

Much More *mere eller mindre* ‘More or Less’ in Argentine Danish

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1. Introduction

This paper is a report of a pilot study on the use of the approximative phrase *mere eller mindre* ‘more or less’ in Argentine Danish. When listening to recordings of the Spanish-Danish bilingual speakers of Heritage Argentine Danish, one gets the impression that the speakers overgeneralize the use of *mere eller mindre* compared to what is expected from Danish as spoken in Denmark (henceforth ‘Standard Danish’). This seems even more likely as spoken Spanish makes extensive use of the formally and semantically equivalent phrase *más o menos* and Spanish is the dominant language in the speakers’ daily life. As such, the overgeneralization of *mere eller mindre* seems to be a case of what Johanson (2002a: 292) calls “frequent copying”. With this term, Johanson denotes the language contact phenomenon where “elements which already exist in the basic code [here, Danish], though they are more “normal” in the model code [: here Spanish], may gain ground and become less marked [in the basic code, here Danish]” (Johanson 2002a: 292).

However, the overgeneralized use of *mere eller mindre* is not the only aspect that distinguishes its use in Argentine Danish from its use in Standard Danish. As the paper will show, it seems that *mere eller mindre* is used in different degrees in different semantic functions compared to Standard Danish. In this case, we speak of “combinatorial copying”, whereby “combinatorial properties of model code units [...] are copied onto units of the basic code” (Johanson 2002a: 292). A typical effect of combinatorial copying may be “loss of former distinctions, leading to underspecification and simplification” (2002a: 295). Further, combinatorial copying may result in “new placement patterns, phrase structure rules, rules for lexical subcategorisation, valency patterns, word-internal morphemic patterns, etc.” (Johanson 2002b: 264).

This paper documents that not only is *mere eller mindre* more frequent in Argentine Danish than in Standard Danish, probably due to the frequency with which the equivalent *más o menos* occurs in Spanish, but *mere eller mindre* also shows elements of combinatorial copying. Further, the paper will point to a number of methodological issues related to setting up criteria for a cross-linguistic corpus-based investigation of the combinatorial patterns in which a phrase appears.

2. Danish in Argentina

The history of the Danish language in Argentina goes back to the Danish immigration to Argentina that began in the late 1840s and continued until around 1930, peaking around 1890–1910 (Hansen 2016; Kühn et al. 2017). The Danes settled primarily in the capital Buenos Aires, on the pampa southwest of Buenos Aires between the towns Tandil, Tres Arroyos, and Necochea, in what was to become known as *The Dane Triangle* (‘Danskertrekanten’), and from the early 1920s, in Eldorado in the province Misiones in the north of Argentina.

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Although approximately 50,000 Argentinians today claim Danish ancestry, the actual number of Danish immigrants was small; historical and anthropological literature mention numbers from 8,000–13,000 (Bjerg 1996; Agertoft 2005; Jarnum 2006). Based on information from informants, we estimate, with uncertainty, that today 1,000–1,500 descendants of Danish immigrants still speak Danish, only few of them are under 65 years old. All speakers are sequential or simultaneous bilingual as they have acquired Danish and Spanish from early childhood or Spanish from start of school.

3. Data and speaker samples

The data for the analysis of *mere eller mindre* in Argentine Danish are extracted from the Corpus of South American Danish (CoSAMDa; see Kühl et al. 2017). All of the speakers in CoSAMDa have Spanish as their dominant and primary language today, but they are all fluent speakers of Danish and have had no problems engaging in the long interviews that serve as the source for the present analysis. In the comparison with other varieties of Danish, two other corpora are used: a corpus of Danish dialects, Corest (Asmussen 2010–2017) and the corpus of modern Danish speech (LANCHART; Gregersen 2009). Corest consists of 170 interviews with and narratives by traditional dialectal elderly speakers recorded in the period 1934–1994. LANCHART represents Standard Danish and a number of regiolectal variants of Danish. The data are collected in the period 1970–2017. The speakers are between 15 and 70 years old at the time of the recording.

Table 1: Three corpora of spoken Danish.

	CoSAMDA	Corest	LANCHART
No. of words	858,000	1,027,000	9,217,194
No. of speakers	90	170	1,090
Speakers' birth year	1911–1971	1845–1931	1930–1991

4. *Mere eller mindre* in Standard Danish

In Standard Danish, as represented by the LANCHART corpus, the approximative phrase *mere eller mindre* can occur as an adjective, (1), or as an adverbial, (2)–(3).

- (1) *Vores mere eller mindre overbevisning om det er at ...* (StDa-ORU)
 our more or less conviction about it is that
 ‘Our rough conviction about it is that ...’
- (2) *De magter faktisk alle sammen mere eller mindre* (StDa-FRK)
 they manage actually all together more or less
at tale rigsdansk.
 to speak Standard Danish
 ‘They can actually all more or less speak Standard Danish.’
- (3) *En fra Italien som man mere eller mindre gebrokkent* (ArgDa-EMD)
 someone from Italy that one more or less haltingly
kunne snakke med.
 could talk with
 ‘Someone from Italy that one more or less haltingly could talk with.’

The adjectival function of *mere eller mindre* is only poorly attested in Argentine Danish, and it also seems to be infrequent in Standard Danish, as Table 2 shows. (The small difference in distribution is not statistically significant: $p = 0.66$; chi-square test.)

Table 2: *Mere eller mindre* as an adjectival and adverbial phrase in Argentine Danish and Standard Danish.

	Argentina	Denmark
Adjectival	2 (2%)	17 (7.7%)
Adverbial	96 (98%)	203 (92.3%)
Total	98 (100%)	220 (100%)

As an adverbial, *mere eller mindre* belongs to the group of focus adverbials that express something ‘approximative’, “noget omtrentligt” (Christensen & Christensen 2014: 145). It translates into English as ‘more or less, approximately, in an approximate way, to a greater or lesser extent, to a greater or lesser degree, about, roughly’ (*Den Danske Ordbog*, DDO [The Danish Dictionary]; *Ordbog over det danske sprog*, ODS [Dictionary of the Danish Language]; *Gyldendals røde ordbøger* [Gyldendal’s red dictionaries]). As an approximative adverbial, *mere eller mindre* has a range of synonyms, including *cirka*, *godt*, *godt og vel*, *nogenlunde*, *næsten*, *omkring*, *omtrent*, and others. These adverbials denote a quality or a quantity that almost reaches a complete stage (approximation) but they may also be used in functions without this quantitative element (cf. Section 5.2). There are to this author’s knowledge no studies that discuss if these synonyms can replace each other in all syntactic and semantic contexts or whether some of them are restricted to specific contexts.

5. *Mere eller mindre* in Argentine Danish

At the time of the extraction of data, CoSAmDA contained 96 occurrences of *mere eller mindre* produced by 31 speakers. Table 3 shows the distribution of *mere eller mindre* across the speakers’ gender and place of residence.

Table 3: Distribution of adverbial *mere eller mindre* in Argentine Danish in relation to gender and place of residence, no. of speakers in parentheses.²

	Women	Men	Total
Buenos Aires	14 (4)	7 (3)	21 (7)
Eldorado	2 (1)	0	2 (1)
Pampa	53 (15)	20 (8)	73 (23)
Total	69 (20)	27 (11)	96 (31)

5.1. *Mere eller mindre* and other approximative adverbials

A total of 96 occurrences of *mere eller mindre* in a corpus of 858,000 words may not seem impressive, and one may speculate how this supports the impression of overgeneralization. It does, however, if we compare the distribution of *mere eller mindre* with the distribution of other approximative adverbials in Argentine Danish and varieties of Standard Danish. This is done in Table 4, which shows the frequency of eight synonymous or near-synonymous approximative adverbials in the three different corpora.

² It is not surprising that women are better represented in the dataset given the general gender distribution of CoSAmDA (Kühl et al. 2017). Only one out of the 10 speakers from Eldorado that appear in CoSAmDa uses *mere eller mindre*. The 9 other Eldorado speakers all use the Spanish equivalent *más o menos*.

Table 4: Approximative adverbs and their distribution in three corpora of spoken Danish.³

	CoSAmDa (n=858,000)	Corest (n=1,027,000)	LANCHART (n=9,281,051)
<i>cirka</i> ‘roughly’	32 (5.9%)	76 (8%)	868 (13.6%)
<i>godt og vel</i> ‘approximately’	3 (0.6%)	7 (0.7%)	26 (0.4%)
<i>mere eller mindre</i> ‘more or less’	96 (17.8%)	3 (0.3%)	203 (3.2%)
<i>nogenlunde</i> ‘fairly, almost’	26 (4.8%)	73 (7.7%)	590 (9.3%)
<i>næsten</i> ‘almost’	342 (63.5%)	571 (60.4%)	3,691 (57.9%)
<i>omkring</i> ‘around (about)’	36 (6.7%)	115 (12.2%)	383 (6%)
<i>omtrent</i> ‘about, nearly’	4 (0.7%)	97 (10.3%)	43 (0.7%)
<i>stort set</i> ‘by and large’	0 (0%)	4 (0.4%)	570 (8.9%)
Total	542 (100%)	946 (100%)	6,374 (100%)

The table shows that *næsten* ‘almost’ is by far the most frequently used and dominant approximative adverbial in all three varieties. The table also shows, among other things, that in CoSAmDa, *mere eller mindre* has a much higher frequency compared to its synonyms than in the other varieties, i.e., if an Argentine Danish speaker wants to express approximation with one of these adverbs, the chances that s/he uses *mere eller mindre* is much higher than for a speaker of Standard or dialectal Danish.

