

A Tale of Two Tongues: Language and Lexicography in Norway

Language is a subject which nobody can feel indifferent to, because of its subjective and personal character as a part of human nature. In Norway, which has two different and officially equal written standards of Norwegian – bokmål and nynorsk – every person has to make their choice between the two, and at the same time get to know the other standard as well. This linguistic division reflects different approaches to history, nationalism, democracy, etc. Ruth Vatvedt Fjeld and Olaf Almenningen, both from the University of Oslo, try to analyze here their own language situation from different points of view: one as a user of the majority standard, bokmål, and the other as a user of the minority standard, nynorsk.

The Norwegian language background

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The current language situation in Norway is the result of our national history as a colony or province of Denmark (1450-1814), and then dependent on the Swedish king as a part of the common union with Sweden (1814-1905). However, in 1814 Norway set up her own constitution, and therefore in many ways we can say that modern Norwegian history starts here. This concerns the language issue as well, as Danish came to be the one and only officially written language in the Norwegian regions during the long Danish rule from 1450 to 1814, while the former Middle Ages Norwegian language (Old Norse) faded away more or less from 1350 onwards. These language roots survived in the following centuries first and foremost in the form of rural dialects throughout the countryside. In the almost 200 years since 1814, we have tried to solve the difficult language problems (at least we like to consider them difficult ourselves!) caused by our history; and in this effort mainly two strategies were followed.

From 1814 to 1890 the dominant Danish language, gradually with more Norwegian elements in it as time went on, was the only official alternative in schools and in society as a whole. It was a more than obvious task, then, to try to "Norwegianize" this tongue by reforming its main spelling, regulate the morphology in a homebound direction, and absorb a typical Norwegian vocabulary and leave out the Danish words and expressions. The leader of this reform-strategy was Knud Knudsen (1812-1895), a headmaster and teacher of Norwegian. He leaned very much on the orthonomic theories in his Norwegian language teaching, and strongly asserted that the difference between spoken and written forms should be as small as possible. Knudsen claimed that his reformed future Norwegian language should be based mainly on the spoken language of the educated classes. This reformed language

standard later got its official name 'bokmål' (which, among other things, indicates that it is the most common written standard in Norway).

The other strategy was one of a more revolutionary character; namely, to form or restore a completely new Norwegian written language based on modern dialects, whose roots could be traced back to the Old Norse. In fact, the "original" Norwegian language had survived as rural (and, to a certain extent, urban) dialects throughout the colonial period from 1450 onwards.

This more revolutionary solution became the task of Ivar Aasen (1813-1896), a self-taught language genius from Sunnmøre in northwestern Norway. His strategy required a broad political and cultural movement in order to succeed, as its final goal was to replace the then-dominant Danish language completely. Aasen himself was humble and cautious in launching the "new" Norwegian language (called 'nynorsk' in Norwegian), and asserted that the most important thing was for his language to exist as an alternative to the main Dano-Norwegian written standard.

In 1885 the Norwegian national assembly (Stortinget) decided that both standards were to be considered equal, as regards official rights, and that both were to be taught in schools and used in education. As a result of this parliamentary decision, from 1892 local school authorities could choose whether to use the nynorsk or the bokmål standard in primary schools. From 1902 all teachers had to learn to write and teach both standards, and some of this system was implemented also in college from 1907 onwards. In the years after 1905, when Norway finally broke out of the Swedish union, the nynorsk standard gradually extended its role as the written language in the local government. The history of nynorsk as an officially used written language is therefore not older than 100-150 years. In 1930 the Stortinget had

to pass an act which regulated the use of both standards in official documents, such as stamps, passport, money, laws and information from the state and its institutions.

From 1900 onwards the central school authorities tried to diminish the language gap between nynorsk and bokmål to make the difference between them as small as possible. These efforts included both spelling and morphology in words that were common in both standards. The Stortinget thus passed language planning acts for both standards in 1917, 1938 and 1959, also trying to include Norwegian dialects into both, hoping that the two standards would gradually grow into one common written Norwegian language. This ambition was not always approved by the majority of the population, especially not among the dominant conservative groups of the bokmål users. Nowadays the main view among politicians, teachers and writers as regards the existence of two standards is one of mutual acceptance.

The current language situation in Norway is roughly as follows: 15% of the pupils in primary schools have nynorsk as their first choice, and the rest have bokmål. In

addition, pupils from the ages of 15 to 19 have to learn to write the standard different to their own. Thus, all pupils eventually learn to read and write both language standards. As a whole, the total "nynorsk population" today amounts to about 600,000, whereas the rest – about 3.5 million – stick to bokmål as their first choice. In local government, 117 municipalities have in 2002 chosen nynorsk, and about 180 bokmål, whereas 150 haven't made any definite choice (these are mostly bokmål users, though). The nynorsk regions are mostly scarcely populated rural areas in the western parts of the country and in the eastern valleys, whereas the cities and urban areas mostly stick to bokmål. The nynorsk written standard has to be considered a minority language in Norway today – although it is the majority as far as spoken language is concerned – representing the rural and most of the urban dialects. It has its strongholds in literature, theatre, broadcasting and art, whereas bokmål dominates the press, main publishing houses and magazines, and other important fields of society such as economy, industry and modern communication.

Current situation and lexicographic overview

Ruth Vatvedt Fjeld

Bokmål and nynorsk are two varieties of the same language. Since Norway is a geographically large country, it has many oral dialects too. In the new Norwegian state established in 1814 (or 1905, when it became independent from Sweden), it was a strong wish for the new nation to have its own national language. By and by it was launched as a principle that every person should have the right to choose her or his own written variant, as close to the oral dialect as possible, and this is still an important credo in Norwegian language planning. As a result, the two written standards favor dialects from either Eastern or Western Norway. The Eastern dialects are closest to bokmål, which geographically as well as demographically covers the main parts of the country, while nynorsk is a Western standard, above all reflecting Aasen's own dialect from Sunnmøre, in northwestern Norway.

The wish behind inventing a modern Norwegian language, and keeping the written standards as close to the oral language as possible, was to satisfy political and democratic goals. The standards are designed to give most Norwegians the

options needed to express their real mother tongue in an acceptable written form. This has made the language situation complicated, and in both standards of modern Norwegian a large variety of inflectional paradigms is allowed, with minute differences.

Although the goals are well motivated, the system offers several pedagogical problems. As all inhabitants are obliged to learn both official standards, this language policy has been in the background of a long quarrel between the language users. Since the government in 1885 stated as an undisputable principle that the two standards were to be considered as equal in every respect, and therefore should be allowed in all kinds of private and official writings, the cause of most disagreements has been about when the minority standard nynorsk ought to be used. Many complaints were made about poor availability of textbooks and public information on both standards. The Nynorsk Movement (målørsla) is an active and dedicated organisation claiming that they were neglected and oppressed. In 1981 a new Legal Act was issued, restating the principle



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a column from
Gundersen's
Norsk Ordbok

* nynorsk
+ bokmål
A both
[] riksmål

fjølment

*fjølment A -
fjøl|a el *fjær|a (om
fuglefjøl helst fjøl)
*fjøl A
*fjøl|e -a, +[fjøl|e -a],
fjær|e -a
fjøl|e -a/+et, +fjær|e
-a/-et (av fjøl, +fjær)
*fjøl|e V -a, +[fjøl|e -a],
+fjær|e -a/-et
(om sjøen)
*fjøl|en -e/-i/[ent] fl -ne
fjøl|et(e) A -, *fjøl|ut
jfr *fjøl|et(e)
fjøl|et
fjøl|ing|a, +fjøl|ing|a/-en
*fjøl|ut A - jfr fjøl|et(e)
fjøl|vekt|a/+en, +fjøl|e-
fjøl|et fl -, bf -a/+ene
fjøl|stell|et
fjøl|g A
f. Kr. = før Kristus, før
Kristi fødsel
fl. = *fleire/*flere,
*fleirtal/*flertall
flabb|en
flabb|et(e) A -, *flabb|ut
flag|e -a (vindkast m.m.)
flag|e V -a (→ flage
ovafør)
flagellat|en
flageolett|en
flagg|et fl -, bf -a/+ene
flagg|e -a/+et
flaggermus|a
jfr *skinnvengje
+flaggstang|a, *-stong|a
fl -stenger
flagr|e -a/+et
flak|et fl -, bf -a/+ene
flak|e -a/+te (danne flak)
flak|e -a/+et (gape; rive)
flakk|e -a/+et
flakn|e -a/+et
flakong|en
flakr|e -a/+et
flaks|en (hell)
flaks|et (det å flakse
m.m.)
flamber|e -te
flamingo|en
+flamlender|en fl -e(r),
bf -ne el
flamlending|en
flamm|e *-a/+en
flamm|e V -a/+et
flammebjørk|a
flammet(e) A -,
*flammut
flamsk A -
Flandern
flan|e -a/+te
flanell|en
flaner|e -te
flanet(e) A -, *flanut
flanke|n
flanker|e -te

from 1885 with additional provisions regulating in minute detail when information should be given in both standards, when only one standard was required, and which standard had to be chosen.

