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Perspectives on Two Centuries of Norwegian Language Planning and Policy

Theoretical Implications and Lessons Learnt

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The significance of a historical perspective on language planning and language policy making – Listening to past voices to inform future policy: the voice of Johan Storm

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Turning to history

The principal purpose of this paper is to focus attention on the significance of a historical perspective on language planning and language policy-making. The reasons for intervention in languages (corpus planning) and in the relationship between languages (status planning) are not different with each new generation, and neither are the tools available to the language planner. Language planning, at least in the form of establishing writing systems, setting standards and teaching languages, is possibly the oldest field of applied linguistics (broadly conceived). It seems obvious therefore that those involved in language planning today should take an interest in the experiences, the perceived successes and failures, of our predecessors, but this is seldom the case in practice.

The formal institutionalised study of the history of linguistics in the western tradition only dates back around half a century. Consequently, historians of linguistics have felt the need to justify their endeavour and to persuade others of the value of a historical perspective on our contemporary work. Even Hovdhaugen (1982: 10–11) makes the case with great passion:

History gives us a frame of reference to understand our own situation, problems, and achievements as well as for evaluating these in a proper perspective. A knowledge of the history of our science may in the long run lead to fewer revolutions and greater leaps forward, but also to fewer dead ends and less wasted work. Above all it may make us conscious of what we are doing and why we are doing it—a reasonable demand to make of any scholar [...] in my opinion the most striking aspect of our science is the gradual accumulation over the centuries of an immense knowledge about language which we all to a large extent draw upon. To become aware of this may perhaps be one of the most significant revolutions in linguistics.

So the historiography of linguistics reminds us of the “immense knowledge” of language, theoretical and applied, which is to be found in writings from the past and which we are at best naïve and at worst arrogant to overlook.

However, sociolinguistics generally has been accused of failing to learn from history. Back in 1999 Jan Blommaert was calling for “the historiography

of language ideologies” (1999: 1), and in 2010 Mufwene was still calling for “more historical depth than is exhibited in the current linguistics literature”, echoing Marnie Holborow’s concern that “many linguists write out history”. Norwegian linguists (such as Hovdhaugen, whom we have just cited) have been prominent in bucking this tendency and combining historical and sociological perspectives in pioneering ways, from Einar Haugen, who Bernard Spolsky (2010: 3) regards as one of the “founding fathers” of sociolinguistics, to Ernst Håkon Jahr (cf. Jahr 2014). It may be that the particular Norwegian experience of current language challenges arising very directly from a specific set of historical social and political circumstances has rendered this approach a more natural one than in some other polities. On the importance of learning from past practices in planning for the future, Darquennes (2016: 33) has written more recently still that

[t]he outcomes of this kind of [historical] research [...] deserve to be taken into consideration by those who reflect on the future language policy of Europe in general, and language learning and teaching strategies in today’s Europe in particular.

There is then a groundswell in the field of sociolinguistics that the history of linguistics perspective is ignored at our peril. Given the impossibility of forward-look, of seeing into the future to find out what the effects and side-effects of a particular language policy might be, then a backward-look to actual experiences in the past is essential for any responsible language planner since “we are in transition, just as much as every past era was part of a process of transition and change” (Law 2003: 7).

Historical sociolinguistics, a research movement at the interface of sociolinguistics and historical insight (cf. e.g. Conde-Silvestre & Hernández-Campoy 2012), is one of the historical tools in the language planner’s toolbox, but I’m focusing in this paper on something different, on past ideas rather than language practices. In her 1994 book on the Polish linguist Mikołaj Kruszewski, Joanna Radwanska Williams explores the use of counterfactuals as a method in the historiography of linguistics, but I’m not going there either, tempting though it is to ask: What if the architect of Landsmål, Ivar Aasen, had never been born? What if the explorer Leif Eriksson had had more followers and North America had ended up Nordic-speaking? The historiography of linguistics is based on the view that making sense of language is a dynamic process that does not start afresh with each new theoretical movement or “paradigm shift”. Linguistics today is poorer if, to continue to echo the well-known historian and philosopher of science, Thomas S. Kuhn, it “destroys its past”. Just because a particular scholar of language is dead and unread, that does not mean that their ideas and insights become redundant and irrelevant to today’s thinking. The big language questions keep on coming around and many wise heads have already given a lot of thought to them. The historian of linguistics is “a sort of go-between, bringing to life the voices of the past” (Cuttica 2014: 198), and an important aspect of the interpretation of language planning debates both now and

in the past is precisely listening to its *voices* (cf. Linn 2010): what they said, how they said it, what characterised their discourse, who was or was not listening and why, and what all of this can teach us.

Richard Whatmore writes in his 2016 book, *What is Intellectual History?*, that

the intellectual historian seeks to restore a lost world, to recover perspectives and ideas from the ruins, to pull back the veil and explain why the ideas resonated in the past and convinced their advocates (Whatmore 2016: 5).

The eminent historian of ideas, John W. Burrow, has described this activity as “eavesdropping upon alien conversations, exploring neglected perspectives and translating sometimes difficult ideas for readers who need help in recovering their meaning” (Whatmore 2016: 99). In short, for Burrow, we become “an informed eavesdropper on the intellectual conversations of the past”, acting as a medium to mitigate the parochialism of the present.

So, the past gives us a body of language planning experience and practice to draw upon. Intellectual history, and specifically its subfield of the historiography of linguistics, gives us a means of engaging with that experience and practice. In this paper we will be eavesdropping briefly on the debates which flourished in the latter part of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries, the often overlooked period between the initial interventions in standard Norwegian by Ivar Aasen and Knud Knudsen and the period in which language planning proper (Jahr’s “sociolinguistic experiment” (Jahr 2014: Part II)) got underway in earnest. The voice to which we will be paying closest attention is that of the leading Norwegian linguist of the period and the first professor of modern languages at Norway’s university, Johan Storm (1836–1920).

Multiple voices in post-independence Norway

After Norway gained independence from Denmark in 1814 there were certainly plenty of voices raised in suggesting how to address the language situation in the newly independent country. The changed political status of Norway meant that to continue to use the written language associated with the colonial power was problematic for nationally minded writers and thinkers. There are clear resonances here with more recent nationalist voices arguing that the unquestioning use of a colonialising English is similarly problematic and that a plan (affecting status rather than corpus in this case) is needed to shift language practices back towards Norwegian. Prior to political intervention in the language, however, and the de facto formulation of a language policy, it was open season in Norway, and language enthusiasts had free rein to explore a range of possibilities. (Language reform without the formal structures imposed by an agreed policy and a formal language institution is

in the hands of the “well-meaning enthusiast” – witness the number of websites proposing changes to English spelling.)

There was on the one hand what Jahr (2014: 25–27) calls the “easy solution” of simply calling the inherited written language *Norwegian* whenever it was used in Norway, a solution also favoured by the leading grammarian of the day, Maurits Hansen (1794–1842), whose grammar was first entitled *Forsøg til en Grammatik i Modersmaalet* [Attempt at a Grammar of the Mother Tongue] (1822), leaving the status ambiguous, and then later (1828) *Grammatik i det norske og danske Sprog* [Grammar of the Norwegian and Danish language]. Others took a more radical line and seized the opportunity to follow their own dialect, a movement characterised by Johan Storm as “Dilettanteri”. Again, there is a parallel with the various approaches to the “English problem” which has bubbled up across the Nordic countries over the past decade or so, with a number of practical responses subsumed under the overarching principle of *parallel language use*. Anna Kristina Hultgren pointed out in a 2014 article that in practice the policy of parallel language use is interpreted at the University of Copenhagen as meaning more use of English and in the Danish Ministry of Culture as more use of Danish! It may be unhelpful to press the parallel between Norwegian language-internal planning in the 19th century and “language-external” planning in the 21st too far for now (but cf. Linn 2014). However, the fact remains that language planning does not start afresh with each new challenge, and what has and hasn’t worked in the past should better inform the planning of today and tomorrow.

Returning to the variety of voices in the folk linguistics of post-independence Norway, there was another “major position taken on the language question”, as Jahr puts it, namely the maintenance of the *status quo*:

Full attention has been given to those individuals who suggested that something had to happen linguistically in the newly established state. Since something did indeed happen, the opinion of the vast majority of people at the time—who were either totally uninterested in language matters or who were in favour of sharing a common written standard with Denmark—has clearly been neglected in the literature [...] (Jahr 2014: 31).

With this in mind we now turn to someone who could absolutely not be said to be “uninterested in language matters” but who was the principal voice in the status quo camp. Given his constant presence in Norwegian language debates for thirty years and his contemporary authority, it is striking that his name doesn’t appear once in the most extensive recent account of the history of Norwegian language planning, Jahr (2014), and this despite Jahr lamenting the fact that the majority position has been overlooked in the literature. What did that voice sound like, what was it saying, and what can we learn from it?

