

Noun disease in Norwegian – lost in translation How to express actions in the two written varieties of Norwegian – teaching vs. practice

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Jens Skarkerud Haugan
University of Inland, Norway; jens.haugan@inn.no

Abstract

This paper is a contribution to the 2025 topic of the Educational Role of Language Association (ERLA 2025a): Language in Actions – Actions in Language belonging to the ERL research scope Language(-)Activity that is addressed in project cycle 2 (ERLA 2025b). The linguistic “action” in focus in this paper is related to the (over)use of nouns derived from verbs and adjectives, and other heavy noun constructions in the two varieties of Norwegian written language, Bokmål and Nynorsk. This has been dubbed “noun disease” in textbooks and general language advice and is considered “bad” language, first of all in Nynorsk texts, but in principle also in Bokmål. The Language Council of Norway as the standardising authority is expected to be especially aware of the differences between the two written standards, and possibly also to be a linguistic role model. In this paper, we have investigated a few parallel texts, i.e. the same text in Bokmål and Nynorsk, published by the Language Council of Norway. While this is a small-scale project, it is strikingly clear that the Language Council has not made any attempt to alter the Nynorsk translations in the investigated texts other than following the standard for Nynorsk orthography and lexicon. The Nynorsk versions are word-for-word translations that follow the Bokmål version slavishly. There is no deviation from Bokmål in syntax or formulation that one would expect in idiomatic Nynorsk texts. While one may say that this is “good” from the perspective of guaranteeing the comparability of the texts as legal documents, one may say that this is “bad” from the aspect of respecting Nynorsk as a language different from Bokmål, with its own history and style, and respecting Nynorsk users’ right to read idiomatic and authentic Nynorsk texts instead of mediocre translations of Bokmål texts. From a teaching and learning perspective, the use of administrative texts is limited. One may learn differences between Bokmål and Nynorsk in orthography and choice of words (lexicon), but the Nynorsk translations investigated here are not what one traditionally would consider authentic or “good” Nynorsk as described in textbooks about Nynorsk.

Keywords: *good vs. bad language, language didactics, linguistic comparability, noun disease, noun expressions, Nynorsk as an alternative written language, Nynorsk style, substantivisation, translation, verbal actions, verbal expressions, verbal nouns*

Introduction

This paper is a contribution to the 2025 topic of the Educational Role of Language Association (ERLA 2025a): *Language in Actions – Actions in Language* belonging to the ERL research scope *Language(-)Activity* that is addressed in project cycle 2 (ERLA 2025b).

My previous contributions to the ERLA cycles and projects have mainly dealt with the two written varieties of Norwegian, *Bokmål* and *Nynorsk*, with focus on *Nynorsk* as the lesser used variety and challenges related to the status in the Norwegian society and educational system, and learning *Nynorsk* at school (Haugan, 2017; 2019; 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024). In the present paper, we will take a closer look at an (alleged) difference in style between *Bokmål* and *Nynorsk* and choice of linguistic expression, the more or less official pedagogical advice on that topic, and some examples of actual writing practice.

One aspect of style are linguistic expressions that are commonly referred to as “noun disease” in Norwegian textbooks. We will investigate some parallel texts published by the Language Council of

Norway. These are the same texts that are written in both Bokmål and Nynorsk for (language) political reasons. The question is, then, whether noun disease can be detected in these texts, and whether the Language Council would differentiate between the Bokmål versions and the Nynorsk versions according to general writing advice found in textbooks and their own explicit advice stated on their website. We will also discuss the “value” of such parallel texts for teachers and learners of Nynorsk as their alternative written language. The main purpose of the paper is to reveal that there is a clear discrepancy between the more or less “official” view on noun disease and the form of the Nynorsk parallel texts found on the website of the Language Council of Norway. This discrepancy – when demonstrated by the Language Council itself – has the potential to undermine the whole concept of “difference in style” between the two written languages, and, thus poses a challenge for teaching and learning different styles.

But why would there be a difference in style and partly grammar between the two Norwegian written languages? To be able to understand this, we need to take a short look at the historical development of the two written languages.

Historical background

Bokmål, often referred to as Dano-Norwegian, is the Norwegian written variety that has developed from Danish written language by adaptation to Norwegian (urban) oral speech and with reference to Nynorsk (New Norwegian), the written variety based on Norwegian (non-urban) dialects (see e.g. Haugan, 2017; Vikør, 1975). After having been in a so-called personal union with Denmark for several hundred years where Danish had been the only (official) written language in Norway, this union was broken in 1814 as a result of the Napoleonic Wars. This being in the middle of the period of romanticism, a demand for a unique Norwegian written language arose. After many hundred years of history and language development, the last coherent written Norwegian language, Old Norse/Norwegian, was no longer usable as a contemporary written language since Modern Norwegian had lost most of the Old Norse inflectional system and the lexicon had been flooded by, among others, German, Dutch and Danish words and expressions. While it is possible to see a direct and very close link between Old Norse and Modern Icelandic, this is not that easy anymore when it comes to modern Norwegian. However, the resemblance between certain Norwegian dialects and Old Norse may be stronger, whereas urban speech, especially in the 1800s, was more influenced by written Danish (see e.g. Haugan, 2020c).

The demand for an official Norwegian written language ultimately led to the development of *two* official written languages, today called Bokmål (lit. ‘book language’ and Nynorsk (lit. ‘New Norwegian’).

The development of Bokmål started by keeping the Danish written language and bit by bit and little by little changing orthography, lexicon and grammar over time to make it more Norwegian, i.e. more in accordance with modern Norwegian colloquial speech. The linguistic “ideal” and reference for this written language was urban Norwegian, i.e. the way middle- and upper-class people spoke in Norwegian towns, so-called “educated speech”. Educated speech was highly influenced by the written language, i.e. Danish.

Nynorsk, on the other hand, was developed on the ground of rural Norwegian dialects with a conscious goal to avoid urban “Norwegian”, which was considered imperfect Norwegian because it was too “danified” (see e.g. Haugan, 2020c; Theil, 2025). Rural Norwegian was less influenced by written Danish and, hence, had a natural oral style. This oral style is basically an ideal and a reference for Nynorsk, i.e. the other Norwegian written variety. Ivar Aasen, the “founder” of Nynorsk, explicitly stated that one had to free oneself from the modern Danish style (Aasen, 1864: 380).

