LANGUAGE *REVIVAL* OR LANGUAGE *CONSTRUCTION?*

A Discussion in Support of the Normannique Language Revival

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ABSTRACT • This paper demonstrates that constructed languages offer valuable methods for the reconstruction and revitalization of natural languages, using Normannique as a case study. Normannique is a reconstructed Scandinavian language derived from remnants of Old Norse found in Normandy's place names (France). Since August 2024, it has been the focus of a modest revitalization program, with resources available on a dedicated website and a YouTube channel. The paper first addresses the distinction between constructed and natural languages, arguing that both can exhibit similar degrees of arbitrariness. The classification of a language as constructed or natural is more dependent on the population's attitude towards it rather than its inherent characteristics. The arbitrary nature of language planning can foster a positive attitude among the population, particularly when it enhances the feasibility of revitalization efforts. Consequently, revived languages, despite being classified as natural, often resemble constructed languages in practice. Conventional linguistic methods struggle to incorporate the feasibility criterion essential for language revitalization. In contrast, constructed language projects have developed formal methods specifically designed to address this issue. The paper proposes a mixed method, illustrated through the Normannique language revival, suggesting that language revival projects should focus on acceptable features rather than strictly natural ones. By adopting methods from constructed language projects, revival efforts can benefit significantly, especially in cases where direct linguistic sources are scarce.

KEYWORDS • Language Revival; Language Construction; Language re-creation; Normannique.

0. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to show that constructed languages provide relevant methods for the reconstruction and revitalization of natural languages. I use the example of *Normannique*, a reconstructed Scandinavian language derived from remnants of Old Norse found in Normandy's place names (France) and currently the focus of a modest revitalization program. Since August 2024, this language has had a website with resources (normannique.org) and a youtube channel featuring 166 subscribers (youtube.com/@normannique).

First, I address the difference between constructed and natural languages. I argue that the languages classified in these categories sometimes have the same degree of arbitrariness. It is therefore not so much the arbitrary aspect of language planning as the population's attitude towards the language that defines its classification as a constructed or natural language. In a second step, I show that the arbitrary nature of language planning can lead to a positive attitude among the population when it fulfils a function aimed in particular at improving the feasibility of a

revitalization process. Thus, despite being classified as natural, revived languages are not always distinguishable in practice from constructed languages. Finally, I show that conventional methods of linguistics, unlike the planning methods developed for constructed languages, struggle to take this feasibility criterion into account. I propose an example of a mixed method, which I illustrate using the *Normannique* language revival as an example.

1. The Search for Authenticity

1.1. Natural vs *Constructed Languages*

Following Yaguello (2006), a constructed language has the following properties: "its origin can be dated and its creation can be attributed to a specific individual or group of individuals". However, she also notes that this definition struggles to exclude some languages that are generally considered to be natural.

Among these languages are certain creoles. For example, Pitcairn English can be traced back to a specific event – the mutiny on the Bounty in 1861 – and some of its lexical features are directly attributed to particular crew members. Reconstructed languages present similarly complex cases. While they reflect the extent of knowledge available at a given point about prehistoric languages, they cannot be fully equated with those original languages (de Saussure, 1916, 301). Essentially, they are new theoretical constructs with identifiable authors and publication dates, such as Proto-Indo-European, which was 'created' in 1861 through the work of August Schleicher. Finally, some planned languages also have a clear origin date and a known creator. This is the case with Nynorsk, introduced by Ivar Aasen in 1848, based on a meticulous comparison of Norwegian dialects. Before this, Lillehei (1914, 68) notes that the Norwegian language was widely considered to have been completely supplanted by Danish.

Some might object that these languages are the result of either unconscious processes (e.g. creoles) or a formal method that leaves no room for arbitrariness (e.g. reconstructed languages, planned languages). Thus, at first glance, it is arbitrariness rather than human intervention alone that seems to mark the difference between constructed and natural languages. But even arbitrariness is not enough to classify a language as constructed.

Estonian is an interesting case of a language considered to be natural, but of which a significant number of elements were created from scratch by Johannes Aavik at the beginning of the 20th century. Aavik created hundreds of words *ex nihilo*, and introduced new morphemes and grammatical categories that were absent from spoken Estonian (Saagpakk, 1970; Raag, 1999; Chalvin, 2010; Vihma, 2011). This unique example of language planning shows a high degree of arbitrariness which is not unrelated to the situation of Esperanto, the international auxiliary language proposed by Zamenhof in 1887. What both languages share is that their lexical and grammatical structures are predominantly derived from a single language family, yet both incorporate a few elements constructed *ex nihilo*.

