

Changes in Newspaper Language explored as Changes in Cultural Norms

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Abstract

Norms are developed by the people in a society to make it easier to live together in a cultural community. The most important norm system in any society is the language. Norms maintain a firm cultural code, although they must adjust to changes in society as well. Because norms are conservative, some members of the community oppose and protest against changing norms – as we have seen in Norway – and criticize the contemporary standard of media language. The critics mix up change with decay and language with grammar. But any mother language is a cultural code regulated not only by grammatical, but also by semantic, phonological, stylistic and pragmatic norms. Furthermore, grammatical norms are also integrated into historical processes of gradual change. In Norway, the government’s legalized language standards changed several times during the 20th century. My findings show that people idealize the language standards they learn during their school years. Mastering those standards makes them feel secure, so they naturally dislike any deviation from the cultural codes they have adopted. But most people seem to be satisfied with the norms in newspaper language because they think simplicity and precision are more important than grammatical correctness. Otherwise, my findings also show that the Norwegian newspaper language of the 20th century became more simple, precise, correct, creative and engaging – but less serious.

Keywords: norm, language, media, newspaper, change, culture, history, sociolect

Language as Cultural Norm

Norms prescribe ways of being and acting together in a society. Norms are conventional in the sense that they are not given by nature, but instead are created by the people in a society to make it easier to live together within a cultural community.

The Latin word “norma” means angle, while “regula” means ruler. Both these Latin words are tools for construction and building. To build a society we need rules and norms. The Swedish linguist Ulf Teleman (1979) thinks that it is the norm system that constitutes a community or group, and the most important norm system in any society is the language. We have to communicate – make common – in a society, and language is our most important tool for doing so. To make sure that the language is common, and by that make it common, it has to follow norms and rules we all agree upon.

Development of written Language Standards in Norway

Accordingly, at least in Norwegian society, there is a longstanding tradition of discussing, complaining about and even quarrelling about linguistic norms. In 1814, when Norway was separated from Denmark, these two countries had been unified for more than 400 years. In this period Danish

was used as the written standard in Norway, and Norwegians felt that the difference between the spoken and written language was too vast. In addition to this, the spirit of national liberation and romanticism encouraged different ways of establishing a Norwegian standard for written language, and two of them became dominant. One way was to modify the written Danish standard by letting Norwegian words and grammar filter into it, while the other was to construct a new standard based on the spoken language in various parts of Norway, which is called "Nynorsk" (New Norwegian).

In extension Norway is quite big. At least it is long. But its population is only 4.7 million. Mountains separate people living in the different parts of Norway, and the differences among the many dialects from these different areas had become great during the union with Denmark. Developing a common written standard based on the spoken language from different parts of Norway was a great challenge, and this radical way of establishing a new written Norwegian standard resulted in mainly focusing on the dialects from the western part of Norway. As a consequence of this, New Norwegian is only used by 15% of the population today, while 85% use the standard written Norwegian, which I will call the majority standard Norwegian (MSN).

During the 19th century, there was quite a bit of conflict both between and about these standardization projects, and most of the Norwegian people still wrote some sort of Danish at the end of the century. From 1814 until 1905, Norway was unified with Sweden, but the Norwegians were never forced to write Swedish. I have to add here that Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians use closely related languages and quite easily understand each other's languages.

But still, the shape and design of the written standards for Norwegian were not legislated through any decision by the parliament at the start of the 20th century. However, in 1907, 1917, 1938, 1959, 1981, and 2004, the government made important decisions in terms of regulating these standards. In 1917, 1938, and 1959, the ambition was to join the two standards into one, although in 1981 and 2004 this ambition was discarded. The efforts to bring the standards together had failed because of a political struggle based on language, which had some strong elements of political disagreement.

Democratization of Language

Conservative people on the MSN side have traditionally preferred a written standard which differs only slightly from the Danish norm, and fits well with their own sociolect. They believe that their standard is non-distinctive, and should be the ideal standard for all other groups in society as well. Deviations from their own standards are conceived of as bad and wrong, even ugly. Since other dialects and sociolects differ from their own norm system, they think of these differences as a result of silly, clumsy and careless people's inaccurate and neglectful use of language, much like Professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady* (Loewe, Lerner, & Shaw, 1959).

