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To translate or not to translate: Attitudes to English loanwords in Norwegian

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Abstract

The ‘fast forward’ button for the influx of English loanwords¹ into the Scandinavian languages has long since been pressed. The views on this phenomenon, both in academic and non-academic circles, can generally be divided into two categories. On the one hand, there are those who are more or less strongly concerned about the ‘pollution’ and possible future eradication of their language (these possibly constitute a majority, at least among Norwegian academics), and on the other there are those who do not seem to mind so much that English seems to be claiming some territory within their language. In this paper, I look at some material which illustrates the nature of this divide particularly well. The material stems from a Norwegian discussion list on the web (Ordlabben/‘The Word Lab’)², where people are invited to contribute suitable Norwegian translations for a set of recent English loanwords. I focus especially on a subset of these contributions, where the contributors, rather than straightforwardly accepting the task they are invited to perform, show fierce opposition to this proposed strategy of Norwegianization, thereby showing a *positive* attitude towards the influx of English loanwords into the Norwegian language. After presenting the material I discuss, mainly from the perspective of Bakhtinian dialogism, whether or not there exists a defence for this kind of attitude, and whether indeed such a defence ought to be considered at all, in light of the fact that the prevailing opinion within academic and policy-making circles seems to be that people representing this kind of attitude need to be ‘protected from themselves’.

Attitudes to English loanwords in Denmark, Sweden and Norway

In Denmark, Pia Jarvad conducted a study on the attitudes of Danes to English loanwords in Danish, and found that 75% of the participants felt that it was OK to use English words like *shorts*, *sweater*, *weekend*, *carport*, *sandwich*, etc.; only 4% characterized speech containing such words as ‘bad language’ (1995:123). The numbers were less definite when it came to more recent, complex expressions (such as *you name it*, *take it or leave it*, *point of no return*, *the real thing*, *the seat of the nineties*, *second to none*, etc.); here, as many as 56% felt that it was OK to use such idioms, whereas 35% did not (125). Nevertheless, the general conclusion was that

¹ I am aware of the widespread doubt regarding the appropriateness of the term ‘loanword’ vis-à-vis the phenomenon it is the label for. I nevertheless choose to use it, among other things because I have yet to come across a better term.

² <http://www.dagbladet.no/kunnskap/ordlabben/>

attitudes to English loanwords were rather relaxed. In Sweden, the results were quite different: Maria Wingstedt's survey of "ideologies of language in Sweden" (1998:159) revealed that 66% of Swedes felt that Swedish should be kept as pure as possible (259). It is also revelatory that as many as 23% of the Swedes who participated in the survey believed that Swedish might be a dead language in 100 years (261).

Inger-Lise Masvie conducted a similar survey among teenagers and young adults in Norway. One significant finding here, was the large number of respondents who had no opinion on the issue of English loanwords in Norwegian (42%). Apart from that, the number of negative responses (39%) outweighed the number of positive ones (19%) (1992:46). Contrary to the study by Jarvad (above), which did not reveal many differences in attitude across sociolinguistic parameters such as region and social group, Masvie's study showed a clear pattern: teenagers are more positive to English loanwords than adults, men are more positive than women, and people from Oslo are more positive than people from Farsund (a regional town in southern Norway) (46).

The material

The present material, rather than adding more and more updated statistics to work such as that carried out by Masvie, rather serves to illustrate and fill in information about the *exact content and nature* of the attitudes that find themselves on either side of the attested *yes/no* divide. This is, in part, because the material – which consists of contributions made to a Norwegian Internet discussion list (Ordlabben/'The Word Lab') – does not easily lend itself to statistical analysis: it does not give reliable information about respondents and it is open-ended: as I am writing this, the number of contributions is still growing, and will continue to do so until it is removed from the web. Thus, the material's value first and foremost derives from the fact that it consists of volunteered, spontaneous, sometimes quite lengthy statements which reveal various kinds of attitude to English loanwords in Norwegian.

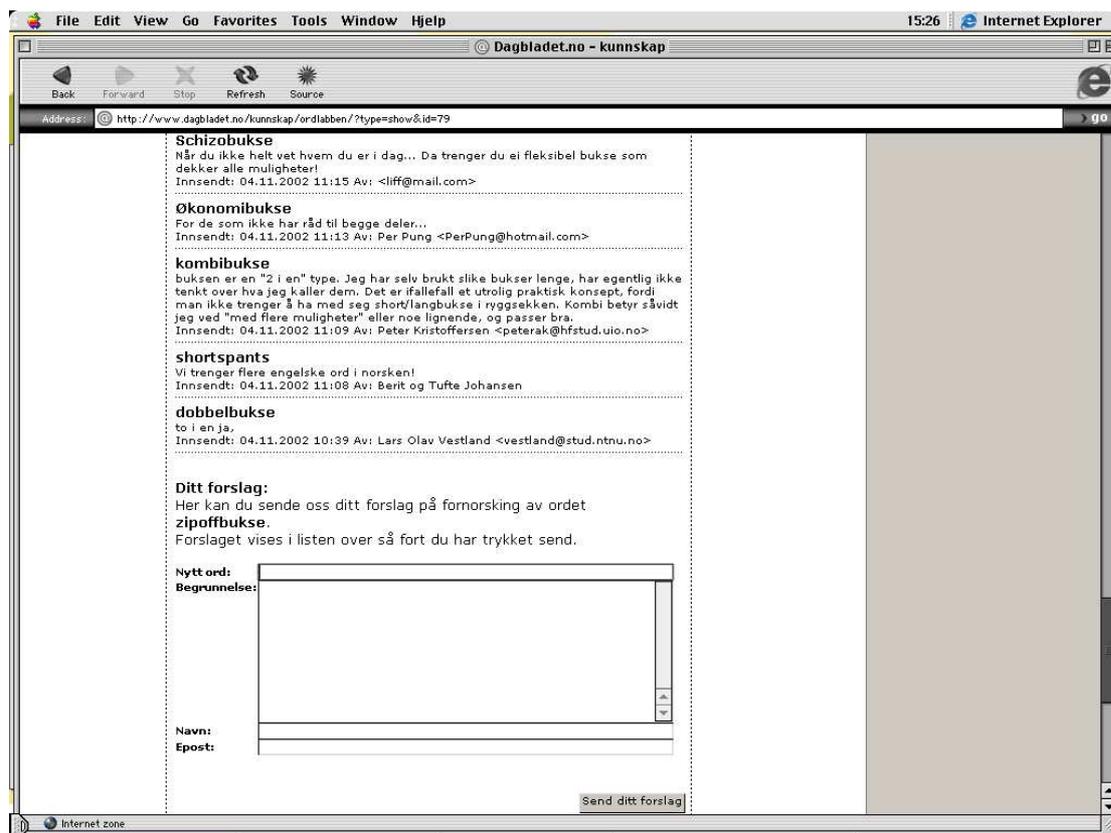
The Word Lab came about as a joint effort between the Norwegian Language Council (NLC),³ which is the Norwegian government's advisory body for matters pertaining to the Norwegian language, and *Dagbladet*, one of Norway's biggest tabloid newspapers. The NLC, being the appointed watchdog for the Norwegian language, takes – as expected – a negative stand to the issue of English loanwords. This, presumably, forms at least part of their motivation for participating in maintaining The Word Lab, since what happens here, is that people (people 'in general'⁴) are invited to take part in a process of Norwegianizing, i.e., trying to find Norwegian equivalents to, some (relatively recent) English loanwords, e.g.,

Date, zipoffbukse, stayer, paintball, kiteboarding, dreadlocks/dreads, trick or treat, Halloween, nuggets, wide-screen, hat-trick, wannabe, fastfood, event, campus, art director, tights, reality-TV, flight, chatte, offroader, eye-liner, happy hour, audition, workshop, street cred, roller blades, image, bake-off, smoothies, performance-kunst, hacker, cracker, backstage, ghostwriter, downlight, body, breakdown, trainee, joystick, catwalk, turnover, walkover.

The contributors are asked to provide a translation for any of these (and more) words, and in addition, they are asked to justify their choices (see sample dialogue box below):

³ <http://www.sprakrad.no>

⁴ The NLC and *Dagbladet* also run an email discussion list which invites council members, students and academics from relevant fields, media workers and other interested parties to contribute translations of English loanwords (Ordsamia/'The Wordsmithy').



It is a reasonable hypothesis that what the NLC is hoping to achieve by means of this and similar initiatives is increased positivity to their attempts at Norwegianizing English loanwords. Many of the NLC's 'purifying' initiatives in the past⁵ have failed, possibly because the Council has attempted to implement changes in what has been perceived as a one-way, dictatorial fashion. By contrast, the Word Lab emerges as an attempt to stimulate an open, participatory atmosphere. And the response has indeed been quite impressive. For some of the loanwords that have been introduced on the list, the number of contributions is as high as 60 or 70. The average number of contributions, however, is probably around 20-30 per word.

This is not, however, to say, that the contributions have always been of the desired kind (at least from the perspective of the NLC). On the one hand, there are a number of more or less straightforward contributions from people who seem to unproblematically accept the invitation to translate loanwords into Norwegian. These contributors delve headlong into the task, whether it be out of a genuine wish to contribute, or out of a seemingly innocent wish to be funny and draw attention to themselves. On the other hand, however, there is a group of contributors who, rather than accepting the invitation, seize the opportunity to argue fiercely *against* the notion that one should translate English loanwords into Norwegian. In the following I call these people 'rebels', not because I want to somehow 'romanticize' their point of view, but rather, firstly, because of their status as a minority on the list (and perhaps also in real life, cf. Masvie's study above), secondly, because of the rather severe political incorrectness – in a Norwegian context – of their views, thirdly, because of the resultant defensive tone of the responses, and finally, because of their archetypal, overt challenge to a powerful 'enemy', namely the NLC.

⁵ E.g. their proposals to Norwegianize the spelling of established English loanwords (some examples: *køntri* (country, as in *country & western*), *pøbb* (pub), *gaid* (guide)).

In the following section, I give some examples of typical responses of both kinds, and draw attention to some of their most typical characteristics. I should like to emphasize that I know next to nothing about who the respondents are; I have made no attempt to contact the respondents via the (possibly not genuine) email-addresses that appear together with their messages (see above), quite simply because I am mainly interested in assessing the general nature of the debate, and not in distinguishing trends according to sociolinguistic parameters. Thus, ‘people in general’ is as close to an identification of the group of subjects as it is possible to come in this case, although the debate must be said to be characterized by a young tone.

