State tradition and language regime in Norway

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Introduction   
The territory of Norway is 385 186 square kilometres. Its wilderness and scattered population are important features in Norway’s history, and in its language history. Currently, Norway has approximately five million inhabitants, most of whom speak Norwegian as their first language. The largest group speaking a different first language than Norwegian is the Sámi people, who use three Sámi varieties acknowledged as separate languages: North Sámi, Lule Sámi, and South Sámi (roughly 20­ 000–30 000 users altogether). The other old linguistic groups in Norway are the Kven people, speaking a variety of Finnish acknowledged as a language (2000–8000 users), the so-called Rom language users (some hundred), and the sign language users (3000). Numerous newer languages have entered Norway since the 1960s. The largest immigrant language groups in Norway are now Polish, Swedish, Somali (Somali and Arabic), Lithuanian, and Pakistani (Urdu, Punjabi) (Vikør, 2001, pp. 88–101; 2015).

However, the case of this study is Norwegian, or to be more precise, the written standards of Norwegian: Bokmål and Nynorsk. The two languages were officially equalized by a Parliament (hereafter the Norwegian word *Stortinget* will be used) resolution in 1885. There are currently 500 000–600 000 Nynorsk users, mainly in western parts of Norway. By analysing a selection of government documents from 1885 to 2010, focusing on political practices and their justifications, I explore the state’s administration of Norwegian bilingualism, sometimes called *bidialectalism* (Trudgill, 2003, p. 15; Vangsnes & Söderlund, 2015, p. 108).

With respect to the spoken language, the term ‘Norwegian’ refers to a wide range of geolects differing linguistically to a considerable extent, but still mutually intelligible. Factors for the dialectal variation are obviously the physical landscape and the poor conditions for contact among groups speaking different languages, at least previously. A factor just as important is the status of political and cultural decentralization in Norwegian politics since the 19th century, which also may explain why there is no officially sanctioned standard of spoken Norwegian. Most Norwegians speak their dialect in all circumstances.

However, the overarching aim of this article is not to examine the situation of the Norwegian oral varieties, but to explore the history and status of the two Norwegian written languages. My first objective is to examine the introduction of parliamentary rule in Norway in 1884 and the subsequent official recognition of Nynorsk in 1885 from the perspective of critical junctures and language regimes (Sonntag & Cardinal, 2015). From 1885, the Liberal Party implemented a wide range of language regulations. The party was also the power behind economic and political welfare regulations, often described as ‘universal’ regulations (Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005; Kildal, 2006; Kuhnle & Ervik, 2011). Thus, my second objective is to assess whether Norway’s language policy can be considered a path-dependent, universalist language regime. The Labour Party was in office 1935–1965, continuing and completing both welfare and language reforms introduced by the Liberal Party. The universalist regime was not challenged by the governments of the late 20th century. However, the Conservative Party and the populist-liberalist Progress Party came into office in 2013, criticizing Norway’s language policy for being illiberal because civil servants and school pupils were obliged to acquire certain proficiencies in both languages. My third objective is to determine whether Norway’s linguistic universalism is currently at a critical juncture.

# Regimes and rights

## Language regimes and critical junctures

The concept of *language regime* has recently been discussed and developed by Linda Cardinal and Selma K. Sonntag in their work *State Traditions and Language Regimes* (2015). The concept is derived from works of Jane Jenson on ‘citizen regimes’ (see, e.g., Jenson 2000; 2001), that is, ‘institutional arrangements, rules and understandings that guide and shape […] concurrent policy decisions […] [and] problem definitions by states’ (Jenson, 2000, p. 232; Sonntag & Cardinal, 2015, p. 6). According to Jenson (2001), a citizen regime comprises four elements. The first is the expression of basic values about the responsibility mix, for example, that state responsibilities are different from those of markets, families, and communities. The second is the formal recognition of rights (civil, political, social, cultural, individual, and collective), defining those who are entitled to full citizenship status and those who are not. The third is the prescription of democratic rules, for example, institutional mechanisms giving access to the state, modes of participation in civic life, and the legitimacy of specific types of claims-making. And the fourth is the definition of ‘nation’, and thus, the boundaries of belonging (Jenson, 2001, pp. 3–4).

Accordingly, Sonntag and Cardinal refer not only to language policy practices by the concept *language regime*, but also to ideological conceptions and discursive representations (Sonntag & Cardinal, 2015, pp. 6–7). Both policy practices and policy justifications contribute to a language (policy) paradigm, or a regime, or *path dependency* (Sonntag & Cardinal, 2015, p. 4). ‘Path dependency’ is a basic concept within the field of historical institutionalism, a concept about which Theda Skocpol and Paul Pierson have published seminal works. They characterize path dependency as governing with blinders: ‘once actors have ventured far down a particular path, they are likely to find it very difficult to reverse course […] The “path not taken” or the political alternatives that were once quite plausible may become irretrievably lost’ (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002, p. 699). In the context of language policy, path dependency could be described as a language regime with difficulties to acknowledge or even to discover other ways of doing and thinking about language rights, policy, and planning.

