Scandinavian language

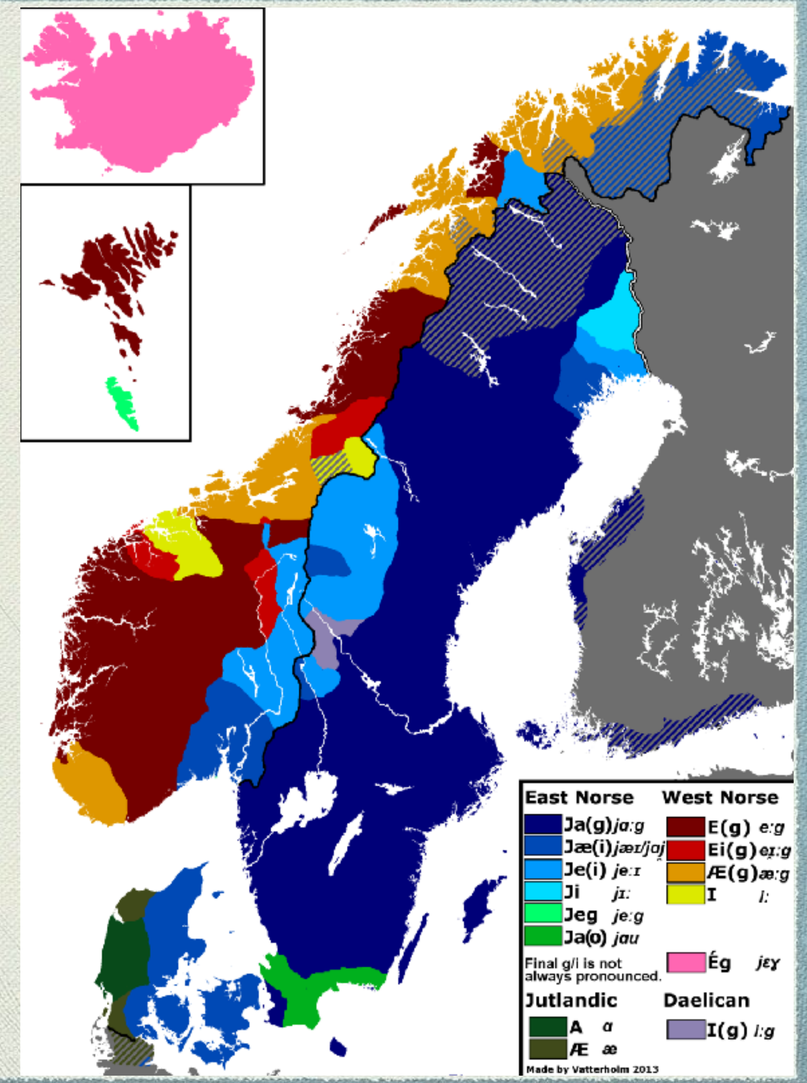
dialects of the North Germanic language group

What is Norwegian?

When Einar Haugen listed his **ecological questions** about a language, he was thinking about "Norwegian", but he wasn't even sure how to define "Norwegian", because Norwegians had several different ways of speaking, and Norway even had two official written languages. Also, Haugen knew that the "Norwegian" he heard in the USA was different from the "Norwegian" he heard in Norway; and yet he could easily communicate with various types of Norwegians, as well as with Danes and with others in Scandinavia.

To understand this situation, let's begin, as Haugen did, by considering the history of the Norwegian dialects. Where did they come from?

(1) What is the **historical linguistic description** of the language? How is it **diachronically** related to other languages?



the North Germanic language history

- Today's North Germanic dialects are descendent from Old Norse. The map shows the two Old Norse dialect areas, as well as other Germanic dialect areas of the early 10th century:

  Old West Norse dialect

  Old East Norse dialect

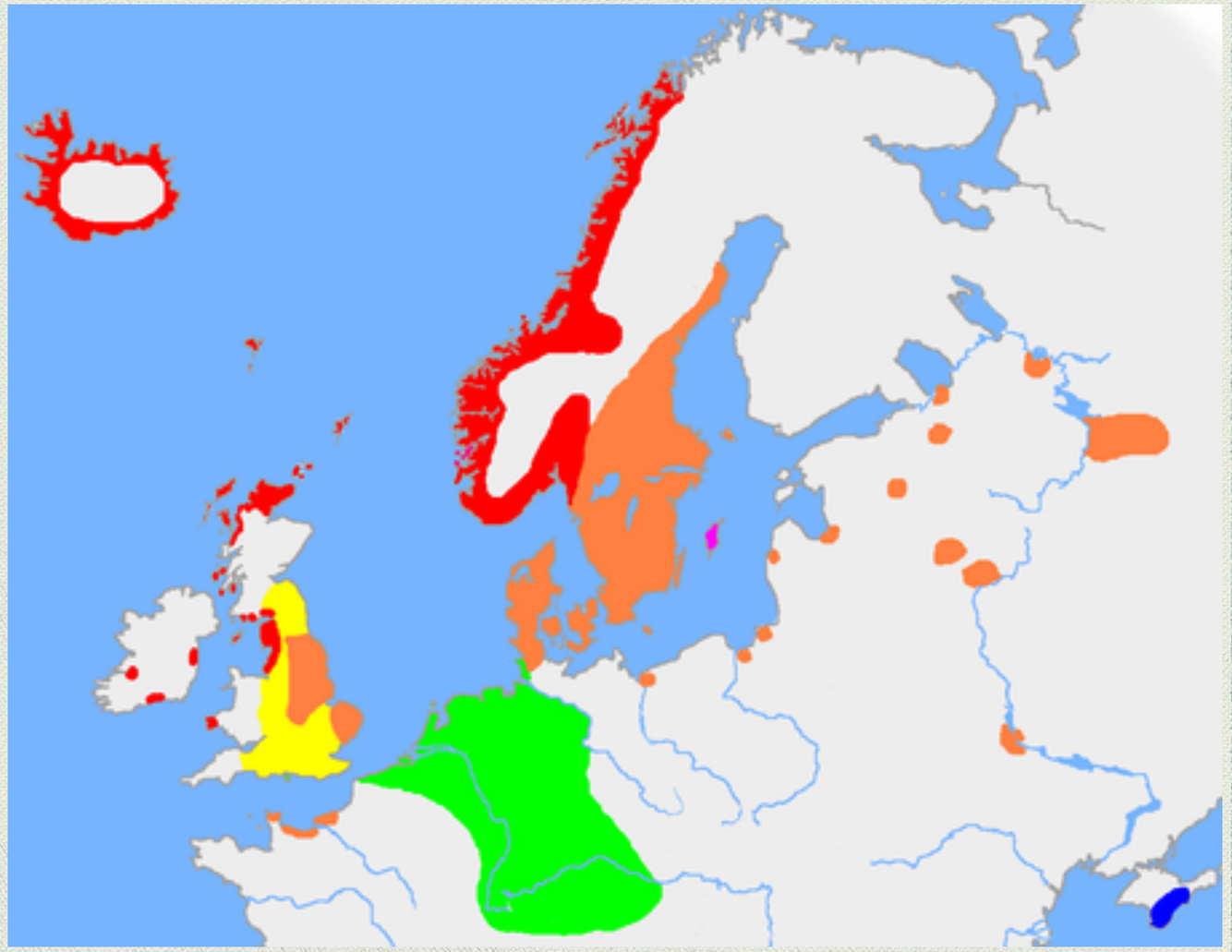
  Old Gutnish

  Old English

  Crimean Gothic

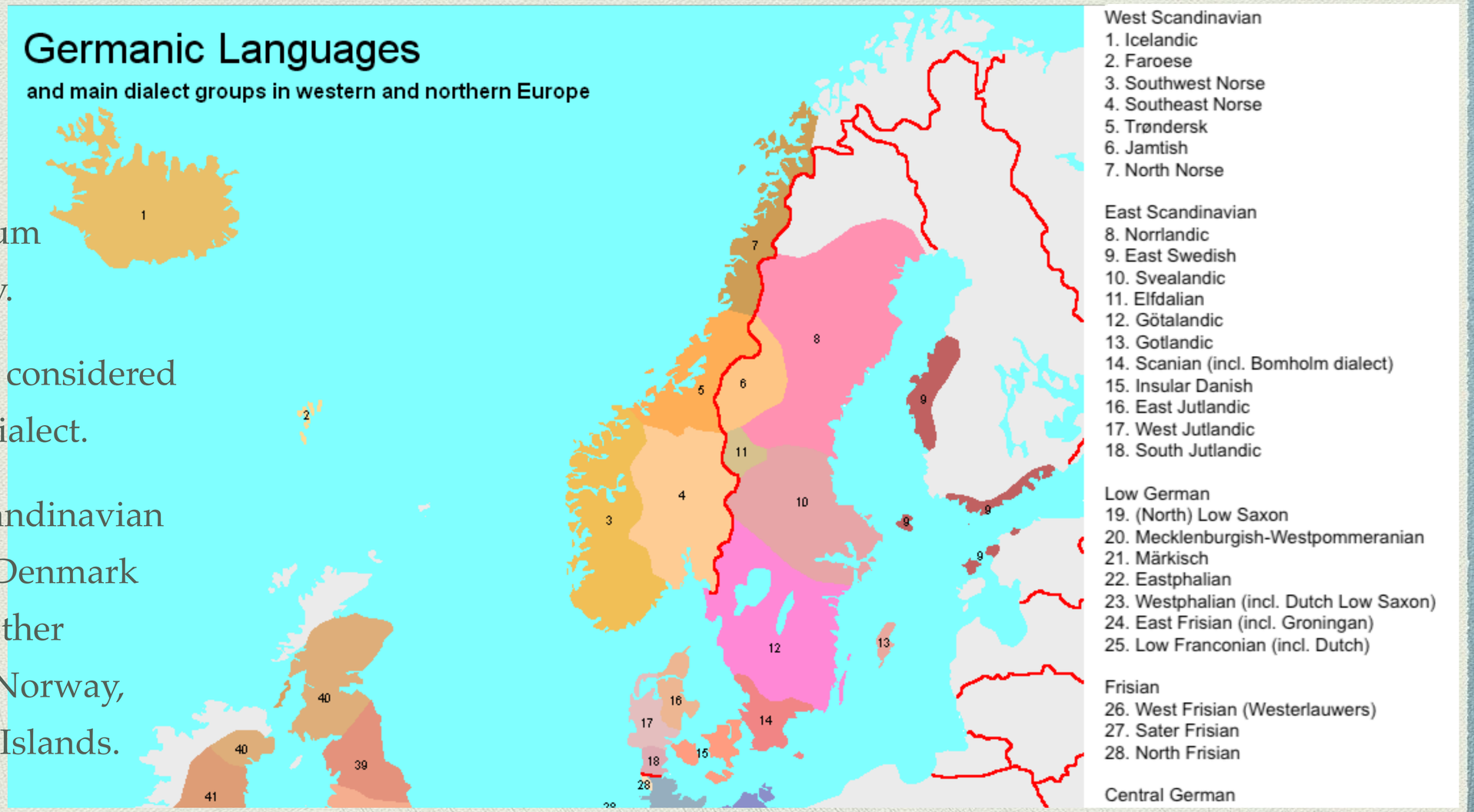
  Other Germanic languages (somewhat mutually intelligible with Old Norse)

- The **Old West Norse dialect** was also spoken in Greenland.



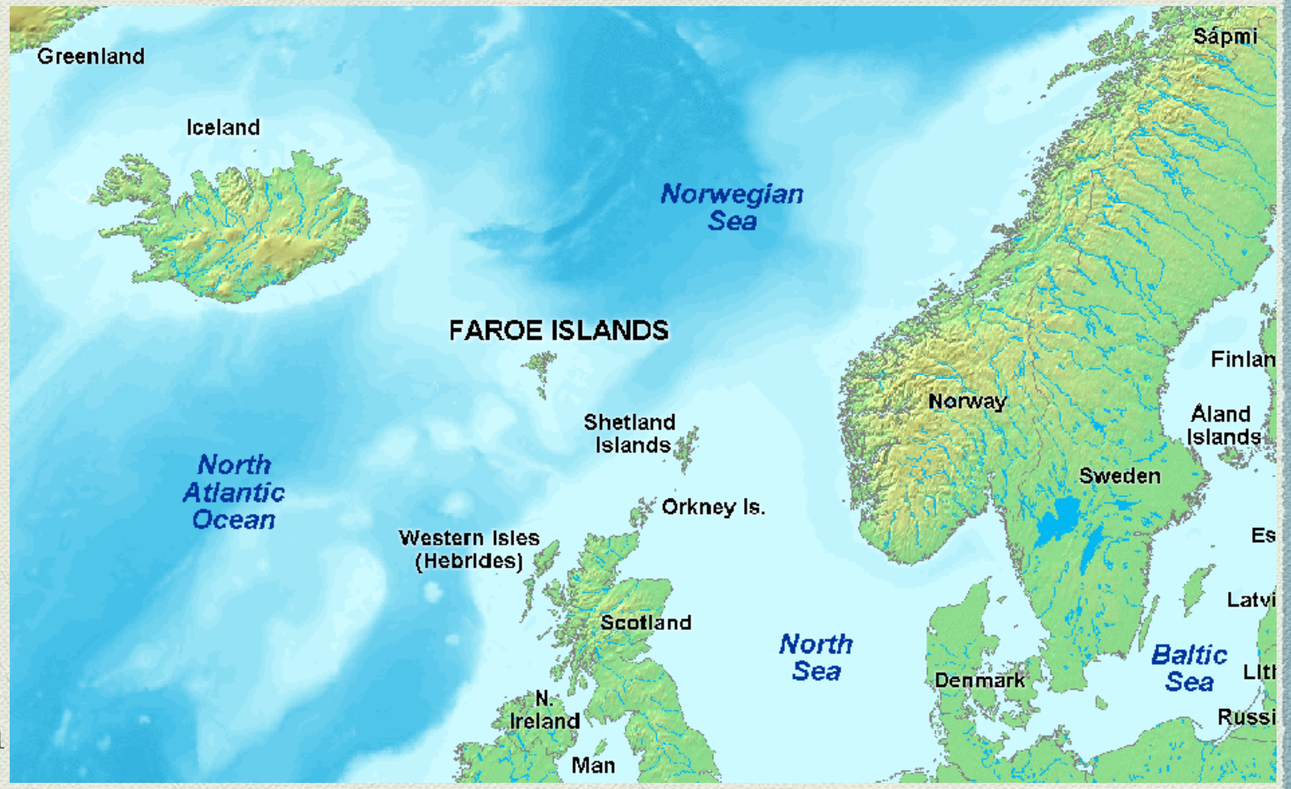
current Scandinavian dialects

- These 18 Scandinavian dialects, spoken in 5 European countries, form a dialect continuum of mutual intelligibility.
- Elfdalian is sometimes considered a West Scandinavian dialect.
- In general, the East Scandinavian dialects are spoken in Denmark and Sweden, and the other dialects are spoken in Norway, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands.



insular vs. mainland

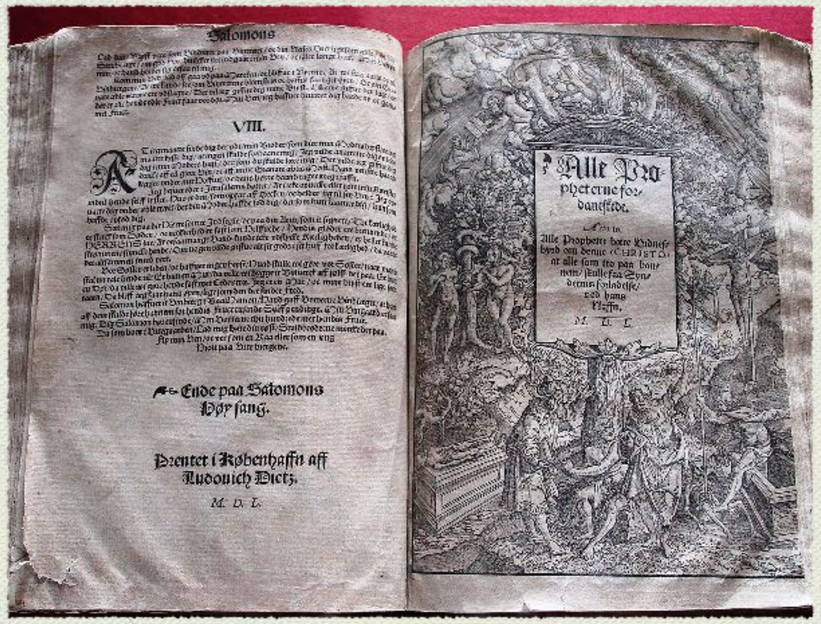
- Although the dialects have been historically divided between East and West, it is now also common to divide the insular dialects, Icelandic and Faroese, from the mainland dialects, because the dialects in Norway have been **assimilating** to the East Scandinavian dialects.

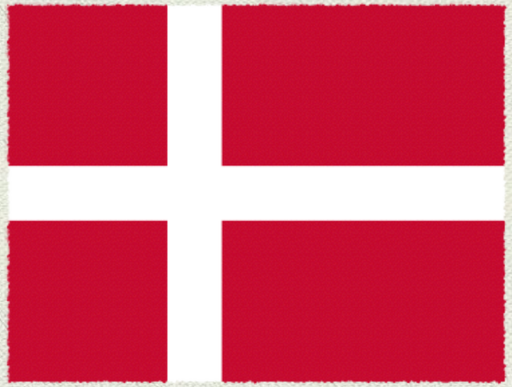


- Icelandic is the modern dialect closest to Old Norse, and Faroese is similarly close. Although they can understand each other's etymological writing, mutual intelligibility of speech is difficult.
- The mainland dialects are less conservative, and they have assimilated to the Danish standard.

