

## Language history and the power of symbols

Gunnar Skirbekk

Not all of it is known. Thus, there is a need to review some of the central events of the history of the Norwegian language – an ideological “archeology” (to talk in Foucauldian tongues). I will do so by highlighting five events that have been pivotal to the development of the Norwegian language. Five events that, each in its way, have been under-communicated in educational contexts and in public debate, five events in the history of the Norwegian language that are relatively unknown to most people and seldom brought up or referred to in a straightforward way:

(i) This is the case for the articles concerning language in the Constitution from November 4, 1814, as an expression of the defining power of the State authorities, with far-reaching implications.

(ii) It is the case for the gradual Norwegianisation of written Danish, that first picked up speed long after 1814.

(iii) It is the case for the education required for the Lutheran confirmation, based on Pontoppidan’s explanation of Luther’s catechism, a regimentation in Danish language of all Norwegian youth, for more than 150 years, under the auspices of the State Church.

(iv) It is the case for the market forces of the book trade at the end of the 1800s, when Norwegian authors *en masse*, including Ibsen and Bjørnson, were publishing their books in Copenhagen, in Danish.

(v) And it is the case for “the parents’ campaign” (in the early post WW II period) in favour of linguistic forms close to Danish, a well-organised campaign, with major implications, that raises interesting questions as to its organisation and financing and its use of “social capital” and rhetoric defining power, and still it was never investigated sociologically. Why?

### **(i) The linguistic *coup* in the Consitution of November 4, 1814**

The final version of the Norwegian Constitution, debated in the autumn of 1814 following the short Swedish-Norwegian war during the summer of 1814, contains several articles that make reference to “the Norwegian language” (“det norske Sprog”, §§ 33, 47, 81). In these articles, among other things, it was anchored in the Constitution that “all laws were to be written in the Norwegian language” (“Alle Love udfærdiges i det norske Sprog”, § 81). Interestingly enough, here Danish was defined as Norwegian. A linguistic “coup”, to quote the Norwegian historian Øystein Sørensen (2001).

However, it did not stop here: this linguistic usage (of the term “det norske sprog”) was endorsed 1815 by the newly established Royal Frederiks University in the capital Kristiania [Oslo]: a clear but curious conclusion: Danish in Denmark is Danish, but Danish in Norway is Norwegian! To support

this view, the University referred to the fact that Norwegians, for a long period of time, had used this language (i.e., Danish) in writing and that Norwegians (e.g. Ludvig Holberg) had taken part in the development of the written Danish language. However, the same can be said of English in Ireland;<sup>1</sup> but the Irish do not call English Irish when it is used in Ireland.<sup>2</sup> Thus, there is something strange here in what the Norwegian University argued for.

Why did the University express such a view? What was the point of this curious definition, this “linguistic coup” of 1814? Politically, there were clear strategic reasons for calling the language of the Constitution of November 4, 1814, for Norwegian: The union was now a fact, with Sweden as the stronger military partner. Then it was important to stand up, also linguistically. From the Norwegian side there was an anxiety that the Swedish language would conquer the country, partly because of Swedish ambitions and partly because many Norwegian dialects are more closely related to Swedish than Danish. Consequently, it was important to establish in the Constitution that the legal language should *not* be Swedish (Jahr 2014:17f.). That was the main point: not Swedish.

But why not “call a spade a spade”? Why not call Danish Danish? Finn-Erik Vinje (2004) formulated it as follows: “After the events of 1814, it was not acceptable to refer to Danish as the official language of Norway. [Etter begivenhetene i 1814 gikk det anstendigvis ikke an å snakke om dansk som offisielt språk i Norge]”

Since the Norwegian delegates in the negotiations with the Swedes in the autumn of 1814 had no written Norwegian language to refer to (Old Norse had not been in use for a very long time) they chose to hold on to Danish – and to call it “Norwegian”. That was understandable enough, in that situation.<sup>3</sup>

However, this linguistic trickery turned out to have major implications, all the way until our time.<sup>4</sup> For this definition expresses the dominant view for a long time to come, bluntly stated: *call it Norwegian and keep it Danish*.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, *avoid calling Danish Danish* (rather use terms like “mother tongue” [Modersmaalet], or “our common literary and written language” [vort almindelige Skrift- og Bogsprog]<sup>6</sup>.) On the other hand, *keep the Danish language free from Norwegian influences! Do not Norwegianise the Danish language!*

---

<sup>1</sup> Or also English in India, cf. that the author Salman Rushdie writes in English, not “Indian”.

<sup>2</sup> I once asked the Irish ambassador if her “Irish” was good. She hesitated before answering, since for her the question evidently referred to Irish, the Gaelic language, and not English.

<sup>3</sup> The State officials (*embetsstanden*) had strong cultural and personal connections with Denmark. That is where they went to university. (The first university in Norway, *Det kongelige Frederiks Universitet*, first opened in Christiania (Oslo) in 1813.) Many of them were married to Danes. Many were Danish, cf. Feldbæk (1998: 390).

<sup>4</sup> For example, during a discussion in the Faculty of Law at the University of Bergen about the introduction of human rights paragraphs to the Constitution, Inge Lønning, professor of theology and prominent member of the Conservative party, insisted (emotionally) that the language of the Constitution is Norwegian.

