

Diversity and democracy: written varieties of Norwegian

Arnfinn Muruvik Vonen, The Language Council of Norway

Abstract

The Norwegian language, in its diverse dialects, is spoken as a mother tongue by the vast majority of the population of Norway. This kind of situation is common in Europe. However, even written Norwegian is diverse: there are two official written varieties, Bokmål and Nynorsk, and considerable room for choice within each of them. My contribution will describe and discuss this fairly unusual situation.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon issues of linguistic diversity and democracy, on the example of the written varieties of the Norwegian language.

Norwegian, in its diverse dialects, is a Germanic language spoken as a mother tongue by the vast majority of the population of Norway. Norwegian shares its Old Norse origins with Danish and Swedish, and the three languages constitute a single dialect continuum and have retained a high degree of mutual intelligibility. Dialect variation is common, of course, in many dominant national languages in Europe, for example those of Great Britain, Germany, and Italy. In most of these countries, however, the national language includes an uncontroversially valid, national spoken standard, maybe with the acceptance of some regional phonological variation. For Norwegian, on the other hand, the very existence of such a national spoken standard is a controversial issue. While so-called "Educated East Norwegian", or "Standard East Norwegian", similar to a certain spoken variety of the language traditionally found in the western parts of Oslo, is still considered standard spoken Norwegian by some, many present-day speakers of Norwegian, of all levels of education, consider this norm obsolete and irrelevant to them. As an alternative norm from which they feel obliged not to deviate, these speakers may instead look at their own native dialect. Immigrants who learn Norwegian as a second language, realize that learning to understand only one variety of spoken Norwegian will not enable them to cope sufficiently with ordinary conversations taking place in the street or on television.

The controversiality of the standardization of spoken Norwegian is an important feature of our linguistic situation and surely relevant for the further development of our written norms as well. However, the heightened status of the Norwegian dialects is a relatively recent phenomenon, approximately since the 1970s, while the norm diversity for written Norwegian is much older. Let me, therefore, turn to written Norwegian now, and rather return to the role of spoken diversity towards the end of my presentation.

2. Two alternative ways of creating a written standard

In the 13th century, Norway was a regional power in Northwestern Europe, and the Old Norse language flourished as a spoken as well as a written language. However, due to such factors as the Great Plague and political intrigues, this relative power dwindled during the 14th century, and Norway ended up as a territory under Danish rule for four hundred years. In the course of this long time, Danish took over as the written language of administration in Norway.

Towards the end of the Napoleonic wars, the political map of Europe was redrawn. According to the Treaty of Kiel in 1814, Denmark, an ally of Napoléon's, had to cede Norway to Sweden. In Norway, a constitutional assembly was quickly convened and signed a constitution for the Kingdom of Norway on the 17th May, 1814. Even though the Swedes invaded Norway to claim their trophy in November of the same year, the subsequent 91 years of personal union with Sweden had a very different character, with much more political autonomy for Norway, than the 400 years under Denmark. The 19th century, in fact, became a period of classical nation-building for Norway, which could boast such cultural achievements as Henrik Ibsen's plays and Edvard Grieg's music. Unfortunately, the period also lay the foundations for the Norwegianization of minority cultures and languages that is still bitterly present in the collective memories of both the Sami communities, of the national minorities (Kven, Romani, Romanes), and of the Norwegian Sign Language community. However, this aspect of the nation-building is outside the scope of my presentation today.

In the European nation-building tradition inspired by such philosophers as the German Johann Gottfried Herder, a nation would be expected to dispose of, among other attributes, a unique language. In fact, when the Constitution had to be changed in November 1814, to balance

the idea of national sovereignty with the new political reality of the union with Sweden, it was stated in it that documents about Norwegian matters should be written “i det Norske Sprog” (in the Norwegian language), even though the language intended to be used was undoubtedly identical to that used in Denmark.

A few decades later, however, the cultural elite took up the issue of the lack of a distinct Norwegian written language. In brief, two main paths were taken to plan and construct a Norwegian written language, and it is the results of each of these two approaches to language-building that still define the uniqueness of the language situation in Norway, where one national language is codified as two different “written languages” (“skriftspråk”) or “language varieties” (“målformer”), currently named *bokmål* and *nynorsk*, respectively.

One approach was to start with the existing Danish norm and forge it to become a Norwegian norm. Danish was, as mentioned above, the language of literacy in Norway, and the literate elite of Christiania, the capital which was later renamed Oslo, was already familiar with that language. Linguistically speaking, the dialects of Norwegian, Danish and Swedish are sufficiently similar to each other that a single written norm might have been functional for these three languages. Since the 17th century, several Norwegian writers had integrated dialectal Norwegian elements into their written Danish. The linguistic proximity of the Danish written norm to the Norwegian language was even so significant that a “Norwegian” pronunciation of written Danish, which was used in formal contexts by some educated urban Norwegians, had developed in the late 18th century. Several activists now made great efforts to suggest modifications to the Danish orthography to harmonize it with certain characteristic phonological features found in the “educated” speech mentioned above. The poet Henrik Wergeland, in the 1830s, made a proposal to change the orthography to suit it better to Norwegian pronunciation, and the foremost among these activists was the teacher and prolific author on language from the 1840s to the 1880s, Mr. Knud Knudsen, often referred to as the father of Riksmål, or the father (or grandfather) of Bokmål (I will get back to these labels in a minute). Knudsen was born in 1812 near Tvedestrand on the South coast of Norway, and thus, we are celebrating his 200th anniversary this year.

The other approach was to discard the Danish written language and start from scratch, creating a new written norm for Norwegian based on a scientific survey of rural Norwegian dialects. The exquisite linguist undertaking this giant task was Mr. Ivar Aasen, whose 200th anniversary

we will celebrate next year. After extensive fieldwork in large parts of the country, mainly in the 1840s, he proposed a norm in 1853 for a new, national written language based on the dialects, with an eye to the Old Norse tradition. He continued his linguistic research well into the 1870s. Without any doubt, he is celebrated as the father of Landsmål, or, in present-day terminology, the father of Nynorsk.

Needless to say, the two approaches competed with each other, and language policy became a part of national politics. In 1885, the Norwegian parliament (*Stortinget*) made its important “equality decision” (*jamstillingsvedtaket*): “Regjeringen anmodes om at træffe fornøden Forføining til, at det norske Folkesprog som Skole- og officielt Sprog sidestilles med vort almindelige Skrift- og Bogsprog.” (The Cabinet is asked to make the necessary measures so that the Norwegian popular language, as a school- and official language, is made equal to our common writing- and book-language.) This decision is still the basis for a central element in the official language policy in Norway, according to which the two written language varieties, since 1929 called Bokmål (literally: Book Language) and Nynorsk (literally: New Norwegian), shall have equal status.

Through most of the 20th century, it was a political goal that the two written language varieties should not be more different from each other than necessary, and a series of spelling reforms was introduced through the century. An example of the prevailing attitude was that, as late as in 1972, when the Norwegian Language Council, the predecessor of the present Language Council of Norway, was established, part of its mission was to “støtte opp om utviklingstendenser som på lengre sikt fører målformene nærmere sammen” (support developmental tendencies which, in the long run, lead the language varieties closer together). Through most of this process, the two language varieties became gradually less different: both have changed from their historical starting point to become more similar to the actually spoken dialects.

However, the political goal of a Samnorsk (“Common Norwegian”), a merged, unique written standard for Norwegian, was controversial among conservatives on both sides all the time, and unofficial alternative norms such as Riksmål (“National Language”) for Bokmål and Høgnorsk (“High Norwegian”) for Nynorsk coexisted and still coexist with them. In fact, Riksmål has remained an influential norm, used in such important media as the daily newspaper *Aftenposten* (“The Evening Post”).

