

Dialogue as a Discourse Pattern in Saga Literature

The attraction of dialogues in sagas seems to have no end; the excellent studies on this subject (e.g. Knirk, 1976, Hallberg, 1976 and references quoted there) only inspire more investigation. The modesty with which one can hope to "add a few minor features" (Hallberg, 1976/2) though, must increasingly melt into humility. In such a frame of mind will the following few thoughts be submitted.

In everyday idiom and in linguistic terminology dialogue can variously be paraphrased as "question and answer", "conversation", "exchange of information", "face to face interaction" and so forth. These terms should be perfectly adequate to label literary dialogues, because they are in fact "conversations" or "exchanges of information" etc. between characters of a novel, drama, or saga. However, they are more than verbal communication between persons in a literary work, they are parts of a larger communicative event between the author and the reader or listener, embodied in the complete text to which the dialogues belong. Literary communication, according to van Dijk (1976/42ff), parallels non-literary communicative events, being characterized as a one way process in which the hearer's or reader's set of evaluations is affected, though no direct influence is intended by the author. For this

reason not only "what is said, but how it is said becomes the object for the attention of both speaker and hearer" (van Dijk, *ibid.*), or writer and reader. Thus not only "semantic" but also "structural" ("formal") information is transmitted. The etymology of the Latin word "informatio", as well as of the English word "information" (Webster, 1966: "endowing with form", "training, discipline, instruction"), supports the connection of communication through "structure" as well as influence through information transmission.

To fulfill the functions of verbal exchange between the represented persons, and the functions of a part of literary discourse, the dialogue may be expected to follow the codes of both literary and non-literary communication. To what extent either of these norms is observed in a literary work will depend on the intention and skill of the author, but also on the literary tradition and the tastes of his public. (See Spitzer, 1948)

From the point of view of "literary discourse" several parameters are of importance: a. the particular text that is presented in dialogue form rather than as a narrative; b. the choice of characters who are to be represented through dialogue; c. parts of their verbal communication that is presented as direct speech vs. those that are retold by the author/narrator in indirect speech form; d. the frame of the dialogue, i.e. introductory and concluding words. The semantic information is thus to be

passed on in the form of dialogue presumably with the intention of producing a particular effect on the audience. Such is, at any rate, the case with the present-day reader (to which effect see Hallberg op. cit, and Knirk, op.cit.).

Apart from the above considerations the dialogues will supposedly have to be composed in agreement with the norms of non-literary verbal interaction, in order to concur with the reader's or listener's experience, so that he may identify the form with "speech" or "conversation". Conversely, the effect may turn out to be different from what the author intended.

Starting from the structure of the whole saga and working down to the structure of the dialogue, it can be noticed (cf. Hallberg op.cit.) that direct discourse is used for particular effects, as a way of foregrounding (Mukařovsky, 1964) scenes in the saga that are particularly important. For that purpose a different discourse structure from the general narrative pattern, i.e. the dialogue, will appear as favourable.

We propose to illustrate the above points with examples from Gunnlaugs saga ormsstungu. The very first dialogue in this saga is at the same time the first important, perhaps even the most significant module in the composition (compare Óláfs saga helga, Hallberg op.cit.). It is Thorsteinn's prophetic dream about the eagles' fight

for the swan on the roof of his house, and its explanation by the Norwegian merchant. The dream brings out in an allegorical form the story of the saga, a convention common enough in medieval Germanic literature. Dreams represent forces more powerful than the human will, for which reason they must be given due prominence in a story. Hrafn's dream later on in the saga, equally prophetic as Thorstein's, is also foregrounded in Hrafn's dialogue with Helga, in which the dream is retold in verse, which intensifies the effect of direct discourse.

Other focal points in the saga are also composed in dialogue form. Thus Thorstein's ordering Jofrid to expose their child to be born if it is a girl, and Jofrid's unsuccessfully trying to dissuade him. Or Jofrid, in spite of Thorstein's command, sending Helga with a servant, to be secretly brought up by Thorgerd, Thorstein's sister. As in the sagas about kings (Hallberg op. cit., Knirk op. cit.) there is an ironic twist in these scenes, which all supply contingencies leading up to the fulfillment of Thorstein's dream. So does the scene when Gunnlaug is first introduced in a dialogue with his father, who forbids him to carry out his intention to travel abroad.

All the transactions between Gunnlaug, Illugi, and later Hrafn and his friends, and Thorstein, concerning Helga's betrothal, are recorded in dialogue form, and so are Gunnlaug's and Hrafn's confrontations and duels, and

Illugi's and Onund's final bitter words after their sons' killings.

A whole series of dialogues in Gunnlaugs saga, but also in other sagas and þattir are more or less formal interviews with kings. These are not always crucial for the events in the narrative, but ~~they~~ are important because of the social status of the participants. In the first place there is the king, no matter whether Norwegian, English, or Irish, he is an important person as such, and his discourse with the hero of the saga or story (e.g. Gunnlaug, Audun, Ivar etc.) makes him important as well. Therefore all encounters with kings are presented in dialogue form.

This brings us to the second point about foregrounding by means of dialogue. Most of the direct discourse is uttered by the hero of the saga, and other dramatically and socially important persons. Characters without these qualities do not speak at all. The following cursory statistics may serve as an example. In 37% of the dialogues in Gunnlaugs saga, Gunnlaug is taking part. (On the basis of P. Hallberg's statistics in op. cit. p. 4, I have calculated the protagonist's share in "speech situations", which in the three versions of Olaf's saga averages at 37%). Such characters as Thorstein, Illugi and Hrafn participate in som 14% of the dialogues each, and thus represent characters of the second order. The fringe consists of the women, Helga, Jofrid, and Thorgerd, the kings, their re-

tainers, and other Icelanders, each taking part in about 4% of the focal points of the narrative, structured as dialogue.

The whole "speech situation" need not be rendered in direct speech form. Trivial phrases such as greeting and thanking formulas: ok kvöddu hann vel, ok kvaddi hann vel ok virðuliga - Gunnlaugr þakkadi konungi vel, konungur þakkadi honum kvöldit; affirmative phrases: Gunnlaugr kvazk þat vilja, hann kvezk þat vera; discourse used to establish phatic communion: Jarl spyr Gunnlaug, hværr hann væri, en hann sagði honum nafn sitt ok stt; are condensed as it were in indirect speech form. On the other hand, much can be made of such dialogue, if a person's status and character are to be focused upon. Other examples of condensed dialogue are parting speeches: ok það hann orlofs til brottferðar, or any other direct discourse not meant to be foregrounded: Gunnlaugr kvazk þá þegar vilja ofan riða til Borgar. Illugi kvað þat ekki rað ..., particularly if a scene, or event has already been told about: Gunnlaugr ok Hrafn sagði hvárr öðrum frá ferðum sínum, Ok litlu síðar fann Gunnlaugr konunginn ok segir honum fjárlánit.

Direct speech is as a rule introduced by phrases such as Illugi mælti, Thorstein segir, hann svarar etc. These phrases are syntactically independent of both the preceding and the following text. They very much resemble stage directions, and seem to demand a pause and change of intonation.

Phrases of the same type (segir hann) are frequently interpolated in a direct discourse, thus maintaining its cohesion. This device however, seems to be more appropriate for a text meant to be spoken (i.e. told or read aloud) rather than silently read, in which case other means (syntactic or graphic) would better serve the purpose. Such oral techniques would also support opinions in favour of an oral tradition as component of the saga literature (e.g. H.M Heinrichs, 1975 and references therein).

