‘Draumar mínir villa oss’: On the Use of the First Person Plural in Contexts of Individuals in Skaldic Stanzas

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Gísli Súrsson speaks this sentence when he is telling his wife Auðr about his dreams (ÍF VI: 75–76). The pronoun oss is apparently not used to indicate plural in this context, because Gísli refers to his own feelings that he had when he awoke. The poet commonly uses first person singular when he speaks for himself and first person plural when he speaks for a group of people (e.g., as a part of an army in battle descriptions). But there are numerous examples where the poet uses the plural when he is speaking about himself alone. In this paper I argue that this use of the plural can very often be explained on the one hand by metrics, and on the other by the context and content of the stanza:

**Plural Pronouns**

The use of plural personal pronouns (vér and oss) and plural possessive pronouns (ór-/vár-) in the context of individuals is, above all, influenced by metrics. They can be used for alliteration (Refr 1, 3.1-2: þér elgum vér veigur/ Val-Cautr, salar brautar), for internal rhymes (GSúrs 34.7: oss getin hjörð of hjassa), or even for both (ESk 6, 67.3-4: ber koma orð frá örum, Òlfárs, bragar stóli). The pronoun oss is the most commonly used plural pronoun for these purposes and it occurs, above all, in vowel alliteration:

Villa oss, ef eð]
oddstríðir skal bíða
(mér gengr Sjófn í svefna
sauma) mínir draumar;

This half-stanza also shows that the singular pronouns mér and mínir are not influenced by metrics, but are chosen because of the stanza’s content. Hence, singular and plural forms are frequently used in the same stanza.

There are only few uses of plural pronouns that are not influenced by metrics. In these cases the context of the stanza may provide an answer. For example, in lausavísa 24, Sigvart Þórðarson remembers his life with Óláfr inn helgi as he looks at the men of King Sveinn who are playing in the street (ÍF XXVIII: 16):

minnumk ek, hvar manna
minn drótinn lék sinna
opt á óðals-toptum
orðsæll ok vér forðum.

prose word order: ek minnumk, hvar
minn orðsæll drótinn lék opt forðum
ok vér á óðals-toptum manna sinna.

‘I remember where my famed master and I often played once at his men’s properties.’

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1 I use the abbreviations given in *Lexicon Poeticum.*
2 Observe that ef is unstressed and therefore not an alliterating stave.
3 For the most part, I use Finnur Jónsson’s edition, but in some stanzas I use the edition of ÍF, when it is closer to the manuscripts.
Here, vér could be translated as plural, because Sigvatr may possibly be referring not only to himself but also to King Óláfr’s whole retinue. Nevertheless, the translation of the pronoun vér as singular is, in my opinion, more plausible, because the poet is speaking about his relationship to his dead master in the whole stanza.

More difficult to explain is the use of vér in lausavísa 57, in which the poet Kormákr refers to his conflict with Pórvældr tinteinn when he says:

Fékk sás fógru vífi
fógru vífi an vér fókk hogg af hjálmur
hogg af hjálmur skjöfi

I hattar stall miðjan
	(Korm Lv 57.1-4)

‘He, who came much closer to the beautiful woman than I, got a blow from a ship’s helm’s tiller in the middle of the hat’s perch (> head).’

The pronoun vér in line 2 is not influenced by metrics because a full internal rhyme (aðhalending) is required in even-numbered dróttkvætt lines. This is already given by før and stórum. In the prose context (ÍF VIII: 294) it is told that Kormákr and Pórvældr are each commanding their own ships in the retinue of King Haraldr gráfeldr. Therefore, the first impression could be that Kormákr is speaking for his ship’s crew. But Kormákr is in fact referring to his personal conflict with Pórvældr, who has married Kormákr’s beloved Steingrím. Therefore, vér has to be translated as singular.

A comparable situation can be seen in the quarrel between Pórmóðr Kolbrúnarskáld and a companion of Pórgrimr trolli in Greenland, in which they discuss who is better skilled at using the harpoon for seal-hunting:

Betr lézk beita skutli,
Baldr hœlír þvi skjáldar,
ðollr hleypr harta of hellur,

hlunnjós, an vér kunna;

(Korm Lv 4.1-4)

‘He thinks he knows better than I how to wield the harpoon, the shield-Baldr (> warrior) boasts of this; the launching-steed’s tree (ship > seafarer) races vehemently over rocks.’

The pronoun vér has to be translated as singular here; this is also supported by a sentence Pórmóðr delivers to introduce this stanza: ‘Óvist þykki mér, hvárt þú bettr betr en ek’ (ÍF VI: 230).

