

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY IN NORWAY

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ABSTRACT. *Language and Identity in Norway.* The paper will discuss the strong relationship between language and identity in Norway with specific reference to the unique situation of an official language with two forms (Bokmål and Nynorsk). I will try to illustrate the role of the Norwegian language in the process of building national identity in Norway. One of the important voices in the ongoing debate regarding the two forms of Norwegian is that of the famous author Jon Fosse, an important Nynorsk writer as well, whose arguments will be used to make the point that language is a vital component of the identity of a people and the right to speak it cannot be taken away on the basis of the number of people speaking it.

Keywords: language, identity, literature, history, cultural relevance, Norwegian, linguistics.

REZUMAT. *Limbă și identitate în Norvegia.* Lucrarea va discuta legătura puternică dintre limbă și identitate în cazul Norvegiei, cu referire specifică la cazul unic al unei limbi oficiale cu două forme (Bokmål și Nynorsk). Vom încerca să ilustrăm relevanța limbii în procesul construirii identității naționale a Norvegiei. Vom susține afirmațiile noastre cu luări de poziție apărute în cărți sau articole din reviste. Unul dintre stâlpii importanți ai acestei dezbateri în desfășurare este celebrul autor Jon Fosse, un important scriitor în Nynorsk, ale cărui argumente vor fi utilizate pentru a susține ideea lucrării de față.

Cuvinte cheie: limbă, identitate, literatură, istorie, relevanță culturală, norvegiană, lingvistică.

This paper addresses the linguistic situation in Norway, which is the only country in Europe whose official language has two official written forms, the New Norwegian (Nynorsk) and the Dano-Norwegian (Bokmål)*², the reason for this being specific historical circumstances. In 1814, after four hundred years of Danish rule and of Danish being the official language, Norway succeeded in breaking out of the union with Denmark. However Danish remained widely spoken, as most of the educated people were rich and thus could afford to travel

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* From now on I will use Bokmål for the Dano-Norwegian and Nynorsk for the New Norwegian.

to Copenhagen for their studies. Moreover, the highly educated people pursued their studies in Denmark until 1811, when the first university in Norway was established in Oslo (old Christiania).³ Therefore Danish was used in the language of administration, whereas throughout the period of Danish domination the rural population had only ever spoken various local proto-Norwegian dialects.

Over the years, the Norwegians never did give up their local dialects but instead combined them with Danish, especially in the written forms. Therefore what emerged was a language of basic Danish structure, but enriched with Norwegian vocabulary and spoken with Norwegian pronunciation. The breaking of the union with Denmark, which happened after the French Revolution, aroused a nationalistic feeling that led to the birth of a patriotic sensitivity of: “who are we?”. However, the Norwegians continued to speak the Dano-Norwegian language, the so-called Bokmål.

During the age of national romanticism, artists and the literati tried to rediscover and establish their identity as Norwegians: “Against this background, achieving a distinctive Norwegian language became de facto the main concern of the nationalism in the 19th century”⁴ as professor Sanda Tomescu Baciu writes in her article “Norwegian distinctiveness. A cultural construction”.

Ivar Aasen was the man who travelled around the country and gathered information about dialects, focusing on the oral rather than the written language, because the oral one was closer to the Old Norwegian that survived via oral transmission. One of the reasons for doing this was to remind people of their origins, of the ancient and powerful Norwegian Kingdom. Aasen published this information in “The Norwegian Folk Language Grammar” and “The Norwegian Folk Language Dictionary”, followed by a book with samples of the New Norwegian compared to the standard language. Thus, in 1929, “new Norwegian” was born.⁵

Due to the fact that this new language had different grammar rules and different words, it was much harder to learn and very different from Danish. Ivar Aasen realized that in order for this language to survive, it needed not only to be spoken but written as well, and in this respect literature occupies a vital place. As a result he made the first attempt to write Nynorsk literature: he wrote poetry, diaries and prose.

³ Halvorsen, Eyvind Fjeld. “Norway’s languages”. *Norway Info*. Last update not listed. Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 29 November 2011 <<http://www.cyberclip.com/Katrine/NorwayInfo/Articles/languages.html>>.

