

# How do words change inflection class? Diachronic evidence from Norwegian

Hans-Olav Enger

*Department of Linguistic and Scandinavian Studies, University of Oslo, P.O. Box 1102, Blindern, NO-0315 Oslo, Norway*

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## Abstract

In cases of diachronic change, do lexemes shift inflection class gradually or in one leap? Evidence is presented from Norwegian verbs and nouns. These seem to behave somewhat differently: Verbs shift more gradually, nouns more abruptly. An alternative account for the verbs, presented by Kusters [Kusters, W., 2003. *Linguistic Complexity: The Influence of Social Change* (LOT 77). LOT, Leiden], arguing that verbs shift class in one leap, is argued to be inadequate. The difference between verbs and nouns in Norwegian is unexpected, given Rhodes's [Rhodes, R., 1987. *Paradigms large and small*. In: Aske, J. (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Thirteenth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics society*, vol. 13, pp. 223–234] claim that noun inflection is more ‘quirky’ than is verb inflection. Perhaps the difference has to do with the observation that, in Norwegian, the “basic form” of the verb is more inflectionally informative than that of the noun. It is shown that the diachronic changes in Norwegian do not endanger the No Blur Principle [Carstairs-McCarthy, A., 1994. *Inflection class, gender and the principle of contrast*. *Language* 70, 737–788].

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## 1. Introduction

How do lexemes change inflection class diachronically? That is the main issue in this paper. A priori, two extreme hypotheses are conceivable:

- (A) When words change their inflection class, they do so abruptly, in one leap.
- (B) When words change their inflection class, they do so gradually, in small steps.

From the theoretical point of view, (A) may be more elegant and more appealing than (B), but linguistics is not only about theoretical elegance or “conceptual economy”; so this paper presents empirical evidence from

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*E-mail address:* [h.o.enger@iln.uio.no](mailto:h.o.enger@iln.uio.no)

Norwegian. The main question above may be several questions rather than one, in that it can be split up in at least three different ways:

- (i) Do all the members of the paradigm of a single lexeme change simultaneously? (For example, do both the present and the past forms of a verb shift conjugation at the same time?)
- (ii) Do the lexemes go directly from, say, the most marked to the most unmarked class, or do they stop in-between?
- (iii) Do all lexemes in a given inflection class change simultaneously, or do they change piecemeal?

Since (ii) raises the question of the destination of inflection class change, it raises issues that go well beyond A and B. We shall therefore pay less attention to this question than to question no. (i). Question (iii) will not be addressed below; for reasons of space.

The focus of the paper is not on sociolinguistics. In the usage in the language community, changes are not abrupt, and presumably, no adherent of hypothesis A would claim so, either.

Questions (i) and (ii) both bear on the issue of abrupt vs. gradual change, or hypothesis A vs. B, but it is important to note that they are logically independent, at least in part, and that is why I have wanted to include them both. A priori, it is conceivable that all the word-forms of a particular lexeme could change at the same time, but not directly from the most marked to the most unmarked class – but to some class in-between. Conversely, it is a priori possible that some, but not all, word-forms of a lexeme should change directly from the most marked to the most unmarked inflection class.

Yet the independence is not complete, for a positive answer to question (ii) presupposes a positive answer to question (i): If lexemes go directly from the most marked to the most unmarked class, it must be the case that all members of the paradigm change simultaneously. Hypothesis A excludes the rise of mixed paradigms not yet attested in the system. On the other hand, if question (i) is answered in the negative, this would entail, at least as a possibility, the development of a mixed paradigm by changing some member of the paradigm on the basis of another lexeme and at the same time retaining some other member in the old form.

In this paper, we mainly look at Norwegian evidence. We shall look at verbs (Section 2) and nouns (Section 3). These are the major word-classes in Norwegian that are relevant for our question and reasonably well-documented. Moreover, they differ in an interesting way. As far as question (i) is concerned, hypothesis B captures the facts on Norwegian verbs better than does A (Section 2). By contrast, Norwegian nouns behave more in accordance with hypothesis A (Section 3). In other words, verbs show ‘messy’, gradual changes and (therefore?) much mixed inflection, synchronically, while nouns show clean, abrupt changes and (therefore?) a rather tidy structure, synchronically.

In Section 4, we consider whether the difference between nouns and verbs in Norwegian should be given a cross-linguistic explanation (for example, following suggestions by Rhodes (1987)). I suggest that it should not; at least, we shall have to take some language-specific factors into account. In Section 5, we look at an alternative account of changes of inflection class in Norwegian verbs, an account that basically advocates hypothesis A. I suggest that this account cannot be upheld. In Section 6, the paper is summarised.

## 2. Norwegian verb inflection

### 2.1. Synchrony: the system

By way of background, we first consider some basic facts of Norwegian grammar. For expository reasons, we cannot dwell on all the niceties of the different Norwegian dialects and all the possible inflection classes. Rather, our aim is to describe the main picture, and we shall have to simplify considerably in what follows. Table 1 presents the core members of the inflectional paradigm of the verb in the dialect of Grenland, as described by Endresen (1990, 1992), and a couple of members of each major class. The transcription used in this paper is ‘broad’ and phonological. It does not include all fine-grained phonetically relevant information; only what I take to be relevant to morphology. The Grenland dialect is chosen for expository purposes. Some dialectal differences will be brought in later, as will one minor class.

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