



The 10 funniest Danish expressions and how to use them

From windy pelicans to wet bottoms: our columnist gets to grips with her new neighbours and their strange sayings

By Helen Russell

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I have moved house and survived (just). It was touch and go for a while but two weeks in, I can now work the boiler and locate clean pants in an emergency. We've moved to a different map-bump of rural Jutland, marginally closer to what can be loosely termed 'civilisation', but my new hometown is an eclectic place. On Friday, I popped out to buy milk and encountered a teen marching band,

competing to be heard above the dulcet tones of a Salvation Army choir and a local DJ playing something loud about 'pole grinding' outside a toyshop on the high street. All at three o'clock in the afternoon.

A new neighbourhood offers fresh opportunities to engage in my favourite sport, one that doesn't involve Lycra, poles or moving for prolonged periods: people watching. And just as importantly, listening. But since most people around me speak Danish, this activity still requires some fairly specialised equipment, namely Google Translate and a patient barista prepared to indulge the 'crazy English woman who asks all the questions'.

Sitting in my favourite cafe, I hear the usual "*tak for kaffe*" - or "thanks for the coffee" - but notice that the speaker hasn't just been given a mug of something rejuvenating. Instead, she is exclaiming, with big hand gestures, to a group of friends, over a PowerPoint presentation on her laptop. She says it again, slaps her hand on the table, and guffaws. Either this woman is telling a prolonged anecdote about a coffee transaction that isn't nearly as funny as she thinks it is, or I've missed something. Neither of these options being improbable, I seek expert advice.

"Does *tak for kaffe* always mean what I think it means?" I start, unsure, the next time Patient Barista is passing.

"That depends," she whispers conspiratorially, "on what you think it means."

"Right." I don't know where to go from here. Fortunately she takes pity on me.

"It can also be something you say when surprised, like, 'Oh my god.' You know?"

I squint at her for a moment as if to say, "are you joking?" She looks at me as if to say, "I could not be more serious. Now please stop BOTHERING me..." then moves off to the milk-frothing area.

Still reeling from this revelation, I start to wonder how the Peanuts comic strip translates into Danish (with Charlie Brown interjecting that he's grateful for his caffeinated beverage every few frames?) and how many other sayings I might have missed during my not-at-all-scientific two-year reconnaissance mission to date.

Every culture has its own proverbs that express a basic human truth through some sort of practical, often archaic, experience. They can offer useful advice about how to live your life or tell you something about the culture they come from. My adopted homeland, I discover from the tirelessly helpful people at [Expat in Denmark](#), is no exception. Take food, for example. The main sources of sustenance in Denmark (aside from the ubiquitous pork) appear to be carbohydrates and liquorice. And so Danish proverbs reflect this. Being told to "*spis lige brød*" or "eat some bread" means you need a time-out to calm the heck down. As someone who's done extensive research into the comforting, soporific effects of carbohydrates, this seems wholly sensible.

To *hygge kartofler* is the Danish saying for “earth-up potatoes” and means that someone’s pushing their own agenda – presumably because they’re being industrious enough to get out there and dig to make things happen. Oh, and if you need a pick-me-up after all those carbs, you just need to head to your nearest *slik store* (sweet shop) to pick up some of the black stuff – because being “up on the liquorice” (*op på lakrids*) means you’re busy and full of energy.

The body is another source of wise maxims in the liberal land of Nord. To have your “bum in the surface of the water” (*have røven i vandskorpen*) means you’re stuck in a tight corner – presumably with an uncomfortably cold, wet bottom.



Before you leave the coffee shop, check it's not "blowing half a pelican" outside (Getty Images)

If you find yourself caught with your “hair/beard in the mailbox” (*håret/skægget i postkassen*), you have a tricky problem (obviously) or you’re about to be found out. Both conundrums could doubtless be avoided if only you’d “stuck a finger in the soil” (*stikke en finger i jorden*) to get the measure of the situation before you took action. Should you find yourself with uncomfortably trapped hair, you just need to *få hul på bylden* or “lance the boil” (lovely), to get things moving in the right direction. You’re welcome.

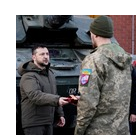
As you might expect from the country that supplies much of the world its bacon and brought us Marius-gate, animal motifs also feature heavily in Danish dictums. A windy day can be described as

“blowing half a pelican” (*det blæser en halv pelican* – here’s hoping it’s not the beak half) and rural Danes will allude to a faeces-hitting-the-fan type scenario as a “cow on the ice” (*ko på isen*). The lesson? It can get pretty damn cold but if you haven’t got your livestock prepared, you’re done for. Enlightened, I’m off to stick my finger in the ground, eat some liquorice, keep my hair well clear of post-boxes and give all expanses of open water a wide berth. Just to be on the safe side. If I make it, I’ll see you again next time.

Helen Russell’s new book, The Year of Living Danishly is out now.



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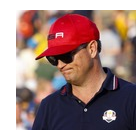
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