

THE REFORMATION AND THE LINGUISTIC SITUATION IN NORWAY

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Abstract

The article gives a short account of the development of the spoken language from Old Norwegian to Modern Norwegian, the transition from Norwegian to Danish as the written language in Norway and the language of the church around the Reformation. It is argued that the changes in the spoken language were a long-term development completed, on the whole, at the time of the Reformation, that the transition from Norwegian to Danish as the written language was also well on the way before the Reformation, and that the vernacular was not abruptly introduced in the Lutheran service. So, the linguistic situation in the centuries following the Reformation is only to a lesser degree a result of the Reformation itself. The Reformation should first and foremost be credited with the translation of the Bible into Danish and with it the consolidation of a modern form of Danish which was spread through the extensive religious literature of the time. Later this consolidated written language formed the basis for the development of a higher variety of spoken Norwegian.

Keywords

Reformation, History of Norwegian, Danish in Norway, Bible Translation, Language of the Church

Introduction

The Reformation is often used as a demarcation point in the history of the Norwegian language. However, most aspects of the linguistic situation in Norway after the Reformation are not at all or only to a lesser degree connected to the Reformation itself. The linguistic situation in the centuries following the Reformation is either a result of a long-term development or a consequence of the political events at the time of the Reformation.

The Reformation as demarcation

The periods of the history of the Norwegian language relevant to this account are shown in the figure in (1).

1. Periods of the history of the Norwegian language around the Reformation

	1350	1536	1814
Old Norwegian	Middle Norwegian	Early Modern Norwegian	Newer Modern Norwegian

The Old Norwegian period is a long and linguistically quite stable period which takes its name from the Old Norwegian variety of Old West Scandinavian commonly known as Old Norse. Middle Norwegian is the transitional period between Old and Modern

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Norwegian when the Norwegian language went through extensive structural changes and was more or less replaced by Danish as a written language. Within the Modern Norwegian period, we can identify Early Modern Norwegian as what has been called the Danish period (e.g. in Nesse & Torp 2018).

The naming and the delimitations of the periods in the figure above are in accordance with what is used in the new history of the Norwegian language (Sandøy 2016, 10). The distinction between Old and Middle Norwegian in 1350 is due to the Black Death, which broke out in Norway in 1349 and had vast economic, political and cultural and consequently linguistic consequences. A distinction between Early and Newer Modern Norwegian is drawn in 1814 when the dissolution of Norway's union with Denmark and Norway's more independent position in the following union with Sweden also created a new linguistic situation.

The distinction between Middle Norwegian and Early Modern Norwegian is obviously the Reformation in Denmark-Norway in 1536–37, which has often been used as a demarcation in the history of Norwegian, see for instance the accounts in Almenningen et al. (1981), Torp & Vikør (1993), Nesse (2013) and Nesse & Torp (2018). In the new history of the Norwegian language mentioned, Nesse & Torp (2018, 359–361) give three reasons for this: first, that the Norwegian spoken language has more or less reached the modern stage at this time, and second, that the written language is from now on definitely Danish, and they also add a less commonly mentioned third reason, namely that Danish replaces Latin as the language of the church.

However, it should be remembered that the Reformation in Denmark-Norway was an effect of king Christian III being victorious in the preceding civil war (Albrechtsen 1997, 331–334). This allowed him not only to introduce the Reformation (Rian 1997, 141–171; Amundsen 2005, 163–165), but also to strengthen his grip on Norway. The Norwegian Council of the Realm was abolished, Norway got a less free position in the union, and the administration was consolidated (Rian 1997, 15–76, 385–402). This in turn led to a greater proportion of Danes in leading positions in Norway, both on the central and on the local level (Sogner 2003, 372–385).

We shall soon look at the development of the spoken language, the use of the written language and the changes in the language of the church in more detail, but first it should be mentioned that other dates than the year of the Reformation have also been used in accounts of the history of the Norwegian language.

