

ATTITUDES OF NORWEGIANS
TOWARDS THE GROWING INFLUENCE
OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT. This paper shortly outlines the present status of English in Norway, principally in relation to the growing presence of English lexical borrowings in Norwegian. Some attention will also be devoted to the views held by Norwegian linguists towards the potential threat that the English language represents, particularly in domains where it is likely to supersede the Norwegian language.

1. POSITION OF ENGLISH IN MODERN SOCIETIES

Currently two general approaches to the global position the English language has assumed seem to dominate the academic discourse. On the one hand, we can observe a trend to perceive English as a global phenomenon (Crystal 2003; de Swaan 2001; Duszak & Okulska 2004; Graddol 1997; Kibbee 2003; Maurais & Morris 2003; Pennycook 1994; Simonsen 2004; Tonkin & Reagan 2003), while on the other, the spread of English is seen as a sign of 'linguistic imperialism' (Ansre 1979; Galtung 1980; Kirkegaard 2008; Mæhlum 2002; 2007; Phillipson 1992).

Broadly speaking, the premises on which the proponents of the former trend have formulated their theories are historical and socioeconomic and can be best summarized by the claim that English has become the *lingua franca* of the post-war world with no other tongue remotely threatening its dominant position. As it also has been the case with the former *lingua francas* – Ancient Greek, Latin, Spanish, or French – it is neither the number of people who speak a given language, nor its structure that have made these languages global ones. As Crystal (2003) rightly puts it, "a language becomes an international language for one chief reason: the political power of its people – especially

their military power” (2003:7). There is no doubt that what has led to the hegemony of English in the world is, obviously, the economic development following the formation of two political blocks after 1945. In the case of English, the phenomenal development of both the former British Empire as a colonial power and the emergence of the United States of America which since the 1950s have been the leading economic power (ibid:57) unambiguously prove the above point.

Not surprisingly, the spread of English also reached other areas of human activity. An interesting development can be observed in the realm of broadly understood science, where English has gradually become so prominent that it has supplanted the once dominating French and German (Mańczak-Wohlfeld 2006:111). Also in diplomacy English has succeeded in asserting a firm hold, becoming the official language of the European Union.

The reasons for this relatively “painless” switch are many, but it is probably Pennycook’s account which seems to most plausible – he writes namely that

the spread of English is considered to be natural, neutral and beneficial. It is considered natural because (...) its subsequent expansion is seen as a result of inevitable global forces. It is seen as neutral because it is assumed that (...) English has in some sense become detached from its original cultural contexts (...). And it is considered beneficial because a rather blandly optimistic view of international communication assumes that this occurs on a cooperative and equitable footing. (Pennycook 1994:9)

Regardless of what one might think of that pre-dominant position of the English language, one cannot disagree with Crystal who says that English has always been “in the right place in the right time”(2003:120). As a natural consequence of the above-mentioned developments, one can easily come to a conclusion that the English language has become synonymous with broadly understood modernity. The reasons for this are best accounted for by Crystal, who writes that

when new technologies brought new linguistic opportunities, English emerged as a first-rank language in industries which affected all aspects of society – the press, advertising, broadcasting, motion pictures, sound recording transport and communications. (Crystal 2003:110f.)

It is also frequently pointed out that the position of English in some countries has reached a far wider range of cultural and political effects, with English becoming ‘the language of power and prestige’ acting as a ‘crucial goalkeeper to social and economic progress’ (see Pennycook 1994:13ff.). This trend can be observed in Norway where English has gained the status of the official corporate language (for example at Statoil) and, what can easily be seen as a worrying trend, the language of instruction at schools of tertiary education.¹

¹ The University of Oslo introduced English as the language of instruction on the ninth semester of medical studies, even though the students and tutors were exclusively Norwegian (see Mæhlum 2002, 2007).

