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Norwegian: Bokmål vs. Nynorsk

Basic information

Norwegian is spoken by a majority close to 100 % in the kingdom of Norway (which at present contains around 5 million inhabitants), although a few tens of thousands have other languages as their first language. In the first place the national minorities: *Sámi* (spoken in three varieties which function as separate languages: North Sámi, Lule Sámi and South Sámi) and *Kven* (a variety of Finnish which is now acknowledged as a separate language), all of these mainly spoken in Northern Norway, and the so-called *Rom* languages, which are used by a few hundreds. The groups using these languages are acknowledged by law as national minorities (the Sámi have a special status as “aboriginal people” (*urfolk*)). In addition, there are many “immigrated languages” which have entered the country since the 1960s, and there is the sign language of the deaf (about 3000 users). These languages will not concern us here.

The majority language, *Norwegian*, has two distinct written varieties: *Bokmål* (‘Book Language’) and *Nynorsk* (‘New Norwegian’). They are so close to each other linguistically that they may be regarded as “written dialects”, mutually completely intelligible. Orally, local dialects are extensively used throughout the country. They are also mutually intelligible, although they can be very diverse, not least in intonation. In addition, both Swedish and Danish are closely related to Norwegian and thus intelligible to Norwegians, although with some initial difficulty in many cases.

In speech, there is much blending between dialects, Bokmål and Nynorsk, but in writing, the varieties are kept more clearly apart. Nynorsk is mostly used in Western Norway¹ as a written language (by roughly 10 % of the people, amounting to about half a million), Bokmål is dominant in the rest of the country, and is used in writing by close to 90 %.

This article will focus on the relationship between Bokmål and Nynorsk; it starts with a historical and a socio-linguistic survey.

Historical and social background

Norwegian belongs to the North Germanic languages, besides Swedish, Danish, Faroese (the language of the Faroe islands, today an autonomous part of the kingdom of Denmark) and Icelandic. Its parent language was Old Norse, which during the Viking age (800-1050) and the Middle Ages (until about 1500) was spoken and written in Norway. Norway was an independent kingdom from the eleventh until the fourteenth century, towards the end of this period also comprising several emigrant societies in the North Atlantic (the Faroe islands, the Orkney islands, Shetland, Iceland, and Greenland). Old Norse was a literary language with a large body of manuscripts on parchment, primarily from Iceland, but also from Norway.

From the fourteenth century on, the kingdom of Norway weakened, particularly because of the Great Plague of about 1350. The country was, although nominally still independent, integrated into a Scandinavian union with its power centre in Denmark. Sweden belonged to this union, but broke out of it several times, making the break definite in 1523. From then on, the Danish kingdom comprised Norway and all its dependencies (although the Orkney islands and Shetland were ceded to Scotland in 1469, but the Norn language, deriving from Old Norse, survived there for some centuries more).

The Old Norse written language was now gradually superseded by Danish, although this did not happen in Iceland. One of the reasons for this was linguistic distance: Norwegian speech, above all in the towns, but later on also in the countryside, was profoundly influenced

by Danish, but even more by Low German, which was the language of the Hanseatic League, a commercial empire based in the North German cities of Hamburg, Bremen, Lübeck and others, dominating trade throughout Northern Europe. Both Norwegian, Danish and Swedish borrowed a lot of words and expressions from Low German. The languages also underwent a rapid morphological simplification, ending up with relatively simple declension and conjugation patterns, while Icelandic kept its Old Norse character (with a complex inflection system) in these respects, and Faroese did so to a lesser, but still significant, degree. The result was that these two insular languages were no more understood by Scandinavians, while the three Scandinavian languages developed along parallel lines and kept their mutual intelligibility. That, again, made it easy for Danish to pass into Norwegian society as the new and modern “state language” not only of Denmark, but also of Norway. “Norwegian” survived only in the form of various spoken dialects throughout the country.

