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NORWEGIAN VARIABILITY IN INTERNATIONAL SYNTAX  
LITERATURE\*

**Abstract.** In an inquiry into how international theoretical linguists use examples from a less known language, Norwegian, many defects were found, mostly in publications on syntax. A number of the defects were related to the peculiar variation of written Norwegian. In this article, a selection of these defects will be described. Further, it will be discussed how dialectal phenomena are presented – as normal features of the language in general or explicitly as dialectal features – as well as their validity as arguments in the general linguistic debate. The objective is to show how variation and variants of one particular language actually are being used in parts of linguistics outside variation studies proper.

*Introduction*

In the continuous effort to spot new linguistic facts that can be used as arguments, material from more and more languages is used by theoretical linguists. Parallel to the quest for new linguistic features is the recent interest in linguistic variation at the level of closely related languages and dialects. A condition for the success of both enterprises is a full understanding of the linguistic phenomena discussed. A stringent requirement of “multilingualism” must be met.

What is the actual performance of linguists in this area? Do linguists use correct<sup>1</sup> data from languages that are not their mother tongue? Do they show that they are able to distinguish between correct and incorrect linguistic material? Do they really understand the phenomena they try to analyse, let alone the languages from which they are drawn? To find out, an inquiry was made into the use of Norwegian examples by non-native theoretical linguists in international linguistics literature.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Correct” not in the prescriptive sense of the word, but in its descriptive meaning as what is regarded as a part of the language in question in general by its native users.

<sup>2</sup> Norwegian as an example of a “minor”, less known language – and because this author has the linguistic competence of a native language user.

*The inquiry*

In an initial phase, all new general linguistics books published abroad in English that were purchased by the University of Oslo library<sup>3</sup> were searched for Norwegian data during a three years' period (2001–2004). Further, an extensive number of volumes of the 18 most well-known international linguistics journals were systematically searched as well. Many defective Norwegian examples were found. They turned out to pertain almost exclusively to syntax and typology. So, in a final phase, the library's remaining stock of books on theoretical syntax and typology from the last 50 years was searched, approximately 1500 books. No excerpts from titles published after 2005 were included in the inventory.

As for the defects, only those found in allegedly correct examples<sup>4</sup> were taken into consideration, and for instance punctuation errors were not counted as defects. Neither were word forms spelled according to obsolete (in practice, Dano-Norwegian) orthography, as such errors can be regarded as the result of conscious political choices made either by the linguists or their informants. Still, a surprising quantity of oddities and errors of all kinds were found, ranging from the most trivial character representation and font problems, orthographic errors, passing via syntactic errors to semantic and pragmatic intricacies. The defects pertain to various descriptive levels (characters, morphology, syntax etc.) involving various subsystems (NPs, VPs, AdvPs, and PPs) etc. However, the inquiry also revealed that many linguists were unfamiliar with the variability of present-day written Norwegian. In fact, a special description of incorrectness is connected with the Norwegian normative variability.

In the following, a representative selection of misunderstood examples relating to the written standards, their respective internal variability, and their relationship to the spoken dialects and to the role of written Danish will be presented.<sup>5</sup> Further, some consequences for the grammatical analyses at hand as well as for linguistics outside variation studies proper will be discussed.

<sup>3</sup> The library provides service to researchers and students of theoretical as well as descriptive linguistics at all levels.

<sup>4</sup> I.e. examples not marked by an asterisk.

<sup>5</sup> This part of the result is only mentioned in passing in Engh 2009, which is a linguistic discussion of the findings in general. The technical publishing and editorial side of the result is discussed in Engh [forthcoming]. The entire inquiry has been documented in Engh 2008.

*Written standards. The Danish connection*

Unlike other Western European languages, written Norwegian is characterised by a great variation. What is special is a liberal acceptance of varying orthographic and grammatical representations within as well as outside the officially given norm as established by Språkrådet<sup>6</sup>, the regulation authority for the Norwegian language. Although Norwegian is one language, it has two competing written standards. Apart from orthographic differences, the two differ with respect to the lexicon, morphology, and even syntax and style. In addition, both standards show a considerable variability, in the sense that each "slot" in a paradigm may be occupied by more than one morphological form. There are two reasons for this. One is the idea that the written language should reflect the rather diverse spoken dialects. The other is the ideology of rapprochement between the written standard based on a selection of the dialects (Nynorsk) and the successor of the older Dano-Norwegian standard (Bokmål).<sup>7</sup> There is a strong historical dimension here, and the relationship between Norwegian and especially written Danish is very important – and far from simple. This relationship to a different language is, in fact, the second property that makes Norwegian unique among Western European languages.

