

The Making of the Scandinavian Languages

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1 Introduction

The Scandinavian languages of Danish, Swedish and Norwegian are mutually intelligible, and have been so throughout their existence.¹ In the terminology of Heinz Kloss they are not recognized as separate languages because of linguistic distance (*Abstand*), but because they are *Ausbau* languages that function as official and administrative languages of the respective national states (Kloss 1978: 207). This shows the truth in the quip popularized by Max Weinrich that a language is a dialect with an army and a navy.² However, the Scandinavian languages have diverged from a single parent language, and in the oldest medieval sources no distinction is made between them. This is an attempt to trace their development towards recognition as separate languages.

This process rests on metalinguistic ideas rather than linguistic structure, ideas that are intertwined with conceptions of national identities and oppositions. Winge (2006: 47) claims that language in the pre-national world was ‘primarily a means of communication. [...] Only with the development of national identity did language become part of national heritage, inspiring the need to assert its uniqueness’. This claim will be investigated through a discussion of available metalinguistic information in medieval and early modern sources, and it seems clear that metalinguistic ideas were indeed closely linked to the emergence of modern states. It should be mentioned at the outset that my point of view is that of a Norwegian, and whereas I know the primary sources for Norwegian, I depend on secondary sources for Swedish and Danish. Nonetheless, this question can only be considered in a pan-Scandinavian context, by bringing together results from different national research traditions.

A general view on the interplay between languages and communities in early modern Europe is taken by Peter Burke (2004). With brief medieval precursors, ‘from the middle of the fifteenth century onwards, more people were becoming conscious of varieties of language’ (Burke 2004: 16). The increasingly close links between language and nation from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards lead Burke (2004: 163–9) to talk about a ‘nationalization of language’. The Scandinavian situation generally conforms to this picture. The

1 Nevertheless, a recent study of inter-Scandinavian intelligibility shows that the ability to understand neighbour languages is deteriorating, especially among young Swedes and Danes (Delsing and Åkesson 2005).

2 The phrase has also been attributed to others (Bright 1997), and cf. Burke (2004: 22) for similar ideas in early modern Europe.

metalinguistic ideas of separate languages show no clear correlation with linguistic changes, but rather a dependence on political developments and emerging national identities.

Traditional accounts have pointed to certain linguistic innovations as determining the emergence of new languages, as e.g. Skautrup (1944: 254–5) describes how by 1300 a series of sound changes had made Danish an independent language, setting it apart from Swedish. In prehistorical times the only possible approach is to apply the methods of historical-comparative linguistics and look for shared innovations. However, the divergence of the North Germanic languages has mainly happened in recorded history, and literary sources tell us at least something about how the speakers themselves conceived the linguistic differences, for instance in their choice of terms for the vernacular.³

The last point is essential for the definition of language by sociological criteria proposed by Tore Janson (1997, 2012): Speakers define what a language is and express it by giving it a name. The question of when a language becomes another is then ‘decided by the speakers themselves, not settled in any objective way’ (Janson 2012: 122). This view on language is in line with the increased focus on language attitudes in modern sociolinguistics, and the following discussion will attempt to connect language names to metalinguistic ideas. It follows from this approach that the emergence of new languages is first and foremost seen as a metalinguistic change: ‘a new language appears not necessarily as a result of linguistic evolution, not only as the development of new linguistic forms, but rather as the product of a new conceptualization of speech’ (Medina, del Valle, and Monteagudo 2013: 23).

The development of writing and a written culture is crucial for this process, as it seems that the written language emerges first, before it has a name distinguishing it from others: ‘It is the written language that is perceived as existing in its own right. The metalinguistic change occurs when the name is pegged onto the written form’ (Janson 2012: 203). The explanation of this pattern may be that the fixation of some linguistic variety in writing makes it a conceptual entity which is easier to grasp and identify than geographically or socially defined varieties. When a language is put to writing it becomes easier to talk about it; in other words, it emerges ‘as an object of discourse’ (Medina, del Valle, and Monteagudo 2013: 23; cf. also Janson 2012: 131–2).

