

DESCRIPTIVE GENITIVES OR ADJECTIVES? HEAD SHIFT WITH *SLAGS* AND *SORTS* IN THE WORKS AND LETTERS OF AUGUST STRINDBERG

Caroline Morris

Abstract

This paper looks at Strindberg's work from a linguistic point of view and tries to establish whether the author was a rebel or a conformist when it came to grammar. Her case study focuses on head shift in phrases with *slags* ("kind of") and *sorts* ("sort of") in Strindberg's writings. Both these words are generally preceded by a determiner and followed by a noun. In a corpus investigation that looks at gender agreement between the determiner, *slags* or *sorts* and the noun is established to what degree head shift occurred in Strindberg's work and private letters. What patterns emerge in Strindberg's use of *slags* and *sorts*? Is his use of language closer to that of his contemporaries or to modern usage? And was Strindberg influenced by the prescriptivist guidelines of the early twentieth century?

Keywords

Headshift, adjectives, descriptive genitives, degree modifiers, prescriptivism

Introduction

The complete works of August Strindberg and some of his letters are available in the annotated online corpus Språkbanken. This means Strindberg lends himself very well for linguistic research into both his private and literary use of language. To mark the one hundredth anniversary of his death in 1912 the focus of this paper will be on Strindberg. It will look at the way he combines *slags* ("kind") and *sorts* ("sort") with determiners and nouns and how his use of the constructions compared to that of his contemporaries. The Swedish approximative constructions [ett slags NP]⁴² ("a kind of NP") and [en sorts NP] ("a sort of NP") both contain a descriptive genitive: *slags* is the genitive of the neuter noun *slag* "kind" and *sorts* is the genitive of the noun *sort* "sort" which has common gender. In the examples in (1) the gender of the preceding determiner (*ett/en* "a") corresponds to the gender of *slags/sorts*.

⁴² NP stands for Noun Phrase

- (1a) *ett slags brott*
 a- NEUT kind- NEUT.GEN crime-NEUT
 “a kind of crime”
Likt och olikt I-II
 1884-1890 [2003, 14]
- (1b) *ett* *slags* *leksskola*
 a- NEUT kind-NEUT. GEN playschool-COMM
 “a kind of playschool”
Bland franska bönder
 1889 [1985, 57]
- (1c) *en* *sorts* *ballong*
 a- COMM sort-COMM.GEN balloon-
 COMM
 “a kind of balloon”
Markurells i Wadköping
 Hjalmar Bergman 1919
- (1d) *en* *sorts* *medlidande*
 a- COMM sort-COMM.GEN compassion-NEUT
 “a kind of compassion”
Markurells i Wadköping
 Hjalmar Bergman 1919

In other cases however, headshift has taken place and these genitive forms have developed into indeclinable adjectives used as degree modifiers. The head of a phrase is the word that determines the gender, number and type of the phrase (noun phrase, verb phrase etc.). When head shift takes place the word which was the head of phrase passes on this role to another word. This is apparent from the examples in (2) where the determiner agrees with the following noun instead of with *slags/sorts*. The nouns *stämgaffel* and *brev* are the heads.

- (2a) *en* *slags* *stämgaffel*
 a- COMM kind-NEUT.GEN tuning fork-COMM
 “a kind of tuning fork”
I vårbrytningen
 1880-1881 [1981, 66]
- (2b) *ett* *sorts* *brev*
 a-NEUT sort- COMM.GEN letter-NEUT
 “a kind of letter”

This development from descriptive genitive to indeclinable adjective is not specific to *slags* and *sorts*. It has also taken place for *gammaldags* “old-fashioned”, *medelålders* “middle-aged” and *stackars* “poor” (Delsing, 1991, 21; Norde, 1997, 73f). In this essay I will focus on Strindberg’s use of *slags* and *sorts* compared to other 19th century authors and to usage in newspaper texts from the 20th and 21st century (also available through Språkbanken). A second research question concerns the differences between *slags* and *sorts*. Finally I want to investigate whether there is a relationship between the gender of the noun used and the choice for either *slags* or *sorts*, i.e. whether *slags* occurs above average with neuter nouns and *sorts* above average with common gender nouns.

Theoretical preliminaries

Swedish nouns are assigned either common (masc/fem) or neuter gender. The large majority of nouns (72% at token-level (Allén, 1971, 1079)) have common gender. This preference for common gender is also apparent in the assignment of gender to English loanwords, where ninety percent is assigned common gender (Kilarski/Krynicky, 2005, 242). Gender is marked on indefinite articles (*en/ett*), definite articles (*den/det*) and adjectives in the indefinite singular. *Sorts* and *slags* are the genitive forms of *sort* (common) and *slag* (neuter). Where *slags/sorts* occur as descriptive genitives an agreement relation exists with the determiner: regardless of the following noun’s gender, *slags* is preceded by a neuter determiner and *sorts* by a common gender determiner. However as was apparent from the examples in (2) *slags/sorts* also occur as undeclinable adjectives, where the determiner agrees with the noun. When the noun is of the same gender as *slags/sorts* it is not possible to tell which word the determiner agrees with. In a small number of these cases a determiner is used that agrees with neither *slags/sorts* nor the following noun. In written language this is extremely rare and it is by no means generally accepted.

Slags and *sorts* can be classified as Degree Modifiers, English examples of which are: *rather*, *very*, *somewhat*, *kind of*. They are used to make fine distinctions in degree by toning down or up an adjective or adverb, but can also occur with nouns and verbs. The type of Degree Modifier (Traugott, 2008, 31) that *slags/sorts* develop into is approximator. Like their English equivalents (*kind of* and *sort of*), *slags/sorts* denote a “member of class not possessing full characteristics of the class” and can “scale their heads up or down on a scale of closeness to a prototype” (Traugott, 2008, 25ff). Semantically these English and Swedish Degree Modifiers are very similar but they differ in their distribution. The English constructions show more resemblance to other Degree Modifiers such as *rather*, *very* and *thoroughly* than the Swedish equivalents. Although *kind of* and *sort of* were originally combined with noun phrases, they are now also used with adjectives and adverbs (*kind of glad*, *sort of disappointed*), with verbs (*kind of expect*, *sort of crawled*) and even as free adverbs (*Do you like it? – Kind of*), and a preceding determiner is no longer required. In

Swedish it is still very much the case that *slags/sorts* are combined with noun phrases. In informal language *slags/sorts* can be combined with adjectives (*slags tyst* “kind of quiet”, *sorts kär* “kind of in love (WWW)) and this relatively new development is to be expected as the next step of head shift according to Traugott (2008, 31).

The approximative constructions [ett slags NP] and [en sorts NP] can be schematified further as [DET NP1-s [NP2]]. Here *slags* or *sorts* (NP1) is the head of the phrase as they govern number and gender agreement with the determiner (DET)⁴³; head shift has not taken place. When head shift does take place, *slags/sorts* no longer agree with the determiner. As degree modifiers they are modifying NP2 and can therefore not be the head. In these cases NP2 is the head of the entire noun phrase and agrees with the determiner and any adjectives used. The differences are shown schematically below.

no head shift		head shift
[DET _i NP1 _i -s [NP2]]	>	[DET _j [NP1-s] NP2 _j]
head = NP1	>	head = NP2
descriptive genitive	>	adjective/degree modifier

