

# #227: LANGUAGE IN NORWAY

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## INTRODUCTION

The Norwegian language is a bit more complex than one might think. Perhaps the most surprising thing a foreign student learns about the Norwegian language is that there are two of them. Despite having just 5 million people Norway has two written forms of its own language, plus dozens of spoken dialects. Some Norwegians even claim it is hard for them to understand certain dialects of their own language and although political and social debates heat up every so often, the country has learned to adapt. How did it all start?

## HISTORY

Norway's unique language situation is a product of its unique history. Back in the time of the Vikings, (approximately 800 – 1100 AD) Norwegians, Swedes and Danes all spoke a common language, which we now call Old Norse. Presumably there was a good deal of variation in the spoken language, but people from different regions could likely understand each other without great difficulty. Literacy was not widespread among common people, but those who could read and write did so in a system that was more or less uniform.

A little later, in the late 1300s, the kingdom of Norway entered into an unequal "union" with Denmark that would last until 1814. Copenhagen became the capital of the new kingdom while Danish standards (and Danish officials) came to dominate Norwegian society at all levels. Norwegians learned to write their language according to Danish rules, although spoken Norwegian continued to evolve relatively unaffected, especially in the country's many isolated villages, valleys and fjords.

## BOKMÅL

A gradual evolution of the language began to take place in the early 1800s. Knud Knudsen (1812-1895) was the main proponent for gradually replacing the Danish spelling, grammar and vocabulary with Norwegian variations. Knudsen pushed to replace written Danish with Norwegian. Most of the Danish vocabulary was left undisturbed, but the words were spelled to match with their Norwegian urban pronunciations and given a different grammar. A type of Dano-Norwegian language evolved, first called *Riksmål*, or Official Language, and later named *Bokmål* in 1929, or Book Language. Bokmål is the official name of the most common dialect used within and outside of Norway today. Prominent writers of the time, such as Henrik Ibsen and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, adopted this modified language in their works, and did much to propagate its rapid acceptance throughout the country.



## NYNORSK



Ivar Aasen, 1891

Around this same time interest in political independence began to rise, so did interest in linguistic independence and the desire for an original Norwegian language. Beginning in the 1840s, a self-taught linguist named Ivar Aasen traveled around Norway, collecting information about the country's many rural dialects. Because of Norway's unique geography, he found many isolated dialects that had preserved words and grammatical forms as old as the

Viking age. Aasen used his familiarity with his own dialect of Sunnmøre as a starting point, and was then able to identify common elements and patterns from the various dialects. Over the course of many years, Aasen assembled a new vocabulary and grammar he called *Landsmaal*, meaning "country language." He developed an entire language system based on his research and presented the language in a grammar review in 1848 and a dictionary in 1850. Later, in the 1930s, the new/old language would be renamed *Nynorsk*, or New Norwegian.

Aasen was the right man for his time. In 1814, Norway had ratified its own constitution, but political circumstances forced the new nation to join a new union, this time with Sweden. Newly, but not fully independent, Norwegians began to unify as never before, and people everywhere became interested in Norwegian folk culture, an era called the Norwegian Romantic Nationalist Movement. Composers, playwrights and poets began to turn their attention to rural culture, which was seen as less polluted by foreign influence; people in the cities began learning folk dances, the *bunad* became a national icon, and books of folk tales became best-sellers.

## THE LANGUAGE DEBATE

Many people, especially in Western Norway, enthusiastically embraced the new written language. Others thought the idea was impractical, and felt that the Danish form of the written language, Bokmål should be the official language because of the intellectual, commercial and historical connections to Denmark, which had always been the more prominent country. The language question became a matter of intense political and social debate. Supporters of each language fought bitterly against each other (and often, amongst themselves) during the late 19th and early to mid-20th century, with the debate sometimes boiling over into physical violence. There was even a movement to merge the two written norms into one, called *samnorsk* (loosely, "unified Norwegian"), which was the catalyst of some of the bitterest arguments over language.

Each written norm has changed a great deal over time. Nynorsk, which had originally been conceived as an academic experiment, was over time reformed to be more usable by the general population. Proponents of Bokmål also made many compromises, gradually embracing spellings that more reasonably reflected the way common people spoke. New Norwegian reached its height of acceptance during World War II, when 34% of the population claimed it as their native tongue. That number declined quickly, however, and since the 1960s only about 15% of the population continued to use Nynorsk as their native tongue.