Danish standardization

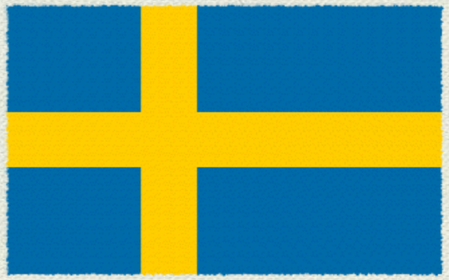
- In **1550**, The publication of the **Danish Bible** of Christian III became the orthographic standard for people in Denmark.
- In modern times, the writing of philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, fairy tale author Hans Christian Andersen, and playwrights Henrik Ibsen and Ludvig Holberg provided further models for written Danish.
- The urban usage of Sjælland is today's standard for Danish.

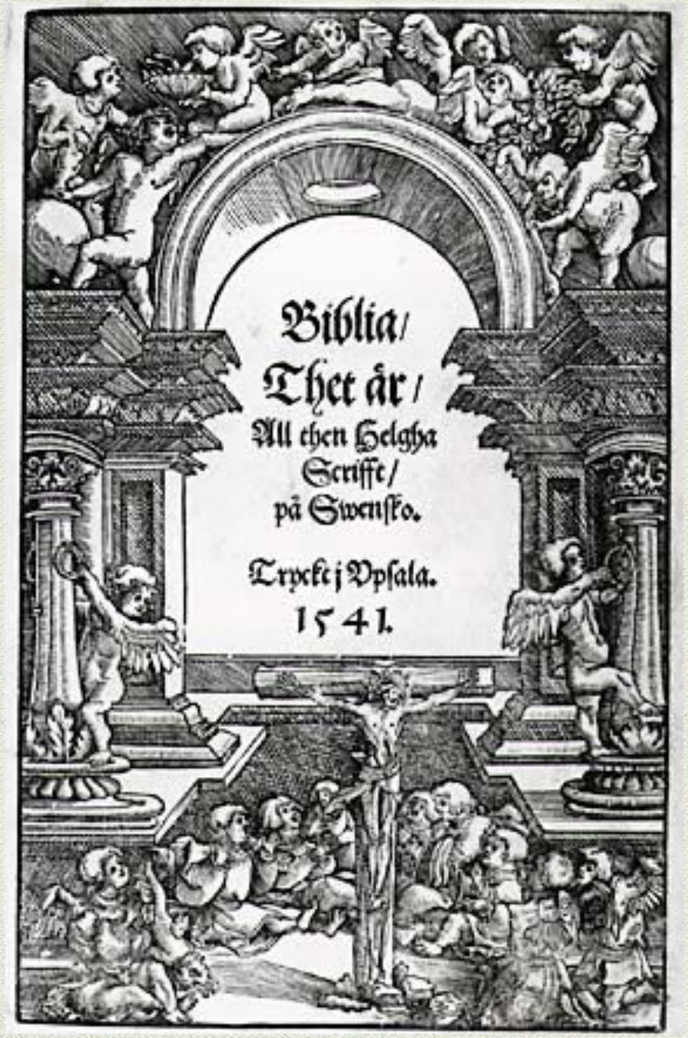




contemporary standard Swedish: *nusvenska*

- (1536, 1541) Shortly after becoming independent from Denmark, the Gustav Vasa Bible established a distinct written Swedish.
- (late 1800s) Writing became more like colloquial speech.
- (1906) Spelling was reformed.
- (1960s) The use of *du* was encouraged. Urbanization increased standard usage.
- The Swedish Language Council (Språkrådet) regulates standard Swedish usage in Sweden. *Nusvenska* is contemporary standard Swedish.
- (**2009**) Swedish was declared Sweden's **primary official language**.
- About 200 languages are spoken in Sweden today, and the people are increasingly speaking English. The government policy is to **protect** and **promote** the use of Swedish and five minority national languages.