Historical development and acceptance of head shift with *slags/sorts*

If we look back to the Middle Ages, neither *slag* nor *sort* with the meaning “kind of, type of” is found in genitive form (Nordberg, 1966, 63). *Sort* does not appear as a descriptive genitive until the beginning of the 19th century and *slag* only occurs with this meaning in prepositional phrases: *siex orna aff thriggia handa slagh* (“six snakes of three kinds”) (*Själens Tröst* 1407)⁴⁴. Instead of *slags/sorts* the native word *kyn* was used as a descriptive genitive and combined with a determiner marked for genitive case: *thäs kyns nat oc mörk* “this kind-GEN night and darkness” (*Pentateuchparafrazen* 1330). *Slag* was borrowed from German during the Older New Swedish period (1526-1732) and replaced *kyn* (Nordberg, 1966, 66): *ett slagz papiir* (1582), *een slags Triakelse* (1589), *all slags Wijn ok Öhl* (1672), *åthskilligt slagz Wildt* (1691), *en serledes slags sijk* (1702), *en annar slags Gudz wilje* (1709). By this time concordial case had largely been lost (Norde, 1997, 139), which is why genitive case is not marked on the determiners. Although we already see cases of headshift in 1589, 1702 and 1709, it has not always been acceptable to let determiners agree with nouns instead of with *slags/sorts*. In the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century grammars of Swedish do not encourage this use. In Dalin’s *Ordbok öfver det svenska språket* (1850-1855) no examples of this type are given under the lemmas for *slag* and *sort*. Sundén in his dictionary (1892, *slag*) explicitly advises to avoid the construction [en slags N_{comm}]. Linder (1886, 92) refers to the practice of combining *slags* with a common determiner as “missbruk” (“erroneous use”) and believes it to be the result of a

⁴³ Note that the abbreviation DET for determiner is not equivalent to the Swedish definite article *det*.

⁴⁴ This and following examples are taken from Nordberg (1966). He does not provide sources.

contamination of *ett slags* and *en sorts*. By the first half of the 20th century the construction is judged less severely. Malmstedt (1939, 42f) still regards it as incorrect but gives citations of *en slags* from scientific papers and the work of esteemed authors to show that it is in general use. He also discusses the use of a plural determiner when the noun following *slags/sorts* is plural, which occurs both in Swedish (*dessas slags besök* “these sort of visitors”), and in English with *sort* (*those sort of people*). In this paper I will not be looking at these cases of headshift as the Swedish Ø-plural for neuter words is a complicating factor, as shown in (3) below

(3)	<i>ett</i>	<i>slags</i>	<i>husdjur</i>
	a- NEUT	kind-NEUT. GEN	pet-NEUT.SG / NEUT.PL
	“a kind of pet”/“a kind of pets”		

Hans nåds testamente
Hjalmar Bergman 1910

Malmstedt (1939, 42) rules out the theory of contamination by *en sorts* on the grounds that *sorts* is far less common than *slags*, that *ett sorts* also occurs, and that Danish and Norwegian always combine *slags* with *en*. Nordberg (1966, 62) also rules out contamination by *en sorts*, adding the argument that the form *sorts* dates from the beginning of the 19th century while [DET_{COMM.} slags N_{COMM.}] was already in use before that. He states that there is a difference in acceptability of head shift with *slags* and with *sorts* (the latter being less acceptable), and puts this down to their different historical developments (1966, 62). Nordberg adheres to the rule of determiners agreeing with *sorts/slags* correct and is of the opinion that more and more language users are following this rule. His recommendation is to accept [DET_{COMM.} slags N_{COMM.}] in colloquial language but to let determiners agree with *slags* in more formal use and with *sorts* in all uses. Wellander (1948, 771f., 1973, 34) follows the same guidelines as Malmstedt and Nordberg, noting that “förskjutningar i syftningen” (shifts in reference) occur and that *ett sorts* and *en slags* are abundantly used in colloquial language, but recommending the use of *en sorts/ett slags* elsewhere. According to Språkrådets current guidelines both [DET_{COMM.} slags_{NEUT} N_{COMM.}] and [DET_{NEUT.} sorts_{COMM.} N_{NEUT.}] are “wholly acceptable” and Nygren (2003) and Hultman (2003, 219f) also accept both forms, be it that neuter determiners are mentioned first for *slags* and common ones first for *sorts*. Teleman (1999, 84) only allows headshift with *slags* and not with *sorts*, arguing that *en slags* and *någon slags* are lexicalised units with internal inflection while *ett sorts* and *något sorts* are not. Svanlund (2005, 108) accepts [DET_{COMM.} slags_{NEUT} N_{COMM.}] and [DET_{NEUT.} sorts_{COMM.} N_{NEUT.}] and puts the development of *en/vilken/någon slags* down to other descriptive genitives such as *kvarts* “a quarter of”, *liters* “a liter” where the determiner does agree with the following noun, and to *all* in *all slags* which is an old plural neuter form (2005, 107). This would mean *en, vilken, någon, den* and *sådan* where all formed analogously. In Nordberg (1966, 67f) we find an alternative theory, based on the fact that *ens, alls* and *hvilkins* are Old Swedish neuter genitive forms. Nordberg

