Norwegian for Genealogy and Everyday Use

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I have found Norwegian to be a relatively easy language to learn. This outline gives some of the basics for those that want to know the language either for genealogical purposes or for everyday use. Also provided are some references for further assistance, including some word lists for genealogy.

There is much about Norwegian that is easy:

- a similar sentence structure to English

- there are a fair number of words that are similar to English

- no conjugating of verbs

- almost all verbs follow a single pattern from infinitive to present tense

- past tenses of verbs follow regular patterns

- definite (“the”) and indefinite (“a”, “an”) articles and adjectives are the same for all cases (nominative, accusative, dative, genitive)

- the plurals of most nouns are regular

Naturally, there are some things that are somewhat challenging, including:

- nouns have genders, which affect the definite articles, indefinite articles and endings on adjectives

- there are three “extra” letters as compared to English -- æ, ø, å

- there are endings to adjectives, which change with gender and whether there is an article before the noun

- there are two official Norwegian language, with many dialects, and changes over the years. Older church and other official records are likely to be in Danish.

And, of course, some things are harder than others:

- speaking Norwegian is harder than reading it. There are fewer opportunities to learn to speak Norwegian than to learn to read it, there are several strong dialects that are difficult even for Norwegians to understand, there are many silent letters and the sounds of several vowels can be hard for some people to learn.

- some words can have multiple meanings. “Gift” can mean “married” or “poison”. “Terne” can either be “tern (the seabird)”, or “female servant”.

- prepositions can both have multiple meanings, and are often not directly translatable

- idioms can be a challenge in any language. In Norwegian, expressions dealing with time are often confusing to English-speaking people.

Any language will take time to learn. The purpose of this writeup is to be a guide for future study. Given this, let’s turn to some grammar to help build a foundation for learning the language. The focus is on bokmål, the most commonly used Norwegian.

Nouns

Nouns are the most popular words in Norwegian. A review of a Norwegian dictionary found that just under 66% of all words listed were nouns. In a review of Norwegian newspaper articles (a total of one million words), just under 28% of all words were nouns. There are three genders of nouns:

masculine - the word for the indefinite article “a” is “en”. For example, “en bil” is “an automobile’

neuter - “a” is “et”. “Et vindu” is “a window”

feminine - “a” is “ei” . “Ei dør” is “a door”

Note that masculine and feminine are in some cases combined and known as the “common gender” and uses the “en”. Also notice that each in each of the above examples, the word is very similar to English. These similar words are known as “cognates”.

Definite forms of nouns

To form the definite form of the noun, the article is added to the end of the word. For the feminine form, the “ei” changes to an “a”. So, we have:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| the automobile | bilen |
| the window | vinduet |
| the door | døra |

Plurals of nouns

For almost all masculine, feminine nouns and neuter nouns of more than one syllable, the indefinite plural is typically formed by adding the letters “er”. So, we have:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| automobiles | biler |
| windows | vinduer |
| doors | dører |

An exception is single syllable words that are neuter (have et for a). In the indefinite plural, they do not take an ending.

The definite plural usually uses the ending “ene”. So, following the examples above, we have:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| the automobiles | bilene |
| the windows | vinduene |
| the doors | dørene |

Possessives of nouns.

The possessive is formed by adding an “s” to the end of the noun, without an apostrophe.

Exceptions

There are exceptions to each of these rules (especially with words that deal with people) , but the above will get you through most of the situations that you will encounter. For example, the plural of “mann” is “menn”, just like in English. These are often easy to figure out in the text.

Other noun cases.

There are no distinctions used for the other cases (accusative, dative) of nouns.

Verbs

The second largest group of words in the above mentioned review of newspaper articles found that just over 18% of all words used were verbs. Verbs are a treat in Norwegian compared to other languages. There is no conjugating of verbs!

Present tense

Generally, the present tense of the verb is formed by taking the infinitive and adding the letter “r”. (The infinitive form is what is found in the dictionary.) Thus:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Infinitive | Present | English |
|  |  |  |
| komme | kommer | come |
| ha | har | have |
| se | ser | see |
| like | liker | like |

There are some exceptions, of course. Here are the most common:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Infinitive | Present | English |
|  |  |  |
| være | er | to be |
| vite | vet | to know |
| si | sier | to say |
| gjøre | gjør | to do or make |

Past tense, and present participle

For the English verb, “to eat”, the past tense is “ate”, while the present participle is “(have) eaten”. For Norwegian, the are several different classes of verbs, and, like English, memorization is necessary.

