Bliva and varda[*]

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1. Introduction

In this chapter, we discuss the use of the auxiliaries (or copulas) bliva and varda in the Nordic varieties. The phenomenon investigated is slightly different from the other phenomena discussed in NALS Volume 1 in that it is not really a syntactic phenomenon, but rather a lexical one. Bliva and varda are used as auxiliaries in periphrastic passives (followed by a passive participle), but they are also used as main verbs or copulas with the meaning ‘become’ or ‘remain’/’stay’, taking adjectival, nominal, prepositional or participial complements. Varda is an Old Norse auxiliary (varða), which originally was used primarily in the meaning ‘become’, but it was also the auxiliary used in periphrastic passives (see Markey 1969, p. 17). Bliva was borrowed from Middle Dutch (MD) and Middle Low German (MLG) (bleiben/bliven) around mid 14th century, originally mainly in the meaning ‘remain’. As discussed extensively by Markey (1969), the ‘become’ meaning of bleiben/bliven had already developed when the auxiliary spread to Scandinavia. The main reason why bliva spread at the cost of varda, is according to Markey (1969, and see references therein) the fact that the paradigms for varda and the copula vara ‘be’ merged, as the phoneme /ð/ (as in varða) was lost in Mainland Scandinavian. Today, bliva is found all over Scandinavia, with the exception of Iceland and some parts of Eastern Finland. Varda is however also still used in most parts of Scandinavia, at least in the past tense, with the exception of Denmark, and the southern parts of Norway, Sweden and Finland.

2. Results

2.1 Nordic Syntactic Database (NSD)

In the ScanDiaSyn survey, bliva and varda were tested in the past tense, in a construction with a passive participle. The following two sentences were tested in Norway, Sweden and Finland:

(1) Han ble skadd i ulykka. (#427) (Nor.)
   he bliva.past injure.part in accident.def
   ‘He was injured in the accident.’

(2) Han vart skadd i ulykka. (#428) (Nor.)
   he varda.past injure.part in accident.def
   ‘He was injured in the accident.’
The results are shown in Map 1 and Map 2 below:

Map 1: Past tense bliva followed by a passive participle.  
(#427: Han ble skadd i ulykka. ‘He was injured in the accident.’ )  
(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score)
As can be seen in the two maps above, both varda and bliva are to a large degree accepted by the same speakers. As will be made clear in discussion part below, varda is in most parts of Mainland Scandinavia only used in the past tense and sometimes in the perfect tense, while bliva has a complete tense paradigm form most speakers.

In the Faroe Islands, bliva was also tested as an auxiliary in a past tense passive:

(3) Vindeygað bleiv knappliga opnað av onkrum. (#427) (Far.)
window.DEF BLIVA.PAST suddenly open.PART by somethingSG.DAT.
‘The window was suddenly opened by something.’

The results are shown in Map 3 below:
As can be seen, there is quite a lot of variation in the Faroe Islands concerning the acceptance of *bliva* as a passive auxiliary. This will be returned to in section 3.4 below.

3. Discussion

Below I will first discuss Norwegian (3.1) and then Sweden (3.2), Eastern Finland (3.2) and finally Faroese (3.3).

3.1 Norway

In most parts of Norway, only the past tense and the past participial forms of *varda* are available. Many speakers have the following paradigm: *bli* (inf.)- *bli(r)* (pres.) - *vart* (past) – *vorte/værte/vørte* (perfect participle). In most parts of Norway where this paradigm exists, a full *bliva*-paradigm is also used by many speakers. The paradigm for *bliva* has the following form *bli* (inf.)- *bli(r)* (pres.) - *ble(i)* (past) – *blivi(t)/blitt* (perfect participle). Some speakers seem to alternate more or less freely between the two paradigms, while other speakers stick to one of the paradigms.\[1\]

In some parts of Norway, most notably Nord-Trøndelag and Oppland, the regular past and perfect participial forms of *bliva* are completely absent, as can be seen in map 1 above. Also in
the Nordic Dialect Corpus, we find spots in Norway where past or participial uses of *blive* are not attested, for example in southern Nordland (Hattefjell and Sømna), Nord-Trøndelag, Møre og Romsdal (Aure, Surnadal and Todalen), Oppland and Buskerud (Ål). The two maps below show the attested instances of the participial form of *bliva* (map 4) and *varda* (map 5). Note that the participial forms of *blive* and *varda* vary significantly throughout Norway. For *bliva* we commonly find the forms *blivi*, *blive*, and *blitt*, but also forms without /l/, such as *bitt*, and *bett* and *binnt* (mainly in Nordland and southern Troms). For *varda*, forms like *vørte*, *vårtri*, and *værte* are common.

Map 4: Past tense of *bliva* (*blitt/blive/blivi*) in Nordic Dialect Corpus.
Vannebo (1997) reports that infinitival and present tense forms of *varda* still exist in parts of Norway, most notably in Nord-Trøndelag, with the present tense form *val* (see below on the Österbotten dialect). In the Nordic Dialect Corpus, infinitival and present tense forms of *varda* are found only in Western Norway, most notably in Rogaland, Hordaland and Møre and Romsdal (this is in accordance with the patterns reported in Markey 1969). Here, the infinitival form is either *værta/vætta* or *værte/vætte*. The present tense *val*-form is not attested, though a very small number of present tense forms like *varnte/vette/værnte* and *værnt/varrt* can be found. Map 6 below shows the places where infinitival use of *varda* is attested.
It should be noted that only one of the young informants uses the infinitival varda (a young woman from Voss, Hordaland, who consistently uses the form vætta). Similarly, there is only one, or possibly two instances of present tense varda from the younger informants.