<sup>5</sup> cf. the historian Øystein Rian (2009: 164-169): “the Danish-Norwegians had a strong aversion to the Swedish language. They knew that Norwegian dialects were much more similar to Swedish than to Danish and they feared that this would lead to a Swedish-Norwegian language. To fortify the legitimacy of written Danish in Norway, they made haste to call it alternately either Norwegian or the “mother tongue” and they held a purist attitude against any Norwegianisation of this language.”

<sup>6</sup> These are the names used in the law for language equality of 1885, in order to avoid using the word “Danish”. At the same time, it was impossible to use the word “Norwegian” because now we had “the Norwegian vernacular language” (“det norske Folkesprog”). Thus the term “our common written and literary language” (vort almindelige Skrift- og Bogsprog) was chosen. The name “Bokmål”, disliked by Riksmål activists (cf.

## (ii) Norwegianisation of the Danish language – so late, and so reluctantly

However, this is not how the history of the Norwegian language is usually portrayed, in retrospect, when the written Danish in Norway had gradually been Norwegianised. Now, in retrospect, this pivotal time in Norwegian language history is usually described as if a wish to Norwegianise the Danish written language was main stream right from the start and that the effort to Norwegianise commenced shortly after 1814. References are often made to Henrik Wergeland and what he said and did early in the 1830s, as well as to Knud Knudsen a little later. In a textbook for the secondary school we may read the following:

Most people agreed that we needed a genuine Norwegian language after liberation from Denmark. The question was how to best attain this new language. Three possibilities or methods in particular were debated: 1) Keep Danish as the written language in Norway; 2) gradually Norwegianise written Danish by introducing Norwegian words and expressions and by adjusting the spelling of the written language in compliance with Norwegian pronunciation; 3) develop a new Norwegian language with Old Norse as the starting point.<sup>7</sup> The first model was rejected by most, but the other two constituted the basis for what we now refer to as the Norwegian language conflict (Fjeld 2008: 226).

In reading this, we might get the impression that there was wide consensus in favour of Norwegianising the Danish written language straight away from 1814, and moreover that the path taken lead directly to the written language of *Bokmål* that we have today.<sup>8</sup> But that is not the case. Rather the other way around. The prevailing opinion supported the *status quo*, to go on with Danish as the written language. This was the dominant view after 1814 and for a long time to come.

In this context, Henrik Wergeland was a marginal figure. There were people like P. A. Munch who represented the dominant view: that Danish should not (and cannot) be Norwegianised.<sup>9</sup> Admittedly, in the 1840s and 1850s Knud Knudsen emerged with his “Danish-Norwegian language endeavour” (“dansk-norske sprogstrev”), a programme for gradual Norwegianisation of written Danish (in competition with Ivar Aasen and in opposition to P. A. Munch).<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the spelling had been

---

Arnulf Øverland: *Bokmålet – et avstumpet landsmål*; ‘Bokmål a blunted Landsmål’), has in this way a prehistory, being used in 1885 in order to avoid the term “Danish” or “Norwegian-Danish”.

<sup>7</sup> This sounds more like P. A. Munch's suggestion in the 1830s than Ivar Aasen, who had the contemporary rural dialects as his starting point.

<sup>8</sup> For similar disinformation, cf. the book given to new Norwegian citizens: Sørensen, Øystein (2006) *Velkommen som ny statsborger* (‘Welcome as a new citizen’). Arbeid- og inkluderingsdepartementet, p. 22: “In 1814 the written language was Danish and it continued to be Danish in the years after 1814 [!]. Many [!] of the Norwegian elite saw this as highly inadequate”.

<sup>9</sup> cf. Jahr (2014: 30): “Munch [*Norsk Sprogreformation 1832*] completely rejected the notion that it would be possible to alter written Danish so that it was more Norwegian without creating a state of complete linguistic chaos. Munch felt that written Danish in Norway should be kept as it was, ...” Ibid. p. 31: “Munch’s primary concern was to keep the Danish standard as it was(...) This view has been greatly under-represented in previous accounts of Norwegian language development”

<sup>10</sup> cf. Knud Knudsen: *Haandbog i Dansk-Norsk Sproglære* from 1856, and *Kortfattet redegjørelse for det dansk-norske målstrev*, 1887.

somewhat simplified in 1862: *f* for *ph*, *k* for *ch*, *hus* ‘house’ for *huus*, *li* ‘slope’ for *lie* (cf. Jahr 2014: 40f.). An end was also put to conjugating verbs in the plural and the capitalisation of nouns, as was done in Danish and Swedish. But the Norwegianisation of Danish did not start making headway until the spelling reforms in 1907<sup>11</sup> and 1917, and at that time under pressure from *landsmålet* and *målrørsla* (inspired by Ivar Aasen) that made major advances in the late 1800s and into the 1900s.<sup>12</sup>

As late as in 1899, the same year that the name “Riksmål” was launched, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson said: “I see it as an asset that we share the written language with the Danes” [Jeg ser det som et Gode, at vi deler Skriftsprog med Danskerne] (Sørensen (2001: 389).

The separation (between Danish and Danish-Norwegian) came late. The first parallel publishing of the same book, one in Danish and one in Danish-Norwegian, was first published in 1919 (Jahr, 1994: 45), more than 100 years after 1814, and on the verge of the interwar period.<sup>13</sup> The process of Norwegianisation up until the 1917 spelling reform had brought “our common literary and written language” [vort almindelige Skrift- og Bogsprog] so far from written Danish that the book trade saw them as two languages.<sup>14</sup> So belated, and so reluctantly.

