

## **Regional varieties in Norway revisited**

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*Short title for the running head: Regional varieties in Norway revisited*

### **Abstract**

This chapter examines diverging tendencies towards vertical convergence in different parts of Norway and patterns of emergence and enregisterment of intermediate regional varieties – at the level of language use, but particularly at the level of perception. Over the last decades the Norwegian language space has undergone substantial restructuring, partly due to increasing mobility, urbanisation and globalisation. More dialect and language contact has led to increased dialect levelling, dialect shift, bi-dialectism, emergence of *koinai*, multiethnolectal speech styles and possibly also intermediate regional varieties. While previous studies suggest that regional lects may be emerging, this paper presents arguments on the basis of results from a recent large-scale study, as well as other recent work, to the effect that these still seem to remain

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\* The history of this paper goes back to a workshop organised by Frans Hinskens, Stavroula Tsiplakou and Juan Villena Ponsoda at ICLaVE 8 in Leipzig. I am most grateful to the organisers for the invitation to take part in the workshop and to Stavroula Tsiplakou and Massimo Cerruti for the invitation to contribute to this volume. I further thank the editors and reviewers for insightful critical remarks and very good suggestions for improvement. I also want to thank Peter Auer, Bjørn Torgim Ramberg and Brit Mæhlum for valuable comments and fruitful discussions. This work was partly supported by the Research Council of Norway through its Centres of Excellence funding scheme, project number 223265.

structurally relatively incoherent, unfocussed and unstable and have little indexical value or symbolic significance.

**Keywords:** regional varieties, dialect levelling, vertical convergence, Norwegian, mobility, indexicality, perception and self-evaluation, enregisterment, translanguaging, ontology

### **Prologue**

As a young student I went to spend a year at the Department of Danish Dialectology at the University of Copenhagen. Here I had the pleasure of meeting Danish Dialectology's Grand Old Lady, Inger Ejkskjær (1926-2015). Apart from being a delightful person with an impressive intelligence, she had a wonderful sense of humour and was a great storyteller. One of the stories she told me – one that actually had rather upset her – was about a phone call that she had one day received from a gentleman who wanted to know the exact answer to the following question: “How many dialects are there in Denmark?”. He told her that he had been in an argument at a dinner party and the disagreement resulted in a wager and now he wanted to know the exact and correct number. Professor Ejkskjær, however, started lecturing the man about why this was an exceedingly stupid question without an answer. Giving an exact number is simply not possible; counting dialects is not what dialectologists do. They describe isoglosses and socio-structural co-

occurrence patterns. She told him that lects – be they languages or dialects – are (social, political, cultural) constructs, theoretical idealisations, and that the number of dialects depends on which features you chose to count and how many features you choose to include. The man was rather surprised – and she didn't think he had quite grasped the points she was making. What he obviously did not know, is that this is a long-standing discussion within Scandinavian dialectology. Where does the border fall between one dialect and the next and who decides that? Or even more relevant to the topic of this paper, when is a dialect not a dialect anymore, but a regional variety – and who decides that?

## **1. Introduction**

Over the last decades, Norwegian society, like many others in Europe and beyond, has changed substantially as a result of increased social and geographic mobility, urbanisation, globalisation and labour- and refugee-driven immigration. As a consequence, the Norwegian language space has undergone substantial restructuring. Not only has the linguistic diversity in the country increased markedly, but the degree of dialect and language contact has intensified substantially. As a result, we experience increasing dialect levelling, dialect shift, emergence and enregisterment of new *koinai*, multiethnolects and possibly also intermediate regional varieties. Another result is that people's individual linguistic repertoires have expanded and

multilingualism and bi-dialectism are becoming ever more common. Hence, globalisation and concomitant social, cultural, political and economic processes have promoted both spatial and symbolic mobility, leading to increasing linguistic complexity and changing norms (see, e.g., Blommaert, 2010). As pointed out by Blommaert (2010) and others, this increasing complexification represents a substantial challenge for linguists who want to describe these new language and dialect landscapes.

In this chapter, the main objective is to revisit the question of whether intermediate regional varieties, or regiolects, have emerged in Norway – either at the level of language use or at the level of language norm – more than a decade after a number of studies concluded that it is not possible to reach a definite conclusion (e.g., Akselberg, 2002; Hernes, 2006; Røsstad, 2006; Røyneland, 2005). Most of the previous studies concentrated on studying regional varieties at the level of language use. The main focus in this paper will be on whether regional varieties are becoming more important as means of signaling regional affiliation and identity. This is one of the topics of a large-scale study undertaken recently (Røyneland, 2017); arguments in this paper draw on results from this study, as well as other recent work.

## **2. Background**

### *2.1 Restructuring of the Norwegian society*

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Norway was a relatively homogeneous rural society with little immigration, but since then Norway has developed into a modern multicultural, industrial and service society with a population concentration in the cities. Numbers from Statistics Norway show that while approximately 80% of the population lived in rural areas and worked as farmers or fishermen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these numbers have been turned upside down today. More than 80% of the population now live in urban areas and only 2.4 % work in farming and fishing (Statistics Norway, 2017, p. 3). The massive urbanisation of the country continues today – not only in the sense that the migratory patterns clearly go from rural to urban areas, but also in the sense that rural areas become urbanised – and the population at large becomes mentally urbanised. Today, approximately 17% of the national population of 5.3 million have an immigrant background and in the capital, Oslo, one third of the population has either migrated to Norway or is born in Norway to two foreign-born parents (Statistics Norway, 2017, p. 2).

