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Norwegian Missionary Linguistic Mishap

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Name Redacted
North Logan, Utah
November 26, 2017

Norwegian Family Legend

Informant: The informant is from Idaho. He is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and served a religious mission in Norway for two years. He lives in Cache Valley with his family.

Context: Serving a mission for the LDS Church is considered a rite of passage for many in the LDS community, and is also considered a commandment from God for all LDS men. During two years for males and eighteen months for females around the age of 19, missionaries spend twenty-four hours per day with their companion, a fellow missionary of approximately the same age, and always the same gender. Together they proselytize within a specific community or area. Companions remain together for any period of time ranging from six weeks to six months or more.

The informant loves the time he spent on his mission, a period of time he considers spent serving God. He loves the Norwegian language and seeks opportunities to speak it or hear it on television, including seeking Norwegian films on streaming services such as Netflix. He has even taught short phrases to his children and his wife, and even recreated a Norwegian cake with his wife called [BLOO-tuh KAH-kuh].

This family legend is often told by the informant during conversations in which the topic of LDS missions are brought up, especially when stories of the difficulties of learning a new language are told. Other, nonreligious settings in which stories of learning a new language are also appropriate settings for the retelling of this legend. His children and his wife also share the story in similar circumstances. Often, stories of LDS missions in general are also the setting in which this story might be told.

The interview took place in his home in Cache Valley.

Text:

[Interviewer introduces the topic of a family legend about the informant's religious, LDS mission to Norway, and some of the linguistic troubles some of the American missionaries had while learning Norwegian.]

Well the fun part about learning a new language is that you get to learn that they have, different words for, to mean different things. So a good example of that in English is change, and, in English

you can have change on a dollar and so you have coins, or you can have, um, a, change your clothes, from you know, change your clothes, you can change you mind, and those are the different, different examples and. We had one mission companion that, just had a difficult time getting that concept down that, you couldn't use the same Norwegian word like we do, use the same English word for change. And u, one day, we were riding the bus in town, and no Norwegian buses you, — and probably on all buses you have a little cable you could pull to get off at the next stop. [clears throat] Uh we uh, we were going down the middle of town and he, reached over and grabbed it, and it, it dinged, and, and uh, then a couple of minutes later he realized that this wasn't the right stop, and so from the back of the bus he yelled to the front of the bus, 'I'm sorry I changed my mind', only in Norwegian, but the change that he used mean that, instead of 'I changed my mind' or 'I have a different opinion now', uh, he used the one where you change your clothes, and Norwegians take things so literally, [laughs] when they heard that, you could see the Norwegians kinda chuckling from the front because in their mind or what, what they envisioned was that his guy, took his mind out of his head, and set it aside and picked up another one and put it in his head [laughs] and so they just, they were reserved you couldn't just outlie, outright laugh at somebody, [laughs] but you could see them they're kind of snickering, and uh, kind of uh, recognizing that his guy didn't know what he was talking about, and uh, so anyway that was, a lesson that we'd use—another one that he, this same Elder, um, he'd taken some, film to be processed—this was you're back in the day when you'd take your, picture on these little film strips and [coughs] they'd roll up inside of a can, and they'd take that canister to a drugstore or someplace and have it, u, processed [coughs] and, the, terminology we use in English if you look at something and say 'ah it didn't turn out right.' And, he just took those exact words and instead of understanding the meaning, and said, in Norwegian he said 'des doo dekuh oot', which means it, didn't, turn, out,

right, or didn't turn out [coughs] which, again in Norwegian, in Norwegian you would listen to that and think, it didn't turn out, so they're thinking 'you mean, you backed and you turned around and then you faced out?' [laughs] you know, they couldn't understand what he was even trying to mean, of 'it didn't develop correctly'

[A child enters and interrupts the conversation]

So, that was one that we always kind of, remember, when Elder — and I shouldn't say his name because I wouldn't wanna, make him feel bad if he ever happened to hear, that this ever got out, but, um, that, we always used that as an example of why you needed to be careful in making sure you understand and were communicating meaning, not just, directly translating words.

Texture:

The informant lay back in his chair while he retold this legend, speaking in an even, measured voice. He obviously felt relaxed and happy to retell this treasured story from his past. His voice took on a nostalgic tone, a fondness. He also found some parts of the story to be comical. During the context of the telling, he or his children often tell it with enthusiasm or even excitement. The informant is a good story teller, and might have told this story more smoothly if were in a more natural context.

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