Skard (1972) sets the demarcation between the earlier and the modern periods to the dissolution of the Kalmar union in 1523, when Gustav Vasa was chosen king of Sweden and Sweden definitely broke with Denmark-Norway. From the point of view of the history of Norwegian, however, it is difficult to see that this is so important. There was a Swedish influence on Norwegian in the first part of the Middle Norwegian period mainly through the higher social classes and the religious movement founded by saint Birgitta Birgersdotter (Indrebø 2001, 166–176; see also Sandvei 1938), but this influence ended after Denmark had secured the union with Norway with the treaty of 1450.

Less specific dates which have been used for the transition from Middle to Early Modern Norwegian are 1520 (Falk & Torp 1900), 1525 (Indrebø 2001), and 1550 (Haugen 1976). The reason for such approximate dating is of course that you can neither

say exactly when the spoken language had reached the modern stage, nor when Norwegian was replaced by Danish as the written language.

In a discussion of the relationship between recent developments in the spoken language and social changes, Gregersen (2015) points out that a line must be drawn between historical events and historical processes. This is of course true also for descriptions of older stages of a language as well as for historical descriptions in general. In this case, it means that although there are reasons to see the Reformation as an event in the history of the Norwegian language, all the same, it only functions as a more or less artificial dividing point in long-lasting processes.

The spoken language

There is no doubt that the bulk of the changes that transformed the Norwegian vernacular into its modern form took place during the Middle Norwegian period, that means before the Reformation, although many changes began earlier and some were completed later (Nesse & Torp 2018, 391–392).

The phonological system changed partly in general ways more or less common for all varieties and partly in different ways in various parts of the country creating dialectal differences. The morphology was simplified with for instance the loss of inflection for case in nominal word classes and the loss of inflection for person and number in finite verbs. In the syntax we get both a more fixed word order and a range of other changes. The most prominent lexical changes are the borrowing of Low German words and with them morphological elements such as the prefixes *an-* and *be-* and the suffix *-he(i)t*. (See the description of these changes in Indrebø (2001, 206–249) and Mørck (2013).)

We reckon that as a consequence of the changes summarized here, the spoken language had more or less reached the modern stage at the first half of the 16th century with the obvious reservation that the lexicon has of course changed a lot since then in accordance with the social and material culture (Nesse & Torp 2018, 359).

However, it must also be added that there are still in the Danish period some archaic features in the grammar (see Indrebø (2001, 330–379) and the articles in Sandøy & Jahr (2011)), for example sentences without an expletive subject or with an oblique form instead of a nominative subject, and that archaic morphological features that can be found even in some present-day dialects such as nouns in dative and verbs in plural, certainly had a wider geographical distribution than in more recent time.

One of the basic questions in linguistics is why languages change and especially why there are many changes at the same time in some periods. The changes in Middle Norwegian are probably in some way connected with the reduction of the population caused by the Black Death and later pests. It is tempting to think that the abandoning of outlying farms and the concentration of the population in central areas facilitated the development of new, distinct dialects. (For a critical opinion about the effect of the Black Death, see Mæhlum (1999, 112–152).) The changes in this period have also been attributed to the extensive contact with Low German – both directly and through Danish – which is clearly seen in all the words and affixes that were borrowed, but probably also caused grammatical simplifications. What is evident, however, is that the transition from

Old to Modern spoken Norwegian was not caused by the Reformation and its consequences.

Although the structure of the language had on the whole reached the modern stage around the time of the Reformation, the sociolinguistic situation was different. There were no towns with an urban variety distinguishable from the surrounding rural dialect with the exception of Bergen, and a separate variety spoken by the higher social classes had not yet developed.

