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LNGST 301 Final Project

The Spread of Norwegian Multiethnolect Syntactic and Morphological Features

Introduction and Background

In the spring of 2021, I conducted research alongside other students in a directed undergraduate research project headed by Kari Lie Dorer. My leg of this project focused on corpus data, attempting to track the spread of the Norwegian multiethnolect, specifically its lexical features, throughout the Oslo area. In this project, my intention is to build upon my past research and to expand the scope of my questions to include syntactic and morphological features. However, before exploring these questions, it is necessary to summarize the methods I employed in my past research and revisit my findings.

The Norwegian multiethnolect (NMET) is an urban vernacular commonly found among youth with immigrant-background parents, especially in the Oslo area. This trend has developed over the past circa forty years as a result of the high influx of migrants arriving to and settling in Norway, especially from the Middle East and North Africa. This language variety and speech style goes hand-in-hand with a minority identity adopted by marginalized youth.

Popular media examples offer great context as to how NMET is used and perceived within the public. One example is the novel *Tante Ulrikkes vei* by Zeshan Shakar, which contains examples of written NMET (2017). These examples initially guided my research. I chose to first examine lexical items because they are easily searchable in the corpus, and because of their colloquial nature. The words that I looked for included the top 20 lexical items that were particular to NMET found within the novel *Tante Ulrikkes vei*. With this list, I searched through

the No-Ta Corpus, which contains data collected from 2004-2006 from 166 speakers from all neighborhoods in the city of Oslo. Out of these, I identified 19 respondents who used lexical items associated with NMET. These respondents were from a wide variety of regions, backgrounds, and were composed of both genders. The most important sociolinguistic variable seemed to be age. All of the respondents that used NMET lexical items were in the 16-25 age category. This suggested to me that these lexical items had become slang words among youth and had become popularized throughout the city because of its status as a youth urban vernacular, rather than a multiethnolect. In other words, age was more of a factor than ethnicity in the speech style employed by the respondents.

Going into syntactic and morphological features, I will revisit the speech from this corpus, specifically from these 19 respondents. This will help me determine whether syntactic and morphological features of NMET are as widespread as lexical items are. Based on scholarly research and corpus data from the No-Ta Corpus, syntactic and morphological features of NMET are likely not as widespread as lexical features within the city of Oslo due to the colloquial nature of lexical features.

Features

Out of the 19 respondents who used NMET lexical items in the No-Ta corpus, 12 (about 63%) had an immigrant background or grew up in an area where there was a high proportion of immigrant-background residents. Some of them also discussed being influenced by “immigrant Norwegian” in their interviews, and talked about using traits of NMET. Based on this information, I categorized these people as NMET speakers, while the remaining 7 respondents, who talked about having “nice Norwegian” or “normal Norwegian” were categorized as majority, standard Eastern Norwegian speakers. My analysis suggested that because these 7

respondents used NMET lexical items, that NMET (at least in a lexical dimension) had spread to other, more “standardized” parts of the Oslo vernacular. In order to examine whether the same is true of syntactic and morphological features, it is necessary to revisit the interviews of all these respondents, classified as NMET speakers or not, and to look for three major syntactic and morphological features of NMET.

I chose these features because they are easily identifiable and are often cited in scholarly literature as classic examples of other systematic features of NMET that extend beyond lexicon. For example, Quist and Svendsen include this in a list of common non-lexical features of NMET, including “violations of the V2 constraint... a simplification within the grammatical gender domain... extended use of the preposition ‘på’ (on) as well as several instances of bare singular nouns or partially omission of definiteness marking” (2010). Quist and Svendsen also examine why lexical items might be easier to research and describe, positing that “one reason for the young peoples’ emphasis on words may be that words are probably one of the linguistic strata that are most cognitively available, and most easily describable from a folk linguistic point of view” (2010). Because people are highly aware of the words they use, it is approachable to ask people to categorize and recognize them easier than with syntactic and morphological features. However, there are some clearly recognizable components of NMET that are not lexical. I have selected three features to pull out of the No-Ta corpus.