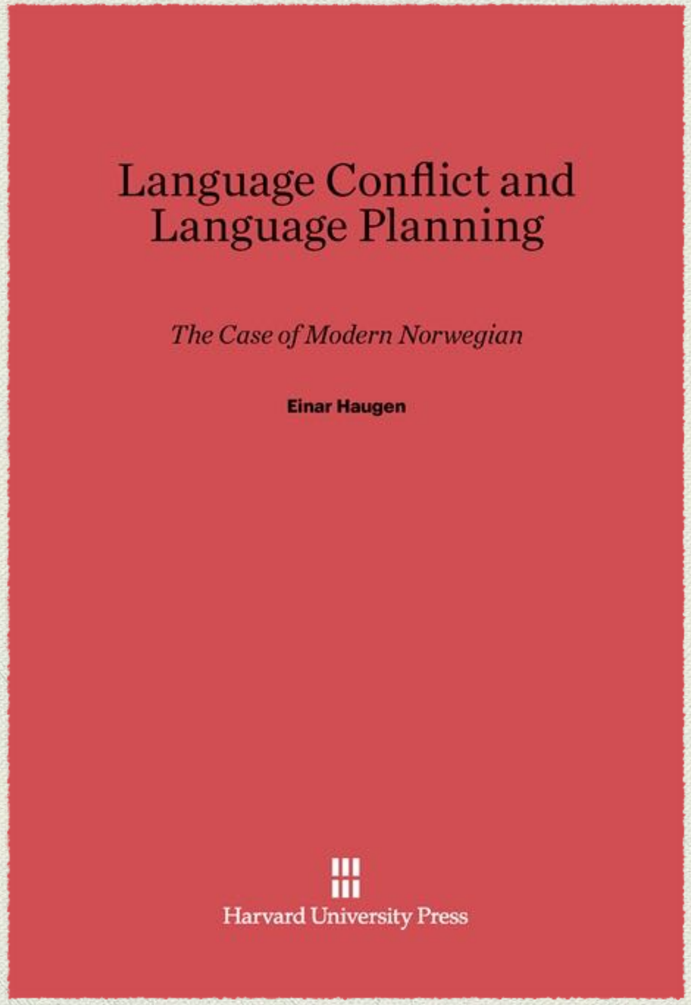


dual national languages for Norway

- (1814) Norwegian independence sparked a desire for a national language for Norway, distinct from Denmark's.
- (1836) Ivar Aasen made a national language proposal, drawn from pan-Norway colloquial speech, and he then began to write in this standardized language, eventually called *Landsmål*.
- Knud Knudsen, who was involved in the national theatre of Norway, promoted a different national language, more similar to educated urban speech, eventually known as *Riksmål*.
- (1862) Spelling reform, promoted by Knudsen, better reflected pronunciation, but also respected a *Riksmål* standard.
- (1885) Both *Riksmål* and *Landsmål* were declared official languages of Norway.
- (1929) *Riksmål* and *Landsmål* were officially renamed *Bokmål* and *Nynorsk* ("new Norwegian"), respectively. The government had tried to merge the two languages into a single standard, called *Samnorsk*. That resulted in their divergence from the original versions, which were then revived by some Norwegians as *Riksmål* and *Høgnorsk* (High Norwegian).
- (1938, 1959) Further reforms toward a single *Samnorsk* standard brought *Nynorsk* and *Bokmål* closer than ever, but still not together.
- Today, when writing *Nynorsk*, there is some spelling variation, because the spelling reflects the regional pronunciation.
- Today, although the spelling of words in *Bokmål* is standardized, there is no standard pronunciation when reading those words aloud.

Norway fails to create a single national language

- Unlike Denmark and Sweden, **Norway could not create a single** standard national language for itself.
- "For the past century Norway has made a conscious effort to unify her two nationally recognized languages, Riksmål and Landsmål. In the first comprehensive account of Norway's linguistic reform program, Einar Haugen […] describes the sharp **socio-political conflict** between adherents of the two languages, the linguistic changes attempted to date, and the establishment of the Norwegian Language Commission."
- Perhaps because of the similarities of Danish, Bokmål, and Nynorsk, there was insufficient incentive to change the status quo.



