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REVIEWS

STEFÁN KARLSSON: *The Icelandic Language*. Translated by Rory McTurk, London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 2004. 84 pp.

While Old Norse and its history have attracted the attention of linguists for about two centuries now, nothing of this sort can be claimed for the subsequent development of its most celebrated descendent, i.e. Icelandic. A steady trickle of individual diachronic contributions has never turned into a flood which could lead to a comprehensive historical account of the development of the language during the past seven or eight centuries. It is characteristic of the singular lack of interest in the subsequent evolution of the language of the First Grammarian that the 1964 collection of papers edited by Halldór Halldórsson still remains the best source of information about the post-Old Norse development of Icelandic. Although the best, it could hardly be called good, since there is no section on either morphology or syntax, no mean gap. On the positive side it is impossible to overlook the monumental etymological dictionary with Modern rather than Old Icelandic in focus (Ásgeir Bl. Magnússon 1989), a dictionary which has no rival among Nordic languages and belongs to one of the crowning achievements of 20th century etymological research at large. Both these books appeared in Icelandic, which narrows down their potential circle of readers. Against this background the appearance in English of a booklet aiming at outlining the history of the language should be greeted with joy as filling in an important gap.

The Icelandic Language is a rendition into English of a lengthy paper *Tungan* (The language) first published in 1989 and aimed at the Icelandic audience. The text has only marginally been altered by the translator so that what the English reading public gets is a competent and faithful translation of a text intended originally for somebody else. This has its consequences, the most striking of them being the almost bipartite division of the book into *The language itself* (pp. 8-38) and *Orthography* (pp. 39-63). The chapter devoted to the changes of the spelling system is broken up into five subsections: *The first attempts, The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, From the Black Death to the Reformation* (15th – 16th centuries), *From the first printed books to the Enlightenment* (16th – 18th centuries) and *The emergence of modern spelling* (from the 18th century onwards). The discussion is accompanied by a sample of 16 texts from different periods neatly illustrating the different stages in the shaping of the orthographic norm. This amount of attention devoted to the vagaries of spelling conventions is surprising at first blush but makes perfect sense when the intended reading audience is considered: for contemporary Icelanders it is precisely spelling that constitutes the greatest

obstacle in dealing with earlier texts rather than morphology or syntax (even though with syntax the situation is less obvious for post-mediaeval texts). For this reason getting used to different orthographic conventions is vital in dealing with non-normalised texts; foreign students and scholars ordinarily deal with normalised orthography of classical texts and they will seldom be delving into, say, 17th century writings. For them the section on orthography, while not exactly superfluous, will be of marginal interest.

A reader looking for an account of the internal development of the language will be sorely disappointed by Stefán's presentation. Conventional wisdom holds that Icelandic is unique in how little it has changed over the centuries, which may be true when Old and Modern Icelandic are compared with Anglo-Saxon and the English of today or Old Church Slavonic and contemporary Bulgarian. However, in certain ways Icelandic has changed as much as any other language. This, of course, holds true for the sound system; when Old Icelandic *é* [ɛ:], *æ* [æ:] or *á* [a:] are pronounced today as either short or long [jɛ], [ai] and [au] respectively, the differences are no smaller than in the case of Old English *ē, ǣ, ā* being pronounced today [i:], [e] and [əu] (in *cēpan* 'keep', *ænig* 'any', *bān* 'bone'). While morphology and syntax can legitimately be claimed to have changed much less, this is in no small measure due to the strong normative and puristic tendencies of the late 18th and the 19th centuries, which, as rightly stressed by Stefán (pp. 36-38), undid many of the changes introduced in the intervening centuries. Had this language planning not been in force, or had the drive to restore Old Norse forms been less effective, contemporary Icelandic would no doubt present a very different picture. In any event, the introductory linguistics class saw about the extreme conservatism of Icelandic is patently false with phonology and less than absolutely true in morphology and syntax. *The Icelandic Language* has regrettably nothing to say about syntax, its treatment of morphological innovations is sketchy and atomistic, while the phonological developments are presented in such a condensed manner that the emerging picture is confusing and in parts incoherent. On the other hand, the book gives a balanced account of the development of the lexicon (pp. 31-38) stressing both the existence of foreign influences and the native tendency to develop neologisms replacing loan words.

The phonological innovations which are as rich in Icelandic as in any other language are described without proper regard for chronology. Unlike the orthographic developments which, as noted above, are broken up into five stages, changes affecting the phonology of the language are dealt with in one fell swoop. They are divided into vocalic and consonantal, the former further subdivided into changes affecting the vowel system as a whole and the traditional combinative changes; similarly Stefán reviews some changes as affecting the consonantal system (pp. 16-18) and lumps together a great many others under the heading *Various consonantal changes* (pp. 18-22). The result is a veritable hotch-potch of changes taking place at different times with no clear picture of the main tendencies shaping the system at different periods. To take just one example: the rounding of the back low vowel [a:] after [v] (presumably [w] actually) is said to have begun in the 14th century, e.g. O. Icel. *svá* [swa:] > M. Icel. *svo* [svo:] 'so'. Furthermore it is assumed to have gone through the stage *ó* [o:] and Stefán insists that *the resultant rounded vowel consistently remained long until the time of the quantity shift* (p. 14). Since the shift *must in the main have run its course in the sixteenth century* (p. 12) and diphthongisation of long, non-high vowels ([a:]> [au], [o:]> [ou], [æ]> [ai]) is an earlier change, we would expect the result of the rounding

of the vowel in *vá* to be the diphthong [ou] today rather than the [o:] that we actually find. The relations among the changes and their chronology are left in a muddle.

One of the features of the book is its obvious desire to remain non-technical and generally accessible. This leads to explanations, most often inept, of basic terms such as a nasal vowel (p. 11) or a fricative (p.16), while leaving others unexplained, e.g. fortis vs. lenis. This also prevents Stefán from resorting to the phonetic transcription and results in confusion when the symbol (letter?) *g* stands both for the velar lenis plosive and the velar fricative (the table on p. 16). This is not an isolated case since we are informed (p. 19) that *t* and *k* became the fricatives *ð* and *g* respectively (as if *g* were a fricative) or that *f, ð* and *g* became stops (as if *g* were not a stop to begin with). Incidentally, one would prefer, too, if the term *stop* were distinguished from *plosive*. At times Stefán makes a half-hearted attempt to introduce spelling-based transcription without explaining what the symbols denote: on p. 19 *efla* 'to strengthen' and *nafn* 'name' are said to be pronounced *ebbla* and *nabbn*. One needs to be an Icelander to know that these "pronunciations" denote, in fact [ɛpla], [napn̥] (or, alternatively [ɛbla], [nabn̥]). The less fortunate individuals will assume that double *bb* denotes a geminate, i.e. [b:]. Although the study was originally written in Icelandic and intended for the Icelandic or Icelandic-reading public, it was the translator's duty to clarify these issues if he could not bring himself to changing the text by introducing regular phonetic transcription.

Finally a word about references. Apart from following the irritating and obsolete habit of including references in footnotes rather than the body of the text Stefán offers a few surprises. The first sentence in the book informs the reader that Icelandic is North Germanic and Indo-European and supplements this by references to three (!) scholarly works, thereby settling the hash of all those who take up a book on Icelandic in the mistaken belief that it is either South Germanic or Finno-Ugric! The reference list at the end of the book is quite useful but again it does not go very far and is openly parochial: obviously Kemp Malone, Albert M. Sturtevant, Michail I. Steblin-Kamenskij, Bruno Kress – to mention just a few – produced nothing worthy of attention. But even leaving aside the *útlendingar* it is difficult to account for the omission of Stefán Einarsson's (1949) important contribution to the history of Icelandic phonology or Alexander Jóhannesson's studies of Icelandic suffixes (1927), of compounding (1929) or consonantal geminates (1932) and a host of other authors. For the period 1900–1970 Haugen's (1974) *Bibliography* remains the most reliable and, to date, unsurpassable research tool also for Icelandic and its history.

