

Kinship nouns in American vs. European Norwegian: a nanoparametric approach

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Recent studies have observed that Norwegian as spoken in Norway (EurNo) has a relatively rich system of split possession: certain syntactic constructions are reserved for certain kinship nouns denoting close family relations (Lødrup 2014, Johannessen et al. 2014).¹ This sets EurNo apart from English, which does not have split possession to the same extent.

The present paper presents novel data from American Norwegian, a heritage language spoken by bilingual (mostly 3rd generation) immigrants in North America. The main empirical research question is to which extent split possession is retained in AmNo; this can shed new light on the diachrony of lexically restricted phenomena and syntactic change in situations of language contact and reduced input.

I focus mainly on two possessive constructions reserved for certain kinship nouns in EurNo: kinship nouns with 1) a postposed possessive pronoun, and 2) a postposed PP. Both constructions are special in that the kinship noun may appear without the definiteness suffix required for other nouns. Cf. (1)–(3):

- | | | | | | |
|-----|---|-----|--|-----|---|
| (1) | <i>mor mi</i>
mother my
'my mother' | (2) | <i>mor til Mari</i>
mother to Mari
'Mari's mother' | (3) | <i>bil-*(en) min/til Mari</i>
car-*(DEF) my/to Mari
'my/Mari's car' |
|-----|---|-----|--|-----|---|

Drawing on the CANS corpus² and additional speech data, I argue that split possession is an even more pervasive property of AmNo than EurNo.³ The main reason for this is that the “special” constructions are attested with nouns that are apparently not used in this way in EurNo,⁴ including nouns denoting distant relatives and loan words (some examples are given in 4):

- (4)
- a. *tremening til kona var i sykehjem*
second.cousin to wife.DEF was in nursing.home
'my wife's second cousin was in a nursing home' (fargo_ND_10gm)
- b. *...nephew min... hadde mye # trouble*
...nephew my... had much trouble
'my nephew had much trouble' (portland_ND_02gk)

The patterns illustrated in (4) are probably not due to a general decline of definiteness morphology or direct English influence: the definiteness suffix is relatively stable in most AmNo speakers in other contexts (e.g. Anderssen and Westergaard 2016), including possessive constructions with

¹To some extent other relational nouns also exhibit special properties; they will not be discussed here.

²<http://tekstlab.uio.no/glossa/html/?corpus=amerikanorsk>

³To establish a EurNo baseline I have consulted Faarlund et al. (1997), Julien (2005), Lødrup (2014), Johannessen et al. (2014) and dialect descriptions from the most relevant areas of Norway (Venås 1977, Dagsgard 2006). I have also queried parts the Nordic Dialect Corpus (NDC) (<https://tekstlab.uio.no/glossa2/ndc>). The sample from the NDC only contains data from speakers of a high age (age group B); this choice was made in an attempt to approximate the language of the first emigrants.

⁴Westergaard and Andersen (2015) note this for construction 1, but do not discuss split possession more generally.

non-kinship nouns. I propose that kinship nouns such as those in (4) have an inherent [DEF] feature in N which is not phonologically spelt out.

My diachronic analysis is based on a neo-emergentist view of parameters (Biberauer and Roberts 2017, Biberauer 2017). On this approach, parameters emerge through interaction of all three factors in language design (Chomsky 2005) and can be characterised according to “size”: some parameters affect major classes of functional heads, others only a small subset. The behaviour of (certain) kinship nouns in EurNo can be analysed as a nanoparameter: a small, lexically specified subclass of nouns have the inherent [DEF] feature in N which allows them to appear without any definiteness suffix. I propose that (some) AmNo speakers have extended this feature to kinship nouns in general, i.e. that they treat all kinship nouns as a class; this could be analysed as a microparameter.⁵ This change is somewhat unexpected; it is more typical for nanoparametric specifications to decline and ultimately be eliminated by analogy (Biberauer and Roberts 2017:151).⁶ However, I will argue that different aspects of AmNo’s status as a heritage language may have contributed to split possession gaining new ground. First, nanoparametric options must be frequently expressed to persist (Biberauer and Roberts 2017:153). Kinship nouns are generally frequent, and presumably particularly so in AmNo, whose domain of usage is largely restricted to the home. Another possible motivation is *cross-linguistic overcorrection* in the sense of Kupisch (2014): bilingual speakers sometimes overstress what is different between their two languages, and as split possession is characteristic of Norwegian, but not English, this property was extended.

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⁵The wide range of kinship nouns involved in split possession makes AmNo resemble Icelandic (Stolz et al. 2008:119), and one might ask whether AmNo is “simply” archaic. However, the baseline data (footnote 3) do not seem to corroborate that view, and cases involving loan words (ex. 4b) can be taken to indicate productivity.

⁶In fact, there are some indications that this is currently happening to split possession in EurNo: Julien (2005:191–192) notes that construction 1 is particularly associated with old speakers and rural areas.