Serious, non-serious, and rebellious contributions

So far, I have been talking about one division line and two main categories of response, although it is obviously not as simple as that. I have, for instance, already briefly mentioned a group of people who seem to respond to the invitation to translate English loanwords in positive terms, but who do not seem to take the assigned task seriously. In the following, I situate this category of response *between* the straightforward, ‘serious’ responses and the rebel responses, since it is indeed a borderline category: it is close to impossible to assess, merely on the basis of what is given in the responses, whether these people are just indifferent to the implicit issue (*yes/no* to English loanwords in Norwegian), or whether they rather constitute a class of good-natured rebels.

A typical ‘distribution of numerical power’ between these three categories – serious, non-serious and rebellious contributions – is for the first to be in the lead, the second not far behind, and the third constituting a minority. For the word *zipoffbukse*⁶, for example, there were 33 responses all in all. 13 of these were clear-cut serious responses; 15 were non-serious/hard to determine, the remaining five were rebel responses.⁷

In the following, I look at some of the contributions pertaining to *zipoffbukse* from each of the three categories. Later on, I also look at some contributions pertaining some of the other loanwords, but only with respect to the rebel category. For each example, I provide a ‘loose’ English translation, both for the translation proposal (when there is one) and for the justification.

Serious contributions

Proposal: Vårbukse

‘*Spring trousers*’

Justification: For om våren er det ofte kaldt først på dagen og så blir det varmt og da kan du ta av beina på bukse omtrent samtidig som du tar av genseren . . .

‘*Because in the spring it is often cold early in the day and then it gets warm and then you can take the legs off the trousers at the same time as taking off your sweater . . .*’

This is quite typical of serious proposals. The respondent basically does as he or she is asked. If we were to judge the quality of the proposal, however, we would probably find that it flouts several of the rules regarding how to put together a good loanword equivalent (cf. Sandøy

⁶ A compound with both English and Norwegian elements denoting a pair of trousers where the bottom part of the leg is attached with a zip and comes off.

⁷ As the list proceeds, with more and more new words for people to translate, it becomes apparent that the rebels have not managed to disrupt and derail the discussion in the way they had perhaps hoped, so the percentage of rebel responses drops even lower. As for words introduced at a relatively late stage, we get hardly any rebel responses at all, something which further emphasizes the minority status of this group.

2000:243ff). Among other things, it is not quite true to fact, since it implies that the trousers are not suitable for summer use. At least with the summers we have in certain parts of Norway, one would normally be grateful for an extra length of leg to zip on when needed.

Proposal: Todelsbukse

'Two-part trousers'

Justification: Eller var det tredels?

'Or was it three-part?'

Again, the contributor tries, and manages, to make a decent go of it. This example demonstrates, however, the typical trend of using the justification-field in a slightly 'naughty' way, i.e. not strictly in order to justify the choice of Norwegian equivalent, but rather to try to create an amusing, entertaining effect.

Proposal: "wannabeshorts" bukse

"wannabeshorts" trousers'

Justification: Her har du ei bukse som ikke helt vet hva den vil være . . . Lang eller kort, så den er delt på midten!

'Here you have some trousers which don't really know what they want to be . . . Long or short, so they're split in the middle!'

Sometimes it is hard to tell whether a proposal belongs to the serious or non-serious category. This is an example of such a case. Here, like in quite a few other places in the material, the respondent replaces one English loanword with another, which is patently not what the list organizers intended. However, because the use of English in creating neologisms in Norwegian is so common, it is difficult to know for certain whether the respondent is actually aware that he or she is doing this, and that it is 'wrong' in relation to the list managers' intentions. After all, the justification of the choice seems serious enough.

Non-serious contributions

Proposal: Bukse for dverger og normale

'Trousers for dwarves and normal people'

Justification: Og visste du at . . . Hei, visste du at det er større sannsynlighet for å bli slått av lyn enn å bli spist av hai?

'And did you know that . . . Hey, did you know that there is a greater probability that you will get struck by lightning than get eaten by sharks?'

Rather than a borderline case, there are several traits that single this proposal out as a clear-cut non-serious one. The translation is for a start unnecessarily cumbersome, a rather heavy noun phrase rather than the expected word. Then there is the use of the slightly derogatory word *dwarf*; and, finally, the justification for the translation constitutes, of course, a complete irrelevancy. This respondent is clearly not trying to contribute to Norwegianization, but on the other hand, he or she cannot really be said to be trying to cause any serious disruption, either.

Rebel contributions

The following responses to *zipoffbukse*, however, clearly are. The opinions of the representatives of the rebel group are – for the most part – crystal clear: keep the word as it is, don't try to

Norwegianize it. The ways in which these opinions are expressed range from the extremely brief and to-the-point, to the extremely verbose. The first example is of the former kind:

Proposal: dere er alle teite!!

'you are all stupid!!'

Justification: Som gidder å diskutere dette!!!!!!!!!!!!

'For even being bothered to discuss this!!!!!!!!!!!!'

This example is in fact ambiguous. The contribution could either mean 'there are so many *important* things to discuss, why do you waste your time on this, very *unimportant* issue?', in which case it is not a rebel response of the type we are after here, or it could mean 'you are all stupid in taking this enterprise seriously because *Norwegianization* is stupid', in which case it would be a true rebel response. Taken in the latter sense, the contribution is typical of rebel contributions in two main respects: on the one hand, it uses derogatory language (*stupid*), and on the other, there is an excessive use of punctuation, both of which signal strong involvement and create a rather aggressive tone. We shall see much more of this in upcoming examples.

