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Gender change in the *indrefinnmarksmål* dialect

Tomáš Bratina

Abstract

This article investigates gender variation and change in the grammatical gender system of the *indrefinnmarksmål* dialect. The interior of Finnmark county, *Indre Finnmark*, has historically been closely linked to the Finno-Ugric population. The coexistence of Norwegian as a representative of the Indo-European languages and Sámi or Kven as representatives of the Uralic languages may have resulted in several specific features. In this article, I focus on morphological features related to grammatical gender.

Key words

indrefinnmarksmål; language contact; gender; feminine; Norwegian; Sámi

Introduction

Northern Norway is an area in which several nations (e.g. the Sámi people, the Norwegians, and the Kvens) have coexisted for centuries. Thorkil Bang, a Norwegian military captain, who visited this region in the 1870s, was astonished by the cosmopolitan atmosphere. He wrote:

Strange was the language confusion in this completely deserted place. Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, Sámi, Russian, French, and German were spoken here. Even Danish had its representative, a man originally from Copenhagen who accompanied us (Bang 1873: 199, my translation).

Despite the linguistic diversity which characterises this area, and which may have led to various morphological, syntactic, semantic, or phonological specifics, local Norwegian dialects have rarely been the subject of research. It was previously assumed that the Northern Norwegian dialects did not contain any significant features.

The breakthrough in the study of language contact between the Norwegian, Kven, and Sámi languages did not occur until 1945. A short but informative article on the characteristics of the Norwegian dialect in the village of Lyngen by the linguist Asbjørn Nesheim (1952) was significant in this regard. As these were unsystematic observations, Nesheim encouraged scientists to make more detailed analyses. This goal began to be realized to a greater extent in the 1980s.

However, the subject of most of these analyses has been the dialects of Troms County. The northernmost and easternmost part of the country, Finnmark, has long remained in the background. In my research, I therefore draw attention to this remote corner of Norway, and specifically to its interior. Geographically, the *indrefinnmarksmål* dialect is bordered by the municipalities of Karasjok, Kautokeino, and Tana (Jahr & Skare 1996: 70). This area has historically been closely linked to the Finno-Ugric population. The coexistence of Norwegian as a representative of the Indo-European languages and Sámi or Kven as representatives of the Uralic languages may have resulted in several specific features. In this article, I focus on morphological features related to grammatical gender.

Material

This analysis relies on data from the Nordic Dialect Corpus (*Nordisk dialektkorpus*), an electronic database which contains records of authentic dialect conversations in various regions of Norway. Indre Finnmark, the interior of the county of Finnmark, is represented by three places: Kautokeino, Tana, and Lakselv. Recording in the area occurred in 2010 (Tana, Lakselv) and 2011 (Kautokeino). Each place is represented by four informants: two men and two women, two representatives of the younger generation and two representatives of the older generation (see Table 1).

Table 1: Basic information about informants

Informant code	Gender	Birth year	Hometown	Mother tongue
kautokeino_01um	male	1994	Kautokeino	Norwegian
kautokeino_02uk	female	1981	Kautokeino	Norwegian
kautokeino_03gm	male	1952	Kautokeino	Sámi
kautokeino_04gk	female	1959	Kautokeino	Sámi
tana_01um	male	1988	Tana	Norwegian
tana_02uk	female	1986	Rustefjelbma and Torhop	Norwegian
tana_03gm	male	1949	Luftjok	Norwegian
tana_04gk	female	1950	Tana	Norwegian
lakselv_01um	male	1986	Indre Billefjord and Lakselv	Norwegian
lakselv_02uk	female	1994	Indre Billefjord and Lakselv	Norwegian
lakselv_03gm	male	1939	Lakselv	Norwegian and Kven
lakselv_04gk	female	1960	Stabbursnes	Sámi

The informants took part in two types of recordings: a more formal interview conducted by the project assistant on which this research is based, and an informal conversation between two informants. However, both types represent spontaneous speech (Johannessen 2009: 74). The decisive factor in the selection of data was its uniform structure. Unlike informal conversation, each respondent was asked the same questions. In addition, the length of the formal interviews was nearly the same, which cannot be said of the informal conversation.

Specifics related to grammatical gender

Grammatical gender is an area in which Norwegian and Sámi (or Kven) do not have similarities or analogies. Norwegian recognises three grammatical genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter.¹ Sámi and Kven, by contrast, lack grammatical gender. This difference may have led to two phenomena observed in the *indrefinnmarksmål* dialect: simplification of the gender system and unstable grammatical gender.

Simplification of the gender system

Jahr (1984: 108) claims that the contact between Sámi and Norwegian has led to the use of only one grammatical gender in certain places (unfortunately, he does not specify

¹ It should be noted that grammatical gender is ambiguous in Norwegian. While Nynorsk (i.e. one of the two standards of the Norwegian language) consistently distinguishes these three genders, Bokmål has a looser system. Some of its variants (e.g. riksmål, conservative Bokmål and Bergen dialect) use only a two-gender system consisting of common gender and neuter. This means that there is no feminine.

where). After all, this is not an unimaginable scenario. The loss of grammatical gender as a result of language contact has been documented, for example, in Afrikaans and Latvian dialects (Bull 2012: 45). However, based on current research, the extinction of the grammatical gender – despite the initial statement – did not occur in the analysed area.

What characterises the grammatical gender in the *indrefinnmarksmål* dialect is a simplification. Several studies have indicated that the distinction between masculine and feminine is close to being lost. It is therefore questionable whether it is still possible to speak of a stable system of three genders. For this reason, some linguists prefer to divide nouns into two groups: common gender and neuter (Conzett et al. 2011; Bull 2012).

To explain this simplification in additional detail, it is necessary to define what characterises the feminine gender. In the current view, the existence of the feminine gender is evidenced only by the indefinite article ‘*ei*’, the possessive pronouns ‘*mi*’, ‘*di*’, or ‘*si*’ before a noun, and the anaphoric pronoun ‘*ho*’.² The suffix *-a* and possessive pronouns ‘*mi*’, ‘*di*’, and ‘*si*’ behind a noun are not considered a clear indicator of the feminine in the current discussion. Enger and Kristoffersen (2000: 70) point out that although the forms ‘*gutten*’ and ‘*boka*’ appear in the dialect, the form of the indefinite article is essential in this case. Some Norwegian users use the forms ‘*en gutt*’ – ‘*gutten*’ and ‘*en bok*’ – ‘*boka*’ (rather than ‘*ei bok*’ – ‘*boka*’). Suffix *-a* thus behaves as a separate declension class of the common gender (Coward 1986: 64). A similar situation occurs with the possessives ‘*mi*’, ‘*di*’, and ‘*si*’. Conzett et al. (2011) point to their unsystematic occurrence (only with a small number of traditional feminine nouns). Moreover, the view that ‘*mi*’, ‘*di*’, and ‘*si*’ placed behind nouns function as a suffix is gradually coming to the fore (Johannessen 1990: 43f; Trosterud 2001: 29). Regardless of the current understanding of the feminine, the occurrence of traditional feminine forms is out of proportion to the masculine in the analysed dialect.

Use of the indefinite article ‘*ei*’

A construction consisting of an indefinite article and a feminine noun occurred 26 times in the analysed material. The form ‘*ei*’ took precedence over ‘*en*’ only once.³

- (1) Vi hadde **æi** lererinna ifra Vennesla. (Nordisk dialektkorpus v. 4.0, lakselv_04gk)
‘We had a teacher from Vennesla.’

In the remaining cases, feminine nouns were associated with the indefinite article ‘*en*’, even if it was a traditional feminine such as ‘*mor*’ (mother) and ‘*datter*’ (daughter).

- (2) Je hadde **en** mor såmm bare snakka nåssjk.
‘I had a mother who only spoke Norwegian.’
(Nordisk dialektkorpus v. 4.0, lakselv_03gm)

2 The anaphoric pronoun ‘*ho*’ as a characteristic feature of the feminine refers only to dialects which are closer to Nynorsk. Unlike Bokmål, it distinguishes whether the word is masculine (*han*) or feminine (*ho*). Bokmål uses the pronoun ‘*den*’ in both cases.

3 To be more precise, I have noticed the indefinite article ‘*ei*’ in two other cases: ‘*ei nabojentunge*’ and ‘*ei geologi*’. However, these are examples of gender substitution. The nouns ‘*nabo(jent)unge*’ and ‘*geologi*’ are masculine, so the article ‘*en*’ should be used here. I did not include these examples in the statistics. Even if they were included, the frequency of the indefinite article ‘*ei*’ would still be low.

- (3) Æ har **en** datter. (Nordisk dialektkorpus v. 4.0, tana_02uk)
 ‘I have a daughter.’

It is concluded that one of the key aspects of the feminine is not present in the dialect.

Use of the possessive pronouns ‘*mi*’ ‘*di*’ and ‘*si*’ before a noun

The analysed material contains eight examples of possessive pronouns used attributively before a feminine noun. However, the feminine forms ‘*mi*’, ‘*di*’, and ‘*si*’ appeared only twice.

- (4) Ho kunne joda fårklare att de va ikkje **mi** sjyll.
 ‘She could easily explain that it was not my fault.’
 (Nordisk dialektkorpus v. 4.0, kautokeino_04gk)
- (5) Æ va me **mi** mor hit te Lakksellv fårr å hanndle.
 ‘I went shopping with my mom in Lakselv.’
 (Nordisk dialektkorpus v. 4.0, kautokeino_04gk)

In the remaining six cases, informants preferred the masculine forms ‘*min*’, ‘*din*’, and ‘*sin*’. The presence of the feminine in the analysed dialect therefore cannot be unequivocally confirmed based on the second criterion. It should be noted that the forms ‘*mi*’, ‘*di*’, and ‘*si*’ have a higher frequency after a noun (84.6%). However, in the current debate, they are not considered to be an indicator of grammatical gender, but rather part of a declension system (Johannessen 1990: 43f; Trosterud 2001: 29).

Use of the anaphoric pronoun ‘*ho*’

To prove the existence of the feminine gender, at least through an anaphoric pronoun, the feminine would have to be uniformly referred to by the pronoun ‘*ho*’. However, this situation did not occur. The form ‘*ho*’ appeared only in connection with nouns referring to persons. In the case of non-living feminines, the anaphoric pronoun ‘*den*’ (6) was used. ‘*Den*’ also referred to masculine nouns (7). That is, no single universal pronoun refers exclusively to all feminine nouns. A complex difference between the masculine nouns and the feminine nouns was thus not observable in this case.

- (6) **Mora mi** kunne samisk menn så glæmmte **ho** alt.
 ‘My mother could speak Sámi but she forgot everything.’
 (Nordisk dialektkorpus v. 4.0, lakselv_02uk)
- (7) Så menn demm byggde jo **brua** æ trur næsst’n **den** va [*pause*] færddi ommtrent da æ bynnte på skol’n.
 ‘But they built this bridge. I almost think it was finished around the time I started going to school.’
 (Nordisk dialektkorpus v. 4.0, tana_03gm)
- (8) De kan være **fåssjell** menn **denn** e iafall vælledi lit’n.
 ‘There can be a difference, but it is very small.’
 (Nordisk dialektkorpus v. 4.0, kautokeino_01um)

The feminine in the *indrefinnmarksmål* dialect

Considering the present data, these features are typical of the feminine in the analysed

dialect (see Table 2). For the sake of completeness, I also present the form of possessive pronouns behind a noun and the definite form, although at present they are not perceived as indicators of gender congruence.

Table 2: Attributes of feminine nouns in the *indrefinnmarksmål* dialect

	Dialects with three genders	<i>Indrefinnmarksmål</i>
Indefinite article	ei (ny) bok	en (ny) bok
Anaphoric pronoun	boka → den or ho	boka → den
Possessive before a noun	mi (nye) bok	min (nye) bok
Possessive behind a noun	boka mi	boka mi
Definite form	boka	boka or boken

The results do not indicate the existence of a stable system of three genders in the *indrefinnmarksmål* dialect. Due to the low frequency of the indefinite article ‘*ei*’, the possessive pronouns ‘*mi*’, ‘*di*’, and ‘*si*’ before a noun, and the absence of a unique feminine anaphoric pronoun, the genus system in the analysed area has been simplified to a common gender (genus commune) and neuter.

Gender substitution

As mentioned previously, Norwegian recognises three grammatical genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter. By contrast, there are no genders in Sámi and Kven. With a few exceptions, no rules exist to assign a gender to Norwegian words with certainty.⁴ This fact could have led to unclear and unsystematic use of gender at the beginning of the language shift in the analysed area.

A certain degree of vacillation in the assignment of gender is still observable. To persons from outside this is perhaps the most salient feature of the analysed dialect. This tendency to vacillate between genders is strongly stigmatised socially, and native speakers themselves characterise their speech as ‘wrong’, ‘ungrammatical’ and the like (Bull 1990: 55). This phenomenon takes various forms. In connection with the indefinite article, possessive pronouns, and adjectives, the masculine gender is overused at the expense of the neuter. When speaking with demonstratives, the tendency is the opposite (Conzett et al. 2011, Bull 2012). At the same time, the phenomenon occurs more often when the distance between morphologically related words increases. The phrase ‘*en kulturarv som er stor*’ (a cultural heritage that is great) is therefore more prone to gender substitution than ‘*en stor kulturarv*’ (a great cultural heritage) (Bull 2006: 40).

⁴ Dannemark (2004) and Todal (1996) look at the grammatical gender from the perspective of Norwegian language students. They claim that difficulties also arise for students whose mother tongue has grammatical gender distinctions for nouns (e.g., German). While the Norwegian word for ‘book’ (i.e. *bok*) is feminine, the German equivalent is neuter.

Several studies have indicated that the vacillation of gender is gradually disappearing in the analysed area. The proportion of the phenomenon in relation to the total number of nominal phrases (NP) ranges from 6.5% (Bull 1996) to 2.6% (Conzett et al. 2011). However, the results cannot be fully compared, as they were based on different criteria. While Bull (1996) included phrases consisting of a noun in the definite form, Conzett et al. (2011) did not take them into account. To follow up on both analyses, I considered these aspects when analysing the *indrefinnmarksmål* dialect (see Table 3).

Table 3: Percentage of gender vacillation compared to previous research

Research	Percentage of gender vacillation	
	Including NP consisting of a noun in the definite form	Without NP consisting of a noun in the definite form
Bull (1996)	6.5%	-
Conzett et al. (2011)	-	2.6%
Bratina (2022)	2.1%	3.6%

If I apply Bull's approach (1996), the phenomenon occurred in 2.1%. If I do not include nominal phrases with a noun in the definite form (as in Conzett et al. [2011]), the share of gender vacillation will increase to 3.6%. However, this is still a small proportion.

In addition to nominal phrases, I included phrases consisting of a noun with the indefinite article, quantifier, demonstrative, possessive, intensifier, adjective, and anaphoric pronoun (see Table 4). Combinations such as '*en liten skole*' (a small school) are counted twice: once as a nominal phrase which contains the indefinite article '*en*', and once as a phrase containing the adjective '*liten*'. On the contrary, I eliminated constructions which contained words which did not change their form depending on gender, for example, indeclinable adjectives such as '*norsk*', '*fantastisk*', '*vesentlig*' or the possessives '*hans*', '*hennes*', and the like. I also excluded anaphoric pronouns referring to proper nouns (Lars – *han*).

Table 4: A quantitative overview of nominal phrases and gender vacillation

NP containing:	Example	Number of NP	Number of NP affected by the gender vacillation
Indefinite article	<i>et bord</i>	165	7
Another quantifier	<i>noen lege</i>	38	5
Demonstrative	<i>det barnet</i>	106	2
Possessive pronoun	<i>min tur</i>	54	3
Intensifier	<i>eget hus</i>	2	0
Adjective	<i>fin natur</i>	57	0
Anaphoric pronoun	<i>ordet - det</i>	188	5
Total (without the definite form)		610	22
Definite form	<i>ved kysten</i>	454	0
Total (with the definite form)		1,064	22

The phenomenon was most often related to the indefinite article (9), the quantifier ‘*noen*’ (10), and the anaphoric pronoun (11).

(9) De e vell **en** par mil makks. (Nordisk dialektkorpus v. 4.0, lakselv_04gk)

‘It is probably a couple of miles maximum.’

In standard language (Bokmål): *et par mil*

(10) Vi hadde jo kke **nåka** stue. (Nordisk dialektkorpus v. 4.0, kautokeino_04gk)

‘We did not have a living room.’

In standard language (Bokmål): *noen stue*

(11) **De** [elva] renne jo ne ti Tanaællva (Nordisk dialektkorpus v. 4.0, tana_03gm)

‘It [the river] flows down to the Tana River.’

In standard language (Bokmål): *den [elva]*

Example (9) uses the indefinite article ‘*en*’ (masculine) rather than ‘*et*’ (neuter). Example (10) shows the opposite situation. The form ‘*nåka*’ corresponds to the form ‘*noe*’, which is typical of neuter nouns. However, the noun ‘*stue*’ is feminine (or, in terms of the *indrefinnmarksmål* dialect, common gender). The form ‘*noen*’ should be used here. In example (11), the feminine noun ‘*elv*’ (river) is referred to with the pronoun ‘*det*’ (neuter), although the correct form is ‘*den*’.

While Bull (1996) and Conzett et al. (2011) observed excessive use of the masculine gender, my analysis showed a slight predominance of the neuter (see Table 5). Bull et al. (1986), who analysed the dialect of the village of Skibotn, also came to the same conclusion, although they expected the opposite.⁵ However, due to small differences and low frequency of the phenomenon, it is not possible to draw an unambiguous conclusion in this regard.

Table 5: The nature of the gender vacillation

	Bull (1996)	Conzett et al. (2011)	Bratina (2022)
M instead of N	52	28	8
N instead of M	13	21	9
F instead of M	–	–	5
Total	65	49	22

The type of nominal phrase plays an important role. If the phrase consists of an indefinite article or a demonstration, masculine is more common. The neuter gender takes precedence in anaphoric pronouns and quantifiers (see Table 6).

⁵ Einar Haugen (1969) also noted the overuse of the masculine gender in the language of Norwegian emigrants in the United States. This situation can also be observed in the multi-ethnic environments in Copenhagen and Oslo (see Quist 2008, Opsahl 2009).

Table 6: A closer look at the nature of the gender vacillation

NP containing:	N instead of M	M instead of N	F instead of M
Indefinite article	1	4	2
Another quantifier	5	-	-
Demonstrative	-	2	-
Possessive pronoun	-	-	3
Anaphoric pronoun	3	2	-
Total	9	8	5

In connection with possessive pronouns, I have noticed an atypical situation which was not observed in other research – the use of the possessive pronoun ‘*mi*’, ‘*di*’, and ‘*si*’ rather than the masculine form ‘*min*’, ‘*din*’, and ‘*sin*’. However, the phenomenon occurred only in the speech of the informant tana_03gm (born in 1949).

(12) Muli ellste *bror mi* lærte litt. (Nordisk dialektkorpus v. 4.0, tana_03gm)

‘Possibly my oldest brother learned a little.’

In standard language (Bokmål): *broren min*

The use of the masculine gender rather than the feminine could also be captured in phrases containing an indefinite article. In Example (13), the indefinite article ‘*ei*’ (feminine) appears instead of ‘*en*’ (masculine).⁶

(13) De va *ei nabojenntonnge*. (Nordisk dialektkorpus v. 4.0, kautokeino_04gk)

‘It was a girl from the neighbourhood.’

In standard language (Bokmål): *en nabounge*

Gender vacillation appeared more often in the speech of informants born before 1980 (see Table 7). This would confirm the hypothesis that the feature is gradually disappearing from the dialect.

Table 7: Occurrence of the gender vacillation by the birth year

	Percentage of gender vacillation	
	Including NP consisting of a noun in the definite form	Without NP consisting of a noun in the definite form
Informants born before 1980	2.41%	4.18%
Informants born after 1980	1.50%	2.64%

When focusing on individual informants, the phenomenon has the largest share in the speech of tana_03gm. He states that he grew up in a Norwegian-speaking environment, although his parents spoke Sámi. The Norwegian he acquired may have contained traces of his parents’ primary language. His gender substitution would support this hypothesis.

⁶ The word ‘*nabojentunge*’ is unusual. It cannot be found in dictionaries (i.e. *Bokmålsordboka 2022*, *Det Norske Akademis Ordbok 2022*). The informant kautokeino_04gk inserted the word ‘*jente*’ into ‘*nabounge*’. In Norwegian, the last noun dictates the gender of the whole word. The word ‘*nabojentunge*’ is therefore masculine.

Table 8: Occurrence of the gender vacillation by informants

Informant code	Percentage of gender vacillation	
	Including NP consisting of a noun in the definite form	Without NP consisting of a noun in the definite form
kautokeino_01um	3.17%	5.71%
kautokeino_02uk	0%	0%
kautokeino_03gm	0%	0%
kautokeino_04gk	2.48%	5%
tana_01um	0%	0%
tana_02uk	1.67%	2.63%
tana_03gm	4.29%	7.05%
tana_04gk	0%	0%
lakselv_01um	1.09%	2.04%
lakselv_02uk	2.86%	5.5%
lakselv_03gm	2.67%	4.54%
lakselv_04gk	2.91%	4.92%

The phenomenon was more common in the speech of informants who identified Sámi or Kven as their mother tongue (see Table 9).⁷ However, the difference does not appear to be statistically significant.⁸

Table 9: Occurrence of the gender vacillation by mother tongue

Mother tongue	Percentage of gender vacillation	
	Including NP consisting of a noun in the definite form	Without NP consisting of a noun in the definite form
Sámi or Kven	2.22%	4.06%
Norwegian	1.96%	3.3%

Conclusion

This article aimed to present the morphological specifics of the *indrefinnmarksmål* dialect which are related to grammatical gender. In regard to the female gender, its representation in the dialect is not significant. Due to its low frequency, it is more appropriate to speak of a simplification of the gender system as a result of feminine loss. The analysis also confirmed the unstable grammatical gender. However, the frequency of gender sub-

⁷ In this group, I also included the informant lakselv_03gm, who has two mother tongues: Norwegian and Kven.

⁸ I deduce this from the p-value which is higher than 0.05. This indicates strong evidence for the null hypothesis.

stitution was low. It did not deviate significantly from previous research (see Bull 1996; Conzett et al. 2011; Bull 2012). It must be emphasised that the current situation may be different, as the analysed material is from 2010 and 2011. Although it is not the most current language track, the material nevertheless provides an important account of the nature of the dialect at the time.

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