

Constructional change in language contact - possessive expressions in Middle Norwegian with Bergen and Voss in focus

The project aims to describe how language contact affected possessive constructions in Middle Norwegian, specifically in Bergen and Voss. The aim is to document and analyze the changes that occurred due to language contact, using the theory of Construction Grammar. The project has two objectives: mapping the changes in possessive constructions in written sources and observing the differences in their development in Bergen and Voss in the light of language contact.

Bergen dialect has interestingly many unique traits compared to surrounding dialects and other city dialects, which is justified by language contact, especially with Middle Low German. In contrast, Voss, located about 100 kilometers away from Bergen and the shore, had much more limited contact with other languages. In medieval towns, people were used to hearing diverse languages, and many developed multilingual competence. In Bergen, where a Hansa office was located, the Norwegian-speaking citizens were exposed to contact with German and other languages and dialects. One possible result of contact between Middle Norwegian and Middle Low German is “garpegenitiv”, a possessor doubling possessive construction, that is still used in today’s Norwegian. During the Middle Norwegian period, many changes occurred and simplified the grammatical system. However, possessive constructions did not undergo as many simplifications, so in Modern Norwegian, there are still plenty of possessive constructions that differ in terms of word order and definiteness marking. Investigating how these constructions evolved in Bergen and Voss is the main goal of the project.

The analysis is based on corpus material consisting of documents and letters from Diplomatarium Norvegicum, both digital and paper collections of texts. The texts will be selected from 1350-1550 and annotated manually, and the results will be formulated on the basis of quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The expected results will be to show the evolution of possessive constructions in Middle Norwegian in the context of other linguistic changes in the Late Middle Ages, and emphasize the differences in Bergen and Voss, based on their sociolinguistic circumstances, in terms of language contact. The theoretical framework used in the analysis is Construction Grammar, which describes grammatical constructions as form-meaning pairings, and combination of grammar and lexicon as a continuum. According to usage-based Construction Grammar, changes appear when language is being used, and mental grammar is affected as well. Such a series of small changes can then affect a whole construction or lead to the creation of a new one. Moreover, within Diasystematic Construction Grammar, the assumption is that language contact is always based on multilingualism, and the linguistic knowledge of people speaking several languages is organized in multilingual constructions. Therefore, linguistic innovations caused by language contact are previous language-specific constructions that have been turned into language-unspecific constructions.

The project’s significance lies in filling the gap in research on the diachrony of the Middle Norwegian language, as well as contact between Middle Norwegian and Middle Low German in Bergen. It is supported by the digitalized Diplomatarium Norvegicum corpus, which during the last has enriched the possibilities of investigating the period. This research project focuses on the variation within expressing possession in Norwegian, which is unusually diverse, providing useful insights into understanding the linguistic notion of possession in general.