1. Introduction

During the first large-scale waves of emigration from Norway to the United States, Wisconsin was the state that had the highest number of Norwegian settlers. By 1870 approximately half of Wisconsin’s inhabitants were foreign-born (Oehlerts 1958) and these newcomers, in Wisconsin and throughout America, prioritized the printing of newspapers and other publications in their native language. The reasons for developing this kind of immigrant resource were manifold, but one explanation is that “[n]ews is a kind of urgent information that men use in making adjustments to a new environment, in changing old habits, and in forming new opinions…The press has become an organ of speech. Every group has its own” (Park 1922: 9). Speaking of the Norwegian-American press, Haugen (1969: 125) explains that “[t]hey had the tremendous task of enlightening their immigrated countrymen about the ways of America, and at the same time they wished to keep them informed about developments in the homeland.” Between 1847 and 1962, Wisconsin had more than 30 Norwegian-language newspapers, though many were short-lived, and others merged. Wisconsin was the birthplace of the first Norwegian-American newspaper, and remained important through the development of the greater Norwegian-American press.

Immigrant-language newspapers are often observed as a separate category, but it is important to consider their place in the broader early American press. They tended to be local, small, and very short-lived. In fact, they faced the same challenges as any other local newspapers at the time—irrespective of language. Oehlerts (1958: v) explains that the success of any publication was dependent on established mail routes, and that eager would-be editors and publishers began newspapers in newly settled areas before they were truly sustainable: “The pattern of premature establishment—and rapid failure—was repeated across the entire West under the stimulus of improved communications and local pride.” In spite of legislative attacks on the German-language and the wider immigrant-language press during WWI, these publications suffered in large part from horizontal local ties giving way to vertical ties—something that affected all local institutions, but especially in immigrant communities where it meant the disappearance of an entire linguistic domain (Salmons 2002). Other challenges that small local newspapers faced during WWI include general economic difficulty and that many men working in the newspaper business were sent off to war (Oehlerts 1958).

Newspapers help create, sustain, and challenge linguistic standards and ideas about how language “should” be: “As institutions, newspapers and their editors have a long history as upholders and disseminators of linguistic standards” (Percy 2012: 200). Norwegian-American newspapers, for example, had to decide whether to resist or adopt the language reforms as they developed in Norway. Contact with English also raised the question of incorporating anglicisms. Was it community-specific creativity, or a foreboding signal of language loss? Newspapers contribute to these matters indirectly in usage, and directly through meta-commentary. In addition to standards, newspapers also played a role...
in upholding and disseminating ideologies. As many Norwegian-American newspapers worked from politically, morally, and culturally motivated platforms, it is no surprise that ideologies of all kinds made regular appearances in these texts. It was not uncommon for newspaper editors to also hold political, religious, or academic positions that influenced which perspectives and ideas were featured. Most Norwegian-American newspapers, and their editors, had strong ties to the Lutheran church and openly championed causes like prohibition and abstinence.

Irvine (2012: 1) defines “language ideologies” as “conceptualizations about languages, speakers, and discursive practices.” She goes on to say that “[l]ike other kinds of ideologies, language ideologies are pervaded with political and moral interests and are shaped in a cultural setting.” This perspective can be applied to the language ideologies of immigrant communities—within the cultural setting of a new country, language ideologies take shape as new political and moral interests develop. So, in addition to Haugen's and Park's claims, I argue that Norwegian-American newspapers used language ideologies to fuse and promote the common goals of 1.) preserving a community language, and 2.) upholding a general and religious sense of morality. According to Woolard (1998: 22), the purpose of studying language ideologies “is to examine the cultural and historical specificity of construals of language, not to distinguish ideology of language from ideology in other domains of human activity.” My approach takes this idea further. Yes, language ideologies should not be examined in isolation, but it is also important to explore how language ideologies work in tandem with ideologies in other domains, e.g. family and religion. I seek to determine if there is a clear ideological relationship between morality and language, and, if so, in what ways are they linked?

Two perspectives of morality will be useful when considering the contents of this paper. The first is from a more general perspective of moral reasoning, which “serves, for example, to guide and determine one’s moral judgment and behavior, to prod and persuade others, and to defend and bolster behaviors to oneself and others that in fact are driven by other motives…” (Jensen, McKenzie, & Pandya 2011: 1). The “other motive” pushed forward through the many examples in this paper is the desire to preserve Norwegian as a community language, which, in turn, should reinforce other positive moral results in the society, e.g. piety, respect for one’s elders. The second perspective of morality is directly linked to a sense of religious spirituality, or righteousness. Religion and morality have always been “closely intertwined” (Hare 2014: 1), and in the Norwegian-American context—the two concepts were deeply connected in the Lutheran church, at home, in school, and, as I will demonstrate, in the Norwegian-language press in Wisconsin.

2. Source Material: Reform

The newspaper that I draw my examples from is the Eau Claire newspaper Reform (1886–1941), the second longest running Norwegian language newspaper in Wisconsin after Superior Tidende. Reform is unique in its longevity, its commitment to promoting Norwegian language, and in that it is the only Norwegian-language paper in Wisconsin that has been comprehensively digitized. Using Reform’s articles to find data for this project has been especially rewarding considering its dedication to the “moral health” of its reading community.

Lovoll (2010) provides a valuable historical context for Reform and its editors, which I will summarize here. Arbeideren (The Laborer, or The Worker), a journal in Eau Claire founded and edited by Reverend Gjermund Hoyme merged with Afholdsbladet, (The Temperance Magazine) a journal from Chicago edited by Ole Br. Olson who had just moved to Eau Claire. Reform picked up where Arbeideren left off advocating for abstinence, prohibition, and a strengthening of the Lutheran church. The result of these merged publications was Reform, which ran from February 29, 1886 to September 18, 1941. Olson initially hired 23-year old Waldemar Ager as a printer. Ager was later promoted to manager and co-editor, dedicating his life to Reform, and taking over as chief editor when Olson passed away in 1903. Ager’s own personal convictions and desire to promote Norwegian language and culture made him a good match for upholding the major tenets of Reform’s ideologies. Reform lost some steam, and readers, after the end of prohibition in 1933, but remained in print until Ager’s death in 1941.
Though there were always other contributors to Reform’s content, Lovoll (2010: 271) gives Ager credit for running “a one-man publishing and editorial enterprise.” While this is a generous tribute to Ager’s hard work, it also demands acknowledgement of the kind of control that comes with editorship. When considering the agenda-driven newspapers of the early Norwegian-American press, it is essential to mention that many of them were very small operations. The editors wrote, chose, and re-worked content to suit the goals of the publication, some more heavy-handed than others. Ager even included content that he wrote under pseudonyms, but the extent of this is unclear. One might claim that the examples sourced from this body of material so closely curated by Ager might reflect his language ideologies rather than an entire community’s. I would argue that Ager’s own ideologies were likely shaped by those of the wider Norwegian-American community.

3. Method

The digitized newspapers are located in the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire’s Ager Museum Collection hosted online by ResCarta-Web, a platform for digital conversion. The newspapers are searchable by date and keyword. I used the keywords: morsmaal ‘mother-tongue’, det norske sprog ‘the Norwegian language’, and hjemmets sprog ‘language of the home’. When reading through more general results, these terms occurred with high frequency in articles with relevant content. Morsmaal and hjemmets sprog, with their more sentimental connotations, tended to appear in articles communicating strong moral imperatives. The search system does not catch everything, but it is highly successful. The similarity of some letters in the Gothic print, along with type-setter tendencies to substitute some letters for others, causes confusion in the optical character recognition (OCR). Other recognition difficulties can be attributed to difficult visibility of the print, especially in some of the older newspapers where the letters are faded or the exposure on the scanned image is very high. For example, the recognition system mistakes /nl/ for /m/, /p/ for /v/, /a/ or /h/ for /ll/, parentheses for /l/, /b/ for /h/, etc.

The excerpts I selected, and translated, contain examples of metalinguistic discourse, or language about language. The data for this paper was collected from 26 different Reform articles. Each of the examples relate Norwegian language to a general sense of morality, a religious sense of morality, or both. In this paper, I present a smaller selection of my findings that best encapsulates the overall results.

