The Norwegian language in Argentina: A first look at heritage Norwegian in a new context

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Abstract. This paper presents preliminary observations of Norwegian as a heritage language (HL) in a contact situation that has largely gone unnoticed up until now: Argentina, where Spanish is the main contact language. We discuss some lexical, morphological, and syntactic properties of Argentine Norwegian, with Norwegian as a HL in North America as a comparative backdrop, and we point out directions for future research.

Keywords. heritage languages; Argentine Norwegian; language documentation; language contact

1. Introduction. The Norwegian language spoken in North America (henceforth NAmNo) has been investigated for more than 100 years (e.g., Flaten 1900–1904; Haugen 1953; Hjelde 1992; Johannessen 2018). Norwegian in Latin America, on the other hand, has attracted far less attention. According to recent estimates, around 10,000 Norwegians emigrated to Latin America between 1820 and the 1950s (Sæther 2015b; Furuseth 2013). This is only a small fraction of the numbers that went to North America (around 900,000; cf., e.g., Lovoll 1984) – however, to this day, it is possible to find heritage speakers of Norwegian in Latin America, particularly in Argentina. Thus far, there are virtually no studies of Norwegian in this contact situation, in which Spanish is the main contact language.

This paper takes a first look at some lexical, morphological, and syntactic properties of Norwegian in Argentina (henceforth ArgNo), mainly based on semi-structured interviews with 12 heritage speakers conducted during a field trip in 2021.[1] We do not aspire to present a full account of ArgNo; thus, at this stage, we do not put forward any quantitative generalisations or firm conclusions. Our aim is to provide some initial, tentative observations of certain aspects of Norwegian as a heritage language (HL) in Argentina, with NAmNo as a comparative backdrop, and to point out directions for future research.

The paper is structured as follows: In section 2, we discuss Norwegian speakers and communities in Argentina. In section 3, we describe our data and methods. In section 4, we present some preliminary findings, which are discussed further in section 5. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Norwegian speakers and communities in Argentina. The great waves of emigration to North America took place between The Civil War (1861–65) and the 1920s, and the emigration rate from Norway was very high, only surpassed by Ireland (Lovoll 1984). Compared to this, the emigration from Norway to Argentina was modest, and it is also difficult to estimate its exact size, as many of the emigrants were never registered in public records (Sæther 2015a). A

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[1] The data was collected in the context of a project that investigates Norwegian in Latin America more generally; in this paper, however, we limit our attention to Argentina. In addition to the Argentine speakers who were interviewed as a part of the 2021 field trip, we have also conducted online meetings with two speakers in Patagonia on a previous occasion. These speakers belong to a different group in terms of demography and migration history, and we have left them out for the purposes of this paper.

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few individuals went to Argentina during the 1800s, but most of the migration took place during the 1920s, later than most of the emigration to North America, possibly because of new regulations on immigration to the US (Sæther 2015a). Young males dominated; some were engineers, while others were searching for a job in, e.g., crafts, trade, and shipping (Sæther 2015b). This emigration was to a great extent urban, as opposed to the earlier, large waves of emigration to the US (Sæther 2015a), with people leaving towns and cities in Norway heading for Argentine cities.

In the US, Norwegian immigrants established substantial settlements, and also several ethnic organisations, which played an important role for maintaining the culture and language across several generations. The most prominent organisation was the Norwegian-American Lutheran church, which promoted the use of Norwegian and offered education in reading and writing in the HL for many years, until it gradually shifted to English after WW1. In 1909, there were 2,190 Norwegian-American churches, compared to 1,190 in Norway (Hempel 2012: 76–77). Norwegian immigrants also founded institutions for higher education, like Luther College and St. Olaf College, and ethnic organisations like *Sons of Norway* and the regional *Bygdelag*. The written language was important; several hundred newspapers were founded, some with large circulations – *Decorah-Posten* reached 45,000 subscribers in the 1920s (Lovoll 1984). There were publishing houses and quite a few authors writing in Norwegian. In Argentina, on the other hand, the immigrant community was too small to establish similar organisations. To our knowledge, there are no attempts to establish a regular press, and the Norwegian-Argentine author Norah Lange (1905–1972) wrote in Spanish. In Buenos Aires, immigrants formed *Det Norske La Plata Samfund* 'The Norwegian La Plata Society', but this was an elitist club not open for all, at least in the beginning (Pedersen 2010). The Norwegian Seamen's Church (1888–1978) served both the sailors and the Norwegian immigrant community in Buenos Aires. However, this church was run by The Norwegian Seamen's Mission in Norway, thus primarily intended for seamen (Pedersen 2010). Even if many Norwegian Argentines felt a sense of belonging to this church, it was not an emigrant institution equivalent to the Norwegian-American churches in the north.

