

## Love, Space-Time, and Language: A Taste of Norwegian Culture

by **Alex Mellbye**, MSc Sociology student at LSE



I would daresay that one of the reasons people are drawn to sociology is an aim for self-understanding, at least, this is certainly my case. However, as all who do sociology are aware of, the self, or to put it a different way, identity, is always contextual. For me now, the context for my identity is nationality. After all, English is not my native language, I am not British, I have no family in London, yet here I am. A Viking descended from the cold hard north of Norway. Not for plunder or women (although neither would hurt), but for that vainglorious goal of study and knowledge. It is within this context then that I find myself reflecting on where I am from as opposed to where I am now – which is to say, by living in England I have become more aware and reflective of what it means to be a Norwegian. By writing this blog post I am therefore hoping and attempting to present a perhaps somewhat logically consistent sketch of what I at least would consider the core aspects of Norwegian culture.

For me, the first and foremost thing to keep in mind when trying to understand Norwegian culture is the relationship between Norwegians and their nature. As some might know, Norway is to the far north of Europe. This means that not only do we have very varied seasons but also a very varied nature. For example, average temperatures change from +25/+30 C in summer to -15/-20 C in winter. Due to our 'northness', the amount of sunlight during the day varies dramatically from having virtually none during the darkest month of the winter, to summer in which 'night' does not really exist as the sky is always lit up. As to the nature itself, you will find a mixture of rough mountainous areas, to agricultural lowlands, to the long coastal line with its famous fjords. What all of this amounts to, in my view, is that you find a society in which certain spatial and temporal concerns emerge. And these issues are at the core of Norwegian culture. Two (badly translated) popular expressions that testify to this are the following:

*Det finnes ikke dårlig vær, bare dårlig klær* – 'there is no bad weather, only bad clothing'.

*Borte bra men hjemme best* – 'travelling is fun, but home is home'.

The first one is such a stereotypical Norwegian saying. It is what we tell each other when it is cold and we are trying to be cool about it. However, it also contains a temporal awareness of the change inherent in a seasonal climate. Similarly so for the second saying. This is perhaps somewhat equivalent to the English 'home is where the heart is'. The way I read it is as a spatial concern with Home and not-Home; between safe and not-safe or private and public. In my view,



such concerns are at the core of Norwegian culture as this is extremely compartmentalised. By this I mean that for Norwegians there is a time and place for everything, and messing with that is awkward for us as it disturbs our space-time cognitions. Talking with strangers on the bus is a great example. Why would you do that? It is public not private space, you do not know them, and if you are to know them then that's not the right place for it. It is not a social space, but a transitional one. Norwegian culture is therefore quite formal in some ways. In our cognition there is a procedure of delineating the world into

spatial and temporal distinctions which must be obeyed. As a result of this, however, we suck at small talk.

This can of course be a problem of integration as foreigners and immigrants who do not understand the appropriate space-time codes might initiate interactions at the wrong times and places – interactions which might then be seen as socially awkward or even rude. This is also interesting in a linguistic sense as our failure to engage in comfortable, low-pressure small-talk can even be seen in our language. Unlike in Britain, for example, we do not have any equivalent for the extremely useful word *mate*. Yes, there are translations that give variations of 'friend', yet no real working alternative. There exists therefore no way of quite comfortably addressing a stranger without making it something of a formal introduction. This is quite a real and significant limitation of Norwegian culture and language; you either are or you are not. Either we will both invest our time in an interaction, or we will completely abstain from engaging. Anything in-between is fuzzy, difficult and uncertain. To illustrate this further, I think an analysis of our emotional words is very apt.

Let us take the word *love*. In Norwegian this is *kjærlighet*, a word which is powerful and heavily loaded with connotations. Why? Well, on the one hand there is the formalism of Norwegian culture. You don't love a movie or a friend with *kjærlighet* the same way English speaking people say 'I love this song'. It is far too intimate. Or you do, and **really** mean it. But on the other hand, it also comes from the linguistic structure of the word. You see, whereas many English words seem to be invented from thin air, Norwegian words tend rather to be constructed from pre-existing words. *Kjærlighet* is no different. By deconstructing it you find that the core root of it is *kjær* which refers to something that is dear/cherished or 'close to your heart'. You therefore have the expression: *du er kjær for meg* = you are dear to me/ I cherish you. The Norwegian word for love is therefore not 'love' in the English sense but rather a form of 'that which is dear to me'. For me at least, this conveys a stronger and more profound meaning than the English *love*. And, this is not mere coincidence but rather due to the very grammatical structure of the word itself.

As I hope to have demonstrated, in Norwegian culture I think you see a way of living which is very compartmentalized. A society in which people have a cognition which sharply delineates certain areas and places for certain purposes and not for others, arising I believe out of our historical need for clear-cut, unambiguous, efficient ways of dealing with an uncompromising and demanding nature. In terms of living experience, this means that bonding with Norwegians might be difficult as we have some specific concerns and opinions about how to do things (never show up uninvited at a friend's place for example). Yet on the other hand, should you succeed in creating strong social ties then you will discover an amount of warmth and softness as contrasted by the rough and inhospitable nature in which we live. Even if it is a culture marked by strong delineations of codes of conduct and etiquette, there is nevertheless a vivid and touching social life beneath it. As an acquaintance of mine once said: "it's hard to make a Norwegian friend, but once you do you have a friend for life".

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