3.2. Sweden

As we see in map 1 above, past tense of bliva (blev) is accepted all over the Swedish speaking area, with the exception of Österbotten in Finland. Past tense of varda (vart) is also accepted in most parts, with the exceptions of southern Sweden and southern Finland. However, there is an important difference between Norway and Sweden when it comes to varda. As was discussed in section 3.1, both past tense and the past participial forms of varda are used in large parts of Norway (see map 4 above for the past participle of varda), whereas only the past tense form is found in most parts of Sweden. The most common mixed/suppletive paradigm has the following shape: bli(va) (inf.) – blir (pres.) – vart (past) – blivit/blitt (perf. part.). In general, a complete bli-paradigm exists side by side with the mixed, with blev as the past tense form. In the Nordic Dialect Corpus, we see that many speakers alter between blev and vart.[2] The only area where
we exclusively find vart is the part of Dalarna where Övdalian is spoken. Here we also find the only instances of the perfect participial form of varda – uortet (woman from Evertsberg) in the Swedish parts of the corpus. However, it should be noted that the spoken material from northern Sweden is still fairly small in the Nordic Dialect Corpus, and we can be quite sure that more tense forms of varda can be found in north-western Sweden (in Västerbotten), where we can expect to find a tense-paradigm of varda similar to that in Österbotten, Finland, as discussed below.

3.3. Österbotten

In Österbotten in Finland, we find spots where bliva is not used at all, and where varda has a full tense paradigm: varda (inf.) – var/val (pres.) – vart/vort (past) – vari (perf. part.). Most notably we find this in the Närpes dialect in southern Österbotten, as discussed extensively in Ivars (1988) and Ivars (2010). Markey (1969) reports that this paradigm is found in Nord-Trøndelag in Norway (see also Vannebo 1996) and northern Sweden (Jämtland, Västerbotten and Norrbotten), but it is not clear if this paradigm is still actively used in these areas.

In the Närpes dialect, the semantics of varda is slightly different from bliva/varda in the other parts of Scandinavia. As mentioned in the introduction, bliva was primarily used with meaning ‘remain’/’stay’ when it was first borrowed into Scandinavian, and at that time, varda did not have this meaning. Today in Österbotten, varda cannot mean ‘remain’/’stay’ (this is true for Icelandic verða as well). In the parts of Scandinavia where both varda (in the past (and perfect) tense) and bliva are used, the two verbs are now semantically equivalent, as shown in the following example, where both varda and bliva can be used in the meaning ‘stay’/’remain’:

(4) Bilen blev /vart stående i garaget i flera månader. (Swe.)

‘The car remained (standing) in the garage for several months.’

(5) Han blev /vart borta i flera år. (Swe.)

‘He stayed away for several years.’ (or ‘He ended up being away….’)

In Österbotten, the verb lämna ‘leave’, with an infinitival or locative complement, has to be used to express the meaning in 3 - 4, as shown in 5 - 6 below. Note that lämna cannot be used intransitively in the rest of Scandinavia (see Ivars 2003 for discussion of this construction, examples 5 - 6 from Ivars, p.c.):

(6) Bi:lin lömna ti sta: i gara:sje i fleir moåna. (Öst.)

‘The car remained (standing) in the garage for several months.’

(7) Han lömna bårrt i fläir oår. (Öst.)

‘He stayed away for several years.’ (or ‘He ended up being away….’)
long time; the first written instantiations of *blíva* are from the 15th century, though *blíva* was probably not incorporated into the spoken language until much later. Due to the conservative sociolinguistic situation, speakers have tried to avoid using *blíva* in written language since it is not considered ‘good language’ (see Pauladóttir 2009). *Blíva* seems to have entered the spoken language fairly late, under the influence of Danish. In contrast to the Mainland Scandinavian languages, *verða* is more or less absent in the past tenses in spoken language, though frequent in the present tense. This could be due to the fact that the preterite forms of *vera* ‘be’ and *verða* are hard to separate in spoken language (due to deletion of */ð*/).

Interestingly, Pauladottír notes that the two verbs have slightly different uses. As has been mentioned above, *varda* in Old Norse, Ostrobothnian and Icelandic is not used in the meaning ‘remain’/’stay’. In Faroese however, this meaning is present with *verða*, though, interestingly, absent with *blíva*, which always has an inchoative meaning. This raises interesting questions about grammaticalization patterns, and the relation between tense/aspect and the semantic shift from ‘become’ to ‘stay’/’remain’ (or the other way around, see Markey 1969: 75-84).

**References**


**Web sites:**

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

Nordic Dialect Corpus: [http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html](http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html)

Nordic Syntax Database: [http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html](http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html)

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[1] Helge Sandøy (p.c.) informs me that the mixed/suppletive paradigm is very strong among the younger speakers in Møre and Romsdal.

[2] In a study on the use of *varda* and *bli* in the Swedish city Eskilstuna, Södermanland, as reported on by Eklund (2011), it was shown that *blev* and *vart* were more or less equally frequent, and that half of the informant
categorically used one of the version, while the other half altered between the two version.

[3] The Swedish part of the Nordic Dialect Corpus is at the time of writing much smaller than the Norwegian part, and glosses are sometimes missing and therefore it is harder to exclude the existence of past participial uses of *varda* in other places in Sweden.

[4] There may be some speaker variation here: some speakers report that they have a preference for *blev* in 5, though they find both verbs equally good in 4.