



Philip Holmes and Hans-Olav Enger. *Norwegian. A Comprehensive Grammar*. London and New York: Routledge. 2018. 553 pages.

The book under review is the outcome of collaborative work by two of well-known linguists representing different grammatical traditions, who nevertheless complement one other quite well. It offers a valuable source of information about the grammar of modern Norwegian in the Bokmål standard and about the orthographic rules that apply to this variant of the language. As the authors themselves stress in the Preface of their grammar, “this is the first attempt to write a truly comprehensive English-language grammar of Bokmål” (p. ix), and in this respect it is indeed a unique publication. This makes it very practical for learners, particularly given the scope of the use of the Bokmål standard among Norwegian speakers – as the authors themselves estimate, “a reasonable guess is that 7 out of 8 Norwegians write Bokmål” (p. 2).

According to the information provided by the publisher, the grammar is above all intended for “the serious student of Norwegian” as well as for “students of comparative linguistics”, and in my view it fully satisfies both those intentions. Considering the descriptions of grammatical categories, we can add that it is also targeted at self-motivated students interested in translation who have a solid command of English, which is consistently taken as a major point of reference in explaining grammatical rules. Phonetic issues are omitted from this description of Norwegian grammar because, the authors argue, the great dialectal diversity of spoken Norwegian and the great tolerance of Norwegians for such diversity essentially render it impossible to identify a single ‘standard’ of spoken Norwegian. This fact, which could be seen as revealing a certain weakness or incompleteness of the grammatical description provided, paradoxically represents an additional source of encouragement to study Norwegian grammar in greater depth – as a language whose native speakers do not exclude those who use it without meeting the demands of a precisely defined standard, but are rather intrigued by those who speak differently, perhaps also less grammatically. Especially at the start of the language-learning process, it would be hard to find a more comfortable implication in learning grammar.

The book starts with an Introduction, in which Holmes and Enger address the question of “What is Norwegian?” In just six pages, they manage to give readers a reliable introduction orienting them in the complex linguistic situation present in Norway, while at the same time encouraging them to study Norwegian grammar more intensively. They draw attention to the relationship between the two variants of written Norwegian – Bokmål and Nynorsk – and how they

function in the socio-cultural context. The approach so presented enables the reader to understand why the authors chose to treat only one of these standards (and the variation within it), while not writing off the other. Rather, the authors claim that Nynorsk was not treated in this volume for a lack of time/space, implying that its grammatical description has merely been postponed until later.

The authors of *Norwegian: A Comprehensive Grammar* adopt the traditional classification of words into parts of speech, which undoubtedly opens up the grammar to a broader group of readers. Good examples of this can be found in the approach to adverbs, or in the category of *Pronouns and determiners*, which, as the authors point out (p. 135, 154), are treated as two different word classes in the broadest grammatical description of Norwegian, *Norsk Referansegrammatikk* (1997). In Holmes and Enger's grammar they are treated together, as "different uses of (the same) words", which renders the complex character of pronouns as a word-class and may encourage students interested in linguistics to investigate the cognitive foundations of how grammatical categories function in language, as complex, prototype-based networks with indistinct boundaries.

The issues discussed in the grammar are illustrated by well-chosen examples (many of them taken or adapted from a corpus), sometimes referring to prominent individuals and current events, which gives the publication a dynamic flare and certainly facilitates remembering the content. On p. 187, for instance, the usage of the Norwegian quantifier *flest* 'several', which unlike *flere* 'several' can occur after its accompanying noun, is illustrated with the example *Nordmenn flest var ikke så begeistret for Trump* 'Most Norwegians were not very enthusiastic about Trump'. While learning a grammatical rule, the student can associate it with an opinion that has existed in public debate in Norway. References to extra-linguistic content intended to pique the interest of readers can also be found in the many commentaries it provides. A good example of this is the explanation on p. 143 about the Norwegian approach (different, we should add, from the Swedish one) to the use of the personal pronoun *hen*, which is neutral in terms of gender. Thanks to such an approach, the authors present Norwegian as a dynamic social phenomenon, subject to change and shaped by the will of its users, as expressed in the linguistic conventions they employ, including on the grammatical level.