The development from Latin to the various Romance languages is an example of how this worked in practice. According to the theory propagated by Roger Wright during the last decades, the Romance-speaking peoples from antiquity to the Middle Ages thought they both spoke and wrote ‘Latin’. People did not perceive the written language as something different from the spoken one, yet used traditional spelling conventions simply because that was the way their language was written – just as we still do: few, if any, modern languages have fully phonemic orthographies. When a new orthography more in line with the spoken language was developed for Romance, this could ‘create a conceptual distinction between Latin and Romance based on the two modes of writing’ (Wright 2013: 38). This description of the development fits neatly with Janson’s work, and the conclusion is that ‘the concept of Romance as a separate language

³ In this historical context, *vernacular* is used as a neutral term for ‘mother tongue(s)’ as opposed to Latin (see e.g. Burke 2004: *passim*).

from Latin followed the elaboration of the new written mode, rather than inspiring it' (Wright 2013: 39; cf. Janson 2012: 132).

2 From *dǫnsk tunga* to separate languages

The development of the North Germanic branch of languages has much in common with the divergence of the Romance branch. However, the point of departure was not, like in Southern Europe, a language known in a written form such as Latin. Ancient Nordic is partly attested in runic inscriptions in the older *fupark* that show no geographical differences. When a more complete description based on texts in the Latin alphabet becomes possible from the twelfth century onwards, distinct dialects are already evident.

2.1 A common tongue

From about 500 CE linguistic changes gave rise to dialectal differences between East Nordic (Danish and Swedish) and West Nordic (Norwegian). Norwegians populated the North Atlantic islands during the Middle Ages and brought West Nordic varieties to new places, of which the Faroe Islands and Iceland have remained Germanic-speaking. However, the east–west division is a linguistic construction imposed upon a dialect continuum stretching from settlements in Greenland to others east of the Baltic Sea. The language of this wide area was commonly known as *dǫnsk tunga* [Danish tongue].⁴ An example of this name can be found in Snorri Sturluson's (1179–1241) prologue to his history of the Norwegian kings (*Heimskringla*), written around 1230.⁵

1. *Í bók þessi lét ek rita fornar frásagnir um höfðing ja þá, er ríki hafa haft á Norðrlǫndum ok á danska tungu hafa mælt* (Snorri Sturluson 1893–1900: I, 3–4)

[In this book I recorded old tales about the chieftains who have held sway in the northern lands and have spoken the Danish tongue]

The same Snorri described national oppositions and prejudices, most famously in the episode where King Óláfr Tryggvason evaluates his enemies before the battle of Svolder in 1000 CE. The king expresses contempt for the Danes and Swedes, but holds the Norwegians in high esteem, stating that 'we may expect a harder fight from them: they are Norwegians (*Norðmenn*), as we are' (Snorri Sturluson 1893–1900: I, 441–2). It appears that language did not form part of these national identities.

The Icelandic law code *Grágás* similarly calls the language in Iceland *dǫnsk tunga*, and as late as the mid-fourteenth century this term was used for the vernacular in the Icelandic poem *Lilja*, albeit with reference to the language of men in days of yore (KLN 2: cols 662–3). From the thirteenth century onwards

4 The terms *dǫnsk tunga* and *norrónt mál* (see below) are discussed with many references to literary sources by Sandøy (2000).

5 All translations are my own and I aimed to follow the original as closely as possible, although there are instances of slight loss of equivalency due to the need for clarity in English.

this name was gradually replaced by *norróna* or *norrónt mál*. This could also be used for all North Germanic varieties, yet was usually taken to mean the West Nordic variety, i.e. the language of Iceland and Norway as opposed to East Nordic (cf. next section). As an adjective (*norrónn*) the word could denote ‘Norwegian’ as opposed to ‘Icelandic’; however, there are no known examples of the name used exclusively for Norwegian language (KLNLM 12: cols 356–7).