### **The uniqueness: Norwegianisation of Danish**

In 1814, Norwegians were faced with different strategic choices with regard to the written language:

(i) We could continue with Danish. To continue with the language of the colonial ruler is a well known strategy in former colonies that have gained their independence – French in Senegal and English in Nigeria. In a Norwegian context this strategy was even more tempting since Danish is a closely related language. And, as already mentioned, from 1814 and for a long time after that, this remained the predominant strategy.

(ii) Another option, returning to Old Norse. In principle, that was possible, and was hinted at by the influential historian P. A. Munch. Israel chose to revive Hebrew, an ancient liturgic language. And they managed the transition into a modern age, with nuclear physics and pop culture. But the situation of the Jewish settlers was quite special. A similar choice was hardly realistic for a Norwegian context (even though we could have made a common cause with the Icelanders).

(iii) We could have chosen to switch to Swedish. The union was a fact. Many Norwegian dialects are close to Swedish. However, as already mentioned, for political reasons this was not an alternative for the Norwegian elite.

---

<sup>11</sup> Jahr (2014: 79): “After the reforms to Dano-Norwegian in 1907, the nation faced a situation whereby it now had to accommodate two distinct and officially recognized written standards, both of which differed from Swedish and Danish standards. Before then, it could be claimed that only one clearly Norwegian standard existed, that is, Landsmaal, since the other was only slightly different from the Danish written in Denmark.”

<sup>12</sup> Jahr (2014: 55): “Only when the Landsmaal project became an imminent threat as a result of the political development of the 1870s and 1880s did Knudsen’s language programme finally become more acceptable to the upper-middle classes.” Also *ibid* p.72.

<sup>13</sup>The Gyldendal Norwegian publishing house was established in Oslo in 1925. Before that, Gyldendal was a Danish publishing house in Copenhagen.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Feldbæk (1998: 398) for more on written language and market forces from 1850 to 1890.

(iv) We could choose to gather data from Norwegian dialects and formulate a modern written Norwegian language on the basis on these data. A similar strategy has been chosen in many countries both in Europe and other places (e.g. Faroese, Macedonian, Slovakian<sup>15</sup>). This is exactly what Ivar Aasen did in Norway.<sup>16</sup>

(v) Then, there was still one alternative. To Norwegianise written Danish, step by step. And so it became, eventually. But this is special, a unique project. There is nothing like it. No one has ever considered to Ukrainianise the Russian language step by step, and then call the result Ukrainian.

Gradually changing a written language in this way, such that little by little a new language evolves, is unparalleled. The fact that this strategy was eventually chosen and implemented can only be explained by a set of peculiar circumstances. These are social and political circumstances as well as the close relationship between the languages. In short, it is Bokmål that is unusual and unique, not Nynorsk.<sup>17</sup>

### **(iii) Lutheran Confirmation and Language instruction orchestrated by the State Church**

In the 1730's, Erik Pontoppidan was commissioned by the Danish king to write an exposition of Luther's catechism to be used in Lutheran Confirmations.<sup>18</sup> His book, entitled *Sandhed til Gudfryghed* ('Truth to piety'), that contained 759 questions and answers, was published in 1737 and was the most widely used textbook in Norway for 150 years. Its full title translates to 'Truth leading to piety, in a simple and when possible short but sufficient exposition on doctor Martin Luther's Small Catechism that contains all that one who wants to be blessed has to know and do. Commissioned by the king for general use'.<sup>19</sup> This was serious: anyone who could not – in church

---

<sup>15</sup> Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson fraternised with the Slovakian language movement, but disliked the Norwegian Landsmål movement [målrørsla].

<sup>16</sup> Aasen was very exact in recording words and expressions. Everything he used was documented. He did not construct words or expressions. But he emphasised the inner cohesion of the language, and the development from Old Norse to the time of his fieldwork, the 1840s. Borrowings from other closely related languages (such as Danish and German) were not seen as important and most often disregarded. This view ("purism") is certainly debatable.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Jan Terje Faarlund, "Verneverdig bokmål" ('Bokmål worthy of protection'), *Morgenbladet* June 2.-8. 2006, p. 16. Similarly, cf. Jahr (2014: 4): "In Norway, the Nynorsk standard has always been regarded by a majority of people as the odd one out, a special case, 'constructed' and 'artificial' in nature. Bokmål, on the other hand, is generally seen as the 'natural' and 'obvious' language choice. However, from a more global perspective, there is no doubt that Bokmål is the more unusual case, in part due to its special history. There is no known parallel to Bokmål in any part of the world."

<sup>18</sup> Confirmation became obligatory in 1736 and in Norway it remained obligatory up to 1912. Pontoppidan (1698-1764) was an interesting figure. He was Bishop of Bergen 1745-1754. He wrote on many subjects, among other things about Norwegian language and nature; he published a fictional travel novel, *Menoza*, about an Asian prince who travelled the world in search of true Christianity, and he edited a Danish-Norwegian economic journal in 8 volumes. A faithful servant of the Danish-Norwegian States Pietism (*statspietisme*), but at the same time an active protagonist of Enlightenment.