In somewhat of an order of frequency, here are the four main forms of the so-called “weak verbs”:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Present | Past | Past Participle |
|  |  |  |
| -r | -te | -t |
| spiser | spiste | (har) spist |
| eat | ate | (have) eaten |
|  |  |  |
| -r | -et | -et |
| snakker | snakket | (har) snakket |
| speak | spoke | (have) spoken |
|  |  |  |
| -r | -dde | -dd |
| bor | bodde | (har) bodd |
| live (in a place) | lived | (have) lived |
|  |  |  |
| -r | -de | -d |
| eier | eide | (har) eid |
| own | own | (have) owned |

There are many exceptions to these above cases, where there are vowel and even some consonant changes. And “strong verbs” have so much strength, they don’t follow any rules, but instead must be memorized. But that’s for more advanced study!

Modal verbs

Modal verbs are also known as “helping” verbs. Modal verbs rarely appear without a main verb. For example, in English, we might say: “He can write well.” The verb “can” is the helping verb, while “write” is the main verb. There are some of the commonest of all verbs after “is” and “have”. There are six or seven in Norwegian, with five being especially common. The main verb is always in the infinitive when used with a modal verb:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| English | infinitive | present | past | past participle |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| can | kunne | kan | kunne | kunnet |
| must | måtte | må | måtte | måttet |
| should | skulle | skal | skulle | skullet |
| want, will | ville | vil | ville | villet |
| is permitted to | få | får | fikk | fått |
| ought to | burde | bør | burde | burdet |
| dare to | tore/turde | tør | torde/turde | tort/turdet |

Passive voice

Norwegian uses the passive voice a lot more than English does. If I say “Mary washed the car.”, this is in the active voice. If I say “The car was washed (by Mary)”, this is in the passive voice.

In Norwegian, the passive voice can be indicated either by the infinitive and the letter “s” at the end of the verb or by using the verb “blir” plus the past participle for the present tense, or “ble” plus the participle for the past tense. There are other forms that build upon this foundation.

Imperatives

The imperative is the command form of a verb - “eat your food”, “have a good day.” In English, we use the infinitive. In Norwegian, they take the infinitive and generally drop the “e”. “Spis maten din”. “Ha en god dag”.

Pronouns

Pronouns – I, you, he, she, it, we, they, etc. -- made up just under 12% of all the words found in a review of newspaper articles. Unlike nouns, there are cases with pronouns. Moreover, the endings of possessive pronouns change with the gender of the noun that the pronoun is associated with.

Nominative pronouns

These are straight forward and should not cause much problem in learning:

Singular Plural

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| jeg | I | vi | we |
| du | you (informal) | dere | you (informal) |
| De | you (formal) | De | you (formal) |
| han | he | de | they |
| hun | she | de | they |
| den/det | it | de | they |

Direct object

If someone gives something to me, the word “me” serves as a direct object. For pronouns in Norwegian, this is done as follows:

Singular Plural

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| meg | me | oss | us |
| deg | you (informal) | dere | you (informal) |
| Dem | you (formal) | Dem | you (formal) |
| ham | him | dem | them |
| henne | her | dem | them |
| den/det | it | dem | them |

Reflexive pronouns

If you do something for yourself (like comb your hair), “yourself” is the reflexive pronoun. They are the same as the direct object pronouns, except in the 3rd person:

Singular Plural

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| meg | me | oss | us |
| deg | you (informal) | dere | you (informal) |
| Dem | you (formal) | Dem | you (formal) |
| seg | him | seg | them |
| seg | her | seg | them |
| seg | it | seg | them |

Possessive pronouns

These are the most challenging of the pronouns included in this short introduction to Norwegian, because the endings change with the gender of the noun, as do adjectives. The forms given are in the order of singular masculine, neuter, feminine, and plural. Reflexive possessive pronouns (that is, the person or thing that is the subject of the sentence also owns the object) are the same except in the third person, where the pronouns are sin, sitt, si and sine.

Singular Plural

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| min, mitt, mi, mine | my, mine | vår, vårt, vår, våre | ours |
| din, ditt, di, dine | your, yours (informal) | deres | your, yours (informal) |
| Deres | your, yours (formal) | Deres | your, yours (formal) |
| hans | his | deres | their, theirs |
| hennes | her, hers | deres | their, theirs |
| dens/dets | its | deres | their, theirs |

Adjectives

Adjectives modify nouns and in a review of newspaper articles, made up just over 9% of the words used. Adjectives have one difference in Norwegian as compared to English -- they take endings depending on the gender and number of the noun and whether there is a definite (“the”) or indefinite (a”) article in front of the adjective. The choices for endings are none, -t for the indefinite neuter singular, and -e for all plurals and definite singulars. Not bad at all !!

