

Margrethe Kvarenes

Clear language in Norway's civil service: a joint initiative under changing political winds

Abstract

In this article I am going to take you through the major aspects of administrative language in Norway, as viewed by the Language Council of Norway. I will focus on “clear language” issues and describe what we mean by “plain language”, how a government-supported clear language project put wind in our sails, and how we adjusted the sails when the wind changed. I will also describe the success factors of the project, the lessons learned and the work ahead.

Abstract in Norwegian

Bokmål: I denne artikkelen vil jeg ta for meg de viktigste aspektene ved det offentlige språket i Norge, sett fra Språkrådets ståsted. Jeg vil fokusere på klarspråk og fortelle hva Språkrådet legger i begrepet, hvordan et klarspråksprosjekt støttet av én regjering ga oss vind i seilene, og hvordan vi justerte seilføringen etter skiftende politiske forhold. Jeg vil også gjennomgå prosjektets suksessfaktorer og hvilken lærdom vi tar med oss videre.

Nynorsk: I denne artikkelen vil eg ta føre meg dei viktigaste aspekta ved det offentlege språket, slik Språkrådet ser dei. Eg vil fokusere på klarspråk og fortelje kva Språkrådet legg i begrepet, korleis eit klarspråksprosjekt støtta av éi regjering ga oss vind i segla, og korleis vi justerte seglføringa etter skiftande politiske forhold. Eg vil óg gjennomgå suksessfaktorane i prosjektet og kva for lærdom vi tek med oss vidare.

The Language Council of Norway is the Norwegian state's consultative body on language issues. It implements Norway's language policy on behalf of the Ministry of Culture, and its overall mission is to strengthen the Norwegian language and language diversity in Norway.

We cooperate with public and private players on language policy measures, including the use of clear language in public administration, business and industry. We also monitor the use by government agencies of the two official Norwegian language varieties, *bokmål* and *nynorsk*. Our specific tasks include the administration of the correct spelling of our two language varieties; the promotion of the Norwegian language in specific fields such as language technology and terminology; and the promotion of Norwegian sign language and the national minority languages Kven, Romani and Romanes.

1. Our language situation at a glance

Norway has a huge variety of spoken dialects, but only two official written languages: Norwegian and Sami. The Norwegian language exists in two official written varieties, the *bokmål* (“book language”), which is influenced by the Danish language and is currently the preferred written standard of 86% of the population,¹ and the *nynorsk* (“new Norwegian”), which is based on the Norwegian dialects and is the preferred variety of 8% of the population. 5% report that they use both varieties to an equal extent.²

As for Sami, there are three main Sami languages in use in Norway today, namely Northern Sami, Southern Sami and Lule Sami. Sami is the official language in 9 municipalities in Norway, and within a certain geographic-administrative area Norwegian and Sami have equal status. Within this area, any person has the right to use and receive an answer in Sami when communicating with the authorities.

2. The use of Bokmål and Nynorsk in the public sector

2.1 In theory ...

By law, the citizens of Norway have the right to choose the language variety they prefer, and to receive information from the authorities in their preferred variety.

The central authorities should reply to any citizen in his or her preferred language variety and ensure that their overall text production does not drop below 25% in either of the two varieties. All official forms should be available in both language varieties.

Each local municipality, on the other hand, makes an official choice whether to use bokmål, nynorsk or to be neutral. Accordingly, certain rights arise for citizens in the respective communities, entailing certain duties for the local administration.

2.2 ... and in practice ...

Although the minority variety nynorsk is protected by law and its use is monitored, few of the government agencies meet the legal requirement. In practice this means that far less than 25% of their texts are written in nynorsk. This is probably due to the fact that too few civil servants master nynorsk sufficiently: 90% of civil servants (in central authorities) prefer to use bokmål at work, whereas only 5% prefer nynorsk, and 5% report that their preference varies.³

¹ The Language Council's survey on the population's use of *bokmål* and *nynorsk*, 2015

² The Language Council's survey on the population's use of *bokmål* and *nynorsk*, 2015.

³ The Language Council's survey on the central government's use of *bokmål* and *nynorsk*, 2015.

3. Plain language work in the public sector

The Language Council has some ten years of experience in the field of clearer administrative language. This field is referred to internationally as “plain language” work. This term refers to the language itself (or its style), and implies a specific type of language to be used in a particular text; whereas we prefer to use the term “clear language”. This contextualises the written words and tells us something about whether a particular text is clear to its intended audience.

There are several local, regional and international ways to define clear or plain language. The International Plain Language Federation posts this definition on their website (2015):

A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information. (www.iplfederation.org)

As you can see, this definition refers to “plain language” or “clear language” not as a style, but as an approach to writing which puts the reader first.

4. What is the problem with written administrative communications in Norway today?

During the union with Denmark (1524-1814), the Danish king's chancery set the style for written communication in Norway. In fact, Norwegian administrative language – although it is perfectly correct Norwegian – is still influenced by the language of the Danish court. This style, which we call *chancery style* (Norw.: kansellistil), contains many elements of administrative jargon and legalese.

I should stress that this is mainly a problem for *bokmål*, since *nynorsk* is based on dialects and thus its wording and syntax is, by its very nature, closer to how people actually speak.

Although the *chancery style* still has a standing among bureaucrats, its defenders are diminishing in number. The public in general find this style alienating. Our work in the field of clear language involves making civil servants aware of the fact that their language culture – this style – which seems a good and precise tool for them in their work, creates unnecessary distance between writer and reader and causes misunderstandings. As a result, citizens may fail to understand their duties and rights and be unable to participate fully in society. This is a both a democratic problem and an economic problem, as unclear communication is inefficient and expensive.

As already stated, the central authorities are required to reply to any citizen in his or her preferred language variety; make sure that all forms are available in both language varieties; and ensure that their overall text production does not drop below 25% in either of the two varieties. Another problem with authorities' written communication is that although they are bound by these legal requirements, many state agencies fail to fulfil the law. Thirdly, writing skills seem to be eroding.

5. A brief history of clear language work in Norway

Norway has experienced several clear language initiatives from the 1950s onwards. Each decade has seen a degree of interest from politicians in improving and clarifying the language used in the public sector. In recent years, a red-green coalition government in 2005 set clear ideals for the public sector: it should be built on openness and the ability for citizens to participate and get involved. In 2006, the Ministry of Culture established a permanent team of five people within the Language Council of Norway whose goal was to work towards the increased use of nynorsk in the state agencies and to promote better and clearer administrative language regardless of language variety.

6. Where are we today?

Compared to what Sweden and Finland have achieved in terms of well-structured clear language work and research, Norway might not be the Nirvana of clear language (this unofficial title is held by Sweden). But we have learned a lot from our Nordic neighbours along the way, and also from the international clear language community.

The screenshot shows the homepage of klarsprak.no. The header features the logo and navigation links: "Hjem", "Prosjekthjelp", "Juridisk språk", "Le og lær", and "Om klarsprak". The main content is organized into several columns and sections:

- LÆR AV ANDRE:** A featured article with a photo of a person walking on stones, titled "Treng du hjelp og inspirasjon til å finne i gang med språkprosjektet? Her får du artikler om hva andre har gjort for å bli klar på bokstaver i utvalgte ord."
- Kalendarer:** A section for "Alle arrangement, presentasjoner og opptak" with a large "30" graphic.
- SØK I ORDBØKENE:** A search bar with "Søk i ordbøkene" and "Lær mer om ordbøkene" links.
- OLEP:** A section for "Vil du fortsette å bruke gamle ord? Eller hva med å lære nye ord?" with a graphic of question marks.
- NORSK PASIENTKADERSTATNING:** A news item about the Norwegian patient classification system (DPS) and its use in the health sector.
- Juridisk språk:** A section for legal language with links to "Språk og tydelighet", "Slike arbeidsmetoder", "Om samarbeid i Norge og andre land", and "Artikler og undervisningsopplæringsmateriale".
- Skrivehjelpe:** A section for writing assistance with a graphic of hands writing and the text "Skrivehjelpen er gratis og er tilgjengelig for alle som ønsker å lære å skrive bedre."
- TÅKEPRAT:** A section for "Tåkeprat" with a graphic of a triangle and the text "Her finner du eksempler på ulike formuleringer fra det offentlige. Som du vil se, er det ingen grunn til å panikkløse klarene med det tørre."
- Klarspråk:** A section for "Klarspråk" with a graphic of a person and the text "Klarspråk er gratis og er tilgjengelig for alle som ønsker å lære å skrive bedre."

