

Comparing heritage speakers of closely related languages: American Swedish and American Norwegian noun phrases

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Compared to American Norwegian (AmNo), American Swedish (AmSw) has been studied much less. In the period 1840s-1930s, around a million Swedes migrated to the US, and close communities were formed where the language was spoken frequently. Present-day speakers of AmSw are elderly and the final generation of speakers, who used Swedish in the family but not in the public domain (Larsson et al. 2015), similar to present-day AmNo. Furthermore, Norwegian and Swedish are closely related, very similar, languages. Comparing heritage varieties of the two languages therefore allows us to investigate micro-variation and change in a heritage language context, and with last-generation speakers, specifically.

In this study, we investigate two aspects of AmSw, grammatical gender and double definiteness, and compare this with AmNo. With respect to both phenomena, there are interesting (sometimes subtle) differences between the two homeland varieties. The data come from the Swedish part of the Corpus of American Nordic Speech (Johannessen 2015; Andréasson et al. 2017), which contains speech of 22 AmSw speakers (ca. 45,000 tokens) from Illinois, Minnesota, and Texas, recorded in 2011-2014.

For AmNo, previous studies found that gender on indefinite articles is vulnerable to a certain extent, such that masculine gender is often overgeneralized to neuter and feminine nouns (Johannessen & Larsson 2015; Lohndal & Westergaard 2016). Swedish, on the other hand, has a two-gender system with common gender (*en*) and neuter (*ett*). The few AmSw speakers in Johannessen & Larsson (2015) showed some overgeneralization of the common gender. In our corpus study, we found 319 phrases with an indefinite article, typically with homeland-like gender agreement (n=300, 94%). With common gender nouns, virtually all indefinite articles are inflected for common gender (251/256, 98%), but there are fewer homeland-like indefinite articles with neuter nouns (49/63, 77.8%). These results suggest that AmSw speakers have more difficulty with neuter than with common gender, similar to AmNo, although AmNo has a three-gender system.

Double definiteness, the co-occurrence of a pronominal determiner and a suffixed article in modified definite phrases (1), has not been studied in AmSw. It is vulnerable in AmNo, and the determiner is often omitted (Anderssen et al. 2018; Van Baal 2020). Homeland Swedish has many contexts where the determiner can be omitted (Teleman et al. 1999). In our preliminary data, there are 158 modified definite phrases, of which 85 require double definiteness. Almost half of these contains double definiteness (41/85, 48.2%) (2), a higher score than in AmNo. In AmSw, as in AmNo, determiner omission (31/85, 36.5%) (3) is much more frequent than suffix omission (4/85, 4.7%) (4).

The patterns found in this preliminary study of AmSw noun phrases indicate that neuter gender (on indefinite articles) and double definiteness are somewhat vulnerable. The patterns are comparable to those in AmNo, suggesting that these phenomena are generally vulnerable in a heritage language context, specifically when the heritage language is rarely used, as for present-day AmNo and AmSw. This study also lays a foundation for future studies on AmSw noun phrase morphology and comparisons with other Scandinavian heritage varieties.

Data

- (1) *den stor-a bil-en*
DEF.SG big-DEF car-DEF.M.SG
'the big car'
- (2) *den lilla gås-en*
DEF.SG little-DEF goose-DEF.M.SG
'the little goose'
- (3) — *gamla hemfarm-en*
old-DEF home-farm-DEF.M.SG
'the old homefarm' (determiner omitted)
- (4) *den ny-a nanny__*
DEF.SG new-DEF nanny
'the new nanny' (suffix omitted)

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