The Scandinavian languages, though closely related, display a great degree of variation in terms of how they divide up the noun space into genders. While some studies exist on gender assignment in individual Scandinavian languages (Steinmetz (1985) on Icelandic; Källström (1995, 1996) on Swedish; Trosterud (2001) on Norwegian; Trosterud (2006) on Old Norse), until now no study has taken a comparative approach. In this study, we compare gender assignment in six Scandinavian language varieties that maintain the three-gender system: Old Norse, Old Swedish, older Standard Swedish, and two lesser-known Scandinavian varieties spoken in Sweden - the Jamtlandic dialect of Swedish, and the Elfdalian language. Jamtlandic is spoken in the region of Jämtland in northern Sweden and has a three-gender system that is in the process of changing to a two-gender system (Van Epps & Carling 2017, Van Epps 2013). Elfdalian, spoken in the region of Dalecarlia, has a three-gender system that is more stable. As a point of comparison, we also consider gender in Standard Swedish, which has a two-gender system.

The material for this study consists of 1200 sets of cognates\(^1\) with gender for each of the six languages. We pick out instances in which gender differs across languages, dividing the data into two groups: stable cognates (where the gender is the same across languages) and unstable cognates (where the gender is different). While the overall distribution of the three genders has not changed much from the earlier Scandinavian languages to the modern languages, there has been some variation in the gender of individual lexical items. For instance, around 12% of Old Norse lexical items have changed their gender from Old Norse to Elfdalian, and this number climbs to around 17% for Jamtlandic.

We look mainly at morphological factors for the group of unstable cognates, identifying patterns that explain shifts in gender assignment. In this study we consider two main morphological drivers of change: derivational suffixes, which generally are associated with a particular gender, and inflectional classes. The addition or change of a suffix in a language can cause the gender to change. For instance, Old Norse *úvísleikr* ‘doubt, uncertainty’ is masculine due to its derivational suffix *-leikr*. In contrast, the corresponding word in older Standard Swedish is *ovisshet* and is feminine due to the suffix *-het*, which strongly indicates feminine gender. To investigate the effect of inflectional class, we classify each cognate set according to its original Old Norse/Old Swedish stem class. We then look at the likelihood for nouns in each class to change their gender, in addition to which phonological and morphological conditions could have brought about this change.

Preliminary results indicate that a variety of factors interact to explain the gender changes in our material. We look briefly at phonological factors in order to better explain the changes in gender assignment in our material. For example, word-final /e/ in Jamtlandic is strongly indicative of feminine gender. Many Old Norse masculine and neuter nouns with word-final /i/ have become /e/ in Jamtlandic, and have consequently acquired feminine gender. In addition, our results indicate that the semantics of a noun may influence its likelihood to change gender. For instance, abstract nouns are more likely to change gender than concrete nouns. Finally, we look at loan words (from various sources) versus inherited words, in order

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\(^1\) Some of the nouns in our study are only partial cognates - they may contain different derivational affixes, or in sets with compounds, some languages may have only the head of a compound.
to better understand how gender assignment operates when speakers must assign a gender to new words.

This study, by focusing on the differences in gender assignment among closely related languages, gives us insight into how gender systems change over time. It also allows us to uncover principles of gender assignment that might be difficult to see when looking at a single language. In addition, by investigating a language that has undergone a change from three grammatical genders to two (Swedish), as well as a language currently undergoing the change (Jämtlandic), we can shed light on how various linguistic factors contribute to the loss of grammatical gender.

References