Each official spelling reform was controversial, and the resulting norms for both Bokmål and Nynorsk were not unitary: many words could be spelt and inflected in different ways within each norm. Through most of the century, a two-level system was in use for the regulation of both language varieties: some forms (known as “main forms”, *hovedformer*) could be used by civil servants and textbook writers as well as by pupils, whereas others (known as “side forms”, *sideformer*, or “bracket forms”, *klammeformer*) were acceptable only for pupils’ use. As an example, the main form of the word for “tired” in both Bokmål and Nynorsk according to the reform in 1959 was *trøtt*, while Bokmål also contained the “bracket form” *trett*, and Nynorsk contained the “bracket form” *trøytt*.

Following popular protests in the 1950s, the official policy of unifying the two language varieties gradually became less pronounced, and in 2002, the parliament decided to abandon the goal of future unification. In the two most recent spelling reforms, for Bokmål in 2005 and for Nynorsk in 2012 (official from 1st August), each language variety was supposed to be regulated on its own, without taking any future unification of the two into consideration. Both language varieties still allow considerable variation in spelling and inflection, but the two-level systems have now been abandoned. The orthography of the conservative Riksmål is now almost fully covered by the new Bokmål norm (which is broader, however, and also includes forms more similar to Nynorsk). There is a hope that these recent reforms will give a higher degree of stability to the orthographies of the two varieties of Norwegian.

When it comes to the *use* of the two language varieties, Bokmål is the stronger. Nynorsk grew until World War II, but after the war it has gradually lost ground. In the academic year 2011–12, 12.8 % of pupils in primary and lower secondary school had Nynorsk as their main language variety. The proportion has been decreasing with about 0.2 % every year. Geographically, Nynorsk is used mainly on the West Coast, and more in rural than in urban areas. In fact, much of the decrease of Nynorsk can be seen as a result of migration from rural areas into cities. In spite of being much less used than Bokmål, Nynorsk has a relatively strong standing in several social domains such as literature, the humanities, agriculture, parts of the public sector, media and local industry (especially on the West Coast), in the Church of Norway, and in education. It is weaker in popular culture, technology and economics, those domains in which Bokmål is under particular pressure from English. (Vikør, 2005.)

The division between two official and several unofficial norms has certainly had consequences for Norwegian lexicographical practices. Let

me just mention a few important dictionaries. The most comprehensive traditional monolingual dictionary is, in fact, *Norsk Riksmålsordbok* (“Norwegian Riksmål Dictionary”) (1937–1957), covering the unofficial norm which is, today, almost identical with the more conservative version of Bokmål. A revised edition named *Det Norske Akademis store ordbok* (“The large dictionary of the Norwegian Academy”) is currently being produced. A large “dictionary of the Norwegian popular language and the Nynorsk written language” (*ordbok over det norske folkemålet og det nynorske skriftmålet*), called *Norsk Ordbok* (“Norwegian dictionary”), was started in 1930 and is intended to be completed by the Constitution bicentennial in 2014. It aims at covering not only the Nynorsk literary language, but also the spoken dialects. Less extensive, normative dictionaries of Bokmål and Nynorsk (*Bokmålsordboka* and *Nynorskordboka*, respectively) are published in collaboration between the University of Oslo and the Language Council of Norway.

3. Diverse written norms – good or bad?

So, as a result of the competing approaches to creating a national written language for Norway, we have two official written standards today, each of which allows a relatively large amount of variation, and several unofficial written standards. Our next question is: is this situation good or bad for the linguistic community?

Before I discuss this question, I have to emphasize that this *is* the situation. I mean: the diversity of written norms has been a fact in Norway for 150 years and, for that simple reason, *is* indeed a part of the linguistic history and identity of Norway. Language, written as well as spoken, carries with it its own history and the history of its users. Even if a single, narrow norm for writing Norwegian was adopted tomorrow (an extremely unlikely event), the situation in Norway would continue to be very different than in countries with less eventful norm histories.

