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Vocabular Clarity and Faroese conjugation

A possible restriction on inflection, more specifically on the behaviour of affixes, is the No Blur Principle (NBP) aka Vocabular Clarity (VC) (Carstairs-McCarthy 1994, 2010 and elsewhere). The principle is based on a parallel between morphology and lexical semantics. Simplified, the idea is that there are restrictions on the behaviour of affixes (morphological elements) similar to restrictions on the behaviour of words (lexical elements): There can be no more than one ‘class-default’ affix, i.e., only one affix that signals a particular morphosyntactic value (e.g. past tense) without also signalling inflection class. If there were more than one default, they’d be analogous to exact synonymy, which is surely rare and possibly non-existent in the lexicon. This approach has been useful, e.g. in the study of Romance (e.g. Maiden 2009, da Tos 2012) and Scandinavian (Enger 2007), but it is controversial (see e.g. Müller 2007, Carstairs-McCarthy 2010, Baerman 2012). In my talk, I wish to present an argument supporting VC, which in some respects is an ‘in-between’ position between two extremes in morphological theory. Dammel (2011: 289) suggests that Faroese verb conjugation is promising ground for discussing the VC. Compared to Old Norse, Faroese shows spreading of the suffix *-i* in the 1. sg. prs. of verbs. This suffix is not characteristic of the most type-frequent verb class (*ǣasta*) in Old Norse, from which Faroese and Norwegian both descend, but of the less type-frequent *duga* class. On the assumption that type frequency has some influence on productivity, the spread is unexpected.

However, also in some Norwegian dialects, the suffix from the Old Norse *duga* class has spread. Faroese is particularly close to Western Norwegian, but the *duga* affix has spread in both some Western and some Eastern dialects. If the two Old Norse patterns instantiated by *duga* and *erfa* are considered two separate classes, then the suffix *-ir* is the ‘class default’ in Old Norse (Enger 2007). It is then less surprising that this suffix might spread. Grammars of Old Norse differ as to whether *duga* and *erfa* should be considered one or two classes. Noreen (1923) takes them as two separate ones, at least in principle; Barnes (1993) takes them as subgroups of one and the same class. The only affixal difference between them in Old Norse has to do with the imperative 2nd sg. For the purposes of VC, this is clearly sufficient to call the two different, and thus to follow Noreen rather than Barnes. Only then does *-ir* emerge as class-default, and then, its productivity is expected. (There are surely good pedagogical arguments for Barnes’ decision, but that is another story.)

My main claims, then, are as follows:

- Faroese supports the assumption that *-ir* is a class default
- The diachronic evidence from Faroese supports one particular understanding of ‘inflection class’ (at least for present purposes)

- While type-frequency may influence productivity, it is not the only determinant (e.g. Maiden 1996); another determinant may be class-default status.
- Vocabular Clarity is a useful hypothesis.

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