The pronoun oss is not influenced by metrics in two stanzas by Viga-Glumr. In stanza 1 he reflects upon the unjust behaviour of Þorkell and his son Sigmundr, who have annexed a part of Viga-Glumr’s property (ÍF IX: 20):

Nær gengr mér ok mínúm
menþóll, hjúum þolly
(bværr við glaum) enn groen

garðr, an oss of varði;

(VGL 1.1-4)

‘The green fence came closer to me and my whole household, necklace-tree (> woman), than we expected, (my/our) joy diminishes.’

A translation as plural is possible, because Viga-Glumr is addressing his mother, who can be included in the statement an oss of varði. Furthermore, he is not only speaking

4 For the English translation I have usually used The Complete Sagas of Icelanders (1997). For Kormákr’s stanzas I also use O’Donoghue 1991.

5 Pórgrimr trolli was one of the men who killed Pórmóðr’s sworn brother Pórgirr.
for himself but also for his whole household (glútum minum hjúum). Similarly, the poet
laments that he has lost his property in stanza 9.3-4 (ÍF IX: 90): oss kom breiðr i búðir/búgr af einu höggvi ‘It came to us in (our) farm a wide ranging harm from a single
blow.’ The plural pronoun here may have been chosen for the same reason, that is to say,
Viga-Glúmr is referring not only to his situation but also to that of his whole
household. One reason may be that the stanza continues with the plural:

þás, fleinmarar, fjóra
fullkátir vér sótum,
(nú’s) mö-grennir (minna)
mit* (setr) sótum
‘after we have sat contented forty winters, feeder of the blood’s seagulls
(ravens > warrior), now my property is decreased’

In ÍF the whole stanza is nevertheless translated as singular. A possible explanation is
that the plural fullkátir vér sótum is influenced by metrics (see below) and that Viga-
Glúmr’s fate is closely connected to him having killed Þorvaldr krókr (ÍF IX: 77-85).

Finally, the poet Gunnlaug ormstunga uses the plural pronoun oss when he
speaks about his fight against Hrafn Önundarson:

Oss gekk, mætr, á móti, proce word order: Hrafn, mætr
mótrumr í dyn spjóta,
gekk jafnan framliga á móti oss
Hrafn, framliga jafnan;
‘Hrafn, the splendid battle-tree (> warrior), who is making a storm of
swords (> battle), pressed on constantly against me/ us in the clash of
spears (> battle).’

I prefer the translation with a singular pronoun, because the final duel between the two
rivals is emphasised in the saga. But if we look exactly at the context in the saga, then
we see that Hrafn has fought against Þorkell svarti before, and Gunnlaug against the
brothers Grimr and Óláf (ÍF III: 101-103). Therefore, a translation with a plural
pronoun is also possible.

Plural Verbs

Plural verbs can also be influenced by metrics, but this is often more difficult to
explain than plural pronouns. Nonetheless, the use of a plural verb for internal rhyme
is easy to explain. For example, the plural form þögum is used instead of the singular
form þá, because it has to rhyme with ægis: áðr þögum vér ægis (Sigv Lv 4.3). A
similar example is found in a lausavisa of Björn hitdælakappi: ok vögum þorn þegi
(Bjhit Lv 18.5).

In other examples, internal rhyme is used in the sequence ‘vowel + consonant +
j’, where ‘j’ of the plural forms can also be used to lengthen and stress the syllable: hér
sverjum þess, hyrfar (Egil Að 1.7). In this line sverjum is used instead of sver (ek) to
rhyme with hyrfar. In other words, [œrf] and [œrf] are used as a half internal rhyme

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6 Observe that the singular pronoun mitt is also influenced by metrics (alliteration).
7 Finnur Jónsson has copied the emendation by Konráð Gíslason: styr instead of dyn
(see Skj. Al. 197). I prefer dyn which is found in manuscripts and is not complicated in the
translation. Therefore, I use the edition of ÍF.
(skothending). This sequence is also used for aðalhending: haft skiljum brag, vilja (Bjhit Lv 1.2). Other examples for aðalhending are:

Bjhit Lv 17.2
hess unnum bær Gunnar  [unnum instead of ann (ek)]
Has 63.6
(oss kjósum þat) ljósi  [kjósum instead of kaus (ek)]

The sequence [of] the plural form hÞjum in the line jefurs dýrð hÞjum skýrða (ESk 6, 66.2) is not used as an aðalhending, even though it rhymes with jefurs, because [þyrð] of skýrða lies in the penultimate syllable and is, as a consequence, the second part of the internal rhyme. Moreover, in stanza 69.1 of the same poem, an aðalhending is not required in odd lines (Óláfs hÞjum jöfra). Therefore, in both stanzas it may also be possible to use the singular form (hef ek). Finally, in Háttatal 80, the plural forms sporum and gorum are used for the end-rhyme:

Lóf’s flutt þjórum  hefk hans þjórum
fyr gúnrórum  till hróðs górum
(né spurð spórum  ypt óvórum
spýg) gram spórum;  fyr aðós bórnum.

