

THE CHANGE OF *þ* TO *H* IN FAROESE¹

by
Hjalmar P. Petersen

It has been said that Old Norse *þ* changed to *h* in some words in Faroese (demonstrative pronouns, adverbs, and the name *Þórr*), when these words are weakly stressed. We will show that the change happened because these words do have a special semiotic structure, and that the change has nothing to do with the notion of weak stress.

Some preliminary remarks

In his paper about the change of Old Norse *þ* to *h* in Faroese, Barnes (2001, 1985) follows other researchers in saying that 'it seems plausible that in Faroese, as apparently in Icelandic – and possibly in Norn – /T/ to /h/ also occurred in weakly stressed position' (Barnes 1985; 2001:64).

The question raised in the present short paper is whether something like weakly stressed position can be used at all to explain a phonological change, since every unit of a language may be weakly stressed. I believe that this is just as good as saying nothing at all about a phonological environment and a change. Instead, I will introduce a different explanation, viz., that it is the nature of the sign in the words that change that can explain why *þ* changed to *h* only in some words, not in others. This change I will call an 'indexical conditioned change' (see below). In addition to this, the words that undergo the change are phonologically contentful and semantically schematic – to use a term from Cognitive Grammar (Taylor 2002).

Hamre (1944:36) lists the following words where the change of Old Norse *þ* to *h* took place in Faroese: *hesin* 'this' and *hasin* 'that' (*hesin* – *henda* – *hetta* < *þessi* – *þenna* – *þetta*), *hasin* 'that' – *handa* – *hatta* (< *þassi* and so forth). The same goes for the following adverbs: *har* 'there', *hagar* 'over there', *haddan(i)* 'from there' (< *þar*, *þagat*, *þaðan*). The change took also place in proper nouns containing the word for *Þórr* north of Suðuroy, as in *hósdagur* (*Þórsdagur*), and in the place name *Hósvík* (*Þórsvík*). We may add that we also find place names containing the

name *Dórir*, as in *Hórisgøta* and with the name *Dórðr* in *Hórðará* (Vestmanna).²

In the demonstrative pronoun *tann* 'that' (Old Norse *þann*), *þ* changed to *t* – the regular outcome of Old Norse *þ* in Faroese; however, as Hamre (1944:37) notes, there was a change of *þ* to *h* in these pronouns in Older Faroese (as seen in Svabo's lexical works from the latter half of 1700) in the neuter of the demonstrative pronoun in the nominative and accusative singular (Old Norse *þat*). Svabo writes: 'He□a S^tM (neutr. af H a n) id, det (bedre te□a) S^t, corrupte pro Te□a M'.

Hamre (1944:27) points out that a word form like *hann*, as a reflex of Old Norse *þann* 'that', is probably reflected in the following phrase from Tarnovius (1669, that is, 100 years earlier than Svabo): *paa han ydersta domadag* 'on that outermost Judgment Day', and he mentions that Svabo's *he□a* = *te□a* Modern Faroese *tað* (Old Norse *það* 'it') speaks in favor of an older *han[n]* = *tann* (Old Norse *þann* 'that'); in fact, Svabo has the form *hann* (< Old Norse *þann* 'that'), when he says that *he□a* is neuter of *han[n]*.³

In addition to these words, there is *hóast*, *hóan*, *hó*, *hógvið*, *hóið*, *óast* < Old Norse *þó* + other units with the meaning 'even'.

An Indexically Conditioned Change

The words in question that make up the change of *þ* to *h* in Faroese are almost the same as the words in which *þ* changed to *d* in Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish; according to Barnes (2001), no one disputes that this change took place under conditions of weak stress.

The question is, however, if it is sufficient to explain a phonological change as a result of weak or weakly stress. Every word may be stressed or unstressed depending on what the speaker wants to emphasize, and hence puts stress on; claiming that the change of *þ* to *h* in demonstrative pronouns, adverbs, and proper names containing the name *Dórr* under weak stress is just as good as saying nothing at all about the matter. We need to ask what these words have in common⁴, and may note in passing that the same explanation would hold for other Scandinavian languages.

For instance, in a sentence like (1a), *Hósdagur* 'Thursday' (< Old Norse *Þórs-*) emphasizes that day as opposed to any other day in the week. In other words, it has contrastive stress. The same would hold for the place name *Hósvík* (< *Þórsvík*) in (1b), where the speaker wants to stress that particular place name as opposed to, say, the name of the next village.

