

Optional forms in standard Norwegian and Ukrainian: Commonalities and differences

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All standard languages display some optionality between different forms, be it orthographical variants or variation between morphemes, words or syntactic constructions. Norwegian Bokmål and Nynorsk are characterised by a particularly high degree of optionality in a European context and also when compared to Swedish and Danish. The same is true of Ukrainian when compared to the much more monolithic Russian standard. I will explore the nature of optionality in Norwegian and Ukrainian and discuss the historical reasons behind this feature found in the two languages today.

While there are some obvious parallels between the language situation in Norway and Ukraine in the 18th–19th centuries, I will argue that the Ukrainian case on the whole is very different from the Norwegian one. The deliberate oppression suffered by the Ukrainian language on the part of the Russian empire in the 19th century and the Soviet state in the 20th century lacks any parallel in the Norwegian context.

Today's optionality in Bokmål is partly the result of the dual origins of this standard, Bokmål being 'a compromise between originally Danish-based upper-class speech and southeastern dialects' (Vikør 2001:57). Nynorsk, on the other hand, is based on (rural) Norwegian dialects with reference to Old Norwegian (a dialect of Old Norse). The official language planning after independence in 1905 aimed at bringing the two standards closer, eventually merging them into one. One of the key methods to achieve this goal was the gradual introduction of optional forms from the other standard; it was presumed that this would facilitate the merger of the two standards. This is a major reason for the optionality seen today both in Bokmål and Nynorsk.

Standard Ukrainian is based on the south-eastern dialects and was formed in the 19th century. It suffered great setbacks in the Russian empire with a wave of prohibitions from 1863 onwards. After a short revival ('ukrainisation') in the 1920s, the Soviet regime began a deliberate policy of bringing the Ukrainian standard closer to Russian, a policy referred to by some Ukrainian scholars as 'lingvocide' (Masenko 2005). The optionality in Ukrainian today is partly a result of endeavours to amend the russification, but in the optionality we also see signs of an east-west opposition due to the greater prominence of western (Galician) dialects at different points in the 19th and 20th centuries.

References

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