Fig. 1: The website www.klarsprak.no with the pool of knowledge (“Lær av andre”), writing tools (“Skrivehjelpe”), project tools (“Prosjekthjelp”), news (“Nyheter”), events (“Kalendarer”), quizzes and gobbledygook generators (“Le og lær”) and special advice on legal language (“Juridisk språk”)

Today we have a well-structured work programme which rests on several pillars:

- the website www.klarsprak.no, which is a toolbox for both writers and project managers,
- free language support and guidance for clear language start-up projects,
- a separate project and toolbox for clear language in legal texts,
- a pool of knowledge on www.klarsprak.no, with free project descriptions, plans and model documents for downloading,
- clear language awards.

7. Political backing

Since 2008/2009, the “Plain language in Norway’s Civil Service” project, which developed the website and the other main pillars, has been funded by central government. It has been affected by political developments over the past 8-10 years.

Norway has a multi-party system, with numerous parties which must cooperate to form coalition governments or minority cabinets. To take a step back, in 2005 the Norwegian Labour Party formed a red-green coalition government with the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party. The post of Minister for Government Administration and Reform was handed to Mrs Heidi Grande Røis of the Socialist Left Party. She was particularly involved in empowering and involving the public, and stated that “unclear official communication should be the authorities’ problem, not the citizens’”. The Ministry acted on this by asking its brand new Agency for Public Management and eGovernment (Difi) to plan a two year programme for plain language in the civil service, and asked the Language Council of Norway to become involved.

8. A good formula

The co-operation of the two agencies proved to be a good formula. The Language Council offered its language skills and staff who were experienced in promoting and teaching clear language. The Agency for Public Management and eGovernment offered project management skills, a solid knowledge of the public sector, a broad network and experience in organising events. Only with the combined skills and efforts of these two agencies have we been able to reach such a broad audience and create high quality language and communication tools.

9. “Plain language in Norway’s civil service” – main approaches

The programme’s overall *raison d’être* was to facilitate the public’s participation in matters that concern them, in the interest of democracy, transparency and equal opportunities.

The programme was based on the following main approaches:

- gather knowledge,
- share good news and good practice,
- guide and advise,
- develop tools,
- more carrot, less stick.

With a yearly budget of € 500.000, plus the manpower of some 3-4 people, we were able to offer

- local project grants,
- free training courses, seminars and conferences,
- free advice on how to start and run clear language projects,
- seminars (both start-up and advanced),
- conferences,
- free language advice,
- the online toolbox www.klarsprak.no,
- The Clear Language Award.

All grant recipients had to consent to freely sharing their experiences and documents, which has provided useful content for the pool of knowledge (“Lær av andre” – Learn from others) on the website www.klarsprak.no.

10. General Elections 2009: A small change required lobbying

After the General Elections in 2009, the red-green coalition remained, but the Socialist Left Party lost the Ministry of Government Administration and Reform to the Labour party. The new Minister at first was not too aware of the clear language programme, but she changed her tune when she was faced with surveys showing that 1/3 of the population had difficulties understanding authorities’ letters, and detailing the savings potential of clearer administrative language.

The Minister got on board and even had her own stamp made, “Needs clear language”, which she used to stamp documents from her own department that she thought needed clearer language and better drafting. She extended our original two-year project until the end of 2013, and established a sub-project for better language in laws and regulations.

Politically supported programmes like ours are of course vulnerable to changes in the political landscape. As the General Elections of 2013 seemed likely to bring a change in government, preparations were made in advance. In 2012 Dr. Neil James, director of the Plain English Foundation in Australia, was invited to speak at a major clear language conference in Oslo, and also to meet with politicians and civil servants in the Ministry of Government Administration and Reform, to talk about how a major Australian clear language programme had fallen flat in 1996

because of a change in government⁴. Thus, when the political winds actually changed after the national elections in 2013, the project group was prepared to meet the challenges, and could adjust the sails accordingly. The election ended with a victory for the right wing of Norwegian politics, and a Right Wing coalition government was formed by the Conservative Party and the Progress Party. Now, how would the original red-green project, which had been based on transparency, dialogue and citizens' rights to participate, be viewed by the succeeding right wing government, which would focus on efficiency in the public sector and cutting administrative costs? Well, a comprehensive evaluation of the clear language project helped to convince the new Minister, Mr Jan Tore Sanner. The evaluation report demonstrated the work of the project with more than 60 government agencies, resulting in increased awareness and more knowledge about clear language, good results when projects are well rooted, and time and money saved.⁵ Here are some figures:

- 5,300 bureaucrats had attended clear language training courses;
- 85% of the agencies involved had made clear writing a permanent part of their skill development programmes;
- 50% of the involved agencies had or would introduce clear writing in their training programmes for new employees;
- 40% of the agencies involved had established a language service or systems for language quality control;
- 75% of the agencies had included clear language as an explicit goal in their strategies;
- 50% of the agencies had involved earmarked resources for clear language measures.

Lack of resources (time and money) was reported to be the most important obstacle, and it was seen as crucial to establish routines and good methods. The report further stressed that middle managers find it difficult to give priority to clear language in their daily work, and explained this by “the challenges that the middle managers [face in the] in operations of their departments without any dedicated resources and without the enthusiasm and attention that distinguished the project phase. Without a doubt, middle manager's ownership of clear language goals will be crucial to the success of the ongoing efforts”.

⁴ The publication “Språknytt” no 1/2013: www.sprakradet.no/Vi-og-vart/Publikasjoner/Spraaknytt/Arkivet/spraknytt-2012/Spraknytt-12012/Klart-sprak-i-heile-verda1/.

⁵ www.sprakradet.no/globalassets/klarsprak/kunnskap-om-klarsprak/evaluering-av-effektene-av-prosjektet-klart-sprak-i-staten-2013-2.docx.pdf.

11. New goals, same tools

The new government put forward eight priorities in its major programme, two of which are to make people's everyday life easier and to work towards a more efficient administration. The Minister has set out to “renew, simplify and improve” the public sector (Norw: “fornye, forenkle, forbedre”), and the clear language programme was swiftly presented to him as a natural, established tool to achieve this goal.

12. The road ahead

To meet the need for basic training, we are launching an online clear writing course in May 2016, together with the Agency for Public Management and eGovernment (Difi). In line with the findings of the evaluation report, the course includes a module for middle management, addressing the questions “why?” and “how?” in order to get them on board, and provide them with tools.

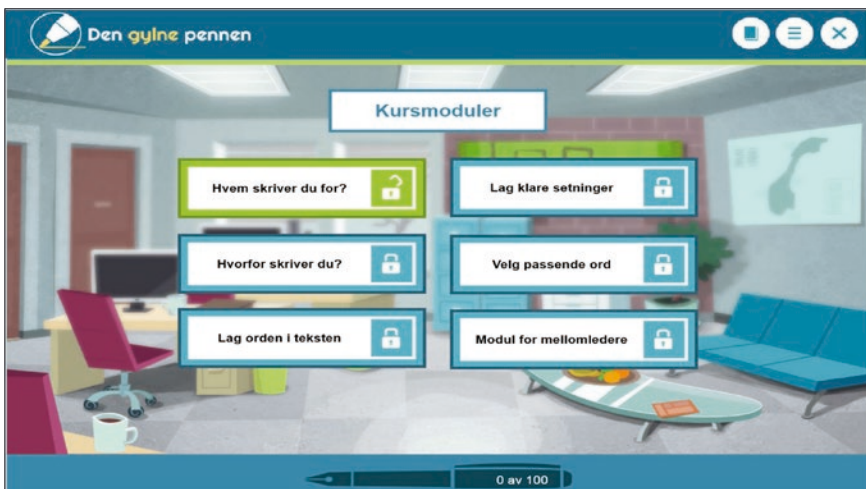


Fig. 2: The online clear writing course's main structure: Who is your audience? / What is the text's purpose? / Create a good structure / Choose the appropriate words / Module for middle management

To raise clear language awareness and also provide tools for local administration (the municipalities), the Ministry of Local Government and Administration recently launched a five-year clear language programme for local administration. This programme has followed the model of the project *Clear Language in Norway's Civil Service*, where the main lesson learned is that we cannot direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails.

Bibliographical information

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The electronic PDF version of the text is accessible through the EFNIL website at:

<http://www.efnil.org>