

Exploring Norn

from a heritage language perspective

Kari Kinn (University of Bergen)

George Walkden (University of Konstanz)

Medieval English in a Multilingual Context

January 2019

Introduction

Norn

Norn is a North Germanic variety, descended from Old Norse (ON), spoken in Shetland and Orkney until the middle of the 18th century.



(a) Orkney



(b) Shetland

Figure: Maps by Finlay McWalter, from Wikimedia Commons

This talk

We look at some of the **morphosyntactic** properties of Norn from a **heritage language** perspective.

Structure of the talk:

1. Introduction
2. Norn: background and history
3. Norn as a heritage language
4. Possessive constructions
5. Summary and conclusion
6. References

Norn: background and history



Figure: Arms of the Feudal Earldom of Orkney, by Sodacan (Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-SA 4.0)

- ▶ Introduced by settlers, primarily from Western Norway, circa 800 CE (Barnes 1998:4)
- ▶ Orkney and Shetland were ruled by Scandinavian earls until the 13th century
- ▶ Scotsman appointed Earl of Orkney (and Shetland) in 14th century
- ▶ Formally became part of Scotland in 1472
- ▶ First official documents in Scots date to the 15th century

Multilingualism and contact

- ▶ From 800 CE: contact between Norn speakers and Picts/Gaelic speakers
- ▶ From 14th century (at the latest): contact between Norn speakers and Scots speakers
- ▶ 1400-1700: contact with (Low) German and Dutch sailors (Melchers 1987)
- ▶ Debate on date of language shift to Scots and Norn language death:
 - ▶ 19th century (e.g. Rendboe 1984)
 - ▶ Late 17th century to before 1774 (Knooihuizen 2008)

Norn language death

Low (1879 [1777]:105):

“The Norse Language is much worn out here, yet there are some who know a few words of it; it was the language of the last age, but will be entirely lost by the next.”

“None of them can write their ancient language, and but very few speak it: the best phrases are all gone, and nothing remains but a few names and two or three remnants of songs which one old man can repeat, and that but indistinctly.”

Low (1879 [1777]:107):

“Norn Proverbs I could find none, nor is it possible to get translations, as it is entirely confined to the lower class of people, who cannot be supposed to have a thorough knowledge either of one Language or the other.”

Knooihuizen (2008:103): Low's speaker William Henry was a 'rememberer' in the terms of Dorian (1982).

Not much material. Several charters, the Lord's Prayer, fragments, and the ballad *Hildina* (Hægstad 1900), as told to Low in 1774. Sample and translation:

Da vara Iarlin o Orkneyar
for frinda sñ spirde ro,
whirdi an skildè meun
or vannaro eidnar fuo –
Or glasburyon burtaga.

“Tega du meun our glasburyon,
kere friendè min,
yamna meun eso vrildan stiendi,
gede min vara to din.”

It was the Earl from Orkney,
And counsel of his kin sought he,
Whether he should the maiden
Free from her misery.

“If thou free the maid from her
gleaming hall,
O kinsman dear of mine,
Ever while the world shall last
Thy glory still shall shine.”

List of Norn texts

Type	Text	Date	Provenance	Words
Charter	<i>DN</i> I.89	1299	Shetland	366
Charter	<i>DN</i> I.109	1307	Shetland	528
Charter	<i>DN</i> II.168	1329	Orkney	259
Charter	<i>DN</i> II.170	1329	Orkney	286
Charter	<i>DN</i> I.340	1354	Orkney	115
Charter	<i>DN</i> III.284	1355	Shetland	253
Charter	<i>DN</i> III.310	1360	Shetland	317
Charter	<i>DN</i> I.404	1369	Orkney	623
Charter	<i>DN</i> II.691	(b)1426	Orkney	2,441
Charter	<i>DN</i> II.797	1452	Shetland	75
Charter	<i>DN</i> II.859	1465	Shetland	135
Charter	<i>DN</i> VI.651	1509	Shetland	197
Charter	Goudie (1904:81-2)	1516	Shetland	393
Ballad	<i>Hildina</i> (Hægstad)	(b)1774	Orkney	677

Norn as a heritage language

Rothman (2009:156):

- ▶ “A language qualifies as a *heritage language* if
 - ▶ it is a language spoken at home or otherwise readily available to young children,
 - ▶ and crucially this language is not a dominant language of the larger (national) society.”
- ▶ “an individual qualifies as a heritage speaker if and only if he or she has some command of the heritage language acquired naturalistically
- ▶ ... although it is equally expected that such competence will differ from that of native monolinguals of comparable age.”

