

100 years of language planning in Norway

1. Introduction

This paper offers a synoptical overview of public language planning in Norway during the last century and a description of today's situation in Norwegian language planning and language standardisation. The starting point is the observation that Norway represents a marginal position in European language planning tradition. The country has no official standard variety of spoken Norwegian, and two separate but closely related standards of written Norwegian.

Norway's tradition of public language planning and standardisation goes back more than a hundred years. The two parallel written standards – Norwegian Nynorsk (NN, originally based on spoken Norwegian) and Norwegian Bokmål (NB, originally based on written Danish) – are both relatively young, and had their first official spelling reforms in 1901 (NN) and 1907 (NB) respectively. The year 2017 represented the centennial for the first common spelling reform for these two written standards.

2. The 1917 spelling reform

The 1917 spelling reform was the starting point for the implementation of the long-term goal of Norwegian language planning in the 20th century: to fuse the two written standards into one. The common ground for these two standards was defined as spoken Norwegian in all its dialect diversity. The 1917 spelling reform was to be sanctioned by the Norwegian Parliament, and both general principles of language planning and specific details of the suggested spellings of words were debated on a very detailed level by the members of Parliament. In the end, the government had to threaten to resign in order to get a majority of votes in favour of the reform. However, the new spelling was quite popular with the public from the start, and today the 1917 spelling reform is considered a huge success for Norwegian language planning.

3. The comprehensive reforms of the 20th century

The 1917 spelling reform was followed by two comprehensive reforms, the first one in 1938 and the second one in 1959. Both of these reforms had as their overall goal a closer fusion of NN and NB on the basis of spoken Norwegian. To meet

this goal, a two-level hierarchy of spelling was introduced in the 1938 reform, for both NN and NB. The main spelling variants were compulsory for public administration and teachers in school, whereas the subordinate forms (in brackets) were allowable for pupils in school and the general public. For the language planners, these subordinate forms represented a waiting room for spellings which were on their way in or on their way out of the two written standards. The subordinate forms on their way *in* were typically forms common to both NB and NN, or forms with broad representation in spoken Norwegian. Figure 1 demonstrates the system and the way it came to be expressed in prescriptive dictionaries of written Norwegian.

<p><i>berre</i> [<i>bare</i>] adv. – ‘only’ <i>nokon</i> [<i>noen</i>] det. – ‘somebody’ <i>vera, vere</i> v. – ‘to be’ <i>skole, skule</i> m., ‘school’ <i>koma, kome, [komma, komme]</i> v. ‘to come’</p>

Fig. 1: The two level system of the 1938 spelling reform (letters in red represent morphologically based variants, letters in green represent phonologically based variants)

The two-level system was difficult for language users to learn, and equally difficult to master consistently. What made the system even more difficult was that the variants were also found in compounds. During the 1950s and 1960s, the 1938 spelling reform met with huge protests. These protests came particularly from parents who wanted their children to encounter traditional (‘conservative’) Norwegian Bokmål-spellings in the school books, and not to be exposed to the new common forms. Campaigns where parents were encouraged to correct the children’s school books by overwriting them in hand became quite widespread, and 1938-forms like *dyra* (‘animals’) and *dokka* (‘doll’) (common to both NN and NB) were corrected to the traditional NB-forms *dyrene* and *dukken*.

4. The Norwegian Language Council (1972-2004)

After years of public debates on Norwegian language politics and language planning, the Norwegian Parliament in 1972 decided to establish the Norwegian Language Council (NLC). The Council was set up with an advisory board that had broad representation from both non-government language organisations and academics from Norwegian universities. NLC was one of several political initiatives taken by the Norwegian parliament in the early 1970s to end the fierce language debate in Norway at the time, and to seek consensus in the field of language politics and language planning.

The long-term political goal of eventual fusion of the two written standards of Norwegian was in principle maintained during the last 30 years of the 20th Century. In practice, however, this policy was abandoned during the 1980s, when a lot of traditional NB-spellings and also some traditional NN-spellings were integrated into the written standards again. As a result, the two standards contained even more spelling variants than earlier.

5. The Language Council of Norway (2005 - today) and language planning in the 21st Century

The long term goal of fusion of Norwegian Nynorsk and Norwegian Bokmål was officially abandoned in 2002. In 2005, a new Language Council of Norway – a governmental expert body under the Norwegian Ministry of Church and Culture – replaced the old Language Council. The Language Council of Norway is not a research institution, but has a broad range of tasks in the field of language politics, including language in the Norwegian public sector, in schools, in higher education, and in the private sector and business. The council works with lexicography, terminology, plain language etc., and also authorises dictionaries for school use and makes minor spelling changes in NB and NN.

In 2005 Norwegian Bokmål went through a comprehensive spelling reform, and the two-level hierarchy adopted in 1938 was abolished. Norwegian Nynorsk was reformed in 2012, and the two-level system was also removed from this standard. The methodology used in the 2012 reform was new to public Norwegian language planning. The board of experts who planned the reform did not only include learned scholars from the field of Norwegian linguistics, but also members representing schools and the media. Due to extensive digitisation initiatives in Norway in the early years of the new millenium, the group had access to huge digital text corpora and digitised slip archives from the Norwegian language collections at the University of Oslo. These huge quantities of empirical data formed the basis of a reform where the overall goal was to reduce spelling variants. In addition, the process included consecutive public response, both during the working process of the expert board and in an extensive public hearing on the final recommendation.

The 2005 Norwegian Bokmål standard and the 2012 Norwegian Nynorsk standard still include spelling variants of words. This is illustrated in figure 2.

The entry circled in red on Figure 2, the screenshot of the public digital Norwegian Bokmål dictionary (www.ordbok.uib.no), shows the two equal spellings of the word *milk* in Norwegian Bokmål. The etymology field in brackets below the entry head shows that the form *mjolk* originates from Old Norse, and that the form *melk* is a loan from Danish.

Every time the spelling of a word is changed by the Language Council of Norway, this is immediately reflected in these prescriptive digital dictionaries.

The two standards of written Norwegian are intended to last for at least one to two generations of language users, but a long-term goal of the standardisation work is to reduce the number of spelling variants.

Bokmålsordboka | Nynorskordboka

melk Bokmål Begge Nynorsk

Bokmålsordboka

Oppslagsord Ordbokartikkel

melk
mjolk

melk m1, f1; el mjolk m1, f1
(norront mjolk; dansk melk)

1 gulhvit næringsrik væske som blir skilt ut av melkekjertlene hos hunn pattedyr
drikke melk til maten / melka har skilt seg / homogenisert, pasteurisert melk, skummetmelk / helmelk, kjememelk, kulturmilk, lettmelk / kua gir mye, lite melk / geitemelk, kumelk, morsmelk

2 bot. saft eller væske som planteorgan(isme) skiller ut, og som ligner på melk (1)
kokosmelk, løvetannmelk

Fig. 2: The dictionary entry *melk/mjolk* ‘milk’ (Norwegian Bokmål) in the online version of Bokmålsordboka/Nynorskordboka (prescriptive digital dictionaries of BN and NN, co-owned by the Language Council of Norway and the University of Bergen)

The main standardisation principles for both Norwegian Bokmål and Norwegian Nynorsk in today’s Norwegian language planning include stability, tradition, uniformity and user friendliness in addition to usage (based on the 120-year literary tradition of each of the two standards). For Norwegian Nynorsk, forms that are widespread in spoken Norwegian should have priority. All extensive changes to the standards on a system level have to be approved and sanctioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Church and Culture.

6. Final remarks

Language planning and language standardisation is of huge public interest in Norway and has been an area of public debate during the whole history of the two standards of written Norwegian. No standard of spoken Norwegian is officially sanctioned, and Norway still has a wide range of dialects. The high

status of Norwegian dialects is reflected in the standardisation principle for Norwegian Nynorsk spelling that favours forms which are widespread in spoken Norwegian. Today, the two written standards of Norwegian have their own separate standardisation, and the long-term goal of Norwegian language politics is no longer the fusion of the two standards into one.

Bibliographical information

This text was first published in the book:

Gerhard Stickel (ed.) (2018): National language institutions and national languages. Contributions to the EFNIL Conference 2017 in Mannheim. Budapest: Research Institute for Linguistics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences. [299 pages.]

The electronic PDF version of the text is accessible through the EFNIL website at:

<http://www.efnil.org>