In view of the above, it is not surprising that the opponents of this omnipresence of English have a far more gloomy vision concerning the future prospects. Their attitude takes its origin in the presumption that the relation of English to other languages is asymmetric which in turn has led to its hegemony threatening the development of other languages which are far less offensive. In extreme cases this trend may result in a diglossic situation with the status of the local language being reduced to a vernacular and English assuming the position of a High variety. Understandably, such claims must have been particularly common among native speakers of 'small' languages, so it does not come as a surprise that some Scandinavian scholars (Bakke and Håvard 2001; Brink 1998; Ellingsve 1999; Jarvad 1999; Jørgensen 2001; Kirkegaard 2008; Lomheim 2001; Myking 1999; Mæhlum 2002, 2007; Simonsen 2004) have also been active in this debate. As a consequence of these reservations, the hegemony of the English language is seen as nothing else but a form of imperialism² according to, for example, Galtung (1980:128ff.) can take many forms: economic, political, military, communicative, social or cultural, the subcategories of the last one being such types of imperialism as academic, educational or media imperialism. Phillipson (2001) goes even further by declaring English a cultural Tyrannosaurus Rex (2001), the sole beneficiary of the globalization process, a linguistic cannibal which "gobbles up others and eliminates local cultural practices" (op.cit.: 2).

Much as one can disagree with some of the above contentions, one thing remains certain – English has entered nearly all areas of human activity, very often playing a central role.

2. ENGLISH INFLUENCE ON THE NORWEGIAN LANGUAGE – AN OVERVIEW

As a natural consequence of its rising prominence in the post-war world, English has also developed into the prime source of loanwords for other languages, irrespective of the attitudes held by their native speakers towards the Anglo-Saxon culture in general. In extreme cases the borrowing process could, of course, lead to what Kibbee calls "this fantastical vision of the McDonaldisation of the languages of the world" (Kibbee 2003:53). Norwegian, being a relatively small language, has appeared to be very impressionable, and the extent of English loanwords has reached such alarming numbers that steps needed to be taken to forestall, or at least hinder, the further spread of the so-called *anglonorsk* (Faarlund 1997).

The first traces of English influence on the Norwegian language date back to the 18th century with loanwords entering the Norwegian shipping and seaman-ship vocabulary. The English loans from the 19th century are predominantly

² For example, according to Galtung (1980:128ff.) can take many forms: economic, political, military, communicative, social or cultural, the subcategories of the last one being such types of imperialism as academic, educational or media imperialism.

related to technological inventions; around the same time, Norwegian also borrowed terms associated with new sports and leisure activities (Mæhlum 2007:163). However, it was during the first three decades of the 20th century when the extent and the intensity of the borrowing process gained in force and the number of English loanwords in Norwegian grew substantially.³

After the Second World War Norway severed its close cultural relations with Germany and, as a result of its new close alliance with the English-speaking countries, found itself under a very strong socioeconomic influence of Britain and the United States. As an obvious consequence of the above shift, the Norwegian language experienced a substantial influx of loans from the Anglo-Saxon culture. The intensity of the borrowing process increased with the influx of English-language entertainment that began to dominate the television programmes of Norwegian television channels. Since all Scandinavian television networks subtitle foreign-language broadcasts, the access and exposure to all modern varieties of English in those countries has unquestionably spurred the acceptability of English loanwords in the Scandinavian languages (Awedyk 1996).⁴

As regards the current situation, the most common types of English borrowings found in contemporary Norwegian are semantic. Johansson and Graedler (2002:83-115) list the most representative semantic groups where most modern English loanwords can be found and these are:

- music,
- fashion,
- sport,
- advertising,
- advertising,
- media,
- information technologies,
- economy,
- commerce.

As the above list clearly indicates, the English loanwords (both lexemes and entire idiomatic expressions) appear most frequently when they are to fill some lexical gap, once the borrowing language incorporates terms to denote trends in new technologies, sports, music, fashion, etc. However, what needs to be highlighted here is that in Norwegian one can also observe morphological and syntactic influence of English (Johansson 1992; Graedler & Johansson 1997; Graedler 1997; Graedler 1998; Sandøy 1999; Sandøy 2000; Johansson 2002; Johansson & Graedler 2002). To give one example, nouns denoting pro-

³ For detailed information on English loanwords in the Norwegian of the 1930 see Stene 1945.

⁴ Norwegians, with their easy access to most contemporary varieties of English (British and American, formal and informal, spoken and written) which has been facilitated by, among other, the common use of subtitling on all Scandinavian TV channels already speak of code-switching (Graedler 1994; Graedler 1999) or 'pidginization' which is manifested coining the term *anglonorsk* 'Anglo-Norwegian' (Faarlund 1997) to refer to the language situation among the younger generation of Norwegians.

fessions when used predicatively, do not require a determiner in Norwegian, as it is the case in English, compare:

1. He is *a teacher*.
2. Han er *lærer*.

However, the recent years have seen the tendency demonstrated by some journalists to place an indefinite article in the above position, a development undoubtedly spurred by the syntactic structures found in English (Johansson 2006).

