

General Outline

Summary

The Research Network *Language and Culture Contact in the West-Nordic Region*, or *West-Nordic Network*, for short, is a group of researchers interested in the Western Nordic Region (i.e. the west coast of Norway, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, and Greenland), focusing on language and culture contact (inside and outside) in this region, including literature, linguistics and language learning.

The Network has been established in 2016, bootstrapped with support from two grants from NordPlus Nordic Language,¹ and currently comprises more than 20 researchers specializing in one or several of the languages in the region, their literature, and/or closely related topics. The Network has developed a common vision on the goals for needed and fruitful research on this region to be carried out in cooperation within the network. Subgroups of the network apply for individual collaborative projects that contribute to the overall vision. Other researchers are welcome to join the Network if their research contributes to its common goals.

This document lays out the general background and the common vision and goals of the network, and outlines individual project plans and the relation of the network with the new Vigdís International Centre at the University of Iceland.

Broader context

Different societies, their cultures and in particular their languages have always been in contact with one another, and this contact has always inevitably transformed all participating sides to some degree. Language use and language change always occur in a culturally diverse context, simultaneously feeding back into its own context. Often languages gain from such contacts, in particular enrich their vocabulary, but often one of the languages is also weakened and may even cease to be spoken at all.

Now, in times of enhanced mobility and migration, when previously remote areas are getting in the focus of countries and international organizations, we need more than ever to understand what the dynamics of such encounters are, and what factors can contribute to make them as enriching and sustainable as possible for both sides. Understanding the tendencies and patterns of the development of such encounters through time is necessary as well as having a deep understanding of the multifaceted synchronic situation and the particularities in each of them.

The Western Nordic Region (WNR) provides very interesting conditions (see below) for us to further our understanding of the dynamics of encounters between languages and cultures. The knowledge gained from research on this region may then be compared with that from other regions in the world, so that aspects of it can be applied or transferred to them or contrasted with them. Ultimately, this may lead to recommendations for language policy and socio-cultural actions that help to strengthen in particular smaller languages and less developed societies, supporting them instead of forcing them to blend with the dominant society and ultimately disappear.

From the outset, and from previous research (see references), we know that many factors are involved in the dynamics of encounters between cultures and languages. Besides obvious factors

¹ One for around 2016, which enabled the first Network meeting; and one for Oct. 2016–Dec. 2018; the latter allows for three Network meetings and a conference.

such as the sheer size of the groups involved (the numbers of speakers), their technological and economic development and the emerging economic and political relations (often dependencies or other relations of dominance), important factors are literacy and literature and other highly valued domains of language use; the role of multilingualism, the self-esteem and attitude towards the local language as well as the openness in interacting with other societies and to integrate new practices and elements.

The Western Nordic Region as suitable for exemplary case studies

The Western Nordic Region (WNR) is an especially suitable area for further developing our understanding for several reasons. It is a well delineated region that is aware of common cultural and linguistic characteristics. In particular, all societies and their languages have been in contact with the Danish nation and language, because Denmark was the colonial power over the whole region, for different time periods in each case (with the Faroese and Greenland belonging to the Danish realm [rigsfællesskabet] to this day). Thus, the historical scenario of this region has many of the same characteristics as, say, the Commonwealth, with a politically dominating language thriving side-by-side with a range of local languages – however, here these local languages are far clearer demarcated (historically and geographically), involving much smaller and more homogeneous populations, and above all, are far better documented; as the history of the region since the first settlements is generally well studied.

Interestingly, most of the local languages (viz. Norwegian, Faroese, Icelandic) are more or less closely related to Danish, also being North Germanic languages, and a completely unrelated language, Greenlandic completes the picture (the varieties of the now extinct Norn language on the Shetland and Orkney Islands as well as Sami in the eastern periphery of the region could be added to this picture).

So, in the whole region, Danish was for centuries the language of the colonial power as well as the common lingua franca, but the outcome for the different societies and in particular their languages has been quite different, demonstrating in particular that the size of the societies and speaker communities is not the most decisive factor to determine the fate of local languages. Other factors include the geographical distance from Denmark, the extent of the link with Denmark, and the amount and type of activities which had to be carried out in collaboration with the Danes, the status of the literature in the different languages, or their role in the respective school systems. These show some common traits, but mostly significant differences. Icelandic, for example, had a strong tradition as a written language throughout its entire period of contact with Denmark, while in contrast written Norwegian and Faroese only developed in the nineteenth century, and Greenlandic is the official language in the country only since 2009. Certainly the differences with respect to linguistic-structural distance between the Mainland Scandinavian languages Danish and Norwegian, the Insular Scandinavian languages Faroese and Icelandic, and the two structurally very different languages, Sami and Greenlandic, must be taken into consideration, too.

The common goals of the Network

The researchers in the network agreed to collaborate in order to contribute to our general and specific understanding of the history and current situation of the societies and in particular their languages in the WN-region in contact with one another and with other cultures and languages. The general leading questions are:

What characterizes the WNR as a distinct region, in particular with respect to its languages?

What is the past and current situation of the languages as central element of the culture of the societies in the WNR? More specifically: What do we need to describe and analyse to understand these situations, also in view of evaluating language policies and other socio-cultural actions aiming at strengthening the languages and societies of the region?

Why and how does the situation of the individual languages vary? More specifically: How far can we explain the current situation of each of the languages in the WNR with common – common within the region and more broadly – tendencies and patterns, and what in turn are the individual specific and peculiar factors that need to be taken into account?

These questions will be approached from various angles, with different foci and using different methodologies, for instance focusing on the sociolinguistics, the literature, the (linguistic and general) history, and the development of the structure of the languages.

The language situation in focus here includes the contact with other languages, not only Danish but also (sometimes intermediated via Danish) German, Latin, French Spanish and now in particular English. (In the future, languages of immigrants and their adaption and contribution to the local linguistic situation may also be included.)

The development of the lexicon in the different languages will play a central role, as it stands in the core of the development of the languages and the ideas and concepts that were expressed in them. Loan words and assimilation processes, for instance, indicate the mutual influence of one language and society over another, and the development of new words (as calques or completely autochthonous) evidence other strategies for introducing new concepts in a changing cultural and social environment.

The diachronic / historical perspective will be important for a number of subprojects; in some other cases, it may be necessary to focus on having a reliable and clear picture of the current situation (for instance in the case of Greenlandic).

The recent developments involving digital technology, with the new possibilities for regional and global communication such as in social media or via hand-held devices, add a whole new dimension to the setting in the focus of the Network, with additional factors to evaluate the vitality and adaptiveness of languages to new challenges which also pose a number of intriguing questions for developing new language policies. Similarly, migration and tourism has, in different degrees, become an important factor in the recent development of the respective societies. Again, which strategies are the best for the languages to react to these new challenges?

The Network is confident that, with their combined efforts in understanding the past and current socio-linguistic situation in a broad sense that includes literature and language-related aspects of culture, it will contribute to having a sound base for taking the right decisions for the future of the WNR, but ultimately also to many other regions that are exposed to comparable developments.

The Network and the Vigdís International Centre for Multilingualism and Intercultural Understanding

Recently, an international centre has been established at the University of Iceland, under the auspices of UNESCO, in order to promote, and to foster research on, linguistic diversity and multilingualism in a context of intercultural encounters. The Centre carries the name of Vigdís (Finnbogadóttir), the former president of Iceland. This is no coincidence, as Vigdís has shown a longstanding interest in and engagement for the promotion of the fruitful and peaceful coexistence

of different languages, as is not least evidenced by her role as UNESCO goodwill-ambassador for language diversity.

The spirit of continuing Vigdís' mission led to the foundation of the Centre; and it is a similar general motivation that resulted in setting up the Western Nordic Region Research Network. Furthermore, the Centre and UNESCO have agreed to start the Centre's work focusing on the closer region, i.e., the WNR. Therefore, the Network and the Centre are seeking to cooperate wherever possible and useful for both sides.

The Centre can accompany and support the activities of the Network. In particular, the Centre can disseminate the results of the research carried out by the Network in future local exhibitions and/or online. The members of the Network will therefore consider, wherever this seems feasible and fruitful, to include components of visualization and accessible presentation of the results in their research activities and project proposals.

Participants of the Network

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Current project plans

The following projects as part of and contributing to the Network have been discussed and are planned to be developed if funding can be obtained:

I. Language.

a) Danish influence in the West Nordic Region in historical times.

Participants: Auður Hauksdóttir (HÍ), Karoline Kühl (Københavns Universitet), Gunnstein Akselberg (Universitetet i Bergen), Zakaris Hansen (Fróðskaparsetur), Nina M. Andersen (Københavns Universitet), Katti Frederiksen (Grøn. Sprognævn), Karen Langgård (University of Greenland), Per Langgård (Grøn. Sprognævn), Peter Juel Henriksen (CBS).

b) Danish – research in education, (in progress).

Participants: Pernille Folkmann (HÍ) and Þórhildur Oddsdóttir (HÍ).

c) West-Nordic Morphosyntax: Big-data methods in areal and genealogical linguistics, (in progress).

Participants: Þórhallur Eypórsson (HÍ).

d) Computer Games – language learning & technology.

Participants: Per Langgård, Peter Juel Henriksen, Zakaris Hansen og Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson (HÍ).

e) English in the West Nordic Region.

Participants: Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir (HÍ), Karen Langgård (Grønlands Universitet), and Elisabeth Lanza.

II. Literature, Culture and Translation.

a) German influence in modern Nordic literature.

Participants: Bergur D. Hansen (Fróðskaparsetur), Gísli Magnússon (HÍ). More experts in this field of research will be invited to participate.

b) Travel Literature in the West Nordic Region.

Participants: Oddný Sverrisdóttir (HÍ), Erla Erlendsdóttir (HÍ), Bergur D. Hansen og Malan Marnersdóttir (Fróðskaparsetur).

c) Colonialism in the West Nordic Region.

Participants: Hólmfríður Garðarsdóttir, Malan Marnersdóttir og Brit K. Mæhlum (NTNU).

d) Literature of the North – collaborative research project between the International Laboratory for the Comparative Multidisciplinary Study of Representations of the North in Montreal and the Vigdis Institute of Foreign Languages, (a possible near future research project).

Participants: Daniel Chartier, (UQAM), Ásdís R. Magnúsdóttir (HÍ), Guðrún Björk Guðsteindóttir (HÍ), Ingibjörg Ágústsdóttir (HÍ), Karen Langgård (University of Greenland), and Birna Bjarnadóttir (SVF).

References

Kühl, Karoline (2015): Danske aflæggere i Nordeuropa: Færødansk, sydslesvigdansk og bokmål. In *Danske talesprog* 14, pp. 29-54.

Kühl, Karoline (to appear): Translocated Danish in Northern Europe. In *Sociolinguistica*.