

Dansk Sprognævn

Text revisions in practice in the
Danish public administration: an
investigation of the effect that
revising a tax letter has on its
readers

Language use in public administration - theory and practice in the
European states, 13th annual EFNIL Conference, 7-9 October 2015

Outline

1. The organisation of plain language work in Denmark
2. Presentation of some of the results from my post doc project - an investigation of the effects that revising a tax letter has on its readers

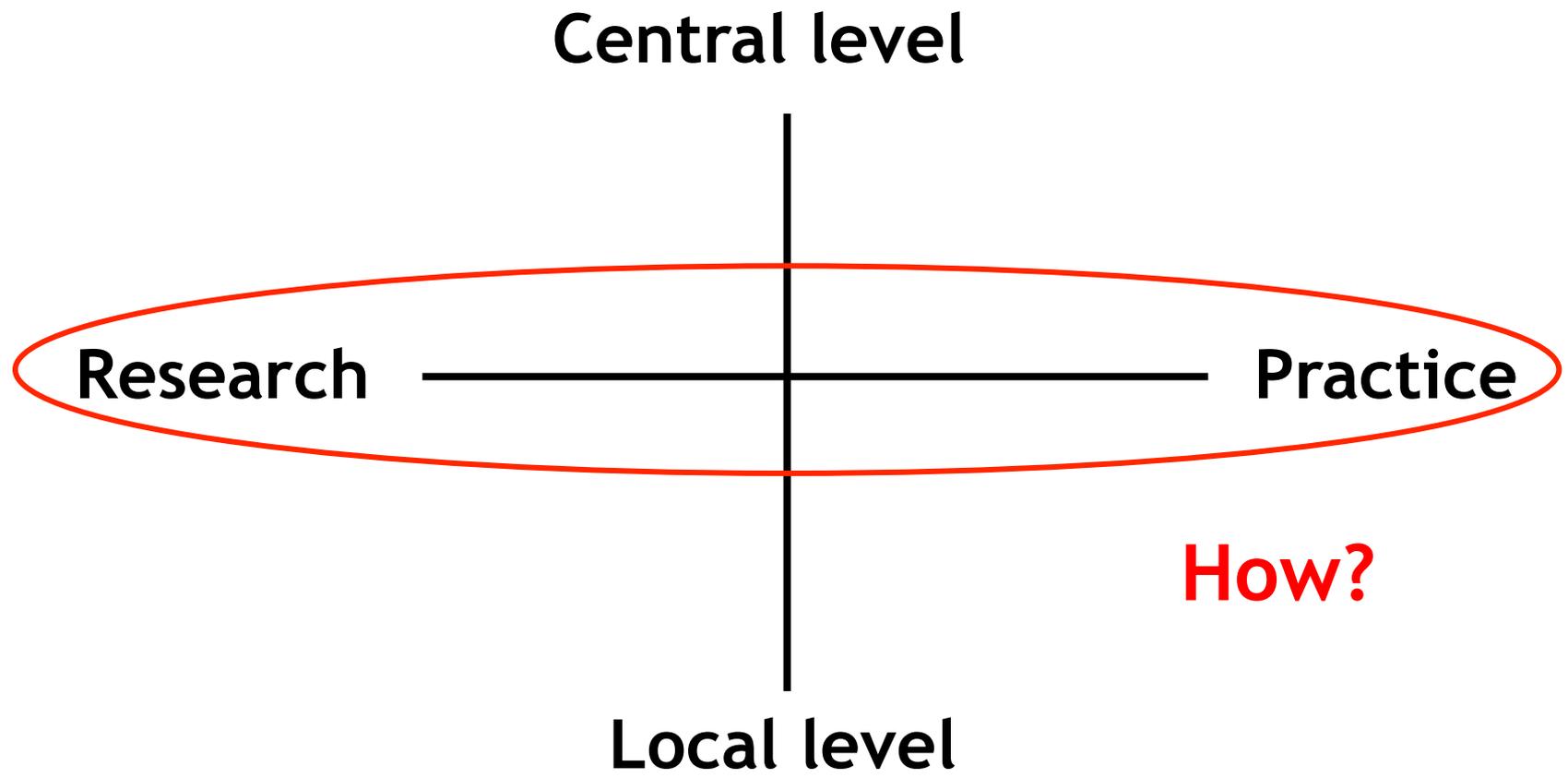
retskrivning sb., -en, -er, f
sms. retskrivnings-, fx ret-
skrivningssystem.
retslig (el. retlig) adj., -t.
retslæge sb., -n, -r.
retslægeråd sb., -et, rets-
lægeråd, bf. pl. -ene.
retslærd adj., itk. d.s.
retsløs adj., -t.