Very significant in this respect was the abolition of the Catholic Church in Scandinavia. This church, with its dependence on Latin as its ecclesiastical language, had been dominant throughout the Middle Ages, but it was replaced by state-run churches based on Martin Luther’s version of protestantism in the 1530s in Denmark (with Norway) (somewhat earlier in Sweden). The most tangible result of this as far as language is concerned, was the translation of the Bible (first the New, then the Old Testament) into the vernacular languages, a key element in the Lutheran reformation. But, whereas Swedes and Icelanders received these holy texts in their own languages, Norwegians (and Faroese) had to be content with the Danish version. This raised the prestige of Danish in Norway even more, now also being the language of the holy texts.

The Old Norse written language thus became extinct in the sixteenth century. To Norwegians, Danish was the only “correct” written language, while the Norwegian dialects were used orally. Gradually, at least from the eighteenth century, the elite developed a separate spoken code based on the Danish writing system, but since the phonetic difference between Norwegian and Danish dialects was considerable, the pronunciation remained markedly Norwegian. Since Danish spelling remained more conservative than pronunciation, which developed more and more distinct Danish features, Norwegian pronunciation of the common written language often came closer to writing than Danish pronunciation. Some contemporary observers in the eighteenth century even thought Norwegian elite pronunciation of Danish to be better than what one could hear in Denmark proper, even though Norway was only a province and Copenhagen was the metropole.

In 1814, everything suddenly changed. The Napoleonic wars had ended with the defeat of Napoleon, and while Denmark had chosen to back the loser, Sweden was on the winning side, along with the British. The result was that the Swedes could force the Danish king to cede Norway to Sweden (although the Faroe islands, Iceland and Greenland remained with Denmark). The Norwegian elite tried to prevent this by staging a national revolution, arranging elections for a national convent, which met in order to declare Norway an independent kingdom and draft its constitution. Sweden did not accept this, however, and after a brief war, a compromise was found. Norway was allowed to keep its new constitution, but an extraordinary parliament had to be elected and to convene in order to make adjustments in the constitution which allowed for the king of Sweden to be elected king also of Norway. By this, Norway acquired the status of separate state, although only semi-independent under the Swedish crown.

Danish was still the only written language used in Norway, and the Swedish authorities accepted this; Swedish was never promoted in this function. But the new (still only cultural) nationalism which was developing under the influence of similar currents in Europe generally, also had a linguistic aspect. An increasing group of Norwegians felt it as a problem that the

standard language was Danish, although some wanted to call it Norwegian, or they preferred the neutral term “the mother tongue”.

The idea of reforming the language itself was first formulated in the 1830s. Already then two different strategies were formulated: to introduce Norwegian elements (lexically and idiomatically) into the standard of Danish in Norway, leading to a separate version of Danish which in the long run might be called *Dano-Norwegian*. The other strategy was to start with an investigation of spoken dialects, particularly those that had preserved Old Norse features in lexicon, pronunciation and morphology, and then codify a common standard on the basis of these features. In this way, a separate Norwegian standard language would have been called into existence.

Both strategies were followed, and they resulted in two different varieties of Norwegian, called *Bokmål* (derived from Danish), and *Nynorsk* (derived from Norwegian dialects). I shall deal with them separately here, beginning with *Nynorsk*.

The founder of this variety, or this language (there is no full agreement on how to designate it), was *Ivar Aasen* (1813-1896), a crofter’s son from Western Norway who was given opportunity to study different languages and even drafted a grammar of his own dialect. He was given a scholarship to travel around in Norway and describe the spoken dialects, which had never been done that systematically before. His travels took place from 1842 till 1846, and he published a comparative dialect grammar of Norwegian in 1848 and a dictionary in 1850. After that, he continued his studies with an allowance from the parliament, and in 1853 he published an attempted codified version based on the common features of the dialects in comparison with Old Norse, which was seen as the common ancestor of all the dialects. Since Western Norwegian dialects had remained (relatively) closest to the Old Norse structure, his standard came to resemble these dialects the most. Even in these relatively conservative dialects, however, the Old Norse morphology had been largely simplified.

Aasen published examples of his standard in the form of poems, essays, folk tales, and a translated Icelandic saga. Others followed up publishing literary works, journalism and so on. Textbooks for schools in it were also compiled and published. In 1885, a parliamentary decree gave it official status, and from 1892, it might be taught in schools after a local decision process. About 1900, Norway had developed into a country with two language standards, the *Dano-Norwegian* one vastly dominant, the pure Norwegian one struggling to establish a base in the rural parts of southern Norway.

