

Diachrony of article systems in Scandinavian Languages

There are many so-called article languages in the world. English is one of them, as well as the Scandinavian languages. We make a difference between something that is new information, e.g. ‘a house’ and old information, ‘the house’. There are also many languages that lack articles, their functions are at least partly taken over by demonstratives or possessive pronouns.

Articles may be formed in a language that had not had them before – as has happened in English and in the Scandinavian languages. When one reads Scandinavian texts from XII or XIII century one finds very few articles or article-like forms. But the modern Scandinavian languages make a regular difference between old and new information by marking it with articles.

There are many questions concerning articles and their history that we still do not have satisfactory answers to. Why is the definite article always formed out of some deictic (‘pointing’) element like a demonstrative pronoun? Why is the indefinite always formed out of the numeral ‘one’? Why are there so few languages that have only indefinite articles but no definite, while there are so many that have the reverse situation: no indefinite article but a definite one (like Icelandic)? And finally: why do these developments always happen in this particular order: the definite first and the indefinite later?

The main objective of the project is to study such developments in four closely related languages: Swedish, Danish, Norwegian and Icelandic. All are well documented and there are many texts available for such a study. In each of the languages articles are formed (though Icelandic lacks the indefinite), but each of the article systems they form is slightly different.