

Pronouns and gender and in American Heritage Norwegian and Swedish

The pronominal systems of Norwegian and Swedish dialects vary a lot with respect to both gender and case. The two Norwegian written standards Bokmål and Nynorsk can serve to illustrate the differences in gender, which are connected to third person reference (Faarlund et al. 1997:326–344). Bokmål makes a distinction between pronouns that refer to humans (*han* 'he' and *hun* 'she') and those that refer to non-humans (including things and abstract concepts) (masculine + feminine *den* and neuter *det* 'it'). This system overrides the grammatical gender system, as in (1).

- (1) a. – Har du sett *broren* min? – *Han* sitter der borte.
brother.M.SG.DEF *he.M.SG.HUMAN*
'Have you seen my brother? He's sitting over there.'
- b. – Har du sett *sykkelen* min? – *Den* står der borte.
bike.M.SG.DEF *it.M.SG.NON-HUMAN*
'Have you seen my bike? It's standing over there.'
(Faarlund et al. 1997:326)

Nynorsk, on the other hand, has a strict grammatical gender system reflecting the three genders (masculine *han*, feminine *ho*, neuter *det*), with no additional distinctions regarding the human-non-human contrast:

- (2) a. –Har du sett *bror* min? –Han står der borte
brother.M.SG.INDEF *he.M.SG.*
'Have you seen my brother? He's standing over there.'
- b. –Har du sett *boka* mi? –Ho ligg der borte
book.F.SG.DEF *she.F.SG.*
'Have you seen my book? It's lying over there.'

Both systems are different from English, which does not have grammatical gender, but system (2) is perhaps furthest away from English, since it does not have a biological gender distinction in the pronouns. This is also the older system, which is preserved in both Norwegian and Swedish dialects. Many Norwegian and Swedish heritage speakers are descendants of dialect speakers with this system. (There is variation between dialects with respect to the feminine – many dialects do not mark the feminine on adjectives.)

Trudgill (2013) argues that the loss of the feminine in some Scandinavian varieties (including Bokmål and Standard Swedish) is due to language contact. Historically, the development seems to have involved first a loss of distinctions in agreement morphology, followed by a change in the pronominal system and the emergence of a semantic gender system for pronouns.

Håkansson (1995) and Johannessen & Larsson (2013) show that gender agreement morphology is affected in attrition (the masculine zero-form is generalized). Johannessen & Larsson suggest that the deviations are due to

processing problems in attrited speakers, and not necessarily to changes in the underlying system. They show that gender assignment to nouns, on the other hand, is not necessarily affected in attrition, and take this as an argument for treating gender as a lexical property of nouns, which can be accessed by the speaker if the noun can. Gender agreement in other categories, especially determiners, is shown to be more susceptible to attrition.

The question then is whether, in Heritage Scandinavian, pronouns pattern with determiners (and begin to lose gender marking altogether), behave like nouns and retain grammatical gender, or if a semantic gender system for pronouns develops, as it has done in Bokmål, Standard Swedish and English (see e.g. Davidson 1990). In our talk we will investigate to what extent Heritage Norwegian and Swedish have kept the old system, or whether they have changed towards loss of gender or semantic gender. We will study the transcriptions and recordings from recent and older fieldwork. In order to trace the development in American Heritage Scandinavian, we will make comparisons with the relevant European Norwegian and Swedish dialects as they are documented in the literature and in dialect corpora. These dialects constitute the baseline for our investigation.

The investigation will show that there is some evidence for the development of a semantic gender system among both attrited and non-attrited speakers. This is presumably due to language contact and koinéisation. The change does however not necessarily mean that grammatical gender is affected, and pronouns, nouns and determiners do not necessarily behave the same. Trudgill (2013) points out that there are different kinds of contact phenomena, and he attributes some of the simplifications to adult foreign language-learning. This would perhaps explain why the situation in Heritage Scandinavian does not completely parallel the historical development in European Scandinavian. The comparison between attrited and non-attrited speakers, combined with the historical data from Scandinavia, will help tease out the different factors involved, and can at the same time shed some light on the morphological properties of pronouns in relation to determiners and nouns.

References

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