Proposal: Zipoffbukse

'Zip-off trousers'

Justification: Hva er vitsen med å absolutt ha norske navn på alt??? Et produkt navn er et produktnavn. Hva blir det neste at Liu, Ahmed og Ali ikke har godkjente navn, hva med Kari, Ole og Per? . . .

'What's the point in insisting on having Norwegian names for everything??? A product name is a product name. What will be next, that Liu, Ahmed and Ali don't have accepted names, how about Kari, Ole and Per? . . . '

What this contribution exemplifies, is the typical tendency of rebel responses to just repeat the word in its original form in the proposal-field, signalling the desire of the contributor that the word should simply be *kept* in its original form. The justification-field also contains a number of recurring features: 1. It is quite wordy (although not as wordy as many of the other rebel responses), indicating strength of involvement. 2. It has an initial, obviously heartfelt statement 'What's the point in insisting on having Norwegian names for everything'. The exasperated – 'at-one's-wits'-end' – quality of this statement is seen over and over again in this kind of response. 3. The argument that follows the initial statement can be found in two of the five rebel responses for *zipoffbukse*: the respondent feels that a product name is akin to a person's first name in the sense that both are somehow inextricably tied to the identity of the product/person. Thus, changing the name of the product, the argument goes, would be as meaningless as asking a foreign person in Norway to change *their* name to a typical Norwegian name, such as Kari, Ole or Per. We may note here that the names used to exemplify typical Norwegian names are very traditional ones, and ones that are considered to be a bit 'farmish'. This might indicate that the respondent feels that foreign is cool and urban, whilst Norwegian is uncool and rural – an attitude which is found in many of the replies, e.g. the following, which is a response to a different loanword, i.e. *stayer*:

Proposal: Til Trak Tor (fortsettelse fra innelegg 1)

'To Trak Tor (continuation of contribution no. 1)'

Justification: Det er klart jeg har medfølelse for fremmedgjøringen og identitetskrisen føler når du humper rundt på traktoren din i frykt for neste møte med framskrittet i form av en engelsk film uten undertekst, et operativsystem som ikke er på norsk eller ei engelsktalende dame du med gebrokkent engelsk prøver å lure med i høyet men som straks avslører deg for den lille

uninformerte bygdegrisen du er da du verbalt kommer til kort. Men det er greit det, behold norsken din du, fornorsk gjerne hvert eneste utenlandske ord som kommer inn i synsfeltet ditt, men den dagen ungene dine på uforståelig vis babler i vei med pleierne på sykehjemmet som da har blitt din faste adresse, er det ikke sikkert det er seniliteten som har tatt det siste avgjørende jafset av språksenteret ditt, du er simpelthen bare for norsk :)

'Of course I sympathize with the alienation and identity crisis you feel when you jolt around on your tractor in fear of your next encounter with progress in the form of an English film without subtitles, an operating system which isn't in Norwegian or an English speaking bird who you, in broken English, try to trick into sleeping with you in the hay but who immediately blows your cover, seeing you for the insignificant, uninformed little farm-pig that you are when you verbally can't hack it. But that's fine, just keep your Norwegian, feel free to Norwegianize every single foreign word that enters your field of vision, but the day when your kids, in a way not understandable to you, babble away with the nurses in the nursing home which by then has become your permanent address, it is not certain that it is dementia which has taken the last, definite bite off your language centre, you are quite simply too Norwegian :)'

This response differs from the others considered so far in being a reply to somebody on the list, rather than a direct response to the invitation to translate a loanword. It is similar, however, in promoting – in a much more aggressive way than in the previous example – the message that Abroad (especially Anglo-America) is cool, whereas Norway, and especially regional Norway, is uncool.

Returning to the word *zipoffbukse*, we see that in one of the remaining rebel responses, a further aspect is added to the above line of argumentation:

Proposal: *zipoffbukse*

'zip-off trousers'

Justification: hvorfor i all verden skal vi fornorske alt hallo. problemet til nordmenn er at vi svært sjelden produsere noen ting og eksporterer det derfor føler vi at det norske språk ikke brukes er helt utmerket jeg vil fortsatt like å bli kalt hva jeg heter selv om jeg er i utlandet, oiii det ble kanskje litt sterkt . . .

'why on earth should we norwegianize everything I'm sorry. the problem of Norwegians is that we very rarely produce anything and export it and therefore we feel that the Norwegian language isn't used is utterly brilliant I'd still like to be called by what is my name even though I'm abroad, whoooops this is perhaps a bit too strong(ly put) . . . '

Here, the respondent displays (implicit?) knowledge of a well-known phenomenon, namely that many English loanwords come to other countries as part and parcel of new products. The respondent then uses this insight to construct an argument to the effect that the whole Norwegianization business is just a result of Norwegians being envious because they do not have any products that could piggyback *their* language out to the world. Or, in other words, we would do the same thing if we only had the chance, so why be so hypocritical . . . The main point of interest here, however, is the final comment: 'whoops this is perhaps a bit too strong(ly put)'. This utterance refers to the fear of being met by sanctions if one expresses this kind of politically incorrect view, and is hence a symptom of the fact that there *is* a battle going on, and that there are real blows to be struck.

Moving on now to a couple of other loanword prompts, we shall see that this aspect of the argumentation is even further developed in some other responses, in the sense that the respondents' positioning vis-à-vis the 'enemy' is becoming clearer:

Wannabe

Proposal: Wannabe . . .

