, with their perceptions of proficiency shaped by self-assessment, and external standards. A direct parallel can be drawn between Nadia’s experience and the “perfect Danish” ideology. Nadia, despite objectively speaking fluent Danish, internalizes this ideology, perceiving her Danish as imperfect. However, this ideological pressure is not unique to Nadia; it similarly affects all four interviewees. The ambiguity surrounding what constitutes “good enough” Danish leads each interviewee to hesitate or entirely refrain from listing Danish as a language they speak, even though their proficiency levels suggest they are more fluent than they acknowledge. This highlights how the ideology of “perfect Danish” shapes refugees’ self-assessments and influences their sense of linguistic belonging.

The interviewees do not place themselves in the category of 'Danish speaker,' as it is tied to specific category predicates, such as fluency, correct pronunciation, and cultural understanding – expectations the interviewees perceive they do not fully meet. The interviewees orient to these membership norms, constructing themselves as 'non-Danish speakers' despite being fluent to varying degrees. They actively negotiate the meaning of 'Danish speaker' as a membership category, invoking and resisting its associated predicates through phrases like "knowing" versus "speaking," "understandingly but not speakingly," and "jeg snakker dansk, men ikke perfekt dansk [I speak Danish, but not perfect Danish]." The interviewees construct and contest this category, positioning themselves in nuanced ways that challenge rigid binaries, yet also expose the fluidity of linguistic belonging. This sense of not linguistically belonging reflects how group boundaries are reinforced through contrast. The category 'Danish speaker' gains meaning in opposition to the category 'non-Danish speaker,' and while the interviewees refrain to align with the former, their internalization of unattainable standards like "perfect Danish" ultimately reinforces their marginalization.

4.2 Us and Them

This section explores how the interviewees construct an 'us' and 'them' distinction. Through their reflections, an intricate interplay emerges between positioning themselves as outsiders and perceiving that they are positioned as such by Danes.

Nadia states,

"Jeg er fremmed her, og jeg skal acceptere min situation. Jeg kan ikke sammenligner mig med danskere, eller øhh, kræver, at de skal acceptere mig (...). Jeg er anderledes (...) [I am a foreigner here, and I must accept my situation. I cannot

compare myself to Danes, or uh, demand that they accept me (...). I am different (...)]."

She explicitly positions herself as different and not entitled to full acceptance from Danes. However, she later expresses a strong personal desire to speak Danish, stating,

"jeg vil gerne taler dansk (...) det er noget med følelser, og det er noget med tilhørighed. Jeg tilhører Danmark, jeg er en del af Danmark, derfor skal jeg taler dansk [I want to speak Danish (...) it is something about feelings, and it is something about belonging. I belong to Denmark, I am a part of Denmark, therefore I must speak Danish]."

For Nadia, speaking Danish is not only a means of communication but is also tied to feelings of belonging and identity. Yet, her experience of rejection persists, as she explains,

"Fordi de siger til mig din plads ikke her. (...) din dansk sprog ikke så godt [Because they say to me your place is not here. (...) your Danish is not so good]."

While she actively pursues inclusion, she perceives that her efforts do not result in full acceptance. Nadia perceives that language becomes one of the key boundaries between her and Danes, shaping her perception of not belonging. Nadia's experience of rejection and her use of "de siger [they say]" and "din plads ikke her [your place is not here]," reflect a sense of marginality and perceived lack of agency, echoing her earlier statement, "jeg skal acceptere min situation [I must accept my situation]."

Ahmad shares a similar experience, as he states, "If you don't get along with them work-wise, they will use language as a way to limit you." Although referring to his colleagues, he generalizes the experience using "they",

implicitly aligning it more broadly with Danes. In his experience, language is not only a barrier but a means to marginalize him and position him as an outsider. Ahmad's use of "they will use" reflects his perception that the power lies with "they," reinforcing a sense of exclusion and lack of agency.

This perception of being positioned as an outsider appears again, as Dina states,

"They always would ask 'hvor er du egentlig fra [where are you really from]?' (...) because I don't look Danish, which is very shallow. Which shows how Danish people are shallow."

In her perception, the question itself marginalizes her based on her looks and positions her as an outsider. Her use of "always" suggests a repeated experience. Her personal frustration becomes a broader judgment, as she generalizes these encounters to "Danish people," ascribing a negative trait to the out-group by calling them "shallow," and reinforcing the boundary between the in-group and the out-group.

Similarly, Farah states, "They don't accept easily foreigners. They don't speak English. They can, but they don't want." Farah also repeatedly uses "they," reinforcing her perception that Danes actively maintain distance from foreigners, particularly through language. Her experience highlights not only how she perceives being positioned as an outsider by Danes, but also how she positions herself as one by drawing a clear boundary through her use of "they."

Even Arif, who speaks more neutrally, reflects the same pattern. He states, "They feel better (...) when you speak their own language." The collective "they" assumes a shared set of expectations and reactions, once again positioning Danes as a unified out-group, since it is "their" language, not his.

The interviewees' experiences highlight how they perceive language as both facilitating and limiting their social

belonging. These reflections show that interviewees not only categorize Danes as a distinct 'them,' but also implicitly construct a shared 'us.' Whether interviewees express resignation, frustration, or attempts to adapt, their experiences reflect, how the boundary between 'us' and 'them' is both constructed and maintained. The repeated use of "they," "them," "their," "Danes," "Danish people," and "foreigner," reveals more than just perception – it actively constructs a social boundary.

This dynamic of in-group (us) and out-group (them) categorization runs throughout the interviews. As the analysis unfolds, the reader is encouraged to note how often pronouns like "they," "them," and "their" appear. This 'us' and 'them' distinction is a discursive undercurrent that shapes how identity, belonging, and exclusion are articulated and negotiated by the interviewees across this study.

4.3 Danish Is Essential for Integration

Even if you live in Denmark, as a foreigner, it's English. (...) I stopped learning Danish in 2017, because I found out that I'm learning a language that only five million people can speak. (Dina)

Engelsk international sprog (...) Det er meget vigtigt, at man ikke mister sin engelsk sprog [English is an international language (...) It is very important that one does not lose their English language]. (Nadia)

English has always been my business language, even before I came to Denmark. So I don't have a problem communicating in English, nor do I have a problem working or expressing myself in English. (Ahmad)

These are some of the initial experiences described by the interviewees when asked which language is more important. So why learn Danish when everyone speaks English anyway? As the interviews unfold, it becomes evident that the

question is not as simple as pointing to one language and deeming it essential. Despite being fluent English speakers, all interviewees highlight the importance of learning Danish. For the interviewees, the notion of language emerges as much more complex and multifaceted, and is experienced as far more than mere communication. The interviewees seem to have recognized that learning Danish can help them meet societal expectations and show a willingness to integrate into Danish society. Additionally, learning Danish serves as a practical tool for personal advancement, providing access to education and better job opportunities.

4.3.1 Societal Expectations

The interviewees recognize that learning Danish is essential for integration and meeting societal expectations. This is evident as Arif states,

“It’s important to learn Danish, because if you want to, it’s not only because you have to learn the language, it’s important to learn the language for integration into society, Danish society.”

Arif repeatedly emphasizes that “it’s important” to learn Danish. His focus shifts from “want to” to “have to.” In his use of “want to,” Arif perceives learning Danish as a personal choice. On the contrary, his immediately added “have to” suggests that he perceives learning Danish as an obligation or necessity to meet societal expectations to integrate into Danish society. His emphasis on “only because you have to” further reinforces his perception that the societal expectation to learn Danish precedes his desire of “want to”.

Nadia, too, emphasizes that learning Danish remains essential for integration. This is evident as she states,

“men det lidt det flest i dansk bor, taler engelsk, men man skal lære dansk her, fordi det er meget vigtig integration [but even if most people living in Denmark speak English, but you have to learn

Danish here because it is very important for integration].”

Like Arif, Nadia also uses “man skal [one has to].” According to Nadia’s perception, even though most Danes speak English and it can suffice for basic communication, her emphasis on “man skal [one has to]” highlights the societal expectation that learning Danish is essential for integration.

Similarly, Farah shares a comparable experience with Arif and Nadia. This is evident as Farah states, referring to herself, “She’s living here now in our country, so she needs to- she has to speak Danish.” Farah’s initial “need to” implies personal judgment, as she perceives that it might benefit her to know Danish. Meanwhile, “has to” implies a societal expectation to learn the language to be accepted into Danish society. The shared use of the terms “have to” and “man skal [one has to]” points to a common perception among the interviewees; learning Danish is essential not merely as a matter of personal choice but as an obligation to meet societal expectations. This recurring terminology also highlights their perception of a consistent awareness of the societal expectations to linguistically conform as a means of integration.

Farah further highlights how in her perception, societal expectations for learning Danish and integrating significantly vary for different groups of foreigners. She illustrates this point by contrasting her experience as a refugee with that of a tourist, based on how she perceives herself to be categorized. This is evident as she states,

“They feel, ‘okay, she’s a tourist, I’m going to help her.’ But if they know you aren’t here- especially if they see you as a refugee, they are like, ‘okay, why is she not speaking Danish?’”