Heritage languages: examples

- ▶ Heritage English spoken in France, Israel, Japan and Thailand (Polinsky 2018:chap. 2)
- ▶ Pennsylvania Dutch (e.g. Brown & Putnam 2015)
- ▶ American Heritage Russian (Dubinina & Polinsky 2013, Polinsky 2018)
- ▶ American Heritage Norwegian (Johannessen 2015, Anderssen et al. 2018)

Over the last fifteen years, our understanding of the mechanisms that shape heritage languages has advanced considerably.

Diachronic change in heritage languages can often be related to the **multilingual context**:

- ▶ Direct influence: **cross-linguistic influence**/transfer (CLI) from the majority language
- ▶ Indirect influence: **cross-linguistic overcorrection** (CLO) in which speakers overstress differences between the heritage language and the majority language, extending patterns that are already present in their heritage language to new contexts (Kupisch 2014)
- ▶ Indirect influence: **spontaneous innovations** not modelled on any existing pattern either in the majority or heritage language (e.g. Benmamoun et al. 2013, Polinsky 2018).

Norn as a heritage language

- ▶ Replacement of Norn by (Older) Scots must have begun in the 14th century, at least in Orkney (Barnes 1984)
- ▶ Dominant language of the larger society would have been (Older) Scots from at least 1472 onwards
- ▶ Norn still learnt at home until 1700

Norn was a heritage language of Orkney and Shetland in the late medieval and early modern periods.

Research question: do the Norn textual records show any (direct or indirect) morphosyntactic influence of the sort found in present-day heritage languages?

Possessive constructions

Possessive constructions

- ▶ We explore some of the morphosyntactic properties of Norn from a heritage language perspective
- ▶ Case study: the syntax of possessive constructions¹
- ▶ An area in which **Old Norse and Scots differ**

¹See Anderssen et al. (2018) on possessive constructions in the context of American Heritage Norwegian.

Possessors in Old Norse

- ▶ In ON, possessors (NPs in the genitive case or possessive determiners) could either precede or follow the head noun (Nygaard 1906, Faarlund 2004)
- ▶ Faarlund (2004:59–60): The latter option was the most common
- ▶ Examples from *Óláfs saga ins helga* (Upps DG 8 II):

- (1) ...er **hans skip** kom i osenn...
when his ship came in river.mouth.DEF
'when his ship came to the river mouth' ON – prenominal possessor
- (2) ...þat sværð bar Haraldr **faðer hans**
that sword carried Haraldr father his
'...his father Haraldr carried that sword' ON – postnominal possessor

Interaction with definiteness marking

- ▶ A noun modified by a possessor normally does not carry definiteness marking
- ▶ However, possessors may sometimes co-occur with demonstratives

(3) þessor þin færð
this your journey
'your journey' (*Óláfs saga ins helga*)

- ▶ Also, the **definite article -inn** is occasionally found on the possessee
- ▶ When the noun is marked with *-inn*, the possessor is usually **postnominal** (Faarlund 2004:60)

(4) um hefnd-ina Bolla
about vengeance-DEF.A Bolli.GEN
'about the vengeance on Bolli' (Laxd 177.30, from Faarlund 2004)

Possessors in Older Scots

- ▶ In Older Scots possessors were generally prenominal (Moessner 1997:118–122):

(5) my querrel
my quarrel
'my quarrel' (MEL 1273)

(6) The pure howlatis appele
the poor owl's appeal
'the poor owl's appeal' (OWL 850)

- ▶ Occasionally: split genitives (discontinuous constituents), but postnominal possessors of the ON type are not found

(7) **the kyngis dochtir of vest mure land** (COM 63.20f)

- ▶ “Very rarely, one finds the combination of a demonstrative and a possessive adjective” (Moessner 1997:119), but **possessors do not seem to co-occur with the definite article**

We now turn to possessive constructions in Norn, focusing on

1. Hildina (ballad)
2. Charters

The results are preliminary – future work includes the establishment of an Old Norse (Old Norwegian) baseline corpus for more systematic comparison.

Possessors in Hildina

Both prenominal and postnominal possessors are attested in Hildina:

- (8) Nu Iarlin an genger i vadlin fram u kadnar **sina mien**
now jarl.DEF he goes to field.DEF forth and calls his men
'Now the Earl steps forward onto the duelling ground and addresses his men'
Norn – prenominal possessor
- (9) for **frinda sin** spirde ro
for relative his.REFL asked advice
'He asked for advice from his kinsman'
Norn – postnominal possessor

One non-reflexive possessive form (*hans*) instead of reflexive *sitt*:

- (10) An cast **ans** huge ei fong ednar
he threw his head in lap her
'He threw his head into her lap'

(But also numerous examples of reflexives that behave like in ON.)

