**

DEAD, BUT WON'T LIE DOWN? GRAMMATICAL GENDER AMONG NORWEGIANS

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Abstract

The question pursued in this paper is to what extent exponents of grammatical gender are indexically tied to identity categories. Building on literature and corpus data sources, I claim that within the Norwegian context grammatical gender has been—and still is—associated with indexical values connected to sociolinguistic dimensions such as urban/rural distinctions, political views, class, ethnicity, and so forth. Traditional three-gender systems are being replaced by a two-gender system in several dialects, resulting in the "loss" of the feminine gender. Indexical values associated with the feminine gender features are still valid, though, and some take on new pragmatic functions. Seen through a sociolinguistic lens, and recognizing the role of the agency of speakers, it seems clear that grammatical gender cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the interactional context at a micro level, and the socio-historic characteristics of—for instance—regions undergoing language contact at a macro level.[1]

Keywords: grammatical gender, Norwegian, language change, identity, speaker agency

1. Introduction.

Currently a traditional three-gender system (masculine, feminine, and neuter) is being replaced by a two-gender system (masculine—or common—and neuter) in many Norwegian dialects (e.g. Busterud et al. 2019, Lødrup 2011, Rodina & Westergaard 2015). This paper highlights sociolinguistic perspectives on grammatical gender, seen from the Norwegian context, aimed at exploring whether sociolinguistic insights—regarding both macro and micro perspectives—are of relevance for the study of variation and change within the grammatical gender domain. Lundquist and Vangsnes (2018) find no need to invoke factors

of language sociology into their analysis of gender processing in speakers' native and non-native dialects, since the differences they find between groups can be explained from differences in the amount of input between minority and majority dialects only (Lundquist & Vangsnes 2018:2). Amount of input is also put forward as a crucial explanatory factor for both the mono- and bilingual acquisition of gender (e.g. Rodina & Westergaard 2017). Even if the current changes within the grammatical gender domain can be explained with reference to frequency in input and/or the difficulty in distinguishing the masculine and the feminine due to syncretism, some data are still unaccounted for. For instance, an increased use of certain types of feminine gender marking is found among speakers of dialects where a change from a three-gender to a two-gender system supposedly has taken place (Opsahl 2017, Fløgstad & Eiesland 2019).

The question pursued in the following is to what extent exponents of grammatical gender are indexically tied to identity categories (e.g. Bucholtz & Hall 2005). The prediction is that grammatical gender has been—and still is—associated with various indexical values connected to sociolinguistic dimensions such as urban/rural distinctions, political views, class, ethnicity, and so forth. Enger (2018:249) points out that "even inflection class suffixes can be manipulated consciously, and not only by linguists." The interplay between speaker agency, involving what may be interpreted as the conscious use of gender features in identity work, and the apparent reduction of the gender systems is the rationale behind the title of the paper, "Dead, but Won't Lie Down."

The sociolinguistic perspective applied here is a social constructivist perspective inspired by what Eckert has called "third wave sociolinguistics." The social meaning of variables is the focus of interest within this framework, and especially the contribution of variables to styles. Style is a clustering of linguistic resources and an association of that clustering with social meaning (Eckert 2001:123). The construction of personae and identities

rests on the assumption that identity is not a structure that expresses fixed social categories. Identity is a relational and sociocultural phenomenon. Hence, the manifestation of identity in discourse is of particular interest, rather than the correlation between linguistic features and social variables per se (Bucholtz & Hall 2005, Quist 2008). This manifestation is often known as stylistic practice, which is the process through which signs and differences become meaningful resources in daily enterprises and activities (Quist 2008:51). Stylistic practice is connected to indexicality, which involves the creation of semiotic links between linguistic forms and social meaning. As pointed to by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), indexicality is thus fundamental to the way in which linguistic forms are used to construct identity positions:

> In identity formation, indexicality relies heavily on ideological structures, for associations between language and identity are rooted in cultural beliefs and values— that is, ideologies—about the sorts of speakers who (can or should) produce particular sorts of language. (Bucholtz & Hall 2005:593)

Indexical processes occur at all levels of linguistic structure and use; hence, both micro-level linguistic structures and entire linguistic systems—such as for instance "dialects"—may be indexically tied to identity categories (Bucholtz & Hall 2005:597). This means that the social meaning of a linguistic feature must take the specific socio-historic context of its instantiation into account (Johnstone 2016), as well as demanding openness to the possibility that micro-level interactional negotiation alters the indexical value of a linguistic feature. Such cases may exceed the level of idiosyncrasies through habitual practices, or what Agha (2003) has called the process of enregisterment; that is, "processes and practices whereby performable signs become recognized (and regrouped) as belonging to distinct, differentially valorized semiotic registers by a population" (Agha 2003:81).

