

Representations of Intercultural Communication in the Sagas of Icelanders

As a result of the developments within the modern scholarship on the Icelandic sagas, the scope of the approaches applied – for example to *Ístendingasögur*, the sagas of Icelanders – has altered significantly. On the one hand, this has obviously enriched the general horizon of saga studies, by adding new dimensions and interesting nuances to the overall picture. On the other hand, there also lie certain risks in the choice of questions for analysis – in some cases, one may expect that focusing only on certain constituent elements of the sagas (or one particular saga) would rule out other important interlinked components, and therefore neither contribute to an unbiased understanding of the sagas as a whole, nor provide explanations for individual traits by which some sagas are shaped.

Bearing such possible limitations in mind, the purpose of this paper is to explore general features of intercultural communication as depicted in the sagas of Icelanders. It is important to emphasize that our task is at least two-folded: for one, to point out a few characteristic patterns of the saga structure that may highlight the sagas' perceptions and ideas about intercultural communication. Secondly, we wish to place the identified narrative devices within a wider context and search for potential underlying realities (in as far as this is possible), according to an understanding that regards sagas as part of a dynamic tradition representative of both continuity and change. Methodologically, this study makes use of a combined approach, where a close analysis of textual premises is connected with a discussion of their possible relevance regarding the view of sagas as the voices of a historical dialogue.

The starting point is made up by saga descriptions of travelling, including the goals of going abroad. Although the sagas of Icelanders concentrate first and foremost on the events that take place in Iceland and/or Norway, they do also contain information about the saga characters' travels on a broader scale. Records of contacts with the outside world is one of the ways in which the sagas deal with certain aspects of external – and intercultural – communication. In addition to that, cases of intercultural encounters – for example, the mixing of native and foreign traditions and languages – can also occur within the original Icelandic saga setting.

This paper focuses mainly on the former, i.e. the external dimension of intercultural communication. Generally speaking, the journeys that the saga heroes undertake play a significant role in the saga's narrative structure, and also provide a type of physical "on-stage" setting for the story. And by being part of the plot, such references in their own way demonstrate the saga characters' continuous involvement in communication between different cultural communities.

Travelling as Part of the Saga Narrative

The sagas of Icelanders follow rather typical narrative schemes with regard to the saga characters' travels – on this basis, travelling may be characterised as a commonly accepted custom and an essential part of the hero's further career. A young man matures during his voyages; it could even be said that he HAS to travel, if he wishes to accomplish something in his life (on the functions of that motive in the sagas of Icelanders, see e.g. Meulengracht Sørensen 1993: 224-226 and Vésteinn Ólason 1998: 78-79). This model of travelling can to a certain degree even be considered a reflection of the general Icelandic lifestyle during the first couple of centuries after the country's settlement: "Voyaging abroad was in itself regarded as an important element in the training of young men" (Hastrup 1985: 223). Such an insight into the importance of travelling seems to be one of the governing ideas behind these narrations; the concrete motives for going abroad, of course, differ from saga to saga:

Looking at the Icelandic saga hero who leaves the intimate world of experience to explore the alien world beyond the sea, we find that his goals vary from one narrative to another: to seek fame and fortune, to gain recognition from a potentially hostile grandfather, to win a name for himself as a court poet or a warrior, to attain promotion above his own social level through associating with royalty, or even to do something for the benefit of his soul. Again and again, we see him taking part in dangerous, if sometimes profitable, campaigns against vikings in the Baltic or British Isles. (Hermann Pálsson 1989: 31)

Experience gathered during travelling forms in sagas a typical feature of the person's characteristics, according to a principle stated by Vésteinn Ólason: "[...] events are a function of individual characters' personalities" (1998: 65). As the result of travelling, the saga hero can win himself a glorious reputation and come back highly respected.¹ Sometimes he then solves the conflicts that initially made him leave Iceland (the hero's outlawry is, in fact, among other common reasons for going abroad). But – as Vésteinn Ólason points out – the journeys abroad can generally "work in two ways [...] and sometimes they can lead to further and more disastrous hostilities when the hero returns home" (p. 79). The outcome of travelling depends on the general schemes of the story.

It is not surprising that saga characters can often be described by directing attention to their deeds and travels; in such a way their varied skills are highlighted.² It is further interesting to observe that identification of a variety of travelling destinations constitutes an important component of these depictions. In this way, accounts of travelling routes and contacts with different regions also provide an interesting insight into the sagas' occurrence – as known during the times of saga composition, with its roots in the knowledge gathered and stored in the (oral) tradition of the earlier times.

What also underlies the saga characters' eagerness to travel, is a wish to experience different parts of the world and learn something about other people – which in some cases is even explicitly stated in the narrative.³ Furthermore, despite the fact that the sagas seldom present thorough reports on foreign places and cultures, they do document the need to tell stories about one's voyages, achievements and experiences, and also emphasize the importance of preserving such knowledge.⁴

¹ As Njáll predicts to Gunnarr in *Njáls saga*, ch. 74 (ÍF XII: 181): "Ok svá sem þér varð in fyrri utanferð þín mikil til sæmðar; þá mun þér þó sjá verða miklu meir til sæmðar; munú koma út með mannvirðingu mikilli ok verða maðr gamall, ok mun engi maðr hér þá á sporði þér standa." Or already confining the facts, as in *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 22 (ÍF V: 61): "Ólafir varð frægr af ferð þessi; þá var ok kunnigt gört kynferði Ólafis, at hann var dóttursonr Mýrkjartans Írakoungs. Spyrsk þetta um allt land ok þar með virðing sú, er ríkir menn höfðu á hann lagt, þeir er hann hafði heimsótt. Ólafir hafði ok mikit fé út haft ok er nú um vetrinn með feðr sínum." E.g. also *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 8 (ÍF VI: 159): "Þorgeirr fór kaupförs suðr til Vindlands, ok var þar lítill friðr í þenna tíma kaupmönunum norðan ór löndum. Af þessi ferð varð hann ágætr, því at hann hafði þat af hverjum, sem hann vildi." *Kormáks saga*, ch. 18 (ÍF VIII: 266): "Í þessi ferð fengu þeir bræðr mikla frægð. Leið á sumarit, ok var komit at vetri. Þeir vildu þá halda til Nóregs, fengu veðréttu kalda, lagði hrim í seglit; þeir váru jafnan mjök frammi bræðr."

² E.g. *Egils saga*, ch. 70 (ÍF II: 221): "Maðr sá, er ørendi þetta bar, hann var allra landa maðr, hafði verit löngum í Danmörk ok í Sviaveldi; var honum þar allt kunnigt fyrir bæði um leiðir ok mannaðelli; hann hafði ok víða farit um Nóreg"; or ch. 32 (ÍF II: 83): "Björn var farnaðr mikill, var stundum í víking, en stundum í kaupferðum; Björn var inn gæviligsti maðr." Also *Kormáks saga*, ch. 27 (ÍF VIII: 298-299): "En þeir bræðr herjuðu um Írland, Bretland, England, Skotland, ok þóttu inir ágæztu menn. Þeir settu fyrst virki þat, er heitir Skarðaborg. Þeir runnu upp á Skotland ok unnu mörg stórvirki ok höfðu mikit lið; í þeim her var engi slíkr sem Kormákr um afl ok áráði."

³ E.g. *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 40 (ÍF V: 114): "Er þat várkunn mikil, frændi," segir Þorsteinn, "at þik fýsi at kanna annarra manna siðu."

⁴ E.g. *Njáls saga*, ch. 32 (ÍF XII: 84): "Njáll varð feginn kvámu þeira ok bað, at þeir skyldi vera þar um nóttina; þeir gerðu svá, ok sagði Gunnarr frá ferðum sínum." In ch. 119 (ÍF XII: 303) we hear about Þorkell hákr's travelling adventures and it is told: "Sjðan fór hann apr til Sviðjóðar ok þaðan til Nóregs ok út til Íslands, ok let hann gera þrekvirki þessi yfir lokhvílu sinni ok á stóli fyrir háseti sínu."

In this way the patterns of travelling that the sagas refer to form a suitable source of background information. It is among the records of contacts with the outside world that we, in the following step, start searching for the sagas' understandings in relation to intercultural communication.

Perceptions of Intercultural Communication

When speaking of intercultural communication, it is important to define how that concept is to be understood in relation to saga studies.⁵ In the framework established for this paper, intercultural communication is first of all associated with various forms of connections between people who represent different countries/cultural communities and/or nationalities. The understanding of the communication situation is developed from the picture that the sagas themselves provide, but in addition to that, some parallels are drawn to possible cultural realities behind the saga scenes.

Earlier in this paper, the sagas' representations of travelling were outlined. We claim that in the saga setting, travelling and communication form two sides of the same coin. Through their choice of narrative patterns, the sagas establish a specific equation between travelling and communication. Besides the above mentioned common activities that the journeys overseas connect with – for example raiding and/or trading, combined with scaldic service at some foreign king's or chieftain's court – and which already in their own way indicate various communicative interests, there also exist other forms of interaction. More or less explicitly, travelling is associated with passing and spreading news and messages – an act, which without doubt is of clear communicative nature. News serves as an important component of all intercultural communication – no matter whether the sagas “disclose” the actual content of these conversations or not. For instance, when a saga hero is visiting a foreign king, he is – besides performing the verses of praise – expected to tell the news from Iceland and/or other regions he has been to.⁶

In this connection we have to pay attention to the special function of ships in the narrative structure of the sagas. In fact, ships carry out interesting communicative tasks within the saga context, as they physically contribute to the idea of linking people from different parts of the world and spreading information. Therefore, they can even be called the early means of cross-cultural communication.⁷ In general, the sagas contain numerous examples of how the act of travelling by ship stands in direct relation to passing news from one region to another.⁸ And sometimes ships are even explicitly described as the very arenas where the newsexchange takes place.

⁵ In general, the term ‘intercultural communication’ may namely refer to communication between several types of discourse systems.

⁶ E.g. *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 21, Óláfr at Mýrkjartan's court (ÍF V: 56): “Þá spyr konungr altmætra tíðenda. Óláfr leysti vel ór þeim tíðendum öllum, er hann var spyrðr. Þá spyrði konungr, hvaðan þeir hefði út látit, eða hverra menn þeir væri.”

⁷ The same idea is introduced in another article by Zilmer (unpublished), under the title “Learning about Places and People”. It is an adapted version of the paper that was presented during the international conference “Sagas and Societies” at Borgarnes, Iceland, in September 2002.

⁸ E.g. *Egils saga*, ch. 56 (ÍF II: 151): “Egill hafði þá verit, svá at vetrum skipti mjök mörgum, at Borg; þá var þat á einu sumri, er skip komu af Nórégi til Íslands, at þau tíðendi spurðusk austan, at Björn höldr var andaðr”; ch. 59 (ÍF II: 176): “En þat sumar, er þeir Hákon ok Eiríkr höfðu hízok ok deilt um Nórég, þá var farbann til allra landa ór Nórégi, ok komu þat sumar engi skip til Íslands ok engi tíðendi ór Nórégi”; *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 43 (ÍF V: 130): “En er sumar kom, þá gengu skip landa í milli. Þá spurðusk þau tíðendi til Nórégs af Íslandi, at þat var alkristit”; also *Grettis saga* ch. 37 (ÍF VII: 124-125): “Snemma um vátit eptir kom skip út af Nórégi; þat var fyrir þing. Þeir kumu at segja mörg tíðendi: þat fyrst, at höfðingjaskipti var orðit í Nórégi; var þá kominn til ríkis Óláfr konungr Haraldsson, en Sveinn jarl ór landi stokkinn um vátit eptir Nesja orrustu. Váru margir merkiligir

At this point it becomes interesting to turn our attention to one concrete aspect of intercultural communication – the question of mutual understanding, which is an inevitable premise for performing social interactions and establishing relationships between people who represent different cultural communities. How do the sagas deal with this question and what solutions do they give for possible complications that may arise in this connection?