Since they represent the cultural and economic power in the society, they also controlled most of the Norwegian press throughout the 20th century. As a result, many Norwegian newspapers did not follow the linguistic norms legalized by the government, but instead chose to follow their own standard that was closer to the traditional Danish norm as a kind of protest. Today, newspapers follow the norms legalized by the government, since the government has left the policy of joining the two standards into one.

However, due to an egalitarian ideology in Norwegian society which has been supported by a strong representation of the Social Democratic Party, the ordinary people's language has slowly but surely also exerted an influence on the conservative MSN of the newspapers. I call this process the democratization of language. Another example of this is that dialects are much more freely used in radio and TV now than they were, for instance, 40 years ago. Common people do not feel ashamed of their own language as much as they used to, so the power of Professor Higgins has somewhat decreased, so to speak.

Because newspapers have to earn money and need many people to buy their paper in order to accomplish this, newspaper language has been slightly altered to fit the style and fashion of the majority of the audience, including ordinary young people. This has been noticed by conservatives among newspaper readers, who complain about a decay in the language standard which has received much attention, although this type of complaint is not uniquely Norwegian. In Sweden, Denmark, and Germany, as well as in most countries with national standards for their written language, we find discussions of this kind.

Social Aspects of Norm Change

This situation may be explained by the two main features of norms. Norms are conservative, which is necessary to keep the cultural code firm, but these norms also have to adjust to changes in society.

Changes in linguistic norms are usually noticed early in media language because this type of language is used to present new happenings, developments, fashions, etc. Because norms are conservative, a lot of the community members oppose and protest against norm changes—as we have seen in Norway—and criticize the contemporary standard of media language.

Any mother language is a cultural code regulated by semantic, phonological, grammatical, stylistic, and pragmatic norms. The people who criticize newspaper language mainly focus on deviation in grammatical norms. In their opinion, newspaper language should be correct; the endings, flexions, cases, and orthography should remain as they have always been. According to the standard of the upper class, if the language remains stable this is a good thing from their viewpoint. The spoken media language has also been criticized as well for phonological failures, as in the case of Eliza Doolittle from *My Fair Lady*.

Nonetheless, these norms are always changing as time goes by. Jean Aitchison (2001) finds that all languages change by norm deviation and norm break, and that the stimuli for linguistic norm changes are complex and based upon both internal and external linguistic preconditions.

Some linguistic changes are due to physiological conditions such as the shape of the speech organ and impulses from the language center in the brain, which explain the tendency to omit ending consonants and unstressed syllables in words.

Other linguistic changes are due to social conditions such as fashion, foreign influence and social need (Aitchison, 2001). Edwards adds power:

Economic success and communicative efficiency militate against the viability of "small" languages in contact with powerful ones. These are factors of great weight, accompanying

social processes like urbanisation, modernisation and social access which are very difficult to combat (even if this were generally desired, which it is not). (Edwards, 1985, p. 163)

Helge Sandøy, a Norwegian professor in dialectology, sociolinguistics, and language history, has constructed what he calls the Norwegian circle of linguistic norm influence, in which he maintains that some institutions have a greater norm influence than others. He draws the model as a circle to show that the norms which influence institutions feed back to each other in some reciprocal system, but it is also possible to present the norm power institutions from a hierarchical perspective. Sandøy (2003) puts the newspapers in the number one position within this hierarchy. Their linguistic norms influence the written language standard practiced in governmental and ministerial documents, which have a greater influence than the publishing companies, the language council, school teachers, pupils, and the rest of the audience—the common people. Sandøy's model shows the importance of power in influencing the written language standard, though I think that business and industry are missing in this model. In my opinion, they might have aspired to the top position in the hierarchy.

Aitchison (2001, p. 256) mentions that a lot of people feel uneasy about the dialect variation in England. They maintain that “the accent that was originally of one particular area, London and the south-east, is ‘better’ than the others.” People from this area maintain that they speak English “without an accent.” A position of hegemony is associated with neutrality and non-distinctiveness.

Social conditions differ in different societies and at different times. Therefore, the linguistic changes also have different features in different societies at different times. However, social conditions only work if the language is ready for a specific change. “They simply make use of inherent tendencies which reside in the physical and mental make-up of human beings” (Aitchison, 2001, p. 256). Consequently, the causes for linguistic changes are to be found on different levels. The diffusion of norm deviation reflects changes in society, but norm deviation initiates processes of change only when they are connected with prestige, i.e., “They are markers of group membership, and people outside the group want, consciously or subconsciously, to belong” to the group (Aitchison, 2001, p. 83). This explains the development of both dialects and sociolects: When norm deviation, whether due to creativity or for some other physiological or social reason, is observed in the language being used by a leading person in a community, the other members of that community gradually adopt the deviating features of this innovative and prestigious person to show their support and solidarity. When all the members of that community have adopted this norm deviation, it then becomes the new norm.