The structure of this article is as follows. In section 2, I start by presenting an overview of the Norwegian gender system (2.1) before turning to a presentation of the meaning potential associated with gender in different domains, from written varieties (2.2) and language contact scenarios (2.3) to semantics (2.4) and pragmatics (2.5). Section 3 is devoted to a general discussion and concluding remarks.

2. Indexical Values across Time and Space.

2.1. The Norwegian Gender System.

To present an overview of "the Norwegian gender system" is not an easy task. Norway does not have a spoken standard language in the traditional sense, but rich dialect variation and two official written standards. *Bokmål,* or "book language," is used by the majority of Norwegians and can be traced back to Danish-influenced urban varieties.[2] *Nynorsk,* or "new Norwegian," is based on Ivar Aasen's compilations of rural dialects in the nineteenth century. In most traditional Norwegian dialects and in the Nynorsk written standard, three gender categories can be identified: masculine, feminine, and neuter, i.e., *ein stol* 'a chair', *ei hylle* 'a shelf', and *eit bord* 'a table' (Faarlund et al. 1997). Three genders are also available in Bokmål, where the corresponding indefinite articles are monophthongs (*en, ei, et*). The Bokmål standard also allows for a system where all feminine nouns take masculine agreement, resulting in a system with two genders: masculine (or common) and neuter. The latter system is also the system characterizing the city dialect of Bergen (e.g. Jahr 1998).

Table 1 combines the most prominent examples of how gender is realized in Norwegian. The Nynorsk standard—with a system corresponding more or less to most of the traditional dialects—is presented on top of the corresponding Bokmål variants within each gender category. Taking the masculine as an example, the Nynorsk standard on top reads '*ein*

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[2] Except for a few months, Norway was in Union or under Danish rule between 1380 and 1814.

fin stol/a-MASC nice chair, *min stol/*mine-MASC chair', etc., whereas the Bokmål standard reads

'*en fin stol*/a-MASC nice chair, *min stol*/mine-MASC chair', etc. The shaded cells illustrate the

most widespread features within the Bokmål written standard (see section 2.2).

Table 1. Lexical gender in Norwegian

	Indefinite (incl. adjective)	Preposed possessive	Postposed possessive	Anaphorical
Masculine	ein fin stol a-MASC nice chair 'a nice chair'	min stol mine-MASC chair 'my chair'	stolen min chair-DEF-SG mine-MASC 'my chair'	Han er min He is mine-MASC 'It is mine'
	en fin stol a-MASC nice chair 'a nice chair'	min stol mine-MASC chair 'my chair'	stolen min chair-DEF-SG mine-MASC 'my chair'	Den er min It-MASC is mine-MASC 'It is mine'
Common	en fin hylle a-MASC nice shelf 'a fine shelf'	min hylle mine-MASC shelf 'my shelf'	hyllen min shelf-DEF-SG mine-MASC 'my shelf'	Den er min It-MASC is mine-MASC 'It is mine'
Feminine	ei fin hylle a-FEM nice shelf 'a nice shelf'	mi hylle mine-FEM shelf 'my shelf'	hylla mi shelf-DEF-SG mine-FEM 'my shelf'	Ho er mi She is mine-FEM 'It is mine'
Neuter	eit fint bord a-NEUT nice-NEUT table 'a nice table'	mitt bord mine-NEUT table 'my table'	bordet mitt table-DEF-SG mine-NEUT 'my table'	Det er mitt It is mine-NEUT 'It is mine'
	et fint bord a-NEUT nice-NEUT table 'a nice table'	mitt bord mine-NEUT table 'my table'	bordet mitt table-DEF-SG mine-NEUT 'my table'	Det er mitt It is mine-NEUT 'It is mine'

There is syncretism between the masculine and feminine in several places, such as in

the adjectives (cf. *en fin stol, en fin hylle*). In addition to the patterns illustrated in Table 1,

Norwegian displays double definiteness, marking definiteness both on a suffix on the noun

itself and on a prenominal determiner (*den*DEF *fin-e*DEF *stol-en*DEF, *det*DEF *fin-e*DEF *bord-et*DEF).

There is syncretism between the masculine and the feminine here as well, with *den* being the

common form and *det* being the neuter.

The complexity of the linguistic situation in Norway is especially conspicuous in the middle part of Table 1, in the overlap between masculine and feminine—resulting in a common gender category in some varieties. The common gender is not a clear-cut category when it comes to the features included, tentatively illustrated with dotted lines. While the feminine indefinite article *ei* 'a-FEM' is virtually absent in the (modern) spoken varieties associated with the capital Oslo, as well as in widespread variants of the Bokmål written standard, the corresponding definite suffix often still has the *a*-ending typical of feminine nouns (Enger 2018, Opsahl & Nistov 2010, Lødrup 2011). The gender system is reduced, but at the same time a more complex declension system may be said to have evolved, since the new common gender has two declension classes, *en stol–stol**en*** 'a chair–the chair' and *en hylle–hyll**a*** 'a shelf–the shelf' (Lohndal & Westergaard 2015).

