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Language policies and language use in Norwegian higher education

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A Norwegian perspective

In recent years there has been an increased focus on developing and maintaining Norwegian specialised languages, in a situation in which English is rapidly growing in importance and strengthening its impact in a number of domains. Recent terminology initiatives such as the *Snorre termbase*¹, the national term portal, *Termportalen*², which we are currently establishing at the Norwegian School of Economics (NHH), or the UHR's *Termbase for Norwegian higher education institutions*³, are indications of such increased focus.

These initiatives are in line with recommendations of recent Norwegian reports and white papers on language policy, including the report *Norsk i hundre!* (2005) published by the Language Council, the *Language policy platform for higher education* (2006) published by the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions (UHR) and two white papers; Report no. 35 (2007-2008) to the Storting on national language policies (*Mål og mening*) and Report no 14 (2008-2009) to the Storting on internationalisation of education (*Internasjonalisering av utdanning*).

As a follow-up to Report no. 35, the *Norwegian Act relating to universities and university colleges* was recently amended, with the inclusion of the following:

§ 1-7. Responsibility for the maintenance and further development of Norwegian specialised language

Universities and university colleges have the responsibility to maintain and further develop Norwegian specialised language (LSP) (my translation)

This amendment places the responsibility for maintaining Norwegian LSPs and terminologies with the higher education institutions. The amendment has, however, not been followed by any funding, nor any definite requirements as to how and to what extent this responsibility should be taken by the institutions.

¹ <http://www.standard.no/termbasen/>

² terminologi.no

³ <http://termbase.uhr.no/>

Most major higher education institutions have now established local policies which are relatively general in nature and in line with the UHR policies. The policies focus on *domainlossand parallel language use*, that is, that Norwegian should be the preferred language, but Norwegian and English (normally) must be used when this is needed (UHR.no).

In general, courses at the bachelor level are given in Norwegian, although with extensive use of English textbooks, whereas English is gradually introduced as a teaching language at master level. At doctoral level, many institutions have opted for English, recommending English in both teaching and thesis writing. This is in line with Report no. 14 to the Storting on internationalisation.

However, the objectives promoted in national and local language policies do in many ways conflict with another important strategic goal in Norwegian higher education, i.e. that of *internationalisation* of the institutions, its students, faculty and campus. This conflict of interest is, I believe, the most urgent challenge to handle if we want to affect the gradual shift from using Norwegian as the means of communication in higher education institutions to using English to an ever-increasing extent, not only in research, but in teaching and in administrative situations.

In Report no 14 (2008-2009) to the Storting on internationalisation of education internationalisation is a strategic goal and is seen as a factor which promotes quality:

internationalisation of higher education will promote quality in teaching, professional development and institution building..."

Without discussing the role of language specifically, it can be inferred from the report that English is the natural language of mediation. A factor which may contribute to this view on the use of English may be existing language attitudes in Norway which counteract the use of Norwegian as a special language, and in particular Norwegian term formation. Surveys carried out in the Nordic countries indicate that we tend to be relatively more positive towards English than we are towards our mother tongues (Kristiansen & Vikør 2006). This attitude is particularly present among university scholars, as shown in a study of attitudes among scholars at the University of Copenhagen (Jensen et al. 2009). This indicates that special measures might be necessary to maintain a Norwegian terminology within certain domains.

Concluding remarks

I believe that the use of English will continue to spread across domains and also downwards in the HE system, also at bachelor level, unless we are able to change language attitudes and/or better show how the students' learning outcome is influenced by teaching language. Thus, we will to an ever increasing extent be heading towards English as the preferred teaching language, and as the language used for administration purposes in Norwegian higher education. At present the major challenge is thus not whether we should develop Norwegian terminology or not, but to what extent we want to maintain Norwegian as the language for communication in higher education.

References

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