The Danish language in Norway was not formally reformed before 1900, but a movement for its norwegianization was developing in nationalist and radical circles, and above all among teachers, who pointed out difficulties in the teaching of the traditional code to pupils who spoke dialects in schools. The leading ideologist behind the movement was *Knud Knudsen* (1812-1895), a secondary school teacher living in the capital (then Christiania, now Osloⁱⁱ). He worked for a reform where the spelling of *Dano-Norwegian* was brought closer to the daily pronunciation of the educated elite (in opposition to the formal and ceremonial speech of the same elite, which approached Danish writing to a significant degree). Knudsen and his followers used both nationalistic and pedagogical arguments for a norwegianization of the language, partly on the basis of educated daily speech of the elite, as we just mentioned, partly including some features from more popular dialects in the central and urban areas of the country. They envisaged a Norwegian standard language, but still different from Aasen’s creation, in a direction they saw as more urban and modern.

I shall go deeper into this presently, but here, I give a very general sketch of developments after 1900. I use some crucial years as a “skeleton” to build the description around, departing from 1905, the year when Norway terminated the union with Sweden and established itself as an independent kingdom.

1907: A spelling reform of Dano-Norwegian, encompassing both morphological and orthographical features, established this variety as a separate language from Danish, allowing for its subsequent development to take place in a solely Norwegian context. The same year, it was made mandatory for all to pass their high school exam to master both varieties (Dano-Norwegian and pure Norwegian) to a satisfactory degree. (But only a minority of the people passed high school; this minority, however, provided the officials necessary for the civil service at the national and the local level.)

1917: A new reform encompassing both written varieties endeavoured to bring them closer together with an amalgamation of them as the ultimate future goal. A high degree of optionality between traditional and new forms in both varieties was introduced. In practice, the more moderate changes in Dano-Norwegian, which brought the language closer to the daily speech of the urban elite, were soon accepted in usage, but the more radical ones, consisting of forms similar to Nynorsk and popular (both rural and urban) non-elite dialect speech, were, however, rejected and thus rarely or never occurred in written texts.

1929: By parliamentary decree Dano-Norwegian was officially renamed *Bokmål* ('Book Language') while the purely Norwegian variety was called *Nynorsk* ('New Norwegian').

1930: A regulation for the national official civil service made it a duty for all governmental offices to use both varieties in their contacts with the public. At this time, Nynorsk had won rural Western Norway and the mountainous inner areas of Southern Norway, partly also other rural areas in the far south and the north, while Bokmål still dominated the rest of the country.

1938: A new spelling reform occurred, also this one encompassing both varieties, introducing many Nynorsk-resembling and dialectal forms in Bokmål, and Eastern Norwegian and Bokmål-sounding forms in Nynorsk. The optionality was reduced, but still present to a high degree. The new spelling was more controversial than its predecessor, but the German WW2 occupation from 1940 till 1945 "froze" the language struggle for the time being.

1952: The parliament established an official language commission (*Norsk språknemnd*), which was given the responsibility for the future language codification and cultivation at different levels. It would have to follow the amalgamation policy.

1959: The 1950s saw a heavy struggle against the amalgamation policy, particularly in urban Norway, and particularly from the political right (who for twenty years after WW2 remained in the opposition against the continuously ruling Labour Party). In 1959, a new spelling reform encompassing Bokmål and Nynorsk was promulgated, still based on the amalgamation principle, but modifying it, consolidating the 1938 reform rather than taking new steps.

1964-66: The government appoints a committee to evaluate the language policy. The committee advises a partial retreat from the amalgamation policy, accepting traditional Bokmål forms which had been excluded from the official norm in earlier reforms, and keeping a high degree of optionality. The language struggle gradually diminishes.

1972: The language commission was replaced by a language council (*Norsk språkråd*), with similar, but quite expanded, tasks, such as checking and improving the usage in school textbooks. This council was entrusted with the task of reassessing the Bokmål standard on new grounds. It was to base itself on a modified version of the amalgamation policy, viz. to support tendencies in general usage which reduced the differences between the language varieties, but not to take new steps towards amalgamation ahead of spontaneous developments. The strengthening of the minority variety, Nynorsk, also remained an important part of its tasks.

1981: A new reform of Bokmål was promulgated by Parliament, reintroducing many traditional forms into the standard again, continuing a high degree of optionality between "conservative" and "radical" forms.

2005: The language council was replaced with a new institution, also called “The Language Council” (*Språkrådet*). Its task should now to a lesser degree involve codification and to a larger degree language cultivation and defence against pressure from outside, above all English. A new spelling of Bokmål was promulgated, basing itself on quantitative investigation of general written usage (among other by examining large text corpora), and the optionality was now reduced as many rare forms in usage were abolished, while a number of additional traditional forms were now admitted.

2012: A similar reform was introduced for Nynorsk, based on extensive analyses of extant and evolving electronic text corpora and widespread discussions among Nynorsk users ahead of the decisions. The result was a reduction of the differences between modern usage and a standard which had included many optional, but rarely used, “heritage forms” from earlier stages of the language’s development.

Linguistic relationships

Danish and Norwegian are closely related languages within the Scandinavian language group (together with Swedish). They used to be mutually intelligible, which they still are to a large extent, at least in writing. The oral intelligibility is, however, reduced, because Danish phonology has developed in a very separate direction which we cannot explore further here. Danish pronunciation sounds extremely “blurred” in Norwegian (and Swedish) ears. The Danish written language, however, is conservative, based upon conventions that were developed from the sixteenth century on. In fact, Danish orthography today reflects a phonological system which resembles Norwegian Bokmål speech more than modern Danish proper (especially if pronounced with a Norwegian south coast accent, because this part of Norway had some early phonetic developments in common with the then contemporary Danish, probably because of language contacts between both sides of the Skagerrak during late medieval times). This means that when Norwegians read a Danish written text aloud, they can read it with their own Norwegian pronunciation, as if it were a traditional Bokmål text with a few deviations which are reflected in the spelling. To Norwegians, this feels almost like reading a (Dano-)Norwegian text from the nineteenth century.

But as we have seen, Norwegian itself consists of a number of markedly different varieties, often without clear boundaries between them. They have different Norwegian names which are not only neutral designations, but also carry ideological and psychological connotations, and therefore become the objects of struggle and strife themselves. I shall analyse the most important ones of these, on the background of the picture painted above.

As we have already seen, the two official written standards of Norwegian are called *Bokmål* ‘Book Language’ and *Nynorsk* ‘New Norwegian’. Both of them have had different names during the time they have existed, partly designated for different varieties of the languages. Besides, the amalgamation policy needed a separate name for its intended goal: *Samnorsk* ‘Common Norwegian’. I concentrate on the two existing varieties one by one first, and continue with Common Norwegian afterwards.

Bokmål has, as has already been shown, evolved from the Danish written language, pronounced in “Norwegian mouths”. Already around 1830, shortly after Norway’s separation from Denmark, there grew an uncertainty as to what to call the language. Some preferred *Danish*, just as most American nationals called their language *English*. Others insisted on *Norwegian*, just as some Americans preferred *American*; this usage, however, caused sharp reactions from some Danish circles. A third position was to avoid the problem altogether, using *Modersmaalet* ‘the mother tongue’ – which of course did not work. These discussions were the start of the process leading towards the Norwegianization of the Norwegian linguistic scene, which we have already sketched. But the naming problem remained: When a

partly Norwegianized version of the written language had come into existence towards the end of the nineteenth century, what should they call it?

There were different proposals, but no official regulation. *Skriftsproget* ‘the written language’ was enough for many, or *Bogsproget* ‘the book language’. The parliamentary decision implying equalization of the two standards (from 1885), used the wording *det almindelige Bogsprog* ‘the general book language’. Some of the most distinguished experts in the field who were in favour of continued Norwegianization used *dansk-norsk* ‘Dano-Norwegian’, among them Knud Knudsen. On the other hand, the “enemies” of this language, the Nynorsk adherents, preferred *norsk-dansk* ‘Norwegio-Danish’. The difference was that the latter saw the language as (more or less) Norwegianized Danish, while Knudsen and his adherents saw it as Norwegian derived from Danish (the latter part of such a compound in Scandinavian carries the main meaning of the word, while the first component is a modifier; therefore, *dansk-norsk* was interpreted as a kind of Norwegian, *norsk-dansk* as a kind of Danish).