Vital changes spread, although the process may proceed slowly. Some norm changes may need hundreds of years to become a new norm, which explains why people get so angry about observed norm changes. They do not see these changes as being part of a long-term process made necessary by the linguistic system itself. Some of the grammatical deviations observed by the conservative readers who complain about what they call the decay of newspaper language are part of this process as well.

One example in Norwegian is the disintegration of the case system for nouns and pronouns. Traditionally, MSN has separated the two forms “han” and “ham” – which means “he” and “him.” The tendency towards omitting “ham” from the system is strong (and has been legalized by the Norwegian language council). Traditional MSN has also separated the two forms “de” and “dem” –

which mean “they” and “them.” The tendency towards omitting “dem” from the system is strong (but only legal under certain conditions and with some restrictions). The disintegration of the case system for nouns and pronouns in Norwegian started approximately 700 years ago. So what we experience as a decay of norms is in fact part of a systematic norm changing process that must constantly be integrated into any currently existing language, which has to make the necessary adjustments in order to serve the communicative needs in the society exposed to these historical changes.

Not all norm deviations are part of a greater norm system change process, but as I have demonstrated, a lot of them are. Other norm deviations may result in norm change processes, though we do not yet know if they will. The question is whether the deviations are necessary enough to win the fight against established norms. The norm system would be damaged if all innovations would replace the old norms, becoming new all at once. Innovations have to fight a struggle against established norms to prove that they are necessary and strong enough to replace the old ones. You could say that the process of norm changing demonstrates the well-known principle of survival of the fittest (Darwin, 1996 [1871]). For the norm deviations to prove themselves to be vital and fit, they have to be exposed to critique by community members who are strongly loyal to the established norms – much like the critics of newspaper language.

Preferred Norms in the Newspaper Language

As I mentioned above, language as a cultural code is also regulated by semantic, stylistic, and pragmatic norms, and seem to be no less important than the grammatical and phonological norms.

In my study of norm changes in Norwegian newspaper language over the course of the 20th century (Roksvold, 2005), I suspected that people in Norwegian society other than the conservative people who think of any norm deviation as decay might think of language quality as not only being correct in the sense that it corresponds with established grammatical norms. For that reason, I asked 262 respondents which qualities good newspaper language should have, in their opinion. The respondents were recruited from four different groups: experienced journalists, inexperienced journalism students, Norwegian language teachers, and ordinary readers who were employed at a Norwegian telecommunication company. The respondents were found by stratified selection, with good representation within each group. I presented them a questionnaire with both open and closed ended questions (multiple choice) about their conception of – and views of – norms and the quality of newspaper language. What is interesting about these groups is that they have a different relationship to newspaper language and the critics of newspaper language: The journalists make a living by writing for newspapers, and are being criticized. The journalism students are going to make a living by writing for newspapers, and are going to be criticized. The Norwegian language teachers make a living by teaching their students how to write well for newspapers, and they are potential critics. The ordinary readers only purchase and read newspapers and are not all professionally related to newspaper language, yet they are potential critics.

The journalists primarily wanted good newspaper language to be simple (i.e., easy to read), precise, creative, and engaging. The students wanted it to be precise, simple, engaging, and correct. The readers wanted it to be simple, precise, correct, and serious, and the teachers wanted it to be precise, simple, creative, correct, and engaging. Among these various respondents, correctness was not mentioned as the main quality of good newspaper language. The most important qualities to

them were simplicity and precision. In all categories, some also mentioned aspects of norms which I will call resources: The journalists are supposed to have an adequate knowledge about how to write well, and they should have time enough to secure the quality of the texts they submit for production. In short: During this questionnaire, I identified a total of seven main norms for good newspaper language, among which correctness was one:

1. Simplicity is mainly a stylistic norm.
2. Precision is mainly a semantic norm.
3. Correctness is mainly a grammatical norm.
4. Creativity is mainly a stylistic norm.
5. Engagement is mainly a semantic norm.
6. Seriousness is mainly a semantic norm.
7. Resource is mainly a pragmatic norm.

Practiced Norms in the Newspaper Language

Then, on the basis of these criteria I have analyzed five Norwegian newspapers from 1903, 1933, 1963, and 1993 to describe norm changes during the 20th century (Roksvold, 2005). The newspapers were *Adresseavisen*, *Dagbladet*, *Gudbrandsdølen*, *Nordlys*, and *Sunnhordland*. They are published in different locations in Norway and are of different sizes and ideological orientation. The method applied was mainly linguistic content analysis. The data size for each newspaper was 10,000 words about domestic news at the end of April in each year. In total, the corpus amounted to 200,000 words.

Norwegian newspaper language from that period clearly became simpler. The sentences are shorter, the subordinated clauses are fewer, their syntactic construction is less complicated and the words are shorter at the end of the 20th century than at the beginning.

The differences in language and style between the newspapers are fewer at the end of the century. One might even say that a specific linguistic and stylistic norm for newspapers had been developed during the 20th century. In 1903, the differences between the newspapers were greater, and some newspapers wrote in the same style as we would find in bureaucratic documents.

These tendencies are due to changes in the newspaper audience – the readers. More people can read, most can afford to buy a newspaper, and ordinary people are not familiar with the bureaucratic style of language. The newspaper audience prefers exciting and entertaining stories with human interest. Newspapers have to compete with other media such as film, radio, television, the Internet, and so on to capture the interest and attention of their audience and they receive inspiration from the narrative techniques used in these media.

To a growing extent, however, English words are being mixed into Norwegian newspaper language – still not that much so far, but seven times more frequently in 1993 than in 1903.

Since at least the 1960s, active sentences in journalism are considered to give more precise information than passive sentences (Grunwald, Smistrup, & Veirup, 1997) because passive sentences often conceal the agent. This view has later been opposed (Blom, 2008). Even so, the frequency of passive sentences has diminished in the corpus from 1903 to 1993 as seen in the omission of the bureaucratic style. Incomplete sentences were less frequent in material analyzed from 1963,

although a lack of precision due to syntax failures was less frequent in the texts from 1903. In total, the lack of precision seemed to be largest in the 1933 corpus.

Errors due to carelessness, punctuation errors, and “de/dem” errors (explained above) are less frequent in the 1903 material than later on, but orthographic errors and morphologic and idiomatic deviations are less frequent in the corpus texts from 1993. Altogether, the texts from 1933 seemed to be the least correct.

To secure the loyalty of readers through journalistic quality, newspaper journalists have shown great creativity in documenting their reports by using even more varied sources in their research. The genres are also much more varied and polished at the end of the 20th century than at the beginning, thus satisfying the readers’ interest in and need for human interest stories (please note that my corpus only contained domestic news, not all types of articles). Thus, modern storytelling in newspaper journalism shows an increasing importance in the creativity norm.

To a great extent, storytelling in modern media has appealed to the involvement and engagement of the audience by primarily activating the human interest aspect in talking on a more personal way about their subjects. Over the last decade, the audience has been particularly encouraged to enter into a dialogue with the mass media. In my analyzed newspaper corpus, the norm of engagement seems to have been stable and not very important in the years 1903, 1933, and 1963, but in the 1993 texts the importance of this norm seems to have increased remarkably.

Competition in the market also seems to favor the use of exclamation marks. Hyperbole – exaggerations – with dramatic, sensational connotations are preferred to more neutral, adequate descriptions, and are much more frequent in the 1993 material than in the texts from 1903. As a result, the importance of the norm of seriousness seems to have decreased in the 20th century.

In general, the level of education, particularly in journalism education, as well as the knowledge about research methods, the insight into principles of language use and of ethically based research – in short, the professionalization among journalists – is higher and the equipment for research and production technology is better in 2000 than in 1900 (Roksvold, 2005). The conditions for the norm of resource have also improved during the 20th century.

The Golden Age at School

Why do readers then complain about the quality of modern newspaper language, thinking that the standard and norms have decayed? My 262 respondents may disclose a little about this. I asked them when – in their own opinion – newspaper language might have been at its best, and when they thought the quality of the newspaper language might have been at its worst. Many of them thought the quality of newspaper language was at its worst “now.” When I compared the answers to the imagined best quality period with the age of the respondents, I found that the “golden age” of newspaper language was imagined to have been at the time when the respondents themselves were in school. At school, we learn the linguistic norms, and what we learn at school is perceived to be true. Changes in linguistic norms since then are experienced as decay and perhaps as threatening to one’s conception of identity.

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