

# How Neighbours Communicate: The Role of Language in Border Relations

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study of the linguistic situation in the border region where Norway meets Russia in the north. The aim of the study was to investigate language use when contact is revitalised after a long period with closed borders. The Norwegian and Russian languages are very different in vocabulary and structure, which makes communication difficult. How are the two languages affected by extended contact and migration across the border? The study was carried out by the author and Marit Bjerkeneg through interviews, a questionnaire and observation of the linguistic situations in two Norwegian communities. The results show an ongoing development where the neighbouring language is increasingly noticeable, and there is a clear link between attitudes, identity and language use. The role of public policy seems to play an important role for the developing linguistic situation, as the Barents region as a political concept introduced in the 1990s has led to cross-border contact within various fields and also inspired local language policy, contributing to cultural pride and changing attitudes.

**Keywords:** neighbouring language, border regions, attitude, identity

## INTRODUCTION

The border between Russia and Norway was closed for nearly all of the 20th century, causing limited contact between people on opposite sides of the border. Different cultures and very different languages in two countries with unequal political and economic systems developed throughout this time. The former links between the peoples seemed to be forgotten, but since the reopening of the border in recent years there has been tremendous development. New cultural contacts have been established through

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festivals, concerts, and arts projects, the participants of which are various amateur and professional groups. Local and regional authorities have met to work for cooperation and increased understanding. Scientific research is now carried out in cooperation between Russian and Norwegian partners. Business development and entrepreneurship across the border can also be seen, in spite of numerous challenges.

Our study focuses on one part of the Barents region, the border between Norway and Russia, and the towns of Kirkenes and Alta in particular. Border studies are often cross-cultural studies representing a multidisciplinary field; they involve sociology, anthropology, economy, history and linguistics (Hofstede 2001). Even though language can be said to be the most recognisable part of culture, it is not often the focus of research on border regions. However, no activity across borders can succeed without language proficiency. In the Russian-Norwegian border region, contact between people in private, business and official contexts involves the use of a language that is foreign to one or both parties. Knowledge of foreign languages is a crucial factor when it comes to successful communication and cooperation (Byram et al. 2001, 2003; Hofstede 2001). However, language is often a major cause of cultural clashes.

The main research question of the present study aims at finding out how languages are used in communication in various areas of social life between Russians and Norwegians in the border region. We have studied how border contact affects the development of the two languages, Norwegian and Russian, and how language use is linked to perception of identity among people in this region.

Although Russian is studied in Finnmark County in Norway, and Norwegian in North-West Russia, there is little knowledge about the effect of language studies and language teaching on both sides of the border. No studies have been carried out to gain knowledge on how the cultural component integrated in language teaching may have an effect on attitudes towards neighbours and cross-cultural communication. This is also a general concern in many border regions. The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers (Rec. 2005-3) recommends that governments encourage people involved in local and regional affairs to promote greater awareness of the importance and value of familiarity with the language, culture and society of neighbouring regions.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical framework for this study comes from sociolinguistics (Romaine 2000; Holmes 2008). In sociolinguistics language is described in terms of how social contexts affect the use of language. One central concept in sociolinguistics is code switching, which refers to the practice of putting together elements from different languages so that two language systems work together. This can be done as a signal of belonging or solidarity, or to show knowledge of some of the other person's language. Code switching can also be the result of not knowing either language well enough, but in this study all informants speak either Norwegian or Russian as their first language.

