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## A NOTE ON CONVERSATION IN THE SAGAS

THE YEARS 1934–1935 saw the appearance of three monographs on dialogue in the sagas, two German dissertations by Werner Ludwig and Irmgard Netter and an American dissertation by Margaret Jeffrey.<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey restricted her coverage to just seven sagas: *Droplaugarsona saga*, *Flóamanna saga*, *Fóstbræðra saga*, *Gísla saga*, *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, *Hrafnkels saga*, and *Víga-Glúms saga*. She does not comment on this particular choice of sagas, but they are perhaps as representative as any others. She focuses throughout on the narrative effects produced by dialogue. These she subdivides into three categories: the role of dialogue in advancing the action, the role in providing characterization, and the role in creating atmosphere.

Ludwig also deals with a restricted number of sagas: *Harðar saga Grímkelssonar*, *Árons saga Hjörleifssonar*, *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, and *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* in particular. Ludwig's interest attaches especially to the cases in which there are two variant versions of the same action. In these cases, Ludwig emphasizes the role of deliberate literary recasting. His emphasis is understated, but the reader may detect a quiet opposition to the emphasis on oral variants promoted by Andreas Heusler and later Knut Liestøl. We may also regret that this opposition was not made the central issue of the book because such opposition was surely justified, but the authority of Heusler and Liestøl may have lain too heavy on the field in 1934 to allow for greater explicitness.

Netter's book is by far the most compendious of the three and includes no fewer than thirty-nine saga texts, with an overpowering outlay of statis-

1 Werner Ludwig, *Untersuchungen über den Entwicklungsgang und die Funktion des Dialogs in der isländischen Saga* (Gräfenhainichen: A. Heine G. m. b. H., 1934); Irmgard Netter, *Die direkte Rede in den Isländersagas* (Leipzig: Hermann Eichblatt Verlag, 1935); Margaret Jeffrey, *The Discourse in Seven Icelandic Sagas: Droplaugarsona saga, Hrafnkels saga freysgoða, Víga-Glúms saga, Gísla saga Súrssonar, Fóstbræðra saga, Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings, Flóamanna saga* (Menasha Wisconsin: George Banta Publishing Company, 1934).

tics on variations in phrasing. Like Jeffrey, Netter is explicitly descriptive in her approach and avoids any chronological speculation on how the use of dialogue may have evolved. All three of these books focus on the narrative use to which dialogue is put. None of them takes account of what is said or what topics are covered by the dialogue. That will be my point of departure.

Jeffrey deliberately avoids the term “conversation,”<sup>2</sup> but I will embrace it because I am interested in what saga characters talk about. I will nonetheless impose a strict definition of what constitutes conversation. In what follows the word “conversation” will refer to an exchange of words between at least two persons and composed of at least four utterances. Thus a single statement with a reply does not qualify as a conversation. I begin with a list of 28 *Íslendingasögur* in the order in which they appear in Íslenzk fornrit, noting the number of conversations in the first column and the number of utterances in the second column. It should be understood that I use only the lead manuscript in the case of variant redactions because I am more concerned with a general comparison of *Íslendingasögur* with *konungasögur* than I am with the variables in a given saga.

What, then, do the participants in these conversations talk about? It is safe to say that they do not talk about trivial matters. There is no small talk, no conversation for conversation’s sake. Most often it is weighty matters that are discussed and decided on. Prominent among these subjects are legal issues, and it is notable how often marriage arrangements prompt conversation. Not surprisingly, this is particularly true in those sagas in which marriage looms large as a theme. Examples may be found in *Hænsa-Þóris saga* (ÍF 3:29–30, 32, and 45–46), in *Gunnlaugs saga* (ÍF 3:54–55, 60, 66–67, and 81), *Eyrbyggja saga* (ÍF 4:71–72 and 112), *Laxdæla saga* (ÍF 5:62, 65, 115, 128–129, 174, 195, 199–201, and 205–6), *Kormáks saga* (ÍF 8:227 and 232–233), *Víga-Glúms saga* (ÍF 9:38), *Svarfdæla saga* (ÍF 9:148 and 186), *Ljósvetninga saga* (ÍF 10:36–38), *Njáls saga* (ÍF 12:8, 30, 41–44, and 240–241), and *Harðar saga* (ÍF 13:13).

