

Subject-Verb Agreement in English Learner Texts: A Pseudo-Longitudinal Perspective

Work in Progress

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This study investigates the use of subject-verb agreement in argumentative texts written by three different groups of Norwegian learners of English: pupils in Years 10 and 11 (material from the TRAWL corpus, cf. Dirdal et al 2022), and first-year university students of English (material from the International Corpus of Learner English, cf. Granger et al 2009).

The study aims to identify possible differences in the frequency and form of concord mistakes made by the writers in each subcorpus. Norwegian and English are typologically different with regard to the presence or absence of subject-verb agreement (Quirk et al 1985: 755; Faarlund et al 1997: 468), and previous research has shown that Norwegian learners struggle comparatively more with choosing the correct verb form in clauses where the subject is realized by a full noun phrase instead of a pronoun and in clauses where the verb-governing element is more distant from the verb (Garshol 2019; Killie 2019). The same applies in clauses where the verb has affixal marking instead of suppletive marking (Garshol 2019). Garshol's and Killie's studies were carried out on texts produced by pre-tertiary learners only, however, and the present study aims to expand the perspective to include learners in tertiary education as well. The pseudo-longitudinal design of the present study also allows for some tentative conclusions regarding probable developmental trajectories in the acquisition of concord competence among Norwegian learners of English.

The study has been guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the frequency and form of concord mistakes in argumentative texts written by Norwegian learners of English in pre-tertiary (Years 10 and 11) and tertiary education?
2. Can any potential developmental trajectories be identified in the pseudo-longitudinal data?

To answer these questions, all finite verb phrases in the texts (excluding those containing modals) were coded for presence or absence of concord mistakes, as well as the form of the verb and the subject in cases of such mistakes, in a coding scheme inspired by Garshol (2019) and Killie (2019). Preliminary results indicate that there is a lot of individual variation within

each subcorpus, but the following trends can be observed: The frequency of concord mistakes seems to decrease with increased age/proficiency, and the majority of concord mistakes occur with affixal inflections. In Years 10 and 11 the subjects are relatively evenly distributed between those realized by subjects and those realized by noun phrases, while in the ICLE material the majority of mistakes occur with noun phrases functioning as subjects. Also, in the vast majority of cases, distance between the verb and the verb-governing element is minimal. Finally, and perhaps surprisingly, an increasing proportion of concord mistakes involve relative pronouns functioning as subjects, i.e. the percentage of such cases is higher in the ICLE material than in Year 11, and higher in Year 11 than in Year 10.

References

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