The study is also inspired by linguistic anthropology, which can be briefly defined as the study of language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural practice (Duranti 1997, 2). Linguistic anthropologists often work in small communities and study how people participate in social activities that involve linguistic expressions, but the research is not limited to that. The linguistic anthropology approach is familiar to the researchers taking part in the present study, as we have examined how people from both countries relate to each other in various situations. Studying language use in a border region involves concepts like bilingualism, biculturalism and transfrontier identity (Comm. of Ministers Recommendation 2005, app B1i). Especially among families where both cultures are represented, it is interesting to find out how the languages are used in everyday situations. Mixed marriages are very common on the Norwegian side of the border, and some of these families have been included as informants. However, other inhabitants near the border can also be expected to make use of both languages and thus build a specific identity as citizens on the border between two cultures. The notion of a Barents identity has been used by politicians and other advocates of international cooperation on this border, but it is not clear what exactly is implied. Language is closely connected to culture and is the supreme expressive component of identity (Paasi 1996, 47), and language provides a context for national socialisation (Paasi 1996, 54). Learning new languages can be expected to contribute to the formation of new identities. The participants interviewed in this study include both people who have learned the language of the neighbouring country and people who have not. This makes it possible to compare people's experiences with language and identity and relate these experiences to language learning.

Cross-border communication is dependent on communicative competence (Chomsky 1965), i.e., the ability to share in conversations and to understand what is going on and which behavioural norms are appropriate. There is not necessarily a need to know each

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other's grammar, but social knowledge is essential for membership in a community. The opening of the border has given Norwegians and Russians opportunities to learn more about each other's culture and to develop their communicative competence. There are a number of examples of cultural events where participants from both countries work together, and there are also people who live permanently on "the other side".

## METHODS

The present paper describes a qualitative study in which the main method of collecting data was through semi-structured interviews. The selection of participants was made firstly from quite a narrow and specific group, namely individuals known to have cross-border experience. This could be either because they have moved permanently across the border or because they travel across it regularly for various reasons. Secondly, a wider selection of people was interviewed, consisting of groups representing different professions, age, and gender. Some of these had cross-border experience, whereas others did not. The total number of interviewees was 40. The participants live in two small towns: Kirkenes is a real border town, and Alta has a large Russian population and many people who travel across the border for cooperation in business, public management and cultural exchange. The rationale behind the selection of participants in a combination of wide and narrow random selection (Sørnes 2004, 77) is that the collected data will enable the researchers to compare and contrast language use. The narrow sampling is expected to produce participants who are reflective on interaction across the border, whereas the wider sample of informants may include people of different fields who are not members of the "Barents elite" (Viken et al. 2008). This term is used for people in the Kirkenes area who participate in various official activities in the Barents region. However, people not belonging to this elite may still have more daily communication with their neighbours. By using a combination of wide and narrow sampling, data will be collected from similar, but different people in the border region. This method of selecting participants is thus in accordance with Glaser and Strauss (2008), who recommend selecting participants both for their similarities and their differences.

Considering the increasing number of Russian citizens living in Kirkenes and Alta, one would expect different institutions and employers to have a strategy to meet this situation. It may be problematic to have to deal with two languages if the organisation is not prepared, but advantageous if users of the second language are considered to be an asset. Language use and language policy in public management and semi-public

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business have been investigated through the use of a questionnaire that was distributed to leaders of about 20 organisations in the same two towns. However, only a few chose to reply; thus it is not possible to draw any reliable conclusion on the basis of these data. Data were also collected through observation of linguistic interaction, especially by taking part in the cultural festival Barents Spektakel in Kirkenes. This is a bi-annual cross-border festival where artists and audience from different countries meet, and the border is often a central theme.

Grounded theory has been used in the analysis of the main data, observation notes and transcribed interviews. Our study does not start with a presupposition, but is rather aimed at creating a theory through empirical study (Corbin and Strauss 1990). The main idea of grounded theory is to work towards a theoretical understanding of phenomena through collection and analysis of empirical data. The theme of investigation is quite complex, in that it involves human opinions, attitudes and interaction. Grounded theory is well suited to capture complexity (Locke 2001, quoted in Sørnes 2004). Corbin and Strauss (1990) claim that grounded theory is suitable for the study of phenomena that are continually changing in response to evolving conditions. Grounded theory seeks not only to uncover relevant conditions, but also to determine how the actors respond to changing conditions. This is relevant for the present study.

