

Spatial References in Icelandic: The Issue of Identity

STEPHEN P. LEONARD
University of Oxford
stephen.leonard@exeter.ox.ac.uk

ABSTRACT. Alongside orientation terms, the rich system of spatio-directional particles in Norse is explored here in the context of identity and the settlement of Norse colonies. The use of these terms in Old Icelandic texts shows a high degree of conceptual and semantic continuity between the Norwegians in Norway and the settlers of Iceland and Greenland. In modern Icelandic, the use of certain Norse spatio-directional particles and terms of direction that were introduced from Norway has given way to the terminology of the peculiar Icelandic system of orientation.

1 Spatio-directional particles in Icelandic

The deictic devices in a language commit a speaker to setting up a frame of reference around him- or herself. Languages tend to carry an implicit division of the space around the current speaker, a division of time relevant to the act of speaking, and, via pronouns, a shorthand naming system for the participants involved in the talk. Aspects of these spatial frames of reference may be of particular relevance to social and linguistic identity in the context of early Iceland. A rich array of spatial deictic terms were used by the settlers to Iceland but it is not clear what their usage can tell us about the role that language played in the establishment of the identity of the settlers. The idiomatic use of some of these particles such as locational adverbs may provide insights into how one group of speakers identified themselves relative to others. Implicit to some of these terms is the notion of how movement from one group of people to another is perceived.

The term spatio-directional particle is used to refer collectively to the family of adverbs in Norse that comprise the threefold distinction between direction, location and origin, i.e. ‘to a place’, ‘in a place’ and ‘from a place’. The most commonly occurring threefold set of spatio-directional *adverbs* in Norse is *hingað-hér-hæðan* ‘hither-here-hence’, *þangað-þar-þaðan* ‘thither-there-thence’, *hvert-hvar-hvaðan* ‘whither-where-whence’.¹ It should be noted that all of these words are used in modern Icelandic and do not have the archaic ring of some of the English equivalents. Many adverbs indicating movement

¹ N.B. these are their modern Icelandic forms.

towards a place have counterparts formed with an *-i* suffix that denote rest in a place and others with an *-an* suffix meaning movement from a place. So, for example, one has in Icelandic: *inn* ‘into’, *inni* ‘inside’, *innan* ‘from within’; *út* ‘out’, *úti* ‘outside’, *útan* ‘from without’; *upp* ‘up’, *uppi* ‘above’, *ofan* ‘from above’; *niður* ‘down’, *niðri* ‘below’, *neðan* ‘from below’ and *heim* ‘home’, *heima* ‘at home’, *heiman* ‘from home’.² Some of the adverbs have only two of the forms such as *norðr* ‘northwards’ and *norðan* ‘from the north’, but the majority of them adhere to the tripartite system. Adverbs with the *-an* suffix combine with the preceding preposition *fyrir* to form a prepositional phrase indicating position relative to another (fixed) position, for example *fyrir norðan heiðina* ‘north of the heath’, *fyrir ofan húsin* ‘above the buildings’ and the idiomatic *fyrir norðan* ‘in the north’.³ With some of these expressions one appears to be in a no-man’s land between prepositions and adverbs and so they have been termed particles since they do not always fall easily under any of the traditional parts of speech. Ideally, one would have specific, economical and transparent terms for ‘movement towards’, ‘rest at’ and ‘movement away’.

The idiomatic use in Norway and Iceland of some of the previously mentioned spatio-directional particles on the one hand, and the system of cardinal and intermediate orientation terms used on the other, are both of relevance to this study. In order to fully understand what the use of these terms may tell us about the identity of the early settlers, the earliest texts written in Iceland have been analysed across a number of different registers. These documents include the earliest legal texts preserved in thirteenth century manuscripts but originally committed to writing in the winter of 1117-18A.D., historical texts dating from approximately 1121-34A.D. (according to *Íslendingabók*), saga material and skaldic poetry. With the exception of the sagas, this corpus was chosen principally because it represents the earliest texts and is thus chronologically closest to the settlement of Iceland in the ninth century.

2 Movement from Norway to Iceland

One may wish to examine the idiomatic use of a select number of spatio-directional particles. It was idiomatic to speak of travel from Norway to Iceland as *að fara út*, an abbreviated form of *að fara frá Noregi út til Íslands*, ‘to go (or

² See Stefán Einarsson (1945: 60-63).

