



Madeline Halmøy: *The Norwegian Nominal System. A Neo-Saussurean Perspective*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2016. 322 pp.

Much has been written about Norwegian noun phrases, or those of the Scandinavian languages in general, including several book-length treatments within different theoretical models (Lødrup 1989, Delsing 1993, Börjars 1998, Julien 2005), still the book under review here offers a truly original perspective on the topic. The book is a slightly revised version of the author's PhD thesis from University of Tromsø, and according to the author, the book 'presents a unified, economic account of the intricate relationship between form, meaning and interpretation in the Norwegian Nominal System, in its own right and on its own terms.' (p. 1) The approach taken is described as 'Post-chomskyan Bouchardian Neo-Saussurean' (p. 3).

The author argues that applying Occam's razor to the choice of theoretical framework for analysing language leads directly to the approach taken by Ferdinand de Saussure, in particular as developed for modern analysis by Bouchard (2013) (and a number of earlier publications referenced in the book). The well-known fact that a language is viewed as a system of arbitrary signs which combine form and meaning is of course central, but of particular relevance is the distinction between invariant meaning and contextual interpretation.

The data on which the analysis is based are generally taken from *Bokmål*, though the data are contrasted at various points with English, French, Danish and Swedish. The data are said to come mostly from contemporary Norwegian literature, newspapers, the internet and 'spontaneous speech' (p. 35). A list of excerpted literary works is provided, but the source of an individual example is only provided when it has been taken from the linguistic literature.

In Chapter 2, the author sets out the theoretical approach and in doing so explains the relevance of the Saussurean distinctions that we are all familiar with to modern syntactic analysis in general and their role in Bouchard's approach and her own analysis in particular. Signs do not exist in isolation; in the system of signs they have paradigmatic relations to other signs, and in use they have syntagmatic relations to the signs around them. It is emphasised in this book that the semantic value of a sign is derived from both aspects. The fact that Saussurean signs are arbitrary is generally part of any introductory linguistics course, but in a discussion of 'radical arbitrariness', the author points out that each part of the sign is also arbitrary. 'There are no (a priori shaped) ideas or concepts waiting to be coupled with a sound, and there are no sounds waiting

to be coupled with ideas.’ (p. 7) With reference to Bouchard’s work, the nature of radical arbitrariness is linked to the specifics of human biology.

The role of syntax in de Saussure’s work is argued to have been fundamentally misunderstood and underestimated in most accounts. The combination of words into phrases and sentences are subject to motivated compositionality, but it is argued that the linearity of human language introduces a degree of arbitrariness into syntax; a French example illustrates: *cent cinq* ‘(one) hundred and five’ versus *cinq cent* ‘five hundred’ (p. 13). However, though de Saussure did take combinations of words into account, he did not offer anything detailed enough to be applicable to a modern study of syntactic phenomena, and for this the author relies on Bouchard’s developments. In Bouchard’s approach, there is a distinction between U(nitary)-signs — words — and C(ombinatorial)-signs — phrases —, but crucially they are both signs with two facets; *signifiant* and *signifié*. However, C-signs differ from U-signs in that they are combined, which means that they are subject to linearity. There are two direct ways of combining *signifiants*; one can follow the other, or one can be superimposed on the other, as when prosody, which is a *signifiant* in itself, is superimposed on a word. All combinations of signs are assumed to be instances of predication in its broadest sense, that is when two signs are combined ‘one tells something, or represents some information, about the other.’ (p. 16) Predication is then considered a *signifié*, in fact the only universal *signifié*.

The modern development of the Saussurean approach and its relation to biological properties of humans as well as the social role of language is captured in the definition of the scope of the book as ‘a *synchronic* study of the *signifiés* and *signifiants* of the U- and C-signs in the Norwegian Nominal System as they are stored in the brains of individual speakers through the conventions of the community.’¹ (p. 26) Chapter 2 also contains a description of the methodology and the dataset used, as well as comparisons of the neo-Saussurean approach and some other current theoretical models.