This contrast reveals her perception, that unlike tourists, refugees are not granted leniency as they are seen as potential members of Danish society and expected to

integrate as long-term residents and expected to learn Danish. In Farah's experience, Danes refrain from speaking English with her despite their ability to do so. She states, "They don't speak English. They can, but they don't want." This disparity implies that Farah perceives that failing to meet the societal expectations of learning the language carries consequences for refugees, a point later echoed in Ahmad's reflections.

Ahmad reflects on how he perceives Danes react to those who do not speak Danish, even after living in the country for years. This is evident as he states,

"if you spent like ten years and you still don't speak Danish, that means you don't want them or you don't want to integrate."

Ahmad's statement highlights how he, like Farah, perceives learning Danish not merely as a means of communication or a personal skill to be acquired, but as a societal expectation from long-term residents.

Ahmad similar to Farah, also shares his perception of the consequences of not meeting these societal expectations, as he states,

"If you don't speak their language and if you stayed a long time and you didn't learn the language, they will be more skeptical. It will not benefit you."

Ahmad's emphasis on the consequences, "it will not benefit you" and "they will be more skeptical," reinforces the shared perception among the interviewees that meeting this societal expectation is closely tied to language being essential for integration, regardless of personal motivation or desire. This dynamic also reflects a form of social pressure to assimilate into the Danish culture which is also omnipresent throughout the analysis.

The repeated framing of Danish as something they "have to" learn rather than "want to" reflects their perception

that Danish is not only an expectation, but also a precondition for participation and a measure of what counts as 'successful' refugee integration in Denmark. The interviewees' use of "have to," "must," and "man skal [one has to]" position learning Danish as a predicate of legitimate membership. Farah's contrast between being seen as a 'tourist' versus a 'refugee' highlights how categories are contextually invoked, each with different expectations. Refugees are expected to perform integration through language, while tourists are exempt. These contrasting expectations show how categorization is used to justify unequal treatment – and how language becomes a way to reinforce social boundaries and exclusion.

4.3.2 Showing Willingness to Integrate

While willingness implies voluntariness, for the interviewees, it is the act of 'showing' willingness that becomes important. For the interviewees, this show of willingness is not just about personal choice; it is a proactive response to countering stereotypes and political narratives. Interviewees share the perception that learning Danish and seeking employment are key indicators of showing willingness to integrate into Danish society, shaping how they navigate their daily lives. This section explores their active efforts and how they perceive these efforts shape the way others see them in turn.

Nadia states,

"Rasmus Paludan (...) Han siger, 'De vil ikke integrere sig.' 'De kan ikke snakke dansk' [Rasmus Paludan (...) He says, 'They do not want to integrate.' 'They cannot speak Danish']."

Her mention of a political figure known for his anti-immigration rhetoric reflects her awareness of these stereotypes and political narratives. Nadia then adds,

"Jeg siger (...) Nej, nej, vi sidder ikke på kontanthjælp. Vi lærer dansk, vi arbejder, vi

integrerer i dansk samfund [I say (...) No, no, we are not on social aid. We are learning Danish, we are working, we are integrating into Danish society].”

Nadia’s declarative tone and use of active verbs highlight a proactive stance in showing her willingness to integrate through learning the language and contributing economically. She reinforces her stance against dependence on social aid, as she explicitly states, “vi sidder ikke på kontanthjælp [we are not on social aid]”. Nadia frames her actions, “Vi lærer dansk [we are learning Danish], vi arbejder [we are working], vi integrerer [we are integrating],” as a direct, proactive response to countering these stereotypes and political narratives and asserts her willingness to integrate.

Like Nadia, Ahmad also shows awareness of the political narratives. Ahmad states,

“I (...) follow all of the political discussions in Denmark and there’s a lot of xenophobia (...) I always get into (...) discussions with people who support this rhetoric, and the first question they ask is, ‘Why are you speaking English and not Danish?’”

To counter this, Ahmad also emphasizes learning Danish, finding a job and avoiding social aid. Earlier, Ahmad stated, “So I don’t have a problem communicating in English, nor do I have a problem working or expressing myself in English.”

However, he later adds, “I started learning (...) I actually passed the first module but Corona came.” This contrast indicates that learning Danish is not driven by Ahmad’s personal linguistic needs but rather serves as a proactive response to show his willingness to integrate.

Ahmad further states,

"I had a certain mentality that I did not want to go on social aid at all. I wanted to start working immediately, (...) and it paid off because when people saw that I actually worked in a Danish company, this seemed like, 'Okay, this guy is legit.'"

Like Nadia, Ahmad perceives learning Danish, working, and not being on social aid as tangible ways to show willingness to integrate into Danish society. Ahmad further adds,

"I immediately started working and paying taxes, and once you start working and paying taxes, everything changes. People don't bother with you."

For Ahmad, paying taxes and avoiding social aid not only reflect his willingness to integrate, but also influence how he perceives others view his integration. This is evident, as he says, "Okay, this guy is legit." The positive reinforcement Ahmad experiences when he says "it paid off" highlights the interplay between his personal agency in showing willingness to integrate and the external pressures to counter stereotypes and political narratives.

Together, their reflections show how the interviewees perceive integration not just as something they do, but something they must be seen to be doing. Showing willingness becomes a category-bound activity tied to the category of 'integrating refugee'. This is evident in Nadia's contrast between stereotypes, "de kan ikke snakke dansk [they cannot speak Danish]," and her statements, "vi lærer dansk [we are learning Danish]," "vi arbejder [we are working]," "vi integrerer [we are integrating]." These activities are constructed as acts of showing willingness. Through this framing, the interviewees resist the passive label of 'dependent refugee' by aligning with active, productive categories like 'employed' or 'self-sufficient'. The repeated emphasis on doing, in terms of learning, working, integrating, reflects the unspoken membership categorization device of 'good refugee' versus 'dependent

refugee'. This also reflects how perceptions shift based on how the actions are interpreted, similar to how behaviors change when Farah is categorized as a 'tourist' versus a 'refugee.' This also shows how these category devices are invoked strategically, as the interviewees assert their place in Danish society not by claiming membership outright, but by aligning themselves with the category-bound actions that define 'belonging.' Through this framing, the interviewees show that categories are not fixed, they are negotiated in interaction, and legitimacy within them depends on performance. These categories are invoked and maintained, as 'speaking Danish' is activity-bound to the category of 'integrated,' while 'not speaking Danish' is tied to 'unwilling' or 'not belonging.' These associations reveal the interviewees' awareness of how language links to inclusion.

4.3.3 Danish as a Tool for Personal Advancement: Education and Job Opportunities

Beyond societal expectations and showing willingness, the interviewees perceive Danish as a tool for personal advancement and accessing education and job opportunities, highlighting its practical role in navigating Danish society.

Nadia states,

"Jeg stræbede og knoklede til at lære dansk, fordi jeg skal have uddannelse og de fleste uddannelser er på dansk, ja [I struggled and worked hard to learn Danish, because I need an education and most studies are in Danish, yes]."

While her statement acknowledges the importance of Danish for accessing educational opportunities, her repeated use of "jeg [I]" is particularly noteworthy. Unlike the earlier example, where she uses the general "man skal lære dansk her [one has to learn Danish here]," here her focus shifts to her personal efforts and motivation, "jeg stræbede og knoklede, (...) fordi jeg skal have uddannelse [I struggled

and worked hard (...) because I need an education].” This shift emphasizes that she perceives Danish as a practical tool for achieving her personal goals of pursuing an education. This perception is further reinforced when she adds,

“fordi jeg bor i Danmark. Hvis jeg vil gerne tage uddannelse og rejser hjem tilbage, så det ikke nødvendigvis at jeg taler dansk [because I live in Denmark. If I want to get an education and travel back home, then it is not necessary that I speak Danish].”

This statement clearly highlights her perception that her motivation to learn Danish is closely tied to the opportunities available specifically in Denmark rather than viewing Danish as universally essential. This also shows how Nadia perceives Danish as a context-specific tool directly connected to her environment and goals.

Arif shares a similar perception of Danish as a tool for personal advancement, particularly for accessing better job opportunities. This is evident as he states,

“All opportunities will open by the language. (...) Even if you are going to work, if you have to have a good work, at least a good job and work, then you have to be proficient with the Danish language (...).”

Arif’s use of “will open” reflect his optimism about how he perceives that once Danish proficiency is achieved better job opportunities will be accessible. Arif adds, “There are more opportunities in Danish than in English.” Like Nadia, Arif also perceives that speaking Danish can expand his job opportunities in Denmark compared to relying solely on English.

Farah, too, shares a similar perception regarding her personal goals. This is evident as she states,

"I just wanted to be fluent as soon as possible. And I didn't have any plan to study like in the university, in Danish. I just wanted to be fluent in a way to start in the society and just to find a job. That was my target."

Her emphasis on fluency as a way to "start in the society" and "find a job" shows that she perceives Danish as a tool for participation and entry into the workforce. Unlike Nadia her goal is not tied to formal education or long-term academic ambitions but rather to gain the linguistic skills needed to start in society and access job opportunities.

