American Norwegian discourse marking: Convergence, detachability, pragmatic change

We present evidence on the use of discourse markers in American Norwegian, drawing data from CANS (Johannessen 2015). Bilingual discourse marking has been widely discussed in the field (Polinsky 2018) and specifically at WILA, but American Norwegian presents a surprising gap. As Johannessen & Salmons (forthcoming) argue, "Since the Germanic languages share many grammatical features but vary on others, Germanic heritage languages provide a natural laboratory for micro-comparison", suggesting that such comparison could inform the field.

Our first goal is simply descriptive, to provide basic data on American Norwegian discourse marking. The rapidly growing research on American Norwegian lacks work on this topic. Initial search results are shown in Table 1 on the next page, including false positives, etc., to give a rough idea of the dataset. With that first goal, we make two hypotheses based on previous work.

First, we hypothesize that the discourse marking systems of bilinguals will show convergence. Salmons 1990 and others since have shown that bilingual discourse systems tend to converge over time. In his data, markers like *well, you know,* and *of course* are widespread in American German, while native German markers — e.g. 'modal particles' like *doch, ja, aber* — have been partially displaced. Our work to date suggests that this hypothesis will bear weight.

Second, we hypothesize that 'pragmatic detachability' correlates with borrowability in this dataset, as argued by Matras 1988 and Fuller 2001. More detachable markers are, among other things, less 'lexical' in their semantics (e.g. *well* is less lexical than *you know*) and more 'operational', e.g. tied to turn-taking (e.g. *well* is more operational than *but*) (Fuller 2001: 355-356). Here, initial data are more complex, where some highly detachable markers (*well, so*) appear less frequent than some less detachable ones (*you know*).

We resolve this discrepancy by exploring the relationship between convergence and detachability: the problematic forms are instances where both languages have pre-existing overlap, namely similar forms and meanings, like *vel* and *well* or *ja* and *yeah* in contrast to forms like English *anyhow*, which lack close parallels in Norwegian. In her data, Fuller finds somewhat similar complexity in semantically and functionally similar English *you know* and Pennsylvania German *weescht*. Initial data from CANS shows that *vel* sometimes functions like English *well* in American Norwegian, as in (1).

(1) ulen_MN_03gm   *ja vel # det tok et par år*   yes well # it took a couple years

The same combination of words, though, can be found in European Norwegian expressing a variety of things including reluctant agreement, surprise, acknowledgment, etc., as in (2).

(2) hatton_ND_02gm   *ja [laughter] ja vel*   yes [laughter] i see

Such similar forms can be ambiguous, allowing for reanalysis and spread of markers.

Where detachability does not predict borrowing patterns precisely, this suggests that convergence may be the stronger force. In other words, the existence of similarities in both Pattern and Matter (to use Sakel's 2007 terms, see also Matras 2009) in both languages may override pragmatic detachability.

Norwegian-American discourse marking: Data and references

Table 1. Some potential discourse markers from CANS, raw numbers with CANS transcriptions

(a) similar structures and/or forms in both languages

well	117x	
vel	1300+	
you know	167x	
veit du	2500+	
vet du	650+	
so	111x	
så	12000+	
ja	9000+	cf. English *yeah,* etc., regional English *ja*

(b) distinctively English markers

anyway, anyhow	12x	
sure	25x	mostly with *ja* or *oh*
because, cause	39x	

References

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