The definite singular endings,[3] *-en*-MASC, *-a*-FEM, and *–et*-NEUT, are thus strongly linked with gender. Gender can in some varieties be considered the main factor in the allocation of nouns to inflection classes (Sollid et al. 2014:189). A lengthy discussion among Norwegian scholars has taken place as to the status of the definite suffix, and evidence has been put forward in support of seeing them as declension class markers rather than exponents of gender (e.g. Fretheim 1985, Enger 2004, Lødrup 2011, Lohndal & Westergaard 2016, Enger 2018). There is little doubt that the definite article—being a suffix—behaves differently from the free gender morphemes in contexts of acquisition and change (Enger 2018:235). The difference between bound and free morphemes has been shown to be significant in the acquisition rate (Rodina & Westergaard 2015). Mono- and multilingual children acquire noun inflection systems earlier and more easily than the abstract rules of gender agreement (Rodina & Westergaard 2013; see also Cornips & Gregersen 2017:123). Also, in heritage American-

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[3] These are the suffixes in the two written standards and some of the major dialect areas. The feminine definite singular endings subsumed under *-a* include variants such as *-i,-ei, -a, -o,-å*, and *-an*, and there is traditionally a division between strong and weak nouns in some dialect areas (see for instance Mæhlum & Røyneland 2012:92).

Norwegian, there are clear differences between bound and free morphemes. Knowledge of the definite form of a feminine or neuter noun (bound morphemes) does not facilitate the production of conventional indefinite forms (free morphemes)—leading Lohndal and Westergaard (2016) to the conclusion that the definite suffixes are not exponents of gender. The -*a*-suffix still may serve a role as an enforcement of specific indexical values associated with the feminine gender marking.

2.2. Social Meaning of Gender in the Written Standards.

As mentioned, the shaded cells in Table 1 are an attempt to illustrate the most widespread features within the Bokmål written standard, by some considered a "neutral" norm where all possessives and adjectives are masculine, with the exception of certain instances of postnominal possessives (e.g. *hylla mi* shelf-DEF-SG mine-FEM 'my shelf'). Considering parts of the system as being "neutral" is not an effort made without certain risks of sticking one's hand into a hornet's nest. There is no room in this paper to present a detailed and justified account of Norwegian language planning (for an overview in English, see e.g. Vikør 2015), but simply put, language planning during the twentieth century was aimed at converging and merging the two written standards of Bokmål and Nynorsk. This policy was officially abandoned in 2002. The attempts at converging Bokmål and Nynorsk crossed sociolinguistic boundaries resting on the indexical values associated with the respective varieties and their— especially morphological—composition, challenging dominant ideologies (Jahr 2015). Such ideologies are present in the strong socio-geographical connections associated with the two varieties. The Nynorsk standard is prototypically associated with the western parts of Norway. Nynorsk and traditional dialects express indexical values such as traditional, rural, peripheral and local, and sometimes old-fashioned (Mæhlum 2007). The obligatory written Nynorsk education in school is met with negative attitudes among pupils, especially in urban

areas. The Bokmål variety, and (southeastern) spoken varieties close to this standard, are the prototypical bearers of meanings such as modern, urban, and superregional and/or being socio-geographically "neutral" (Mæhlum 2007:197). This leads to an understanding of a language hierarchy with Bokmål and closely related spoken varieties, especially the ones spoken among middle-class speakers in the capital Oslo, being the most prestigious varieties. Bokmål, and especially the variety with a two-gender system, resembles the Danish system on which it is based, and the managerial class and the urban elite had strong connections to Denmark, both during and after Norway was under Danish rule. Thus, a seemingly innocent pattern like *hylla mi* (shelf-DEF-SG mine-FEM) has a meaning potential grounded historically in an association with less prestigious varieties.

Social indexical meanings are not stable, and they must be understood in their local and/or socio-historical context and in light of the dominant language ideology. An illustrating example is Solheim's studies of the western Norwegian industrial town of Høyanger, where eastern Norwegian forms were introduced to the local community due to industrialization. Some of these forms were too strong to be acceptable in a western Norwegian context, with its associations to both the Bokmål standard and the former managerial class, and they were rejected by the following generation of speakers (Kerswill 2013:241).

