Grammatical gender and declension class in the two-gender system of the Tromsø dialect of Norwegian: A study of indefinites and possessives

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The present paper investigates the linguistic characteristics of the ongoing change in the gender system of Norwegian combining insights from language acquisition and experimentation. The change from three genders (masculine, feminine, neuter) to two (masculine, or common, and neuter) has recently been attested across a number of dialects and is characterized by substitution of the feminine indefinite article ei (e.g., ei bok ‘a book’) by the masculine form en (e.g., en bok) (cf. Conzett et al. 2011 for the Kåfjord and Nordreisa dialects; Lødrup 2011 for the Oslo dialect; Rodina & Westergaard 2015 and Alsos 2016 for the Tromsø dialect; Stabell 2016 for the Alta dialect).

In previous studies the change has often been attested based on a single form of the feminine indefinite article ei (e.g. Rodina & Westergaard 2015). It is therefore appropriate to ask whether what we observe is a change from masculine-feminine-neuter to common-neuter or whether this is simply disappearance of the feminine form ei. To answer this question we investigate gender marking on two unambiguously feminine forms, indefinite ei ‘a’ and possessive mi ‘my’ in child and adult speakers of the Tromsø dialect of Norwegian. We hypothesize that if language change takes place, both ei and mi should no longer be in use in younger speakers. Our second hypothesis is related to the status of suffixed definite articles which have been argued to mark declension rather than gender (e.g. Enger 2004). In the present study the gender-declension class distinction is investigated through contrasting prenominal and postnominal possessives, such as mi bok ‘my book’ vs. boka mi ‘book my’. According to a recent proposal by Svenonius (2017), while prenominal possessives mark gender, postnominal ones are reanalyzed as declension class, and the use of mi in boka mi is conditioned by contextual allomorphy. Given this, we predict that min rather than mi will be used prenominally with the feminines by younger speakers, but that the -a mi forms will still be used postnominally by the same speakers.

Two elicited production tasks were conducted with four participant groups: second graders (N=14, mean age=7;10), seventh graders (N=15, mean age=12), adolescents (N=20, mean age=16), and adults (N=15, mean age=50). The results presented in Figure 1 and 2 show that both hypotheses are borne out. First, feminine gender is disappearing since both ei and mi are used very infrequently by school children and adolescents (Figure 1). Second, the sharp contrast between prenominal forms in Figure 1 and postnominal forms in Figure 2 in school children and adolescents suggests that suffixed definite articles and postnominal possessives are not exponents of gender, but declension class.
Figure 1. The use of indefinite *ei* ‘a’ and prenominal *mi* ‘my’ with feminine nouns.

Figure 2. The use of suffixed definite -*a* and postnominal *mi* ‘my’ with feminine nouns.

References