Foreign linguists often fail to distinguish correctly between the written standards of Norwegian, frequently and erroneously describing them as dialects. This inability is confirmed by my investigation. There are signs of a general unawareness of the differences between the written standards, and errors relating to the presentation of them and their respective internal variability,<sup>8</sup> as well as indiscriminate use of dialectal and atypical data. The

<sup>6</sup> The Language Council of Norway.

<sup>7</sup> Vikør 2001: 53–57 and 98–104 describes the relationship between Bokmål and Nynorsk for those unfamiliar with the language situation in Norway.

<sup>8</sup> It is important that this is not (only) a question of correct usage according to a prescriptive norm. The parallel forms of each standard are usually seen as indicators with a wider symbolic value, as the difference between the two written standards is generally internalised as "our" versus "their" Norwegian by their respective users. Where a sentence in one standard contains an instance of one feature from the other standard, the native users do not consider this as simply yet another orthographic flaw, but as a foreign element, pretty much like a Danish word or a Swedish syntactic pattern in the middle of what is, to all intents and purposes, a Norwegian sentence. In the present context: The wrong choice as to written standard is primarily not a question of linguists failing to observe the prescriptive norm. And the present article is certainly not a critique of linguists for not limiting their analyses to what prescriptive grammarians will consider correct language use.

identification of what is Norwegian in contrast to the neighbouring languages is also debatable.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Awareness of written standard*

Lack of awareness of the two written standards manifests itself in three ways: In either explicit or lacking labelling of examples, in incorrect analyses as reflected in translations or comments, and in mixing word forms pertaining to different standards.

#### *Inaccurate labelling*

Indications of written standard may not be given at all. For instance, the following two examples from the same source are in Nynorsk and Bokmål respectively,<sup>10</sup> although no indications are given in the article.

- (1) Desse konstruksjonar trur eg at er meir naturlege uttrykksmåtar.  
these constructions think I that are more natural expressions  
'These constructions, I think that they are more natural expressions.'

Det finns substantivforekomster vi ikke engang vet om skall klassifiseres som mengdetermer eller ikke.  
'There are noun occurrences that we don't even know if they should be classified as mass terms or not.'  
(Engdahl 1985: 13)

A word to word gloss to Bokmål of "Desse konstruksjonar" etc. will be "Disse konstruksjoner tror jeg at er mer naturlige uttrykksmåter." From a morphology point of view, the difference is obvious. Similarly, the Bokmål sentence "Det finns substantivforekomster" etc. can be glossed in Nynorsk as "Det finst substantivformar vi ikkje eingong veit om skal klassifiserast som mengdetermar eller ikkje."

<sup>9</sup> As for the representation of the examples, a certain simplification has been made in the following, compared to Engh 2008. With few exceptions, "local" numbering, "analytical" parentheses or hyphens, indexation, elements representing "gaps" etc. as well as tabs aligning corresponding elements in the Norwegian example and its gloss have been removed.

<sup>10</sup> Despite various errors, mainly irrelevant in this context: "finns" and "skall". Correct: "fins" and "skal". (Swedish "finns" and "skall".) As for "Desse konstruksjonar", see below.

Here, and in various other cases, distinguishing between Bokmål and Nynorsk is not important with regard to the point at issue, which is related to syntax. However, there are cases where a distinction is futile and even misleading: Citing a Nynorsk sentence as simply Norwegian is quite in order<sup>11</sup> (e.g. Siewierska 1988: 157).

- (2) NORWEGIAN (Faarlund 1981:48)  
(4.23) a. Eg vil i alle fall ikkje stole på han  
I will in any case not rely on him  
(Siewierska 1988: 157)

On the other hand, stating explicitly that a sentence is Nynorsk when it is identical in Bokmål or vice versa is unfortunate:

- (3) en nynorsk  
sykkelen har Marie kjøpt  
<bicyclette a Marie achetée> c'est-à-dire <la bicyclette, c'est Marie qui l'a achetée>  
(Perrot 1998: 621)

The same author labels another sentence simply as "norvégien" – even though it stands out as a Nynorsk sentence by its morphology (Perrot 1998: 641).

#### *Incorrect word analysis*

At a word and phrase level, lack of written standard awareness may materialise as incorrect analyses or comments:

- (4) The embedded clause variant of (1a) is given in (17). (17) immediately shows that ingen fuglar cannot be in the SPEC of the complement of vaere. (---).

(17) at det ingen fuglar var skotne  
That it no birds were shot+AGR3pl

(18) at det NP<sub>i</sub> vaere [AGRP t<sub>i</sub> AGR [VP skotne t<sub>i</sub>]]  
(Hoekstra 1990: 216)

- (5) Notice also that the inherently reflexive verb par excellence (i.e. the example most often mentioned in the literature, (---), viz. skamme sig 'be ashamed' has two variants in Norwegian dialects, see (141).