As researchers we have not approached the field with no expectations, as was originally demanded by advocates of grounded theory. Observations across the years had already made us curious about questions of language use and change. Labelling and coding our data has enabled us to arrive at a theory. In short, the process of interviewing and analysis was carried out as follows: the first six interviews were carried out using an interview guide with quite open questions to let the participants tell their own stories. In the first analysis of these interviews, open coding was used in comparing the information in the interviews. This information was sorted into approximately ten concepts including integration vs. segregation, generational differences, communication, code switching, language use at home and at work, language change, and language as a door opener. We grouped these concepts into categories which were compared with the information from the following interviews. The analysis thus developed from dealing with a wide range of categories in the first phase to selective coding into three core categories: language use, attitudes to language, and language and identity.

## RESULTS

### *Language use*

The Russian language has become more and more prominent in the border town of Kirkenes, and there is obviously a political willingness to facilitate the maintenance and development of the language for the Russian part of the population. There are Russian-speaking day care workers and shop assistants, and one bank uses the presence of a Russian-speaking employee for PR purposes. Proficiency in Russian is a qualification that is sought after, for example, when the local newspaper hires new journalists. The library in Kirkenes has three Russian librarians and is the national resource for Russian literature. All the street signs in the city centre are in both languages. There are numerous other examples of how the Russian language is used in the community; in fact, Kirkenes can be said to have two languages functioning side by side. Some of the informants even expressed the concern that this may lead to the isolation of Russians, as they do not need to learn Norwegian and will thus not be properly integrated into the Norwegian society. This is quite a new development, as Russian immigrants are generally known to put a great deal of effort into learning Norwegian. If it is true that Russians are less integrated now than during the first period after the opening of the border, it is a result that definitely was not intended. The local language policy in Kirkenes has been to promote the Russian language and mark the town as a border town and a home for Norwegians, Russians and people of other nationalities.

In spite of this politically accepted language policy, the questionnaire sent to various organisations did not return answers that showed a clear policy on language in these organisations. However, Russian-speaking employees are seen as an asset in that their language competence is an advantage in dealing with clients or customers who are not proficient in Norwegian. The situation seems to be identical in Kirkenes and Alta in this respect.

When it comes to the presence of the Russian language in Alta, the situation is quite different. The Russian language is not as prominent as it is in Kirkenes, although one can find Russian-speaking employees and business managers all over town. They may speak Russian to each other, but Norwegian is preferred. Most Russians have found it important to learn Norwegian in order to live and work in Norway, as the following two stories illustrate:

*You understood that when you started to master the language, you made friends and acquaintances, everything became simpler; you could apply for a job and earn some money. Everything was more fun. You understood that language is very, very important.*

*“Alexandra”*

*I had such ambitions when I came to Norway. [...] I thought that everybody spoke English. I could work as a teacher immediately, I could teach mathematics anywhere. I spoke English for two years, didn't get any job – no Norwegian. I don't call it discrimination any more.*

*“Victoria”*

Very few Norwegians on the Norwegian side of the border have learned Russian properly, although in Kirkenes and Alta it has been possible to study the language for many years. It is obvious that Russians living in Norway need to speak Norwegian in all social areas of life in order to be understood. In bilingual families where one of the parents is Russian, both languages are used. In practice, this generally happens as follows: the mother speaks Russian to the children, and the father speaks Norwegian. The two parents speak Norwegian to each other, but their everyday language also contains Russian vocabulary denoting typical cultural content like food or traditions.

In business where Norwegians and Russians work together, Norwegian is reported to be used most of the time. However, English seems to be preferred when dealing with international partners. The choice of language used in this border region has changed over the years, and in the following section this phenomenon will be discussed in an attempt to analyse what has happened.