Snorri’s nephew Óláfr Þórðarson hvítaskáld (c.1210–59) makes an interesting observation on linguistic differences in his so-called Third Grammatical Treatise. Commenting on the word *vröngu* [wrong (dative)] in a poem composed by Egill Skallagrímsson, he notes that Germans and Danes still pronounce the initial *v* in such words; in Icelandic, initial /vr/ clusters had lost the /v/ long before his time:

2. *þýðerskir menn ok danskir hafa v fyrir r i þessu nafni ok mörgum öðrum [...] þat er nú ekki haft í norrónu máli* (Krömmelbein 1998: 164; here with normalized spelling)

[German and Danish men have *v* before *r* in this word and many others [...] that is now not found in *norróna*]

This implies that he did not identify the language of the Danes as *norróna*, although not much more can be learned from the brief statement. In Norway *norróna* was used as the name of the language as late as 1436, when the archbishop and two bishops issued a charter with a translation of a Latin letter from King Henry VI of England:⁶

3. *latina breff [...] sem wy letom siidhermeir wendæ j noreno* (DN VII, No. 757)

[a Latin letter [...] that afterwards was translated into noreno]

As far as I know this is the last use of *norróna* in the preserved Norwegian sources. In Iceland, on the other hand, it continued to be used for a further couple of centuries, although in competition with ‘Icelandic’ (first attested in 1555) from the sixteenth century (see Sandøy 2011 on Icelandic and Faroese).

2.2 Danish and Swedish emerge

There is an early example of ‘Danish’ being used in a specific linguistic sense in Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum* [*Deeds of the Danes*], written around 1200. He writes about a Norwegian chieftain who sends out scouts, *duos Danicę facundos lingue* [two [men] fluent in the Danish tongue] (Saxo Grammaticus 2005: I, 290). However, this story is set in a mythical past (told just after the story of prince Amleth, better known from Shakespeare’s adaptation), and it is difficult to ascribe much significance to this instance of the language name.

A law manuscript from around 1300 states that the law is written *a danskæ* [in Danish], but this use of the language name is rare (Karker 1977: 482). When vernacular words occur in Latin texts the language is specified with *materna*

6 He styled himself ‘king of England and France’, but the France part was disputed.

lingua [mother tongue] or similar terms, in Denmark as in other countries (KLNLM 2: cols 662–4). Skautrup (1944: 308) assumes that the usual name for the language in Denmark during the fourteenth century was simply *vort moder(s)mål* [our mother tongue].

The first examples of ‘Swedish’ used about the language stem from the first part of the fourteenth century, all with reference to translations (KLNLM 17: cols. 504–5). The oldest example is from the first decade of the century, albeit preserved only in fifteenth-century manuscripts, and occurs in a ballad described as being translated from German (4a). However, in a contemporary ballad translated from French, the term used is *vart maal* [our language] (4b).

4a. *aff thysko och j swænskæ thungo* (Janson 1997: 126)

[from German and into Swedish tongue]

4b. *aff valske tungo ok a vart maal* (Lodén 2012: 63)

[from French tongue and into our language]

The changing terminology should indicate that ‘Swedish’ was not yet established as the name of the language. However, when a Danish version of the first ballad was made based on the Swedish one, the word *swænskæ* in (4a) was substituted by *danskæ* [Danish] (Janson 1997: 126).

Although the metadiscursive act of naming the Scandinavian languages appears to have become widespread by this time, language still did not have much significance as a denominator of nationality, and Swedish manuscripts written by Danish scribes have many Danish forms and vice versa (Skautrup 1947: 36–40). This is especially prominent in Danish translations (or rather versions) of Swedish works, mainly from the fifteenth century, like the aforementioned ballads. Purist ideas were not yet born; although the languages could be identified, they had not yet acquired a fixed form and were not yet markers of a national identity – at least not intra-Scandinavian oppositions. There are interesting indications in medieval Scandinavian texts that ‘foreign’ was understood as ‘German’, be it people or language (Berg 2013: 187, 238). A point worth noting is that this identification of Swedish and Danish should imply that *norróna* now took on the specific meaning ‘West Norse’, i.e. the language of Norway and the Atlantic islands.