Also, in terms of socio-economic status there have been dramatic changes in Norway in the last decades. The standard of living has increased for most people in the country, almost all Norwegian adolescents have higher education and an increasing number study at university level. Almost four times as many Norwegians have higher education today as compared to the 1980s (50% in Oslo and 33% in the rest of the country; Statistics Norway, 2017, p. 10). In other words, Norwegian society has changed profoundly in terms of both geographic and social mobility, urbanisation and globalisation.

## 2.2 Linguistic diversity in Norway

Norway is also one of the most dialect-speaking countries in Europe. [...] The most important aspect of the Norwegian language situation, however, is that there is an enormous societal tolerance for linguistic diversity and that, what is more, linguistic diversity in Norway is officially recognised and protected. (Trudgill, 2002, p. 31).

As pointed out by Peter Trudgill (2002), the Norwegian sociolinguistic climate is in many ways quite unique, regarding both the written and the spoken language situation. Dialects are widely used in everyday contexts, both formal and informal, and there are two written norms of Norwegian (Bokmål and Nynorsk) (see, e.g., Jahr, 2013; Røyneland, 2009; Sandøy, 2011). A historically rooted sense of inter-Scandinavian identity yields expectations of mutual intelligibility among speakers of the Scandinavian languages. Globalisation has, moreover, introduced a number of new minority languages and led to the increased use of English. The extent to which societal tolerance for diversity also includes new hybrid (multiethno)lects, *koinai*, foreign-accented Norwegian and minority languages is, however, open to question. Recent studies show that this societal tolerance first and foremost applies to traditional Norwegian dialects and to a certain extent to the two norms of written Norwegian and not to other types of linguistic diversity in

the country (Ims, 2014; Kulbrandstad, 2007; Lane, 2009; Myklestu, 2015; Svendsen, 2014).

Dialects in Norway differ considerably (at all linguistic levels) between regions. Spoken diglossia, in the sense of Fishman (1967), with shifting between low and high varieties depending on function and domain, is quite rare in contemporary Norway. On the contrary, Norwegians are expected to use their dialect in all situations and also to keep their dialect if moving out of their place of origin (Røyneland, 2017). With increasing inter- and intra-regional migration, this means that communication between Norwegians is very often polylectal. Dialects are used by people in all layers of society and in recent years the use of dialects in formal domains has in fact increased (Nesse, 2015). There is no officially sanctioned oral standard proper in Norway, although many scholars refer to the high prestige variety spoken in and around the capital, Oslo, as “standard eastern Norwegian” (e.g., Jahr & Mæhlum, 2009).<sup>1</sup> In fact, the Norwegian Parliament decided in 1878 that no particular spoken standard should be taught in elementary and secondary schools (Jahr, 2013). This principle is still valid today and in Norwegian schools there is no tradition of correcting pupils’ dialects. This historical

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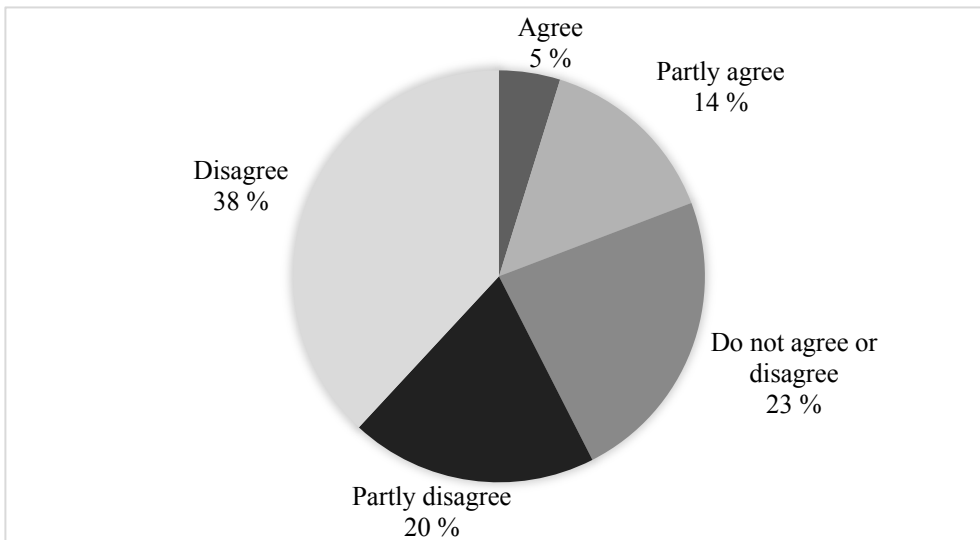
<sup>1</sup> The question of whether or not there is an oral standard in Norway is a quite contentious matter, which has been much debated by Norwegian sociolinguists (e.g., Jahr & Mæhlum, 2009). One might argue that spoken Bokmål has some of the properties of an oral standard although it is not officially standardised. Spoken Bokmål may be pronounced with a range of different accents, but south-eastern Norwegian phonology, particularly as it appears in and around the capital, Oslo, seems to have achieved a hegemonic status, is commonly regarded as the most “normal”, “neutral” and even “correct” way of speaking Norwegian and it is often referred to as “standard eastern Norwegian” (cf. Røyneland, 2009, 2010, for further discussion).

background has no doubt been essential for the continued use of local dialects in Norway even in polylectal communication and it explains the relatively weak position of the spoken standard.

