

Investigating historical heritage languages: possessives in Norn

Kari Kinn (University of Bergen) & George Walkden (University of Konstanz)

Research on heritage languages to date has focused almost exclusively on languages of the present day (or attested within the last century). We address the question of whether the methods and findings of modern heritage language research can be applied to languages attested further back in time, and how best to do so. To this end we draw upon a case study of possessive constructions in the extinct North Germanic language Norn.

Norn descends from Old Norse (ON) and was spoken in the Shetland and Orkney Isles off the north coast of mainland Scotland until the mid-18th century (Knooihuizen 2008). The language was introduced by settlers who primarily came from Western Norway from around 800 AD (Barnes 1998:4); until the 13th century Orkney and Shetland were ruled by Scandinavian earls, and the Isles only formally became part of Scotland in 1472. Remaining sources of Norn include the ballad of Hildina (Hægstad 1900) and a number of charters (legal documents). From at least the 14th century Norn and Scots were in contact (Barnes 1984), and from the 15th century onwards official documents start to be produced in Scots instead of Norn.

The setting in which Norn existed can be readily characterized as a heritage-language setting: from the late 15th century Norn was “spoken at home or otherwise readily available to young children, and crucially ... not a dominant language of the larger (national) society” (Rothman 2009:156). In the context of Norn, the dominant language of the larger society was (Older) Scots, but Norn was still learnt at home until at least 1700.

Change in heritage languages can often be related to the multilingual context: possibilities include cross-linguistic influence (CLI) from the dominant language, cross-linguistic overcorrection whereby speakers extend patterns already present in their heritage language (Kupisch 2014), and spontaneous innovation (for further discussion, cf., e.g., Polinsky 2018). We explore the morphosyntax of Norn from this perspective, focusing on possessive constructions. This is an area where ON and Scots differ: In ON, possessors could either precede or follow the head noun (Faarlund 2004:59–60). In Older Scots, possessors were prenominal (Moessner 1997:118–122).

Our Norn corpus consists of the 18th-century Hildina ballad and 13 charters (late 13th to early 16th centuries). This constitutes virtually all the available Norn textual material, and runs to 6,665 words. As a comparator, or ‘baseline’ corpus, we took matching Norwegian texts: the early 19th-century Falkvor Lommanson ballad and (Western) Norwegian charters from the *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* (again, late 13th to early 16th centuries), totalling 4,949 words.

We investigate whether Norn displays any of the typical types of change that have been observed in heritage languages, or if there is stability. As a starting point, we observe that both prenominal and postnominal possessors are attested (Ex. (1)):

- (1) a. \ddot{y} hennar parth
for her part
‘for her part’ Norn (Goudie 1904:81) – prenominal possessor
- b. Helga kona min
Helga wife my
‘Helga, my wife’ Norn (DN III.310) – postnominal possessor

However, the distribution of these two patterns in Norn differs somewhat from the Norwegian baseline: Overall, Norn has a significantly higher proportion of prenominal possessors (175/227, or 77.1%, vs. 129/189, or 68.2%, in the baseline corpus; $p < 0.05$). The proportion of prenominal possessors is at its highest after 1400, i.e., after Scots had become well established as a contact language (Table 1). A rise in the proportion of prenominal possessors can be observed in the baseline corpus too, although it never reaches quite as far as in Norn.¹ One reason for the development in Norn could be that Norn scribes received training in Norway (Barnes 1998:16); however, it is also possible that CLI from Scots played a role in promoting prenominal possessors. In a study of

¹We are not aware of previous, diachronic studies of possessor placement in the history of Norwegian, and it is beyond the scope of our paper to account for this.