In the case of saga quotes that were listed as examples under the previous footnote (no. 8), we could observe how ships carry news and secure communication between Iceland and Norway. With regard to contacts between Iceland and Norway, the concept of understanding certainly does not pose any problems, and this applies also to the Icelanders' communication with other parts of Scandinavia. Thus there is no actual need for the sagas to make any comments on the matters of understanding. At the same time we can note here the logical results of real knowledge about historical language conditions. Hastrup describes that situation in the following way:

On the whole, travel and communication between Iceland and mainland Scandinavia was based on the idea of unity between the separate countries. This unity was reflected in the common term for the Norse language spoken at the time, which was *dönsk tunga*, 'Danish tongue'. This shared linguistic reality was an important aspect of Norse identity. (Hastrup 1985: 224)

The question of understanding becomes more challenging when the setting of intercultural communication is extended. As mentioned earlier, in the saga context the various "itineraries" simultaneously function as records of corresponding communication routes. In this world that the sagas create, fictitious narrations intermingle with realistically grounded elements and therefore, in some cases, the sagas may indeed find it necessary to also add extra comments regarding the matters of understanding.

A well-known case is the passage from *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, which informs us that when Gunnlaug arrived in England, the same language was being used there as in Norway and Denmark; as well, we learn about later historical and linguistic changes.⁹ The age and the meaning of this piece of information in the saga have been disputed, but regarding the immediate narrative context, the comment obviously underlines that Gunnlaug did not experience any language problems while visiting the English king. In fact, it is demonstrated that communication ran smoothly, an idea reinforced also by the following line: "Gunnlaug gekk bráðliga fyrir konung ok kvaddi hann vel ok virðuliga" (ÍF III: 70-71).

If we wish to combine the saga picture with some historical perspectives, we could present the views of Erik Simensen, according to whom that saga passage indicates that during Gunnlaug's times (around 1000), the Old Norse language and the Old English language were fairly close, and mutually intelligible for people who represented these two speech communities (Simensen 1994: 40-41). The scene may then be considered as a reflection of a similar type of speech community that we identified earlier in the case of Iceland and the Scandinavian mainland. This finds support in an observation from Hastrup: "The Norsemen also constituted a kind of speech community which extended beyond the Nordic countries (of today), including parts of the British Isles. [...] Thus, from a purely linguistic point of view, communication was easily maintained" (1985: 224).

hlutir sagðir frá Óláfi konungi ok þat með, at hann tók þá menn alla bezt, sem váru atgærvismenn um nökkura hluti, ok gerði sér þá handgengna. Við þetta urðu glaðir margir ungir menn ok fýstusk til útanferðar."

⁹ *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, ch. 7 (ÍF III: 70): "Ein var þá tunga á Englandi sem í Nóregi ok í Danmörku. En þá skipuusk tungur í Englandi, er Vilhjálmr bastarör vann England; gekk þaðan af í Englandi valska, er hann var þaðan ættaðr."

We can illustrate an opposite saga experience using a scene from *Sneglu-Halla þátr*, where Halli is said to perform in front of the English king. The king does not really understand his poem, and has to ask from the others whether it was good.¹⁰ Simensen uses this episode as an example of how understanding poetry must have been a more demanding matter also in real life (1994: 42).

In other cases the sagas introduce at an early stage devices that serve to solve potential complications concerning intercultural communication. For example in *Laxdæla saga*, a woman named Melkorka – who is Irish of origin – teaches her son Óláfr to also speak Irish, and she explains to him that with this knowledge it would make no difference which part of Ireland he would travel to: “Heiman hefi ek þik búit, svá sem ek kann bezt, ok kennt þér írsku at mæla, svá at þik mun þat eigi skipta, hvar þik berr at Írlandi” (ÍF V: 51).¹¹ And later the saga relates how Óláfr functions as an interpreter during his journey to Ireland;¹² it is even mentioned that he speaks exceptionally good Irish. When once again widening our approach, it is interesting to add that Simensen claims on the basis of different sources that bilinguals could have been used as interpreters when communicating both with Irish- and Slavic-speaking people (1994: 43-45).

Several sagas seem to witness to a certain interest in and/or ties with the Irish cultural community – which can, for example, also be seen in an episode from *Eyrbyggja saga*. We read about seafaring men who reach a safe harbour and initially do not know who the inhabitants there are, but find it likely that they talk Irish (this fact demonstrates a certain familiarity with the language). Later they are taken to an old chieftain who is actually their fellow countryman and thus speaks Icelandic.¹³ Other similar saga portrayals can be said to echo historical language contacts, and to some degree maybe even stand in relation to some interesting linguistic developments, as described by Ian McDougall: “There is evidence that a hybrid Irish-Norse dialect distinct from Irish Gaelic was spoken in western Scotland and the Hebrides during the ninth and tenth centuries” (1987/ 1988: 182).

