elites, language, and the politics of identity

the norwegian case in comparative perspective
ELITES, LANGUAGE, AND
THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY
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For my parents,
and for Lisa
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Chapter 1
Language, Politics, and Modern Norway

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1996, leaders of all the major Norwegian political parties, covering a political spectrum from left socialist to extreme neoliberal, appeared briefly together for the universal ritual of the photo opportunity. Grinning broadly, armed with shovels, the leaders were posed awkwardly around a young tree. The tree was being planted in honor of Ivar Aasen, the Norwegian scholar who had died a hundred years earlier and had devoted his life to the development of Nynorsk, the minority written Norwegian language. When questioned by the press, each party leader managed to find a way to tie the legacy of Aasen and Nynorsk to the ideals of her or his party. To outsiders, this joint appearance to celebrate cultural heritage might evoke no attention, or at best, the usual references made to the cultural symbols of smaller European nations as being nothing more than folksy and quaint. Further, outsiders may find it remarkable that this small nation has witnessed three versions of written Norwegian compete for official recognition over the past 100 years: Bokmål, the dominant standard, derived from Danish and widely used in urban areas; Nynorsk, the minority standard constructed out of rural western dialects; and Samnorsk (Common Norwegian), a proposed fusion of the previous two into a standard that reflected the language usage patterns of everyday Norwegians. However, as the subsequent case study chapters will show, this photo opportunity would not have been possible only a few decades earlier. For much of modern Norway’s existence, language has served as a tool that elites of varying ideological stripes have used in order to wage political
battle. From the 1880s up to the 1960s, struggles over language went hand in hand with struggles over Norwegian national identity, economic ideology, and electoral politics.

This book explains what factors led to the initial politicization of language in Norwegian society, why it remained a salient political issue throughout much of the twentieth century, and why elite desire to focus on the language question declined in the 1960s. Despite this extensive focus on the particulars of the Norwegian case, my chief aim is not to cast light on events that are solely of interest to specialists in Scandinavian political history. Rather, I argue that an investigation into Norwegian language politics has merit because it adds to a much larger debate about the relationship between group identity and elite political objectives.

I show how political elites create group identity based on linguistic characteristics. This, in and of itself, is nothing new to either political science or contemporary sociolinguistics. Two of the key works on nationalism, Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, and Hobsbawm’s *Nations and Nationalism*, provide what are generally considered to be some of the strongest accounts as to how language is employed in the construction of national identities.

Where my own investigation differs is in demonstrating that language has potential for elite use well after state construction. Specifically, my own investigation of Norwegian language politics suggests a link between language and identity that has not frequently been explored. The Norwegian case demonstrates that while language was initially politicized to aid in the creation of the new Norwegian state, elites found language to be politically valuable in the following decades as well. Moreover, these subsequent constructions and manipulations of Norwegian linguistic identity, taking place well after the consolidation of the Norwegian state, did not involve relations between different ethnic groups. Linguistic differences among Norwegians are correlated with class and regional differences. Social democratic political elites promoted the construction of linguistic identities that merged linguistic characteristics from different social classes. The intent of these newly constructed identities was to assist in forging and maintaining broader cross-class alliances between the urban working class and rural inhabitants.

Prior to the case studies, it is useful to begin by focusing on the varying role that language has been assigned both within political
philosophy and in contemporary political science. In doing so, this review draws attention to a division among scholars regarding language’s ability to be employed as a tool in changing society and in obtaining political objectives. Marx’s argument that, on the one hand, language is mostly a reflection of a given set of social relations, will be presented. Yet many twentieth-century thinkers who were influenced by Marx arrived at a sharply different conclusion. That is, it has also been argued by some that language can be employed not only to reinforce social relations, but can also fundamentally alter those relations. As the case study chapters will demonstrate, the history of the Norwegian language conflict speaks powerfully to these opposing views on language, lending credence to a view of language as a policy instrument that has ramifications far beyond the cultural arena.

LANGUAGE AND POLITICAL THOUGHT

One importance of language is that it inherently contains insights on the social relations of a given society. In this regard, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* stands out, rejecting the Platonic view of language as a tool whose function was to mirror an objective reality. Wittgenstein argued that the Platonic view of language, in which language gained meaning by naming objects in the real world and expressed an objective universality, was sharply flawed. His alternative is posited through the construction of “language games.” In these games, the use of words as object names did not just label them within reality, but also implied a set of commands issued by the speaker and to be obeyed by the listener. Wittgenstein’s example of this is the master builder and the apprentice: The builder states only the name of an object that he needs, and the apprentice passes him the appropriate object when requested. Naming the object lends symbolic representation to it as a physical object, and also carries the message that certain relations exist between two individuals sharing this simple “language”: namely, the speaker is commanding the listener to engage in a certain activity, and that the authority for him to do so is understood by both. Thus, the lesson is clear: language, even in its most basic form, goes beyond communication and represents a set of social relations that can assign both speaker and listener to certain roles, each with varying degrees of power.
However, if language is not charged with the task of defining universalities, but is rather the subjective expression and description of a given society, one can inquire as to whether language also has additional functions. That is, once produced, are languages limited only to communication and to mirroring (however loosely) existing social relations? Specifically, can languages be used to alter the society in which they were produced? In this regard, a brief discussion of Marx and twentieth-century Marxist thinkers will be instructive.

Marx and Engels were more explicit than Wittgenstein about the connection between language and the organization of society. In *The German Ideology*, they argue that man first makes history by engaging in four circumstances or moments on a near simultaneous basis. Stating that “life involves before everything else, eating and drinking, clothing, and many other things,” the production of the means to satisfy the basic needs becomes the first activity. Following the fulfillment of these basic needs, new needs immediately arise that must also be fulfilled through production. Third, as a practical function of fulfilling these needs, humanity propagates its own kind, and engages in reproduction. Finally, Marx and Engels state that the “production of life, both of one’s own in labour and of fresh life in procreation” is also mirrored in a social relationship, which is considered the cooperation of individuals under any given set of conditions. A result of these four moments, particularly that of social relationships, is the production of consciousness within individuals. For Marx and Engels, consciousness is a product of the necessity that individuals have social relations. Language enters into this formulation by being the “practical expression” of that consciousness:

Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness, as it exists for other men, and for that reason is really beginning to exist for me personally as well; for language like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men.

Thus, Marx and Engels, in sketching their materialist view of history, place language in the same framework: language is a product of material and social relations. One must question whether the vulgar reductionism which implies that language (as an element of the superstructure) cannot be transformed without first transforming the
material relations of society (base), or that language, once produced, does not have the ability to alter the material relations of society. However, there are significant elements of this line of thinking in Marx’s work. For while Marx indirectly considered language in the *Grundrisse*, one cannot conclude that he offered any support for the idea that “language as superstructure” could exercise influence on the current mode of production. Specifically, Marx discussed labor as a “category” that had taken on different meanings under different modes of production. To locate language in Marx’s discussion, it is important to recognize that a “category” can be interpreted as an abstraction that is synonymous with language. In precapitalist times, the category of labor had quite limited and specific meanings that were linked to certain concrete activities. However, under capitalism, Marx argued that labor as a category had lost these specific connotations and now existed as only an abstraction, and that it “has ceased to be organically linked with individuals in any form.”

