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# Descriptive and Prescriptive Lexicography in the Norwegian Context

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## Abstract

The paper examines some selected Norwegian dictionaries from the perspective of descriptivity and prescriptivity. The main conclusion is that the element of prescriptivity in the dictionaries is larger than what is openly signalled to the users. In the case of one-volume standard dictionaries, prescriptivity also extends outside the domains of spelling and inflection, although these are the only domains that are officially regulated. It is argued that a revision of these standard dictionaries should encompass a reevaluation of their prescriptive profile. The fact that dictionaries contain elements of prescriptivity is neither unexpected nor a problem in principle. However, prescriptive statements as a principle should not remain hidden or implicit. To the extent that they do so, this can easily be interpreted as misleading the users rather than guiding or enlightening them.

**Keywords:** Norwegian lexicography; prescriptivity; descriptivity; language norms; language usage; language regulation

## 1 The Norwegian Language(s) – Present Status and Historical

### Background

Norwegian is fairly unique in a European context in that it is codified in two different written standards – Bokmål (“Book Language”) and Nynorsk (“New Norwegian”). The reasons for this division lie in the two different paths taken towards a Norwegian standard language around the middle of the 19th century: While there was wide agreement that there was a need for a Norwegian standard language separate from the Danish that was in use at the time, scholars disagreed on whether this new standard from the outset should be established as an entity altogether distinct from Danish or whether Danish in Norway should gradually be changed in the direction of spoken Norwegian. The first path led to the establishment of Landsmål (“National Language”), later renamed Nynorsk, while the second path led to the gradual separation of a Norwegian standard from Danish from the outset of the 20th century, resulting in the present Bokmål.

Apart from the two official written standards, Norwegian also has a number of non-official standards propagated by different groups. While both official Bokmål and Nynorsk are broad norms characterised by many optional variant forms on the level of lexicon as well as morphology, the non-official standards are narrower, with fewer options. The non-official standards to different degrees overlap with one of the official standards. The official standards are mandatory e.g. in texts produced by state and municipal institutions and in books and other materials used for instruction in schools.<sup>1</sup>

As for spoken Norwegian, there is no standard that enjoys official status. In many contexts an Eastern Norwegian spoken variety close to written Bokmål is perceived as a de facto standard, but other

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<sup>1</sup> A thorough introduction to the two official standards and their historical background is given by Vikør (n.d.)

regional varieties also have high prestige. In general, the use of various dialects is widespread, also in public settings.

The Language Council of Norway is the body concerned with implementing language policy as adopted by the parliament. Among the tasks undertaken by the Council is the regulation of the two official standards of Norwegian; this authority primarily concerns spelling and inflection, but in the case of Nynorsk also extends to the inclusion of loan words of Danish and German provenance in officially-approved dictionaries, e.g. dictionaries for use in schools.

## 2 Descriptive and Prescriptive Elements in the Comprehensive

### Dictionary *Norsk Ordbok*

The terms *prescription* and *description* are well known in linguistics, where the former is commonly frowned upon or considered to be outside the scope of linguistics proper. As noted by Bergenholtz & Gouws (2010), the transposition of these terms from linguistics to lexicography is far from straightforward. Dictionaries often claim to be descriptive and take this to be a commendable thing – after all, describing the lexicon of a language *as it is* rather than *as it should be* seems perfectly sensible from a scholarly point of view. However, a dictionary that is purely descriptive and at the same time fulfils the needs of its users is quite hard to envisage. The choices made by the lexicographer when it comes to lemma selection, presentation of different ways to write, pronounce or inflect a word, selection of grammatical constructions represented by the examples etc. all have repercussions which users are likely to interpret in a prescriptive way – although this was not necessarily the lexicographer’s intention. It might be argued that some dictionaries that claim to be descriptive in effect deceive their users, as their prescriptive elements – which are almost inevitably present – thereby remain hidden, cf. the term *hidden prescription* as employed by Bergenholtz & Gouws (2010).

A more fruitful approach than distinguishing between prescriptive and descriptive dictionaries is to identify prescriptive and descriptive elements in a given dictionary or even in a given dictionary entry. This may be exemplified by examining the entry for the verb *stryka* “stroke; iron” in *Norsk Ordbok* (a 12-volume dictionary covering Nynorsk and Norwegian dialects, henceforth abbreviated NO):<sup>2</sup>

### **stryka v stryk, strauk, stroki**

Figure 1: The lemma *stryka* with inflected forms in volume 10 of *Norsk Ordbok*.

*The lemma* is given in the infinitive form *stryka*. According to the present-day norms of Nynorsk the infinitive may end either in *-a* or *-e*, thus one is free to write either *stryka* or *stryke*. This is not explicitly reflected in the dictionary entry. NO generally gives only infinitives in *-a* in the headings of the entries. Although knowledgeable users of the dictionary are probably not confounded by this practice (and NO is an academic dictionary whose users can be expected to be well-versed in Norwegian), the choice of infinitive form is certainly a prescriptive one.

