

Dialectical Development and Comparison: a Case Study of Norwegian in the U.S. and Norway

Introduction

The current linguistic climate in Norway makes understanding how language ideologies have functioned within Norwegian-speaking communities highly relevant to today. With levels of immigration to Norway higher than ever in the past forty years, new communities of minority-background Norwegian speakers emerge at a fast pace. What we have seen is pushback against these varieties of Norwegian, and at times the rejection that these are even legitimate Norwegian dialects. Telling the story of how Norwegian evolved in the United States and in Norway provides two examples where Norwegian changed over time due to natural linguistic processes and helps to normalize the modern linguistic processes that Norwegian is experiencing.

When Norwegian emigrants settled in America, there was frequent dialect mixing as people were exposed to dialects they had never encountered before, the effect of which was to “wipe out isolation and thereby to upset the delicate balance of dialect against dialect” (Haugen 337). The Norway they left behind was undergoing a major language transformation, in which dialects became a source of local pride. What ensued was dialectical change that became separate, but parallel to the changes going on in Norway. Because we have this clear diverging of paths: those who emigrated and those who remained, we can trace language development and change in these two domains. Though there are very few heritage Norwegian speakers left today, the time that Norwegian was used in America speaks to how these paths can be so juxtaposed and yet parallel due to differing linguistic pressures. We can make note of how dialect and identity are related, and how Norwegian has shifted and might continue to shift in the future. With this in mind, my research can be split into two portions: a historical cross-comparison of Norwegian dialectal features found in the Midwest and Norway, primarily during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and a sociolinguistic analysis of the surrounding forces upon these dialects and their effect on identity and culture within these groups.

Study

My research will focus on the following questions to guide my investigation:

1. What does cross-comparison of previous research tell us about how Norwegian dialects both in the U.S. and in Norway evolved since the 19th century?
 - a. What evidence of local regional pride in Norway or Norwegian-American identity as an influence do the data show?
2. What forces were driving dialectical change in Norway versus in the United States, and how did they differ?
3. How can we use this information to combat language discrimination, to provide information of future developments, and to validate current language forms found in Norway?

The first major source for my research will be Einar Haugen's seminal work *The Norwegian Language in America: a Study in Bilingual Behavior* (1953), which details the linguistic landscape and dialect distribution of Norwegian in the U.S. and Norway (Haugen 339), which includes North and West as overarching categories, with more specific subcategories. Because there are likely hundreds of distinct dialects in Norwegian, this condensed overview helps to group the dialects for more concise analysis. The second grouping for the categorization of modern Norwegian is taken from *Store norske leksikon*.¹ Modern Norwegian dialects fall into four main groups: *østnorsk* "Eastern Norwegian", *vestnorsk* "Western Norwegian", *trøndersk* "Trondheim Norwegian", and *nordnorsk* "Northern Norwegian" (Skjekkeland et al. 2021). My linguistic cross-comparison will compare late 19th and early 20th century Norwegian in the U.S. to Norwegian in Norway, and then compare these varieties, i.e. more so the native Norwegian dialects due to the moribund state of American Norwegian varieties, to modern Norwegian.

Speaking more specifically about exactly which qualities I will employ to conduct my analysis, I have chosen three main dialect distinguishers, found both in the Norwegian and in the American Norwegian samples. These qualities include:

- The presence of *rulle-r* vs. *skarre-r* (the rolled, alveolar [r] versus the uvular [R])
- Personal pronoun use (for example, *jeg* vs. *eg* vs. *æ*, etc.)
- Substitution of the /hv/ sound for /kv/ or /k/ (for example, *hva* vs. *ka* meaning "what")

These distinguishers provide a good basis for comparison because they are easily identifiable and vary according to dialect. Beyond these phonological (sound-based) features, I will include lexical (word-based) features of language in my analysis. Setting these standards in groupings and dialectical features will allow me to have a baseline for my comparative analysis.

Other sources for my analysis of American Norwegian include *Germanic Heritage Languages in North America: Acquisition, Attrition and Change* (2015) by Janne Johannessen and Joe Salmons, and Haugen's works *Norsk i Amerika* (1975) and "A Language Survey That Failed: Seip and Selmer" (1992).