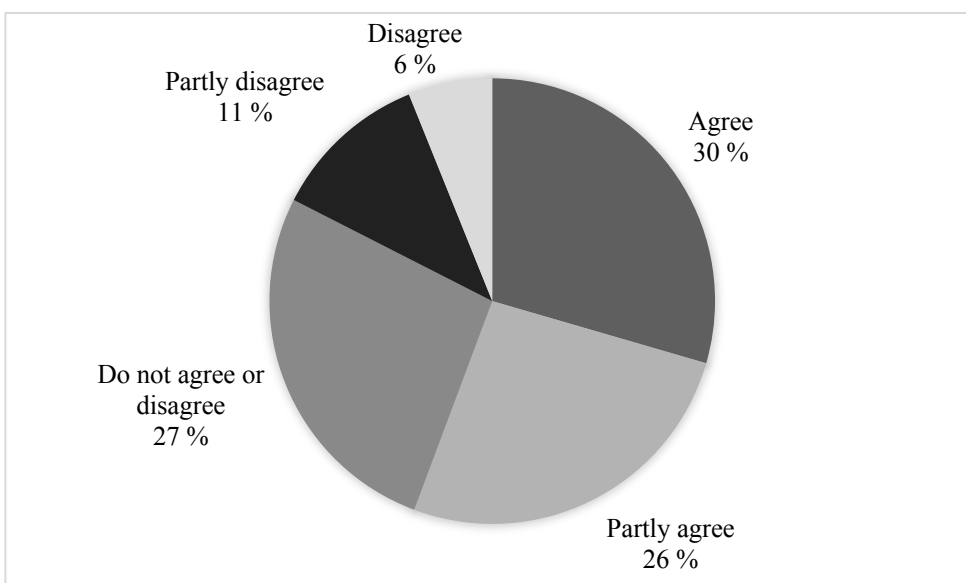
A study of attitudes towards dialect use in the national broadcasting channel NRK, shows that 91% of the respondents are very positive to the use of dialects in general and 73% agreed that TV and radio hosts should use their dialect on air (N=1000) (NRK/Norstat, 2014). Until 2007 news presenters in national broadcasting (NRK) were required to use standard Bokmål or Nynorsk morphology and segmental phonology when presenting the news (each presenter's supra-segmental phonology would of course vary according to his or her dialect background), but now they may upon request use their dialect also in these very formal areas of transmission (Språkrådet, 2007). In addition, it has become increasingly common to use dialect in writing on social media, particularly on Facebook and YouTube, and in text messaging (Rotevatn, 2014; Røyneland, 2018b).

Among young Norwegians we also find predominantly positive attitudes towards dialect use. In a recent study of 584 adolescents from eleven different secondary schools in six different places in eastern and western Norway, only 19% agree that it is problematic that there are so many different dialects in Norway (Figure 1), whereas 56% agree that the Norwegian dialect diversity is only positive (Figure 2) (cf. Røyneland, 2017; 2018a; Røyneland & Jensen forthcoming, see more details about the study in Section 3.4 below).





**Figure 1.** "It is problematic that there are so many dialects in Norway" (N=584)



**Figure 2.** "It is only positive that we have so many dialects in Norway" (N=584)

Although dialects in general enjoy high status and there is no standard proper, some dialects are obviously more prestigious than others. Previous research has shown that dialects spoken in proximity to the larger cities tend

to be less valued and may be exposed to stigmatisation (Hårstad & Opsahl, 2013; Mæhlum & Røyneland, 2018; Stjernholm, 2017).

### *2.3 Dialect developments in contemporary Norway*

In contemporary Norway, two main but opposing tendencies may be observed: on the one hand, increasing dialect levelling and, on the other hand, increasing dialect acceptance.<sup>2</sup> In spite of the general tendency of overall levelling, the use of dialects in formal settings has, as discussed above, gained more acceptance over the last fifty years and is now seen as legitimate in most public domains. This kind of ambiguity in the position of the dialects is not unique to Norway but can also be observed in many other European communities. Since the 1970s there have, for instance, been attempts in

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<sup>2</sup> According to Auer (2005), dialect levelling may be described as a dynamic dialect contact phenomenon that leads to the gradual abandonment of local dialect features in favour of more regional or standard ones. Hence, dialect levelling is a two-dimensional process where both horizontal dialect–dialect levelling and vertical dialect–standard levelling is involved. The result of the process is primarily reduction of inter-systemic variation. Intra-systemically, the degree of variation may in fact increase because people get to choose linguistic variants from a larger linguistic repertoire (or “feature pool”; Mufwene, 2001). Decreasing contrast between varieties does not necessarily imply loss of traditional forms. Old and new forms may co-exist for some time, at least at the beginning of the process. However, in the long run, local features tend to be abandoned. The long-term effect of the process is therefore most probably also a reduction of dialect-internal variation. Generally, features with a restricted geographical and social distribution tend to disappear first, whereas features with a wider geographical distribution in language space have a greater chance of surviving. The expected result of the process may thus be the emergence of new, more or less focused lects, but more diffuse situations may also emerge with a range of non-discrete structures within the dialect-standard continuum (cf. Auer & Hinskens, 1996; Auer, 2005).

several parts of Europe to revive dialects as a means of displaying regional affiliations and identities (cf. Auer & Hinskens, 1996).

Although dialect levelling is the most distinct tendency in modern Norwegian dialect change (see, e.g., Hernes, 2006; Hilton, 2010; Hårstad, 2010; Røsstad, 2006; Røyneland, 2005, 2018a), increased dialect and language contact has also resulted in a number of other developments. In some areas, particularly in eastern Norway, we see tendencies to regular dialect shift where new generations simply do not acquire the local dialect but speak something close to “standard eastern Norwegian” (see, e.g., Rudi, 2007; Papazian, 1997). Another development is the emergence of *koinai* in new industrial towns due to intensified dialect contact (see, e.g., Solheim, 2009; Neteland, 2017) and the emergence of multiethnolectal speech styles in multilingual urban centres (Opsahl, 2009; Svendsen & Røyneland, 2008). Increased inter-regional mobility has also led to bi-dialectism becoming more common (Indrehus, 2014; Ommeren, 2016) and also to young people developing more complex and fluid linguistic repertoires (Hårstad & Opsahl, 2013; Mæhlum & Røyneland, 2009; Røyneland, 2017).

Whereas some of these developments are restricted to certain regions, tendencies towards dialect levelling may be detected all over Norway. As discussed by Auer & Hinskens (1996), dialect levelling may involve both horizontal dialect–dialect levelling and vertical dialect–standard levelling. Some scholars argue that horizontal dialect–dialect levelling is the most dominating force in western Norwegian dialect change, whereas vertical

dialect levelling dominates in eastern Norway, where the capital, Oslo, is located (e.g., Akselberg, 2004; Røstad, 2006; Sandøy, 2013). Other scholars contend that both forces may be found in dialect levelling processes all over the country (e.g., Hårstad, 2010; Mæhlum, 2009; Røyneland, 2010). Scholars particularly disagree on the extent to which vertical levelling constitutes a key factor in contemporary dialect change, given the relatively weak position of the spoken standard. In many cases researchers interpret the developments quite differently – where some call upon vertical forces, others tend to interpret the same developments as horizontal convergence. Isomorphism may of course complicate the matter and leave open different interpretative possibilities (see Hårstad, 2010). Also, the *result* of the levelling processes often differs from the converged-to variety and may contribute to the emergence of new intermediate variants and to the creation of new distinctions, hence making it difficult to determine what the motivating force is (cf. Auer, 2005; Røyneland, 2010).

Nevertheless, most scholars seem to agree that dialect changes in southeastern Norway follow a rather different pattern than in the rest of the country. The predominant development in this area is undoubtedly vertical dialect–standard levelling, although horizontal levelling has been documented as well (e.g., in Hilton, 2010; Røyneland, 2005). Regional “eastern standard Norwegian” is expanding rapidly to all cities and towns (Hilton, 2010; Mæhlum & Røyneland, 2012; Vikør, 1999). Hence, developments in this part of the country resemble those in many other

European countries (described as a type C area in Auer's typology; see Auer, 2005, p. 22). It is, however, not only traditional high-status urban variants that are spreading, but also variants that used to be perceived as working-class and low status. As in many other parts of contemporary Europe, these variants appear to be spreading at the expense of traditional high-status ones, both in the cities and in surrounding areas (see, e.g., articles in Kristiansen & Coupland 2011; Opsahl & Røyneland, 2009; Stjernholm 2013). These traditional low status working-class variants have become re-allocated to modern urban features; that is, they do not index low social class and lack of education anymore, but urbanity and a "cool" urban lifestyle. Hence, change occur not only at the dialect end of the continuum but also at the standard end, and can be described as an example of demotisation (cf. Coupland & Kristiansen, 2011). The very same process may, though need not, also lead to destandardisation, in the sense that the characteristic functions of the standard may be weakened. An example of demotisation of the standard is the expansion of the singular definite marker *-a* in feminine nouns: *jenta* (upper class form: *jenten*) 'the girl', *boka* (*boken*) 'the book' (Stjernholm, 2013, p. 150). Another example is the expansion of the traditional working class apical pronunciation of *-sl-*, *-[ʂ]*-, at the expense of the traditional upper class laminal pronunciation *-[sl]*- (as in the name of the capital *Oslo* [*uʂlu*] vs. [*uslu*]) (Opsahl & Røyneland, 2009, p. 103; Kristoffersen & Simonsen, 2008, p. 100). According to Jahr (2008) the apical pronunciation used to be a quite stigmatised feature: "[...] to pronounce the s before l as ʂ has up till now been

considered popular and vulgar” (Jahr, 2008 [1985], p. 126). Now, however, the apical variant is clearly the dominant variant in all social layers of the capital.<sup>3</sup> Another change, which however only is taking place in the surrounding dialect areas and not in the city itself, is the replacement of the traditional local morphological ending in the definite masculine plural  $-\text{[anə]}$  by the traditional low status Oslo variant  $-\text{[a]}$  instead of the high status Oslo variant  $-\text{[ənə]}$  (*guttane* > *gutta* and not *guttene* ‘the boys’). The ending  $-\text{[a]}$  is virtually non-existent in this category in the upper class Oslo dialect, in which the ending is  $-\text{[ənə]}$  (Johnsen, 2015, p. 619).

In the northern, southern, western and central parts of Norway, there seem to be several different regional developments whereby the urban variety of the dominant city or town within each region constitutes the most important intraregional linguistic norm ideal (e.g., Røyneland, 2009). We find vertical levelling toward the “standard eastern Norwegian” in these parts of the country, too, but in some cases the regional developments may in fact diverge from the standard. Also, in these parts of the country the traditional sociolinguistic stratification of speech in the bigger cities and towns seems to be disappearing and people from different social groups tend to speak the same way in both informal and formal situations. These new common urban dialects, which cut across class differences, are normally based on old low-

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<sup>3</sup> In both of these examples, however, the working-class variants also form part of the traditional rural eastern dialects. Hence, their expansion in the capital means that their chances of surviving in rural and semi-urban areas increase substantially (Røyneland, 2005).