The concept of c*ritical juncture* is closely related to language regimes and path dependency, being a concept also derived from historical institutionalism and institutional economics. According to Pierson, junctures are critical ‘because they place institutional arrangements on paths or trajectories, which are then very difficult to alter’ (2004, p. 135). In other words, critical junctures are the starting points for many path-dependent processes. Sonntag and Cardinal claim that critical junctures of a regime might appear ‘[w]hen the state traditions that underpin the language regime are vulnerable’, for example, when coalitions formed around strategic language policy choices change (2015, p. 7). A language regime is defined by its stability, but introducing the concept critical juncture allows for change and a dynamic analysis. A substantial body of scholarship in various fields has examined critical junctures, both conceptually and empirically (see, e.g., David, 1985; Collier & Collier, 1991; Stack & Gartland, 2003; Page, 2006).

Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen criticize that body of scholarship for lacking conceptual consistency, and for failing ‘to provide adequate methodological guidance to those who would invoke the critical junctures framework’ (2007, p. 347). First, they argue it is not always obvious that the unit of analysis, the purported juncture, is genuinely *critical*. To analyse the change as a critical juncture, they claim, it is important to look at the extent of political contingency and structural fluidity. Critical junctures can be described as situations or periods in which the structural (that is, economic, cultural, ideological, organizational) influences on political action are notably relaxed, meaning there are more possible alternatives for individual political actors – because the situation is more open, they have more choices, and thus, the consequences of their decisions are potentially more far-reaching (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, p. 343). Furthermore, Capoccia and Kelemen claim that research literature provides little guidance on how to deal with time horizons in work on critical junctures. They emphasize that although the duration of a critical juncture depends on the research object, a critical juncture is nevertheless shorter than the path-dependent process it initiates (2007, p. 350). Third, they remind us of the fact that critical junctures are not the same as moments of change. The central feature of a critical juncture is not change, but structural fluidity and heightened contingency. In a situation characterized by political contingency, change is possible and even likely, they argue, yet they stress that re-equilibration – or status quo – is also a possible outcome of a critical juncture (2007, p. 352). Finally, they assert that critical junctures are too often treated as phenomena of *deus ex machina*, implying that the role of power asymmetries during critical junctures is hidden. Identifying a critical juncture implies identifying the crucial decisions ‘steering the system in one or another direction, favoring one institutional equilibrium over others that could have been selected’ (2007, p. 369). According to them, scholars interested in critical junctures should pay particular attention to the alternative choices available to decision makers.

Although Capoccia and Kelemen promote a narrow, or ‘strong’, interpretation of critical junctures, their attempts to clarify the concept are relevant to the discussion below. I will return to the usefulness of the concepts of path dependency and critical juncture in the concluding remarks, after the empirical sections.

## Negative and positive linguistic universalism

To examine Norway’s language regimes diachronically, it is necessary to discuss the concept of linguistic universalism. Numerous works on political rights and language policy have discussed the distinction between universal linguistic rights and group-differentiated rights (see, e.g., Kymlicka, 1995; Patten & Kymlicka, 2003; Rubio-Marín, 2003; De Schutter, 2007; Réaume & Pinto, 2012).

A comprehensive discussion can be found in Will Kymlicka’s book *Multicultural Citizenship* (1995). In Kymlicka’s view, there are several kinds of group rights. Some of them belong to individual members of minority groups, for instance, the right to translation in courts and hospitals. Other group rights belong to the group as such, not to separate individuals. One example is some indigenous populations’ and ‘old’ national minorities’ right to self-government according to international agreements. Both types of rights may be considered examples of political differentiation, because only members of specific language groups are entitled to them. Then there are universal rights, belonging to all individuals in the relevant jurisdiction, no matter their linguistic group. Universal rights are thus connected to the concept of strict equality (Kymlicka, 1995, p. 26). However, linguistic universalism is not a meaningful notion if not related to the concepts of negative rights/liberties and positive rights.

Negative linguistic rights are characterized by non-intervention. Their function is to hinder both linguistic discrimination and state intervention in language matters. Consequently, negative linguistic universal rights are sometimes conceived of as linguistic freedom of expression (Réaume & Pinto, 2012, p. 47). These ideas are sometimes associated with concepts such as *minimal government* and *benign neglect*, that, according to Patten and Kymlicka, ‘applied to disputes about language policy, seem to suggest that the state should refuse to do anything that would encourage or discourage particular linguistic choices by its citizens’ (2003, p. 32). For those who hold this view, the state should not support any particular language group more than it should support any particular religion (2003, pp. 32–33; De Schutter, 2007, p. 6). The theoretical position is developed and defended by many scholars, a prominent one being Brian Barry (e.g., 2001).

Positive linguistic rights are characterized by a state or another jurisdiction giving citizens (rights holders) permission to do something or the right to be treated in certain ways. One example is the right to be taught in school a specific language as your first language. In this case, the state intervenes by regulating, and thus promoting one or several languages/linguistic groups. Essentially, the term ‘positive linguistic rights’ seems to overlap the terms ‘language regulation’ and ‘language management’ (Pinto, 2009, pp. 36–37). The concepts discussed by Kymlicka are essentially positive universalist linguistic rights.

Negative linguistic universalism is value-neutral according to the traditional liberalist understanding of the concept. Positive linguistic universalism could be neutral, by giving all groups the same rights, but is always regulatory. I will refer to the positions as negative universalism and positive universalism, respectively.

# 1814–1885: Linguistic fluidity

## 1814: Danish is Norwegian

The Scandinavian languages, Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish, have the same Old Norse origin. Hence, all Scandinavian varieties constitute a dialect continuum: They have been and they continue to be mutually intelligible (Vikør, 2001, pp. 32–62). By the 15th century, Old Norse had declined as a living written language in Norway. Danish replaced written Norwegian, as Norway was increasingly subordinated in a union under the Danish crown (Jahr, 2014, pp. 7–8; Hoel, 2016).

The year 1814 was a turning point in the history of Norway. Denmark-Norway sided with the French in the Napoleonic Wars. Because the British navy had blocked Norwegian ports from 1808, important bonds to Denmark were broken and Norway was essentially left to itself. The results were severe famine, political tensions, and a growing Norwegian independence movement. In spring 1814, a Norwegian constitutional convention convened for the first time, demanding political independence. A constitution was passed in May; however, in July, Swedish forces moved to invade Norway. Consequently, *Stortinget* was forced to vote to join Sweden in a union, and in November, *Stortinget* elected the king of Sweden, Charles XIII, as king of Norway (Dyrvik, 2011, pp. 181–260). The union was dissolved in 1905.

The Constitution of May 1814 mentioned language in only one paragraph, stating that civil servants had to speak the country’s language (Grunnloven 17de Mai, 1814, § 93). In November, *Stortinget* had to adopt constitutional amendments to enter the new union. The revised constitution stated that all documents about Norwegian matters and all Norwegian laws must be written in ‘the Norwegian language’ (Grunnloven 4de November, 1814, § 33)\*.[[1]](#footnote-1) Nevertheless, the Constitution was written in Danish, and certainly, the term ‘Norwegian’ referred to Danish exclusively. Fear of Swedish influences was an important reason for justifying Danish as ‘Norwegian’ and as the only legitimate language of the state, but considering the recent dissolution of the union with Denmark, the term ‘Danish’ was politically problematic. The terminological result was ‘our mother tongue’ or just ‘Norwegian’. The re-branding drew criticism from Danish intellectuals and from Norwegian writers and philologists (Jahr, 2014, pp. 17–18; Berg, 2016; Hoel, 2016).

The Constitution of November 1814 marked the start of a language regime characterized by some positive rights for Danish users vis-à-vis Swedish in the public service domain. Yet the most salient feature of the language regime seems to be the lack of both negative liberties and positive rights.

## The 1860s: What is Norwegian?

The state of Norway was not politically independent, but the idea of independence was sown. In the context of European romanticism and nationalism in the 1830s and 1840s, the public debate about language was intensified. The fundamental problem was that spoken languages in Norway, the dialects, were, although parts of the Scandinavian continuum, linguistically considerably different from the only written language of the Norwegian state. An increasing interest in folk literature, fairy tales, and local dialects gave rise to the debate, and two parallel responses to the question emerged (Haugen, 1969, pp. 22–30; Jahr, 2014, pp. 28–32; Hoel, 2016).

In 1848, the teacher and linguist Ivar Aasen published a Norwegian grammar, arguing that Old Norse was still alive in the contemporary dialects of wide areas of rural Norway, and that these dialects added up to a distinct language. In 1850, Aasen published a dictionary, and in 1853 he launched a unified standard for a Norwegian language (*Landsmål*, changed to *Nynorsk* in 1929). Poems, books, journals, and newspapers in the new standard were published from the 1850s. The language also spread in the countryside through its use among primary school teachers and enlightened peasants (Haugen, 1969, pp. 27–29; Hoel, 2011, p. 15; Jahr, 43–57; Hoel, 2016).

However, Nynorsk found little support in conservative establishment circles that roughly could be described as ‘the urban elites’ (Hoel, 2016). They claimed that Danish as used in Norway constituted the country’s Norwegian language, and was developing such that it was different from standard Danish as used in Denmark. Considerable parts of the urban elites therefore supported the spelling reforms of Danish devised by the teacher Knud Knudsen. The Knudsen spelling was implemented by an official orthographic reform in 1862, showing growing, but marginal, linguistic unilateralism vis-à-vis Denmark (Jahr, 2014, pp. 35–43; Hoel, 2016). Thus, Dano-Norwegian (changed to *Bokmål* in 1929) prevailed as Norway’s only official language, as legislated by the Constitution of November 1814.

Nynorsk was endorsed by the Liberals, a parliamentary group led by Johan Sverdrup. The group was formally established as the political party *Venstre* (‘Left’) in 1884. From the 1860s and onwards, it was the core of a broad, liberal and nationalist movement aiming at ‘getting out of the unions’ – meaning the political union with Sweden and the cultural union with Denmark (Myhre, 2012, pp. 224–225). Not all Liberals supported Nynorsk, though. One branch of the Liberal Party favoured Knudsen’s reforms. Nevertheless, the Liberals took two language issues to *Stortinget* in the 1870s. In 1874, they proposed the implementation of Old Norse and Nynorsk as subjects in teachers’ colleges, but lost (Hoel, 2011, p. 68), and in 1878, they proposed that primary school pupils should have the right to have oral instruction in their language (the local dialect instead of Danish), and they won (Jahr, 2014, pp. 60–61).

