

# Investigating historical heritage languages

Possessives in Norn

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

RUEG: Dynamics of Language Contact  
February 2021

# Introduction

# This talk

Research on heritage languages to date has focused almost exclusively on languages of the present day.

We look at some of the **morphosyntactic** properties of the North Germanic language **Norn** from a **heritage language** perspective, using corpus data.

Exploratory case study:  
**possessive constructions.**

Structure of the talk:

1. Introduction
2. Norn: background and history
3. Norn as a heritage language
4. Possessive constructions
5. Summary and conclusion
6. References

# Norn

Norn is a North Germanic variety, descended from Old Norse (ON), spoken in Shetland and Orkney until the middle of the 18th century.



(a) Orkney



(b) Shetland

Figure: Maps by Finlay McWalter, from Wikimedia Commons

## Norn: background and history



**Figure:** Arms of the Feudal Earldom of Orkney, by Sodacan (Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-SA 4.0)

- ▶ Introduced by settlers, primarily from Western Norway, circa 800 CE (Barnes 1998:4)
- ▶ Orkney and Shetland were ruled by Scandinavian earls until the 13th century
- ▶ From 14th century (at the latest): contact between Norn speakers and Scots speakers
- ▶ Formally became part of Scotland in 1472; first official documents in Scots date to the 15th century
- ▶ Death: 17th-18th centuries (Knooihuizen 2008)

# Norn language death

George Low (1879 [1777]:105):

*"None of them can write their ancient language, and but very few speak it: the best phrases are all gone, and nothing remains but a few names and two or three remnants of songs which one old man can repeat, and that but indistinctly."*

Low (1879 [1777]:107):

*"Norn Proverbs I could find none, nor is it possible to get translations, as it is entirely confined to the lower class of people, who cannot be supposed to have a thorough knowledge either of one Language or the other."*

Knooihuizen (2008:103): Low's speaker William Henry was a 'rememberer' in the terms of Dorian (1982).

Not much material. Several charters, the Lord's Prayer, fragments, and the ballad *Hildina* (Hægstad 1900), as told to Low in 1774. Sample and translation:

Da vara Iarlin o Orkneyar  
for frinda sñ spirde ro,  
whirdi an skildè meun  
or vannaro eidnar fuo –  
Or glasburyon burtaga.

“Tega du meun our glasburyon,  
kere friendè min,  
yamna meun eso vrildan stiendi,  
gede min vara to din.”

It was the Earl from Orkney,  
And counsel of his kin sought he,  
Whether he should the maiden  
Free from her misery.

“If thou free the maid from her  
gleaming hall,  
O kinsman dear of mine,  
Ever while the world shall last  
Thy glory still shall shine.”



# List of Norn texts

Type	Text	Date	Provenance	Words
Charter	<i>DN</i> I.89	1299	Shetland	366
Charter	<i>DN</i> I.109	1307	Shetland	528
Charter	<i>DN</i> II.168	1329	Orkney	259
Charter	<i>DN</i> II.170	1329	Orkney	286
Charter	<i>DN</i> I.340	1354	Orkney	115
Charter	<i>DN</i> III.284	1355	Shetland	253
Charter	<i>DN</i> III.310	1360	Shetland	317
Charter	<i>DN</i> I.404	1369	Orkney	623
Charter	<i>DN</i> II.691	(b)1426	Orkney	2,441
Charter	<i>DN</i> II.797	1452	Shetland	75
Charter	<i>DN</i> II.859	1465	Shetland	135
Charter	<i>DN</i> VI.651	1509	Shetland	197
Charter	Goudie (1904:81-2)	1516	Shetland	393
Ballad	<i>Hildina</i> (Hægstad)	(b)1774	Orkney	677
Total				6,665

## Norn as a heritage language

Rothman (2009:156):

- ▶ “A language qualifies as a *heritage language* if
  - ▶ it is a language spoken at home or otherwise readily available to young children,
  - ▶ and crucially this language is not a dominant language of the larger (national) society.”
- ▶ “an individual qualifies as a heritage speaker if and only if he or she has some command of the heritage language acquired naturalistically
- ▶ ... although it is equally expected that such competence will differ from that of native monolinguals of comparable age.”

# Norn as a heritage language

- ▶ Replacement of Norn by (Older) Scots must have begun in the 14th century, at least in Orkney (Barnes 1984)
- ▶ Dominant language of the larger society would have been (Older) Scots from at least 1472 onwards
  - ▶ Q: role of standardization? 'National'?
- ▶ Norn still learnt at home until 1700

Norn was a heritage language of Orkney and Shetland in the late medieval and early modern periods.

# Contact and change in heritage languages

**Change** in heritage languages can often be related to the **multilingual context**

- ▶ Direct influence: **cross-linguistic influence**/transfer (CLI) from the majority language
- ▶ Indirect influence: **cross-linguistic overcorrection** (CLO), (Kupisch 2014)
- ▶ Indirect influence: **spontaneous innovations** not modelled on any existing pattern either in the majority or heritage language (*divergent attainment*, Polinsky 2018:24).
- ▶ **Attrition**: loss of linguistic skills in a bilingual environment over the lifetime of individual speakers (Polinsky 2018:22)

**Research question:** do the Norn textual records show any (direct or indirect) morphosyntactic influence of the sort found in present-day heritage languages?

## Possessive constructions

# Possessive constructions

- ▶ We explore some of the morphosyntactic properties of Norn from a heritage language perspective
- ▶ Case study: the syntax of possessive constructions
- ▶ An area in which **Old Norse and Scots differ** → interesting to see the patterns of Norn

# Possessors in Old Norse (ON)

- ▶ In ON, possessors could either precede or follow the head noun (Nygaard 1906, Faarlund 2004)<sup>1</sup>
- ▶ The latter option was the most common (Faarlund 2004:59–60)
- ▶ Examples from *Óláfs saga ins helga* (Upps DG 8 II):

- (1) ...er **hans skip** kom i osenn...  
when his ship came in river.mouth.DEF  
'when his ship came to the river mouth'                      ON – prenominal possessor
- (2) ...þat sværð bar Haraldr **faðer hans**  
that sword carried Haraldr father his  
'...his father Haraldr carried that sword'                      ON – postnominal possessor

---

<sup>1</sup>Our definition of possessors includes genitive pronouns/NPs of the semantic types “possessive” and “argumental” (Faarlund 2004:61). Patronyms/matronyms are excluded.



- ▶ Occasionally, the **definite marker -inn** is found on the possessee
- ▶ When the noun is marked with *-inn*, the possessor is usually **postnominal** (Faarlund 2004:60)

(3)    um    **hefnd-ina**        **Bolla**  
         about vengeance-DEF.A Bolli.GEN  
         'about the vengeance on Bolli' (Laxd 177.30, from Faarlund 2004)

# Old Norse – Reflexive possessors

Old Norse: separate reflexive forms of 3rd person possessive pronouns

Reflexive forms are used when the possessor is bound by the subject of the sentence/clause:

- (4) Reið hann<sub>i</sub> heim með flokk **sinn<sub>i</sub>/hans\*<sub>i</sub>**  
rode he home with people his.REFL/his  
'He rode home with his people.'

Cf. Faarlund (2004:280)

# Possessives in Older Scots

- ▶ In Older Scots possessors were generally prenominal (Moessner 1997:118–122):

(5) my querrel  
my quarrel  
'my quarrel' (MEL 1273)

(6) The pure howlatis appele  
the poor owl's appeal  
'the poor owl's appeal' (OWL 850)

- ▶ Occasionally: split genitives (discontinuous constituents), but postnominal possessors of the ON type are not found

(7) **the kyngis dochtir of vest mure land** (COM 63.20f)

- ▶ Possessors do not normally co-occur with the definite article
- ▶ No distinction between reflexive and non-reflexive possessive pronouns

# Possessors in Norn – in comparison with Old Norse/Norwegian

We now turn to possessive constructions in Norn, in comparison with Old Norse/later stages of Norwegian as spoken in Norway

To identify differences between Norn and the homeland variety: a **comparator/baseline corpus** consisting of texts from Norway

- ▶ Dates and genres matching with the available Norn texts
- ▶ Norwegian **charters** (late 13th to early 16th centuries)
  - ▶ Mainly Western Norway (where most settlers came from)
  - ▶ Two Eastern Norwegian documents included: very similar contents to one of the longest Norn charters
  - ▶ Social status of the first signatory matching the Norn documents<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ The early 19th-century Falkvord Lommanson **ballad**
  - ▶ To match the Hildina ballad
  - ▶ Transcribed later than Hildina, but similar type (historical ballad)

---

<sup>2</sup>*Annotated DN online* by Tam Blaxter, [https://www.icge.co.uk/dn\\_online/](https://www.icge.co.uk/dn_online/)

# List of Old/Middle/Early Modern Norwegian texts

Type	Text	Date	Provenance	Words
Charter	<i>DN II.54</i>	1299	Stavanger	379
Charter	<i>DN I.117</i>	1308	Bergen	340
Charter	<i>DN II.165</i>	1328	Bergen	609
Charter	<i>DN I.338</i>	1353	Giske (Sunnmøre)	132
Charter	<i>DN IV.374</i>	1355	Stavanger	252
Charter	<i>DN I.370</i>	1360	Stedje (Sogn og Fjordane)	262
Charter	<i>DN XVIII.27</i>	1370	Tønjum (Sogn og Fjordane)	115
Charter	<i>DN XVIII.25</i>	1368	Ljøvik (Møre og Romsdal)	170
Charter	<i>DN II.683</i>	1425	Rakkestad	475
Charter	<i>DN II.681</i>	1424	Rakkestad	371
Charter	<i>DN XV.55</i>	1426	Suldal	146
Charter	<i>DN I.709</i>	1425	Kinsarvik (Hordaland)	122
Charter	<i>DN III.680</i>	1425	Volda (Møre og Romsdal)	131
Charter	<i>DN I.706</i>	1425	Giske (Sunnmøre)	217
Charter	<i>DN VII.446</i>	1452	Valle (Vest-Agder)	222
Charter	<i>DN IV.959</i>	1465	Kvalbein (Rogaland)	222
Charter	<i>DN IV.1051</i>	1510	Barskaar (Telemark)	138
Charter	<i>DN XII.283</i>	1516	Bø (Rogaland)	142
Ballad	Falkvor Lomansson	(b 1846)	Telemark	504
Total				4,949

# Results: overview prenominal vs. postnominal possessors

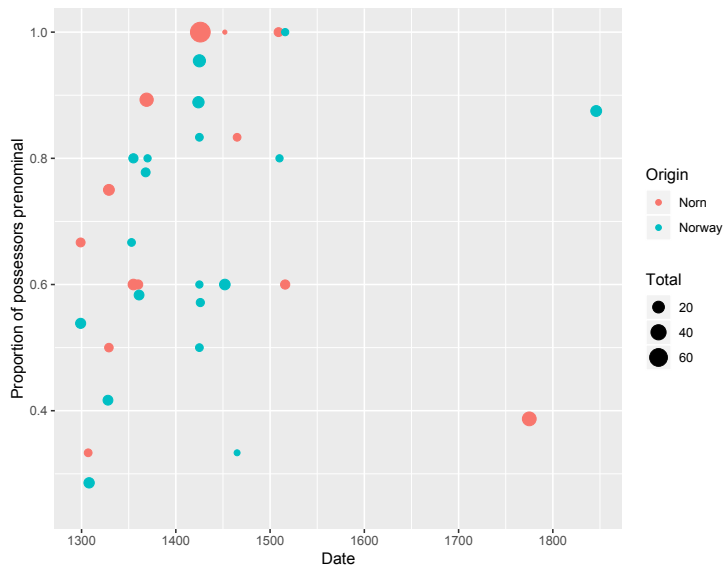


Figure: Possessors in texts from the Isles and from Norway

## Prenominal vs. postnominal possessors, cont.

- ▶ The patterns are not very clear; however, Norn texts have somewhat **more and earlier** prenominal possessors (until 1500)
- ▶ This could (at least in part) be a result of **CLI from Scots**
- ▶ Rise in proportions of prenominal possessors in **Norwegian** texts: probably related to Danish influence (Danish taking over as the written standard, Mørck 2018)
- ▶ Barnes (1998:16): “gradual Danicising” can be observed in Norn 15th/16th century documents too, because of contact with Norway
- ▶ Earlier/stronger increase of prenominal possessors in Norn would be consistent with CLI from Scots

## Prenominal vs. postnominal possessors, cont.

Norn outlier:

- ▶ *Hildina* ballad (1776). Note: the date reflects the time this ballad was transcribed by George Low, not the time of origin. Also, metrics may play a role.

Comparison with possessive constructions in present-day American Norwegian (Anderssen et al. 2018)

- ▶ AmNo: present-day heritage variety spoken in the US; Am. English is the majority language
- ▶ Interesting because possessives in (homeland) Norwegian and Am. English differ in a way that resembles ON and Scots (only Norwegian allows postnominal possessors)
- ▶ In AmNo, CLI is not a common pattern; **only a minority** of speakers “overuse” prenom. poss.; “overuse” associated with **low proficiency**
- ▶ Q for future research: signs of low proficiency in the relevant Norn charters?



# Norn – Interaction with definiteness marking

- ▶ Norn seems to resemble the ON/Norwegian baseline
- ▶ Occasional use of the definite marker *-inn* when the possessor is postnominal

(8) feyr-in      sien  
father-DEF her.REFL  
'her father'

Hildina – def. marker + postnom. poss

# Norn – Reflexive possessors

Several examples of reflexive pronouns (*sinn*) used like in ON/Norwegian

However: non-reflexive pronoun forms are attested; not found in ON/Norwegian

- (9) Jtem for<sup>de</sup> Thomos kærde oppa **hans** eghna  
moreover aforementioned Th. complained on his own  
wæghnæ...  
behalf  
'Moreover, the aforementioned Thomas complained on his own behalf...' (DN  
II.691, b. 1426)

- (10) An cast **ans** huge ei fong ednar  
he threw his head in lap her  
'He threw his head into her lap' *Hildina*, 1774

- ▶ Could be CLI from Scots
- ▶ Alternatively: influence from medieval Danish (Barnes 1998:14); however, this seems somewhat less likely for the Hildina ballad (oral tradition; Danish influence mainly on the written language)

# Norn – Morphological marking of the possessor

- ▶ Old Norse: genitive case marking on possessors
- ▶ Norn: possessor occasionally unmarked

(11) **hera biskup** insigli  
lord bishop seal  
'the lord bishop's seal' (DN I.404, 1369)                      Norn – unmarked possessor

(12) **Alexander tomesszonn** skolgetinn    dotthr  
A.                      T.                      lawfully.born daughter  
'A. T.'s lawfully born daughter (Goudie 1904, 1516)    Norn – unmarked poss.

- ▶ Morphological reduction – possibly ongoing restructuring or attrition
- ▶ However, not unique to Norn: unmarked possessors are also attested in the Norwegian sample (cf. Mørck 2013:654)

## Summary and conclusion

# Summary

- ▶ From a sociohistorical perspective, Norn plausibly meets the definition of a heritage language (at least 1400-1700).
- ▶ Overall, we observe a high degree of stability in the syntax of possessive constructions compared to the ON/Norwegian baseline, even many centuries after the Scandinavian settlements
- ▶ However, possessive constructions in Norn texts display some special features:
  - ▶ Somewhat more prenominal possessors at an earlier stage
  - ▶ Non-reflexive pronouns replacing reflexive pronouns
  - ▶ Unmarked possessives
- ▶ These features can be related to Norn's status as a heritage language

Future work has the potential to shed light on other interesting features of Norn, heritage languages in general, and syntactic change in contact situations.

## References

# References I

- Anderssen, Merete, Björn Lundquist & Marit Westergaard. 2018. Crosslinguistic similarities and differences in bilingual acquisition and attrition. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 21(4). 748–764.
- Barnes, Michael P. 1984. Orkney and Shetland Norn. In Peter Trudgill (ed.), *Language in the british isles*, 352–366. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barnes, Michael P. 1998. *The Norn language of Orkney and Shetland*. Lerwick: The Shetland Times Lt.
- Dorian, Nancy C. 1982. Linguistic models and language death evidence. In Lorraine K. Obler & Lise Menn (eds.), *Exceptional language and linguistics*, London: Academic Press.
- Faarlund, Jan Terje. 2004. *The syntax of Old Norse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goudie, Gilbert. 1904. *The Celtic and Scandinavian antiquities of Shetland*. Edinburgh/London: William Blackwood and sons.

## References II

- Hægstad, Marius. 1900. *Hildinakvadet. Med utgreiding um det norske maal paa Shetland i eldre tid*. Christiania: Jacob Dybwad.
- Knooihuizen, Remco. 2008. Fishing for words: the taboo language of Shetland fishermen and the dating of Shetland language death. *Transactions of the Philological Society* 106(1). 100–113.
- Kupisch, Tanja. 2014. Adjective placement in simultaneous bilinguals (German–Italian) and the concept of cross-linguistic overcorrection. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 17(1). 222–233.
- Low, George. 1879 [1777]. *A tour through the islands of Orkney and Schetland: containing hints relative to their ancient, modern, and natural history, collected in 1774*. Kirkwall: William Peace and son.
- Moessner, Lilo. 1997. The syntax of older Scots. In Charles Jones (ed.), *The Edinburgh History of the Scots Language*, 47–111. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Mørck, Endre. 2013. Mellomnorsk språk. In Odd Einar Haugen (ed.), *Handbok i norrøn filologi*, 640–690. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget 2nd edn.



- Mørck, Endre. 2018. Seimellomalderen (1350–1536). In Agnete Nesse (ed.), *Norsk språkhistorie: Tidslinjer*, vol. 4, 293–356. Oslo: Novus forlag.
- Nygaard, Marius. 1906. *Norrøn syntax*. Kristiania: Aschehough.
- Polinsky, Maria. 2018. *Heritage languages and their speakers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rothman, Jason. 2009. Understanding the nature and outcomes of early bilingualism: Romance languages as heritage languages. *International Journal of Bilingualism* 13(2). 155–163.