comparing Danish, Bokmål, and Nynorsk

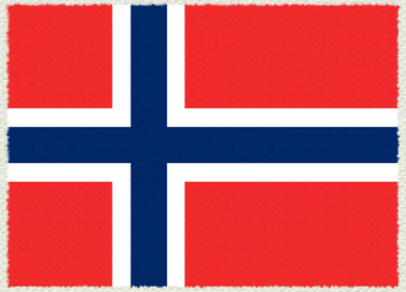
- [Danish] I 1877 forlod Brandes København og bosatte sig i Berlin. Hans politiske synspunkter gjorde dog, at Preussen blev ubehagelig for ham at opholde sig i, og han vendte i 1883 tilbage til København, hvor han blev mødt af en helt ny gruppe af forfattere og tænkere, der var ivrige efter at modtage ham som deres leder.
- [Norwegian Bokmål] I 1877 forlot Brandes København og bosatte seg i Berlin. Hans politiske synspunkter gjorde imidlertid at det ble ubehagelig for ham å oppholde seg i Preussen, og i 1883 vendte han tilbake til København, der han ble møtt av en helt ny gruppe forfattere og tenkere, som var ivrige etter å motta ham som sin leder.
- [Norwegian Nynorsk] I 1877 forlét Brandes København og busette seg i Berlin. Då dei politiske synspunkta hans gjorde det utriveleg for han å opphalda seg i Preussen, vende han attende til København i 1883. Der vart han møtt av ei heilt ny gruppe forfattarar og tenkjarar som var ivrige etter å ha han som leiar.
- [English translation] In 1877 Brandes left Copenhagen and took up residence in Berlin. However, his political views made Prussia an uncomfortable place in which to live and in 1883 he returned to Copenhagen. There he was met by a completely new group of writers and thinkers who were eager to accept him as their leader.

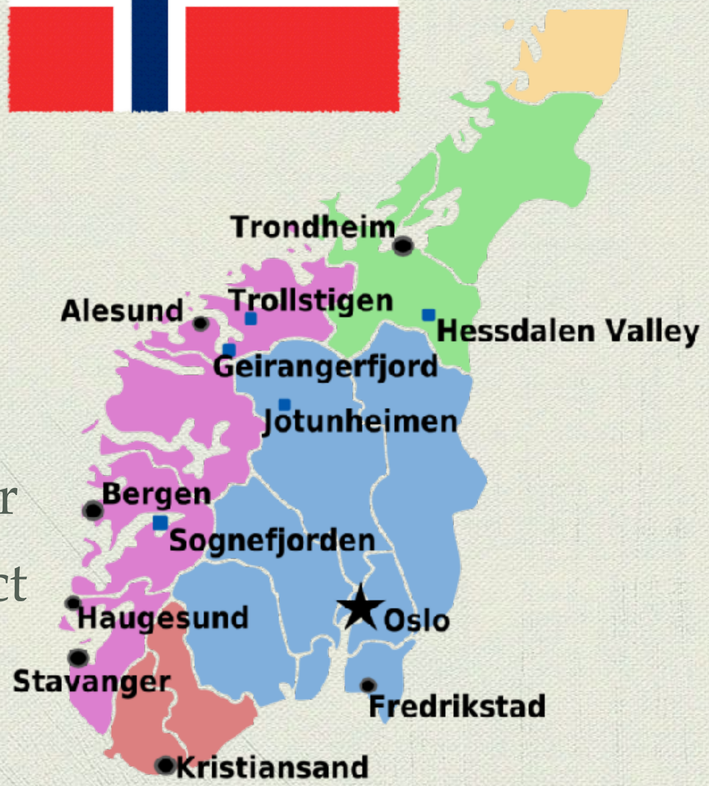
A language is a dialect with an army and navy.

- Norwegian Bokmål and Danish are very similar.
- Max Weinreich popularized this expression: *A language is a dialect with an army and navy*. This is certainly true of Scandinavia. Very similar dialects are spoken in Denmark and Sweden, but we recognize two languages, Danish and Swedish, not for linguistic reasons, but for **political reasons**: Denmark and Sweden have armies and navies.

Whose dialect should be “Norwegian”?

- In **1814**, the Royal Norwegian Navy was established. On international maps, Norway was given a color different from Denmark and Sweden. Norway flew its own flag. Even so, the Norwegian government could not agree on a single national language.
- There were too many **social and political groups** within Norway who were arguing about what kind of language “Norwegian” should be. Some groups wanted the written standard to be similar to local usage. Other groups wanted the written standard to reflect learnèd usage. Different dialects were spoken in major cities: **Bergen, Oslo, Trondheim**. Disputes continue even today.





pan-dialectal solidarity

- Founded in 1952, the Nordic Council (an official body representating Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and the Åland Islands) sometimes refers to *skandinaviska* ("the Scandinavian language") as the language of **all Scandinavia**.
- The Nordic Council website is published in English, Finnish (Suomi), and four national Scandinavian dialects: **Dansk**, **Islenska**, **Svenska**, and **Norsk**. They use the ambiguous code "no" for Norsk (which is the most popular internet coding option for Norwegian), rather than "nb" for Bokmål or "nn" for Nynorsk.