Prenominal possessors and definiteness

Possessee mostly appear without the definite article, but the ON pattern with def. art. + postnominal possessor is attested:

- (11) Nu Hildina on askar **feyr-in sien**
now Hildina she asks father-DEF her.REFL
'Now Hildina asks her father'

Norn - definite art. and postnominal possessor

We also note an occasional pattern whereby a noun with a **prenominal** possessor carries a definite suffix:

- (12) sin shall lathì **min hera-n** i bardagana fwo
as self let-you my lord-DEF in battle get
'as you yourself let my lord receive in battle'

Norn – definite art. and prenominal possessor

Hildina – stability or change?

- ▶ The ballad of Hildina exhibits much variation, similar to Old Norse:
 - ▶ The position of the possessor
 - ▶ The use of the definite article
- ▶ The pattern with a **prenominal possessor + definite noun** is not mentioned in descriptions of either Old Norse or Scots – a **spontaneous innovation? Or crosslinguistic overcorrection?**
- ▶ However, Aasen (1864:291) notes similar examples in ballads from Telemark (Norway)
 - Not exclusively found in Norn. Could be a genre-specific feature associated with ballads.
- ▶ One case of an unexpected non-reflexive possessive form – CLI from Scots?

Possessors in Norn charters

Some general impressions:

- ▶ Variation between charters, but both prenominal and postnominal possessors are attested

(13) **hennarh ffader**
 her father
 'her father' (Goudie 1904: 81, 1516) Norn – prenominal poss.

(14) Helga **kona min**
 Helga wife my
 'Helga, my wife' (DN III.310, 1360) Norn – postnominal poss.

- ▶ Mostly no definite article on the possessee. This is consistent with descriptions of ON.

Possessors in Norn charters – cont.

- ▶ Sometimes the possessor is **unmarked** (no genitive suffix):

(15) hera **biskup** insigli
lord bishop seal
'the lord bishop's seal' (DN I.404, 1369)

→ Morphological reduction – spontaneous innovation or attrition over the lifetime of individuals?

- ▶ Some cases of **non-reflexive** possessive pronouns (*hans*) instead of reflexive ones (*sinn*):

(16) Jtem for^{de} Thomos kærde oppa **hans** eghna
moreover aforementioned Th. complained on his own
wæghnæ...
behalf
'Moreover, the aforementioned Thomos complained on his own behalf...' (DN II.691, b. 1426)

→ CLI from Scots? Or a medieval Danish feature (see Barnes 1998:14, citing Falk & Torp 1900)?

(Recall, however, that a similar example was found in Hildina, where Danish influence seems less likely.)

- ▶ The longest charter in our sample (2,441 word tokens)
- ▶ Written in **Orkney**, not dated, but from **before 1426**
- ▶ A public complaint against David Menyes for harassment, thefts etc.
- ▶ Possessors are **(almost) exclusively prenominal**² – many ex., *i.a.*:

(17) hans kirchio, hans systerson, there gotz, jærlins lansculd ++
 his church, his nephew, their property, earl.DEF's land.rent
 'his church, his nephew, their property, the earl's land rent'

- ▶ Some split possessors (discontinuous), but we found no clear examples of continuous, postnominal possessors
- ▶ This **differs from descriptions of ON**, according to which postnominal possessors are the most common option

→ CLI from Scots? (Could Danish play a role?)

²One example could be interpreted as involving two genitive arguments, of which one is postnominal (*pace* Faarlund 2004:64 on ON). This is not a possessor argument, however.

Charters – stability or change?