The speakers that we have identified in Argentina are mostly 2nd generation heritage speakers – this sets them apart from the NAmNo speakers that we have met on previous occasions, who are typically 3rd–4th generation. The speakers have acquired Norwegian in the home, and the arena for use was mainly among close family. Few of them use it much today. Although it is difficult to make any firm generalisations, some traits appear striking for us, especially in light of our experience with Norwegian heritage speakers in the US. First of all, the speakers in Argentina are to a much higher degree multilingual in the sense that they speak more than two languages; in addition to Norwegian and Spanish, most are familiar with English, some also with German or other languages. Furthermore, the Norwegian Argentines are to a higher degree able to understand different Norwegian dialects (as field workers we did not have to accommodate as much as we normally do with heritage speakers in the US). Also, some of them belong to pan-Scandinavian communities, where using Norwegian when communicating with Danes and Swedes has been normal. And, finally, ArgNo speakers are in general familiar with written Norwegian; this holds to a much lesser extent for present-day speakers of NAmNo. This being said, the heritage speakers in Argentina are, with a few exceptions, of rather advanced age, and they have generally not passed the language on to the next generation. This is similar to the situation in the US, making Norwegian a moribund variety on both continents.

3. Data and methods. The data underlying this study was mainly collected during a field trip to Argentina in November/December 2021. On this trip, we met with 12 heritage speakers of Norwegian, most in the province of Buenos Aires, but also one in Misiones and one in Salta

(the speaker in Salta was interviewed online; all other meetings were in person). The speakers are mostly 2nd generation heritage speakers (cf. section 2), and mostly in their 70s/80s at the time of recording.

We did a semi-structured interview of approximately 45–80 minutes in Norwegian with each speaker. Additionally, we conducted a picture task targeting nominals, as well as a conversation in Spanish.[2] The Norwegian interviews are currently being transcribed and will be added to the Corpus of American Nordic Speech (CANS, Johannessen 2015).[3]

With 12 speakers, our sample size is very modest. To the best of our knowledge, the population of Norwegian heritage speakers in Argentina does not include many more individuals than this. Collecting data in this scenario, and interpreting the results, involves many challenges (D'Alessandro et al. 2021). At the same time, in our view, the importance of our work is not diminished by the low number of speakers – on the contrary, it is crucial to document and study this moribund HL while we still can.

4. Preliminary findings. In this section, we present some preliminary observations of ArgNo. Section 4.1 discusses vocabulary and lexical innovations; section 4.2 discusses morphology and syntax.

4.1. VOCABULARY AND LEXICAL INNOVATIONS. Overall, our impression is that ArgNo has relatively few loanwords that are shared widely across speakers. This sets ArgNo apart from NAmNo, in which the vocabulary includes many loans from English – also words that have straightforward equivalents in homeland Norwegian, such as *råd* 'road' (homeland Norwegian *vei*) and *leik* 'lake' (homeland Norwegian *innsjø*) (Haugen 1953; Hjelde 1992). Our overall impression aligns with Petersen et al. (2020) on Argentine Danish: Petersen et al. find that speakers of Argentine Danish display a more limited degree of lexical influence from the majority language than Danish heritage speakers in North America.

We do, however, observe some cases of cross-linguistic influence (CLI) on the vocabulary. Sometimes speakers draw on non-Norwegian lexical resources in a way that can be characterised as 'nonce borrowing' (Poplack et al. 1988): the borrowed words occur in otherwise Norwegian contexts and seem to be structurally integrated, but they are used in what appears to be an ad-hoc manner, not as an established part of the vocabulary, and they are not shared across speakers. Two examples with Spanish lexical material are given in (1):

(1) a. det er veldig **importante**
it is very important
'It's very important.' (buenos_aires_AR_02gm)

b. og denne **amigo** sa…
and this friend said
'and this friend said…' (martinez_AR_01gk)

Notably, nonce borrowings in ArgNo are not exclusively from the majority language Spanish; speakers also use lexical material from other languages. In this respect, ArgNo differs from

[2] The picture task was conducted either during the in-person meetings in Argentina or as a part of an online follow-up meeting. The Spanish data can inform future studies of the dominant language of these heritage speakers, and they can also be used to compare, e.g., speech rate in the HL and the dominant majority language.