The interviewees' reflections reveal their perception of Danish as a practical tool for personal advancement and for navigating critical domains such as education, employment, and societal participation. This not only highlights the practical utility of language but also reinforces its symbolic power, as in the interviewees' perception those who speak Danish are more likely to be seen as capable and integrated.

4.4 Danish Is Essential for Building Social Relations

There is a general consensus among the interviewees that social life 'happens' in Danish. Dina, for example, distinguishes between speaking Danish "if you want to make relationships" as opposed to "when it comes to work, you have to be professional more than speaking Danish." Ahmad echoes this perspective, stating, "Socially, Danish is much more limiting than professionally." According to the interviewees' experiences Danish operates under different parameters in social interactions than it does in professional contexts. This section explores how the interviewees perceive Danish as essential for building social relations, connecting with others on an emotional level, as well as for understanding Danish mentalities, adapting their communication style, and developing a sense of belonging in Danish society.

4.4.1 Danish for Building Social Relations: Communicating vs. Connecting

In the interviewees' experience Danish is essential not merely as a tool for everyday communication but as a means to build social relations. Dina highlights this importance, stating,

"It's important if you want to make relationships. (...) I would have made myself better in Danish, and I would have waited to learn English later, and I think I would have made a better connection with Danish people."

Dina's emphasis here is not a complete lack of Danish skills to communicate, as she says, "I would have made myself better in Danish," but rather on a lack of sufficient mastery of Danish to be able to make "a better connection with Danish people." The use of "want" when Dina says, "If you want to make relationships," emphasizes that in her experience, learning Danish for building deep connections or relationships is a personal choice or desire. Had she instead used 'have to' or 'must,' it would have implied a sense of external obligation or societal expectation rather than her desire to learn Danish to "make relationships."

Dina contrasts communication with connecting by stating, "It's not enough to say the day-to-day language. It's not enough. If you want to get to know a person, you need to know them deeply." Here, "day-to-day language" signifies Danish as a tool for functional, everyday communication, which Dina perceives as insufficient for truly knowing someone. She reinforces this by repeatedly stating, "it's not enough." Dina elaborates,

"I mean, what are people without their thoughts? (...) I'd like to get closer to people, like emotionally (...) I'm learning Danish, I remember situations where I really wanted to get in emotional contact (...) and couldn't because of the language."

For Dina, knowing someone “deeply” means being able to “emotionally” connect and understand their “thoughts”. This highlights Dina’s perception of Danish as more than just a functional language, it is essential for forming meaningful social relationships. Dina’s emphasis on “I really wanted to (...) and couldn’t” reflects a sense of realization or awareness of Danish as essential for social integration on a personal and societal level.

Similar to Dina, Arif emphasizes the importance of learning Danish, particularly when understanding feelings and emotions. This is evident as he states,

“it’s very much important to learn Danish and because only then you can understand what the other person expressing by his or her feelings.”

Arif’s emphasis on “because only then you can understand (...) his or her feelings” reflects his perception, that while he might understand what the other person is saying, he is unable to understand what they are thinking or feeling. Arif adds,

“What the person is saying in Danish and what the translator is telling me in English or other language it will not be the same expression or not the same feeling.”

The challenge for Arif lies in not knowing Danish well enough to fully grasp the emotional and expressive nuances in social interactions, as he explicitly states that the translation from Danish to another language “will not be the same expression (...) or feeling.” In Arif’s experience learning Danish is essential because it is by understanding expressions and feelings behind communication that he can build deeper social relations.

Like Arif and Dina, Ahmad shares the same perception regarding Danish as essential for building social relations.

This is evident as he states, "I would want to learn Danish not for work (...) but socially, I still suffer." While Ahmad's linguistic proficiency may be sufficient for professional interactions, as he explicitly states, "learn Danish not for work," it falls short in building genuine friendships, as socially he "still" suffers. Ahmad expresses this sentiment as he states,

"I don't have Danish friends, per se. I have Danish friends that we do stuff together every once in a while, but they are not close friends."

Ahmad distinguishes between "Danish friends that we do stuff together" and that "they are not close friends," which implies that achieving true close friendships requires linguistic fluency that can pave the way for building a deeper connection and understanding. His contrast between "not for work" but "socially" highlights the different dimensions of linguistic proficiency; the communicative aspect, as he says, "I have Danish friends," versus the connective aspect, as he adds, "but they are not close friends." Ahmad's distinction between communicating and connecting closely mirrors Dina's perspective.

Their experiences and perceptions illustrate how Danish enables them to understand nuances of thoughts, feelings, and emotions unfolding in social interactions which facilitate transforming acquaintances into close friendships. So "day-to-day" communication and doing "stuff together every once in a while" or using a "translator" do not make up for the lack of deeper connection that comes with proficiently speaking Danish. This also reinforces the idea that speaking Danish is not simply helpful in getting by but also to feel included in Danish society.

4.4.2 Beyond Words: Learning Culture Through Experience

In the interviewees' experiences, breaking down social barriers is not only about being able to speak Danish but

also about understanding Danish mentalities. Arif states, "you have to be proficient with the Danish language". He adds,

"So it's being socialized is not like that learning the language, okay, and learn about the culture and that's all. No, you are going to the bar to understand the local culture and talk with people on their way. To be socialized on their way (...)."

Arif perceives that "learning the language" alone is not enough for "being socialized"; true integration requires engaging with Danes in "their" cultural spaces. His wording, particularly "talk with people on their way," suggests that meaningful interaction happens beyond formal language learning, in informal settings like bars, where cultural norms and behaviors are experienced firsthand.

This aligns with his earlier example (section 4.1.3), where he shares his perception that even a simple gesture like a tap on the shoulder can be interpreted differently across cultural contexts. For Arif, such an experience further reinforces his perception that speaking Danish also entails mastering the embodied and cultural dimensions of interaction. He adds,

"As I am tapping to the people, someone said, 'Are you trying to tell me I am stupid?' Why? I'm appreciating you. (...) showing a good expression to you. 'No, you are telling me that I am stupid.'"

This experience illustrates his point that "learning the language" alone does not lead to socialization; it also requires cultural understanding. As Arif emphasizes "It has to be not only learning from this school, from practical life you have to learn many things." This highlights his perception that socialization involves continuous learning and adapting through lived experiences, where

understanding cultural nuances is essential to navigating interactions and building social relationships.

Nadia expresses a similar perception when she states that Danish is "ikke kun svære ord, det også noget med comprehension [not only difficult words, it also something with comprehension]." This is evident as she adds,

"Når jeg øhh, 'distinguish' – eller når jeg forstår, hvornår de mobber, hvornår de ikke mobber på mig. (...) så på den måde bliver – jeg forstår (...) også kultur [When I uhh, distinguish – or when I understand when they are bullying, when they are not bullying me. (...) so in that way it becomes – I understand also culture]."

In Nadia's experience, "comprehension" includes interpreting social cues, such as distinguishing between playful teasing and actual bullying. When Nadia says, "så på den måde (...) forstår jeg også kultur [so in that way (...) I also understand culture]," it reflects her perception that cultural "comprehension" is essential for building social relations. She further explains,

"Jeg forstår ikke, hvad den 'flue på væggen.' Det med tiden jeg forstår at man bare kigger på, uden, og ikke deltager i diskussion. De har – de har andre forståelse end min forståelse til situationer [I do not understand, what it means to be 'a fly on the wall.' It is with time I understand that one just looks, without, and does not participate in the discussion. They have – they have another understanding than my understanding of situations]."

Her remark, "de har andre forståelse end min forståelse til situationer [they have another understanding than my understanding of situations]," highlights her perception that comprehending these nuances is part of a broader cultural fluency that enables deeper social connections beyond basic communication.

Arif and Nadia highlight that building social connections requires more than just speaking Danish – it involves understanding cultural norms and social cues. True socialization happens through lived experiences, informal interactions, and adapting to “their way.”

4.4.2.1 Building Better Connections: Understanding Danish Mentalities and Adapting

Building on the previous section, where interviewees emphasize that socializing, along with learning Danish, helps in understanding cultural and social norms, this section explores how speaking Danish enables them to understand Danish mentalities and adapt their communication style accordingly.

Ahmad highlights the importance of speaking Danish to understand Danish mentalities and adapt his communication style. He states,

“I’m very much aware that it is about understanding mentalities (...) I didn’t know a lot of things about how Danish people perceive, analyze, plan ahead, and all of that.”

He emphasizes that he is “very much aware” of the importance of understanding mentalities as he perceives that it provides insight into the underlying thought processes that shape social relations and interactions with Danes. He adds, “Once you understand, you can also change the way you communicate, and this is key.” For Ahmad, speaking Danish is essential because the ability to “change the way you communicate” only becomes possible once he understands how Danes “perceive” and “analyze.” Ahmad’s emphasis on “and this is key” reinforces his perception of understanding mentalities and adapting communication as interdependent, as effective social relations require understanding mentalities and adapting communication style.

Ahmad illustrates this with a specific cultural insight he gained once his social relationships shifted from professional to casual. This insight should be understood as Ahmad's personal perception of cultural difference, rather than as a general characterization. Ahmad explains,

"Quick service was a huge thing when I was in the Middle East. (...) Over here, they value their comfort, so people like to know things in a timely manner, so they can react to it in a timely manner."