status urban dialect features, but with some modifications reflecting the influence from the high-status urban dialect (cf. Sandøy, 1998). Some studies demonstrate that local varieties deviate substantially from the high-status variety at the level of the lexicon and suggest that this is where we find the most pronounced vertical convergence (e.g., Jenstad, 2015; Sandøy, 2013). At the level of morphology, by contrast, we may find system-internal simplifications that deviate from the high-status variety. One example of this is the expansion of the plural indefinite marker *-a* and the plural definite marker *-an* in all three noun classes: *bila* m. (standard *biler/bilar*) ‘cars’; *jenta* f. (*jenter*) ‘girls’; *husa* n. (*hus*) ‘houses’; and *bilan* m. (*bilene/bilane*) ‘the cars’; *jentan* f. (*jentene*) ‘the girls’; *husan* n. (*husa/husene*) ‘the houses’. These plural morphemes are not found in either of the two written standards of Norwegian or in “standard eastern Norwegian”, but are nevertheless spreading in northern and central Norway, at the expense of a more differentiated system with different plural markers in the different noun classes (e.g., Røyneland, 2009, p. 23).

The result of these changes is in many cases increased intra-structural variation and a range of non-discrete structures within the dialect-standard continuum. Most scholars seem to agree that, while new intermediate regional varieties may be emerging, they still seem to remain structurally relatively incoherent, unfocussed and unstable and have little indexical value or

symbolic significance (see, e.g., Akselberg, 2004; Sandøy, 2004; Røyneland, 2009).<sup>4</sup>

### **3. Regional varieties**

#### *3.1 Regional varieties in Scandinavia*

The idea of regional varieties appears relatively late in Scandinavian dialectology as compared to in Germany and France, though both in Sweden and Denmark studies of this phenomenon emerge much earlier than in Norway. According to Akselberg (2005), the term *regional dialect* or *regional language* was first introduced to Scandinavia by the before mentioned Danish dialectologist Inger Ejsskjær, who presented and discussed the term in an article from 1964 (Akselberg 2005, p. 1708). Ejsskjær was particularly inspired by the French dialectologists Albert Dauzat and Jean Séguy and their work on the phenomenon “français régional”. According to these researchers, regional French varieties are relatively homogeneous and focused within their respective regions, since they have developed in close connection to dominating city centres – like Lyon, Toulouse and Grenoble –

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<sup>4</sup> Focussing and coherence are closely related, though not identical, concepts: Focussing is used about the gradual consolidation of a norm, which coincides with the establishment of community and group identity, after a period characterised by diffuse and variable language use (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985). Coherence, on the other hand, is defined as systematic co-variation of variable features which have some social characteristics in common (Guy, 2013, p. 64).



and they deviate linguistically both from the local dialects in the area and from the Parisian spoken standard. After a thorough revision of the international literature and a study of regional varieties in Denmark, Ejskjær concludes that regional varieties primarily tend to emerge where the local dialect differs substantially from the official standard norm and where the region has a strong cultural centre (Ejskjær, 1964, p. 40). In addition, she emphasises the subjective recognition by the language users themselves as a criterion, that is to say, the regional variety must be something that language users recognise as an entity and something towards which they orient themselves. For a regional language to emerge and become noticed it is not enough, then, to rely on linguistic criteria alone. In fact, as pointed out by Gregersen (1996), Ejskjær (1964) defines the term phenomenologically: “What is felt by the speakers themselves to belong to the (prestige) norm is accepted as the regiolect” (Gregersen, 1996, p. 96). Other Danish dialectologists also place emphasis on the importance of social construction and social acceptance in the emergence of regional lects. Pedersen (1977, p. 11) concludes that it is not possible to give any precise linguistic definition of a regiolect, but that it may be defined subjectively:

Nogen præcis sproglig afgrænsning kan ikke gives, men regionalsprog kan subjektivt defineres som en geografisk bestemt talemåde, der på nogle punkter afviger fra rigssproget, men som den talende ikke selv opfatter som dialekt

(‘any precise linguistic delimitation may not be given, but regional language may be defined subjectively as geographically specific speech, that in some ways diverges from the standard language, but that speakers do not perceive as dialect’).

The idea of regional lects has been discussed and problematised in a number of subsequent Danish studies (e.g., Gregersen, 1993; Pedersen, 1996; Kristiansen, 2003; Gregersen & Pharaoh, 2016). A common feature of these studies is the claim that unless users actually have a conception of a regional norm, it does not make any sense to postulate one. Hence, an important question is whether regional varieties have come into existence as means of signaling regional affiliation and identity.

Kristiansen (2003) distinguishes between two types of existence of a regional variety: at the level of language use and at the level of norm ideal. In his study he concludes that even if regional dialects may be described at the level of language use, they do not exist as labels in people’s vocabulary or as entities people orient towards:

Ud fra de forskningsresultater vi har, må konklusionen imidlertid være at regionalsprog ikke findes i Danmark – forstået som en sprogbrug der opleves som en resurse i opbygningen af positive regional selvbevidsthed

(‘from our research results, the conclusion must be that a regional language does not exist in Denmark – understood as language use that is perceived as a resource in the creation of a positive regional self-awareness’).

In Sweden the term *regional language* was also introduced relatively early. However, Swedish dialectologists have been less interested in regional language as social construction and have concentrated on delimiting regional varieties on linguistic grounds. Thelander (1983) argues that there is ample evidence that non-arbitrary regional languages have emerged at the level of language use in Sweden. However, Thelander asserts that there will always be a fair amount of variation within a regional variety since it has emerged as result of collision between competing norms, and since regional language is often used as an additional code (in alternation with dialect and standard). Furthermore, he notes that it is to be expected that the structure of these varieties is relatively loose and with fuzzy boundaries (Thelander, 1983, p. 212). The question then, is, how loose, variable and fuzzy this structure can be, before it no longer makes sense to designate the mixture – in this case between dialect and standard – as a variety. Some scholars may want to dismiss the whole idea of a distinct regional variety, as we have seen in the Danish case.