The plural form of the verb need not be solely influenced by the requirements of rhyme, but sometimes also by the strict count of syllables in dróttkvætt stanzas. This means that a disyllabic plural form may be used instead of a monosyllabic singular form, to obtain the required six syllables per line: leikum sárt við bleikan (Eg Lv 30.6). But this is not without problems, because a monosyllabic singular form can be combined with a pronoun to obtain the required count of syllables. This is shown, for example, in a similar line by Egill Skalla-Grimsson: leik ek við hal bleikan (Eg Lv 29.2). Furthermore, the line hádi, kunnun hróðs-smið (Ormr 1, 2.3) differs among manuscripts: kvunn (SnE R, W, U) versus kan ec (SnE T) [see Skj.AI: 415].

If the singular form of a disyllabic plural verb is also disyllabic, then one can hardly use the syllable count as an argument. In likn reynum svá, lauka (GSúrs 33.7) the plural verb reynum can also be interchanged with the singular form reynið(k). This is also shown in a line by Egill (Lv 36.5) which differs among manuscripts: leifum vætr, þótt Laufa (Egils s. K) versus leifi ek vætr þo at laufa (Egils s. M) [see Skj.AI: 57].

The trochee (lx) at the end of the line, which is ‘usually provided by an independent disyllabic word’ (Whaley 1993: 591), requires the use of a disyllabic plural form instead of a monosyllabic singular form (+ pronoun). Therefore, in lýðr nemi ljóð sem kvðum (Búðir 1.7), only the plural form can be used. However, disyllabic singular forms may also be used at the end of the line: hárir menn, es heyrik (Sigt 11, 12.3). Therefore, in sparðak jó, þanns sítum (Korm Lv 24.7), the singular form áttuk(k) is also possible.

The plural verb + pronoun can be used to obtain the required six syllables. This is shown, for example, in vér kunnun skil skepja (Korm Lv 33.3). Ek kann is not feasible, because there would then only be five syllables in the line. There are examples in which the plural form is used although there are more than six syllables per line: hrein getum hála launa (Sigt 9, 1.1) and hlutum dýran grip, stýra (Esk 11,

8 Most of the weak verbs are disyllabic, whereas the strong verbs are monosyllabic in present/ past indicative.

9 In most manuscripts ek is not written as an exclamative form, but it should be regarded as such for the metre.
3.2). But there are also examples in which the count of seven syllables can be explained:

*Nú skulun göfgan geislir/ göðs hallar vör allir* (ESk 6, 7.1-2)

*nú gerik enn, því unnun/ æsgǫðu vel fljóði* (Rv 19.5-6).

In stanza 7.1 skulun is necessary because of allir in the following line. Allir (instead of allr) not only fits the syllable count but a disyllabic word is also required by the trochee in the metre. Similar reasoning also explains the seven syllables in 19.5: the plural form unnun has to be used, because the monosyllabic singular form annik is not permitted at the end of the line.

Finally, there are verb forms which appear to be plural forms, for instance erun and hǫfum, which prove to be singular forms onto which pronouns are affixed enclitically, e.g.: mjǫk erum [= er mér] tregt/ tungu at hræra ‘(my) tongue is sluggish for me to move’ (Egill St 1.1-2) and hǫfum [= hefr mik] gramr framlan ‘the king has honoured me’ (Hfr I v 5.6). These examples show that the third person singular is used here in combination with the pronoun mér or mik. Axel Kock illustrated the change from er mér to erum as follows:

‘3. sg. pres. *er-miʀ bled genom synkope av ultimas i-ljud till *erum télé, och eftersom slutljudande –mri i infortisstellande blev till –mri, uppstod av *erum télé formen erum med en betydelse motsvarande isl. er mér’ (Kock 1919: 70).

This examination shows that many plural forms can be explained by metrics, but I have also given some examples in which the singular and plural form of a verb are possible. Therefore, other criteria should be considered. As I wrote in the introduction, the poet commonly uses the plural when he speaks for a group. I have noticed that the poet acts as such a speaker above all in battle descriptions. This is apparent when Þorgils is telling Guðrún that he and his fellows have killed Helgi, the murderer of Bolli (IF V: 194):

Sóttum heim at Helga;
hráf láttum ná svelgj;
ruðum fagrðúls eiki
þús fylgðum þórleik.
þrí láttum þar falla
þjóðnyta gorvaila
hjaim alkvæna þolla.
Hefnt teljum ní Bolla. (ÞorgHolli) 10

‘We went home to Helgi, we let ravens gorge on corpses, we reddened the oak of the nice sun (> shield > sword) when we accompanied þórleikr. There we let fall three very good (and) experienced helmet-trees (> warriors). We reckon that Bolli is now revenged.’

Still, some stanzas by Egill Skallagrímsson are difficult to explain: he uses plural forms, although he fights alone against the berserk Ljótr according to the saga context (IF II: 201-204):

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10 Finnur Jónsson has emended fagrðúl into farrðúl to get a better kenning for shield. Furthermore, I prefer hefn teljum ní Bolla (AM 132 fol.) instead of þó teljum hefn Bolla (ÍB 225, 4to) [see Skj.ÁI: 205].
Hoggum hjaltvönd skyggðan, stýllum Ljót af lifi,
hofigum rodn með brandi,
reynum randar mána,
jóðum sverð í blóði;
leikum sát við bleikan,
kyrrum kappa errinn
komi orn á hræ, jörnum (Eg Lv 30)

‘Let us beat with the polished hilt-twigs (sword), we strike shields with
the blade, we test the shield’s moon (sword), we redded the sword with
blood, we shorten the life of Ljótr, we play painfully with the pale man,
we silence the strong warrior with iron, the eagle is coming to the body.’

A reason for the use of plural may be that Egill, who wants to help Friðgeirr defeat the
berserk, is calling to arms. According to the saga, Egill arrives at the battlefield with
Friðgeirr and his fellows and says forúm helms á vit, svarvar ‘let us go to the duelling-
place, warriors’ (Eg Lv 28.2). But after that, he is fighting alone with Ljótr: háumk til
vigs, en vægðar/ vín letka ek hónum ‘I am prepared to fight, I give him no hope of
mercy.’ (Eg Lv 29.5-6)

More difficult to explain is the use of the plural in lausavisá 40, in which Egill
speaks to his friend Einarr skálaglamm about his most glorious deed [ÍF II: 268/9]:

Børðumk einn við áttu, ‘I fought alone with eight, and twice
en við elfiút týsvar, with eleven. I fed the wolf with
svá fingum val vargi corpses, I killed them all myself.’
varð einn bani þeira;

(Eg Lv 40.1-4)

The metre and the context in the saga would also allow the use of fekk ek instead of
fingum. This stanza demonstrates that it is not always possible to conceive the poet to be
speaking on behalf of a group in battle descriptions. For example, in sýddum hrafná
á holdi holðs the singular is suitable because Kormákr is speaking about himself
throughout the stanza:

Swá kveðk snyrtir-Freyju at vegskorðan verði
snímtr trúða ek brúði,
varrskíðs nemit síðan,
gamðis vangs of gengna
svipgar báls ór skólum,
varrskíðs nemit verði.

Prose word order: Swá kveðk greipar báls snyrti-Freyju of gengna ór
skólum gamðis vangs - snímtr trúða ek brúði - at vegskorðan varrskíðs
nemit verði mér sínan at tafni; sýddum hrafná á holdi holðs.

‘Thus, I declare the elegant Freyja of the hand-clasp’s fire (woman)
to be gone from [my] hollows of the hawk’s plain (arm > palm)
- too soon I trusted in the bride - [so] that the abductor of the prop of the
sea-ki’s way (ship > sea > woman > Bersi) shall later be my prey – I
have fed the ravens on the flesh of men.’

¹¹ Finnur Jónsson has chosen hjalta vendi from the manuscript W (AM 461, 4to), but I
prefer hjaltvönd skyggðan from the other manuscripts because of internal rhyme (hoggum and
skyggðan).

¹² I have chosen the stanza’s editing by ÍF (VIII: 231/2) because it is closer to
manuscripts. Finnur Jónsson has emended vegskorðan varrskíðs nemit into vegskorða
varrskíðs funa to get a better kenning for a woman. But it is also possible that this is a
kenning for a man (Bersi), and I have chosen this for the translation.

¹³ I use the translation of Heather O’Donoghue (1997: 65) which is geared to ÍF.
Another domain in which the poet speaks for a group is the presentation of his poetry. When he is reciting praise poetry, he sometimes includes the audience:

  emn vēr götum,
  stillis lof,
  sem steinabrū

(and we have made the praise of the king
like a stone bridge)

(Hál 16.2-4)

It is possible that the poet uses the plural to indicate that he is also speaking for all poets: oss dugir satt of snotran/ sælinga kon mæla ‘it behoves us to speak true of the wise offspring of wealthy men (> king)’ (Steinn 1, 7.3-4). In my opinion, however, it is more suitable to give a singular translation when the poet tells about the process of making poetry: frammi/ hornstræum getum Hrímnis/ hræra ‘I am able to produce a horn’s stream of the Hrómnir (= giant > mead of poetry)’ (Evald 1.2-4) and vekjum mjöð Súðra ‘I recite Súðri’s mead (> poetry)’ (GSúrs 20.2). There are also examples where these poetic formulae are influenced by metrics: nē Yggæs fyrr léð leggjum ‘I don’t stop making verses’ (Korm Lv 14.7) and hæft skiljum brag, vilja ‘I make a clear verse’ (BjHit Lv 1.2).

Finally, in love poetry, the use of the plural is influenced by metrics most of the time, as for example when Kormákr expresses his love to Steinirðr:

Brunnu beggia kinna
bjoért ljós á mik dróser
(oss hlægir þat eigi)
eldhúss of víð feldan [...] 
(þró muna eldask oss of ævi)

(prose word order: björn ljós beggia
kinna dróser brunnu á mik of feldan
eldhús við - oss hlægir þat eigi - [...]
þró muna eldask of ævī)

(Korm Lv 2.1-4, 7-8)

‘The bright lights of both her cheeks (> eye) burned upon me from the fire-hall’s felled wood, no cause of laughing for me in that, [...] the longing will burn my whole life.’
rendak alt et iðra
(eyrar geirs) at þeiri
(hlins* erum Hörn at finna)
hús brágeislum (fúsir)

(prose word order: rendak brágeislum
alt hús et iðra at þeiri; erum fúsir at
finna geirs eyrar hlins Hörn)

(Korm Lv 15.5-8)

‘I ran my eyelid candles (> eye) all inside the house for her, I am eager to find the Hörn [= Freyja] of the spear bank’s flame (> arm > gold > woman).’

These examples show that in stanza 2.3 and 2.7 the pronoun oss is used for vowel alliteration, and in stanza 15.7-8 the plural form erum fúsir is used to provide a disyllabic word (fúsir) at the end of the line. But there is one stanza spoken by the poet Hallfreðr in which the plural verb unnanum is not the result of metrics. Hallfreðr recites this stanza on hearing that his beloved Kolfinna has married Griss [IF VIII: 150]:

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14 This kenning for a woman is complicated because of the word hlins, which has been emended in different ways: hlins (Björn Magnusson Olsen), hyrs (Finnur Jónsson) and hiðs (Ernst A. Kock). Also the first part of the kenning (geirs eyrar) is interpreted differently [see: IF VIII: 219/20].

15 I prefer the translation by Heather O’Donoghue, who has used Finnur Jónsson’s emendation ‘even though this spoils the line’s rhyme, because it does give the relatively straightforward kenning’ (O’Donoghue 1997: 45).
‘for I love the well-born woman’

(Rv Lv 19.5-6)

The reason for this use of the plural remains elusive: it is not always possible to explain each use of the plural in the context of individual. But this examination has shown that the majority of plural forms are influenced by skaldic metre. Moreover, the context of some stanzas can help us to understand the use of the plural. However, there are examples which can be explained neither by metrics nor by content.

In conclusion, I present an example which shows, once again, the difficulties we encounter when we examine the problem of the use of the plural instead of the expected singular. This stanza, spoken by Grettir (14.7-8), is handed down differently in different manuscripts. In AM 556a the plural forms are used, whereas in AM 551a (et al.) the singular forms are used [see Skj.AII: 434]:

hvít, ef hér skulum láta
hvert sinn fyr oss viðna (AM 556a)

Neither variant can be justified by metrical needs. However, saga literature may provide an explanation for such variants. If the same phenomenon also occurs in saga literature, then its explanation may also explain the variants in skaldic poetry. This approach is justified because saga literature is not governed by metrics.

I have discussed a phenomenon in skaldic poetry which has, to my knowledge, never been studied before, although it is very important for the interpretation and translation of skaldic verses. I have shown the necessity to examine both the content and context of skaldic stanzas carefully in order to obtain the best possible reading, regarding the interpretation of singular versus plural pronouns and singular versus plural verb forms.

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16 Finnur Jónsson has emended ágrundar endis into eldgrundar Endils to get a better kenning for a woman.
Bibliography


Gísla Saga Súrssonar (see Fóstbræðra Saga).


ÍF – Íslenzk forrit.


Kormáks Saga (see Hallfreðar Saga).


