

# Language culture in Norway: A tradition of questioning standard language norms

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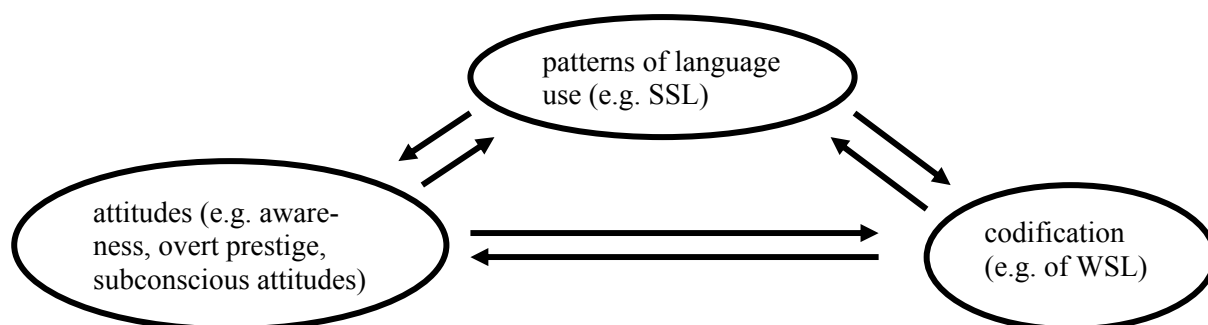
## SPOKEN STANDARD LANGUAGE (SSL)

The term ‘standard language’ is not widely known in Norwegian. A traditional term in Norway has been *normalmål*, meaning ‘language norm authorised by the state’, and this has applied first and foremost to our two written language versions: Bokmål and Nynorsk.

With respect to spoken language, the situation is more complex, as no single language variety has been authorised as a standard for spoken Norwegian, and language conflict in Norway has stressed exactly the political issue that authorising one variety would give privileges to some specific social group and be intolerant towards other groups. The verb *normalisere* has been used for ‘speaking in accordance with the norms for written language’, and this corresponds to the use of ‘spoken standard language’ (SSL), as described below. Here we should note, however, that this language is standardised with respect only to vocabulary, syntax and morphology – where the norm for written language is easily transferable. This standardisation does not apply to phonology, as people use the phonology of their local dialect. This is also how we read texts aloud at school. A Norwegian speaking one of the standards is therefore expected to replace local words, to adapt to the standard’s distribution of pronominal case forms, stick to the standard’s declensional classes etc., however, not to replace his or her retroflex flaps or intonation pattern. As a consequence of this language policy, dictionaries published by the authorities do not include information on pronunciation (except for some foreign words).

There are several ways of defining the term ‘standard language’. In order to compare the standard-vs.-dialects conflict in different communities it is important to define the key concepts precisely. In order to study the interplay between the many forces involved in this conflict, our definition of SSL should be based on as few criteria as possible, to avoid the concept overlapping with other necessary concepts. My suggestion, very much inspired by Swann *et al.* (2004: 195ff.), is: *a common language variety to which people switch in certain settings or with the intention of communicating to a broader public*. Thus, the relevant data for observing SSL include only observations of sociolinguistic patterns of code-switching.

The other factors in the mix will be defined independently of SSL, and they can draw on various types of sociological data (ideological included), for instance whether or not the language variety is authorised and codified, is described (grammatically and lexically), corresponds to a written standard language (WSL), has influence on dialect changes, and has prestige. Having defined the various factors/notions of interest for the research question as independent of each other, we are able to avoid circular argumentation and to study empirically whether some of them correlate and to discuss whether one is an effect or a cause of the other:



Most important in our discussion is to keep the notion of prestige apart from the notion of SSL because it is relevant in the Norwegian context to discuss the two different historical lines that Ammon (2004) has indicated: on the one hand that a prestigious language variety can become the standard language, on the other that a standard language can gain prestige. This aspect of Norwegian language history will be outlined in the following section.

## STANDARDISATION INTO THE 1960S

In 1814 Norway acquired almost full sovereignty and started a radical democratisation process, after having been subordinated to the Danish crown since the Middle Ages. For the next century, i.e. until 1905, the country had a personal union with Sweden under the Swedish king. The sudden turn of history in 1814 coincided with the prelude to National Romanticism.

Since the Late Middle Ages the Danish written language based on the Copenhagen spoken variety had been accepted in Norway. The bourgeoisie and people of the official authorities had, during the 18th century, established a spoken class-variety of Danish based on the written code, but with many compromises to local Norwegian phonology. In 1814 the Danish written language was taken as the given Language – a common language to two from now on independent states. This turned soon out to represent a dilemma, from which the Norwegian authorities tried to escape by using the term ‘mother tongue’! The most prestigious pronunciation of the common Danish-Norwegian language was the Copenhagen one, which was practised for instance in theatres.