4. Examples: Norwegian, a Path to Righteousness

In a Reform article from 1897, someone using the pseudonym En enfoldig Sjæl ‘A Simple Soul’ wrote a three column complaint about parents who were not teaching their children enough Norwegian, and speaking to them far too often in English. The writer says that mothers use phrases like “you shut your mouth” instead of a Norwegian være stille, claiming that due to the mother’s own inadequate knowledge of Norwegian, she resorts to English:


[It is not the language of the heart these mothers are speaking to their children. That language of the street. It is demoralizing…The error lies deeper than the language. It lies in their character.] (November 16, 1897. 12 (46): 4)

This writer also describes Norwegian as the conduit to spirituality that must not be obstructed with impure speech; linguistic purism is aligned with the concept of religious purity. Other denounced

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1 As mentioned previously, these newspaper articles from Reform were accessed online through the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire’s Ager Museum Collection hosted online by ResCarta-Web. I will be including citations for each article referenced parenthetically after the English translations in the body of the text.
anglicisms in this article include “never mind,” “all right,” “quit that monkey business,” and “go and do that.” These examples of code-switching are pointed to in order to invoke the image of immorality. Equating the occasional use of English with deep and immoral character flaws is extreme, but perhaps effective for the writer’s end goal of maintaining Norwegian as the community language. In 1909, Norwegian-American parents are reprimanded again, this time by Ager himself, in an article titled “Et religiøst Underlag” (A Religious Foundation):

(2)  
Og de Forældre, som ikke kan bibringe Børnene sit eget Morsmaal og sine egne Idealer og Slegtfølelse, vil heller aldrig kunne bibringe dem sin egen religiøse Opfatning.

[And those parents, who cannot impart their own mother tongue and their own ideals and feeling of family to their children, will never be able to impart their own religious understanding to them either.] (July 16, 1907. 22 (29): 2)

This example takes a less accusatory approach than the last, but still places responsibility on parents. Norwegian language, ideals, and a strong sense of family are the foundation, according to Ager, that pave the way for religion. Here, Ager points to parental failure to explain why the Norwegian Lutheran church risks losing younger members. They may attend American English-speaking churches instead, where the language is easily understood, but where Aanden ‘the spirit’ is fremmed ‘foreign’. Ager explains that the Norwegian Lutheran church is more suitable—Norwegians take religion far more seriously, and religion runs much deeper with them because “der er mere Dybde i den norske Folkekarakter end den amerikanske” (there is more depth in the Norwegian character than in the American). Parents must keep Norwegian alive at home to protect the religious integrity of their children, and to ensure the longevity of the Norwegian Lutheran church. The theme continues with a letter submitted by reader Johanna Frønseth from Milan, WI (1917):

(3)  

[I have often heard old respectable people, who otherwise speak their Norwegian dialect; but when they speak to their children, so must it be in English. Ridiculous and contemptuous to the highest degree. God must open their eyes, so they can learn to value their own parents, their mother-tongue and their fatherland. Without this, they will simply be unable to love God or their neighbor.] (February 6, 1917. 32 (6): 5)

Heritage, language, community, and religion are described here as essential and inseparable features of Norwegian-American society. More specifically, God and spirituality are rendered inaccessible without their mother-tongue.

A representative from Normalskolen, a Norwegian-language Lutheran affiliated school in Madison gives hope for the future of Norwegian in America. The writer describes how the students actually prefer speaking in Norwegian in certain contexts:

(4)  
Og det gjør de, ikke fordi de trør at det maa saa være; men fordi ‘det falder lettest, naar de skal si noget som hører til Religion.’

[And they do this, not because they believe it must be so; but because ‘it comes the easiest, when they will say something on the topic of religion.’] (January 23, 1917. 32 (4): 3)

Considering most children in Norwegian-American communities received their religious education in Norwegian with Norwegian materials, it would be a challenging task to talk about such matters in
another language. This gives insight into a later pattern of logic that ultimately led to church publications in Norwegian-American communities being the first to include material in both English and Norwegian (Park 1922). Churches eventually adopt a much different stance than these reform contributors. It became necessary for churches to disassociate Norwegian from religious morality. If religious experience is confined to a language undergoing shift, the church might fail to preserve the moral stability of the community without providing appropriate accommodation.

In each of these examples, a link connecting general and religious morality to the ability to express oneself competently in Norwegian, without the influence of English, is clearly drawn. There is also a misunderstanding of the nuances of bilingualism, which was not uncommon at this time. If spoken competently, separately, and within the right contexts, English was not much of a threat. English encroachment into Norwegian domains, and elements of English bleeding into Norwegian speech were the real fears. Parental failure is identified as the primary culprit, and the home as the domain where the link between morality and language needed its strongest foundation. There is a very palpable fear that the loss of Norwegian will initiate the unraveling of the moral fabric holding the community together. Conversely, these moral perspectives are used to fortify and preserve culture, language, and heritage.

5. Examples: Churches under Attack

World War I (1914–1918) marked a high point in an already steady stream of xenophobia in the United States. A new kind of nationalistic skepticism was burgeoning where “it was no longer enough to learn English and assimilate: the political climate of the era required that immigrants discard all other allegiances but to America” (Pavlenko 2002: 178). At this time, German-Americans were the primary targets of widespread “Americanization” legislation and “English only” policies, but many other immigrant groups were affected. The goal was to homogenize the American population culturally, linguistically, and politically. The Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 were used to suppress voices that criticized or interfered in the United States war effort, especially those involved in organized labor and radical socialism (Preston 1994). Many of those voices belonged to Swedish-, Norwegian-, and German-Americans (Lovoll 2010). Other legislative decisions directly targeted the immigrant press. In October of 1917, Congress made a move to outlaw “commerce with enemy nations” and censor foreign-language newspapers (Lovoll 2010: 261). According to Lovoll, this act required reform, and other socialist or left-leaning publications, to submit English translations of any political content for review. Lovoll (2010: 259) also mentions that reform was one of the newspapers that expressed sympathy for Germany, citing that “[m]any leading Norwegian Americans admired German civilization; the cultures had Lutheranism in common.”

During an earlier nationwide “Americanization” effort, the Bennett Law (1889) came into effect in Wisconsin delegitimizing schools that taught in any language other than English. Petty (2013: 48) cites the Wisconsin State Legislature (1889):

No school shall be regarded as a school, under this act, unless there shall be taught therein, as part of the elementary education of children, reading, writing, arithmetic and United States history, in the English language.

German-Americans and Norwegian-Americans were particularly upset by this as they “interpreted the law as an affront to their culture, their language and—since by 1889 most German and Norwegian instruction occurred in parochial schools—religion” (Petty 2013: 48). The Bennett Law was repealed only a year after its introduction as a result of outcry from immigrant communities across Wisconsin. The new wave of “Americanization” legislation during and after World War I sought to eliminate foreign languages from as many domains as possible, and this time churches were direct targets. Though no such laws had come to pass again in Wisconsin, the Norwegian-Americans in this state were closely watching as it happened just next door in Iowa. After Governor William Harding passed the Babel Proclamation on May 23, 1918, they feared their right to practice religion in their mother
tongue might soon come under threat. Governor Harding decreed many of the usual restrictions including establishing English as the only language of instruction, and forbidding public conversations or speeches in a foreign language. However, this proclamation took it a step further: “Let those who cannot speak or understand the English language conduct their religious worship in their homes.”

Many contributors and subscribers wrote in to Reform to express their indignation at such a measure. The first mention of the Babel Proclamation came in early June of 1918 in an article titled En merkelig Proclamation ‘A Strange Proclamation’ written by a contributor with initials S.K:

(5) Dersom Proklamationen virkelig er slig, som Telegrammet meddeler; kan der vel neppe være Tvil om, at den strider mod Landets Konstitution…Den katolske messe foregaar paa Latin, og Latin er, som bekjendt hverken Landets eller Iowas “officielle” Sprog…vil da Guvernøren forbyde al katolsk Gudstjeneste i Staten, saalenge Krigen varer?

[In the case that the proclamation really is true, as the telegram describes, then there can hardly be a doubt that it goes against the country’s constitution…Catholic mass goes on in Latin, and Latin is, as known, neither the country’s nor Iowa’s “official” language…will the governor then also ban all Catholic church services in the state, as long as the war lasts?]

(June 4, 1918. 33 (23): 4)

The writer is baffled at the contemptible measure, but raises two important questions. How far is the Governor of Iowa planning on pushing this decree? How far is the nation willing to go in order to suppress the rights of others and to enforce linguistic homogeneity?

In January of 1919 “Gamle Iver Madson” (Old Iver Madson), writes that he never thought that he would be forbidden to speak his own mother tongue. Considering his progressed age, and the great injustice of these limitations, he couldn’t wish for anything else other than to soon “faa fare herfra i Fred,” or to soon “get to leave from here in peace.”

(6) Hør nu her: Er det ikke sandt som det er sagt af Paulus…at i de sidste Dage skalde vanskelige Tider være at forvente; men at det skalde bli saa riv-ruskende vanskelige Tider, at en gammel Kroksom jeg og flere med mig ikke skalde være saa meget værd at vi kan faa være sammen med andre og faa høre Guds Ord i vort eget Morsmaal, saa vanskelig troede jeg ikke det skalde bli.”