The (preliminary) winner of this somewhat disorganized competition, however, was a new alternative, *Riksmål*, meaning ‘language of the state’. The first component *riks-* was developed from *rike*, actually inspired by German *Reich* (thus, *Riksmål* by German *Reichssprache*). Both in German and in Scandinavian the meaning of *Reich* / *rike* was and is somewhat hazy; it may imply both ‘state’ (in the institutional European sense of the word, not the American sense), ‘country’ and ‘nation’. Words with the prefix *riks-* in Norwegian often imply ‘nationwide’ as opposed to ‘regional’, the latter encompassing only parts of the country, such as province or municipality. *Riks-* thus represents the highest in a hierarchy of units. Even some Nynorsk adherents wanted to call their variety *Riksmål* because of the formal and social position this word implies. One of their more militant slogans was: *Nynorsk som einaste riksmål i landet!* ‘Nynorsk as the only *Riksmål* in the country!’ But in reality, *Riksmål* in the early twentieth century was established as the usual name of the language we now call *Bokmål*.

The change from *Riksmål* to *Bokmål* took place in 1929, when it was effectuated by Parliament. This was the first time a formal decision concerning the names of the language varieties was taken by an authoritative body. In informal speech, however, *Riksmål* had been firmly established, and it remained in use. After WW2, when the struggle about the amalgamation policy hardened, a struggle about the naming also developed. The resistance movement defending the traditional (thus Danish-like) forms of the language now codified a separate version of the standard, based on the traditional variety of the 1917 reform (see above), but accepting some (minor) features of the 1938 spelling (which had already been accepted in general usage). The movement itself was called the *Riksmål* movement, and the word *Riksmål* therefore marked an ideology, not only a linguistic variety. The term *Bokmål*, on the other hand, was now used to designate the officially standardized variety of the language, which was marked by much optionality, so that *Bokmål* encompassed a variety which included many *Nynorsk*-derived and dialect-inspired forms *as well as* a variety of a more traditional kind, but less traditional than the pure *Riksmål*. This pattern remained until the 1980s, when the official language policy had become more accommodating towards the *Riksmål* movement. This meant that the border lines between the “oppositional” *Riksmål* and the state-run *Bokmål* became increasingly diffuse. *Bokmål* itself had been polarized into two varieties with numerous transition forms, marked by the adjectives *moderate* and *radical*. *Moderate Bokmål* was the most *Riksmål*-marked, *radical Bokmål* was stretching towards *Nynorsk* and popular speech. The problem was that official moderate *Bokmål* resembled *Riksmål* more and more, while radical *Bokmål* was pertinently non-*Riksmål*. From the other side, the *Riksmål* movement opened its language codification towards moderate *Bokmål*, accepting a (limited) number of non-*Riksmål* forms where the *Riksmål* equivalents had clearly

been marginalized in general usage, thus blurring the borderline towards moderate Bokmål even more. This policy took effect during the eighties and nineties.

This is the situation today. *Riksmål* and *Moderate Bokmål* and more and more blend into each other, not only linguistically, but also within the ideological rhetorics. Radical forms within Bokmål is excluded from this unity, but they still exist within Bokmål and are used mostly by people ideologically committed to a policy of opening the Bokmål standard to common and popular speech of both rural and urban areas, above all in the populous southeastern part of the country.

Then we pass on to the *Nynorsk* side.

Ivar Aasen called the book where he launched his new language standard *Prøver af Landsmaalet i Norge* 'Samples of the *Landsmål* in Norway' (1853). *Landsmål* meant 'the language of the country'. But *land* in Norwegian is used both in the general sense of 'country' and the more special sense of 'countryside'. The word was not taken into use at once. Its adherents preferred simply *norsk* 'Norwegian', considering this word to be the only objective and correct term (implying that the alternative and dominant standard was "un-Norwegian", of course). In the 1885 parliamentary decision, the term *det norske Folkesprog* 'the Norwegian people's language' or 'the Norwegian popular language' was used as the counterpart of 'the general book language'. But it was discussed what *Folkesprog* really was supposed to mean: standardized Nynorsk (in Aasen's codification or some alternative form) or the spoken dialects in themselves? The latter meaning was the most common. *Landsmål* generally established itself as the most used term, but mostly in official discourse or among those who did not use the language themselves. Its adherents disfavoured *Landsmål* because of its rural connotation, since one of the main problems of the movement promoting the language, was that it proved difficult or nearly impossible to have it accepted in the urban communities throughout the country, even though it spread quite efficiently throughout parts of rural Norway.

