

Language and Culture Show and Tell: Faroese Bjarni Steintún

Transcript

1.

These are the Faroe Islands. A small archipelago consisting of 18 islands located in the North Atlantic, halfway between Iceland, Scotland, and Norway. While the islands today are an autonomous region of Denmark, they were originally settled by Vikings from the west coast of Norway around the ninth and tenth centuries. These Norsemen took great risks when they took to the sea in search of new lands and a better fortune. Even though they were excellent sailors and their ships were built for long journeys, the sea could be treacherous, and probably some of these first settlers were blown off course towards unintended destinations, and perhaps a few of them even perished at sea. But many of them eventually arrived at these practically empty weathered islands, and here they started building their new lives, surrounded by ocean, basically in the middle of nowhere.

2.

This is a painting from UCL's Art Collections by Thomas Arge, a Faroese painter. The painting is rather obscure and not considered one of his main works, but the motif is quite common in Faroese art: man and the sea. And no wonder, as the Faroese people have always been surrounded by the ocean, and, like the first settlers, have risked much when they have sought their fortune on the sea. The sea always looms in the imagination of the Faroese, and indeed it is almost unavoidable to see it, as the farthest you can get from the sea anywhere on the islands is only about five kilometres.

The natural surroundings of a people are bound to have an influence on its psyche, and the volatile nature of the sea and the weather has in many ways moulded the Faroese mind. The Faroe Islands are often jokingly referred to as the Land of Maybe, as the weather plays such a significant role in planning for the future. Even though the infrastructure has been radically improved these last 50 years, and transport has become increasingly fast and reliable, there are still days when the police advises everyone to stay at home, as the wind is reaching hurricane levels. And there are days when roads are filled with either ice or snow, making travelling by car highly risky. The few ferries that have not yet been replaced by sub-sea tunnels are not so seldom cancelled during the winter due to bad weather. The Faroese phrase 'um viðrar', meaning 'if the weather permits', is a very frequently used phrase, and it reflects the uncertainty and patience needed when arranging outdoor activities or trips in the Faroes.

3.

This is a painting with a similar motif by the great Sámal Joensen Mikines. The title I have chosen for this presentation: 'Navigare necesse est, vivere non est necesse', 'To sail is

necessary, to live is not', is quite relevant here. As the industrial revolution paved its way through Europe, another revolution thoroughly changed the Faroese society: the advent of the fishing industry in the late nineteenth century. The Faroese had until then relied on a primarily agricultural economy, which was supplemented by bird catching, whale and seal hunting, and by small scale fishing. But when the royal trade monopoly was abolished in the middle of the nineteenth century, the Faroe Islanders started fishing with ships on a larger scale and the young men now abandoned the farms to go fishing instead, as it increased the likelihood of them being able to feed a family and to build their own house.

While the sea made all this possible it was also the source of much worry and sorrow. This picture by the famous Faroese painter shows the worried and sorrowful wife of a sailor on board a fishing vessel on its way to the sea. She knows that they will be at sea for many months in all sorts of weather, in exceedingly harsh working conditions and she has many mouths to feed back home, and there is always the possibility that her husband will never return, a fate that was not uncommon in the Faroe Islands far into the twentieth century. The sea gave life and took life.

4.

This is a picture of Venceslaus Ulricus Hammershaimb's model boat, which is stored at the department of Faroese Language and Literature at the University of the Faroe Islands. This is the kind of boat that was used to supplement the old agricultural economy before the advent of the fishing industry. It is a descendant of the old Viking ships and is still in use today, although mainly in the national sport, which is rowing.

We will return to the boat, but let us first talk about this Hammershaimb. Who was he? Well, he was a priest. And a renowned folklorist. But most importantly, he was the father of the written standard of the Faroese language. By the first half of the nineteenth century, academics (mostly Danish) had already developed an interest in the Faroese language and the oral literature of the islands, with its large number of extensive ballads. This oral material, passing from mouth to mouth, generation after generation, had developed largely in the social gathering point of the old agricultural society, the 'roykstovan', so called because of the smoke that went from the hearth up into the smoke-hole in the roof. It was the combined kitchen, workplace, living room, and sleeping quarters of the old farms, where the old stories, legends, and fairy-tales were told, and the old ballads and songs were sung. But Faroese had no written standard, and so the folklorists who wanted to document all this oral material, had to invent their own writing system based on the sounds of the language. Hammershaimb took a different route: he based his writing system, published in 1846, on the origin of the language, namely the old Scandinavian language of the settlers, commonly referred to as Old Norse. That way, he could bypass the problem of the many different dialects of the islands. Also this writing system was more easily recognisable to anyone acquainted with either Icelandic or Old Norse, the ancestor of the Scandinavian languages. But the downside was the large gap between the pronunciation of the words and how they were written, as the Faroese language through a thousand years of development had become a very different language from the original Old Norse,

making Faroese notoriously difficult for ordinary people to spell. The letter *ð* (*edd*, in Icelandic *eth*) for example, is used in Faroese in largely the same way as in Old Norse, although it has become mostly mute in Faroese.

