Co-variation without parameters: on the loss of argumental simplex reflexives

There is a well known divide within the Scandinavian languages between those that allow long distance anaphors in subordinate complement clauses and those that do not: long-distance anaphors are found in Icelandic and Faroese (and marginally in more archaic dialects in Trøndelag), and has been claimed to co-vary with e.g. V-to-I movement (see Holmberg and Platzack 1995). Even though long distance anaphors are not present in the other Mainland Scandinavian languages, they are reported to have other types of non-locally bound reflexives, that are either innovations, e.g. unbound generic reflexive possessors (see Lødrup 2007) or old common types, like mid-distance binding (i.e. binding into an infinitival clause by the main clause subject). This paper is about mid distance binding, and presents new evidence for the ongoing loss of certain types of mid-distance binding in Sweden and Norway, and the lack of any similar change in Icelandic and Danish. In the talk I draw new data from the Nordic Syntax Database (Lindstad et al. 2009), the Korp corpus (from Språkbanken), the Oslo corpus (from Tekstlab), Korpus.dk. This change has not been observed before, and would probably have passed unnoticed if we did not have tools like the Nordic Syntax Database and very large corpora like Korp available. I will argue that a radical reanalysis of simplex pronominal anaphors as non-arguments, or Voice markers, has taken place during the last 150-100 years in Swedish, and is taking place in Norway today. This change is linked to other structural properties of the languages in question, but not in a straightforward parametric fashion.

Despite the fact that sentences of the type in (1) have been claimed to be part of the standard Swedish grammar (see e.g. Teleman et al. 1999, 2), the majority of the informants in Sweden rejected it (only around 20 percent accepted it):

(1) Hon, bad mig hjälpa sig.

'She asked me to help her.'

Among the Norwegian informants, the sentence (1) was accepted to a higher degree than in Sweden, though mainly older informants accepted it: the mean score for the older speakers was 3.68, and the mean score for the younger speakers was 2.45 (where max score was 5), making it one of the test sentences in the whole survey that had largest difference between younger and older speakers. Results from corpus searches also show that mid-distance reflexives of the type (1) are no longer a part of the Swedish grammar. A search for the string BE 'ask' (in any form), followed by 1-4 words of any kind, followed by an active infinitival verb and a simplex reflexive (sig) gives no relevant hits in the GP, Bloggmix and SWEWAC corpus (in total 778 million words). The same search in the corpus containing older Swedish literature (from around 1850-1930) and the Strindberg korpus (containing texts from late 19th and early 20th century, with a total 10 million words) gives at least 20 relevant hits. In the much smaller Norwegian Oslo korpus, one or two examples of the same type as (1) can be found, while they are fairly easy to find in the Danish Korpus.dk, though not quite as frequent as in the corpus of older Swedish literature/Strindberg (the difference may be due to genre though). The results from the Swedish corpus searches clearly show that something has changed in Swedish within the last 100 years, and the results from the Norwegian dialect survey clearly show that something is changing within Norwegian today. As far as I am aware, no change of this kind has taken place or is taking place in Danish or Icelandic. The two main questions I address in this paper are (I) exactly what is it that has changed/is changing in Swedish and Norwegian, and (II) why are Swedish and Norwegian changing, while Icelandic and Danish are not.

I will first and foremost argue that is is not the “binding domain” that has changed in Swedish and Norwegian, as mid-distance binding is still licit in both Norwegian and Swedish
(for close to all speakers) as long as the anaphor is not a simplex reflexive directly following a verb, as can be seen in the fact that reflexive possessors can be mid-distance bound, as well as simplex reflexives in a PP, as shown in (2) ((2-a) was included in Swedish part of the ScanDiaSyn-survey, and was accepted by around 80% of the informants.):

(2)  

   a. Hon _i_ bad mig passa sin _i_ katt.  
      she asked me watch RFLX.Poss cat  
      ‘She asked me to look after her cat.’  
   b. Hon _i_ bad mig PRO _j_ stanna hos sig _i_ / henne _i_ k _ö_ over natten.  
      she asked me PRO stay at RFLX/her over night.DEF  
      ‘She asked me to stay with her overnight.’

I will argue that anaphors, in the particular context V REFL, have been fully reanalyzed as Voice-elements in most variants of Swedish, while this reanalysis is still taking place in Norway. As Voice-elements, these reflexives can clearly not be “non-locally bound”. In Danish and Icelandic, anaphors still have a clear argumental status. I will further argue that mid-distance binding in general comes for free (as long as the reflexive does not contain an adjectival like element like self, which needs a strict local binder), based on the argument that non-local anaphors simply are to infrequent, even in the older Swedish sources: a generous approximation, based on targeted searches, is that around 0.5 % of the simplex reflexives in the Strindberg corpus are non-locally bound, and in present day Swedish it is much lower (possibly around 0.001%, including the mid-distance possessives of the type illustrated in (2-a)). The reanalysis must have taken place as the contexts where only simplex reflexives can appear, or are preferred, have increased. I will in the talk look at how the following constructions differ quantitatively or qualitatively among the Scandinavian languages, and diachronically within Swedish: (I) Presubject reflexives in comparison to regular long-object shift, i.e. Därefter tvättade sig mannen ordentligt ‘thereafter he carefully’ vs. *Därefter tvättade henne mannen ordentligt ‘thereafter the man washed her’, (II) Reflexive vs. non-reflexive construals with (pseudo-) ECM-verbs, i.e. Iblånd tror jag mig vara bättre än vad jag faktiskt är ‘Sometimes I believe myself to be better than I really am’ compared to %Iblånd tror hon mig vara bättre än vad jag faktiskt är ‘sometimes she believes me to be better...’, (III) “Transitive” existential constructions: Det satte sig en man på stolen lit. ‘There sat down a man on the chair’ compared to ??Det hjälpte mig en man över vägen lit. ‘there helped me a man across the road’, (IV) reflexive vs. non-reflexive elements preceding verb particles, and (V) reflexive elements in complex verb particles. In all these constructions, it is obvious that the reflexive elements have very particular syntactic properties, compared to regular arguments (DP’s or pronouns), in present day Swedish, but not in older Swedish (say 150-100 years ago) and Danish.

I will emphasize that the chance of this type of change taking place is clearly conditioned by other properties within the language. For example, a reanalysis of anaphoric pronouns to non-arguments/Voice markers is less likely to take place if a language has a rich case system or if it has long-distance binding linked to subjunctive marking: the case marking brings the reflexives in to the same paradigm as the rest of the nouns/pronouns, thus making reanalysis less plausible, and the subjunctive-conditioned long-distance binding strengthens the association between (argumental, non-locally bound) first and second person object pronouns and reflexive pronouns (i.e., they both find their antecedent in a speech act participant, directly or indirectly). It is possible that even factors like particle placement and available sizes of infinitival complements matter. Most importantly though, mid-distance binding in the V REFL-context can not be said to be “parametrically” tied to above mentioned properties, though they may co-vary with these properties for other reasons. Selected references: