

IVAR AASEN AND THE GENESIS OF THE NEW NORWEGIAN WRITTEN LANGUAGE

Let me begin by thanking the arrangers of this conference for inviting me here, and enabling me to share in your celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the birth of Jonas Jablonskis. Sometime during the 30th of December I shall raise my glass and wish him many happy returns.

I expect that not very many of you will have heard of the founder of the New Norwegian written language, Ivar Aasen, just as, I am afraid to say, Jonas Jablonskis is anything but a household-name in Norway, even amongst historical linguists. I am embarrassed to admit that I too had been ignorant of Jablonski's contribution to the standardization of Lithuanian until for obvious reasons I looked him up recently. I am certainly not qualified to give you a detailed comparison of the work of Ivar Aasen and Jonas Jablonskis, but it does strike me even from very cursory knowledge of Jablonski's contribution that there are interesting similarities and differences between these two men. In my presentation of Aasen, I want to focus on some of the more general topoi that present themselves when we look at the work of what have famously been called the "visionary drudges" who revived or created the standard languages of Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I shall try not to drown you in a long list of works you have never heard of in a language you do not speak, or in the minutiae of a political history of no significance to you.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It might nonetheless be useful to begin with a quick summary of the historical context in which the creation of the New Norwegian written language took place. As I am sure you know, early North Germanic runic writing

was superseded after Christianisation by writing in the Latin script, and a flourishing written culture developed in Old Norse, both in Norway and Iceland. This written tradition was based both in the Church and in centres of secular power. After 1319, however, the Norwegian state was weakened, and Norway entered into a series of unions with Denmark, Sweden, or both, in which the centre of secular power moved outside the country. The Black Death fatally weakened the aristocratic basis of medieval Norwegian society as well as the priesthood. As more and more secular writing took place in Danish, Norwegian remained in use in the Catholic church, at least until the last Norwegian-born archbishop died in 1510. The Reformation, with its vernacular Bible and increased literacy, was enforced in Norway by the Danish crown and through the medium of Danish. Increasingly the priesthood as well as the secular administration of the State came to be recruited from Denmark, whilst trade was in the hands of Hanseatic merchants. Whilst scattered remnants of popular writing in Norwegian dialects can be found from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, Norwegian to all intents and purposes suffered virtually total domain-loss as a written language. Norway is however a very large country with a difficult topography, with no natural centre and a high degree of isolation. Norwegian peasants continued throughout the period to speak local dialects, whilst they read and wrote in Danish. From 1739 compulsory confirmation in the State Lutheran church was introduced, which had the consequence that everyone at least had to be able to read the catechism, and from that year a universal rudimentary literacy developed. An urban administrative, mercantile and clerical elite arose which spoke a form of Danish that gradually acquired Norwegian phonological characteristics, whilst retaining Danish morphology, lexicon and syntax, most notably in the retention of the Danish two gender system as opposed to the Norwegian three gender system.

AASEN'S CONTEXT

Within this general context there was a large degree of local variation, both in the development of dialect-speech and in the development of local literate cultures. Ivar Aasen was born on 5 August 1813 into a peasant family in Ørsta, in the region of Sunnmøre, which comprises the southernmost area of the county of Møre and Romsdal, 320 km north of Bergen, 560 km

north-west of Oslo. It is a region divided into a coastal strip with offshore islands, where fishing formed the basis of the economy, and a mountainous, indeed alpine, inner area of deep valleys where the sun does not penetrate for months on end in the winter, and where the climate, although mild, is extraordinarily wet. The principal problem in this area, which was predominantly agricultural, was how to remove the extreme quantities of water that fell from the sky, cascaded down mountainsides, or flooded from fast-running torrents. The best solutions to problems of this type came by the eighteenth century to be found in books.

It is not then surprising that the most vibrant and dynamic peasant literate community in Norway was to be found by the end of the eighteenth century in Sunnmøre, agriculturally self-sufficient and halfway between the trading centre of Bergen and the cultural and ecclesiastical centre of Trondheim. Whilst in recent years clear evidence has come to light of far more widespread literacy than was previously thought even in the seventeenth-century (cf. Fet 1995, 2003), the existence of a strong literate peasant culture in Southern Sunnmøre in the late eighteenth-century can be linked to a number of identifiable cultural entrepreneurs. One is a priest, Hans Strøm, another one of his parishioners, the extraordinary figure of Sivert Aarflot. Aarflot used book-learning to acquire knowledge and skills in drainage and cultivation techniques, which enabled him first to improve his home farm so that it became a model for other farmers in the area and then established himself on one of the finest and sunniest farms in the area. Aarflot then crucially set about a programme of popular enlightenment through literacy which led by the turn of the nineteenth-century to the creation of a lending-library of 2000 volumes, the first printing press, and, from 1810-1816, the first newspaper in rural Norway. These then are the cornerstones of the written culture into which Aasen was born in 1813.

Unlike Jablonskis, Aasen never formally studied and was never educated at a university, despite having the opportunity to attend a teachers' seminary, which would have put him on the path to academic institutions. He grew up, the youngest of seven children, on a small tenanted farm, both his parents dead by the time he was twelve. He received the normal cursory education from peripatetic teachers which children in rural Norway received, altogether around ten days' instruction a year, but he was taught by a sister to read and read avidly. At eighteen he became a peripatetic teacher himself for two years and encountered at first hand the difficulties children had learning not only to read and write, but to do so in a foreign language,

Danish. At the age of twenty Aasen spent two years receiving instruction in the house of the rural dean on the nearby island of Herøy, where he was expected to acquire sufficient knowledge later to be able to attend the seminary; he did not do so but he spent seven years as the tutor to the children of an army captain, further north but still in the same region.

As an adolescent, Aasen used the library on the Aarflots' farm at Ekset, and the homes of both the dean and the captain contained well-stocked collections of books as well as newspapers and periodicals from the capital and from abroad. The year after Aasen's birth, Norway's statehood was restored, and its independence proclaimed by the assembly of notables at Eidsvoll, one of whom was Sivert Aarflot. Although the country immediately fell into a union with Sweden, which lasted until 1905, it did so as a reborn political entity with its own parliament and with its own relatively democratic constitution based on the principles of the French and American revolutions. By the 1830s the immediate post-independence problems of bankruptcy and establishment of a functioning state administration had given way to new concerns, inspired by German and Danish Romanticism: what were the peculiarities of the Norwegian nation, and especially of the Norwegian national language? Indeed, was there a Norwegian national language?

On the language question there was no agreement, neither amongst politicians nor scholars. The great Jacob Grimm even imagined as late as 1840 that Norwegian peasants were left speaking a deformed variety of Swedish after the departure of what he called "die Kraft der Sprache" for Iceland. This view was also current in the Norwegian ruling class; one famous legitimization for the continuation of the linguistic union with Denmark under the new political union with Sweden, proceeded from the organicist imagery of the Norwegian language as a moribund fruit-tree which required the graft from new Danish stock to keep it alive. This view was contradicted by the prolific poet Henrik Wergeland, who argued that the Norwegian landscape and Norway's history were so distinct from Denmark's that a national Norwegian written language should include extensive lexical borrowing from the peasant dialects which were supposed to have preserved so much from Old Norse. A third view also briefly emerged in the wake of the publication of a collection of ancient ballads in one of the more conservative mountain dialects; a new written language should proceed from one of these dialects. Norwegian should begin again, as the author of this view put it, from where it left off five hundred years earlier. In short, by

1832 the famous Norwegian language “question” had emerged, a question which to the extent that we still have two written forms of Norwegian which so far have stubbornly refused to coalesce, is still with us.

We know that Aasen followed the language debate closely in the 1830s from his vantage point in his unusual and well-informed peasant written culture, and he put his first contribution to it to pen in 1835, at the age of twenty-two. What was needed, he wrote, was a new written language that would reflect the democratic ideals of the new, post-independence constitution, and be truly Norwegian in the sense that every inhabitant of the country could enjoy a stake in it; that the constitution called written Danish in Norway “Norwegian” did not in itself make Danish Norwegian. Furthermore, the task of constructing the new national norm could not be accomplished by well-meaning members of the danicised ruling class. This task must fall to one brought up, as he put it, in a peasant’s hut.

Aasen’s short and analytically brilliant text, written as I said in 1835, was not published until 1909, thirteen years after Aasen’s death in 1896. It was simply put aside, but it circulated in the reading and writing community of peasants in which Aasen grew up. It also contains the plan for what we would now call language revitalisation that Aasen spent the rest of his life carrying out.

AASEN’S WORK

Sick and tired of seven years of tutoring children – and who can blame him? – Aasen was by the early 1840s desperately trying to find a way to leave, better himself, and establish himself either as a botanist, or as a language-reviver. With the help of the bishop of Bergen, who referred Aasen to the director of the Norwegian Academy of Sciences in Trondheim, Aasen was given a grant to study the dialects of the western part of Norway. Since no-one before Aasen had actually studied the dialects of Norway, what they contained by way of hidden lexical and morphological treasures from the past and what relationship they stood in to each other, was still if not entirely unknown, then at least the object of guess-work and conjecture. In September 1842 Aasen set off on his long march, his visionary trudge along the highways and bye-ways of rural Norway. His working hypothesis – I am now paraphrasing him – was that the dialects of Norway were epiphenomena of an underlying diasystem. The idea of

the underlying unity of the dialects of Norway was not Aasen's; in fact, Aasen had very few original ideas at all, his success lay in applying other people's ideas brilliantly. His intention was to gather sufficient evidence from the dialects to create a standardized form of Norwegian which would make the underlying diasystem manifest and thereby in and of itself constitute a truly democratic written language that the majority of ordinary people would find easy to use. The agenda of the Academy in giving him his initial grant was different. They were interested in unearthing relics of a language they imagined was rapidly dying out; the fantasy that popular forms of Norwegian are on their last legs is one still indulged in by conservative linguistic propagandists to this day. Aasen set out then to bend the grant he received to his own different and more ambitious purpose.

Between 1842 and 1847 Aasen travelled just over 4000 km, largely on foot, to collect empirical linguistic material. During the earliest period he developed extremely effective methods of collection which, although they broke just about every rule of later sociolinguistic research both in terms of representativity of informants, the eliciting of information through direct questions etc., nonetheless enabled Aasen to systematise his vast empirical material as he went along. In my biography of Aasen, I call it Aasen's "cumulative method" (Walton 1996: 335-342). To put it very briefly, his technique consisted in establishing firstly the boundaries of a dialect-area. He would then create a systematic collection of lexical and morphological material at the lowest possible level, that of the "bygd", or extended village. When he passed on to a new community he would repeat the process, and when he crossed significant isoglosses and found himself in a *region* with a significantly different dialect from that he had just left, he would create a regional dictionary and grammar for the previous area. The result was a pyramidal structure with village-collections at the bottom, two or three levels above them, and the national level at the top. Just as the village collections were systematised at the area level, the area-collections at the regional level, the regional level was systematised at the national level.

Now, one consequence of Aasen's method of working was that it enabled him to complete his project in an astonishingly short time. Remember, he started from scratch in 1842, but by 1847 he had completed the manuscript of his Grammar of the Norwegian Popular Language, and it was published the year after. Remember, too, that for most of this time he was on the road. This is an extraordinary achievement.

A second consequence of the cumulative method was that since the underlying diasystem manifested itself in all the various epiphenomena, it followed that once the first epiphenomena had been systematised, so, by default, had the diasystem. In other words, the material which Aasen gathered in first came *by virtue of its place in the process of collection and systematisation* to play a fundamental role in the appearance of his ultimate norm. This has been endlessly misunderstood subsequently as an irrational or ideological predilection for archaic West Norwegian dialects, but this is not the case. It was, however, the case that Aasen used the written forms of Old Norse to arbitrate in cases of difficulty in deciding how to reconstruct a diasystemic form where no such form existed in any living dialect (and if anyone cares to ask me for an example, I'll give you one).

Unlike Jablonskis, Aasen grew up in a simple peasant home and never had a formal academic education. Also unlike Jablonskis, he was never banished. In fact, he never once crossed Norway's borders, not even to Sweden. He never suffered repression, but was rewarded with generous State funding from, first, the Academy, then the Parliament which only ended on his death. Also unlike Jablonskis he had no previous work to guide him, there was no Norwegian Juška to point the way. And also again unlike Jablonskis Aasen ended up not only creating the new written language, but was also its first major author, both of poetry, drama, and essayistic prose. Only the novel eluded him.

On the other hand, Aasen's most important work was his dictionary, just as was Jablonskis'. The first, descriptive edition appeared in 1850 with no reconstructed forms, whilst a second, normative edition came out in instalments from 1871 to 1873. By this time, Aasen had already published a normative grammar, translations, the first play in New Norwegian, a collection of proverbs, and a best-selling collection of verse and was well on his way to producing a thesaurus, a brief encyclopaedia for rural youth and a Danish-Norwegian dictionary. Just as Jonas Jablonskis espoused the cause of what I learn from Zigmantas Zinkevičius' very useful *History of the Lithuanian Language* is called "žmonių kalba", Aasen attempted to create a truly popular language, notwithstanding the fact that later language reformers have seen good reasons to discard some of Aasens' more etymologising reconstructions. Like Jablonskis and all their revitalising colleagues, Aasen used his own literary works to create neologisms. The strength of the Danish written tradition in Norway, the penetration of many Norwegian dialects by written Danish, and widespread and polemical re-

sistance to what was perceived as comically historical forms, all led Aasen in the direction of what is frequently and correctly called a “moderate” purism. Aasen’s New Norwegian has nothing like the purist lexical extremism of Icelandic, for example.

NOWADAYS

I interpret this conference as evidence of an enduring interest in Lithuania in the work of Jablonskis, but I am afraid I know nothing about how he is considered in this country today; I am sure I shall learn a lot about this whilst I am here. As far as Aasen is concerned, I can tell you that there was a lull in interest in him after his death and, for many years, little scholarly interest in his work. His collected – but expurgated – letters and diaries were published in the late 1950s. Strangely enough, only two doctoral dissertations have been written about Aasen, both at the University of Cambridge, and a third one is well underway at the University of Edinburgh, but none so far in Norway. By the late 1990s, however, a renewed publicistic interest in Aasen became visible with the Aasen Year in 1996 (when no fewer than three biographies appeared), the establishment of The Aasen Institute in 1995, which began teaching master’s programmes in 2002, and the opening of the national centre for New Norwegian Written Culture at the site of Aasen’s birth in 2000 (www.aasentunet.no).

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Gauta 2010 11 17

IVARAS AASENAS IR NAUJOSIOS NORVEGŲ RAŠY TINĖS KALBOS KILMĖ

S a n t r a u k a

Norvegas Ivaras Aasenas (Osen, 1813–1896) buvo iš tų kultūros veikėjų, kurie XVIII–XIX a. Europoje domėjosi valstiečių tarmėmis ir jų pagrindu siūlė kurti naujas ar gaivinti tautines kalbas.

I. Aaseno intelektualinę brandą lėmė tai, kad jis augo nuošalioje kaimo bendruomenėje, kuri jau nuo XVIII a. pabaigos puoselėjo itin intensyvią literatūrinę veiklą, o gana daug šios bendruomenės narių priklausė ilgesnes negu šimto metų raštingumo tradicijas turinčioms šeimoms. Taigi jau ankstyvasis mokymas stiprino jo įsitikinimą, kad norvegų valstiečių tarmės tėra paviršius, po kuriuo slypi bendra sistema, t. y. nekodifikuota tautinė kalba.

Iš pradžių I. Aasenas siekė suvienodinti vyraujančią rašto kultūrą, bet vėliau jis sumaniai pritaikė savo tikslams pagrindinių tautinio romantizmo skelbėjų idėjas, gyvavusias XIX a. viduryje. Savo galutinį siekį – naujos ir visuotinai priimtinos rašytinės kalbos sukūrimą – jis derino su tuometinių kultūros veikėjų norais atgaivinti senąją valstiečių kalbą. Jo sumanymas sulaukė ir finansinės, ir moralinės paramos, tad naujųjų laikų Europoje I. Aasenas tapo vienu pirmųjų valstybės išlaikomų intelektualų.

Viešumoje I. Aasenas prisiėmė valstiečio-intelektualo vaidmenį, o tai, nors ir skamba paradoksaliai, leido jam dalyvauti platesnėse kultūros sferose. Apskritai, I. Aaseno nuopelnai siejami ne tik su praktinės ir rašytinės kalbos normos kūrimu – jis yra pirmasis literatūrinę ir estetinę vertę turinčių ta kalba sukurtų tekstų autorius. Didžiausio pasisekimo sulaukė poezija ir pjesės, nors jam neblogo sekėsi rašyti ir esė.

Daugelį metų I. Aaseno darbai ir nuopelnai buvo nepagrįstai pamiršti, ir tik pastaraisiais metais susidomėjimas jo veikla gerokai išaugo. Nuo 1996-ųjų, paskelbtų Ivaro Aaseno metais, parengtos bent trys išsamios kalbininko biografijos. Praėjus dar ketveriems metams jo gimtinėje atidarytas muziejus, o susidomėjimas Ivaro Aaseno veikla ir toliau nemažėja. Jo darbai dabar yra politikos ir kalbos filosofijos objektas, o artėjant 2013-iesiems, kai bus minima Ivaro Aaseno 200 metų gimimo sukaktis, dėmesys, tikėtina, tik stiprės.

Ši publikacija yra Jono Jablonskio konferencijoje (2010) autoriaus skaitytas pranešimas.
Red. pastaba.

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