Apart from marriage arrangements there is a wide variety of legal or contractual issues that call for verbal exchanges. In *Egils saga* the recovery of an inheritance becomes an opportunity for discourse (ÍF 2:214–215). In *Hænsa-Þóris saga* the words that lead to a legal summons are recorded (ÍF

2. *The Discourse in Seven Icelandic Sagas*, 5.

Sagas	Number of conversations	Number of utterances
<i>Egils saga</i>	22	4 to 9
<i>Hænsa-Þóris sagas</i>	16	4 to 20
<i>Gunnlaugs saga</i>	13	4 to 15
<i>Bjarnar saga</i>	10	4 to 13
<i>Heiðarvíga saga</i>	4	4 to 7
<i>Eyrbyggja saga</i>	19	4 to 9
<i>Laxdæla saga</i>	34	4 to 25
<i>Gísla saga</i>	14	4 to 8
<i>Fóstbræðra saga</i>	40	4 to 15
<i>Hávarðar saga Ísfirðing</i>	12	4 to 7
<i>Grettis saga</i>	48	4 to 10
<i>Bandamanna saga</i>	15	4 to 45
<i>Vatnsdæla saga</i>	27	4 to 9
<i>Hallfreðar saga</i>	11	4 to 7
<i>Kormáks saga</i>	6	4 to 8
<i>Víga-Glúms saga</i>	22	4 to 17
<i>Valla-Ljóts saga</i>	17	4 to 16
<i>Svarfdæla saga</i>	32	4 to 17
<i>Ljósvetninga saga</i>	48	4 to 16
<i>Reykðæla saga</i>	4	3 to 4
<i>Vápnfirðinga saga</i>	8	4 to 6
<i>Þorsteins þáttr stangarhoggss</i>	6	4 to 9
<i>Ólkofra þáttr</i>	4	4 to 13
<i>Hrafnkels saga</i>	6	5 to 21
<i>Droplaugarsona saga</i>	4	5 to 7
<i>Gunnars þáttr Þiðrandabana</i>	1	8
<i>Njáls saga</i>	164	4 to 15
<i>Harðar saga Grímkelssonar</i>	8	4 to 6

3:20–21). In *Eyrbyggja saga* several legal issues tip into conversation, land-transfer and inheritance matters (ÍF 4:25–26), a matter of legal redress (ÍF 4:85), and a question of slave compensation (ÍF 4:118–119). In *Laxdæla saga* the proper division of an inheritance prompts a discussion among brothers (ÍF 5:72), and the context suggests that the dress code for both men and women may have been a quasi-legal matter (ÍF 5:96). In *Gísli saga* a similar question of property division leads to a discussion between the brothers Gísli and Þorkell (ÍF 6:34–35). Later in the same saga the legal search of a house prompts a formal request and a formal, albeit devious, response (ÍF 6:87).

The motif of a house search accompanied by dialogue recurs in *Fóstbræðra saga* (ÍF 6:166), where we can also find a case of theft with a detailed exchange of words (ÍF 6:187–189). *Bandamanna saga*, which has the highest percentage of conversation in any saga, provides verbatim accounts of the temporary conferring of a chieftaincy (ÍF 7:303), a full legal discussion (ÍF 7:316–18), and a unique reporting of court proceedings (ÍF 7:322–357). *Vatnsdæla saga* dramatizes the exact exchange of words prompted by an alleged illegal introduction of a sword into a temple (ÍF 8:48–49) and the formulation of a banishment from a district (ÍF 8:50–51). *Svarfdæla saga* does the same in the case of financing a ship (ÍF 9:163–164) and again in the establishment of a financial caretakership (ÍF 9:199–200).

Legal issues can of course escalate into regular confrontations, and there is no dearth of these in the sagas. They too are profiled with the exchange of words. Thus an inheritance or money claims or priority in grazing rights can be vigorously disputed in *Egils saga* (ÍF 2:157–158, 173–174, 280–281). Pasturage recurs as a disputed issue in *Hænsa-Þóris saga* (ÍF 3:43), and *Eyrbyggja saga* provides examples of property disputes with words to match, or contested whale rights (ÍF 4:142–143, 161, 159). Sometimes the disputes seem slight, but the words are no less contentious, as in the case of a borrowed horse in *Fóstbræðra saga* (ÍF 6:127), a family dispute in *Hallfreðar saga* (ÍF 8:149), a quarrel at a thing-meeting in *Vatnsdæla saga* (ÍF 8:88), or a dispute over status or seating precedence in *Ljósvetninga saga* (ÍF 10:17–18, 58–59). Not all such communications are hostile. Some can be undertaken in the interest of forming an agreement or an alliance, for example in *Hænsa-Þóris saga* (ÍF 3:27), *Eyrbyggja saga* (ÍF 4:68–69), *Vatnsdæla saga* (ÍF 8:21), *Svarfdæla saga* (ÍF 9:201–2), or

*Ljósvetninga saga* (ÍF 10:12–13). The point of direct discourse seems to be to mark an official moment and signal its importance.

Among such moments are personal or business commitments. Thus in *Hænsa-Þóris saga* the fostering of a child, a hay sale, or the closing of an aid agreement are arranged with explicit exchanges of words (ÍF 3:7, 14–16, 20–21). Such transactions need not be benign, as the plan for an assassination in *Eyrbyggja saga* illustrates (ÍF 4:65–66), but more commonly it is the simple matter of a purchase or an exchange, as in *Laxdæla saga* (ÍF 5:23–24, 101, 102–103, 146–147, 216–217). The transaction need not be restricted to material goods but can include services. Thus *Fóstbræðra saga* (ÍF 6: 168, 195–196, and 221), *Grettis saga* (ÍF 7:52), and *Ljósvetninga saga* (ÍF 10:64–65) report the terms of a ship passage, *Svarfdæla saga* spells out an agreement between brothers (ÍF 9:131) and gives the wording of a financial deal (ÍF 9:203), while *Víga-Glúms saga* details the arrangement of a winter's lodging (ÍF 9:17–18).

Since gift-giving was more of a business transaction in medieval Iceland than it is today, it is occasionally signaled by explicit words, whether it be an extravagant gift like a ship in *Egils saga* (ÍF 2:91) or a less princely gift like a sword in *Svarfdæla saga* (ÍF 9:145–146) or a gift of wall hangings and clothing in *Víga-Glúms saga* (ÍF 9:48). Falling slightly below the legal bar are the matters of hiring and firing as in *Grettis saga* (ÍF 7:110) or a truce formula as in *Heiðarviga saga* (ÍF 3:312–313) or another case of setting the terms of combat in *Svarfdæla saga* (ÍF 9:146–147).

What all these occurrences of direct discourse have in common is that they underline the importance or seriousness in the dealing of saga characters. They might be termed transactional; they signal the commitment of the parties involved to an interaction of legal or business importance. There is, however, one category of interaction that does not subscribe to the transactional pattern. This category involves an exchange of words with royalty or the high aristocracy, kings, queens, or sometimes jarls. Examples may be found in *Egils saga* (ÍF 2:191, 107, 123, 139–140, 183–185), *Gunnlaugs saga* (ÍF 3:69–70, 76, 79–81), *Bjarnar saga* (ÍF 3:116–117, 132–133), *Laxdæla saga* (ÍF 5:117–118), *Fóstbræðra saga* (ÍF 6:159, 183, 213, 220), *Grettis saga* (ÍF 7:132, 134), *Vatnsdæla saga* (ÍF 8:24, 33–34, 44, 114), *Hallfreðar saga* (ÍF 8:153–154, 161, 167–168), and *Njáls saga* (ÍF 12:14, 20, 206, 215, 218–223). It will be readily apparent that such conversations are largely confined to sagas

about Icelanders who travel to Norway, particularly skalds. Sagas located exclusively in Iceland have no royal words to report.

Royal words were clearly considered to be weighty and worth recording, but they raise questions about transmission. Whereas the day-to-day transactional conversations are so richly represented in the *Íslendingasögur* that they can easily be imagined to be part and parcel of the oral transmissions that anticipated the written sagas, we might question whether royal words had a similar currency. Meetings with kings and queens were no doubt part of the transmission, but we may wonder whether the words spoken actually go back to the first-hand reports of Icelandic travelers. It seems more likely that the words were devised by later tellers on the basis of what might be reasonably guessed at under the circumstances. Such words are well represented in the *Íslendingasögur*, but the amount of discourse naturally shrinks in comparison to what we find in the *konungasögur*.