In comparison with Standard Danish (LANCHART) the high-frequency occurrence of *mere eller mindre* in CoSAmDa is at the expense of *cirka*, *nogenlunde* and *stort set*. In comparison with dialectal Danish, the high-frequency status of *mere eller mindre* is at the expense of *omkring* and *omtrent*. The comparison of Corest and the CoSAmDa shows clearly that the high-frequency status of *mere eller mindre* cannot be due to a high-frequency status in the traditional Danish dialects. It must thus be due to either a usage pattern from non-dialectal spoken Danish from the late 19th century and the early 20th century, of which we do not have a comparable corpus, or due to a specific usage pattern in Argentina, probably influenced by the usage patterns of Spanish *más o menos*.

The figures in Table 4 do not consider any syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic restrictions for the use of the adverbials, and it may be necessary to examine closely whether *mere eller mindre* has expanded its usage domains and whether some of the other adverbials have lost usage domains. An exhaustive analysis along these lines requires a semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic study of all eight adverbials in all three corpora. As mentioned above, there are no studies of this for Danish, and conducting such a comprehensive study is beyond the scope of this paper. I will therefore in the following restrict myself to looking at semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic characteristics of *mere eller mindre*. Since *mere eller mindre* only occurs three times in the dialect corpus, I will only compare the usage of *mere eller mindre* in CoSAmDa and LANCHART.

5.2. *Mere eller mindre* in short replies

Mere eller mindre may in both Argentine and Standard Danish be used in non-clausal short replies. Such short replies can be very short, for example, *ja, mere eller mindre* ‘yes, more or less’, or they can be more expanded as in (4). In both cases the short replies lack a finite verb and a subject.

³ The numbers for *omkring* include instances of the synonym form *deromkring* ‘there around’ and the dialectal forms *deromkring ved* and *omkring ved* ‘(there) around about’. Examples where *omkring* and variant forms express spatial meaning are excluded from the count.

- (4) Interviewer: *Hvor er du opvoks-et?* (StDa-SNT)
 where are you grow up-PTCP
 ‘Where did you grow up?’
- Informant: *Øh, mere eller mindre i Holstebro.*
 er more or less in Holstebro
 ‘Er, more or less in Holstebro’ [i.e., in a town in West Jutland]

A comparison between CoSAmDA and LANCHART shows that the short reply function is more frequent in CoSAmDA than in Standard Danish.

Table 5: *Mere eller mindre* and short replies and full clauses.

	Argentine Danish (CoSAmDa)	Modern Danish (LANCHART)
In short reply	21	10
In full clause	75	193
Total	96	203

A chi-square test for significance shows that the Argentine Danish speakers’ preference for *mere eller mindre* as or in short replies is significantly greater than the Standard Danish speakers’ ($p < 0.0001$).

5.3. The syntactic position of *mere eller mindre*

As part of a full clause, *mere eller mindre* may occur in the ‘core clause’, see (8)–(11) below, or as a right-dislocated constituent, (6)–(7).

- (6) *Til den dansk-e skole i Cascallares* (ArgDa-NPN)
 to the Danish-DEF school in Cascallares
der var en tredive kilometer, mere eller mindre, ikke sandt.
 there was about thirty kilometres more or less right
 ‘To the Danish school in Cascallares, there was about 30 kilometres, more or less, right.’
- (7) *Hun har ikke nogen dansk-e i familie-n,* (ArgDa-SKK)
 she has not any Danish-PL in family-DEF.SG
mere eller mindre.
 more or less
 ‘She doesn’t have any of Danish descent in the family, more or less.’

Following traditional Danish syntax, the function of a right-dislocated constituent is to provide a comment on the content of the full clause as a sort of afterthought expression (Hansen & Heltoft 2011: 1621–1623). This syntactic position is almost equally represented among the occurrences of *mere eller mindre* in both varieties as Table 6 shows ($p = 0.338$).

Table 6: *Mere eller mindre* and position as right-dislocated or in core clause.