In the middle of the century it became essential for the cultural elite to establish the characteristic criteria of a Nation, i.e. literature, music, folklore, language, etc., and Ivar Aasen’s coinage of the New Norwegian written language took advantage of this historic opportunity. But during the last half of the century a new awareness arose that language was a matter of social and cultural distinction and of democracy. There was also progress in economic life, and the bourgeoisie had developed a pride in its own language variety independent of the previous Danish ideal. The educationist Knud Knudsen was a catalyst in this development in his advocacy of ‘the daily language of the cultured in towns’. He was at the same time a spokesman for modernising the school system, i.e. of introducing new subjects and relinquishing the classical languages. This implemented the alternative national language route: to change the Danish written language into a Norwegian one, and several spelling reforms were introduced in textbooks. Thus, from the last decades of the 19th century Norway has had two competing written language versions, and the state authorities have been an active participant in language policy.

The Left party demonstrated its social and democratic perspective by supporting the rights of the New Norwegian written language, and determinedly supporting the nationalisation of the Danish written language, with the argument that this would be advantageous for common people, pedagogically and socially. From 1910 there was a proclaimed policy that the two written language versions in some future should become fused into one, changing step-by-step in the direction of ordinary people’s vernacular. New spelling reforms were introduced in 1917, 1938 and 1959 with this aim (spelling refers here to both orthography and morphology) (Haugen 1966; Vikør 1975, 2001).

An effect of the competition between two language versions and the consecutive changes has been an awareness that there is not one single self-evident written language form. In the political efforts to model one future common language the authorities were pragmatic and introduced quite a lot of free spelling choices within the written norms, in order not to challenge the conservative groups too much and in order to allow for a change in people’s writing habits to take some time. This rather extensive freedom of choice opened up a wide range of accepted writing practices. This language situation has certainly undermined centralised au-

thority and challenged what might otherwise have been the indisputable status of the language norm; it has also influenced Norwegians' awareness and understanding of language.

In 1878 the Norwegian Parliament included in a school law a section saying that teachers should adapt their language of instruction to the local dialect, and pupils were both allowed and encouraged to use their own dialect. This was, of course, a provocation to the cultural and social elite, since their prestigious language varieties were no longer self-evident models. In towns, however, this section was ignored by many teachers, and incidents of correcting pupils' vernacular in the classroom continued there into the second half of the 20th century. In the historical context of 1878, this decision was part of the 'National Question'; the language and culture of the social elite were not fully accepted as national values.

On the other hand, there has been a long tradition for adults to tend to standardise their language when speaking with people from other parts of the country, especially with persons from higher classes. Rural people have also tended to standardise when they went to town. This inclination to code-switching was, however, not universal. Blom and Gumperz's (1972) well-known study from Hemnesberget describes a society where code-switching was learnt at school and where switching depended on situation and topic when people met. The study is sparsely documented, and it has been criticised by scholars for not being a trustworthy description of a Norwegian community (Mæhlum 1987).

The situation in the 1960s was still characterised by the post-war period, with strong centralisation economically as well as culturally. The main goals after the war were to rebuild industry and welfare, improve general education, secure economic efficiency, etc. People often moved from local communities in the periphery, and cultural life was stamped by the values of economic centres. In this respect, Norway showed tendencies of becoming a 'normal' European nation in which language reflected authority. In 1966 a government committee presented a report on the language situation, and a majority wanted pupils to be instructed in using a standard language. However, this proposal was not approved.

The areas with a strong tradition of standardisation are theatre, media and some formal public situations. Actors learnt to pronounce Bokmål and Nynorsk (New Norwegian) with South-East Norwegian phonology, whereas in radio the two standard languages were pronounced with the speaker's own dialectal phonology. This has also been the situation for priests, public servants, salesmen, etc., who all were expected to use a standard language in their professional work. Students too normally standardised their spoken language.

### **THE NORWEGIAN 'DIALECT BOOM' FROM THE EARLY 1970S**

In the middle of the 1960s a political discussion began on depopulation of the periphery, and political measures were introduced in order to change the situation. Little by little, regional awareness arose and political discourse over the next decade very much revolved around economic decentralisation. The referendum of 1972 on membership of the EEC (now EU) greatly enhanced this perspective and considerably broadened political involvement. This political shift had several cultural parallels, including an organised struggle for the general usage of dialects.