<sup>19</sup> [Sandhed til Gudfrygtighed, udi en eenfoldig og efter Muelighed kort dog tilstrekkelig Forklaring over Sal. Doct. Morten Luthers Liden Catechismo, Indeholdende alt det, som den, der vil blive salig, har behov, at vide og gjøre. Paa Kongelig allernaadigst Befalning, til almindelig Brug.]

and in the front of the entire congregation – give correct answers to the priest’s questions would have to retake the examination.<sup>20</sup> If you were not confirmed by the church, you could not marry. (and this was before contraceptives). Here the people were being disciplined, by the State, using different kinds of power, from social classes to shame and sexuality.<sup>21</sup>

However, at the same time, people were also taught how to read. And when the people start reading, the authorities do not know what they might read, and what they might start to think. In this way, it was a liberation, a cultural modernisation,<sup>22</sup> as we see it manifested by many folk movements (*folkelege rørsler*) in Norway during the 1800s (Skirbekk 2011).

Mandatory Confirmation and Pontoppidan’s Danish exposition, that was to be learnt verbatim. These were important events, also for Norway’s linguistic history: every Norwegian youth, boys and girls, were drilled and disciplined in Danish, written as well as oral, from the 1730s and a long period of time.<sup>23</sup> A decisive event in Norwegian linguistic history, but seldom mentioned in that connection. It surely does not fit, however, into the traditional narrative of a free linguistic development, without State coercion and class power.

#### (iv) Market forces and books

During the 19th century, it was beneficial for Norwegian writers to publish their books in Denmark. It ensured a larger audience, and higher incomes. According to the Danish historian Ole Feldbæk, there were as many as 90 Norwegian authors publishing their books with Danish publishing houses

---

<sup>20</sup> 759 questions and answers that should be drilled and learnt by rote, in Danish. (Dispensation was possible for those with special difficulties). The text is partially straightforward and argumentative, partially antiquated and odd.

Question 213. Hvad Ont forbydes os i det siette Bud? Horerie, Ukyskhed, Bloskam, bæstisk Utugt, Legemets Besmittelse, Ægte-Stands Foragt, Lyst til fremmed Deylighed og alle-haande Urænlighed i Tanker .... (‘What evil does the sixth commandment forbid? Whoaring, unchastity, incest, sodomy, adultery, coveting what your neighbour has and all kinds of impure thoughts .....’)

225. Hvad er der mere, som kan friste til Ukyskhed? Ørkesløshed, liderligt Selskab, Romaner og løsagtige Elskovs-Bøger eller Billeder, letfærdige Leege, Dands, Skue-Spil og alt det, som føder Øyens-Lyst, Kjøds-Lyst og et overdaadigt Levnet. (‘What more can lead to unchastity? Idleness, bad company, reading novels, permissive romance stories or pictures, frivolous games, dancing, theatre and all things that foster desires for the eyes or flesh and for a lavish life’).

226. Hvad for gode Tanker kan være beqvemme til at dæmpe de kiødelige Fristelser? At man ihukommer den allerhelligste Guds Aasyn og Nærværelse, den korsfæste Jesum i sin legemlige Pine, de Fordømtes gruelige Smerte i Helvede, og den urene Synds korte Glæde efter det bekiendte Vers: Du skal og ey bedrive Hoer, det monne så mangen Daare, Ukyskheds Synd den snart forgaaer, men Pinen længe varer. (‘What kind of good thoughts are convenient for suppressing temptations of the flesh? That one remembers the Almighty God’s sight and presence, Jesus’ body suffering nailed to the cross, the damned being painfully tortured in Hell, and the short-lived pleasure of impure sins after the known vers: Thou shalt not commit adultery, like so many fools do, and unchastity’s sin fades away quickly but the anguish lasts a long time’).

<sup>21</sup> It is just what critical intellectuals, inspired by Foucault, would dream of, as a case of sexuality-based discipline imposed on people by State authorities – if they had cared about Norwegian cases.

<sup>22</sup> As Max Weber, the classical theoretician of modernity, saw it, in contrast to the post-modernist Michel Foucault (e.g. Weber 1966 and Foucault 1961). For introductory comments on Weber and Foucault, cf Skirbekk/Gilje 2001, ch. 24, pp. 400f. and ch. 27, pp. 463f.

<sup>23</sup> The Danes replaced Pontoppidan’s book with *Biskop Balles lærebog* (‘Bishop Balle’s textbook’) in 1794, but in Norway Pontoppidan was used throughout the 1800s and even longer. Certain parishes supposedly still use the book today.

in the period from 1850 to 1890 (Feldbæk 1988: 398). This included “the great four”: Henrik Ibsen, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Alexander Kjelldand and Jonas Lie, but also Amalie Skram and many others.<sup>24</sup>

Similar figures are found by Jens Arup Seip (1981: 21-22), who quotes Nils Collett Vogt: “A book published in the writer’s home country [i.e.: in Norway] during this period (1880s–1890s) was a weirdo condemned to be unsold and unread [En bok trykt i forfatterens hjemland var i hine tider (i 1880-90-årene) et misfoster, dømt til å bli usolgt og ulest].” Seip adds: “It was only during the interwar period [1918-1940] that the liberation (as it may be called) from Denmark was completed.”