## TODAY

Today, Bokmål is the dominant Norwegian language in Norway. Approximately 85% of Norwegians speak and write Bokmål including foreigners and students abroad who study the Norwegian language. Both forms have equal status before the law; local governments get to decide to use Bokmål, Nynorsk or take a neutral approach; and

**HOW DIFFERENT ARE BOKMÅL AND NYNORSK?** Here are a couple of simple texts comparing the two side-by-side:

**Bokmål:** Jeg kommer fra Norge og jeg heter Lars.  
*I come from Norway and my name is Lars.*

**Nynorsk:** Eg kjem frå Noreg og eg heiter Lars.  
*I come from Norway and my name is Lars.*

Bokmål	Nynorsk	English Meaning
Jeg	Eg	I
kommer	kjem	come
fra	frå	from
Norge	Noreg	Norway
og	og	and
jeg	eg	I
heter	heiter	am called
Lars	Lars	Lars

while students receive most of their instruction in one version of the language, they are also required to study the other. NRK broadcasts in both forms, plus a myriad of dialects, while newspapers and websites frequently publish content in both of them as well. Like most effective compromises, the current status of the Norwegian language does not satisfy everyone. Today only about 10% of Norwegians use Nynorsk as their primary written language, but its adherents continue to advocate for it passionately. On the other hand, in many parts of the country (especially Eastern Norway, where Bokmål is very close to the spoken dialect) some students resent being made to study Nynorsk, which seems almost foreign to them.

However, times are shifting, states Norway's *Morgenbladet* Newspaper (2013), "Nynorsk is becoming increasingly popular in bigger cities", calling it an "urban elite lingo." It takes a while to shift a population and their language and it seems as though Bokmål will continue to thrive in Norway as the language of the majority. The two languages are closely related, so that each group is able to understand and communicate with one another—a task not quite so simple for foreign students of Norwegian, who often wonder if they have landed in the wrong country when confronted with New Norwegian.

Regulating the use of Nynorsk and Bokmål falls on the shoulders of the Language Council of Norway, that is appointed by the Minister of Culture. This group works to foster tolerance and respect between the two official tongues as well as increasing public knowledge of the Norwegian language. Although English is considered the most

prominent foreign language in Norway, (followed by German) the Language Council of Norway's goal is, "that the Norwegian language should be used in all parts of society into the future, and that it should not be forced out by English." ([www.sprakradet.no](http://www.sprakradet.no))

## SAMI LANGUAGE

The history of the Sami language is also quite complex. There are approximately ten different Sami languages in existence covering areas of Northern Norway, Finland, Sweden and Northern Russia. Many people categorize Sami as one language but because of the secluded northern regions that hold the Sami population, various dialects were formed therefore shaping different subset languages. The Sami languages are a distant relative of the Uralic language family that derives from parts of Eastern and Northern Europe as well as North Asia. Today about 20,000 people in Norway claim Sami as their mother tongue. Sami attained equal status with Bokmål and Nynorsk in the northern counties of Troms and Finnmark in the late 1980's. Today, the Sami language is established as an official language alongside Norwegian in the North-Norwegian districts of Kárášjohka-Karasjok, Guovdageaidnu-Kautokeino, Unjárga-Nesseby, Porsanger and Deatnu-Tana and Gáivuotna-Kåfjord. Article 110a in the Norwegian Constitution states, "It is the responsibility of the authorities of the State to create conditions enabling the Sami people to preserve and develop its language, culture and way of life."

## WHO? WHAT? WHERE?

American students of Norwegian are typically trained in bokmål, the written form of Norwegian that is based on Danish. In their class they learn to ask questions starting with *hvem*, *hva* and *hvor* - who, what and where, respectively. In Norway's many dialects, even these basic words can vary greatly. Here's a brief overview of how these words vary across Norway.

Hvem	Hva	Hvor	District
kem	ka	kor	Hordland
køm	kæ	kær	Dovre, Oppland
kvæ	ko	kor	Valle, Aust-Agder
kven	kå	kår	Lista, Vest-Agder
kimm	ka	kor	Haugesund, Rogaland
kenn	ke	kest	Leikanger, Sogn og Fjordane
kvæn	hott	hori	Vinje, Telemark
håkkje	kå	kår	Ringebu, Oppland
håkke	hå	å	Nannestad, Akerhus
håkken	hå	hår	Nord-Odal, Hedmark
vemm	hå	hårre	Birkenes, Aust-Agder
håkken	hått	hårre	Hjartdal, Telemark
høkke	hø	hø (henn)	Nore i Numedal, Buskerud
ekken	høtt	hørre	Aremark, Østfold



To learn more about Norwegian – both Bokmål and Nynorsk – check out "Norwegian for Reading Comprehension" on [www.sonsofnorway.com](http://www.sonsofnorway.com). This unique course in reading Norwegian for general understanding covers the many historical forms of Norwegian and teaches innovative reading strategies for understanding anything from modern web pages to old immigrant letters.