At the end of the Middle Ages, Norwegian towns were too small to develop a distinct urban dialect. The only exception was Bergen with a population of almost 10 000, and here a characteristic dialect with roots seemingly going back to the Old Norwegian period developed (Sørli 1969, Nesse 2012). The reason for this was probably the extensive domestic and international contacts through trade. Other urban dialects came into existence during the Danish period, for instance in the medieval town Trondheim and the new mining town Røros (Dalen et al. 2008, 109–129). The reason is again considered to be dialect and language contact, but probably also some kind of opposition to the rural dialects. The Reformation, on the other hand, together with the other events which brought Norwegians into closer contact with Danish, played a part in the development of the new higher variety (Indrebø 2001, 296–302).

It has been suggested, especially by Seip (e.g. 1954 a, 1954 b), that there was a higher spoken variety already in the Middle Ages, but this has gained little support. The general view is that at the time of the Reformation all classes spoke their local dialect in all situations (Almenningen et al. 1981, 45), and that there was no clear social variation even in a town like Bergen. An exception to this generalization is of course immigrants, who to a large degree belonged to the higher classes, and who spoke their foreign languages.

However, during the 18th century a higher variety was formed which can be characterized as spoken Norwegian based on or influenced by written Danish with some features even from spoken Danish (Nesse & Torp 2018, 420–424). This Norwegian more or less literal rendering of Danish spelling was at the time considered the best spoken Danish (Indrebø 2001, 300, see also Seip 1954 c), maybe not surprising in a time when the written language was often considered to be primary to the spoken. This over-regional variety was used by civil servants and citizens belonging to the higher classes especially among those living in the growing towns, but also gradually spread to people belonging to these classes elsewhere in the country. It seems that this new variety was first and most extensively used in the formal style of sermons, while it was less consistently used in colloquial speech. The development of such a higher variety must have been caused by extended contact with both spoken and written Danish.

Language contact was of course nothing new in Norway, compare, for instance, the contact with Low German. An illustration of the extensive language contact is the fact that the last archbishop Olav Engelbrektsson immediately before the Reformation had both Norwegians, Danes, Swedes, Icelanders, Faroese, Scots, Dutchmen and Frenchmen in his service (Opsahl 2003, 188–189).

After the Reformation, more Danes got official positions in Norway both in the church, the civil administration and the military, and more Danes were engaged in trade and crafts (Sogner 2003, 316–332, 372–385), and all of this brought Norwegians into closer contact

with spoken Danish. Some Norwegians spent time in Denmark, among other reasons as a result of the requirement after 1629 that all priests should be educated at the University of Copenhagen (Sogner 2003, 378). The general public therefore often heard Danish during the church service, although, amongst the public authorities, the clergy were the earliest group to be dominated by Norwegians, and to the greatest extent (Sogner 2003, 378) even though there were an increasing number of Danish priests after about 1550 (Rian 1997, 153). Simultaneously with this oral contact, Norwegians were also more in contact with written Danish than before.

The written language

The replacement of Norwegian by Danish as the written language of Norway took place during a prolonged period of time.

Norwegian was gradually ousted by Danish during the last part of the Middle Norwegian period, but is still used to a certain degree at the beginning of the Danish period. There were written charters in a more or less traditional form of Norwegian until about 1580 (Indrebø 2001, 273–278, 306), and the medieval Norwegian secular and ecclesiastical laws were used until they were replaced by new laws in Danish in 1604 and 1607 respectively. The laws had, however, already been translated unofficially from Norwegian into Danish during the 16th century to make them understandable for Danish officials and others by the lawman Anders Sæbjørnsson and others (Indrebø 2001, 283–285; Vinje 1967, 18–42; Kolsrud 1917, 195–198; Sigrun H. Berg 2013, 262).

Some time after the traditional written Norwegian language with its roots back in Old Norwegian fell out of use, there began to appear new texts in a modern Norwegian form, the so called Norwegian vernacular texts (Indrebø 2001, 307–315). Most are poems written to impress the king or to commemorate some special occasion like a wedding, but there are also a few texts in prose. Among these is a translation of the 1st chapter of the Epistle of Paul the apostle to the Romans into the dialect of Jæren from 1698, which is the oldest text from the Bible in modern Norwegian, see an extract in (2) (from Venås 1990, 62; see also Kolsrud 1950), which can be compared to the Danish version in (3) below.

2. (1) Podl, Jesu Christi tenar, saa va kadlæ te a væra senningsbu, dæ æ aa betya serdæilis atlæ te a sæja Guds gleæligiæ buschab, (2) nemlig dæ Gud formelst serligiæ spaamænnene sine laabdæ forðum i dej heligiæ schrøbtæ, (3) om sonnen sin, saa blei fødde a Davids ætt, saa vit han va eit menniskie, (4) men at han va Guds son, dæ provdæ han uryggielegt ebtæ si gudomæligie aands verk mæ si opstannelse fra død, dennæ kar æ Jesus Christus okka herræ. (5) for meelst qvilken mæ hævæ niødt naae a værtæ sæningsbu siaa hæiningiene, at mæ skullæ læræ dej i nabnæ hans a tru aa lye Gud, (6) blant dissæ æræ de aa kadlæ te naaæ a Jesu Christo (7) doke adlæ heligiæ aa Guds kornæ (venæ) i Rom, ønskiæs naae aa fre a Gud okka far aa Jesu Christo den herræ.

The authors of these vernacular texts try to render local Norwegian dialects by means of the Danish orthographical system of the time. So, these texts do not represent a new Norwegian written standard (Indrebø 2001, 328–329).

According to Indrebø (2001, 195–196), Danish was competing with Swedish for influence on Norwegian from about 1390 to 1450. This competition ended and was followed by increasing Danish influence after the signing of the treaty of the union between Denmark and Norway in 1450. And by 1525 Danish had on the whole supplanted Norwegian with the exceptions mentioned above. Once more according to Indrebø (2001, 192), the transition to Danish took place in one of two ways: Either Norwegian officials and citizens began writing pure Danish, often first in some charters, and then in all; they “jumped” from Norwegian to Danish. Or there was an increasing admixture of Danish in Norwegian charters, they “crept” over to Danish. (Examples of Danish forms in Norwegian texts can be seen in Indrebø (2001, 193–194) and Mørck (2018, 346–348).)

The transition to Danish took place at different times in different types of texts depending on when leading positions in Norway were filled by Danes, and when the various social groups were influenced by Danish (see e.g. Hægstad 1902, 28–29, 38–39, 43–44; Indrebø 2001, 168–169, 180–192). In royal charters, only Danish is used after 1450 except in the formulary charters giving criminals protection (“grids-/landsvistbrev”, cf. Indrebø 2001, 279–280). Charters issued by the Norwegian Council of the Realm about internal affairs were mostly in Norwegian up to 1450, but after a transitional period up to 1490, Danish is prevalent. In other charters from higher officials, Danish is generally used after 1450 even by those born in Norway. The language of the archdiocese is with some exceptions on the whole Norwegian up to 1510, but afterwards gradually more Danish. The other dioceses generally use Norwegian up to about 1475 even though some of the bishops were Danish, but Danish prevails more and more during the rest of the Middle Norwegian period. On the other hand, Norwegian is used to a large degree in charters issued by priests, lawmen, bailiffs, citizens and peasants all the time up to 1500. However, towards the end of the period there is an increasing Danish influence before there is a more or less wholesale transition to Danish even in this part of the source material.

As described above, the Norwegian written language had already been supplanted, on the whole, by Danish before the Reformation as a result of Norway being the weaker member of the union with Denmark. Still it is arguably through its effect on the written language that the Reformation plays the most important part in the history of the Norwegian language.

The reason for this is the Lutheran doctrine that the religion should be presented in the vernacular, and the new religious literature following from this (Skautrup 1947, 149–158). A less successful translation of the New Testament had already been published in 1524, and a translation of the whole Bible, named after king Christian III, in 1550. The extract from the beginning of the Epistle of Paul the apostle to the Romans in (3) illustrates how different this Danish version is from a Norwegian dialect, cf. (2) above.

