

Parametric explanations in Scandinavian syntax

Since the 1980's, much of the diachronic and synchronic variation within the syntax of Nordic languages has been explained by assuming a number of parameters. Holmberg & Platzack (1995), being one of the most important contributions to the parametric approach to Scandinavian syntax, argue that an agreement parameter and a case parameter account for at least fourteen syntactic distinctions between Mainland Scandinavian (Swedish, Danish, Norwegian) and Insular Scandinavian (Icelandic, Faroese, Old Scandinavian). The differences in question are for instance the presence or absence of V-to-I movement, null expletives, non-nominative subjects, DP-object shift, transitive expletives, and of Stylistic Fronting. The presence of these features in a language (group) is further connected to the presence of overt verb agreement and case morphology.

However, during the past years, the parametric approach has been under criticism, among other things for its reputed inability to make cross-linguistic predictions (e.g. Newmeyer 2004, 2006), but also for more theoretical reasons (e.g. Boeckx 2010, 2012). Parametric clustering, that is a number of syntactic properties depending on one parameter, has though been claimed for Scandinavian languages recently by Holmberg (2010a, b) and by Gunnar Hrafn Hrafnbjargarson & Wiklund (2010), while Koenenman & Zeijlstra (2012) have resurrected the Rich Agreement Hypothesis.

In my talk, I will show that the parametric clustering is difficult to prove also for Scandinavian languages, in contrast with what have been claimed. The data are collected from a number of closely related varieties of Scandinavian, i.e. the Swedish Övansiljan-vernaculars, Norwegian dialects, and various stages of Swedish. Such closely related varieties are often said to provide an ideal testing ground for parametric hypotheses.

Finally, I will ask the question how much of the Scandinavian syntax variation can be explained by the parametric approach and whether there are other alternative explanations.

References:

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