

Introducing younger speakers of heritage Norwegian:

A novel perspective on causes of change in moribund heritage varieties

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Disentangling different causes of change is a common problem encountered in the study of moribund heritage varieties in North America. Most American Norwegian heritage speakers studied in recent work are elderly and, moreover, third and/or fourth generation emigrants (Johannessen & Salmons 2015). When analyzing the language of such speakers, a problem with the interpretation of findings is that the change we observe may have occurred in the language of previous generations of the immigrant language. What is more, presently observed change may be caused by the effects of aging on the cognition and language production of the elderly speakers. One way to solve these problems of interpretation is to introduce speakers of different emigrant cohorts (van Baal, 2021). This study is one such preliminary work.

Recent studies of present-day American Norwegian has found change in several domains of its grammar, e.g. increase of non-V2 word order in declaratives (Eide & Hjelde, 2015; Larsson & Johannessen, 2015; Lykke, 2018; Westergaard & Lohndal, 2019), changes in tense morphology (Lykke 2020) and in the morphosyntax of the DP, including compositional definiteness (van Baal, 2018; 2020), gender agreement (Johannessen & Larsson, 2015, Lohndal & Westergaard, 2016) and the placement of possessives (Westergaard & Anderssen, 2015). These studies draw their data from the Corpus of American Nordic Speech (CANS; Johannessen, 2015), where the speakers are on average 80 years old, and third and/or fourth generation immigrants.

We examine the Norwegian language of two younger heritage speakers of Norwegian and will contrast our findings with the studies of the elderly speakers of CANS. The empirical basis for our study is a one-hour recording of a semi-structured interview. The speakers are a mother (early 40s) and daughter (aged 16), who are second and third generation immigrants respectively. They are thus one to two generations less removed from the homeland than most speakers of CANS. The relevant homeland variety can be used as baseline for the oldest speaker, the mother, and we must assume any innovations in her language has been part of her daughter's input for acquisition.

The goal of our study is to find whether the language of the two younger speakers exhibits the same tendencies as that of the older immigrant cohorts presently available through CANS. If the same trends are found in the language of the younger speakers, this indicates that similar causes underlie innovation and change. If the tendencies of change in the language of the younger speakers are found to differ, it paves the way for two discussions. Firstly, findings from younger speakers may comment on which domains of the heritage language grammar are the most susceptible to change (compare the hierarchy proposed by Benmamoun, Montrul & Polinsky 2013: 141–144). For instance, older speakers, who have experienced decreased exposure to the heritage language for a longer period, may be more affected by language attrition, and exhibit more change. Secondly, differing tendencies in the language of the younger speakers who are less removed from the homeland language in time, may necessitate an evaluation of whether aging and previous diachronic change plays a greater role in the innovations we observe.

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