The Folk Linguistics of Phonological Variation in Icelandic and Faroese

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It has been maintained that language regard or sociolinguistic value, as partly reflected in language planning ideals, may have had an effect on the fate (maintenance or loss) of phonological variants in 20th century Icelandic (Árnason & Þráinsson 2003: 180-193). This may be interpreted as being due to an unusually high level of consciousness about linguistic form and “language cultivation” in Iceland. Although it is probably an exaggeration to say that Icelandic phonological development was managed by the educational authorities, the possibility of an effect of this sort should definitely not be excluded. And in any case the phonological “consciousness” of the Icelanders was very high all through the 20th century. This is witnessed by popular names known to the public, such as hardmæli ‘hard speech’, flámæli ‘salck-jawed speech’ and linmælgi ‘soft, unclear speech’. Although traditional dialect differences in Iceland are minimal people have been well aware of the existing variation and are ready to pass judgment on the beauty and appropriateness of different variants.

Sociolinguistic conditions in the Faeroes are fundamentally different from those in Iceland. The main difference is that there are “real” dialects, which can be defined both formally (internally in terms of linguistic characteristics) and functionally (externally with reference to geography). But like in Iceland, there is a high level of consciousness about language and linguistic variation. This means that on the whole speakers are aware of the existence of varieties different from their own. Thus concepts like Vágamál, Suðuroyarmál and Havnarmál are commonly used. But particular features or characteristics of the varieties are also known to speakers, and they are willing to discuss these characteristics. Identifying the exact linguistic feature involved may be difficult for the layman, but folk linguistic terms like drynjingin show that different phonological characteristics are noticed and can even get labels, like in Iceland. One problematic phonological phenomenon, which necessarily stands high in the consciousness of modern speakers is the variation, reduction and even syncope of unstressed vowels in endings written –ir, -ur, or –ar, which speakers refer to in various ways (see e.g. Árnason 2011: 96-97). The consciousness about this feature is no doubt due to the problems in spelling facing those speakers which have neutralized the difference.

In my paper I want to survey the folk linguistics of phonological variation in the Faeroes. Based on interviews with speakers from four locations, discussing linguistic matters and the status of Faroese and its varieties, taken in the Faeroes in August 2008, I will propose a rudimentary analysis of Faroese folk linguistics and language ideology in the hope that such characteristics may be used in the future study of phonological (and perhaps other) variation and development.

References