The market forces were unambiguous. If you wanted to earn a living from writing, you had to write in Danish and publish in Denmark. It was against this backdrop that Bjørnson in 1899 wrote: “I see it as an asset that we share a written language with the Danes. [Jeg ser det som et Gode at vi deler Skriftsprog med Danskerne]» (Sørensen 2001: 389).” Not hard to understand, given the market forces. Nevertheless, an amazing declaration, since it explicitly states that the dominant written language in Norway at that time (1899) was Danish. Furthermore, this is said in the same year that Bjørnson launched the name “Riksmål” for this language – as a symbolic countermove directed against *Landsmålet* (later *Nynorsk*) and *Målrørsla* in strong progress at that time.<sup>25</sup>

#### (v) The “parents’ campaign” for a written Norwegian close to Danish

In the autumn of 1949, a group of parents from the affluent areas of Oslo and Bærum came together to protest against the language used in textbooks<sup>26</sup> — especially against the use of *-a* in the definite form of singular feminine nouns, common in spoken Norwegian,<sup>27</sup> but which do not exist in Danish. “The parents’ campaign for language issues” (“Foreldreaksjonen i sprogsaken”) was established. In 1951, the “Riksmål” Society (“Riksmålsforbundet) joined in, and the “national committee for the parents’ campaign against *Samnorsk*” (“Landskomiteen for Foreldreaksjonen mot samnorsk”) was established. The parents’ campaign was active on several levels and had high impact. They collected 407,119 signatures with a petition in 1953.<sup>28</sup> In the same year, they started an initiative to “correct” in pen the language used in school books. An amplification of this was the burning of *Samnorsk* books — 10-15 years after World War II, with similar atrocities by the Nazis.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Cf. the inscription on Amalie Skram’s gravestone: “Danish citizen, Danish subject and Danish author.”

<sup>25</sup> As mentioned above, in the “Equality Decision” (*jamstillingsvedtaket*) from 1885, the expression used is “vort almindelige Skrift- og Bogsprog” (‘our usual written and book language’). Hjalmar Falk and Alf Torp used the adjective “Danish-Norwegian”, as in the titles of their books: *Dansk-norsk lydlaere* (‘Danish-Norwegian phonetics’), 1898, and *Dansk-norskens syntax* (‘Danish-Norwegian syntax’), 1900.

<sup>26</sup> According to the Oslo decision (*Oslo-vedtaket*) 1939.

<sup>27</sup> With the exception of the Bergen dialect, that in return has “eg” and “ikkje”, as in *Nynorsk*.

<sup>28</sup> For comparison: The campaign against the distribution of condoms to Norwegian soldiers in the Norwegian Brigade in Germany in 1947 collected 440,000 signatures. The campaign against the liberalisation of the abortion law in 1974 collected 610,000 signatures.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. for example Jahr (2014: 135f.): «Some of the means employed by the Riksmål supporters in their struggle were very insensitive. For instance, only a decade or two after Nazi atrocities had taken place in the country, young high-school Riksmål supporters threw school textbooks onto bonfire because they were written in Radical Bokmål, which was branded as ‘pan-Norwegian’ [samnorsk] by Riksmål advocates. The first of these book burnings occurred in 1956, the final in 1963 .... Many Riksmål supporters were not able to see that this was a totally unacceptable form of action, with unpleasant recent associations. The poet André Bjerke (1918-85), one of their ideological leaders and the founder and editor of their magazine *Ordet*, actually wrote

The parents' campaign is an interesting phenomenon. Not because there were people who thought that the Norwegianisation process had gone too far. Due to the fact that the Danish written language gradually had become Norwegianised, in particular due to the writing reforms of 1907 and 1917, it is understandable that there were different opinions as to how far the Norwegianisation should go and also in view of the social anchoring of language standardisation. The cultural dispute that went around nation and classes is well known from the 1800s. The interesting point is the following: that the *Riksmål* activists got such a strong and long-lasting impact; and that they themselves did not realise (or indeed care) that they simultaneously hurt and stigmatized people who used words and forms that the *Riksmål* activists perceived as foul and vulgar;<sup>30</sup> and that the *Riksmål* activists did not want to (or could not) understand that there are many kinds of power, not merely from the State or elected politicians but also from the market, from social status and social networks, and by obtaining a defining force in the social sphere.<sup>31</sup>

In this setting, there are many interesting issues for social research: how was the campaign organised? How did they proceed? What kind of social and professional background did the activists<sup>32</sup> have? Which networks were activated? What about contacts to publishing houses, newspaper editors, cultural institutions and political parties?<sup>33</sup> What about the finances? When key actors in the business community systematically supported publications of the *Riksmål* association such as *Frisprog* ('Free speech') and *Ordet* ('The Word'), did they only do this in support of the language policy or was this

---

enthusiastically about this deed – one of his articles carried the title 'Books as fuel for the bonfire!' ["Brennstoff til et bokbål", i *Hårdt mot hårdt*, published by Riksmålsforbundet, 1963, p. 81, 89].” – For more about the burning of books, see Kjartan Fløgstad, *Brennbart*, Oslo 2004, and more recently, the burning of books by the youth politician of the Right Party (*Høyre*), Harald Hove, in 2005, cf. later ftm.

<sup>30</sup> Jahr (2014: 134): “Riksmål supporters ... saw it as totally unacceptable that the current official Bokmål standard required their children to use forms which they had always considered ‘sloppy’, ‘ugly’ and even ‘vulgar’. Riksmål supporters could not or would not recognize that this view point implied the social denigration of speakers who used these so-called ‘vulgar’ forms in their everyday speech.” *Ibid.*, 134: “The sociolinguistic aspect of the conflict was obvious, but mostly denied by the Riksmål supporters.”

<sup>31</sup> Hence, it is problematic to refer to Norwegian linguistic history in the 18th and 19th centuries as “free language development” (*fri sprogutvikling*’).

<sup>32</sup> What kind of education and professional experience? What about knowledge of and friendship with people from other backgrounds and other social classes, and from other parts of the country? What about knowledge of the political history of our language?