[3] In December 2022, a second field trip was conducted, mostly to collect more data from the same speakers, although a few new participants were included. The data from this trip, which to a larger extent includes targeted elicitation of specific grammatical phenomena, will be systematically analysed in future research.

NAmNo, where we are not aware of other lexical sources than the majority language English. The variation in terms of source language for borrowing in ArgNo is illustrated in (2):

(2) a. og med en **motorhome** du kan sove
and with a motorhome you can sleep
'and with a motorhome, you can sleep' (buenos_aires_AR_02gm)

b. jeg hadde et snekkeri og seksten **snickare**
I had a carpentry and sixteen carpenters
'I had a carpentry and sixteen carpenters.' (obera_AR_01gm)

c. og så **langsam** var vi med den svenske kirken
and then eventually were we with the Swedish church.DEF
'and then eventually we were with the Swedish church' (martinez_AR_01gk)

In (2a), the English noun *motorhome* has replaced homeland Norwegian *bobil* – however, the indefinite article *en* (m.) is clearly Norwegian. In (2b), the speaker uses a Swedish noun, *snickare* 'carpenters', instead of homeland Norwegian *snekkere.* The presence of Swedish as a lexical resource is particularly clear in Misiones, where inter-Scandinavian ties are strong and Swedes played a major role in community building (e.g., Flodell 2012); however, influence from other Scandinavian languages is also displayed by other speakers. In (2c), the speaker uses the word *langsam*, which we interpret as German, based on its form (the expected Norwegian form would be *langsomt*) and meaning (the most obvious interpretation in (2c) is 'eventually', which would be less expected from Norwegian *langsomt* than German *langsam*). The variation illustrated in (2a–c) is a reflection of the multilingual competence that characterises many of the ArgNo speakers (cf. section 2).

Apart from nonce borrowings, most examples of lexical CLI in ArgNo seem to fall into three categories: i) words without a straightforward equivalent in homeland Norwegian, ii) discourse markers, and iii) semantic transfer, which does not involve replacement of Norwegian lexical items, but instead a shift in their meaning.

Words that do not have a straightforward homeland equivalent are typically related to life and culture in Argentina. Obvious examples are names of plants, food, or drinks, e.g., *yerba mate* and *mate* (the name of a plant and a drink brewed with its leaves). Relatedly, *asado* 'barbeque' is commonly used, and in Misiones, a cultivated piece of land is called a *chacra*. These words are used in a more systematic way than nonce borrowings, both on the intra-speaker level and across speakers.

Borrowed discourse markers are also a feature shared by many speakers. We note that especially *sí* 'yes', *no* 'no' and *bueno* 'well' are used in discourse contexts that are otherwise Norwegian. Cf. (3):

(3) a. vi har fått besøk hit # **bueno** det er lenge siden men før…
we have had visit here BUENO it is long since but before
'We've had visitors. Well, it's been a long time, but before… (vicente_lopez_AR_03gk)

b. med mamma og pappa var det norsk # **sí**
with mum and dad was it Norwegian SÍ
'With mum and dad, everything was in Norwegian – yes.' (obera_AR_01gm)

The fact that Spanish discourse markers are borrowed into ArgNo, even though ArgNo speakers generally do not seem very prone to adapting lexical material from the majority

language, corroborates the notion that discourse markers are highly borrowable across languages (Matras 2020:209 and references therein).[4]

Finally, we note some cases of semantic transfer, whereby the meaning of a Norwegian lexical item is slightly changed, apparently under influence from Spanish. Some examples of patterns used by several speakers are given in (4):

(4) a. og de skulle **gå** til Chile etterpå
and they should go to Chile afterwards
'and they were going to Chile afterwards' (vicente_lopez_AR_01gk)

b. hun var veldig flink til å **koke**
she was very good to to cook
'She was very good at cooking.' (buenos_aires_AR_01gk)

c. vi hadde to større **brødre** gutt og jente
we had two bigger siblings boy and girl
'We had two older siblings, a boy and a girl.' (adrogue_AR_01gm)

In homeland Norwegian, the verb *gå* most commonly means 'walk'. In (4a), however, it is used as a more general motion verb, much like Spanish *ir*. The expected verb in homeland Norwegian would be *dra* or *reise*. Similarly, the verb *koke* means 'boil' in homeland Norwegian; in (4b), it is used with the more general meaning 'cook' or 'prepare food', similar to Spanish *cocinar*. In homeland Norwegian, the expected expression would be *lage mat* 'make food'. In (4c), the noun *brødre* (pl.) is used about siblings of both genders, similar to Spanish *hermanos*. In homeland Norwegian, this noun exclusively refers to male siblings; the term for siblings of both genders is *søsken*.[5]

