

Reading skills among young Norwegian American heritage speakers in the early 1900s

Arnstein Hjelde & Camilla Bjørke;
Østfold University College

Our knowledge regarding Norwegian American's (NA) ability to read Norwegian (N) during the era of the mass immigration is limited. Anecdotic evidence indicates that in the early years, these skills were in general low. In the early 1900, however, NAs had turned into vivid readers; they established publishing houses and founded hundreds of newspapers and magazines. However, the "English only" ideology from WW1 had a severe effect on N during the interwar years, as many NA institutions felt the force to switch to English (E).

A central figure in N school history is Nordahl Rolfsen, famous for his reader for the N elementary school (*Læsebog for Folkeskolen, (LfF)*), which set a new and progressive standard for modern reading material and dominated the N school from the 1890s to the mid 1950s. Less known is that Rolfsen also made a reader for the NAs; *Boken om Norge (BoN)* (1913-1915).

Both these readers were used for introducing adolescent NA heritage speakers to written N, and extra material was made as support for these two; O. E. Rølvaag's *Ordforklaring* (1909) for LfF, and D. Reque and J. Hjelmstad's *Notes and Vocabulary for BoN, Vol 1* (2nd ed. 1930). These authors were experienced teachers; Reque in high school, Hjelmstad and Rølvaag at college level; thus, our assumption is that these word lists give us some insight into which words they expected to cause comprehension problems for young heritage speakers when reading N. Also, by comparing Rølvaag's list from 1909 with Reque and Hjelmstad's 1930, we hope to see changes in the students' need for "scaffolding" when reading N.

Some of the "difficult" words listed in the vocabularies are as expected. One group of such words are those typically substituted by English loanwords in AN, like *gård* (*farm*) and *gate* (*street*). Another such group is words associated with "literary language", i.e. words normally not found in colloquial speech, like *avmægtig* (*feeble, fainting*) and *gevaldiger* (*guard*). We also find culture specific words from a traditional N context, but of limited relevance in the Midwest: *naust* (*boathouse*), *hjuring* (*herdsman*), *stabbur*, (*storehouse*).

But the vocabularies also include a great bulk of words commonly used in spoken varieties of N, but where the spelling makes them less transparent. Fluent reading skills depend on visual word recognition, and before reaching this level of automation, the reader depends on a strategy where one and one letter is put together to words (Kulbrandstad, 2018). Thus, when the spelling rules only partly are based on phonemic orthography (like N), or in a NA context - divert from the spelling rules in E - this might complicate reading, and even more so hundred years ago when written N was strongly influenced from Danish. Compounds is another troublesome group, which in N is consequently rendered as single words (in contrast to E), thus making them long and less transparent; *garnsildfiske* (*herring-fishing with nets*).

The content of the two vocabularies examined indicates that young NA heritage speakers in the early 1900s were not experienced readers of N. However, this is in line with what is to be expected from typical heritage speakers: what they master is the oral everyday language, while the more formal aspects of it, like the written variety, poses a greater challenge

Literature:

Berthele, Raphael and Amelia Lambelet (eds.). 2018. *Heritage and School Language Literacy Development in Migrant Children. Interdependence or Independence?* Second Language Acquisition 119. Channel View Publications Ltd. Bristol, Blue Ridge Summit

Haugen, Einar. 1953. *The Norwegian Language in America: a Study in Bilingual Behavior*. [University of Pennsylvania Press](#)

Hvenekilde, Anne. 1995. Readers for Norwegian-American Schools. *Norwegian-American Studies*, Vol. 34.

Hvenekilde, Anne. 1996. *Hvad gjør vi saa med arven: en studie av abc-er og lesebøker utgitt til norsk morsmålsundervisning i Amerika*. Acta Humaniora 3. Universitetsforlaget: Oslo

Kulbrandstad, Lise I. (2018). *Lesing i utvikling. Teoretiske og didaktiske perspektiver* (2. utg.). Bergen: Fagbokforlaget/Landslaget for norskundervisning.

Lovoll, Odd. 1984. *The Promise of America: A History of the Norwegian-American People*. University of Minnesota Press

Reque, Dikka & Jens H. Hjelmstad. 1930 [1915]. *Notes and Vocabulary for Boken om Norge Vol. 1*. The Lutheran Free Church Publishing Co. Minneapolis.

Rølvaag, Ole E. 1909. *Ordforklaring til Nordahl Rolfsens Læsebok for Folkeskolen, II*. Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis.

Øverland, Orm. 1996. *The Western Home: A Literary History of Norwegian America*. NAHA Authors Series Vol. VIII, The University of Illinois Press.