In *Stortinget*, the Liberals opposed the Conservatives’ support of the Government appointed by the Swedish king. The Conservative Party, *Høgre* (‘Right’), was established in 1884, as a response to the founding of the Liberal Party. In the 1870s, the conflict over how to govern the state sharpened. The Swedish king had since 1814 maintained his right to choose his Norwegian ministry at his own discretion and to refuse to sanction resolutions of *Stortinget* that seemed to him to threaten the union and the king’s position. The introduction of yearly *Stortinget* conventions increased *Stortinget*’s power, and simultaneously, the liberal movement became stronger under the leadership of Johan Sverdrup (Myhre, 2012, pp. 248–251).

To enhance its control of the Government, *Stortinget* in 1872 proposed that ministers should have access to *Stortinget* sessions. Constitutional amendments were accordingly needed, on which the Liberals passed parliamentary proposals several times in the 1870s and the 1880s. Each time the king refused his sanction. In 1882, the Liberals won the election, which enabled them to take the Government to the Court of Impeachment in 1883. The Government was there convicted for not having announced the constitutional amendment to open *Stortinget* sessions for ministers. The prime minster and seven other ministers were sentenced to be removed from office. In June 1884, the king asked Sverdrup, the Liberal Party leader, to form a new government, a step that marked the introduction of parliamentarianism in Norway (Myhre, 2012, pp. 251–255).

## 1885: Official recognition of Nynorsk

In the early 1880s, Sverdrup had publicly suggested several regulations in order to officially introduce Nynorsk into schools and public services. Underpinned by a huge campaign by teachers and intellectuals, 41 Liberal representatives proposed a parliamentary resolution in February 1885, calling for official recognition of Nynorsk. The debate in *Stortinget* was long and tough. The opposition, consisting of the Conservative Party and two Liberals, argued that people could use privately whatever language they wanted, and that Nynorsk was of great historical interest, but that it could not be considered a modern language with a legitimate place in schools or public services (Hoel, 2011, p. 49; Bjørhusdal, 2014, pp. 126–129).

However, in May 1885, *Stortinget* passed the following resolution, (Jahr, 2014, p. 63, Jahr’s translation): ‘The Government is requested to ensure that the necessary measures are taken so that the Norwegian Folk Language [det norske Folkesprog] as a language for schools and official use be given equal status with our usual written language and book language [i.e., Dano-Norwegian]’ (Innst. S. nr. 111 1885: 354). It was now a fact that the new standard had received official recognition along with the ‘old’ language, but apart from that, the resolution was rather diffuse. It did not specify any language rights, and it was even unclear whether it applied only to Aasen’s Nynorsk, or to Knudsen’s revised Dano-Norwegian as well. Nevertheless, the resolution became in practice the legal basis for the subsequent language regulations concerning education and public services (Bjørhusdal, 2014, p. 139). It was the starting point for a new language regime.

# **1892–2000: Linguistic universalism**

## 1892–1930: Establishing the regime

Fundamental principles and provisions of the current Nynorsk-Bokmål language regime were, with few exceptions, adopted between 1885 and 1930. The Liberal Party was predominantly the governing party until the 1920s, when the Labour Party (*Arbeidarpartiet*) became its main rival.

The parliamentary resolution on Nynorsk gave rise to new challenges and questions. Admittedly, the resolution was more of a theoretical principle than operationalized realpolitik up until 1892, partly because the Liberal Party lost seats in *Stortinget*, partly because the moderate and Knudsen-supporting branch of the party strengthened its position. In 1892, however, the Liberals finally got enough votes in *Stortinget* to pass explicit regulations in the area of education, explicated by the so-called *Language Article* (‘Målparagrafen’) of the Education Act of 1889. The Article states that Nynorsk is a legal first (written) language in primary education along with Bokmål (Haugland, 1985, pp. 133–153).

Still, important questions had to be tackled: Which language should be taught as the first language in school, and who should have the right to make the decision? One option was to make individual parents rights holders, entailing bilingual classrooms, thus pursuing, or rather establishing, a personality principle (Williams, 2012, p. 180). Another option was to give every citizen in every school district the right to vote on a first language, consequently launching a territoriality principle (Williams, 2012, p. 176). In 1892, *Stortinget* responded by instituting the local language referendum. All eligible Nynorsk and Bokmål users were given equal rights to vote on Nynorsk or Bokmål as the first written language in their particular school district (Bjørhusdal, 2014, pp. 141–143).

Such voting is still used to select the first written language of Norwegian primary schools. Language referendums are initiated either by the municipal council or by the voters in the district if at least 25 per cent of them have signed a petition. However, the referendums cannot be held more frequently than every fifth year (Søberg & Tangerås, 2003, pp. 3–4).