### ***Attitudes to language***

In the first few years after the opening of the border, there were a number of problems related to Russians in Norway. The key words were theft, prostitution and dubious financial transactions, most of which were related to the enormous economic challenges in Russia. The attitudes among Norwegians in the North towards their Russian neighbours were accordingly negative, and these attitudes were reflected in attitudes towards the language. Over the years the conditions have changed, and the terms have become more equal. One of our participants explains this change in the following story:

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*During the first period when I was here as a student, we used to be afraid of speaking Russian openly, because we might be approached as “prostitutes”, especially by drunk men. Or we might be followed closely in shops, suspected of being thieves. When I came back after a few years to visit, some of my friends shouted hello to other Russian friends in the street. I said, “Hush, don’t shout!”, and they didn’t understand why I was nervous. Then I realized that things had changed, Russian was okay.*

The participants in the present study underline this positive story and seem to have a positive attitude towards Russians and Russian language and culture. In Kirkenes especially, people said they were proud to live “in Kirkenes, close to Russia”. The fact that it is easier now to travel between the countries seems to have changed attitudes:

*With my visits to Russia, my view of Russia has changed a lot – it is a rather “cool” country; there is development there.*

*(Concerning the language:) Fun to understand, a pity we didn’t start to learn it earlier.*

People go to Russia for the weekend and think highly of this possibility, but there are also informants who think the country is a bit scary, because it is so different.

In general, Russians are looked upon as very clever, hard-working and apt to learn well, and they know a lot about art and culture. In small communities successful individuals are noted. When some of these are Russian, this can have an impact on attitudes towards Russians in general. Our material contains several examples of such role models in business and performing arts in particular.

Russian attitudes towards Norwegian language and culture have not been very evident in this study, although there are some comments on differences between the two languages. Russian is perceived by Russians as a much richer language than Norwegian, a language that reflects the culture and literature of the country. However, there is a great interest in learning Norwegian. Some of the informants report that they were advised by their mothers to start learning Norwegian while still living in Russia, as the language was seen as a door opener to the West.



Changing attitudes seem to be reflected in the use of the languages in the border region. Even if one does not know much of one's neighbour's language, one tends to use a few words. As some of our informants put it: *"To say hello is the minimum"* and *"I use the language a bit."*

It is quite common to greet others in the other language, to say for example "Happy New Year" or "Good morning". This is a token of participation, and is especially appreciated by the Russians, who are not in their home country. The Norwegians who do this naturally appear to have some contact with Russians, and most of them have also been in Russia.

Russians mix in some Norwegian words when they speak Russian. These are typically Norwegian words that have no counterpart in Russian, such as work permit, social benefit, and the names of various institutions. The result is code switching. In the examples below, which were taken from interviews, the Norwegian words are in bold type:

сёкать – сёкнуть  
(**å søke**)  
(to apply for )

Дай мне машину **der oppe**  
(Dai mne mashinu **der oppe**)  
(Give me the car up there [i.e., on the shelf])

Я написала **søknad**  
(Ja napisala **søknad**)  
(I wrote an application)

Она уже дала мне **beskjed**  
(Ona uzhe dala mne **beskjed**)  
(She has already given me a message)

### ***Language and identity***

In analysing our data, we found that identity seems to be a core category. This is in line with the theory of Paasi, who claims that "language is closely connected to culture and is the supreme expressive component of identity" (Paasi 1996, 47). A key question

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in our study is whether there is a Barents identity. Does the fact that people live in the high north in different countries give them something in common that creates a common identity? Our interviewees express some doubt about that, yet many of them say that we do have something in common related to identity across the border. We are Northerners living in a harsh climate, far from the capital, and we have a common history. Many of the participants in the study described themselves as citizens of the North who find it easy to identify with values that are common to people from the other neighbouring countries. Still, the main perception of identity is that of belonging to a country and speaking one's native language. One of our Russian informants claims, *"It is easier to maintain your Russian identity if you keep up the language"*.

Another explains the connection between language and identity as follows:

*I am a Russian. I can change my national identity, I can change my passport. I can change my religious identity, from Christian to Jew, for instance. But I can never change my mother tongue. For that reason I am a Russian, never anything else. It has a lot to do with language.*

This remark is interesting as it comes from a woman who moved to Norway about 15 years ago. Hers is an example of a typical life story of a Russian immigrant who married a Norwegian man. In the first years she worked hard to learn Norwegian, and her first child was taught only this language. However, with the birth of her second child, she had been inspired by other Russian women who had arrived later and who were eager to keep up their language. Therefore, her second child has learned both Norwegian and Russian and is completely bilingual. Contact with family in Russia is now maintained, and the Russian identity has not been forgotten.