Ahmad further explains how he adopted a new email routine, stating,

"So I started pacing out, so I know the answer, but I will not reply until tomorrow because I don't want people to not be at ease or whatever."

Ahmad perceives that Danes feel uneasy or "overwhelmed" by immediate replies, so by pacing his responses, he prioritizes their sense of ease and comfort.

Ahmad further notes,

"one of the lady friends (...) I developed to be friends with. (...) told me that, 'You put me under so much pressure because you reply immediately (...)'. This is also something that I learned. You don't get these insights unless you break the barriers and talk to people on a casual basis. But on a professional level, people will never tell you, 'Don't send me emails quickly.'"

In his perception, shaped by his cultural background, "quick service" is expected and appreciated. Once the relationship became more casual, however, his colleague shared that his immediate replies put her "under too much pressure," an insight he perceives he would not have received in a professional relationship. Through casual interactions, he

started intuiting how his actions were perceived by Danes, allowing him to adapt accordingly and gradually interpret situations as a Danish speaker would. He contrasts this with professional interactions, where such insights are “never” shared, emphasizing the importance of informal, everyday communication for understanding social norms and behaviors.

Nadia shares a similar perception to Arif and Ahmad. She states,

”Det kræver praktisk og daglig (...) handling med danskere, at forstå den måde de tænker på. Fordi sprog også tænkeretning ikke bare nogen ord (...) retning de tænker på [It requires practical and daily (...) interaction with Danes, to understand the way they think. Because language is also train of thought, not just some words (...) the way they think].”

Like Ahmad, Nadia connects language with “tænkeretning [the way they think],” highlighting that understanding Danish mentalities is not just about learning “nogen ord [some words]” but about understanding the “retning de tænker på [direction they think in].” Nadia’s insights reinforce Ahmad’s point that connecting with Danes requires a deeper understanding of how Danes “perceive” and “analyze.”

As interviewees develop a deeper understanding of Danish mentalities and adapt their communication style to fit social norms, this layered accumulation of linguistic, social, and cultural adaptation leads to a shift in their connection to Danish society. They move beyond surface-level integration and begin to see themselves reflected in Danish culture, reinforcing a more internalized sense of belonging.

4.4.3 A Sense of Belonging Through Danish

This sense of belonging becomes evident when interviewees recognize cultural concepts that resonate with their own

experiences. Dina mentions a specific cultural concept that became apparent once she moved beyond the “day-to-day language.” She states,

“It’s a Danish idea ‘urørlighedszone [untouchable zone]’ (...) the Danish culture, which has become more like me (...) So, yeah, that’s why I felt – I felt more Danish.”

The concept of “urørlighedszone [untouchable zone]” marks a shift from merely “knowing” Danish on a functional level to “speaking” it in a way that enables Dina to develop a deeper cultural understanding and a sense of belonging. Dina’s experience of relating to this Danish idea, which made her feel “more Danish,” highlights the role of language in shaping her cultural identity and developing a sense of ‘Danishness.’

Speaking Danish also carries an emotional significance. This is evident as Nadia states,

“Jeg tilhører Danmark, jeg er en del af Danmark, (...) Jeg vil gerne lære dansk, fordi jeg kan godt lide Danmark, og jeg føler mig en del af samfundet [I belong to Denmark, I am a part of Denmark, (...) I want to learn Danish, because I like Denmark, and I feel like a part of society].”

Nadia’s explicit statements, “jeg tilhører Danmark [I belong to Denmark]” and “jeg vil gerne lære dansk [I want to learn Danish]” imply that she perceives learning Danish as more than a necessity; it is a personal affirmation of her sense of belonging to Denmark. “Jeg vil gerne [I want to]” and “jeg føler mig en del af samfundet [I feel like a part of society]” further reflect a personal desire and emotional connection to Danish society.

This contrasts with her earlier statement, “man skal taler dansk her, fordi det er meget vigtigt integration [one has to speak Danish here, because it is very important for

integration]”, which reflects a societal expectation to learn Danish for integration. This shift from an external obligation to a personal sense of belonging reflect her perception of how speaking Danish transforms from a requirement to an expression of identification with Danish society. Nadia later adds,

”ja Google Translator. Så man kan godt translate, siger den på engelsk og måske lever ens liv på engelsk uden dansk. Men jeg bekræfter her, det er noget med følelser og tilhørhed [(...) yes, Google Translate. So one can translate, say it in English and maybe live your life in English without Danish. But I confirm here, it is something about feelings and belonging].”

While she acknowledges that it is possible to live in Denmark without Danish, her use of “jeg bekræfter [I confirm]” reflects a declarative stance that language is tied to emotions and belonging. This distinction highlights her perception that Danish is not just for communication but a fundamental part of her identity in Denmark.

Dina has a perception similar to Nadia’s. In Dina’s experience speaking Danish gives her access to cultural insights that allow her to see herself reflected in Danish culture. Unlike Ahmad, who adapts his behavior to align with Danish norms without necessarily identifying with them, Dina experiences a more internalized connection. For Dina, seeing herself reflected in and identifying with “urørlighedszone [untouchable zone]” leads her to reflect, “how much Danish I am or I have become. And how much the Danish culture is actually part of my lifestyle.” Dina’s emphasis on “have become” implies a gradual process of internalization, ultimately leading her to the realization, “so I felt like, okay, I belong here.”

For the interviewees, this gradual process highlights how language is not just for communicating and understanding but also essential for developing a sense of

belonging. Speaking Danish develops a deeper connection that bridges the gap between knowing the language and identifying with Danish society. Nadia's and Dina's word choices like "jeg bekræfter [I confirm]" and "I felt like," highlight that this sense of belonging is self-affirmed rather than dependent on external validation. It emerges as a personal and self-determined feeling of inclusion.

Based on the interviewees' experiences explored throughout this section, it is evident that "speaking Danish" is not a singularly defined competence but rather an ongoing, multidimensional process. In their perception, speaking Danish firstly means having basic communicative proficiency sufficient for casual, everyday interactions. Secondly, it means understanding and adapting appropriate linguistic conduct to navigate subtle cultural norms and social cues. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it means thinking, feeling, or behaving like a Dane, thus internalizing Danish mentalities.

In their perception, when these three dimensions come together, proficiency in Danish transforms from mere linguistic competence into a deeper sense of cultural integration. As illustrated by the interviewees, the transition from simply communicating to genuinely connecting relies significantly on their ability to understand nuanced emotional expressions, interpret cultural norms, and adapt their communication style according to the Danes. It is precisely this multidimensional proficiency that allows interviewees to move from feeling obligated to speak Danish as a societal expectation toward experiencing a genuine, internalized sense of belonging.

Thus, in their perception, speaking Danish in its fullest sense goes beyond mere communication and language mastery. Speaking Danish becomes synonymous with "becoming Danish" not only reflecting proficiency but a meaningful identification with Danish culture and society.

4.5 Danish Becomes Secondary

There is a general consensus among the interviewees that Danish and English are essential; however, their significance varies depending on the context. This section explores how Danish becomes secondary in work and academic interactions within professional contexts. The interviewees have recognized that being able to provide value precedes their lack of linguistic proficiency in Danish. However, they also recognize a precarious balance: while Danish can become secondary, it regains power when the interviewees' utilitarian value is questioned by others.

4.5.1 Providing Value

Ahmad explicitly highlights the initial barriers to entering the workforce, stating, "But you have to get through the door first, and this is where looks and language which can be a barrier." However, he perceives that these barriers are negotiable, if he can compensate through professional competencies. He states,

"Once they understood that you can actually help them with what they are asking for even the language becomes secondary (...) and looks they become secondary because at one point it's, it's uhh fully understood that it is professional."

Ahmad's emphasis on "Once they understood that you can actually help them" highlights a pivotal shift. It reflects his perception that language transitions from being an initial barrier in work interactions to a "secondary" factor dependent upon his ability to be of utilitarian value. Ahmad reinforces this perception by stating, "If you can prove that you can provide value, language does not matter." This statement is particularly assertive; unlike earlier, Ahmad does not say language "becomes secondary," but instead he states, "language does not matter." However, his use of "if" highlights his perception that his acceptance is conditional

and contingent upon his ability to “prove” that he can “provide value.”

Dina shares a similar perception, reinforcing the idea that providing value outweighs lack of Danish proficiency in academic interactions. She states,

“I’m really good at physics and chemistry. But when it comes to Danish, there is where I struggle. So they want me in their group because they know they need the knowledge I have.”

Dina’s emphasis on “they want me” and “they know they need the knowledge I have” highlights her perception that her academic knowledge is both recognized and needed by her group members. She mirrors Ahmad’s experience that utilitarian value outweighs lack of language proficiency, making Danish secondary.

Dina reinforces this idea, stating,

“There was no other teachers. They gave me the class for myself because I can communicate the idea when it comes to mathematics. Language was the second thing for them.”

Her experience echoes Ahmad’s assertion that “language does not matter” when you can provide value. Dina’s experience reinforces a transactional dynamic, as she perceives her knowledge takes precedence over her limited linguistic proficiency due to its utilitarian value.

Both Ahmad and Dina’s experiences show how they possess symbolic capital when their cultural capital is recognized, rendering Danish secondary. Symbolic capital does not exist inherently; it becomes powerful only when recognized as legitimate and valued by others, in this case, by Ahmad’s colleagues and Dina’s group members. Their inclusion, therefore, is not automatic but earned through their perceived utilitarian value.

By framing Danish as “secondary” or “the second thing,” Ahmad and Dina do not dismiss its power entirely. Rather, their experiences reveal a precarious balance, which the following section will explore.

4.5.1.1 From Value to Exclusion: The Limits of Capital

Ahmad and Dina share a similar perception; Danish remains secondary as long as they provide utilitarian value. However, when that value is absent, Danish resurfaces as a primary barrier, revealing the conditional and transactional nature of their inclusion.

This is evident as Ahmad states,

“If I worked in a different career and I couldn’t deliver what I am supposed to do, then the first thing that will be brought up is language.”

Unlike earlier, Ahmad does not mention looks, but places his emphasis on “language” as the “first thing that will be brought up” as an argument “if” he cannot “deliver.” He adds, “You cannot deliver because you cannot speak the language. We can’t communicate well enough with you.” Ahmad’s statements reflect his perception that language becomes a scapegoat, regardless of whether communication is the actual reason he cannot “deliver.”

Dina shares a personal experience that reflects this conditional dynamic. Dina previously stated,

“I’m really good at physics and chemistry. (...) So they want me in their group because they know they need the knowledge I have.”

Dina’s experience is starkly different in another subject, where she cannot provide value. She states,

“I’m not good at, arts. I don’t like art. (...) I do my work alone. (...) But for them it seems like the girl who doesn’t speak Danish.”

By saying, “for them it seems,” Dina distances herself from her classmates’ perception of her as being unable to speak Danish. Dina adds, “even though I do, I swear to God, (...) But it’s now a stereotype.” Dina, too, experiences how language becomes a scapegoat – not her lack of competence or interest in the subject. Like Ahmad, when her value is questioned, language resurfaces as a primary barrier to inclusion.

Their experiences reinforce the transactional nature of their conditional inclusion, where their worth is tied to their ability to meet the needs of those around them. In her experience, when Dina is seen as having utilitarian value in physics and chemistry, she is included and even perceived as needed. But in her experience, when she is not seen as having any utilitarian value in arts, language becomes the basis for exclusion. The interviewees perceive that when they lack capital, language proficiency is no longer overlooked; instead, it reemerges as a barrier used to reassert boundaries and justify exclusion.

4.6 Language as a Tool for Exclusion

The previous section explored how Danish is a barrier until value is proven and provided. This section explores the interviewees’ experiences of implicit and explicit exclusion in group interactions, where language functions as a tool for exclusion regardless of their Danish proficiency, reflecting a broader power play that, in their perception, positions them as outsiders.

4.6.1 Exclusion as a Power Play

Ahmad articulates this experience,

“I can tell you in meetings when people in a very serious discussions address me specifically in Danish because they didn’t want me to speak back

or didn't want me to understand what was happening."

Ahmad's emphasis on "they didn't want me to understand" reflects his perception that the choice to speak Danish to him is not accidental but strategic. He further adds,

"If you don't get along with them work-wise, they will use language as a way to limit you. I have sat in meetings where people decided to address me in Danish even though they know I don't speak Danish."

Speaking Danish over English reinforces a social boundary, where Ahmad experiences being explicitly excluded from the meeting and positioned as an outsider among those who speak Danish. In this instance, he experiences Danish as a means to "limit" him when disagreements occur. The power play, as Ahmad perceives it, lies in his dual position of being both aware of and vulnerable to this exclusionary dynamic, as he states "they know I don't speak Danish."

Unlike Ahmad, Nadia speaks Danish and can communicate, yet she too experiences explicit exclusion. This is evident as she states,

"Accent og ordstilling (...). Det træls for mig, og også i min studiegruppe vi er fire (...) de har deres egen gruppe. De snakker sammen i deres egen gruppe og bagefter de snakker med mig [Accent and word order (...). That is frustrating for me, and also in my study group we are four (...) they have their own group. They talk together in their own group and afterwards they talk with me]."

In Nadia's experience, there is a clear distinction between how the members of her group speak among themselves and then to her. When prompted about the group members speaking Danish among themselves just as she does, Nadia

states, "De siger, jeg snakker dansk men ikke på deres niveau [They say, I speak Danish but not at their level]." According to Nadia's perception her "accent [accent]" and "niveau [level]" become reasons for exclusion. Nadia perceives that the power to exclude her from the group lies with her group members, as she states, "de siger [they say]," indicating that they determine whether she is fully included or not. In Nadia's experience even with linguistic proficiency, Danish is still used as a tool for exclusion to reinforce social boundaries, reinforcing her position as an outsider.

Similarly, Dina also experiences exclusion despite speaking Danish. She states,

"But for them, it seems like the girl who doesn't speak Danish, even though I do. I swear to God that I do. (...) they try to avoid me. (...) I meet them at, let's say at campus, and I say 'Hi,' and then they start asking me, 'Hey, hvordan går det [Hey, how is it going]?' And then I say 'Det går fint [It is going fine].' And then they start talking to each other without telling me something (...) I'm just left there (...)."

Dina's frustration is evident as she emphasizes, "it seems like the girl who doesn't speak Danish," while insisting, "I swear to God that I do." When Dina is "just left there" she experiences being positioned as an outsider, where her presence becomes secondary despite her ability to communicate in Danish. Dina experiences a form of implicit exclusion, while she is not actively rejected by the group, when "they start talking to each other without telling," it highlights that she is left out or ignored after the initial formalities are over.

The interviewees' experiences demonstrate that exclusion is not solely tied to language proficiency. Ahmad does not speak Danish, while Nadia and Dina do, yet all three experience exclusion in group interactions, either explicitly or implicitly. Both Nadia and Dina hold cultural

capital through their language proficiency, but still experience exclusion when their Danish is not accepted as sufficient. Their language is recognized in practice, as they communicate with their group members or classmates, but the standard for what is “good enough” shifts. Their accent or level of Danish become new criteria for exclusion, despite proficiency. The power play lies in exclusion not being about language proficiency alone, but about the dominance maintained through constantly moving criteria for “perfect Danish” or “good enough” Danish. The interviewees’ experiences highlight the instability of symbolic capital and the fragility of their inclusion, as legitimacy is determined by those with the power to define what counts as capital – and, ultimately, who belongs.

4.7 Once a Foreigner, Always a Foreigner

This section explores how the interviewees perceive Danishness as unattainable and undefined, yet firmly in place. While the interviewees actively try to negotiate their positioning between the categories of ‘Dane’ and ‘foreigner’, they perceive that looks, accents, and cultural differences become markers of foreignness and persist as barriers to being recognized as Danish.

4.7.1 It’s Just the Look

The interviewees perceive their look creates a barrier that excludes them from being seen as Danish. This is evident as Dina states, “From the Danish perspective, you have to have blonde hair. (...) I hate they don’t see me as Danish in Denmark.” Dina perceives that there is a rigid and exclusionary societal standard of what a Danish person has to look like. Her emphasis on “have to have,” instead of ‘need to have’ or ‘should have,’ reinforces this perception that being seen as Danish requires fitting into an idealized image of Danishness, an image she feels excluded from as she states, “I have brown hair.” Dina’s use of “I hate” instead of a more neutral wording like ‘I don’t like’ or ‘I wish they saw me

as Danish' conveys both frustration and a desire to be recognized as Danish.

Dina continues, "It doesn't matter how much your lifestyle is like their lifestyle. It doesn't matter." The repetition highlights her perception that visual markers override her efforts. She adds,

"I don't eat my cultural food. I actually eat what's in the supermarket, which is Danish. I mean, I have a very similar Danish lifestyle, for an average person, I'd say. I go to the same schools, I get the same fund, I have the same economic level of an average student, you know. But because I don't look, it's just the look."

Dina's remark, "it's just the look" reflects a tone of resignation. Dina perceives that despite adopting a Danish lifestyle and being on par with her peers, her looks remain the biggest barrier to being seen as Danish.

Ahmad shares a similar perception, stating, "people (...) have a much bigger problem with people who look like me." His emphasis on "who look like me" and "a much bigger problem" reflects his perception that his looks not only mark him as foreign, but trigger stronger reactions. He later asks, "Like, how can I be Danish? (...) Like, what is us?" – a rhetorical question that reflects his perception of Danishness as both exclusive and ambiguous.

Nadia also perceives that her looks set her apart. She states,

"Så når de ser en kvinde med tørklæde (...) bliver de lidt 'stumped'. (...) Det er ubehageligt til danskere, når jeg har tørklæde på [So when they see a woman with a headscarf (...) they get a little stumped. (...) It is uncomfortable for Danes when I wear a headscarf]."

She not only perceives that her headscarf visibly marks her as foreign but also evokes discomfort. She later adds, "Jeg snakker dansk, men alligevel jeg er ikke dansker [I speak Danish, but I am still not Danish]." Like Dina's "I hate", Nadia's "alligevel [still]" conveys frustration and resignation. Nadia perceives that the idea of Danishness is ultimately tied to looks and that speaking Danish does not make her Danish.