The features include:

- Violation of V2 rule
- Overgeneralization of the masculine gender (*en*)
- *-a* ending on definite plural-form nouns

The violation of the V2 refers to a grammatical rule that exists within many Germanic languages in which following a time marker or other modifier at the beginning of a sentence, the pronoun and noun must switch places. For example, in Norwegian, *Jeg spiste middag* (“I ate dinner”) becomes *I går spiste jeg middag* (“Yesterday I ate dinner”) when a time marker is added to the beginning of the sentence. In NMET, this rule is not followed, so the sentence would be: *I går jeg spiste middag*, which is incorrect in Standard Eastern Norwegian. The overgeneralization of the masculine gender refers to the grammatical gender of nouns in Norwegian, which can fall into one of three categories: *en* (masculine), *ei* (feminine), or *et* (neuter). In NMET, speakers tend to assign *en*, the masculine article, to all nouns, even when they really fall into another category. It is worth noting that this is allowed in Standard Eastern Norwegian if the article is feminine, but not if the article is neuter. Finally, many NMET speakers trade the Standard Eastern Norwegian ending *-ene* for definite plural nouns for a simpler *-a*. For example, *skoene* (“the shoes”) becomes *skoa*.

These three markers are very common within NMET, and are easily spotted within the transcripts. I have chosen them to determine whether these simple changes in syntax and morphology have spread to the degree that lexical items have within the city of Oslo. In order to better illustrate their use, I have taken several quotes from Zeshan Shakar’s popular novel *Tante Ulrikkes vei* (2017). I previously used this novel to compile a list of the most popular NMET lexical items. However, for this analysis, because it is a popular written source and one of the only mainstream examples of written NMET, it contains rich examples that demonstrate the features we are looking for within this corpus.

NMET examples from *Tante Ulrikkes vei* (Shakar 2017)

Jeg hadde så noia for den læringa der, du veit ikke.

I had so much paranoia about that teaching there, you don't know.

-a ending on definite plural-form nouns

*Når du kjører på T-banen, **du kan se den røde husen** ved politistasjonen.*

When you go on the subway, you can see the red house by the police station.

Violation of V2 rule

Overgeneralization of the masculine gender (*en*)

*Fra begge **jeg gidde hun** sånn to lapper.*

From both I gave her like two (hundred kroner) bills.

Violation of V2 rule

*Jeg jobber så heftig for **dem flusa**.*

I work so hard for that money.

-a ending on definite plural-form nouns

*Hvis dem gidde skikkelig uføretrygd, **ting var bedre**.*

If they gave a lot of unemployment benefits, things were better.

Violation of V2 rule

Limitations

In the past, most other corpus studies of NMET have drawn upon the Upus-corpus, which is specifically catered to NMET speakers. However, this corpus is not widely available to the public. This means that the conclusions I can draw from the No-Ta corpus, which has less access to NMET speakers, are limited in nature. Additionally, “adolescents’ language use in multiethnic areas has primarily been studied at the lexical level” in the past (Svendsen and Røyneland 2008). Much more scholarly research exists in the realm of lexical features versus more abstract ones, like syntactic and morphological features. Opsahl cites another limitation, explaining that “[he

believes] an experimental setting to be unsuitable for capturing the characteristics of a multiethnolectal speech style” (2009). This is because youth are far more likely to display these features in “in-group” settings where they are more comfortable versus around adult researchers who are actively recording their speech. Svendsen and Røyneland summarize this best: “in general, in out-group contexts in our data (i.e., interviews), we find minimal use of the characteristic multiethnolectal intonation” (2008).

In this analysis, I am relying on data collected from individual interviews with researchers rather than peer conversations. Most of the tokens collected for lexical items were taken from these conversations. However, I chose to focus on the interviews because they are much easier to parse without searching, and because there is a meta-linguistic conversation prompted by the interviewer during the session, in which respondents are asked how they would characterize the speech where they were from. I wanted to see whether these respondents would be aware of the syntactic and morphological features of NMET and how they are distinct from Standard Eastern Norwegian. As I have omitted the conversation data, the tokens may be more sparse, but more specific to each participant rather than influenced by conversation with a peer.