This legislation was all based on the wish to safeguard the right of the weaker part, the minority, in the name of democratic language planning. The unalterable principle of closeness between spoken and written languages as decisive for good language usage made it necessary to accept the overwhelming diversity. It is therefore noteworthy what one of the most eager present-day actors for nynorsk in language planning writes: "Through its literary tradition, containing folk literature as well as belles lettres, it has a register of expressions – and indeed a particular expressiveness – which is not matched by bokmål; many bokmål users support nynorsk for this reason." (Vikør 2001).

The quotation shows that some users of nynorsk do not see their written standard just as a technical variety, but closely attach to it other values of political and personal kind, and that democratic thoughts are overruled by dedication to their own standard.

But the disagreement between nynorsk and bokmål is not the whole picture of the Norwegian language situation. As a consequence of our political history and the Norwegian legislation, at least 25% of the programmes have to be in nynorsk in the public broadcasting, and all public information has to be printed in both standards. Each public office has to respond in the standard that was used to approach it, which means that all officials must be able to write both standards. This is expensive for a small linguistic society, and official language planning has therefore tried to implement one common Norwegian standard, the so-called *samnorsk* (common Norwegian) standard. Up till 1972 this was the explicit aim among leading linguists and language planners in Norway.

In 1938, a big step was taken to turn this plan into reality, with a new spelling standard for both bokmål and nynorsk. The main goal was to create a common standard built on the vernaculars in both Western and Eastern Norway, quite a radical political undertaking for that time.

Unfortunately, World War II came short after, and language politics were for 5 long years given little attention. Besides, the Quisling-regime launched its own language planning of a national-romantic kind, which gave no support to the *samnorsk* solution. After 1945, the 1938-standard was implemented in schoolbooks and all public

information. But the linguistic climate has considerably altered since 1938, and the bourgeoisie in particular did not accept these radical forms, which reflected the language of the working class rather than the heritage from the historical Danish-speaking upper class.

A culturally conservative movement, Riksmålsforbundet and Det Norske Akademi for Sprog og Litteratur (The Norwegian Academy of Language and Literature) are two private organisations that established an elitist private norm, closer to the Danish written standard, disallowing many forms normally spoken by modern Norwegians. Consequently, now there are at least three or four standards of written Norwegian – nynorsk, bokmål, *samnorsk* and riksmål – each representing different ideologies and goals in language planning.

The most important difference between the two official standards (bokmål and nynorsk) is of lexical, and even more of morphological nature. Hence the lexicographical situation in Norway is odd. Because of the instability of the norms, the Norwegian Language Council is allowed to change the orthography quite often. In earlier years, this occurred twice a year, but since 1991 such change may take place every four years. This has made the Norwegians extremely tolerant to orthographic changes. In addition, each norm has several optional variant forms, and school children are allowed to choose freely among the variants, which is a great challenge to the teachers.

It is no wonder, then, that orthographic word lists are a big issue in Norwegian lexicography, presenting the variety of the standards, with new editions appearing very often. Each standard has several lists on the market, and publishers have a good income from such word lists. However, this word list industry has led to a neglect of other kinds of lexicographical works, with very few dictionaries being published. The most comprehensive is *Norsk Riksmålsordbok* (1937-1957, with supplements 1995), documenting the unofficial riksmålsstandard. A desk dictionary of the same kind, *Riksmålsordboken*, appeared in 1977. As late as in 1986, the first two standard dictionaries for the official varieties of bokmål and nynorsk were presented, *Bokmålsordboka* and *Nynorskordboka*.

As the riksmål variety was going to be documented in *Norsk Riksmålsordbok*, a great effort was taken in 1930 to launch the project *Norsk Ordbok*, which was to document the nynorsk standard and the rural dialects in one dictionary. The first

volume was published in 1950, and the edition has now reached the letter H. Recently the project received fresh and generous funding so it can be completed by 2014, the bicentennial of the new Norwegian state founded in 1814.

There has been one attempt to include the two standards bokmål and nynorsk in one word list, *Norsk ordbok* (1966) by Dag Gundersen, inspired by Einar Haugen's bilingual dictionary *Norwegian-English Dictionary* (1965). Lemmas acceptable only in bokmål were marked with a special tag, and nynorsk lemmas with another tag. Lemmas without tags were accepted in both standards. This dictionary showed well how much the two standards have in common, and maybe made it too clear that the quarrel between the two parties could have been solved given some efforts and cooperation. Gundersen's dictionary was an initiative approved by all Norwegians who wanted to unify the two standards into one common but flexible standard. And it was a pedagogical masterstroke, as pupils could easily find out how close to their own dialect they could come without breaking the rules for the standard chosen. Still, it had no financial success because it was not approved by the authorities for use in schools, and so it has long been unavailable. Probably the attitudes by the leading language planners already in the 1960s had been changed from working towards one common Norwegian standard to strengthening two clearly different official standards. In June 2002 the government finally stated that the unification of bokmål and nynorsk in one standard is no longer an official goal in language planning.

Today it is impossible to know what this language policy will lead to. It is beyond question that bokmål is the most used standard, but it is difficult to give exact figures, and estimates differ from 85 to 92% of the population. As the standards are numerous and variable, this is no simple issue, and it is also a question of how to count. Many nynorsk users change to bokmål after school, especially well educated young people moving to the urban parts of the country. There is on the other hand a continuum of standards ranging from more or less private ones, from conservative nynorsk close to Aasen's original, via radical standards close to modern oral variants, all the way to conservative standards close to the Danish written in the 19th century – the Golden Age in Norwegian literature.

The Norwegian language is fairly young, and therefore has no long tradition in bilingual lexicography. Danish dictionaries

have fulfilled the needs for translation and L2-learning, though some of the best among these dictionaries were actually written by Norwegian lexicographers. In this way also Norwegianisms in Danish were included, and give us valuable information about how Danish was practiced by the Norwegians in the last two centuries.

In modern lexicography there are several bilingual dictionaries between Norwegian and English, German and French. In later days also Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Turkish, Vietnamese, Serbo-Croatian and Persian have been available. Recently the linguistic situation in Norway has changed radically with new immigrants from East Asia and elsewhere, which raises the need of several new dictionaries.

There are still a lot of tasks to be solved in Norwegian lexicography, especially in LSP dictionaries and among the Nordic languages. And all dictionaries need to have two editions, one for bokmål and one for nynorsk! Some of the bilingual dictionaries are made after Haugen's principle of including both standards with special tags, but this tradition is more seldom followed today.

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a column from
Gundersen's
Norsk Ordbok

* nynorsk
+ bokmål
A both
[] riksmål

*flanut A -, flanet(e)
flær|en
flær|e -a/+te
*flær|et, *flær|et
*flær|e V -a, *flær|e -a/-et
*flær|et(e) A -, *flær|et
flær|en
flær|e -a
flær|e -a/+et (f- opp; f-
seg)
flær|et|et, *brøt|et
flær|et|et
flær|hals|en
flær|post|en
+flær|et, *flær|et
+flær|e -a/-et, *flær|e -a
+flær|et(e), *flær|et(e),
*flær|et
flær|a/-en
flær A
flær|et|et
flær|et|et
flær|e -a/+en
flær|e -a/+et (f- ut)
+flær|et|et|et
flær|et|et
flær|et A -
flær|e -a/+et
flær|et|et
flær|et -te
flær A +t|t|/*-tt
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+flær|men
*flær|et|et, *flær|et,
*flær|et], +flær|et
flær|en
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*flær|et|et|en,
+flær|et|et|en
+flær|et|et, +flær|et
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*flær|et -a
flær|et|et A -,
+flær|et|et|et - flær|et|et
flær|et|et|en
flær|et|en
flær|et -a/-te/+et
flær|et(e) A -, *flær|et
*flær|et|et|et A som
*døbbel, døbbel
*flær|et|et, *flær|et
*flær|et|et A -
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*flær|et A -, flær|et(e)