Let us look at what the main document of current language policy has to say about the matter. *Report to the Storting No. 35 (2007–2008) “Mål og mening. Ein heilskapleg norsk språkpolitikk”* was endorsed by the parliament (Storting) in 2009 and is recognized as the fundamental document of current language policy in Norway.¹ Even though the division into two norms and the high degree of optionality within each norm both contribute to a general impression of a multitude of norms in written Norwegian, it is sensible to distinguish analytically between the

two as different phenomena. One might imagine a situation with two norms with no internal optionality, and one might also imagine a situation with one norm which contains much optionality.

Let us, therefore, first look at what the report says about the division into Bokmål and Nynorsk, and then at its comments on the degree of optionality within each of the norms.

4. Two language varieties – good or bad?

In Chapter 5.7.3, titled “A real bilingual policy in cultural diversity”, the report is clear on the value of the overall fact of there being two written language varieties:²

Today, Nynorsk and Bokmål must be considered as integrated parts of a linguistically divided national common culture, and as expressions of a cultural diversity which it would be a great loss for Norway as a cultural nation to give up. If a language is to be kept up, it must be used. Practically as well as economically, measures must be taken for Nynorsk to secure and strengthen its position as a living language of use as well as an equal official written language alongside Bokmål.

The foundation for a democratic language policy in Norway, therefore, should be the recognition of the fact that Norway is a multicultural and multilingual society in which the two Norwegian language varieties make up the common language which Norwegian citizens must, in principle, know well, and which inhabitants should be able to use in all circumstances. Necessary exceptions or adaptations must be designed in such a way that they do not shake this principle.

The report even goes on (Chapter 5.7.4) to formulate the “Nynorsk Principle” (prinsippet nynorsk), which says:³

In principle, Nynorsk always belongs in where the Norwegian language is thematized or used. In those cases where Nynorsk is not a relevant factor anyway, this must be actively legitimized, and the needs of Nynorsk users covered. The normal thing, then, will be that Nynorsk is counted in.

The background for the Nynorsk Principle is, of course, the current situation in which Nynorsk is in need of strengthening in order to become an equal language variety in reality, not just on paper.

One important argument for the maintenance of the Bokmål–Nynorsk division which is not mentioned in these quotes, is that the situation seems to promote language awareness in general and to make it easier for Norwegians than for writers of other European national languages to remember that any instance of writing is a selection process, and that the selected forms can be read as a statement about the author’s identity.

5. Optional spellings and inflections within one language variety – good or bad?

Now, let us turn to the issue of orthographical and morphological optionality within each of the two language varieties. On this issue, the report on language policy prefers to analyse rather than to recommend. It says the following in Chapter 8.4.2.5:⁴

Optionality in orthography has advantages as well as drawbacks. One of the advantages is that the language users can more easily find written forms in which they feel at home, because, for example, the forms are identical with or similar to their own spoken language. A drawback is that optionality entails that the norms become less firm, that it can be difficult to keep in view what forms that are inside and outside of the norm, and that it can lead to somewhat wavering and inconsistent writing.

Even if there may be different considerations of these consequences, it follows from the very objective of a regulated written language that optionality must not be too large. Not everybody should get to write the way they wish.

The various elements that are embedded in the special Norwegian language situation, have led to an optionality that is clearly greater than what is common for a standardized written language. It is, correspondingly, clear from various foundational documents that it has long been an ambition to try to restrict the volume of optional forms somewhat, but various tendencies and divisions in the regulatory work have often been solved, in practice, by extending optionality.

The Storting has earlier endorsed the principle of independent regulating of Nynorsk and Bokmål with no merging of the two, as well as the principle of stability, i.e., that we should have less frequent and less extensive changes in orthography than what has previously been common in our country. These two principles should still be at the basis and be applied as consistently as possible.

In brief, norm optionality gives the language user the advantage of being able to write in a way not too different from the way he or she speaks or feels at home with for other reasons, but also several drawbacks, for example, a certain insecurity regarding whether he or she is writing within the limits of the norm or not.

Notice that the report on language policy recognizes that there may be “different considerations” of the consequences of the high degree of optionality found in the two official norms. Let us, therefore, reflect upon one more of these: may there be a democratic gain in allowing a high degree of optionality in a norm?

Let us return for a moment to spoken Norwegian and the social acceptance of its dialect variation. One aspect of this situation that is often seen as an advantage, is that it is democratic. A standard dialect is usually close to the way socially privileged members of a language community speak, thus adding to their privileges. This strengthening of social inequality through language is avoided or at least less pervasive in a society where just about any dialect is tolerated in public use. The language policy report says (Chapter 5.2.2.7):⁵

In Norway, a spoken language culture developed in which the dialects won at last – it took a long time – a clear hegemony. This spoken language culture can be understood as a historically necessary prerequisite for subsequent linguistic democratization. This is about processes towards ever more people from different social layers being able to gradually defend their interests, promote their needs, or take part in linguistic actions on public as well as other arenas.

It is now very tempting to hypothesize that the same could be true for “dialect variation” in written Norwegian. And in fact, the report does open up for this idea (Chapter 5.2.2.7):⁶

In principle, standardized written language is something one learns best through schooling. How well one masters this standardized language, varies a lot, and, therefore, such written norms may contribute to keeping up differences between groups. For many, therefore, the Norwegian situation with large written optionality within the two language varieties can have certain advantages.

A number of scholars in the educational sciences have addressed the challenges, some of which are of a democratic nature, that are faced by schoolchildren with non-standard dialects who have to learn to read and write in a standard variety of their language. In this country, too, long discussions have been conducted about the possible educational gains of offering beginning literacy instruction with reading and writing in the local dialect instead of the standard written language. In recent years we have been witnessing the proliferation of non-standard written Norwegian on new arenas of literacy, in particular in the social media on the Internet. Evidently, many informal writers prefer varieties of Norwegian that are even closer to their own dialects than the norms. It will be interesting to see whether this phenomenon will have consequences for the future regulation of written Norwegian.

It is not my purpose here to criticize attempts that have been made up through the last century to narrow down the norms through spelling reforms. Of course, it is also possible to find aspects of a narrow norm that are more democratic than a diverse norm: if a written norm is something to be learned at school anyway, then it will be easier to learn a narrow one than a broad or diverse one. But it has been my intention to point out that the historically given situation here in Norway has aspects which may also be seen as desirable from a democratic point of view.

6. Conclusion

Within the format limitations of this paper, I have tried to give you an account of the present-day diversity of written Norwegian, and to explain how this diversity came about through a historical process with the aim of constructing a suitable national language for a young nation. It may be sensible to say that the frequent spelling reforms in the 20th century have instilled in the users of Norwegian an attitude towards spelling norms as results of political processes, and, subsequently, towards spelling reforms as political tools that can be used for democratic purposes. Further, the

pervasive optionality which is still characteristic of both official written norms of Norwegian, seems to function as an encouragement of linguistic awareness in the language users. I would welcome a more general discussion of the overall democratic qualities of a multi-normed written language such as Norwegian compared with those of the traditional and more stable, but often privately established and maintained, standard written norms of other European languages.

Notes

¹ All translations from the language policy document in this paper are mine and are not official.

² **Ein reell tospråkspolitikk i eit kulturelt mangfald**

I dag må nynorsk og bokmål oppfattast som integrerte delar i ein språkdelt nasjonal felleskultur, og som uttrykk for eit kulturelt mangfald som det ville vera eit stort tap for Noreg som kulturnasjon å gje avkall på. Skal eit språk haldast i hevd, må det brukast. Både praktisk og økonomisk må det leggjast til rette for at nynorsk kan tryggja og styrkja posisjonen sin som eit levande bruksspråk så vel som eit likeverdig offisielt skriftspråk ved sida av bokmål.