3. Paulus Jhesu Christi Tienere / kaldet til Apostel / vdualt til at predicke Guds
Euangelium / Huilcket hand loffuede tilforn / formedelst sine Propheter / i den

hellige Scrifft / om sin Søn / som er fød aff Dauids Sæd effter Kødets / oc
krafftelige beuist at vere Guds Søn / effter Aanden som helliger / Siden den Tid
hand opstod fra de Døde / som er Jhesus Christus vor HERRE / formedelst
huilcken wi finge Naade oc Apostels Embede iblant alle Hedninge / at oprette
Troens lydighed / vder hans Naffn / Aff huilcke i ere oc en deel / som ere kallede
aff Jhesu Christo.

Alle dem som ere i Rom / Guds elskelige oc kallede Helligen. Naade vere med
eder oc Fred / aff Gud vor fader / oc den HERRE Jhesu Christo.

The difference between the written language of the Danish Bible and spoken dialectal Norwegian is acknowledged by Aschim (2017, 118), who comments that this difference between the language of the church and the vernacular in Norway was larger than what Luther thought ideal, although the language of the Bible was probably intelligible to Norwegians. However, the reason he gives for this – the convergence of written Old Norse and Danish towards the end of the Middle Ages – is not really relevant as this is a consequence of the Danish influence on the written language of Norway and not a result of the development of spoken Norwegian.

The language of Christian III's Bible has been praised for its modern form, with a consistent and simple orthography, a quite consistent Danish vocabulary and a not too ornate style (Skautrup 1947, 210–214). A prayer book was also compiled with the liturgy, together with hymn books, collections of sermons and other types of literature propagating the new teaching. Since common people could not afford a Bible, other types of religious literature were probably more influential (Skautrup 1947, 214–216; Aschim 2017, 116–118). In addition to the religious literature, there were of course also different kinds of secular literature (Skautrup 1947, 137–149, 158–161; Indrebø 2001, 292–293).

The spreading of both the religious and the secular literature was facilitated by the introduction of printing (Skautrup 1947, 124–126; Nielsen 2016, 373–382). Printed material was in the beginning often imported from abroad, but a Danish printing shop was established in 1482, and this was soon followed by other shops. The production of printed books in Denmark rose sharply with the Reformation and again in the last part of the 16th century with commissions from the court, nobility and university. Since the printers corrected the manuscripts, printing also contributed to spreading a more or less normalized form of written language.

To sum up, we can say that the linguistic consequences of the Reformation stem from the creation of a for its time modern standardized form of written Danish in Christian III's Bible and the spreading of Danish through the literature of the Reformation facilitated by printing. In the last half of the 16th century Norwegians used a slightly older form of Danish more similar to Norwegian according to Iversen (1921, 273–274; 1932, 87) (a view questioned by Seip (1922, 117–119)), but soon – after 1620 – the modernized form of the Bible prevailed even in Norway (Skard 1972, 35). And the extended contact with this written Danish in the Bible and in other types of literature contributed to the development of a higher spoken variety.

To take another perspective on the situation in Norway after the Reformation, we may focus on what we did not get, namely a modern written standard based on spoken Norwegian. It has been claimed that the germ of a modern Norwegian written form based on coastal dialects can be found in the translations of the laws (Taranger 1900, 26–31). Whether this is correct, or the case at hand is only early Modern Danish, any development of a Norwegian standard was at any rate halted by the consolidation of Danish in both Denmark and Norway.

The use of Danish as the written language in Norway at the time of the union was not in itself a problem. Many countries have a written standard which is just as far from the spoken dialects. However, in Norway the use of written Danish became a problem after the dissolution of the union in 1814 with the slogan of the Romantic Movement that every country should have its own language (Jahr 1989, 9–11; Aschim 2017, 118–119). Consequently, the fact that we did not get a Modern Norwegian written language by the Reformation, is in a way the ultimate reason that we got the two standards “landsmål/nynorsk” on the one hand and “riksmål/bokmål” on the other and the concurrent language conflict in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The language of the church

The third reason that has been given for considering the Reformation important in the history of Norwegian, is the change from Latin to the vernacular as the language of the church.

