Norwegian bilinguals in America and their language change: real, apparent, attrition?

Kristin Melum Eide  
Østfold University College / NTNU

Arnstein Hjelde  
Østfold University College

This presentation investigates how the Norwegian language in America has changed over time, using several different measure points covering a time span of about 75 years. The data is collected from the traditional Norwegian-American settlements in Wisconsin and Minnesota, areas where the Norwegians arrived in the mid 1800s. The two rural communities where most of our data is recorded are Coon Valley and Westby in Western Minnesota, and Wannamingo in Eastern Minnesota. The first area was settled by immigrants predominantly from Gudbrandsdalen, while the latter settlements to a great extent had a Trøndelag background, a fact that is also reflected in the dialect spoken there. Over an extended period of time Norwegian had a strong position in these communities, Norwegian was used in church and taught in parochial school, and it was also the language spoken at home. Today the situation is quite different, and only a few individuals are still able to speak their Norwegian heritage language at a level permitting online dialogue with an interlocutor. Typically these last speakers of Norwegian grew up with Norwegian as the dominant home language, but when starting school, English quickly became the preferred language, and only a few still use the language at a regular basis (cf. 2000 Census data).

The data used in this study is partly from Einar Haugen’s recordings around WW2, Arnstein Hjelde’s recordings from the 1980s and 90s, and CANS from the 2010s. We search for changes at the phonological, morphological, and (morpho-)syntactic level; via the development of some selected linguistic features at each level. These are the vowel y and the consonants r and «thick l» (a retroflex flap); double definiteness in DPs (an exotic trait belonging to homeland Norwegian); inherent reflexives where the reflexives obligatory occurs in Norwegian but not in English; verb movement (to the verb second position) and topicalization (or fronting) in declaratives; an infrequent option in English but very frequent in Norwegian. Our data allows us to look at changes from three different perspectives:

- **Within a language community:** From Coon Valley and Westby we have access to data recorded by Haugen in the 1940s, by Hjelde in the 1990s and from the CANS project from the 2010s. This is a fairly big material, consisting of more than hundred hours of sound or video recordings. This allows us to study real time changes.

- **Between generations:** By combining parts of the fairly rich material compiled over time, we can also study language change and thus possible differences between «actual» generations, i.e. parents and children. The parents were recorded by Hjelde in the 1980s and 90s, while the language of the offspring (who today are around 80 years old) has been documented during the last decade. We discuss this under the heading apparent time change.
● *On the individual level, across the lifespan:* A few of our recordings document possible language change at an individual basis. For two speakers we have recordings with a 30 year gap, from early 1990s and the 2010s, for one the gap is 70 years, from 1948 to 2017. We discuss this as possible cases of *attrition.*

**References:**


Matras, Y. 2009. Language Contact. CUP.