

THE SURVIVAL OF A DIALECT THROUGH 400 YEARS
– AN EXAMPLE FROM SOUTHERN NORWAY

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The “parent language” of Norwegian is customarily called Old Norse, a term which includes both Old Norwegian in a narrow sense (the language of Norway) and Old Icelandic. The chronology traditionally used for the Norwegian language is:

Old Norse 700-1350

Middle Norwegian 1350-1550

The Danish period 1550-

In histories of the Norwegian language, this chronology is usually motivated on structural grounds: *Old Norse* is the synthetic medieval language, which we find in the manuscripts of the time. This language was stabilised in a relatively conservative form which did not reflect the changes in speech. It persisted until the middle of the fourteenth century. *Modern Norwegian* represents the analytic stage reached by the Norwegian dialects in the sixteenth century, but not expressed in writing until the codification of a written standard New Norwegian (Nynorsk), around 1850. *Middle Norwegian*, then, represents a short transitional stage, a period when the written language was under increasing pressure from Danish (c.f. Vikør 1995:51).

Norway in union with Denmark for 400 years

From the end of the fourteenth century Norway was part of a political union with Denmark. The Danish king ruled this union. The capital of Denmark, Copenhagen, was the great centre of power in the “twin-kingdom” of Norway-

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Another, more humanistic view, was also expressed, at least as far back as 1749, when the Danish grammarian Erik Pontoppidan published a *Glossarium Norvegicum* of Norwegian idioms, which he recommended as a means of 'enlightening and improving the common language', in this case Danish (c.f. Haugen 1976:360).

A number of observers in the late eighteenth century, and especially writers of the Romantic nineteenth century, discovered that the dialects were 'purer' and often more expressive than the urbanised official Danish language. This view led to the study and collection of materials on dialects, conceived as a national resource (like folk ballads, folk music, folk art). The Danish author Henrik Scharling said in 1867 about the dialects: 'Here are the gold mines, from which the cultivated language shall fetch its treasures, instead of asking for loans from abroad' (c.f. Skautrup 1953, III:159).

A famous dialect text from 1625

One of the oldest and most famous Norwegian texts from this period, written in dialect, is a small book from Agder in the southern part of Norway. We can clearly understand that this book has been written with respect and love for the local dialect in the area. Both historians and philologists feel sure that the book is from the first half of the seventeenth century (1625?). It is hand-written and contains a small three-page grammar and a collection of 300 proverbs (sayings). We also feel quite sure that the text is trying to reproduce the dialect(s) from an area on the southern coast of Norway (Agder).

The text represents a "Modern Norwegian Language"

First of all it is interesting to notice that the dialect material we find in this nearly 400 years old text must be characterised as "modern Norwegian oral language". The text shows us that the language has gone from a complex Old Norse language system to a more simple system, with a rather simple morphology, but with many dialect features preserved.

The Old Norse language was a synthetic language. In the nominal categories (nouns, pronouns and adjectives) of Old Norwegian there were four cases, each with different forms both in singular and in plural, and the noun endings were not the same as the adjective ones. The verbs were conjugated in person, number and tense. To get an idea of this system we can look at the paradigms of a noun (*hest* m. 'horse') in the definite form and of a strong verb (*gripa* 'catch') in the present and the past tenses.

S.	Nom. <i>hestriinn</i>	pres. <i>ek gríp</i>	pret. <i>ek greip</i>
	Gen. <i>hestsins</i>	<i>þú grípr</i>	<i>þú greipt</i>
	Dat. <i>hestinum</i>	<i>hann/hon grípr</i>	<i>hann/hon greip</i>
	Acc. <i>hestinn</i>	<i>vér grípum</i>	<i>vér gripum</i>
Pl.	Nom. <i>hestarnir</i>	<i>þér grípuð</i>	<i>þér gripuð</i>
	Gen. <i>hestanna</i>	<i>þeir grípa</i>	<i>þeir gripu</i>
	Dat. <i>hestunum</i>		
	Acc. <i>hestana</i>		

A varied morphology (as shown above) implies a relatively free word order. In Old Norwegian, for example, the form of the word might indicate its syntactic function. In the late Middle Ages this system gradually disintegrated and the morphological system of the language was radically simplified. Thus, modern Norwegian nouns have one form in singular and one in plural:

hesten – *hestane* New Norwegian, 'Nynorsk')
hesten – *hestene* Dano-Norwegian, 'Bokmål')

And the verb has one present tense form and one past tense form:

(New Norwegian): *eg, du, han/ho, vi, de, dei* grip – greip
(Dano-Norwegian): *eg, du, han/hun, vi, dere, de* griper – greip

To compensate for the loss of information in the morphological system there is a more rigid word order and more use of prepositions and adverbs in this analytical language.