The dramaticism of the sagas, and the vividness of the dialogues is frequently mentioned. It appears worthwhile therefore, to examine the dialogues as instances of face to face interaction. Information in actual "speech situations" is culled from the social and psychological as well as from the verbal context. Economy of verbal behaviour requires shortcuts in most interactions except the very formal ones. Many structures surface as pro-forms (pronouns, auxiliaries, adverbials like here, now, so), ellipses with stretches of verbal matter deleted, as truncated and even outright ungrammatical discourse. To disambiguate such verbal output non-linguistic support is indispensable. Such kinesic features (posture, gesture), paralinguistic features (volume or pitch of voice etc.), together with redundancies inherent in the language are concomitant to speech and serve to enhance the communicative value of the words, i.e. to ensure successful com-

munication.

The violation of norms required by the laws of nature (such as whispering to someone standing at a distance of a hundred meters), or the violation of social conduct norms (such as sitting down while talking to one's superior, not thanking for a gift etc.) may be of great consequence both in real life and in a story.

It is reasonable to suppose that in a written medium kinesic and paralinguistic features would be supplied by descriptions, as it indeed is frequently done in novels and similar narrative texts. Sagas, or at any rate Gunnlaugs saga, is not particularly rich in such clues. An explanation of this fact could be sought in the medieval custom of reading to an audience, by which performance it was possible to supply many of the paralinguistic features.

On two occasions in Gunnlaugs saga it is indicated that the speakers stood up and stepped in front of the king when addressing him. Conversely, when the king bids someone to sit down, he does not want to speak with the person at the moment. Thus Gunnlaug is invited by king Olaf to sit down though he had offered to recite verse in honour of the king, who does not want to listen to them until later, when Gunnlaug is given permission to speak. Not to stand up while speaking to the king, or on any other formal occasion might be interpreted as arrogance, and draw serious consequences. As regards arrangement of

the speakers it need not depend on social convention. In *Ölkofra þáttur* for instance, Gudmund and Broddi are talking while riding one behind the other. When they speak they have to turn around in order to be heard. This is recorded in the text (Hann sneri aptr ok mælti).

The only gesture in *Gunnlaugs saga* is the formal handshake to mark a settlement. Gunnlaug takes Thorstein's hand while the latter reluctantly agrees to betroth his daughter to Gunnlaug. The initiator of the gesture, being the younger of the two speaker's, obviously is showing his eagerness. Shaking hands is often mentioned in other saga texts, because of the social importance of the gesture, which has survived in many cultures.

Next to the norms of conduct which regulate the non-linguistic behaviour, or intervals of speech and silence, there are regulations for the use of formulas of address. In the sagas they appear to be relatively simple, which to a present-day reader conveys the impression of an egalitarian society. Everybody addresses everybody else by his or her personal name, or his ethnic designation (e.g. Íslendingur) and the second person singular of the personal pronoun. In formal situations, i.e. when addressing the king, the honorific form (2nd plural) is used, though not obligatorily. Likewise, equals may use words such as fellagi, or frændi, while the king is addressed with herra, or even more deferentially with minn herra.

When speaking to the king the speaker frequently turns to the familiar þu, after having used the honorific form of address first: Kvæði hefi ek at þara yör ... ok vilda ek, at þér hlýddið ok gafið hljóð til. The title herra can also be left out. A character can be vividly presented through the choice of more or less honorific speech. Gunnlaug, for instance, uses honorific forms much more sparingly than Hrafn or other retainers. He is least deferential towards Eirik jarl, but most so towards Ethelred, whom at one point, when asking for a favour, he addresses with minn herra. A king will occasionally use the majestic first person plural, which adds to the formality of the situation.

Utterances with the greatest verisimilitude with actual speech make considerable use of pro-forms, whose main function is reference to an item elsewhere in the verbal context, or in the non-linguistic situation. The frequent brevity of these sentences also resembles the economy typical of much everyday spoken intercourse: Hvat er þat? - Hvat þá? - Of mikit er þat, herra. - þat má vel.

Apparently, when more formal utterances are intended, sentences are padded with more lexical items than they would be in real life, e.g. To the question "eða hve gamall ertu, Íslendingr?", Gunnlaug answers "Ek em nú átján vetra" instead of saying just "átján", but of course,

he is politely answering Eirik jarl's question. Similarly when asking Thorstein for Helga's hand:

Gunnlaugr: ... eða hvi byðr þú mér eigi þat, er ek vil þiggja?

