



Sigríður Mjöll Björnsdóttir University of Maryland, College Park

BACKGROUND

Gender in heritage language situations

- Amount of input has been shown to be crucial in the acquisition of grammatical gender (see e.g. Rodina & Westergaard 2015).
- Since heritage language speakers usually have limited exposure to the minority language, it is to be expected that their gender system may differ from the baseline.

Why is the study of gender in heritage languages interesting?

- It can shed light on how gender systems may change over time.
- Studying gender in situations with reduced input is important in understanding the role of input in acquisition more generally.

Unresolved issues

- How to account for variability in heritage language populations.
- What are the (potentially) differential effects of **incomplete acquisition** and **attrition**, respectively, on the development of the gender system in heritage language speakers?

The present study

A longitudinal case study of the development of grammatical gender in the letters of a speaker of North American Icelandic (NAI).

The Gender System in Icelandic

- Icelandic has three genders: masculine, feminine and neuter.
- The three genders are represented **at almost equal frequency** in the language (masculine 34,8%, feminine 32,9% and neuter 32,2% (*Íslenska orðtíðnibókin* 1991).
- The gender of many nouns in Icelandic is predictable based on nominal endings, although there is some opacity:

	Masculine	Feminine	Neuter
Transparent	#X-r# drengur ('boy') #X-i# pabbi ('daddy')	#X-a# kona ('woman')	#X-ø# barn ('child')
Opaque - frequent		#X-ø# náli ('needle')	
Opaque infrequent	#X-ø# biskup ('bishop')	#X-ur# brúður ('bride')	#X-a# auga ('eye')

Table 1: The distribution of transparent vs. opaque nouns based on noun endings in the Nominative Singular

- There is syntactic evidence that neuter is the default gender in Icelandic.
- Feminine is the marked gender (Rögnvaldsson 2013).
- Gender is expressed DP-internally on **adjectives**, **quantifiers** and the **definite article**, which is a suffix, as well as **verbal** and **adjectival predicates**.

Hypotheses

- Gender is vulnerable to attrition in the later years of letter writing due to reduced input in NAI.
- Neuter, the default gender, will be overgeneralized to feminine, the marked gender.
- Most discrepancies in gender occur where the morphophonological cue to gender is opaque.

THE DATA

A corpus of 152 letters (82.000 word tokens)

The letters were written by a first-generation NAI speaker, who wrote for more than 70 years (1908-1980). The letters were discovered at *Héraðsskjalasafn Austur-Húnavatnssýslu* in Blönduós, Iceland. They were photographed and typed into a text editor.

