

## Gender Attrition in American Norwegian Heritage Language

**Introduction:** The goal of this paper is to study gender attrition/incomplete acquisition in Norwegian American heritage language based on the Corpus of American Norwegian Speech (CANS). We show that the three-gender system is relatively stable, although there are cases of overgeneralization attested. Neuter nouns occasionally become masculine, whereas feminine nouns are more prone to overgeneralization, also to the masculine. The paper raises certain theoretical questions that are important for our understanding of gender attrition: i) why is gender vulnerable?, and ii) which aspects of gender disappear first? Our answers will be based on considerations of the linguistic system in question and on the analysis of gender as a grammatical category.

**Previous research:** In recent years, gender assignment under incomplete acquisition has received some attention. Gender assignment is a complex phenomenon involving different areas of grammar and with significant variation across languages. For this reason, case studies of individual languages are of particular importance. In a study of Russian heritage language in the US, Polinsky (2008) finds that there is a reduction of a three-gender system (masculine(M), feminine(F), neuter(N)) to a two-gender system M-F. M nouns typically end in a consonant, F nouns in *-a*, and N nouns in *-o*. In the new system, M nouns end in a consonant and F nouns end in a vowel. Reduction and incomplete acquisition can also be seen in bilingual children. Rodina and Westergaard (2013a) show that bilingual Norwegian-Russian children living in Norway overgeneralize M also to F nouns.

Historically, it is well known that M and F in Germanic can collapse into common gender (C). This has happened in Dutch, Danish, the Bergen dialect of Norway (Jahr 1995, Nesse 2002, Heide 2003, Trudgill 2013), and it is currently taking place in the Oslo dialect (Lødrup 2011). Rodina and Westergaard (2014) demonstrate that in the Tromsø dialect of Norway, this process has also been attested in data from young children.

**Methodology:** We have used CANS, which has data from 36 informants from 12 areas in the US (e.g., Blair, Coon Valley, Harmony, Rushford, Sunburg and Westby). The corpus is composed of transcribed speech collected through structured conversations and interviews. In the corpus, we have searched for occurrences of gender assignment: i) the indefinite article followed by an adjective or a noun or both, ii) definite forms, and iii) possessives. If relevant, we have counted both type and token occurrences. We have also used the Norwegian part of the Nordic Dialect Corpus to compare the distribution of gender assignment in American Norwegian with that of contemporary spoken Norwegian.

**Findings:** In the Corpus of American Norwegian Speech, the token distribution of the three genders is as follows: 74.2% M, 13.1% F, and 12.6% N. In the Eastern Norwegian part of the NorDiaCorp ('Østlandet'), the token distribution is 64.8% M, 18.2% F and 17.0% N (only older speakers). Thus, gender seems to be relatively stable in American Norwegian. However, when we take a closer look at the data, we see that there are cases of overgeneralization. There are three examples of N nouns becoming masculine (1).

(1) *ffjell* 'mountain', *år* 'year', *stykke* 'piece'.

For F nouns, the picture is different: There is considerably more overgeneralization of F to M. These nouns appear after the indefinite article, an adjective or a possessive. A few examples are provided in (2).

- (2) *uke* ‘week’, *mil* ‘mile’, *kirke* ‘church’, *matte* ‘mat’, *dame* ‘lady’, *tid* ‘time’, *kusine* ‘cousin’, *kiste* ‘chest’, *svigerdatter* ‘daughter in law’, *datter* ‘daughter’, *jente* ‘girl’, *søster* ‘sister’, *ku* ‘cow’, *ordbok* ‘dictionary’.

Note that all F nouns are acceptable with M gender in one variety of written Norwegian (*bokmål*). Many of the nouns in (2) also appear in CANS with F gender. For example, *datter* ‘daughter’ occurs three times with F gender and three times with M. Altogether, approximately 25% of all F nouns are overgeneralized to M gender. These nouns are fairly frequent in this small corpus, suggesting that the heritage speakers are treating M as a default gender in many cases.

The data also provide additional support for the distinction between gender and declension class (Lødrup 2011, Rodina and Westergaard 2013b, 2014), gender being defined as agreement on other targets, while declension is marked on the noun itself. Many of the F nouns in the corpus occur with a M indefinite article or possessive: *en datter* ‘a daughter’, *en mil* ‘a mile’, *en tid* ‘a time’, *en kirke* ‘a church’, *en uke* ‘a week’, *mor min* ‘my mother’. However, the definite suffixes of these nouns are usually the F forms: *dattera*, *mila*, *tida*, *kirka*, *uka*, and not the M forms: *datteren*, *milen*, *tiden*, *kirken*, *uken*. This suggests that the declensional suffixes are considerably easier to retain. It has also been shown that both bilingual and monolingual children acquire declensions much earlier than gender agreement in Norwegian (Rodina and Westergaard 2013b, 2014).

**Discussion:** In cases of language attrition/incomplete acquisition, gender appears to be vulnerable. This is true both in bilingual acquisition and in heritage languages. Why should that be? Frequency by itself cannot speak to this issue, as many of the nouns that are overgeneralized into M are very frequent. If we compare heritage speakers of Russian with heritage speakers of Norwegian, we see that the reduction of the gender system is different. This must be due to differences in the linguistic systems: In Norwegian, there is considerable syncretism in gender agreement between M and F. Thus, there are few morphological cues to differentiate the two. In Russian, the N nouns are the most vulnerable, typically being analogized into the F class (Polinsky 2008). Clearly, each linguistic system has to be considered independently, which underlines the importance of considering heritage speakers from a wide range of languages in order to be able to better understand gender attrition. Furthermore, the vulnerability of gender as a grammatical category seen in this study and others may lend some support to a view of gender as syntactic (Alexiadou 2004, Kramer 2012), a possibility that we will discuss and evaluate in the talk.

**Conclusion:** Gender appears to be vulnerable in cases of language attrition/incomplete acquisition. We demonstrate that although gender is relatively stable in American Norwegian, there are cases of overgeneralization, most notably of F to M. We also argue that the data support the distinction between declension class and gender, the former being much more robust, both in acquisition and attrition.

### Selected references

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