For my sociolinguistic analysis, I will employ the use of the Corpus of American Nordic Speech (CANS, Johannessen 2015)², which contains original recordings and transcriptions of Norwegian and Swedish American respondents recorded between 1931 and 2016. This corpus is a readily available, searchable database that is fully processed and transcribed, thus making it easy to begin research with. Seeing as there is a wide timespan that can track respondents' perceptions of their own dialects, this source is extremely valuable. Related oral history projects conducted by Odd Lovoll and Terje Joranger in 1995 on Norwegian heritage speakers produced a variety of recordings which have recently been submitted to the Norwegian-American Historical Association (NAHA) archives. These recordings have largely yet to be transcribed or processed, and I would be honored to include them in my project, such that they can be made more widely

¹ Taken from https://snl.no/dialekter_i_Norge.

² Available to the public here: <https://tekstlab.uio.no/glossa2/cans3>.

available. Joranger's project is especially relevant, since it is entirely devoted to dialect samples. Including these new materials in my project would ensure that the synthesis I produce is original and includes new cross-comparisons. Comparing these recollections to the ones in the corpus will allow me to have a variety of enriching sources on sociolinguistic perceptions of Norwegian Americans. Being aware of the subjectivity in documents and testimonies of memory, the materials here will be examined with an especially critical lens. That being said, the recordings capture the narrative of what these people believe and what their perceptions are.

On the other hand, I have more sources that will illuminate the situation of dialects in Norway without consideration of American Norwegian, necessary for cross-comparison. Among these, *Language Planning as a Sociolinguistic Experiment: the Case of Modern Norwegian* (2014) by Ernst Håkon Jahr is my main source. This book examines, chronologically, the development of Norwegian dialects, starting in the early 19th century. This information will help me line up what I gather about American Norwegian to Norwegian dialects found within Norway. In order to ascertain a source that compares dialects in modern Norwegian, I employed a website with data gathered by the faculty at Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet (NTNU), which has a database of dialect speakers from all around Norway reading the same text in their respective dialects.³ This database allows us to examine dialectical groupings on a map and hear real samples of modern dialects gathered in the early 2000's. From a more sociolinguistic lens, Charlotte Goosken's "How Well Can Norwegians Identify Their Dialects?" (2005) gives us information about modern dialectical perceptions in Norway.

Preparation

My interest in this project stems from my previous work at NAHA, where I have done archival work and research for the past year. During the summer of 2021, I compiled a primary source guide aimed at Minnesotan students exploring the life and work of Norwegian-American author, O. E. Rølvaag.⁴ This project and subsequent archival work conducted through NAHA gave me an opportunity to examine some primary sources, such as original correspondence and documentation that paints an intimate picture of many aspects of the lives of Norwegian Americans.

As a linguistics individual major, I have an interest in the linguistic phenomena associated with American Norwegian. I have also conducted directed undergraduate research in linguistics with Dr. Kari Lie Dorer, in which I examined the Norwegian Multiethnolect (NMET). NMET is a speaking style often employed by minority-background youth in urban areas in Norway. In this research, I was able to analyze corpus data containing features of NMET and geographically map its use, as well as examining the demographics of the speakers who used it. This research made me keenly aware of the effects of language discrimination in Norway.

I also conducted research for an internship under Dr. Jill Watson, in which fellow students aided me in reading through popular news sources in the fall of 2020, with a focus on

³ Available here: <http://www.hf.ntnu.no/nos/>.

⁴ Available at <https://naha.stolaf.edu/o-e-rolvaag-resource-guide/>.

examining how the media portrayed BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) groups and individuals. Through this analysis, we were able to break down the mechanisms used by the media to discuss BIPOC and how these processes related to language ideologies and the perception of these groups.

From this previous research experience, I built a new research topic that would allow me to continue learning about Norwegian-American history, while bringing in a linguistic lens such as the one I employed in my NMET and language in media research. The most rewarding part of the Rølvaag project was the ability to make this information more widely accessible to the public via the internet. I would love to be able to repeat this such that those with interest in Norwegian would be able to learn more about its history, diversity, and modern relevance. Because of my background in historical and sociolinguistics, I feel I come equipped with the necessary tools to dig into such a robust project regarding the history of Norwegian.