Grunnlaget for ein demokratisk språkpolitikk i Noreg bør difor vere ei erkjenning av at Noreg er eit fleirkulturelt og mangespråkleg samfunn der dei to norske målformene utgjer det fellesspråket som norske statsborgarar i utgangspunktet må kunna godt, og som innbyggjarar skal kunna bruka i alle samanhengar. Nødvendige unntak eller tilpassingar må utformast slik at dei ikkje rokkar ved dette utgangspunktet. [footnote omitted]

³ Nynorsk høyrer i utgangspunktet alltid med der norsk språk blir tematisert eller brukt. I dei tilfella der nynorsk likevel ikkje er ein relevant faktor, må dette legitimerast aktivt og behova til nynorskbrukarane bli dekte. Det normale vil då vera at nynorsken blir rekna med.

⁴ Valfridommen i rettskrivinga har både fordelar og ulemper. Éin av fordelane er at språkbrukarane lettare kan finna skriftformer som dei kjenner seg heime i, til dømes fordi formene fell saman med eller ligg nær opptil eige talemål. Ei ulempe er at valfridommen inneber at normene blir mindre faste, at det kan vera vanskeleg å halda oversikt over kva former som ligg innanfor og utanfor norma, og at det kan føra til eit noko vaklande og inkonsekvent skriftbilette.

Jamvel om det kan vera ulike vurderingar av desse konsekvensane, følgjer det av sjølve formålet med eit normert skriftspråk at valfridommen ikkje må bli for stor. Alle kan ikkje få skriva slik dei sjølve vil.

Dei ulike elementa som ligg innebygde i den spesielle norske språksituasjonen, har ført til ein valfridom som er klart større enn det som er vanleg for eit standardisert skriftspråk. Det går då også fram av ulike grunnlagsdokument at det lenge har vore ein overordna ambisjon å freista å stramma noko inn på omfanget av valfrie former, men ulike tendensar og motsetnader i normeringsarbeidet har i praksis ofte vorte løyste ved i staden å utvida valfridommen.

Stortinget har tidlegare har slutta seg til prinsippet om sjølvstendig normering av nynorsk og bokmål utan tilnærming, dessutan prinsippet om stabilitet, dvs. at vi bør ha mindre hyppige og mindre omfattande endringar i rettskrivinga enn det som tidlegare har vore vanleg her i landet. Desse to prinsippa bør framleis liggja til grunn og praktiserast mest mogleg konsekvent.

⁵ I Noreg utvikla det seg ein talemålskultur der dialektane til sist – det tok lang tid – vann eit klart hegemoni. Denne talemålskulturen kan forståast som ein historisk nødvendig føresetnad for seinare språkleg demokratisering. Dette dreier seg om prosessar i retning av at jamt fleire frå ulike sosiale sjikt over tid kunne hevda sine interesser, fremja sine behov eller ta del i språkhandlingar på både offentlege og private arenaer.

⁶ I utgangspunktet er normert skriftspråk noko ein lærer best gjennom skulegang. Kor godt ein meistrar dette normerte språket, varierer mykje, og difor kan slike skriftnormer vera med og halda oppe skilnader mellom grupper. For mange kan difor den norske situasjonen med stor skriftleg valfridom innanfor dei to målformene ha visse fordelar.

References

- Ministry of Culture 2008.** *St.meld. nr. 35 (2007–2008) Mål og mening. Ein heilskapleg norsk språkpolitikk.* [Report to the Storting No. 35 (2007–2008) Language and meaning. A comprehensive Norwegian language policy.] Online version: <http://www.regjeringen.no/nn/dep/kud/dokument/proposisjonar-og-meldingar/stortingsmeldingar/2007-2008/stmeld-nr-35-2007-2008-.html?id=519923>
- Vikør, L. S. 2005.** *Fakta om norsk språk.* [Facts about the Norwegian language.] Online version: <http://www.sprakrad.no/nb-NO/Politikk-Fakta/Fakta/>