The overall project of Rune Røssstad’s book on folk linguistics and dialect change in a Norwegian region is very ambitious. In his introduction to the study, he states that the aim of the study is to investigate the relationship between perceived and actual language use. Furthermore, he wishes to focus on the two sides of this relationship each in their own right, which means that he has two additional foci: 1) language perceptions as a study in itself, and 2) variation and change in the spoken language in the specific region. The study examines linguistic variation among young people in four different locations in West-Agder, with different distances to Kristiansand, the largest town in the region. Røsstad’s focus on the possible influence from the dialect spoken in Kristiansand, or the possible influence from some sort of national standard, “normal-norsk”, places his book in the central discussion among Norwegian linguists about standardisation and regionalisation. His integration of perceptual dialectology into the traditional sociolinguistic/dialectological study of variation is an interesting way to supplement and broaden the results.

Before setting out to study the linguistic change in Eastern West-Agder, Røsstad lists four hypotheses which he, based on informal observations, expects to confirm with his study. The four hypotheses are (quoted from the English summary, p. 312):

1. The variation in the spoken language of adolescents in the investigated area as a whole has been reduced.

2. The spoken language in Søgne and Finsland differs greatly from the traditional language and is identical or similar to the language of Kristiansand.

3. The spoken language of adolescents in Mandal is relatively identical to the traditional language of the town, and has not or only to a small degree, become similar to the language of Kristiansand.

4. The spoken language of adolescents in Øyslebo and Laudal differs greatly from the traditional language and has become identical or similar to the language of Mandal rather than Kristiansand.

Røsstad divides his study into two parts: The study of language perceptions on the one hand (chapters 2, 5 and 6), and the study of the actual linguistic variation in Eastern West-Agder, on the other hand (chapters 3, 7 and 8). In chapter 4, Røsstad offers an overview of the region, both linguistically, demographically and historically. The three final chapters 9, 10 and 11, offer analyses of the relationship between the results from the two studies (chapter 9), discussions of the results and concluding remarks (10 and 11).

The variation study is based on linguistic analyses of 24 interviews with pupils in high schools (‘ungdomsskole’), aged 15 or 16, from three different places in Eastern
West-Agder: Finsland, Mandal and Øyslebo-Laudal. Data for the perception study are interviews with 20 adults, mainly teachers, from four different areas of the region: Søgne, Finsland, Mandal and Øyslebo-Laudal, as well as part of the interviews with the adolescents. This means that data for the perception study are qualitative, and this is a major difference from most studies in the field of perceptual dialectology today. During the interviews, informants are also asked to fill out questionnaires. The teachers fill out questionnaires reporting on typical features of the local dialect, and on changes in the local dialect. The adolescents fill out a questionnaire where they self-report on their own linguistic practice. Furthermore, the teachers draw perceptual dialect maps, placing borders and regions in a prefabricated map of the region. Finally, both groups of informants listen to constructed dialect texts and comment on them.

As can be seen from the above overview, the book is an extensive work. It is therefore not possible to go through it in details in a review like this. Accordingly, I will focus on two of the more important issues in the book; the perception study and the discussion of regionalisation versus standardisation.

In chapter 2 the theoretical framework of the study of perceptions is presented. Røsstad argues that there is a strong need for the integration of perceptual studies into traditional sociolinguistics. He presents the theoretical basis for this part of the study, which is very much inspired by the work of Dennis Preston (e.g. 1996, 1999) on perceptual dialectology. Røsstad is undoubtedly right that we need more research into perceptions of language in sociolinguistics, and his effort in this respect is admirable. On the other hand, I find his disregard of socio-psychological motivations as important factors in processes of linguistic variation and change regrettable. Røsstad’s view is that there has been a “strong focusing on psycho-social and attitudinal aspects of perceptions” in the kind of perception studies that have been carried out in sociolinguistics. This may be true, but the underlying assumption that legitimises this is the assumption that socio-psychological processes are important motivations in language variation and change (e.g. Kristiansen, Garrett & Coupland 2005). This motivation is not of primary interest to Røsstad, and hence he is not very concerned with issues like “attitudes, identity and ideology”. Instead the main focus point is the external factors that influence non-linguists’ perceptions of language. Røsstad’s project is quite ambitious as it is, which makes it very understandable that he has to prioritise in his approach. However, particularly in discussions of regionalisation versus standardisation, examining socio-psychological factors might contribute to our understanding of the processes.

