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How language can hinder efforts in health promotion

EDITORIAL

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An English technical term is not necessarily more precise or accurate than a translation or an alternative term in Norwegian, and it may be difficult for the intended audience to understand.

Photo: Sturlason

When new technical terms emerge in English, finding a good translation or an appropriate alternative term in Norwegian is not always easy. Nonetheless, it is achievable given adequate motivation, willingness and competence (1). Despite this, many English technical terms have become established in Norwegian with little resistance. This does not necessarily constitute a major issue, but it can be problematic in person-centred work when the term is seen as vague, alienating or clichéd. Two such examples are *empowerment* and *recovery*.

> ***«Many English technical terms have become established in Norwegian with little resistance. This does not necessarily constitute a major issue, but it can be problematic in person-centred work when the term is seen as vague»***

The World Health Organization defines *empowerment* as 'a process through which people gain greater control over decisions and actions affecting their health' (2). However, the term has multiple definitions and is interpreted and applied in various ways. It is also used in psychology, sociology and other disciplines (3). When the term was discussed in the Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association many years ago, leading experts in the field argued that the Norwegian translation *mestringsstyrking* (strengthening coping capacity) was inadequate, as *empowerment* also encompasses the

notion of counteracting the forces that generate powerlessness (4). Over the years, various explanations of the term have been given in numerous academic articles in the Journal and other Norwegian publications.

It is paradoxical that a concept intended to enable 'people [to] gain greater control over decisions and actions affecting their health' is described as difficult for the intended audience to understand; namely, a group in which low levels of education, social problems and poor health are common. *Empowerment* could easily be considered a theoretical concept used exclusively in closed academic seminars and texts. Norway's National Advisory Unit on Learning and Mastery in Health has used the term *egenkraftmobilisering* (mobilisation of one's own resources) as a synonym (2). Mobilising resources (and strengthening coping capacity) is something people can relate to. The notion that countervailing forces must also be addressed is just as implicit in these terms as it is in the term *empowerment*.

On the website of the Norwegian Resource Centre for Community Mental Health, the term *recovery* is defined as 'the process of recovery as it is "owned" and personally experienced by the individual' (5). The concepts of recovery-oriented service development, the recovery perspective and recovery-oriented services are also described in more detail. The website also states that 'the term [*recovery*] can often seem somewhat vague and alienating, particularly because it is in English', but that they have continued using it because there is no suitable Norwegian translation and the English term is 'well-established'. I consider this a contradiction.

The absence of a Norwegian translation or alternative term for *recovery* may be due to the fact that no one has tried to find one. It could also be that the term is seen as appealing to an important demographic: young people. Nonetheless, it is puzzling that such an alienating term is chosen to raise awareness among those struggling with mental health issues. If *recovery* can be used as a technical term with a meaning beyond its general sense (restoration, restitution, recuperation), then surely a more widely understood Norwegian term could be adopted to describe 'the process of recovery as it is "owned" and personally experienced by the individual'. It does not have to be a direct translation. What about a term like *mestring* (coping), for instance?

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I am not writing in the hope of eradicating established technical terms that are poorly understood, but rather to remind us that Norwegian academic communities and educational institutions have a responsibility to find appropriate Norwegian translations or alternative terms for English technical terms. Ideally, this should happen before the new English term becomes well established (1). Norwegian educational institutions, including medical faculties, actually have a statutory duty to 'use, develop and strengthen Norwegian academic language' (6). A point worth mentioning.

> ***«There is a risk of developing jargon that is only intelligible within a particular field, ultimately creating a closed community focused on theory and with limited impact beyond its own circles»***

Using English technical terms in both written and spoken Norwegian can be tempting, as it is convenient, feels safe and can enhance the identity and credibility of an academic community. However, there is a risk of developing jargon that is only intelligible within a particular field, ultimately creating a closed community focused on theory and with limited impact beyond its own circles. This has an impact on us as academics; we become detached. This is particularly harmful in relation to individuals facing challenges in recovering from illness and poor health. It can act as a direct barrier to the efforts in health promotion. The alternative is to embrace (*omfavne*) the use of English words, even when their meaning is hard to comprehend.

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