

Systematic Variation in the Gender System in American Norwegian

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1. Introduction

Between 1825 and 1920 more than 800.000 Norwegians immigrated to the U.S., and the Norwegian language has been maintained in some areas until the present day. This variety of Norwegian is called *American Norwegian* or *Heritage Norwegian*. Two recent papers – Johannessen & Larsson (2015) and Lohndal & Westergaard (2016) – discuss the status of grammatical gender in American Norwegian by considering noun phrase-internal agreement in the Corpus of American Norwegian Speech (CANS; Johannessen 2015). Johannessen & Larsson (2015) claim that the gender system is in place for most speakers since they find a great degree of target-consistent gender agreement in CANS. Lohndal & Westergaard (2016), on the other hand, find extensive overgeneralization of masculine agreement and conclude that the gender category in American Norwegian is vulnerable. Both studies consider inter-speaker variation, and Johannessen & Larsson (2015: 16) conclude that “the individual differences are big.” However, in both studies there is a very limited amount of data per informant, “so it is impossible to provide complete profiles of the gender system of each of them” (Lohndal & Westergaard 2016: 9). According to Johannessen & Larsson (2015: 18), “additional work is clearly required.”

The present study presents new data on gender agreement in American Norwegian, obtained through elicitation tasks specifically designed for eliciting indefinite articles and personal pronouns. Through careful examination of the gender agreeing forms at the level of the individual, four different patterns of gender agreement were identified. The data also replicate the finding of Lohndal & Westergaard (2016) concerning overgeneralization of masculine agreement forms. Since all individuals in this study conform to one of four agreement patterns, and since the overgeneralization of masculine forms is found across speakers, I argue that the individual differences are not as big as previously assumed. Importantly, this study shows that the variation between speakers is not random: all speakers produce gender agreement according to one of four systems.

2. Grammatical gender

According to Hockett’s (1958: 231) classic definition, “genders are classes of nouns reflected in the behavior of associated words.” This means that the determining criterion for gender is *agreement*, observed in elements other than the noun itself (Corbett 1991: 4, 105). When it comes to gender in Norwegian, the three genders *masculine*, *feminine*, and *neuter* are distinguished in nearly all dialects. The gender of a noun determines (and is thus realized through) the form of articles, adjectives, and demonstratives (including possessives) accompanying this noun. Additionally, the gender of the noun determines which personal pronoun can be used for referring to it (see e.g. Beito 1986: 235), cf. Table 1 below. For animates, however, reference can be made to the biological gender, e.g. *læraren*_(M) ‘the

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teacher’– *ho_F* ‘she.’ In this paper, only personal pronouns referring to inanimates are considered, and the abbreviation PPI (Personal Pronoun referring to Inanimate) will be used. Table 1 lists the gender agreeing forms in Nynorsk that are relevant for the present paper.¹

Table 1: Overview of the gender agreement in Nynorsk that is relevant for this paper.

	M	F	N
Indefinite article	<i>ein</i> bil ‘a car’	<i>ei</i> lampe ‘a lamp’	<i>eit</i> bord ‘a table’
Personal pronoun	<i>han</i>	<i>ho</i>	<i>det</i>

When it comes to the distribution between the three genders in speech, Lohndal & Westergaard (2016: 7) investigated the occurrences of the three indefinite articles by the speakers over 60 years old in the Nordic Dialect Corpus (Johannessen et al. 2009). Of all occurrences of the indefinite article, 65% are masculine, 18% are feminine, and 17% are neuter. These numbers are similar to the distribution between the genders found by Rodina & Westergaard (2015: 150–151) in a corpus of child language recorded in Tromsø (Anderssen 2006).

