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Johan Ernst Gunnerus – **Studies of the Norwegian Language**

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Abstract

As is well known bishop J. E. Gunnerus contributed substantially to the study of natural science. Less known is his contribution to the study of contemporary Norwegian language. Even if restricted in scope his contribution to the study of Norwegian dialect words deserves attention. A collection of dialect words preserved in the University Library of Trondheim, the Gunnerus Library, was not published till 1980 – a piece of work inspired, as pointed to in the present contribution, both by physico-theological ideas and work in the same field by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.

Key words:

J.E.Gunnerus, dialect words, physico-theology, G.W.Leibniz.

We often hear about bishop J. E. Gunnerus as a natural scientist – a botanist and a zoologist in particular. To what extent, we may well ask, did Gunnerus contribute to the study of the vernacular Norwegian language? Or to put it differently: To what extent did the spoken language he heard around him matter as something worth

investigating? The short answer to those questions is that he did contribute, even if not extensively, and, yes, he seems to have seen it worth while spending time on studying the language spoken in his bishopric. The important point to note is that he took an interest in language as such, an interest that should, I think, be seen both in the context of the general scholarly paradigm within which he worked as a natural scientist – and in the context of the modest contemporary work conducted in the field of language studies in Norway, contemporary with his own work, that is.

As for the former of these two contextual frameworks, I think it is correct to say that Gunnerus considered even language to be part of the studies of nature that preoccupied him so much, inspired as he obviously was by the contemporary physico-theological ideas that originated in England around the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries. The relevance of physic-theology to dialect word studies had been pointed to by Gunnerus's colleague in Bergen, bishop Erich Pontoppidan (1698–1764), who published a *Glossarium* of Norwegian dialect words in 1749 (Pontoppidan 1749), the preface of which contains an explicit reference to the physic-theological way of looking at nature, language included. Material of the kind provided by his glossary, Pontoppidan says, “might supply a Derham or his equals amply with substance for *physico-Theognostical* deliberations.”¹ There is every reason to think that this particular contribution to Norwegian word studies meant a great deal to Gunnerus and that it was one motivating factor for his own efforts in the field.

It makes, in any case, good sense to include language in the context of physico-theological interests, preoccupied as this line of thought was with describing and classifying the work of God's creation. And it may explain why Gunnerus in between his many tasks of studying nature “in eternal praise of God” as he expressed it in a letter to Carl von Linné (Amundsen (ed.) 1976, 1), also found it worth while to collect lexical items from the dialects he encountered on his expeditions to the outskirts of his vast bishopric in the 1760s and early 1770s. As was the case as far as Gunnerus's studies in botany and zoology are concerned, taxonomy would be a key word, although somewhat less refined, it seems fair to say about his work on language.

At any rate it seems as if Gunnerus's first steps into the sphere of language studies were taken on one of his expeditions to Northern

Norway when he, as stated by himself, started to enregister and classify terms, names, connected to biological phenomena, plants in particular. In a letter to Linné dated 13th February 1768 (Amundsen (ed.) 1976, 78) he writes that he had started to collect a *nomenclator lapponica* – related to plants we must assume – the previous summer, that is to say in 1767 on the third of his voyages to the Grand Nord – combined voyages of bishop’s visitation and scientific expeditions. In addition to starting the establishment of a *nomenclator lapponica* he also began collecting Norwegian dialect words on this voyage, he tells Linné. He had collected a few hundred words “som ej tilforn har været ved Trykken bekiente” (words that have not previously been published in printing). This as a pastime he adds. The story behind this collection of dialect words can be retraced in retrospect – an interesting and amusing detail that demonstrates the bishop’s mode of conduct towards his subordinate clergy. Here is not, however, the place to recapitulate this story in any detail. In short it seems as his interests in dialect vocabulary were triggered by a small piece of work that had been carried out by the parson at Buksnes, Lofoten Islands, Eric Gerhard Schytte (1729–1808) whom Gunnerus had visited on that particular voyage. In retrospect, that is to say through later correspondence between Schytte and a colleague, a certain pressure seems to have been exercised by the reverend bishop on that occasion in order to get hold of the parson’s collections. Schytte had been robbed, he writes, of his collections of various materials by “a threatening politeness” (“en truende Høflighed”, cf. Hagland 2002:117).