Johan Storm and his role in the planning of Norwegian

In 1907, after the language debates had been rumbling on for several decades in Norway, the Nobel-Prize-winning author Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832–1910) called for Storm to be consulted, since up to this point the views of the experts had (in Bjørnson’s view) been ignored, and he regarded Storm as “the highest authority on language”. Johan Storm’s authority may not have been fully appreciated in Norway where the advocates of more interventionist language planning had the strongest voices, but his standing internationally in the European community of linguists was considerable (Linn 2004). As Arthur Sandved writes, “Storm was an object of great distinction even amongst Europe’s leading language scholars” (1998: 120). He was a friend and collaborator of Henry Sweet (1845–1912), the leading light in the new philology based on phonetic science which developed during the 1870s and 1880s. Others with whom Storm corresponded, many of whom came to visit him in Norway, included Paul Passy (1859–1940), founder of what would become the International Phonetic Association, and also the leading Danish linguist, Otto Jespersen (1860–1943). As a young man Jespersen sought Storm’s approval for his work on French, as Storm was not only the leading linguist in Norway but also within Scandinavia. Passy described him as “the greatest practical linguist, as also the greatest phonetician, in the world” (Passy 1886). He was a key figure in what Jespersen called the “Anglo-Scandinavian School” which is, as has been suggested elsewhere, where the discipline of Applied Linguistics was born (Linn 2008). The Reform Movement in language teaching was part of it, but Storm, Jespersen, August Western (1856–1940) in Norway, J. A. Lundell (1851–1940) in Sweden and others were driven by their commitment to the *Living Language*, living in speech and writing and in all portions of society, and this led them to a range of linguistic and indeed non-linguistic activity.

New legislation for the upper secondary schools in 1869 allowed for the teaching of modern foreign languages, which called for the training of language teachers. In response, Storm was appointed Professor of English and Romance Philology at Norway’s only university in 1871, making him the first professor in modern languages in Norway and one of the first such appointments anywhere in Europe. His commitment to the *Living Language* principle led him to publish language teaching textbooks as well as substantial studies of English philology on the one hand and French syntax on the other. As the only teacher of these languages at the University, his workload was heavy, as he rehearsed in an 1877 application to Parliament for funding to write what he called a *Værk over det norske Sprog* [a work on the Norwegian language] (Linn 2004: 276–279), which exists in incomplete draft in the National Library in Oslo (Storm 1877a), but at the start of his career his principal scholarly interest was in Norwegian, despite the demands of his teaching position. Until the appointment of Moltke Moe (1859–1913) as professor of “norsk Folkesprog” in 1886,

Storm was in practice professor of Norwegian as well. Moe was a folklore specialist and, by his own admission, no linguist, and a “professor i landsmål og dets dialekter” [professor of Landsmål and its dialects] in the person of Marius Hægstad (1850–1927) (Venås 1992) did not arrive on the scene until 1899, nearly 30 years after Storm’s appointment. Consequently Storm gave various series of lectures on Norwegian between 1875 and at least 1903. For several generations of linguistically interested Norwegians, he was the authority on that language, reporting in his 1877 funding bid that he had “held popular lectures on our mother tongue, also for a group of about 100 listeners”.

Storm’s published work on Norwegian is extensive. He was the leading dialectologist of his day, devising a fully phonetic alphabet, *Norvegia*. His expertise in language matters was recognised by the Norwegian establishment towards the end of his career, drawing him in to national literary projects, as language adviser to the 1904 translation of the *New Testament* (Linn 2004: 288–289) and as contributor to the national Ibsen *Festschrift* of 1898 and the official commemorative edition of Ibsen’s works from 1908 (Linn 2004: 289–292).

So in his day Storm was no marginal voice in the study of the Norwegian language or, more significantly, in the international linguistics community. It might be considered that he was intellectually adrift between his national interests and his international outlook, maybe too Norwegian for international *renommé* (a lot of what he wrote was in Norwegian and so inaccessible for many) and too international in outlook to respond to the national *zeitgeist*. This might in part explain the stilling of his voice, his disappearance into the footnotes, but given his extensive knowledge of Norwegian, its history and its varieties, Norwegian language planning is less well informed if it fails to ask what Storm’s view was on what was going on, and what his voice can tell us today.

What did Storm say about Landsmål?

Even after the Language Equality Resolution of 1885, as Jahr implies (2014) via his writing of “the Landsmaal movement” and “Knudsen’s programme / agenda”, there did not exist two separate written varieties; rather they were programmes. Storm was no party man. He was typically an honorary member only, rather than an active participant in the various language reform groups established during his lifetime both in Norway and beyond, so temperamentally he was not going to get behind any programme or agenda. As a linguist (rather like Louis Hjelmslev (1899–1965), the Danish progenitor of the theory of *Glossematics*), he failed to produce any coherent statement of his linguistic philosophy or theory, as he was, again temperamentally, a critic rather than a proponent. He filled pages of newspaper columns with trenchant critical analyses of others’ works as he pursued practical applications of his *Living Language* ethos.