Many people in the border region express the belief that the multilingual and multicultural situation is important as an identity marker. This is connected with the presence of the Russian language and the proximity to the border: *"I come from Kirkenes, right next to Russia!"*

Some of our informants are young Norwegian school students who are used to having Russians as their school mates. In replying to the question of whether the Russians are accepted, this remark came: *"Yes. When you meet them in the corridor, you do not reflect on the fact that they are Russian."*

This could be interpreted in several ways, one of which is linked to language: they do not speak Russian, so we forget their Russian identity.

## CONCLUSIONS

The use of data analysis in accordance with grounded theory appeared to be useful in organising the diversified information in the interviews. There seem to be clear links between language use, attitudes to language, and the perception of identity. An open border encouraging more mobility has, over time, changed attitudes towards the neighbouring language and culture. There is increasing interest in learning Norwegian in North-West Russia, as we have seen that many of the participants in this study started learning the language while living at home. One major reason for the increasing interest in learning the neighbouring language is that people see that mastering the language will open doors to employment on both sides of the border. The movement across the border is mostly from Russia to Norway, but there are also examples of Norwegians who have moved to cities in the North West of Russia for work or studies. We talked to some of these Norwegians in Murmansk, but further interviews are necessary to give a good picture of how neighbours communicate on the Russian side of the border.

Cultural contact has caused some changes in the everyday language on the Norwegian side of the border. Russians who speak Norwegian tend to mix in Russian terms, and Norwegian words for typically Norwegian concepts and institutions find their way into Russian sentences. This code switching is often a token of *participation* (Duranti 1997) in a local community consisting of speakers of the two languages.

The role of language policy in the region may have an effect on the linguistic situation. The border town of Kirkenes allows for the use of the Russian language in most areas of social life. This could be the reason why Russian inhabitants and guests use their language more freely, but also why their interest in learning Norwegian may be lower. The result may be less integration into the community. Such a development has been seen in multicultural communities in many countries, but usually in large cities where different ethnic groups sometimes live side by side. However, in a small border town this is not a desirable situation, and the development needs to be followed closely. Many inhabitants addressed this challenge in our interviews, worrying that there will be less contact. In Alta, 500 kilometres from the border, the Russian language is more prominent and accepted in public than it used to be, but there is no local policy of using the language in public institutions, business or street signs.

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Political decisions play an important role in that they may lead to increasing mobility. This happened when the border was opened, and when the Barents region was established. The most recent development is the introduction of special passports for border citizens that will facilitate border crossing for inhabitants of the region. It will be interesting to see what effect this new policy will have on the development of language use.

This paper has not focused on the use of English as a lingua franca, but it can be mentioned that English is used increasingly in business across the border now that proficiency in the language is increasing in both countries. There are obvious advantages to using a common language, as one of the Russians working in Norway explained. She said that when all formal contact is in English, it saves resources, there is no need for translation, and both parties are dealing with the same text. However, there are some negative sides to using English. Communication through a third language which is foreign to both parties is far from unproblematic. The language is restricted and has a limited vocabulary, and it is not as useful in conveying culture.

The term *russenorsk* referred to a common language used in everyday communication before the border between Norway and Russia was closed in 1917. The present trends in language development show no such pidgin language appearing, although the languages are mixed and influence each other somewhat. This can probably be explained by the fact that not only tradesmen and fishermen travel across the border now, and that the two languages are used in various linguistic situations and areas of social life. However, the following little exchange from a local market illustrates that the tradition of mixing the two languages is still alive. A Norwegian customer examines a pair of beautiful hand-knitted mittens offered by a Russian woman and wonders how they can be laundered:

*Можно (Mozhno) vaskemaskina? (R: Is it possible N: in washing machine?)*

*Да, можно (Da, mozhno) (R: Yes, it is possible)*

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