	Standard Estonian	Esperanto
Lexicon	mostly Fennic some *a priori* words	mostly Romance some *a priori* words
Grammar	mostly Fennicsome foreign features	mostly Romancesome foreign features

Table 1

This raises the following question: why is Standard Estonian considered a natural language, while Esperanto is considered a constructed language?[1]

1.2. Naturalness in Language Constructions

In fact, Esperanto, like some other auxiliary languages, can be perceived as a standardization of something that already existed in its time. This point of view appears as early as the 19th century in the work of Lott (1890) and Liptay (1897).

> There are people optimistic enough – and I'm one of them – not only to believe in the possibility and easy realization of this conventional language, but, what's more, to affirm that **it already exists today**… (Liptay, 1897, 4)

This idea was later taken up by scholars such as Guérard and Jespersen.

> The international language already exists – it is latent in the common elements of the various national tongues. **It has to be "discovered, not invented"**. (Guérard, 1922, 135)

> […] the task is not so much to invent a language as **to find out what is already** in international use […] (Jespersen, 1928, 39)

This naturalistic approach thus aimed at defining an international language that would not be the result of any arbitrary choice made by one or more individuals, but of a rational examination.

> […] no new international language (on the *a posteriori* principle) can be different from Neutral, except in the same way as **two good scientific treatises** on the same subject are apt to differ; details of method and presentation may vary, **the essentials remain the same**. (Peano, cited by Guérard, 1922, 139)

Alexander Gode, pioneer of Interlingua, explicitly defines the aim of the naturalistic school as the standardization of a macro-language (Standard Average European), of which the European languages would be dialectal varieties.

> Secundo Whorf le linguas europee es pauco plus que dialectos de un standard commun que es representate per illos omnes. Super iste base interlingua se presenta como le producto del effortio de **extraher ab le varie dialectos le standard** inherente in illos omnes e de effectuar iste extraction sin ulle addition o violation subjective. (Gode, 1959)[2]

Put in these terms, this project is indistinguishable from the standardization of Breton, Occitan, Norwegian and so on.

The dialogue between de Wahl and Jespersen in their respective auxiliary languages – Occidental and Novial – demonstrates in practice the natural intercomprehension of these

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[1] It's worth mentioning, for the non-specialist reader, that both languages now have a speaker community that includes native speakers.

[2] "According to Whorf, European languages are little more than dialects of a common standard represented by all of them. On this basis, Interlingua presents itself as the product of the effort to extract from the various dialects the standard inherent in them all, and to perform this extraction without any subjective additions or violations."

naturalistic languages and, consequently, the fact that these should be defined as mere standardization efforts, not construction ones.

Novial: **Occidental:**
Durant li fine de aprile e li comenso de maye 1935 li   Durant li fine de april e li comensa de mai 1935 li
autore de Occidental E. de Wahl ha visitat li autore   autor de Occidental E. de Wahl ha visitat li autor de
de Novial Otto Jepspersen in Helsingør […]   Novial Dr. Otto Jespersen in Helsingør […]

(de Wahl and Jespersen, 1935)

Table 2

1.3. *Arbitrariness* vs *Acceptance*

So why aren't these languages considered natural? In fact, these debates about whether a language is natural or artificial are also widespread in the context of natural language standardization. Halperin (2012), for instance, highlights similar criticisms directed at Modern Hebrew in the early 20th century. Such debates often involve academic voices. In the case of Cornish, Mills (1999) laments the perceived unnaturalness of one particular standardization,[3] whereas Deacon (2006) argues against equating Cornish with constructed languages. Even Breton, a language with a substantial community of native speakers, has not been immune to such critiques. Hornsby (2005) demonstrates that the standardized form of Breton is frequently criticized for its lack of naturalness and is sometimes explicitly compared to Esperanto.

The notion of naturalness should not be taken literally. It is a property claimed by the supporters of a language variety, while artificiality is denounced by its detractors. It's therefore a notion that reflects people's attitude towards language, rather than its objective status.[4] These debates stem less from the search for a truly natural language than from the search for a compromise acceptable to all potential users.

Such a connection between authenticity and acceptance is also explicitly stated in some discourses concerning auxiliary languages.

> Esperanto es absolutmen **inacceptabil**, pro que li lingue contene mult elementes, quel ne es trovat in **null lingue**. (de Wahl and Jespersen, 1935, 2)[5]

> Such a language would indeed be very **acceptable**, if it **existed**. (Liptay, 1897, 4)

In short, we should speak less of naturalness than of a *perception of naturalness*. This perception is shaped by people's attitudes and is not directly tied to the degree of arbitrariness in the language construction.

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[3] More specifically, Mills aims to point out errors in the reconstruction of the lexicon and phonology of Kernewek Kemmyn.

[4] A participant of the conference, John Hutchinson (University of Surrey), rightly pointed out that the notion of naturalness refers to something more prescriptive than descriptive, and can therefore be compared to the notion of correctness. This point is also supported by a reviewer of this article, who sees standardization and construction as equal.

[5] "Esperanto is absolutely unacceptable, as the language contains many elements not found in any other language."

As a matter of fact, the very distinction between "artificial" and "natural," between "dead" and "living" languages, is to a very great extent **arbitrary**. (Guérard, 1922, 73)

Rather than using the terms 'natural' or 'constructed' languages, which imply a difference in nature, it's better to speak of 'natlangs' and 'conlangs' as two socio-linguistic categories that designate different degrees of acceptance. The success of a language (re)vitalization project therefore depends on the following constraint:

Acceptability Constraint: A successful language should be accepted as a medium of self-representation by the group using it.

The confusion between the role of arbitrariness and acceptance in the definition of constructed languages is rather to be expected, given that this constraint would generally imply a low degree of individual choice. But I'll show that the acceptance of a language also depends on the context in which arbitrariness occurs.

2. Purism *vs* Compromise

2.1. Language Revival and Hybridity

Although accepted by the group that uses it, a natlang is not necessarily free from arbitrariness. We've already looked at Estonian, but there's a whole category of languages – revived languages – that share with conlangs the existence of a specific creator and a specific date of creation. The best-known of these languages, Hebrew and Cornish, are perfect examples. Hebrew was reborn in 1882 under the impetus of Eliezer Ben Yehuda, while the revitalization of Cornish was initiated by Henry Jenner in 1904. In fact, there is a historical parallel between revived languages and conlangs. Like conlangs, revived languages took off at the crossroads of the 19th and 20th centuries and found a second wind at the end of the 20th century. This parallel between them is all the more striking in that Esperanto and modern Hebrew were both intended to be a vehicular language for the Jewish community (Korĵenkov, 2005).

It is common to think of revived languages as the resurrection of a dead language. But no revived language is identical to the target language. They are all heavily influenced by the new speakers' mother tongue. Zuckermann (2009), for instance, considers Modern Hebrew to be a hybrid containing a Semitic lexicon and structures that he attributes to the aforementioned Standard Average European. What, then, is the difference between Hebrew and Interlingua as hybrids?

We can speculate that the difference is one of intention. Whereas the hybridization that gives rise to Interlingua is entirely conscious, the hybridization that gives rise to Modern Hebrew would be largely unconscious. But some innovations in Modern Hebrew are conscious, ideological choices, such as retaining an Ashkenazi pronunciation of certain letters to westernize the language (Zuckermann, 2020, 18) or retaining a simpler tense system (Amery, 2000, 165).

2.2. Language Reclamation **vs** Re-creation

Language revivalists vary in their willingness to accept hybridization. We can distinguish two main approaches:
- Language **reclamation**, which aims to revive a language in its original form.
- Language **re-creation**, which aims to consciously adapt the target language to the skills of the new speakers.

Thieberger (2002) defines language re-creation from the description of a Quileute[6] revival program described by Powell (1973). Noting the failure to learn this language with its morphology far removed from English, the members of this program decided to simplify the language by simply replacing English words with Quileute words.

Give me half that candy
Give me half that **lape'**
Hes me half **sa' lape'**
Hes me **tala'a sa' lape'**

Other examples of language re-creation projects include Wiradjuri[7], Esselen[8] (Reid, 2010) and Ngarrindjeri[9] (Amery, 2001), which are sometimes in competition with another revitalization approach.

In the aforementioned examples, changes come 'from below' (the community of new speakers). But they can also be implemented proactively by the leader of the revival project. In the case of Kaurna (South Australia), Rob Amery introduces a tense system close to English, even though he knows that this system is unlikely in a Pama-Nyungan language. Such arbitrary simplifications are proposed with the explicit aim of increasing the chances of success of the linguistic revitalization project.

> However, **it may be preferable to ignore this complexity** and opt for a simple and regular distinction between past, present and future tense. This would certainly enable easier acquisition of Kaurna. (Amery, 2000, 165)

Palawa Kani (Tasmania) is another example of language re-creation 'from above'. As there were no direct sources of the many languages spoken on the island, the initiators of this project had to reconstruct a single language from the few wordlists compiled by Westerners in the 19th century (Berk, 2017). The very many gaps in the sources are filled by speculative reasoning, which is assumed as such, and by combining attested lexemes to produce new ones. This process is quite similar to that of Esperanto.

Revived languages can therefore be just as arbitrary as conlangs (Romaine, 2011). They are not, however, classified as such because of the global acceptance of their potential users. It can also be noticed that language re-creation is adopted if and only if it is considered unavoidable, either because new speakers fail to learn the language, or because the language cannot be reconstructed in its original form.

2.3. A Continuum of Arbitrariness

From the examples given above, we can establish different degrees of arbitrariness according to three criteria: intentionality (is the change conscious or not), coercion (is the change avoidable or not) and commonness (is the change *a priori* or not). In the schematic table below, Modern

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[6] Quileute is a Chimakuan language formerly spoken in Washington state, USA.
[7] Wiradjuri is a Pama-Nyungan language spoken in New South Wales, Australia.
[8] Esselen is an isolate formerly spoken in California, USA.
[9] Ngarrindjeri is a Pama-Nyungan language spoken in South Australia.

Hebrew exhibits fewer deliberate changes than Palawa Kani; Palawa Kani involves more necessary changes than Kaurna; and Kaurna contains fewer *a priori* forms than Estonian.

CONCIOUS	AVOIDABLE	A PRIORI	NATLANG	CONLANG
—	—	—	Modern Hebrew	
+	—	—	Palawa kani	Interlingua
+	+	—	Kaurna	Esperanto
+	+	+	Estonian	Quenya

Table 3

There may be no clear limit between these different categories. This classification therefore takes the form of a continuum in which natlangs tend to rank lower and conlangs higher.
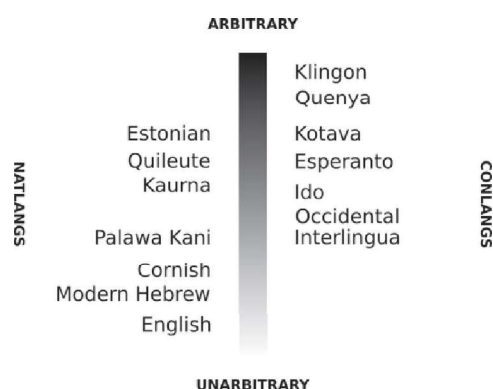

Figure 1

Despite this distribution, arbitrariness alone cannot separate natlangs from conlangs, since a similar degree of arbitrariness can be found in the languages of both categories. It can therefore be said that the acceptance of a language depends not only on its arbitrariness, but rather on the relationship between arbitrariness and the feasibility of the project:

Feasibility Constraint: A group should be able to use the language it claims for itself.

This second constraint implies that arbitrary changes that serve a function, such as simplifying the language to make it easier to appropriate, are deemed acceptable.

The adoption of an objective method is therefore necessary to find the balance between acceptability and feasibility that ensures the success of a linguistic (re)vitalization project. However, unlike conlangs, revived languages are generally based on historical linguistic methods that do not take the feasibility constraint into account.[10]

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[10] This is not to say that language revival programs never take the feasibility principle into account, but they do not define a formal method for doing so.

3. Unconventional Methods

3.1. Reconstruction and Re-construction

It's probably no coincidence that conlangs and revived languages flourished after the first reconstructions of Proto-Indo-European. The methods of comparative grammar have had a strong impact on these two categories of languages.

The original aim of comparative grammar was to reconstruct prehistoric languages by rigorously comparing the forms and structures derived from them. For example, the regular correspondence between Latin /p/ and Germanic /f/ makes it possible to envisage a common ancestor of these two phonemes and, by repeating the same pattern, to reconstruct the primitive form of words.

French	English	PIE
père	father	$ph_2t\acute{e}r$
pied	foot	$p\acute{o}ds$
plein	full	$plh_1n\acute{o}s$

Table 4

Assuming that changes are regular and therefore predictable, this method makes up for the lack of written sources, which is often an obstacle to the revitalization of languages. Comparative grammar was explicitly used for Cornish (Mills, 1999), Old Prussian (Szatkowski, 2021), Kaurna (Amery, 2000) and Nynorn (Korobzow, 2016) among others.

But this method is also used in a devious way in the field of conlangs. First, proponents of international auxiliary languages have traditionally compared vocabulary lists (Lott, 1890; Peano, 1909; de Wahl, 1925), not to establish genealogical relationships or reconstruct a common ancestor, but rather to highlight convergence and construct a unifying "roofing" language. Second, with the advent of the Internet, we have witnessed the rise of linguistic fictions aimed at imagining what a language might have looked like if it had survived in a given context. The best-known example is Brithenig, a hypothetical Romance language influenced by Welsh.

> Afef ty lle erfid gwerfent
> ke nu h-afrewan parlad esperanto,
> Afef ty lle erfid gwerfent
> o-dd afef ty lle ysperad sulfent?
> (Smith, 2007)

A similarly unconventional use of comparative grammar can also be found in the domain of natural languages. de Gila-Kochanowski (1994) proposed an analogous approach for Romani, aiming to "resanskritize" the language by substituting borrowings with Sanskrit-derived words, evolved according to the same phonetic laws as the rest of the lexicon. For instance, he suggested introducing the word *akran* ('raid'), derived from the Sanskrit *akramana*.

This devious way of using comparative grammar confirms that the search for authenticity is actually a search for acceptability. Indeed, the construction of new forms is arbitrary, but it often aims to flatter speakers' sense of belonging to a specific ethno-linguistic group. Comparative grammar methods therefore serve above all to satisfy the constraint of acceptability (Enguehard, 2014).

3.2. *Taking Feasibility into Account*

Unlike auxiliary language projects such as Esperanto, language revival projects usually do not take the feasibility criterion into account. When they do, it's only on an informal basis, with no explicit feasibility criteria.

> I **tend** not to worry about pronunciation **too much**. It is more important to encourage people to use the language. (Amery, 2000, 165)

Conversely, conlangs use methods that are repeated from one project to the next. The most formal is that formulated for Interlingua. This method consists in "choosing the most regular form or the simplest grammatical structures among those attested in a sample of Romance languages" (Gode and Blair, 1951, x). The exact same method was used by Parke (2011) to create the Germanic equivalent of Interlingua. The advantage of such a method is that it satisfies both the feasibility and the acceptability constraints by avoiding arbitrary choices.

So, rather than inventing forms, conlang projects invented a method. I show that there are at least some cases where linguists would be well advised to use it.

3.3. *The Case of* Normannique *language*

Normandy (France) presents a striking paradox between identity and linguistic reality. While Normans strongly identify with the figure of the Viking, their mother tongue is mostly a Romance language, French (Enguehard, to appear). This situation would seemingly provide an ideal foundation for a linguistic revival project. However, no direct sources exist for the language spoken by the first Norman invaders. The closest related varieties include Old Icelandic, Old Norwegian, Old Danish, and Old Swedish. Among these, Old Icelandic is the most extensively attested, but it poses significant challenges for revitalization: its grammatical structures are vastly different from French; it is already deeply associated with Icelanders; and it is the most distant from the dialect historically spoken in Normandy. Evidence from Norman toponymy and dialect suggests a connection to an archaic form of Old Danish, which, though more relevant, is far less documented than Old Icelandic (Adigard des Gautries, 1954).

The undefined nature of the target language to be revived opens the door to considerable arbitrariness. Consequently, several isolated and marginal attempts have emerged, each adopting markedly different approaches. The language reclamation approach is exemplified by a campaign in the 1980s to promote the so-called "language of the Vikings" – mistakenly equated with modern Icelandic – published in the regionalist magazine Heimdal. The language re-creation approach is evidenced by a self-published work deposited at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (de Warenghien, 2010). More recently, examples of initiatives to appropriate Norwegian have surfaced online (Association Normande et Normannique, 2021), thus reflecting a language adoption approach (for a discussion of this concept, see Tsunoda, 2006, p. 213).

These examples form a group of potential candidates who meet the same definition. But without a formal method, such diverse projects have little chance of satisfying both the feasibility and acceptability constraints. I therefore propose to use the methods introduced by Brithenig and Interlingua to derive a language that formally corresponds to the Normans' linguistic skills, heritage and identity: *Normannique* (Adigard des Gautries, 1954). This method is based on two principles:

> **First Principle:** Each target language element must be attested in the group of related languages.

This principle mimics the method of Interlingua and aims to satisfy the acceptability

constraint by confining the *Normannique* language to forms and structures that exist in Scandinavian languages.

> **Second Principle:** Unless it violates the first principle, each element of the target language should conform to the evolution of the new speakers' mother tongue.

This principle mirrors the Brithenig method by simulating language contact.

Its goal is to satisfy the feasibility constraint by adapting the Scandinavian language spoken in medieval Normandy to the linguistic skills of the region's present-day inhabitants. In practice, this approach involves *Normannique* adopting phonetic shifts observed in Scandinavian elements that are found in local toponyms and loanwords, provided that similar shifts are also documented in Scandinavian languages.

Following this method, changes are considered as acceptable when they bring the target language closer to the structures of the mother tongue without departing from the attributes expected by the potential new speakers.
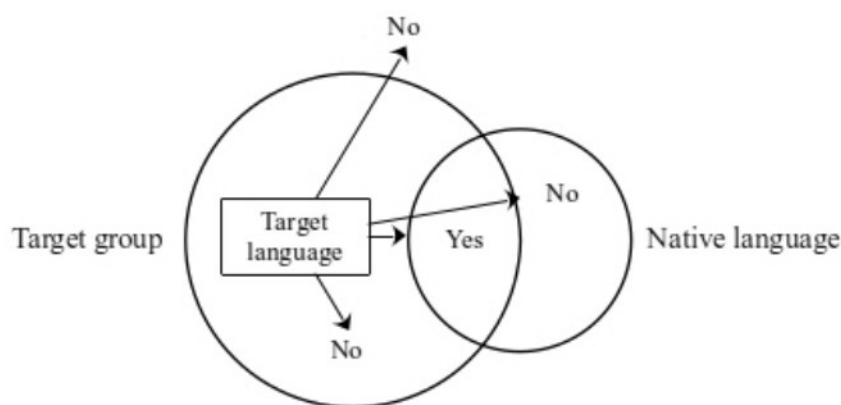

Figure 2

For example, the sentence 'the dog' is very different in French (*le chien*) and Old Icelandic (*hundrinn*). But French properties are documented in Scandinavian varieties: the loss of the nominative case is observed in Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish, while the anteposed definite article is attested in the Jutlandic dialect of Danish (Lyngby, 1858).[11] These changes are therefore theoretically acceptable, as they bring the Vikings' language closer to French without falling outside the scope of Scandinavian languages.

	NOUN		ARTICLE	
N	hund	r	in	n
A	hund		in	n
G	hund	s	in	s
D	hund	i	n	um

→   /dəʔɔ̃d̃/ **den hund**

Figure 3

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[11] Regarding phonetic features, the loss of final /n/ in definite articles, the dropping of initial /h/, and vowel

On the other hand, the distinction between 'his dog' and 'her dog', which is absent in French (*son chien*), is preserved in all Scandinavian varieties. While implementing such a feature would enhance the feasibility of revitalization, it cannot be adopted without violating the principle that ensures the language's acceptability.

hundr hans   →   /ʔansʔɔ̃d̃/ **hans hund**
hundr hennar   →   /ʔensʔɔ̃d̃/ **hennes hund**

Figure 4

In summary, this mixed method enables the anticipation of influences from the new learners' mother tongue by defining a language that embodies both the core characteristics of Scandinavian languages and the specific features of the Scandinavian linguistic heritage in Normandy. I have shown that the lack of direct linguistic sources fails to provide a robust framework for the emergence of a common standard, making an autonomous adaptation to the mother tongue unlikely. This underscores the necessity of a formal method to reconstruct a language that maximizes the chances of revival by meeting both acceptability and feasibility constraints.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that there is no fundamental distinction between language construction and language revival, other than the criterion of language acceptance. Language revival projects should seek *acceptable* features, not *natural* features. Indeed, I've shown that naturalness is not really an objective characteristic, but rather one that reflects an attitude towards language. In cases where direct linguistic sources are absent, these projects would greatly benefit from explicitly considering the feasibility constraint. Conventional linguistic methods offer little assistance in this context, as they focus on identifying natural changes rather than acceptable ones. By contrast, conlang projects have developed formal methods specifically designed for this purpose. Why not adopt them?

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