

## Response to Kjell Lars Berge

# Cultural Semiotics and New Norwegian Written Culture

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In his contribution to this volume, "Text-theoretical Presuppositions of New Norwegian Written Culture", Kjell Lars Berge adopts a "cultural semiotics" approach to the theoretical situation of New Norwegian written culture. In other words he theorises New Norwegian as a *textual code*. More specifically he makes use of the theory of cultural semiotics developed by Lotman and the Tartu school and in the applied methods of Roland Posner.

This approach has a number of advantages. First – and most importantly for the general project of theorising the relation between the New Norwegian language itself and the New Norwegian written culture – the semiotic theory is culturally inscribed. In other words, it is by no means independent of the general cultural context in which communication takes place. On the contrary, it underscores the function of culture in the determination of textual meaning. Secondly, it investigates and problematises the *intentional structure* of communication. In other words, it explores the relation between sender and receiver in any linguistic event. It attempts to draw conclusions about the role played in communication by the *intended* receiver, the "model reader". This provides methods for understanding which assumptions and presuppositions about the receiver are implicitly contained in the message and, in some sense, in the language itself. Thirdly, through the general concept of the "semiosphere" it provides a coherent system for gathering otherwise heterogeneous linguistic practices under one umbrella. Fourthly, it

provides a differentiation and clarification of the "semiotic resources" within the semiosphere. In other words, it provides tools for mapping out the available materials from which meaningful linguistic communication can be formed. This encompasses what is commonly called "subject matter", but also includes idioms, forms, common beliefs and myths, etc. Lastly, it permits a number of conclusions about the nature of the relation between oral and written communication, an issue which is central to the principles behind the construction of New Norwegian in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and the official debates on normalisation in the years that followed. The ensemble of these elements in the theory of cultural semiotics provides a context for the hypotheses which Berge proposes for explaining the relative "success" or "failure" of the New Norwegian language.

In what follows I would like to exploit Berge's good labours for my own purposes, using his empirical material to draw some conclusions of my own, to give his theoretical scaffolding an inflection which may go beyond Berge's own intention.

## The Nationality of Language

Berge's exposition begins with an intriguing textual illustration of the potential of the cultural semiotic approach. His object is a largely insignificant pamphlet, authored by two largely insignificant Norwegian peasants – Einar and Reiar – in 1771, during the brief period when freedom of speech was an actively cultivated principle in the Dano-Norwegian kingdom.

The pamphlet gives Berge the occasion to ask a number of theoretical questions about the nature of textual communication, among them, the nature of textuality, intentionality, and the materiality of the text. The pamphlet is allegedly the first text written in "Norwegian". This claim – made not only by Venås and other contemporaries, but by the publisher of the pamphlet himself, as cited by Berge – is in itself relatively problematic, and opens a number of questions about the *legitimacy* and the *nationality* of a language. Many would equate the cultural or anthropological status of a language with its nationality. In other words, the very determination of the nation would be understood as the ensemble of users of a given language. As Berge indicates, without going so far as to adopt this definition, the very fact that the two language-users in

question are peasants, has broad implications for the political status of the Norwegian provinces at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

This notion is supported by the semiotic principles that Berge underscores. The text is as much a *manifestation* of the sovereignty of the Norwegian people as a "message". The *content* of the pamphlet has certain specific economic implications for peasants in general and for the lives of Einar and Reiar in particular, but the "significance" of the pamphlet is in its phenomenological moment, that is, in the pamphlet as an event. Though Berge lays out three "text-theoretical dimensions" of the pamphlet and its content, it is arguably its very *appearance* which carries the greatest semiotic consequences.

## The King is Always Schizophrenic

Closely related to the question of this phenomenological aspect is the question of intentionality and of the intended receiver. Berge points out that the text was most likely *intended* for only one reader, Christian, King of Denmark-Norway. That reader is thus the model reader, not only because he is the only one in a position to take concrete action toward improving the material condition of the two peasants, but also because he is the embodiment of the Dano-Norwegian sovereignty, "both a judicial institution *and* a concrete person in flesh and blood". Christian *is* Denmark-Norway; the intended reader, the model reader is the very institution of sovereignty. It is before this institution that "the Norwegian" is to manifest itself.

Moreover, and as Berge underscores, there is no reason to believe that the King would receive – in the broad and narrow sense of the term – the message sent him by Einar and Reiar through their pamphlet. Countless practical reasons can be imagined as to why King Christian – the model reader – would not ultimately carry out the intended function as model reader. The most significant of these is the King's known mental illness. "The seriously schizophrenic Christian, who lead a hidden life within his huge castle in the King's town, would surely not have had the resources necessary to make him a model reader – or even an actual reader – of this text." The theoretical question, which might be posed here, is precisely what would render possible the convergence of the model reader and the empirical reader. In some sense, in the "event" of understanding, the empirical reader always and necessarily introduces



contingent, unexpected, un-theorised – that is, empirical – elements into the event of communication. In other words, if the intended reader were entirely predictable, completely encapsulated in the intention of the message sender, then no message would be necessary. The “message-ness” would be unintelligible because an empirical divergence between what is communicated and what is received would be unthinkable. Therefore, not only is convergence between the model reader and the empirical reader problematic, it is conceptually excluded. Or, to put it another way, the presupposition of communication is the *non-convergence* of model and empirical readers. The schizophrenic King – one of whose symptoms is the incapacity to live up to the intention of the message sender – is by definition schizophrenic. Were the King absolutely self-present, there would be no communication at all.

## Language as a Contract

One might prolong this kind of speculative reasoning by asking what kind of role language plays in the relation between the King and his subjects, in this case the exemplary Einar and Reiar. The communication between two parties can be construed as a contractual arrangement, as an agreement for exchange, based on given code of exchange or exchange rate: the language itself. Here language is the medium in which unlike “goods” are exchanged: the ideas and notions in the mind of the one, and the words understandable to the mind of the other. Language is a transformational mechanism, the effectiveness of which is contingent on a wide range of variables – cultural, ideological, or other. Like any text, the pamphlet of Einar and Reiar is a reenactment of that pact.

The phenomenon of language is also the assurance of a certain kind of relationship between sovereign and subject in general. Just as it represents empirical things in a transferable system of reference, it represents a *continuity* between the sovereign and the people who use the language. The King – the father – is the ultimate reference of any kingdom, the alpha and the omega of the Danish as well as the Norwegian cultures. If there is anything intelligible about culture, it is the King who has implicit understanding of it, who is the receptacle of the meaning of the people of his kingdom. (If the King were not empirically the ideal sovereign, it would be necessary to invent him as such, to re-theo-

rise the ideal). The democratisation and popularisation processes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in which both the Norwegian nation-state and the Norwegian language are born utterly problematise this. The 19<sup>th</sup> century is the period of transformation from the intrinsic unity of the King's body to the contingent solidarity of popular sovereignty.

## Language and universality

At first glance, language has a kind of democratising effect. Indeed, in many historical cases, the European vulgates were pivotal in the disruption of monarchical grasp on absolute power. Language is available to be used by all, messages encoded in a given natural language are accessible to all members of the national group. It is thus the fundamental element – though hardly the guarantee – of the modern notion of freedom of expression. Language is the sign of the universality of a nation. It is the common substance, shared by all, the emblem of solidarity and commonality.

Still the dialectic converse of this universality of language is its role as the mark of a nation's *particularity* vis-à-vis other nations and national languages. The commonality or solidarity created by the existence of a universal national language on the one hand, is always tempered by the possibility of the presence of *another* nationality or national language. The theme of the foreign as a creative component in any given culture is not new. Historical migrations have been a constant part of the history of the European continent. The waves of migration experienced by Europe in the last decades are only the most recent illustration. Still, the point is clear. The universality of language is always closely associated with the particularity of language.

This tension or paradox can be applied to the Norwegian context, both in terms of the publication of the pamphlet by Einar and Reiar in 1771 and in terms of the language debates of the middle and late 19<sup>th</sup> century in Norway. Einar and Reiar did not intend to write a pamphlet about language. They were concerned with communicating something about the economic situation in the Norwegian provinces. Nonetheless, they did indeed write about language, in the sense that they seized the moment of “freedom of expression” to formulate their thoughts in a written form corresponding to their particular mode of expression. Although it is claimed by Venås, Berge, and others that this is the first



illustration of the "Norwegian language", there was clearly no Norwegian language in 1771. In the narrow sense of "national language" – that of an officially sanctioned, formalised and normalised form of expression – the pamphlet is not written in any "language". Only in the broad sense of the word – that of a coherent system of communication – do the two use language. The pamphlet was not written in "the Norwegian language" but in "the language of (two) Norwegians".

Still, from the Danish perspective, and from the perspective taken by Berge, the pamphlet suffices to express the *universality* of the Norwegian in contrast to the hegemony of the Danish culture, political and military power, and language. The phenomenon of the publication of a Norwegian document establishes in some sense the existence of a self-present culture, which is *other* than the Danish, and which thereby stakes a claim to recognition, as a sovereign, particular culture in the first instance, then as a potential sovereign state in the next. From the Norwegian perspective, however, it would also be necessary to emphasise the particularity of the language of Einar and Reiar with respect to *other* Norwegian languages. Another Norwegian, from a different region, would have written a pamphlet in another "Norwegian" while at the same time insisting on the universality of that language.