(141) a. skamme seg (Bokmål Norwegian)

<sup>11</sup> There is a long tradition of referring to Bokmål as plainly "Norwegian".

- shame REFL  
'be ashamed'  
b. skjemme-s (Ny-norsk Norwegian)  
shame-S  
'be ashamed'  
(Bergeton 2004: 300)

In (4), both the analytic remark and the gloss are wrong. The clause is definitely written in Nynorsk ("fuglar" and "skotne" are both Nynorsk forms, the remaining words are common to both written standards), and the infinitive of "var" in Nynorsk is VERE. However, VÆRE<sup>12</sup> is Bokmål. In (5), the linguist constructs an incorrect distinction between the two written standards, as SKAMME SEG and SKJEMMES belong to both written standards although with different stylistic values.<sup>13</sup>

In the cases above, the confusing information concerning the written standards is of little or no importance to the grammaticality of the isolated sentence or the grammatical reasoning in the context in which they appear. However, the evident unawareness of the differences reveals a certain lack of linguistic insight. Also, one can easily imagine cases where distinguishing between Bokmål and Nynorsk sentences is a necessity. It is also easy to find cases where unawareness of the difference between the written standards leads to errors in the examples that are subject to analysis.

#### *Errors and written standard. Words*

The most common type of errors consists in word forms pertaining to one standard being used in what is clearly a context of the other.

- (6) desse konstruksjonar trur jeg at er meir naturlege uttrykksmåta  
diese Konstruktionen denke ich daß sind mehr natürliche Ausdrucksmittel  
(Fanselow 1991: 338)
- (7) at det ikke var skote noe fuglar  
that he not has shot any birds  
(Hoekstra 1990: 217)
- (8) Det har vore en katt i kjøkenet.  
'There has been a cat in the kitchen.'  
(Bobaljik and Thráinsson 1998: 55)

<sup>12</sup> The only possible interpretation of incorrect "vaere".

<sup>13</sup> Note that "Ny-norsk" (with a hard hyphen) is incorrect in English as well as in Norwegian. Correct Norwegian form: "nynorsk". As for the "dialects" remark, see below.

- (9) Harald fortalde Jon om ham/seg selv  
Harald told John about!<sup>14</sup>  
(Büring 2005: 76)
- (10) ??Dei undredes hvorfor bildet av hverandre var solgt  
They wonder why the picture of each other was sold  
(Everaert 1986: 253n.)

"jeg" 'I', an emblematic Bokmål form, appears in (6), which is a Nynorsk sentence.<sup>15</sup> This also holds for "ikke" 'not' of (7) and "en" 'a' of (8) (Nynorsk "eg", "ikkje", and "ein"<sup>16</sup>). What clearly signals these sentences as Nynorsk are the forms "skote" (Bokmål "skutt", "fuglar" (Bokmål "fugler"), and "vore" (Bokmål "vært"), "kjøkenet" (Bokmål "kjøkkenet"). ("at", "det", "var", "har", "katt", and "i" are common to the two written standards.) In contrast, "fortalde" 'told' of (9) is Nynorsk in what is clearly a Bokmål sentence (Bokmål "fortalte"; both "ham" and "selv" are Bokmål forms – Nynorsk "han"/"honom" and "sjøl(v)"), whereas "undredes" of (10) is a markedly archaic form of Bokmål in what is, at a strictly morphological level, a normal Bokmål sentence except for Nynorsk "dei" 'they', which ought to be Bokmål "de".<sup>17</sup> To any native Norwegian user, such a combination of morphologically marked words of both written standards in the same sentence is an elementary mistake.

#### *Phrase level*

At phrase level, the mistakes are usually mentioned in connection with inaccurate assertions. Many mistakes were found concerning determination of the noun phrase. Cf. "denna man%(nen) (Mainland Scandinavian) this man-(the)" explained as "In Mainland Scandinavian (---), the optionality of the article appears to be a matter of dialectal variation, represented by "%". (Giusti 1994: 241f.) In a footnote, she adds:

<sup>14</sup> The original gloss does not cover "ham/seg selv", 'himself' with Harald or Jon as referents.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. my discussion of (1) above.

<sup>16</sup> "noe" of (7) is possible albeit less used than "noko". However, "noe" is neuter singular, while plural is required, "noen" or "nokre".

<sup>17</sup> Additionally, (6) contains the error "uttrykksmåta" (correct: "uttrykksmåtar") and (10) is incomprehensible – despite the correct words – and thus a sentence completely unacceptable to native users. Apart from that, "undredes", a past form, is translated as 'wonder' (present).

“With respect to this problem it seems quite difficult to distinguish clearly between the two variants in that the occurrence of the suffixed article is banned by the academy of certain national languages but used in the spoken languages. It can be roughly stated that Swedish allows it freely, including the formal language, Norwegian allows it in spoken varieties, while Danish does not display it at all.” (Giusti 1994: 242n.)

This is stated categorically by others, e.g.

- (11) (---), Danish and the formal Bokmål variety of Norwegian obligatorily shed the noun-article when an attributive adjective is added along with its adjective-article (---).  
(Plank 2003: 357f.)

As far as Norwegian is concerned, this is misleading. The suffixed article is generally recommended by Språkrådet, reflecting the attitude of the native user. Suffixed articles may be omitted only in the case of names of institutions: In written Norwegian – even in Bokmål, the standard closest to Danish – the lack of a suffixed definite article is very rare, unless we are not talking about a name. It has an archaic (i.e. Danish) ring. In spoken Norwegian, the lack of the suffixed article is exceptional.

As for names, another linguist contends correctly: “A noun phrase containing an adjectival modifier and a head noun may be lexicalised as a proper name, as in *the White House*. (---) In Scandinavian, we can see a tendency towards decreased definiteness marking. There is great variation in how this tendency is realized, however.” (Dahl 2004: 155.) In the following passage, moreover, erroneous explicit statements about determination in general and proper noun formation are combined:

- (12) As mentioned, Danish doesn’t have Dx in construction with descriptive attributive adjectives, and also does not do so in names: *Det Hvide Hus* ‘The White House’, *Det Døde Hav* ‘The Dead Sea’. Norwegian, for some reason, either behaves like Danish or employs a form of compounding: *Det Hvite Hus* but *Døde Havet*, the latter with compound intonation.  
(Holmberg and Platzack 2005: 454n.)

As already stated, Norwegian (especially Bokmål) has a tendency to follow Danish in the case of names. In other cases, the so-called double definite form is both recommended and used in practice. The description above reflects (written) Dano-Norwegian of more than one century ago.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The quoted passage contains an error too: “Døde Havet”. Correct: “Dødehavet”. As signalled in the quotation (cf. “but”), compounding cannot be used freely. For instance, this author has never heard nor seen any instance of “Hvitehuset”, which can only be understood as a joke.

### Other features

Other subsystems where variability may be involved are gender, relativisation, and genitive. In this inquiry, mistaken assertions concerning all of these were found: For instance: “Norwegian and Icelandic have retained the Old Scandinavian three-gender system with masculine, feminine and neuter.” (Platzack 2000: 301n.) This observation is unfortunate; since the foreign reader may get the impression that the three-gender system of Old Scandinavian has been retained completely in both modern languages. This is not the case. Nynorsk is closest to Icelandic in this respect. In Bokmål, the feminine gender leads a fluctuant existence with feminine as an optional category,<sup>19</sup> and is virtually ignored in conservative Bokmål and at least in one traditional dialect (city of Bergen).

One unique misunderstanding is “Norwegian non-restrictive relative clauses are structurally very similar to the Danish ones, except that *der* is used only in conservative Bokmål. Faarlund et al. (1997: 1056).” (Platzack 2002: 80.) Now, *DER* was used by authors of Riksmål, the precursor of today’s Bokmål and in Dano-Norwegian. Today, it will – without exception – be felt as a deliberate and conspicuous archaism or the straightforward borrowing of a Danish construction – presumably in order to achieve a special stylistic effect. This is, in fact, the case with the two examples given in Faarlund et al. (1997: 1056).

Of more general importance is the following incorrect observation: “In the possessor-doubling construction (13a) from Norwegian (Nynorsk dialect),<sup>6</sup> the doubling element *sin* is a reflexive, hence anaphoric (it is opposed to pronominal *hans*; see Delsing 1998, Fiva 1984).” (Haegeman 2004: 705.) Nynorsk is not a dialect. It is a written standard. The SIN genitive, on the other hand, is a dialectal phenomenon,<sup>20</sup> and its users are found in both the Nynorsk and the Bokmål camp. Also, numerous Nynorsk users will never say nor write the SIN genitive.

The manifestations of unawareness of the written standards mentioned above are all linguistic errors – both from the point of view of linguistic analysis and for the common native language user.

<sup>19</sup> Apart from the possibly consistent three-gender system of the articles, indefinite and definite, it represents some sort of latent category in other subsystems.

<sup>20</sup> See Torp 1988.

*Inconsistency as to written standard*

So far, a general lack of awareness as to the difference between the two written standards has been exposed. However, inconsistency may even prevail in a conspicuous manner when it comes to morphological variants of what is basically the very same written standard. One example is (13), where "ei bok" is presented as the indefinite noun phrase corresponding to definite "boken".

- (13) det blir kjøpt ei bok/\*boken  
it is bought a book/book-the  
(---)  
der blir gitt Jon ei bok/boken  
it is given John a book/book-the  
(Hoekstra 1995: 123)

As already mentioned at the outset, both Bokmål and Nynorsk are characterised by extensive variability, i.e. the possibility of choosing between members of a set of equivalent morphological forms. Two examples are the Bokmål indefinite article feminine singular {*en, ei*}, as in "en bok" or "ei bok", 'a book', and the postposed definite article feminine singular {-*en, -a*}, "boken" or "boka", 'the book'. This does not imply, however, that any element may be combined with or substituted for anyone else in the same (part of a) sentence or text. For instance, a native user of Norwegian would either write "ei bok", "boka" or "en bok", "boken". Writing "ei bok" and "boken" as alternatives in the very same sentence context is clearly an anomaly.<sup>21</sup>

Again, the lack of linguistic insight is patent both to the informed grammarian, and to the non linguist native speaker of Norwegian as well. It is all too clear that many foreigners are ignorant of the inherent variability of written Norwegian.

*Dialects*

Several examples have already been given where the linguist has mistaken written standards for dialects. These are not the only ones revealed by the

<sup>21</sup> By the way, in (13), "blir" is glossed as "is". Now, "is" is normally considered equivalent to "er", a form of VÆRE. Given that Norwegian also has a periphrastic VÆRE 'be' passive, the "blir" construction (present of BLI) ought to be glossed correctly as "becomes".

inquiry. A related phenomenon is the representation of regional (dialect) features as if they apply to Norwegian in general.<sup>22</sup>

At a morphological level, there are cases where one mixes standard and non-standard, exclusively dialect words and endings, using them as arguments without making the proper distinction between them:

- (14) In colloquial Scandinavian varieties, including at least Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish, demonstratives may be reinforced with adverbial-like elements.  
(---)  
(10) (a) den herre klokka (Norwegian)  
the here watch-the  
'this watch'  
(b) det derre huset  
the there house-the  
'that house'  
(Bernstein 1997: 90)

Both "herre" and "derre" are dialect word forms, unknown to any written standard of Norwegian. This fact has to be specified explicitly.

At a syntactic level, the situation is more complicated. First of all, nothing may be mentioned about variation at all. (15), for instance, is listed as Norwegian, although it has a definite dialectal if not archaic flavour.<sup>23</sup>

- (15) "Jeg har ingen bok kjøpt"<sup>24</sup>  
(Hoekstra 1995: 123)

Perhaps a handful of Norwegian speakers of the Southern coast variant will accept it today? To Norwegian language users in general, it is not grammatical without reservation. The "unmarked" Norwegian sentence would be "Jeg har ikke kjøpt noen bok".

In other cases, a variation is mentioned, although nothing is said about the dialects involved. C.f. this case of adverb placement:

- (16) Vi slap {\*ud} hunden {ud} (Dan)  
Vi slapp {ut} hunden {ut} (Nor)  
Vi släpte {ut} hunden {\*ut} (Swe)  
we let out the.dog out

<sup>22</sup> Despite wise caveats such as: "To talk about Swedish, Norwegian and Icelandic as monolithic entities with no variation among the speakers of each language is of course an oversimplification. As will become clear, the variation among Norwegian speakers is so important that even for an overview like this one, it is not possible to maintain the fiction of one grammar." (Maling and Zaenen 1982: 277n)

<sup>23</sup> This also holds for the syntax of (4) above.

<sup>24</sup> 'I haven't bought any book'.

'We let the dog out'  
(Svenonius 1994: 3/8)

This alternation is one of the features of Norwegian most frequently cited in the international literature. E.g. Bobaljik (2002: 236) and Toivonen (2003: 20) quoting Svenonius (1994), Zeller (2001: 285), Zeller (2002: 234), Svenonius (1996), and Holmberg and Platzack (2005: 427). See also Hróarsdóttir (2000: 316) and Thráinsson (2001: 198n.). Now, the second alternative illustrated in the Norwegian example "Vi slapp hunden ut" is hardly grammatical to all Norwegians unless further context is added, e.g. "på gården" 'into the backyard'. Without this expansion, the sentence is grammatical only to native users from the South-Western region. Some similar sentences, however, for instance "Mannen har drukket vinnen opp" 'The man has drunk up the wine' (Zeller 2002: 234)<sup>25</sup> will simply be considered as incorrect, even by most southerners.<sup>26</sup> Here, no relevant preposition phrase or other type of expansion is conceivable.