[Now listen here: Is it not true as it is said by Paul…difficult times could be expected; but that they should become such rip-roaringly difficult times, that an old man like me, and several others like me, should not be worth so much that we are allowed to be together with others to hear God’s word in our own language, I never believed it would become this difficult.]

(January 14, 1919. 34 (2): 2)

Madson uses scripture to illuminate how ridiculous it is to expect the elderly, many of whom have little need for English otherwise, to suddenly speak and understand English. The move effectively bans them from attending church altogether.

Svig. Rødvik contributed multiple articles to Reform in which he rails against the “infamous” language ordinance in Iowa. Rødvik takes the position that Governor Harding acted and continues to act directly “against God’s message and provisions…where he has created many languages on earth.” This policy, and others like it, is characterized as ungodly and hostile to religion itself. In 1919 Rødvik wrote an article titled “Sprogfanatismen” (Language Fanaticism) where he mentions specific repercussions:
(7) Geistlige og Prester, er fortælles det, forbudt at meddele Folk det hellige Sakramente i deres Morsmaal. Det er ogsaa blit dem forbudt at forrette Begravelser eller tale trøstende Ord ved Graven til den afdødes Paarørende i deres eget Tungemaal, det eneste Sprog de forstod. I et Tilfælde blev endog en Kirke, hvori der prædikedes i et “fremmed” Sprog sat Ild paa og nedbrændt.”

[Clerics and priests, as it is told, are forbidden to deliver the holy sacrament in their mother tongue. They have also been forbidden from conducting funerals or speaking words of comfort at the gravesite to the deceased’s relatives in their own language, the only language they understood. In one case, a church in which there was preaching in a “foreign” language was even set on fire and burned down.] (March 4, 1919. 34 (9): 3)

Rødvik uses words like “brutality” and “tyranny” to set up this section of his article. Not only does he highlight the inhumane interpretations affecting funeral services, but also how society at large is responding to these anti-immigrant measures with violence.

Peder Langback (1919) responds to the question of whether the word norsk ‘Norwegian’ should be taken out of the den norske Kirke ‘The Norwegian Church’ in order to make it sound more kosmopolitisk ‘cosmopolitan’. He defends keeping Norwegian as an integral part of the name, the church services, and other domains in his community. He dismisses the suggestions to abandon Norwegian in these contexts as “fanatical patriotism:”

(8) Vil du se en gudløs norsk Befolkning her, saa luk Kirkedøren for dem — den norske Kirkedør.

[If you want to see a godless Norwegian population here, then close the church door to them — the Norwegian church door.] (May 6, 1919. 34 (18): 3)

In this set of examples, the writers do not point an admonishing finger as others do in Norwegian, a Path to Righteousness. Instead, they are in a complete outrage—standing in defense against policies that directly targeted their right, and the right of others, to attend places of worship. The response was strong, and came from a variety of perspectives. The prevailing themes include positioning legislators and their supporters as enemies of religion, the inhumanity with which people were being treated, and the godlessness of a Norwegian-American population without access to their language in church.

There is no argument being made in any of the examples that religion, morality, and language are connected—it was already known. Yet, the process of attacking this ideological link solidified its existence and legitimacy.

6. Conclusion

My research question yielded significant results indicating that yes, there was a strong ideological correlation between morality and language in the pages of Reform, and in the wider Norwegian-American psyche. These ideologies were both established and upheld through newspapers, and it is easy to feel the weight of the writers’ comments—even today. Language and morality, especially religious morality, were seen as inseparable foundational elements in Norwegian-American society; if one was threatened, the other was not safe.

The vulnerability of both morality and language are at the forefront of these examples, and weaving the two together was a protective mechanism against two different kinds of threats. In the first set of examples, Norwegian: A Path to Righteousness, there is a clear ideological connection between religious morality and language maintenance. In those examples, the threats are internal. Members of the Norwegian-American community themselves are accused of, and warned against, failing to impart their native language and good morals to the younger generations. In the last set of examples, Churches under Attack, the threat is external. The inseparability of language and morality had long been established, but “English only” legislation attempted to separate these concepts in efforts to eradicate “foreign” language from as many domains as possible.
There is more to learn here, and I plan on looking at other digitized newspaper collections for additional examples of language ideology. Other future directions for my research include looking at morally centered language ideologies in other immigrant and multilingual contexts in the United States and the Nordic region, examining the history of moral perspectives expressed by advocates of “English only” movements, and exploring how Ager’s literary work relates to the major themes in this paper.

References


