The marked case: A case study in morphological change

During the Late Middle Ages, the mainland Scandinavian languages underwent inflectional simplification. Some Swedish and Norwegian dialects preserved remnants of a dative case, especially in pronouns, but mainly the 4-case system disappeared. However, this development was not a straight-forward road to perdition, and this paper looks at a) examples where the genitive was replaced by the dative as an intermediate stage, and b) how written sources can throw light on this process.

The prepositions *til* and *millum* governed the genitive in Old Norse (as still in Modern Icelandic), yet in the Late Middle Ages they are increasingly found with dative complements, as in (1) below, both from the 1490s.

(1a) mellom he ne oc hemar twem systrom (DN I no. 985)
    ‘between her and her two sisters’
(1b) [...] som han gaff til domkirkione (Brinchmann and Agerholt 1926: 114)
    ‘which he gave to the cathedral’

I suggest that this be due to the fact that genitive disappeared earlier than dative as a lexical case. Also, nominative and accusative merged before dative was lost. This development left dative as the only option if case were to be marked on the noun at all; dative was the only *marked* case at this intermediate stage, and survived as such in archaic dialects. Norde (2001: 257f) similarly argues that «a preposition could sometimes take complements of whatever case that still happened to be marked inflectionally».

A further problem is how the sources can illuminate this process. Are we dealing with ink-horn forms trying to follow an older tradition, or do the dative forms reflect change in the spoken language? Charters, the only texts written in Norwegian during this time, have many fixed phrases which may preserve older linguistic stages, and sometimes also hypercorrect dative forms, archaisms in an attempt to make the language look «older» or «more dignified». (2) below should probably be explained as a hypercorrect form (as indicated also by *omboto* < *umboði*), rather than Indrebø’s claim (2001: 344f) that the ending -om (dat.sg.masc. or dat.pl.) spread to other slots in the paradigm (here: dat.sg.neut.) before it eventually disappeared.

(2) y fvlvm omboto (DN VIII no. 738)
    ‘with full authorisation’

The written testimonies must thus be carefully examined before any conclusions regarding the development of the case system may be drawn, showing once more how dependent historical linguistics are on solid philological groundwork.

References

DN = *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*. 1847–. Christiania/Oslo.