Medieval texts often contain exchanges of words which are not immediately understandable, even though the words themselves are perfectly clear. One of the main reasons why such passages seem obscure is that the social and cultural context in which the dialogue is embedded is unfamiliar to the modern reader.

The main goal of this paper is to show how speech act theory (Austin 1962, Searle 1969) can be used to illuminate a difficult passage in Morkinskinna, an Old Icelandic kings’ saga. The example can be retold roughly as follows: An old man addresses King Magnús, asking if he would give him some money. The king offers him half a mark, but the man replies: “This is generous, Sir, but I expected more at Hlýrskógarheiði.” The king then asks if he is the man who gave him an advice in the battle at Hlýrskógarheiði, to which he responds that this is indeed the case. Consequently, the king offers the old man a ring, but he refuses to accept it, and instead gives the king three rings and asks for his friendship.

A present-day reader encountering this example is likely to be confounded by it, asking questions such as these: Why is the old man asking for more money but turns it down when it is offered? Why is the king not offended when a subject states that he had expected more from him?

Looking at this exchange of words in the light of speech act theory, the most important part of the discourse seems to be the sentence uttered by the old man: “I expected more at Hlýrskógarheiði”. In an Austin/Searle-inspired analysis these words can be classified as an indirect speech act, instantiating a directive illocutionary act, whereas the perlocutionary effect of the sentence involves the offer made by the king.

It must emphasized that an analysis in terms of speech act theory does not suffice to explain the strange exchange of words between the king and his subject. In addition, information about the cultural background in regards to the unwritten norms of gift exchange in the society which the text originates from is also necessary. The importance of speech act theory in this context, however, lies in the fact that it provides us with a framework within which we can approach the questions stated above. Given a particular kind of a gift exchange system in medieval Norse society, and applying speech act theory to analyze the text, it is possible to flesh out the basic meaning of the crucial sentence, what it refers to, what it is supposed to achieve, how it is understood by the king, and possibly what the old man intends by uttering it.