1. THE ORGANISATION OF PLAIN LANGUAGE WORK IN DENMARK

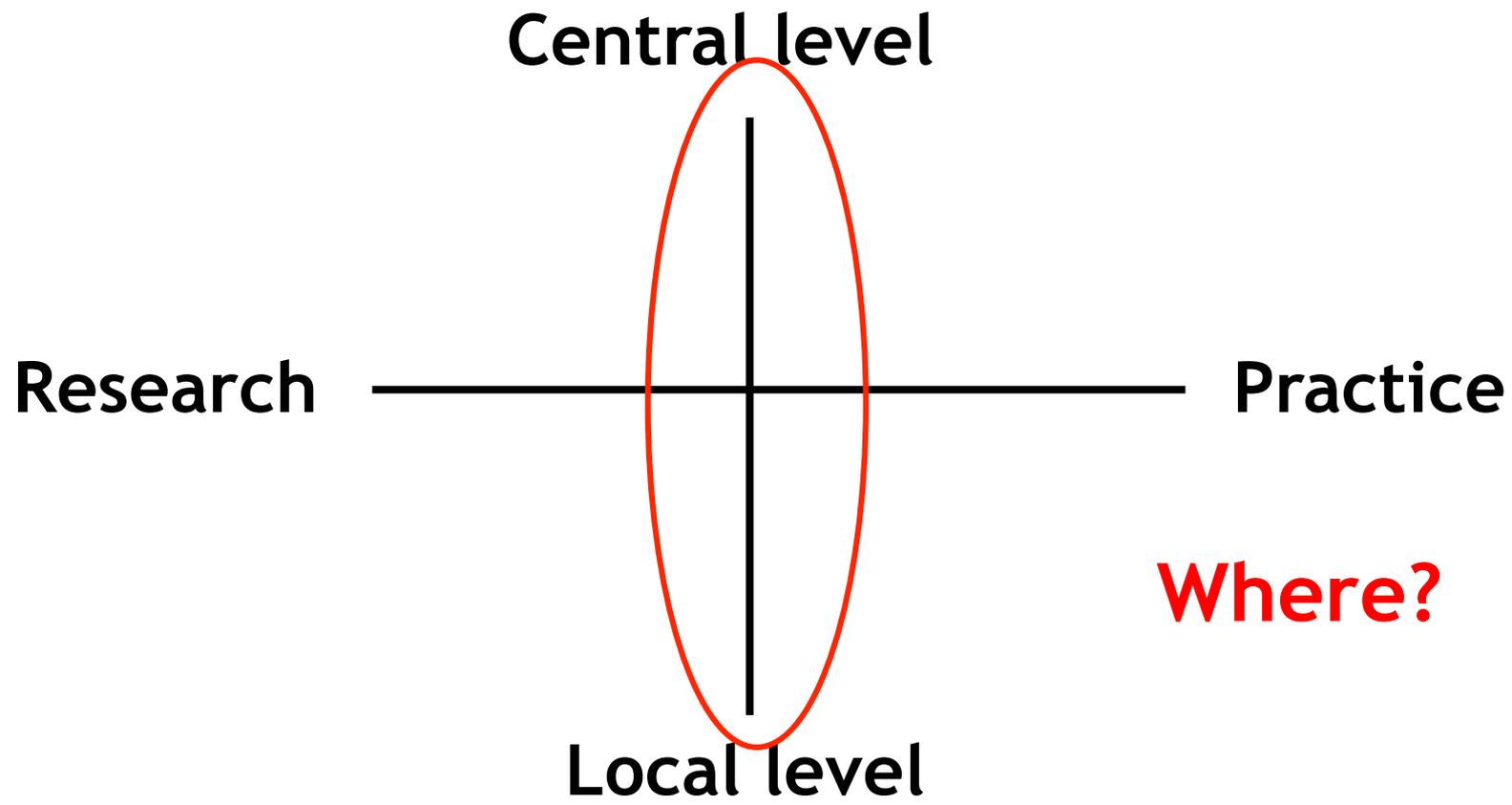
retskrivning sb., -en, -er, f
sms. retskrivnings-, fx ret-
skrivningssystem.
retslig (el. retlig) adj., -t.
retslæge sb., -n, -r.
retslægeråd sb., -et, rets-
lægeråd, bf. pl. -ene.
retslærd adj., itk. d.s.
retsløs adj., -t.

Characterisation of PL work in Denmark, 2 dimensions



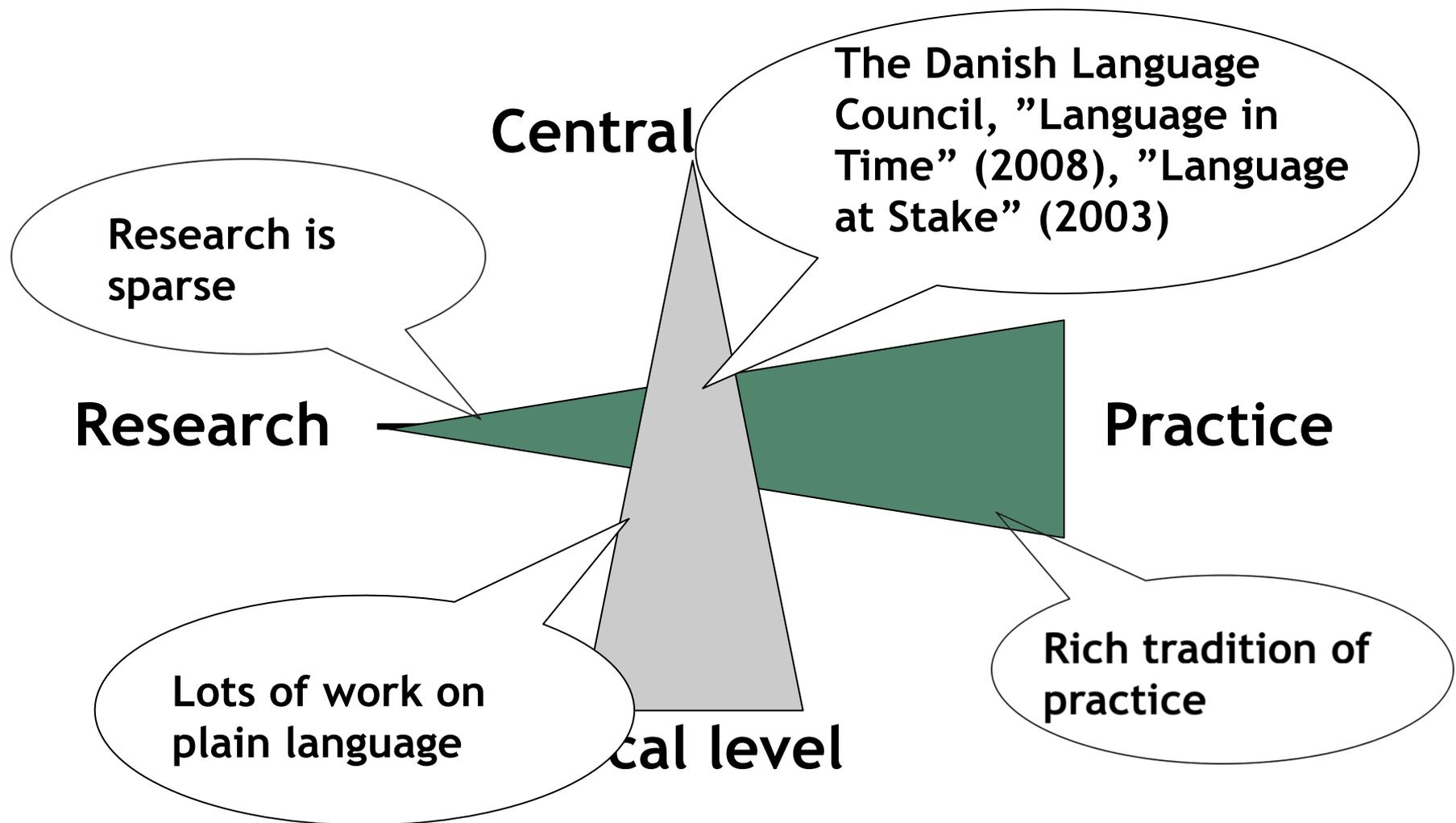
retskrivning sb., -en, -er, f
sms. retskrivnings-, fx ret-
skrivningssystem.
retslig (el. retlig) adj., -t.
retslæge sb., -n, -r.
retslægeråd sb., -et, rets-
lægeråd, bf. pl. -ene.
retslærd adj., itk. d.s.
retsløs adj., -t.