In the case of the examples above, we are, at best, talking about a truly regional variant which ought to be presented as such and used as an argument accordingly. In the following paragraph, one finds examples of the same kind. However, the last set of examples implies one further methodological complication.

(17) Norwegian and Icelandic have both possibilities, as shown by the following examples from Svenonius (1996):

- (11) a. Han spiste tørrfisk *opp*. (Norwegian)  
He ate dry.fish-the up
- b. Han spiste *opp* tørrfisk.  
he ate up dry.fish-the  
'He ate up the dried fish.'
- (12) a. Ég gerði nokkra bíla *upp*. (Icelandic)  
I fixed some cars up
- b. Ég gerði *upp* nokkra bíla.  
I fixed up some cars  
'I fixed up some cars.'

When the object is a weak pronoun, it is placed before the particle in Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic; in Swedish, it still tends to follow the

<sup>25</sup> "vinnen" is incorrect for "vinen" in a sentence drawn from Svenonius (1996: 10).

<sup>26</sup> Although even regional speakers from the same Southern city or township tend to disagree whether this is a correct sentence or not. (Martin Skjækkeland, p.c.)

particle. Evidently, the optionality of particle shift of DPs in Norwegian and Icelandic is similar to that found in English:

- (13) a. Hun har hengt det *opp*. (Norwegian)  
she has hung it up
- b. Hon har hängt *upp* det. (Swedish)  
she has hung up it  
(Holmberg and Platzack 2005: 427)

A sentence corresponding to "(13) b." of (17), "Ho har hengt opp den.", is perfectly grammatical in the Norwegian dialect area close to the South-Eastern Swedish border. (A fact which, in turn, emphasises Norwegian's relative position between Danish and Swedish.) This means that a dialectal feature from one area is included as arguments (cf. "spiste tørrfisk opp") while a dialect feature from another area (as in "har hengt opp det", a clear parallel to "har hängt upp det") is excluded.<sup>27</sup>

In the cases above, nothing is mentioned about dialects. A different attitude to dialect data is manifest when "mannen sitt hus" 'man-the his-REFL house' is labelled plainly as "(Norw.)" (Delsing 1998: 94), while "han Per" 'he Per', i.e. 'Per', has the label "(N.Norw.)" (Delsing 1998: 102). There is no doubt as to the grammaticality of the two phrases. Still, "mannen sitt hus" is above all a phenomenon characterising the Western dialects of Norwegian. "han Per" on the other hand, is, in fact, a construction used in the spoken language in most parts of Norway, with the South Western region as an exception. Again, there is labelling and use of dialect phenomena at will, which is also observed in reference to other subsystems, e.g. pseudo-coordination:

(18) Consider the (---) examples from the Trøndelag dialect of Norwegian (---)

- (26) (a) Det kom en mann og reparerte bilen min  
'There came a man and repaired my car.'
- (b) Det satt et menneske og leste avisen  
'There sat a person and read the newspaper.'
- (Cormack 1999: 60)

<sup>27</sup> It is revealing that the comparison with Icelandic is somewhat flawed as well. While Norwegian language users in general cannot alter freely between (11a) and (11b), Icelanders may choose (12a) or (12b). In Icelandic, this alteration represents a stylistic option for all language users. (Kjartan Ottosson, p.c.)

This example represents yet another twist to the dialect/language relationship, as both sentences are perfectly normal Norwegian, no matter the dialect.

#### Archaisms

As mentioned, there is a certain correspondence between Danish and several distinctively regional phenomena of Norwegian. At the dialect level, this can be seen as a regular part of the Scandinavian dialect continuum. In the written standards, such phenomena may be perceived as the result of influence from archaic written language as well.<sup>28</sup> The inquiry shows, however, that many archaic features are exploited in theoretical discussions without any additional information about mode, stylistic level or geographical distribution. The examples (4) and (15) above belong to this category and so do (19) and (20), which are more or less acceptable, although archaisms.

- (19) Jeg har ingen set  
 'I have no one seen'  
 "I haven't seen anyone."  
 (Thráinsson 2001: 197)<sup>29</sup>

- (20) Jag fick boken {skrivnen/\*skrivet} (Swe)  
 I got the.book written.M/written.N  
 Jeg fikk boka skrevet (Nor)  
 I got the.book written  
 Jeg fik skrevet bogen (Dan)  
 I got written the.book  
 'I got the book written'  
 (Svenonius 1994: 3/51)

As a matter of fact, the syntax of the Danish parallel in (20)<sup>30</sup> is more appealing to a native user of present day Norwegian and should be considered the unmarked case, in the sense of 'I managed to get the book written [before the deadline]'.<sup>31</sup> In the same way, a sentence such as "[Til

<sup>28</sup> I.e. written Danish, cf. Vikør 2001: 54.