Nynorsk 'New Norwegian' was rarely used at first in its modern sense, but it was taken into use as a term of periodization in descriptions of the history of the language, denoting the (dialectal) Norwegian spoken language after the sixteenth century, as a successor of *gamalnorsk* 'Old Norwegian' (the language which in English is called Old Norse and encompasses both Old Norwegian and Old Icelandic). Norwegian language histories also operate with a Middle Norwegian (*mellomnorsk*) stage, marked by a process towards a simplified morphology and a more international vocabulary (particularly influenced by Low German) during the fifteenth century and the immediately preceding and succeeding decades. *Nynorsk* 'New Norwegian' was a natural term for the more recent period, and it was generally accepted that the structural features of popular Norwegian speech around 1600 had already reached the "new Norwegian stage". This "new Norwegian" speech was of course the basis which Aasen built his codification on. But only after 1900 did *Nynorsk* begin to be used as the designation of the language variety which had evolved from Aasen's works and subsequent reforms, the variety, thus, which at the time was officially called *Landsmål*. The parliamentary decision of the names of the varieties in 1929, however, also formally introduced *Nynorsk* as the name of *Landsmål*, and unlike *Bokmål* for the other variety, *Nynorsk* soon came into use, both among friends and foes. *Landsmål* was after the war simply seen as the old name of *Nynorsk*, and discarded as a living term (except for use in historical contexts).

Høgnorsk 'High Norwegian' is a quite recent term designating Nynorsk with its most traditional forms, approaching the shape it had in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Some circles within the Nynorsk movement have reacted to the amalgamation policy and advocated a turn towards these older forms, which would bring the variety closer to Aasen's

original codification. This traditionalist Nynorsk movement has always been there, often very active, but the designation *Høgnorsk* is relatively recent. It has never had an official status.

Finally, we take a look at *Samnorsk* ‘Common Norwegian’. This term was designated around the former turn of the century, around 1900. It denoted the planned or imagined aim of the amalgamation policy, i.e., a future language which nobody knew exactly what would be like. The word received no official status, but after 1945, it was taken into use on a broad scale, especially by the Riksmål movement, who used it in their propaganda as a ‘hate word’. This movement dominated much of the discourse of the 1950s, and they changed the contents of the *Samnorsk* concept to mean ‘radical Bokmål’, thus a known extant language variety, not only a future aim. They campaigned heavily against the forms which they called *Samnorsk*, often popular dialect forms of the Oslo area, and they succeeded in compromising the whole idea of gradually amalgamating Bokmål and Nynorsk. *Samnorsk* is not very much discussed at present; it is mostly used in historical contexts, although it may still be used as a catchword for linguistic forms within Bokmål which are so “radical”, containing Nynorsk-like or urban dialectal forms, that many Bokmål users would regard them as utterly strange or perhaps revolting.

The Samnorsk project

As I have already stated, the idea of amalgamating Bokmål and Nynorsk (I use these names irrespective of which period I treat, for the sake of simplicity) into a future Samnorsk originated at the turn of the century (around 1900). This was supposed to be attained through a gradual process of mutual linguistic rapprochement (*tilnærming*) between the two varieties. I shall now show how this was planned to be done, and assess the results.

The basic condition for such a policy to take effect, was the relatively great similarity between the two written varieties and the dialect patterns of different parts of the country. Bokmål was, as we have seen, based on a phonetically Norwegian spoken variety of the Danish written standard. Its users lived in close contact with locally spoken dialects in different areas, but the most important area here was the south-east, where the capital is placed. This southeastern popular speech was closer to neighbouring Swedish and Danish varieties than the speech of Western and Northern Norway. Ivar Aasen, however, based his Nynorsk standard on the dialect forms most closely resembling Old Norse, and they were best preserved in Western Norway and some inland mountain areas in Southern Norway. Thereby, maximum distance was sought between the two written varieties, although they were still mutually intelligible.

The Nynorsk movement, on the other hand, had the ambition to unite all Nynorsk dialects and their speakers in a common Norwegian standard language. The archaizing tendency in the codification sprang from the view that the most common features were those that reigned at the stage when the dialects split from each other; Old Norse was conceived of as a unified language without or almost without dialectal variation (a conception which later research in the medieval Norwegian manuscript literature has considerably modified). Ivar Aasen’s Nynorsk standard was in many ways an impressive creation by its systematicity and its aesthetic qualities, which made it well suited to poetic and artistic purposes, and some of its users reached a high literary quality in their works. But in its original form, Aasen’s standard was too good to be realized by a whole language community in practice, and against his warnings, an increasing degree of variability and adjustments towards different dialect groups became a characteristic of much Nynorsk usage. In other words, it proved to be more flexible than Aasen would have liked, since flexibility often goes at the cost of systematicity.

The same happened in Bokmål, as southeastern dialect features crept into the language, particularly in literary and informal functions. This tendency was strengthened by the

demographic development of Norway, since the population in and around Oslo expanded more rapidly than elsewhere in the country (where urban centers like Bergen, Trondheim etc. also grew at the cost of their rural surroundings). As the twentieth century wore on, the linguistic features of southeastern popular speech were seen as markedly expansive. This was the key which unlocked the language to the rapprochement policy with full amalgamation, *Samnorsk*, as the future goal; the catchword which expressed this goal was “linguistic unification” (*språklig samling*). Through the introducing of popular southeastern dialect forms in the two official standards, Bokmål became more representative in a social sense, less onesidedly attached to the speech of societal elite groups – which many saw as an asset when the labour movement also expanded and gradually transformed the society in the direction of an increasingly elaborate welfare society. Nynorsk also gained in its representativity, but here in a geographic sense, by accepting Southeastern forms on a par with the Western ones (also northern dialect forms were accepted and taken more into use during these years). This was the policy which reached in zenith in 1938.

After WW2, the Labor Party governed the country for twenty years, and the non-socialist coalition which took over in 1965, in many respects continued the basic elements in the social democratic policy, including the language policy. The resistance did however succeed in securing a modification and a gradual change of this policy, which has been described on p. 00. Here, I shall sketch the main forces behind the developments from the 1950s on.

The resistance phase was strongest in the 1950s. The language planners, viewed in hindsight, had underestimated the forces of habit and tradition among language users. Large groups of people, not least in the traditional social and cultural elite, felt that an authoritarian government was in the process of taking their language from them by forcing them to use forms they felt to be strange and vulgar. This provoked widespread resistance, especially in the cities and towns, where the traditional Bokmål had its strongest position.

A big additional problem is indicated by the use of the adjective “vulgar” – since many of the new forms were not necessarily brand-new and unknown, but had been in traditional use in popular dialectal speech, associated with urban and rural working class. To the Labour Party, this was a reason for promoting them, to reduce social prejudice also in language matters, but even among those who used such forms in speech, they gave a connotation of lacking dignity. People in particular resented that their children were taught in school that such forms were standard, and the language of school textbooks was at the heart of the struggle. The school was to a dominant degree state-run, and there were regulations as to which kinds of books could be used as textbooks, also regarding linguistic usage. These regulations were the first to be softened and modified in face of the resistance of hundred thousands of parents – already in the fifties.

However, an opposite development took place in a more discrete and less visible way, namely a growing acceptance of many of those new forms which were already most widespread in speech and thus less tainted with the “vulgarity” stamp. In usage, a difference developed partly along political lines, for example in the press: The most conservative papers followed the private *Riksmål* (see above) norm, while more centrist and radical ones kept inside the official standard, using the optionality to such a degree that they preferred “moderate” forms to the more “radical”, but still keeping a distance to “Riksmål”. The long-term result was that the most marked “radical” (dialectal or Nynorsk-marked) forms disappeared in use, although remaining as optional “standard” forms in the dictionaries and school spelling lists (until 2005), while more “moderate” rapprochement forms gradually gained currency in use and were regarded as acceptable and “neutral” in the language struggle. “Riksmål” counterparts of these forms, through this development, were increasingly

seen as “snobbish” or “old-fashioned”. A kind of “middle course” between the “radical Bokmål” and “Riksmål” thus developed and became increasingly dominant.

