

New data on language change: compositional definiteness in American Norwegian

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Like most Germanic heritage languages in the US, American Norwegian (AmNo) has a long migration history, with a large migration wave in the period 1850-1920s. The recent addition of old recordings of AmNo to the *Corpus of American Nordic Speech* (Johannessen 2015) makes it possible to study language change in AmNo. In this talk, I focus on compositional definiteness.

Norwegian definite noun phrases that are modified by an adjective or numeral contain both a prenominal determiner and a suffixed article (e.g., *den store bil-en* ‘the large car’), known as compositional definiteness (CD, Anderssen 2012). In contrast, unmodified phrases only include the suffix (e.g., *bil-en* ‘the car’). AmNo speakers produce modified definite phrases without CD in contexts where it is obligatory in homeland Norwegian (Anderssen et al. 2018; van Baal 2018, 2020). They tend to omit the prenominal determiner (e.g., *_ svarte glass-et* ‘the black glass’), and a few speakers sometimes omit the suffixed article (e.g., *den blåe bok_* ‘the blue book’).

Given the abundance of modified definite phrases without the prenominal determiner, van Baal (2020) assumes that such phrases have become part of the AmNo language, and argues that this language change can be explained by the heritage language acquisitional context. It is, however, not clear in which generation of speakers the language change took place. Since the current speakers received input from other heritage speakers, it is possible that the language change has taken place earlier in the AmNo history.

In this talk, I present data from the previous generations of AmNo speakers. Until recently, historical studies had to be based on Haugen’s (1953) descriptions, but recordings of AmNo from 1931 (by Seip & Selmer), 1942 (by Einar Haugen), and 1987, 1990 and 1992 (by Arnstein Hjelde) have now been made available through *CANS* (version 3.0).

The 1931-recordings contain too few modified definite phrases to base conclusions on; I discuss the use of CD in 1942 and 1987-1992, compared to the current generation of speakers. In both previous generations, there are many phrases with CD in the data (e.g., *det norske språk-et* ‘the Norwegian language’, *CANS-1942*). The majority of the phrases that require CD contains both the determiner and the suffixed article (76% in 1942; 70% in 1987-1992), while the current speakers use CD much less frequently (25% in Van Baal 2020). With a restricted set of adjectives, the prenominal determiner may be omitted in homeland Norwegian, and many similar examples are found in AmNo (e.g., *første krig-en* ‘the first war’, *CANS-1992*). In fact, such phrases become more frequent over time.

These results suggest that the use of modified definite phrases without a prenominal determiner is a change in the language of the current generation of speakers, while previous generations used CD in a homeland-like manner. The sociolinguistic context of the current speakers is quite different from previous generations, when speakers were more balanced bilinguals and there was a higher level of literacy. The timing of the language change can shed light on the role these factors play in the historical development of syntactic structures such as CD in American Norwegian, as well as in heritage languages in general.

References

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