Together, the interviewees' experiences reinforce their perception that regardless of how much they adapt or integrate, they remain 'visible strangers'.

4.7.2 'Huh?' 'Hvad Siger Du?'

Accent, accent, ordstilling og accent ja (...) Så siger de til mig 'Hvad?' 'Hvad siger du?' 'Vi forstår ikke [Accent, accent, word order and accent, yes (...)] Then they say to me 'What?' 'What are you saying?' 'We do not understand]'. (Nadia)

And I had heard several times that 'Hvad siger du [What are you saying]?' And I was like, my God, something is wrong. (Farah)

'Huh?' 'I don't understand what you are saying.' And they switch to English. (Ahmad)

The interviewees all describe experiences where their attempts to speak Danish are met with confusion, dismissal, or redirection, like "Vi forstår ikke [We do not understand]," "Huh?" or "Hvad siger du [What are you saying]?" These reactions reinforce their perception that accents, like looks, becomes a marker of exclusion and foreignness.

Ahmad states,

"I would still be more comfortable in English, only because (...) the accent is – is something that they have a very sensitive ear to, and they can identify immediately (...)."

He perceives that Danes' "sensitive ear" instantly marks his accent as foreign, leading them to "switch to English." He further adds, "and the discussion will switch from the topic to, 'Where are you from again?'" He perceives this shift in focus, from topic to identity, as a reflection of how his accent redirects conversations away from what he is saying to who he is.

Nadia also describes how she experiences her accent affects how others view her ability to speak Danish. Nadia states,

"nogen siger til mig, 'Du har dårlig sprog.' 'Du skal lære dansk.' 'Jeg forstår ikke hvad du siger.' 'Tror du, at du taler dansk [someone says to me, 'You have bad language.' 'You must learn Danish.' 'I do not understand what you are saying.' 'Do you think, you are speaking Danish]?"

In Nadia's perception, the rhetorical question "Tror du, at du taler dansk [Do you think, you are speaking Danish]?" dismisses and invalidates her linguistic proficiency. Her ability to speak Danish is overshadowed by how she sounds, and she perceives that her accent marks her as foreign.

Ultimately, Ahmad and Nadia's experiences reflect their perceptions that accents, like looks act as barriers to inclusion and markers of exclusion. While the interviewees themselves emphasize and perceive linguistic proficiency as a "have to" for integration, the interviewees' experiences suggest that accents serve as a constant reminder of their foreignness, preventing them from being fully accepted as Danish. The shift in discussion, such as "Where are you from again?" or "Du har dårlig sprog. Du skal lære dansk [You have bad language. You must learn Danish]," further reinforces the interviewees' perception that societal standards of "perfect Danish" or "good enough" Danish remain tied to rigid and exclusionary linguistic ideals. In their experience, accent is not just a feature of speech, but an

unchangeable marker of foreignness undermining their ability to be recognized as fluent, or by extension, Danish.

4.7.3 Cultural Difference as a Marker of Foreignness

Cultural differences act as another marker of the interviewees' foreignness as they experience it deviates from the idea of Danishness. This is evident as Ahmad states,

"Only in Denmark, people will ask, 'Why don't you drink? (...) it is almost taken personally if you don't drink, and that is also very strange because drinking is a sort of social thing, but somehow I think Danes take it from a religious perspective, and they identify you as a Muslim (...)."

Ahmad perceives drinking as a personal, "social thing" which is "taken personally" when he does not drink. What he views as a neutral decision is instead interpreted as a cultural or religious signal, reinforcing his perception that difference is magnified and turned into a marker of foreignness.

Nadia shares a similar perception. She states,

"Det er ubehageligt til danskere, når jeg har tørklæde på. (...) fordi de siger at det er mærkeligt kultur [It is uncomfortable for Danes, when I have a headscarf on (...) because they say it is a strange culture]."

Nadia adds,

"og han bange, at hans kultur og tradition ikke påvirke. Så han bange for mig derfor [(...) and he is afraid, that his culture and tradition is affected. So he afraid of me because of that]."

Nadia perceives that her headscarf is associated with an 'un-Danish' culture and is met with a fear-driven reaction. In her view, the headscarf not only marks her foreignness but is also perceived as a threat. Like Ahmad's choice not to drink,

Nadia's headscarf although a personal choice, becomes in her perception a cultural and religious difference that Danes interpret as incompatible with Danishness.

The interviewees' reflections in this section reveal how the categories 'Dane' and 'foreigner' are constructed through visible and linguistic markers, which operate as membership categorization devices. These categories are not fixed by citizenship or residence, but by visible traits, such as looks, accents, and cultural differences, that function as category predicates. For instance, blonde hair or speaking Danish without an accent are treated as expectations for the category 'Dane,' whereas headscarves, brown hair, or accents index the category 'foreigner,' regardless of one's actual integration. When Dina states, "you have to have blonde hair," she explicitly invokes these predicates. Through these statements, we see how membership categories are tied to expectations that go beyond behavior to unchangeable markers of foreignness.

At the same time, the interviewees describe their efforts to resist these fixed associations. Their experiences highlight attempts to move toward the 'Danish' category through category-bound activities, such as learning Danish or adopting a Danish lifestyle. But the continued experience of being positioned as an outsider shows that these efforts do not grant full re-categorization. Thus, the problem is not the activity, but how embedded these category predicates are. Even when category-bound activities are performed, the predicates associated with "Danishness" remain narrowly defined and unattainable for those marked as visually or culturally different.

Thus, 'once a foreigner, always a foreigner' is not just a feeling – it reflects how social categories are constructed and maintained through interaction. Even when the interviewees use language and self-categorization to negotiate their position, the boundaries remain fixed. The interviewees' experiences show that inclusion is not just about what you do, but whether others recognize it as "the right way."

4.8 We Are the Same Kind of Outsiders

There is a common saying that to truly understand someone, you must walk in their shoes. Dina expresses this sentiment when speaking of her challenges in Denmark. She states,

"I sometimes try to justify why they do that, you know, and give them reasons, but they haven't been in our – in our place, you know, where you have to speak a language that maybe doesn't matter to you in the first place."

Or as Nadia states,

"De har – de har andre forståelse end min forståelse til situationer [They have- they have another understanding than my understanding of situations]."

These statements capture the interviewees' perception that their challenges cannot be fully understood by Danes due to the lack of shared experiences.

While the previous section focused on the interviewees' perceptions of their foreignness, this section shifts to the interviewees' categorization of me during the interviews. The interviewees perceive me as someone who can relate to their challenges and experiences. The following section will explore precisely this dynamic, where I am categorized as 'one of us'.

4.8.1 One of Us

The interviewees perceive me as someone who can relate to their experiences, which becomes apparent in the interviews both implicitly and explicitly. In some cases, they do not

respond to a question directly, implying that I already understand what they mean. This is evident when I ask Nadia whether language alone makes her feel different. She replies, "Nej, ikke kun sprog, kultur, sprog, race (...) [No, not just language, culture, language, race (...)]". When I prompt her to elaborate, she chuckles and adds,

"Jeg kommer fra et land, du kommer fra et andet land, ja [I come from one country, you come from another country, yes]."

Her chuckle paired with this response signals recognition of similarity that does not require further explanation. She perceives that I already know what she means, implicitly categorizing us both as members of the category 'foreigner' situated within the broader membership categorization device of 'nationality/cultural background'.

Like Nadia, Arif does something similar, but more explicitly. While explaining the importance of speaking Danish, he switches mid-interview to one of our shared languages and states, "If I speak in Hindi now or if I speak in Urdu, it would just be the same thing, right? So how would it feel?" He then switches back to English and adds, "everyone with the connection is similar like that way, when you speak their own language they feel better." He makes a clear point about emotional connection through language, how hearing one's own language creates a sense of connection. Arif's shift to a shared language categorizes me in the category 'Urdu/Hindi speaker' within the broader membership categorization device of 'foreign background'. By speaking Urdu, Arif tries to make the sentiment more relatable to me, reflecting his perception that I would understand – not just linguistically, but emotionally.

The interviewees occasionally express an awareness that I am, in some ways, like them. Before Ahmad explains how he perceives Danish mentalities, he asks, "Where are you from, by the way?" Later he adds, "I mean your

background culturally is also very close to mine.” He then goes on to elaborate,

“Our families, big tables of food, with gatherings over weekends and all of these things, and this is also very different for Danish people because they are more like an island mentality.”

Although a question like this may echo those the interviewees themselves receive from Danes, in this context it does not appear exclusionary or an attempt to ‘other’ me. Instead, it functions as a way of categorizing me in relation to his own experiences. This reflects a broader process of categorization, where belonging is not fixed but relationally constructed through interaction. While the interviewees often categorize me as ‘one of us,’ this alignment is not absolute.