The point is that both the universal and particular are operative in any linguistic moment. A language is not a language if it does not assert its universality – its universal applicability and validity – on the one hand, and at the same time recognises its particularity against the horizon of other languages, which in turn assert their own universality.

## Semiotics and Democracy

As is well known, New Norwegian emerges in the 19<sup>th</sup> century from the midst of a particularly virulent, and thus productive debate, about (1) whether there should be a Norwegian language as a consequence of the formation of the Norwegian nation-state at Eidsvold in 1814, (2) what the correct arguments for and against that language should be, and (3) what that language should be. The question of the particularity of the Norwegian language was inseparable from the question of the particularity of the Norwegian culture. Is there something purely and properly Norwegian left after centuries of Danish colonisation? (Or more generally: is there *ever* anything purely and properly distinguishing any national culture inde-

pendently of external influences?) Can one coherently distinguish between Norwegian "high culture" in the sense that it is practised and defended by a cultural elite, primarily educated in Denmark or other places in Europe, and Norwegian "popular culture" such as it is practised in the everyday lives of peasants living in dispersed situations?

## Semiotics and Discourse

After a review of the theoretical foundation of the Tartu school of semiotics, and of the contributions made by Posner, Berge arrives at his own modified definition of a "text": it consists of an "utterance [...] that participants in a certain culture supply with a certain restricted status or value, where the culture has developed its own text norms for how utterances that are being valued as texts, should be structured". This definition would be acceptable with few reservations by someone who, like Foucault, seeks to explore the conditions and presuppositions of any given discourse. Foucault would perhaps put the accent on power dimensions involved in the negotiation of the values, the "structures" and, above all, the restrictions on codes to which Berge refers. A Foucault-inspired discursive approach, like the semiotic, would be interested in the undisclosed, the implicit cultural or social backgrounds and preconditions of any meaningful code.

It is this aspect of Berge's approach that makes his cultural analysis of the state of New Norwegian and New Norwegian written culture quite pertinent. That approach is built upon a synthesis of a number of other approaches and concepts. Berge uses an expanded version of Posner's notion of "mentefacts" (in opposition to "artefacts"), and a modified version of Bourdieu's concept of "social field" in the direction of Lotman's concept of semiosphere in order to create a hybrid analytic tool for his claims concerning New Norwegian. "Semiosphere", in the sense Berge uses the term, is the interplay of different contexts, institutions, and social fields available to the users of semiotic codes, in this case, language. The semiospheres available in 19<sup>th</sup> century Denmark-Norway – scientific, popular, private, legal, literary, religious, etc. – overlap and cross-feed. They are limited and particular. Not all semiospheres are available to all; not all semiospheres have equal status or legitimacy.

Transferring this structural method to current debates about the success or failure of New Norwegian, one then asks which and in what pro-

portion users of the New Norwegian have access to singular semiotic resources. His main conclusion is that New Norwegian is a "restricted semiotic resource". In other words, in a number of areas New Norwegian has only a limited field or set of semiospheres to draw upon. This brings Berge to the high point of his essay. The formulation of the "cultural paradox" at the heart of the phenomenon of New Norwegian: "One should perhaps expect that a language associated with ordinary people and their oral dialects, characterised by authentic Norwegianness, backed by the government and the bureaucracy – that this language would be chosen by the majority of this country as their written language." The explanation he provides is based on the critically limited availability of semiospheres, that is, pools of meaning, available fields of application, which are implicitly attached to the code system. New Norwegian is destined for decline because it is understood as a preservative, not creative language. Its traditional strengths have been in descriptive functions, narratives of recapitulation and recreation. Its defenders typically exploit narratives of recreation at the cost of technical innovation or forward-looking commercial application. This is doubtless true. Berge reminds us that Ivar Aasen's original intention was to attach New Norwegian to a variety of discourses, including the natural-scientific, as a strategy for insuring that it would flourish.

Berge's conclusion about the present state of New Norwegian might, however, be exposed to the criticism that it lacks a historical dimension. Berge's analysis is, in other words, unusually horizontal. Despite the fact that it begins with a penetrating contextualisation of the New Norwegian debate in a discussion of the Norwegian "arche-text", the famous pamphlet by Einar and Reiar, Berge does not seek to draw any conclusions about the continuity or discontinuity of semiotic resources in the period between 1771 and the language debates of the 1840s and 1850s. The next step in the analysis would be more an anthropological one, still within the bounds of the semiotic approach. Semiotic resources are not a-historical. Quite the contrary, the history of a culture *is* the history of its semiotic resources, because history itself is nothing more than one institutionalisation of semiotic resources. The difference between the semiotic-analytic method employed by Berge and the historical discursive approach of, say Foucault, Edward Said, or Hayden White, is that the former is not interested in a deeper analysis of the genesis or history of the discursive limits and strategies which shape the availability of semiotic resources today, and which could provide some indication of their near future.