

Loss of inflection in North Germanic adjectives - or is it?

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Many studies deal with the loss of case inflection on nouns in the North Germanic languages. However, there are also other inflectional changes in these languages. This paper deals with adjective agreement, which has received less attention so far. My main claim is that while labelling the diachronic development 'simplification' captures some aspects of the development, it misses other aspects. Also, the notion of 'construction' is relevant.

Old Norse adjectives agree in case, number, gender and definiteness (strong/weak declension). Consider a textbook example of Old Norse adjective paradigms, *spakr* 'wise; meek'; only the indefinite sub-paradigm is given:

	Sg	M	F	N
N		spakr	spøk	spakt
G		spaks	spakrar	spaks
D		spøkum	spakri	spøku
A		spakan	spaka	spakt
	Pl			
N		spakir	spakar	spøk
G		spakra	spakra	spakra
D		spøkum	spøkum	spøkum
A		spaka	spakar	spøk

The paradigm in the daughter languages, e.g. Modern Norwegian, is much reduced, compare the present-day indefinite inflection of *spak* 'meek':

	M	F	N
Sg	spak		spakt
Pl	spake		

Compared to the Old Norse inflection of *spakr*, this is a textbook example of simplification in diachronic change. There is no longer any case inflection, there is no gender distinction in the plural, and the opposition between M and F in the singular has been lost. So far, the data fit well with the common assumption that historical change entails simplification, often modelled as reduction of lexical markedness (e.g. Wurzel 2002).

Yet this is not the entire story. While Old Norse adjectives overwhelmingly inflect like *spakr* (with fairly well-defined, extra-morphologically motivated exceptions), there are, alongside *spak*, two other central adjective paradigms in Modern Norwegian, illustrated with *norsk* 'Norwegian' and *sta* 'stubborn':

	M	F	N
Sg	norsk		
Pl	norske		
Sg	sta		
Pl			

There are many items like *norsk* 'Norwegian', for which the gender distinction in the singular is lost and only the number opposition remains, and many like *sta* 'stubborn', i.e., indeclinable adjectives. While adjectives displayed a larger paradigm (in the sense of number of cells) in Old Norse, there are thus more paradigms (in the sense of inflection classes) in Modern Norwegian. Old Norse had one central inflection class, Modern Norwegian has three. In this perspective, there has actually been a massive increase in the amount of lexical learning needed; the notion of 'inflection class' has become more important, and the notion of 'simplification' seems more problematic.

This can perhaps be compared with the development in verbs, where apparently useful (?) agreement morphology is much reduced, while apparently useless (?) inflection classes are surprisingly stable (e.g. Enger 2007). However, the case of the adjectives is even more than that of the verbs. The development in the adjectives seems actually more radical than that of the verbs. For the verbs, the loss of agreement morphology is irrelevant to the stability of the inflection classes. For the adjectives, by contrast, it is the loss of agreement morphology that actually is responsible for the rise of inflection classes.

In most Mainland Scandinavian varieties, number agreement in the predicative function is retained. Compare e.g. Norwegian *han er spak* 'he is meek' vs. *de er spake* 'they are meek'. In some Northern varieties (e.g. Troms, Finnmark), however, number agreement is lost in the predicative, but not attributively (Bull 1990), compare *han er spak* vs. *de er spak*; *de spake ungan*. These are dialects in which there has been a certain tendency to lose the final vowel, so at first glance, there seems to be no need for an explanation outside of regular phonological change; i.e., 'sound law'. However, we find *de er spak* also in Bergen, which has not had loss of final vowel. Language contact may therefore seem more relevant, since that factor has often been invoked both for Bergen (e.g. Nesse 2002) and for the North, and contact is often held to induce inflectional simplification (e.g. Kusters 2003).

Another Scandinavian dialect for which contact is often invoked is that of Jutland, Denmark. Intriguingly, in the Jutland dialect of Vendsyssel, gender agreement is retained only predicatively, not attributively (Skautrup 1944: 271). While it is difficult to see any reason for this differential treatment, one conclusion seems inescapable: loss of inflection may take place in certain constructions without doing so in general, and loss of inflectional contrasts doesn't necessarily involve only simplification if it moves gradually across the lexicon or through different syntactic constructions.

References

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