³ See Barnes (2004: 124-25): it is odd that in the different instances, different forms seem to be primary: *hér* is certainly basic, and *hingað/heðan* secondary (English *hither* is an oddity, because one could argue that it is as old and ‘primary’ as *here*); but in the cases of *inn*, *út* and the cardinal directions *suðr* etc., it is certainly the ‘movement towards’ that is basic. Indeed, in the case of the cardinal directions, the ‘rest at’ is still phrasal: *fyrir sunnan*.

sail) from Norway out to Iceland'.⁴ The Norse system of spatio-directional particles was based largely on the sea and *út* is often (but not always) to be understood as travelling 'out to sea'. One may wish to compare this to the American usage of 'out west'. If the speaker were in Iceland, travel from Norway to Iceland would be typically described as *að koma út (hingað)*, literally 'to come out (here)', *hingað* being the directional adverb.⁵ The arrival of Christianity to Iceland is described for instance in the Icelandic law-code, *Grágás*, as *I þan tíð er cristni com ut hingat til islandz*, literally 'At that time when Christianity came out here to Iceland'.⁶ The particle *út* may imply a sense of geographical remoteness and not just refer to the logistics of crossing the sea to get to Iceland. It is perhaps also noteworthy that Icelanders described their geographical remoteness in the same terms as Norwegians did. Icelanders appear to have reapplied the particle *út* in different geographical contexts too, describing for instance travel from Russia (*Garðaríki*) to Constantinople (*Miklagarð*) in terms of *að fara út*.⁷

3 Movement from Iceland to Norway

The opposite, i.e. travelling from Iceland to Norway, was formulated as *að fara útan* which may be translated literally as 'to travel from without' and the phrase was used widely in the saga and legal literature. Passages in the Icelandic laws discuss the treatment of outlaws travelling from Iceland to Norway and their movement is expressed as *að fara utan heðan (sic)*, literally 'to travel from without (from here or hence)'.⁸ The same movement is sometimes expressed using the phrase *að koma útan heðan* as in *Íslendingabók*, the history of Iceland written by Ari Þorgilsson: *En þat sumar it sama kómu útan heðan þeir Gizurr ok Hjalti ok þágu þá undan við konunginn* 'But that same summer Gizurr and Hjalti came from Iceland ('from outside') and got the King to release them'.⁹ Ari is emphasizing that although the action is set in Norway, it is being

⁴ See *ÍF* IV: (*Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 4).

⁵ This is also described as *að fara ut (sic) hingat*, see *Grágás* (Ib: 20).

⁶ See *Grágás* (Ib: 192).

⁷ See *ÍF* XII (*Njáls saga*, ch. 81). Travel to Byzantium appears to have been described in these terms, whilst travel to Rome was described as *að fara suðr* ('to travel south'). Crossing water does not appear to have been a specific requirement in itself. For instance, travel to the British Isles is described as *vestr um haf* 'west over the sea', not *út*.

⁸ See *Grágás* (Ia: 226): *Ef scogar menn eða fiorbavgs menn [fara utan heðan...] (sic)* 'If full or lesser outlaws [travel from without (from here or hence)...]'.
⁹ See *ÍF* Ii (15).

recounted from an Icelandic authorial perspective. This usage mirrors the phraseology *að koma út hingað* used for travel to Iceland, but from an Icelandic perspective and using what one may call the adverb of origin and not direction, i.e. *heðan* and not *hingað*.

As previously stated, Iceland was settled by Norwegians and people from the British Isles, and it may not be surprising therefore to discover that the settlers used the same spatial grammar as their Norwegian ancestors. The consistency of usage was such that, many centuries after having settled in Iceland, the emigrants were still describing travel to Norway from a Norwegian perspective, i.e. Icelanders described travel to Norway as ‘travelling from without’ (*að fara útan*). This is interesting for two reasons: it seems to contradict the evidence found elsewhere in legal and historical documents which shows Icelanders wishing to present an Icelandic identity, employing consciously from the earliest period new terms to describe Icelandic social structures, writing grammatical treatises to develop alphabets for *oss íslendingum* (*sic*) ‘us Icelanders’ and insisting on the retention of Icelandic laws (*íslenskum lögum*) in their negotiations with the Norwegian Crown.¹⁰ Secondly, the phrase *að fara útan* used in the context of travel from Iceland to Norway implies that Iceland, the location, was *úti* or ‘outside’. One could argue this was a loaded word in Norse and carried frequently negative connotations, when used in other contexts at least. The term *útangarðs* (‘beyond the enclosure’) could be applied to those who were lawless and *Útgarðr* was the part of the Norse cosmos that was inhabited by non-humans.

4 Spatio-directional particles and Greenland

The use of these spatio-directional particles was partially reapplied by the Icelanders in the context of travel to Greenland. Evidence for the use of these terms comes principally from *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grænlandinga saga*, thirteenth-century texts describing the settlement of Greenland in the latter half of the tenth century. Travel or movement to Greenland from both Iceland and Norway is phrased as *að fara út*, or as *að koma út þangað*: *sá hafði háttur verið á Grænlandi síðan kristni kom út þangað* ‘that had been the custom in Greenland since the arrival of Christianity (out) there’.¹¹ There do not appear to be references, however, to travel from Greenland to Iceland being described as *að fara útan*. It is perhaps not surprising that Icelanders did not describe travel from Greenland to Iceland thus since Icelanders themselves were *úti* ‘outside’,

¹⁰ See Haugen (1972: 12); *DÍ* (I: 620).

¹¹ See *ÍF* IV (*Grænlandinga saga*, ch. 2; *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch.4, ch. 8: *hafði út þangað*).

and presumably this precluded them from describing people as ‘coming from outside’. It seems that Icelanders not only adopted Norwegian terminology but employed it as if they were still in Norway. Icelanders were of course originally Norwegians (for the most part), but almost a century and a half previously. It must also be borne in mind that the textual evidence postdates the settlement of Greenland by three hundred years or so, and that is long enough for perspectives to change. Equally, it might just be that both Iceland and Greenland were considered *úti*, even by their inhabitants.

5 Intermediate terms of orientation

As well as spatio-directional particles, the emigrants to Iceland brought with them in the latter half of the ninth century the cardinal directions *norðr*, *suðr*, *austr* and *vestr* (‘north’, ‘south’, ‘east’ and ‘west’). Evidence from historical texts, the saga narratives and skaldic poetry show us that the Icelanders used additionally intermediate terms.¹² These terms discussed by Stefán Einarsson (1944: 265-85) and Haugen (1957: 447-59) were based on the contour of the Norwegian west coast and in the absence of compasses could only have been determined by celestial observation. So, for example, north-east was referred to as *landnorðr* (‘northwards by the land’), south-east as *landsuðr* (‘southwards by the land’) whereas north-west was referred to as *útnorðr* (i.e. northwards and out to the sea which meant ‘west’) and south-west as *útsuðr*. These terms may appear obscure, but if one considers the shape of the Norwegian coast line (with the exception of the Vík area) then their derivation becomes apparent.

The relevant point is that these terms were adopted in Iceland even though they were peculiar to the geography of Norway. Interestingly, the *Icelandic* settlers to the Norse colony of Greenland appear to have adopted the Norwegian system of orientation too. The terminology of Eystribyggð (‘Eastern Settlement’) and Vestribyggð (‘Western Settlement’) had the same skewing of the terms of direction to the north-east, reflecting once again the shape of the Norwegian coast line. Vestribyggð appears certainly far more northerly than westerly. One suspects that in both the case of Iceland and Greenland, it did not occur to the respective settlers that terminology as fundamental as spatial orientation should be modified to reflect their new geographies.

¹² See *ÍF IX (Svarfdæla saga, ch. 15: útnorðr); ÍF XII (Njáls saga, ch. 151: landsuðr); Unger (1862: 88): útsuðr; Finnur Jónsson (1912: 110, vol. 1: A: Styrbjörn): ut nordr (sic).*

6 The Icelandic Quarter-based system of orientation

It would be wrong to believe though that the orientation system used in early Iceland was based entirely on the Norwegian model. Icelanders developed their own system based on the different Quarters of Iceland. The land was administratively divided into Quarters (*fjórðungar*) named after the cardinal directions in 965 A.D. This led to ‘incorrect’ or ‘proximate’ dialectal usages of cardinal terms whereby Icelanders would for instance indicate that they were travelling ‘south’ to the Southern Quarter, irrespective of the fact that the actual direction of travel might be west.¹³ Similarly, Icelanders living on the tip of the Reykjanes peninsula would indicate they were travelling ‘west’ to Snæfellsnes even if they were strictly speaking travelling almost due north just as inhabitants of Eyjafjörður speak of going north to Langanes even if the map shows that it is due east.¹⁴ Usage varies from region to region with Icelanders living in the western Quarter describing travel westwards as *út*, since it is in the direction of the sea, but those in the East using the ‘correct’ cardinal term, *vestr*. There is no category of words that shows more dialectal difference of usage in Old and modern Icelandic than the words of orientation.¹⁵