In the 1970s, a strong anti-authoritarian movement with leftist inclinations among the youth challenged the Riksmål movement, favouring *Nynorsk* and the use of dialects, but also promoting the use of “vulgar” forms from urban (above all Oslo) working class speech. This wave waned again after 1980, when the political right gained power within economic and social policy, but continued dialect use and a freer attitude to the written forms strengthened the “middle course”, where optionality between popular forms and more traditional forms continued to exist and established itself more permanently. The new trends promoted, again, in particular by the youth, led to a more relaxed view on language, leading to a more informal style in writing which favoured many of the popular forms in Bokmål, in so far as they had already gained currency in use. Both on the “Riksmål” side and on the opposite “rapprochement” side, many forms simply gradually disappeared from use, being seen as old-fashioned. The new Bokmål spelling of 2005 based itself on these new attitudes to the language form and the usage that developed from it. The present trends in language development are dominated by generations that were unborn during the intense language struggle phases, and therefore relatively untainted by the feelings and attitudes of their grandparents’ generation.

I end with a brief sketch of the present situation, based on three catch-words.

The first is *stabilization*, which is clearly the aim of the most recent spelling reforms. Official policy is now to maintain Bokmål and *Nynorsk* as separate standards, although Bokmål is vastly dominant and the *Nynorsk* community actively struggling to keep its language strong. As a cultural elite language, *Nynorsk* asserts itself well, but among the “grassroot” youth, active endeavours are still needed to maintain it. The official spellings of the two varieties seem to stabilize on a course in between the most traditional styles of the past and the most “radical” elements of the rapprochement policy, which now also is seen as “old-fashioned”

The second catchword is *fragmentation*. In the social spheres outside the official (both governmental and private) ones, many new stylistic levels are developed and explored, often based on traditional dialect speech, but also exploiting resources taken from English and from the urban registers based on non-Western immigrant languages. These oral styles are now eagerly used even in writing, by young people and in the so-called social electronic media. Here, creativity abounds, and new linguistic resources constantly prop up. How this all will influence developments in the future, is impossible to indicate now.

The final catch-word is *accommodation*, and this applies to the informal spoken language. While dialects have been widely used in Norway, also in official and national contexts, at least since the seventies, they have not remained unchanged. They are constantly influenced by neighbouring dialects, in particular the dialect of the nearest city, developing into larger units, more regional than purely local, as before. They are also influenced by the standard languages, mostly Bokmål, but in Western Norway also by *Nynorsk* (in the regions where people are accustomed to see *Nynorsk* in writing). A long-term *oral* amalgamation into a kind of *Samnorsk* is possible (independently of any official policy), but so is a future stable coexistence of several regiolects in the different parts of the country.

ⁱ A brief note on geography: Norway is a long and rather narrow country, customarily divided into two main parts: Northern Norway (*Nord-Norge*) and Southern Norway (*Sør-Norge*). Southern Norway is broad enough to be divided between west and east, however. In Norwegian (Bokmål) those parts are called *Vestlandet* resp. *Østlandet*, by me rendered *Western Norway* and *Eastern Norway* in English. *Vestlandet* is thus the western part of *Sør-Norge*, while *Nord-Norge* does not have an east-west division at all. The center of Western Norway is Bergen, while for Eastern Norway it is Oslo, which is also the national capital. The northern part of Southern Norway, bordering on Northern Norway and having Trondheim as its urban center, is called *Trøndelag*. In Nynorsk, by the way, the country is called *Noreg* (Bokmål: *Norge*) and *Østlandet* is called *Austlandet* (because this variety has preserved Old Norse diphthongs in many words where the diphthongs have been monophthongized in Bokmål (and Danish and Swedish).

ⁱⁱ The capital was until 1924 named *Christiania* after the seventeenth-century Danish king Christian IV, but from 1925 it was renamed *Oslo*, an Old Norse name probably dating from the Viking age. I stick to *Oslo* throughout here, for the sake of simplicity.