A key point to make is that Storm was an enormous admirer of Ivar Aasen. “Maalstrævere” (e.g. Storm 1877b), or language activists, was a term of abuse for Storm, but Aasen, whom he called the “old master” was “an honourable exception” (Storm 1885). He saw him as “the father of Norwegian linguistics” (1884a). He also loved Aasen’s Landsmål, and it is worth quoting Storm’s post-mortem tribute to Aasen:

It is recognised by all parties that, with his death, a great man has passed away, a man of fundamental importance for the Norwegian people. Ivar Aasen was great in everything he did [...] Norwegian Landsmaal is a beautiful language. It is the language of the heroic ballads, of fairy tales and folk tales. We read Vinje and Ivar Aasen, Garborg and Mortenson; we are seized by a strange power (Storm 1896).

What Storm objected to was not the idea or Aasen’s “magnificent experiment” but that the Landsmål project was not a living language. It manifested itself as a series of individual experiments without basis in a singular spoken form or a written tradition. Storm, the Norwegian, was attracted to the grand patriotic endeavour of Aasen, but Storm, the student of English, French, Spanish and Italian, who wrote his *magnum opus* in German, found it artificial and he didn’t tire of saying so. An anonymous piece in the journal *Den 17de Mai* from 1902 entitled “Johan Storm on the warpath” made a fair point that “at least once every equinox he has to come out”:

And it’s always the same notes that “blast” out of him. He knows that people have short memories, so the thing is to grind out the same thing over and over again (Linn 2004: 237).

He understood the power of the media and had a close relationship with the right-wing organ *Morgenbladet* in particular, and he understood the force of striking imagery and hyperbole. Storm prophesied that Landsmål, noble though it was in Aasen’s hands, would not last, that it would “suffer the fate of all artificial languages: *it will pass quietly away*” (Storm 1896: 115). Rather he predicted that only the language which was common to the whole of Norway would survive “the Dano-Norwegian usage of the towns and the language of literature” (Storm 1888: 99). So did that point of view make him a Knudsenite?

What did he say about Dansk-norsk?

To begin with, Storm saw Aasen, himself and Knud Knudsen as kindred spirits. They agreed that Norway should develop its own written language, and they agreed that this should have its basis in actual usage, what Knudsen called “det dannede talesprog” [the educated spoken language] and what Storm called “det levende, dannede Talesprog” [the living educated spoken language] (Storm 1888: 115), and that one word – *levende* – was the tipping point. Writing in 1878 Storm was quite complimentary towards Knudsen, stating that he had “exercised a great and a beneficial influence” (Storm 1878: 4). However, some

bad-tempered newspaper articles by both men in the following years caused an enormous rift to open up between them.

While Landsmål was for Storm tasteful and stylistically admirable but artificial, Knudsen's Dano-Norwegian was both tasteless *and* artificial, showing "no respect for reality, for the educated spoken language which exists in reality" (Storm 1896: 3). His view of the Knudsen project, generating new Norwegian words to insert into the existing written language, comes across very nicely in his recipe for how to make Knudsen "sour slop", which will maintain maximum force if I leave it in the original Norwegian, as it seeks to imitate how the language would look if the Knudsen programme were to prevail:

Gi bymålet et Knudsenk opkok av hårde medlyd og nystavernål. Slæng ind en tvilyd her og der, så det blir en passelig målgraut. Spæd så op med østlandsk vasvilling, og strø på nogen avløser-nøtter til atpåsleik og krydder. Så er Maalrøra færdig og kan smøres utover hele landet (Storm 1904: 109). [Reheat the urban language à la Knudsen with hard consonants and new-spellers. Throw in a diphthong here and there so that it forms a suitable language porridge. Dilute with a gruel of eastern dialect and sprinkle on some alternative-word nuts as dressing and seasoning. And so the language mixture is ready and can be spread across the whole country.]

Storm became increasingly colourful in his use of images, and although this recipe appears in his own two-volume set of proposals for Norwegian orthography, it started life as an article in the newspaper *Aftenposten*.

What did he actually think should be done?