	Argentine Danish (CoSAmDa)	Modern Danish (LANCHART)
Right-dislocated	31 (41.3%)	69 (35.8%)
In core clause	44 (58.7%)	124 (64.2%)
Total	75 (100%)	193 (100%)

In a core clause, there does not seem to be a difference with respect to which syntactic constituent (Subject, Subject Predicative, Object, etc.) *mere eller mindre* modifies. Both varieties show examples of modification of the finite verb, the subject, the subject predicative, the object, etc., and there are no distributional differences between the two varieties in this respect.

However, if we look at the type of phrase that makes up the modified syntactic constituent, we see another striking difference between Argentine Danish and Standard Danish. In both varieties, *mere eller mindre* modifies noun phrases with an adjectival or numeral modifier, verbal phrases, adverbial phrases, or adjectival phrases as shown (7)–(11), but not to the same extent (cf. Table 7).

- (7) *Jeg var egentlig mere eller mindre ligeglad med* (StDa-AJO)
 I was actually more or less indifferent with
hvad de sagde.
 what they said
 ‘I actually more or less didn’t care about what they said.’
- (8) *Min storebror han var så med til at lave mad-en.* (StDa-MKC)
 my elder brother he was then with to to make food-DEF.SG
Det gik mere eller mindre heldigt.
 it went more or less luckily
 ‘My elder brother helped prepare the food. It went more or less well.’
- (9) *Så træff-er han mor som var sådan* (ArgDa-LSN)
 then meet-PRS he mother who was so
mere eller mindre i gruppe sammen med hans bror.
 more or less in group together with his brother
 ‘Then he meets mother, who was, like, more or less in a group together with his brother.’
- (10) *Der var mere eller mindre tredive børn i den skole.* (ArgDa-EEL)
 there were more or less 30 children in that school
 ‘There were more or less 30 children in that school.’
- (11) *Alle leder-e bliv-er mere eller mindre tvung-et* (StDa-CNI)
 all manager-PL become-PRS more or less force-PTCP
til at gå på lederuddannelse.
 to to go on manager education
 ‘All managers are more or less forced to take an education as a manager.’

Table 7 below shows the distribution of *mere eller mindre* across these categories. The ‘Other’ category includes phrases that are few in number in the dataset, for example numeral phrases, pronominal phrases, and phrases of comparison. From the table we see that in Argentine Danish *mere eller mindre* is notably less frequent before an adjective and an adverb, cf. examples (8)–(9). With caution due to the low overall number, *mere eller mindre* occurs with a somewhat higher frequency in Argentine Danish before prepositional phrases compared to that syntactic position in Standard Danish. *Mere eller mindre* also occurs with a notably higher frequency in the Other category but this may be due to the fact that occurrences with adjectival phrases like *de fleste* and *den samme*, which mainly occur in Argentine Danish, are grouped in that category.

The tendency for dispreffering *mere eller mindre* as modifying an adjective is also seen when *mere eller mindre* modifies an adjective that occurs as an attributive in a noun phrase, (12).

- (12) *For de var mere eller mindre samme alder.* (ArgDa-VIA)
 because they were more or less same age
 ‘Because they were more or less the same age.’

Table 7: *Mere eller mindre* as a modifier of phrases.

	Argentine Danish (CoSAMDa)	Standard Danish (LANCHART)
Adjective	3 (6.8%)	38 (30.6%)
Adverb or adverbial phrase	1 (2.2%)	17 (13.7%)
Prepositional phrase	8 (18.2%)	10 (8.1%)
Noun phrase	8 (18.2%)	20 (16.1%)
Verb phrase	8 (18.2%)	30 (24.2%)
Other	16 (36.4%)	9 (7.3%)
Total	44 (100%)	124 (100%)

Only 2 out of 15 examples of *mere eller mindre* before an attributive adjective (with a head noun, included in Noun phrase in Table 7) are from Argentine Danish. We may ask why the approximative adverbial *mere eller mindre* seems to be dispreferred with adjectives.

5.4. *Mere eller mindre* as a modifier of measurable contents

If we look at the semantic content of the phrase modified by *mere eller mindre*, we see a striking difference Argentine and Standard Danish as *mere eller mindre* to a much larger – and statistically significant – degree modifies ‘measurable’ content in Argentine Danish than in Standard Danish. Examples (14)–(16) show occurrences where *mere eller mindre* modifies measurable content, in (14) a period of time, in (15) an amount, in (16) a distance, and (17) is an example of modified content that is not measurable (see also (7)–(9) and (11)).