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Masculine | Neuter | Feminine |
|  |  |  |  |
| Singular, indefinite | en fin gutt | et fint hus | ei fin kake |
| Singular, definite | den fine gutten | det fine huset | den fine kaka |
| Plural, indefinite | fine gutter | fine hus | fine kaker |
| Plural, definite | de fine guttene | de fine husene | de fine kakene |

Of course, there have to be exceptions to any rule and adjective endings have their share. Mostly, it is for words that don’t take certain endings, or adjectives that end in double consonants that lose one of the consonant in the plural form. An important exception is for the adjective is the word for little.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Masculine | Neuter | Feminine |
|  |  |  |  |
| Singular, indefinite | en liten gutt | et lite hus | ei lita kake |
| Singular, definite | den lille gutten | det lille huset | den lille kaka |
| Plural, indefinite | små gutter | små huse | små kaker |
| Plural, definite | de små guttene | de små husene | de små kakene |

Adjectives also have comparative and superlative forms, such as cold city, colder city and coldest city. Often the endings for these forms are -er and -est, similar to English. Plenty of exceptions exist, just like we have good, better, best. Here are four exceptions that are especially helpful for genealogy:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| English | Standard | Comparative | Superlative |
|  |  |  |  |
| old | gammel | eldre | eldst |
| young | ung | yngre | yngst |
| many | mange | flere | flest |
| small | liten | mindre | minst |

Prepositions

Prepositions are big in Norwegian, making up over 11% of the words in the newspapers reviewed. Some are also challenging because they have multiple translations, and in two situations that seem similar to English speakers, would use two drastically different prepositions. They just have to be memorized.

For example, a young person would go “på en skole”, while an older student would go “ved et universitet”. A person can live “på Hamar”, but would live “i Oslo”.

The only rule for prepositions that I can offer is that for certain prepositions of motion and position (such as “opp”, which means “up”), if movement, the short form is used. If only the position is described, then an -e is added.

# Time Expressions

These are tricky for most English-speaking people, but important in genealogy. Three common forms are modeled:

for tre år siden three years ago

om tre år in three years (in the future)

i tre år for three years

BUT! ikke på tre år not for three years Books for learning Norwegian on your own:

I highly recommend *Norsk, Nordmenn og Norge*, Kathleen Stokker og Odd Haddal. Includes a text book with 28 chapters and an extensive, a very well done grammar section, a work book, an anthology and all lessons on cassette. Has exercises in each chapter, but not the answers. Is available at some public libraries.

*Norwegian in 10 Minutes a Day*, Kristine Kershul, is colorful, having pictures of the things that represent nouns. It also includes phonetic descriptions of how to pronounce words. There are work exercises with answers and stickers to put on objects around the home or office. It avoids grammar, and keeps things fun. Good for an introduction, but the tradeoff is in less depth. Available at public libraries.

Norwegian language resources

I have been away from this topic for over a decade, but a search in August 2018 found the site <http://www.101languages.net/norwegian/>, which appears to offer a variety of very useful-looking resources, all for free.

Norwegian language learning on the internet

This is a nice site which requires interaction - <https://www.duolingo.com/course/no-BO/en/Learn-Norwegian-Bokm%C3%A5l-Online> . There is no cost.

Norwegian-English Genealogical term internet list

There are a lot of sources for these; I recommend <http://martinroe.com/blog/index.php/norwegian-genealogy-dictionary-2/>

Norwegian-English paper dictionary

I recommend Einar Haugen’s *Norwegian English Dictionary*, University of Wisconsin Press.

Electronic dictionary

A number of web pages provided free dictionaries either on-line or for download. Google Translate is also improving.

In a study of newspapers in Norway, it was found that 50% of all the words in the articles consisted of less than 200 individual words. The 30 most common words in Norwegian newspapers were:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| i | in, at |
| og | and |
| det | it, the, that |
| som | which |
| er | is |
| til | to |
| en | a, one |
| av | of |
| på | to, at |
| for | for |
| at | that |
| å | to |
| med | with |
| de | they, the |
| har | has |
| den | it, the |
| ikke | not |
| et | a, one |
| om | about |
| fra | from |
| var | was |
| han | he |
| men | but |
| seg | him or her self |
| vil | will or want |
| vi | we |
| ble | became |
| ved | by means of |
| kan | can |
| man | one (person) |