þorsteinn: Hvat er þat?

Gunnlaugr: Helga in fagra, dóttir þín.

instead of just saying Helga in fagra, or just dóttir þín.

Not all utterances are necessarily complemented by counter^{utterances}, but by some kind of non-linguistic act. Such utterances are said to have a perlocutionary force, the most frequent instance of which is to be found in commands. (On perlocutionary force see Searle, 1965) Two illustrations from Gunnlaugs saga, where the effect of an utterance with perlocutionary force is recorded, can serve as examples:

"Þú skalt þú búa ferð hennar heim með mér." Hon gerði svá.

"Göngum upp á borgina ok tölum þar." Ok svá gerðu þeir.

Communication, as said earlier, can be impeded by ^{noise} "noise" originating both outside the language ^{and} inside it. A breakdown in communication is a favourite device in dramatic literature, breeding ironic turns of events and destinies.

An inadequate volume of voice can be an obstacle for the hearer, which is removed by requests for louder speech. Gunnlaug mutters for himself uncivil words to Eirik jarl's unfriendly remarks:

Gunnlaugr ~~mælti~~ ok heldr lágt.

and Eirik who does not hear what is being said asks:

"Hvat sagðir þú nú, Íslendingr?"

Gunnlaug says what is on his mind, not trying to avoid conflict by a ~~þéite~~ lie.

Too much, or more often too little information can be a source of misunderstanding. The shortwindedness of the Icelanders is almost proverbial, and can be successfully employed for literary communication.

An extreme example is Ivar's conversation with king Eystein, who is trying to find out why Ivar was depressed (Ivars þáttur Ingimundarsonar). Only after guessing six times, and always getting very curt answers (Eigi er þat, herra.), the king learns that Ivar is pining after a woman. A further four questions are necessary for the king to find out who the woman is.

In a different social situation the puzzled interlocutor (particularly if of a socially inferior status) may not be able to obtain clarification by asking, i.e. the speaker (of a superior status) may refuse to answer questions. A case in point is Jofrid's not understanding Thorstein's wish to expose the child to be born if it is a girl. She says that such an act would be unlike him (~~óþínslígr~~), and that it would be unbecoming for a man of such social standing as his: "slíkr maðr sem þú ert, ok mun þér eigi sýnask þetta at láta gera, svá auðigr maðr sem þú ert." The only answer Thorstein provides is that

what he said was his will, and he did not care whether it was appropriate or not. One cannot but wonder whether the saga might not have had a different turn had Jofrid been acquainted with the tragic events that were to evolve around Helga.

What makes the dialogue appear as actual speech most is the choice of vocabulary (in the narrative the author would be less likely to describe a character as a fretkarl, whereas as an insult expressed in direct speech it adds the right flavour of emotions involved), and such structures as questions and commands, typical for direct discourse. What is most unlike speech is the lack of such features as stammering, repetitions, pauses, omissions and ungrammatical utterances. On the whole, the more formal a dialogue is, the more resemblance it bears to actual spoken discourse.

Upon careful examination it becomes obvious that what the author was most concerned about was his communication with the listener or reader. To that end he concurs with the reader's or listener's experience of literary discourse, which means keeping inside the boundaries of traditional norms of such communication. It has been noticed elsewhere (Knirk op. cit, about the rhetorical structure of speeches in Sverris saga) that the direct speech in a saga is composed less in accord with the rules governing the particular spoken style, than with

those applying to the form and content of the saga. This has been found to hold good of the dialogues we examined as well. The attention of the author is mainly concentrated on the effect of the dialogues as parts of the whole saga structure, not on their verisimilitude with actual speech. The fact that the dialogues appear to the reader so very much like real speech, is to be attributed to the art of the author who made an apt choice of direct discourse features not clashing with the literary mode of information transmission. He also succeeded in bringing together parts of the everyday experience of his audience with their literary experience, and produced an effect on their set of evaluations.

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