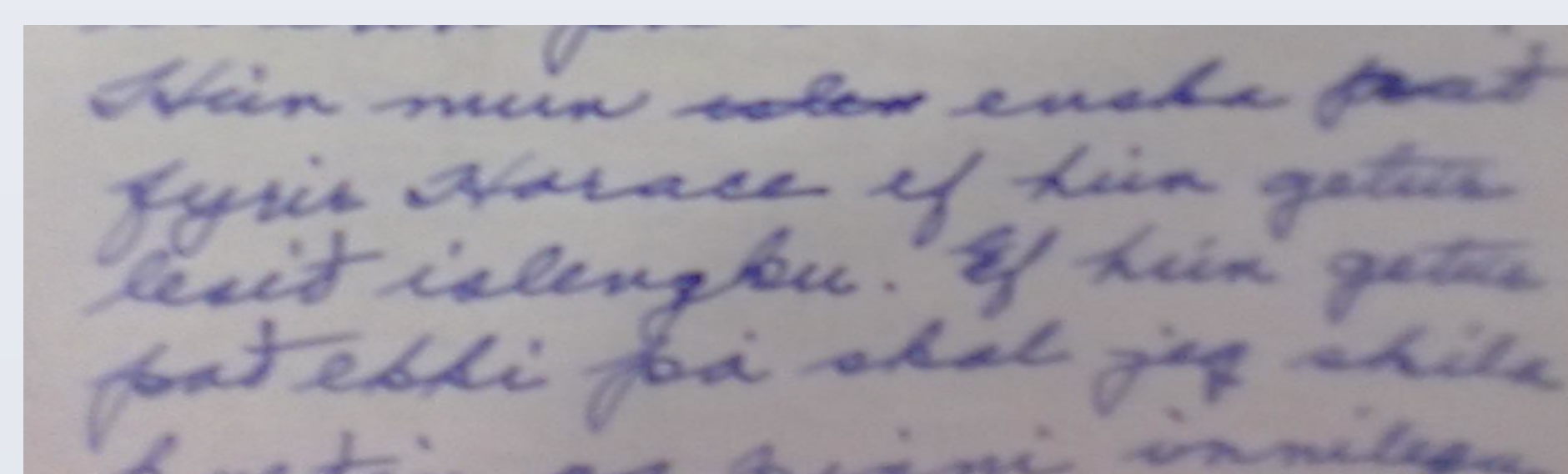


Blönduós, Iceland

Background information

Information on the PLD and input/use in NAI is based on the speaker's own record of it:

- The speaker mainly used Icelandic with her parents, who died when she was in her 30s.
- The speaker received primary schooling in English.
- English was the only language spoken in the speaker's home in adulthood.



Development of the grammar in NAI

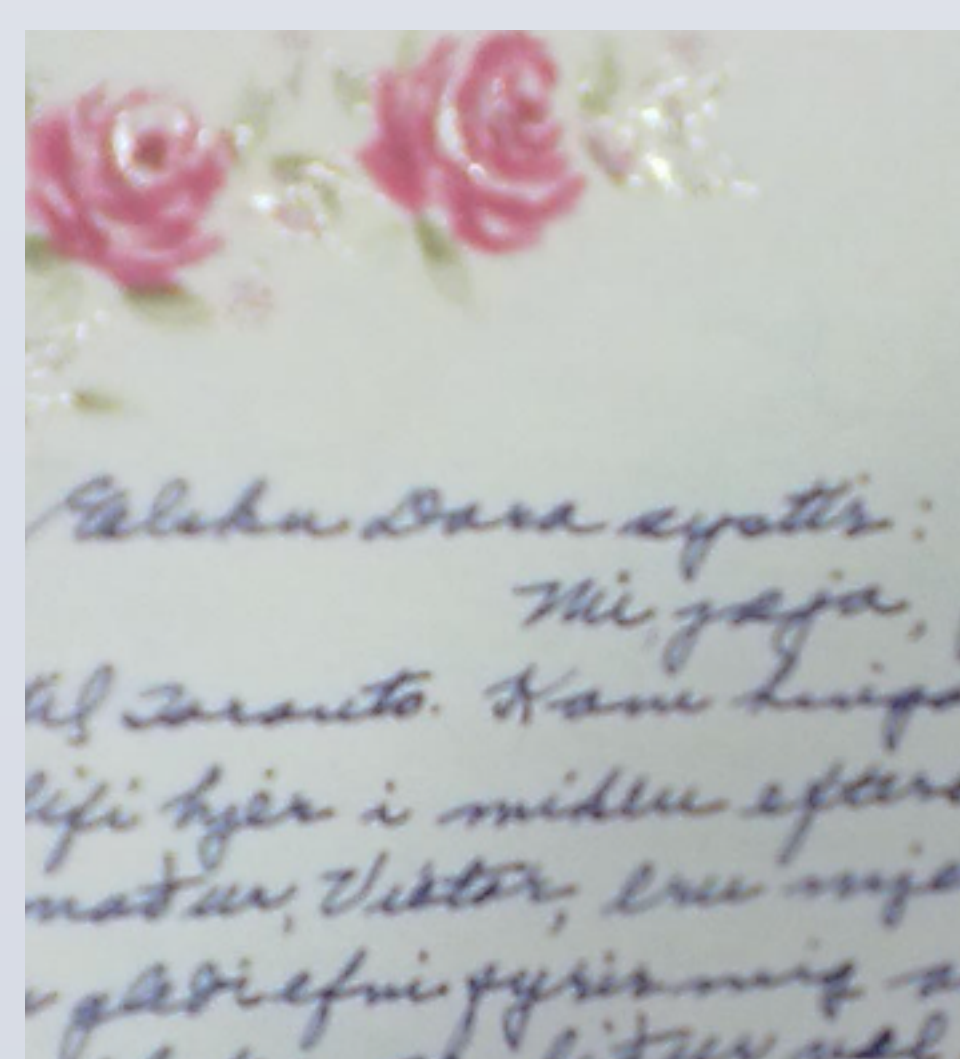
The grammar of NAI seems to be relatively stable until the last 30 years of writing:

Modules of grammar that stay intact

- Word order (V2)
- The 4-Case system (although there is considerable variation between Genitive and Dative forms)
- Tense
- Verbal morphology

Modules of grammar that are vulnerable to attrition

- Gender
- Mood



RESULTS

Reduced input and/or use leads to systematic discrepancies

- All three genders are represented in the corpus at all times. However, systematic discrepancies in gender become pervasive in the last 30 years of writing.
- Discrepancies in gender are attested on adjectives and quantifiers within the DP (47 examples), referential anaphora (34 examples), adjectival predicates (20 examples) and verbal predicates (22 examples).

Feminine nouns are by far the most problematic

Almost all discrepancies are due to the overgeneralization of masculine or neuter to feminine:

- The earliest and most frequent discrepancies occur on adjectives or quantifiers modifying opaque feminine nouns.
- As time progresses, the overgeneralization of masculine/neuter to feminine is extended to transparent feminine nouns (see f.ex. (1) below).
- There is considerable variation between masculine and neuter forms used with some feminine nouns in DP-internal discrepancies:

- (1) a. Það hefur verið svo **mikið** **aukavinna**.
EXPL has been so much.N extra work(F)
'It must have been so much extra work.'
- b. Það er nokkuð **mikill** **vinna**.
EXPL is quite much.M work(F)
'It has been so much work.'

Overgeneralization of the default gender

Overall, neuter is most frequently overgeneralized to feminine.

- Neuter is almost always overgeneralized to feminine on referential anaphors, verbal and adjectival predicates.
- Neuter is overgeneralized irrespective of whether the antecedent is animate or not. cf. (2b) and (2c).

- (2) a. Henni líkar **sú** **vinna** og **það** borgar nokkuð vel.
She likes DEM.F job(F) and it.N pays rather well
'She likes that job and it pays rather well.'
- b. **Þessi bók** er **ætlað** mest fyrir Ísland.
This book(F) is intended.N most for Iceland
'This book is intended mostly for Iceland.'
- c. **Hún** er svo íslenskt.
She is so Icelandic.N
'She is so Icelandic.'

Non-target consistent omission of the definite article

The speaker frequently omits the definite article in the last thirty years of writing:

- (3) Við borðuðum á Geysir, en **matur** var ekki góður.
We ate at Geysir, but food was not good
'We ate at Geysir, but (the) food was not good.'

- May either indicate difficulties with gender assignment or fine-grained semantic/pragmatic distinctions in the minority language

DISCUSSION

- The 3-gender system is retained, in spite of systematic discrepancies in later years of letter writing.
- The speaker does not fully develop a 2-gender system, as has been attested, for example, in some varieties of heritage Russian (Polinsky 2008), and has been argued to be an effect of incomplete acquisition.
- Instead, there is considerable variation in gender forms.
- This may indicate that the effects of attrition manifest themselves in great variability in input-sensitive forms (such as gender), rather than the development of a heritage variety with a different gender system from the baseline.

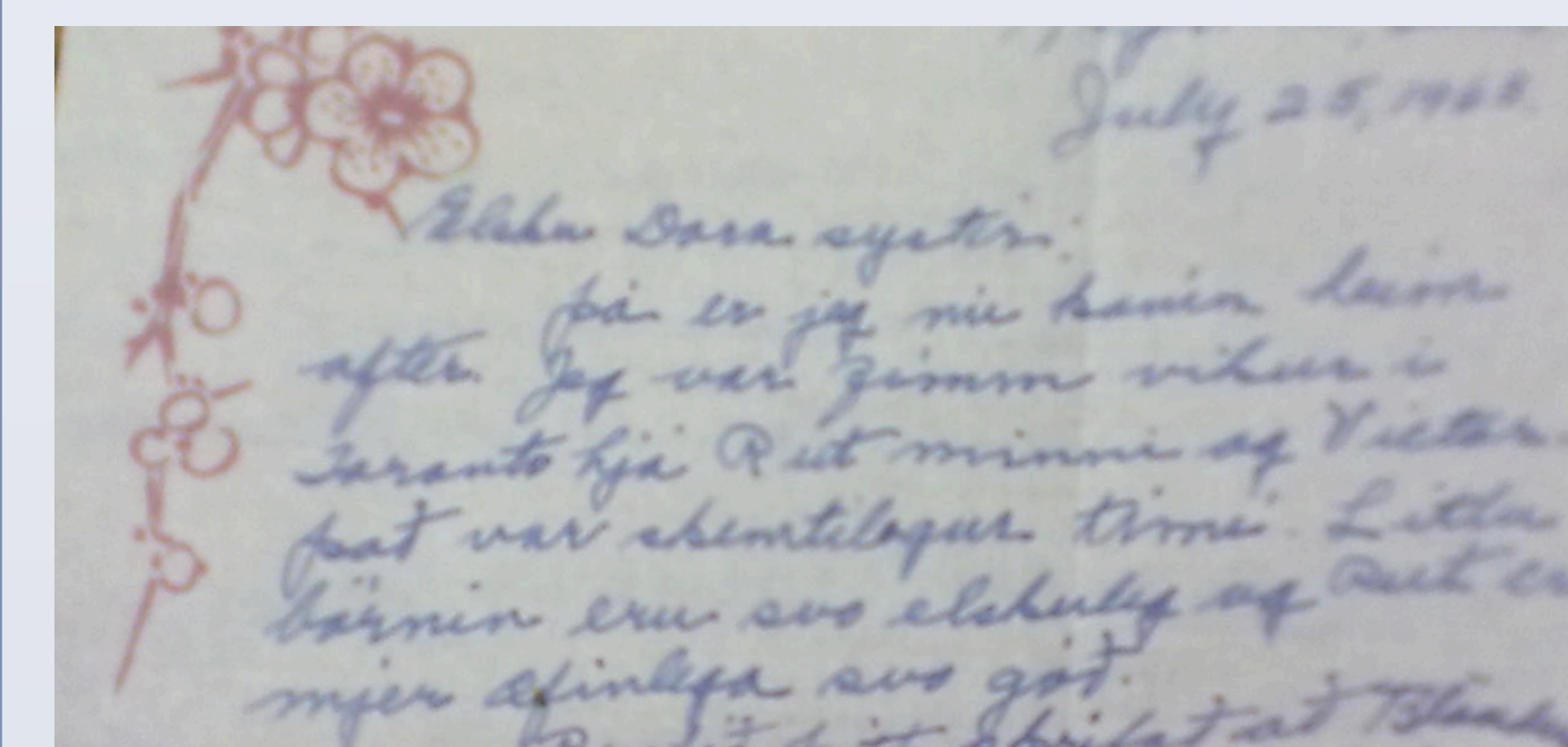
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CONTACT

Email: sirrimjoll@gmail.com
Website: www.hugurogtunga.com