Another early and well-known example of the language name is the stipulation in the Swedish national law of King Magnus Eriksson from 1347 that all written judgements should be given *a suensko* [in Swedish]; the language and the centralized state emerged hand in hand (Janson 1997: 128). This had probably nothing to do with opposition to other Scandinavian varieties, but rather to two other and more foreign languages: Latin and Low German. Sweden took up vernacular writing considerably later than Norway, and official documents were written in Latin until the mid-fourteenth century. The stipulation in the 1347 law marked a new practice. Furthermore, during the fourteenth century the influence of Low German was increasing, and Swedish cities were so dominated by immigrant traders and craftsmen that it was hard to find enough Swedes to fill official positions (Pettersson 2005: 134–5). The city law had a similar stipulation that the city scribe had to be a Swede and that documents concerning ownership

of land and property should be written in Swedish (Wessén 1965: 95). This is the likely background for the specific reference to ‘Swedish’ in the law: It could just as well have been *vart maal* [our language] as in (4b) and does not refer to a specific variety of Scandinavian. There is no such paragraph in the Norwegian laws; as it was a well-established tradition to write official documents in the vernacular, there was no need for it.

2.3 Norwegian

After the last occurrence of *norróna* quoted in (3) above, I do not know of any specific name given to the Norwegian language until the modern *norsk(e)* emerges.⁷ In a charter from 1489 (DN I, No. 961), famous because a linguistic quarrel led to a killing, the language is mentioned in opposition to Low German. A man proposes a toast in Low German, to which another man replies that they should rather speak *vorth fader moll och moder moll* [our father tongue and mother tongue].⁸ Although the language is not given a name, the reaction against the use of Low German is interesting.

The first occurrence of the name *norske* for ‘Norwegian’ I have found, is from 1486. An English ship that came to the town of Marstrand (then southern Norway, present-day Sweden) had an interpreter who spoke *bode norske och tyske* [both Norwegian and German] (DN V, No. 930). In an undated note probably from 1521, a royal servant mentions a *bescreffuit kristen reth pa Norske* [a written canon law in Norwegian] (DN XIII, No. 183). However, in the 1530s the terms *norske* ‘Norwegian’ and *danske* ‘Danish’ were used interchangeably in exactly the same expression with no distinction made. The first of these is from 1533:

5. *messzer holdis vppaa norske ymott thenn hellige kirkes skiick och budh* (DN X, No. 674)

[masses are held in Norwegian against the Holy Church’s custom and creed]

Nonetheless, a text written in the same milieu two years later has a similar complaint against *messer paa danske* [masses in Danish] (DN XI, No. 621). In both cases the crucial point seems to be protestant use of the vernacular during mass as opposed to the traditional Latin liturgy of the Catholic Church, and the interchanging use of the two language names indicates that ‘Danish’ and ‘Norwegian’ were not regarded as two distinct codes (Berg 2013: 240–1).

We similarly saw above that the first instances of ‘Swedish’ were in opposition to foreign languages, and the true meaning was more like ‘vernacular’ than our modern metalinguistic ideas of the various languages. This seems to be a common pattern, as the same is observed for Romance languages: ‘The metalinguistic distinction between different Romance languages came later than that between Latin and Romance. [...] The words *castellano* and *leonés* existed, but not with the metalinguistic meaning’ (Wright 2013: 39–40). Also in

7 The form *norske* is based on the slightly older adjective *norsk*, derived from *normskr*, which in its turn stems from *norrónn* with the adjectival suffix *-sk* and contraction of the vowel.

8 There might have been a longer story behind the quarrel (Jahr 2012).

Scandinavia the national adjectives existed and were used about origin before they were employed for language.

There are, however, testimonies of the two languages as being different. In 1515 Abbot Henrik of Utstein Monastery acted as an interpreter for French and Scottish ambassadors, and according to his own report helped them understand *linque Danice Norice* [the Danish and Norwegian languages] (DN VII, No. 539; cf. Karker 1977: 485). Whether this was a way for the abbot to underline his own linguistic skills or whether he indeed saw Danish and Norwegian as two different languages, is hard to say for certain. By the sixteenth century at least, following the argumentation set out above, people had the means, in the form of different names, to differentiate between languages.