<sup>29</sup> "set" is an error. Correct: "sett". Cf. Danish "set".

<sup>30</sup> Note that "boken" in the Swedish sentence is an error. Correct: "boken". (Swedish BOK means 'ram', "boken" definite singular. This error must be due to a confusion with the indefinite plural form of BOK 'book', "böcker".)

<sup>31</sup> A different, however marginal, interpretation of the Norwegian sentence as 'I managed to get the book written [by a professional journalist]' is, in fact, possible - but then it will be no equivalent to the Danish sentence.

hvem] skriver du", literally 'to whom write you' (Webelhuth 1992: 124) is felt to be acceptable only under special circumstances (with extraordinary accentuation/stress). Unacceptable under all circumstances is "Jeg setter ham en hatt på hodet" (Hoekstra 1995: 122).<sup>32</sup> Today, this particular word order is acceptable in a limited number of idiomatic expressions only.<sup>33</sup>

Another much quoted confusing sentence is "Så provoserer fortsatt Salomes mannshunger dagens publikum." 'Then Salome's hunger for men still provokes today's audiences.' (Ernst 2002: 434.) The origin of this sentence<sup>34</sup> is unclear. In fact, it bears all the signs of being a literary quotation from an old-fashioned Dano-Norwegian source from at least one century ago. As such, it is hard to understand for any contemporary native speaker of Norwegian - as they are for the grammarian himself, cf. the English translation, where "så" is mistaken for 'then' instead of 'thus'. At any rate, such examples have hardly any validity in a discussion of modern Norwegian.

#### Atypical language use

Still more dubious in a discussion of modern Norwegian are arguments based on geographically and otherwise extremely limited slang or more or less single child language:

- (21) Furthermore, it turns out that even the pronominal forms aren't always identical, (---).

min jakke jakka mi (Oslo dialect)  
 my jacket jacket.DEF my  
 (---)

min bror brorsan (Sarpsborg dialect)  
 my brother brother-my"  
 (Svenonius 1993: 215)

- (22) Hvem er det's (bil)  
 who is it+s (car)  
 'Whose (car) is that?'  
 (Newmeyer 1998: 267)

<sup>32</sup> Literally 'I put him a hat on (his) head'.

<sup>33</sup> E.g. "skytte henne ett skudd for baugen" 'fire her a shot across her bow'.

<sup>34</sup> According to Ernst, the examples are drawn from Svenonius 2000, which turns out to be Svenonius 2002: 221, where an almost identical sentence is given.



The first couple of phrases of (21) is a reminder of the charm of Norwegian variation. The last two phrases, however, constitute a far from perfect pair. "min bror" is the rigid, written language "high" form, just like "min jakke". "brorsan", on the contrary, is slang; a Swedish casual word, used as a loanword with a distinct Swedish flair both at a lexical, morphological, and syntactic level.<sup>35</sup> This is a different word in any respect, and it is my firm conviction as a native speaker of Norwegian that the only Norwegian that may have uttered a sentence such as (22) without any reservation must be a small child – before being acknowledged as a regular user of Norwegian.<sup>36</sup> This sentence is unique, in the sense that not all Norwegian children of any dialect necessarily pass through a phase of language learning involving similar sentences.<sup>37</sup>

#### *Language complexity and consistent documentation*

The indiscriminating use of data from different written standards and dialects as well as atypical linguistic data is a reminder of what it actually means that a word or a sentence is associated with a particular language. This relationship is generally complicated. The case of Norwegian is still more complicated, since there is no accepted uniform norm for written Norwegian. In a European perspective, the two written standards and their internal variability are exotic phenomena, hard to grasp for a foreigner.<sup>38</sup> Still, this cannot serve as an excuse for defective documentation, let alone incorrect data. The written standards and their internal variability are integral parts of modern Norwegian. They have to be understood and adequately presented by anyone who wants to discuss and use Norwegian data. The contrary inevitably arouses suspicions of a general ignorance. This also holds for dialectal variation. However, the proper treatment of dialect

<sup>35</sup> Sarpsborg is a town close to the Swedish border. However, the use of this noun is not limited to this particular region.

<sup>36</sup> Newmeyer seems to have found this example in Fiva 1987, 43. However, in Fiva's monograph, this example is marked with an interrogation mark, and it is explicitly stated that the -S suffix can only "marginally occur" in this position.

<sup>37</sup> By all means, the example has a value – as a unique linguistic deviation, shedding light over how one Norwegian toddler learnt his/her mother tongue, language processing of children, and possibly other features of a psycholinguistic nature. However, it just isn't a regular Norwegian sentence. (Needless to say, the sentence contains a clear error from a normative point of view.)