The territoriality strategy was adopted in the area of public services in 1930. Nynorsk was gradually adopted by municipal administrations in the 1920s and 1930s, mainly in western and eastern Norway. Some local administrations also required public bodies to use Nynorsk in correspondence with Nynorsk municipalities (Lilleholt & Gramstad, 1983, p. 13). In 1930, *Stortinget* passed Norway’s first language act concerning public administration and services, guaranteeing every Norwegian (individual, municipality, company) the right to receive replies to correspondence in the same language in which it was written, accordingly requiring civil servants to master and use both Nynorsk and Bokmål. The new language act formalized the municipal councils’ right to decide if Nynorsk or Bokmål should be used by public (state) bodies located in the municipalities, for instance the police and the national insurance service. Public bodies were additionally required to issue all kinds of information in both languages in a reasonable proportion, and information regarding Nynorsk municipalities and counties had to be communicated in Nynorsk (Lilleholt & Gramstad, 1983, p. 21; Vikør, 2001, p. 98).

These regulations are still in force. They are territorial in that they constitute the municipality as the decision-making authority concerning the local administration language, and they are positive because they give citizens and institutions the right to receive public documents and information in their own language.

The Language Article of the Education Act of 1889, and the Public Administration Language Act of 1930 have created numerous monolingual territories within the Norwegian bilingual state, at least at the administrative level. The choice between Nynorsk and Bokmål as a territory’s first language is made by the (people of the) territory itself, by direct and indirect elections (Bjørhusdal, 2014, p. 179). Nynorsk and Bokmål users have equal rights in these decisions. The right to vote is universal. Such elections to choose a first language are not the case concerning Irish in Ireland and Sámi in Norway, where the languages of the territories are designated by the state (Williams, 2012, p. 183; Bjørhusdal 2014, p. 66).

The arguments supporting the universal right to vote on language were closely related to the Liberal Party’s ideas about decentralizing political power from the central government to local democratic institutions (the municipal councils). In 1887, a report from the committee working on the new education act concluded that it was ‘obvious’ that a school district’s first language should be adopted by vote and that the (elected) school board should be given the authority to make the final decision ‘according to the status and the duties of school boards in other areas’ (Folkeskulelovkommisjonen, 1887, p. 99)\*. This kind of argumentation can also be found in the parliamentary bill proposing the 1930 Public Administration Language Act: ‘Because the 1885 resolution recognised Nynorsk as an official language, it implicitly recognised the people as holders of the right to decide which language should be used in public administration and services’ (Innst. O. V. (1929), p. 2)\*.

However, territoriality has not been an absolute principle. Modifications, in the shape of provisions permitting individuals to overrule the territory, appeared relatively soon. In 1917, primary school pupils were entitled the right to use textbooks in the ‘other’ language, that is, the language which was not the district’s first written language. Furthermore, parents living in school districts with a different first language than the one that they actually preferred were given the right to establish linguistic parallel classes for their (primary school) children (Lover, 1917, p. 46; Bjørhusdal, 2014, pp. 157–160). Today, organizing such parallel classes is possible if a minimum of 10 children can be found for a class.

The territoriality principle was modified for public services as well. The act of 1930 included the individual citizen’s personal right to correspond with public bodies in her preferred language regardless of where in the state she was located, in other words, regardless of whether she was living in a Nynorsk or Bokmål territory (Målbrukslova, 1932; Bjørhusdal, 2014, p. 157).

Interests and needs of local linguistic minorities played an important role in argumentation for personal rights, as seen in a parliamentary proposal from 1917, concerning free choice of the language used in primary school textbooks. The regulation, the committee argues, ‘is a right of parents which will be strongly appreciated by the linguistic minorities in all school districts’ (Innst. O. XIII (1917), p. 1)\*. The regulation and the argumentation applied to Nynorsk users in Bokmål territories and to Bokmål users in Nynorsk territories. Hence, individual minority rights were universal too.

Welfare universalism   
Norway’s language policy practices and justifications seem to be connected with the state’s social welfare model. As stated in numerous international welfare studies, universalism has been the foundation of social policy reforms in the Nordic countries Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland as well (see, e.g., Kuhnle & Ervik, 2011; Kildal, 2006; Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005). In economic welfare, universalism is often contrasted with selective policies of a means-testing, group-differentiated kind, targeted at the poor (Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005, pp. 13–14; Kildal, 2006, p. 3).

Nordic welfare universalism refers to systems of general coverage in sickness and unemployment insurance and pensions, introduced in the 1930s, and to general child allowance, implemented immediately after WWII. General coverage in sickness, general child allowance, unemployment insurance, and pensions are arguably the core schemes of the Norwegian and Nordic welfare states. The Scandinavian states extended social insurance to cover the entire population instead of compensating only the wage earners for lost income, and in this way, the systems of relief for the poor and dispersed insurance funds were terminated (Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005, pp. 18–24; Kildal, 2006, pp. 5–7). By establishing universal access to basic welfare services, the Nordic countries sought to promote solidarity with the state’s policies across social classes, and between classes as well. Thus, the main argument for welfare universalism is that everyone, including elites, has political interest in supporting the system (Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005, p. 25; Kildal, 2006, p. 8).

## After WWII: Path dependency?

The administration of Nynorsk and Bokmål has to a very limited extent gone beyond the principle of universal equality. The most salient example of linguistic group differentiation is the national government’s financial support to fund publishing of Nynorsk textbooks and education material, because of an Education Act article passed in 1969 requiring publishers to produce such material in both languages (Grunnskulelova, 1969, § 39; Bjørhusdal, 2014, p. 248).

A common argument for linguistic group differentiation is the purported importance of securing minority languages and linguistic diversity, and consequently, of meeting the specific needs of minority language users. In this case, the argument could be conceived of as underpinned by the language’s intrinsic, cultural value (see, e.g., Patten & Kymlicka, 2003; Rubio-Marín, 2003; De Schutter, 2007; Réaume & Pinto, 2012). However, citing a language’s intrinsic, cultural value is not how the very few examples of linguistic group differentiation are justified in Norway’s official language policy documents. Instead, the documents use universalist argumentation to defend not only equal rights, but also group-differentiated provisions.

I will give some examples: *Stortinget* first gave financial support to publish textbooks in Nynorsk in 1894. The parliamentary committee’s argument was that the languages had to be ensured ‘equal competitive conditions’ (St.tid., 1894, p. 1232; Haugland, 1985, p. 170)\*. ‘Equal conditions’ has also been the rationale of more recent regulations concerning education materials and general literature in Nynorsk. A White Paper from the Ministry of Culture in 1981 stated that Nynorsk literature needs support ‘to be able to compete with literature in Bokmål on relatively equal conditions’ (St.meld. nr. 23 (1981–82), p. 143)\*.

The Labour Party came into office in 1935 and remained in power until 1965. Universalism seems to be the foundation of Norway’s language policy and planning in this period too. At the end of the 20th century, however, the discourse was somewhat altered. The idea that Nynorsk, like all languages, does have a cultural, intrinsic value and that as a lesser-used thus vulnerable language it needs targeted provisions and particular support, was explicitly articulated in official documents in the 1990s (Bjørhusdal 2014, pp. 348–353). Yet, I will argue below that the new rhetoric did not affect the practical politics of language.

The Public Administration Language Act of 1930 remained in force until 1980. Then *Stortinget* passed a new act, proposed by the Labour government. The new Public Administration Language Act of 1980 included an article on language reports (‘mållovsmeldingar’) to be published every fourth year (Mållova, 1980, § 10). Formally, these reports are White Papers, documenting the status and use of Nynorsk and Bokmål in public bodies (Lilleholt & Gramstad, 1983, p. 62). The 1987 language report, by another Labour government, required all public bodies to produce at least 25 per cent of their national publications in Nynorsk (St.meld. nr. 27 (1986–87), p. 13). Specifying a percentage was a new and somewhat controversial provision.

Then how did the Government justify its 25 per cent provision on the basis of universalism and equal rights? Fifty per cent would arguably be more in line with the established regime, but that would obviously be politically impossible. In 1987, the Ministry of Culture defended the 25 per cent regulation as follows: ‘Approximately 25 per cent of the municipalities and 21 per cent of the counties have required the state to correspond with them in Nynorsk’ (St.meld. nr. 27 (1986–87), p. 13)\*. The allegation was that the quantity of Nynorsk in official publications should mirror the quantity of Nynorsk users (or administration territories) in society. Thus, the 25 per cent provision was legitimised as strict quantitative and neutral administration of Nynorsk and Bokmål.

This argumentation was sure to cause difficulties. Five years later (i.e., 1992) the (still Labour) Government launched a new language report, defending the 25 per cent provision in a completely different manner. The report mentioned the fact that 17 per cent of Norwegian pupils by then had Nynorsk as their first language. However, this time the argument was that ‘these numbers are not crucial’ because ‘[t]he public administration must in any case show best practice in supporting the interests of a vulnerable linguistic minority […] therefore, it may be necessary to favour Nynorsk by introducing group-differentiated provisions’ (St.meld. nr. 53 (1991–92), p. 8)\*. This time, the argument is not supported by the concept of (strict) equality or universalism, but by the political and cultural interests of *one* of the linguistic groups. In 1987, the Government justified the 25 per cent regulation as a tool for equal treatment. In 1992, it was justified as group differentiation.

The next language report was launched in 1997, now by a Conservative-Centre coalition government. There was a public debate prior to this launch regarding the fact that the number of Nynorsk municipalities and the number of Nynorsk primary school pupils had now decreased to well below 20 per cent. The Government responded in its report by arguing that ‘it is perfectly clear’ that the Nynorsk language is in an exposed minority position, and that this implies the following: ‘The Norwegian state should uphold and even strengthen the provisions for Nynorsk, in order to try to stimulate the private use of the language as well’ (St.meld. nr. 13 (1997–98), p. 17)\*.

This response may look like a step off the universalist path. However, the report defended language regulations by equality arguments as well: ‘When adopting provisions to protect the Norwegian language we have to consider the fact that Nynorsk is far more vulnerable than Bokmål; thus, an important political task is always to try to find the best way of promoting linguistic equality’ (St.meld. nr. 13 (1997–98), p. 33)\*. This was an argument referring to the intrinsic value of Nynorsk and to the importance of securing the language on the one hand; on the other hand, and simultaneously, it was grounded on the universalist idea of equal conditions.