In some of the Norwegian dialects we find remnants of the case category in the noun and pronoun system. In these parts of the country (some outskirts) people still use the dative in the definite form in certain syntactic functions: *på væga* ('on the road'), *i fjellom* ('in the mountains'). However, this use of the dative is not a part of today's dialectal system along the coastline of Southern Norway (where our old text comes from). But in the text from 1625 we find some occurrences of dative forms in plural (16 occurrences):

Got mæ *Goom* ejga (119)* ('It's nice to have something in common with rich people')
Kvær karrer til *sinom* Kage (165) ('Everybody is bringing flour to his own cake')
Der er Mad i *goom* Mungaar (193) ('There is good food in good beer')
Skiot er aa *skiom* farra i *frackom* fœra (267) ('It's easy to go skiing when the skiing-surface is all right')

Most of the 16 examples could be seen as remnants from old sayings (old formulas). But a few of the examples *could* indicate that the dative still, in the seventeenth century, is a living grammatical category in this area. Nevertheless, we get the impression that *the text as a whole represents and shows us a shift from a synthetic language system to a more analytic one*. The dialect forms in the text represent a rather modern and simplified morphological system.

One very instructive example of this is the loss of the unstressed final consonant *-n* in many grammatical inflections. This loss of the single *-n* led to many inflections with a vocalic ending in the dialects, especially in the feminine singular and in the neuter plural. In Old Norse we find many categories with a final consonant *-n*:

Old Norse <i>sólin</i> f.def. ('the sun')	>	Modern Norw. <i>sola</i>
Old Norse <i>konan</i> f.def. ('the woman')	>	Modern Norw. <i>kona, konå</i>
Old Norse <i>opin</i> adj. ('open')	>	Modern Norw. <i>opa, (åpen)</i>
Old Norse <i>húsin</i> n.def.pl. ('the houses')	>	Modern Norw. <i>husa</i>

In this old dialect text we find feminine strong definite forms like *Bygda* ('the parish') 6, *Kyra* ('the cow') 164, *Mærraa* ('the horse', female) 16, and definite weak forms like *Konnaa* 158 ('the woman'), *Kaga* 157 ('the cake'), and several other examples. We see that the Old Norse ending *-in* has developed into *-a* or *-aa* [] (with loss of *-n*). This is also how it is in the dialects in the area today (and in most of the regional varieties in Norway).

Simplification as a result of language contact

Many scholars believe that an important reason why we got this linguistic simplification from Old to Middle Norwegian was the influence of Low German on the Norwegian language in the late Middle Ages, from 1350 to 1500 (c.f. Dalen 1994:36-37). A language which is in contact with another language will have a tendency to develop a more simplified morphological system, simply because a group of dominant foreigners have acquired imperfect control of the native language (c.f. Trudgill 1986:103). It is interesting to notice that the period when the Hanseatic League was strongly embedded in Norwegian economic life and there were close contacts with North Germans in Norway, coincides with a period of radical changes in the Norwegian language (c.f. Dalen 1994:37). *As mentioned before: In this text book from 1625 we find that this simplification has taken place*. The language in the text must be characterised as an analytic language system. But many typical dialect features appear in the text.

* The number refers to the number of the proverb in the text.

About some phonological dialect features in the text

Let us take a look into *the small 3-page grammar*, which is the first part of the old text. What features has this unknown author made comments about? Almost two of the three pages deal with the characteristic consonant differentiation in the dialect. The Old Norse consonant clusters *fn* and *rn* are in most Norwegian dialects assimilated into [vn] and [ɭ] (retroflex), respectively. But in the south-western part of the country, where the text was written, we find dialects today where these clusters have been differentiated into *bn* and *dn*. The author is aware of this, and he makes comments on the following forms:

Text forms	Standard Norwegian (Bokmål)
<i>nabn</i> m. ('name')	<i>navn</i>
<i>rabn</i> m. ('raven')	<i>ravn</i>
<i>stavn</i> m. ('stem')	<i>stavn</i>
<i>næbne</i> v. ('mention')	<i>nevne</i>
<i>rebne</i> v. ('tear')	<i>revne</i>
<i>jabne</i> v. ('level')	<i>jevne</i>
<i>bjødn</i> m. ('bear')	<i>bjørn</i>
<i>tiødn</i> f. ('lake')	<i>tjørn</i>
<i>kaadn</i> n. ('corn, grain')	<i>korn</i>

The writer of the text also uses many dialect forms with differentiation (segmentation) of the geminant *ll*. Thus, in many of the proverbs we find examples such as *gudle* ('the gold'), *trodle* ('the troll'), *adle* ('all of them'), *kadla* ('to call') – a total of 28 occurrences.

This *differentiation of geminants* (e.g. *adle*, *kadla*) is also a well known peculiarity in the dialect of the area today, and even younger people use these forms.

Medial palatalisation

A characteristic innovation in the western dialects of Norway is the medial palatalisation of the consonants *g* and *k* in positions between vowels.

Old Norse	The south-western dialects of Norway
<i>vegg(r)inn</i> ('the wall')	<i>vejjen</i> [vej↔n]
<i>bekk(r)inn</i> ('the stream')	<i>bekkjen</i> [beX↔n]
<i>skóg(r)inn</i> ('the forest')	<i>skojen</i> [sku↔n]
<i>bókin</i> ('the book')	<i>bokja</i> [buXa]

In the text we find a lot of forms which show this innovation. The author writes:

Examples in the text

<i>vejen</i> (77)	('the road')
<i>ingien</i> (22)	('nobody')
<i>længie</i> (60)	('long time')
<i>fiskie</i> (60)	('the fishing')

This medial palatalisation has survived in the dialects up to our time. It is still a salient feature in the oral language used by people who are older than 60. The younger people, however, have abandoned this local pronunciation. They use forms like: *veien*, *ingen*, *lenge* and *fiske*.

Morphological characteristics in the text

In the Old Norse language the *present tense forms* in the strong verbs had the ending *-r* in 2nd and 3rd person singular.

<i>hann bítr</i>	(he 'bites')
<i>hann kemr</i>	(he 'comes')
<i>hann stendr</i>	(he 'stands')

In many Norwegian dialects a new intrusive ('svarabhakti') vowel developed in these forms to break up the old consonant cluster endings. Transitional forms emerged, such as *biter*, *kemer* and *stender*. Later, in the Middle Ages, the *-r* was lost, and new forms appeared, for instance present tense forms such as *bite/bide*, *kjeme* [Xc:me] and *stenne*. In the text from 1625 we find exactly the same forms. The author uses present tense forms like:

Examples in the text (present tense)

<i>bide</i> (8)	('he bites')
<i>gleppe</i> (28)	('he slips')
<i>kiæme</i> (130)	('he comes')
<i>tænde</i> (135)	('he stands')

These forms are the dominant ones in today's dialects in this area, even among young people.

Vowel merger

In the Old Norse morphology we find three unstressed vowels: *-a*, *-i*, *-u*. In Medieval times there must have taken place a vowel merger in the unstressed syllables. The three vowels could merge into *-e* [↔], in old manuscripts written *æ* or *e*. This vowel merger is typical of the dialects in two areas in southern Norway: One area in the south-east, and one in the north-west. Between these two 'e-areas' we find one area that preserves *-a* in the infinitive and in weak feminine nouns: *å finna* ('to find'), *ei kaka* ('a cake'). (In this area *-i/-u* would merge into *-e* [↔] in other categories.) This preservation of *-a* in the infinitive and in weak feminine nouns is still a distinct feature in the south-western part of Norway, also among the young people. The Standard Norwegian language (Bokmål) has the ending *-e* in these categories. Let us have a look at the text on this point. Here in the old text we find both *-a* and *-e* in the infinitive forms:

Examples in the text

<i>være</i> (16)	('to be')
<i>lage</i> (62)	('to make')
<i>leve</i> (189)	('to live')
<i>væra</i> (11)	('to be')
<i>gjæva</i> (96)	('to give')
<i>tacka</i> (55)	('to thank')
<i>gjærra</i> (17)	('to do')

These forms in the text could indicate that the author has collected dialectal material from both sides of the 'merger border' (from both east and west in the Agder area).

How could the many dialect features in the text survive up to our time?

I have now presented some of the many dialectal features that we find in this old text from the seventeenth century. I have tried to show that the oral language (the dialect) presented in the text is a relatively "modern language". The dialect in the text has reached a form that is not so far from today's spoken language in the southern part of Norway. In my comments I have also stressed the fact that most of the dialectal features that we find demonstrated in the text, have survived in the local dialect up to our days, through nearly 400 years! And we may ask the question: How is this possible? I am inclined to claim that this preservation of the local dialects is special for the Norwegian society. Let me try to explain to you why I think it is so.