His approach to developing written Norwegian rested, like all he did, on commitment to the Living Language and the guiding principle that the language must be allowed to develop naturally, that it must be allowed to live a normal life like other languages and that this natural development must not be stunted by any form of artificial intervention. He was no radical, but neither was he content just to accept the status quo. What he advocated was moderation, letting things happen in the fullness of time, responding to natural change in the written language following development in the living, educated spoken language, i.e. the *laissez-faire* approach to language planning.

He did not just theorise but sought to put his cautious authentic modernising into practice where he could. Thus he gives "a brief account" of his orthography in the preface to his first publication, a travelogue published in 1871:

I shall give a brief account of my orthography. It is for the most part that which should now be regarded as the most general. In foreign loans I keep *c*, where it is pronounced as *s*, otherwise I change *c*, like *ch*, to *k*; *ph* I alter to *f*; but I keep *th*, though I write *t* after other consonants.

In his 1904 orthographic reform proposals, he did, as we established at the beginning of this paper, what all language planners would like to be able to do: he predicted the future:

The only language reform work which is any good is the *moderate conservative*, which builds on what is there, seeks to protect and *ennoble* what we have by choosing the best and removing excrescences, adopting the new which takes hold and becomes generally accepted, in short working on a *good language*, not on a *new language*. It is the gardener's work we need, not the radical's (1904: 108).

What can listening to Storm tell us?

Storm wasn't right in all his predictions about the future. Landsmål didn't die a gradual death, becoming an attractive historical curiosity, although it may have done had political conditions been different. His example of what one of the traditional folk tales collected by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen (1812–1885) would look like in 2004 if the “New Spellers” got their way isn't too wide of the mark (Storm 1904: 42), but of course there have been plenty of Bokmål reforms to interrupt the logic of the Knudsen programme, so Storm didn't have a crystal ball for Bokmål either.

However, I maintain that listening to his voice remains relevant for several reasons:

1. He knew the whole of the language, its history and its varieties, and the principles of international linguistics far better than anyone at the time when the language was being planned for the first time. His views should not have been so readily sidelined in his day, and responsible language planning should have allowed them to continue to resonate to guide continued thinking after his death.
2. He was right to point to the unacceptability of artificial intervention in the corpus. Had this objection been adopted as a central principle of language reform, the whole sorry Samnorsk saga could have been avoided. Unn Røyneland has written about the approach taken in the most recent Nynorsk reform “to ensure democratic legitimacy and user acceptance of the proposed reforms” (Røyneland 2013: 53), and Storm could have pointed out the need for this 150 years earlier. Admittedly Storm had a Victorian view of where the democratic line ended, but his insistence on practice over policy has indeed won out in the end.
3. Hearing Storm's voice “blasting out the notes” is a timely reminder for all who seek to influence in language matters of the need for tolerance and strategies to engage with rather than just rail at opponents. The way that certain prominent Norwegian sociolinguists rose up in the first decade of the 21st century against the then Language Director, Sylfest Lomheim, and his rhetorical statement (echoing Storm) of the possible death of Norwegian, suggests that it has always been tricky to ensure that all stakeholders understand one's voice, even for those like Storm and Lomheim experienced in working with the media.

4. Certain forms of discourse don't die, and each new generation of users of that voice should seek to understand why. In March 2004, exactly a century after Storm's major statement on reform in Norwegian, Lomheim wrote in the national newspaper *Dagbladet* of the need for language battle [språkkamp], and Storm wrote in a letter to his Danish colleague Vilhelm Thomsen in 1900 about his battle "pro aris et focu" ['for God and country'] against both Landsmål and the New Spellers. The 1966 committee on the language situation in Norway, chaired by Hans Vogt, was dubbed the "language peace" committee, and Storm had written in 1904 that "it will probably be best to leave the language and the public in peace". Here it turns out again that his long view did prevail: despite the best efforts of half a century of intervention, the 2008 parliamentary white paper on the language *Mål og mening* also commits to a need for språkfred [language peace], leaving the varieties of Norwegian to develop in peace. It is striking in that same language-political document that the word *living* [levande] crops up 35 times, on average once every 7 pages, so the keyword at the heart of Storm's view of language planning lives on, characterising the principal voice of language planning a century later. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

Finally, it is true that it is the gardener's work that has prevailed over the engineer's in Norwegian language planning, and that was Storm's key lesson. Whether official policy on the status of English had learned that when it sought to implement a policy of parallel language use, I'm not sure, but, again, in practice, in universities and in business, practical needs, living language practices, have typically prevailed over language planning. That is another big question for another day, and, given how much Storm knew about and wrote about English too (cf. Storm 1892/1896), we could do worse than to keep eavesdropping on him and heeding his voice.

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