The authors of the early monographs on dialogue elected to omit the *konungasögur* from consideration, but their inclusion may offer additional insights. I have surveyed seven of these sagas, including two of the North Atlantic island sagas, and arrive at the following figures comparable to the listing of *Íslendingasögur* above:

Sagas	Conversations	Utterances
<i>Orkneyinga saga</i>	9	4 to 9
Oddr's <i>Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar</i>	13	4 to 18
<i>Færeyinga saga</i>	19	4 to 8
<i>Morkinskinna</i>	98	4 to 39/40
<i>Fagrskinna</i>	22	5 to 10
<i>Heimskringla</i>	56	4 to 20
<i>Knyttlinga saga</i>	15	4 to 7

It will be immediately apparent that the conversations in the *konungasögur* are both less frequent and largely shorter than what we find in the *Íslendingasögur*. The outlier in this listing is *Morkinskinna* with 98 conversations, but we must bear in mind that a disproportionate number of these conversations is found in the *þættir*, which are more readily classed with the *Íslendingasögur* than with the *konungasögur*. The *þættir* constitute about

11.4% of the text, but they account for 53 of the total tally of conversations, that is, more than 50% of all the conversations. If these 53 are subtracted from the total of 98, the residue is 45, and that is more in line with the 56 conversations in *Heimskringla*. It should also be noted that the two cases of exceptionally long conversations in *Morkinskinna*, with 39 utterances in one case and 40 in the other, are from respectively “Hreiðars þátrr” (ÍF 23:153–157) and “Sneglu-Halla þátrr” (ÍF 23:276–278). Apart from *Morkinskinna* the *konungasögur* are tight-lipped indeed.

Furthermore, the conversations in the *konungasögur* are not analogous to what we find in the *Íslendingasögur*. I have not found a single example of what I termed transactional conversation in the *Íslendingasögur*. Quite predictably most of the conversations are assigned to royalty and the high aristocracy: 7 of 9 conversations in *Orkneyinga saga*, 11 of 13 conversations in Oddr Snorrason’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, 66 of 98 conversations in *Morkinskinna*, 16 of 22 conversations in *Fagrskinna*, 8 of 9 conversations in *Heimskringla* I, 21 of 27 conversations in *Heimskringla* II, 12 of 21 conversations in *Heimskringla* III, and 10 of 15 conversations in *Knýtlinga saga*. It is more difficult to make such a tally in *Færeyinga saga* since the exact social status of the Faroe Island farmers is not always transparent. In the sagas that can be counted, 151 of the 212 conversations engage royal or high-status persons, that is, roughly 70%. The percentage of high-status conversations in the *Íslendingasögur* is surely in the single digits.

Not much effort has been made to differentiate between the *Íslendingasögur* and the *konungasögur* in terms of style or narrative practice, but it is evident that one of the distinguishing features is the amount of conversation and the sort of subject matter deployed in such conversation. Further study of the *konungasögur* might reveal other clear markers that set the two types apart. Such study could also shed light on quite incidental problems. For example, *Eyrbyggja saga* has no conversation at all in the first 24 pages, then records a repique that is a verbatim duplicate of words found in *Gísla saga*. That not only bolsters the supposition that the author of *Eyrbyggja saga* borrowed the repique from *Gísla saga* but perhaps suggests as well that this model inspired him to make more general use of conversation further along.<sup>3</sup>

3 On the relationship of these two texts see the remarks of the editors in the introduction to ÍF 4, XXI–XXII.

Another case in point is that *Reykðæla saga* contains no dialogue whatsoever except in the passage it famously shares with *Víga-Glúms saga*. *Víga-Glúms saga*, on the other hand, has a normal amount of dialogue, 22 conversations in all. This disproportion shows that the author of *Reykðæla saga* has surely borrowed the shared episode from *Víga-Glúms saga* rather than vice versa.<sup>4</sup>

The study of conversation may occasionally yield small textual observations such as those I have noted in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Reykðæla saga*, but this is not the burden of my argument. My point has been rather to find stylistic dissimilarities between the *Íslendingasögur* as a group and the *konungasögur* as a group. One of these differences is that the characters of the two groups converse differently.

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