Object Shift (OS) has been studied extensively across the Scandinavian languages (Holmberg 1986, 1999, Vikner 2006). Traditionally, OS is assumed to apply to all weak pronominal objects in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish. However, based on written corpora, Andréasson (2008, 2009, 2010) shows that while OS is obligatory with weak pronominal objects in Danish, these elements may marginally remain in situ in Swedish (cf. also Josefsson 2010 for similar Swedish results based on grammaticality judgments). In an elicited production study, Anderssen et al. (2012) find that Norwegian speakers consistently shift such objects, (1). Moreover, Andréasson also shows that not all weak pronominal objects behave the same way. While pronouns with nominal referents typically undergo OS, weak pronoun det ‘it’ referring to a clause or VP may remain in situ in Swedish. In contrast, in Danish also this latter type usually shifts. Anderssen & Bentzen (2012) argue that det with non-individuated (clausal/VP/type DP) referents generally remains in situ in Norwegian, (2).

In this study, we investigate OS in spontaneous speech of adults in large Danish, Norwegian and Swedish child language corpora (Plunkett 1985, 1986; Simonsen 1990, Anderssen 2006; and Plunkett & Strömqvist 1992, Strömqvist et al. 1993, respectively).

Our corpus data display both similarities and differences with the patterns reported above. Concerning non-contrastive weak pronominal objects with a nominal referent, our data show a similar pattern to that of previous studies. In Danish and Norwegian, these objects occur in a shifted position 80-90%, while in Swedish the majority of such objects remain in situ (57%). With respect to det ‘it’ with a non-individuated referent, our spoken data are quite different from those reported in Andréasson. While she found that these elements relatively frequently undergo OS in Swedish, we see a strong tendency for non-individuated det to remain unshifted (found in shifted position less than 3% in both Swedish and Norwegian). Moreover, for Danish, Andréasson reports that non-individuated det practically never remains in situ, while in our Danish data, such elements remain in situ as much as 86% of the time.

Despite these discrepancies, our investigation confirms the picture regarding OS that has emerged in recent years (Andréasson 2008, 2009, 2010, Mikkelsen 2010, Josefsson 2010, Anderssen & Bentzen 2012), namely that OS is not a uniform phenomenon. There is much variation both depending on type of pronoun (and its referent), and across the Mainland Scandinavian languages. To account for some of the variation, Andréasson links OS to accessibility and cognitive status of the pronominal object. Similarly, Anderssen & Bentzen argue that Norwegian OS is clause-internal topicalization of familiar topical objects with an individuated referent, while this position is generally unavailable to pronouns with a non-individuated referent. Since OS clearly depends on information structure, the discrepancies between our data and those of Andréasson may be due to the different types of corpora studied (spoken vs. written discourse).

Against this backdrop, we investigate the various factors influencing the position of pronominal objects across spoken Danish, Norwegian and Swedish.
Examples:

(1) A: Så du huset\textsubscript{NEUT}?  
   saw you house.the
B: Ja, jeg likte det\textsubscript{NEUT} ikke.  
   yes I liked it not
A: ‘Did you see the house?’
B: ‘Yes, I didn’t like it.’

(2) A: Spiste du noe frukt?  
   ate you any fruit\textsubscript{MASC}
B: Nei, jeg gjorde \text{*det\textsubscript{VP}} ikke \text{det\textsubscript{VP}}.  
   no I did it\textsubscript{NEUT} not it\textsubscript{NEUT}
A: ‘Did you eat any fruit?’
B: ‘No, I didn’t.’  
   \text{(det = ‘eat any fruit’)}

References


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