⁴ Baciu, Tomescu Sanda. “Norwegian distinctiveness. A cultural construction”. *Studia Universitatis Babeş Bolyai. Philologia* Vol 57 (2012): 14.

⁵ Halvorsen, Eyvind Fjeld. “Norway’s languages”. *Norway Info*. Last update not listed. Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 29 November 2011 <<http://www.cyberclip.com/Katrine/NorwayInfo/Articles/languages.html>>.

In the beginning, Nynorsk was known as Landsmål (the language of the country) and Bokmål as Riksmål (the language of the realm), names which carried a clear distinction of status. The people who did not want to abandon Danish were the ones who did not wish to give up their status or lose their target public, as in the case of writers such as Henrik Ibsen and even Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson⁶ (the latter was to reconsider his position later in life). As explained by V. Skard, "Although Ibsen remained most of his life outside the language controversy in Norway, he had great influence on the development of language and style, primarily through the realistic poetry of his work. His plays reflect the linguistic and stylistic development in Norwegian literature in the second half of the 18th century more typically than any other writer's works, but also independently. At the same time this development is a picture of how the Norwegianization process took place with different strength in syntax, vocabulary, phonology and morphology."⁷

In 1885 Stortinget voted for the two languages to have the same status and, after 1929, they were officially renamed in their current form. Since 1885 there have been, and continue to be, many reforms of the two languages in the hope that eventually an agreed upon form will be reached. The most recent changes were made on August 1, 2012.

In the book *Kampen om Norgers sjel*, Øystein Sørensen describes the road which Norway had to travel through centuries by emphasizing the most important moments, such as 1899, when Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson spoke for the people who lived in the countryside and "had to hold their tongues"⁸, meaning that they did not have the right to express themselves naturally, that is in their "native" language. Sørensen also makes reference to the situation a hundred years later, by this calling attention to the fact that the problem will never be solved and also hinting at the implied racism.

⁶ Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson became one of the militants for Landsmål and contributed to the writing reforms.

⁷ Skard, Vemund. "Ibsens språklige betydning" ("Ibsen's importance"). *Norsk språkhistorie (Norwegian language history)*. Eds. Vemund Skard, Arne Rosenvold. Oslo-Bergen-Tromsø: Universitetsforlaget, 1973, page 145.

My translation of "Selv om Ibsen det meste av sin levetid holdt seg utenfor språkstriden i Norge, har han fått stor innflytelse på utviklingen av språk og stil, først og fremst gjennom sin realistiske diktning. Hans dramatik avspeiler den språklige og stilistiske utvikling i norsk litteratur i annen halvdel av 1800-årene, mer typisk enn noen annen dikters verk, men også uavhengig. Samtidig gir denne utviklingen et bilde av hvordan fornorskningprosessen har foregått med forskjellig styrke innen syntaks, ordvalg, lydverk og formverk"

⁸ Sørensen, Øystein. "Kampen om Norges sjel" ("The battle for the Norwegian soul"). *Norsk idéhistorie (Norwegian History of Ideas)*. eds. Trond Berg Eriksen, Øystein Sørensen. Oslo: Aschehoug, 2001, Vol. 3, p. 398.

My translation of "Måte man holde tungen rett i munnen".

There was actually an attempt to unite the two languages in the so-called “samnorsk” but, with the outbreak of WWI, this process was never finalized; on the contrary the issue of language became even more political after the war. For the Norwegians language is strongly connected to their identity, as shown by their belief that one can speak one’s own dialect at all times as an expression of one’s identity. For example, even when talking with a foreigner who possesses only basic knowledge of Norwegian, it is considered acceptable to address him/her in one’s dialect. Norwegian pride has reached these heights, and if you travel to Norway even now you will not hear just one variant of the language, but hundreds. Interestingly enough, Norwegians can all understand each other due to the reforms made in both languages, thus the two forms are closer to each other than they were before.

