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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Morphological variation in Southwestern Norwegian children's role-play registers

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**Abstract**

This paper presents a study focusing on the morphological variations in Southwestern Norwegian preschool children's role-play register. Within this register, the children switch between their local Southwestern Norwegian dialect and a Central Eastern Norwegian variety similar to the Oslo dialect. Although the majority of the children (with the exception of two) employ this Central Eastern Norwegian variety in role-play, two children exhibited a significantly greater degree of usage compared to the others. Consequently, these two children were selected for an in-depth analysis. The detailed analysis reveals that while the Central Eastern Norwegian variety is used for most variables by both children, the extent to which they code-switch depends on the individual child and the specific variable in question. The observed variation across variables and between the children is examined and discussed in the paper.

**Keywords:** bidialectism; child language; morphology; Norwegian; register variation

## 1. Introduction and background

Language plays a critical role in children's role-play as it shapes the structure of the interaction (Kleemann 2015, Benítez-Burraco et al. 2022). But what are the characteristics of this language? This is the question that this article will explore. Katerbow (2013:146) proposes that children have two different registers in role-play, a peer-directed register (PDR[1]), which includes utterances where the children negotiate and plan the play, and a role-play register (RPR), where the children act in character. Both registers have many characteristics where the children employ different linguistic resources to mark roles and create multiple layers of reality within the role-play context (Ervin-Tripp 1973, Gleason 1973, Vedeler 1987). Code-switching is one of the linguistic mechanisms that is observed in role-play globally (McClure 1977, Halmari & Smith 1994, García-Sánchez 2010, Katerbow 2013). In Norway, children from areas outside the Oslo region tend to alternate between their

local dialect and a Central Eastern Norwegian variety similar to the Oslo dialect during role-play. Typically, children use their local dialect in their PDR, when planning and negotiating the play, and the Central Eastern Norwegian variety in their RPR, when adopting other characters (Gravir 1983, Larson 1985, Vedeler 1987, Vangsnes et al. 2017, Strand 2020). The switching between different Norwegian varieties is illustrated in the excerpt below, where two girls, Lisa and Sophie, from Southwestern Norway play fire station.

Lisa: **Eg e** Georg # **eg e** Georg # **eg e** Georg
'I'm George # I'm George # I'm George'
Sophie: Og Georg han **va oppå** der når det **e** brann
'And George was up there when there is a fire'
Lisa: Ja han **va** liksom nærme han # han visst'**ikkje da** # han **berre såg** på himmelen
'Yes, he was kind of close to him # he didn't know then # he was just looking at the sky'
***
Sophie: Og **nå** sklir **jæi** ned stanga
'And now I'm sliding down the pole'
Lisa: Hjelp hjelp
'Help help'
Sophie: **Hva ær** det som skjer Georg?
'What is happening George?'

In the first part of the excerpt, the two girls engage in the planning phase (PDR) of their play, employing their local Southwestern Norwegian dialect. In the latter part, as they adopt roles as firemen (RPR), features of Central Eastern Norwegian emerge. Several linguistic features have been highlighted in the excerpt, but the pronoun I and the present tense of BE will be emphasised, as these are morphological features that will be discussed in more detail in this article. In the PDR, the children use the local dialect forms *eg* for the pronoun and *e* for the verb. In the RPR, they switch to the Central Eastern Norwegian variants *jæi* (for the pronoun) and *ær* (present tense of BE).

Even though the use of Central Eastern Norwegian in role-play is a well-reported phenomenon in the literature (e.g. Venås 1983, Åm 1989, Mæhlum 1992, Allern 1995, Bugge et al. 2017), the linguistic features of children's language in role-play have not been extensively studied. Some sociolinguistic studies have been conducted (Larson 1985, Guldal 1997, Kleemann 2015), but Strand (2020) was the first to carry out a systematic study of the play language. He examined morphological features in the RPR of preschool children from Tromsø in Northern Norway. The current study explores the morphological variation in the RPR of preschool children from Southwestern Norway, a region that speaks a different Norwegian dialect from that of Tromsø in Northern Norway.[2] The study aims to identify which morphological features of Central Eastern Norwegian are present in the children's RPR, thereby contributing insights to the international field of research on second dialect acquisition. Strand (2020:289) refers to the Central Eastern Norwegian variety children use in role-play as Standard East Norwegian (henceforth SEN), a term that will be adopted throughout this article. The abbreviation LD will be used for the children's local dialect, Southwestern Norwegian.

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The paper presents a longitudinal multiple case study exploring morphological variation within the RPR of children from Southwestern Norway, aged between 3 and 6 years. Eleven children were part of the initial sample, while the play language of two children has been analysed in depth. The paper investigates the following research questions.

(i) What morphological features of SEN are present in the children's RPR?
(ii) To what extent do the children make use of the SEN variant of the morphological form in their RPR, compared to when they use the LD variant in their PDR?

The main aim of the study is to identify morphological features that are distinctive of SEN in the RPR. Based on what we know about code-switching in role-play, it is expected that the children primarily use SEN in the RPR, while it is anticipated that they use LD variants in the PDR. To determine the distinctiveness of features as characteristic of SEN, the features from the children's RPR will be compared to LD features from the PDR. However, as the subsequent sections will illustrate, on-going dialect levelling may cause some features of LD to be different from how they have traditionally been described, with some forms potentially overlapping with SEN. As these changes are on-going, this has to be determined based on the child language data. Note, however, that this does not mean that every instance of SEN variants occurring in the PDR must be interpreted as indicative of dialect levelling. In work on bilinguals, there is a lot of evidence that both languages are constantly active, even when one of the languages is not being used (Marian & Spivey 2003, Thierry & Wu 2007). While the participants in this study are not bilingual in the traditional sense, they are active users of two distinct varieties, and engage in code-switching between SEN and LD. Code-switching is widely acknowledged as a cognitively demanding process, whereby when one linguistic variety is activated, the other one simultaneously has to be inhibited (Kootstra et al. 2020). Co-activation is not limited to differing language systems but also applies to closely related varieties (Sandstedt et al. 2025). Therefore, these processes should also be considered in an analysis of code-switching within the role-play context. Given that the children are switching between the two varieties, it is not surprising if they occasionally also use SEN forms in the PDR.

### *1.1 The Norwegian language setting*

Unlike the language situation in many other countries, the Norwegian language has two official written standards: Nynorsk and Bokmål. Bokmål is the majority written variety. 87.5% of school children have Bokmål as their main written language, while 11.2% have Nynorsk as their main written variety (Statistics Norway 2024). There is no official codified Norwegian spoken standard. Local dialects are used in all contexts, including official ones. This means that most children acquire only the local dialect from the area where they grow up. However, there is an on-going debate as to whether there is an unofficial spoken standard in Norway. According to Mæhlum (2009), a standard spoken language is '[ . . . ] a variety that functions as a norm or normative ideal for a larger language community, usually a nation-state, and in some cases, is codified' (Mæhlum 2009:9–10, my translation). It is also

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presumed that the spoken standard is developed in close relation to a written language (Mæhlum 2009, Vangsnes 2019). Mæhlum (2009) argues that SEN functions as an unofficial standard and plays a significant role in dialectal processes of change in society. This view is supported by Røyneland (2009:7), who claims that '[ . . . ] the upper middle-class variety spoken particularly in and around the capital, Oslo, has some characteristics of an [unofficial] overarching standard variety'. However, she emphasises that the Norwegian language situation cannot be classified as a diglossic society, with alternation between discrete high and low varieties. On the other hand, Sandøy (2009) argues that a distinction must be made between prestige languages and standard languages, and that Norway has a prestige language, SEN, and two spoken standards sometimes used in news broadcasts, one closely related to the Bokmål written standard and the other to the Nynorsk written standard. Like Røyneland (2009), Sandøy (2009) underlines that the role of the standard language(s) in Norway does not fit the standard representation in other countries (e.g. not diglossic). He also argues that the prestige language influences dialectal changes to a lesser extent.

Regarding dialect changes in Western Norway, Røyneland (2009) highlights dialect levelling towards SEN and regionalisation (see Røyneland 2009 for a detailed discussion of these complex processes). Sandøy (2009) suggests that influences from neighbouring dialects and simplification drive dialect changes, and changes that align with SEN do not necessarily originate from SEN. Regardless of their origins, the levelling processes often result in local dialect forms being replaced by variants with broader regional or national use, reducing differences between dialects (Røyneland 2009, Mæhlum & Røyneland 2023).