Findings

In general, it is very evident that morphological and syntactic features of NMET show up far less often than lexical items do, as I anticipated. From the interviews of these 19 users of NMET lexical items, 13 of them also used morphological and syntactic features of NMET, making up 59.4% of the sample. I counted 30 total tokens from these 13 users. Of these, only 4 were spoken by non-NMET speakers, and 3 of the 13 users (23.1%) were classified as non-NMET speakers. As predicted, NMET users displayed morphological and syntactic features of NMET much more often than non-NMET speakers. In this analysis, 76.9% of the respondents

using morphological and syntactic features were NMET speakers, while 63.2% of the respondents were NMET speakers in the lexical analysis. In fact, 4 out of the 6 speakers who displayed no morphological or syntactic features of NMET were non-NMET users, despite making up a minority of the original sample (7/19). The gender distribution was majority male, but was nearly the same proportion as the sample, implying that females are neither more or less likely to use morphological and syntactic features of NMET versus lexical ones.

In my original analysis, I found 91 tokens of NMET lexical items, far surpassing the instances I found of morphological and syntactic features. Within the tokens that I did find from both analyses, the vast majority of them were lexical tokens, making up 75.2% of all the instances of NMET features that I recorded. Out of these instances of morphological and syntactic features, the trait that was primarily found (80% of the tokens) was the violation of the V2 rule, particularly after the modifier *så* (“so”). In this analysis, 86.7% of the tokens came from NMET speakers, while 60.4% of the tokens came from NMET speakers in the lexical analysis. The difference is more clear here. Generally speaking, across the board, morphological and syntactic features of NMET were less common than lexical features. However, NMET speakers were much more likely to use these features than non-NMET speakers were, even more so than with lexical items.

Interestingly, when many of these non-NMET speakers were asked to describe what the language was like in their part of Oslo, many of them immediately distanced themselves from NMET and were quick to imply that due to the low proportion of immigrant-background people residing in the area, the language was different. One speaker, who used no morphological or syntactic features of NMET, and who was not categorized as an NMET speaker, said that she spoke “pretty Norwegian.” However, she used lexical NMET items. This implies that these

lexical items have come into the mainstream and are no longer associated with NMET, even though they originate from there. It appears that the morphological and syntactic features have not achieved the same status, and that many speakers who might occasionally use NMET lexical items do not often use morphological and syntactic features of NMET.

Other respondents mentioned the very phenomenon I hypothesized about in their interviews, describing that slang words had spread all around Oslo. One respondent even reminisced about NMET, saying that she had outgrown the “*ffortisspråk*” (“fourteen-year-old language”). She displayed no morphological or syntactic features of NMET, despite having a minority background and being categorized as an NMET speaker. Interestingly, one participant who did display these features, but was not categorized as an NMET speaker, characterized his part of Oslo, Bjerke, as being influenced by “bad Norwegian.” Overall, it was clear that although respondents were aware of this phenomenon, they did not display these features as often. Many of them focused on the lexical items rather than other features of NMET. It is logical that lexical features could spread more quickly and efficiently through neighborhoods of Oslo instead of morphological or syntactic features.

