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Ivar Aasen and Knud Knudsen – the Centenary and the Legacy

In the early 19th century the language situation in Norway was in many ways similar to that in Scotland. Both countries had seen their written national language vanish and the written language of a dominant neighbour take over. These dominant languages (Danish and English) were in both cases closely related to the spoken languages in Norway and Lowland Scotland respectively. The linguistic situation in Scotland has changed very little since the early 19th century. Written English dominates everywhere, and attempts to try and restore the written Scots language are few and far between. In Norway, however, the situation has changed completely in the last one hundred and fifty years. By now Danish has been replaced by two official Norwegian written standards, both of them based on spoken Norwegian, both of them products of language planning and political decisions.¹

This year is the centenary of the death of Ivar Aasen (1813-96) and last year was that of Knud Knudsen's (1812-95), the two men who more than any other are the individuals responsible for the two written standards of modern Norwegian. This article will briefly look into the lives and linguistic ideology of these two men, and finally comment upon the current language situation of Norway, said by some to be the language laboratory of Europe.

Ivar Aasen and Nynorsk

In 1814 the union between Denmark and Norway was dissolved and Norway entered a union with Sweden, but now with its own constitution and national assembly and with a need to define its national identity. The German thinkers of the

Romantic period claimed that the language was nothing less than the soul of a nation, even the justification of the existence of a nation. The fact that Danish was the written language of Norway was an obvious embarrassment to the political and cultural elite of the country, but it was not until around 1835 that a real debate took place on how to develop a truly Norwegian written language.

Inspired by this linguistic debate a young schoolteacher from Vestlandet, Ivar Aasen, wrote an article, 'Om vaart Skriftsprog' (About Our Written Language). The young Aasen here presents a programme for the study and the advancement of Norwegian dialects. Although it was not published until 1909, the little article is important because it outlines a plan that Aasen actually dedicated his life to carrying out.

Ivar Andreas Aasen was born in Ørsta, a small town on Vestlandet, the west coast of Norway, half way between Bergen and Trondheim. A peasant farmer's son, he grew up in poor circumstances but with access to a very good book collection. Although his formal education was brief, he worked as a teacher for several years, and he acquired on his own an extensive knowledge of botany and literature, but first and foremost of language and linguistics.

In the above article from 1836 Aasen disagrees with the poet Henrik Wergeland who wanted to gradually Norwegianize written Danish. Aasen also thinks it wrong to choose only one Norwegian dialect and base a written standard on this, as was suggested by the influential historian and linguist P.A. Munch. In the last paragraph he concludes:

My proposal: It is not my purpose to bring forward any single dialect. No, none of them should be the main language, which should instead be based on a comparison of all of them.

Aasen's hypothesis was that a new Norwegian language could be established based on the common elements of the various Norwegian dialects, especially those with features close to Old Norse, as these reflected a common grammatical system that many modern dialects had lost. Not only had Aasen a national

interest in ridding the nation of a foreign language, just as important for him were the social and democratic reasons for restoring a Norwegian written language. By founding a truly national language on the farmers' dialects it would help to forward this class, with which Aasen strongly identified himself.

After completing a grammar of the Sunnmøre dialect in 1839, Aasen received a grant in 1842 from *Det Kongelige Norske Videnskabers Selskab* (The Royal Norwegian Society for the Advancement of Science) in Trondheim to start a systematic research project into the dialects of Norway. This enabled Aasen to travel and study the spoken language, first in the south-western part of Norway and later in other parts of the country.

In 1848 he furnished proof of his hypothesis by publishing *Det norske Folkesprogs Grammatik* (Grammar of the Language of the Norwegian People), followed in 1850 by *Ordbog over det norske Folkesprog* (Dictionary of the Language of the Norwegian People). The grammar and the dictionary form the basis for the new norm for written Norwegian based on the country dialects. With *Prøver af Landsmaalet i Norge* (Specimens of the Landsmaal in Norway) from 1853, Aasen laid the grounds for what was to become the standard for Landsmål (from 1929 called Nynorsk, literally 'New Norwegian'). Aasen received an annual grant from the National Assembly in 1851 to continue his research. He did continue his linguistic research, but in order to establish Landsmål as an alternative to Danish, Aasen intended to prove that this new norm could be used for literature. The play or musical *Ervingen* (The Heir) from 1855 includes popular poems and songs. The best poems he wrote over the years are collected in a little book entitled *Symra* from 1863. The book reveals a learned and distinct poetic talent, and it includes poems and songs that are still enduring and popular national treasures.

The cultural elite, in Norway as elsewhere, was during the Romantic period preoccupied with the connection between the Old and the Modern World. In Norway it meant that the Norwegian farmer came into focus; his music, art and language became important. The farmer was seen as the connecting line

between the glorious past and contemporary Norway. He had escaped the cultural and linguistic corruption that the long Danish political dominance had meant for the bourgeoisie. The dialect of the farmers was therefore claimed to be the real national language of Norway. With the grammar and the dictionary Ivar Aasen had proved the linguistic connection between Old Norse and the current speech of Norway, a feat hailed as a great national achievement. The political emancipation of the farmers resulted in a strong alliance with the radical bourgeoisie, and this unlikely affiliation resulted in the political party *Venstre* (Left). The national and radical programme behind Ivar Aasen's *Landsmål* was promoted by the party, which in 1884, by a majority in the National Assembly, introduced parliamentarism, and the year after managed to have *Landsmål* recognised as an official written standard of Norwegian alongside the Danish-Norwegian standard.

Knud Knudsen and Bokmål

The language debate in 1835 had indicated two different courses to follow in order to obtain a Norwegian national language:

- 1) to reconstruct a radically new Norwegian language on the basis of the dialects and Old Norse;
- 2) to Norwegianize the Danish written language gradually.

The ideologist and practitioner behind the second course was the high school teacher Knud Knudsen. As a teacher Knudsen, like Aasen, was aware of the difficulties the students had when they attempted to write Danish, which, in spite of being closely related to Norwegian, differed in several ways from the students' spoken language. Knudsen felt there was a need for a better correspondence and consistency between spelling and pronunciation. Both Aasen and Knudsen thus stressed the democratic aspect of getting rid of Danish and establishing a written language that was closer to Norwegian speech.

Knudsen also shared Aasen's view when it came to the urgency for a national language, but unlike Aasen he supported Henrik Wergeland's idea of the gradual process of Norwegianizing written Danish.

Knud Knudsen's concern was spelling and vocabulary. As the basis for his spelling reforms he decided to use the pronunciation of Norwegian used by the educated elite in towns. He found this sociolect to be the most unifying among all the variants of Norwegian speech. It was heard in all Norwegian towns, and since it was strongly influenced by written Danish, this sociolect would be the least radical breakaway from established Danish. Furthermore, as it was the spoken language of the upper classes it had the advantage of carrying prestige – an observation that later proved to be of great importance.

Like Aasen, Knudsen was a purist and he emphasised the importance of Norwegianizing the vocabulary, i.e. of replacing the German words that have entered Norwegian through Danish with Norwegian words. Knudsen considered his main work to be the dictionary *Unorsk og norsk eller fremmedordenes Afløsning* (Un-Norwegian and Norwegian or the replacement of foreign words) from 1881.

Unlike Ivar Aasen, Knud Knudsen did not have a poetic vein and his written work is dry and dull and more or less forgotten today, as is his dictionary. Nevertheless, Knudsen was very influential with his contemporaries; he served as linguistic consultant to authors like Henrik Ibsen and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and he was listened to by the authorities. The spelling reform of 1907, the first clear and decisive step away from written Danish, was in most ways based on Knudsen's suggestions. The reform of this Dano-Norwegian language, which was now called Riksmål (from 1929 called Bokmål, literally 'Book language'), came after a period when Landsmål had been on the advance, winning support not least because its supporters could claim that Landsmål was a more national language; a very important argument in the time around the breaking up of the union between Sweden and Norway. It was felt that only by introducing Norwegian features to Riksmål could the advancement of Landsmål be

prevented. Following Knudsen's advice, the Parliament decided in 1907 that Norwegian as it was spoken by the educated classes in towns was to be the basis upon which the Riksmål was to be nationalised. Landsmål at this time was essentially still as Aasen had suggested, based upon the most archaic dialects of the Norwegian countryside.

This picture changed drastically when the authorities launched the policy of gradually trying to amalgamate the two standards. Nothing less than a revolutionary decision was taken when it was agreed that the spoken language of the working class in the populous south-eastern part of Norway should be the foundation upon which the rapprochement of Landsmål and Riksmål was to happen. This class was seen as the political, cultural and linguistic compromise between the bourgeoisie and the farmers. With the language reforms of 1917 and 1938 we observe language planning at its most intense and innovative stage. In language history it is all but unheard of to allow into a national written language the grammar and vocabulary of the working class, whose language is normally regarded as the most vulgar and socially unacceptable of all dialects and sociolects. And sure enough, there was a reaction by the bourgeoisie. After W.W. II we can see how the idea of the amalgamation of the two standards becomes more and more a political hot potato, until it is finally given up in the 1960's. Not only is the idea now aborted, but in 1981 Parliament actually made a linguistically reactionary move – seen from the perspective of language planning – when it admitted into the Bokmål standard forms of writing that had not been allowed since 1938.

