

The Ghost of the Old Norse Subjunctive: the Norwegian Subjunctive Participle

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This paper will argue that in modern Norwegian there are constructions in which what looks like a past participle or supine is better described as an irrealis form. I refer to this participle as ‘subjunctive participle’. Earlier analyses have resorted to concepts such as ‘have–omission’, ‘misplaced perfect’ and ‘morphological attraction’ to account for the unexpected past participles in infinitival positions. I will present data showing that what looks like a past participle sometimes occurs in finite positions in Norwegian dialects, data that make those earlier analyses less convincing. My proposal follows my earlier analyses (Eide 2002; 2005): it assumes that this participle is a *distal* form; a form expressing modal remoteness (Langacker 1978; cf. Section 3.1. below) which amounts to a full-fledged irrealis marker; cf. also Julien (2003). Admittedly, the form has a rather restricted distribution in standard written Norwegian, but it occurs in many dialects and variants of spoken Norwegian in spite of the tendency of normative grammars to ban or ignore it.

I assume that the morphological collapse of the old subjunctive preterit form and the past participle led to the subjunctive preterit retaining its counterfactual meaning and disguising as a past participle although confined to constructions with a hypothetical or counterfactual meaning (cf. Sandøy, 1991; Dørum, 2000; and Julien, 2003 for related ideas). More specifically, the old subjunctive, subsumed by the supine, can still impose counterfactual or subjunctive meaning, provided its syntactic surroundings contain the right semantic elements to trigger it. What counts as a sufficient trigger varies between dialects and constructions, and I will examine some of those constructions. Relevant examples are listed in (1)–(3), all of which have counterfactual or hypothetical readings.

- (1) (a) Jon skulle vært på kontoret
Jon shallPRET bePTCPL₁ on officeDEF
‘Jon should have been in his office’

(b) Hu har måtta vorre her
She has mustPTCPL bePTCPL here
‘She must have been here ’
- (2) (a) Det hadde vært artig å sett deg igjen.
It had been fun to seePTCPL you again
‘It would have been fun to see you again’

(b) Har du arbeidd heile dagen utan å kokt kaffe?
Have you worked all day without to boilPTCPL coffee?
‘Have you worked all day without making coffee?’
- (3) (a) Tænk om æ ha vorte det!
Think if I haveINF becomePTCPL that
‘Imagine if I had become that ’

(b) Da fått du en helt anna opplevels
Then getPTCPL you a totally different experience
‘Then you would have had a totally different experience ’

My aim is to provide an empirical description of the selected constructions and show that analysing the participial form, or subjunctive participle, as irrealis in these contexts enables us to generalize over a range of seemingly different constructions.