Since 1885, Norway has acknowledged two official Norwegian written languages, Danish-Norwegian (Danish/Riksmål, eventually Bokmål) with all the developments/reforms during the 1900s (last reform 2005), and New Norwegian (Landsmål, eventually Nynorsk) with all its developments/reforms during the 1900s (last reform 2012). Naturally, this has had consequences for the educational system. Both written languages were/are taught as mandatory subjects at school, however, one as the so-called main written language, and the other one as the alternative written language. Most pupils (approx. 85%) have Bokmål

as their main written language. Bokmål is also the most dominant/visible written language in Norwegian society. As a consequence, Nynorsk has to be taught and learned more specifically/explicitly at school (see Haugan 2017 and subsequent work), and here we are at the crucial point of the historical and linguistic development.

Linguistic differences and language didactics

One didactic perspective at Bokmål and Nynorsk in an educational context is highlighting, teaching and learning the *differences* between the two varieties of Norwegian. These differences can be lexical. For instance, one would oftentimes use different words (lexical items) for the same thing. Bokmål *begravelse* (funeral) would be *gravferd* in Nynorsk (which, on the other hand, would also be valid in Bokmål). The grammatical morpheme *-else* is not considered a “good” Nynorsk morpheme, and it is avoided as much as possible. Many times, it can easily be replaced by the morpheme *-ing*, e.g. Bokmål *øvelse* (exercise) would be Nynorsk *øving* (again, this would also be valid in Bokmål). There may also be differences in conjugation. For instance, masculine nouns (actually almost all nouns) have typically *-er* in the plural in Bokmål, while most masculine nouns in Nynorsk have *-ar*: *hester* (horses) vs. *hestar*. The inflectional ending *-er* is the most common ending for feminine plural in Nynorsk, e.g. *hingstar og hopper* (stallions (m.) and mares (f.)). Then, there may be differences in the conjugation of verbs, e.g. Bokmål *treffer, traff, truffet* vs. Nynorsk *treffer, trefte, treft* (hit (pres., pret., prt.)). Conjugation exercises are typical tasks in Nynorsk classes at school and subject to both debate and hate (see e.g. Askeland et al., 2020: 139).

Another difference between Bokmål and Nynorsk may be the *style* – which is not that easily put into tables and clear descriptions. Since Nynorsk as an alternative written language is used and taught little or less in school than Bokmål, many pupils never get to the stage where they actually work with Nynorsk style. Working with grammar and orthography is often the only focus in teaching and learning Nynorsk as an alternative written language.

Here is not the place to elaborate on all aspects of writing style. In our case, it is important to understand the main historical difference between Bokmål and Nynorsk, namely that Bokmål originally developed from written Danish with reference to so-called educated speech with close ties to Danish chancery style, i.e. administrative language. Over time, it has been adapted and developed into a fully modern Norwegian language. But Bokmål on its own has at least two “styles”, usually referred to as *conservative* or *moderate*, and *radical* Bokmål – roughly speaking, the former closer to Danish and the latter closer to Nynorsk, which, to some extent, can be measured by the degree of morphological variation, especially regarding *a*-endings in nouns and verbs; a) being the conservative style, and b) being the radical style:

- 1 a. *Melken har kostet en krone de siste årene.* (Danish: *Mælken har kostet en krone de seneste år.*)
(The milk has cost one crown the recent years.)
b. *Melka/mjølka har kosta ei krone de siste åra.* (Nynorsk: *Mjølka har kosta ei krone dei siste åra.*)

Even though there is an association for radical Bokmål (since 2019), Foreninga for radikalt bokmål (2025), according to Lokalhistoriewiki (2025), radical Bokmål has a relatively “weak position”, and it is under pressure in academic circles (see e.g. Müller, 2017). Moderate Bokmål is clearly the most used style (cf. also Ims, 2007, and Kola, 2014), i.e. Bokmål in general is – to some degree – still influenced by an earlier/conservative way of writing which developed on the basis of written Danish. A radical version of Bokmål that is closer to dialectal/oral speech and Nynorsk does exist but is not that visible in public communication. Therefore, it should usually be possible to detect a difference in writing style between Bokmål and Nynorsk. But apart from spelling/orthography and lexical difference, what could be described as Nynorsk style?

What is Nynorsk style?

Given the historical development of Bokmål and Nynorsk and the accompanying public and academic debate for and against one or the other or both written varieties, naturally, the question of Nynorsk style has also been and still is a topic of discussion. The question could be very concrete and direct, for instance: “What is good Nynorsk language?”, as asked by Brunstad (2009), the point being that there are obvious differences in orthography, but there is also “something” about style that would make Nynorsk “good Nynorsk”.

Trying to capture what “good Nynorsk” might be, Brunstad (2009) asked 67 Nynorsk users about their personal opinions regarding “good Nynorsk”. These informants were not random, “average” language users but what Brunstad described as “Nynorsk users with a close relationship to the written Nynorsk discourse” (Brunstad, 2009: 92), which were general linguists, Nordic linguists, journalists, cultural workers, editors and Nynorsk language activists. Based on handbooks in “good Nynorsk”, like e.g. Breivega (1993), Fretland (2006), Almenningen (2006), Hellevik (2005), there exist some more or less concrete descriptions of “good Nynorsk”, which are summarized by Brunstad (2009: 94) (my translations/adaptions):

- 2 1. Good Nynorsk is closer to oral speech and uses more dialect words than Bokmål.
2. Good Nynorsk uses less passive than Bokmål, and there are restrictions on the use of passive.
3. Good Nynorsk has restrictions on the use of the genitive.
4. Good Nynorsk has less use of single determined form of nouns.
5. Good Nynorsk has a more verbal expressions, therefore, one should avoid many nouns derived from verbs or adjectives when one can use verbs or adjectives (avoid the “noun disease”).
6. Good Nynorsk has restrictions against heavy participle constructions.
7. Good Nynorsk has restrictions against subordination and interpolated sentences.
8. Nynorsk has a word-formation tradition that should be cultivated.

Brunstad (ibid.) states that it would be a matter of discussion whether these criteria can be considered specific for Nynorsk, but the “overuse” of nouns (so-called “noun disease”), passive and heavy sentences is generally more accepted in Bokmål than in Nynorsk (Brunstad referring to Simonsen, 1999: 43 p., Vinje, 2006, Maagerøy, 2003). In Brunstad’s (2009: 103) survey, “noun disease” was on top of the list, followed by passive constructions as characteristics of “bad Nynorsk”. On third place was “verbal expressions are good”, which is pretty much in line with the statement that “noun disease is bad”.

What is noun disease?

Breivega (1993: 78) states:

- 3 I nynorske tekster, både administrative, juridiske og politiske, kan vi tidt finna substantiviske uttrykksmåtar som nynorsken har teke opp i seg frå bokmål, og som kler han dårleg. Slik ordlegging kan dessutan skapa ein uturvande avstand mellom det skriftlege og den munnlege seiemåten. Nynorsk og bokmål har her fått eit sams stilproblem, som populært går under namnet «substantivsjuke».

In Nynorsk texts, both administrative, legal and political, we can often find nominal expressions that Nynorsk has taken over from Bokmål, and which do not suit it well. Such wording can also create an unnecessary distance between the written and the oral way of speaking. Nynorsk and Bokmål have here developed a common stylistic problem, which is popularly known as “noun disease”. [translation into English by Google Translate]

According to Hellevik (1977: 201), the term *substantivsjuke* (noun disease) was borrowed from Swedish (meaning that there must also have been a general awareness around developing written language in a more oral direction in Swedish):

- 4 Uttrykket substantivsjuke har vi lånt frå svensk, og det har vorte den vanlege nemninga for omskriving med verbalsubstantiv, ofte saman med eit innhaldstomt verb og ein objektsgenitiv, i staden for å bruke eit aktivt verb.

We have borrowed the expression noun disease from Swedish, and it has become the common term for paraphrasing with a verbal noun, often together with an empty verb and an object genitive, instead of using an active verb. [translation into English by: Google Translate]

In Simonsen (1999: 212), noun disease (*substantivsjuke*) is defined as:

- 5 *substantivsjuke* overdreven bruk av substantiv; en setning som endringer av stor viktighet fant i disse årene sted på kirkepolitikens område viser substantivering av adjektiv: **av stor viktighet** (bedre: **svært viktige**) og av verb: endringer ... fant ... sted (bedre: **endret seg**); et alternativ uten substantivsjuke kunne se slik ut: det skjedde svært viktige endringer i kirkepolitikken i disse årene eller slik: kirkepolitikken endret seg mye i disse årene
noun disease excessive use of nouns; a sentence such as changes of great importance took place in the area of church policy in these years shows substantivization of the adjective: **of great importance** (better: **very important**) and of the verb: changes ... took place (better: **changed**); an alternative without noun disease could look like this: there were very important changes in church policy in these years or like this: church policy changed a lot in these years [translation into English by Google Translate]

Under the heading “Noun disease and related disorders” (*Substantivsjuke og beslektede lidelser*), using some of the same examples, it is stated that (Simonsen, 1999: 44):

- 6 Substantivsjuke er overdreven bruk av substantiverte adjektiv og verb. En setning som endringer av stor viktighet fant i disse åra sted på kirkepolitikens område viser begge typene: **av stor viktighet** (< svært viktige) og endringer ... fant ... sted (< endret seg). Meningsinnholdet er her uttrykt ved abstrakte substantiv, og adjektivet, respektive verbet, er formelt og semantisk redusert. Kortere og klarere kunne det samme vært sagt slik: kirkepolitikken ble sterkt endret i disse åra. Særlig vanlig er substantivering av verb: gjere ei undersøkning (< undersøkje), gjøre en henvendelse (< henvende seg).

Noun disease is the excessive use of nounified adjectives and verbs. A sentence such as changes of great importance took place in the field of church policy in these years shows both types: **of great importance** (< very important) and changes ... took place (< changed). The meaning is here expressed by abstract nouns, and the adjective, respectively the verb, is formally and semantically reduced. The same could be said more briefly and clearly as follows: church policy was greatly changed in these years. Substantivization of verbs is particularly common: to make an investigation (< investigate), to make an inquiry (< contact). [translation into English by Google Translate]

Something similar is said in a textbook for Nynorsk “as the alternative written language” (Berge, 2002: 37):

- 7 Når det er mange verbalsubstantiv i ein tekst, kallar vi det substantivsjuke. Det bør du prøve å unngå både på bokmål og på nynorsk, men nynorsk «toler» enda mindre av slike konstruksjonar enn bokmål.

When there are many verbal nouns in a text, we call it noun disease. You should try to avoid that in both Bokmål and Nynorsk, but Nynorsk "tolerates" such constructions even less than Bokmål. [translation into English by Google Translate]

Principally, noun disease is considered equally "bad" in both Nynorsk and Bokmål, e.g. Almenningen & Søyland (2012: 16):

- 8 Det [substantivsjuke] gir dårleg språk som er tungt å lese, anten det er nynorsk eller bokmål. It [noun disease] gives bad language that is difficult to read, whether it is Nynorsk or Bokmål. [translation into English by Google Translate]

Even though Skei (1993) writes about Nynorsk, he states categorically (1993: 20):

- 9 Norsk språk er eit verbalspråk. Det vil seie at vi oftast bruker verb når vi skal fortelje om hendingar og handlingar, og ikkje skriv dei om til verbalsubstantiv. The Norwegian language is a verbal language. This means that we usually use verbs when we have to tell about events and actions, and do not rewrite them as verbal nouns. [translation into English by Google Translate]

Skei (ibid.) explains the overuse of nouns (i.e. noun disease) as influence through press, radio and tv, i.e. the language of the upper class of Oslo (here called "Løvebakkespråket"). Veka & Hellevik (1986: 70) refer to language with noun disease as "papirmål", i.e. paper language.

The relevance from a didactic / language-teaching and -learning, and text-editing point of view can be understood through the advice given in Simonsen (1999: 44):

- 10 Vær på vakt mot substantivsjuke i lærebokmanus på begge målformer, og pass særlig på i nynorskbøker. Forskjellen mellom nynorsk og bokmål på dette punktet er nok blitt mindre tydelig etter hvert, men fortsatt bør vi gripe noe oftere inn mot substantivering i nynorskmanus. I nynorsk har verbpreget, talemålsnær syntaks vært noe av et ideal, og som konsulenter bør vi ofte frarå eller rette setninger av den typen som er nevnt ovenfor. Blant de vanligste inngrepene er å sette inn verb i stedet for substantiv (for eksempel endre oppteljinga av stemmene er avslutta til dei har no talt opp alle stemmene) og å endre genitivkonstruksjoner (for eksempel *på kyrkjepolitikken område til på det kyrkjepolitiske området; se også i 6.2.3.1). Det som her er sagt om nynorsk, er også aktuelt på bokmål, men der er substantiveringer god tatt i mye større grad. Be on the lookout for noun disease in textbook manuscripts in both language forms, and be especially careful in Nynorsk books. The difference between Nynorsk and Bokmål on this point has probably become less clear over time, but we should still intervene somewhat more often against substantivization in Nynorsk manuscripts. In Nynorsk, verb-based, conversational syntax has been something of an ideal, and as consultants we should often advise against or correct sentences of the type mentioned above. Among the most common interventions are inserting verbs instead of nouns (for example, changing the counting of the votes to they have now counted all the votes) and changing genitive constructions (for example, *in the area of church politics to in the church-political area; see also 6.2.3.1). What has been said here about Nynorsk is also relevant in Bokmål, but substantivization is accepted to a much greater extent there. [translation into English by Google Translate with some corrections by the author]

As teachers and editors, we are advised to comment on and possibly suggest changes in Nynorsk texts with (too much) substantivisation of verbs, i.e. noun disease. Norsk Måldyrkingslag, “an association formed in 1928 with the aim of investigating and cultivating the Norwegian language” (Wikipedia) does not use the term *substantivsjuke*, but they state clearly (Norsk Måldyrkingslag, 1987: 14):

- 11 I god norsk skal me bruka verbal seiemåte så mykje som råd er. Me skal lata verbet «styra» setningane og ikkje substantivi. Substantivisk seiemåte vert ofte meir abstrakt og oppstylta bokleg. Han har opphavet sitt i latinsk stilgrunnlag og høver ikkje i norsk.
In good Norwegian, we should use verbal speech as much as possible. We should let the verb "control" the sentences and not nouns. Substantive speech is often more abstract and stylized as a book. It has its origins in Latin style and does not belong in Norwegian. [translation into English by Google Translate]

Cf. also e.g. Askeland et al. (2020: 118):

- 12 Unngå substantivtunge formuleringar når verb gjer betre nytte. Skriv heller «Idrettslaget skapar trivsel i bygda» enn «Idrettslaget er ein trivselfremjande faktor i bygda». (with reference to Vinje (1998)).
Avoid noun-heavy formulations when verbs are more useful. Write “The sports team creates well-being in the village” rather than “The sports team is a factor that promotes well-being in the village.” [translation into English by Google Translate]

Interestingly, here the authors themselves – in their own advice to the Nynorsk learner – wrote: “når verb gjer betre nytte», i.e. ‘when verbs do more use’. Even Google Translate refuses to translate this directly into the variant with the noun. This shows how common expressions like this are, and how difficult it might be to avoid them – even for those who write and teach Nynorsk. In this case, however, the noun (*nytte* (use)) is not the typical “substantivisation” of a verb or an adjective by using e.g. the morpheme *-ing* (in English, too, the verb and the noun *use* have the same morph as a stem). Therefore, it is not that obvious that the expression “gjere nytte” should be considered a classic example of noun disease. Often the textbook authors explicitly refer to direct morphological derivations, e.g. Øygarden (1989: 79), when he treats the topic of noun disease:

- 13 Som ein hugseregel bør du vere særleg merksam på lange ord på -heit og -ing.
As a rule of thumb, you should pay special attention to long words ending in -heit and -ing.
[translation into English by Google Translate]

or with examples referring to these derivations, e.g. Almenningen & Søyland (2012: 16):

- 14 To slags substantiv kan vere teikn på dårleg setningsbygnad: verbalsubstantiv (av typen *opprydding*) eller substantiv laga av adjektiv (av typen *einigheit*).
Two types of nouns can be signs of poor sentence structure: verbal nouns (of the type *tidying*) or nouns made from adjectives (of the type *unity*). [translation into English by Google Translate]

Almenningen & Søyland (2012: 17) also mention the use of “(content-)empty” verbs:

- 15 Substantivsjuka fører ofte til at skribenten bruker innhaldstomme verb. I staden kan vi bruke verbet som ligg til grunn for verbalsubstantivet:
«Kommunestyret føretok ei vurdering av saka.»
«Kommunestyret gjennomførte ei vurdering av saka.»
«Kommunestyret sette i verk ei vurdering av saka.»
vurderte saka.

Kommunestyret

«Kommunestyret stod for ei vurdering av saka.»

«Kommunestyret gjorde saka til gjenstand for vurdering.»

Noun disease often leads the writer to use empty verbs. Instead, we can use the verb that underlies the verbal noun:

“The municipal council carried out an assessment of the case.”

“The municipal council carried out an assessment of the case.”

“The municipal council initiated an assessment of the case.” The municipal council assessed the case.

“The municipal council was responsible for an assessment of the case.”

“The municipal council made the case the subject of assessment.”

[translation into English by Google Translate with some corrections by the author]

As demonstrated above, the (over)use of nominal expressions, the so-called noun disease, is treated in many Norwegian textbooks and may be considered a well-known and accepted ideal for modern writing, especially for writing Nynorsk, but also for writing Bokmål.

Theory versus practice

The most common practices when teaching/learning Nynorsk as an alternative written language are declension exercises to train and build word paradigms. Awareness regarding noun disease may be a topic when and if the teacher him-/herself is aware of this as a Nynorsk style ideal, and if the teacher finds the time or prioritizes to teach more than just declension.

The best way of learning Nynorsk style would be through reading Nynorsk literature i.e. authentic Nynorsk texts. However, as a teacher, we would usually want to have concrete examples that the pupils can compare and work on. Norwegian prose fiction, or poetry for that matter, normally only comes in either Bokmål or Nynorsk, not in both varieties. So, there is nothing to compare directly. As shown above, Nynorsk textbooks try to illustrate noun disease by using a few examples of “good” and “bad” writing practice. A typical classroom activity might, then, be to translate sentences or whole texts from Bokmål into Nynorsk. This would also be a good activity to enhance so-called metalinguistic awareness (which also found its way as a concept into the latest Norwegian curriculum (Udir, 2025)). However, this activity may be rather time consuming since there is not necessarily only one right solution/translation, and the teacher might have to act as a judge, i.e. spend time on feedback. Another way to investigate differences between Bokmål and Nynorsk would be to compare so-called parallel texts, i.e. more or less identical texts, but written in both Norwegian varieties, Bokmål and Nynorsk.

Parallel texts and methodological challenges

As mentioned above, prose fiction would usually be written in either Bokmål or Nynorsk, and normally, one would not consider it necessary or practical – or sensible – to translate prose fiction into the other Norwegian variety given the fact that every Norwegian is supposed to be able to read both varieties, not to forget that prose fiction is a work of art and the language itself is part of this piece of art and intellectual property. Hence, translating prose fiction into the other written variety (and publish it as a new text) would alter the text as a work of art.

Public texts published by state authorities, on the other hand, are subject to Norwegian law. Norwegian state institutions are (usually) supposed to use both written varieties to some extent: “Over time, central state bodies shall use at least 25 per cent of both Bokmål and Nynorsk in publicly available documents.” (Lovdata, 2021: §13). Furthermore, public forms and some other texts are to be published in both written varieties: “State bodies shall make forms and other self-service services simultaneously available in Bokmål and Nynorsk.”; and: “State bodies shall simultaneously publish documents intended for use in schools in both Bokmål and Nynorsk.” (Lovdata, 2021: §14). This means that parallel texts do

exist, and one could – potentially – use them in the classroom to investigate stylistic (and morphological and lexical) differences between Bokmål and Nynorsk.

There is just one small or rather huge catch: Texts from state bodies are, by definition, administrative texts and usually expected to be written in some kind of chancery style, i.e. among other things exhibiting noun disease instead of colloquial language with verbal expressions. This could be exactly what we want as teachers if our goal is to compare differences between Bokmål and Nynorsk.

However, another challenge in our endeavour is the fact that more than 85% use Bokmål as their main (or only) written language, and when there are parallel texts, they are most likely written in Bokmål and afterwards translated into Nynorsk. Nowadays, this kind of translation can be done instantly and automatically by using a translation programme/app. It may also be the case that the author(s) of the original Bokmål text feel competent to transfer their text into Nynorsk. Hence, we will not necessarily find genuine, authentic Nynorsk texts – and Nynorsk style – in these parallel texts. So, our problem is that we do have parallel texts in Bokmål in Nynorsk, but we cannot be sure that these texts are suitable for classroom activities where the goal is to learn differences between Bokmål and Nynorsk beyond formal grammar. Our best shot, then, might be to consult the Language Council of Norway (Språkrådet, 2025a). Not only is the Language Council as a state organisation obliged to use both written varieties of Norwegian, coming from the official language-standardising organisation, every text published by the Language Council may (by some) be considered a template or role model for “perfect” Norwegian. If the Language Council of Norway cannot produce “good Norwegian”, who can?

The Language Council of Norway

The Language Council of Norway is a state organisation and “the state's consultative body on language issues”. Among other tasks, they “offer advice and disseminates [*sic*] information about language, language use and language work”, and “administer the correct spelling of Nynorsk and Bokmål and monitor how the languages evolve» (Språkrådet, 2025b).

“State language” has traditionally evolved from chancery style, in this case Danish (with its influences from Latin tradition). In 2008, in accordance with the aim to make written Norwegian more colloquial (plainer and clearer), and especially to make state communication more user-friendly, the Language Council of Norway started a project called “Klarspråk i staten” (plain language in the state) (Språkrådet, 2025c). Among other things, the project has a website (Språkrådet, 2025d), and a physical handbook about so-called good administrative language (Senje & Aasen 2010). Today, we have also international initiatives, like e.g. PLAIN – Plain Language Association International (PLAIN 2025).

Not surprisingly, the handbook for Norwegian (plain) administrative language by the Language Council of Norway (Senje & Aasen 2010) has a subchapter with the title “Substantivsyke”, i.e. noun disease (p. 90-93). The chapter is written in Bokmål and addresses general administrative writing (which is mainly in Bokmål anyway given the distribution of Bokmål users and Nynorsk users in Norway). The writer of chapter 3 is relatively direct or blunt in his/her characterization of noun disease (Senje & Aasen 2010: 90):

- 16 Overdreven bruk av tunge substantiver kalles gjerne *substantivsyke*. *Saken ble gjort til gjenstand for behandling i kommunestyret* betyr bare at kommunestyret behandlet saken. Substantivtunge setninger er unødig omstendige, og de er svært tunge å lese. Hvis vi overfører dette mønsteret til et eksempel fra hverdagslivet, blir det både kunstig og klønete: å gjøre potetene til gjenstand for langvarig koking er ikke noe annet enn å koke potetene lenge. Ingen vil finne på å bruke en slik uttrykksmåte om potetkoking, men de fleste ser ut til å godta den hvis de er snakk om saksbehandling.

Excessive use of heavy nouns is often called *noun sickness*. *The matter was made the subject of consideration in the municipal council* only means that the municipal council considered the matter. Sentences heavy in nouns are unnecessarily verbose, and they are very difficult to read. If we

transfer this pattern to an example from everyday life, it becomes both artificial and clumsy: making the potatoes the subject of prolonged boiling is nothing more than boiling the potatoes for a long time. No one would think of using such an expression about boiling potatoes, but most people seem to accept it if they are talking about case processing. [translation by Google translate]

Expectedly, the chapter also describes different types of noun disease (type 1, type 2, and other ways of using heavy noun expressions). The reader gets examples and suggestions on how to rewrite into plain(er) language. The (sub) chapter ends with clear advice (Senje & Aasen, 2010: 93):

17 Råd

Unngå tunge omskrivninger med substantiv.

Bruk heller konkrete verb og fortell hvem som handler.

Advice

Avoid heavy paraphrasing with nouns

Instead, use concrete verbs and tell who is doing the action. [translation by Google translate]

The book also contains a chapter with advice about Nynorsk in particular. In the introduction, the authors state (Senje & Aasen, 2010: 121):

- 18 Bokmål har lang tradisjon som byråkratspråk i Noreg. Mange nynorsktekstar i det offentlege blir difor skrivne med tunge bokmålstekstar som grunnlag. Vedtaksbrev på nynorsk blir ofte skrivne med utgangspunkt i lovtekstar på bokmål. Dessutan blir mange tekstar direkte omsette frå bokmål til nynorsk. Om vi byrjar i andre enden og prøver å skrive ein tekst på god nynorsk frå grunnen av, blir teksten oftast betre og klarare. Gode nynorsktekstar som ikkje er bundne av ein vanskeleg «bokmålsoriginal», kan dimed ha ein positiv verknad, ein «klarspråkseffekt», på bokmålstekstar. Bokmål has a long tradition as the language of bureaucrats in Norway. Many Nynorsk texts in the public domain are therefore written with heavy Bokmål texts as a basis. Decision letters in Nynorsk are often written based on legal texts in Bokmål. In addition, many texts are directly translated from Bokmål into Nynorsk. If we start at the other end and try to write a text in good Nynorsk from scratch, the text usually becomes better and clearer. Good Nynorsk texts that are not bound by a difficult "Bokmål original" can therefore have a positive effect, a "plain language effect", on Bokmål texts. [translation by Google translate]

The chapter about Nynorsk has a short subchapter (5.1.3.7, p. 125) with examples of noun disease, but no extra explanation of the phenomenon (probably since it is already treated earlier in the book).

The Language Council of Norway also has a web page with writing advice under the plain-language domain (Språkrådet, 2025e). Here, one can find "general writing advice" in both Bokmål and Nynorsk, i.e. the same text written in both standards, (and Northern Sami). Also here, it is stated clearly:

- 19 Unngå substantivsyke. Unngå tunge omskrivninger med substantiv. Bruk heller konkrete verb når du beskriver en handling. (Bokmål)
Unngå substantivsjuke. Unngå tunge omskrivingar med substantiv. Bruk heller konkrete verb når du skildrar ei handling. (Nynorsk)
Avoid noun-sickness [noun disease]. Avoid heavy paraphrases with nouns. Instead, use concrete verbs when describing an action. [translation by Google translate]

However, if we take a closer look at the Bokmål version and the Nynorsk version, we will notice that the only difference between them is morphological and lexical, i.e. Bokmål *syke* is Nynorsk *sjuke*, bokmål

omskrivinger is Nynorsk *omskrivningar*, and *beskriver* is *skildrar* (where one actually also could have used *beskriv*). Apart from that, the Nynorsk version is identical to the Bokmål version. One might ask: Isn't *unngå omskrivinger/omskrivningar* (avoid paraphrases) a symptom of noun disease that could have been rewritten into *unngå å skrive om* (avoid to paraphrase)?

So, how does the Language Council of Norway deal with noun disease in parallel texts in Bokmål and Nynorsk? Do they follow their own advice?

Data and discussion

Even though the Language Council of Norway is obliged to use both Bokmål and Nynorsk, they do not publish everything on their website as parallel texts (actually, surprisingly little, hence the small corpus in this survey). But one document in both varieties is *Retningslinjer for normering (av bokmål og nynorsk)* (Guidelines for standardisation (of Bokmål and Nynorsk)) (Språkrådet, 2025f). This should be a good candidate to show us how the Language Council – who we would expect to be the most competent institution within this field – would treat differences between Bokmål and Nynorsk. That being said, standardisation is mainly about orthography and declension and not necessarily about style. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the Language Council clearly stated that noun disease should be avoided. This goes for both Bokmål and Nynorsk from a plain-language perspective, but it should at least be a clear stylistic/syntactic ideal for Nynorsk.

In the guidelines for standardisation (Språkrådet, 2025f), we can read (there may be some small differences in content and page numbers between the web versions and the downloaded versions):

- 20 Det kan gjøres justeringer i normen i lys av bruk. (web version, Bokmål, p. 13)
 Det kan gjerast justeringar i norma i lys av bruk. (web version, Nynorsk, p. 12)
 Adjustments can be made to the norm in light of usage. (Google translate)
- 21 Rettskrivningen av 2005/2012 skal ikke endres vesentlig, men det kan gjøres mindre justeringer. (Bokmål, p. 10/12)
 Rettskrivinga av 2005/2012 skal ikkje endrast vesentleg, men det kan gjerast mindre justeringar. (Nynorsk, p. 10/12)
 The spelling of 2005/2012 will not be changed significantly, but minor adjustments may be made. (Google translate)
- 22 Slike endringer for enkeltord kan gjøres selv om de innebærer utvidelse av normen på det punktet. (Bokmål, p. 12)
 Slike endringar for einskildord kan gjerast sjølv om dei inneber utviding av norma på det punktet. (Nynorsk, p. 12)
 Such changes for individual words can be made even if they involve an expansion of the norm at that point.

All of these three examples exhibit the construction *kan gjøres/gjerast* (can be done) + substantivisation with *-ing*, i.e. a “classic” example of noun disease. Furthermore, the Nynorsk text is a direct word-for-word translation of the Bokmål version. Apart from small morphological differences, they are exactly the same. In (22), there is a minor lexical difference. The word *enkelt* has been replaced by *einskild* where one also could have used *enkelt* in Nynorsk. This shows that the translator has tried to make the Nynorsk text a little more different and a little more Nynorsk than strictly necessary (following a Western norm/style).

So, there is some degree of awareness when it comes to Nynorsk style or flavour, but only on a lexical level, not on a syntactic level.

The verb *gjøres/gjerast* ('to be done') is a passive verb. The use of passive is also on the un-official list of "bad Nynorsk" (number 2 on Brunstad's (2009) list) and a topic within the plain-language discourse. In the examples above, the passive construction may be considered "extra bad" seen from a plain-language perspective. It is literally saying: "it can/may be done/made adjustments/changes". The semantic agent is totally hidden in the construction, which is typical for administrative texts of this kind. The potential agent is, of course, the Language Council as the standardising authority of the state. From a plain-language perspective, the sentence would have benefited from a rewrite to e.g. "Språkrådet kan gjøre/gjera mindre endringer/endringar", i.e. "The Language Council may make small changes", and, to get rid of the substantivisation, one could rewrite the whole second part of the sentence (still with passive, though):

- 23 Rettskrivningen skal ikke endres vesentlig, men kan justeres litt.
Rettskrivinga skal ikkje endrast vesentleg, men kan justerast litt.
The spelling should not be changed significantly, but can be adjusted slightly. [Google translate]

And, of course, one could also rewrite it into an active sentence:

- 24 Språkrådet skal ikke endre rettskrivningen vesentlig, men kan justere den litt.
Språkrådet skal ikkje endre rettskrivinga vesentleg, men kan justere ho litt.
The Language Council shall not change the spelling significantly, but may adjust it slightly. [Google translate]

To make it clear, there is nothing "wrong" with these sentences from a grammatical or idiomatic point of view. They are modern Norwegian, and they "fit" as expected in an administrative text like this. However, they are not really in line with the guidelines for plain language formulated by the Language Council itself. Another example may be:

- 25 Når det gjelder opptak av tyske og danske importord i nynorske ordlister og ordbøker, kan Språkrådet gjøre bindende vedtak, jf. § 3 i vedtektene. (Bokmål, p. 13)
Når det gjeld opptak av tyske og danske importord i nynorske ordlister og ordbøker, kan Språkrådet gjera bindande vedtak, jf. § 3 i vedtektene. (Nynorsk, p. 13)
When it comes to the inclusion of German and Danish import words in Nynorsk glossaries and dictionaries, the Language Council can make binding decisions, cf. Section 3 of the statutes. [Google translate]

Again, it strikes us that the Nynorsk version is a direct word-for-word translation/transformation. There is no attempt to change the syntax or style of the Nynorsk version. The examples of noun disease may be less visible here since there is no *-ing* derivation. The two nouns in question are *opptak* (inclusion(s)) and *vedtak* (decision(s)) that are derived from the verbs *ta opp* (to include (take up/in)) and *vedta* (decide). One could instead have written:

- 26 Når det gjelder å ta opp tyske og danske importord i nynorske ordlister og ordbøker, kan Språkrådet vedta dette (med bindende kraft), jf. § 3 i vedtektene. (Bokmål, p. 15)
Når det gjeld å ta opp tyske og danske importord i nynorske ordlister og ordbøker, kan Språkrådet vedta dette (med bindande kraft), jf. § 3 i vedtektene. (Nynorsk, p. 15)
When it comes to including German and Danish import words in Nynorsk glossaries and dictionaries, the Language Council can decide this (with binding force), cf. Section 3 of the statutes. [Google translate]

A genre feature of “classic” administrative/legal texts is the extensive use of nouns/substantivisation in the way we have seen here. Changing these expressions into more verbal expressions would, of course, affect the formal style of these documents. But according to the plain-language initiative, using more verbal expressions is one of the explicit goals.

Yet another example of noun disease in standardisation documents:

- 27 Språkrådet kan også i visse tilfeller gjøre en mer systematisk gjennomgang av termlister og termbaser. (Bokmål, p. 14)
 Språkrådet kan også i visse høve gjera ein meir systematisk gjennomgang av termlister og termbasar. (Nynorsk, p. 14)
 The Language Council can also, in certain cases, conduct a more systematic review of term lists and term bases. [Google translate]

There is no *-ing* or *-heit* derivation here, but we find the typical *gjøre/gjera* + noun instead of using a verb, ‘to conduct a review’ instead of just ‘to review’, i.e. *gjennomgå*. The translator changed *tilfeller* to *høve* (which is perceived to be more Nynorsk) where one quite as well could have used *tilfelle* in Nynorsk. But there is no syntactic/stylistic change – as there is none in the whole text.

In the next example:

- 28 Siden Språkrådet har manglet normeringsfullmakter inntil desember 2012, er mange spørsmål utsatt med tanke på senere behandling. (Bokmål, p. 8)
 Sidan Språkrådet har mangla normeringsfullmakter inntil desember 2012, er mange spørsmål utsette med tanke på seinare handsaming. (Nynorsk, p. 8)
 Since the Language Council lacked standardization powers until December 2012, many issues have been postponed for later consideration. [Google translate]

med tanke på senere behandling (with respect to later processing) could easily be rewritten to ‘to be processed/treated later’, i.e. *for å bli behandlet/handsama senere/seinare*.

The same goes for:

- 29 For behandling av importord og nyord er det også utarbeidet særskilte retningslinjer, se pkt. 9. (Bokmål, p. 8)
 For handsaming av importord og nyord er det også utarbeidd særskilte retningslinjer, sjå pkt. 9. (Nynorsk, p. 8)
 Special guidelines have also been drawn up for the treatment of imported words and neologisms, see section 9.

Instead of *for behandling av importord* (for the treatment of imported words), one could easily have written ‘to treat’, i.e. *for å behandle/handsame importord*. One could also have avoided the passive here (i.e. the passive could have been avoided). Instead of ‘guidelines have been worked out’, one could have written *Språkrådet har utarbeidet/utarbeidd særskilte/særskilte retningslinjer*, i.e. ‘the Language Council has worked out special guidelines’.

Skje (take place) + verbal noun is another typical candidate for noun disease:

- 30 Terminologiutvikling må derfor skje i fagmiljøene. (Bokmål, p. 13)
 Terminologiutvikling må derfor skje i fagmiljøa. (Nynorsk, p. 13)
 Terminology development must therefore take place in professional environments. [Google translate]

We observe the general pattern that the Nynorsk version is a word-for-word translation of the Bokmål version, and we notice that the author(s) and/or translators have not been aware of or have not made a great effort to follow their own guidelines for plain language. Here it says: ‘Terminology development

must take place' where one easily could have written 'terminology must be developed...', i.e. *terminologi må derfor bli utviklet/utvikla i fagmiljøene/fagmiljøa*.

The investigation of the (few) parallel texts published by the Language Council of Norway shows that one has chosen to translate the texts word for word, only making morphological and possibly lexical changes where necessary for orthographic-standard reasons or when there was a "better" Nynorsk word (lexical reasons), while there are no syntactical differences. Since these are administrative texts within a guidance or even legal genre, the reason for not making major changes is most likely that one wanted to make the two versions as identical and comparable as possible, minimising the possibility of interpreting them differently. This comes at the expense of idiomatic/stylistic differences and recommended language advice stated by the Language Council itself.