argues that these forms would have been recognised as neuter genitive by language users to start, but gradually case marking on determiners disappeared and the /s/ on *en(s)*, *all(s)* and *hvilkin(s)* was usurped by the -s following it on *slags*. *Någon*, *den* and *sådan* would have been formed analogously, and more plausibly as they are less frequent than *en* and *all*. Knowing that *slag* was neuter and not recognising the old genitive forms, but rather seeing *en*, *all* and *vilken* as common gender, language users began to introduce *ett*, *allt* and *vilket*. This theory is supported by the fact that *allsköns* is derived from *alls-kyns* “all kinds, all sorts” where the genitive /s/ on *all* has survived. Nordberg however does not give a time frame for this development and none of the many examples presented for the use of *slags* in Svenska Akademiens Ordbog (SAOB) involve case marking on the preceding determiner. Neither does this theory explain how a form such as *ett slagz papiir* “a-NEUT kind-NEUT.GEN of paper-NEUT” could occur as early as it did. It is thus not clear when or why *en slags* came into use. Further research into the Old Swedish forms would be necessary to answer this question.

Method and material

The online corpus Språkbanken is a very useful tool for investigating the use of *slags* and *sorts* and any changes over time. This corpus contains Strindberg’s novels, dramas and letters and these will be the focus of this analysis. I will also make a comparison to a number of other sub-corpora, namely the novels of other authors from the nineteenth and twentieth century and newspaper texts from the twentieth and twenty-first century. The table below shows the text type, period covered, size and the number of occurrences of *slags* and *sorts* in each sub-corpus.

sub-corpus	text type	period	tokens	<i>slags</i>	<i>sorts</i>
Äldre svenska romaner	older Swedish novels	1834-1940	4.347.449	508	104
Strindbergs brev	August Strindberg’s letters	1861-1909	1.507.917	83	1
Strindbergs romaner och dramer	August Strindberg’s novels and plays ⁴⁵	1870-1912	4.308.015	463	14
ORDAT Svenska Dagbladets årsbok	periodical	1925-1945, 1948, 1958	1.525.484	103	12
Press65	various newspapers	1965	1.120.332	199	59
Press76	various newspapers	1976	1.351.243	135	42
Hufvudstadsbladet	newspaper texts -	1999	10.623.991	500 ⁴⁶	195

⁴⁵ Two novels written by Strindberg in French and later translated into Swedish by others have been excluded (*Inferno* and *Ett dåres försvarstal*), because they do not tell us anything about Strindberg’s use of Swedish

⁴⁶ First 500 of 1298 occurrences

1999	Finlandic				
GP09	newspaper Göteborgs- Posten	2009	17.308.784	500 ⁴⁷	499

Table 1 Sub-corpora from Språkbanken used for analysis

All noun phrases containing *slags* and *sorts* were extracted from these sub-corpora. Because the focus lies on agreement relation between determiner and noun, phrases with no distinction between common and neuter gender marked on the determiner were excluded. This is the case where *vad för* (“what for”), *för* (“for”), *(h)vad* (“what”), *varje* (“every”), *alla* (“all”), *flera* (“many”), *olika* (“various”), *samma* (“same”) or numerals precede *slags/sorts*. The determiners where gender is marked and which are therefore relevant here are given and glossed in Table 2.

common	neuter	gloss
<i>all</i>	<i>allt</i>	“all”
<i>den</i>	<i>det</i>	“the”
<i>denna</i>	<i>detta</i>	“this”
<i>den där</i>	<i>det där</i>	“that”
<i>en</i>	<i>ett</i>	“a”
<i>någon, nån</i>	<i>något, nåt</i>	“some/any”
<i>sådan</i>	<i>sådant</i>	“such”
<i>vilken</i>	<i>vilket</i>	“which”

Table 2 Determiners marked for gender found in corpus

The frequency of head shift with *slags* can be determined by comparing the number of occurrences with a common gender determiner and a common gender noun to the overall number of occurrences with a common gender noun. The same can be done for *sorts* but with neuter determiners and nouns.