Justification: NEI!!! Ikke la ?språknissene? sitte å konstruere kunstige ord, språk er et kommunikasjonsverktøy og er i så måte dynamisk og utvikler seg i takt med tiden vi lever i og behovet vi har for kontakt med andre mennesker. Så ikke bruk resurser på å lage kunstige og fjollete ord, men la språket utvikle seg naturlig. Det går helt fint uten såkalt eksperthjelp! Og jeg bare spør, hva er Norsk? Nei, slutt å tøve med dette! Hilsen en som bruker vårt språk, og andre, som et kommunikasjonsverktøy! Jeg synes de som jobber i språkrådet kanskje burde finne andre ting å gjøre, begynne å skape virkelige verdier! ;-) mvh, ?ikke språkexpert? :-)

'NO!!! Don't let the ?language gnomes? make up artificial words, language is a tool for communication and in this respect is dynamic and develops in pace with the times we live in and the need we have for contact with other people. So don't waste resources on making artificial and silly words, rather let the language develop naturally. We are fine without so-called expert help! And I ask: what is Norwegian? Stop messing about! Greetings from someone who uses our language, and other languages, as a tool for communication! I think the people who work in the Language Council should look for something else to do, start creating real values! ;-) friendly greetings, ?not-a-language-expert? ;-)

What we see here, is that the contributor takes a daring step further, actually *explicitly referring to the enemy*, first in terms of a metaphor: they are 'language gnomes' (who 'waste resources on making artificial and silly words', rather than letting the 'language develop naturally'). At the very bottom of the message the name is finally revealed, and, lo and behold, it is the NLC. Their activities are superfluous and 'silly', according to this contributor, because if only the tool for communication that is language is left alone, it will evolve 'dynamically' and in a perfectly satisfactory way. The implication seems to be that the enemy is seeing language for 'more' than what it really is ('more' than merely an instrument of communication), building values into the notion of language (revolving around its role in society and in individuals' lives?), which are quite simply not warranted – a view which is not too far removed from that of proponents of certain mainstream branches of linguistics, in fact!

Joystick

Proposal: Morostake . . . Styrepinne . . . NÅ HAR NORSK SPRÅKRÅD DRITI SEG UT . . .

'Funstick . . . Steering stick . . . NOW THE NORWEGIAN LANGUAGE COUNCIL HAVE REALLY MADE ASSES OF THEMSELVES . . . '

Justification: Altså . . . Internasjonalisering er nødvendig dersom Norge skal klare å følge med i verden . . . (for guds skyld, drit i de anglikanske uttrykkene) Og nynorsken . . . er så enig . . . kast den på søppeldynga. Hvorfor i faen skal vi lære et mål som en dust gikk rundt å samla ord til for 100 år siden . . . Alle skulle ha snakka engelsk – misforståelse = krig, forståelse = fred . . . Om vi alle kunne kommunisert med hverandre hadde verden vært et enklere sted. Go fast everyone . . . Live your life and smile to the world . . . Hilsen opprørt jævel fra Oslo . . .

'Let's see . . . Internationalization is necessary if Norway is to be able to keep up with the world . . . (for goodness sake, forget about those Anglican expressions) And nynorsken (one of Norway's two official written standards, based on the Norwegian dialects, compiled by the philologist Ivar Aasen in the 19th century) . . . I couldn't agree more . . . throw it on the rubbish heap. Why the hell should we have to learn a language which some fool went around collecting words for a 100 years ago . . . Everybody should speak English - misunderstandings = war, understanding = peace . . . If we all were able to communicate with one another, the world

would be a simpler place. Go fast everyone . . . Live your life and smile to the world . . .⁸
Greetings from a pissed-off bastard from Oslo . . . ‘

Here, the positioning vis-à-vis the NLC is even clearer (cf., e.g., the capital letters used when referring to the Council in the proposal field, capital letters signalling ‘shouting’ in email and SMS varieties), and the ill-feelings expressed are, if possible, even more acrid (cf., e.g., the heavy use of derogatory language in the proposal field and elsewhere in the text). Also present is an extensive display of the typical downgrading of the national and an upgrading of the international, but with the interesting addition of the so-called ‘technocratic’ approach (see Sandøy 2000:181): if only languages became more alike, the respondent claims, we would understand one another better and hence we would be able to create a better world. This opinion would perhaps have been more edible to the intellectual elite if it had not been for the fact that languages seem to be becoming more alike in terms of becoming more like one single language, that language being unpalatable to them: English.

A defence for the rebel responses?

At the outset, I promised that I would try to raise a defence for the opinions of these rebels. Two obvious questions emanate from this resolve. Firstly, is there really a *need* for such a defence? These people are ‘rebels with a cause’ who moreover seem to be more than capable of speaking for themselves, and besides, their opinions are perfectly in accord with the way things are going anyway. Secondly, and more importantly, however: is raising such a defence at all a responsible thing to do, insofar as the threat to linguistic diversity – an unquestionable value – is serious enough as it is? Why add fuel to the fire by recognizing such opinions as those voiced by these rebels?