This being said, Norway is among the few countries that have their law and administration written in two languages (other examples: Belgium, Wales, Canada, Spain, Switzerland). However in Norway every employee has to be able to understand, respond orally or in writing in both languages, according to the wish of the client. During the 1900s Nynorsk became more and more popular, but lost its popularity afterwards only to regain ground in recent years when more Nynorsk literature has become available. However, the quantity of Nynorsk literature is very small in comparison to the literature that is produced and read in Bokmål.

An important role is played here by the mass media, which again uses mostly Bokmål although in 1970 Stortinget voted that at least 25% of NRK’s [Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (Norsk Rikskringkasting)] broadcastings should be in Nynorsk. Nowadays people in the media are encouraged to present the news in their own dialect, especially in rural or district broadcasts.⁹ In 2007 Språkrådet (The Language Council of Norway) published the following recommendation for NRK: “NRK should reflect the diversity of the Norwegian language, even when it comes to dialect usage and pronunciation, which are colored by other languages.”¹⁰

One can say that there is a continuous debate going on in Norwegian society that goes hand in hand with the search for freedom to express oneself in one’s own language. As Thomas Hylland Eriksen writes in his book *Typisk norsk. Essays om kulturen i Norge*, in every country there are debates about national identity and about the old and the new, the traditional and the

⁹ There is even a George Orwell Prize awarded every year for Freedom of Speech and it is also stated by The Language Council of Norway (Språkrådet) that the use of dialect should be encouraged.

¹⁰ Språkrådet (The Language Council of Norway). *Språkregler for NRK (Language policy for NRK)*. Oslo, 2007 << <http://www.sprakradet.no/nb-NO/Politikk-Fakta/Spraakpolitikk/NRK/> >>.

My translation of ”NRK skal spegle mangfaldet i det norske språket, også når det gjeld dialektbruk og uttale som er farga av andre språk.

modern¹¹. However, I find the circumstances of the language situation in Norway rather different and not so banal.

Even-Zohar argues that: "Language, which far back in early antiquity began to be linked to a sense of collective identity, has been mobilized as a major vehicle for successful implementation of national identity among often rather heterogeneous sorts of populations."¹² Therefore, language is defined as an instrument to unify people around a common constructed identity, sometimes even an instrument of coercion – of freedom by creating a viably-sized community. This statement has also been made by professor Sanda Tomescu Baciu (who cites E.J. Hobsbawm) in her article regarding the Norwegian nationhood, where she argues that the Norwegian nationhood is identified as "*a posteriori*."¹³

Without a doubt language is the instrument by means of which man becomes aware of himself. During the 1960s and 1970s a movement emerged which brought a modern view to the language situation in Norway: "Speak dialect, write New Norwegian", the idea behind this slogan being that Nynorsk is the basis of all dialects and one should be proud of one's dialect. Of course, Nynorsk is not the *basis* for the dialects, but rather a *distillation* of the dialects; Nynorsk was created on the basis of dialects. Obviously, the movement was initiated with the hope that Nynorsk would win more ground than it had possessed up to that moment.

In this respect the existence of Noregs Mållag is really important¹⁴, for its aim is for this language to become the primary language for every Norwegian or immigrant because the "Norwegian language is the most important symbol of Norwegian culture, and the best platform for building a common Norwegian identity."¹⁵ Apparently it is believed that if Nynorsk dies, the glorious and distant past dies with it: "If we give up our own language, Nynorsk, we will lose one of our greatest heritages. If our ways of expression, our words or our songs disappear, we also lose knowledge about our past. Our language, and

¹¹ Eriksen, Hylland Thomas. *Typisk norsk. Essays om kulturen i Norge*. Huitfeldt Forlag, Oslo, 1993, page 10. (Typical Norwegian. Essays on culture in Norway).

¹² Even-Zohar, Itamar. *Language conflict and national identity*. Last update not listed. I.Even-Zohar: LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY. 2 December 2011 <<http://www.tau.ac.il/~itamarez/works/papers/papers/lngconf.htm>>.