The perception study has two aims. First of all Røsstad wishes to investigate what are the typical perceptions of the spoken language in the local area. Secondly, he compares perceptions (reporting) with actual language use, and examines the agreement between the two. He finds that the reports the teachers give are very similar within the same geographical location, but not across locations, and this makes it possible to put the reports together and construct what Røsstad labels “collective stories”. The agreement between the informants is remarkable and Røsstad interprets this as a result stemming from two “external” factors:

(1) Observations of spoken language
(2) Production of knowledge in the local community
The second point builds on Berger and Luckmann’s social constructionist approach (Berger & Luckmann 1967). Røsstad presents a model of the forming of perceptions of language (chapter 10) which shows the “external” factors influencing language perceptions. These are 1) the experienced spoken language, 2) discourses, events, and structures both in the local community, and 3) in the larger society, and 4) the life situation of the individual. The mental level (“det mentale nivået”) is also part of the model, but since it is not the focus of the study, it is unfortunately not elaborated. However, one could imagine that bringing in theories of discourse psychology would contribute to this model and connect the different factors.

The second aim of the perception study is the comparing of perceptions and actual linguistic practice. Comparing the reports from the teachers with the actual linguistic behaviour of the adolescents shows that overall the reports given by the teachers are in accordance with the linguistic practice of the adolescents. Røsstad argues that this is a further indication that perceptions are to a very high degree based on actual linguistic experience.

The other issue I would like to mention is Røsstad’s discussion of how best to model the ongoing change in the spoken language. Is it a matter of “dialect levelling”, “regionalisation” or “normalisation” (which seems to be close to theories and models of “standardisation”), or a combination? Some Norwegian linguists argue that the ongoing processes of linguistic change in spoken Norwegian is better labelled “regionalisation” than “standardisation” (e.g. Akselberg 2003), whereas others argue that standardisation processes do indeed play a role in the ongoing change in spoken Norwegian (e.g. Mæhlum 2007). Røsstad provides a thorough reading of previous studies of dialect change in the area of Agder (and other places), and concludes that it is not possible, based on these earlier results, to decide whether the best model for description of the change is “regionalisation” or “standardisation”. Still, Røsstad finishes his discussion by stating that there is little doubt that Kristiansand plays a role in the processes of linguistic change in the region; the only question is in which way. It is not clear to me why this is obvious, given Røsstad’s own discussion of the uncertainty concerning the development of variants in the region; are they Kristiansand forms or standard forms? Often the two coincide. Nevertheless, Røsstad seeks to shed more light on the issue, and that is very creditable.

The data is analysed with respect to 20 linguistic variables. Often the variables distinguish the urban dialects of Kristiansand and Mandal from the other dialects. However, in a few cases the Kristiansand variant is different from the Mandal variant. The results of the analyses of the 24 adolescents show that in Finsland there is a lot of variation, whereas in Mandal and Øyslebo-Laudal the informants show almost no variation. This is taken by Røsstad to imply that in Finsland, there is an ongoing change, whereas in Mandal and Øyslebo-Laudal the change is complete with regard to most of the variables. Røsstad interprets his results in the light of regionalisation, and argues that it is possible to see the results as consequences of a certain kind of regionalisation. Since the pattern from Øyslebo-Laudal is very similar to the pattern from Mandal, it is possible to see Mandal as a regional centre for the Øyslebo-Laudal informants, whereas this is not the case for the Finsland informants, whom Røsstad
argues converge more towards the Kristiansand dialect. It is not possible to judge whether or not this model is the most relevant to use, because the Mandal and the Kristiansand dialect only diverge with respect to one out of the 11 variables that show change among the Øyslebo-Laudal informants. The informants do not use the traditional dialect from sei/seie but instead they use the form si/sie which is also used in the Mandal dialect. This is different from the Kristiansand dialect where the variant is siår. However, this is the only case where there is a convergence towards a Mandal variant different from the Kristiansand variant. And in this case, another possible explanation is that the Mandal variant is a “stop on the way” towards the variant siår. This would mean that the Øyslebo-Laudal informants could in fact be converging towards the Kristiansand dialect – or perhaps even “normal-Norwegian”, through the use of this variant. This is a discussion that seems relevant for all the results in the study. It seems that the regionalisation model that Røsstad proposes is not the only possibility, based on his results. It could very well be that the development in the spoken language among his informants is in fact better described as an ongoing standardisation process, where intermediate forms do not represent a regional norm, but are results of a change towards an overregional norm, that has not yet reached completion. I shall not pursue the matter here, since I realise that I am not on home ground, but it appears to me to be a possibility.

Røsstad’s discussion of these issues is very thorough, and the discussions of different possible interpretations of the results are extremely interesting. The book offers insights into the linguistic situation in a specific Norwegian region, and it raises questions and discusses issues of general importance in sociolinguistics, especially concerning models of linguistic regionalisation and standardisation, and the relationship between reported language and actual linguistic practice.

References:

