

Urban Vernacular Processes and Contact in Early Modern Icelandic (1500-1800): The Loss of the Pronominal Dual

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We investigate the loss of the pronominal dual in Early Modern Icelandic. According to Guðmundsson (1972), the dual was lost in speakers born shortly after 1600, spreading outward from the South. Haugen (1975) criticized Guðmundsson for ignoring sociohistorical dimensions, maintaining that this feature was lost due to intense Danish contact during this period. This view finds additional support in the fact that even ‘mild’ contact may influence grammatical aspects (Thomason 2001, Drinka 2017). It is thus hardly a coincidence that South Iceland, with its Latin school (1552-1782) based in the bishopric Skálholt, was also among the largest population centres on the island. From the perspective of urban vernacular processes, we contrast the loss of the pronominal dual with a phonological change involving the merger of /i, y/, taking place at roughly the same time but which is claimed to have originated in the North (Gunnlaugsson 1994).

Partly in response to Haugen (1975), we apply a combination of different methods to explore sociohistorical factors in the loss the dual in Icelandic. We present a statistical analysis of Guðmundsson’s (1972) data (N=6,377) as well as the results of an ongoing corpus-based study: a) dual vs. plural reference of undersigned letter writers in early modern charters (approx. 4 million words); b) the use of the dual in private correspondences of Árni Magnússon (1663-1730, approx. 300,000 words). We also discuss early attestations of the dual in plural contexts in Icelandic charters, some of which have been dismissed as scribal errors. If diffusion of innovations is subsumed under the heading of supralocalisation, both changes above can be viewed as levelling. However, the loss of the dual also qualifies as (targeted?) change operating on a supraregional level, where the pronominal system was (re)modelled after Danish. This shift resulted, moreover, in the systematic adoption/use of honorific forms.

Examples

- (1) Það giorvm við asmvndur klemenzson. ion gislason. gvnlagvvr jonson. Einar Olafzson
that do wedu A. Klemenzson J. Gíslason G. Jónsson E. Ólafsson
godum monnum kvnigt með þessv vorv opnv brefi. at vier ... (DI 7: 552; anno 1501)
good men known with this ourpl open letter that wepl
‘We[dual form], A. Klemenzson, J. Gíslason, G. Jónsson and E. Ólafsson, make known
with this open letter of ours[plural form] that we[plural form] ...’

(2) EARLY MODIC.

SINGULAR

DUAL

PLURAL/HONORIFIC MODIC.

PLURAL

NOMINATIVE eg ‘I’, þú ‘you₁’ við ‘we₂’, þið ‘you₂’ vér ‘we_{≥3}’, þér ‘your_{≥3}’ við ‘we_{≥2}’,
þið ‘you_{≥2}’

ACCUSATIVE mig, þig okkur, ykkur oss, yður okkur, ykkur

DATIVE mér, þér okkur, ykkur oss, yður okkur, ykkur

GENITIVE mín, þín okkar, ykkar vor, yðar okkar, ykkar

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