3. Research questions

As already mentioned, Johannessen & Larsson (2015) and Lohndal & Westergaard (2016) reached different conclusions concerning the status of grammatical gender in American Norwegian. Johannessen & Larsson (2015) found big individual differences, but were not able to find a clear pattern to these differences. Lohndal & Westergaard (2016), on the other hand, found overgeneralization of the masculine forms across speakers. The present paper considers two formal categories that in traditional dialects distinguish between three genders: (1) the indefinite article and (2) the personal pronoun. The latter is especially interesting since none of the aforementioned studies considered it for gender purposes. Due to the striking inter-speaker variation, the agreement pattern on the two formal categories are first investigated at the level of the individual. Then I investigate whether some patterns are shared by several speakers. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. Which genders are identified on the indefinite article for each individual speaker?
2. Which genders are identified on personal pronouns referring to 3SG for each individual speaker?
3. Do the analyses of research question 1 and 2 allow for the establishment of patterns of gender agreement in the speech production of the whole speaker group?

4. Methodology

4.1. Elicitation tasks

As pointed out by Lohndal & Westergaard (2016), gender agreement data are not sufficiently represented for each speaker in the Corpus of American Norwegian Speech. In order to elicit enough data for each single informant on the use of indefinite article and personal pronoun, two free elicitation tasks were developed and presented to American Norwegian heritage speakers during fieldwork in three different towns in Minnesota and Wisconsin, USA. *Free* indicates that the elicitation tasks were not strictly formalized, but rather designed to elicit naturalistic speech. These tasks were carried out using pictures, and thus participation did not require any reading or writing skills in Norwegian. The pictures were presented to the informants on a computer screen, accompanied by questions concerning the

¹ A crucial issue when discussing gender in Scandinavian varieties is the status of the definite suffix. It is not unusual to treat the definite suffix as a gender exponent (see e.g. Dahl 2000), but this view is not shared by all scholars (e.g. Lohndal & Westergaard 2016). For a thorough discussion on this matter, see Rødvang (2017).

depicted object that triggered the use of pronouns. All pictures were meant to represent concrete nouns that are found with a certain frequency in CANS.

In the first elicitation task, each object was shown in four different pictures, occurring in a new place in each one. The informants were first asked to identify the object. This could result in occurrences of the indefinite article and would trigger the use of anaphoric pronouns, as well as ascertain that they knew the target noun. They were then asked where the target object was placed in the picture. The goal was to obtain a discourse like (1):

- (1) Interviewer: *Kva er dette?*
 ‘What is this?’
- Participant: *Det er eit brød.*
 it is a[N] bread(N)
 ‘It’s a bread.’
- Interviewer: *Kor er brødet?*
 ‘Where is the bread?’
- Participant: *Det ligg på bord-et*
 3SG.N lies on table(N)-DEF.SG
 ‘It’s on the table.’
- Interviewer: *Kor er brødet no?*
 ‘Where is the bread now?’
- Participant: *No er det på golv-et*
 now is 3SG.N on floor(N)-DEF.SG
 ‘Now it’s on the floor.’

In the second free elicitation task, there was only one picture of each object. As in task 1, the informants were first asked to identify and name the item. Then they were asked questions that ensured that the target item was topic, and that therefore triggered the use of pronouns. For instance, the informants could be asked to describe the object.

The gender agreeing forms were carefully interpreted and analyzed for each of the speakers. The interpretation of the various gender agreeing forms has been informed by earlier descriptions of American Norwegian (Haugen 1969; Hjelde 1992), as well as by descriptions of especially relevant dialects in Norway. These descriptions have also helped determine the target gender of each noun.²

4.2. Participants

This study includes data from 25 speakers, 10 women and 15 men. They were between the age of 58 and 92 at the time of recording, the average age being approximately 79 years. All of them are descendants of immigrants arriving in the U.S. before 1920. One informant is a second generation immigrant, and one is fifth generation immigrant, whereas the rest have grandparents or great-grandparents who emigrated from Norway. They come from three different towns in Minnesota and Wisconsin. All participants had to speak the majority language, English, at school. For many of these speakers, this was their first exposure to English. Subsequently, English has taken over as the dominant language for all speakers.

The elicitation tasks were also presented to three speakers from the valley of Gausdal in Gudbrandsdalen in Norway, age-matched with the American Norwegian speakers. This was done to ensure that the tasks triggered the targeted response, and to get an indication of how non-heritage speakers would perform on the tasks.

² For a thorough description of how the agreeing forms were analyzed and a discussion of the consequences of choice of analysis, see Rødvand (2017).

5. Results

Altogether, the elicitation tasks provided 1005 tokens of the indefinite article and 657 PPIs (Personal Pronoun referring to Inanimate). On the basis of the gender agreeing forms found for the indefinite article and the PPI, the American Norwegian speakers are divided into four groups. Importantly, in this overview a speaker's use of a single gender form is sufficient for inclusion of the speaker in a group. This grouping of the speakers helps uncover a clear pattern concerning the ways in which the original gender system is altered, cf. Table 2. Note however that for half of the speakers, the non-masculine forms are not occurring as frequently as expected. Instead we see an overgeneralization of masculine forms (cf. Lohndal & Westergaard 2016), which will be addressed when describing each of the groups. Table 2 shows the agreement forms found within each group.

Table 2: Overview over the indefinite articles and PPIs found in each of the groups. Vertically: PPIs, horizontally: indefinite articles.

	<i>ein_M, ei_F, eit_N</i>	<i>ein</i>
<i>han_M, ho_F, det_N</i>	Group 1 (n=15)	
<i>han, det</i>	Group 2 (n=5)	Group 3 (n=3)
Referential system → <i>det</i>	Group 4 (n=2)	

5.1. Group 1: Original three-gender system (15 speakers)

Table 3 illustrates the gender agreeing forms that are characteristic of Group 1. The forms are identical to the original three-gender system, cf. Table 1.

Table 3: The gender agreeing forms found in Group 1.

	Indefinite article		PPI
Masculine	<i>ein</i>	<i>bil</i>	<i>han</i>
	<i>a[M]</i>	<i>car(M)</i>	<i>3SG.M</i>
Feminine	<i>ei</i>	<i>dør</i>	<i>ho</i>
	<i>a[F]</i>	<i>door(F)</i>	<i>3SG.F</i>
Neuter	<i>eit</i>	<i>flagg</i>	<i>det</i>
	<i>a[N]</i>	<i>flag(N)</i>	<i>3SG.N</i>

There are differences between the speakers of this group concerning how frequently they produce the expected agreement forms. Since the agreement pattern in Group 1 is identical to the system we find in the majority of the European Norwegian dialects, the in-group difference in this particular group can be operationalized by comparing the production of these speakers to the production of the three Norwegian speakers mentioned in Section 4.2. In doing so, I found that four speakers in Group 1 have a lower score than the Norwegian speakers for *both* of the formal categories, i.e. both for the indefinite article and for the PPI. These four speakers therefore make up Group 1b. The way their production deviates from that of the rest of the speakers in Group 1 – as well as that of the Gausdal Norwegians – follows a clear pattern: the masculine is used where a feminine or neuter form is expected. Table 4 below shows how frequently the non-masculine nouns occurred with masculine agreement in the total production of Group 1b.

Table 4: Percentage of times the masculine form (in italics) was used instead of the expected non-masculine form, Group 1b.

	Indefinite article	PPI
F nouns	<i>ein</i> 70% (33/47)	<i>han</i> 55% (17/31)
N nouns	<i>ein</i> 68% (47/69)	<i>han</i> 55% (27/49)

This finding is in line with Lohndal & Westergaard (2016), and we will see that this pattern of deviation is also found in Group 2 and 4. A discussion of this finding is presented in Section 6.

5.2. Group 2: No feminine PPI (5 speakers)

The hallmark of Group 2 is that there is no distinct PPI for referring to feminine nouns. Instead, the masculine pronoun *han* is normally used in reference to feminine nouns, but *det* is also used. The three original genders are distinguished in the indefinite article, albeit not always consistently, which we will see below. The gender forms that are characteristic of Group 2 are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: The gender agreeing forms characteristic of Group 2. (Forms deviating from the baseline in italics.)

