

Disentangling decreased exposure and cross-linguistic influence from incipient changes to the input: A diachronic study of heritage Norwegian tense morphology

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The aim of this study is to contribute towards solving a methodological problem with the interpretation of findings in research on moribund heritage varieties. One confounding issue with the interpretation of the findings from such varieties is that the change we observe, may have occurred in previous stages of language, and innovations may already have been part of the input of the present-day speakers (van Baal, 2021, see Pires & Rothman 2009, Polinsky 2018: 33–35). This study is an attempt to disentangle different causes of change by a diachronic, empirical analysis of North American heritage Norwegian (AmNo) tense morphology, which additionally contributes increased insight into AmNo grammar and language history specifically.

There is a growing body of work that researches grammatical structure in AmNo (e.g. Eide & Hjelde 2015, Lohndal & Westergaard 2016, Westergaard & Lohndal 2019, Lykke 2020 etc.) and other similar moribund heritage varieties (e.g. Larsson, Tingsell & Andréasson 2015, Page & Putnam 2015, Hopp & Putnam 2015). The speakers providing the data for these studies are usually third to fifth generation immigrants (see Putnam, Kupisch & Pascual y Cabo 2018: 265). The effects of decreased exposure to the heritage language during acquisition or across the lifespan are often invoked to explain change in these heritage varieties. Another commonly proposed cause of change is cross-linguistic influence (CLI). However, change may have arisen in previous speaker generations, making the identification of the exact causes of change more difficult. Increasing our knowledge of when change arises, will enable us to identify the causes of change with greater accuracy.

I draw data from The Corpus of American Nordic Speech (CANS, Johannessen 2015) and study the tense morphology of AmNo (see Table 1). Recordings of AmNo from 1942 and 1987–1992 have recently been made available in CANS. In recent work, Lykke (2020) finds change in the tense morphology of present-day AmNo, pertaining to inflectional class and the use of the inflectional categories (innovated syncretism). By relating findings from the 1942 and 1987–1992 material to Lykke's (2020) findings, I shed light on whether the observed change has occurred with the present-day speakers.

Study of a selection of recordings from 1942 shows practically no indications of morphological change; neither does preliminary study of the 1987–1992 material. Tense morphology has previously been found to be quite stable in heritage language (Benmamoun et al. 2013; Lykke 2020). Additionally, van Baal's (2021) diachronic study of the morphosyntax of the DP similarly predicts a low degree of change in the early AmNo material. Accordingly, finding no change in the tense morphology of early AmNo is as expected.

Stability in the older stages of language, in the same speech community, is an indication that the change in the tense morphology found by Lykke (2020), has occurred during the lifespan of the present-day speakers of AmNo. The wider implication of such findings (compare van Baal, 2021) is that incipient changes to the input are less likely as cause to the changes we observe with the present-day speakers of moribund heritage varieties, and that the effects of decreased exposure and CLI on present-day speakers are more likely causes.

	a-class	Te-class
Infinitive	<i>kast-e</i>	<i>prøv-e</i>
Present	<i>kast-ar</i>	<i>prøv-er</i>
Preterit	<i>kast-a</i>	<i>prøv-de</i>
Participle	<i>kast-a</i>	<i>prøv-d</i>

Table 1: The verbal inflection of Norwegian exemplified by the two regular classes (data from Nynorsk)

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