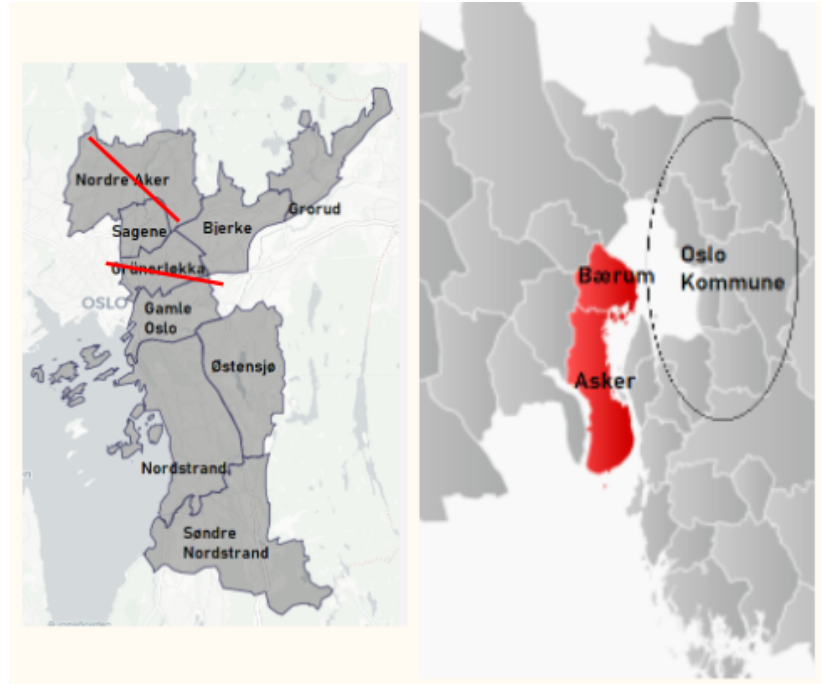


Figure 1. This map shows all of the areas where lexical features of NMET were recorded. Areas with a strike through them indicate that no morphological or syntactic features were found here.

As shown in Figure 1, the areas of Oslo affected by morphological and syntactic features of NMET are largely the same as those affected by lexical features. Only two areas, Grünerløkka and Nordre Aker, had no morphological or syntactic features. Neither area had an above average distribution of minority-background populations, and Nordre Aker had a distribution that was below average. It is difficult to draw conclusions about geographical spread based on this analysis. However, there is something to be said about the demographic information about NMET versus non-NMET speakers. The real findings of interest lie there rather than in the geographical spread of these features, as it largely mimics the earlier findings.

Discussion

I have a few theories as to why NMET users had such a larger proportion of morphological and syntactic features versus non-NMET users. For one, words are very colloquial. Many lexical items have been picked up and adopted by other youth groups in an

effort to seem popular or unique. These words, which youth have heard from NMET users and have begun to use themselves, despite not being in an area densely populated with minority-background individuals, become status symbols. They are “slang words,” as many of the respondents put it. Slang words catch on much more frequently than “slang grammar.” Changing grammatical structure is not something that these participants are quite as meta-linguistically aware of. They are aware of their word choice, but not quite as aware about how they can adjust their grammar. For this reason, it would be more common for NMET users to display these features, which are more inherently built into the DNA of NMET versus lexical items that can be plucked out from an array of language.

Additionally, it could be that these features were much more prevalent in the peer conversations than in the interviews. It is well-known that speakers of multiethnolects are much more likely to display features when speaking with peers than when speaking with researchers. However, even if that were the case, there were still instances of morphological and syntactic features in use in the interviews, and at a higher rate among NMET users. This suggests that in the same environment, NMET users are more likely to use morphological or syntactic features. As for the reason for the dominance of violation of the V2 rule over the other two features I chose, I believe this is because this grammatical difference goes unnoticed more easily than the other two. V2 inversion can be a difficult rule in Norwegian, and in general the word order of the pronoun and verb switches often based on context, so it makes sense that this would be the one to change most often.

Conclusion

In general, it appears as though morphological and syntactic features of NMET are employed much more frequently by NMET users than by non-NMET users within this corpus.

Additionally, non-NMET speakers used NMET lexical features much more often than morphological or syntactic features. With the understanding that this data is only one source collected from 2004-2006 and that only the interviews were analyzed, my hypothesis was correct: morphological and syntactic features of NMET are not as widespread among the general youth population as lexical features are, at least within this corpus. This would align with the assumption that lexical items would spread faster due to their “slang word” status. They are viewed as rather normalized by youth all around Oslo, and are associated with age rather than ethnicity. However, other morphological and syntactic features have not reached the same icon status. More research is needed to draw conclusions about the prevalence of morphological and syntactic features of NMET, as little exists presently. With more analysis, it will be possible to determine with greater certainty whether other features of NMET have spread to various neighborhoods of Oslo the way that lexical features have.

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