Still, there is reason to highlight the two-gender system of Bokmål as being a prestigious variety within the current dominant language situation. In addition to the official variant of Bokmål, an unofficial variety called Riksmål exists, which stays truer to its Dano-Norwegian heritage than the modern Bokmål standard. This variety—as well as the conservative Bokmål standard[4]—is regulated by the Norwegian Academy for Language and Literature and is available through the large online dictionary NAOB. This dictionary is the

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[4] Bokmål features resembling Nynorsk or traditional dialects are sometimes labelled as "radical," whereas the use of features closer to the Dano-Norwegian heritage version is labeled as "conservative."

largest and most complete documentation of Bokmål to date. The dictionary builds on a two-gender system, and the feminine indefinite marker *ei* is not displayed as part of the lexical entries of feminine nouns (NAOB 2018). Lødrup (2011) bases his study of the loss of the feminine gender in the Oslo west dialect in the NoTa-Oslo-corpus, which is a corpus from 2004–2006 with videotaped recordings of three generations of speakers from different parts of Oslo, 166 informants in total. Lødrup (2011:132) points to the possibility that the level of formality associated with an interview situation affects the occurrence of feminine gender marking negatively, implying that a two-gender system avoiding the feminine gender is the marked choice in certain formal registers.

Throughout the language planning history of the twentieth century, ever since the written reform of 1917, feminine features have occasionally been called "vulgar" and even "ugly" (Jahr 2014, Ims 2019). The first efforts in trying to slowly merge the two written varieties in 1917 met with strong opposition, especially aimed at the feminine definite *a*-suffixes (as well as the *a*-suffixes in certain verb classes, and certain plural noun forms). The concept of "*a*-suffixes" has a rich social meaning still relevant for the establishment of the so-called radical or popular variant of the Bokmål written standard, as well as being indexical of the traditional working-class, eastern areas of Oslo (Ims 2019). Evidence for how feminine gender marking and the *a*-suffixes are exponents of a certain style are found in metalinguistic reflections in the aforementioned NoTa-corpus, where speakers point to *a*-suffixes and gender marking as socio-geographical markers of belonging in a strikingly parallel manner.

(1)

    a.   veldig sjelden a-endelser det er ikke mora   mi   men moren min

          very rarely   a-suffixes it   is not   mother my-FEM but mother my-MASC

          'very rarely a-suffixes, it's not my mother but my mother'

          (NoTa speaker 181, Oslo west)

    b. istedenfor moren min   så blir   det mora di   ikke sant

        instead-of mother my-MASC so becomes it mother your-FEM not true

        'instead of my mother it becomes my mother you know'

        (NoTa speaker 192, Oslo east)

Another speaker represented in the corpus points to the use of *a*-suffixes as a means of being "radical and freaked out" (NoTa speaker 041). This resembles the characteristics the researcher Irmelin Kjelaas received from a group of journal editors a few years ago, igniting a debate on the stylistic norms of scientific texts written in Norwegian (Kjelaas 2017). The editors pointed to Kjelaas's use of the indefinite feminine article *ei* and *a*-suffixes as "something not to be expected in scientific texts." In the following debate, and also in earlier debates about the radical form of the Bokmål written standard (e.g. Lillealtern 2010), "radical" has also been connected to a political orientation, and stylistic practices involving certain Bokmål features are sometimes labeled "AKP-m-l-Norwegian" (e.g. Müller 2017). AKP was the Workers' Communist Party associated with the Marxist-Leninist movement of the 1970s. The left-wing politicians associated with this movement, such as Tron Øgrim, cultivated a sociolect with an emphasis on, among other things, the use of feminine forms (Brekke 2015). The party had its origin in the eastern parts of Oslo, highlighting a socio-geographical dimension in this case as well.

2.3. Gender, Geography, Ethnicity, and Contact.

The Norwegian three-gender system has a socio-geographical meaning potential, and the two written standards are associated with different geographical areas. The traditional dialects, including the Oslo dialect typical of the eastern parts of town, have had a three-gender system, whereas the Oslo west variety, as well as the city dialect of Bergen, have a two-gender system. There are also other socio-geographical dimensions relevant for a study of

gender in the Norwegian context, both involving linguistic contact, in the following presented as urban contact and northern contact.

Corpus data retrieved from the so-called UPUS project (Utviklingsprosesser i urbane språkmiljø, "Linguistic developments in urban spaces") (e.g. Svendsen & Røyneland 2008, Hårstad & Opsahl 2013) show how young speakers in multicultural, urban neighborhoods use grammatical gender as one of several linguistic (and non-linguistic) resources in their portrayal of identities or personae, typically associated with a certain multiethnolectal speech style. This observation is not restricted to the Norwegian context. The findings resemble earlier research showing how gender is used in a slightly different way among speakers in multiethnolectal youth groups than speakers of more traditional "monoethnic" varieties (e.g. Kotsinas 1988, Quist 2008, Wiese 2009). Cornips (2008) shows how groups of friends in multiethnic neighborhoods in Utrecht construct social identities by using the definite determiner *de* in cases where the neuter determiner *het* is required, according to standard Dutch (see also Cornips & Hulk 2006).