It does not seem that foreigners perceived a difference between Danish and Norwegian either. Dutch copies of Norwegian charters from the 1540s show the same unawareness of differences between Scandinavian varieties:

6. *originaliter in denss oder noirwegens gescreuen ende nae auergesat in duetsche* (DN V, No. 1077; No. 1091 similarly)

[originally written in Danish or Norwegian and now translated into German]

Nesse (2002: 98–9) discusses such expressions in translated letters and suggests that it is merely a tautology as a rhetorical figure; in that case, it means that Danish and Norwegian were perceived as the same thing rather than different languages. A similar uncertainty is evident in an inventory set up by the city scribe of Deventer concerning some goods left behind when the former archbishop of Nidaros died in exile in the Low Countries in 1538: The scribe writes initially about an *jnnuentarijs cedell meestedeel op noirwegens gescreuen* [an inventory list for the most part written in Norwegian], and later mentions a short notice *gescreuen op deensz vff noirwegens* [written in Danish or Norwegian]. It remains unclear whether he had any basis for the different language names on the two occasions; my guess is that he had not.

3 National languages in national states

In the early sixteenth century, linguistic unity could still be stressed when convenient, i.e. in situations where unity in other matters was deemed important. In 1506 the Swedish Council of the Realm wrote to their Danish counterpart that *wij ære alle eth twngomaall* [we are all one tongue] (Skautrup 1947: 36). This was also the image held by foreigners; a papal bull from 1499 mentions that Sweden, Denmark, and Norway are *de eadem lingua* [of the same tongue] (Wessén 1965: 95–6). Latin *lingua*, and similar words in other languages, could also be used to refer both to a language and the people speaking it (Burke 2004: 160–1).

Nonetheless, the preface of a Danish translation of the New Testament in 1529, written by the Danish theologian Christiern Pedersen, points explicitly to language:

7. *Naade och fred [...] Vere met alle Danske, Suenske oc Norske, oc meth Alle andre som forstaa wort twngemaall* (KLN 2: col. 663)

[Grace and peace [...] be with all Danes, Swedes and Norwegians, and with all others who understand our tongue]

In the last case linguistic unity was perhaps stressed in order to expand the possible market of the translation.

3.1 Swedish as anti-Danish

In 1523 Gustav Vasa took Sweden out of the Kalmar union, which united the Scandinavian nations in the period 1397–1523. In his striving for political control over the border region Scania in the 1520s he used linguistic arguments and argued that people there had *et twungamaal ok alla aathlefwor ok seder [...]* *efther Swenske* [a tongue and all mores and customs from the Swedish] (Gustafsson 2000: 85). Nonetheless, when the region was finally secured for Sweden more than a century later, in 1658, it became subject to an assimilation policy, including the enforcement of Swedish in administration and the church (cf. Burke 2004: 162–3).

King Gustav was even more explicit in a letter to a bailiff (*fogde*). The bailiff's scribe had apparently been unlucky with his choice of words in a previous letter, and the bailiff was told to give him the strict instruction in (8):

8. *att han blifwr with sitt modernmål swensken [...] och scriffuer oss jcke Jeg för Jag till* (Gustafsson 2000: 295)

[that he stays with his mother tongue Swedish [...] and do not write *Jeg* for *Jag* to us]

It is, not surprisingly, the first person singular pronoun that is the focus of attention; *jeg/jag* [I] have a different vowel in the two languages (the final *g* was probably silent or vocalized in most varieties at the time). This is a prime example of how linguistic features 'acquire political meaning and socio-symbolic significance', as Medina, del Valle, and Monteagudo (2013: 28) argue with respect to similar phenomena in Spanish. How we refer to ourselves is a strong marker of linguistic identity; at least that goes for Norway, where we have a fairly wide range of first person pronouns, and it also seems to have been a clearly perceived difference between Swedish and Danish in the early sixteenth century. These statements of Gustav Vasa make a striking contrast to the linguistic unity expressed by some of his contemporaries, as shown above. As the strictly linguistic differences were small, other factors were more influential in making the distinction between different varieties.

