

From Tune to Eggja – the ontology of language change

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”Det er eit større stig frå målet på Tune-stenen [...] til målet på Eggjasteinen [...] enn frå gamalnorsk til det nynorske normalmålet.” (Indrebø 1951:46)

The change in language from Proto-Norse to Old Norse is characterised by many language historians as the greatest upheaval known to Nordic language history. Gustav Indrebø stated in his *Målsoga* from 1951 that the Norwegian language has never undergone so much change during such a short period of time. According to Indrebø there is a greater gap between the language of the runic inscription on the Tune stone and the language of the Eggja inscription than from Old Norse to modern Norwegian.

It is not easy to compare these two transitions; the dominant changes that constitute each of them took place in different parts of the language structure. The distinctive feature of the shift from Proto-Norse to Old Norse is a substantial phonological change, while the transition from Old Norse to modern Norwegian first and foremost is characterised by morphological changes. It does not follow that this younger transitional period was free from phonological changes, but compared to the changes from Tune to Eggja, the changes in the phonology from Old Norse to modern Norwegian are to be regarded as modest.

What happened?

When we are talking about the language shift from Proto-Norse to Old Norse we are referring not only to changes in the spoken language but also to modifications of the writing system, the transition from the older to the younger *fupark*. If we add the changes in the spoken language to the changes of the *fupark*, I think Gustav Indrebø was right. There has been no other period in the history of

the Scandinavian languages that has seen more subversive transformations than the shift from Proto-Norse to Old Norse. The time span taken into consideration, we are talking about not more than 300 years, will further emphasise such a characteristic.

The inscription on the cranium from Ribe, North Jutland, is supposed to be the oldest documentation of the younger fuþark. The archaeological dating is 720 AD. The Eggja inscription, however, does not testify to the transition from the older to the younger fuþark. At best we might say that it gives a hint of the alphabetical changes to come. The linguistic evolution from Tune to Eggja does not coincide with the transition from Proto-Norse to Old Norse if all aspects of language, speech and writing are taken into account.

The most comprehensive changes in the spoken language in this period are the innovations summed up under the terms vowel mutation – umlaut – and syncope. We are, however, dealing in principle with two different changes. Umlaut is a common denominator for a series of regressive assimilations where a vowel in an unstressed syllable modifies a preceding stressed vowel in such a way that the two vowels become phonetically more similar: *gastiR* > **gæstiR*; **mūsiR* > **mȳsiR*; **bōkiR* > **bōkiR*; **landu* > **lōndu*. Syncope refers to the loss of vowels and consonants in unstressed syllables, the result of which was that weak syllables were shortened or contracted or completely disappeared. Proto-Norse idioms like *stainar*, *gastiR*, *arbija*, *magur*, **skeldur*, *raisiðō*, *faihiðō* became Old Norse *steinn*, *gestr*, *erfi*, *mogr*, *skjoldr*, *reista*, *fáða*.

The chronology of umlaut and syncope

Umlaut and syncope have often been considered to be in a causal relation. The reason is that the vowel that caused the assimilation belonged to the set of vowels that disappeared through syncope. The pre-structuralist Neogrammarians stated explicitly that umlaut was brought about as a direct result of the syncope process; in that respect it is more correct to say that the mutating process was regarded as an epenthesis rather than assimilation. That would say that the umlauting vowel was transferred to the syllable preceding that in which it

originally occurred: *gastiR* > **gaⁱstiR* > **gaⁱstR* > **gæstR*. If we on the other hand consider umlaut strictly as assimilation, then there need not be any relation of cause and effect between umlaut and syncope. There is, however, a chronological relationship between the two; since the umlauting vowel was often syncopeated, it goes without saying that the assimilation must have taken place before the assimilating vowel disappeared.

In the framework of classical taxonomic phonology the causal relationship between umlaut and syncope was brought up again but reformulated according to the theoretical background. In terms of phonology “umlaut” has two different meanings; phonetic umlaut and phonemic umlaut. It is the phonemic umlaut that is commonly regarded to be dependent on syncope. Phonetic umlaut, on the other hand, stands in no causal relation to syncope. As a result of regressive assimilations phonetic umlaut is dependent on the unstressed vowels being there. So when we refer to “umlaut” we must state explicitly whether we are talking about phonetic or phonemic umlaut.

When one wants to substantiate the transition from Proto-Norse to Old Norse, the Tune and Eggja inscriptions are often called upon to illustrate this shift. The language of the Tune stone is said to be classical Proto-Norse, while the Eggja inscription seems to demonstrate more or less the same linguistic structure as we find in the skaldic and Eddaic poems. The archaeologists and historians of art dated the inscribed Eggja stone to the seventh century, the Vendel period, 650 AD. The basis for this dating is mainly the horse figure carved on the stone, a typical Vendel horse, which must be contemporaneous with the inscription. Also the circumstances around the grave where the stone was found, a flat grave, should indicate a date not later than the seventh century. This early dating was hard to accept for the linguists and language historians. It would imply that the whole language shift from Proto-Norse to Old Norse was brought about during a period of not more than 250 years. And if this was the case, then there must have been special reasons for this sudden outburst of radical language transformations that were carried through that quickly. And then one started not only to describe this language shift but one also looked for explanations. Why did our ancestors experience umlaut and syncope?

There are no other language changes where the focus has to such a degree been directed towards explanation at the expense of description as is the case

with umlaut and syncope. One has been just as much preoccupied with the question of why things happened as with the description of what took place. This relates both to umlaut and syncope taken as a whole and the way in which these innovations were carried through. The most recent contribution to that discussion is the monograph of Michael Schulte from 1998: *Grundfragen der Umlautphonemisierung. Eine structurelle Analyse des nordgermanischen i/j-Umlauts unter Berücksichtigung der älteren Runeninschriften*. In this book Schulte gives an overview of previous research on Nordic i-umlaut, concentrating on contributions he himself finds in support of taxonomical phonological theory. He also suggests new solutions to the main problems connected with umlaut and syncope, such as the non-appearance of umlaut when *-i* is syncope after short syllables. In his discussion Schulte is relying on evidence he finds in the Proto-Norse runic material. In this regard Schulte's contribution distinguishes itself, we rarely find discussions about umlaut and syncope that are so data oriented, and when these data are exclusively Proto-Norse runic inscriptions, it adds to the appeal of this book.

The evidence of umlaut and syncope on Tune and Eggja

What is then the status of the Tune and Eggja inscriptions when it comes to umlaut and syncope? Since umlaut occurred before syncope, it would be natural to expect that phonetic umlaut would reveal itself before syncope. The umlaut vowels were, however, most reluctant to manifest themselves. When we are dealing with the older fupark, we are very insistent about maintaining that the 24-character fupark represented a phonemic script. There was, with some few exceptions, a one-to-one relation between grapheme and phoneme, each phoneme was marked by one and the same grapheme, and each grapheme represented one phoneme only. Phonetic umlaut, allophonic in its nature, should therefore not reveal itself in such a system. A graphic manifestation of umlaut is not to be expected until after the syncope, when the umlaut allophones had been phonemicised. The form **hornā** in the Gallehus inscription and on the whetstone from Strøm are commonly regarded as exceptions to the grapho-phonemic principle of Proto-Nordic carving.

Instead of being persistent about considering Proto-Norse runic script to be phonemic and regarding Gallehus and Strøm as exceptions to that general principle, I would say that the older futhorc was phonemic in the sense of a general one-to-one relation between phoneme and grapheme. To account for instances like **hornā** I would refer to the dichotomy of deep and shallow orthography, introduced by Geoffrey Sampson in his book *Writing systems. A linguistic introduction* from 1985. A writing system that has two graphemes for allophones of the same phoneme is on that point more shallow than a system that has one grapheme for all the allophones of the same phoneme. It is therefore more explicit to say that the orthography of the Proto-Norse runic inscriptions is normally deep, while there are also some instances of shallow orthographies. In deep orthographies phonetic umlaut never comes to expression, but thanks to the more shallow orthography of Gallehus and Strøm we have clear indications of phonetic a-umlaut of /u/. The form **hariwulafa** of the Istaby inscription is on the other hand deep in respect to a-umlaut compared with Gallehus and Strøm, but there is every reason to suggest that the phonetic reality is -[o]- also in the Istaby case.

Because of the principle of deep orthography one has generally not taken umlaut into account until after syncope. When we reach post-syncope time, however, runic script, with its 16-characters, has moved from a level of deep orthography to an even deeper one. Now there are no symbols to represent the new phonemes. A syncopated unstressed umlauting vowel may therefore be the only evidence of a preceding umlauted vowel. There is therefore no direct written manifestation of umlaut in the Eggja inscription, but it is generally accepted that the root vowels of word forms like **nakdǫn** and **mǫnR** are phonemicised umlaut vowels, /ɔ/ and /æ/ respectively, *nǫkðan*, *mǣnnR*. If Ottar Grønvik's reading and interpretation of the last word in the inscription is correct, **lagi(s)**, then we have a third instance of an umlauted root vowel, /æ:/, *lægis*. In this case the umlauting *-i* has not been syncopated.

When it comes to syncope, the Eggja inscription gives evidence of the following instances: *stain* < **staina* (acc.); *skorinn* < **skorinanō* (m. acc. sg.) or **skorinar* (m. nom. sg.);¹ *mǫR* < **mannaR*; *fiskR* < **fiskaR*; *mǫnR* < **manniR*;

1 An accusative *skorinn* might also be the result of analogical levelling from nom.

wrīnR < **wrīniR*. All these are examples of syncope after a long syllable. *Bor-* in **bormoþa** exhibits the disappearance of *-a* after a short syllable. The Eggja inscription has no certain samples that might show the status of syncope of *-i* and *-u* in inflexional endings after short syllables. In his latest contribution to the Eggja discussion, “Om Eggjainnskriften enda en gang”, in *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 115 (2000), Ottar Grønvik reads a form **nip** *nip*, “relative”, “kinsman”, acc. sg. < **nipi*. If this reading is correct, *-i* in absolute final position was deleted after a short syllable around 650 AD. When not in absolute final position, *-i* was still standing after short syllables, as was any *-u*. This situation is testified in the Rök inscription, which is supposed to be 100–150 years younger than Eggja, **sunu** (acc. sg.), **sitir** (2.3. sg. pres.), **karur** (adj. m. nom. sg.) *gqrr*.

After short intermediate syllables, however, *-i* and *-u* seem to be syncopated in the Eggja inscription, **nakðan** *nokðan* < **nakuðanō*. The same holds true as for Rök, **fatlaþr** < **fatilōðar* (“to have in a sling”, “tie up”) **twalfþa** < *twaliftō*. Both Eggja and Rök indicate that syncope of *-i* and *-u* in intermediate position is older than the disappearance of these vowels in final syllables.

There are no traces of syncope in the Tune inscription. But what about umlaut, and now we are talking about phonetic umlaut. Since umlaut does not manifest itself in the Proto-Norse runic inscriptions, it is impossible to state when this innovation occurred. How far back is it reasonable to trace the occurrence of umlaut? Are umlaut allophones parts of a synchronic common Proto-Norse (sub-)phonological system?

The term phonetic umlaut has two different meanings; diachronically it designates an innovation, regressive assimilations. In the search for explanations for the origin of the innovations labelled as umlaut and syncope, one has often referred to the common Germanic accent shift, the fixing of expiratory accent on root syllables. The term umlaut also refers to a synchronic situation of allophones in complementary distribution. I do not think we are taking any chances by stating that this synchronic stage was established by the time of the Tune inscription. I would even go further and suggest that phonetic umlaut as an innovation goes back to the early history of the Germanic languages, and by the time of the oldest runic inscriptions combinatory allophones conditioned by the following unstressed vowels were part of the synchronic system.

There should be nothing to prevent us from maintaining that the root vowels in *dohtriR*, *dālidun*, *arbija*, *āsijōstēR*, *arbijanō* in the Tune inscription were pronounced [ø] and [æ(:)] respectively, that phonetic umlaut had taken place. In that case the language of the Tune inscription and the language of the Eggja inscription are formally but not functionally identical as far as root vocalism is concerned. And then we reach the preliminary conclusion that the introduction of umlaut should be excluded as one of the main distinctions between the Tune and Eggja inscriptions.

There are nevertheless differences between the language of these two inscriptions when it comes to the function of umlaut. In the Eggja language the umlaut is phonemicised. Eggja exhibits phonemic umlaut, Tune does not. And how did this phonemicisation take place? In my opinion it is not satisfactory to refer to syncope alone. If the situation of complementary distribution implies a psycho-dynamic co-articulation, then the umlaut allophone should retrieve its original phonetic quality with the disappearance of the conditioning element – the umlauting vowel. If **hurna* becomes *horna* as a result of regressive assimilation, and if the root vowel [o] is a combinatory allophone of /u/ conditioned by the unstressed -[a] in the following syllable, then this [o] should return to [u] with the syncope of [a]. Why is it not so? The answer must be that the allophone had achieved a sort of independent status in relation to the conditioning factor – in our case the following unstressed vowel – before it was syncope.

It is precisely this question Michael Schulte is discussing in his book *Grundfragen der Umlautphonemisierung*. He is opposing what he calls the “Syncope-zentrismus” in the discussion about the realisation of umlaut. He finds it absurd that the phonemicisation should have taken place as a result of syncope, the umlaut vowels must have acquired the status of phonemes before syncope occurred. Schulte regards syncope as a process of gradual weakening of unstressed vowels, and it starts with the lowering of $-ī > -ē$:

Der früheste relevante Phonemisierungsimpuls des nordischen i/j-Umlauts, mithin der Initialimpuls, erfolgt durch Absenkung der Ultimalänge $*-ī(-) > *-ē(-)$. [229]

He finds evidence for this allegation among other things in the inscription on the By stone, **h̄rorer**, and **wate** in the inscription on the whetstone from Strøm,

following those who interpret **hrorer** as an adjectival patronymic parallel to **holtijar** in the Gallehus inscription. On the By stone the ending *-ijaR* has been reduced to *-ēR*. In the case of Strøm Schulte reads **wate** as a subjunctive, the ending *-ē* represents a weakening of older *-ī*. In the other two corresponding word forms in the Strøm inscription, **skapi** and **ligi**, the weakening of *-ī* has not yet taken place, owing to the quantity of the root syllable; **wate** has a long root syllable while the root syllables of **skapi** and **ligi** are short.

The main thing is, however, that Schulte assumes phonemic umlaut in **hrorer** and **wate**, the root vowels being /ø:/ and /æ:/ respectively. It is not the syncope in itself or the complete disappearance of the unstressed vowels that brings forth the phonemicisation, but the weakening of unstressed vowels that results in phonemic mergers in the system of endings.

There might be a lot to say both for and against the theories of Schulte, I am personally in favour of his objections to the “Syncopezentrismus”. There must have been other incentives to phonemicisation of the umlaut allophones ahead of syncope. I would not say that Schulte’s suggestion is the clinching argument, but I think it represents a move in the right direction.

The periodisation of Proto-Norse

The oldest stage of the Scandinavian languages is commonly labelled “Proto-Scandinavian”, “Proto-Norse”, “Urnordisch”. It is usually dated from the time when the first runic inscriptions appear, around 150–200 to around 500. According to another popular view, the language of the earliest runic inscriptions represents a common Germanic dialect and is regarded as an antecedent of the later Common Scandinavian. The language is known to us partly through the small number of “classical” Proto-Norse runic inscriptions, partly through reconstruction. In many respects Proto-Norse has more the character of an abstract reconstruction than a linguistic reality. It is traditionally regarded as a variation-free common starting point for the language shift of which the main innovations are umlaut and syncope. The transitional period from Proto-Norse to the language of the Viking Age is often called the syncope period, and since syncope

and umlaut are considered common for all the Scandinavian languages, this period is also called “Common Scandinavian”.

There has been some discussion about the extent to which Common Scandinavian or Proto-Norse should be regarded as a uniform variation – free language, or whether it is reasonable to allow for dialect variation. In that respect I refer to Michael Barnes’ article ‘How ‘common’ was common Scandinavian?’ from 1997 and Martin Syrett’s PhD thesis *The unaccented Vowels of Proto-Norse*, published in 1994. Both Syrett and Barnes seem to be of the opinion that neither a proto stage nor a “common” stage of any language, understood as a real linguistic situation, could be variation free. On my own account I would say that variation is a universal property of any spoken language.

When it comes to Proto-Norse or Common Scandinavian the problem is of course that the runic inscriptions do not testify to any large extent to variations in the language they are presenting. As Syrett points out: “[...] although it seems probable that there were dialectal differences throughout Scandinavia in this period, it is also likely that they are effectively irrevocable given the limitations of evidence.” (1994: 34) They must, however, have been there.

In his works on language development in pre-Viking-Age Scandinavia Ottar Grønvik seems to look upon Proto-Norse or Common Scandinavian as a variation-free language. He considers every variation as diachronic variation, completely disregarding the possibility of synchronic variation. Grønvik describes the language development from 200 to the Viking Age (800) through three main stages taking a reconstructed Proto-Norse with no umlaut and no syncope as the starting point. Every main stage is divided into several sub-stages where the stage I c “late proto-Norse” (sein urnordisk), 450–500 AD is the period for the origin of phonetic umlaut. In my opinion there is no need for this transitional stage I c. This is unquestionably a reconstructed language stage for which there is no evidence because of the presumed phonemic nature of runic script – the deep orthography in this matter. Grønvik is aware of this fact; he states explicitly that such a stage must be presumed “for theoretical reasons”.² Linguisti-

2 “Det viktigste argument for å skille ut et språktrinn I c *sein-urnordisk*, er at det av teoretiske grunner må forutsettes en språkfase med bevarte temavokaler *a, i, u*, der de senere omlyds- og brytningsvokaler hadde allofonstatus, [...]” (Grønvik 1987:182).

cally it is just as plausible to reconstruct an initial stage for Proto-Norse where umlaut allophones – phonetic umlaut – constitute part of the synchronic system.

Grønvik's phasing of Proto-Norse in consecutive stages raises more problems. He operates within a chronological framework that uses timespans of not more than fifty years. To take one example: He states that the youngest artefact that can be dated with certainty (!) with a Proto-Norse inscription is the Bratsberg clasp from 475–485.³ By the time of the Ågedal bracteate, dated with the same certitude to 500–525, we have reached his stage II, "older Nordic", the characteristics of which are general syncope of *-a* and syncope of *-i* after a long syllable and loss of final *-n*. In his reading and interpretation of the Ågedal inscription Grønvik finds evidence for these innovations: **afl** *afl* < **afla*; **wir** *wiR* < **wiwaR*; **aiga** **aiga* < **aigan*. There is no clear documentation of syncope of *-i* after long syllables, but he finds circumstantial evidence for this loss, too.

I shall not discuss Grønvik's reading and interpretation of the Ågedal inscription, the main thing is how he uses it in his periodisation. Up to at least 475–485, dependent on the dating of the Bratsberg clasp, we have Proto-Norse. 15 to 50 years later, dependent on the dating of the Ågedal inscription (500–525), we have reached older Nordic and syncope of *-a*, and of *-i* after long syllables and loss of final *-n*. The archaeological basis for the absolute dating of these inscriptions is Egil Bakka's chronology for some runic artefacts. He places Bratsberg, Ågedal and the Eikeland clasp as representatives of three different styles within a period of 75 years, Eikeland is dated to 550. I do not know much about archaeology, and I know even less about the history of art and the ornamentation of clasps and bracteates, but I find it strange that any difference in style must necessarily be diachronic. There are at most supposed to be 50 years between the Bratsberg clasp and the Ågedal bracteate, they may have been made by artists of the same generation. Would it not therefore be just as plausible to say that what we have is synchronic variation, an overlap between two fashions, where there are traits that indicate that a style shift might be underway. If this periodisation is to be understood in the way that after the Ågedal bracteate

3 "Den yngste sikkert daterbare gjenstand med en urnordisk innskrift" (Grønvik 1987:175).

one did not any longer make clasps in the Bratsberg fashion, I find that highly questionable. Do we really change style from one decade to the next?

We definitely do not change language in that way. It is commonly acknowledged that languages change in the way that an innovation arises as a facultative variant, for a shorter or longer period we have double forms while in the end one of them gets the upper hand and becomes the single common form. The assertion of a new linguistic form does not necessarily imply that every occurrence of a previous form is older than the innovation. Consequently, even if the Ågedal bracteate gives evidence of syncope, every runic inscription without syncope need not be older than Ågedal, they might be – but it is not necessarily so.

If every variation is regarded as a diachronic variation and all variants are supposed to mutually exclude each other, uncalled for problems will arise in dealing with the real thing, manifestations of the language. Ottar Grønvik's interpretation of the inscription on the whetstone from Strøm on the island of Hitra is very illustrative in that respect.

A watehalihinohornā
B hahaskapihapuligi

The special shape of the s-rune, ᚱ, and the k-rune, ᚷ, should indicate a dating to the middle of the 6th century. We are in Grønvik's period II, characterised as we now know by syncope of *-a* and loss of *-i* after long syllables. Then the form **hornā** creates a problem. According to the postulated chronology this cannot be acc. sg. *hornā* "horn", because of the *-a* in the ending. If this was the word "horn", then the expected form would be *horn*. To solve this problem Grønvik postulates a derivative corresponding to an unattested Old Norse **horni* m. obl. case **horna*. It should be a word of the same kind as *namni* m. "namesake", *sessi* m. "bench-mate". *Horni* should then mean "horn-mate", the plural *hornar* "those who share the same horn", "having the same horn in common", the pragmatic meaning should be "members of a party sharing the same horn when drinking". The given singular *hornā* should then refer to "each participant in such a joint imbibing".

Martin Syrett warns us against "the ad hoc practice of plucking dialectal and other irregularities from nowhere to justify speculative readings" (1994: 31).

And these are wise words. The question is, however, which is most doubtful: To allow for dialectal variation that would suppose an overlap between forms with and without syncope of *-a*, or to hypothesise a strained derivation otherwise not attested in any Scandinavian dialect. There might be no more than 25 years between Ågedal and Strøm, at maximum 50 perhaps. Within that span of time it is not unreasonable to allow for variants with and without syncope of *-a*, or dialectal differences between the spoken language on the Norwegian southern coast (Ågedal) and the north-west coast (Strøm).

Conclusion

A reconstructed proto-stage of any language must be ascribed every attribute common for attested languages, such as synchronic variation. Variation has always been, is and will always be a universal property of any spoken language. It is only a reconstructed language taken as an abstraction that is likely to be hypothesised as variation-free, and such an abstraction has little to do with real life. Linguistic changes progress through different stages, innovations arise, they spread to different areas, for a while they are synchronic facultative variants parallel with the original forms and in the end the old variants fall out of use. All these stages must be accounted for as possible distinctive features of a proto-language. Every variation ascribed to Proto-Norse need not be diachronic.

Phonetic umlaut, a complementary distribution of the quality of stressed root vowels dependent on the following weak syllable, may have been a part of an early Proto-Norse synchronic system. There is every likelihood to suggest that the umlaut allophones had acquired an independent status in relation to the following unstressed vowel before this conditioning factor was syncopated.

Syncopé could possibly not be the only incentive for umlaut phonemicisation. Ahead of syncopé there must have been a sort of restructuring concerning the relation between the umlaut allophones and the following umlaut-causing vowels. When the final *-i* in *[gæsti] was syncopated, the root vowel must in some way or other have become independent of the disappearing *-i*, if not, the expected result of the syncopé should be *[gast].

If one lets reflections like these form the basis for the discussion about the rise and fall of Proto-Norse and the coming of Old Norse, then the linguistic path from Tune to Eggja might not be as abrupt as hitherto often assumed.

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