Characterisation of PL work in Denmark, 2 dimensions



retskrivning sb., -en, -er, f
sms. retskrivnings-, fx ret-
skrivningssystem.
retslig (el. retlig) adj., -t.
retslæge sb., -n, -r.
id sb., -et, rets-
, bf. pl. -ene.
idj., itk. d.s.
j., -t.

Characterisation of PL work in Denmark, 2 dimensions



An advantage - and a disadvantage of this organisation

Advantage

Lots of attention and awareness of the importance of plain language on the local level

Disadvantage

A rich tradition of practice is passed on within organisations - but it is unclear how successful language campaigns in organisations actually are

→ How well are revised texts understood by the intended readers?

retskrivning sb., -en, -er, f
sms. retskrivnings-, fx ret-
skrivningssystem.
retslig (el. retlig) adj., -t.
retslæge sb., -n, -r.
retslægeråd sb., -et, rets-
lægeråd, bf. pl. -ene.
retslærd adj., itk. d.s.
retsløs adj., -t.



AN INVESTIGATION OF THE EFFECT THAT REVISING A TAX LETTER HAS ON ITS READERS

Research questions

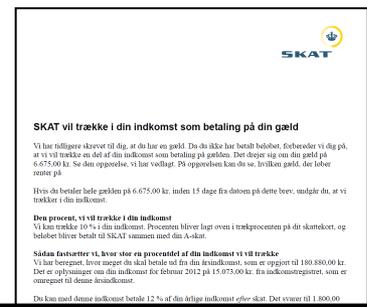
Do text revisions result in

- **increased comprehension and**
- **changed perceptions of texts and text sender?**

Case: A letter from The Danish Tax Authority (SKAT)

retskrivning sb., -en, -er, f
 sms. retskrivnings-, fx ret-
 skrivningssystem.
 retslig (el. retlig) adj., -t.
 retslæge sb., -n, -r.
 retslægeråd sb., -et, rets-
 lægeråd, bf. pl. -ene.
 retslærd adj., itk. d.s.
 retsløs adj., -t.

3 letter versions



Written by
 somebody at
 The
 Authority

Original version

Written by
 communication
 professionals at
 SKAT

Awarded the Danish
 Business Language
 Prize

Written by
 communication
 professionals &
 caseworkers at
 SKAT

retskrivning sb., -en, -er, f
sms. retskrivnings-, fx ret-
skrivningssystem.
retslig (el. retlig) adj., -t.
retslæge sb., -n, -r.
retslægeråd sb., -et, rets-
lægeråd, bf. pl. -ene.
retslærd adj., itk. d.s.
retsløs adj., -t.

Differences between the letter versions

- Word level
- Syntax
- Information structuring
- Information selection

retskrivning sb., -en, -er, f
 sms, retskrivnings-, fx retskrivningssystem.
 retslig (el. retlig) adj., -t.
 retslæge sb., -n, -r.
 retslægeråd sb., -et, retslægeråd, bf, pl. -ene.
 retslærd adj., itk. d.s.
 retsløs adj., -t.