Regardless of the debate on whether Norway has an unofficial spoken standard and its role in driving dialect changes, studies show that children switch between their local dialect and SEN in role-play. In this study, the children's LD closely resembles the Nynorsk written standard. Their tendency to switch to a variety similar to the Bokmål written standard, which appears to share features attributed to the unofficial spoken standard, suggests that it holds a special status and that many children also acquire (variants of) a SEN variety in addition to their LD. Although the term 'standard' is used to describe the Central Eastern Norwegian variety spoken by the children in role-play, it does not necessarily indicate a stance in the debate. Following Strand (2020), the term serves as a framework to describe any variation in the children's use of a spoken variety *closely related* to the Bokmål written standard.

### *1.2 Role-play and code-switching*

Children's engagement in role-play with peers increases around the age of three (Perren et al. 2019). The literature has different ways of categorising the types of speech children use in role-play. In this section, only those categorisations considered in the analysis in the current study will be presented. Role-play utterances are utterances where the children are in character (Høigård 1999, Kleemann 2015, Strand 2020). In planning utterances, the children distribute roles and props, and these utterances relate to the narration of the play (Høigård 1999, Kleemann 2015). Out-of-play utterances are utterances where a child explains something related to the game, negotiates outside of the play situation, or rejects

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someone from the play (Kleemann 2015:59). Katerbow (2013) adopts a different approach by distinguishing between two registers: RPR (role-play register) and PDR (peer-directed register). In the RPR the children adopt characters and assume a pretend role and could thus be said to encompass role-play utterances. The PDR, on the other hand, is described as the point where '[ . . . ] children abandon the role-playing framework and interact as peers and no longer in roles' (Katerbow 2013:146). This suggests that both out-of-play utterances and planning utterances fall within this register. In this article, both utterance types and registers are relevant. During the transcription process, the children's utterances were coded according to utterance types, which in the analysis were then placed into one of the registers (more on this in Section 2.3).

Within these utterance types or registers, the children use their linguistic resources to mark roles and construct the play world (Ervin-Tripp 1973, Gleason 1973, Vedeler 1987). The different linguistic reflexes used in role-play differ from culture to culture, but it is not uncommon to find variation in pitch, tone of voice, phonology, wording, semantics, and speech acts (Katerbow 2013, Kleemann 2015, Strand 2023). Code-switching has also been observed in children's role-play globally (McClure 1977, Halmari & Smith 1994, García-Sánchez 2010, Katerbow 2013). Trudgill (1992:16) defines code-switching as '[t]he process whereby bilingual or bidialectal speakers switch back and forth between one language or dialect and another within the same conversation'. Code-switching in role-play entails both switching between different languages in bilingual populations (Halmari & Smith 1994, Green-Väntinen 1996, Guldal 1997, Paugh 2005, García-Sánchez 2010, Kyratzis 2010, Kleemann 2015) and between dialects and more standardised varieties (Erwin-Tripp 1973, Katerbow 2013). An example of the former is found in García-Sánchez (2010), who studied a group of Moroccan immigrant girls in Spain. These girls were found to use more Spanish in their RPR and Moroccan Arabic in their PDR. An example of the latter is discussed in Katerbow (2013), in which children with a Moselle-Franconian dialect in Germany were found to use more standardised forms in their RPR compared to their PDR. The switching has a function and has by many been attributed to the children's need to signal 'otherhood', whether they are in character or not (Vedeler 1987, Halmari & Smith 1994, Guldal 1997, Høigård 1999, Katerbow 2013, Kleemann 2015, Strand 2020).

In this study, the focus is on bidialectal children who code-switch between SEN and LD in their RPR. The switching occurs both between utterances and within a single utterance. Although the term code-switching has been critiqued for not fully aligning with current developments in language research – particularly because it views different languages as separate codes (see, for example, Garcia 2009) – it remains commonly used in the context of language use in role-play (e.g. Halmari & Smith 1994, Guldal 1997, García-Sánchez 2010, Kleemann 2015, Strand 2020). Given the distinct alternation between two linguistic varieties in role-play, the term remains relevant and will be used in this article.

### *1.3 Role-play and (socio)linguistic acquisition*

In the present study, it is anticipated that the children will, at least to some extent, use SEN in their RPR, in addition to their LD. There are various perspectives that

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can aid our understanding of dialect acquisition and dialect use in the role-play context. One relevant approach is Siegel's (2010) perspectives on learning of a second dialect (D2). However, in this connection it is important to point out that the acquisition of the play variety in Norway is different from the acquisition of a second (standard) dialect in other contexts. From research, we know how important interaction with and input from caregivers and peer groups is for language acquisition (Labov 1964, Smith et al. 2007, 2009, Stanford 2008). In this study, the children and their parents live in Southwestern Norway and speak a Southwestern Norwegian dialect, so it is reasonable to assume that this is the dialect they are most in contact with in their daily lives. However, SEN is, as far as we know, only used during role-play. Therefore, the acquisition of the RPR in the Norwegian context is different from the acquisition of play language varieties in other countries where children either learn two or more languages or a local dialect and a spoken standard and use one of these varieties to signal in-character utterances in role-play as well. However, the fact that the children in both cases acquire and make use of a second variety suggests that it may be useful to refer to the literature on the D2 acquisition.

In D2 acquisition, there are many factors that account for differences in the degree of acquisition or use among D2 variants. *Salience* is one of them. According to Siegel (2010:210), salience refers to '[ . . . ] the characteristic of being easily noticeable, prominent, or conspicuous'. Although salience is not the most straightforward linguistic factor, it intuitively makes sense that for a linguistic feature to be picked up, it must be salient enough to be noticeable. In his study of SEN in children from Tromsø's RPR, Strand (2020) identifies three forms of salience as potential explanatory models for why children use certain morphological forms more frequently than others.

First, Strand (2020:309) refers to Errington's (1985) concept of *pragmatic salience*. Errington regards pragmatically salient morphemes as '[ . . . ] those that are recognized by speakers as more crucial linguistic mediators of social relations' (Woolard 2008:438). For example, personal pronouns are seen as a salient class of lexemes that are *referential*, as in that they refer to people and index *subjective interactional stances* and therefore will play a more crucial role in social relationships. Second, Strand (2020) addresses *frequency*, suggesting that SEN forms which are frequently used in role-play are the most commonly heard, and are thus more likely to be adopted and used by children in play. Finally, Strand (2020) highlights that certain forms exhibit phonological similarity (such as the personal pronoun forms I, YOU.SG, ME, and REFL.; see Section 1.4), which can contribute to these forms being picked up and having a higher rate of usage. Strand (2020:310) presents the term *conceptual grouping*, where the prominence of one variable could reinforce the usage of related forms.

Another important factor in D2 acquisition is the age at which it occurs. Siegel's (2010) review of research on D2 acquisition emphasises that much of the focus has been on identifying the optimal age for acquiring various linguistic features to attain native-like competence. According to Siegel (2010), phonological features are best learnt by children under the age of 7, while morphological features are most easily acquired before the ages of 16–17. This consideration is somewhat less relevant to the current study since the children are exposed to SEN throughout their upbringing, placing them within the so-called sensitive period for language

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**Table 1.** Dialectal differences in pronouns and determiners between LD and SEN

| | LD | SEN | gloss |
|---|---|---|---|
| Personal pronouns | eg | jæi | I |
| | meg | mæi | me |
| | deg | dæi | you (sg. obl.) |
| | ho | hun | she |
| | de/dekan | dere | you (pl.) |
| | dei | di | they |
| | dei | dem | them |
| | me | vi | we |
| Reflexive pronoun | seg | sæi | -self (3rd) |
| Indefinite pronoun/ determiners | nok(k)en/nok(k)on | noen | some(one) |
| | nok(k)e/no(k)ko/noe | noe | something |
| | dekans | deres | your (pl.) |
| | deira(n)s/deira | deres | their |
| Demonstratives | dei | di | those |

acquisition (see Long 1990, 2007, Siegel 2010). It is well established that exposure plays a significant role in language acquisition (MacDonald & Christiansen 2002, Parra et al. 2011). Additionally, Siegel (2010) highlights linguistic experience through social interaction with D2 speakers as a factor in D2 acquisition. However, given the quantity/quality of exposure, opportunities for use, and individual cognitive abilities, individual variation is likely to be expected (Luk & Rothman 2022). This study does not provide data on the extent and quality of the children's exposure to SEN or their specific experiences with this variety, at least not outside the role-play setting. Nonetheless, it is plausible that as children grow older, their exposure and experience with SEN will increase – from society and through role-play – potentially affecting their use of the variety.

### *1.4 Properties investigated: LD vs. SEN*

In this section, the linguistic differences between the LD used in the area where the children live, Southwestern Norwegian, and SEN will be explored. The literature, including works by Sandøy (1987), Akselberg (2003), and Mæhlum & Røyneland (2023), as well as observations from the Nordic Dialect Corpus (Johannessen et al. 2009), offers insights into these differences, which are depicted in Tables 1, 2, and 3. Just as with SEN, the presentation of LD features is not intended to serve as a precise characterisation of a variety that encompasses its variations. Instead, it works as a point of reference to understand the variations we might expect in the children's language output (Strand 2020:293). In the presentation of dialectal differences,

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**Table 2.** Noun inflection in LD and SEN. Differences between the varieties in boldface

| Noun inflection | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | LD | | SEN | | |
| | | Indef. | Def. | Indef. | Def. | Gloss |
| m. | sg. | dinosaur | dinosauren | dinosaur | dinosauren | (the) dinosaur |
| | pl. | **dinosaura**[a] | **dinosaurane** | **dinosaurer** | **dinosaurene** | (the) dinosaurs |
| f. | sg. | bygd[b] | **bygde** | bygd | **bygda/bygden** | (the) village |
| | pl. | **bygde** | bygdene/**bygdena** | **bygder** | bygdene | (the) village |
| n. | sg. | hus | huse | hus | huse | (the) house |
| | pl. | hus | **huse**/husene/**husena** | hus | husene/**husa** | (the) houses |

[a]According to Sandøy (1987), masculine nouns with an *i*-stem (from Old Norse) sometimes have the suffixes *-e*/*-ene* in the Southwestern Norwegian dialect. However, the majority of masculine nouns, and also newly coined words that have been adopted, follow the inflectional pattern *-a*/*-ane* (see Enger & Conzett 2016), and it is the pattern of these that has been emphasised and presented in the overview of dialect features in the Southwestern Norwegian dialect.
[b]A village (*ei bygd*) is a strong feminine noun. In LD, weak feminine nouns differ from strong ones in that weak nouns have an *-o* ending in the definite singular form instead of *-e* (e.g. a lady: *ei dame – damo*).

words will be represented orthographically. However, in some cases where the pronunciation does not correspond to the standard spelling of the word, spelling is adapted to reflect pronunciation. For instance, in Table 1, the pronoun I follows the Nynorsk orthography for LD, whereas in the SEN variety, it is spelled in a way that deviates from the Bokmål norm to more accurately capture its pronunciation.

Table 1 provides a comparative overview of pronouns and determiners that differ between LD and SEN. There is considerable variation in pronouns and determiners between the two varieties. As noted by Strand (2020:293), there is a parallelism in the pronunciation of the SEN pronouns I, ME, YOU.SG (oblique position), and the reflexive pronoun (henceforth REFL.), all ending in the diphthong [æi]. There is also syncretism between the corresponding pronouns in the LD, where each is articulated with the long, lower vowel [e:]. Both traditional LD forms of SOMETHING and variants corresponding to SEN are documented in the LD by Akselberg (2003:211). In Norwegian, the determiners SOMETHING and SOME(ONE) are inflected forms of the same lexeme. Thus, extensive use of SEN correspondents in LD for one variable could reasonably be expected to affect the other.

Turning to nominal inflection, Table 2 summarises the differences between the two varieties. Firstly, nominal inflection differs between the two varieties. In LD, masculine and feminine plural forms have distinct suffixes: *-a* for masculine plural indefinite forms and *-e* for feminine plural indefinite forms. SEN uses *-er* for both genders in these cases. For plural definite nouns, LD uses *-ane* for masculine and either *-ene* or *-ena* for feminine, while SEN consistently uses *-ene*. In LD, plural neuter nouns have varied suffixes, though *-ene* is most common among adolescents (Akselberg 2003:216).

Verbal inflection also displays distinct patterns in the two varieties, as presented in Table 3. The verbs presented are the ones that are relevant for the analysis. Highlighting some distinctions, present tense forms in SEN have a word-final /r/, a

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**Table 3.** Verbal inflection in LD and SEN. Differences between the varieties in boldface

| Verbal inflection | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| LD | | | | SEN | | | |
| Infinitive | Present tense | Past tense | Present perfect | Infinitive | Present tense | Past tense | Present perfect |
| å kom(m)a 'to come' | **kjem/ kjem(m)e** | kom | har **komt**/ **kom(m)e** | å **komme** | **kommer** | kom | har **kommet** |
| å vera 'to be' | **e** | **va** | har vært/**vore** | å **være** | **ær** | **var** | har vært |
| å trenga 'to need' | **treng/ trenge** | **trong**[a]/ trengte | har **tronge**/ trengt | å **trenge** | **trenger** | trengte | har trengt |

[a]The past and perfect forms of 'to need' are traditionally strong in the LD (*trong*/*tronge*). However, the Nordic Dialect Corpus (Johannessen et al. 2009) contains examples of both traditional strong variants and weak variants (*trengte*/*trengt*) in the Southwestern Norwegian dialect. Although instances in the corpus are limited, Enger and Conzett (2016) note that a shift from strong to weak inflection is common in verb inflection systems. Thus, it is not unlikely that both variants exist in the LD.

**Table 4.** Strand (2020): high and low frequency SEN pronouns and determiners in the RPR of children from Tromsø (numbers and percentages)

| SEN in RPR: low frequency | | | | SEN in RPR: high frequency | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | CTD | SEN | | | CTD | SEN | |
| YOU.PL | dokker | dere | 26/181 (14.3%) | I | æ | jæi | 2,092/2,805 (74.5%) |
| SHE | ho | hun | 19/58 (32.8%) | ME | mæ | mæi | 246/354 (69.5%) |
| SOMETHING | nokka | noe | 7/50 (14%) | YOU.SG (obl.) | dæ | dæi | 157/239 (65.7%) |
| | | | | REFL. | sæ | sæi | 9/13 (69.2%) |

feature absent in LD. In the present tense of BE, there is also a distinction between SEN and LD in vowel quality: SEN has a more open vowel sound, /æː/ [æːɾ], compared to LD, /eː/ [eː]. For the present tense of COME, LD employs ablaut, or internal inflection, with modification of vowel and consonant, which SEN does not have.

### *1.5 Previous findings*

As previously noted, there are a limited number of studies exploring grammatical aspects of children's role-play language in the Norwegian context. Guldal (1997:174–176) notes the use of 'standard Norwegian' pronoun forms, particularly I (*jæi*), ME (*mæi*), and YOU.PL (*dere*), and briefly mentions the use of standard plural noun inflection (definite *-ene*). She also finds that the switching of varieties was applied with varying consistency but was restricted to RPR.

The first comprehensive study of the linguistic features of the RPR is Strand's (2020) investigation of morphological variation in seven Northern Norwegian children from Tromsø. The morphological categories analysed were verbal and noun inflection, and pronouns and determiners. Strand (2020) finds that the children employ SEN variants of most variables, in addition to variants of their local Tromsø dialect (CTD). The rate at which the children use SEN varies across variable and the individual child.

Looking more closely at some of his results, plural nouns are infrequent in Strand's (2020:299) corpus data. Nonetheless, the children seem to associate the SEN suffix *-er* with the RPR, applying it to nouns to mark role-play, albeit sometimes incorrectly, for example **menn-er* for *menn* ('men' in the indefinite form). In verbal inflection, Strand (2020:306) finds 32.4% SEN variants of the present tense of BE (CTD, *e*, SEN, *ær*) in the children's RPR.

In analysing pronouns and determiners, Strand (2020:303) finds that while children predominantly use SEN variants of most pronouns, the usage rate varies, with some pronouns having low SEN usage and others high (see Table 4). However, some variables turned out to have the same variability as in CTD, which according

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to Strand could indicate a process of dialect levelling (e.g. THEY: CTD, *dem*, SEN, *de*, and SOME: CTD, *nokken*/*nån*, SEN, *noen*).

## 2. Method

Observational data with audiovisual recordings were made over 10 months from September 2022 until June 2023. The empirical basis for the paper is a corpus of 37 video recordings from the 11 children participating in the study, totalling approximately 24 hours of recording time.

### *2.1 Data collection*

The series of audiovisual recordings were made in a preschool in a municipality in Southwestern Norway. As the study processes personal data, it had to be reported to SIKT (Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research) to ensure compliance with privacy requirements. Approval was granted in June 2022.

Twelve children between the ages of 3 and 6 initially had parental consent to participate in the study. A short survey retrieving information about the parents' dialect background was conducted. One child turned out to have a dialect similar to SEN and therefore she was excluded from the analysis. Thirty-eight recordings were made in total. However, due to asynchrony between picture and sound in one clip, there were ultimately 37 clips that were analysed. Each recording lasted 30–50 minutes.

The children played in a designated room with toys, i.e. dolls, a play kitchen, a fire station, and dinosaurs. Only children with parental consent were allowed in the room. Playgroups consisting of children with parental consent were organised in January 2023, in collaboration between the staff and the researcher. The children who knew each other and played well together were assigned to the same group. This approach was first and foremost driven by ethical considerations, as children's well-being and best interests are paramount in any research endeavour (NESH 2022). Moreover, this grouping strategy benefitted the data collection process, as it was observed that the children who got along well in the play situations also generated more language output. A consequence of grouping the children was that some children attended more play sessions than others, as the playgroups that worked well were given more playtime. The playgroups consisted of two to three children to prevent overcrowding of the space. This was important to facilitate transcription, as it reduced the likelihood of multiple children speaking at the same time. It also fostered a good dynamic for role-play, ensuring as far as possible that all the children could engage in the same game (Strand 2020:296). The researcher was consistently present during the play sessions.

### *2.2 Participants*

Table 5 shows the children's age and participation in play sessions throughout the data collection period. The children have received pseudonyms. The number of play sessions the children actively participated in varied. Sophie and Lisa participated the most (14 sessions each), while Eva and Marie participated the least (2 and 3, respectively). All children had a Southwestern Norwegian dialect (see features in Tables 1, 2, and 3).

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**Table 5.** Age (year and months) and participation in play sessions from September 2022 to June 2023 (one × per play session)

| Participants | Sep. 2022 | Oct. 2022 | Nov. 2022 | Dec. 2022 | Jan. 2023 | Feb. 2023 | Mar. 2023 | Apr. 2023 | May 2023 | Jun. 2023 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Larry | — | — | — | — | × (3;3) | × (3;4) | × (3;5) | × (3;6) | × (3;7) | × (3;8) |
| Eva | × (2;11) | × (3;0) | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| Marie | × (3;1) | × (3;2) | — | — | — | — | — | — | × (3;9) | — |
| Henrietta | × (3;3) | × (3;4) | × (3;5) | × (3;6) | — | × (3;8) | — | — | × (3;11) | — |
| Peter | × (4;1) | × (4;2) | — | — | × (4;5) | × (4;6) | × (4;7) | × (4;8) | × (4;9) | × (4;10) |
| Lucas | × (4;1) | × (4;2) | × (4;3) | × (4;4) | × (4;5) | × (4;6) | — | × (4;8) | × (4;9) | × (4;10) |
| Martin | × (4;2) | × (4;3) | × (4;4) | × (4;5) | × (4;6) | × (4;7) | × (4;8) | × (4;9) | × (4;10) | × (4;11) |
| Lisa | × (4;4) | × (4;5) | — | × (4;7) | ×× (4;8) | ×× (4;9) | ×× (4;10) | ×× (4;11) | × (5;0) | ×× (5;1) |
| Roger | × (4;5) | × (4;6) | × (4;7) | × (4;8) | × (4;9) | × (4;10) | × (4;11) | × (5;0) | × (5;1) | × (5;2) |
| Sophie | × (5;1) | × (5;2) | × (5;3) | × (5;4) | ×× (5;5) | × (5;6) | ×× (5;7) | ×× (5;8) | × (5;9) | ×× (5;10) |
| Charlotte | — | × (5;3) | × (5;4) | × (5;5) | — | × (5;7) | × (5;8) | × (5;9) | — | × (5;11) |

According to the language background survey, none of the parents reported speaking a variety similar to SEN. Most parents reported speaking a Southwestern Norwegian dialect. For one of the children (Marie), it was noted that both a Southwestern Norwegian dialect and a non-Scandinavian language were spoken at home.

### 2.3 Transcribing and coding of the material

In the transcription process, phonetic transcription based on Norwegian orthography was used for words/those parts of the words where there is a difference in pronunciation between SEN and LD (e.g. 'I': SEN, *jæi*, LD, *eg*). Meanwhile, words with identical pronunciations in the varieties were represented orthographically (e.g. 'and': *og*, 'that': *det*). This approach was adopted to streamline the transcription process. Repetitions of words and segments within an utterance were represented in the transcriptions to reflect what was being said as accurately as possible. Two assistants were hired in January 2023 to help with the transcription work. The researcher reviewed all the transcriptions multiple times to secure reliability.

As in Strand (2020), the children's utterances have been coded for level of pretence: planning utterances, out-of-play utterances, and role-play utterances. Some utterances were *not* part of the game at all, e.g. a discussion of the images/pictures on the children's drinking bottles. These utterances were coded as everyday utterances. As previously mentioned, Katerbow's (2013) two registers, RPR and PDR, are central to the analysis. The planning and out-of-play utterances constitute the PDR, the register where children interact as peers. An utterance was coded as a planning utterance if it was about (i) distributing roles and props, or (ii) part of the narration of the play. Children often used the past tense form of verbs in these types of utterances, which sometimes helped in identifying them in an otherwise present tense context (see Kleemann 2015:24) (e.g. 'And he was a firefighter' or 'We just pretended he was sliding down').

Out-of-play utterances were coded as such when the children (i) discussed something related to the game without narrating it, (ii) negotiated outside of the play situation, or (iii) rejected someone from the play (e.g. 'Don't touch the fire station!' or 'Huh, where is the helmet?').

For this paper, the role-play utterances that constitute the children's RPR are the most important, as these are the utterances in which it is anticipated that the children will engage in code-switching. For an utterance to be coded as a role-play utterance, it had to comply with at least one of the following criteria developed by Strand (2020:297).

1. The utterance refers to something not happening in real life (e.g. 'There's a fire!').
2. The utterance is uttered with a voice quality or intonation that is manipulated in a creative way to indicate role utterances.
3. The utterance is uttered while holding and animating a doll or a toy.
4. The utterance is uttered as an answer to or in a conversation together with an utterance with the characteristics in 1–3.

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If there was uncertainty about how to code an utterance, i.e. if parts of the utterance were unclear, it was categorised as undecided and excluded from the analysis.

The operationalisation of what constituted an utterance and how to divide turn-taking in role-play is inspired by Sacks et al. (1974). In this study, an utterance was considered a piece of speech with a natural pause before and after or followed by a change of speaker. The division into utterances was also related to the three utterance types in role-play. For example, an utterance that could be considered a single utterance, that is, without a natural pause in between and without a change of speaker, was divided if the different parts could be linked to different utterance types, such as: 'I said I'm making a cake'. This sequence could in some cases be divided into two utterances, where the first part could be considered a planning utterance ('I said'), while the second part could be considered a role-play utterance if it met one or more of the criteria above ('I'm making a cake').

### *2.4 Data analysis*

To address the first research question regarding which morphological features of SEN are part of the RPR, several broad morphological categories were initially selected, including pronouns, determiners, noun and verbal inflection, based on Strand's (2020) work. In terms of verbal inflection, the present study elaborates on more variables than Strand (he investigates the present tense of BE). The selection of variables within each morphological category was based on their expected distinctiveness as features of SEN and their frequency. To determine the actual distinctiveness of these features as characteristic of SEN, the features from the children's RPR were compared to those from the PDR, where it was anticipated that the children predominantly used their LD. The linguistic features in the children's LD served as a sort of dialectal base form (Strand 2020:298).

To address research question two, which delves into the extent to which the children use SEN forms of the variables in question, descriptive statistical analyses were carried out. As noted earlier, the transcriptions capture all repetitions of words and segments within an utterance, which are also included in the count. This means that if a child repeats the pronoun I in an utterance, all instances are included in the count. To determine whether there is a correlation between variant (LD/SEN) and register type, a Fisher exact test (Fisher 1922) was conducted to obtain $p$-values for the variables that occurred frequently enough, with 10 or more occurrences in total.

## 3. Results

The results section begins with an overview of the relative frequency of RPR and PDR in the children's role-play, as well as the overall percentage of SEN in the children's RPR (Section 3.1). Next, to address which morphological features are part of the RPR, the variables will be presented one by one within each morphological category, along with illustrative examples. To determine the extent to which the

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**Table 6.** Relative frequency (%) of RPR and PDR for all participating children. Number of utterances in parenthesis

| | RPR | PDR |
|---|---|---|
| Charlotte | 9 (344) | 91 (3,358) |
| Peter | 9 (306) | 91 (3,262) |
| Martin | 10 (668) | 90 (5,965) |
| Eva | 12 (88) | 88 (617) |
| Henrietta | 14 (1,015) | 86 (5,987) |
| Roger | 14 (1,793) | 86 (10,728) |
| Lucas | 14 (1,726) | 86 (10,385) |
| Sophie | 24 (6,822) | 76 (21,118) |
| Larry | 25 (1,223) | 75 (3,676) |
| Lisa | 25 (3,743) | 75 (11,360) |
| Marie | 28 (227) | 72 (584) |

children use SEN forms of morphological variables, the presentation will also include numbers, ratios, and *p*-values where appropriate (Sections 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4).

### *3.1 The relative frequency of RPR and PDR and overall SEN*

Table 6 provides an overview of the relative frequency of RPR and PDR for each child, calculated from the total number of utterances across all play sessions. The children use the PDR far more often than the RPR, with the latter ranging from 9 to 28%. The fact that the children produce a certain amount of RPR does not necessarily indicate that SEN variety forms were used. Figure 1 provides an overview of the total percentage of SEN in the children's RPR. The presentation is based on a count of the distinctive features of SEN addressed in the analysis and their LD counterparts.[3]

According to Figure 1, most of the children produce some SEN in their RPR. Two children do not use any SEN at all (Martin and Eva). SEN constitutes 2% ($n = 4$) of Henrietta's and 8% ($n = 10$) of Larry's RPR. Roger and Lucas use 13% ($n = 28$) and 15% ($n = 35$) SEN, respectively. Peter and Marie use more than 25% SEN, with Peter at 29% ($n = 13$) and Marie at 36% ($n = 4$). The highest percentages of SEN are produced by Lisa (59%) ($n = 247$), Charlotte (62%) ($n = 25$), and Sophie with 89% ($n = 530$).

Even though the percentage of SEN is relatively high for some participants, this does not mean that the absolute number of SEN variants is high. Lisa ($n = 247$) and Sophie ($n = 530$), who have the highest percentages of SEN in their RPR, also have the most instances of SEN. Although Charlotte has a high percentage of SEN, the number of instances is low ($n = 25$).

To address the research questions and describe distinct features of SEN in children's RPR, an in-depth analysis was conducted on Lisa and Sophie

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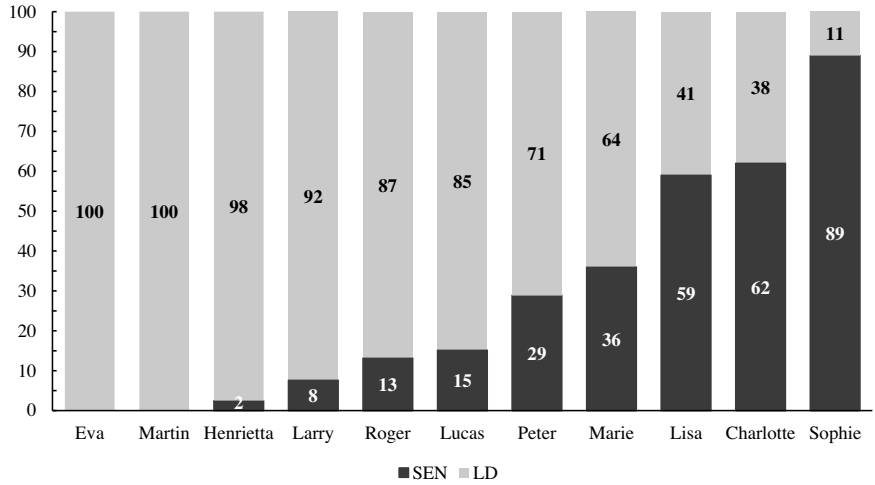


**Figure 1.** Proportion of SEN (%) in the RPR of all participating children.

(16 recordings), the two children who produce the most SEN in their RPR. The girls play together in 12 play sessions.

### *3.2 Pronouns and determiners*

The pronouns and determiners that will be discussed in this section are I, YOU.SG, ME, SHE, YOU.PL, REFL., WE, THEY, THEM, THOSE, SOME(ONE), and SOMETHING. The possessive determiners YOUR.PL and THEIR were omitted because they were not frequent (two instances in total for each pronoun).

The analysis reveals that a group of pronoun forms and determiners stand out, including WE, THEY, THEM, THOSE, SOME(ONE), and SOMETHING. The children frequently use SEN and LD variants in both registers (Table 7).[4]

As illustrated in Table 7, the proportion of SEN is high, both in the children's RPR (69–91%) and in their PDR (22–73%). It is not surprising that SEN variants of SOMETHING and SOME(ONE) are found to a certain extent in the children's PDR, considering that the variant associated with SEN in the former was documented in the LD already at the turn of the millennium (see Akselberg 2003:211), and both are inflectional forms of the same lexeme in Norwegian. However, this means that the variants cannot be viewed as distinctive SEN features, and further (Fisher) analysis is futile. Instead, this may indicate that a process of dialect levelling is occurring in the children's local language community.

For the other group of pronouns (I, YOU.SG, ME, SHE, YOU.PL, REFL.), it looks different (Table 8). Most of the pronominal variables in the RPR occur in the SEN form (75–89%), while SEN variants are hardly attested in the PDR. The pronoun I is the most frequent in the material, in terms of number. The SEN variant is used quite consistently in the RPR (87.7%), and hardly at all in the PDR (0.3%). The SEN

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**Table 7.** Overview of pronoun forms and determiners not distinctive of SEN in Sophie and Lisa's RPR and PDR

| Variables | SEN in RPR | SEN in PDR |
|---|---|---|
| WE | 149/214 (69.6%) | 529/815 (64.9%) |
| THEY/THEM/THOSE | 45/59 (76.3%) | 272/372 (73.1%) |
| SOMETHING | 21/23 (91.3%) | 9/40 (22.5%) |
| SOME(ONE) | 18/26 (69.2%) | 23/71 (32.4%) |

**Table 8.** Overview of distinctive SEN pronouns in Sophie and Lisa's RPR and PDR

| Variables | SEN in RPR | SEN in PDR | Fisher exact test (two-tailed) |
|---|---|---|---|
| I | 415/473 (87.7%) | 4/1273 (0.3%) | $p < .001$ |
| YOU.SG (OBL.) | 66/83 (79.5%) | 0/114 (0%) | $p < .001$ |
| ME | 50/63 (79.4%) | 0/170 (0%) | $p < .001$ |
| SHE | 25/28 (89.3%) | 1/236 (0.4%) | $p < .001$ |
| YOU.PL | 13/15 (86.7%) | 0/19 (0%) | $p < .001$ |
| REFL. | 3/4 (75%) | 1/101 (1%) | $p < .001$ |

variants of YOU (sg. and pl.) and ME are only attested in the RPR, while there is one example of the REFL. in the PDR. The Fisher exact test demonstrates a strong correlation for all pronouns ($p < .001$), indicating that the SEN variants are overwhelmingly used in the RPR.

Examples of the use of pronoun forms in RPR are shown in (1). Here, the children use only the SEN variants of the pronouns.

(1) a. ja **jæi** holder på å gjøre **mæi** klar (Sophie, 5;1)
*yes I.SEN hold on to make me.SEN (myself) ready*
'Yes, I'm (in the process of) getting ready.'

b. berre prøv å få **dæi** gjennom denne (Lisa, 4;7)
*just try to get you.SG.SEN through this*
'Just try to get through this.'

c. viss bebien vil ha grøt så kan **hun** (Sophie, 5;1)
*if baby.DEF wants porridge then can she.SEN*
få det
*have it*
'If the baby wants porridge, she can.'

d. hei vi æ'kke ferdig # kan **dere** gå hem? (Sophie, 5;1)
*hi we aren't done # can you.PL.SEN go home?*
'Hi, we are not done # can you go home?'

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In the examples shown in (2), the children use both SEN and LD variants of the pronouns within the same utterance.

(2) a. du kan no gå og sette **deg** på (Sophie, 5;5)
*you can now go and sit you.LD at*
venterommet # dette ordner **jæi**
*waiting.room.DEF # this fix I.SEN*
'You can go and sit in the waiting room; I will fix this.'

b. okei **jæi** ska bare finne **meg** sjølv (Lisa, 4;8)
*okay I.SEN shall just find me.LD self*
'Okay, I will just find myself.'

There are also examples where the children only use LD variants of the pronouns, as in (3).

(3) a. ja men e- e- e- **eg** kan rydde # litt (Lisa, 5;1)
*yes but I- I- I- I.LD can tidy # a bit*
'Yes, but I can tidy a bit.

b. **ho** kan ikkje grisa på den nye duken (Lisa, 4;4)
*She.LD can not make.a.mess on the new tablecloth*
'She cannot make a mess on the new tablecloth.'

c. den har fortsatt masse blod på **seg** (Sophie, 5;5)
*it has still a.lot.of blood on **itself**.LD*
'It still has a lot of blood on it.'

Even though there are very few occurrences of the SEN variants of the pronouns in the children's PDR, there are a few examples of this, as illustrated in (4).

(4) a. **jæi**- # eg skulle liksom sova (uforståeleg) (Lisa, 5;1)
*I.SEN # I.LD should like sleep (incomprehensible)*
'I was supposed to sleep.'

b. halvt spøkelse og halvt **sæi** # sant? (Sophie, 5;10)
*half ghost and half **self**.SEN # right?*
'Half ghost and half himself, right?'

As shown in example (4a), we see that Lisa corrects herself in the utterance, going from the SEN variant to the LD variant, indicating an accidental slip and awareness of the 'rules' of code-switching in role-play.

As both languages and dialects are acquired by individuals, let us consider the use of the SEN variants in the two girls separately to explore whether there are any differences between them. Table 9 shows the distribution of the most frequently attested SEN pronouns in the children's RPR: I, ME, YOU.SG, and SHE. It becomes clear that both Sophie and Lisa are quite consistent in their use of SEN variants in their RPR with all four pronouns. Based on the number of occurrences, Sophie uses the pronouns more frequently than Lisa, and the percentages indicate that she is also somewhat more consistent in her use of the SEN variants. For both participants

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**Table 9.** Distribution of the most frequent SEN pronouns in Sophie and Lisa's RPR

| Variables | SEN in Sophie's RPR | Fisher exact | SEN in Lisa's RPR | Fisher exact |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| I | 247/259 (95.4%) | $p < .001$ | 168/214 (78.5 %) | $p < .001$ |
| YOU.SG (OBL.) | 51/62 (82.3%) | $p < .001$ | 15/21 (71.4%) | $p < .001$ |
| ME | 27/32 (84.4 %) | $p < .001$ | 23/31 (74.2%) | $p < .001$ |
| SHE | 18/20 (90.0%) | $p < .001$ | 7/8 (87.5%) | $p < .001$ |

**Table 10.** Overview of the SEN variant of the present tense of BE in Sophie and Lisa's RPR and PDR

| Variable | SEN in RPR | SEN in PDR | Fisher exact |
|---|---|---|---|
| Present tense of BE | 153/272 (54.4%) | 0/427 (0%) | $p < .001$ |

there is a statistically significant correlation between variant and register type ($p < .001$ for all pronouns).

### *3.3 Verbal inflection*

This section will discuss verbs that occur frequently in the data and that are expected to differ between SEN and LD, specifically focusing on the present tense forms of BE, NEED, and COME.

The present tense of BE is attested in both the SEN and the LD variant in the children's RPR (Table 10). However, only the LD variant of BE is attested in the children's PDR, indicating that the SEN variant is a marker for the RPR. This is further underscored by the results of the Fisher exact test ($p < .001$).

Upon closer examination of the distribution of the variants of BE in the RPR, it becomes evident that there is considerable difference between the two girls (Figure 2). Sophie employs the SEN variant the most (83.5%) (132/158) in her RPR and has a clear preference for this variant in this register ($p < .001$). In contrast, Lisa predominantly uses the LD variant (81.6%) (93/114), suggesting a preference for the LD variant in her RPR. However, Fisher's test indicates a significant correlation between variant and register type for BE in Lisa's case as well ($p < .001$).

Other features that were found with some frequency included various present tense forms of NEED and COME (Table 11). Notably, the SEN present tense forms of NEED and COME were exclusively observed in the children's RPR, not in their PDR. This suggests that the specific variants belong to the children's RPR, which is substantiated by significant *p*-values, even though the use of the SEN form of COME was less consistent than the use of NEED. However, there were notable differences between the two participants (Table 12).

As seen in Table 12, Sophie is much more consistent in her use of these SEN variants in her RPR compared to Lisa. For Sophie there is a statistically significant correlation between both variables and type of register. Lisa has very few instances of

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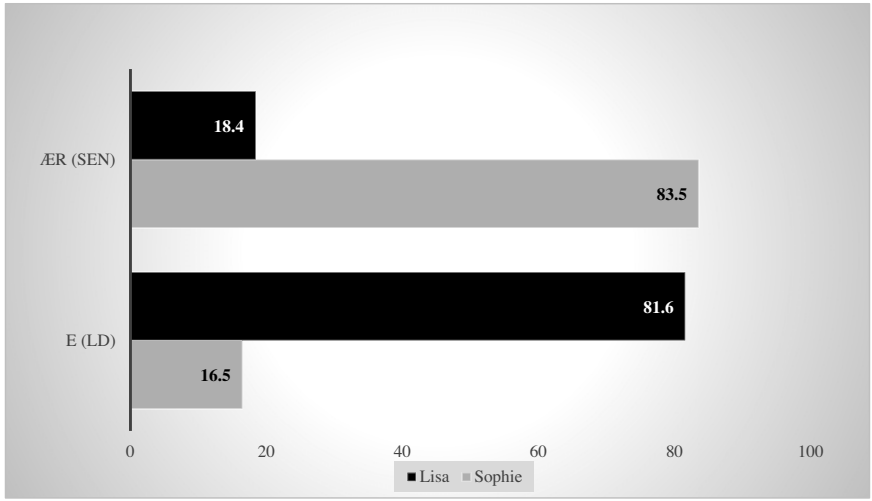


**Figure 2.** Distribution and rate (%) of the present tense of BE in Sophie and Lisa's RPR.

COME in any of her registers (hence, no Fisher exact test) and does not use the SEN variant at all in her RPR. However, she uses the SEN variant of NEED in 50% of the instances in her RPR, and this was found to be statistically significant ($p = .0098$), albeit less so than in Sophie's data.

Some examples of present tense forms in the children's RPR are presented in (5). These examples include both the use of SEN forms, as in (5a, b), and LD forms, such as (5c, d).

(5) a. vi **trenge-r** sånn mel (Lisa, 4;4)
*we need.SEN like.that flour*
'We need that kind of flour.'

b. nattpysj her **komme-r** nattpysjen din (Sophie, 5;10)
*pyjamas here comes.SEN pyjamas.SG.DEF your*
'Here come your pyjamas.'

c. sånn at ikke fluene **kjem** oppi (Lisa, 4;5)
*so that not flies.DEF come.LD into*
'So the flies do not get inside.'

d. kan eg få litt appelsinsaft oppi her (Sophie, 5;4)
*can I get a.bit orange.juice into here*
# det **treng-e** jæi
# *that need.LD I*
'Can I get some orange juice in here # I need that.'

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**Table 11.** Overview of SEN variants of NEED and COME in Sophie and Lisa's RPR and PDR

| Variables | SEN in RPR | SEN in PDR | Fisher exact |
|---|---|---|---|
| NEED | 35/46 (76%) | 0/34 (0%) | $p < .001$ |
| COME | 17/29 (59%) | 0/6 (0%) | $p < .001$ |

**Table 12.** Distribution of SEN variants of NEED and COME in Sophie and Lisa's RPR

| Variables | SEN in Sophie's RPR | Fisher exact | SEN in Lisa's RPR | Fisher exact |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| NEED | 26/28 (92.9%) | $p < .001$ | 9/18 (50%) | $p = .0098$ |
| COME | 17/22 (77.3%) | $p = .0084$ | 0/7 (0%) | — |

### *3.4 Noun inflections*

Regarding noun inflection, there was a lack of examples of relevant variables in the RPR.[5] There were only a couple of masculine nouns that are relevant to mention (DINOSAUR and BABY). It might not be surprising that there were mostly masculine nouns relevant for the analysis, both because the majority of nouns in Norwegian are in fact masculine (Rodina & Westergaard 2021), but also because it is in the masculine nouns that one finds the greatest differences in the inflectional system between SEN and LD (Section 1.4 Table 2).

For the nouns relevant to discuss, the girls seem to exhibit variation in both registers, which might indicate on-going dialect levelling in the local language community of the children. For example, regarding the plural forms of DINOSAUR, most of the variation is found in the children's PDR ($n = 53$), while very few instances are attested in the RPR ($n = 4$). Sophie predominantly uses the SEN variants of the noun, *dinosaur-er* (pl. indef.) and *dinosaur-ene* (pl. def.), in her PDR (35/40), suggesting that she prefers the SEN variants irrespective of register. However, it appears to be a considerable amount of individual variation here. Lisa uses only LD plural suffixes with DINOSAUR in her PDR (*-a*/*-ane*). She has one instance of noun inflection in her RPR, which is the SEN variant *dinosaur-er* (pl. indef.).

However, a further assessment of Lisa's use of definite plural noun inflection substantiates that there might be some on-going dialect levelling in the children's local language community, as demonstrated in (6).

(6) a. Nei ikkje chilisaus # da likte [PDR] (Lisa, 4;4)
*No not chili sauce # that liked*
ikkje **beibi-ene**
*not babies.DEF.SEN*
'No, not chili sauce # the babies did not like that.'

b. Eg går og # jæi går og [RPR] (Lisa, 5;1)
*I go and # I go and*
leker litt med **bebi-ene**
*play a.bit with babies.DEF.SEN*

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'I'm going to go and play with the babies for a bit.'

In example (6a), Lisa employs the suffix *-ene*, instead of the expected masculine *-ane*, in the plural definite form of the noun BABY in her PDR. No occurrences of *-ane* are present in the material, only two instances of *-ene*. Furthermore, she uses the suffix *-ene* in her RPR with the same noun, as in (6b). The distinction between the forms used in the two registers lies in the pronunciation of the root rather than the inflectional ending, namely in the employment of a monophthong in the RPR (see (6b)) and a diphthong in the PDR (see (6a)), delineating a distinction between the SEN and LD variant of the noun.

Due to the overall infrequency of plural nouns in the dataset, it is challenging to assess the extent to which the children use different forms in the two registers. This uncertainty is exacerbated by the observation that there may be on-going dialect levelling in the local language community of the children causing forms that appear to overlap with SEN plurals to spread to the LD.

## 4. Discussion

In this section, the two research questions will be explored in conjunction for each morphological category in turn: What morphological features of SEN are present in the children's RPR? To what extent do the children make use of the SEN variant of the morphological form in their RPR, compared to when they use the LD variant in their PDR?

### *4.1 Pronouns (and determiners)*

Upon examining the pronouns found in the corpus, SEN variants of I, YOU.SG, ME, SHE, YOU.PL, REFL., WE, THEY, THEM, THOSE, SOME(ONE), and SOMETHING have been documented. Interestingly, variants corresponding to SEN of WE, THEY, THEM, THOSE, SOME(ONE), and SOMETHING were extensively used by the children in their PDR, in addition to the RPR (Table 7). Therefore, these features cannot be viewed as distinctive of SEN. Rather, it may indicate that a process of dialect levelling is happening in the children's local language community, a phenomenon also observed in Strand (2020). Specifically, Strand (2020:303) points out that similar variables, such as THEY, THEM, SOME(ONE), and SOMETHING, are undergoing a process of dialect levelling within the language community of the children from Tromsø.

In discussing the features that appear to be distinct SEN variants and the extent to which the children use these SEN forms in their RPR, the most frequent SEN pronouns observed are I, YOU.SG, ME, and SHE (Table 9). Both Sophie and Lisa show a clear preference for the SEN variants of these pronouns in their RPR ($p < .001$ for all pronouns). Sophie is, however, slightly more consistent in her use. Additionally, YOU.PL and the REFL. appear frequently in SEN forms in the children's RPR. However, there are few numbers of occurrences of these pronouns overall (Table 8). In comparison, Strand finds a high percentage of SEN in the variables I, ME, and YOU.SG. He also reports a high percentage of SEN of the REFL. in the children's RPR

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(Table 4), even though the number is not very high (9/13). In contrast to this study, Strand does not find a high percentage of the pronoun form SHE.

A low percentage of the most frequent SEN pronouns (I, ME, YOU.SG, and SHE) is attested in the children's PDR. This is in accordance with the same variables in Strand (2020:304). As Strand (2020:304) suggests, the few instances of SEN variants observed in the PDR may be attributed to the children still mastering code-switching, resulting in occasional 'bleeding' or 'spilling over' of SEN variants into their PDR. This can be understood in relation to the demanding cognitive process of co-activation that code-switching entails (see Kootstra et al. 2020), where, in these instances, it can be interpreted as a lack of inhibition of the SEN variants in the PDR. Lisa's instance of self-correction from the SEN variant of I to the LD variant mid-sentence (example (4a)) suggests that these crossovers are inadvertent rather than a lack of proficiency in distinguishing between the two varieties. Such an assessment is also supported by Fisher's test, which shows that there is a significant correlation between variant and register type for this pronoun ($p < .001$).

Delving deeper into the most frequently used pronouns, Strand (2020:310) hypothesises that phonological resemblance between I, YOU.SG, and ME may have facilitated acquisition, as all these variants end in /æi/ in SEN (see Table 1). Furthermore, he speculates that there may be an impact of conceptual grouping, where the prominence of one variant could reinforce the usage of related forms (Strand 2020:310). Drawing on Siegel's (2010) definition of salience, one could argue that the phonological similarities between the pronoun forms enhance their noticeability, which in turn may facilitate their quicker acquisition by children. Salience in terms of frequency, as suggested by Strand, may also play a role here. As he points out, the variants most frequently used in role-play are the ones most frequently heard in role-play, which could give a reinforcing effect 'towards agreed-upon role play variants' (Strand 2020:309).

The REFL. also phonologically resembles these pronouns, but despite the high percentage of SEN in the RPR, the total number of occurrences in the data is low. Here, the role of pragmatic salience (see Errington 1985) could play a part: as pointed out by Strand (2020:309), first- and second-person personal pronouns are '[. . .] ideal nuclei for stance-taking'. In the RPR, the children are in character and speak to other children in character, and in the PDR, they speak as themselves but also about the characters, as this register contains utterances that direct the play (see Høigård 1999, Kleemann 2015). This may have had consequences for the use of pronouns, making the children more likely to use I, ME, and YOU.SG in both the RPR and the PDR, and third-person personal pronouns (such as HE and SHE) and the REFL. in the PDR when talking *about* the characters.

An interesting difference between the current study and Strand's is the use of SHE, which has a high frequency of SEN forms in the present study (> 85% for both girls) and a low frequency in Strand's study (32.8%) (19/58). From the numbers, it is clear that the pronoun form is used by the children in Strand's study (2020:305). In this case, the age of the participants must be considered, as age is an important factor in acquisition. The children in Strand's study were younger (aged 3–4) than the children that have been analysed in depth in the present study (aged 4–6), and it is

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reasonable to think that the older children have had more exposure to SEN, both from society and through role-play.

### 4.2 Verbal inflection

Upon examining verbal inflection in the corpus, SEN variants of the present tense of BE, COME, and NEED were the most frequent verb forms. If we first examine the overall use of BE in the RPR, the SEN variant (54.4%) is more frequent than the LD variant (45.6%). This is a higher proportion than found in Strand (2020:306), where the SEN variant appears 32.4% of the time. It may initially be thought that age plays a role here as well. However, there is a significant difference in the use of BE between the two girls: Sophie uses the SEN variant in her RPR to a much greater extent than Lisa (83.5% compared to 18.4%). Considering that Lisa is older than the children in Strand's study, one might expect her to have a more advanced use of the SEN variant for this particular variable, but this is not the case. Thus, the age difference between the children in Strand (2020) and the current study cannot explain this discrepancy. Rather, there is a great deal of individual variation. Compared to Sophie, Lisa uses SEN variants less frequently in her RPR. Nonetheless, since the LD variant of BE is the only variant found in both children's PDR, it appears that the SEN variant is specific to the RPR. This is underscored by significant $p$-values for both Lisa and Sophie ($p < .001$).

Moving on to the present tense of COME and NEED, both SEN forms are used at a relatively high percentage in the RPR (> 50%) (Table 11). However, again there is a clear difference between the girls: Sophie uses the SEN variants much more consistently than Lisa (Table 12), confirming that overall, Sophie appears to be a more adept role-player compared to Lisa. The varying use of SEN in RPR among the children is also evident when looking at the other nine participants in the study (Figure 1), and previous research has shown the same variation (Guldal 1997, Strand 2020). Variation between individuals is also to be expected due to factors such as exposure, opportunities for use, and cognitive abilities (see Luk & Rothman 2022). For instance, it could be suggested that Sophie has more experience with SEN, both in and out of the playroom. However, since Sophie and Lisa were regular playmates, one might have expected that if one participant uses more SEN variants, this would 'rub off' on their playmate, as social interaction with proficient speakers of the dialect is a factor that could affect acquisition (see Siegel 2010). Examining the evolution of different variables over time and with different children could be a way to see whether playing with a more adept peer has this kind of influence on the child's use of SEN variants.