In Chapter 3, the properties of Norwegian nouns and adjectives are considered in some detail, and it is here that the radical approach to form–function relations is introduced. The author identifies eight ‘abstract forms’ for nouns and six for adjectives. The noun forms are three ‘bare noun’ forms, one for each gender, and similarly three ‘definite singular forms’. However, because of syncretism in the plural endings, only two plural forms are recognised: ‘indefinite

1. In this quote, ‘uni-’ is used rather than ‘U-’, but since the latter is used throughout the book, I assume this is a typo.

plural’ and ‘definite plural’, which means that these forms are neutral with respect to gender. There are three positive adjectival forms; two for indefinite singular that differ in gender and one ending in *-e*. The form ending in *-e* can occur with plural indefinites and with definite nouns of either number, and hence it is assigned the feature ‘general number’, a feature I will return to shortly. One striking way in which this approach differs from traditional approaches is then that the feature distinction ‘weak’ vs ‘strong’, roughly corresponding to definite and indefinite, plays no role. There is further one comparative form and two superlative forms. The two superlative forms, *-est* and *-este*, are traditionally characterised by ‘strong’ and ‘weak’, respectively, but since this feature is not used for the positive form, it is also not employed for superlatives, instead *-est* is assigned only the feature ‘superlative’, whereas *-este* has the features ‘superlative.general number’. The avoidance of polysemy is a striking property of the feature system assumed; in Halmøy’s neo-Saussurean approach, there are no polysemous forms. The fourteen forms can then be summed up as in Table 1 (49 & 119).²

| Nouns | | Adjectives | |
|--------------------------|----------|----------------------|-----------------|
| form | features | form | features |
| <i>elg</i> ‘elk’ | M.GN | <i>grov</i> ‘coarse’ | POS.CG.SG.INDEF |
| <i>kolle</i> ‘(elk) cow’ | F.GN | <i>grovt</i> | POS.N.SG.INDEF |
| <i>dyr</i> ‘animal’ | N.GN | <i>grove</i> | POS.GN |
| <i>elgen</i> | M.SG.DEF | <i>grovere</i> | COMP.GN |
| <i>kolla</i> | F.SG.DEF | <i>grovest</i> | SUP |
| <i>dyret</i> | N.SG.DEF | <i>groveste</i> | SUP.GN |
| <i>elger</i> | PL.INDEF | | |
| <i>elgene</i> | PL.DEF | | |

Table 1: Form and features for nouns and adjectives

One of the most striking departures from standard assumptions relates to bare nouns, where Halmøy includes both count and non-count nouns (contrary to Borthen 2003, who excludes non-count nouns in her analysis of bare nouns). A property of these nouns is that they can occur in argument positions without a determiner, most comfortably as objects, but also in other functions. Halmøy argues that the absence of definiteness marking does not make these nouns indefinite, instead they are analysed by her as unmarked for definiteness. With

2. The following abbreviations are used here f(eminine), m(asculine), n(euter), cg(common gender), sg(singular), pl(ural) , gn(general number), def(inite), indef(inite), pos(itive), comp(arative), sup(erlative).

respect to number, the author refers to Bouchard (2002), who identifies a set of differences between the English and the French nominal systems and accounts for these by assuming that number is semantically encoded on the determiner in French, but on the noun in English. Halmøy shows that Norwegian sides with French for some of these properties, but behaves like English with respect to others. In order to account for this distribution she introduces a ‘general number’ feature – where ‘general number’ is to be understood as ‘numerable’ – and argues that this feature accounts for the behaviour of the Norwegian bare nouns. Her example in (1a) shows that bare nouns can be incompatible with a singular interpretation, and with respect to (1b) she argues that the bare noun is compatible with a plural interpretation, but that the truth conditions of this sentence could also be satisfied by a single newspaper (pp. 95–97).

(1) a. Jeg har sett **elg** tusenvis av ganger.
 I have seen elk.M.GN thousands of times
 ‘I have seen elks thousands of times.’

b. Her er det **avis** nedi postkass-en fra før.
 her is Dem.N.SG newspaper.F.GN down.in mailbox-DEF from before
 ‘Here, there is a newspaper in the mailbox already.’

Norwegian plural nouns which are not marked as definite are, unlike the bare singular nouns, assumed to be truly indefinite, that is non-identifiable. The behaviour of Norwegian indefinite plurals is contrasted with that of English plural nouns, which are assumed to be neutral with respect to definiteness. Halmøy shows that Norwegian indefinite plural nouns occur with (weak) indefinite and generic reference, but cannot be used for kind-reference. This contrasts with English; compare (2a), which is fine as kind-reference, and (2b), which is infelicitous in the kind-reading (pp. 66–68). This, she claims, has been predicted in the literature to be impossible. For a kind-reading, a definite form is used as in (2c) (p. 77).