The ambivalence was also articulated in a voluminous White Paper on language, power, and politics published by the Centre-Left coalition government in 2008, probably the most comprehensive language policy document ever published by a Norwegian government (St.meld. nr. 35 (2007–2008)). The report certainly contained the ‘intrinsic’ and cultural kinds of arguments, for instance by declaring the Government’s intention to ‘identify and implement provisions that promote and highlight the Nynorsk language and the Nynorsk linguistic culture’ (St.meld. nr. 35 (2007–2008), p. 212)\*. Still, no *specific* provisions or regulations were legitimised by this kind of argumentation. It served as rhetorical framing of reflections on language, language power, and language diversity rather than as justification for specific provisions and regulations (Bjørhusdal, 2014, p. 455). Consequently, the extensive report did not suggest any policy provisions beyond strict equal treatment.

The language regime established in Norway between 1885 and 1930 is still viable, implying that municipalities, school districts, and individuals are entitled to choose freely between the two written languages. The task of public bodies and the central government is to ensure that the languages are treated (formally) equally, it is not to intervene in or guide people’s language choices. As long as language policies are founded on fair and democratic procedures, it is none of the state’s business whether one of the languages grows stronger at the expense of the other. From the 1990s, however, differentiation arguments are also observable in government documents.

# Challenges to the regime

## Negative universalism

The Conservatives continued resisting the Nynorsk-Bokmål policy throughout the first half of the 20th century. During the debate on The Public Administration Language Act in 1930, the Conservative Party protested the dominant interpretation of the concept ‘linguistic equality’. While the *Stortinget* majority, consisting of the Liberal Party and Labour Party representatives, claimed that linguistic equality had to imply implementation of Nynorsk in central and local administration, in schools, and in churches, the Conservative Party maintained the view that equality meant ‘permission’ – not regulation (Ot.tid. 1930, p. 826). From their perspective, all individuals were free to choose and use either language, but there was no need for policy implementation.

After WWII, Conservatives continued their criticism of positive universalism. They were particularly critical of the requirement that public bodies communicate in Nynorsk with individuals or institutions using Nynorsk, describing the regulation as a threat to employees’ negative linguistic liberties. On several occasions, Conservatives proposed to entitle civil servants the individual right to use their preferred language at work (Bjørhusdal, 2016, pp. 189–190). As we have seen, in 1980, a new language act replaced the 1930 act, and the Conservative Party articulated their views during this process as well. Eventually it had a small victory, as civil servants were entitled to use their preferred language in internal proceedings (Bjørhusdal, 2016, p. 190).

In 2013, the Conservative Party came into office in coalition with the Party of Progress (*Framstegspartiet*), a party founded on calls for tax reform and for opposition to immigration. Their coalition government platform promises to abolish the obligation of civil servants and public bodies to use both languages (Sundvolden-plattformen, 2013).

## More differentiation, less universalism

However, the Nynorsk-Bokmål language regime is criticized not only by those who want less government regulation, but also by those wanting more regulation. The context of the latter position has three elements: recent sociolinguistic research on and increasing political awareness of language shift and language death; international institutions focusing on multilingualism and language policy questions, for instance the Council of Europe and UNESCO; and Norway’s Sámi language policy (Bjørhusdal, 2016, pp. 190–191).

Norway’s Sámi language regime differs from the Nynorsk-Bokmål regime in important aspects. Several official government documents, for example the Plan of Action for Sámi Languages from 2009, emphasize that a major goal of the Norwegian government is to increase the number of Sámi language users (Handlingsplan 2009, pp. 8–9). Several provisions have been implemented to reach this goal. One example is public campaigns to convince parents to choose Sámi as the first language for their children; another is governmental supervision of the implementation and teaching of Sámi as a first language in schools; a third example is public financial support to students of Sámi languages. Regarding Sámi, the aim of Norwegian language policy and planning is not to treat Sámi languages in the same way as Norwegian is treated. In other words, its aim is not linguistic neutrality, but differentiation.

One probable reason the Norwegian government’s strategy for Sámi differs from its strategy for Nynorsk is that Sámi language regulations were established later, that is, at the end of the 20th century, in a rather different context (Bjørhusdal, 2014, p. 483). From about 1990, there has been a new language policy situation in Norway, involving calls for implementation of immigrant language rights in education, for stronger measures and rights for old linguistic minorities in Norway, in particular for the Sámi and the Kven peoples, and for comprehensive measures to restrict the use of English in business and academic domains.

These may be some of the reasons that there are now increasing appeals for a more conscious public management of Nynorsk. With its half a million users, Nynorsk is not a threatened language, but it is vulnerable. Educators and teachers are particularly worried about the lack of strategies regarding the shift from Nynorsk to Bokmål in school. After primary school, Norwegian pupils individually choose their first language, regardless of which school district they originally belonged to. More than 30 per cent of Nynorsk students shift to Bokmål as their first written language in secondary and high school (Garthus, 2009). Nynorsk students are less exposed to their first language than Bokmål students are, both at school and outside school. The conditions of first-language learning are therefore very different and more difficult for students using Nynorsk than for those using Bokmål, despite universal rights. This is arguably an important factor for the language shift from Nynorsk to Bokmål.

The language shift is a sociolinguistic fact generally accepted, but its political implications are not generally accepted. Scholars and teachers have argued that more support and differentiated curriculums may be needed, permitting *more* and *different* education in Nynorsk as a first language (Garthus, 2009; Bjørhusdal, 2014, pp. 478–479). However, the universalist language regime tends to resist such differentiation pleas, because they attempt to promote one of the languages at the expense of the other.

Language policy has become more important in Norway, with two consequences. On the one hand, the traditional Norwegian language regulatory policy concerning Nynorsk and Bokmål receives less political attention than before. On the other hand, new policy perspectives arise, and new tools can be found for the administration of the Nynorsk-Bokmål situation.

# Conclusion: Critical junctures, path dependency?

Can the period from 1814 to 1885 be characterized as a critical juncture in Norway’s language regime, and accordingly, can subsequent decades be understood as a period of path dependency? And finally, to what extent can the current language policy situation be described as a critical juncture?

The governing of Norway went through far-reaching, almost revolutionary changes from 1814 to 1884, and language matters were central elements of the rationale behind the political shift. Thus, it is tempting to describe the process of language policy changes resulting from the 1885 parliamentary resolution as a critical juncture, which is also a characterization justified by Sonntag and Cardinal’s allegation that a language regime’s critical junctures are often underpinned by changes in state tradition (2015, p. 7). According to Capoccia and Kelemen, however, the occurrence of a critical juncture for one institution does not have to imply critical junctures for connected institutions (2007, p. 349).

This considered, the period from about 1860 to about 1885 clearly *was* a critical juncture in Norway’s language regime. This was a period characterized by political uncertainty, in which various options for radical institutional change were probable, as the discontent about having Danish as the national language grew, but no agreements on alternatives were in effect settled until 1892. In other words, those 25–35 years were very much characterized by structural fluidity, implying *linguistic* fluidity (Danish or Norwegian?), *codification* fluidity (which Norwegian?), and *institutional/administration* fluidity (which language rights for whom?). Consequently, political and cultural mobilization for at least three language ‘solutions’ increased during the 1860s and 1870s, climaxing in the *Stortinget* debate in 1885.

We have seen that to describe changes as critical junctures, one must identify the important decisions taking the system in one or another direction. I have argued that the introduction of parliamentarianism in 1884 was crucial for *Stortinget’*s resolution about language equality in 1885, and I have argued that the latter constituted a legal foundation for all language measures and regulations passed by *Stortinget* in subsequent decades. In this way, the resolution generated a long-lasting institutional legacy.

In this structurally ‘relaxed’ period, the actions of individuals had great influence. The scope of this paper has not allowed me to go into details here, but hopefully, I have made it clear that Ivar Aasen and Knud Knudsen definitely put their stamp on the development of Norwegian. Johan Sverdrup is also an illustrative example. The 20th-century language regime could have had a very different starting point, and therefore developed considerably differently, if in 1884 Sverdrup had chosen to delay the *Stortinget* proposal on official recognition of Nynorsk. Throughout the 1880s, Nynorsk supporters in the Liberal Party had problems passing further regulations to promote the language. These problems were partly due to the party’s lack of success in two elections after 1885, partly to a split in the party, a split in which one of the factions was not very engaged in the language question. It is plausible that if there were no language resolution in *Stortinget* in 1885, Danish would have prevailed as the only official Norwegian standard. The result could have been re-equilibration.

I have also argued that the critical juncture of the Norwegian language regime had its starting point in the 1860s, when the language debates that had been ongoing since 1814 unquestionably increased, that it culminated in 1885, and that it opened a path-dependency period of more than a century. The duration of the critical juncture was, in other words, relatively brief compared to the duration of the period it instigated.

Governments and parliament majorities have come and gone, and the sociological contexts for the two Norwegian linguistic groups have altered a lot. Yet the main principles of Norwegian language policy and planning have endured, decade after decade, with few steps off the universalist track. I have tried to illustrate the latter by demonstrating the Government’s attempts to fit the argumentation for the 25 per cent regulation into the universalist rationale in the 1980s. One obvious reason for the endurance of universal provisions and discourse is that their endurance has been in the interest of both linguistic groups. Another important reason is their relation to the general welfare model. These reasons are factors for my understanding of the Norwegian case as an example of institutional and normative linguistic state tradition, and as such, path dependency. The essential traits of the regime trajectory are positive and universal linguistic rights, closely intertwined with Norway’s general welfare universalism.

The universalist language regime is now challenged by a negative universalist approach on the one hand, and by arguments supporting more regulation and group differentiation on the other. If the current government is still in office after the 2017 election, there are reasons to expect language deregulation provisions in the coming years. The potential corresponding legislative and political processes may be a crucial opportunity for the mentioned positions to renegotiate central institutions of Norway’s language policy. However, general unpredictability within an institutional regime does not determine critical junctures. If critical junctures essentially are processes or incidents that initiate (long) path-dependency periods, they are phenomena that can be discovered only by looking back. Therefore, it is in principle impossible to identify present or future critical junctures.

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1. All quoted passages that are translations are identified by an asterisk and the translations are by the author. The Norwegian versions from which the translations are derived are available upon request. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)