In public life, patterns have differed from area to area. At universities the tradition of speaking standard language was rapidly phased out in the 1970s and 1980s, and today it is normal for both teachers and students to use their own dialect or idiolect. In 1978 Omdal showed that 54% of students in Bergen claimed to switch between dialect and standard language; today such code-switching would be quite unusual. In the *Storting* (parliament) politicians also tended towards standardisation, but less so after the 1970s.

In business, the dominance of the Bokmål standard lasted much longer. As late as the 1970s, shop and office employees were instructed to abandon their dialects and switch to a Bokmål standard. In 1979 Strømsodd asked Oslo people about their tolerance of dialect use,

and 77% accepted a plumber retaining his dialect, while only 43% accepted a lawyer doing so.

### **MORE MEDIA AND DIVERSE MEDIA**

The Norwegian Broadcasting Company (NRK) had a monopoly of radio and television until about 1990, and its language form was considered essential in evaluating the quality of the broadcasts. This meant that NRK has been the most important intermediary for the two standard spoken languages. Ever since NRK was established in 1933, it has been important for it to be loyal towards the language policy provided by the state (Dahl and Bastiansen 1999: 262–270). A consequence of this loyalty was that great tolerance was practised towards dialectal variation in pronunciation of the standard languages. As formulated in the 1996 version of the guidelines: ‘Staff members can freely choose among the forms accepted in the norms for written language. NRK appreciates that staff members in their choices of forms and pronunciation give the standard language a regional stamp’.

Standard *contra* dialect language turned out to be a hot-button issue. In more and more broadcasts journalists started using dialect. A considerable increase in dialect use was observed as early as the 1960s (Nesse 2007: 120). From the 1980s only news broadcasts and announcements were expected to be made in a standard language. In the 1990s the rules were relaxed one step further: only news headlines and announcements read from manuscripts were mandated to be in a standard language, and eventually, from 2010, even news may be read in dialect.

These changes in the language policy of NRK are certainly a result of challenges from other radio and TV channels. Alternative radio channels were introduced in the 1980s, and TV channels in the 1990s. These channels developed a more informal style, and using local accents or dialects was a characteristic from early on. While those advocating standard language in NRK still argued that a precondition for efficient communication was that the broadcaster’s personal language should not distract from the message itself, TV2 – the most serious challenger – justified its liberal policy with the assertion that good broadcasting was achieved only when it had a personal stamp. TV2 was thus a forerunner in the change of media style, and NRK had to play catch-up. Despite this, however, we should bear in mind that even in TV2 standard language is still extensively used, especially where the texts are based on written manuscripts. In a Nordic Gallup poll, summarised in Kristiansen and Vikør (2006: 208ff.), it appears that Norway is by far the most liberal society with respect to attitudes to the use of non-standard varieties in spoken media.

Regional features have been more and more accepted, even preferred. For the last decade (or perhaps two), actors are more and more often allowed to speak their own dialect on the stage. This new trend can be a way of making theatre more realistic, as in daily life people talk together in different dialects. This ‘realistic style’ has been normal for a long time in film production.

In church the priests normally used a standard language. However, since the 1970s the pattern has gradually changed, and priests nowadays often use the standard language for the liturgy but switch to their own dialect when preaching their sermons. Recently, some have even started using their dialect consistently throughout the church service.

### **DESTANDARDISATION AND DEMOTISATION**

The Norwegian language community has experienced an extensive destandardisation, demonstrated in Table 1. Nowadays, complaints about incomprehensible dialects have become rare in public discourse, and a governmental report of 2008 on language policy (St.meld.nr. 35)

does not comment on spoken standard language, but notes the fact that media style has become informal during the last decades (p. 158). The white cells in Table 1 illustrate how use of dialect instead of standard (grey cells) becomes socially acceptable in an increasing number of social contexts in the period 1950–2010.

**Table 1:** Social acceptance of dialect use (white cells) in various domains at various times

<i>Situation / role</i>	<i>Among friends</i>	<i>Within the family</i>	<i>Pupils</i>	<i>National politicians</i>	<i>Teachers*</i>	<i>At service points Speaking with strangers</i>	<i>Students</i>	<i>Lecturing</i>	<i>Strangers on the phone</i>	<i>Managers</i>	<i>Radio reports</i>	<i>From the pulpit</i>	<i>Reading the Liturgy</i>	<i>News reading</i>
2010														
2000														
1980														
1950														

\*The social norms were different for teachers in towns versus in the countryside, so that urban teachers in practice stuck to the SSL of Bokmål.

This table is based on my own and several colleagues' intuitions, and supported by various descriptions in historical literature (Jahr 1981; Nesse 2008: 116; Ims 2009; Papazian 2009). Comparable data in a stricter sense is naturally not available, as the table refers to acceptance and not to frequency. An interesting study from 1995, however, has quantified the use of different types of Norwegian, and the results tell us that, in the four radio channels studied, the average percentage of SSL is 4.9 of New Norwegian and 65.9 of Bokmål. Thus, 29.3% of oral broadcasting time was already presented in a Norwegian dialect (Alsnes 1995: 12).