As regards the first of these questions, I would like to make the claim that contrary to popular (or should I say academic) opinion, the groups representing rebel attitudes are *not* necessarily a strong group. There are two main reasons for this. For a start, in Norway, their ‘enemy’ is an elite of academics and politicians; the rebels have few, if any, representatives or spokespeople within this club, insofar as adopting a position which would in any way support ‘rebel opinion’ within Norwegian academia today is a risky affair. Secondly, as I have pointed out before, Masvie’s (1992) study, and the relatively low numbers of rebels participating in the list (in comparison with the number of ‘conformers’), seem to suggest that they constitute a minority. The result of both of these situations has been a considerable suppression of the rebels’ views. To an extent, the Word Lab came in and changed all that, in providing the rebels with a welcome outlet for their opinions. At last, there was a chance to be heard, and paradoxically, it was the ‘enemy’ who (inadvertently) provided the opportunity.

The relative weakness of this group is also reflected in the tone of the responses. Long-term suppression of opinion and the fact that the present opinion-voicing goes on behind enemy lines causes unmistakable aggression, which, unfortunately for the rebels, makes it all too easy to dismiss their responses as childish and unserious, and to see them as perfect illustrations of why ‘folk linguistics’, “folk-beliefs”, ought to continue to be regarded as “unscientific and worthy only of disdain” (Niedzielski & Preston 2000:3). Nobody has, to my knowledge, paused to ask themselves the question whether the rebels’ defensiveness, sometimes bordering on desperation, could not be anchored in some form of justifiable experience.

⁸ The non-italicized portions of the text are in ‘English’ (Norwegian-English) in the original.

As regards the second question posed above – is it *responsible* to try to raise a defence for the ‘rebels’ – it should, for a start, be clear that it would definitely be irresponsible to continue to *suppress* their views, regardless of one’s own opinions on the matter. Secondly, however, I show in the following that the question is hardly valid in this particular case, insofar as the underlying, generally accepted ‘truth’ that it builds on – that if the influx of loanwords into a language becomes too overwhelming, then this will engulf the language (and hence culture) in question – is tenuous. This view, which in itself goes a long way to justifying the rebels’ opinion that the road to linguistic happiness does not necessarily go via the translation of English loanwords, is rendered plausible, in the following, by reference to some of the ideas of the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, which show *how* and *why* (rather than just *that*) loanwords do not change (in a transitive sense), as much as they are *themselves* changed in the process of borrowing.

This will be my first move in this game of devil’s advocate. The second move will consist in trying to find a justification for the ‘internationalist’, ‘technocratic’ aspects of the rebels’ argumentation. Here, I will draw on some suggestions made by the Danish literary researcher Frederik Thygstrup, which, amalgamated with the present perspective, produce the conclusion that loanwords are not *just* little missiles of cultural imperialism (although this aspect *is* clearly present), being also quite willingly-chosen air holes punctuating a potentially oppressive regional operational ground.

The Bakhtinian perspective

Despite a growing consensus among sociolinguists that the influx of loanwords is probably not the greatest threat to the survival of a small language,⁹ there still seems to be a large residue of opinion that if such an influx should become too overwhelming, then this would threaten to engulf the language in question. And not only that; since language is also generally seen to (somehow) carry culture, then it is not just the *language* which will become engulfed and finally extinct, but also all of the target culture.

The so-called dialogism of Mikhail Bakhtin (e.g. 1981, 1986) and the Bakhtin circle gives us the tools to show how this is not necessarily what happens (and also that *if* it happens, it is not necessarily because of borrowing). Because according to a dialogistic perspective, a word is not a static entity with a fixed (in the present case, foreign) identity which by its very emergence will necessarily push a lesser used target equivalent over the ‘edge’ into oblivion. Rather, a word is a dynamic, highly adjustable entity which displays a relatively low degree of loyalty to its origins, and which therefore quickly finds a home within its new contexts, co-existing quite happily with its neighbours.

To start, however, from the beginning, let us first take a look at the traditional, Cartesian, linguistic thinking in relation to word meaning. Generally speaking, within this paradigm, words are regarded as entities whose forms are ‘walled’ vessels which safeguard a reservoir of alternative meanings which, because of their containment within this vessel, can be relatively easily grasped, described and circumscribed. Under this perspective, meanings are properties of the *form* of the word. More recently, of course, emphasis has been shifted from meaning as a property of form, to meaning as a property of the entity that is seen to embody that form, namely the individual mind.

⁹ In an attempt at solving one problem by exaggerating another, the role of main threat has recently been shifted over to domain loss (e.g. Mæhlum 2000).

It is quite clear that this way of looking at word meaning does not efficiently accommodate the well-known phenomenon that loanwords seem to become gradually adjusted to the host language, both in terms of form, function, and meaning (e.g. Johansson & Graedler 2002:18-19). For instance, the first part of the English expression *rock'n roll* – *rock* – has, since the borrowing of the expression into the Norwegian language, assumed a new form (the adjective-forming suffix *-a* has been added to it, to produce *rocka*), and a new use, as a description of a visual style and/or attitude suited to the rock'n roll life-style (e.g. *ei rocka dame*: a girl/woman sporting a look associated with the rock'n roll life-style, and/or with a behaviour or attitude of somebody 'into' the rock'n roll life-style). The point is, that if you were to try to use *rocka* vis-à-vis a native speaker of English, or even an 'anglified' version of it (**rocky*; **a rocky lady*), you would no doubt raise quite a few eyebrows. Somehow the word is no longer English. The question is, of course, whether it therefore has necessarily become Norwegian.

