

# Prefixed negation

Björn Lundquist

*UiT The Arctic University of Norway*

## 1. Introduction

All over Scandinavia the negative prefix *o-/u-/ó-*<sup>[1]</sup> productively attaches to passive participles (and to some extent to adjectives as well), just like e.g. *un-* in English (as in *un-washed*). In the northern parts of the Swedish speaking area, *o-* can attach to active past participles (the so-called supine) as well. In the ScanDiaSyn survey, we investigated to what extent *o-* prefixation to active participles is available in Sweden, Norway and Denmark.

## 2. Results

### 2.1 Nordic Syntactic Database (NSD)

In the ScanDiaSyn survey, the following sentence was tested in Norway, Sweden and Finland:

- (1) Jag har oläst tidningen idag, och jag kommer inte att göra det heller. (#906) (Swe.)  
*I have.PRES NEG.read.PART newspaper.DEF today, and I will not to do it either*  
'I have not read the newspaper today, and I will not do it either.'

The results are shown in map 1 below:



Map 1: Active participles prefixed with *o-*.  
 (#906: *Jag har o-läst tidningen idag, och jag kommer inte att göra det heller.* 'I have not read the newspaper today, and I will not do it either.')  
 (White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score).

This sentence, as can be seen, is only accepted in northern Sweden, and northern Finland (Österbotten). It is a very clear dialectal phenomenon. As seen in the following two maps, this construction is more accepted among the older speakers, indicating that this might be a dialectal phenomenon that may be about to disappear:



Map 2: Active participles prefixed with *o-*, younger speakers, (#906: *Jag har o-läst tidningen idag, och jag kommer inte att göra det heller.* 'I have not read the newspaper today, and I will not do it either.')

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score)



Map 3: Active participles prefixed with *o-*, older speakers.  
 (#906: *Jag har o-läst tidningen idag, och jag kommer inte att göra det heller.* 'I have not read the newspaper today, and I will not do it either.')

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score)

As the Map 3 show, older speaker as far as Gräsö in Uppland accept the prefixed negation. This indicates that this construction was more widespread at earlier stages of Swedish. There are no instances of this construction in the Nordic Dialect Corpus. In the discussion of the *o-* in northern dialects in Dahlstedt and Ågren (1980), the authors also note that this construction is hard to find in corpora, even though it is a prominent dialect feature in northern Sweden.

### 3. Discussion

The *o-*prefixation is a well-known dialectal feature of the northern Swedish dialects, and has been discussed by Dahlstedt and Ågren (1980: 272). According to Dahlstedt and Ågren, *o-*prefixation can only take place in the perfect tense, and not in the simple present and past tense. Dahlstedt and Ågren give the following example of *o-*prefixation:

- (2) Jag har o-äte. (North Swe.)  
*I have.PRES NEG-eat.PART*  
 'I have not eaten (yet).'

This construction seems to be most naturally used with events that are expected to take place every day. As the translation in (2) indicates, the event denoted by the verb is expected to take place during the course of the day, but it has not done so yet. The construction can presumably not be used in so-called experiential perfects, as e.g. *I have not met the king of Norway*, but this needs to be further

investigated.

Dahlstedt and Ågren (1980) mentions that the prefix *ny-* 'new' also can attach to active participles/supines, as in the following example:

- (3) Han har ny-komme. (North Swe.)  
*he have.PRES new-COME.PART*  
 'He has recently arrived.'

In standard Swedish, prefixation of *ny-* to the supine/active participle is not possible. The prefix *ny-*, as well as *o-*, can however attach to passive participles. *Ny-* 'new' can also attach to passive participles formed from intransitive verbs, both mainly unaccusative verbs, but also some unergative verbs (as e.g. *ny-badad* 'newly bathed' (unergative) and *ny-rakad* 'newly shaven' (reflexive/unergative)). When the prefixed participles that are formed from intransitive verbs appear in predicative position (which is sometime a bit marked), the interpretation they get is basically the same as the interpretation for the prefixed active participle in (3) above, as illustrated in (4):

- (4) Han är ny-kommen. (Swe.)  
*he be.PRES new-arrive.PASS.PART*  
 'He has recently arrived.'

Both *o-* and *ny-* can in general prefix to passive participles formed from transitive verbs in the Nordic languages. The result is a typical adjectival (or stative) participle that, unlike verbal participles, cannot be modified by agentive adverbial phrases (by-phrases) or occur in the complement of the eventive copula *bli* 'become/get':

- (5) a) Han var ny-/o-kammad (\*av en känd frisör. (Swe.)  
*He be.PAST new-/un-comb.PASS.PART (by a famous hairdresser*  
 'He was newly combed/uncombed (\*by a famous hairdresser).'
- b) \*Bilen blev ny-/o-tvättad (Swe.)  
*car.DEF get.PAST new-/un-wash.PASS.PART*  
 'The car got new-washed/un-washed.'

It is still an open question whether the dialects of Northern Swedish allow prefixation of *ny-* and *o-* to verbal passive participles, as in (5a) and (5b) above.

## References

Dahlstedt, Karl-Hampus and Per-Uno Ågren. 1980. *Övre Norrlands bygdemål*, Skrifter utg. av Johan Nordlander-Sällskapet 2. Umeå: Cewe.

### Web sites:

Nordic Atlas of Language Structures (NALS) Journal: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nals>

Nordic Dialect Corpus: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html>

Nordic Syntax Database: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html>

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[1] *O-* in Swedish, *u-* in Danish and Norwegian, and *ó-* in Faroese and Icelandic. I will use the Swedish form in the discussion, since the tested construction is only accepted in parts of the Swedish speaking areas.