- (1) a. Vit fara *hósdagin*
 we leave Thursday
 'We are leaving on Thursday'
- b. Tey fara til *Hósvíkar* (ikki Hvalvíkar)
 they go to Hósvík (not Hvalvík)
 'They are going to Hósvík (not Hvalvík)'

Barnes mentions an article by Kristján Árnason, according to whom Icelanders pronounce *það er nefnilega það* as [hamb6a'ha]; Barnes concludes that 'from their distribution one would tend to think [such pronunciations] were due to weak stress' (Barnes 2001:63).

As to the marking of stress, it certainly is on the latter syllable [ha]; from my time in Iceland I know *það er nú það* is pronounced [ha:(r)nu'ha], with stress on the pronoun. Høskuldur Þráinsson tells me (personal communication) that *h* and *þ* vary in Icelandic, so that the pronoun *það* 'it' in neuter and *þetta* 'this' may have /h/ pronunciation under stress, and /ð/ when unstressed, at least with regard to *það* 'it'. He mentions further that the variation is stylistic, so that /h/ is preferred in casual speech, and /ð/ in formal speech. It is easy to imagine such a situation in older Faroese.

We note from the examples in Hamre (1944) and Barnes (2001, 1985) that the change of *þ* > *h* affects:

- (i) demonstrative pronouns (except *tann* 'that' (< Old Norse *þann*))
 (ii) adverbs
 (iii) proper names with *Þórr-*.

In the proper names, the change happened in *hósdagur* 'Thursday' and the place name *Hósvík* 'Thorsvik' as well as in other place names – see

above. While *bósdagur* is an adverb of time, place names are a special kind of 'adverbs' denoting place; this could explain why the change does not affect other names with *Þórr*, such as *Tórur*.

The words that undergo the change all have one thing in common: they are indexes in the sense of Peirce (Anttila 1998), which is why *þ* > *h* affects only these words. Thus, the change has nothing to do with weak stress. (We will define 'index' below).

It is disputed whether functional needs may prohibit language change, as when changes are depended on morphological categories.

As to /s/, it was lost between vowels in Classical Greek, except in certain future and aorist forms (Campbell 1998:288); some linguists have argued that it is not lost in these categories because otherwise, present future and tense would have identical forms. The lack of change in *lūsō* 'I will loosen' is morphologically conditioned, as opposed to the present tense *lúō* 'I loosen'. (For a similar example from Faroese, see Petersen 2003).

To me, the change of Old Norse *þ* to *h* in Faroese is an *indexically conditioned change*. With Anttila (1998:13, following Peirce), I will recognize three types of signs: *icon*, *index* and *symbol*.

A *symbol* is the basic characteristic of the linguistic sign, as it was understood by de Saussure, while there in an *icon* is a 'formal, factual similarity between the meaning and the meaning carrier; that is, there is physical resemblance between the shape of the sign and the referent' (Anttila 1989:13). Many sounds which imitate or try to imitate the sounds of nature are iconic.

Anttila says further that an *index* (Anttila 1989:13) 'expresses mainly material relation (factual, existential contiguity) between meaning and form. It is based on psychological association and/or physical juxtaposition of different events and things'; he further says that this includes relational concepts of time and place such as realized in deictic elements or shifters (e.g. *now*, *here*, *I* and *this*, which all depend on other elements in the discourse).

It is obvious that the change of Old Norse *þ* to *h* affects only indexes; perhaps this is why an alternation between *þ* and *h* is allowed in Icelandic in certain words such as: *það er nú það* (pronounced as [ʰa:(r)nu'ha]) ~ /'ða:rnu'ða:/. The problem is how to classify *bóast*, *bó*, *bógvið*, *bóið*, *óast* 'even'; this I will address in the next section. Another

problem is why the change of *p* to *h* did not affect the demonstrative pronoun *þann* 'that'. If we take the Icelandic data at face value, then it is the /ð/ form that underlies Faroese /t/ in *tann* 'that-masc.' and *tað* 'that-neut.'.

The change of *p* to *t* in this pronoun cannot be due to analogy, as there is no *t* in the system that could bring about an analogical change here. What happened was presumably that *p* varied with *h* in these pronouns, just as it does in Modern Icelandic; we do see this change in Svabo's dictionary in *he□a* 'that', which he says is the neuter of *han* (= *hann* < Old Norse *þann*). This word form *hann* 'that' would merge with the personal pronoun *hann* 'he', which in turn blocked for the regular change of *p* to *h*, and pushed *hann* in the direction of *tann* 'that', the actual word form in Faroese.