The observation that loanwords somewhere down the line somehow lose their original identity and acquire a new one is not well catered for within a framework which assumes a static and inflexible relationship between a word and its meaning. What we need, then, is a theory, which, like dialogism, assumes that words and meanings arise and develop in social – dialogical – interaction, in a dynamic, sometimes unpredictable fashion. In fact, and in stark contrast to traditional linguistic thinking, words are, in dialogism, not seen to 'have' meanings at all. Rather, words can, from this perspective, be seen to provide some highly elastic anchorage to meaning *potentials* (Voloshinov 1973:79ff), which could be described as loosely consistent associative networks with no real beginning and no real end. When a word is deployed in context, certain aspects of this meaning potential are *actualized*, and it is precisely – and only – in the relation between this context and the given meaning potential that meaning 'proper' is seen to arise, exist, or alternatively, take place. The most important point for the present purposes, however, is that this actualization process is *not* a neutral process where context merely 'highlights' a (predictable) aspect of a word's meaning potential. There is a rather more profound process of mutual influence going on. When meaning elements of the context and meaning elements from the meaning potential come into contact with one another, none remain unaffected. Thus, each time a word is used in a new context, its meaning potential is – at the very least on a micro-level – somehow affected: the organization of elements within the associative network may change slightly, there may be additions to the meaning potential (the word gains new meanings and/or areas of use), or subtractions (the word *loses* old meanings). In principle, each and every context a word is used in, *contributes something new to the meaning potential of that word*. Furthermore, this is a process that never finishes. A word is never 'finished' (Voloshinov 1973:79ff, Linell 1996:7:205-206, Greenall 2002:234ff).

And here we are, of course, at the heart of the matter. If we trace the history of an English loanword – any loanword, really – according to this theory, the word would start life, obviously, as a word of the English language; it would evolve as an element of the English language through insertion into an innumerable number of contexts, adapting and adjusting, becoming an inextricable part of the language and through this an equally inextricable part of its users' culture and identity. One day, however, the word becomes 'copied' into a completely different language, thereby starting a journey through a number of *foreign* contexts, each putting its thumbprint on the word, to the point where the word is hardly recognizable in any of its original contexts. And the word continues its journey forever, the relative distance between the two languages and cultures ensuring that the difference continues to grow. After a while, there is hardly anything left of the word's original meaning potential, it has been eroded away by the constant 'rubbing' against target language contexts. At this point, nobody, not even the most hard-headed purist, will flinch at the sight of the word; it has become 'Norwegian'.

As an example of this, consider the fact that in the middle ages, e.g., Old Norse in Norway experienced an influx of words and grammatical structures from low German, because of Hanseatic activity on the West Coast. Practically overnight, Old Norse changed from a form which we, today, as modern Norwegians, cannot understand at all, to a form which is relatively understandable to a speaker of modern Norwegian (e.g. Johnsen 1987:54-55). In all likelihood, many people found this problematic to cope with at the time. Today, however, there is nothing about this heritage which shouts ‘German’ to the average user, and the Norwegian language is as Norwegian as it ever was, to all of its speakers.

Everything that has been said so far points towards the conclusion that the postulated threat is a *perceived*, and not an *objective* threat (Haberland 1997:4): what we are facing is *not* engulfment. Change, absolutely, but nothing like the predicted case of linguistic or cultural hijacking. One remaining worry is perhaps the unprecedented speed at which the current process of adoption of English loanwords is taking place; at the present time there is no way of knowing for certain what sort of impact this will have. But if it is the case that the dialogical process of contextual influence on meaning potentials will, as I believe it will, always ensure adaptation and evolution in the direction of an ‘indigenous’ identity for the originally foreign word, then the arguments against English loanwords merely become a matter of purism for purism’s sake, and the rebels will have been avenged. Because if the process of accepting loanwords into the language is not a process of linguistic and cultural enslavement, but rather just an ordinary process of linguistic and cultural change which will in fact safeguard diversity, then their opinion will have gained a considerable amount of legitimacy.

Home and away

So far, I have been considering the possible justification of the general project proposed by the rebels, that we should *not* translate English loanwords. In the final part of this paper, I have a look at their main *argument* which, loosely rephrased, consists in the claim that the reason we should not reject English loanwords is because we need English in order to be able to somehow connect with the outer world (ultimately in order to do our ‘bit’ in the bid for world peace, so to speak).

Some would perhaps say that this is too kind a rendering of their argument, since it mostly takes the form of ‘slagging off’ Norway as rural, naïve, and uncool, whereas the international (Anglo-American?) arena is glorified as its counterpart: urban, streetwise and cool. The Norwegian Language Council, in the rebel responses, actually emerges as a *symbol* of the former; their representatives are seen as embodiments of home-grown, ingrown attitudes. They are ‘*språknisser*’ (a *nisse* is a short, stout, mythical creature associated with farming communities and rural areas in general). Moreover, the NLC also has the perceived power to *impose* their attitudes on everybody else. Thus, they come to represent everything that is narrow and limiting about home. In this picture, English (in Norwegian, or in itself), emerges as a ‘saviour’, a life-saving, soul-saving link to the greater, international community.

This, to me, echoes a point made by the Danish literary researcher Frederik Thygstrup in the course of a debate at a recent conference on globalization at NTNU,¹⁰ Trondheim. The backdrop to his point is this: in the globalization debate, one strong line of conjecture is that the national level as a provider of identity is gradually losing importance by comparison with the global and

¹⁰ Norwegian University of Science and Technology. The conference was held in May 2003.

local levels. In addition, there has been a strong feeling that the global is imposing on the local, *dominating* it. Thygstrup's point was, I believe, that it is possible to look at this picture slightly differently. Rather than a one-way situation where the strong dominates the weak, what we may well be faced with, according to Thygstrup, is a situation where the local arena becomes a cultural meeting place, an arena for the (dialogical?) *exchange of culture*. This is well in line with the fact – evidenced to an overwhelming degree in the Word Lab, in fact – that both on the linguistic and cultural levels, the so-called linguistic impositions are actually often invited or warmly welcomed (i.e., if English is a killer language, then some people are clearly suicidal). Brit Mæhlum, in an article on domain loss for Norwegian, uses the notion of “*avmaktens optimisme*” (2002:131) (borrowed from the Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright), translatable into English as ‘the optimism of powerlessness’, to characterize the positive reception of the emergence of a dominating language on the national scene. Under this interpretation, people (e.g. the rebels), knowing that they have no choice but to accept their fate (e.g. the taking over of Norwegian by English loanwords), will choose to cheerfully give in to circumstances that they cannot control, *because* they cannot control them. This kind of effect exists, I am sure, but I am rather doubtful of its applicability here, insofar as the rebels seem neither full of optimism nor of cheerfulness: on the contrary, there is every indication that they feel like they are on the losing end of a battle, *not* vis-à-vis a development they cannot control, but rather vis-à-vis forces that are working to *stall* this development. Or, in other words, in the rebel's mind, the fate is not unavoidable at all, and those who are opposed to the development may well win.

Returning to, and looking further into, Thygstrup's point (that the influence is not one-way (dominating > dominee) but rather two-way), we see that rather than the predicted *homogenization* of a target culture, what we may have on our hands is equally likely a *hybridization* of cultures, a process which may well constitute – and this is Thygstrup's expression – a ‘civilizing influence’ on local communities, since such communities can often be rather repressive in nature.¹¹ Knowledge that things can be done in a different way may have the effect of keeping a valuable check on repressive forces, and the actual adoption of new perspectives and customs may of course have an even more strongly liberating function. As far as language is concerned, there has also been a predicted homogenization, but here, too, as we saw in the previous section, the notion of hybridization may be more fitting. It is not necessarily a question of a brutal take-over. Looking at the available evidence, the process seems much more amenable to a description in terms of a gentle mix and subsequent absorption, with an end-product that is different from both points of departure, but always with a distinct indigenous identity.

We cannot quite let go of this point, however, without also noting that this kind of hybridization seems to go hand in hand with the establishment of ‘ghettos’ by those who feel that the ‘air-holes’ provided by foreign loan words and the increasing acceptance of English into everyday life do not provide *enough* ventilation, and who therefore (and for other reasons, of course) gather together in enclaves where one or more aspects of the foreign culture are embraced particularly enthusiastically. Such groups most often gather around some sort of activity or special interest, such as, e.g., skateboarding, snowboarding, kiteboarding, rollerblading, paintballing, and so on; and typical of most of them is that the terminology which defines the group and the activity that the group gathers around consists of untranslated English loanwords, often in a relatively non-adapted form (cf. Preisler 1999). I would actually not be surprised if it

¹¹ A good example of this is provided in the Swedish film *Fucking Åmål* by Lukas Moodysson, which describes the falling in love of two lesbian girls in a small, dull Swedish town called Åmål.

turned out, upon further scrutiny, that some of the rebels of the Word Lab have ties to some such subgroup. And if they do, the reason for their frustration and anger becomes even more clear: to take away their words, like the NLC proposes to do, would amount to removing their air-holes, their deliberately chosen breathing space, where they can escape and be themselves without controlling influences that try to keep them in their place. Furthermore, since loanwords so quickly become a natural part of the linguistic environment that they are used in, and since this environment plays a large role in shaping people's identities, to take away their words would also mean to take away part of their identity.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, what I have tried to show is that it ought to be possible to look at the rebels' position and argumentation with more sympathetic eyes than what is normally the case: if we manage to look beyond the underlying 'vulgar-evolutionary' attitude that one might suspect lies behind their contributions to the Word Lab discussion list, an alternative picture emerges, that of a defensive group at their wits' end, driven to desperation by an uncomprehending elite trying to deprive them of important portholes which enable them to catch a glimpse of a bigger reality, portholes that they have come to rely on to the extent that the view beyond them has become part of their identity. If this picture is too one-sided, then the regular picture – that of the rebels as ignorant bullies – is equally one-sided, and in any case it is clear to me that nobody benefits from the suppression of an entire side of a coin.

Makers of language policy tend to be influenced by individuals who in their eagerness to protect the rights of speakers of small languages tend to overlook the crucial fact that these are not a homogenous group. Whether or not the rebels constitute a minority is, as I have said before, an open question; however, their mere existence ought perhaps to be a good argument in favour of turning the question of the rights of speakers of small languages into a question of *whose* rights. Another important question to consider is who empowers whom in this game of postulating what constitutes a 'right', and exactly what these rights (ought to) consist in. For some, their current definition results in 'protection' from something they actually desire, from something that they feel that they are voluntarily choosing, and hence the right ceases to be a right and becomes a rule. And if you want to know how that feels, just ask 'a pissed-off bastard from Oslo'.

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