3. NORWEGIAN LANGUAGE LAWS

Norway has 4 language laws, but none of them aim to protect the native language in the way, for example, *the Law on the Polish Language* of 7 October 1999 does.⁵ This, however, may soon change as there is a bill's draft known as *the Proposed Culture Act and Possible Constitutional Protection of Cultural Matters*⁶ which soon may limit the frequent use of English in all areas of life ensuring the two official forms of the Norwegian language a superior role in the public, commercial and political life. Furthermore, on 20 September 2004, the Norwegian Language Council, *Språkrådet*, launched a project *Norsk i Hundre*, the aim of which is to implement a language policy where by the year 2105 both varieties of the official language, *nynorsk* and *bokmål*, will have maintained their superior role as the only national languages used in all areas of human activity in Norway. Also here certain apprehensions concerning the threat posed by the omnipresent English have been expressed. In the official document issued by the *Språkrådet* one can read that

det offentlege har eit hovudansvar for å styrkja norsk språk i konkurranse med engelsk. Staten har vore ein garantist for nynorsk som mindretalsmål i hove til bokmål. Samme offentlege saksfelt er utsette for særleg press fra engelsk. Det gjeld internasjonal økonomi, IT-næringsorgane og andre ulike teknologi fag.⁷

it is one of the main public liabilities to strengthen the Norwegian language. The state has been the guarantor of nynorsk as the minority language in relation to bokmål. The same areas of public activity are now exposed to particular pressure from English. It concerns international economy, IT companies, and other technology-related fields (translation by W.A.).

The above-mentioned undertaking of the Norwegian Language Council, in spite of its unquestionable pioneering nature, follows an already existing trend in the Scandinavian countries, with similar projects for Swedish – *Mål i mun* (2002)⁸ and for Danish – *Sprog på spil* (2003)⁹ in which policies to maintain the superiority of the respective languages in their native countries are clearly laid out.

⁵ *The Law on the Polish Language* introduced particular obligations on the use of Polish within the territory of Poland. This pertains in particular to names of goods and services including foreign language advertisements which must be accompanied by a Polish translation.

⁶ See www.merlin.obs.coe.int/iris/2007/1/article25.en.html.

⁷ www.sprakrad.no/upload/9832/norsk_i_hundre.pdf.

⁸ www.regeringen.se/sb/d/108/a/1443.

⁹ www.modersmaalet.dk/dansktunge/sprogpaaspil2003.htm.

4. ATTITUDES OF NORWEGIANS TOWARDS THE GROWING PRESENCE OF ENGLISH IN NORWEGIAN

In Norway, as well as in the other Scandinavian countries, voices of concern about the potential linguistic littering of the local language have been voiced quite willingly. To exemplify it, let us now look at some selected opinions concerning the growing influence of English on the Norwegian language and the effect this situation has had on the language and its native speakers. Already in 1960, Henrik Groth wrote that

de små språksamfunn star i dag i fare for å absorbers av de store. Om kanskje ti år har engelsk vunnet hegemoniet i Island, om tredve år i Norge.

today small language communities are in danger of being absorbed by the big ones. Perhaps in ten years English will have won hegemony over Iceland, and in 30 years over Norway (translated by W.A.).

Unrealistic as it may sound from the point of view of the contemporary reader, the above opinion published in one of Norway's dailies – *Dagbladet* – must have come as a shock on many Norwegians who, ever since regaining their independence in 1905, have consistently been very territorial as far as their cultural heritage (part of which is undoubtedly their mother tongue) is concerned. An equally gloomy vision was presented as recently as in 2001 in Norway's most respected daily – *Aftenposten* – by Sylfest Lomheim who published a portentous article, dramatically entitled “Vil norsk overleve?” (“Will Norwegian survive?”) where an argument is put forward that the status of the Norwegian language in all areas of human activity will slowly be diminished and that English will slowly supersede the local language in all formal contexts, with Norwegian becoming the language used only in the most private and intimate spheres of human interaction, something one should take with an obvious pinch of salt. As it might have been anticipated, the above-mentioned article sparked off a relatively heated debate in Norway, with many Norwegian linguists openly criticizing Lomheim's doomsday scenario.¹⁰ At the same time, it should be noted here that since his arguments were met with such a response, his fears must have been shared by many of his countrymen.

