A new piece of the gender puzzle in American Norwegian

Linn Iren Sjånes Rødvand
Master’s programme in linguistics – University of Oslo
Heritage languages can give valuable insight

• American Norwegian – the varieties of Norwegian spoken in the United States by the descendants of Norwegians who immigrated from the middle of 1800 to 1920 (Johannessen & Salmons 2015)

• Exciting to investigate the grammar of these heritage speakers, and later what this can tell us about language acquisition and linguistic change

• Gender as a complex and challenging category – to what extent is it preserved?

• ”Genders are classes of nouns reflected in the behavior of associated words” (Hocket 1958: 231)
The status of the gender system in American Norwegian is still not clear!

• Indefinite article, adjectives, possessives (and noun declension)
• CANS (Corpus of American Norwegian Speech)
• Different conclusions:
  • J&L: gender is in place for most speakers. No general simplification of the gender system, but considerable inter-individual variation.
  • L&W: Considerable overgeneralization of M forms of the indefinite article to both F and N nouns. Gender is vulnerable in American Norwegian.
"Is the gender system in American Norwegian retained?"

- More relevant data for each informant
- An unexplored field: personal pronouns
- Traditional Norwegian dialects: personal pronoun for *inanimate nouns* correspond to their grammatical gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indefinite article</th>
<th>Pronoun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Ein kopp</em> (m) ‘a cup’</td>
<td><em>han</em> (m)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ei flaske</em> (f) ‘a bottle’</td>
<td><em>ho</em> (f)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Eit bord</em> (n) ‘a table’</td>
<td><em>det</em> (n)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Uncertain whether the old pronoun system is retained
- Pronouns a habit of agreeing with properties of the referent (not grammatical gender) (Corbett 1991)

→ indefinite article
Research questions

• To what extent is the gender system in American Norwegian retained?
  → how many target genders do we find per informant for the indefinite article and personal pronoun?

• Rest of this presentation:
  • Method
  • Informants
  • Results – indefinite article
  • Results – personal pronouns
  • Results – article and pronoun
Method - fieldwork

- Minnesota/Wisconsin May/June 2015
- Pictures of concrete objects, familiar from CANS
- Questions to the pictures that triggers pronouns

- "Where is the stone now?"
- "Now it’s on the staircase"
Method - items

• All three genders represented
  • Masculine: 6 animates, 6 inanimates
  • Feminine: 4 animates, 6 inanimates
  • Neuter: 1 animate, 7 inanimates

• Transcription
  • Gender exponents often subtle, pronouns fonologically reduced

The pictures of food items (3) presented a challenge which I call «the problem of det». See Faarlund, Lie og Vannebo 1997 for other types of reference.
Informants

- American Norwegian as L1, English only from 5-6 (school)
- How often they speak Norwegian varies very much from person to person
- 20 informants transcribed so far (8 yet to come)
- Age: 74 - 92
- Twelve men, eight women
- 3rd or 4th generation immigrants (one is 2nd)
- Cannot read or write Norwegian
Investigation of indefinite article

- Three genders – three indefinite articles:
  - Ein – masculine (52%)
  - Ei – feminine (32%)
  - Eit/ei – neuter (16%)

  percentage in Nynorskordboka, m forms more frequent in spoken language, n/f evenly distributed (Lohndal & Westergaard 2016: 7)

- I have counted English loanwords as masculines (e.g. *ein kønnkabb (m)* – ’corncob’)
  - most popular gender for loanwords (J&L 2015).
  - A few exceptions: *ei fil (f)* – ’field’, *eit fens (n)* – ’fence’

- I could identify three different groups of speakers based on their use of indefinite article
Three groups for indef. art.

Ten informants
Three indefinite articles - three target genders
Clean and tidy!

Six informants
Three indefinite articles – three target genders?
Overgeneralization of *ein* (m) to both f and n

Four informants
One indefinite article (a few exceptions) – *ein* (m)
Any gender?
Personal pronouns for inanimate objects

• Lack of data due to
  • Use of null subjects in American Norwegian
    \[ Nå \quad sit \quad ___ \quad på \quad stolen \]
    Now sits on the chair
  • Gender information coming from me → removed these pronouns

• Three different pronouns was identified for 3SG inanimate:
  • \textit{Han} (m)
  • \textit{Ho} (f)
  • \textit{Det} (n)

  • I count the reduced form /\text{n}/ as an instance of the pronoun \textit{han} (some might wonder if it could be an instance of the pronoun \textit{den})

• Three different patterns for use of personal pronouns
Seven informants

Three personal pronoun forms – clearly agreeing with grammatical gender

Only 1-2 *ho* (f)

Loss of feminine pronoun:
- loss of feminine gender?
- Just a matter of frequency?

Results – personal pronouns for inanimate objects

Three informants

Two personal pronouns: *han* (m), *det* (n)

No clear correlation with gender

Two informants: *han* (m) + 1-2 *det* (n)

One informant

One pronoun: *det* (n)
Hard to draw conclusions based on just one target

• Article – memorized chunk?
• Pronoun – reflecting grammatical gender, semantic agreement or just at random?

• When we look at the two targets together, we can identify another three groups
10 informants

Three articles

Three pronouns

Quite clean and tidy (with a few exceptions)

4 informants

One article

Two pronouns

6 informants

Three articles

One or two pronouns
Three articles - a diverse, messy group

One pronoun (2)
- Et (n) tre (n) ‘tree’ – det (n)
- En (m) hus (n) ‘house’ – det (n)
- Ei (f) klokke (f) ‘clock’ – det (n)
- En (m) gutt (m) ‘boy’ – han
- En (m) kjerring (f) ‘woman’ – ho

Two pronouns (4)
- Et (n) tre (n) – han (m)
- Ein (m) brødloff (m) – det (n)
- Ei (f) klokke (f) – han (m)
- No clear system

Semantic (here: inanimate) agreement on pronoun
Four informants without gender?

Sunburg_MN_08gk
• En (m) tre (n) ’tree’ – han (m)
• En (m) hus (n) ’house’ – det (n)
• En (m) truck (m) ’truck’ – det (n)
• En (m) ball (m) ’ball’ – han (m)

One article – two pronouns
• Hard to find a system for choice of pronoun
• Complete loss of gender system?
Summary: three different “gender” groups

• One group (10): quite stable gender system – a few exceptions
• One group (6): a lot of deviation from the baseline. Loss of feminine pronoun, no clear grammatical agreement for the pronouns, overgeneralization of the masculine article to n and f
• One group (4): no real indication of gender – probably a total loss of gender
• Work to be done: what characterizes the different groups? Which factors will contribute to keeping a gender system stable?

• The feminine pronoun dissapears for inanimate objects
• The feminine article is not vulnerable in the same way
• No clear indication that f is more vulnerable than n
Some implications

• Normally not sufficient to look at just one target, but some implications:
• Three pronouns for inanimate objects → probably a stable gender system
• Just one indefinite article → probably no gender system
Conclusion

• Target genders:
  • Personal pronouns: three, two or one
  • Indefinite article: three or one
  • Together these targets give us an indication of the status of the gender system

• Support for previous conclusions
  • L&W: overgeneralization of the M article to n and f nouns
  • J&L (2015): the gender system seems stable for almost half of my informants
  • L&W (2016): at the same time, for the other half this does not seem to be the case. Thus we could say that gender is a vulnerable category

• A lot of variation! Any question about heritage grammar should be investigated at the level of the individual or small groups of individuals
Thank you!
References