Differences between the letter versions

Plain language

Corresponds to the expectations at SKAT

SKAT

SKAT vil trække i din løn som betaling på din gæld

Vi har tilladelse af lov nr. 46 af 20. april 2012 om at trække beløb fra løn og pensioner til betaling af gæld. Hvis du har gæld til SKAT, kan vi trække beløb fra din løn og pensioner til betaling af din gæld.

De afholdte tilbagebetalinger:

Udgift	Beløb	Beløb
Skat	1.200,00	1.200,00
Skatteforbehold	1.200,00	1.200,00
Skatteforbehold	1.200,00	1.200,00
I alt	3.600,00	3.600,00

V2

SKAT

SKAT vil trække i din løn som betaling på din gæld

Vi har tilladelse af lov nr. 46 af 20. april 2012 om at trække beløb fra løn og pensioner til betaling af gæld. Hvis du har gæld til SKAT, kan vi trække beløb fra din løn og pensioner til betaling af din gæld.

De afholdte tilbagebetalinger:

Udgift	Beløb	Beløb
Skat	1.200,00	1.200,00
Skatteforbehold	1.200,00	1.200,00
Skatteforbehold	1.200,00	1.200,00
I alt	3.600,00	3.600,00

V3

Været om besiddelse af data til dækning af pensionsgælden m.v.

Den 1. januar 2012 er der indført en ny lov om at trække beløb fra løn og pensioner til betaling af gæld. Hvis du har gæld til SKAT, kan vi trække beløb fra din løn og pensioner til betaling af din gæld.

De afholdte tilbagebetalinger:

Udgift	Beløb	Beløb
Skat	1.200,00	1.200,00
Skatteforbehold	1.200,00	1.200,00
Skatteforbehold	1.200,00	1.200,00
I alt	3.600,00	3.600,00

V1

Design of the study

- 717 respondents read one of the 3 versions
- All respondents answered a questionnaire about their levels of comprehension and perceptions of the letter.
- My concern: Did their levels of comprehension and perceptions of the letter depend on the letter version they had read?

retskrivning sb., -en, -er, f
sms. retskrivnings-, fx ret-
skrivningssystem.
retslig (el. retlig) adj., -t.
retslæge sb., -n, -r.
retslægeråd sb., -et, rets-
lægeråd, bf. pl. -ene.
retslærd adj., itk. d.s.
retsløs adj., -t.

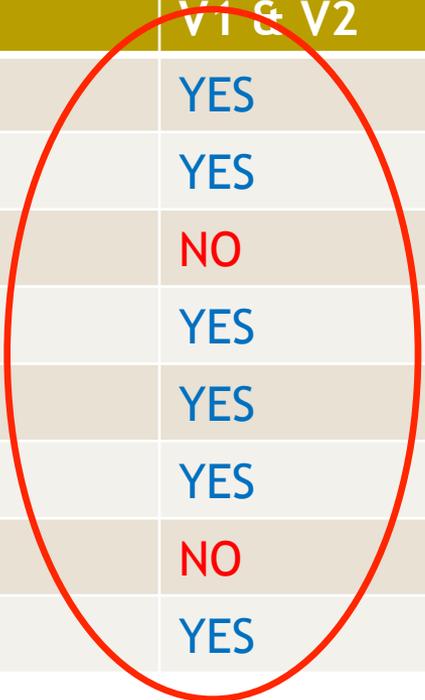
Are there any statistically significant comprehension differences between the 3 letter versions? (P = 0.05)

Question	V1 & V2 & V3
Q1: What does “budget form” refer to in the letter?	YES
Q2: How much do you owe the Danish Tax Authority according to the letter?	YES
Q3: What is the origin of your debt, according to the letter?	NO
Q4: What may happen if your salary decreases?	YES
Q5: For how long will the Danish Tax Authority keep withholding money from your income?	YES
Q6: What may happen if you send in a budget form to the Danish Tax Authority?	YES
Q7: In which situation should you send in a budget form?	YES
Q8: Where on the internet can you, according to the letter, read the rules on which the ruling is based?	YES

retskrivning sb., -en, -er, f
sms. retskrivnings-, fx ret-
skrivningssystem.
retslig (el. retlig) adj., -t.
retslæge sb., -n, -r.
retslægeråd sb., -et, rets-
lægeråd, bf. pl. -ene.
retslærd adj., itk. d.s.
retsløs adj., -t.

Between which versions are the statistically significant differences?

Question	V1 & V2	V1 & V3	V2 & V3
Q1	YES	YES	YES
Q2	YES	YES	NO
Q3	NO	NO	NO
Q4	YES	YES	NO
Q5	YES	NO	NO
Q6	YES	NO	YES
Q7	NO	NO	YES
Q8	YES	YES	NO



Character of the differences

A statistically significant difference between V1 and V2 does **not** imply that V2 comes out as the version that is most easy to understand:

Example 1: Q2: 52% answer the question correctly on the basis of V1
93% answer the question correctly on the basis of V2

The difference is statistically significant ($P < 0.0001$), V2 is easier to understand.

Example 2: Q6: 63% answer the question correctly on the basis of V1
34% answer the question correctly on the basis of V2

The difference is statistically significant ($P < 0.0001$), V1 is easier to understand (!).

Character of the differences

Compared versions	Differences in accordance with the expectations of SKAT	Differences NOT in accordance with the expectations of SKAT	No statistically significant differences
V1 & V2	Q1, Q2, Q4, Q5	Q6, Q8	Q3, Q7

retskrivning sb., -en, -er, f
sms. retskrivnings-, fx ret-
skrivningssystem.
retslig (el. retlig) adj., -t.
retslæge sb., -n, -r.
retslægeråd sb., -et, rets-
lægeråd, bf. pl. -ene.
retslærd adj., itk. d.s.
retsløs adj., -t.

Perceptions of the letter and sender

Scale 1

(Tick only once)

In the letter, I think that the Danish Tax Authority appears

Forthcoming		X			Not forthcoming
-------------	--	---	--	--	-----------------

___ Do not know/do not understand

retskrivning sb., -en, -er, f
 sms. retskrivnings-, fx ret-
 skrivningssystem.
 retslig (el. retlig) adj., -t.
 retslæge sb., -n, -r.
 retslægeråd sb., -et, rets-
 lægeråd, bf. pl. -ene.
 retslærd adj., itk. d.s.
 retsløs adj., -t.

Are there statistically significant differences between the three letter versions?

Scale	V1 & V2 & V3	Revised version evaluated as more forthcoming		
S1: I think that the Danish Tax Authority comes across in the letter as NOT forthcoming - forthcoming.	YES	YES	NO	NO
S2: I think that the Danish Tax Authority comes across in the letter as an institution that provides bad services - good services.	NO	Revised versions evaluated as easier to understand		
S3: I think that the letter is difficult to understand - easy to understand	YES	YES	YES	NO
S4: I think the letter is written with the Danish Tax Authority in focus - NOT written with the Danish Tax Authority in focus.	NO			
S5: I think the letter is NOT written with the text recipient in focus - written with the text recipient in focus.	NO			

Research questions - Summary of results

Do authentic text revisions result in **increased comprehension and changed perceptions of texts?**

Comprehension

- V1 (original version) hardest to understand. V2 (awarded the Danish Business Language Prize) the easiest to understand.
- Revised versions not always easier to understand - original version can be the easiest.
- In some cases the versions are equally difficult to understand (no statistically significant differences between levels of comprehension).

Perceptions of text and sender

- Revised versions perceived as more forthcoming (V2) and easier to understand (V2 and V3).
- 3 out of 5 scales did not result in differences between the letter versions.

Some implications...

- Case study - no general knowledge on the effects of revising texts in the Danish public sector
- BUT: V2 was awarded the Danish Business Language Prize → promoted as an ideal.
- The results seem to leave room for further improvements.

- Reading situation: The questionnaire was filled out as part of class. Not a typical reading situation!
- Calls for a more ethnographic approach - how do people handle mail from authorities in their everyday lives?