

Spatial references in Icelandic: the issue of identity

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The role that language played in the establishment of the identity of the settlers to Iceland is poorly understood. One approach to this problem may be to examine the patterns of spatial deictic referencing used by the settlers that came principally from Norway, but also from the British Isles. The reason for focusing on these particular terms is two-fold: there existed in Norse a rich and widely used system of spatial-directional particles; the use of some of these particles such as locational ablatives may provide insights into how one group of speakers may have identified themselves relative to others. The objective of this paper is to examine not just how the settlers applied spatial deictic and orientation terms to their new geography, but also to study how the Icelanders reapplied these terms subsequently.

In order to understand fully what the use of these terms may tell us about identity, the earliest texts written in Iceland have been analysed across a number of different registers, including the Icelandic legal corpus, historical texts, saga material and poetry. The sources show us that it is clear that the Norwegian settlers brought with them not only their rich spatial-directional grammar, but a complex system of indeterminate orientation terms that were based on the shape of the Norwegian coast line. These terms were re-applied to the geography of Iceland and combined with a system that was based not on cardinal directions, but on movement towards the respective Quarters of Iceland. Aspects of this terminology have survived in modern Icelandic and have been studied by Einarsson (1944) and Haugen (1957).

The Norse system of directional, locative and ablative particles was based on the sea. The directional phrase *að koma út* (*hingað*) was used to describe travel from Norway to Iceland if the speaker were in Iceland. The same movement was expressed as *að fara út* by a Norwegian. The ablative *að fara útan* was used to describe travel from Iceland to Norway – this phrase was used by Norwegians in Norway and Icelanders in Iceland. The use of such ablatives by Icelanders to describe movement to Norway appears to imply that the settlers' perspective remained Norwegian to the point that an ablative was used when one may expect a directional particle. The Icelanders reapplied these spatial reference terms to describe movement to Greenland.

The use of such spatial deictic terms in the earliest Icelandic texts seems to suggest that there was a high degree of conceptual and semantic continuity between the Norwegians and the settlers. It shows also though that Iceland was considered as a geographical (and perhaps cultural) periphery by Norwegians. At some point, the system of spatial deictics appears to have become confused, however. In modern Icelandic, the ablative *útan* if used at all, is used synonymously with the directional *út*. The use of these locational ablatives as a frame of reference appears to have diminished in the modern language.

References

- Einarsson, S. 1944. Terms of Direction in Old Icelandic. *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 43: 265-85
Haugen, E. 1957. The semantics of Icelandic orientation. *Word* 13/3: 447-59