Be this as it may. Within a framework of the history of science it is necessary for us to look for models for studies of the vernacular language in Norway around the middle of the 18th century in order to appreciate Gunnerus’s (modest) contribution. First and foremost, in that respect, it seems right to emphasize that the idea of a specific Norwegian language was vague and not well developed – and as such not very pronounced as an independent field of scholarly work. A certain level of more or less amateurish activity of enregistering dialect vocabulary did exist – some of it published in print, some of it not. A common view among those who conducted work of this kind was, it seems, that everyday Norwegian speech represented a resource to enrich the common written language used in the kingdom of Denmark-Norway. Norwegian dialects were sometimes spoken of as “Meddialekter” or “Medsprog” in this respect – *co-dialects* and

co-language in glossed translation, the idea being, at any rate, that even the Norwegian dialects were part of the language of the larger whole, the Dano-Norwegian area, politically referred to as “helstaten” (the whole state) at the time.

The only Norwegian linguist in a more modern sense of the term in Gunnerus's time was Knud Leem, professor of the Sami language at Seminarium Lapponicum Fredericianum in Trondheim from 1752 till he died in 1774. Leem was an explorer of the Sami language and produced an important grammar (1748) and a trilingual lexicon to and from Lappish or the Sami language (Lappish-Danish-Latin, both ways, 1768–1781). Even if he lived in Trondheim close to the bishop and the Society, he never became a member or accepted membership in DKNVS. We do not know the reasons for this and this is not the place to make more guesses about it than have already been done. Nonetheless, Leem seems to have collaborated with Gunnerus on questions concerning the Sami language, particularly in respect to botanical terminology. Leem also collected, in the 1740s, a fairly extensive dialect lexicon from Karmøy and Møre in the West and North-West of Norway, in fact one of the best contributions of its kind. It was, however, never published in his time, and Gunnerus probably never knew it (cf. Hagland 2000).

None of this seems, anyway, to have influenced Gunnerus's rather peripheral work on Norwegian dialect material much. Having said so, it must be added that we only have what should be considered preliminaries left, when his work in the field of Norwegian language studies is concerned. And there is no evidence that he ever did go beyond that level in his studies. A manuscript, obviously the only one existing, is kept in the University Library at Trondheim – the Gunnerus Library (qMs 245) containing a collection of about 1200 dialect words from Northern Norway and the Trøndelag area – much in the style of what has been published or otherwise preserved from other (amateur) collectors in 18th century Norway. That is to say a collection that should appropriately be looked upon as raw material to word studies of certain Norwegian dialects. The collection is, as it seems, at least in part, a fair copy in an editing process that was never finished in Gunnerus's time or later (cf. below). The preserved manuscript was, as a matter of fact, not edited and published till 1980 (Hagland 1980). The draft contains as such most of the weaknesses we find in similar work from the 18th century, most importantly so a persistent lack of consistency when

the entries are concerned. Nouns can, for instance, equally well be entered in definite as in indefinite form, such as *Lab*, “en fod” (a foot in indefinite form), but *Kjættø*, “en Hunkat” (a female cat in weak definite form, and so on), whereas verbs, unlike in many other collections from this period, are as a rule given in the infinitive etc. That is to say that, all things taken together, a slightly more consistent taxonomic grasp of the matter can, after all, be detected in Gunnerus’s work compared to the average collection of his time – even so Gunnerus’s collection can be seen as a fairly representative expression of the state of the art in 18th century Norway (cf. Hagland 2005: 81–84).

There is not, in the source material, so much to find as far as Gunnerus’s ideas and interests in language is concerned. In his correspondence with members of the clergy in his bishopric from the early 1760s there are, however, sporadically minor notes to be found. In a letter to the parson of Grytten, in Romsdal, Jonas Jacob Schanche, he drops a short remark about having recently put together “a small piece on the orthography of the Danish language” – a piece of which we do not know the exact content to day. In the letter, however, he puts forward two main rules that should determine the constitution of the orthography: 1) Firstly and primarily there was the law, as he expressed it, of the pronunciation. 2) Secondly, pronunciation permitting, there was the etymology. This may, in many respects, sound modern. But as Gunnerus does not elaborate on any of these two main principles, we do not know exactly what he had in mind (Hagland 1980: 15f.).