### 4.3 Noun inflections

Regarding noun inflection, there was a lack of examples of relevant variables in the corpus. This was also the case in Strand (2020). Despite the lack of nouns in his data set, Strand (2020:299) finds that especially *-er* in plural definite nouns could be a marker for RPR. The absence of relevant nouns in the current data set makes it difficult to determine any definite patterns. However, the fact that the children utilise the SEN suffixes *-er*/*-ene* in their PDR with masculine nouns that originally

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do not have these suffixes might indicate that a process of dialect levelling is taking place in their local language community. From the overview of features in the LD (Table 2), one can see that *-ene* is a suffix found with feminine nouns in the dialect, which in recent years also has crept into neuter nouns in the dialect (Akselberg 2003:216). Given this development, it may not be long before it also spreads to masculine nouns, which have not been associated with this suffix so far. Whether these changes originate from SEN (see Mæhlum 2009), or if the correspondence with SEN is coincidental and rather due to neighbouring dialect contact and simplification (see Sandøy 2009), is difficult to determine and is not the aim of the current study. However, what can be concluded is that these forms cannot be considered markers of SEN in the children's RPR.

### *4.4 Summary and further questions*

To summarise, there is a difference between Sophie and Lisa in their use of SEN variants within morphological categories, particularly with pronouns and verbal inflection. Both girls frequently use SEN pronouns, but Sophie is slightly more consistent than Lisa. Regarding verbal inflection, Sophie (> 70%) is much more consistent in her SEN use than Lisa (< 55%). Furthermore, the girls use pronoun forms (75–90%) more than the children from Northern Norway (69–75%) (Strand 2020:305). When it comes to the present tense of BE, Sophie (> 80%) also uses the SEN variant far more than the children in Strand's study (< 35%), but Lisa does not (< 20%). This nicely illustrates that even though age plays a role, it is not the only factor influencing the use of SEN variants. There is also a great deal of individual variation, with factors such as quantity/quality of exposure, opportunities for use, and individual cognitive abilities (see Luk & Rothman 2022) potentially playing a role and impacting the girls' use of SEN. Exploring how these factors influence the use of SEN in role-play could be a focus for future research.

The next question is: What exactly is the SEN variety? Are SEN forms merely emblematic markers to show that the children are in character, or are they acquiring SEN features as part of a target variety (Strand 2020:311)? Strand (2020:312) suggested that the children in his study were acquiring (variants of) SEN after tracking the most frequent SEN variants over time and finding a significant positive progression. At present, this study cannot further address this question. However, examining the progression of the most frequent SEN variants over time to determine whether features of SEN are a target variety for Southwestern Norwegian children could also be a focus of future research.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper reports a study of Southwestern Norwegian children and their use of Standard East Norwegian (SEN) variants of morphological variables in their role-play registers (RPR). The study set out to (i) report what morphological features of SEN are present in the children's RPR, and (ii) determine the extent to which the children use the SEN or the LD variant of the morphological forms in their RPR. The use of the targeted variables in the PDR is also examined to ensure that the two

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varieties differ regarding the relevant forms. The findings of the study are based on the two participants who used SEN the most, Sophie and Lisa.

From the in-depth analysis, we can conclude that the extent to which the children use SEN varies depending on the individual child and the specific variable. The children were most consistent in using SEN with certain pronoun forms, namely I, ME, YOU.SG, and SHE. This was discussed in terms of phonological similarity, pragmatic salience, and/or frequency of use in role-play. Although age appears to influence the use of SEN when compared to a younger cohort from a different region in Norway, the individual differences between the two girls show that not all observed variations can be attributed to age. In verbal inflection, Sophie demonstrates much greater consistency in her use of SEN than Lisa. This trend was evident throughout the analysis, suggesting that additional individual and contextual factors affect language use.

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**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

## Notes

**1** List of abbreviations and variable names: BABY = indefinite and definite plural noun variable (*beibia*, *-ane/bebier*, *-ene*); BE = present tense of copular 'be' variable (*e/ær*); CTD = children's Tromsø dialect (from Strand's (2020) study); COME = present tense of 'come' variable (*kjem*, *kjem(m)e/kommer*); DEF./def. = definite; DINOSAUR = indefinite and definite plural noun variable (*dinosaura*, *-ane/dinosaurer*, *-ene*); F/f. = feminine; I = first person singular subject pronoun variable (*eg/jæi*); Indef. = indefinite; LD = the local dialect of the children in this study; m. = masculine; ME = first person singular non-subject pronoun variable (*meg/mæi*); NEED = present tense of 'need' variable (*treng*, *trenge/trenger*) n. = neuter; OBL./obl. = oblique/non-subject; PDR = peer-directed register; PL./pl. = plural; REFL. = third person reflexive pronoun variable (*seg/sæi*); RPR = role-play register; SEN = Standard East Norwegian; SG./sg. = singular; SHE = third person singular feminine subject pronoun variable (*ho/hun*); SOME(ONE) = indefinite pronoun/determiner variable (*nok(k)en*, *nok(k)on/noen*); SOMETHING = indefinite pronoun/determiner variable (*nok(k)e*, *nok(k)o*, *noe/noe*); THEIR = third person plural possessive variable (*deira(n)s*, *deira/deres*); THEM = third person plural non-subject pronoun variable (*dei/dem*); THEY = third person plural subject pronoun variable (*dei/di*); THOSE = plural demonstrative/pronoun variable (*dei/di*); WE = first person plural personal pronoun (*me/vi*); YOU.PL = second person plural pronoun variable (*de, dekan/dere*); YOUR.PL = second person plural possessive variable (*dekans/deres*); YOU.SG = second person singular non-subject pronoun variable (*deg/dæi*).

**2** The Norwegian dialects vary in terms of morphology, phonology, lexicon, and syntax. Mæhlum & Røyneland (2023) divide Norway into four dialect areas: Northern Norwegian, Central Norwegian, Western Norwegian, and Eastern Norwegian. Within a dialect area, there are many different dialects that share features characteristic of that specific area. Although there are linguistic differences among dialects, they are mutually intelligible for Norwegians. Strand (2020) has investigated the RPR of children from the Northern Norwegian dialect area, while the current study examines the RPR of children from the (south) Western Norwegian dialect area. Examples of differences between the children in Strand's (2020) study and those in the current study include various pronoun forms: 'I' (Southwestern Norwegian, *eg*; Northern Norwegian, *æ*), 'me' (Southwestern Norwegian, *meg*; Northern Norwegian, *mæ*), and 'you' in the singular oblique position (Southwestern Norwegian, *deg*; Northern Norwegian, *dæ*). Additionally, there are differences in nominal inflection, such as the neuter plural definite form of 'roof' (Southwestern Norwegian, *taka*; Northern

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Norwegian, *takan*) and the feminine plural definite form of 'book' (Southwestern Norwegian, *bøkene*; Northern Norwegian, *bøkern*).

**3** Since the main objective of this study is to describe features of SEN (which differ from the children's LD) that are part of the children's RPR, only the variables where distinct SEN variants have been identified are included in the count. Variables where it seems that the variants are undergoing dialect levelling in the children's LD community, in terms of their correspondence with SEN, have not been considered. Including these variables would have resulted in a much higher number of SEN features for all participants.

**4** In the data, the pronouns and demonstratives THEY (SEN, *di*; LD, *dei*), THEM (SEN, *dem*; LD, *dei*), and THOSE (SEN, *di*; LD, *dei*) are pronounced with the SEN variant *di* and the LD variant *dei*. Traditionally, the SEN variant of THEM is *dem*, but this form does not appear in the material. It appears that the children use *di* (or *dei*) in both subject and object position (the lack of distinction between subject and object forms is a common phenomenon in Norway (see Mæhlum & Røyneland 2023). As the SEN variant *di* is consistently used across all three variables – THEY, THEM, and THOSE – and the same applies to the LD variant *dei*, the variables have been merged and counted together.

**5** The reason there might be fewer nouns in the RPR compared to the PDR could be that the children primarily use pronouns to refer to the nouns in the RPR.

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