4.2. MORPHOLOGY AND SYNTAX. Our overall impression is that grammar, and syntax in particular, largely remains stable in ArgNo, despite the intense contact with Spanish and the limited input and use of Norwegian. This corroborates previous proposals on stable and vulnerable domains in HLs (e.g., Polinsky 2018; Lohndal et al. 2019 and references therein). However, variation exists, both on the inter- and intra-speaker level, and we do observe some innovative patterns. In this section we focus on three topics: grammatical gender, V2 in declarative main clauses, and the relative order of the finite verb and sentence adverbials in embedded clauses.

There are cases of divergent agreement and/or assignment of grammatical gender. While masculine agreement is practically identical to homeland Norwegian, more variation is observed with feminine and neuter nouns. For example, the masculine article *en* is used with both masculine and feminine nouns (5) indicating a reduction from three to two grammatical genders, much like what has been observed in other Scandinavian varieties (e.g, Conzett et al.; Lødrup 2011; Busterud et al. 2019).

(5) **en** lit-**en** hand
a.M.SG. small-M hand.(F)
'a small hand' (obera_AR_01gm)

[4] Unsurprisingly, English discourse markers can be found in NAmNo, as shown by, e.g., Moquin & Salmons (2020).

[5] In the context of the finding that speakers of ArgNo draw on lexical resources from multiple languages, one might ask if Spanish is actually the source of the semantic shifts illustrated in (4a) and (4b); English has similar patterns (*go* and *cook*). In (4c), however, Spanish seems to be the only possible source language.

The neuter indefinite article is more stable; however, we observe some overgeneralisation of the masculine article to neuter nouns. This process is subject to inter-speaker variation, and the speakers range from displaying a complete two-gender system with no diverging forms, to a system with only masculine forms for all genders, like in (6).

(6) a. **en** sol
a.M.SG sun.(F)
'a sun'

b. **en** vei
a.M.SG road.(M)
'a road'

c. **en** hus
a.M.SG house.(N)
'a house' (buenos_aires_AR_02gm)

In addition to variation between speakers, there is also significant intra-speaker variation. In (7), the same speaker alternates between masculine and neuter determiners with the neuter noun *fjell* 'mountain'.

(7) a. **et** fjell
a.N.SG mountain.(N)
'a mountain'

b. **en** stor-**Ø** fjell
a.M.SG big-C mountain.(N)
'a big mountain'

c. **den** stor-e fjell-**et**
the.C.SG.DEF big-DEF mountain-N.SG.DEF
'the big mountain'

d. **det** stor-e fjell-**et**
the.N.SG.DEF big-DEF mountain-N.SG.DEF
'the big mountain' (vicente_lopez_AR_02gk)

Definiteness in Norwegian is (in part) expressed by a suffix on the noun, which has three forms, corresponding to the three traditional genders. In accordance with observations in homeland Norwegian (e.g., Lødrup 2011; Rodina & Westergaard 2021; Busterud & Lohndal 2022), NAmNo (e.g., Lohndal & Westergaard 2016 and references therein) and Argentine Danish (Kühl & Petersen 2021), we observe that this declension system displays less innovation than gender agreement on determiners and adjectives. In (7c–d), the definite suffix remains neuter both with the prenominal neuter determiner and the (innovative) common gender determiner.

For clause-level syntax, the V2 property (whereby the finite verb must appear in the second position of declarative main clauses) is of obvious interest. Some ArgNo speakers occasionally have V3 where homeland Norwegian requires V2, although this pattern appears to be relatively rare. An example with V3 in ArgNo is given in (8a), with homeland Norwegian V2 in (8b) for comparison:

(8) a. …nå **hun** **er** pensjonist også…
now she is pensioner too
'…now she is retired too…' (buenos_aires_AR_02gm – V3)

b. nå **er** **hun** pensjonist også (homeland No – V2)

Occasional V3 orders have also been observed in NAmNo (e.g., Larsson & Johannessen 2015; Westergaard et al. 2023). It remains a task for future research to analyse main clause word order in ArgNo in further detail. It is particularly interesting to compare ArgNo to NAmNo, as CLI from the majority language English has been argued to play a role for V2 violations in NAmNo: Westergaard et al. (2023) (W&L) propose that CLI from English affects the contexts for unambiguous V2 syntax (i.e., contexts in which V2 word order does not converge with SVO), in particular the proportion of non-subject initial clauses, which is higher in spontaneous speech in homeland Norwegian (around 30%) than in English (less than 10%). According to W&L, when the contexts for unambiguous V2 syntax are reduced, V2 syntax in turn becomes vulnerable to attrition because of lack of activation. The reason why ArgNo makes an interesting comparison to NAmNo is that the majority language, Spanish, has more flexibility than English in terms of subject placement: the subject position in finite declaratives is 'relatively "free"', with both preverbal and postverbal subjects, and with non-subjects regularly moving to the preverbal position for reasons of information structure (Zagona 2002:27, Chap. 5). This means that Spanish is not an obvious source of CLI promoting subject-initial clauses over non-subject-initial clauses in ArgNo,[6] which in turn implies that, in the context of W&L's proposal, one might expect V2 to be (even) more stable in ArgNo than in NAmNo. If, upon scrutiny, this turns out not to be the case (see Melvær 2023 for an initial study of this issue), other factors promoting variation and change should be considered – and it might also be relevant to reconsider the analysis of NAmNo and see if these factors are relevant there too.

In embedded clauses, homeland Norwegian generally requires the verb to follow negation and other sentence adverbials (with certain exceptions; e.g., Ringstad 2019 with references). This word order is commonly analysed as *verb-in-situ* (Faarlund 2019). In ArgNo, however, we note examples of verbs *preceding* negation/sentence adverbials, a word order that indicates movement. An example with a verb preceding negation (V-Neg) is shown in (9a), with the homeland order (Neg-V) illustrated in (9b).

(9) a. …hvis du **kan** **ikke** s- reise
…if you can not travel
'if you can't travel' (martinez_AR_01gk – V-Neg)

b. hvis du **ikke** **kan** reise (homeland No – Neg-V)

Examples like (9a), with the verb preceding negation, are found also in NAmNo (Larsson & Johannessen 2015; Jensberg et al. 2024). The question of how similar NAmNo and ArgNo are with respect to this pattern, and how it should be analysed, is high on our research agenda.

5. Discussion. As discussed in section 4.1, an overall impression is that ArgNo differs somewhat from NAmNo in the sense that NAmNo displays a more extensive and systematic use of loanwords. We tentatively propose that this difference can at least in part be related to the sociolinguistic context and migration history of the two contact scenarios (see sections 2–3). The systematic integration of English loans in NAmNo has developed in Norwegian

[6] Conceivably, the null subject property of Spanish (Zagona 2002:24–26), which implies that subjects are often left unpronounced, may also contribute to this.

communities of a substantial size, and with several arenas for using Norwegian. The Norwegian communities in Argentina, on the other hand, were much smaller and more scattered; thus, a shared vocabulary has not been consolidated to the same extent. A question for future research is whether the typological distance between Norwegian and Spanish, or other factors, also play a role (see Petersen et al. 2020).

With respect to morphology and syntax, we observe a high degree of stability in ArgNo, but also some variation and innovative patterns. The variation that we have pointed out can, to some extent, also be found in NAmNo, although it remains a task for future research to establish more firmly the quantitative and qualitative similarities between the HL varieties. For now, we note that although the Norwegian HL communities of Argentina and North America are different, reduced input and use of the HL (compared to the homeland) is a defining characteristic in both scenarios. Thus, we can expect common HL outcomes such as divergent attainment and attrition (Polinsky 2018) in both contexts. The role played by the different majority languages (Spanish vs. English) and migration history (ArgNo speakers typically being 2nd generation HL speakers, and NAmNo speakers typically being at least 3rd generation) are important issues for future research.

6. Concluding remarks. In this paper we have presented some initial observations of Norwegian as a HL in a hitherto unexplored contact scenario, namely Argentina, with Spanish as the main contact language. We have discussed ArgNo on a comparative backdrop formed by Norwegian as a HL in North America (NAmNo). We have proposed, preliminarily, that ArgNo speakers display systematic integration of loanwords to a lesser extent than NAmNo speakers. We have also observed that the grammar of ArgNo is generally stable, although some variation and innovative patterns can be found.

In our view, an important priority in future research on ArgNo, and Norwegian as a HL in Latin America more generally, is to continue and develop the comparison with NAmNo. Comparisons of these two HLs, which have different majority languages, can enhance our understanding of the effects of CLI, as well as other factors that shape HLs.

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