From a language-ideology and teaching perspective, this may be problematic in several ways. In the same document (Språkrådet, 2025f), Bokmål and Nynorsk version, sections 5.2 and 6.2), it is stated explicitly that the two written languages should be standardised on the basis of their own written practice and development, and independently of each other. As mentioned before, standardisation first of all regards orthography and declension. However, the document(s) also say(s) that (6.2.3): 'The essential basis for standardizing written Nynorsk is the language as it appears in Nynorsk texts, with particular emphasis on texts that are considered norm-forming' (Google translate). By definition, the Nynorsk versions of the texts authored by the Language Council are "Nynorsk texts", i.e. they are part of a corpus that shows how Nynorsk may "appear", and these texts may be used to define what should be considered norm-forming, i.e. we have a kind of "vicious circle". If there were no genuine Nynorsk texts written on their own terms, these translated texts may give the impression that there are no major differences between Bokmål and Nynorsk other than minor morphological and lexical differences.

From a teaching perspective, this may obviously be a good starting point. Nynorsk learning pupils would not be "scared" by major stylistic and idiomatic difference, they would only see the morphological and lexical differences, which is also the most typical focus in classroom activities when teaching and learning Nynorsk. As a pupil, one would typically be asked to either produce complete Nynorsk noun or verb paradigms (conjugation tables), or one would be asked to use the right inflection form in a text with blank spaces.

From a language-ideological and language-political point of view (if we ignore the legal and interpretational aspects of parallel texts like these), on the other hand, the Nynorsk versions are very problematic. The translations clearly show that the Nynorsk version is not independent of the Bokmål version. On the contrary, the Nynorsk text is based on the Bokmål text to the extreme, i.e. it is a word-for-word translation with no syntactic or stylistic difference at all. Against the Language Council's own advice, the Nynorsk translations consequently adopt all instances of noun disease and other phrasing from the Bokmål texts.

So, are the Nynorsk translations by the Language Council "bad"? There is no clear answer to this question. From a holistic perspective, both Bokmål and Nynorsk are written representatives of "The Norwegian language", i.e. one would not necessarily expect major differences between the two varieties other than those connected to different standardisation of orthography and the lexicon. Given the fact that every Norwegian speaker should be able to express her-/himself through either written variety of Norwegian, the written outcome would naturally be based on the way the language user feels natural to express her-/himself in writing. The result would be Norwegian by definition, and adaptation to written text would mainly be choosing the "right" standard when it comes to orthography and possibly the lexicon (e.g. in cases where dialect words might not be standardised).

Then there is the aspect of genre and style. Written language is often different from the way we speak in casual conversation. While one might say "Shut up!" in an oral context, one might possibly want to moderate the expression to "Would you please be quiet?" or some other milder way of saying the same,

i.e. we are normally respecting that there may be the different rules/conventions for oral speech versus written language. If we accept that written language is slightly different from oral speech, with all its different registers, dialects and sociolects, we may also accept that Bokmål and Nynorsk may be different from each other, even by law, cf. section 4 in the Act on Language (Lovdata, 2021):

31 Section 4. Norwegian language

Norwegian is the primary national language in Norway.

Bokmål and Nynorsk are Norwegian languages with equal value that can be used in all parts of society.

Bokmål and Nynorsk have equal standing as written languages in public bodies.

The investigated texts show that Bokmål and Nynorsk are treated as legally equal languages in the way that both are used to convey the same content of the document(s) and, thus, do the same administrative and official “job” as state documents. Given the fact that the differences in these texts are limited to orthography and very few times also to the lexicon, one could wonder whether it is really necessary to have them as parallel texts (which is something that is also frequently debated in public due to the economic aspect). The only obvious reason is political. Since language standardisation is crucial in the educational system, one might say that the following statement from section 14 of the Language Act applies (Lovdata, 2021):

32 State bodies shall simultaneously publish documents intended for use in schools in both Bokmål and Nynorsk.

Generally, everyone in Norway learns to read (and possibly write) both Bokmål and Nynorsk during primary and secondary school. From that perspective, there would not be a reason to have parallel texts of the same document – especially not when the potential differences are minimised like in the investigated documents. The use of parallel texts is first of all connected to democratic, individual rights and the way one has chosen to deal with the two written languages in Norway, cf. e.g. also Section 15 in the Language Act (Lovdata, 2021):

33 In documents addressed to a private legal person, state bodies and county authorities shall use the written Norwegian language which the private legal person itself has used in communication with the body, or which the private legal person has otherwise stated that it wishes to use.

One could say that by using the “appropriate” language in communication with the citizens, one shows respect for the individual linguistic choice of the individual citizen. However, strictly speaking, serving Nynorsk users a pale “shadow image” of Bokmål where the only aspect that has been treated seriously is spelling and word choice, could be considered less respectful, either to the individual Nynorsk user or the ideal of Nynorsk as a language in its own right.

If one chooses to work with parallel texts like these in the classroom, this aspect should absolutely be discussed and reflected upon. The translations into Nynorsk are definitely not “wrong” from a strict standardisation standpoint. They are 100% correct – formally, but one may still say that they are “bad” Nynorsk from the perspective of Brunstad’s criteria (2009) and all the textbooks that explicitly mention noun disease as a criterium of “bad” Nynorsk. Despite the Language Council’s own advice, the awareness of noun disease got lost in translation.

Conclusion

“Noun disease”, the (over)use of complex noun constructions and substantivisation (noun derivation from verbs and adjectives), is generally considered “bad” language, first of all, in Nynorsk texts, but in principle also in Bokmål. Most textbooks explicitly list and/or discuss noun disease as something that should be avoided. Even the Language Council of Norway mentions noun disease in guidelines and advice on written language. However, noun disease does not seem to be that serious that a text would “get sick” or even “die” of it. The parallel texts by the Language Council of Norway that were investigated here show many examples of noun disease and as far as we know, no one has publicly complained about this. What is more striking, though, is the fact that the Language Council has not made any attempt to alter the Nynorsk translations other than following the standard for Nynorsk orthography and lexicon. The Nynorsk versions are word-for-word translations that follow the Bokmål version slavishly. There is no deviation from Bokmål in syntax or formulation that one would expect in idiomatic Nynorsk texts. While one may say that this “good” from the perspective of guaranteeing the comparability of the texts as legal documents, one may say that this is “bad” from the aspect of respecting Nynorsk as a language with its own history and style, and respecting Nynorsk users’ right to read idiomatic and authentic Nynorsk texts instead of mediocre translations of Bokmål texts. Maybe the content is not lost in translation, but Nynorsk as a language is. From the perspective of teaching and learning Nynorsk, this topic should be raised and addressed. The linguistic practice described in this paper may also serve as a case within translation studies and language policy analyses and should be investigated in a broader context in future studies.

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