Norwegian gâ-copula construction: from motion verb to copula

Motion verbs play an important role in the constructionist studies of Nordic languages. One of the reasons is that they tend to develop into different kinds of grammatical constructions, such as future constructions (Hilpert 2008; Andersson & Blensenius 2018; Kinn 2018). This study explores another interesting, yet poorly understood, case where the Norwegian motion verb gâ ‘walk’ develops into a copula. In this unusual development, gâ lost its dynamic sense and became a word that links subjects to adjectival predicates, as in (1) (Faarlund, Lie & Vannebo 1997). This ([NP] gâ ADJ) construction is referred to as the Gâ-COPULA construction in this study.

(1) Mange av dem har gâtt sultne i månedvis.

‘Many of them have been hungry for months.’

(http://no.wfp.org/news/news-release/wfp-n%C3%A5r-rekordmange-med-matvareassistanse-i-syria)

The goal of this study is to examine the constructional characteristics of the Gâ-COPULA construction and explain their idiosyncrasies by positing a polysemy link between this construction and the Gâ-SECONDARY PREDICATE construction. Methodologically speaking, the data examined are collected from the “noTenTen17 Bokmål” corpus, a large web corpus that includes 2.47 billion words (https://app.sketchengine.eu/#/concordance?corppname=preloaded%2Fnten17_bokmal).

This corpus-illustrated study has two major findings. First, the Gâ-COPULA construction displays constructional characteristics that differentiate it from the VÆRE ‘be’-construction, the least marked copula construction in this language: (i) only adjectives can be predicative elements; (ii) subjects are restricted to animate NPs; (iii) only stage-level adjectives (Carlson 1980; Krifka et al. 1995) can be used in this construction; and (iv) this construction implies that the states at issue continue for a certain period of time.

Second, these idiosyncrasies of the Gâ-COPULA construction can be explained by analyzing it as related to the Gâ-SECONDARY PREDICATE construction via a polysemy link. In the Gâ-SECONDARY PREDICATE construction, a single clause contains two predicative elements (Müller 2002; Shultze-Berndt & Himmelmann 2004). For example, in (2), both gikk ‘walk.PST’ and sultne ‘hungry.PL’ are predicated of the subject de ‘they’. Note that, as in the VÆRE-construction and the Gâ-COPULA construction, adjectives agree with subjects in this construction.

(2) Vi gikk sultne hjem.

‘We walked home hungry.’ (https://litteraturargasjen.no/2014/07/29/reisebrev-this-is-the-end/)

The main analysis of this paper is that the Gâ-COPULA construction is linked to the Gâ-SECONDARY PREDICATE construction, forming a network, as in Figure 1. They share the same morphosyntactic and semantic constructional characteristics, such as agreement, animate subjects, and stage-level adjectives. The only difference between them is that the dynamic meaning of gâ has bleached out in the Gâ-COPULA construction.

Figure 1: from motion verb to copula

To conclude, this study reveals the constructional characteristics of the the Gâ-COPULA construction and analyzes them in terms of the polysemy link between the Gâ-COPULA construction and the Gâ-SECONDARY PREDICATE construction. It also demonstrates that constructionist approaches
to Nordic languages can make a meaningful contribution to explaining this unique development of the Norwegian motion verb gå into a copula and beyond.

References