<sup>33</sup> A central activist and organiser, Sofie Helene Wigert (1913-1989), came from a shipping family (née Olsen) and was herself a shipowner and married to the *Aftenposten* editor, J. S. Huitfeldt in her first marriage. She was editor of *Frisprog* (1953-1981), which was supported by key business figures who regularly advertised in *Frisprog*. She was honoured as a Knight of the Saint Olav's Order. – Another activist was Henrik Groth (1903-1983), known for his declaration that the fatherland had been subject to two fatal disasters: the Black Plague (*Svartdauden* in the 14<sup>th</sup> century) and Ivar Aasen. Groth was managing director of Cappelen publishing company (1947-1973), chairman of the Norwegian Booksellers Association and of the Norwegian Publishers Association, member of the board and later deputy chairperson of the National Theatre, referred to as “the leading publisher in the history of Norway” (alongside Harald Grieg, according to Norwegian Wikipedia ([https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henrik\\_Groth](https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henrik_Groth)), received *Fritt Ords Pris* ('free word prize') in 1977, *Riksmålsforbundets litteraturpris* ('Riksmål Society Literature Prize') in 1980, and Knight, 1st Class, of the Saint Olav's Order. – What does all this tell us about power in the form of networks and social capital? (Cf. Bourdieu.) Good topics for social scientific research?



also directed against the Labour party?<sup>34</sup> What about the power of symbols in the form of social capital, defining power and designation of social status?<sup>35</sup> And what about the rhetoric?

There are lots of interesting questions, for researchers in sociology and other social sciences. Yet, there is hardly any social scientific research on this campaign.<sup>36</sup> This is strange. As a contrast, consider all the themes about social power and covert discrimination that have been investigated thoroughly by social scientists in Norway, again and again. But not this one. We have to ask why?

It is interesting that this topic was not seen as interesting. That is in itself a challenging sociological question, for social scientists.<sup>37</sup>

Not only that: there is power in being allowed to act in peace, to act politically without becoming an issue of research, of critical and publically accessible research. The author and *Riksmål* activist Arnulf Øverland, with his rhetorical trickery, could thus safely avoid any effective correction.<sup>38</sup>

The “parents’ campaign” was allowed to steer clear of being investigated by critical research by the social sciences.<sup>39</sup> Even the burning of books, as a deliberate political action 50 years later, could pass without public reactions.<sup>40</sup> In short, they were able to perform rhetoric defining power without research-based correction. What does that mean, for us today?

## (vi) Linguistic trickery

---

<sup>34</sup> And what about the negotiations (behind closed doors) between *Riksmål* supporters and central people in the Labour party, when the campaign obtained a political impact and the leadership of the Labour party wanted to have peace about the language question (bearing in mind the upcoming elections)? Cf. Trygve Bull (1980: 250).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Bourdieu (1979) on class power in terms of designation downwards.

<sup>36</sup> All I have been able to find are works written by researchers and scholars in philology.

<sup>37</sup> Does this tell us something about the role and force of a taboo? Or about linguistic blindness or one-sided cultural formation? About narrow recruitment and narrow social experience? Or about a lack of self-critical reflection?

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Arnulf Øverland’s (1949: 11–13) curious reference to a strange letter, in *Bokmålet – et avstumpet landsmål*, commented on in the next section.

<sup>39</sup> Jahr (2014: 133): “The political right and private enterprise supported the *Riksmål* movement, private enterprise contributed to it financially, among other ways by advertising in every issue of the *Riksmål* movement’s publications *Frisprog* (Free Language) and *Ordet* (The World).”

<sup>40</sup> Cf. from Bergensavisen 12 August, 2005: “*Harald Victor Hove* [*Høgre*; *politically right*] burns *Nynorsk* books to win young voters. – By now, three commercials have been made to help the 22-year old Hove to get a seat in Norwegian Parliament. The youth candidate in fifth place campaigns against car taxes, the ban on alcohol for those under 18, and against *Nynorsk* as a secondary language at school. In one of the commercials, he throws a copy of Alf Hellevik’s *Nynorsk ordliste* [‘*Nynorsk* dictionary’] into a burning oil barrel. – “Yes, it is the yellow one. We called it the “*spynorsk mordliste*” (approximate translation ‘vommit-Norwegian murder-list’), hee hee. I am burning it to show that we want to abolish the second Norwegian language requirement. *Nynorsk* is a problem for many people who are trying to learn how to write good Norwegian, says the *Høyre* politician. The commercials are meant to impress young voters. – They will probably be shown at the cinema house in Bergen. In any case, they will be put up on my homepage, stemharald.no, that will be up and running on Monday, says Hove.” – Hove became the city councillor for schools in Bergen, delegated into this position by the ruling party, the *Høgre*. However, good rumours have it that Hove has changed over the years. Such things happen. As when Knud Blaauw, a former leader of the *Riksmål* association in Bergen, made a transition and joined the *Noregs Mållag* (The Norwegian Language Society – promoting *Nynorsk*). Bergen is diverse, in ways that people around the Oslo fjord do not always comprehend. As when the Bergen enthusiast, Sjur Holsen, went in for Bergen as the “*Nynorsk* capital” (‘*nynorskens hovedstad*’) – “Here we use *Nynorsk*, here we are different” (*De hårsåres diktatur*, 2013: 43ff). Or the arch-Bergensian, Arild Haaland, who was honorary member of the *Vestmannalaget* (the oldest association in favour of Ivar Aasen’s language), with his diploma hanging at the entrance to his university office.