A common, single written standard did not become more than an idea, but the move towards this aim changed both Bokmål and Nynorsk drastically. Nynorsk distanced itself from the previously narrow base of the archaic west-Norwegian dialects that Aasen had emphasised and Bokmål moved away from the narrow base of the upper-class sociolects that Knudsen had enforced. Both norms thus became more democratic, as they now included features from the spoken language of many more people.

Aasen and Knudsen – the Legacy

With the liberalisation of the spelling of Bokmål in 1981, this standard now reflects quite well the sociolect of the bourgeoisie of the capital of the country – a situation approaching Knudsen's original idea, and in many ways a 'normal' language situation which we recognise from most other countries. In other ways, however, the language situation in Norway is still highly unusual. What is exceptional is not the fact that the nation has two official written languages – many other countries have two or more official languages. The unusual case of Norway is that there are two official languages that are very similar indeed and that there is a high incidence of alternative spelling forms within each of the two norms. These double forms arose as products of the attempt to amalgamate the two norms. Vocabulary and structural and grammatical features that approached the other language standard had gradually been introduced and this has left both standards unstable and difficult to produce an overview of. It is not an easy task for students and teachers to remember what is allowed and what is not allowed in writing, especially when at the upper secondary level the students have to learn to write in both standards. Both modern Bokmål and modern Nynorsk are in this respect very different from Ivar Aasen's intention when he insisted that "there should only be one form of the language".

A close similarity between the spoken and the written language is normally regarded beneficial to the users of the language, and a positive side to the linguistic situation in Norway is that it gives the users of both forms of Norwegian the opportunity to utilise the leeway in the norms in order to write fairly close to their own dialect. Another plus is that it has made Norwegians very aware of language in general and that it has created a higher level of tolerance to language varieties than is found in most other countries. When seen from another perspective, however, one could claim that Norwegians are forced to accept linguistic varieties because they do not enjoy the luxury of a fixed linguistic standard. Whatever the point of view, it is a fact that the relatively high degree of dialectal

differences seems to survive much better in Norway than in Denmark and Sweden and that there is a much more liberal attitude towards the use of dialects. One of the reasons for this is obviously that Ivar Aasen, in his campaign, managed to establish a certain status for the dialects, founding a written language on them and proving that they are directly descending from Old Norse (and therefore very Norwegian); thus the dialects are culturally acceptable and are not thought of as degenerated forms of the current written language – a very usual assumption elsewhere.

The two official languages of Norway must both be considered as Norwegian languages, or rather as two written varieties of one national Norwegian language. Though one of the written standards, Nynorsk, can claim to have sprung from a more pure Norwegian source, the national issue is not any longer felt to be a crucial argument in favour of this form. As an innovation that arose from the mind of one individual and became a fully-fledged national language, the Nynorsk standard is often mentioned as a linguistically unusual case. Nynorsk, however, is not exceptional. V.U. Hammershaimb's Faroese written standard is parallel in time and in method to Ivar Aasen's work, and both are part of a great international movement that saw the rise of national languages elsewhere in Europe, e.g. in Finland and in the Balkans. The development of both Nynorsk and Bokmål are results of the European national and democratic movement of the 19th century. In some ways, however, the rise of Bokmål is more unusual than that of Nynorsk. There are no obvious parallels to the case where a foreign written standard becomes a nation's dominant language through a planned and gradual hybridisation with the native spoken language.

The Sami language is an old native language with a minority status within Norway. Is Nynorsk in a similar minority language situation? As we have already stated, the best way to describe the linguistic situation in Norway is to say that there are two written varieties of the one national Norwegian language, and thus there is little logic in characterising one group of the Norwegian speakers as belonging to a linguistic minority.

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Nynorsk cannot easily be classified as a minority language in other respects either. As a common denominator of Norwegian dialects, the Nynorsk standard is closer to the spoken language of what may be the majority of Norwegians, in spite of the fact that most people choose not to write Nynorsk. It is useful to bear in mind that Nynorsk is basically a written standard – very few people speak normalised Nynorsk. Instead, users of Nynorsk will nowadays mostly speak their dialects. Most minority languages will be linked to an ethnic group. The Sami language is part of a cultural identity that constitutes the Sami people, the Basque language is part of a Basque ethnicity etc. This is in many ways the strength of these minority languages, since the fight for ethnic survival for such a group will be linked to a fight for their language. Since, however, Nynorsk and Bokmål in principle reflect the same spoken Norwegian, they are without ethnic bases within Norway, and Nynorsk, the smaller of the two, therefore does not have the backing of a clearly defined and unifying ethnic identity.

There is a geographically determined core area in which Nynorsk is anchored. As the percentage of Nynorsk-users has dropped, this area has shrunk and is now basically Vestlandet and the western, mountainous part of Østlandet – the area where Ivar Aasen found the most conservative and purest Norwegian dialects and which therefore gave most features to the written standard he set up. In the towns in Vestlandet, though, there is very little use of Nynorsk.

As Bokmål and Nynorsk both reflect spoken Norwegian, Nynorsk in principle draws its recruits from the same people as Bokmål. What makes people choose to write Bokmål or Nynorsk depends on several factors, the most important being which of the two standards the individual has learnt as his or her main language at school – a school board decision based on the choice of the majority of the parents within a school catchment area. Sometimes his or her position in society may influence an individual's choice of language standard. If you work in business you are likely to be more or less pressurised to use Bokmål, but you may also be a user of Bokmål who happens to work for the local authority in an area where the

language of administration is Nynorsk. Some people will use Bokmål and Nynorsk in different contexts, but because of the pressure from the dominating Bokmål there is a tendency for many to drift from Nynorsk to Bokmål as their personal language standard.

Even though it is not an obvious minority language, Nynorsk, however, has many of the problems linked to minority languages. There are familiar problems of lack of text books (for further education), under-representation in the mass media and in general official life, etc. Still, as one of the two official written standards of Norwegian, Nynorsk enjoys a legal support that secures it a certain space in official life.

Bokmål and Nynorsk are legally equal in all official administration (though in practice Bokmål dominates greatly). School textbooks for primary education are not officially accepted unless they are published in both Bokmål and Nynorsk at the same time and at the same price, and in state broadcasting 25% of the programmes are to be in Nynorsk.

With a growing economic liberalism Nynorsk now faces a more difficult period. The tendency is clear, e.g. with the opening up of the air waves to commercial enterprise, the new privately owned television stations hardly use Nynorsk at all.

Who Won - Ivar Aasen or Knud Knudsen?

There is no doubt that Ivar Aasen is by far the best known and celebrated of the two. The centenary in 1995 of the death of Knud Knudsen was not much noticed outside academic circles in Norway, while this year's centenary of the death of Ivar Aasen is quite different, with a number of cultural events, conferences, publications and with official support for what has been named the Year of Ivar Aasen. The reason for this is not only the fact that Aasen clearly is the more significant linguist of the two, but, more importantly, that while Knudsen merely helped to revise a language step by step, Aasen single-handedly created a brand new written standard. Still, the Bokmål that Knudsen helped to form now dominates most areas of Norwegian society. The support for Nynorsk reached a

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peak in 1943 when more than one third of all the primary schools in Norway had chosen Nynorsk as their main written standard. The centralisation and depopulation of the countryside since then are the main factors behind a sharp fall in the number of users of Nynorsk, and today c. 17% of the primary schools have chosen to use Nynorsk. This figure now seems to have stabilised, but the domination of Bokmål is striking, especially in mass media and in business.

A crude focus on figures, however, may hide the fact that there has been a tremendous inner growth in the Nynorsk standard. Aasen himself stressed the importance of developing the vocabulary so that it could be used in all areas of social life. Today Nynorsk is used in more social contexts than ever before, covering all areas of life, from philosophy and politics to nuclear physics and love letters.

Looking at user-statistics for the two norms may also make us forget the influence Bokmål and Nynorsk has had on each other's development. While the success of the latter at the beginning of this century rapidly pulled Bokmål, in a defensive move, in a more Norwegian direction, the domination of Bokmål has strongly influenced Nynorsk, especially in the second half of this century. One can say that this again followed Knudsen's intentions, as he had hoped that his own Dano-Norwegian and Aasen's Norwegian-Norwegian standards would reach the same goal, namely one Norwegian written language.

Although the authorities through most of this century have been pushing for a fusion of the two written standards, this is not likely to happen in the foreseeable future. Whether or not it ever happens, the language situation in Norway will remain complex and linguistically interesting, and Ivar Aasen's and Knud Knudsen's efforts to create a Norwegian written language will certainly still be felt.

Note

1. For a comparison of the language situation in Norway and in Scotland, see Harry Watson, 'Scots and Nynorsk:

Minority Languages?' in Blom, Graves, Kruse and Thomsen, eds., *Minority Languages – The Scandinavian Experience*, (Oslo, 1992).