Anyway, the orthography established by Hammershaimb was scarcely used throughout most of the rest of the nineteenth century, but late in that century Faroese academics started using Faroese more and more in poetry and writing using Hammershaimb's system, and efforts were made to replace Danish as the language of the school and the church. Efforts that paid off, as Faroese was made the official language of the schools by 1937 and in the churches by 1938. Hammershaimb's written standard is now used in all parts of Faroese society and even though people often are frustrated with the spelling difficulty of it, there still exists a particular fondness for our writing system, and abandoning it in favour of a more phonological one does not seem to garner much favour in the general population.

5.

Back to the boat.

All Scandinavian languages are closely related to each other. And they are all related to English as well, albeit more distantly, possessing many words of common Germanic origin, for example the word for 'boat', which is *bátur* in Faroese. The word for 'keel' is another such word, and it is called *kjølur* in Faroese. Here's another one: *bekkur*, 'thwart' or 'bench' in English. All of these words end with *-ur*, which indicates the grammatical gender of the words, namely masculine. There are three different grammatical genders in Faroese: masculine, feminine and neuter. Let us see if we can find a feminine noun in this picture: there's one: *ár*, English 'oar'. In English you add an s to make it plural. In Faroese, the most common endings in the plural are *-ar* and *-ir*: so we have: *ein ár* (one oar) - *fleiri árar* (many oars), *ein bátur* – *fleiri bátar*, *ein kjølur* – *fleiri kjøllir*, and *ein bekkur* – *fleiri bekkir*.

We do have a few neuter nouns as well: *borð*, 'ship side' or 'board' as in 'on board', *stevni*, 'stern' or 'stem', *róður*, 'rudder', and *segl*, 'sail', although this boat doesn't have one. One difference between the neuter nouns and the others is that the neuters mostly do not change between the singular and plural. So it's *eitt borð* (one board) – *fleiri borð* (many boards), *eitt stevni* – *fleiri stevni*, *eitt róður* – *fleiri róður*, and *eitt segl* – *fleiri segl*. Just like English 'a sheep' – 'many sheep'.

In English, when you don't want to refer to any old boat, but a specific boat, you use the definite article 'the'. You say 'the boat'. In Faroese, just like the other Scandinavian languages, we use an ending instead, so the masculine *ein bátur* (a boat) becomes *báturin* (the boat). The feminine *ein ár* (an oar) becomes *árin* (the oar), while the neuter *eitt borð* (a board) becomes *borðið* (the board).

This may seem simple, but don't be fooled. Faroese is a highly inflected language, which means that the individual words can take many different forms, depending on specific grammatical rules. Most of these inflections were present in Old English as well, but have

been lost throughout the centuries. Let's look at *bátur* for instance: *bátur, bát, báti, báts, bátar, bátar, bátum, báta, báturin, bátin, bátinum, bátsins, bátarnir, bátarnar, bátunum, bátanna*. These are all inflections of just one word! And the inflections are not all the same for different nouns. They vary from gender to gender and even within the same gender!

6.

Now let's look at some Faroese sayings:

- a. *At flóta við reyvini í vatnskorpuni*. 'To float with one's butt above the surface'. This means that you are barely surviving. It could be economically or in some other sense. The colours indicate the common origin of the Faroese and English words.
- b. *At rógva í land*. 'To row back to land'. To try to retract something, for example a claim too far-fetched.
- c. *Bundin er bátleysur maður*. 'Bound (tied) is boatless man'. If you had no boat, you were unable to travel very far.

Several Faroese sayings are about sustenance, for example:

- d. *Betri eru smáir fiskar enn tómir diskar*. 'Better are small fishes than empty dishes'. It's better to have little than to have nothing. Here you can really see how related the languages are, as almost all the words are the same.
- e. *Gullið ger lítið uttan glitrar, matin vil eingin missa*. 'Gold does little but glitter, but no one wants to be without food'. Most people in the Faroe Islands were concerned with the basics of human existence: getting food on the table. Even the relatively rich were very poor compared to today.
- f. *Maturin er undir manningini*. 'The food is under the crew'. The food mentioned in the phrase is the fish, that are swimming in the sea underneath the boat or ship that contains the crew.
- g. *At hava hjallin á sjónum*. 'To have one's storehouse in the sea'. In the old days, those who had no land possessions – and they were many! – had to turn to the sea for food.

7.

Still today we look to the sea for our sustenance. The Faroese economy is heavily reliant on the fishing industry and the fish farming industry. The last 20 years or so, fish farming has grown into a big industry on par with the fishing industry. But before that, there was only the fishing industry, which made the Faroese economy exceedingly vulnerable. If the fish suddenly decided to disappear or prizes dropped, economic crisis loomed. The growth of the fish farming industry has made life in the Faroes more secure and very prosperous with unemployment at an all-time low.

8.

So although we are still as dependant as ever on the sea for our survival here on the islands, the sorrow and the worry are not as prominent as before. The ships are now larger and safer, the shifts are shorter, and the facilities on board are top notch. We are in a prosperous time with economic stability.

We have indeed found our fortune in the sea. Without it, there would be no foundation for the society that lives and thrives here today. Indeed, tourists now come in great numbers to experience the wildness of the sea and nature in the Faroes. They willingly pay to go on long hikes to see great waves crash against the sea stacks, while the wind blows in their faces. The sea really is what makes life on these wind-swept, battered, barren old islands possible.

Let me end with a Faroese saying that is often used, when someone has started a new chapter in their life: *Blíðan byr!* A literal translation would be 'blithe wind!', but it means 'favourable wind for your sails!'

Blíðan byr!