From the time of Gustav Vasa the written language in Sweden, which had been under considerable Danish and Low German influence, took a different turn. The reformation was a national project, and the language of Gustav Vasa's bible from 1541 has few Danish traces (Skautrup 1947: 37), thus underlining the connection between language and power. In the establishment of Sweden as an independent kingdom, the Swedish language gained symbolic power (Janson 1997: 131, 146). Nonetheless, Danish scribes were still active in the service of the new state and set their linguistic mark on the written output of the chancery (Wessén 1965: 95). A clear example of this is the infinitive ending *-e*, as in

Danish; although found in many Swedish dialects, its prominent role in the chancery language was probably due to written tradition (Svensson 1981: 95). This tradition was eventually broken: In printed royal charters from 1610, 5% of the infinitives have *-a*, whereas the number had risen to 72% in 1612–14 (Svensson 1981: 30, 65). The rise of *a*-infinitives was slower in unprinted charters, showing that the printers played an important role as standardizers (cf. Burke 2004: 106–8). The infinitive ending is an element of the linguistic standardization which marked distance to Danish, and the switch is so marked that it must have been the result of a conscious decision, and probably an explicitly formulated orthographic rule (Svensson 1981: 95–7). Svensson further sets this in connection with a general linguistic patriotism, and King Gustav II Adolf, who ascended the throne in 1611, is known to have had an interest in the mother tongue.

3.2 The language that never became

During the Late Middle Ages Danish became the sole written language in Norway; this has often been called a language shift, yet may just as appropriately be described as a standardization process, where the orthography of the central government in Copenhagen became the model for the written language and peculiar Norwegian features gradually disappeared. There were no attested attempts to distinguish a separate Norwegian language.

The term *norsk* [Norwegian] to refer to the language – of which we saw the first instances above – was occasionally used during the latter half of the sixteenth century, always meaning ‘Old Norwegian’. When the Norwegian Laurents Hansson translated *Heimskringla* into Danish around 1550 (printed in Storm 1899), it was said to be *Fordansket af then Gamle Norske* [Danified from the Old Norwegian] (Storm 1899: 5), and the target language was called *thet mal Som wi nu tale here i Norrige* [the language that we now speak here in Norway] (Storm 1899: 9). Laurents Hansson translated *dønsk tunga* as ‘Danish tongue’, but wrote *norsk maal* [Norwegian language] for *norróna*. One page in the original language was included as an example and called ‘Norwegian’. Similar expressions are also found in other sixteenth-century sources: ‘Norwegian’ is used for the past, ‘Danish’ for the present; the terms must in any case refer to the written form, as the dialects still formed a continuum (Sandøy 2000: 877). An interesting parallel is the use of ‘Norwegian’ for Faroese in the late seventeenth century, meaning the old language (Sandøy 2011: 25–6).

From the mid-seventeenth century onwards, scattered poems and small glossaries written in Norwegian dialects show a consciousness of a Norwegian language. Although this language was usually defined by its dialectal distance to the Danish standard, a short description of some aspects of a southern Norwegian dialect, written around 1625, is entitled *norsk Grammaticam* [Norwegian grammar] and bears witness to a regional identity connected to language (Sandøy 2000: 884–5). Nonetheless, during the eighteenth century Norwegian varieties were mostly considered ‘part of the language which had its expression in the shared Danish written form’ (Hagland 2011: 68, my translation). Hans Olufsen Nysted may serve as an example: he was born and raised in Trondheim, studied theology and worked as a priest in Denmark. In 1727 he sent a manuscript to the king suggesting an orthographic reform of Danish. He based his reform on the

language of Copenhagen, yet frequently gives forms from *medsprog* [co-languages (i.e. dialects)] for comparison; one of these dialects is Norwegian, which is then set on par with e.g. Jutish (Dalen 2006: 66).

On the other hand, European linguists from the mid-sixteenth century onwards frequently mention Norwegian along with Danish and Swedish, often commenting on their similarity (Hovdhaugen 1982). The exact knowledge of the Scandinavian languages was, however, not always impressive, and the reason for including Norwegian was perhaps more that it was a known geographical and historical country, more than a recognition that the language was a separate one (Hovdhaugen 1982: 63). Writing in this European tradition, the Danish grammarian Peder Syv in 1663 counted to the Cimbrian (i.e. Germanic) languages ‘Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, German and others’ (Syv 1915: 88, my translation), with particular mention of Norwegian. When Norwegian was later treated as a dialect of Danish, that might have reflected a general ideology of unity within the Dano-Norwegian kingdom, and perhaps more importantly increased awareness of a standard language. When ‘standard Danish’ became a more clearly defined entity, it was also easier to identify deviations from this standard.

