Rasmus Degnbol

One **dead dog**, please, but easy on the **loose teeth**

Learners of the Danish language are said to be doing very well if they have mastered the pronunciation of the wretched silent 'd'. But pølsevognsslang – jargon used at the hot dog stand – provides a whole new level of linguistic challenges and insight into Danish culture, provided you can stomach the racism and vulgarity

In the just under 100 years of mobile hot dog stands in Denmark, an incredible array of slang has developed that make ordering the classic Danish takeaway snack a unique insight into the Danish psyche – from the regular **død hund** (dead dog) to the red **Stalinpik** (Stalin's penis).

'Pølsevognsslang' – jargon used at a hot dog stand – makes use of metaphors and obscenities and sometimes even racial slurs (see page 35). If you find yourself ordering a **nissearm** from a **tarmpusher** at the **natguffen**, you're on the right track. You have literally ordered an 'elf's arm' from an 'intestine pusher' at the place where you 'gobble' at night. The *pølsemand* (hot dog vendor) will know what you mean, just be careful with that last part – it can easily be misconstrued as a sexual act, and probably will be, depending on how much your mates have had to drink. As for many Danes, the pølsevogn is the last stop on the way home from a big night out.

WATERLILLIES AND PLACENTA

In the 22 years that Michael Christensen has been carting his hot dog stand around Helsingør he's seen it all. On this barely warm summer Sunday, Christensen services the packed car park at the hardware store Silvan as the wind whips up the hill from the Øresund. He tries to take a break to speak to The Murmur, but hungry DIY-types interrupt our interview with orders and requests.

Christensen says that on his watch, certain slang trends have developed.

"Some are more popular than others," he says. "For older people, there's something called a **Karl Stegger i lædervest** [Karl Stegger in a leather vest]. You know the old Danish actor? Well that's a sausage wrapped in bacon."

"Can I just help myself to the ketchup and remoulade?" someone calls out. Christensen waves a friendly hand in their direction and explains, "each ingredient has its own slang too."

And then he rattles off his favourites, all crude, as is tradition: roasted onion is **sårskorper**, or scabs, while raw onion look a bit like **løse tænder** – loose teeth.

A simple bread roll placed to the side of your sausage might be referred to as a **bind** (a sanitary pad or a **tampon**), despite the obviously more apt **sidevogn** – side-car.

He can only think of one ingredient that's been spared repulsive slang. Gherkin slices are **åkander**, or waterlilies, a reference to the green pads that keep the flowers afloat.

Christensen says the most vulgar one he can think of turns a stock-standard red sausage with ketchup and mustard into **øgle med slam og moderkage**. That's a lizard with sludge and placenta.

"To say something like that is a bit disgusting, but that's part of it," says Christensen.

The slang term **hele svineriet** – another crafty one meaning "the whole mess", but including the word for pork – means different things depending on who's making the order.

"For young people, it means everything possible: ketchup, mustard, remoulade, raw onion, roasted onion and gherkin slices. But if an older person says the same thing, they only want ketchup, mustard and raw onion on their hot dog."

COME BACK DOGS

Christensen says he has been pleased to see an uptick in the number of young people stopping by in recent years, after waning demand that hit a low point at the beginning of the 2000s. In 1950, there were 400 hot dog stands in Copenhagen alone, but this had dropped off to only 63 in 2010 in response to patrons going elsewhere.

> **You just don't have that same tradition of slang in a kebab shop.**
>
> MICHAEL CHRISTENSEN, HOT DOG VENDOR

That number is on the rise again, according to city historian Allan Mylius Thomsen, author of the only book ever published on Danish hot dog history, *Café Fodkold: the tale of the Danish hot dog stand*.

Thomsen, who has been hosting pølsevogn history tours for 20 years and is a member of Copenhagen City Council, says this is because the younger generation really wants something different to the generation before.

"Many of them have grown up with Burger King and McDonalds, things like that, and they're now beginning to rediscover pølsevogne as something very funny and very Danish" he says.

"This is true, especially now that we're seeing organic hot dog stands. That's a new interest, particularly for young people who are getting back into eating sausages."

Pølsemand Christensen thinks slang might play a part in the renewed interest.

"Young guys often use slang here that is ridiculously funny, because they think it's great that something so simple can be transformed into something vulgar and disgusting," he says.

"You just don't have that same tradition of slang in a kebab shop."

Christensen says he has seen hot dogs stands not only cross generational divides, but social ones as well.

"I was once working at a party for one of Denmark's richest people, with 550 guests and 100 service staff. I, myself, had six helpers, as well as my dad running the pølsevogn. It was really fun to see all the famous people there: lawyers, actors and politicians."

Vanessa Ellingham

Andreas Nielsen

A 'pølsemand' is just like a bartender or a barber. You can talk with him freely, because you'll probably never see him again. So you stand there and have a chat, and then you wander off.

MICHAEL CHRISTENSEN

Københavns Stadsarkiv

Andreas Nielsen

On the left is a hot dog stand on Kongens Nytorv, central Copenhagen, in 1961. To the right, Michael Christensen's stand in Helsingør. While the design has changed, the basic setup remains the same.

But after consuming seven courses, and once they were drunk, what the guests really craved was a hot dog.

"I'm used to having drunk youth queue up at my pølsevogn at night, but that night it was adults in their finest clothes, people I only ever see on TV, having a hard time pronouncing what they wanted, because they were so drunk."

"These fancy people also use the slang, because at some time in their lives, they've all been to a pølsevogn."

Thomsen agrees, describing a visit to the pølsevogn as "very democratic". He says Crown Prince Frederik was known to frequent a pølsevogn as a student. Tabloids also reported that his wedding to Princess Mary had a hot dog stand. Danish shipping magnate Arnold Mærsk McKinney Møller was also a big hot dog aficionado.

"Old Mærsk had a pølsevogn just outside his big company down at the harbour. Normally he was over there eating a red sausage before he drove home to Hellerup after work."

"It goes across social barriers – anyone can stand at a pølsevogn."

"A pølsemand is just like a bartender or a barber," says Thomsen. "You can talk with him freely, because you'll probably never see him again. So you stand there and have a chat, and then you wander off."

In the experience of pølsemand veteran Christensen, getting the humour right goes a long way towards keeping customers.

"If you tell a joke, people may or may not get it. But when you use pølsevognsslang, it's almost a guaranteed laugh."

"I think it's up to me to add something they may not have heard before. But I also have to be careful, because when I ask, 'how would you like it?', they might just say, 'quickly'." M

FACTS

On March 4, 1920, Copenhagen City Council gave permission to sell warm hot dogs on the street – the first council to do so in Denmark.

In early 1921, six hot dog stands were operating on the streets of Copenhagen. The number of hot dog stands peaked in the seventies at around 700 across the country.

Hot dog stands have been on the decline. There were around 400 in Copenhagen in 1950. By 2007 the number had dropped to 93. In 2010 there were only 63.

Traditionally, opening a hot dog stand was mainly available to people barred from the job market due to an illness or handicap.

Copenhagen and several other councils still have clauses in place that prioritise hot dog stand ownership for people with disabilities.

Bodily fluids and derogatory slurs

While often playful and entertaining, there's a dark side to Danish hot dog slang. For example, the French hot dog, which has a tube-like bun, is called en indianer i sovepose (an Indian in a sleeping bag). A hot dog in an open bun uses a derogatory term for Indigenous Greenlanders, en Eskimo i kajak (an Eskimo in a kajak).

Greenlandic author Iben Mondrup says the use of 'Eskimo' in this context is frowned upon. "Many of my friends from Greenland are very tired of references to their ethnic backgrounds in Danish food, such as the ice cream 'Kæmpe Eskimo' (huge Eskimo)."

In addition to the racially disparaging phrases, some hot dog slang also includes references to shit, or menstrual and vaginal fluid.

Associate Professor Rashmi Singla from the Department of People and Technology at Roskilde University, has lived in Denmark for 36 years. Her studies focus psychology and interculturalism, and over the years has amassed a large catalogue of racially-charged slurs from her students.

"This kind of slang used at hot dog stands are slurs, or over-simplistic and negative terms for people. They are problematic because slurs often focus on negative traits and are therefore de-humanising."

Racism in food culture has been the subject of increasing debate in Scandinavia. In 2014, German confectionary company Haribo pulled its Skippers Mix liquorice product from Sweden and Denmark, after complaints that the candies took the shape of ethnic masks or faces resembling primitive African, Asian or Native American art.

Some Danes with foreign heritage couldn't see the harm.

"I am a brown person with African roots," wrote Social Democrat MP Mattias Tesfaye in a blog for TV2. "It is beyond my wildest imagination that some people think that liquorice masks are racist or cast a negative light on ethnic groups."

Singla argues, however, that while slurs are often thought of as harmless, they can be socio-psychologically stigmatising.

"These terms categorise groups of people as 'the other'. They are usually used when addressing people who are different to you. You wouldn't use these terms for people you know or respect."

She says it is hard to know if slurs are going out of fashion – she works in a sheltered academic environment. But while she doesn't have any documentation about the waning or increasing popularity of the terms, she hasn't witnessed a decline in the use of slurs in mainstream, particularly print, media.

"In the media and some newspapers the terms are getting harsher and more stigmatising," she says, adding that the continuing use of the slurs reflect an unease with an increasingly multicultural society.

"Globalisation has a psychological impact. While it brings opportunity, it can foster the process of 'localisation' and create anxiety. It makes people feel insecure. We need to recognise these insecurities as a driver for the slurs. But still, I think in Denmark we need to be far more mindful about the harmful effects of the terms."

Lena Rutkowski