<sup>38</sup> Even distinguishing between separate languages isn't always a trivial task. In fact, one aspect of this is that clearly Swedish examples are mistaken as Norwegian and vice versa (Engh 2008: 57).

data is not only a question of knowledge and facts; the methodological point of view is equally important.

Norway is a special case concerning variation in written standards, dialects are found in all European languages. So, one should expect that the use of dialect material drawn from Norwegian should comply with general rules of linguistic methodology. This inquiry produced a different result.

Traditional Norwegian dialectology exaggerated the uniqueness of the dialects. Ironically, this tradition was supported by structuralism, when features were analysed in relation to the idealised dialect as a system. This inquiry shows that a different approach is often adopted. There is a tendency to leave a feature of a given dialect out of consideration if it suits the argument. Complementarily, one geographically limited phenomenon can be considered as representative of the language as a whole, apparently for the same reason.<sup>39</sup> With few exceptions, nothing at all is said about the very fact that the features at issue belong to certain dialects.

However, the inquiry shows yet another way to use dialect data. It consists in generally correct references to single features from well identified dialects with no explicit association to the Norwegian language as a whole. They are only presented as single arguments in a grammatical reasoning. One example from the inquiry is the repeated references to the dialect of Hallingdalen (Roberts 1993: 265, Vikner 1997: 190, and Alexiadou and Fanselow 2002: 226f.).

The common denominator of all these different uses of dialectal material is a *biased* selection of language data, where dialectal phenomena are included or excluded at the linguists' own discretion in order to make a point about the language in question, or about language in general. Hardly any attention is paid to the syntactic dialect system to which a given feature belongs or its relationship to the system of the language in its entirety.<sup>40</sup> This can be seen as an infringement of "structural consistency".<sup>41</sup> Of course, a requirement of structural consistency does not apply solely for variants

<sup>39</sup> It is also worthwhile mentioning that the selection of syntactic dialect features is *accidental*, as the distribution of syntactic features is largely unknown at present. Traditional dialectology focussed on phonology and morphology, and the new interest in dialect syntax has not yet (2005) found its proper methodology and produced reliable results.

<sup>40</sup> Note that this has, in principle and in time, nothing to do with the embryonic interest in *systematic* dialectal variation in syntax among theoretical linguists, although the authors may belong to the environments where such an interest can be found today.

<sup>41</sup> In this respect, post-structuralism has turned non-structuralist. To all intents and purposes, gleaning single linguistic facts from particular languages, written standards, or dialects without taking the structural relationship to their respective variants into consideration is contrary to basic methodological tenets.

along a geographical dimension. Consistent use of variants is required also in the case of archaisms (no matter the mode, stylistic level etc.), atypical language (slang, unique expressions from small children etc.), and written standards.

### Conclusion

The inquiry shows that Norwegian examples used by non-native linguists contain an extraordinary quantity of errors. Many of these are related to a lack of knowledge of the variation that characterises modern Norwegian and its historical preconditions. Elements pertaining to different dialects or standards are included in the very same (set of) examples, archaic features (mainly of Danish origin) are not identified, etc. Clearly, the linguists in question are not able to distinguish between correct and incorrect sequences. Additionally, basically correct sequences are attributed to the wrong variants, archaic examples are analysed as if they were representative of present day Norwegian, and there seems to be a widespread confusion as to the very nature of the variation of written and spoken Norwegian.

Most of the syntactic analyses seen in isolation do not seem to be flawed because of the lexical and morphological errors made presenting examples from written standards. Still, the lexical and morphological defects and the general lack of insight manifested *may* indicate defect analyses, as deficient documentation is the synonym of bad data. In fact, one can raise the question whether the linguists actually understand the context of the phenomena they pretend to analyse. In some cases, one may even wonder whether they understand Norwegian at all. Did they analyse their examples themselves,<sup>42</sup> or do they rely on the analyses of somebody else?<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the unsystematic selection of variation data whenever it is seen to strengthen a given argumentation not only represents an infringement of basic linguistic methodology, it also has inadequate analyses as its natural consequence.

Taken by and large, it is clear that the linguists covered in this inquiry have ventured beyond their competence as far as the Norwegian language is concerned and that they have not been fully able to base their research on the linguistic competence of others. The new grammatical “multilingualism” of modern theoretical linguistics has its limits and, altogether, the way

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Engh 2009: 270.

<sup>43</sup> For typologists, this is a risk of the trade, cf. Engh 2009: 299. Still, it should also be a part of the trade to avoid dubious data, and to treat the remaining material with exactness and sound criticism.

Norwegian variation data is used can be seen as an indicator of modern theoretical syntax’ troubled relation to empirical data.

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