(2) a. *Elks are not on the verge of extinction.*

b. #*Elg-er står ikke i fare for å bli utryddet.*
 elk-PL.INDEF stand not in danger for to become extinct
 ‘Elks are not in danger of extinction.’

c. *Elgen/Elgene står i fare for å bli utryddet.*
 elk-M.SG.DEF/elk-PL.DEF stand in danger for to become extinct
 ‘The elk(s) is(are) in danger of extinction.’

Turning now to adjective-noun combinations, I will focus on the singular forms here since they show most clearly the consequences of Halmøy's assumptions about form-feature correspondences, and I will restrict the account to the positive adjectives. As illustrated in Table 1, there are no singular indefinite nouns, but there are singular indefinite adjectives. The only positive adjective form that is not indefinite is marked as general number, whereas there are nouns marked as singular definite.

A noun phrase consisting only of a bare noun that has a zero plural form, such as *hus*, will rely on the context for number interpretation. Consider the examples in (3) (p. 105).

- (3) a. *Flyktingehjelp-en bygger hus i Sør-Libanon.*
 refugee.help-DEF builds house.N.GN in South-Lebanon
 'The refugee-help is building houses/a house in South-Lebanon.'
- b. *Vi har nettopp bygd stor-t hus, men allikevel...*
 we have just built big-N.SG.INDEF house.N.GN but nevertheless
 'We've just built a big house, but still...'
- c. *De bygger stor-e hus og anskaffer store inntekt-er ...*
 they build big-GN house.N.GN and acquire big-GN income-PL.INDEF
 'They're building big houses and acquiring large incomes...'

In (3a), the only number feature on the noun phrase *hus* is general number and hence it is ambiguous with respect to singular-plural as indicated by the idiomatic translation. In (3b), the number feature on the adjective disambiguates and only a singular interpretation is possible. As the idiomatic translation in (3c) shows, the noun phrase is not ambiguous here even though both the adjective and the noun have the feature general number. This is accounted for by the position of the sign *store hus* in the system; the existence of separate singular and plural definite forms of the noun and the singular indefinite adjective form defines *store hus* negatively as plural indefinite. Though the feature-based account proposed by Halmøy is new, the fact that the adjective can determine the number interpretation of noun phrases involving nouns with an unmarked plural has been noted in the literature. However, she points out that this holds also for nouns that do have a distinct plural form, something which has not previously been noted according to the author. The examples provided can be found in (4), where the second clause in (4a) shows both that *hest* has a plural form, and that a plural interpretation of the bold ambiguous noun phrase is possible in the first clause. In (4b), the adjective form disambiguates (p. 123).

- (4) a. *Jeg har hest på Ebru islandshestgård :) Islandshest-er er*
 I have horse.M.GN on Ebru iceland.horse.farm. iceland.horse-PL.INDEF is
det jeg har der ...
 Dem.N.SG I have there
 ‘I have horses at Ebru Icelandic horse farm :) It is Icelandic horses I have there.’
- b. *Jeg har brun hest og synes da det passer*
 I have brown.CG.SG.INDEF horse.M.GN and think then Dem.N.SG fits
best med svart utstyr.
 best with black equipment
 ‘I have a brown horse and think black equipment fits best.’

A definite singular noun has the features definite and singular and also a gender feature. The only positive adjective form that would not cause a feature clash is the *-e* form, which has the feature general number. Hence the number and gender features of a sign such as (*det*) *grove rundstykket* ‘the coarse bun’ are attributable to the noun rather than the adjective (the syntactic determiner is not discussed at this point in the book since functional elements are dealt with in Chapter 4). The absence of a weak-strong feature means that it is the same adjective form that is used in a plural indefinite noun phrase such as *grove rundstykker* ‘coarse buns’, and here the sign gets the features plural and indefinite from the noun. The absence of a weak-strong feature might be expected to cause problems for adjectives in predicative position. As (5) demonstrates, in predicate function the adjective in its singular indefinite form is used both with definite and indefinite noun phrases (p. 138).³

- (5) *Et rundstykke / rundstykk-et er grov-t.*
 one.N bun.N.GN bun-N.SG.DEF is coarse-N.SG.INDEF
 ‘A/the bun is whole grained.’

This is generally assumed to be because the predicative adjective always occurs in its strong form, regardless of the definiteness of the noun phrase it refers to. This option is not open to Halmøy since it relies on there being two forms in *-e*, one weak and one strong (plural), and she rejects the existence of polysemy in general. Instead she argues that whereas attributive adjectives show grammatical agreement, the agreement behaviour of predicative adjectives is pragmatic, and definiteness is irrelevant. Evidence for this position, which is in line with the Agreement Hierarchy proposed by Corbett (1991:226), is provided in Section 3.9.3.

3. *Rundstykke* is glossed as F.GN in this example, but I assume this a typo since *rundstykket* does have the glossing N.SG. The idiomatic translation here is that used in the book.

In Chapter 4, Halmøy extends her feature system to function words within the noun phrase, this includes definite and indefinite determiners, demonstratives and a range of quantifiers. She points out that in her system, there is in principle no reason to distinguish between lexical and function words; the same approach to the form-function relation can be taken. She does, however, admit that there are aspects of the meaning of function words which are harder to pin down, in particular in relation to her distinction between core and additional paradigmatic meaning. In the examples considered in Chapter 3, ‘core’ meaning is lexical in the commonly used sense of the word, that is *ELK* or *BIG*, and the ‘paradigmatic’ value is grammatical, like *SG* or *INDEF*. This distinction is maintained for function words, so that for instance the indefinite article is assumed to have core meaning, *EN*, and paradigmatic meaning, for instance *INDEFINITE*, *MASCULINE*, *SINGULAR*. There is not the space here to explore the detailed argumentation in Chapter 4, but it is a matter of consistently applying the principles developed and applied to lexical words in earlier chapters to function words.

Chapter 5 expands on the notion of C-signs and syntax as a part of the system of signs. Just like U-signs, C-signs are assumed to have one invariant meaning that may receive a range of interpretations depending on context. Given the constraints of oral languages, there are two ways of combining two *signifiants*; they ‘can share either a temporal edge or a temporal space.’ (p. 226) In the former case one *signifiants* comes before the other and the actual ordering is also a *signifiant*, and in the latter case it takes the shape of prosodic modification of a *signifiant* and, again, that modification is likewise a *signifiant*. In addition, links between *signifiants* may be established paradigmatically, that is through marking on one of the *signifiants*, this can be head or dependent marking. Combining this gives six ways of combining *signifiants*: syntagmatically, paradigmatically on the head or paradigmatically on the dependent, and in each case this can be done either through juxtaposition or superimposition.

This approach to syntax is then applied to noun phrases in Norwegian, in particular to the issues relating to the placement of pronominal possessives and attributive adjectives. I will illustrate here with the former. It is a well-known property of Norwegian that pronominal possessors can precede or follow the noun. It is generally assumed that the postnominal position is more neutral, and there are factors that favour pronominal positioning. When the noun precedes the possessor, it occurs in its definite form, whereas when it follows, the bare noun is used. This is illustrated in (6) (p. 232).

- (6) *Det er min hund / hunden min.*
 Dem.CG.SG is my.M.SG dog.M.GN dog-M.SG.DEF my.M.SG
 ‘This is my dog.’

The two constructions are said to be ‘(generally) quite synonymous’ (p. 233), but there are a number of factors that influence the positioning and these are discussed by Halmøy. She also refers to the fact that historically the postpositioned possessor was the norm. Halmøy makes the standard assumption that Norwegian is a head first language, and hence the syntactic determiner is assumed to be the head in a phrase such as *den elgen* ‘that elk’. However, she extends the role of head first in an interesting and original way. When the noun precedes the possessor the noun is the head, but a sign with a pronominal possessor is headed by the possessor. A number of the interpretational properties of pronominal possessors, for instance a tendency to be understood as contrastive, is then due to the fact that they are heads. The difference in definiteness marking is also attributed to the head status. A head noun needs to be marked for definiteness to ensure identifiability. When a pronominal possessor heads the sign, on the other hand, its person features ensures identifiability, and definiteness marking is not required. The discussion of the adjective positioning is more complex as it involves agreement, that is paradigmatic association, and the discussion also involves superimposition. However, I hope to have given a flavour of the approach taken here.

It is not possible in a review of this length to do justice to the full argumentation in this book. Given the breadth of data dealt with, the carefully argued framework and the originality of the analysis, it should be obligatory reading for anyone working on any aspect of Scandinavian noun phrases. The originality of the ‘Post-chomskyan Bouchardian Neo-Saussurean’ approach and the radical approach to the form-function relation makes it recommended reading also beyond those with an interest in Scandinavian noun phrases.

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