¹³ Hobsbawm, E.J. *Nations and Nationalism since 1870: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2nd edition), 2008. Here cited in Baciu, Tomescu Sanda. "Norwegian distinctiveness. A cultural construction". *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai. Philologia* Vol 57 (2012): 19.

¹⁴ Noregs Mållag is an organization that promotes the use of Nynorsk in every field and area in the country so that it would be used by the majority, if not by everyone.

¹⁵ Skarpeteig, Trond Sæbø. "What is Noregs Mållag?". *Noregs Mållag*. Last update not listed. Noregs Mållag. 26 November 2011 <<http://www.nm.no/english.cfm>>.

the Nynorsk language, is the main anchor for our local and national identity, and that's why people love their own language!"¹⁶

Norwegian identity is not rooted in, or shaped only by, the Danish period as the use of Bokmål would suggest, but rather springs from the deeply typical Norwegian attitude of rejecting submission. This is why pure Danish was never spoken by the Norwegians, but only a perfect written Danish spoken with Norwegian pronunciation. Bokmål is a language with a much simpler grammar than Nynorsk, which is one of the reasons why it is also more widely spoken by the population. However, this has not prevented supporters of Nynorsk from fighting to sustain their beliefs.

During the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries Nynorsk was introduced in schools, administration, law, newspapers etc., but there have been critics saying that such promotion (and this ongoing debate about languages) is not the wish of the people but rather a political conflict. One example is Gregg Bucken-Knapp's book *Elites, language, and the politics of identity: The Norwegian case in comparative perspective*¹⁷, where the author discusses the connection between cultural identity and language as being motivated by political interest. Nynorsk is supported by the left, conservative party and Bokmål by the democratic, right party. No matter whether this is true or not, the Nynorsk speakers have already strongly identified themselves with the language. "Bokmål and Nynorsk have been cultivated in different ways and have become unique literary means of expression, and it seems difficult for those versed in one of them to be able to transcend to the other without feeling that they lose something of themselves linguistically. In other words Nynorsk is felt by its users to be an integral part of their linguistic identity, and this is one of the reasons why it has been maintained for so long in its minority position" writes Lars S. Vikør in *The Nordic languages. Their Status and Interrelations* published on The Language Council of Norway (Språkrådet) website.¹⁸

In 2004 Svein Ketil Løhaugen, a primary school teacher, wrote an article in *The Norwegian Teacher (Norsklæraren)*: "This is a text about the reasons for one's simple choices, ...and choice has much to do with identity. I don't want to be labelled as a Nynorsk user. I don't want to be labelled with distinguishing features. I don't want to defend my own language. I don't want to write Bokmål. I am Norwegian and I want to write Norwegian and since I come from the part of the country that uses Nynorsk, I use in writing the

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Bucken-Knapp, Gregg. *Elites, language, and the politics of identity: The Norwegian case in comparative perspective*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003.

¹⁸ Vikør, Lars S. "Nynorsk in Norway". *Språkrådet (The Language Council of Norway)*. 31 December 2001. Språkrådet. 29 November 2011 <http://www.sprakrad.no/Toppmeny/Om-oss/English-and-other-languages/English/Nynorsk_in_Norway/>.

language I find myself in. Language further accounts for a big part of our identity. Language, identity and dialogue thus become three fundamental concepts to which everyone has a connection.”¹⁹ However, the situation is not as tolerant as it seems, since there have been violent reactions against Nynorsk; for example there is a so-called “spynorsk mordliste” (literally “spitting Norwegian murder list of words”) which is a derogatory term for “Nynorsk ordliste” (Nynorsk list of words) in order to ridicule the Nynorsk form. This attitude came around in the 1960s especially from the younger generation, who found Nynorsk difficult to learn²⁰. Nevertheless, the situation is not very different in the 21st century; there have been cases when not only young people have expressed their feelings publicly, but officials have as well. In 2005, during the parliamentary elections, Herald Victor Hove was seen in a video burning Nynorsk textbooks in order to win votes from the young people: “It is the yellow one²¹, yes. Spynorsk murder list, as we called it, hehe. I burn it to show that we want to get rid of compulsory secondary language. Nynorsk is a problem for many who are trying to learn to write good Norwegian, says the young Conservative politician.”²²

Such occurrences notwithstanding, Ottar Grepstad writes: “The shared Norwegian linguistic culture in multilingual Norway is, in 2006, characterized by a challenging tolerance. Only a few decades ago such tolerance was a far-off thought. Using now Nynorsk in the workplace rarely leads to big conflicts, whereas before speaking it would have caused a reaction, and Nynorsk users, with their willingness for the language to gain ground, would have been perceived as aliens.”²³

¹⁹ Løhaugen, Svein Ketil, “NN: “Ikke bestått, eller ikke godkjend?” (“NN: Not accepted/passed/voted or not well known?”). *Norsk læreren (Norwegian Teacher)*, no.1, Bergen, 2004, page 8.

My translation of “Dette er en tekst om årsaker til at en tar enkelte valg...,og valg har mye med identitet å gjøre. Jeg vil ikke stemples nynorskbruker. Jeg vil ikke stemples med nynorske kjennetegn. Jeg vil ikke forsvare mitt eget språk. Jeg vil ikke skrive bokmål. Jeg er norsk og vil skrive norsk og siden jeg kommer fra nynorskland bruker jeg det skriftspråket som jeg finner med selv i. Språket utgjør videre en stor del av vår identitet. Språket, identiteten og dialogen blir derfor tre grunnleggende begreper som alle har et forhold til.”

²⁰ Schjerven, Hilsen Petter Wilhelm. *Typisk norsk* after the NRK production *Typisk norsk*, Dinamo Forlag, 2005, p. 170-171.

²¹ The Nynorsk textbook has yellow covers.

²² Børhaug, Espen. “Harald brenner «spynorsken»” (“Harald burns <<spitting Norwegian>>”). *Bergensavisen (Bergen newspaper)*. 12 August 2005. < <http://www.ba.no/nyheter/politikk/article1695152.ece>>.

My translation of “Det er den gule, ja. Spynorsk mordliste, som vi kalte den, hehe. Jeg brenner den for å vise at vi vil ha bort tvungent sidemål. Nynorsk er et problem for mange som prøver å lære seg å skrive godt norsk, sier den unge Høyre-politikeren.”

²³ Grepstad, Ottar. *Viljen til språk. Ei nynorsk kulturhistorie (Willingness to language. A Nynorsk cultural history)*. Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 2006, page 9.

My translation of “Den språkdeltede norske kulturen i det fleirespråklege Noreg er i 2006 prega av ein utfordrande toleranse. Berre for få tiår sidan var ein slik toleranse ein framand tanke. Å bruke nynorsk på innarbeidde område fører no sjeldan med seg store konfliktar, men som før kjem reaksjonane når nynorskbrukarane med sin vilje til språk stig inn på område der dei blir oppfatta som framande.”

A language exists through and as literature as well; this is why the role of Nynorsk writers such as Kjartan Fløgstad, Eldrid Lunden, Edvard Hoem, Jon Fosse and many others is essential. One of the most intense militants for Nynorsk is Jon Fosse, who claimed that the best argument for Nynorsk he could have was “Why should I have to give arguments in favour of my language and another hundred thousand people’s language to have the right to exist? That is, after all, my language, something to which I’m most connected here in this life. I love my language. I have to experience the humiliation of needing to argue for it.”²⁴

Jon Fosse is a Nynorsk writer; he writes poetry, drama, novels, children’s literature and essays, and therefore his work covers all genres. His first attempt to write about his Nynorsk identity, with regard to his roots on the West Coast of Norway, was in 1979 in a newspaper called *Gula Tidend*, which used a rather strict language structure. In 1980 he started collaborating with another newspaper, *Norsk Målungdom* (New Norwegian Language Youth), for two years - and he was only 21 years old then. Cecilie Seiness mentions in her book *Jon Fosse. Poet på Guds jord* (*Jon Fosse. Poet on God’s Earth*) that “The newspaper wrote about the case of Nynorsk, about dialects, dialect actions, Nynorsk educational resources, goals and minutes from the congresses [...] where he [Jon Fosse] defended linguistic diversity in Nynorsk: << We will both begin* and begin>>”²⁵.²⁶

From 1993 to 1996, Jon Fosse together with Jan Kjærstad published a literary journal called *Bøk*, a word between bok (book) and bøker (books). From the newspaper *Dag og tid* (no. 47, 2003) we learn that in the first issue of this journal Jon Fosse wrote: “The good literature is neither one’s private language nor the common language of many, two languages that often confusingly resemble each other, however, literature exists somewhere in-between singular and plural, a place that does not exist, yet in a way exists. What place is this? It is at any rate literature’s place. And maybe this place

²⁴ Fosse, Jon. “Min kjære nynorsk” (“My dear Nynorsk2). *Essay*. Oslo: Samlaget, 2011, page 365.

My translation of “...kvifor skal eg argumentere for at språket mitt og til nokre hundre tusen andre skal få lov til å eksistere? Det er jo språket mitt, det eg kanskje er mest knyttet til her i livet. Eg er veldig glad i språket mitt. Eg opplever det nedverdiggande å skulle matte argumentere for det.”

²⁵ Seiness, Cecilie N. *Jon Fosse. Poet på Guds jord* (*Jon Fosse. Poet on God’s Earth*). Oslo: Det norske Samlaget, 2009, page 55.

My translation of “Avisa skreiv om nynorsksaka, om dialektar, dialektaksjonar, nynorske læremiddel, målsigrar og referat frå landsmøte [...] der forsvarar han eit språkleg mangfald i nynorsken: << Vi vil både byrje og begynne.>>”

*the first “begin” is the form in Nynorsk and the second in Bokmål.

²⁶ Even-Zohar, Itamar. *Language conflict and national identity*. Last update not listed. I.Even-Zohar: LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY. 2 December 2011

<<http://www.tau.ac.il/~itamarez/works/papers/papers/lngconfl.htm>>.

between singular and plural is also the place where you can best search for the deepest insight of what one calls the big questions of life.”²⁷

Therefore it is not only that Fosse enriches Nynorsk literature and gives educational resources to his country, but he also creates a way of thinking and approaching the situation in Norway. Moreover, Nynorsk culture is privileged that Fosse is the most famous Norwegian author in Europe and overseas. Hence, he does not only honour his linguistic and cultural roots, but his country as well. He is considered to be the new Ibsen of Norway, inasmuch as *Le Monde* called him “the 21st century Beckett” and his works have been translated into over forty languages. Consequently, via his writing, Nynorsk has become known to outsiders and he compels other nations to read and understand it in order to have access to his literature.

The need to speak one’s own language equals freedom: freedom to be oneself and express oneself. They, the Norwegians, are still fighting to build their linguistic identity and this has not been an easy task to fulfil, but a goal that must continue to be fought for. In the same book, *Language and Identity (Språk og identitet)*, Åge Steinset and Jo Kleiven argue that personal identity is closely tied to communication, therefore spoken language stands as a central pillar of the building of identity. To sum up, this paper has intended to contribute to the discussion of relevant aspects of the contemporary Norwegian linguistic context, especially because I believe that this is an essential example of what a language means for the people who speak it and how much people need to communicate and feel free when doing so. This incredible experience that most of the time is taken for granted is actually very much alive and intense amongst contemporary Norwegians.

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²⁷Seiness, Cecilie N. “Jon, Jan og Bøk” (Jon, Jan and Bøk). *Dag og Tid (Day and Time)*, no. 47, Oslo, 2003, page 8.

My translation of “Den gode litteraturen er verken den eines private språk eller dei mange felles språk, to språk som ofte til forveksling liknar kvarandre, litteraturen finst derimot ein stad immelom eintal og fleirtal, ein stad som ikkje finst, men som likevel på ein måte finst. Kva stad er dette? Det er i alle høve litteraturens stad. Og kanskje er staden mellom eintalog felirtal også staden der ein best kan søkje etter dei djupaste innsiktene i det ein kallar for livsens store spørsmål?”

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