A comparison of young speakers' linguistic practices across different speech situations revealed that some linguistic features were restricted to certain situations and interactional functions (Svendsen & Røyneland 2008, Opsahl & Nistov 2010:52). The most striking feature was the violations of the syntactic verb second constraint, resulting in an XSV word order (where X is a topicalized element, V the finite verb, and S the subject). V2 violations are often found in Norwegian L2 learner data, but their presence in the UPUS corpus were clearly not learner data (Opsahl & Nistov 2010:54). Other stylistic features at play were certain phonological characteristics (cf. Svendsen & Røyneland 2008:72), the use of loan words from migrant languages represented in the neighborhood, and the use of discourse markers like "wallah." The adolescents expressed an affiliation toward hip-hop music, also visible in their choice of clothing and accessories, and many were proud of their

socio-geographical belonging, with ties both to the local, multiethnic neighborhood and to a globalized world. Grammatical gender may also be included into this pool of linguistic and non-linguistic resources. Among the few metalinguistic utterances involving morpho-syntax in the UPUS interviews, where the youngsters describe their linguistic practices, some concern grammatical gender (Opsahl & Nistov 2010:53). Table 2 shows the distribution of gender-marked noun phrases produced in conversations by 22 of the adolescents represented in the UPUS corpus. As pointed out by Cornips and Gregersen (2017), there are certain difficulties associated with the establishment of a target norm when looking into young people's linguistic practices, because their actual use may cut across lines stipulated by standard norms. The norm established for the UPUS adolescents is based on the Bokmål standard, "without prepoposing that they wanted to produce an invariable standard" (Cornips & Gregersen 2017:103).

Table 2. Gender-marked noun phrases produced by UPUS adolescents compared to the Bokmål *norm*

	MASCULINE	FEMININE	NEUTER	NON-CONVENTIONAL	TOTAL
N	658	132	175	26	991
%	66.4	13.3	17.7	2.6	100

According to Faarlund and colleagues (1997:152), the expected ratio of nouns per gender in Bokmål, when counting all the nouns that may be marked as feminine as feminine, is approximately 40% masculine, 30% feminine, and 25% neuter. Even when taking into account that the distribution of all available nouns may differ from the distribution of nouns found in the conversations, it is striking that the UPUS adolescents produced considerably more noun phrases marked as masculine (66.4% vs. 40%). Non-conventional use of gender marking is also adding to the impression of a masculine or common gender dominance. In several cases, neuter nouns are treated as masculine nouns, as shown in examples 2a–b.

(2)   a. er dette min   glass?

is this   my-MASC glass-NEUT

'is this my glass?'

b. løpe rundt på sånn   stor   område

run around on such   large-MASC area-NEUT

'run around on a large area'

The masculine dominance becomes even clearer in the noun phrases with an indefinite article as their only gender marker. Leaving out instances of fixed expressions such as *et eller annet* ('one or the other') and *på en måte* ('in a way'), 144 noun phrases introduced by the indefinite articles *en*, *ei,* or *et* remain (or, to be more precise, *en* or *et*, because none of the 22 adolescents used the feminine indefinite article *ei*). Nineteen of these are introduced by the neuter indefinite article in a conventional fashion, 115 are marked as masculine in a conventional fashion, and 19 potentially feminine nouns are marked as masculine (common) with the indefinite article *en*, in line with the general tendency in other studies of the Oslo dialect (Lødrup 2011). A search in the youngest age group in the NoTa corpus delivers only 24 instances of *ei*, and as many as 2,356 of *en*. In the case of the UPUS adolescents, 11 cases of non-conventional use of indefinite articles are found. With one exception, these are cases where neuter nouns are combined with the masculine determiner *en*, in examples like "en-MASC maleri-NEUT" ('a painting').

Another characteristic feature related to the noun phrases, and to a certain extent also grammatical gender, is the use of the determiner *sånn* ('such') in the UPUS corpus. The use of *sånn* has increased among young speakers, including outside of multiethnic neighborhoods (Lie 2008:92, Ekberg et al. 2015). In addition to developing new, pragmatic functions as a focus marker, in parallel with similar markers in Swedish and German, *sånn* seems to be grammaticalizing into a determiner, hence competing with the traditional indefinite articles

(Ekberg et al. 2015). This can be seen in example 2b, where *sånn* is also chosen over the neuter variant *sånt*.

A tendency of overgeneralizing the masculine pattern is typical for many speakers learning Norwegian as their second language (Ragnhildstveit 2018). There is no direct correlation, however, between the language backgrounds of the speakers and the cases of non-conventional gender marking. The girl responsible for the utterance given in 2a, for instance, was born in Norway to two Norwegian-born parents. She expresses a positive attitude toward the multiethnic neighborhood of which she is a part, and she has included several other features mentioned above into her linguistic repertoire as well. The "deviations" from standard norms and expectations are found primarily in in-group settings. Even though the examples of how the masculine conquers the neuter domain are few, they are meaningful: the cases of non-agreement enter into a complex of features typical for a certain stylistic practice. As was the case with the written Bokmål examples in the previous section, it is the interplay between gender and other linguistic (and non-linguistic) features that together are involved in what may be seen as an enregisterment process (Agha 2003).

The UPUS corpus is now itself in its teens, and no large-scale follow-up studies have yet been made on the linguistic practices in multiethnic neighborhoods in Norway. However, there are several tendencies pointing toward the continuous existence of a style or register characterized by many of the same features as described in the UPUS data. In widely used high school textbooks, multiethnolectal speech styles are treated as an inevitable and natural addition to the existing socio-geographical linguistic landscape of Norway by being portrayed alongside more traditional dialects (Opsahl & Røyneland 2016). In 2017, Zeshan Shakar wrote a highly acclaimed, bestselling novel called *Tante Ulrikkes vei* ("Aunt Ulrikke's road") about two boys growing up in the northeastern, multiethnic part of Oslo. The language use of one of the two protagonists in the novel, Jamal, is in many ways a spitting image of the

findings from the UPUS project. In addition to a strong affinity with hip-hop culture and the expression of pride in belonging to his local neighborhood, he uses the linguistic features typical for a multiethnolectal speech style, including *sånn* used as a focus marker and the overgeneralization of masculine patterns to neuter nouns (see examples 3a–b).

(3) a. Hun tok sin glass på sånn fire slurk

    She took its-MASC glass-NEUT on such four sip

    'She finished her glass in like four sip(s)'

  b. Han viser en album til oss

    He shows a-MASC album-NEUT to us

    og vi sjofer på albumen   liksom

    and we look at album-NEUT-the-MASC like

    'He shows us an album and we look at the album, like'

Shakar has written a novel, and an esthetic artefact should not be treated as a naturalistic rendering of (one of the) modern Oslo dialect(s). At the same time, the novel has been read as a realistic representation of such, and it is fair to say that the multiethnolectal speech style, as described ten years ago, is available as one way of portraying—and probably also expressing—certain personae today. One of the features indexing the relevant meaning and belonging is gender non-agreement, but not in a random way causing the breakdown of the gender category. The definite suffixes, both the ones associated with the feminine and the neuter, are for the most part intact, such as in examples like *livet* life-NEUT-the-NEUT ('the life') and *gata* street-FEM-the-FEM ('the street').

Sollid, Conzett, and Johansen (2011, 2014) have studied contact between the Finno-Ugric languages Sámi and Kven on one hand, and Norwegian, with gender marking, on the other. In this northern contact scenario, they find several traces of unsystematic variation and simplification, but the three- or two-gender system still stands. Noun inflection in the contact

varieties is very similar to the other northern Norwegian vernaculars, and referential non-agreement involving traditionally masculine or neuter nouns is no more than a marginal phenomenon. The number of nouns displaying non-agreement is in fact fascinatingly similar to the number of non-conventional gender agreement examples in the UPUS data (cf. Table 2), as they amount to 2.6% of the cases. Neither of the gender systems are affected in their foundations, however, and both the urban and the northern contact varieties have a noun inflection system similar to the traditional varieties. Rather than being called a case of simplification and/or dissolvement of a category, the gender category seems to be characterized by stability, as Sollid and her colleagues (2014) claim. The cases of non-agreement shown in earlier studies may be "considered characteristic of a Norwegian contact variety in formation, whereas our informants […] represent the phase of stabilization" (Sollid et al. 2014:191). The numbers are small, but the gender non-agreement involving masculine and neuter receives metalinguistic attention in both northern contact communities and elsewhere, also according to Sollid and her colleagues (2014:200). Using masculine agreement marking on neuter nouns may index both a minority language background and a specific socio-geographical belonging.

2.4. Gender, Sex, and Semantics.

Several testimonies point to the role grammatical gender has had, and still has, in the negotiation of sexual identities and the contesting of heteronormativity. One trace of the role of grammatical gender in the negotiation of sexual identities is found in the novel *Villskudd – sangen til Jens* ("Wild Shot – the song for Jens") (Vindland 1979). This novel played a significant role in the education of the general Norwegian public in the recognition and understanding of the homosexual lifestyle and the love between people regardless of their gender and sexual orientation. There are several instances in the novel where feminine

grammatical gender marking is used to denote men, or more precisely men with the intention of expressing a certain persona, resembling Podesva's studies of how regional accent features are used to portray particular brands of "diva" or "partier" gay personae (e.g. Podesva 2011). More importantly, the semantically grounded aspects of gender agreement make it possible to contest and exploit—and eventually maybe even dissolve—stereotypical correlations between gender and sex. This is an aspect which deserves more research attention in the future.