Format

This project would commence in the beginning of June 2022 and conclude in mid-late July 2022. This would be a project conducted and synthesized in the summer in order to be revised and completed by the presentation in spring 2023. The stipend would go primarily towards supporting my housing to live in Northfield during the summer, in order to have access to the archival materials through NAHA and the special collections materials through the St. Olaf Libraries. Dr. Nora Vosburg, who will be overseeing the project, also lives in Northfield, and would be accessible to me. Other funding would go to paying myself for the research and buying any materials (books, website materials and access, etc.) that might be needed to complete the project.

The final format of the project would be a 40-50 page research paper with an accompanying interactive website, which would present similar information in a more digestible format. It would allow users to navigate through different sections and discover more about their particular interests. I would also like to create a map where users could click on different parts of Norway and the U.S. to see how dialects changed in these areas over time. I have met with DiSCO workers to confirm that there will be tech support available during the summer that could help me with this goal. My presentation in the spring of 2023 would be a complete overview of my findings, including information from the research paper as well as a demonstration of the accompanying website.

Significance

Although this project does not focus solely on Norway, it draws heavily on the linguistic context of Norway and seeks to analyze dialectical change with the goal of applying this information to today. This story heavily involves language discrimination, something that is pertinent in Norway, especially with the rise of new waves of immigration from countries in the Middle East and North Africa. If we know more about dialectical change and how it has worked in the past, we can apply these principles to issues of current dialectical change and legitimacy,

both in our community and the greater Norwegian one. My goal is to make this information about linguistic change more widely available to the public in an effort to spread awareness about dialectal shift as a naturally occurring linguistic process. If the Norwegian public can see that Norwegian has changed before, they will be able to conclude that it can change again. It is worth noting that both of the groups in this research were White and Christian, and that due to racial bias, these newer groups are less likely to be considered with the same legitimacy as the older ones are. However, exploring the long-term implications of linguistic bias and dialect change can inform how to best legitimize modern varieties of Norwegian not yet treated with the same respect and status as other Norwegian dialects.

Bibliography

- Almberg, Jørn, and Kristian Skarbø. "Nordavinden Og Sola." Nordavinden og sola: Opptak og transkripsjoner av norske dialekter, <https://www.hf.ntnu.no/nos/>. (Accessed April 6, 2022).
- Gooskens, Charlotte. "How Well Can Norwegians Identify Their Dialects?" *Nordic Journal of Linguistics*, vol. 28, no. 1, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 37–60, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0332586505001319>.
- Haugen, Einar. "A Language Survey That Failed: Seip and Selmer." *American Speech*, vol. 67, no. 3, University of Alabama Press, 1992, pp. 330–36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/455572>.
- Haugen, Einar. *Norsk i Amerika*. 2. utgave., Cappelen, 1975.
- Haugen, Einar. *The Norwegian Language in America: a Study in Bilingual Behavior*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953.
- Jahr, Ernst Håkon. *Language Planning as a Sociolinguistic Experiment: the Case of Modern Norwegian*. Edinburgh University Press, 2014.
- Johannessen, Janne Bondi. *The Corpus of American Norwegian Speech (CANS)*. Linköping University Electronic Press, 2015.
- Johannessen, Janne Bondi, and Joe Salmons. *Germanic Heritage Languages in North America: Acquisition, Attrition and Change*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015.
- Joranger, Terje Mikael Hasle, "Dialect samples interviews, 1995," *Norwegian-American Historical Association*, <https://naha.omeka.net/items/show/16106>. (Accessed April 6, 2022).
- Lovoll, Odd S., 1934- and Christianson, Peter C., "Peter C. Christianson interview, 1995," *Norwegian-American Historical Association*, <https://naha.omeka.net/items/show/15590>. (Accessed April 6, 2022).
- Skjekkeland, Martin, and Kjell Venås. "Dialekter i Norge." Store norske leksikon, November 22, 2021. https://snl.no/dialekter_i_Norge. (Accessed April 6, 2022).