- ▶ Unmarked genitives – incipient, spontaneous change (or possibly attrition)?
- ▶ Non-reflexive poss. pronouns – possibly due to Scots influence?
- ▶ Apart from that: we found no unambiguous examples of features in Norn that are not also known in ON
- ▶ However, the **proportion of prenominal vs. postnominal possessors** is interesting:
 - ▶ The results from DN II.691 could suggest that some speakers **overused prenominal possessors**; CLI from Scots might be at work
 - ▶ In a study of possessives in present-day American Heritage Norwegian, Anderssen et al. (2018) relate overuse of prenominal possessors to low proficiency. Only a minority of their informants exhibit this pattern
 - ▶ Implications/predictions for Norn remain to be explored

Summary and conclusion

Summary

- ▶ From a sociohistorical perspective, Norn meets the definition of a heritage language (at least 1400-1700).
- ▶ Norn texts display some features that deviate from descriptions of classical Old Norse:
 - ▶ Unmarked possessives
 - ▶ Prenominal possessors + definite noun
 - ▶ Unexpected use of non-reflexive forms
 - ▶ Unexpectedly high proportions of prenominal possessors (in some texts)
- ▶ At the same time, there is a high degree of stability in nominal syntax even many centuries after the Scandinavian settlements

Future work has the potential to shed light on other interesting features of Norn, heritage languages in general, and syntactic change in contact situations.

References

References I

- Aasen, Ivar. 1864. *Norsk Grammatik*. Christiania: Malling.
- Anderssen, Merete, Björn Lundquist & Marit Westergaard. 2018. Crosslinguistic similarities and differences in bilingual acquisition and attrition. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 21(4). 748–764.
- Barnes, Michael P. 1984. Orkney and Shetland Norn. In Peter Trudgill (ed.), *Language in the british isles*, 352–366. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barnes, Michael P. 1998. *The Norn language of Orkney and Shetland*. Lerwick: The Shetland Times Lt.
- Benmamoun, Elabbas, Silvina Montrul & Maria Polinsky. 2013. Heritage languages and their speakers: Opportunities and challenges for linguistics. *Theoretical Linguistics* 39(3–4). 129–181.

References II

- Brown, Joshua R. & Mike Putnam. 2015. Functional convergence and extension in contact: Syntactic and semantic attributes of the progressive aspect in Pennsylvania Dutch. In Janne B. Johannessen & Joseph C. Salmon (eds.), *Germanic Heritage Languages in North America: Acquisition, Attrition and Change*, 135–160. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Dorian, Nancy C. 1982. Linguistic models and language death evidence. In Lorraine K. Obler & Lise Menn (eds.), *Exceptional language and linguistics*, London: Academic Press.
- Dubinina, Irina & Maria Polinsky. 2013. Russian in the USA. In Michael Moser & Maria Polinsky (eds.), *Slavic languages in migration*, 130–158. Vienna: University of Vienna Press.
- Faarlund, Jan Terje. 2004. *The syntax of Old Norse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Falk, Hjalmar & Alf Torp. 1900. *Dansk-Norskens syntax i historisk fremstilling*. Kristiania: H. Aschehough.

References III

- Goudie, Gilbert. 1904. *The Celtic and Scandinavian antiquities of Shetland*. Edinburgh/London: William Blackwood and sons.
- Hægstad, Marius. 1900. *Hildinakvadet. Med utgreiding um det norske maal paa Shetland i eldre tid*. Christiania: Jacob Dybwad.
- Johannessen, Janne Bondi. 2015. The Corpus of American Norwegian Speech (CANS). In *Proceedings of the 20th nordic conference of computational linguistics (nodalida 2015)*, 297–300.
- Knooihuizen, Remco. 2008. Fishing for words: the taboo language of Shetland fishermen and the dating of Shetland language death. *Transactions of the Philological Society* 106(1). 100–113.
- Kupisch, Tanja. 2014. Adjective placement in simultaneous bilinguals (German–Italian) and the concept of cross-linguistic overcorrection. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 17(1). 222–233.
- Low, George. 1879 [1777]. *A tour through the islands of Orkney and Schetland: containing hints relative to their ancient, modern, and natural history, collected in 1774*. Kirkwall: William Peace and son.

References IV

- Melchers, Gunnel. 1987. On the Low German and Dutch element in Shetland dialect. In P. Sture Ureland (ed.), *Sprachkontakt in der Hanse: Aspekte des Sprachausgleichs im Ostsee- und Nordseeraum*, 276–324. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Moessner, Lilo. 1997. The syntax of older Scots. In Charles Jones (ed.), *The Edinburgh History of the Scots Language*, 47–111. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Nygaard, Marius. 1906. *Norrøn syntax*. Kristiania: Aschehough.
- Polinsky, Maria. 2018. *Heritage languages and their speakers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rendboe, Laurits. 1984. How “worn-out” or “corrupted” was Shetland Norn in its final stages? *NOWELE* 3. 53–88.
- Rothman, Jason. 2009. Understanding the nature and outcomes of early bilingualism: Romance languages as heritage languages. *International Journal of Bilingualism* 13(2). 155–163.