7 Conclusion

The usage of the *inn* and *út* terms in the earliest Icelandic texts seems to suggest there was a high degree of conceptual and semantic continuity between the Norwegians in Norway and the settlers in Iceland. Not only were the same terms used, but they were used as if the settlers were still in Norway. Based on the evidence of these spatial references, the settlers appeared to wish to retain a Norwegian perspective or perhaps it did not even occur to them to change the terms. Their usage of this aspect of the spatial grammar reflects an identity that contrasts with that evoked elsewhere in other texts and in different contexts.

Spatio-directional particles such as *út*, *úti* and *útan* are in general used less frequently in Iceland today than previously. *út* is still used, however, by all age groups and in different parts of the country in the context of describing travel ‘out to sea’ or going abroad. The phrase *að fara útan* is now widely considered archaic. It may be used by older speakers but interestingly it is considered synonymous with *að fara út*. The sense of travelling ‘from without’ appears to have been completely lost at some point in the last century.

¹³ See Haugen (1957: 450-51). N.B. the Quarter-boundaries divided only the inhabited areas – the Interior is effectively undivided.

¹⁴ See Haugen (1957: 450-51).

¹⁵ See Stefán Einarsson (1944); Haugen (1957).

The Norwegian intermediate orientation terms such as *landnorðr* and *útnorðr* were replaced by *norðaustur* and *norðvestur*, also in the last century: the old system may still be used at sea, but is generally speaking no longer understood, let alone used, by younger people. The Icelanders have developed their own system of orientation based on the Quarters and this may reflect an Icelandic identity. This system has survived into the modern language. At the time of the Settlement and for probably centuries after, Icelanders described movement in largely Norwegian terms. A thousand years after the Settlement, Icelanders appear now to be describing spatial movement in their own terms.

References

- Barnes, M. (2004). *A New Introduction to Old Norse: Part I Grammar*. London: Viking Society for Northern Research.
- Diplomatarium Íslandicum 1857-1972* (DÍ). Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmentafélag.
- Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal. *Íslenzk Fornrit*, vol II. 1933. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Eiríks saga rauða*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson. *Íslenzk Fornrit*, vol IV. 1935. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Finnur Jónsson. 1912-15. *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*. København og Kristiania: Gyldendal, Nordisk forlag.
- Grágás. Íslændernes Lovbog I Fristatens Tid*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen; vols Ia, Ib 1852 vol. II 1879; vol III 1883. Reprinted 1974: Odense University Press.
- Grænlandinga saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson. *Íslenzk Fornrit*, vol IV. 1935. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Hastrup, K. 1985. *Culture and classification in modern Iceland: an anthropological analysis of structure and change*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Haugen, E. (1957). The semantics of Icelandic orientation. *Word* 13/3, 447-59.
- (1972). *First Grammatical Treatise. The Earliest Germanic Phonology. An Edition, Translation and Commentary*. 2nd edition. London: Longman.
- Íslendingabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson. *Íslenzk Fornrit*, vol I. 1968. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Jackson, T. (1998). On the Old Norse System of Spatial Orientation. *Saga-Book XXV*, Part 1. Viking Society for Northern Research, 72-82.

Spatial References in Icelandic: The Issue of Identity

- Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. *Íslenzk Fornrit*, vol XII. 1954. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Stefán Einarsson. 1942. Terms of Direction in Modern Icelandic. Presented to George T. Flom. *Scandinavian Studies* 37-48.
- . 1944. Terms of Direction in Old Icelandic. *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 43, 265-85.
- . 1945. *Icelandic: Grammar, Texts, Glossary*. Baltimore; London: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Svarfdæla saga*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson. *Íslenzk Fornrit*, vol IX. 1956. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Unger, C. R. (1862). *Stjórn: Gammelnorsk Bibelhistorie fra verdens skabelse til det babyloniske Fangenskab*. Christiania: Feilberg & Landmarks Forlag.