Still, in the majority of corresponding saga scenes of intercultural communication, the question of understanding a different language and coping with a foreign culture is not placed in the foreground. This is one of the ways in which the saga functions as a special narrative mixture – a mixture that “depicts historical reality, but in accordance with specific patterns, which cannot be changed by the individual facts of history” (Meulengracht Sørensen 1992: 36). In *Egils saga*, for instance, Egill and his companions are being taken into captive in Courland; as the story unfolds, we actually get the feeling that they – or at least the saga teller – can follow the discussions that the locals are having concerning the prisoners’ fate, with one influential farmer suggesting that they should be killed one-by-one.¹⁴ To point out a few more examples, scenes from *Grettis saga* – which refer to Norsemen taking service in the

¹⁰ *Sneglu-Halla þátr*, ch. 8 (ÍF IX: 290): “Sezk Halli fyrir kné konungi ok flytti fram kvæðit: ok er lokit var kvæðinu, spurði konungr skáld sitt, er var með honum, hvern veg væri kvæðit. Hann kvezk ætla, at gott væri.”

¹¹ For an analysis of different groups of foreigners, and the situation with foreign languages in Iceland, see e.g. Sobczynski 1991, and McDougall 1987/1988.

¹² *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 21 (ÍF V: 54-55): “En er á lífr daginn, þá drifr ofan mannfjöldi mikill til strandar. Síðan fara tveir menn á báti til skipisins; þeir spyrja, hverir fyrir ráði skipi þessu. Ólafr mælti ok svarar á írsku, sem þeir mæltu til. En er Írar vissu, at þeir váru norrœnir menn, þá beiðask þeir laga, at þeir skyldu ganga frá fé sínu, ok myndi þeim þá ekki górt til auvísla, áðr konungr ætti dóm í þeira máli. Ólafr kvað þat lög vera, ef engi væri túlkr með kaupmönnum.”

¹³ *Eyrbyggja saga* ch. 64 (ÍF IV: 177-178): “[...] þeir kenndu þar engan mann, en helzt þótti þeim, sem þeir mælti írsku [...] Síðan sendi þessi maðr eptir þeim Guðleif: ok er þeir kómu fyrir þenna mann, þá mælti hann til þeira á norrœnnu ok spyrt, hvaðan af löndum þeir væri.”

¹⁴ *Egils saga* ch. 46 (ÍF II: 115): “Síðan var um reott, hvat við þá skyldi gera; sagði bóndi, at honum þótti þat ráð, at dreppinn væri hverr á footr öðrum.”

Varangian guards in Constantinople – may in a similar manner bear in themselves rather unproblematic assumptions about language matters.¹⁵

When discussing the sagas' strategies for depicting intercultural communication situations, one might in the end wonder why it all in all seems irrelevant to provide fuller explanations for the matters of understanding? One logical answer would be that such commentaries remain of secondary interest and simply fall outside the core of the narrative. But when we consider this absence to be a kind of narrative – or even cultural – device in itself, there is reason to search for answers from the wider schemes that the sagas may follow.

In this connection, we can benefit from the concepts of low context and high context cultures in order to gain an alternative understanding of the sagas' narrative setting and cultural background. Jennifer E. Beer has characterised different types of culture by comparing them to an iceberg: "High context cultures have more cultural knowledge below the waterline, low context cultures have more cultural knowledge accessible above the waterline" (Beer 1998). Eva Österberg uses the studies of ethnologist Åke Daun on the Swedish mentality as her point of departure, and applies corresponding concepts to the analysis of patterns of speech and silence in the Icelandic sagas. A low context culture can be defined in the following way:

Such a culture is predominant when social and ethnic homogeneity is great, so that people become accustomed to understanding one another without complications. The "psychological interest and the capacity for social improvisation" are lower than in a high context culture, where several different social norms and shifting interpretations of social situations are constantly found. In a low context culture, on the other hand, all people are expected to react about the same as oneself. There is the expectation that a person means what he says and stands for it. (Österberg 1991: 185)

According to Österberg, the model of low context culture can provide explanations for the fact that the sagas often do not focus that much on speech, but rather present it as a part of the action. She draws parallels to the structures of the Icelandic society of the Middle Ages, which she regards as a milieu where talking means to act and where not much needs to be said in order to be able to understand each other (Österberg 1991: 184).