There are some indications to suggest that Gunnerus’s manuscript in its preserved form was meant to be expanded and elaborated upon so as to be some sort of a *glossarium etymologicum*. A few articles seem to be complete in this respect, and they are really comprehensive and elaborate – also seen from an etymological point of view, it should be added. And, of course, etymological from an 18th century perspective – a perspective which it is easy to ridicule seen from a present day vantage point. That is, nonetheless, another matter. Some of the first entries under the letter **A** in particular, seem to have been left in the middle of an editing process of this nature, a good example of which is **Aa**, the very first entry of the collection. When first entered this word was provided with a simple glossing in Danish, much in accordance with the style of the collection at large – “paa, ovenpaa” i. e. as a preposition or an adverb meaning “on” or

“above”. Later a different hand has expanded on the lexical definitions by adding in the margin of the manuscript and in between entries a long article containing deletions, illustrative compoundings and more (cf. fig. 1). The entries elsewhere in the manuscript leaves ample place for expansions of the definitions (cf. fig. 2).

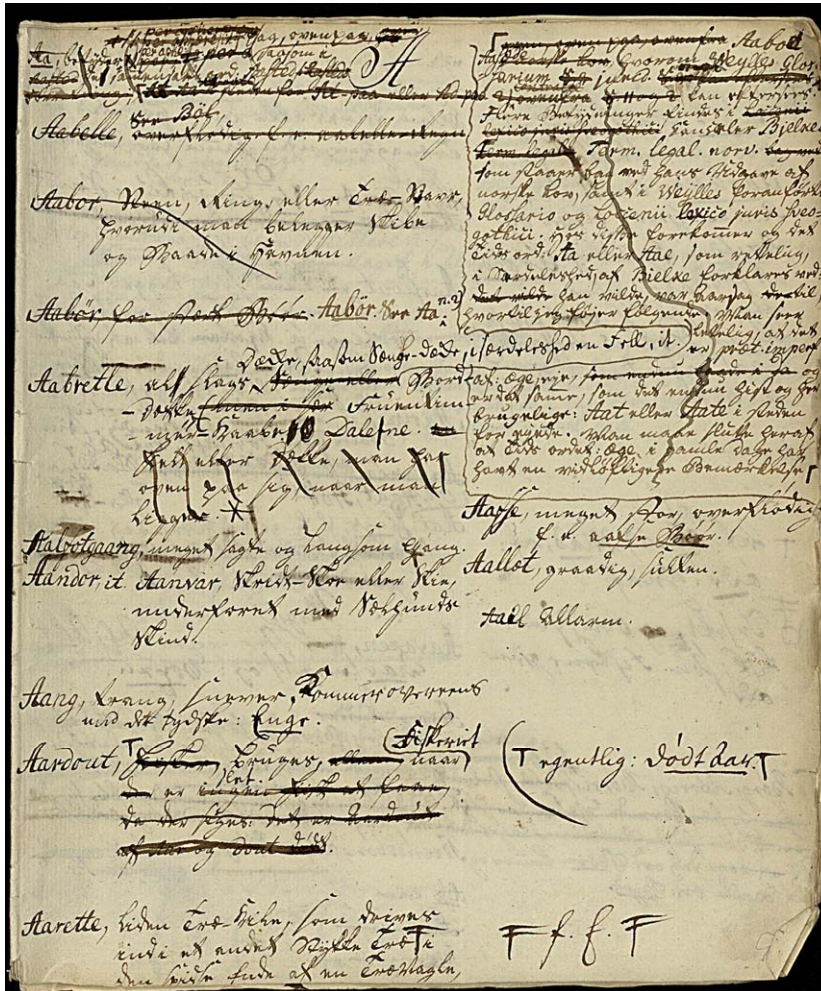


Fig. 1: First page of Gunnerus’s collection of dialect words – entries reworked and amplified