A prime example of a conceptual change with no immediate linguistic consequences is the Norwegian constitution of 1814. Norway was ceded from Denmark to Sweden as a result of the Napoleonic wars, but the Norwegians revolted against this and declared their independence in a constitution passed 17 May 1814. Norway lost the ensuing short war against Sweden, but was able to keep its new constitution with minor changes and entered into a personal union with Sweden that lasted until 1905. There was no mention of language in the original constitution of May 1814. However, in the revised version – written in flawless Danish – after the union with Sweden was accepted, § 33 states that all matters concerning Norway should be written in *det Norske Sprog* [the Norwegian language], § 47 that an under-age king should be given due teaching in Norwegian, and § 81 that all laws are to be written in Norwegian.⁹ By ‘Norwegian’ was of course meant a written language identical to that current in Denmark. The point here was to prevent that Swedish was introduced as the administrative language, as had happened in Scania (cf. above and Sandøy 2000: 889).

It was still a long time before much happened to the language itself, and a written language that was Norwegian in a strictly linguistic sense did not emerge until the work of Ivar Aasen; the publication of his *Prøver af Landsmaalet i Norge* [Examples of the national language of Norway] in 1853 is a landmark.¹⁰ We leave the later development aside for the time being; suffice it here to point out that only after Norway was established as an independent state (albeit in a personal union with Sweden) did a separate Norwegian language become possible. This process was of course also supported by the nineteenth-century romantic nationalism (cf. Burke 2004: 169–70).

3.3 A national value of Norwegian?

Although there are no direct references to a separate Norwegian language in the Late Middle Ages, a few examples of the use of traditional language – and lack

⁹ Both versions available at <<http://no.wikisource.org/wiki/Wikikilden:Grunnloven>> accessed 30 August 2016.

¹⁰ *Land* in *landsmål* meant ‘of the country’ to Aasen.

thereof – shall be considered at some length here.¹¹ A couple of official texts are written in a fairly conservative Norwegian, and the linguistic form has sometimes been given a nationalist interpretation. The most famous example is the electoral capitulation given by Karl Knutsson Bonde at his coronation as king of Norway in 1449 (DN VI, No. 531), in direct rivalry with the elected Danish king Christian of Oldenburg; a charter issued by the Norwegian Council of the Realm during the interregnum 1481–3 (DN V, No. 915) has similar linguistic traits.

Both charters exhibit old-fashioned language for their time, and scholars such as Indrebø (2001: 183) have ascribed this to a national dimension and even called it a ‘national demonstration’. However, this interpretation presupposes a highly developed consciousness of language and nation and may be an anachronistic transfer of modern ideology onto the Middle Ages (Sandøy 2000: 874). I have previously (Berg 2013: 241) suggested another explanation: Old-fashioned language could add legitimacy to a legal act which was constitutionally – at the very best – questionable; at least this goes for the coronation in 1449, conducted by the archbishop and not the full Council of the Realm. This interpretation is in accordance with common models of thought at the time, which laid emphasis on old customs (Gustafsson 2000: 277–9). That the old language at the same time happened to be more Norwegian as we understand it, may not have meant anything to those involved and was possibly a mere side effect. The same line of reasoning may also be applied to the last charters written in Norwegian during the sixteenth century, after Danish had mostly replaced Norwegian as the written language. Contrary to Indrebø’s (2001: 277) assertion that the code choice showed a will to preserve the language, it was probably intended to be traditional, not Norwegian (Berg 2014: 133).

It is worth noting that in its opposition to the king in the early sixteenth century the Norwegian Council of the Realm never used linguistic or national arguments, as we saw Gustav Vasa did, but argued with traditional law and the rights and privileges of the Council and the Catholic Church (cf. Gustafsson 2000: 303). The last archbishop of Nidaros, Olav Engelbrektsson, has often been portrayed as a struggler for Norwegian independence. Again, this is probably an anachronistic interpretation. He struggled for the customary privileges of the Council and the Church against the centralizing policy of the Danish king, but there is no evidence that this was at the time understood in a context of a Norwegian nation and its independence. What we can prove today is that linguistic form had no such meaning to him; written documents from the Council of the Realm are in Danish (with occasional Norwegian interference). Another point worth noting is that even when *norsk* is used as a national adjective (not connected to language), its meaning is defined by law and not by modern ideas of nationality. Vincens Lunge, a Danish nobleman married into a Norwegian family could thus write about *vii norske* [we Norwegians] (DN VII, No. 613, 1525) including himself; and he also specifically mentioned that Norwegians included those having become so by marriage (DN VII, No. 638, 1527).

Berg (2013) points to higher levels of Norwegian interference in administrative and unofficial writings in the early sixteenth century. Once again, I do not believe that this needs to be explained in nationalist terms. It is more likely a

11 This section is based on Berg (2013: 237–42), where the question of ‘identity’ is discussed more thoroughly.

question of register variation (cf. Sandøy 2011: 24–5): In formal writing one uses the ‘best’ language, and the language of authority was that in which the king’s chancery in Copenhagen wrote. This of course happened to be Danish as we conceive the term, but that need not have meant anything at the time. A Norwegian identity in opposition to Danish seems to have existed (Opsahl 2002), but language never became part of it. This may be an example of Burke’s (2004: 163) claim that before the middle of the eighteenth century, ‘the connections between languages and states were closer than those between languages and nations’.

There is one rare exception to this that deserves mention (the following is taken from Opsahl 2002: 99–101). In 1649 the Danish official Georg von Reichwein (who was born in Germany) visited the former Norwegian areas Idre and Särna, which had been occupied by Sweden in 1644. Reichwein wrote a report to the king where he claimed that clothing and building style in Särna was completely Norwegian and that the people spoke Norwegian and not a single Swedish word.¹² Cultural aspects thus were part of being Norwegian in Reichwein’s mind, and he must have assumed the same for the recipient. Reichwein had been an officer in the Norwegian army since 1629 and knew the country well, and this use of ‘Norwegian’ is intriguing. However, he remains a lone voice in his time.

4 Conclusion

In accordance with the Romance parallels discussed above, the Scandinavian development shows both the emergence of different languages from what was once conceived as a linguistic unity, and later the connection of language to national identities. It seems a usual pattern that the first thing to emerge is a new written mode, while subsequently the national adjectives are used to denote it. From a common ‘Danish tongue’ different written traditions were established, and the terms seem for a time to have been ‘*norróna*’, ‘Swedish’, and ‘Danish’. However, when the names first occur, they probably had no clearly defined properties, but were used in opposition to foreign languages much as we use ‘vernacular’ today. Later, in the case of Norwegian much later, they became part of the national identity and associated with clearly perceived linguistic differences. As written tradition and incipient standardization made the languages more fixed entities, it also became easier to ascribe certain linguistic properties to them.

We saw how language was given a social value in the carving of a national identity for an independent Sweden already in the sixteenth century. Denmark-Norway was a conglomerate state, incorporating also Iceland and German areas; and it was multilingual, as both Low and later High German were important languages within the state. Whereas Gustav Vasa used whatever arguments he could think of, including linguistic ones, in his establishment of an independent Swedish state, language remained more diffuse as a national property in Denmark-Norway, and Danish and Norwegian were not clearly differentiated until much later. An ideology of unity within the dual kingdom may also have suppressed tendencies to identify Norwegian as a separate language; instead it

¹² As Opsahl (2002: 100 n.) points out, Reichwein must have compared the dialect to the Standard Swedish of the political élite, as the dialects along the border form part of a continuum.

was set on par with other Danish regional dialects. This may be compared to the gradual superiority given to Spanish (castellano) in Spain ‘as an effective tool of the new centralist state’ during the eighteenth century (Medina, del Valle, and Monteagudo 2013: 26).

Even though there were pre-modern sentiments of a Norwegian national identity, they were not linked to language. Returning to the claim by Winge quoted initially, national identity may be a prerequisite for the identification of languages, yet it is not a sufficient prerequisite, as Norwegian was not fully recognized until the (relative) independence in 1814. The Scandinavian situation thus illustrates clearly how metalinguistic ideas of language depend on political power.

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