

Gender assignment in the Jämtlandic dialect of Swedish

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Although the Scandinavian languages are closely related, they exhibit a surprising degree of variation in their grammatical gender systems. While the standard languages of mainland Scandinavia (Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish) have lost the three-gender system that was present in Old Norse, three genders are preserved in many Norwegian dialects and some rural Swedish dialects.

The Scandinavian languages have a formal assignment system; a noun's gender cannot be predicted solely by the semantics of the noun (Corbett 1991:33). However, Enger (2009) and Trosterud (2006, 2001) show that semantic criteria may play a larger role in Scandinavian gender assignment than is traditionally assumed. They develop criteria for gender assignment in Scandinavian languages, basing their assignment rules on semantic features as well as morphological and phonological criteria.

In the present study I apply the principles of gender assignment rules to the Jämtlandic dialect of Swedish. The Jämtlandic dialect is an interesting subject for research into grammatical gender, since its traditional three-gender system is gradually collapsing under influence from the two-gender system of Standard Swedish. This allows me to investigate how assignment rules operate within a changing gender system. This project is based on data collected from my fieldwork in Jämtland, in which I obtained the gender of over 800 nouns in various semantic categories through small-group interviews with dialect speakers.

Preliminary results indicate that gender in the dialect can partially be predicted by semantic criteria. In addition, the feminine gender is losing ground to the masculine gender as a result of extensive contact with Standard Swedish. This project makes an important contribution to existing research on dialectology and gender assignment in the Scandinavian languages. It is the first study on gender assignment in a Swedish dialect, contributing to our understanding of how grammatical gender assignment can be influenced by contact.