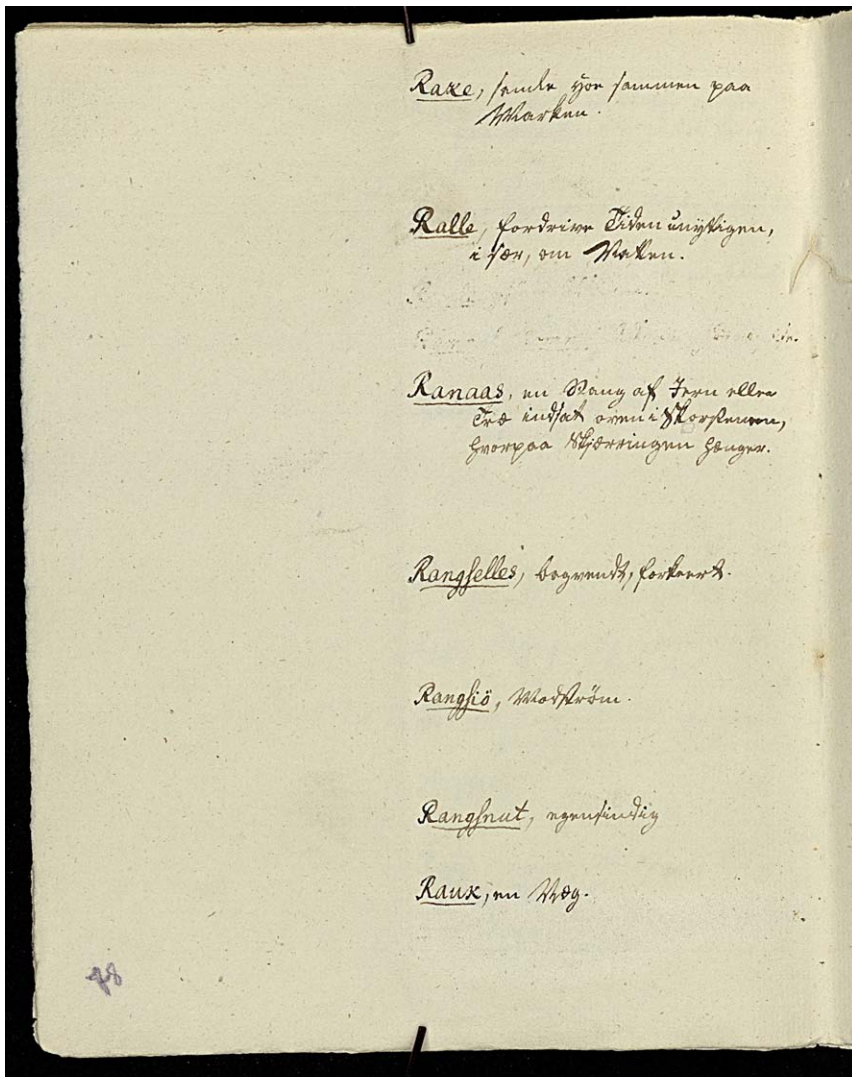


Fig. 2: Page with ample space between the entries for further comments

Aspects of the manuscript such as this may seem to support, at least to an extent, the language historian Gustav Indrebø's opinion that Gunnerus did as a matter of fact have in mind some sort of etymological dictionary. The etymologies, Indrebø adds, are in the

style of their time and often rather infelicitous (“ofte ikkje so heppelege”, cf. Hagland 2005:83). As we have touched upon already that goes without saying. But even so this is an aspect of Gunnerus’s lexicographical work that points towards the future in the history of science – and, in my opinion, it brings his rather limited work with language more on a par with the level of his achievements in the natural sciences.

It should be added here that there is evidence to suggest that Gunnerus entertained a hope of further work in the field of “profan Filologi” (secular philology) as it was termed at the time. I. H. Tauber in his diaries from the early 1770s (Tauber 1865: 430f.) tells us that Gunnerus, while working in Copenhagen at the time of Struensee, offered him a post as secretary to DKNVS in Trondheim on his return there. “Then,” Tauber quotes Gunnerus to have stated, “we shall, together, study philology thus encouraging this neglected field of scholarship and improving the taste in my diocese”ⁱⁱⁱ

The arrangement with Tauber never came about, and there is nothing to suggest what kind of philology Gunnerus had in mind. We might think that he intended to expand on his word studies, but we shall never know. His interest in ‘secular philological studies’ seems at any rate to have been more than a peripheral one.

There is a possibility that Gunnerus’s lexicographical efforts, as well as his thoughts about the orthography of the Danish language were influenced or inspired also by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s ideas about the cultivation and improvement of the German language, developed in an essay called *Unvorgreiffliche Gedanken, betreffend die Ausübung und Verbesserung der Teutschen Sprache*, published posthumously in 1717 (cf. Pietsch 1908, 314). Even if it cannot be established with certainty, we must assume that Gunnerus had acquired first hand knowledge of this work during the course of his stay in Halle and Jena in the 1740s and 1750s. In his *Gedanken*, probably written c. 1697 (cf. Pietsch 1908: 322–26) Leibniz explicitly mentions pronunciation as well as etymology as organizing principles of the dictionary for the improvement of the German language that he proposed: “Und solte ich dafür halten, es würde zwar das Glossarium Etymologicum, oder der Sprach-Qvell nach den Buchstaben zu ordnen seyn, es könnte aber auch solches auf zweyerley Weise geschehen: nach der ietzigen Aussprache, und nach dem Ursprung, wenn man nemlich nach seinen Grund-Wurtzeln gehen, und ieder Wurtzel, oder iedem Stamm seine Sprossen anfügen

wolte; welches auf gewisse masse sehr dienlich, auch eine Ordnung mit der andern zu vereinigen nützlich wäre.” (Pietsch 1908: 348f.).

As we know next to nothing about the plans of a new orthography for Danish that Gunnerus mentions in his letter to Schanche (see above), we cannot know for certain how much of Leibniz’s ideas he had acquired in that respect. There is every reason, however, to think that his interest in collecting dialect words was *per se* inspired, at least to some degree, also by Leibniz. “Der Grund und Boden einer Sprache, so zu reden,” Leibniz said, “sind die Worte, derauff die Redens-Arten gleichsam als Früchte herfür wachsen” (Pietsch 1908: 336). In consequence “eine Musterung und Untersuchung aller Teutschen Worte” was needed according to Leibniz, “und nich nur auf die so man Hochteutsch nennet, und die im Schreiben anietzo allein herrschen, sondern auch auff Plat-Teutsch, Märckisch, Ober-Sächsisch, Fränckisch, Bährisch, Oesterreichisch, Schwäbisch, oder was sonst hin und wieder bey dem Landtman mehr als in den Städten bräuchlich.” (loc. cit.).

Ideas such as these could well legitimize and inspire the effort of collecting dialect words also in Norway, we must think, even more so as Leibniz explicitly includes the neighbouring Germanic languages in his field of interest when lexicographical work was concerned: “Auch nicht nur was in Teutschland in Übung, sondern auch was von Teutscher Herkunfft in Holl- und Engelländischen: worzu auch fürnehmlich die Worte der Nord-Teutschen, das ist der Dänen, Norwegen, Schweden und Issländer (bey welchen letztern sonderlich viel von unser uralten Sprach geblieben,) zu ziehen” (loc. cit.).

Leibniz’s investigation of “des Ursprungs und Grundes” of the German languages was conceived of as a tripartite piece of work, according to his essay, “deren erstes man *Sprachbrauch*, auff Lateinisch *Lexicon*; das andere *Sprach-Schatz* oder *cornu copiaë*; das dritte *Glossarium* oder *Sprachquell* nennen möchte.” (Pietsch 1908, 337). That is to say that “das *Glossarium Etymologicum*” (op.cit, 348) was seen as an important part of the word studies proposed by Leibniz.ⁱⁱⁱ

There was, then, in the 1760s a philosophical basis available on which Gunnerus could establish the construct of a Norwegian dialect glossarium etymologicum as part of his scholarly project. Even if this project was abandoned, as it seems, at an initial stage, it is possible to see Gunnerus’s lexicographical efforts as an extension of a greater,

European, line of ideas, rather than being something that had grown out of a local and amateurish Norwegian tradition of collecting dialect words. The existence of a wider interest in dialect word studies is evidenced also by the botanist John Ray's *Collection of English Words not generally used* from 1674, 2nd edition 1691. John Ray (1627–1705) was one of the early advocates of the so-called physico-theology, of which also Gunnerus, like Linnaeus and Pontoppidan, was an adherent. Ray's interest in nature and dialect words alike corresponds perfectly with Gunnerus's scholarly interests.

There is, however, no evidence to suggest that Gunnerus knew Ray's work. He may well have, but as we do not even know for certain whether or not he read English at all, this must remain an open question. And as the physic-theological aspect even of dialect word studies was pointed to already by Pontoppidan, the question of a possible direct influence from Ray's work becomes less relevant and is more difficult to answer. Gunnerus's work in the field of word studies was not known by his contemporaries. The possible Leibnizian ideas underlying this part of his work were, in consequence, not transplanted into Norwegian intellectual soil, so as to make any immediate impact on the study of the Norwegian language. The physic-theological motivation for it he seems to have shared with Pontoppidan, as we have seen, and may also have inspired efforts by others in the field, even if not necessarily visibly so.

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ⁱ ”kunde fornere en Derham eller hans Lige, overflødig Materie til physico-Theognostiske Betragtninger” (Pontoppidan 1749, B5). William Derham (1657–

1735) was one of the most prominent exponents of physic- theology. His work was translated from English into the European main languages.

ⁱⁱ "Saa skal vi," sagde han, "studere Filologi sammen og ophjælpe den forsømte Videnskab og forbedre Smagen i mit Stift".

ⁱⁱⁱ I am grateful to professor Peter Burke who suggested to me the possibility of an influence from Leibniz on Gunnerus's interest in Norwegian dialect words.