Contentful vs. schematic

In Cognitive Grammar (Taylor 2002:324), a distinction is made between contentful and schematic units, and this distinction may add to our understanding of the change of *p* > *h* in Faroese.

Lexical words are specified as being phonologically contentful and semantically contentful, since a unit like *house* is specified both semantically and phonologically. Function words such as *the*, *a*, *of*, the adverb *there*, and pronouns like *this* are phonologically contentful and semantically schematic, according to Taylor (2002), where e.g. *this* and *there* 'profile some entity that is taken to be near, or near to, the speaker' (Taylor 2002:325). Clearly, the words in which *p* changed to *h* in Faroese (adverbs, demonstrative pronouns, and some 'place' and 'time' adverbs like *Tórshavn* 'Thorshavn' and *hósdagur* 'Thursday') are phonologically contentful but schematically schematic.⁵ This distinction between contentful and schematic, where the words that are phonologically contentful, but semantically schematic appear as indexes, constitutes a group including such different (un)declined words as the adverb *har* 'there', the pronoun *hesin* 'this', and adverbs of time and place like *Hósvík* 'Thorsvik' and *hósdagur* 'Thursday'. Moreover, conjunctions like *hóast* 'even' also seem to be semantically schematic and phonologically contentful.

To summarize: The change of *þ* to *h* is indexically conditioned, and we can do without the notion of weakly stressed position. In addition to this, we will say that word forms such as *þann* and *hann* 'that' did alternate in Older Faroese, as it is the case in Modern Icelandic for *það* 'that-neut.'; it was the *h* form that did win out in some words, while homonymy blocked the change of *þ* to *h* in the demonstrative pronoun *þann* 'that', which would have become homonymous with the personal pronoun *hann* 'he'.

á Merkrinum 5
FO-360 Sandavági
Faroe Islands

Notes

1. I would like to thank Eivind Weyhe for comments on this short paper.
2. Thanks to Eivind Weyhe for pointing these word forms out to me.
3. A possible change of *þ* to *h* is in the idiom: *tað vildi hann/tann Dávur sagt* lit.: 'that would that/he? D. said'. It is difficult to find examples in the Older Faroese Ballad language of *hann* for *tann* 'that'. The latter word form, *tann* 'that' is what we find in Modern Faroese, and also as a rule in the Ballad Language.

I have one example in *Aslaugs Sang*, which is written down by Schrøter in the beginning of 1800.

Aslaugs sang:

11.

Kiedlingin ajur ain lujtlan Knuiv	Litt: The old woman owns a small knife
snarlia sjilde han Giest vi luiv	quickly separated he G. with life (that is: from his life).

(Matras 1951-1953)

Here **han** (Mod. Far. *hann* 'he') could *maybe* be read as the demonstrative pronoun, i.e. a case where *þ* changed to *h*. The translation would then roughly be: quickly separated **that** G. from life; however, it is more likely that *han* is the personal pronoun *hann*, which is referring back to the knife.

4. There are exceptions like *Tórshavn*, but this place name usually has the form *Havn* in colloquial speech, while *Tórshavn* may be a learned pronunciation.

THE CHANGE OF *b* TO *h* IN FAROESE

5. Phonologically schematic and semantically schematic are categories like [NOUN], [VERB]... Most likely, neither the speaker nor the hearer will perceive a connection between *Hós-* and the name *Tórus*, unless taught or told so.

Bibliography

- Anttila, Raimo. 1989. *Historical and Comparative Linguistics*: Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Barnes, Michael. 2001. A note on Faroese /t/ > /h/. *Faroese Language Studies*. Oslo: Studia Nordica 5. Novus Forlag.
- Campbell, Lyle. 1998. *Historical and Comparative Linguistics. An Introduction*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Hamre, Hákon. 1944. *Færøymålet i tiden 1584-1750*. Oslo: I kommisjon hos Jacob Dybwad.
- Matras, Chr. 1951-1953. J.H. Schrøters Optegnelser af Sjúrdar Kvæði. Hafniae: Ejnar Munksgaard.
- Petersen, Hjalmar P. 2003. Orðið *vari* í *Finnurin fríði*. *Varðin*, 70.66-71.
- Taylor, John R. 2002. *Cognitive Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.