Similarly, *the inflected forms* in the heading of the entry are rendered according to one specific norm, i.e. the official Nynorsk norm dating from 1938. This is the norm that was in force when the first parts

<sup>2</sup> For more details on the history and structure of *Norsk Ordbok*, see Berg-Olsen & Wetås (2014).

of the dictionary was published in the 1950s, and it was faithfully followed in all the subsequent volumes, despite the fact that the Nynorsk underwent several changes from the 1950s until the last volume was published in 2016. The codification of the headings is clearly a prescriptive element; in a predominantly descriptive dictionary one would not expect to see one specific set of inflected forms being given special status. On the other hand a purely descriptive approach to the headings of the entries could easily become both unwieldy and impractical.

Further down in the entry, however, the descriptive element dominates: here we find a long list of dialect forms with geographical indications pointing to the locations where each form is attested. NO puts great emphasis on the documentative aspect, and all the attestations underlying the dialect forms with geographical indications are electronically available through the dictionary's web page.

målf òg inf *strjuka* (Hof i Sol, Gransherad, Vinje i Tel, Mo i Tel, Set, Hard, Vo, Gulen, Lavik, Vik, Balestrand), *struka* (A, Vinger, Odal, Sol, Gbr, ØvTel, Agd, Sokndal, Lund, Evanger, Masfjorden, So mst, Grytten, Eresfjord og Vistdal), *strjoka* (VSlidre, Helleland, Norddal), *stroka* (Gausdal, Nore, ATel, Rog), *strjøke* (A<sup>2</sup>, Va, Vestnes, Tresfjord), *strøk(j)e*, *strøkø*, *strøk(j)a* (A, Øyer, Va, Hall, Rollag, Lærdal, Tresfjord, Oppdal, Meråker), *stråkkje* (NGbr), *strike* (Eidskog, Vinger, Sigdal, Norderhov, Eresfjord og Vistdal, Eide på Ndm, Øre, Sunndal); nt pl *str(j)uka*,

Figure 2: Part of the entry *stryka* in *Norsk Ordbok* with dialect forms (in italics) followed by geographical indications.

Thus, we see that it does not immediately make sense to label NO as a “descriptive dictionary”, nor indeed as a “prescriptive dictionary”. On some levels it is primarily descriptive, while in other respects it clearly favours one particular norm among several possible ones. This dichotomy is observable also when it comes to the quotations; literary quotations are faithfully reproduced as in the original text, while dialectal examples are rendered in codified Nynorsk according to the official norm from 1938.

### 3 The Standard Dictionaries BOB and NOB

The one-volume dictionaries *Bokmålsordboka* (BOB) and *Nynorskordboka* (NOB) cover the two official written standards of Norwegian. They were first published in 1986 and are primarily intended for native speakers of Norwegian. Since the 1990s both dictionaries have been freely available in electronic form. The Language Council of Norway, as part-owner, ensures that the dictionaries at all time reflect the official norms and considers NOB and BOB to be important tools for the dissemination of the norms. In light of this it comes as no surprise that the prescriptive elements are quite strong in these dictionaries.

#### 3.1 Spelling and Inflection

According to the by-laws of the Language Council, the normative authority of the Council is by and large limited to the regulation of spelling and inflection (Kulturdepartementet 2015). The vocabulary – in effect, the lemma lists of the standard dictionaries – is not subject to regulation, with one notable exception: The Council is authorised to regulate the inclusion of German and Danish loanwords in

dictionaries of Nynorsk. This exception is motivated by the history of the Nynorsk standard, cf. part 1 above.

When it comes to spelling and inflection, NOB and BOB faithfully give the forms approved by the official norms. However, both the Bokmål and the Nynorsk standard encompass a broad scope of optional forms that are considered to be on equal footing. The prescriptive character of the dictionaries requires all sanctioned forms to be presented on equal terms. This is a logical consequence of the official language policy, but it can create difficulties for the dictionary users because the optional forms often have different stylistical properties, different distributions across various genres etc. This is discussed by Fjeld (2015), who argues that dictionaries of Bokmål should reflect the different properties of variant forms, especially when they have undergone what she terms “semantic split”.

In some cases the norm includes forms that are hardly ever found in actual usage, while a form that is in use remains outside the norm and is thus not listed in NOB and BOB. An example of this is the term for Béarnaise sauce, which according to the Bokmål and Nynorsk norms should be written *bearnés*. Actual usage data show that the form *bearnés* is very rare, the French form *bearnaise* (with or without an accent) clearly being preferred.