Head shift with *slags/sorts*

Tables 3 and 4 contain the results for headshift in the different sub-corpora. They show 1) the number of times *slags/sorts* occurs with a determiner and a singular noun, 2) the number of times *slags(/sorts)* occurs with a common gender (/neuter) noun, 3) the number of times the determiner and the singular noun agree with each but not with *slags/sorts* (=head shift). The final column (4) gives the frequency of head shift relative to the total number of cases where it could have occurred.

⁴⁷ First 500 of 1261 occurrences

<i>SLAGS</i>	1	2	3	4
sub-corpus	<i>slags</i> + singular noun	<i>slags</i> + common gender noun	head shift (n)	head shift %
Older Swedish novels	394	260	31	12%
Strindberg's letters	57	32	15	47%
Strindberg's works	279	189	40	21%
ORDAT årsbok	62	41	2	5%
Press65	158	107	11	9%
Press76	97	63	26	41%
Hufvudstadsbladet	341	247	74	30%
GP09	390	281	83	30%

Table 3. Absolute and relative frequencies for head shift with *slags*

<i>SORTS</i>	1	2	3	4
sub-corpus	<i>sorts</i> + singular noun	<i>sorts</i> + neuter noun	head shift (n)	head shift %
Older Swedish novels	89	11	3	27%
Strindberg's letters	1	0	0	-
Strindberg's works	2	0	0	-
ORDAT årsbok	11	3	0	0%
Press65	48	6	1	17%
Press76	31	5	1	20%
Hufvudstadsbladet	137	23	7	30%
GP09	402	63	16	25%

Table 4. Absolute and relative frequencies for head shift with *sorts*

At first glance these tables tell us that head shift with *sorts* was very uncommon until fifty years ago, except in the sub-corpus of older Swedish novels. *Sorts* is now catching up with *slags* in relative terms if not in absolute numbers. The lower frequency of head shift with *sorts* can be explained by the low frequency of *sorts* overall and especially with neuter nouns, and by the higher share of common gender nouns in Swedish, which may make language users more inclined to change from neuter to common gender (leading to head shift with *slags*) than the other way around (leading to head shift with *sorts*). The data for the sub-corpus of older Swedish novels is rather perplexing. Here, head shift with *sorts* is relatively more frequent than with *slags*. This is probably a statistical blip as the total frequencies for *slags* and *sorts* are so very different. Also, there is much variation within this sub-corpus: Frederika Bremer and Carl Jonas Love Almqvist, writing around 1840, often use head shift, whereas most of the later authors use it very infrequently (Agnes von Krusentjerna, Martin Koch and Viktoria Benedictsson) or not at all (Karin Boye and Selma Lagerlöf). Lumping these authors together gives a rather distorted picture. *Sorts* does not occur with a singular noun until 1897 and even after that head shift is

even more sporadic than with *slags*. Strindberg does not use *sorts* with neuter nouns, so no results can be given for head shift with *sorts*, but with *slags* it is abundant, in his early work and letters in particular. Although the absolute numbers are small, there is a clear development in Strindberg's letters (Table 5) and work (Table 6): head shift becomes steadily less common. In his early years he often treats *slags* as an adjective, and the noun as the head of the phrase. Later on he follows the strict rules of the Swedish grammars at the time and lets *slags* or *sorts* determine the gender of the phrase.

decade	common gender noun	head shift	head shift %
1860s-1870s	6	6	100%
1880s	10	5	50%
1890s	7	2	28.6%
1900s	9	2	22.2%

Table 5. Head shift with *slags* by decade Strindberg's letters

decade	common gender noun	head shift	head shift %
1860s-1870s	24	9	37.5%
1880s	87	27	31.0%
1890s	8	0	0%
1900s	70	9	12.9%

Table 6. Head shift with *slags* by decade in Strindberg's novels and plays

From the end of the 19th century onwards head shift becomes less frequent, a development which continues well into the 20th century, and not only in Strindberg's writings. It was presumably subdued by the strict rules forbidding its use. As Malmstedt (1939, 41) puts it, this construction was "verderböriligen perhorrescerat" ("duly quashed") in schools at this time. In the ORDAT subcorpus (1925-1958) there are only two occurrences of head shift, a low frequency in keeping with the guidelines for non-colloquial use at the time (Malmstedt 1939, Wellander 1948). Towards the end of the 20th century [DET_{comm} slags N_{comm}] can be found more frequently again. By the turn of the 21st century head shift is occurring in around one third of cases in both Finlantic and Swedish newspapers, for both *sorts* and *slags*. This corresponds with the guidelines in most current grammars and dictionaries. The lower frequency of *sorts* overall and the resulting lower absolute counts for head shift with *sorts* may explain Telemann's (1999) different attitudes towards *ett sorts* and towards *en slags*. The high frequency of head shift in Strindberg's letters may be down to their more informal nature, the lack of proofreading or correction by others and the fact that Strindberg was still a schoolboy in 1862 and thus still in the process of acquiring specific grammatical rules and guidelines.

Preference for common/neuter noun with *slags/sorts*

It is immediately clear from Table 7 that there is a difference in the distribution of common gender and neuter nouns between *slags NP* and *sorts NP* which is most clear for the works and letters of Strindberg. *Slags* is combined with common gender nouns at roughly the same frequency as the normal distribution of common (72%) and neuter gender (28%) would lead one to expect. The data for *sorts* reveals that language users (and August Strindberg in particular) seem to have preference for common gender nouns in combination with *sorts*. With the exception of ORDAT (where it must be noted that the absolute figures are very low), all the sub-corpora show percentages well above 72%.

sub-corpus	<i>slags</i> + common N	<i>sorts</i> + common N
Older Swedish novels	66.0%	87.6%
Strindberg's letters	56.1%	100%
Strindberg's works	67.7%	100%
ORDAT årsbok	66.1%	72.7%
Press65	67.7%	87.5%
Press76	64.9%	83.9%
Hufvudstadsbladet	72.4%	83.2%
GP09	72.1%	84.2%
Total	68.6%	84.7%

Table 7 Share of common gender nouns combined with *slags* and *sorts*

Conclusion

This essay looked at the development of *slags* and *sorts* from descriptive genitive to adjective. It is clear that head shift became more frequent in newspaper texts over the course of the 20th century. For the literary texts there is a decline visible in head shift towards the end of the nineteenth century, although here personal preferences of the individual authors are relevant to a certain extent. I put the development found down to diachronic changes, connected to the changing attitudes discussed. Besides this the difference between *sorts* and *slags* was object of investigation. *Slags* is generally more frequent and has been in use for longer, this may explain why head shift is also more frequent for *slags* than for *sorts*. Another contribution factor is the high proportion of common gender nouns in Swedish, meaning language users may be more inclined to change a neuter determiner into a common gender one than the other way around. Finally I looked at the relation between *slags/sorts* and the gender of the nouns they are combined with. Both *sorts* and *slags* are used more frequently with common gender nouns than with neuter nouns, because common gender nouns are generally more frequent, but the share of common gender nouns is far above the overall share for *sorts* and slightly below it for *slags*. This indicates a preference for the use of *slags* with neuter nouns and *sorts* with common gender nouns, which is very apparent in the letters and publications of Strindberg. When it comes to Strindberg's overall use of *slags* and *sorts* the following pattern emerges. Compared to his contemporaries he is one of those who most frequently applies head shift,

alongside Fredrika Bremer. As he grows older we see his use of head shift declining with both *slags* and *sorts* and in private letters as well as novels and plays. It thus seems that Strindberg, in this linguistic respect at least, becomes less rebellious and confirms more to the prescriptivist standards set by society as his life and career progress.

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Biographical note

Caroline Morris completed her BA in Scandinavian Languages and Cultures at the University of Groningen in 2011. She went on to do a Research Masters in Linguistics at the same university. During her BA and MA she focused on morphology and language change in the Germanic languages. Caroline graduated in 2013 and now works as a translator.