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Linguist works with locals to preserve Norwegian-American dialect

By Marlene Deschler, Community Reporter

Wednesday, June 24, 2015 11:04 AM

Stroll the streets of Spring Grove and one might just hear bits and pieces of Norwegian being spoken; attend a Sons of Norway meeting and it's likely one will hear even more spoken.

The Norwegian language local speakers are using is unique to the local area, including dialects of the immigrants who first came here and used to speak with each other, sometimes combining dialects from different parts of the country.

There are also words used in this unique Norwegian dialect that don't exist in Norway as they are words that were melded into the language from the English speaking immigrants who also lived in the area.

Nearly five years ago, linguist researchers from Norway visited Spring Grove and other towns in the region to see how much Norwegian language was still being spoken, if any, and which dialect was prominent. At that time, they did not know what they would find for language, but were happily surprised when they discovered there were still people speaking the language their ancestors taught them.



Norwegian linguist Janne Bondi Johannessen gave a presentation at the Giants of the Earth Heritage Center about the project she has been working on regarding the Norwegian dialect that is spoken yet in the United States. MARLENE DESCHLER/SPRING GROVE HERALD

The lead researcher and University of Oslo professor, Janne Bondi Johannessen, returned to Spring Grove in May to meet again with the Norwegian speakers and to delve a little deeper into the dialect they speak. This Norwegian language is called Heritage Norwegian as it was spoken at home and not at school.

"It is very interesting to look at the words and grammar used in the language spoken here," said Johannessen. "The words can show us if there has been contact with other Norwegian-Americans and if there is an American-Norwegian vocabulary that has remained stable over time."

Researchers collected 200 hours of recordings when they were in the United States doing their research in the fall of 2010. Of these many hours, 20 have been transcribed and the words have been put into a database. This is an important step in the research as this database can then be searched for certain words to see how they were spoken in the United States. This research is being used in Norway and has inspired other countries to doing similar research into their languages in the United States.

"Through our research, we have learned that the language and culture was kept more often in small communities, such as Spring Grove," Johannessen said. "When people immigrated into bigger cities in the United States they didn't keep their native language. If people didn't keep their Norwegian heritage through language, they often made the tie through other ways like cooking traditional foods such as lutefisk or lefse or through painting such as rosemaling."

When conducting the interviews in the United States, the researchers preferred that the American-Norwegian speakers converse amongst themselves so the researchers could observe and record their language without influencing them with their own dialect. One way they got conversations started was by showing them pictures on a screen and asking them to talk about it, describe it, share any memories associated with it and other comments. From this method, the researchers could then find out what grammar and vocabulary were used.

The researchers do feel an urgency for recording and preserving as much of this language as they can because it has not been passed down through generations; the remaining generation that speaks this Norwegian-American language is generally 70 years of age and beyond. This detail piqued the researchers' curiosity and so they inquired into the reason from their speakers.

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“When we asked them why their generation hadn’t taught Norwegian to their children, many of them replied, ‘I don’t know,’” said Johannessen. “I think it was hard for many of them when they went to school and they only knew Norwegian and they weren’t allowed to speak it there, so it was hard for them to learn in a language [English] that they did not know; they didn’t want their children to go through this experience, they wanted the best for their children so they spoke English to them and not Norwegian.”

Two research assistants were also with Johannessen on this research trip to the United States. These assistants have been working on transcribing past interviews and also helped record the current interviews.

“I was stunned by how well they spoke Norwegian having never been to Norway,” commented Linn Iren Sjønes Rødvand. “I love listening to their Norwegian dialect.”

“It was fun to laugh together and have a nice time with them,” added Eirik Tengesdal.

“We are extremely grateful that these people gave of their time to be recorded, this is very important information that we couldn’t gather without the generous attitude of these people,” Johannessen concluded. “With these recordings we are able to preserve this language and continue to study it in the future.”



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I have been working on project with my 91 year old father who speaks Norwegian we made some videos with some of his friends and relatives speaking with each other. Look and listen on this website. <http://norwayverdi.blogspot.com/> My email is keithalc06@yahoo.com. Questions comments.

Keith Gilbertson 7/30/2015 2:39:00 PM [Report this comment](#)

Is there somewhere online that we can listen to some of the dialogues? That would be fascinating!

Catherine Springer 7/13/2015 9:04:00 AM [Report this comment](#)

This sounds so interesting. I am first generation American-Norwegian. Most of my family who spoke fluent Norwegian have passed away. I struggle to remember how to speak Norwegian. It would be wonderful to have Norwegian speaking neighbors!

Allyn Haaseth-Sweet 7/11/2015 10:02:00 PM [Report this comment](#)

I am a Professor of Environmental Studies at Prescott College, in Prescott, Az. I am researching the tradition of planting a tuntre in the courtyard of Norwegian farms, and am curious if anyone in Spring Grove knows if this tradition was brought to America by Norwegian immigrants.

Doug Hulmes 7/10/2015 1:04:00 PM [Report this comment](#)

Is there a link or access to the database?

Karen 7/10/2015 9:11:00 AM [Report this comment](#)

I wonder if folks in Spring Grove realize how special it is to have the gathering places such as Giants of the Earth Heritage Center to help focus the connections between our history and our futures. We are so glad the University of Oslo is now familiar with our area as a hotbed of culture.

Jill Storlie 7/10/2015 7:26:00 AM [Report this comment](#)

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