That uniqueness of the Norwegian language situation lies in the step by step Norwegianisation of the Danish written language. There is nothing like it. And it is a contentious process, with tensions all along: how far should this new language be removed from Danish? Which social groups and which regions should be allowed to determine the standardization of the new language?

However, the very term “Norwegianisation” (“fornorsking”) is now seldom used: in 2014, changes of the Danish language in the Norwegian Constitution were currently referred to as “modernisation”, not as Norwegianisation. In exams at secondary school, authors who wrote in Danish, such as Ibsen, Bjørnson or Skram, are said to have been “facilitated” or “modernised”, not Norwegianised (“fornorska”), also when books of these authors are published today, the texts are said to have been “modernised”, not Norwegianised. However, also the Danes can “modernise” Danish texts written by Amalie Skram and Henrik Ibsen, or by Ludvig Holberg. The difference is that when Norwegians “modernise” Holberg and Ibsen, it is at the same time a Norwegianisation. But hardly anyone speaks of Norwegianisation in such contexts. Why? Why this avoidance of using the term “Norwegianisation”?

In his day, Arnulf Øverland fought against what he sarcastically called “down-Norwegianisation” (“nednorsking”): “And remember that 'Bokmål' is not a language but a harassment, ...this public clownery [Og husk at “bokmål” ikke er noget sprog, men en chikane ... dette offentlige klovneri]” (Øverland 1949: 51). “It is the babbling of the dummies [Det er sinkenes babel]” (Øverland 1948: 29).

In this connection, Øverland is quoting a letter to illustrate the linguistic coercion by the State and the dreadfulness of “Bokmål”. But this is not a letter *from* the State, but a letter *to* the State, written by a private (not named) person, complaining about taxes (and who apparently dislikes the State). At the same time, it is unclear how (and why) precisely Øverland came into the possession of this letter.<sup>41</sup> In short, something to grab, for a rhetorical analysis!

Lars Roar Langslet (a conservative politician and *Riksmål* activist) published a *Festschrift* for the *Riksmål* association (Riksmålsforbundet) entitled “Fighting for Norwegian culture” (“I kamp for norsk kultur”) – not “for Norwegian language”, reasonably enough, since the *Riksmål* association was established 1907 to defend a written language that was close to Danish, in reaction to the Norwegianisation movement. However, in this book Langslet refers to this curious private letter as a “public ‘paper’ ” (“et offentlig ‘skriv’ ”) and to Øverland’s rhetorical trickery as an “agitatory master piece” (“et agitatorisk mestergrep”): “After this, *Bokmål* and *Samnorsk* were equal terms for that which the *Riksmål* movement is fighting against” (Langslett 1999: 188).

Per Petterson is an author of sovereign language, and a living proof that *Riksmål* activists, with Øverland stinging from the back, were shamefully mistaken when they stamped *Bokmål* as “useless” and “vulgar”. Per Petterson writes in the *Bokmål* variety closest to the dialects and hence also closest to Nynorsk (in Norwegian: “Radikalt bokmål”). He has received numerous prizes for his books: “Språklig samlings pris” (1993), (the publishing house) *Oktober's* Prize (1996), the *Brage* Prize (2000 & 2008), *Klassenkampen's* Literature Prize (2003), Norwegian Booksellers’ Prize (2003 & 2012), Norwegian Critics’ Prize for Literature (2003 & 2008), Nordic Council’s Literature Prize (2009), (the publishing house) *Gyldendal's* Prize (2013), Independent Foreign Fiction Prize (2006), Le Prix Littéraire Européenne Madeleine Zepter (2006), Le Prix Mille Pages (2006), International IMPAX

---

<sup>41</sup> Cf. footnote 38.

Dublin Literary Award (2007), Prix des Lecteurs de Littérature Européenne (2007), New York Times 10 Best Books of the Year (2007). His novels have been translated into 50 foreign languages, his most famous novel being "Out stealing horses" (2003).

Up until 2005, the Riksmål movement was fervently trying to abolish the differentiation between so-called *main* forms (meaning forms that could be used in school text books) and *allowed* forms (allowed for all but for text books in school) in Bokmål. Their goal was clear: It must be allowed to use more linguistic forms close to Danish, for example, that all feminine forms in Norwegian (that end in *-a*) could be changed to common-gender words (ending in *-en*), e.g. *kuen* (instead of *kua* 'the cow'), *huldren* (instead of *huldra* 'fairy, forrest spirit'), *merren* (instead of *merra* 'mare'), *hurpen* (instead of *hurpa* 'hag'), *våronnen* (instead of *våronna* 'spring work'), *på fylten* (instead of *på fylla* 'being intoxicated'), *ta rotten på* (instead of *ta rotta på* 'gang up on') etc. However, this led to Bokmål getting a tremendously large amount of double forms. Ironically so, since the supporters of Bokmål with linguistic forms close to Danish have always fought for a strict norm. And they have criticised Nynorsk for being difficult due to the many optional forms (before the 2012 reform). However, after the Danish forms were set free in Bokmål in 2005, it is Bokmål that formally got a wild chaos of optional forms. For example, if you took this – admittedly – constructed Nynorsk sentence: "Ei lita jente kasta dokka si djupt nedi graset på framsida av løa der kua beita" ('a small girl threw her doll deep into the grass in front of the barn where the cows graze'); there is only one way to write this sentence in Nynorsk. How many ways for Bokmål, formally, after the opening for Danish forms in 2005? The answer is  $2^{13}$  times. That is 8,192 – eight thousand one hundred and ninety two. In short, the norm in Bokmål is now so broad that it opens the way for wild chaos. It opens the way for Bokmål emerging as two languages, i.e. a language as close to Danish as possible (called Moderate Bokmål or Riksmål) and Per Petterson's language closer to the popular dialects (called Radical Bokmål).