The explanations are free of linguistic jargon. The vast majority of them are full and concise. Among the numerous examples, we can mention here the good explanation of the issue of reflexivity (pp 167–172) and the whole of Chapter 10, dealing with sentence structure and word order. The authors (like teachers engaged in pedagogic work) are not afraid to provide the student with useful

pieces of informal advice, meant to facilitate independent grammatical study and the development of linguistic competence. For instance, on the issue of conjugating verbs, which is no simple matter in Norwegian, the authors offer advice in the form of a well-known saying – “birds of a feather go together”, together with a rule-of-thumb explanation that a “verb will often inflect like another verb with which it rhymes” (p. 210), encouraging readers to take up the challenge and experiment with the language in communication already at an early stage of study. Ultimately, the use of an ungrammatical form is not likely to render an utterance incomprehensible, as “the chances are that a Norwegian will understand anyway” (p. 211), the authors write reassuringly. This thoroughly didactic approach, assuming that it takes time to absorb the grammar of a language and allowing for grammatical mistakes, is a unique trait of Holmes and Enger’s publication. Here, the study of grammar is meant above all to be a source of pleasure, satisfaction, and practical knowledge.

Nevertheless, the grammar cannot be said to provide a reference source for students irrespective of their level of grammatical knowledge. The potential reader is expected to have at least some basic awareness of grammatical concepts and categories. Explanations addressed to individuals who have never encountered a grammatical description of this sort occur relatively rarely. Irrespective of their degree of advancement in this respect, however, readers can also count on the authors’ assistance in the form of the included extensive glossary explaining numerous linguistic terms (those not explained in the descriptions of individual grammatical categories), supplemented with an English-Norwegian and Norwegian-English glossary of such terms.

Moreover, readers taking *Norwegian: A Comprehensive Grammar* in hand, should realize that many grammatical phenomena are explained in it from the perspective of an English speaker, which sometimes unnecessarily complicates the description (even under the assumption that the vast majority of people in today’s world know English to some extent). It should not be forgotten, however, that Holmes and Enger’s grammar requires that the student consider each piece of content and study it attentively, because only through such an approach to grammatical issues can the reader be sure to learn the language and gain practical command of it. This is facilitated by a user-friendly paragraph structure and by a system of intertextual references.

Against the backdrop of other grammars, the authors of this one take a uniquely translation-oriented approach to certain grammatical issues. They stress that one of their objectives is to teach readers “how to render Norwegian accurately into English” (p. ix). Even if this assumption relies upon a certain

simplification of what translation actually involves, it certainly opens up students' awareness of such issues, enabling them to realize how grammatical structures carry meanings and as such are a very important aspect of translation. The authors of the grammar demonstrate this approach also indirectly, in their own very apt renditions of Norwegian linguistic examples into English and, in exceptional cases, of English expressions into Norwegian (e.g. p. 354).

Practical study of Norwegian grammar is also aided by the way the authors combine grammar with certain elements of phraseology, as is evident for instance in the case of expressions of time (p. 133) or the use of interjections (p. 364–366). A similarly helpful trait is the way the book deals with different styles in contemporary Norwegian.

Like any grammar, *Norwegian: A Comprehensive Grammar* inevitably takes certain stances on grammatical issues that are open to debate. For instance, it defines such categories as Definiteness or Indefiniteness formally (not notionally). The former is therefore reduced to the presence of the definite article, the latter to the presence of the indefinite article. However, there are also uses of nouns without any article, the so-called 'naked noun' in the singular. The book takes a predominantly contrastive perspective, and issues are presented in simple juxtapositions such as Definite article in Norwegian – Indefinite article in English, etc. The student therefore learns where to "insert" a certain article or where to remove it, which represents a quite old-fashioned approach to the problem. This is especially true from the perspective of readers who do know English and can utilize Holmes and Enger's grammar as a source of knowledge about Norwegian, but in whose native languages Definiteness and Indefiniteness are expressed by other means and so mastering the system of article use in Germanic languages poses a serious challenge to learners. Such an approach will leave many such learners with only a very superficial understanding of these categories. Only a serious student with an attentive eye may perhaps notice that, for instance, each Norwegian noun (not including an end article) in such expressions as *I den **natt** da han ble forrådt, ...* 'On the same night in which he was betrayed, ...' (I Corinthians 11:23), *Det er den eneste **glede*** 'That is the only joy' (p. 155), *Det gode **liv** er en drøm* 'The good life is a dream' (p. 156), *Det hvite **hus*** 'The White House' (p. 157), or *Denne forunderlige **by** som ingen forlater før han har fått merker av den* 'This strange city [viz. Oslo] that nobody leaves before it has marked him' in a citation taken from Hamsun (p. 159), etc. is indeed definite and not indefinite, as the authors maintain.

The grammar therefore encourages questions about the understanding and description of grammatical categories in language. In my view, it makes a valu-

able and practical contribution to presenting Norwegian to an international audience, and it should undoubtedly be on a nearby shelf of every student interested in modern Norwegian and comparative linguistics. However, such students may be also encouraged to notice a slight error on p. 6 where the authors claim that what was once known as Serbo-Croatian is now the set of four languages Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian, and Macedonian. The latter should be definitely Montenegrin (as Macedonian is similar to Bulgarian, not to Serbo-Croatian in any construal).

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