In our case, we apply the model of low context culture on the level of intercultural communication and claim that the picture of intercultural communication in the sagas is in itself of relatively low context nature. Borrowing the wording from the quotation above, we could say that the sagas are in general "accustomed to understanding" and also follow the same patterns with regard to intercultural communication. Their depictions of people participating in intercultural communication and different cultural communities establishing contacts with each other, for the main part, seem to follow the scheme of a special type of unity. It has the features of a low context culture exactly because, in general, understanding in the saga context is not considered a separate problem. Potential intercultural "questionmarks" are easily solved by a specific narrative approach which manages to create the images of "a shared language" and/or "shared knowledge (interests)".¹⁶ In this way the sagas' perceptions of intercultural communication build upon the idea of "a common reality" between different cultural communities, at the same time strengthening the basic lines of narration.

¹⁵ *Grettis saga*, ch. 86, e.g. (ÍF VII: 271-272): "Nú vildu þeir koma sér í sveit með Væringjum, ok var því vel tekit, þegar þeir vissu, at þeir vǫru Norðmenn. Þa var Mikael katalak konungr yfir Miklagarði."

¹⁶ We do naturally find occurrences in the sagas where clear distinctions are being made between contacts with the closer and the more remote (and mysterious) regions, but the overall representation of intercultural communication still remains of a rather low context nature.

Dialogue and Tradition

This paper has explored some aspects of intercultural communication as presented in the sagas of Icelanders. We have seen that a number of saga scenes disclose the mutual relationship between travelling and communication and support the idea that intercultural communication in the saga world depends on the contact network established by travelling.

It can be said that in the so-called "genre" of sagas, representations of any kind of communication are based upon narrative sequences of events and action. At the same time, the understanding that is created regarding intercultural communication does also in its own way contribute to the conceptual world of the sagas. Parallel ideas to this approach can be found in the general characteristics of the saga structure:

The text always contains material which though not directly part of the plot itself nevertheless contributes importantly to the saga, both by helping to establish the narrative world within which the events take place, and by offering a frame of reference for the interpretation of those events. (Vésteinn Ólason 1998: 79)

Besides focusing on the narrative significance of relevant saga scenes, we have pointed out also a few possible historical connections between the textual premises and their realistic – and possibly real – environment. First of all, we are here dealing with the contemporary environment of the saga writers; but it also bears traces of knowledge accumulated during earlier times. This is one of the factors that turns the sagas into so-called "historical fiction", as Hermann Pálsson has defined it: they attempt to provide an acceptable description of the past, but at the same time also aim at "encouraging people to make sense of themselves and of the world to which they belonged" (1989: 39). Or as Paul Durrenberger et al. have put it: "The sagas are not historical records in the modern sense, but they embody representations of the society which enable us to read the cultural paradigms which underlie the dramatic action and discourse their anonymous writers set down in them" (1987/ 1988: 144).

We regard the sagas both as narrative fiction that follows certain structural patterns governed by the plot, and as the original outcome of a realistic – oral and written – tradition, which stores historical knowledge and experiences. In this manner, the sagas were the obvious products of a dynamic tradition, which allowed them to build a bridge between the past and the present. Written down during the Middle Ages they were in many ways related to that period, but at the same time they were also the voices participating in a unique historical dialogue with previous times.

When placing the sagas into such a dynamic cultural context, we see that they are directly involved in an intercultural communication act themselves. The holders of the traditional lore and the composers of these texts can be said to have participated in intercultural communication – here understood as communication between different cultural systems that originate from varying temporal settings. The saga writers were communicating with tradition – and so were the sagas. In their own special manner, the sagas continue to pursue such cultural dialogues even today; now it is also the modern saga reader who gets involved in this process and can seek to acquire his/her understanding about these unique cultural artefacts. The ideal aim of applying different perspectives would then mirror the wish to dive deeper and deeper below "the waterline" of the world of sagas.

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