Table 1 demonstrates an extensive *destandardisation* with respect to oral language, but an obvious parallel in written language is that it has become quite normal to use dialect or dialect-stamped language in new media such as SMS and Internet. Within the frames for optional spelling forms (see the section on standardisation into the 1960s, above) there has been a certain move over the last two decades, evidently most in Bokmål, where some previously prestigious variants have become stylistically obsolete, and they were abandoned in the largest Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* during the 1990s (Nygaard 2003). This move can be covered by the term *demotisation*.

Since the turn-of-the-century a corresponding move is observable in the SSL of Bokmål in broadcasting. The dominant tradition has been to use optional variants corresponding to upper-class varieties, e.g. a pattern of preferring a two-gender noun system, more monophthongs, special past-tense endings in verbs, etc. However, in 2008 some new newsreaders started using demotic Bokmål (Ims 2009), and this seems to be influencing other newsreaders and reporters gradually to change their style.

## LANGUAGE ATTITUDES

### *Conscious attitudes*

Some patterns of language attitudes seem to be rather homogeneous all over the country. Urban dialects have normally been judged more prestigious than rural ones and dialects of Cen-

tral Eastern Norway more prestigious than dialects from the rest of the country. This pattern also held in recent empirical studies in Western Norway when respondents were asked how they thought other people evaluated various dialects in terms of social status. However, when asked about personal preferences, the tendency was to prefer their own local dialect as the most ‘beautiful’ one, and the prestigious Central-East Norwegian dialect was not ranked highly at all (Aasmundseth 2010). The same pattern of ‘self-admiration’ was found by Helge Omdal in the 1970s: two-thirds of the university students thought their own dialect was beautiful, and one-third expressed a negative attitude towards it (Omdal 1978).

### *Subconscious attitudes*

In a verbal guise test carried out in the large town of Drammen (Eastern Norway), Elsa Kristiansen (1999) found that informants using non-prestigious forms were evaluated as unintelligent and with little education. However, the voice containing only the most prestigious variants did not rank highest on the evaluation scale; highest in rank were the speakers with some occurrences of the non-prestigious forms. Those people were considered both intelligent and likeable, and, as Kristiansen underlines, they used a language variety very similar to the informants’ dialect.

Also, in a verbal guise study in the small town of Sandnessjøen in Northern Norway, Husby (1987) found that an increasing degree of standardisation in the voices correlated with the evaluation that the person was intelligent, educated, had social status, etc. Here too the intermediate variety was considered most attractive and convincing.

Recent studies in Western Norway show that voices with a Central-East Norwegian dialect most often rank highest when evaluated on a set of positive personal traits, but on a level with one of the regional dialects.

### *Language awareness*

Very little research has been done on how people think and reflect on language and in what concepts they categorise their observations of language variation. However, in a comparison of Iceland and Norway, Kari Gjerdevik (2005) tried to elicit the notion of ‘standard language’ and found it very difficult, especially among the Norwegians. She asked what the opposite of ‘dialect’ was, but no one answered ‘standard language’. In the awareness of most of her informants, all Norwegians spoke a dialect or they mixed their dialect with the written language.

Very often we observe that people from the Oslo area refuse to call their language variety a dialect; they prefer to call it either ‘Oslo language’ or Bokmål, and sometimes ‘normal’ (Skolseg 1999). In a survey among teachers from Southern Norway attending a course in Denmark, 40% indicated that they spoke one of the standard languages, the rest reported that they used some other kind of spoken Norwegian (Kristiansen 2008: 45f.).

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The Norwegian language community has experienced an obvious destandardisation since 1970 and a demotisation since 2000. The fact that these changes of Late Modernity are so evident and great in Norway may be an effect of language conflict since the 19th century, which facilitated reflexive focussing on language in Norwegian culture. In the long run, the liberal orientation to authorised written standards paved the way for non-prestigious variants to come into formal usage, and thus released them from the traditional stigma.

There is no space in this sketch to discuss in more detail all possible relations in the figure in the first section, but so far it seems reasonable to assume that, over time, awareness (i.e.

conscious attitudes) has an indirect impact on SSL by being one of the prerequisites for changes in codification, and has a direct impact on SSL by influencing speakers' preferences of optional forms within the codified language norm. However, we still lack data to have a full grasp of relations between the historic changes in SSL and subconscious attitudes. Nevertheless, the Norwegian situation reveals that there is a rather complex interplay of several forces in the standard-vs.-dialects conflict.

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