	Indefinite article		PPI
Masculine	<i>ein</i>	<i>bil</i>	<i>han</i>
	a[M]	car(M)	3SG.M
Feminine	<i>ei</i>	<i>dør</i>	<i>han (det)</i>
	a[F]	door(F)	3SG
Neuter	<i>eit</i>	<i>flagg</i>	<i>det</i>
	a[N]	flag(N)	3SG.N

In Table 5 we see that the agreement forms produced by the speakers of Group 2 in part deviate from the original three-gender system. Importantly though, Table 5 clearly illustrates that there is a system underlying their gender agreement production. However, the speakers sometimes deviate from the system outlined in Table 5. These deviations consist in overgeneralization of the masculine form, similar to what was found in Group 1b. Table 6 shows how frequently non-masculine nouns occur with non-expected masculine agreement.

Table 6: Percentage of times the masculine form (in italics) was used instead of the expected non-masculine form, Group 2.

	Indefinite article	PPI
F nouns	<i>ein</i> 69% (37/54)	(The Masculine is part of the system)
N nouns	<i>ein</i> 70% (49/70)	<i>han</i> 55% (31/56)

5.3. Group 3: Two genders only (3 speakers)

This group is characterized by not showing signs of three distinct genders in any of the two formal categories. In the absence of a distinct feminine PPI, the neuter *det* is most commonly used for referring to feminine nouns (with one exception, see below). When it comes to the article, the masculine *ein* is used across the board, and the article thus seems to be detached from gender in this group. Ultimately, this means that in these data there is no evidence for a feminine gender.

Table 7: The gender agreeing forms characteristic of Group 3. (Forms deviating from the baseline in italics.)

	Indefinite article		PPI
Masculine	ein	bil	han
	a	car(M)	3SG.M
Feminine	<i>ein</i>	dør	<i>det (han)</i>
	a	door(F)	3SG
Neuter	<i>ein</i>	flagg	det
	a	flag(N)	3SG.N

One participant in this group is of particular interest, namely sunburg08. For all speakers of this group, the indefinite article seems to be detached from grammatical gender. For sunburg08, there is also no evidence that the PPI is linked to grammatical gender, since the distribution of the two PPIs (masculine and neuter) seems arbitrary. Moreover, three out of twelve nouns are referred to with both PPIs. For instance, both *han*_M and *det*_N are used for referring to *tre*_(N) ‘tree.’ In comparison, the other two speakers do not vacillate between different PPIs for any noun. This means that for sunburg08, and only for her, there is no evidence of a gender system when we consider the indefinite article and the PPI.

5.4. Group 4: A new pronominal system (2 speakers)

Group 4 displays a three-way distinction the indefinite article that corresponds to the original grammatical genders. However, there is only one PPI occurring in the data: the neuter *det*. The gender forms identified within the two formal categories for Group 4 are represented in Table 8.

Table 8: The gender agreeing forms characteristic of Group 4. (Traits deviating from the baseline in italics.)

	Indefinite article		PPI
Masculine	ein	bil	<i>det</i>
	a[M]	car(M)	3SG.INANIMATE
Feminine	ei	dør	<i>det</i>
	a[F]	door(F)	3SG.INANIMATE
Neuter	eit	flagg	<i>det</i>
	a[N]	flag(N)	3SG.INANIMATE

According to Corbett (1991: 242), personal pronouns are “the major initiator of changes in the balance between syntactic and semantic gender.” This is the case for this group, as the pronominal system is dramatically reorganized into a semantically-based pronominal system. Here, *det* is used for inanimates, while *han* and *ho* are only used for masculine and feminine gendered animate beings respectively. This new pronominal system emphasizes the characteristics of the Norwegian genders: “The neuter is the inanimate gender par excellence in Norwegian, while masculine and feminine are the genders primarily associated with animacy” (Enger 2004: 26).