One should also bear in mind that Norwegians are not alone as regards their fears of possible ‘eradication’ of their native languages due to the expansion of the English language. Also in Denmark and Sweden, the discussion on the allegedly devastating effect of English influence has been quite heated (Andersen 2002; Davidsen-Nielsen et al. 1999; Haberland 1991; Hellberg 1986; Jarvad 1995; Ljung 1988; Sharp 2001; Sørensen 1995; Preisler 1999). Nevertheless, pronouncements of that kind, regardless of how eye-catching and pro-

¹⁰ Responding to the debate initiated by his article in *Aftenposten*, Lomheim wrote a series of articles (see Lomheim 2001) in which he attempted to elaborate on his predictions concerning the future of the Norwegian language.

vocative they are meant to be, seriously distort the general picture of language contact since they fail to interpret the current trends in the development of languages in terms of language enrichment bear a striking similarity to the influence Low German once had in that field.

While Scandinavian linguists are fairly apprehensive about the future of their respective mother tongues, their countrymen seem somewhat more relaxed. As one may have anticipated, Scandinavians are not as unanimous in their feelings towards the presence of English in their mother tongues and the research projects conducted in Norway, Sweden and Denmark seem to confirm that notion. The survey carried out in Denmark revealed that 75% of those polled had no problem with English loanwords in Danish (Jarvad 1995:123).¹¹ By contrast with the above, the findings of a similar survey in Sweden indicate that 66% of the polled Swedes thought that Swedish should be kept as pure as possible (Wingstedt 1998:259). The results of sociolinguistic studies carried out in Norway (Awedyk 1996; Masvie 1992; Simensen and Uri 1992) seem to bear more resemblance to those deriving from the Danish project. However, Massvie's study (1992) conducted among teenagers and young adults also showed that surprisingly many informants (42% of those polled) had no opinion on the growing presence of English loanwords in Norwegian (1992:46), a finding most likely affected by the age of her informants.

Notwithstanding the differences revealed by the findings of the above research projects, it ought to be emphasized here that Scandinavian societies on the whole are still very open towards English language features. Apart from the genealogical relationship between English and the Scandinavian languages, the reasons why Norwegian, as well as Swedish and Danish, is infused with so many Anglicisms can be ascribed to the following factors:

- the unchallenged status of the English language in the Scandinavian societies,
- the enormous popularity of Anglo-American media products,
- the intensive teaching of English at all levels in all age groups,
- the extensive international contacts, both personal and related to work.

(adapted from Gottlieb 2004:41)

As regards English lexical borrowings, they enter the Norwegian language in their original spelling form which is even retained after their pronunciation has been adapted to the phonological system of Norwegian. However, with the increasing pressure to eliminate all unnecessary anglicisms, the Norwegian Language Council, *Språkrådet*, became the driving force behind the trend to “domesticate” the English lexical borrowings by passing a resolution in 1996

¹¹ Interestingly, this high level of acceptance only referred to such lexemes as *sandwich*, *weekend*, or *shorts*; the informants were less definite about such complex idiomatic expressions as *second to none*, *you name it*, or *take it or leave it*, with 35% of the respondents being negative about these idioms entering the Danish language (Jarvad 1995:125).

which allowed alternative spelling – following the rules of Norwegian morphology and orthography – of most common direct loans from English. Consequently, since 1996 the Norwegian language has two spelling forms for such direct loans as ‘guide’ (also spelt ‘gaid’), ‘polish’ (‘polisj’), or ‘service’ (‘sørvis’). The above decision was a logical consequence of the tendency to limit the number of direct loans in Norwegian by adapting them to the rules of Norwegian orthography and/or morphology (a tendency referred to as ‘*norvagisering*’), or by substituting the already existing English direct loan with a newly coined Norwegian word (the process referred to as ‘*fornorsking*’).¹² Not surprisingly, not all alternative spelling forms have caught on and among those rejected by Norwegian native speakers we can find: ‘køntri’ (country), ‘pøbb’ (‘pub’) and the already mentioned ‘gaid’ (‘guide’). One of the likely interpretations is offered by Greenall, who writes that “the Norwegian Language Council attempted to implement changes in what has been perceived as a one-way dictatorial fashion”(2005:214) hence their effort was spurned by the general public.

Another interesting aspect of the dispute on the influence of English on Norwegian concerns the hotly debated insufficiency of Norwegian specialist terminology and a very weak development of the Norwegian-language academic discourse which is hindered by an ever-increasing number of academic work being conducted solely in English.¹³ Some of the concerns can be legitimized since as much as 71% of all academic publishing activity is done in English (Kyvik 2001:15). Interestingly, the choice of language varies depending on the field of academic activity: the lowest score was recorded in humanities (40%), then came social studies (51%), followed by medicine (77%), while nature science had an average of between 80 and 90% of all publications coming out in a non-Scandinavian language (*ibidem*). Then again, the fact that Norwegian academics wish to publish in English can hardly be perceived as unprecedented since English has now become the major language of the academic discourse, a fact most of us have come to terms with. Therefore, when Mæhlum claims that the dominance of English at universities has led to a domain loss for Norwegian (2002:131), it seems that such an interpretation fails to acknowledge the fact that English has become a neutral medium of international academic discourse rather than a linguistic predator.

What is more, the extent to which English has succeeded in replacing Scandinavian languages in cross-linguistic contacts between Scandinavian scholars has given rise to a variety of English termed ‘Scandinavian English’ the characteristics of which have been discussed by Altenberg (1998), Hasselgård (1997) and Shaw (2004). The opponents of this trend, however, fear that if English becomes the lingua franca of the Scandinavian academics, the mutual intelligibility may suffer (Tislevoll 2001), an outcome the author of this article cannot possibly envisage.

¹² See Sandøy (2000).

¹³ See also *Forskerforum* 6, June 2008.

5. NORSK VIL OVERLEVE!

To recapitulate, English has undeniably assumed the position of the 'lingua franca' becoming also the prime source of lexical borrowings for many languages today. On balance, this outcome should not come as a surprise since native speakers of English are at the frontline of technological innovation, trends in popular mass culture and also scientific achievements. The fact that professionals use English in their work, including academic writing simply facilitates cross-cultural communication and exchange of ideas by means of a relatively neutral language, the spread of which is commonly viewed as a positive result of globalization rather than linguistic (and consequently cultural) imperialism.

Although one might question the legitimacy of many direct loans, principally in cases where the borrowing language has its own well-established lexeme, it would be very unsound to defend the national languages against other lexical borrowings from English, particularly in the realm of technical innovation. One may be tempted to say that a wise and balanced language policy laying down the guidelines for the adaptability of such lexical items ought to serve as a universal panacea for upholding relative language purity. Such measures are likely to do more good than any promulgated language purity laws.

To prove the above point, the author would like to present one of the findings from a pan-Scandinavian project known as Modern Loanwords in the Languages of the Nordic Countries (*Moderne importord i språka i Norden*).¹⁴ According to the results of the above-mentioned project, based in this case on the evidence from Denmark and the Faroes, which represent polar opposites as regards language laws, there does not seem to be any correlation between the official language policy and the attitude towards the English influx. The Danish (with their *laissez faire* language policy) and the Faroes (with their stiff language purity laws) show the same pattern as regards the attitude of native speakers (in this case the target group were people belonging to the elite of the respective societies) towards the English influx.

Summing up, the author wishes to make one final point. While the veiled threat posed by the dominant position of English might sometimes be seen as serious, Norwegians should not fear that their national language may one day

¹⁴ The above project investigates the situation in all major languages spoken in Scandinavia: Danish, Faroese, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, Swedish in Finland and Swedish in Sweden. Its main components are:

1. a comparison of volume of loanwords in each of the investigated languages,
2. the frequency and usage of native substitute forms,
3. the adaptation of loanwords to the target languages,
4. official standardization,
5. attitudes of native speakers of a particular language towards loanwords and substitute forms (Graedler 2004).

become a mere vernacular. The current trend should rather be viewed as a passing phase and, regardless of how profound the influence of English on Norwegian might seem to be, there is little likelihood that Norwegian nationals might succumb to the supremacy of English in Norway, by allowing a foreign language to substitute their mother tongue as the means of communication in all imaginable domains of human activity.

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