The neuter singular as a gender resolution form: the differing cases of Norwegian (Nynorsk) and German standardization

In many Germanic languages a complex noun phrase consisting of conjuncts referring to humans of different sex may be anaphorically taken up by neuter forms. Neuter plural agreement, found as early as in Gothic, is covered by Askedal (1973). Neuter singular agreement, however, albeit not attested in the oldest documents, has not received the same treatment. But valid instances of neuter singular agreement can be found in Middle High German and (later) Old Norse. This type of "gender resolution" (see Corbett 2006, 243-253) is illustrated by examples (1), (2) from Norwegian, and (3) from 18th/19th century German.

However, this construction in usually not part of the Germanic standard languages (to the possible exception of Icelandic). In the case of Norwegian this is especially interesting since Ivar Aasen himself evidently propagated the form for New Norwegian (they are not found in Bokmål), although it arguably was rare and archaic even at his time. This is shown by the fact that these forms do not appear in the dialect samples in Prøver af Landsmaalet i Norge, but only in his own normalized texts. Examples (1) and (2) are both taken from Aasen's normative grammar and dictionary of New Norwegian. We deduce from Beito (1970, 247) that gender resolution with the neuter singular is extinct in modern Norwegian dialects, but that it probably existed up to the 20th century. In Norwegian dialects, the construction seems to have been most frequent in reciprocal constructions. The loss of a distinction between dual-like and plural reciprocal pronouns (einannan/kvarannan vs. kvarandre) and gender agreement there all together may have led to the loss of this particular form of gender resolution in Norwegian.

In the case of German, quite a different development has taken place. Up until the early 19th century, many examples of the construction can be found. As illustrated by example (3) it was even used by writers such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), whose work was of great influence for 19th century German. The construction is still found in many present-day German dialects, as illustrated by example (4) from Hessian. Yet, despite its ubiquitous dialectal appearance this construction did not find its way into Standard German. There are explicit stigmatizations (cf. Davies and Langer 2006) of this construction by 18th century grammarians such as Adelung (1796, 1429), according to whom it be restricted to the language of the "common life" [im gemeinen Leben], which might explain this state of affairs.

Thus, we find the intriguing situation that the same construction is held as "good", but disappearing in the spoken varieties nevertheless, in Norwegian, whereas it is held as "bad", but thriving in spoken registers all the same, in the case of German. In our paper we will argue, however, that this seemingly puzzling situation can be explained by taking into account the different standardization histories of the two languages compared. Whereas in the case of Norwegian the 19th century ideal of a standard language based on the language spoken by the people led to the standardization of this construction by Aasen (1864, 269-270), the German 18th century grammarians, who based their work on the Latin (and French) grammatical tradition, gave no room to this construction. Instead, the generic masculine form, known from Latin (and French), was established.

Examples

(1) anten baade tvau elder eitt av deim
   either both two.pl.n or one.sg.n of them
   'either both two or one of them' (Aasen 1864, 270)

(2) dei læja kvart aat annat
   they laugh each.sg.nat other.sg.n
   'they laugh at each other' (Aasen, Norsk Ordbog)
(3) Beide junge Personen waren verlegen,
eins wie das andere
‘both young persons were embarrassed, one as the other’ (Goethe, Tag- und Jahreshefte)

(4) Isch kenn koans, des noch nie kronk woar
‘I don’t know anybody who hasn’t been sick’ (Hessian German, example from SyHD)

References