

Norwegian (norsk) is a North Germanic language spoken primarily in Norway, where it is an official language. It is also spoken as a second language among Norwegian-Americans in the USA, especially in the central northern states. Together with Swedish and Danish, Norwegian forms a continuum of more or less mutually intelligible local and regional variants .

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These continental Scandinavian languages together with the insular languages Faroese and Icelandic, as well as some extinct languages, constitute the North Germanic languages (also called Scandinavian languages). Faroese and Icelandic are hardly mutually intelligible with Norwegian in their spoken form, because continental Scandinavian has diverged from them. As established by law and governmental policy, there are two official forms of written Norwegian – Bokmål (literally "book language") and Nynorsk (literally "new Norwegian"). The Norwegian Language Council recommends the terms "Norwegian Bokmål" and "Norwegian Nynorsk" in English.

There is no officially sanctioned standard of spoken Norwegian, and most Norwegians speak their own dialect in all circumstances. The sociolect of the urban upper and middle class in East Norway, upon which Bokmål is primarily based, can be regarded as a de facto spoken standard for Bokmål. This so-called standard østnorsk ("Standard Eastern Norwegian") is the form generally taught to foreign students. From the 16th to the 19th centuries, Danish was the standard written language of Norway. As a result, the development of modern written Norwegian has been subject to strong controversy related to nationalism, rural versus urban discourse, and Norway's literary history. Historically, Bokmål is a Norwegianized variety of Danish, while Nynorsk is a language form based on Norwegian dialects and puristic opposition to Danish. The now abandoned official policy to merge Bokmål and Nynorsk into one common language called Samnorsk through a series of spelling reforms has created a wide spectrum of varieties of both Bokmål and Nynorsk. The unofficial form known as Riksmål is considered more conservative than Bokmål, and the unofficial Høgnorsk more conservative than Nynorsk.

Norwegians are educated in both Bokmål and Nynorsk. A 2005 poll indicates that 86.3% use primarily Bokmål as their daily written language, 5.5% use both Bokmål and Nynorsk, and 7.5% use primarily Nynorsk.[citation needed] Thus 13% are frequently writing Nynorsk, though the majority speak dialects that resemble Nynorsk more closely than Bokmål Broadly speaking, nynorsk writing is widespread in Western Norway, though not in major urban areas; it is little

used elsewhere. The Norwegian broadcasting corporation (NRK) broadcasts in both Bokmål and Nynorsk, and all governmental agencies are required to support both written languages. Bokmål is used in 92% of all written publications, Nynorsk in 8% (2000). Norwegian is one of the working languages of the Nordic Council. Under the Nordic Language Convention, citizens of the Nordic countries speaking Norwegian have the opportunity to use their native language when interacting with official bodies in other Nordic countries without being liable to any interpretation or translation costs. This is the approximate extent of Old Norse and related languages in the early 10th century. The red area is the distribution of the dialect Old West Norse; the orange area is the spread of the dialect Old East Norse. The pink area is Old Gutnish and the green area is the extent of the other Germanic languages with which Old Norse still retained some mutual intelligibility

The languages now spoken in Scandinavia developed from the Old Norse language, which did not differ greatly between what are now Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish areas. In fact, Viking traders spread the language across Europe and into Russia, making Old Norse one of the most widespread languages for a time. According to tradition, King Harald Fairhair united Norway in 872. Around this time, a runic alphabet was used. According to writings found on stone tablets from this period of history, the language showed remarkably little deviation between different regions. Runes had been in limited use since at least the 3rd century. Around 1030, Christianity came to Norway, bringing with it the Latin alphabet. Norwegian manuscripts in the new alphabet began to appear about a century later. The Norwegian language began to deviate from its neighbors around this time as well.

Viking explorers had begun to settle Iceland in the 9th century, carrying with them the Old Norse language. Over time, Old Norse developed into "Western" and "Eastern" variants. Western Norse covered Norway (including its overseas settlements in Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands and the Shetland Islands), while Eastern Norse developed in Denmark and south-central Sweden. The language of Iceland and Norway was practically the same up until the 1300s, when they started to deviate from each other.

The language phase traditionally dated to 1350–1525, is known as Middle Norwegian and is seen by many as a transitional period from Old Norse to Modern Norwegian. The reason for this is that although most languages are in a state of constant change, Norwegian phonology, morphology and syntax changed considerably during this time.[8] The use of grammatical case, and a great portion of the conjugation of verbs was lost and replaced by a more fixed syntax, use of prepositions and a greater use of auxiliary based verb forms. During the late Old Norse period and this period there was also a considerable adoption of Middle Low German vocabulary. Similar development in grammar and phonology happened in Swedish and Danish, keeping the dialect continuum in continental Scandinavia intact, but with greater dialectal variation. This process did not, however, occur in the same way in Faroese and Icelandic. These languages remain conservative to this day, when it comes to grammar and vocabulary, so mutual intelligibility with continental Scandinavia was lost.

In 1397, the Kalmar Union unified Norway, Sweden and Denmark, and from 1536 Norway was subordinated under the Kingdom of Denmark–Norway. Danish became the commonly written

language among Norway's literate class. Spoken Danish was gradually adopted by the urban elite, first at formal occasions, and gradually a more relaxed variety was adopted in everyday speech. The everyday speech went through a koinéization process, involving grammatical simplification and Norwegianized pronunciation. When the union ended in 1814 the Dano-Norwegian koiné had become the mother tongue of a substantial part of the Norwegian elite, but the more Danish-sounding solemn variety was still used on formal occasions.

Norway was forced to enter a new personal union with Sweden, shortly after the end of the former one with Denmark. However, Norwegians began to push for true independence by embracing democracy and attempting to enforce the constitutional declaration of being a sovereign state. Part of this nationalist movement was directed towards the development of an independent Norwegian language. Three major paths were available: do nothing (Norwegian written language, i.e. Danish, was already different from Swedish), Norwegianize the Danish language, or build a new national language based on Modern Norwegian dialects. All three approaches were attempted. From the 1840s, some writers experimented with a Norwegianized Danish by incorporating words that were descriptive of Norwegian scenery and folk life, and adopting a more Norwegian syntax. Knud Knudsen proposed to change spelling and inflection in accordance with the Dano-Norwegian koiné, known as "cultivated everyday speech." A small adjustment in this direction was implemented in the first official reform of Danish language in Norway in 1862 and more extensively after his death in two official reforms in 1907 and 1917.

Meanwhile, a nationalistic movement strove for the development of a new written Norwegian. Ivar Aasen, a self-taught linguist, began his work to create a new Norwegian language at the age of 22. He traveled around the country, comparing the dialects in different regions, and examined the development of Icelandic, which had largely escaped the influences Norwegian had come under. He called his work, which was published in several books from 1848 to 1873, *Landsmål*, meaning national language. The name "*Landsmål*" is sometimes interpreted as "rural language" or "country language," but this was clearly not Aasen's intended meaning.

The name of the Danish language in Norway was a topic of hot dispute through the 19th century. Its proponents claimed that it was a language common to Norway and Denmark, and no more Danish than Norwegian. The proponents of *Landsmål* thought that the Danish character of the language should not be concealed. In 1899, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson proposed the neutral name *Riksmål*, meaning national language like *Landsmål*, and this was officially adopted along with the 1907 spelling reform. The name "*Riksmål*" is sometimes interpreted as "state language," but this meaning is secondary at best, compare to Danish *rigsmål* from where the name was borrowed.

After the personal union with Sweden was dissolved in 1905, both languages were developed further and reached what is now considered their classic forms after a reform in 1917. *Riksmål* was in 1929 officially renamed *Bokmål* (literally "Book language"), and *Landsmål* to *Nynorsk* (literally "New Norwegian"). A proposition to substitute Dano-Norwegian for *Bokmål* lost in parliament by a single vote. The name *Nynorsk*, the linguistic term for Modern Norwegian, was chosen for contrast to Danish and emphasis on the historical connection to Old Norwegian. Today this meaning is often lost, and it is commonly mistaken as a "new" Norwegian in contrast to the "real" Norwegian *Bokmål*.

Bokmål and Nynorsk were made closer by a reform in 1938. This was a result of a state policy to merge Nynorsk and Bokmål into one language, called "Samnorsk" (Common Norwegian). A 1946 poll showed that this policy was supported by 79% of Norwegians at the time. However, opponents of the official policy still managed to create a massive protest movement against Samnorsk in the 1950s, fighting in particular the use of "radical" forms in Bokmål text books in schools. In the reform in 1959, the 1938 reform was partially reversed in Bokmål, but Nynorsk was changed further towards Bokmål. Since then Bokmål has reverted even further toward traditional Riksmål, while Nynorsk still adheres to the 1959 standard. Therefore a small minority of Nynorsk enthusiasts uses a more conservative standard called Høgnorsk. The Samnorsk policy had little influence after 1960, and was officially abandoned in 2002.

The Norwegian dialects are commonly divided into 5 main groups, North Norwegian (nordnorsk), Trøndelag Norwegian (trøndersk), Midland Norwegian (innlandsmål), West Norwegian (vestnorsk), and East Norwegian (østnorsk). The dialects are generally mutually intelligible, but differ significantly with regards to accent, grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. If not accustomed to a particular dialect, even a native Norwegian speaker may have difficulty understanding it. Dialects can be as local as farm clusters, but many linguists note an ongoing regionalization, diminishing or even elimination of local variations. Normalized speech, following the written languages Bokmål and Nynorsk or the more conservative Riksmål and Høgnorsk, is not in common use, except in parts of Finnmark (where the original Sami population learned Norwegian as a second language), in certain social groups in the major urban areas of Norway, in national broadcasting, and in courts and official decrees.

- * West and South Norwegian
 - o South Norwegian (Aust-Agder, most of Vest-Agder and a small part of Telemark)
 - o South-West Norwegian (inner parts of Sogn og Fjordane, Hordaland (except the city of Bergen), Rogaland (Stavanger), and western parts of Vest-Agder)
 - o Bergen Norwegian or Bergensk (Bergen)
 - o North-West Norwegian (Romsdal, Sunnmøre, Nordfjord, Sunnfjord and outer parts of Sogn)
- * North Norwegian
 - o Helgeland Norwegian (Nordland county south of Saltfjellet, except for Bindal)
 - o Nordland Norwegian (Nordland county north of Saltfjellet)
 - o Troms Norwegian (Troms county, except for Bardu and Målselv)
 - o Finnmark Norwegian (Finnmark county, except for Kautokeino, Karasjok, Tana and Nesseby).
- * East Norwegian
 - o Vikvær Norwegian (Vestfold, Østfold, and adjacent lowland parts of Telemark, Buskerud and Akershus)
 - o Middle East Norwegian (Ringerike, Romerike, and Oslo)
 - o Oppland Norwegian (southern Hedmark and south-eastern Oppland)
 - o Østerdal Norwegian (northern Hedmark)
- * Midland Norwegian
 - o Gudbrandsdal Norwegian (northern Oppland)
 - o Valdres and Hallingdal Norwegian (south-west Oppland and western Buskerud)

- o Western Telemark Norwegian (Vinje, Tokke and Kviteseid)
- o Eastern Telemark Norwegian (Tinn, Hjartdal, and upper Numedal)
- * Trøndelag Norwegian
 - o Outer Trøndelag Norwegian (Nordmøre, outer Sør-Trøndelag, and Fosen)
 - o Inner Trøndelag Norwegian (inner Sør-Trøndelag, Innherad, Lierne, and Snåsa)
 - o Namdal Norwegian (Namdalen and surrounding coastal areas)
 - o South-eastern Trøndersk (Røros , Selbu, Tydal, Holtålen, Oppdal)

Owing to geography and climate, Norwegian communities were often isolated from each other till the early 20th century. As a result, local dialects had a tendency to be influenced by each other in singular ways while developing their own idiosyncrasies. The community of Oppdal, for example, has characteristics in common with coastal dialects to the west, the dialects of northern Gudbrandsdalen to the south, and other dialects in Sør Trøndelag from the north. The linguist Einar Haugen documented the particulars of the Oppdal dialect, and the writer Inge Krokann used it as a literary device. Other transitional dialects include the dialects of Romsdal and Arendal.

On the other hand, newly industrialized communities near sources of hydroelectric power have developed dialects consistent with the region but in many ways unique. Studies in such places as Høyanger, Odda, Tyssedal, Rjukan, Notodden, Sauda, and others show that creolization has effected the formation of new dialects in these areas.

Similarly, in the early 20th century a dialect closely approximating standard Bokmål arose in and around railway stations. This was known as stasjonsspråk ("station language") and may have contributed to changes in dialect around these centers.

Till the 20th century, rural dialects were considered an attribute of the uneducated provincial class in Norway. Social mobility involved conforming speech to standard Riksmål, a pattern that persists to this day in certain urban areas. Studies show that speakers of dialect tend to change their usage in formal settings to approximate the formal written language.

This has led to various countercultural movements ranging from the adoption of radical forms of Oslo dialects among political radicals to movements preserving local dialects. There is widespread and growing acceptance that Norwegian linguistic diversity is worth preserving.

The trend today is a regionalisation of the dialects causing smaller dialectal traits to disappear and rural dialects to merge with their nearest larger dialectal variety.

In most Norwegian chat rooms and similar today, people write in something resembling their regional dialects with pride.

There are many ways to distinguish among Norwegian dialects. These criteria are drawn from the work Johnsen, Egil Børre (ed.) (1987) Vårt Eget Språk/Talemålet. H. Aschehoug & Co. ISBN 82-03-17092-7. These criteria generally provide the analytical means for identifying most dialects, though most Norwegians rely on experience to tell them apart.