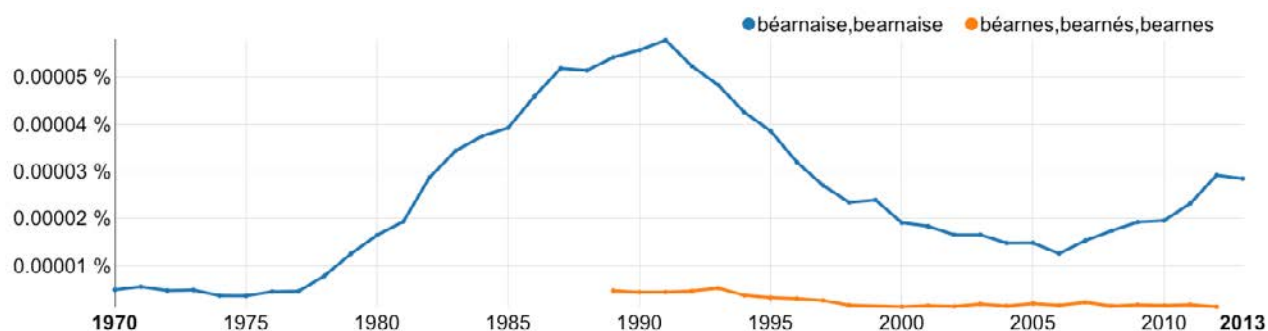


Figure 3: Relative frequencies over time for the forms *béarnaise* and *bearnés* (with and without accents) in the National Library (NB) corpus of digitalised newspaper texts in Bokmål and Nynorsk.

Another field where there often is a discrepancy between the norms and actual usage, is compound words, which in Norwegian are formed freely and constitute an important part of the vocabulary. When the parts of a compound word have two or more optional forms, all possible combinations are also sanctioned by the norm. A case in point is the Bokmål compound word meaning “deciduous forest”, which has four optional variants, listed in BOB in alphabetical order: *lauvskau*, *lauvskog*, *løvskau* and *løvskog*. Corpus data show that two of these variants are very seldom used in actual language (see table 1):

Variant form	Frequency in the LBK corpus	Frequency in the NoWaC corpus
<i>lauvskau</i> .*	1	0
<i>lauvskog</i> .*	32	105
<i>løvskau</i> .*	0	2
<i>løvskog</i> .*	145	353

Table 1: Variant forms of the Bokmål word for “deciduous forest” with corpus frequencies.

Similar examples are easily reproduced, and this raises the question whether the prescriptive profile

of NOB and BOB at times makes the dictionaries less user-friendly than they need to be. One could argue that native-language speakers, which make up the primary target group, know which combinations of elements are in use and what stylistical properties different variants of the same lemma have. But this is hardly the case always and for all users. Also for the sake of users without native competence it would make sense to complement the mere listing of sanctioned forms with an element of descriptivity, e.g. in the form of usage frequencies or selected corpus occurrences of the different forms. As long as the empirical material for this descriptive element is fairly sound, it could hardly be argued to undermine the norms in any way.

### 3.2 Lemma Selection

As mentioned above, the vocabulary is not subject to regulation by the Language Council (with one historically motivated exception for Nynorsk). Thus, the selection of lemmas for NOB and BOB is a task for lexicographers rather than for language regulators. Still, in practice prescriptive considerations play a role on this level as well, especially when it comes to loanwords. I shall present a couple of examples illustrating this.

The English noun *email* is commonly rendered in Norwegian as *e-post*, although the loanword (*e-)*mail “email” is not uncommon either. Figure 4 gives an indication of the relative usage frequency of the two alternative words:

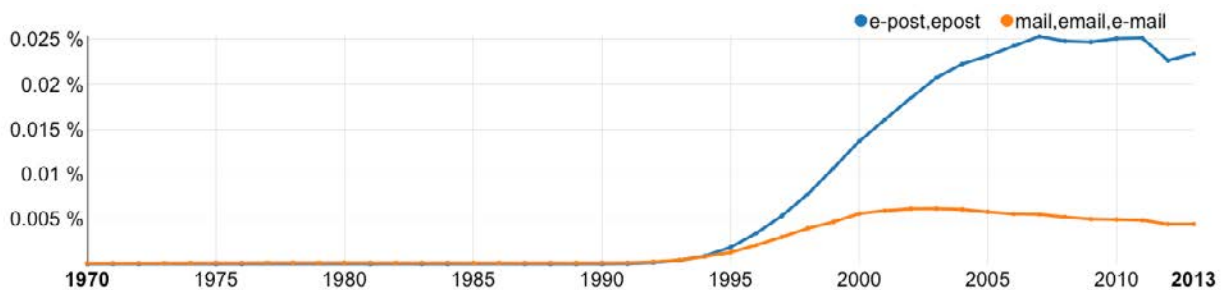


Figure 4: Relative frequencies over time for the forms *e-post* and *mail* (with variants) in the National Library (NB) corpus of digitalised newspaper texts in Bokmål and Nynorsk.