### *3.2 Regional varieties in Norway*

Norwegian dialectologists seem to have been less preoccupied with delineating regional varieties and determining where the border between one variety and the next is linguistically, geographically and socially, than their Danish and Swedish colleagues (cf. Akselberg, 2005). Most of the early studies of dialect variation and change in Norway concentrated on levelling between local rural dialects and the semi-urban socio-cultural, political and economic centre of the area in question and registered which features from the local centre local dialects converged to (see, e.g., Steinsholt, 1972; Akselberg, 2005, p. 23, for further references). One reason why dialectologists in both Denmark and in Sweden started studying the emergence of regional varieties much earlier than Norwegian dialectologists may be that there have been much stronger standard language ideologies and more dominating spoken standard norms in Denmark and Sweden than in Norway (Pedersen, 2009; Thelander, 2009). As noted by Ejskjær (1964, p. 40), “sansen for sprogrigtighed skal være sterk, for at der skal opstå et udligningsprog mellem dialekt og officiel norm” (‘the sense of linguistic correctness must be strong, if a compromise language between dialect and the official norm is to emerge’).

Norwegian socio-dialectologists first began to examine the question of regional Norwegian varieties in the 1980s. In the 1990s a national project with the aim of investigating sociolinguistic change in Norwegian dialects, *Talemålsendring i Norge – TEIN* (‘Dialect change in Norway’) was initiated

(1998-2002). The overarching objective of the project was to study processes of dialect levelling and to investigate the extent to which regional standards or regional dialects were emerging as result of vertical and horizontal levelling. TEIN had approximately 75 sociolinguistic research projects connected with it in 2000 (TEIN, 2001), a large number of which were post-graduate research projects that dealt with varieties in rural or semi-urban areas. In addition, nine doctoral dissertations on vertical and horizontal dialect levelling and koineisation were conducted over the following years (for an overview see Mæhlum & Røyneland, 2011). Results from these studies clearly demonstrate that dialects all over Norway are changing as a result of regional levelling. However, most of the studies were inconclusive with regard to the question of whether or not regional varieties had indeed been established and enregistered. While regional lects seemed to be emerging, these studies suggested that they remained relatively unfocussed and unstable and seemed to have little symbolic significance.

Let us recall the four criteria suggested by Ejskjær (1964) that must be satisfied for a regional dialect to emerge (see Section 3.1. above): (1) the local dialect must deviate strongly from the official norm, (2) there must be a strong sense of linguistic correctness and a dominating spoken standard, (3) the region must have a cultural centre, (4) the language users themselves must recognise it as a variety. In light of these, there are reasons to expect regional varieties to emerge also in Norway. The local dialects in many areas certainly deviate substantially from “standard eastern Norwegian”, although the

position of the standard is not as strong as in our neighbouring countries. There are many strong cultural centres in the western, southern, central and northern part of the country, with cities like Bergen, Kristiansand, Stavanger, Trondheim and Tromsø, to mention the most important ones. The critical question, however, is whether – or to what extent – people actually orient towards regional varieties; do users perceive that such varieties exist? Do such varieties function as means of signaling regional affiliation and identity?

### *3.3 Deconstruction of lects*

More generally, fundamental concepts like “language”, “code” or “variety”, as well as the very idea that people switch between clearly identifiable codes, have come under heavy criticism in recent sociolinguistic research. The main charge is that these notions contribute to an illusion of coherence, focus, stability and fixed boundaries while in fact such features are not to be assumed (see, e.g., Blommaert, 2010; Eckert, 2008; García & Li Wei, 2014; Jørgensen, 2008). Critics contend that the idea of languages or varieties as discrete, identifiable entities is problematic and often fictitious at the level of language use, and propose concepts like “bricolage” (Eckert, 2008), “polylinguaging” (Jørgensen, 2008) and “translinguaging” (García & Li Wei, 2014; Li Wei, 2018) to describe peoples’ actual linguistic practices in multilectal contexts. Instead of trying to delimit codes, they focus on linguistic features and what people do with linguistic resources they have at hand and argue that

“[I]anguage users employ whatever linguistic features are at their disposal to achieve their communicative aims as best they can” (Jørgensen et al., 2011, p. 34).<sup>5</sup> Svahn and Nilsson (2014, p. 270) reach a similar conclusion in their study of dialect levelling in western Sweden, where they describe how adolescents combine traditional dialect variants and new variants: “Ur denna variantbank ‘plockar’ den enskilde individen drag efter olika mönster och betingelser och den inter- och intraindividuell variationen är stor” (‘from this variant bank each individual ‘picks’ features according to different patterns and conditions and the inter- and intra-individual variation is great’). For similar findings from other parts of Europe see Grondelaers & van Hout (2016).

In line with recent social constructionist approaches to dialect, Coupland (2009, p. 28) argues that:

the social conditions of late modernity (taken to mean post-industrial, fast-capitalist, globalising modernity – see Giddens 1991), require more fluid approaches to sociolinguistic and semiotic function. When researchers approach “dialect” and “standard” language in this framework, they are sceptical about what these terms actually mean

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<sup>5</sup> For an extensive discussion of the relationship between (in)coherence, covariation and bricolage, see various articles in Hinskens & Guy (2016) and also Guy (2013).

in late modernity, both in general and in any specific context of language performance.

What this seems to mean is that studying language structure and co-occurrence patterns or delimiting codes is not what we as dialectologists ought to be doing; rather we should be studying individuals' fluid and dynamic linguistic practices, the individual's linguistic repertoire. And maybe they are right. Still, this is an epistemic interest that is quite distinct from inquiring into how norms are negotiated, formed and enregistered at the societal level – issues that to a great extent have preoccupied dialectologists.

In many such discussions, what seems to be at stake, then, is diverging epistemic interests and the related question of the proper ontology for theorising linguistic behavior. The claim seems to be that in reality there are no such things as stable entities with fixed boundaries at the level of language use, with the implication that there can be no point in searching for anything like distinct regional varieties. For present purposes, however, the issue is better addressed from a more pragmatic perspective. The question is not whether there *really* are such structures, but whether, by appealing to them, researchers are able to reveal interesting patterns in language use and in particular in the changes that such use is undergoing. From this perspective, then, what is at issue is whether there is any real explanatory gain to be achieved by invoking regional varieties. Language use may well be illuminated through the investigation of different patterns, such as, for



instance, those emphasised by Jørgensen and by García and Li Wei, but this in itself would not count against the idea of distinct varieties as a useful idealisation for particular explanatory purposes.

Accordingly, dialectologists like Thelander may be very much aware of the fact that there can be a lot of variation within a variety, that it may be somewhat incoherent and unfocussed, and that boundaries may be fuzzy. But this in itself does not lead to the conclusion that one should refrain from trying to delineate new varieties. On the contrary, as Thelander (1983, p. 212) emphasised already 35 years ago:

brist på sträng struktur får inte leda till att man förbiser de tendenser till språkartsbildning som ändå finns, och när man diskuterar existensen av just regionalspråk är det av särskilt stor betydelse att kraven på normfasthet balanseras mot en generös hållning till fluktuationer

(‘lack of a strict structure must not lead to overlooking the tendencies of language formation that still exists, and when discussing the existence of regional languages, it is of particular importance that the demands of focus and firmness are balanced against a generous attitude towards fluctuations’).

Delineating dialects, languages or varieties may be risky and always involves some degree of abstraction and idealisation. This, however, is by no

means a new insight, as illustrated by Thelander (and in the prologue above), but belongs to the very nature of scientific understanding. Delineation may be difficult to do on linguistic grounds alone, though, since lects are also historic, cultural and subjective entities and as such depend on processes of enregisterment (Agha, 2005). Still, as Thelander argues, that in itself does not imply that one should refrain from trying. The vindication of such efforts will depend on the extent to which one meets the specific criteria discussed above, whether they be conceived in purely linguistic terms or also in socio-psychological (subjective) terms.

#### *3.4 Regional varieties revisited*

The idea that a language, dialect, regiolect or any variety, style or register cannot be defined on linguistic grounds alone, but partly is a social construction that depends upon and is a result of gradual enregisterment is, as we seen above, not new in dialectology. However, this idea has become prevalent in sociolinguistics through the work of linguistic anthropologists like Agha (2003; 2005). Agha defines enregisterment as “processes through which a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognised register of forms” (Agha, 2003, p. 231). He uses the notion enregisterment to label the processes and communicative activities that characterise a set of semiotic resources and that connects these resources to specific norms, distinctive speaker personae and characteristic situations. In

this sense, enregisterment does not only describe the formation of registers, it also involves how ways of speaking become associated with different norms, different identities, different geographical and social spaces, social actions and activities. Hence, enregisterment happens both on the level of practice and of ideology, as well as on the level of metapragmatic commentary (cf. Stæhr, 2014, p. 45).

If we look at the terms *regional language*, *regional dialect* or *regiolect* in the Norwegian context, it is interesting to notice that these terms are almost non-existent outside of scholarly circles. People don't seem to use these terms and have no conception of what they may mean. Newspapers often write about dialects – as they are a popular subject matter – but they much more seldom write about regional language or regional dialect. A simple Google search on Norwegian websites gives 91 hits on regional spoken language,<sup>6</sup> 861 on regional language, 601 000 on regional dialect and 4.7 million hits on dialect. Most of the pages writing about regional varieties are connected to universities and schools and are used in student work referring to research on this topic. So, it seems that we as researchers are the primary propagators of the term regional language or regional dialect in Norway and hence our use of the terms plays a pivotal part in the (potentially emerging) enregisterment of the terms.

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<sup>6</sup> “Regionaltalemål”.

In a recent study of 584 secondary school students at eleven different schools, six different urban and rural places in western and eastern Norway, the term *regional language* or *regional dialect* is not mentioned one single time (Røyneland, 2017).<sup>7</sup> The study formed part of the project *Dialect identities in late modern Norway* and an extensive fieldwork was conducted in the spring/autumn of 2015. The students were asked to fill in an electronic questionnaire where they were asked to describe their own way of speaking with family and friends and also to react to a number of statements concerning language variation and dialect use in Norway on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from “fully agree” to “fully disagree”). In addition, approximately half of the students (N=341) were asked to react to a visual-verbal guise experiment where different dialects and combinations of the same dialect samples and two different faces (traditionally Norwegian looking and non-Norwegian looking) were tested (see results in Røyneland & Jensen forthcoming). Some of the students also took part in focus group interviews.

In the self-evaluation part of the questionnaire as many as 59% of the students from eastern Norway report that their speech is “close to Bokmål” or “standard eastern Norwegian”, that is, they do not perceive their own speech as “dialect”. However, while 34% say they speak the local dialect

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<sup>7</sup> The schools were located in and around the capital Oslo, in and around the second largest city in Norway Bergen and in rural areas in both eastern and western Norway (Valdres and Hardanger respectively). The online questionnaire was designed in collaboration with research assistant Kristin Myklestu and MA-student Ragni Vik Johnsen.

(both in rural and urban areas), no one mentions regional dialect and only very few say they speak a levelled version of the local dialect. The pattern is exactly the same in rural and urban parts of eastern Norway. In western Norway only 8% of the students report that they speak “close to Bokmål” (only students from Bergen), whereas 85% state that they speak either the local dialect (64%) or a levelled version of the local dialect (21%). It is of course difficult to determine what exactly the students mean by local and levelled dialect. It may be the case that the levelled version is close to what linguists might want to label *regional dialect*, but this term is not mentioned by the students in the open comment fields of the questionnaire or in the focus group interviews. From an etic perspective, this in itself does not necessarily imply that such a label cannot be applicable, but if we also want to include an emic perspective, it appears less apt. The interesting thing is that most students in western Norway and one third of the students in eastern Norway perceive and label their own speech as *dialect*. Also, Oslo speech is considered to be dialect by one third of the Oslo youth (particularly the ones living in the traditional working-class areas of the city). This points to a rather flexible and liberal attitude towards what counts as a dialect. Although a dialect may have changed over time, it still seems to be perceived as a dialect.

A study of dialect levelling in Hønefoss, a city located some 60 km from Oslo, reached a similar conclusion (Hilton, 2010). The majority of the 44 respondents that were interviewed in this study state that they speak the local dialect, but only one third of them say they can recognise local dialect features

to some degree, whereas two third of them state they cannot recognise local dialect features (Hilton, 2010, p. 363). This means that there is little awareness of which linguistic features constitute the local dialect. Given that most of the respondents state that they speak the local dialect, it becomes clear that, to many of them, speaking a local dialect may be based on social or geographical grounds rather than on linguistic grounds. Identifying with the dialect seems to be more important than actually using the linguistic features that used to form part of the traditional dialect of the area.

A similar finding has been reported from the comprehensive Danish project LANCHART (*Language change in real time*). The main objective of this project is to study modern Danish dialect change in real time. They have found that although dialects in Denmark have changed substantially, to the extent that some might argue that there is hardly any dialect left, there are still prosodic/intonational differences which clearly differentiate geographic areas. In the article *Lects are perceptually invariant, productively variable: A coherent claim about Danish lects*, Gregersen and Pharao (2016) study possible coherence between three segmental phonological dialect features at four different sites using a multivariate analysis. The results were on the whole negative. This contrasts with the finding that Danish speakers in general react without hesitation when they are asked to give their attitudes to local lects (e.g., Kristiansen, 2009). The reason for this, the authors contend, may be that the ability to perceive the local way of speaking as a lect resides in intonation and not in segmental phonetics. Furthermore, they suggest that:

Lects are perceived as structurally coherent both because of categorical perception taking salient features as the only cue necessary to constitute a gestalt whole and because lects are ideological constructions necessary to language ideologies. Accordingly, we suggest that coherence is in the eye of the beholder – or rather in the ideologically informed ear of the listener (Gregersen & Phrao, 2016, p. 42).

Notwithstanding, there seems to be an even more flexible and dynamic view of what counts as a dialect and a less restricted view on who counts as a dialect speaker in Norway compared to Sweden and Denmark (Akselberg, 2002, p. 49; Svahn & Nilsson, 2014, p. 253). The fact that not only traditional dialects qualify for the term *dialect*, but also levelled dialects and speech which is close to the “eastern Norwegian standard”, may help explain why there has been less concern in studying, delimiting and talking about regional varieties in Norway – both among scholars and people in general.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

##### *4.1 A fiction in the minds of linguists?*

There did not seem to be any awareness of regional languages or regiolects in Norway until linguists started to talk about them in the 1980s and 1990s. The evidence suggests that to a large extent this is still the case in Norway. One might even ask whether regiolects are an example of the emperor's new clothes. The analogy is a little one-sided, though, since the emperor may in fact be wearing some clothes – even if it may only be a transparent rain coat – not detectable for the untrained eye. That is to say, that regional varieties may of course be identified at the level of language use and described in terms of co-occurring linguistic features. However, findings that might support this possibility are in fact rather scarce in the Norwegian context. On the contrary, recent Norwegian studies suggest that regional lects still seem to remain structurally relatively incoherent, unfocussed and unstable and have little indexical value or symbolic significance.

#### *4.2 A reality in the lives of people?*

At the level of perception, orientation and identification, regional varieties seem to be almost non-existent in the Norwegian context. One very rarely hears anyone refer to their own language as a regional variety or a regiolect. Even levelled dialects seem to be perceived and referred to as the local dialect – levelled, yes, but still the local dialect. Hence, regional variants or varieties do not seem to be used as means of displaying regional affiliation and identity. As we have seen, there are no sharp boundaries between the different regions,



the varieties are rather heterogeneous both inter- and intra-individually and one may question whether there are clear norms and social functions associated with them.

Kristiansen (2003) raises doubts as to whether regional varieties have in fact emerged in Denmark – at least if we consider their social reality for the speakers and their function as symbolic markers of regional identity. According to Kristiansen (2003), there is no regional linguistic consciousness among Danes and regional varieties of Danish lack any positive group-marking function of the sort that may be used as means of distinction or to display regional allegiance in opposition to a centralised culture of the capital. The same may be said for Norwegians.

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