In addition to what has already been said about the effect of the for its time modern Danish norm in the new translation of the Bible, the increased spreading of religious literature in Danish, and the later development of a higher variety based on written Danish, the influence of Danish through the reformed service has also been noted (Skard 1972, 13). In short it can be said that the liturgy was now generally in the vernacular instead of Latin, the sermon got a more prominent place, hymns were sung by the congregation, and the priests were often Danish or influenced by Danish.

Once more, however, not everything changed abruptly with the Reformation. The vernacular was already used extensively in religious literature during the Old Norwegian period (see overview in Mundal 2013, 421–424, 440–443; Wellendorf 2013, 304–341; about the Bible and its influence in Schumacher 1991). During the medieval Catholic Latin mass, a text was read from the gospels and a sermon given in the vernacular, and even the creed and the confession might be recited in the vernacular (Hareide 2014, 32–33). And the singing of hymns by the congregation probably goes back before the Reformation (Kolsrud 2007, 135). At the very end of the Middle Norwegian period, the use of Norwegian in the mass is documented by a complaint which has been attributed to the archbishop Olav Engelbrektsson (4) (Hamre 1998, 561; Berg 2011, 29; Ivar Berg 2013, 114, 240). On the other hand, Latin continued to be used besides the vernacular well into the 17th century (Amundsen 2005, 186; Kolsrud 2007, 133–134, 555, 693; Halse 2011, 34).

4. Item messzer holdis vppaa Norske ymott thenn hellige kirkis skiick och budh
– *Item, Masses are said in Norwegian against the Holy Church's custom and rules.* (DN X 674 and NgL 2.r. B4 171 1533)

According to Hareide (2014, 51), there was a gradual transition from the Catholic Latin mass with its focus on the Eucharist to the Lutheran vernacular service with more focus on the sermon and hymns. Bull (2018, 39) may be right that later propaganda for the Reformation wanted to make the break with the past look more complete than it really was.

Conclusion

As hinted to in the introduction, the linguistic situation in the centuries following the Reformation is only to a lesser degree a result of the Reformation itself. The changes in the spoken language from Old to Modern Norwegian were a long-term development completed, on the whole, at the time of the Reformation. The transition from Norwegian to Danish as the written language was also well on the way before the Reformation as a consequence of the union between Norway and Denmark. And the vernacular was already used in the Catholic mass and not abruptly introduced in the Lutheran service.

The Reformation should, however, first and foremost be credited with the new translation of the Bible and with it the consolidation of a modern form of Danish which was spread through the extensive religious literature of the time. Later this consolidated written language formed the basis for the development of a higher variety of spoken Norwegian.

The most important aspect of this can be said to be the fact that we did not get a translation of the Bible into Norwegian. As a counterfactual experiment, Torp (2007) has tried to imagine what the language of a Norwegian Bible might have looked like if the Bible had been translated into Norwegian after the Reformation. He considers two possibilities – both with less Danish influence than we actually got: one translation based on the eastern variety of Oslo and another translation based on the western variety of Bergen. The former he argues would be quite similar to the Swedish Gustav Vasa's Bible (1541) and the latter more akin to the Icelandic Guðbrandsbiblíá (1584). According to Torp, a modern Norwegian standard language would then have been either more similar to Swedish and more distant from Danish than Modern Norwegian or something between Modern Western Norwegian dialects and Faroese, probably not mutually understandable with Swedish and Danish. In either case a written Norwegian standard with all the national and social prestige already from the 16th century would probably have given as little room for the spoken dialects as in Sweden and Denmark and not the extensive use of dialects we see in Norway (cf. also Kolsrud [1921] 1993, 117). In any case, it is difficult to see that it would have been possible to translate the Bible into any kind of Norwegian after the Reformation since Danish was already well established as the written language of Norway at that time.

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