Hence, it is concealing when Trond Vernegg, leader of the Riksmål association, wrote about Riksmål and Bokmål in the Norwegian daily *Klassekampen* (Vernegg 2015a), as if this is just one harmonic language norm. It was never that simple and is not that simple.

There are now two paths for Bokmål: either tighten its norms, for example, opt for the consequent use of the feminine forms – such as *kua* 'the cow', *øya* 'the island', *hytta* 'the cabin' – and these forms becoming the only correct forms, or to differentiate between "*Bokmål*" and "*Bokmål close to Danish*" as two separate languages.

Moreover, it is possible to love Nynorsk and still – in good faith – pursue a politics that undermine Nynorsk. That is schizophrenic, but possible. However, if Trond Vernegg and the Riksmål association truly care about Nynorsk as they claim they do, when they state that Nynorsk is "an important part of our culture and cultural heritage and important [...] for our society" (*Klassekampen*, Vernegg 2015b), they ought to read the 2014 Ph.D. dissertation *Mellom nøytralitet og språksikring* ('Between neutrality and language protection'), written by Eli Bjørhusdal (cf. also her paper in this volume), where she lists reasons for an active protection of Nynorsk – under the premise that one sees Nynorsk as "an important part of our culture and cultural heritage and important for our society".

## At the end

And then, at the end, in the conciliatory light of an afterthought, there might be reasons to take in that all Scandinavian languages now and in the future are our languages, we who are so lucky as to grow

up in this part of the world at this time. It is all ours from Ibsen to Garborg, from the Old Norse sagas to Per Petterson, from Selma Lagerløf and H. C. Andersen to Haldor Laxness and Piet Hein and many more.

We should be thankful for that.

## References

- Balle, Nicolai Edinger, 1794: *Lærebog i den evangelisk-christelige Religion*. København.
- Bergensavisen, 12 August, 2005.
- Bjerke, André, 1963: *Hårdt mot hårdt*. Oslo.
- Bjørnhusdal, Eli 2014: *Mellom nøytralitet og språksikring*. PhD diss. University of Oslo.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 1979: *La distinction*, Paris.
- Bull, Trygve, 1980: *For å si det som det er*, Oslo.
- Faarlund, Jan Terje, 2006. *Verneverdig bokmål*. In: *Morgenbladet*, 2-8 June.
- Falk, Hjalmar and Torp, Alf, 1900: *Dansk-norskens syntax*. Kristiania.
- Feldbæk, Ole, 1998: *Danmark-Norge*, vol. 4. Oslo.
- Fjeld, Ruth Vatvedt, 2008: Quotation In: Jomisko, Anne Lise; Tommy Moum and Marianne Texmo: *Spenn Vg3*. Oslo, p. 226.
- Fløgstad, Kjartan, 2004: *Brennbart*. Oslo.
- Foucault, Michel, 1961: *Histoire de la folie*, Paris.
- Holsen, Sjur, 2013: *De hårsåres diktatur*. Bergen.
- Jahr, Ernst Håkon, 1994: *Utsyn over norsk språkhistorie*. 2nd edition. Oslo.
- Jahr, Ernst Håkon, 2014: *Language planning as a sociolinguistic experiment*. Edinburgh.
- Knudsen, Knud, 1856: *Haandbog i dansk-norsk Sproglære*. Kristiania.
- Knudsen, Knud, 1887: *Kortfattet redegjørelse for det dansk-norske målstrev*. Kristiania.
- Langslet, Lars Roar, 1999: *I kamp for norsk kultur*. Oslo.
- Pontoppidan, Erik, 1737: *Sandhed til Gudfrygtighed etc*. København.
- Rian, Øystein, 2009: 1809–14 – grunnlaget for det moderne Norden. In: *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 164-169.
- Seip, Jens Arup, 1981: *Utsikt over Norges historie, Annen del*. Oslo.
- Skirbekk, Gunnar and Gilje, Nils, 2001: *A History of Western Thought*, London/New York.
- Skirbekk, Gunnar, 2011: *Multiple Modernities. A Tale of Scandinavian Experiences*, Hong Kong.
- Sørensen, Øystein, 2001: *Norsk idéhistorie*. Oslo.
- Sørensen, Øystein, 2006: *Velkommen som ny statsborger*. Oslo.
- Torp, Alf and Falk, Hjalmar, 1898: *Dansk-norsk lydlære*. Kristiania.
- Vernegg, Trond, 2015a: *Det historiske krumspringet*. In: *Klassekampen* 21 April.
- Vernegg, Trond, 2015b: *Ut av skyttergraven*, Grepstad. In: *Klassekampen* 27 May.
- Vinje, Finn-Erik, 2004:  
<http://www.sprakradet.no/Toppmeny/Publikasjoner/Spraaknytt/Arkivet/2004/2/Svesismer>.

Weber, Max, 1966: The Theory of Social and Economic Organization, New York.

Øverland, Arnulf, 1948: Hvor ofte skal vi skifte sprog? Oslo.

Øverland, Arnulf, 1949: Bokmålet – et avstumpet landsmål. Oslo.