Enger (2018) points to instances of semantically motivated gender agreement in cases like *ei god venn* ('a good friend'), *har fått ei lærer som ... og hun ...* ('has got a teacher who … and she …'). The nouns *venn* 'friend' and *lærer* 'teacher' are masculine, so one would expect the determiner *en* ('a-MASC') and not *ei* ('a-FEM'). Examples like these may be said to contradict the move toward a two-gender system where the feminine is lost. The examples are rare, but they are here, and according to Enger they are not random: "They relate to nouns denoting humans, and whenever the feminine is employed, it refers to females" (Enger 2018:242). Moreover, even if the nouns change the attributive determiner from *en* to *ei*, they do not change the suffix *-en* to *-a*, contradicting the vulnerability of the gender category. Enger seeks an explanation for these and other cases where the feminine seems to have been ousted by the masculine apart from in the definite suffix, in morphological theory, more precisely in grammaticalization theory related to a revised version of Corbett's Agreement Hierarchy, concerning the "tightness" of grammatical relations (Enger 2018:243). From a somewhat different angle, he arrives at a similar conclusion as Rodina and Westergaard's acquisition study (2013). They quote Bybee in their showing that the more closely a feature is tied to a lexical root, the more resistant it is to reduction. This insight also resembles the one made by Cornips and Gregersen (2017).

2.5. Gender and Pragmatics.

Gender involves the interaction of morphology, syntax, semantics, and phonology (Lohndal & Westergaard 2016:1). To this already complex category, one may add pragmatics. In section 2.1 I showed that there is syncretism between the masculine and feminine in adjectives. There is only one exception to this pattern today, and that involves the adjective *liten* ('small'), expressing gender through the forms *liten*-MASC, *lita*-FEM, and *lite*-NEUT. There are few instances of the feminine form *lita* in the spoken language corpora collected ten years ago, and the feminine indefinite article is more or less absent among young speakers, leading to the conclusion that a two-gender system is taking over in several Norwegian dialects. Over the last couple of years, however, several examples of *ei* and *lita*—typically pronounced with a short vowel, *litta*—have popped up among speakers who are expected to be users of a two-gender system with neuter and masculine or common gender (Opsahl 2017, Fløgstad & Eiesland 2019). Interestingly enough, these feminine forms are combined primarily with masculine nouns, in cases like *lita tur* ('small-FEM hikeMASC'). A recent Christmas commercial from the large Norwegian dairy company Tine features the popular folkloric "Fjøsnisse" ('cowshed Santa') who is furious of people's failure to bring him his traditional plate of porridge at Christmas. He shouts whether it is too much to ask for "ei litta porsjon julegrøt" ('a-FEM small-FEM serving-MASC of Christmas porridge'). Another illustrating example is found in a conversation between a student and supervisor, where they discussed the pitfalls and challenges of field work. The student openly appreciates the possibility to discuss moments of insecurity, and the possibility to be provided with *ei litta tips* ('a-FEM small-FEM piece-of-advice-NEUT').

The loss of the feminine gender has left an opening for exaptation, to use Lass's (1990) term. The feminine forms take on the role as a pragmatic marker connected to a group of speech acts and situations where some sort of pragmatic hedging is required (Opsahl

2017). The feminine form of the adjective, with and without the indefinite article included, seems to be associated with situations and practices concerning personal portrayal, as in the case where the cowshed Santa is denied his prime attribute, his porridge, leaving him on the very edge of being forgotten. Personal portrayal is also at stake in situations where one "puts oneself out there," such as in the case of exploring insecurities in the supervisor/student conversation. The hashtag *littaselfie*, combining the feminine adjective form with the masculine *selfie*, is typical in this respect, added to mobile self-portraits on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. The phrase *litta selfie* generates close to 200 hits in public Instagram profiles, as well as more than 1,000 Google hits. Several examples have also been found in a large text corpus based on Norwegian web-texts (Fløgstad & Eiesland 2019). Selfies are probably one of the most striking cases of self-staging, where the use of this construction risks the possible danger of negative evaluations through downplaying or hedging. In addition, the depiction of activities such as hiking or other social events calls for hedging in the sense that what one actually does on these occasions is to expose oneself, and the phrase *litta tur* ('small-$_{\text{FEM}}$ hike-$_{\text{MASC}}$') is easily traceable across several social media platforms.