In this passage, Marx reaffirms the argument made in *The German Ideology* that “categories” are products of historic relations, but he also is commenting on how these categories can have influence of their own. Marx suggests that the category of labor (as conceived of under capitalism), while only fully valid to describe elements of capitalism, is nonetheless employed by bourgeois economics to describe labor in precapitalist times. According to Marx, the influence that categories/language have is in shaping our present-day understanding of a very different set of historical circumstances. One should note very carefully that Marx is not arguing that (present) superstructure has an influence on (past) base, but rather on our understanding of past bases.
Yet, as a strategy, the use of noneconomic forces in society to alter the material base is not fully enunciated until Antonio Gramsci takes the term “hegemony” on loan from the Bolsheviks and the Third International and employs it as the cornerstone of a cultural and political “united front” against capitalist forces. Antonio Gramsci is of course widely noted for his theoretical contribution of identifying the “ideological predominance of the dominant classes in civil society over the subordinate” as the hegemony of the ruling class, yet one can argue that an equal contribution was made when he offered his tactical suggestions for combating the totality of ruling class domination.\(^8\) Gramsci argued that for the proletariat to fight the bourgeois state successfully, it is necessary to engage in a counterhegemonic effort that consists of a three-prong war of position for control of the state and civil society. It is the second and third elements of this war of position that are of interest in this context and are in fact interrelated.

As opposed to a direct attack (i.e., the use of violent force) on the bourgeois state, Gramsci argued that the key to working-class success lay in the creation of a specifically working-class culture. This working-class culture would be in opposition to bourgeois cultural norms, which, of course, only served to perpetuate bourgeois domination. While Gramsci never directly addressed the role of language conflict in the construction of his counterhegemonic strategy, chapter 3 will show how language conflict can serve in the war of position: The Norwegian Labor Party (DNA), after decades of a traditional Marxist focus on purely “economic” questions and the need to promote potentially violent revolutionary struggle, eventually came around to recognizing the significance of combating the bourgeois control of culture in general and language in particular.

Linked to this is the third component of Gramsci’s war of position, which proved to make the tactics of coalition-building around language possible. Gramsci suggests that there need to be certain shifts in consciousness before the working-class can be successful in its attempt to fight bourgeois control of the state and civil society. One of the transformations that an individual must undergo is to leave behind the identification with only his or her own respective economic class and instead come to see him or herself as a member of all subordinated classes, who can “come together to form a counterideology that frees them from the subordinated position.”\(^9\) However, Gramsci appears to have held contradictory stances as to
whether or not a successful counterhegemonic war of position should be waged that involved language as a unifying force. On the one hand, he argued that as many of Italy’s dialects were low prestige, it would be necessary for working-class Italians to take advantage of the “normative grammar” offered by standardized and hegemonic Italian if they were fully to take advantage of the modern and unified Italy.¹⁰

Yet, in personal writings to his sister, Gramsci expressed a far different view on the abandonment of nonstandard linguistic patterns for the new, modern Italian. In dealing with the question of what language his nephew ought to be educated in, Gramsci strongly came out for the use of Sardinian, as opposed to Italian, and justified this view by labeling Sardinian as an entirely separate language.¹¹ Regardless of the tension between these views, Gramsci’s development of a united front that would employ a strategy of political and cultural counterhegemony moves us a great deal away from both Wittgenstein and Marx.

What may be thought of in Gramscian terms as a counterhegemonic project utilizing language can also be expressed through Pierre Bourdieu’s focus on cultural capital in general and in some of his specific remarks on the nature of language. The broad outlines of Bourdieu’s analysis have centered around an extension of Marx’s work on capital and the insight that capital as a form of domination cannot be conceived in strictly economic terms. Rather, it is supplemented by at least three additional types: social, cultural, and symbolic. Of particular interest to us here is cultural capital, which can be viewed as the cultural traits that are necessary for children from nonbourgeois backgrounds to attain if they are to achieve a shift in membership from an underprivileged to a privileged group. Alternately, as “natural” members of the advantaged group, bourgeois youth by definition are already rich in the necessary cultural capital that will be of use in perpetuating their dominance over the nonprivileged classes.¹² For Bourdieu, cultural capital, along with the other forms, are thought of in highly strategic and utilitarian terms. He states that the “social world can be conceived of” by:

discovering the powers or forms of capital which are or can become efficient, like aces in a game of cards, in this particular universe, that is, in the struggle (or competition) for the appropriation of scarce goods of which this universe is the site. It follows that the structure