

The Nynorsk Language in America

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When Norway exited the union with Denmark in 1814 and entered a new union with Sweden, the written language continued to be Danish. However, during this era of national romanticism and nation building, this posed a problem since language was considered to be the key feature of a nation. Consequently, towards the mid-1800s, work was done to establish a written standard of Norwegian on its own. This effort followed two paths, one focused on “Norwegianisation” of the Danish standard – by a series of reforms, the vocabulary and morphology was to be altered towards urban varieties of spoken Norwegian. This path led to the variety to what we today know as Bokmål. The other strategic path was more radical, to establish a totally new written standard based on rural dialects, a work done by the autodidact Ivar Aasen. He traveled around Norway and documented dialects in the rural areas, and based on this data, he constructed, or, as some would argue, reconstructed, a new Norwegian written standard. At that time this standard was called Landsmaal, today it is known as New Norwegian or Nynorsk.

During the last part of the 1800s and towards the 2nd World War, Nynorsk gained popularity, especially in the rural areas in the Midland and western Norway, areas from where many emigrated to America. Thus, one could expect that these emigrants brought the enthusiasm for Nynorsk along with them when they emigrated. However, that was not the case; emigrants were conservative as regards a written standard, and to a high degree cherished the Danish way of spelling. In general, they showed a skepticism towards reforming Danish more towards spoken Norwegian, and to a great degree rejected the idea of establishing a new written standard based on Norwegian dialects. For them, the language reforms initiated in Norway represented a break-up between the language communities in the Old and New World.

This presentation will examine actual use of Nynorsk in America, and why this standard did not gain the popularity one could anticipate, given that many emigrants had a dialect close to this written standard. Furthermore, we will investigate which attitudes that were expressed in some of the leading periodicals (Waldemar Ager’s *Reform*, and “the three big” *Skandinaven*, *Decorah-Posten*, *Minneapolis Tidende*). Today, these Norwegian-American newspapers are made available in digital (and searchable) form. This represents a unique possibility to do a systematic study on which attitudes these mainstream media expressed towards Landsmaal / Nynorsk.

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