The source of the construction has generated some debate, and it is said to have its origins among some popular radio show hosts at the national broadcasting corporation, NRK. There is good reason to believe that the popularity increased when Noora, one of the characters in an immensely popular television show, SKAM, used the *litta tur* phrase. One of the most prominent examples of her use of the phrase is during a romantic encounter, where she is vulnerable and at risk of getting hurt (Opsahl 2017).

The choice of a conspicuous form, such as the traditional feminine in a system where feminine forms have "disappeared," may be an answer to the need for expressing, projecting,

and negotiating particular personae and identities in everyday interaction; this everyday interaction includes social media platforms and a wide range of semiotic resources.

3. General Discussion and Concluding Remarks.

Hinskens (2014:136) distinguishes two types of hyperdialectism. Type 1 is when L1 speakers introduce features intentionally in order to dissociate from speakers of a (closely) related variety. The second type is a result of L2 speakers who unintentionally overgeneralize morphologically conditioned or lexicalized rules. At first glance, both types seem applicable to the variation within the Norwegian gender system as presented above. The first type could be the choice of adhering to a two-gender system to achieve a deliberate dissociation from, for example, a radical, rural, or other indexical meaning associated with—for instance—the feminine gender. The second type may be relevant for the contact scenarios involving L2 speakers of Norwegian. Taking the sociolinguistic perspective outlined in the introduction seriously, however, means that it is hard to draw a strict line between intentional and unintentional language use:

> Any given construction of identity may be in part deliberate and intentional, in part habitual and hence often less than fully conscious, in part an outcome of interactional negotiation and contestation, in part an outcome of others' perceptions and representations, and in part an effect of larger ideological processes and material structures that may become relevant to interaction. (Bucholtz & Hall 2005:606)

Many of the features used in the young urban varieties as reflected in the UPUS data, as well as features characteristic of varieties emerging from the language shift in northern Norway, resemble learner language. That does not necessarily mean that it *is* learner language, but

something worth being interpreted along the same pattern as Hinskens' type 1 hyperdialectism, i.e. "features speakers introduce intentionally in order to dissociate from speakers of a (closely) related variety." This interpretation underscores another theoretical point, and that is the importance of the agency of speakers. The speakers themselves do the work of indexicality and enregisterment from within specific socio-historical matrices.

It is nevertheless interesting to reflect on how the increased use of feminine gender marking will affect the input situation for new speakers of Norwegian. The chance of a re-instatement of a three-gender system is not very likely, since the cases of novel use of feminine gender marking are hard to connect to systematic patterns of agreement. The existence and even reiteration of morphological material previously associated with gender marking is still possible through linguistic exaptation. Several studies have shown that the feminine gender is so-called vulnerable and subject to changes, and even the neuter gender has been under pressure in certain contexts, for instance those involving bilingual speakers. It is not so much a qualitative difference as that of a quantitative difference among speakers (Cornips & Gregersen 2017), and even in long-term contact scenarios, such as in the north of Norway, the gender system as a whole is not dissolving (Sollid et al. 2014). One exception to the stability of the gender category is mentioned in the literature, and that is the case of American-Norwegian, where the gender system seems to be affected by attrition, according to Lohndal and Westergaard (2016). Even in this scenario, however, it is relevant to point to the relationship between gender and social meaning. Entire linguistic systems may be indexically tied to identity categories. The non-systematic agreement patterns characteristic of the American-Norwegian variety may in fact be one of the important features indexing the very existence of such an identity category.

Experimental studies have shown that the comprehension of gender as grammatically meaningful is affected before the production. Even though speakers produce three genders,

they do not use these cues to anticipate or predict upcoming linguistic material (Lundquist et al. 2016), and the extent to which they do anticipate the upcoming material is partly dependent on the language or dialect mode of the test situation (Lundquist & Vangsnes 2018). Any attempt to isolate the indexical value of a certain gender feature may benefit from a combination of psycholinguistic experimental methods and socio-ethnographic methods, highlighting the local socio-historical context, in future research.

The social meanings associated with grammatical gender presented above were not intended to be exhaustive, but rather suggestive of the different indexical meanings created through identity construction involving—among other linguistic resources—grammatical gender. Each of these deserves closer inspection. It would probably be a semiotic fallacy to claim that everything in language at any given point is always meaningful (Lass 1990:100), but variation *may* be socially indexical. Seen through a sociolinguistic lens, and recognizing the role of the agency of speakers, it is clear that grammatical gender cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the interactional context at a micro level, and—at a macro level—the socio-historic characteristics of, for instance, regions undergoing massive language contact. Whether one agrees with this claim or not, there is little doubt that sociolinguistic perspectives add more color to the overall picture of the mysteries of grammatical gender in Germanic.

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