- (14) *De var deroppe en ti dag-e, mere eller mindre.* (ArgDa-IJE)
 they were up there about ten day-PL more or less
 ‘They were up there for about ten days, more or less.’
- (15) *Vi havde de der 800 hektar-er, mere eller mindre.* (ArgDa-COM)
 we had those there 800 hectar-PL more or less
 ‘We had those 800 hectares, more or less.’
- (16) *Herfra der er mere eller mindre 70 kilometer.* (ArgDa-PHH)
 from here there are more or less 70 kilometres
 ‘From here there is more or less 70 kilometres.’
- (17) *Da min kone mere eller mindre lærte at tale dansk.* (ArgDa-EDD)
 when my wife more or less learn-PST to speak Danish
 ‘When my wife more or less learnt to speak Danish.’

Table 8 shows the distributional differences between Argentine Danish and Standard Danish with respect to modified semantics.

Table 8: *Mere eller mindre* and semantic modification and syntactic position.

	In core clause		Right-dislocated		Full clause (total)	
	Argentina	Denmark	Argentina	Denmark	Argentina	Denmark
Measurable content	8	2	23	2	31	4
Non-measurable content	36	124	8	66	44	190
Total	44	126	31	68	75	194

The table shows that Argentine Danish has a strong preference for using *mere eller mindre* as a modification of ‘measurable content’ in contrast to modifying non-measurable content. The preference is statistically significant in occurrences in the core sentence and in right-dislocated constituents (full clause: $p < 0.0001$; core sentence: $p = 0.0004$; right-dislocated: $p < 0.0001$).

6. Concluding perspectives

The preceding analysis has pointed to a number of differences with respect to the distribution of *mere eller mindre* in Argentine Danish and Standard Danish. *Mere eller mindre* occurs with a much higher frequency in Argentine Danish than in Standard Danish compared to other approximative adverbs, also those that occur in the dialect corpus. The analysis also showed that *mere eller mindre* in short replies is represented to a higher extent among the Argentine Danish speakers’ use of *mere eller mindre*. Further, we saw that *mere eller mindre* occurs to a significantly lower degree as a modifier of adjectival and adverbial phrases than in Standard Danish, and to a significantly higher degree as a modifier of what is here termed ‘measurable content’. We also saw that with one notable exception, speakers from Eldorado seem to prefer to switch to Spanish *más o menos* rather than use *mere eller mindre*. The differences between groups of speakers, as well as idiolectal differences, call for future sociolinguistic studies.

The observations regarding function and syntactic and semantic distribution seem at first sight as indications of Johanson’s notions *frequential copying* and *combinatorial copying* for certain language contact phenomena: (1) *Mere eller mindre* occurs with a higher frequency in Argentine Danish than in Standard Danish because its formal and semantic Spanish equivalent *más o menos* is “more normal” in the model code” (= Spanish) (Johanson 2002a: 292); (2) in their ‘reanalysis’ of the more frequent approximative phrase, the speakers of Argentine Danish have at the same time redefined the usage domains of *mere eller mindre* (cf. Johanson 2002a: 264: “combinatorial properties of model code units [...] are copied onto units of the basic code” (“basic code” = Danish).

However, it seems too soon to draw such conclusions as the analysis of *mere eller mindre* needs to be expanded in a number of ways that each has its own methodological considerations and challenges. These challenges are notably large due to the multi-functional nature and general approximative semantics of an adverbial phrase such as *mere eller mindre*. I here list a few of the perspectives that, to the best of my knowledge, need to be taken into consideration in future studies of *mere eller mindre*.

First, we need to know whether the assumed influential Spanish approximative phrase *más o menos* actually is “more normal” than its approximative synonyms in spoken Argentine Spanish. This calls for supplementing corpus studies of the distribution of *más o menos* and other approximative adverbs and adverbial phrases (for example, *casi*, *cerca de*, *poco menos de*, *cosa de*, *alrededor*) in line with the one for *mere eller mindre* reported in Table 4. Second, a rough count of the number of adverbial expressions of approximation cannot in itself explain the differences with respect to the function of *mere eller mindre*. Hence, further corpus studies also need to examine which Argentine Spanish approximative adverbials are used in the functions defined by this study, namely in or as short replies, in phrases with measurable content, and as modifiers of adjectival vs. verbal phrases, adverbial, and other phrases. Third, and crucially, the second perspective also calls for further studies of semantic and combinatorial aspects of the synonyms of *mere eller mindre* in both Argentine Danish and Standard Danish. Such studies may show which approximative adverbs are used in a certain syntactic positions and in which semantic function.

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