A Norwegian linguist, Professor Ernst Håkon Jahr, has uttered the following statement about the use of dialects in Norway: "It is probably true to say that in Norway more people use more dialect in more situations for more purposes than in many other European countries" (c.f. Jahr 1997:365). I agree with Professor Jahr's statement. In all parts of Norwegian we find that dialects are being used: in the schools, at the universities – among university professors as well as among the students – in the media, on television and in the theatres, at workplaces and in Parliament. Government ministers speak their dialect quite frequently. Professor Jahr (1997:365) thinks that many of them gain in popularity and receive increased popular support and confidence by using their home dialect. The use of local dialects is not directly supported in any special way, but rather is seen as normal linguistic behaviour (Jahr 1997:365).

Norwegian urban dialects have previously often had an even lower status than many rural dialects. But here a change has taken place. Today the urban dialects can be heard as often as the rural dialects, and many of the urban dialects have been an important part of a recent growth in cultural activity (see Omdal 1995:103). Many of the most famous song artists (especially rock music and country music) use texts written in their local urban dialect. And also other artists, in, for example, regional theatres, use urban dialects to day – not only for humorous purposes. It now seems obvious that the old low-status urban dialects have gained social acceptance in urban communities and dominate the new common urban dialect (see Omdal 1995:103).

Why, then, is Norway so different from many other European countries?

This has to do, of course, with the Norwegian history, with the fact that no separate Norwegian language was recognized as such for several hundred years when Norway was part of a political union with Denmark. Dialects spoken in what is now the territory of Norway were then regarded as Danish dialects. However, when Norway regained its independence in 1814 as a result of the Napoleonic wars, and in the period of Romanticism, the search for a separate national Norwegian idiom started. The written standard of the time (the 1800s) was Danish, inherited from the Dano-Norwegian union. It was of course problematic for the Norwegians to call written Danish "Norwegian". Therefore, instead of the written standard (written Danish), the local rural dialects in Norway had to serve as national linguistic symbols (c.f. Jahr 1997:368). In the local schools (about 1870) the written standard (Danish) was gradually viewed as anti-national and the local dialects were regarded as the only representatives of a genuine, Norwegian tongue. This led to a policy of supporting and stimulating the use of local dialects in the schools as well (c.f. Jahr 1997:368).

In 1878, Parliament decided that in elementary and secondary schools *no spoken standard* should be taught whatsoever. Instead, the children as well as the teachers should use the local vernacular. This principle, which probably is unique to Norway, is valid even today and is now encoded in the Norwegian School Law. This Parliamentary decision is of great importance for the continued use of local dialects in Norway. In addition, through the first half of the 20th century, Parliament repeatedly ruled that the popular dialects, both urban and rural, should form the basis and norm for planned changes in the two written standards, Bokmål and Nynorsk (cf. Jahr 1997:368).

I also wish to mention that in Norway, there is no such thing as "bad Norwegian" or "incorrect Norwegian" in any other sense than when referring to Norwegian spoken with a foreign accent by non-native speakers. There is a general attitude among the population towards linguistic diversity as being something "natural", valuable and, as it were, obvious (c.f. Vikør 1989, Jahr 1997:365).

According to Helge Omdal (1995:102) there seems to be general agreement about the view that tolerance of the use of dialect has even increased in Norway during the last decades. Since 1970 we have experienced a period that is particularly favourable for the maintenance of dialect/non-standard speech and for its use outside its "natural" environment ("domain") and in formal situations. There is a great deal of evidence of increased use of non-standard speech, including regional dialects (see for instance Sandøy 1985: 271, Omdal 1995:102).

Summary

In this article I have focused on an old handwritten text from the beginning of the 17th century. The text is one of the oldest existing documents dealing with the Norwegian dialects. The author of the text is trying to copy the dialect forms in his contemporary local community.

1. The language in the text (the dialect forms) must be characterised as a "modern type".
2. The dialect demonstrated in the text shows us many dialect forms that still are salient features in the rural spoken language in this southern region of Norway.

As I have already mentioned: To explain how so many characteristic dialect forms have survived in the area from 1625 up to the present, we have to take a look into the Norwegian linguistic history. There we find that the local rural dialects in Norway had to serve as national linguistic symbols for more than a

hundred years. Another reason why so many characteristic dialect forms have survived in Norway, is the general positive attitude among 'modern' Norwegians towards linguistic diversity as being something "natural" and valuable. There is a long tradition in this country for using the local dialects in all situations. In this linguistic climate lies, in my view, the explanation why the dialect could survive through nearly 400 years.

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