

Gender and number peculiarities of uncountable nouns in Jutlandic (Western Danish)

Torben Arboe
Aarhus University

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to present and investigate some grammatical features in which the Jutlandic dialects differ from Standard Danish with respect to the gender and number categories. Firstly, the most important differences between the gender systems of the main dialects (3 / 2 / 1 gender(s)) as opposed to Standard Danish (2 genders) are introduced, and attention is given to mass nouns / uncountable nouns: As the accompanying pronouns and articles show, these nouns are treated as *neuters* even when the dialect only has common gender nouns (West Jutland), or as an alternative to the normally used common gender (East Jutland). Secondly is demonstrated that in East Jutlandic, this is even seen in the declination of some nouns, definite forms having the suffixed neuter article. Thirdly, a seemingly opposing feature is discussed, mass nouns treated as *plurals* as shown by the accompanying pronouns and certain adjectives. Lastly, a really specialized use of certain plural forms of nouns is found together with special uses of certain adjectives and a pronoun as markers for collective nouns. These investigations taken together gives a description of some fascinating interconnections between number and gender features in Jutlandic dialects.

1. Introduction

Standard Danish nouns have two genders, common gender and neuter, e.g. *en mand* ‘a man’, *et barn* ‘a child’ respectively¹, the indefinite article being

¹ The Danish examples in this paper are glossed word for word rather than translated into idiomatic English, as the latter would sometimes blur the grammatical distinctions found in the data.

en for the common gender, and *et* for the neuter. In contrast, the Danish dialects as spoken up to the middle of the 20th century show a very different picture. The islands (Sealand, Funen, etc.) and parts of East Jutland have three genders, as in earlier stages of Danish: masculine, feminine and neuter, e.g. *i mand* ‘a man’, *en kvinde* ‘a woman’, and *et barn* ‘a child’, respectively, *i* being the indefinite article of the masculine. Most of East Jutland together with South Jutland (North Schleswig) have two genders as in Standard Danish because the masculine and the feminine have merged into the common gender. Further, in West Jutland only the common gender is found; this means that the indefinite article *en* of the common gender is used also in e.g. *en barn* ‘a child’ (as opposed to *et barn* above)². The distribution of 3 / 2 / 1 gender(s) in the Danish dialects is shown in fig. 1.

The borderline between West Jutland and East Jutland here first runs from the northwest coastal point Lild to Horsens on the south east coast of Mid Jutland, then towards the southwest to the coast south of Ribe. In addition to the common gender, West Jutland also has a neuter gender, which is found in uncountable nouns (e.g. mass nouns, collective nouns for matter liquids and other things). This is shown by the use of the neuter pronoun *det* in noun phrases as *det mælk* ‘this (or the) milk’, as opposed to Standard Danish *den mælk* ‘this (or the) milk’, with *den* as the common gender pronoun.³ It is also shown by the use of neuter in attributive adjectives, e.g. *godt mælk* ‘good milk’, the common gender form being *god* ‘good’ (Skautrup 1944:270). The phenomenon is often called *stof-genus* ‘matter gender’ in Danish grammar (Skautrup 1968:88).⁴ In the Dictionary of Jutlandic Dialects, *Jysk Ordbog*, a more precise term is used, *stof-neutrum* ‘matter neuter’; both these terms will be used below.

This feature can not be observed in the use of the definite article in West Jutland because there the dialects have only one definite article, *æ* ‘the’, as in e.g. *æ barn* ‘the child’, *æ mælk* ‘the milk’. But a tendency towards using the neuter in uncountable nouns is also found in East Jutland, and here it can be seen in the choice of definite article. In East Jutland as well as in Standard Danish and the insular dialects, the definite article has the form of a suffix, *-en* for common gender and *-et* for neuter, e.g. *manden*

² Dialectal pronunciations are not rendered here, but hinted at in a few cases below, e.g. the forms *bræwnt*, *bröwnt* ‘aquavit-the’ in section 2 below.

³ This is also mentioned in Haugen (1976:288), to my knowledge one of the few English descriptions of grammatical aspects of Danish and other Scandinavian languages.

⁴ According to Skautrup (1968:325), the term comes from Diderichsen (1946:91ff.), but it is not directly employed there (§ 42 Genus, pp. 91-97).

Fig 1. Gender: Bennike & Kristensen (1898-1912), Map no. 81, *Navneordenes køn* 'Genders of the nouns'. Legends: *Kun 1 køn findes* 'Only 1 gender is found' (pale red); *2 køn findes* '2 genders are found' (blue); *3 køn findes* '3 genders are found' (yellow). The slantingly hatched legend represents a mixture of the pale red area and the blue area: *Foransat findes 1 køn* i.e. in nouns with preposed definite article 1 gender is found, *Efterhængt findes 2 køn* i.e. in nouns with suffixed definite article 2 genders are found. (The placing of the definite article is explained below). Unfortunately,

the hatching is placed a little too far to the right (too far eastwards) in the north-west district at the map: the area there ought to be only blue (2 genders), cf. the accompanying text, Bennike & Kristensen (1898-1912:158). Instead, the hatching should have covered the area *Lild* referred to in the following text and shown in fig. 2. – Cf. the map K 7.1 of *Jysk Ordbog* (with further comments)

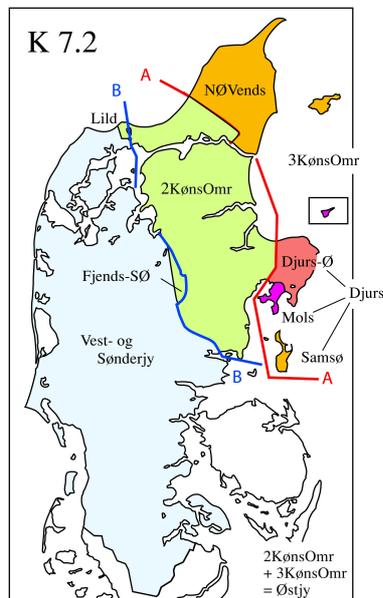
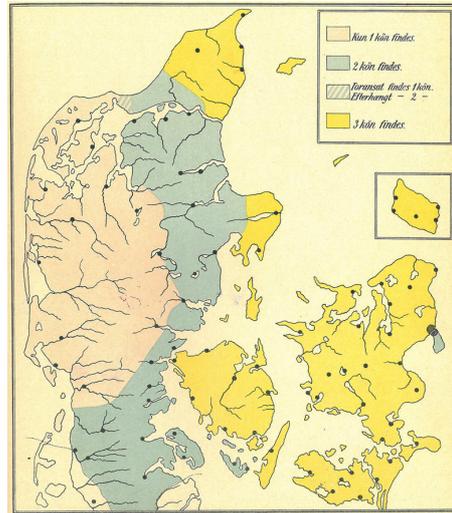


Fig. 2. The definite article: *Jysk Ordbog* (2000ff.), map K 7.2. The blue line B-B is the border between West (and South) Jutland with the prepositioned article *æ* and East Jutland with the suffixed articles *-en/-et* (and also *-i* north and east of the line A-A). *2KønsOmr*, *3KønsOmr* = area with 2 resp. 3 genders. – The map represents an upgrading of map 80 in Bennike & Kristensen (1898-1912).

‘man-the’, *barnet* ‘child-the’. The borderline between the preposed article *æ* and the suffixed, enclitic articles *-en/-et* roughly follows the border between one and two genders in fig. 1, except that South Jutland has the preposed article *æ* just like West Jutland, cf. fig. 2. Besides the normal common gender definite form *mælken* ‘milk-the’, East Jutland also have examples of the definite neuter form, *mælket* ‘milk-the’.

2. Uncountable nouns as neuter

In Bennike & Kristensen (1898-1912), the philologist Marius Kristensen lists about 20 nouns of common gender which in varying parts of Jutland are treated as being of neuter gender. The reason for this use is (according to Kristensen) that Jutlanders seem to have an urge to ... *lade stofnavnene være intetkøn* ‘let the “matter nouns” (mass nouns) be neuter’ (p. 158). An example is *det jord* ‘this (or the) earth’ (about a portion of the material), and also nouns as *kaffe*, *honning*, *mjød*, *tran* ‘coffee’, ‘honey’, ‘mead’, ‘train-oil’ can have *det* as a neuter determiner. Further, two nouns are mentioned with the definite neuter article *-et*, *lynget*, *iset* ‘heather-the’, ‘ice-the’, as opposed to the normal definite common gender forms *lyngen*, *isen*; the neuter forms are found in Kvolsgaard (1886:3,12) which renders the dialect of the Lild parish, the northwest coastal point of the border line between West and East Jutland in fig. 2 (and fig. 1). Also Diderichsen (1946:95) cites these two neuter forms, placing them as just East Jutlandic, and seeing the whole group of neuter ‘matter nouns’ as having semantically motivated gender (p. 92).

In order to get an overview of the use of especially such neuter forms, but also the *stof-genus* ‘matter neuter’ as a whole in the East Jutland dialects, I conducted a more thorough investigation of the nouns mentioned above and many others for which there were indications of ‘matter neuter’ (Arboe 2009). Among the results were maps of ten nouns with a substantial number of instances of ‘matter neuter’: *mælk* ‘milk’, *mad* ‘food’, *honning* ‘honey’, *kaffe* ‘coffee’, *brændevin* ‘aquavit’, *dypelse* ‘sauce’, *byg* ‘barley’, *is* ‘ice’, *sne* ‘snow’, and *to* (an old word for) ‘wool’, i.e. several of the nouns mentioned above. As we have touched upon *mælk* ‘milk’ a couple of times, we shall take this noun as an example, see fig. 3 (Arboe 2009:21, map 1).

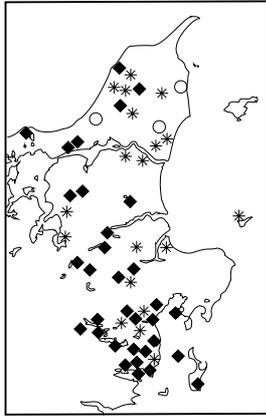


Fig. 3. *Mælk* 'milk', as a mass neuter form.

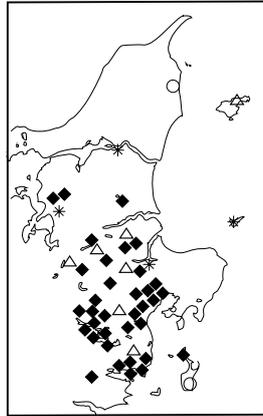


Fig. 4. *Kaffe* 'coffee', as a mass neuter form.

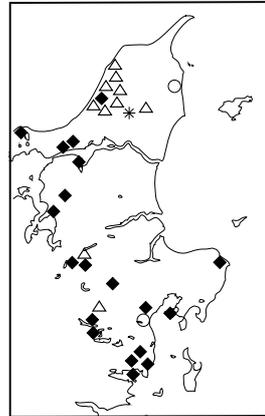


Fig. 5. *Is* 'ice', as a mass neuter form.

Legends for the 3 maps:

- ◆ Forms with the neuter definite suffix *-et*.⁵
- * Use of the neuter pronoun *det* 'this (or the)', or *noget* 'something (of)', in front of the noun; more seldomly the adjective *meget* 'much', or an adjective with the neuter suffix *-t* in the dialectal pronunciation.
- The text source maintains that the noun has the neuter gender, but does not show it by any of the means just mentioned.
- △ Forms with the neuter definite suffix *-t*.

The borderline of East Jutland of fig. 1-2 from Lild in the northwest to Horsens in the southeast is easily recognized in fig. 3, and it will be noted that most of the instances show the definite neuter form *mælket* 'milk-the', but also use of the pronouns *det* 'this (or the)', and *noget* 'something', are rather frequent. The oldest form is *milcket* 'milk-the', from about 1550 (Skautrup 1947:196). Another distribution is seen by the noun *kaffe* 'coffee', cf. fig. 4 (Arboe 2009:23, map 4). Here the neuter forms are centered in Mid East Jutland, from Horsens to Silkeborg and Randers, but a substantial number of them are also found to the north and west of Randers, and a few in Himmerland even further north. The most common definite form is *kafferet* 'coffee-the', which rather unexpectedly shows an epenthetic *-r-*, which can be retained in the form *kaffert* besides the more regular form *kaffet* in Mid East Jutland. Some of the maps in Arboe (2009) show an alternative definite suffix, just *-t* as opposed to *-et* above, e.g. the noun *is* 'ice', cf.

⁵ Pronounced *-e*, *-ed*, *-et* in certain areas, cf. *Jysk Ordbog*, map K 7.3.

fig. 5 (Arboe 2009:25, map 8). The instances in the north (Vendsyssel) are seen to have just *-t* as the definite suffix, manifested in forms as *ijst* ‘ice-the’, whereas a broad strip from the northwest to the southeast of the rest of East Jutland features the *-et* suffix, *iset* ‘ice-the’. Similarly, *brændevin* ‘aquavit’ most often has the *-t* suffix in the north, in the dialectal forms *bræwnt*, *bröwnt*, which can be rendered in an ortographic form like *brændevint* ‘aquavit-the’, but the suffix *-t* is further used as an alternative to *-et* in the rest of East Jutland. It may be added that the simplex *vin* wine also can take the neuter suffix in this area, cf. *vinet* ‘wine-the’, registered back to Høysgaard (1747).

Finally, it may be noted that the tendency to conceive mass nouns as neuters is not just Jutlandic as Marius Kristensen suggested, but also found in Standard Danish, cf. Diderichsen (1946:92) as to *det mælk* ‘this (or the) milk’. Further examples are *det regn*, *der ligger over Nordsøen* ‘the rain that is placed over the North Sea’ (weather forecast on TV), and *det musik*, *vi nu skal høre* ‘the music we shall hear now’ (speaker at the national radio) where the common gender of the nouns prescribes the forms *den regn* and *den musik* (Ringgaard 1992:26). As a recent example may be mentioned, *20% på alt chokolade* ‘20% (discount) on all chocolate’ (advertisement in the Copenhagen based newspaper *Politiken*, April 4, 2015) where just *al chokolade* is required because of the common gender of the noun. A final example comes from an online recipe: *tag det kartoffel du gravede ud ...* ‘take that.NEUT potato you dug out ...’, where the neuter demonstrative makes it clear that the reference is to an amount of potato, because *a/the potato* would be common gender.

3. Uncountable nouns as collectives or plurals

In Bennike & Kristensen (1898-1912:159), it is briefly mentioned that some kinds of food and liquids are treated as plural forms in Jutland, i.e. *fløde* ‘cream’, *sirup* ‘syrup’, *grød* ‘porridge’, *vælling* ‘gruel’, *kål* ‘cabbage’, *suppe* ‘soup’, and further *olie* ‘oil’, *tjære* ‘tar’. It also appears from the entries in the Jutlandic dialect dictionary of the same time, Feilberg (1886-1914), that these words are treated as plurals at least in some of the dialects. Thus, by *fløde* ‘cream’, the feature *flt.* (i.e. *flertal* ‘plural’) is added to each of the more than 10 pronunciation forms (Feilberg 1886-1914, I: 324), followed by examples as *mange fløde* ‘many cream’, *de fløde* ‘these (or the) cream’, and with an anaphoric pronoun, *fløden ... de er sure* ‘cream-the ... they are sour.PL’; here also the adjective *sure* ‘sour’ is a plural form, the singular being *sur* ‘sour’, and *-e* the plural suffix. This feature is recog-

nized by Diderichsen (1946:100) where it is described as peculiar merging of the collective and the plural category, exemplified by *mange kål* ‘many cabbage’, used in stead of *meget kål* ‘much cabbage’, both concerning a dish. And in Nielsen (1959:47) it is mentioned that denominations for wholly or partly liquid matters normally are collectives in Jutlandic, for instance *mange* (or *flere*) *suppe* ‘many’ (or ‘more’, with plural meaning) ‘soup’, *fløde* ‘cream’, *vælling* ‘gruel’, *kål* ‘cabbage’, again some of the nouns from Bennike & Kristensen (1898-1912) above.

As will be seen, the grammatical surveys just mention the feature as Jutlandic, but do not indicate whether it is a general feature or confined to certain dialects; this may be sought in the entries of Feilberg (1886-1914) or elsewhere. In order to get a more precise picture of the distribution of the feature, I investigated all the nouns mentioned above in the dictionary files at *Jysk Ordbog*, supplemented with other nouns found during this research. The results were presented in Arboe (2001, 2003). In Arboe (2001), maps 1-4 show the areas in which the nouns *grød*, *suppe*, *sirup*, *tjære* ‘porridge, soup, syrup, tar’ are conceived of as plurals or collectives, designated *stof-pluralis* ‘matter plural’ (as a parallel to *stof-netrum* ‘matter neuter’ in section 1). Only *grød* ‘porridge’ has this feature for almost the whole area (Arboe 2001:7), whereas *sirup* ‘syrup’ has it in areas to the north, northwest and southeast, and *tjære* ‘tar’ has it in the northwest, mideast and south of Jutland (Arboe 2001:10f.). Different from this, *suppe* ‘soup’ shows a more coherent area to the west, cf. fig. 6 (Arboe 2001:9, map 2).

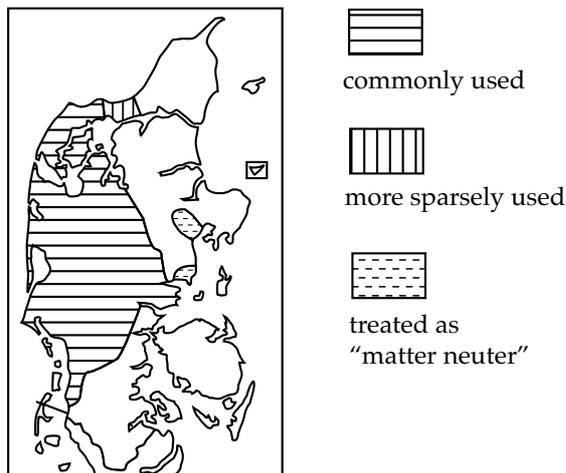


Fig. 6. *Suppe* ‘soup’ as ‘matter plural’, respectively as ‘matter neuter’.

As this shows, *suppe* ‘soup’ is conceived of as a ‘matter plural’ noun in West Jutland almost as sketched in fig. 2, as a common gender noun in most of East and South Jutland, and as a ‘matter neuter’ noun in small parts of Mid East Jutland. Arboe (2001) also lists a number of other collective nouns, e.g. *aske* ‘ash(es)’, *gær* ‘yeast’, *klid* ‘bran’, found in sources from north to south in Jutland (Arboe 2001:12f.). The conclusion is that the generations born up until the mid-1930es have had these nouns as possible collectives, and after that the tradition died out, partly because school teachers did not allow the collective forms in written work (Arboe 2001:14, cf. Noesgaard 1951:66).

In Arboe (2003), these and more nouns designating comminuted solid substances are investigated, e.g. *hakkelse* ‘chaff’, *avne* ‘husks’, *blår* ‘tow’, together with nouns for liquids, e.g. *eddike* ‘vinegar’, *kærnemælk* ‘buttermilk’, and nouns concerning health, e.g. *hoste* ‘cough’, *hikke* ‘hiccup’. One result is that *aske* ‘ashes’ is commonly treated as a collective or ‘matter plural’ noun (Arboe 2003:239, map 5), as seen in e.g. West Jutlandic, *æ å-sk æ kåld* ‘the ash(es) is (are) cold’ which in Standard Danish would give *askene er kolde* provided *aske* could be treated as a plural noun (instead of the correct form, *asken er kold*). Also *hakkelse* ‘chaff’ is rather commonly treated as a ‘matter plural’ (Arboe 2003:240, map 6), presumably because it designates straw cut into (very) small pieces. The sentence, *hvem ska så betå-l di uli*, in Standard Danish orthography *hvem skal så betale de olie* ‘who then is to pay these oil’, illustrates the use of one of the nouns as to liquids (Arboe 2003:237). As to nouns concerning health perhaps the heading ‘matter plural’ is not the most adequate, but systematically the nouns mentioned fit in here, e.g. *hoste* ‘cough’ (Arboe 2003:243, map 8), cf. *nogle slemme hoste* ‘some bad cough’; here both *nogle* and *slemme* are plural forms, but *hoste* is not a plural form of *host* ‘a single cough’ (as the plural form of the count noun *host* is identical to the singular form). Finally, the category *stof-pluralis* ‘matter plural’ is not found in the older stages of Danish, the first instances (concerning *kål* ‘cabbage’, *grød* ‘porridge’) appearing in Høysgaard (1747:156); the ‘matter plural’ thus most probable an innovation, presumably a supplement to the more common category *stof-neutrum* ‘matter neuter’ (Arboe 2003:247).

4. Plural treated as singular neuter

By working through the dictionary material to edit the entry *klæder* ‘clothes’ for the *Jysk Ordbog* earlier this year, I discovered that, rather surprisingly, this plural noun is commonly treated as a singular neuter in many Jutlandic dialects, seemingly in a parallel way to the singular noun *tøj* ‘clothes’ in Standard Danish. Many examples are found of *meget klæder* ‘much clothes’ (instead of *mange klæder* ‘many clothes’), *det klæder* ‘this. SG.NEUT clothes.PL’, and with personal pronouns, e.g. *mit klæder* ‘my.SG.NEUT clothes.PL’, in East Jutland even with the definite neuter form, *klæderet* ‘clothes.PL-the.SG’, in fact an intranslatable form. This is, so to speak, a relation in the opposite direction of the relations discussed in section 2 above: There we had singular nouns with plural characteristics, here we have a plural noun with singular neuter characteristics. The relation is also found with the plural form *sager* ‘things’, ‘matters’, e.g. *meget sager* ‘much things’ (instead of *mange sager* ‘many things’), with noun phrases, *det sager* ‘this things’, *mit sager* ‘my.SG.NEUT things.PL’, in East Jutland (Vendsyssel) also definite singular form *sageret* ‘things.PL-the.SG.NEUT’, all parallel to the forms with *klæder* ‘clothes’. Also compounds with the nouns show the features mentioned, e.g. *meget sengeklæder* ‘much bedclothes’, *mit legesager* ‘my.SG.NEUT toys.PL’. These aspects are described in detail in Arboe (forthcoming) together with instances of other plural nouns used with the adjective *meget* ‘much’, in the singular, e.g. *meget vogne* ‘much carts’ (instead of *mange vogne* ‘many carts’). Further, the pronoun *det* ‘it’ can be used in a ‘collective’ way; in some contexts, *it* refers to a group of animals or people, e.g. *unge mennesker ... det lærer ingenting i dag* ‘young people ... it learns nothing today’ (instead of ‘they learn’ etc.), presumably with a little derogative twist.

5. Concluding remarks

The state of things concerning gender and number shows large differences between Standard Danish and the Jutlandic dialects as have been demonstrated above. Many more examples in the form of sentences could have been cited to give a touch of the ‘real use’ of the nouns in sections 1-3, and as for section 4, new examples are still appearing during the research in the preparation of entries in the *Jysk Ordbog*, the Dictionary of Jutlandic Dialects. The description of uncountable nouns, collectives, mass nouns, ‘matter neuters’, ‘matter plurals’ is – whichever label one may prefer – an ongoing and fascinating affair.

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