

A Study of a Diachronic Relationship between Two Weak Inflection Classes in Norwegian, with Emphasis on Unexpected Productivity

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Abstract : This contribution presents parts of an ongoing study of a diachronic relationship between two weak verb classes in Norwegian, the a-class (cf. the paradigm of 'throw': kasta - kastar - kasta - kasta) and the e-class (cf. the paradigm of 'buy': kjøpa - kjøper - kjøpte - kjøpt). The study investigates inflection class shifts between the two classes with Old Norse, the ancestor of Modern Norwegian, as a starting point. Examination of inflection in 38 verbs in four chosen dialect areas (106 places of attestations) demonstrates that the shifts from the a-class to the e-class are widespread to varying degrees in three out of four investigated areas and are more common than the shifts in the opposite direction. The diachronic productivity of the e-class is unexpected for several reasons. There is general agreement that type frequency is an important factor influencing productivity. The a-class (53% of all weak verbs) was more type frequent in Old Norse than the e-class (42% of all weak verbs). Thus, given the type frequency, the expansion of the e-class is unexpected. Furthermore, in the 'core' areas of expanded e-class inflection, the shifts disregard phonological principles creating forms with uncomfortable consonant clusters, e.g., fiskte instead of fiska, the preterit of fiska 'fish'. Later on, these forms may be contracted, i.e., fiskte > fiste. In this contribution, two factors influencing the shifts are presented: phonological form and token frequency. Verbs with the stem ending in a consonant cluster, particularly when the cluster ends in -t, hardly ever shift to the e-class. As a matter of fact, verbs with this structure belonging to the e-class in Old Norse shift to the a-class in Modern Norwegian, e.g., ON e-class verb skipta 'change' shifts to the a-class. This shift occurs as a result of the lack of morpho-phonological transparency between the stem and the preterit suffix of the e-class, -te. As there is a phonological fusion between the stem ending in -t and the suffix beginning in -t, the transparent a-class inflection is chosen. Token frequency plays an important role in the shifts, too, in some dialects. In one of the investigated areas, the most token frequent verbs of the ON e-class remain in the e-class (e.g., høyra 'hear', leva 'live', kjøpa 'buy'), while less frequent verbs may shift to the a-class. Furthermore, the results indicate that the shift from the a-class to the e-class occurs in some of the most token frequent verbs of the ON a-class in this area, e.g., lika 'like', lova 'promise', svara 'answer'. The latter is unexpected as frequent items tend to remain stable. This study presents a case of unexpected productivity, demonstrating that minor patterns can grow and outdo major patterns. Thus, type frequency is not the only factor that determines productivity. The study addresses the role of phonological form and token frequency in the spread of inflection patterns.

Keywords : inflection class, productivity, token frequency, phonological form

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