

Jan Terje Faarlund. *The Syntax of Old Norse*.
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XVII + 300 pages.

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1. Introduction

For a whole century, Nygaard's monumental work *Norrøn syntax* (1905) has been the definitive authority on the syntax of Old Norse. Nygaard's book is in many ways a wonderful work, with a wealth of examples of various constructions and phenomena. However, its replacement has long been called for, as Jan Terje Faarlund points out in the Preface to his book *The Syntax of Old Norse* (p. xi). There are various reasons for this. First, Nygaard's book is written in Norwegian, and hence not accessible to the great majority of the linguistic community. Second, we now have access to more reliable editions of Old Norse texts than Nygaard had hundred years ago to build the description on. Third, and most important, theoretical syntax in the modern sense did not exist when Nygaard wrote his book. Modern syntactic theory has greatly affected and changed our views on which syntactic features and characteristics are interesting and which are not. Therefore, this new overview of Old Norse syntax, written in English in line with current syntactic theory, is a treasure for scholars working on diachronic and historical syntax.

That is not to say that the book is perfect in all respects. On the contrary, in my view it deserves strong criticism and leaves much to be desired. The value of the book lies in its wealth of examples. It contains more than one thousand Old Norse sentences and provides both word-by-word (in some cases morpheme-by-morpheme) English glosses and idiomatic translations of them all. This makes the book a very important research tool for the English speaking world, which has not had access to any comparable source up to now. Faarlund deserves great credit for providing syntacticians who do not read Scandinavian with this valuable resource.

2. Structure and theoretical framework

The first two chapters of the book (after a short Introduction) are overviews of Old Norse Phonology and Inflectional Morphology, respectively. As Faarlund points out in the Preface (p. xii), the purpose of these chapters is to make it easier for readers to correctly understand and interpret the examples in the book. These two chapters appear to be based on standard handbooks, which are however not referred to (although some are listed in the bibliography), and I will have nothing to say about them in this review. The following five chapters describe the most important syntactic phrases; the Noun Phrase, Determiner Phrases, the Adjective Phrase, the Prepositional Phrase, and the Verb Phrase. The Finite Sentence and Subordinate Clauses get a special chapter each, and the book finishes with a short chapter on Reflexive Binding, followed by a Bibliography on Old Norse Syntax and indices.

The choice of a theoretical framework for a work like this is by no means self-evident. Modern syntactic theory is a highly technical subject which is not always easy to understand for less theory-oriented scholars. The author could have chosen to base his description on fashionable trends like the most recent version of the Minimalist Program. That would have been a very interesting and challenging approach, but it would have greatly reduced the number of potential readers. Instead,

the author has chosen to base the description on a “light version” of the Principles and Parameters framework, with some unorthodox additions, such as the Referential Phrase (RP) (p. 56-57). In order to make the description more accessible, the author includes a short overview of a few central concepts of the theory, such as X-bar theory, movement, and adjunction. At several places in the discussion of individual constructions, he also shows the assumed tree structure of certain examples to make it easier for the reader to follow his analysis. I think the author has taken the right decision here. His aim is not to theorize but rather to furnish others with classified examples (cf. p. xii) – those who want to use these examples to argue for or against a particular theory now have the opportunity to do so.

Generative research on the syntax of the Scandinavian languages during the past decades has highlighted certain phenomena that are considered to be important and interesting. It is customary to draw a distinction between ‘Insular Scandinavian’ (i.e. Icelandic and Faroese) on one hand, and ‘Mainland Scandinavian’ (i.e. Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish) on the other (cf., for instance, Holmberg and Platzack 1995). It has often been claimed that several syntactic features distinguish these two groups of languages. Since Old Norse is the direct ancestor of both Modern Icelandic and Modern Norwegian, which belong to different groups, it is very interesting to see how these syntactic phenomena behave in Old Norse. Among these phenomena we can mention oblique subjects, object shift, and various types of sentences containing expletives. It would have been valuable to be able to look up these constructions in the book, but none of them is mentioned in the list of contents. Oblique subjects can be found in the Subject Index, but the other two types are not mentioned at all. For object shift, it is possible to find some relevant examples scattered through the book, but no overview of the phenomena as such is given. No examples with expletives are found in the book, so the reader has to decide which conclusions to draw from their absence.

In a few cases, Faarlund compares his description of Old Norse with Modern Norwegian (for instance, p. 101, 126, 253). This is fine, of course, but I think the book would have benefited considerably from some comparison with Modern Icelandic. The reason is that Modern Icelandic is undoubtedly the closest living relative of Old Norse, and many syntactic phenomena in Old Norse that have disappeared from Norwegian still exist in Icelandic. For instance, noun phrases without the definite article can still have “unique and specific reference” in Modern Icelandic (p. 58-59), as opposed to the modern Mainland Scandinavian languages. It is also well known (cf. Maling and Zaenen 1978) that the allegedly universal ban against moving the subject out of a clause introduced by a complementizer (p. 263) does not hold for Modern Icelandic any more than for Old Norse. Furthermore, oblique noun phrases seem to be able to function as subject in Old Norse in much the same way as in Modern Icelandic (see section 5 below).

3. Textual sources

Selecting the textual basis for a syntactic description of a dead language is by no means a trivial task. On his sources, the author has the following to say (p. 2):

The texts used as sources in this book are printed editions of manuscripts written either in Iceland or in Norway before 1400; the oldest ones are from the early thirteenth century.

The texts are listed in a section on Abbreviation and Sources (p. xvi-xvii), together with the approximate year of the writing of the manuscript. However, the age of the manuscript does not tell the whole story. It is well known that no Old Norse texts, except for diplomas, are found in the original; most of them are only preserved in manuscripts that can be several decades or even centuries younger than the original text. This makes it extremely difficult to assess the validity of these texts as linguistic evidence, since it is often impossible to know whether a certain feature of the preserved text stems from the original or from the scribe of the preserved copy, or perhaps from the scribe of an intermediate link between the original and the preserved manuscript. In many cases, two or more manuscripts of the same text are preserved, and usually they differ to a greater or lesser extent – not only in spelling and morphology, but also with respect to syntax.

But it is not only the age of the texts that must be considered; the different text types or genres must also be taken into account. The author goes on to say (p. 2):

Only prose texts have been used, since they may be assumed to be closest to the spoken language. The texts include fiction (Icelandic family sagas and translated sagas), historical texts (kings' sagas), laws, official documents and charters (diploma), religious texts (homilies), and learned literature.

I do not think it is justified to lump these different types of texts together. Most descriptions of Old Norse syntax (among them Nygaard's *Norrøn syntax*) rely primarily on narrative texts of the first two types, i.e. (vernacular) fiction and historical texts (the boundaries between these two types not being very clear). The other text types are rather different from the narrative texts, and can hardly be assumed to be close to the spoken language. It is customary to distinguish between 'popular style' (*folkelig stil*) and 'learned style' (*lærd stil*) (cf. Nygaard 1905:1). The former is the style of the narrative texts, whereas the latter is characteristic of religious texts and learned literature (mostly translations), and is usually assumed to be influenced by Latin to a greater or lesser extent. Laws, official documents and charters make up yet another style which is characterized by heavy use of formulae.

I don't find it objectionable *per se* to use examples from these different sources – after all, they are all from Old Norse. But I think the readers have the right to know about these different styles, and I find it very strange that Faarlund never mentions them. Sometimes it is evident from his choice of examples that a certain construction mainly belongs to the 'learned style'. This is especially clear when the only examples of the construction in question are from translations like *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga*, *Gamal norsk homiliebok*, or from diplomas in *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* (cf., for instance, (10b) and (12a) on p. 60; (13) on p. 85; (15) on p. 86; (29) on p. 134; (81) and (82) on p. 150; (47) and (48) on pp. 264-265; etc.). In such cases, it is doubtful whether the examples really show "the internalized grammar of the once living speakers of Old Norse" (p. 1).

4. Bibliographical references

Much has been written about Old Norse syntax since Nygaard's book was published one hundred years ago. The bibliography at the end of the book contains around 190 titles, most of them from the 20th century. As the bibliography shows, the study of Old Norse syntax has been especially lively in recent years; approximately one third of the titles date from the last two decades. The bibliography, albeit comprehensive, is

however not ‘complete’, as claimed on the title page. For instance, it does not list the CD-ROM containing the texts of the Icelandic Family Sagas and the concordance to these texts, even though this edition is mentioned in the Preface. Strangely, however, unpublished concordances to *Heimskringla* and *Sturlunga saga* are listed in the bibliography.

A number of recently published papers (and a few older ones) are also missing from the bibliography. Admittedly, many of these papers (but by no means all) are in Icelandic, and hence perhaps not accessible to many readers of the book. That cannot be the sole explanation for their absence, though, because several papers in Icelandic are listed. However, what amazes me most is that the bibliography does not list Fritzner’s (1954) *Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog* (Dictionary of the Old Norwegian Language), nor is it ever referred to or mentioned in the book. Fritzner’s work is of course a dictionary, not a book on syntax, but it contains such a wealth of examples and syntactic information that it should certainly not be dismissed. The same goes for the new *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, published by the Arnamagnæan Commission in Copenhagen (of which only the first three volumes have appeared) – it is mentioned on p. 2, but not listed in the bibliography.

Faarlund says in the Preface (p. xii) that “[a]ll bibliographical references are given in the footnotes” and points out that the bibliography “includes other works besides those referred to in the book”. This is an understatement; only around 12 of the ca. 190 works listed in the bibliography are actually referred to in footnotes. I find this a major drawback of the book. The explanation (or excuse) for this lack of references in the text might lie in the author’s words in the Preface (p. xii):

[T]here is hardly any theoretical argumentation in the book. It is hoped, however, that the amount of data presented, and the way in which it is presented, may form the basis of theoretical argumentation and of hypotheses about syntactic structure and change.

I completely agree with this, but my point is that the author would have served the readers much better by making them aware of published papers on certain constructions, by pointing out to them where scholars have presented different analyses of the constructions in questions, etc. One can of course say that the readers can find these works in the bibliography, but that is not sufficient. First, it is by no means always obvious from the title that a certain phenomenon is described or analysed in a certain work. Second, a considerable part of the titles in the bibliography are in a Scandinavian language (especially Norwegian and Icelandic) which many of the readers probably will not understand.

In some cases, reference to earlier works would not only have been helpful for the readers but also appropriate. To name a few examples: Hreinn Benediktsson (1976) has written a paper on the variation between *vera at at* and *vera at* (p. 137). In his dissertation on the Icelandic Middle Voice, Kjartan Ottosson (1992) has discussed the syntactic status of the suffix *-sk* with respect to the accusative with infinitive construction (p. 154-155). I have shown (Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson 1996a) that when a particle precedes the finite verb, no element can intervene between them (p. 164). Both Þóra Björk Hjartardóttir (1993) and Halldór Ármann Sigurðsson (1993) have described and explained the conditions on the deletion of noun phrases under coreference with a preceding NP (p. 221-223).

In a few cases, the author doesn't seem to be aware of recent studies of individual phenomena in Old Norse. For instance, he claims that the imperative mood "is used only in main sentences" (p. 190) but "cannot be used in subordinate clauses" (p. 247). This is not true, however. Old Norse texts contain several examples of subordinate clauses with verbs in the imperative. I have recently made a thorough study of such sentences (Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson 2000), but their existence was already pointed out by Falk and Torp (1900:192) and Nygaard (1917:30), among others. Faarlund shows that the topic position in imperatives may occasionally be filled by an adverbial (p. 229), but it is in fact much more common to find the subject there, as I have shown (Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson 2000:71-73), cf. also Falk and Torp (1900:289).

5. Case study: Oblique subjects

There are many points where I disagree with Faarlund's description and analysis, or where I find it unsatisfactory. Space does not permit a thorough discussion of these points, so I have chosen to focus on the question of the existence or non-existence of oblique subjects in Old Norse. This has been a lively debate in recent years, where some scholars, including myself (Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson 1996b), have claimed that oblique subjects do exist in Old Norse, whereas others, Faarlund (2001) among them, have rejected this claim. In the present book, Faarlund still keeps to his former opinion on this. Instead of attempting to refute the arguments that have been brought forth in support of oblique subjects in Old Norse, he adds a new argument against their existence (p. 195 n.):

One prediction that would follow from the existence of oblique subjects, is that non-subjects (other than predicate complements) may occur in the nominative, even in non-finite clauses. This occurs in modern Icelandic, but is not found in Old Norse.

It is not quite clear to me what Faarlund means by this. It is of course clear that Old Norse has a great number of sentences with both a dative experiencer and a nominative bearing some other (non-agentive) role. In Modern Icelandic, it is clearly the dative that is the syntactic subject in such sentences, and those linguists that have argued for the existence of oblique subjects in Old Norse would analyse similar sentences from Old Norse in the same manner. If we choose to say that the nominative always bears the subject role in such sentences, as Faarlund does, then we don't have any non-subjects in the nominative in Old Norse. But this means of course that their non-existence is not an independent argument against oblique subjects, because it presupposes that we already have analysed the nominative as the subject of the sentence.

In fact, several arguments for the existence of oblique subjects in Old Norse are found in Faarlund's book, even though he does not recognize them as such. One such argument is the common lack of verb agreement with the nominative in sentences with a dative experiencer in initial position. Faarlund points out (p. 202) that "[t]he verb *þykkja* 'seem' often fails to agree with the raised nominative subject, appearing instead in the 3rd person singular". The same phenomenon can be found with other similar verbs, like *leiðast* 'be bored'. In most of the other cases where number agreement fails to apply, the subject is coordinated and often also extraposed, as Faarlund points out (p. 201). If the subject is not coordinated, number agreement with the subject is an absolute requirement, except in sentences containing a nominal

predicate where the verb can agree with the predicate. If we claim that the nominative phrase is the subject in sentences with *þykkja*, *leiðast* and other similar verbs, we will have to say that the subjects of these verbs are somehow weaker governors of agreement than other subjects, and thus admit that they are exceptional in some sense. Note that verb agreement in Modern Icelandic behaves in all relevant respect in a similar manner. Particularly, there is variation in the number of the verb in sentences containing a nominative noun phrase in the plural.

Another argument for oblique subjects is reflexivization. As Faarlund points out (p. 282), “[a] reflexive may be bound by a dative phrase instead of by a nominative subject. This is very common where the dative phrase has a ‘subjectlike’ function, such as with the verb *þykkja* ‘seem’.” True, other dative phrases can also bind reflexives, but the point is that the dative phrase with *þykkja* (and also *sýnast* ‘seem’ and *virðast* ‘seem’, cf. Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson 1996b:53) behaves exactly like a subject in this respect.

Actually, Faarlund does not seem to believe strongly in his definition of subject as a noun phrase in the nominative case (p. 194-195). For instance, he claims (p. 223) that “[t]he subject role may be filled by a clause”. Realizing that this doesn’t fit with his earlier definition, he adds (p. 223): “Since I have defined the subject as a phrase in the nominative case, such sentences are technically subjectless, because clauses are not case-marked. But for convenience and in accordance with common practice I will still refer to such clauses as subjects.” On p. 224 he says: “It is clear from these examples that finite and non-finite clauses can function as subjects.” Furthermore, Faarlund often finds it necessary to talk about “nominative subject” (p. 154, 202, 215, 216, 218, 282), thus implying that there may be other kinds of subjects. In a chapter on ‘subjectless sentences’, the following passage is also found (p. 218):

The verb *líka* ‘like, please’ takes the (human) experiencer in the dative, while the source of the favourable sentiment may be expressed as a prepositional phrase [...]. It is perhaps more common, however, for the source to be expressed in the nominative [...] which cannot then strictly be called a subjectless sentence.

Faarlund points out that in sentences where “the accusative NP is coreferent with the subject of the matrix verb, it is usually added to the verb as a reflexive suffix” (p. 153). This gives us forms like *kvezk* ‘says+REFL’ (< *kveðr sik*), *kvazk* ‘said+REFL’ (< *kvað sik*), etc. where *kveða* takes an accusative with infinitive construction which would have a nominative subject if it were a finite clause. He adds (p. 154) that “[p]hrases that do not correspond to a subject of a finite sentence are not cliticized, although a ‘subject-like’ oblique phrase may be cliticized” as in constructions where *kveða* takes a clause with a verb like *þykkja*. If we allow for oblique subjects in Old Norse, such sentences cease to be exceptions.

Yet another mismatch is found in Faarlund’s description of PRO. He points out (p. 271) that “since infinitival clauses do have an understood subject, which not only has a semantic role, but even plays a role in the syntax, we assume an abstract element as the subject of infinitival clauses”. Later, he mentions “[t]he unexpressed subject PRO” (p. 275), and points out that “[t]he subject PRO has no case, gender, or number” (p. 277). Of course, this can’t be easily reconciled with the definition of the subject as a noun phrase in the nominative case. All this shows that the notion of ‘subject’ is used rather vaguely in the book.

6. Translation errors and misprints

As far as I can judge, the interpretations and translations of the examples are usually correct, but there are exceptions. For instance, it is clear from the context that *hina* in (2c) on p. 56 (repeated as (8b) on p. 248) belongs to the demonstrative *hinn* ‘the other’ but not to the definite article. The same goes for (80) on p. 80; *hinu* is a demonstrative but not a definite article.

In (2c) on p. 94, *Þórarinn svarar fá um þetta mál*, ‘Thorarin says little in reply about this matter’, *fá* is glossed ‘few.P.NEU.A’ – i.e. ‘plural, neuter, accusative’. The same goes for (3b) on p. 190, *Óláfr svarar fá ok hló* ‘Olaf said little in reply and laughed’. However, the verb *svara* always takes a dative object, and *fá* is a regular dative singular form of the adjective *fár* ‘few’. Thus, the gloss should be ‘S.NEU.D’.

In (13) on p. 23, repeated as (27b) on p. 64, *þat dreymdi mik* is glossed as ‘that.N dreamt me.A’. It is true that *þat* can be both nominative and accusative, and the verb *dreyma* ‘dream’ can have the ‘object of dreaming’ in the nominative in Old Norse – cf. p. 218 and Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson (1996b:64-65). However, the only clear cases with a nominative NP are those where this NP denotes a person, which it does not in this case. In other circumstances, *dreyma* appears to take two accusatives, as it does in Modern Icelandic. Thus, the gloss should at least be ‘that.N/A dreamt me.A’.

I didn’t find many misprints in the examples, and those I found are rather harmless. They include *pví* for *því* ((101b), p. 157); *hjlópu* for *hljópu* ((134b), p. 167); *blótadi* for *blótaði* ((35b), p. 259); and *pér* for *þér* ((36c), p. 260). Furthermore, length marks (acute accent) are missing in several places, especially on *í*. To name a few examples from the final three chapters: *hrið* for *hríð* ((11a), p. 195); *likastir* for *líkastir* ((27b), p. 202); *dyrð* for *dýrð* ((92a), p. 231); *dottur* for *dóttur* ((17b), p. 251); *líf* for *lífi* ((18a), p. 252); *siðan* for *síðan* ((29a), p. 257); *i* for *í* ((70a), p. 275); *lif* for *líf* ((6a), p. 282).

7. Conclusion

The Syntax of Old Norse is an ambitious work, but it is far from faultless. In my view, the book could have been made much more useful by including more references to other works on individual subjects dealt with. For generative syntacticians, it would also have been useful if the book had dealt specifically with certain well-known syntactic phenomena known to be characteristic of the Scandinavian languages.

In spite of these criticisms, it must be emphasized that the richness of clearly presented and classified examples, accompanied by English glosses and translations, makes the book an invaluable tool for anyone working with Old Norse syntax – and Scandinavian syntax in general. As such, it is a worthy successor to the hundred year old *Norrøn syntax*. Let’s just hope that we don’t have to wait another hundred years for the next thorough description of Old Norse syntax.

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