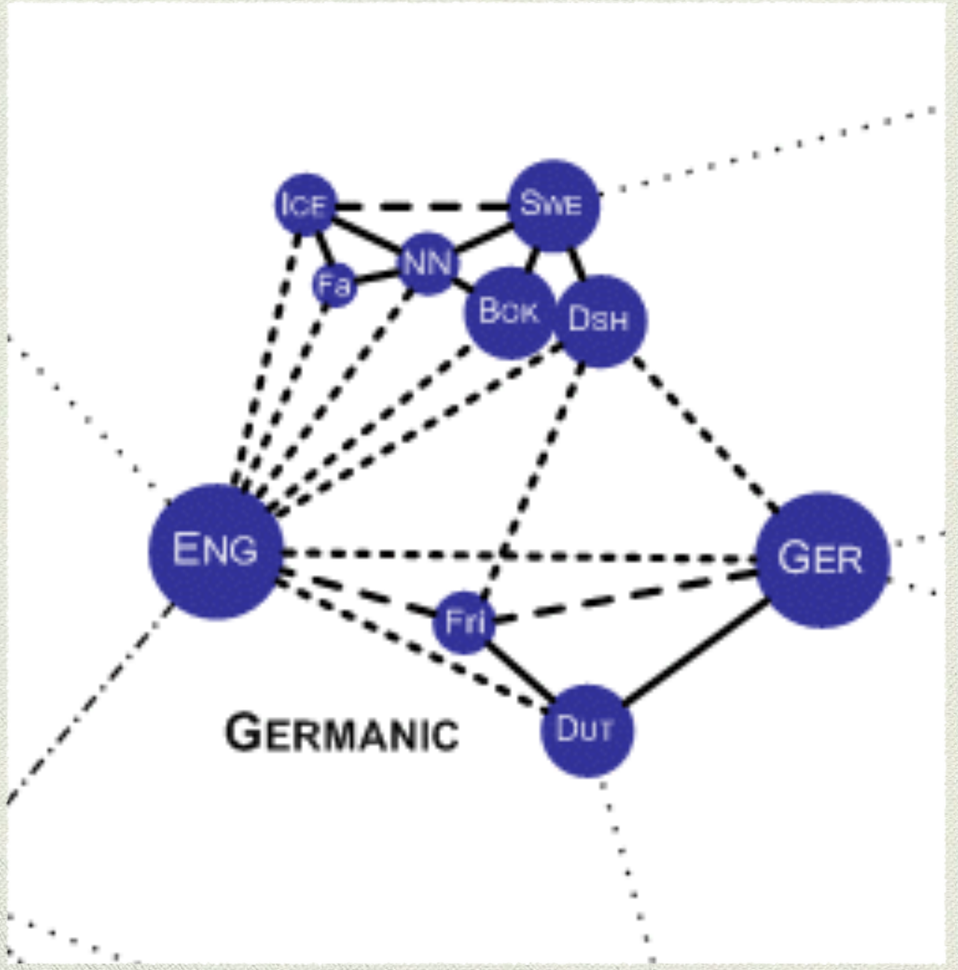
"{{lang-no}}"

"{{lang-nb}}"

"{{lang-nn}}"

asymmetrical intelligibility

- Norwegians are generally better than other Scandinavians at understanding various dialects, although the Faroese speakers are even better at understanding the mainland dialects.
- The Swedes of Stockholm and the Danes of Copenhagen are the worst at understanding the dialects of other Scandinavians.
- Perhaps because the Norwegians have grown up with the weakest standard language tradition, they have had more practice trying to understand different Scandinavian dialects within their own country.



hard questions to answer

Having considered this brief history of Scandinavian, how easy do you think it would be to answer some of Haugen's other questions?

(2) Who uses the language? What is its **linguistic demography**? What are the human geographic dimensions of this usage? In which **places**, among which **groups**, with which **religious practices**, by which **socioeconomic classes**, in which **professions**, etc. is this language used?
(3) What are the sociolinguistic domains of usage which **limit** or **restrict** its usage in certain ways?
(4) What other languages are concurrently used by its users? What is the **multilingual** nature of its users?
(5) What internal variation does the language show? What is the range of dialectal and sociolectal **variation**?
(6) Is the language written? and what is the nature of its **written tradition**?
(7) To what degree has the language, especially its writing, been **standardized**? **unified**? **codified**?
(8) What sort of language **policy support** does the language have from governments, schools, or other public or private institutions?
(9) In terms of intimacy or status, what are the **attitudes** of its users which characterize **personal identification**?

These are some the key questions that one must answer to understand the language ecology of Scandinavian in general, and of Norwegian in particular; or to understand the language ecology of any area.

next week: South Slavic

- Next week, we will consider the South Slavic language situation.