This negotiation becomes particularly evident when Nadia states, “mit sprog er ikke ligesom dit sprog. Det fordi du er ung [my language is not like your language. That is because you are young].” referring to the fact that I (subjectively) speak Danish without an accent. While we share the experience of being non-native speakers, my accent becomes a category marker of difference *within* a shared experience. Nadia uses a language proficiency membership categorization device to place me in a different category, ‘young, accent-free speaker,’ while still maintaining a connection through the broader ‘immigrant’ or ‘non-native’ device. In doing so, she both acknowledges our shared outsider status and simultaneously creates a subtle hierarchy within it. Nadia simultaneously perceives similarity and difference between us. This reflects the subtle layers of categorization – not simply a divide between us and them, but varying degrees of “us-ness.”

The way I am categorized in these interviews is shaped by a delicate interplay of perceived similarity and difference. I am similar enough to evoke connection, and different enough for nuanced dynamics to unfold. This dual

categorization reflects how interviewees negotiate membership in real time – through category invocation, contrast, and alignment. My role as a non-white interviewer invokes a relevant device (ethnic outsider) but allows for re-categorization into one of us, shaping the interview in ways that would likely differ if I were categorized as ‘one of them’ (ethnic Dane, native speaker).

4.9 Revisiting the Us and Them Distinction

The analysis began by exploring the interviewees’ perceptions of what it means to speak Danish and how they perceive and experience the Danish language. Each theme allowed for a deeper exploration of how language shaped their experiences with identity, inclusion, exclusion, and belonging. Throughout the analysis, the presence of us and them has remained consistent. This distinction appears in relation to speaking Danish, meeting societal expectations, building social relations, being of utilitarian value, and most evidently, through being visible strangers. A different ‘us’ is created during the interviews, where the interviewees categorize me in contrast to the surrounding society. Thus, the analysis has shown that the ‘us’ and ‘them’ distinction is not only described – it is continuously produced, negotiated, and lived.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

Danish is not only a means of communication; it is also a social and symbolic tool that shapes identity, feelings of inclusion, exclusion, belonging, and power relations for the interviewees. Rather than simply categorizing themselves as either ‘Danish speakers’ or ‘non-Danish speakers,’ the

interviewees distinguish between knowing, speaking, and embodying Danish. The interviewees construct alternative linguistic categories that reflect a more fluid, context-dependent perception of language proficiency, shaped by self-assessment rather than a fixed binary of speaking or not speaking Danish. The interviewees' hesitation to identify as 'Danish speakers' reflects their internalization of the "perfect Danish" ideology, which they perceive sets an unattainable standard and continues to shape their self-perception.

The interviewees repeatedly frame Danish as an expectation, something they "have to" learn. This perceived societal expectation overrides personal choice, desire, or practical need and reflects their perception of a broader pressure to show willingness to integrate. In the interviewees' experience, learning Danish becomes both a precondition and a measure of what counts as "successful" refugee integration in Denmark. The interviewees have internalized the dominant 'One nation, one language' ideology: 'We speak Danish because we are in Denmark,' not because they identify as Danish speakers, but because they perceive that they are expected to speak Danish in order to be accepted – hence their emphasis on "have to" rather than "want to" when they speak about learning the language.

The importance of Danish varies in social and professional contexts. In social contexts, the interviewees perceive Danish as essential not just for communication, but for building meaningful relationships. Interviewees consistently emphasize that a basic conversational level of proficiency is insufficient to form emotional connections with Danes. In their experience, Danish is essential to think, feel, and behave like a Dane, and to understand Danish mentalities and cultural norms. In professional contexts, however, the interviewees experience Danish becomes secondary as long as they are perceived to have utilitarian value. In their experience, Danish reappears as a barrier and becomes a tool for exclusion when they are no longer perceived as having value, regardless of linguistic proficiency.

Through these experiences, the interviewees have developed the perception that integration, inclusion, 'being Danish,' or fulfilling criteria of 'Danishness' is an ambiguous pursuit and a constantly moving target. The interviewees perceive the criteria for what counts as "good enough" as unstable and never fully attainable. Ultimately, despite their efforts, the interviewees perceive themselves as visible strangers, marked as foreigners by appearance, accents, or cultural differences. Hence their perception: once a foreigner, always a foreigner, and speaking Danish does not make them Danish.

Initially, the interviewees perceive learning Danish as a goal in itself and as necessary for belonging – something they pursue and strive to achieve in the belief that it will lead to fulfillment through employment, education, social inclusion, and recognition as integrated members of society. The analytic findings suggest that this pursuit ultimately leads the interviewees to experience that language acquisition alone does not necessarily lead to inclusion, and that other social markers continue to shape their sense of belonging, or lack thereof, in Danish society.

So rather than striving to 'become Danish,' the interviewees navigate an in-between space, negotiating a category that is neither fully 'Danish' nor entirely 'foreign'. These findings suggest that, in their experience, it is not just about language; the underlying ideology 'We should all be the same' is perceived to persist. The 'us' and 'them' distinction remains a consistent undercurrent, raising the question: what is 'us'?

5.2 Theoretical Reflections

The interviewees' experiences reveal more than individual instances of exclusion; they point to broader processes of marginalization that they perceive as deeply embedded in the social structures of Danish society. Their persistent emphasis on 'not being accepted as Danish' despite speaking Danish reveals how they perceive social categories such as

'Danish,' 'foreigner,' and 'refugee' as not only socially constructed but also tied to power, prestige, and status (Hogg & Abrams, 1990b). Social Identity theory asserts that society is made up of social categories that are defined by power and status relationships (Hogg & Abrams, 1990b, p. 13). The interviewees' experiences reflect their perception that, within the Danish context, social categories such as 'Danish,' 'foreigner,' or 'refugee' carry differing levels of privilege, recognition, and access to full societal membership.

What emerges from the interviewees' experiences is not just a perception of hierarchy, but also of rigidity. In their experience, language proficiency, showing willingness to integrate, or even a desire to belong are insufficient to shift their social categorization. The findings indicate that the interviewees perceive their efforts to transition from a marginalized group ('refugee,' 'foreigner') to a socially privileged majority group ('Danish') as structurally impossible to achieve.

Danishness, as it is socially and ideologically constructed, remains elusive and inaccessible due to entrenched cultural norms, rigid linguistic standards, and persistent visible differences, all of which are reinforced by a broader national ideology that presupposes a one-to-one-to-one relationship between language, culture, and people (Nassri, 2018). The interviewees experience a contradiction in the simultaneous requirement to linguistically assimilate and integrate, and the social structures that invalidate this assimilation even once it is achieved. What does it mean to "speak Danish" if fluency does not lead to recognition or acceptance in the new group? For the interviewees, speaking Danish becomes less about actual linguistic ability and more about performing a particular cultural identity. In their experience, speaking Danish is a symbolic act that does not, in itself, guarantee inclusion for outsiders such as refugees.

Despite fulfilling formal integration criteria, such as learning Danish, becoming self-sufficient, and showing willingness to integrate, the interviewees experience

exclusion from in-group belonging. Their experiences highlight a gap between the formal criteria for integration and the informal and invisible, yet still deeply influential, boundaries of national belonging in Danish society. These lived contradictions reflect the interviewees' experience that even when doing all the "right" things, such as learning the language, working, and attempting to adapt culturally, they can still remain outsiders. What the interviewees experience is not just out-group prejudice or marginalization, but ideological boundaries. This raises the question not of whether they are willing to integrate, but whether the very concept of Danishness is experienced as unintegrable. Perhaps it is not the interviewees who fail to integrate, but the Danes. If inclusion is conditional on sameness, and sameness is unattainable, what is left to strive for? This reveals a paradox at the heart of integration as described by the interviewees; it demands constant adaptation without ever guaranteeing acceptance. In their experience, it keeps them in a permanent audition, always performing, never belonging. Perhaps that is precisely how the boundary of Danishness is perceived to be maintained.

The analysis shows that Membership Categories like 'Danish,' 'Danish speaker,' 'refugee,' and 'foreigner' are constantly negotiated, resisted, and redefined by the interviewees. Throughout the interviews, there is an ongoing negotiation around what it means to belong to these categories, what it takes to move between them, and what renders that movement impossible. Sometimes, interviewees categorize themselves as 'integrated' or 'willing to integrate,' while at other times, they reflect on being seen as a 'foreigner' no matter what they do because they do not have blonde hair and blue eyes.

The analysis reveals that the interviewees associate the categories 'refugee' and 'Danish' with distinct category predicates and category-bound activities, which structure their expectations, assumptions, and social positioning within Danish society. The interviewees express awareness of the consequences of being positioned in one category

versus another, and they use their language and self-categorization strategically to negotiate their positioning within these shifting boundaries. But despite their efforts, the interviewees experience the boundaries as rigid. The category 'Danish' remains tied to attributes they cannot change, such as appearance, accent, and cultural background. What is of interest is how the interviewees also reproduce the very categories they resist. This is evident in the way I am categorized during the interviews. I went in to the interviews aiming to objectively explore their experiences, but the interviewees did not allow me to remain a neutral outsider. I did not share their refugee or national background, but my appearance, language, and perceived cultural alignment meant that a sense of shared experience was forced on me. This ethnification, allowing for the re-categorization into 'one of us,' likely shaped the kind of insights I was granted access to. While I return to this point in a later section, it is important to note that I did not only hear about categorization. I became a part of it. This reflects how embedded these category predicates are, even among those who experience their consequences most directly.

The interviewees' efforts to learn Danish can be understood as attempts to acquire linguistic capital and convert it into symbolic capital by gaining recognition and legitimacy. However, in their experience, this conversion is neither straightforward nor guaranteed. The value of Danish proficiency shifts depending on context, usefulness, and how the interviewees perceive their language use to be received. Some interviewees possess strong cultural capital in the form of academic knowledge, professional competence, fluency in English, among other resources, but these only become symbolic capital when they are recognized by those who hold power. Without this recognition, their resources are not accepted as capital. Thus, in their experience, it is not merely about having resources, but about having the right capital, at the right time, in the right form.

This also raises the question: is it fair that a person's right to belong depends on their ability to provide value? Language becomes a central resource, one that the interviewees internalize as something that they must invest in. The interviewees are aware that even after learning Danish, working, and adapting, they may still not be seen as 'Danish enough.' Their linguistic resources may remain unvalued and may never become recognized as capital. In their experience, their worth continues to be measured against an unspoken standard that they can never fully meet. These hierarchies and power structures are selective, conditional, and ultimately shaped by those perceived to hold the power to define what counts as capital.

Together, the interviewees' experiences suggest that the 'us' and 'them' distinction is not experienced as merely linguistic or cultural but rather as ideological. The ideology that 'We should all be the same' appears to persist because it disguises inequality as neutrality. This perception places the burden of integration entirely on the marginalized group, while obscuring the systemic nature of exclusion in Danish society.

5.3 Reflections on Language Centrality and Interviewer Positionality

This returns us to the question that emerged during the research process: Why does Danish hold such prominence for refugees, even when alternative means of communication such as English are readily accessible? In her thesis, Navntoft (2023) explores language ideologies and language choice among refugees in Denmark, a topic closely related to the present study. In her findings, interviewees emphasized that "English is the key" for refugees in Denmark. This raises a further question: why do Navntoft's findings differ from mine?

As outlined in the methodology section, English was also my initial focus. I had expected it to take up significant space in the interviews, particularly given its practical value in Danish society. However, because Danish consistently emerged as central in the interviewees' experiences, I adjusted the focus of the study to reflect what mattered most to them.

One possible explanation lies in the different stages of integration. In Navntoft's (2023) thesis, the interviewees were earlier in their integration process and still navigating the practical and immediate challenges of settling into a new country. While some had only recently arrived, others had been in Denmark for several years yet still spoke little to no Danish, and not all were fluent in English either. For Navntoft's interviewees, English became the most important language. "English is the key," as one interviewee put it, because it functioned as a *lingua franca*, offering immediate access to Danish society and a quick, accessible way to communicate and gain a degree of independence. The interviewees in the present study, although some have also recently arrived, are all already fluent in English, employed, or pursuing an education. They are, in many ways, already "functioning" within Danish society. English has gotten them through the door, and the challenge now is not survival, but something deeper: social inclusion, cultural access, and emotional belonging. For the interviewees in this study, Danish becomes the next threshold.

Another possible explanation lies in the interviewer/interviewee dynamic. In Navntoft's (2023) thesis, the interviewer was Danish, whereas I am visibly non-white. My interviewees did not feel the need to explain the basics of navigating Danish society, as they assumed I already understood and accepted them. Instead, they moved directly into their more complex experiences with Danishness, belonging, and exclusion. The fact that I was not positioned as 'one of them' may have created space for different kinds of reflections to unfold.

This comparison does not contradict Navntoft's (2023) findings – it extends them. It suggests that the centrality of Danish is not fixed. Rather, it depends on who is being asked, who is doing the asking, and where the interviewees are in their integration journey. In this study, Danish mattered because the interviewees had already passed the threshold of survival. The issue for the interviewees was no longer how to get by, but how to belong.

Although I did not enter the interviews expecting my appearance and perceived identity to play a central role, it quickly became clear that these aspects shaped how I was positioned by the interviewees. Over time, I became increasingly aware of how my language and perceived cultural similarity influenced the interview dynamics – not by directing or shaping what was said, but simply by being read as someone who already understood their challenges and “where they were coming from.” In this study, my perceived identity as non-white shaped the kinds of stories that were told, and may plausibly have done so in Navntoft's (2023) case, where the interviewer was white and Danish. In that sense, even presumed attitudes are worn on the skin, challenging the idea of an ‘objective’ or neutral interview.

6. CONCLUSION

This study explored how refugees in Denmark perceive and navigate the Danish language as a social boundary, and how their experiences with it shape their sense of identity, inclusion, exclusion, and belonging in Danish society. The analysis shows that the refugees in this study perceive and navigate the Danish language not merely as a means of communication but as a deeply symbolic and socially charged boundary. Across the interviews, it becomes clear that Danish is experienced as a marker of legitimacy and

belonging, an invisible yet powerful barrier to full societal inclusion. While the interviewees recognize the practical utility of Danish for education and employment, their experiences reveal that language proficiency alone does not secure belonging. Instead, the interviewees perceive Danish as functioning as a social litmus test, where even those who speak the language fluently may continue to face exclusion due to visible markers such as accent, appearance, or cultural background.

The interviewees internalize societal expectations that they "have to" and "must" speak Danish to prove their willingness to integrate, yet they often encounter shifting and ambiguous standards of what qualifies as "good enough" Danish. In their experience, this perpetuates a sense of marginality, where full acceptance remains elusive despite meeting linguistic and integrative benchmarks. Speaking Danish becomes less about being understood and more about being recognized as "one of us" – a status they experience is difficult to attain when cultural norms, ideologies of "perfect Danish," and visual difference continue to frame refugees as outsiders.

Through their narratives, the interviewees also demonstrate agency in how they position themselves relative to dominant categories such as "Dane," "foreigner," or "non-Danish speaker." They challenge binary notions of belonging and construct nuanced identities that resist being reduced to their refugee status or linguistic ability. For the interviewees, language in this context, becomes both a strategy of resistance and a terrain of negotiation, a way to claim space, assert value, and seek connection in a society they perceive often views them through a lens of difference.

Ultimately, the Danish language operates as both a bridge and a barrier, opening doors to opportunity while simultaneously reinforcing social boundaries. The interviewees' experiences with Danish highlight the complex, often contradictory role that language plays in shaping their identities and their place within Danish society.

Belonging, as the study shows, is not solely a matter of speaking Danish – it is about being heard, seen, and recognized as part of the social whole.

7. LITERATURE

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Appendix A – Interview Guide
1. Introduction
- Can you tell me about when you first arrived in Denmark? What was that experience like for you? - What languages do you speak? - How was your experience communicating with authorities and navigating the system when you first arrived? - How were you received by Danes? Do you remember any particular experiences? - How were your first weeks or months in Denmark? Can you describe a memorable moment from that time? • Follow-up questions - What stood out to you the most during that period? - Were there any moments that felt especially confusing, exciting, or overwhelming? - Did language play a role in how you felt during that time?
2. Experiences with English and Danish in Daily Life
- What languages do you use in different parts of your daily life - like at home, work, or with friends? - How do you experience speaking and switching between English, Danish, and your native language? - Can you describe a situation where language played an important role for you? - Are there places or situations where you feel more comfortable speaking one language over another? - Can you think of a situation where the language you spoke influenced how you interacted with others?

- Have you ever noticed people reacting differently depending on whether you speak English or Danish? If so, can you describe an experience?
- Are there situations where you avoid speaking a particular language? If so, why?
- **Follow-up questions**
 - How did you feel in that moment?
 - What made that experience easier or more difficult?
 - What language(s) do you find yourself using most naturally?
 - Would you say your language use changes depending on who you're with?

3. Relationship with Languages (Emotional, Social, and Practical Meanings)

- What role do these different languages play in your life?
- How do you feel when speaking English compared to Danish or your native language?
- Have you had moments where speaking a certain language made you feel particularly welcome or unwelcome?
- Can you describe a time when using a certain language helped you achieve something important?
- How have your experiences with language influenced your connections with others?
- **Follow-up questions**
 - Do any of these languages feel more emotionally connected for you?
 - Have your feelings about any of these languages changed over time?

4. Language Use in Different Contexts

(Social vs. Professional)

- In which situations do you prefer to use Danish, and in which situations do you prefer English?
 - How do you experience speaking different languages in work, educational, or social settings?
 - What role does language play in your relationships with colleagues, classmates, or friends?
 - How has your use of language changed since you first arrived in Denmark?
 - What are your thoughts on the importance of speaking multiple languages in your everyday life?
 - Can you describe a time when language created a barrier for you?
- **Follow-up questions**
 - What helped you navigate through that situation or what do you think would've helped?
 - Was adjusting your language something you did naturally or consciously?
 - How did others react when you used different languages in those settings?

5. Closing Questions

- What has learning and using different languages meant to your experience in Denmark?
- How has being able to speak different languages shaped your opportunities here?
- Looking back, have your views on language and its importance changed since coming to Denmark? If so, how?
- Is there anything else about your experiences with language that you'd like to share?
- Is there anything we haven't talked about that feels

important to your experience?