The two speakers in Group 4 sometimes deviate from the agreement pattern shown in Table 8. As we saw for Group 1b and 2, these deviations consist in non-masculine nouns occurring with the masculine indefinite article. For feminine nouns, this is the case in 75% (12/16) of the occurrences, whereas the same number for neuter nouns is 55% (6/11).

6. Concluding perspectives

This paper has investigated the gender system of 25 American Norwegian speakers by focusing on the indefinite article and personal pronouns referring to inanimates (PPI). The material was collected during fieldwork in the Midwest, using free elicitation tasks.

The gender agreement data were considered for each single speaker. In line with previous research (Johannessen & Larsson 2015; Lohndal & Westergaard 2016), this uncovered inter-speaker variation. For the vast majority of the speakers (n=22), the three-way distinction from the original gender system is retained in the indefinite article. The greatest change related to gender is found within the pronominal system, which had not been studied for gender purposes prior to this study. For eight speakers there is no longer a separate pronoun for referring to feminine inanimates, and for two speakers the pronominal system has been completely reorganized into a semantic system that is independent of grammatical gender. For one single speaker (sunburg08) there is no clear evidence of a productive gender system.

Importantly, and in contrast to the previous studies, the present analysis revealed that the variation across speakers is not random: all heritage speakers turned out to fall into one of four groups as regards gender agreement patterns. Group 1 (n=15) has a gender system that is identical to the original three-gender system, where the three genders are distinguished in both the indefinite article and in the PPI. Group 2 (n=5) is characterized by lacking a separate feminine PPI, and feminine nouns are therefore often referred to with the masculine pronoun. Group 3 (n=3) also has a pronominal system without a distinct feminine PPI. Additionally, their use of the indefinite article seems to be detached from gender: they only use one, invariant article. Finally, speakers in Group 4 (n=2) have developed a semantically-based pronominal system.

Across these four patterns of gender agreement, however, there is a strong tendency for masculine agreement forms to be used with non-masculine nouns, a pattern also identified by Lohndal & Westergaard (2016). For some of the speakers, this tendency is very strong. One reasonable interpretation of the data is therefore that the target-like use of non-masculine indefinite article is the result of memorizing the article and the noun (i.e. *ei_F dør(F)*) as one single unit. Lohndal & Westergaard (2016: 9) propose this as a possible explanation for such target-like occurrences, and are not convinced that it is “the result of a productive system” (ibid: 9). However, the possibility for chunking is ruled out for the personal pronoun, since the anaphoric pronoun rarely occurs adjacent to the noun in these data. The data from the PPI therefore provides valuable insight into the gender system. At the same time, since the pronominal system is easily susceptible to change (cf. Section 5.4), it should not be the only agreeing element investigated. As we have seen, the gender agreement in the indefinite article and the PPI pattern together in a systematic fashion for all groups. It therefore seems plausible that the target-like use of the indefinite article is produced (at least to a certain extent) on the basis of a productive gender system.

However, we need to account for the overgeneralization of the masculine forms. My interpretation of the data is that the speakers have a productive gender system – of which we find four different variants – but that producing gender agreement is challenging. This is also the position advocated by Johannessen & Larsson (2015). After all, speaking American Norwegian is cognitively demanding; Both high age and bilingualism can contribute to increased difficulty with language processing (De Bot & Makoni 2005). Additionally, Norwegian is not the dominant language of these speakers. Therefore, the deviations from the four systems outlined for each group can to some extent be the result of processing difficulties. I argue that this explanation is consistent with the pattern of deviations that is found in the present data: masculine nouns have a much higher token frequency than non-masculine nouns (cf. Section 2), and the masculine agreement forms should therefore be easier to retrieve than the non-masculine forms (cf. Paradis 2004). For a more thorough discussion of this matter, see Rødvand (2017).

To sum up, this study has replicated the findings of Johannessen & Larsson (2015) and Lohndal & Westergaard (2016) as regards inter-speaker variation in gender agreement. But further this paper has provided new and systematically elicited data for each single informant. Careful examination of these data revealed that the individual variation is in fact limited and systematic, in contrast to what has been found in the previous studies.

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