As for the verb “email”, dictionaries give Norwegian *e-poste*, but the adapted loanword *maile* with variants is clearly more frequent than *e-poste*, as shown by figure 5.<sup>3</sup>

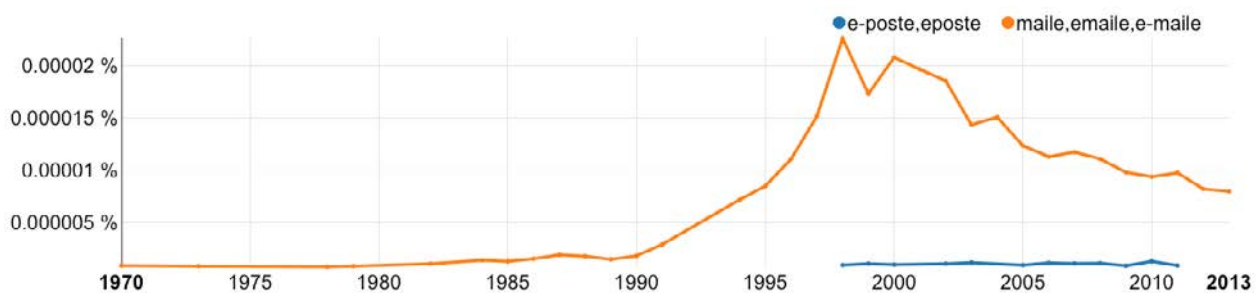


Figure 5: Relative frequencies over time for the verb forms *e-poste* and *maile* (with variants) in the National Library (NB) corpus of digitalised newspaper texts in Bokmål and Nynorsk.

<sup>3</sup> The phrases *sende e-post* “send email” and *sende mail* are also commonly used.



The rendering of the English loanwords and their Norwegian counterparts in NOB and BOB are clearly biased in favour of the latter. In fact, NOB does not list the English words at all, while BOB in the entries *(e-)mail* and *(e-)maile* only refers the user to the entries *e-post* and *e-poste*:

**mail m1 se e-post**  
**maile v1 se e-poste**

Figure 6: The entries *mail* and *maile* in the digital version of BOB.

Something similar is seen with the word *edderkopp* “spider” in NOB. This is a word from Danish and is also the common word for the arachnid in Bokmål. While NOB does include the word, thus signalling that it is OK to use it in Nynorsk texts, the NOB entry gives no definition, only references to the synonyms *kongro* and *vevkjerring*, both of which belong to a more traditional Nynorsk lexicon. It is difficult to read this in another way than “yes, you may write *edderkopp* if you want to, but these two alternatives are better” – in other words, a hidden prescriptive statement. The main definition of “spider” is given in the entry for *kongro*.

There is in principle nothing wrong with dictionary editors making deliberate choices of a prescriptive nature, but when they do so, this should be openly stated in one way or another. Otherwise the users are left to guess what the intentions of the editors are, something that invariably lead to misunderstandings. It might be argued that a practice such as the one followed in the first volumes of *Norsk Ordbok* is more sound in this regard: here words of German or Danish provenance that at the time were considered unsuitable in Nynorsk often were provided with the label *lbr* for *lite bruka og lite brukeleg* “little used and not recommended”:

**anbefala** v -te [òg ft -a; gj da. frå e ty *anbefehlen*] **lbr.** gjeva lovord, leggja inn eit godt ord for; stø, råda til. **anbefaling** **lbr.** 1) det å anbefala. 2) (skriftleg el munnleg) utsegn til stønad for ein person el ei sak; lovord, tilråding; støeskriv, innføringsskriv; hertil *anbefalings-brev, -skriv*.

Figure 7: The entries *anbefala* “recommend” and *anbefaling* “recommendation” in volume 1 of *Norsk Ordbok*, with the abbreviation *lbr* indicating a prescriptive statement about the use of these words.

## 4 Conclusions – Perspectives for a Revision of BOB and NOB

Clearly, the prescriptive character of BOB and NOB is in effect not limited to the domains of spelling and inflection, but also extends at least partially to the lexicon, i.e. the choice of lemmas included. This practice is questionable, at least when the prescriptivity is hidden (i.e. when the intention of influencing the choice of words of the users is not openly stated) or implicit (when some variants are allowed, while others are prohibited simply by not being included).

There are several reasons why a major revision of NOB and BOB is called for in the near future. The problems outlined above concerning the prescriptive features of the dictionaries should be given due consideration when planning the revision project. This includes establishing new criteria for lemma selection and providing corpus-based background data on optional forms. State-of-the-art language

technology must be employed to improve the dictionaries and make them more effective for users. Finally, emphasis must be put on making it clear to the users which aspects of the dictionaries are prescriptive and which ones are not.

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