Stefán Karlsson's book provides a solid background to the external history of Icelandic, and to a study of its orthography and vocabulary. It supplies glimpses into phonological and morphological developments which should encourage the reader to look for more elsewhere.

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ASTRID VAN NAHL: *Einführung in das Altisländische.* Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag, 2003. XIV+239 pp.

Das steigende Interesse am Altisländischen an vielen Universitäten in Europa und außerhalb des Kontinents zeigt, dass die Sprache der Wikinger auch für heutige Studenten und Forscher von großer Bedeutung ist. Das Unterrichten des Altisländischen auf Universitätsniveau benötigt selbstverständlich entsprechendes Lehrmaterial. Neben den „klassischen" Standardlehrwerken beziehungsweise Grammatiken von Gordon (1957), Heusler (1967), Holthausen (1895/1896), Iversen (1973), Noreen (1903) oder Valfells und Cathey (1981), die seit vielen Jahren oder Jahrzehnten im Gebrauch sind, sind in den letzen Jahren viele neue Lehrbücher des Altisländischen erschienen (z.B. Barnes 1999, Ebel 1986, Nedoma 2001, um nur einige von ihnen zu nennen). Das 2003 vom Helmut Buske Verlag veröffentlichte und zur Rezension vorgelegte Buch von Astrid van Nahl ist als eine Einführung in die altisländische Sprache gedacht. Es ist in 17 Kapitel gegliedert und mit einem Verzeichnis der wichtigsten im Buch vorkommenden Begriffe versehen. Jedes Kapitel ist durch einen Texteil und Aufgaben ergänzt. Das Buch beinhaltet auch 25 Abbildungen, wobei man bemerken muss, dass das Foto auf Seite 65 nicht Goðafoss sondern Gulfoss darstellt.

Das erste, einführende Kapitel bietet eine kurze Übersicht über die Entwicklung der altnordischen (altisländischen) Sprache vom Indogermanischen über das Germanische bis zum Altnordischen. Dabei kommt auch die Runenschrift kurz zur Sprache. Die wichtigsten sprachlichen Veränderungen auf dem Weg vom Indogermanischen zum Germanischen werden hier übersichtlich und komprimiert dargelegt. Die Verfasserin bemüht sich darüber hinaus, Grundregeln der Aussprache anzugeben, da sie zu Recht schreibt: „im heutigen wissenschaftlichen Umgang wird Altnordisch wie das Neuisländische ausgesprochen; diese Übereinkunft erleichtert die internationale Verständigung" (S. 10). Jedoch abgesehen von der Tatsache, dass das phonetische System des Isländischen bei weitem komplizierter ist als die Darstellung von van Nahl (von den Konsonanten werden hier nur 6 in Betracht gezogen!), sind die Informationen unübersichtlich und leider oft falsch. Um diese kritische Bemerkung an zwei Beispielen zu bekräftigen: *g* ist bei van Nahl als stimmhafte ([ɣ]) oder stimmlose ([χ]) Spirans beschrieben, wobei die erste „zwischen zwei Vokalen" (S. 10) vorkommt: „saga, segir" (S. 10). Folgen wir der neuisländischen Aussprache, dann wird das Wort *segir*, das van Nahl als Beispiel für eine stimmhafte Spirans anführt, regulär mit dem Halbvokal [j] ausgesprochen (und der Diphtongierung des betonten Vokals, was hier aber irrelevant ist). Die richtige Transkription wäre also [seijɪr]. Es ist in jedem Nachschlagewerk zur isländischen Aussprache zu finden, dass wenn der Buchstabe *g* durch den Vokal [ɪ] gefolgt