# Jón the Fleming: Low German in thirteenth-century Norway and fourteenth-century Iceland

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**Abstract**

Low German influence is one of the most prominent characteristics of Old Norse in the later medieval period, but the processes whereby this took place are little evidenced. However, *Laurentius saga*, Einarr Hafliðason's fourteenth-century Icelandic biography of Bishop Laurentius Kálfsson, provides anecdotal evidence for this that has been overlooked by researchers. The anecdotes concern the linguistic (mis)adventures of a Low German-speaker in thirteenth-century Norway—the otherwise unknown Jón flæmingi (Johannes the Fleming)—and, perhaps uniquely in medieval Scandinavian texts, they also provide a representation of L2 Norse. Problematic and brief though this source is, it affords us valuable perspectives both on fourteenth-century Icelandic metalinguistic discourses and on the processes whereby Low German influence took place in thirteenth- to fourteenth-century Norse. Contrary to some recent assumptions, *Laurentius saga* suggests that Low German and Old Norse were not seen as mutually intelligible; it provides some support for the idea that Low German influence was responsible not only for loan words into Old Norse, but also for morphological levelling; and emphasises that in seeking vectors of Low German influence on Old Norse we should look not only to Hanseatic traders, but also to the Church.

## 1 Introduction

Perhaps the most dramatic changes that took place in the North Germanic languages during the Middle Ages were massive Low German influence on the lexicon (Simensen, 2002–5) and, in the Continental varieties, the profound reduction of morphological complexity (Mørck, 2002–5).[1] However,

[1] I use the term *Low German* here inclusively, to denote all the West Germanic varieties spoken along the North Sea and Baltic coasts, from Flanders in the West to the eastern Baltic. Like-

the sociolinguistic processes by which these changes took place are little evidenced (see for surveys Braunmüller, 2002–5a, 2002–5b; Nicholas, 2009: 180–98; Elmevik and Jahr 2012a). For the most part, their outcomes appear in the written record long after the developments themselves must have begun, while the written record itself offers only an indirect witness to the oral communication which must, then as now, have been the dominant engine of language-change (Jahr, 1999 [1995]: 119–22, 129). It is widely suspected that Old Norse lexical and morphological change are linked: that the Low German influence clearly attested in the lexicon is also part of the explanation for the reduction in morphological complexity. It is also assumed, in turn, that the profundity of the Low German influence on Old Norse was facilitated by the close family resemblance between the two languages: Braunmüller in particular has argued that Old Norse and Low German were for practical (and particularly mercantile) purposes mutually intelligible in speech as well as in writing, and that the massive influence of Low German on Old Norse arose in a context of 'receptive bilingualism/semicommunication … between speakers of these genetically closely related languages', 'predominantly in face-to-face situations', arguing that we should really be thinking in terms of dialect contact rather than language contact (2002–5b: 1231).

This consensus is fragile, however. Elmevik and Jahr recently surveyed a century or so of historiography which assumed that there must have been a 'mixed language' or pidgin deriving from Low German and Old Norse in the Hanseatic period, finding that these assumptions are 'all unfounded' (2012b: 13). Nor is this the only such shibboleth to have come under fire recently: the long-standing assumption that the Low German which later medieval Scandinavians encountered was a homogeneous *Lübecker Norm* has also been dismantled (Mähl, 2012: 118). However, Elmevik and Jahr concluded their article with the declaration that 'the most probable reason for the lack of such a pidgin-like mixed Scandinavian–German idiom is that, at the time, Scandinavian and Low German were … mutually intelligible'

wise, I use *(Old) Norse* to denote all the North Germanic varieties, using *(Old) West Norse* to specify the closely related Norwegian and Icelandic varieties. The terms *language* and *dialect* are generally fraught, and as Braunmüller has emphasised (2007: 27–29; 2013), potentially anachronistic for a pre-national period. I use both loosely in this study, viewing both 'Old Norse' and 'Low German' as modern scholarly abstractions from a complex array of linguistic varieties. I argue, however, that we can meaningfully understand the different varieties denoted by these terms as both genetically very similar and to a large extent mutually incomprehensible.

(2012b: 14) when the primary-source evidence for this idea is no stronger than for the 'mixed language' idea. The degree of mutual intelligibility between Old Norse and Old Low German is uncertain—particularly for the period before the fifteenth century, and particularly regarding spoken rather than written communication—making it hard to guess at the precise sociolinguistic contexts in which Low German influence first took place on Old Norse. Accordingly, some recent commentators seem to prefer to conceptualise German-Norse language contact firmly in terms of bilingualism rather than 'receptive bilingualism' (the ability of a speaker to understand a variety but not to produce it) or dialect contact (e.g. Rambø, 2012; Zeevaert, 2012).

This debate should also be connected with wider discussions of Norse linguistic identity in earlier periods (cf. Leonard, 2012) and the vexed question of how readily Old Norse- and Old English-speakers could converse during the Viking Age (cf. Townend, 2002). The degree of mutual intelligibility between Old Norse and Old English is basically unknown, but the fact that scholars dispute it should encourage caution in assuming that other medieval North and West Germanic dialects were mutually comprehensible. Morphological changes in Old Norse and its later varieties are typologically consistent with long-term developments across most Germanic varieties, so are hard to connect with German influence specifically or even, necessarily, with language contact of any sort (Perridon, 2003; cf. Trudgill, 2012; Zeevaert, 2012)—a problem that has likewise dogged efforts to explain morphological simplification in medieval English as a result of language-contact with Celtic, Norse, and/or Romance languages (see Hall, 2011: 220).

A helpful step in the debate on the roles of language-contact in language-change has recently been taken by Peter Trudgill, who (building on Jahr, 1999 [1995]) has argued in a comparative context that the most plausible mechanism for morphological simplification in Old Norse is that adult Low German-speakers—speakers past the critical age-threshold for child language-acquisition—learned Old Norse, introducing and promoting the kinds of non-language-specific morphological simplifications characteristic of adult language-acquisition. In this interpretation, the prestige of Low German-speakers in Scandinavian society then led native speakers to adopt the distinctive features of Low German-speakers' L2 Old Norse, which thus spread through the language (Trudgill, 2010: esp. 306–9; cf. Lupyan and Dale, 2010). This invites a slightly different understanding of the sociolinguistic situation in medieval Scandinavia than the receptive bilingualism/mutual

intelligibility model: it encourages rather a reading in which, at least in the crucial earlier periods, we are dealing with contact between mutually incomprehensible languages, in which German-speakers had to learn Old Norse. This situation would be typologically more similar to the contact between English and French in medieval England than to the 'receptive bilingualism' scenario.

A further assumption which characterises almost all work on Low German influence on Old Norse is that the vector of linguistic contact was Scandinavian trade with the Hanseatic League and its precursors. There is no reason to doubt that this was one major vector of contact, especially in the later Middle Ages, where we have strong evidence to support this. But that should not lead us to exclude other possibilities, particularly earlier on. Aristocratic and courtly connections are a possible vector: in a Norwegian context, *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, a massive compilation of heroic narratives apparently largely translated from lost Low German poetry, probably attests to an enthusiasm in the court of Hákon IV (r. 1217–63) not only for France but also for the German-speaking world as a model for Norway's Europeanisation (Haymes, 1988: xx–xxi; cf. Murray 2004 on Denmark). Indeed, one of the few figures *Laurentius saga* mentions in the Norwegian royal court is a Fleming noted for his skill in fireworks (B ch. 10; ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1998: 237–38). But the strongest alternative possibility would be the Church, medieval Europe's pre-eminent transnational organisation. It is well known but little considered that earlier medieval Old Saxon/Low German loan-words into Old Norse include a large tranche of ecclesiastical terminology (e.g. Veturliði Óskarsson 2003: 146–53). The Scandinavian Church was part of the archdiocese of Hamburg-Bremen until 1104, with Norway gaining its own archbishop, based in Niðarós (now Trondheim), only in 1151. The proportion of German ecclesiastical personnel in the medieval Scandinavian church is unknown, but links with the Low German-speaking world must have been deep, and could have been influential long into the thirteenth century. Zeevaert has recently argued that some of the influence on Old Swedish ascribed to Low German can instead be seen as earlier Latin literary influence (2012: 184–86); while this de-emphasises the role of Low German *per se*, it does emphasise to potential power of the Church to promote linguistic change. The disinterest in the Church as a possible vector of Low German influence on Old Norse is a striking blind-spot in past research.

Bringing evidence to bear on the issues of mutual intelligibility and the sociolinguistic contexts for language contact would be helpful. Braunmüller has commented that in medieval texts, 'generally, hardly any comments are to be found concerned with questions of problems of multilingual communities' (2002–5b, 1228). Hopefully, the rising wave of new work on administrative literacy in medieval Scandinavia will start to uncover new perspectives on multilingualism in our medieval material (for major recent contributions see Veturliði Óskarsson 2003; Nedkvitne 2004; Hagland 2005; Heikkilä 2010; Ranković, Melve, and Mundal 2010). But researchers have so far overlooked a valuable, if brief, anecdotal source for the relations between Low German- and Old Norse-speakers in thirteenth- to fourteenth-century Scandinavia. Problematic though anecdotal evidence for multilingualism is (cf. Adams 2002: 9–14), it can afford insights which the language of written texts itself cannot. Moreover, the source makes an unusual effort to represent in direct speech the Old Norse of an L2 speaker. The source is *Laurentius saga*, a biography of Laurentius Kálfsson (1267–1331), bishop of Iceland's northern diocese of Hólar 1324–31. The biography is a richly anecdotal account of Laurentius's life, almost certainly composed by Laurentius's pupil and subsequently colleague Einarr Hafliðason (1307–93) in the third quarter of the fourteenth century (Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, 1998: lxiv–lxxv; Sigurdson 2011: 47–52). It survives primarily in sixteenth-century copies of two versions: A (in Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, AM 406 a I 4to, which seems generally the more conservative copy) and B (in AM 180 b fol, which seems the more innovative, and to have been shortened). Both manuscripts are defective, however, and most of the material discussed in this article is found only in B or a 1640 copy of B, with gaps filled from A, AM 404 4to, made when the source manuscripts were more complete. The saga shows a profound interest in language and literacy throughout. This interest is focused on Latin, but Low German makes an appearance during Laurentius's time working at the archiepiscopal seat of Niðarós (now Trondheim) in Norway in the 1290s, where he meets one Jón flæmingi, or Johannes the Fleming (a man known only from the saga). The relationship between the two visitors to Niðarós forms the basis of a couple of striking anecdotes about language which have received almost no comment in previous scholarship.

As always with Icelandic sagas, the text's source-value is problematic: *inter alia*, it is hard to decide how far the anecdote in question represents the realities of the time it depicts (sometime around $1296 \times 98$ by the reckoning

of Elton 1890: 19); the realities of the time when it was composed (around $1331 \times 93$, to give the broadest date range); or something else again—tall tales concocted by an elderly Laurentius about his own youth or invented by his biographer, for example. This article examines *Laurentius saga*'s anecdotes about Jón flæmingi both from the point of view of its setting, late thirteenth-century Niðarós, and from the point of view of its time of composition, later fourteenth-century Iceland. The two perspectives together enable a balanced evaluation of the historical sociolinguistic significance of the text, offering insights into the metalinguistic discourses of Iceland in Einarr's time, but also raising useful points which are consistent with Trudgill's argument about how Low German might have been perceived and have been influential in thirteenth-century Norway.

## 2 Norse-German contact in late thirteenth-century Norway

If only for heuristic purposes, it is worth reading *Laurentius saga*'s account of Norse-German contact first on the assumption that the saga faithfully presents the experience and metalinguistic discourses of late thirteenth-century Niðarós (ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1998: 238–39 [ch. 11]):

> var þá kominn fyrir litlu klerkr einn mikill, Jón flæmingi, hafði hann lengi til Parísar staðit til Orliens at studium. Var hann svá mikill juriste at enginn var þá í Nóregi hans líki; hafði ok erkibiskupinn þar við at styðjaz sem hann var, því at allir mestháttar kórsbræðr vóru honum mótstaðligir. Appelleruðu þeir iðugliga til páfans ok fengu bréf mörg af páfagarði erkibiskupi til þunga; vildi ok erkibiskupinn gjarnan fá klerka hvar sem hann kunni. Mátti því Jón flæmingi miðr gagna erkibiskupi í deilum þeira kórsbræðra at hann kunni ekki norrænu at tala, ok skildi alþýðan ekki máls hans því at hann talaði allt á latínu, fransisku eðr flæmsku.
>
> A great scholar, Jón the Fleming, had recently arrived. He had spent a long time studying in Paris and Orleans. He was so great a jurist that there was at that time no-one of his calibre in Norway. Moreover, the archbishop had good reason to lean on him, because all the leading brothers of the chapter were set against

> him. They were always petitioning the Pope and got many letters from the Curia with which to oppress the Archbishop—and the Archbishop was always eager to get hold of scholars wherever he could. But Jón the Fleming could help out the Archbishop less in his dealings with the chapter because he couldn't speak Norse, and the *alþýðan* didn't understand his speech because he said everything in Latin, French or Flemish.

This passage testifies to the relevance of the advice on trading of the father to his son in the Norwegian *Konungs skuggsjá* from around 1260: 'nemdu allar mállyzkur, en allra helzt latínu ok vǫlsku, þvíat þær tungur ganga víðast' ('you must acquire all languages, but first and foremost Latin and French, because those languages are the most widely used'; normalised from Holm-Olsen, 1983: 129). Jón flæmingi's story emphasises that these language skills need not have been of use only to Norwegians abroad, but also in Norway itself. However, *Konungs skuggsjá* goes on to say 'en þó týndu eigi at heldr þinni tungu' ('though don't neglect your own language either'), and it would seem that this was the message taken more to heart by the populace of Niðarós.

Given the later importance of German, its absence from the list of languages most needing to be learned in the *Konungs skuggsjá* is interesting. This could be seen as consistent with the idea that, for practical mercantile purposes, Low German and Norse were mutually intelligible. Braunmüller (2002–5b, 1228) has argued that communication between speakers of different Germanic varieties was, to medieval Scandinavian writers,

> not worth mentioning because it was the normal or default situation: if problems occurred, they must have been treated as the result of different points of view or antagonistic interests but obviously not by a failure of communication due to a multilingual/dialectal situation. Therefore, we have very good reasons to suppose that direct, interdialectal communication worked quite well between genetically closely related languages/dialects in the Hanseatic sphere.

Braunmüller's reasoning here does not take into account medieval writers' general disinterest in discussing interlinguistic communication (Kalinke 1983: 850; Leonard 2012: 118–19; cf. Hall 2010: 39–40 regarding Anglo-Saxon England and Murray, 2011: 121–31 on the eastern Baltic). It is also

contradicted by *Laurentius saga*, which states explicitly and with no suggestion of surprise that Flemish was unintelligible to Norse speakers.

Even if taken as an accurate report of real events, *Laurentius saga*'s statement is not, of course, straightforward evidence. Flemish was the westernmost variety of Low German and might have been less familiar in Norway than, say, the German of Hamburg or Lübeck; meanwhile, Niðarós is more famed as a seat of royal and archiepiscopal governance than as a trading place, by contrast with Hanseatic Bergen (the presumed epicentre of Low German influence on Norwegian) or the southern Norwegian coast, and so its inhabitants might have been less used to dealing with Low German-speakers. Nor of course in any Norwegian experience necessarily representative of the rest of Scandinavia: with relatively high segregation of ethnic Germans and Norwegians in fourteenth-century Bergen, a case can even be made that we owe Low German influence on Norwegian not to German merchants but to its transmission through the (written) Danish of the fifteenth-century state (see Nedkvitne 2012: 32–35). Another complexity is that the account of Jón's incomprehensibility arises in the context of antagonism between interlocutors, and (as Braunmüller implies) the mutual comprehensibility of different language varieties can depend more on the willingness of interlocutors to communicate than on formal linguistic features. The precise valence of *alþýðan* is important here: the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (1983–) defines it both as 'everybody, the people, the population' and 'common people (without special title or status), ordinary people' (s.v.). It is not entirely clear, then, whether virtually nobody in Niðarós understands Latin, French and Flemish, or whether it is only the lower-status inhabitants who do not understand them. Laurentius uses the word later, in chapter 49, when electing to speak Norse instead of Latin in a legal case where some people present understand spoken Latin but the 'alþýða' does not, but this passage presents a similar ambiguity (ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, 1998, 404; *almúgi* in the B-text, p. 403). It is hard to see why Jón's comprehensibility to the general populace of Niðarós would be important in legal disputes between the Archbishop and the cathedral chapter, so it might indeed mean 'everybody', in which case *Laurentius saga* offers a testament to the monoglot character of Niðarós's thirteenth-century clerical elite. Whatever the case, we might reasonably conclude from the passage that—if it does indeed directly reflect Laurentius's experience in the late thirteenth century—a significant proportion of the chapter of Norway's archiepiscopal cathedral could unblushingly claim

not to understand Low German. This is consistent with similar claims elsewhere, which have perhaps been dismissed previously is too distant in time or space from Hanseatic Scandinavia to be relevant to the history of Low German there. In chapter 4 of *Grœnlendinga saga*, the 'suðrmaðr' ('Southerner, Saxon') Tyrkir speaks, in his excitement at discovering grapes, 'á þýzku' ('in German'), to the incomprehension of Leifr Eiríksson and his fellow settlers, to whom he has to speak in *norrœna* ('West Norse'; ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935). In *Kristni saga*, Bishop Friðrekr, from Saxony, 'undirstóð þá eigi norrœnu' ('didn't then understand West Norse'; ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson, and Foote 2003: 6).

The most striking discussion of Flemish-Norse multilingualism, however, comes a little later in the saga (ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1998: 243–44 [ch. 14]):

> Nú er þar til at taka at Laurentius var með Jörundi erkibyskupi í Niðarósi ok studeraði jafnan í kirkjunnar lögum er meistari Jóhannes flæmingi las honum; vóru þeir ok miklir vinir sín í millum. Laurentio þótti mikil skemmtan at hann brauz við at tala norrænu en komz þó lítt at. Einn tíma mælti Jón flæmingi við Laurentium: 'Ek vildi at þu flyttir við minn herra at hann veitti mér Máríukirkju hér í býnum, því at hún er nú vacans.'
>
> Laurentius svarar: 'Hversu má þat vera þar sem þér kunnið ekki norrænu at tala?'
>
> 'Kann ek sem mér þarfar', sagði Jón, 'ok þat sem mér liggr á at tala.'
>
> 'Skipum nú þá', sagði Laurentius, 'sem kominn sé föstuinngangr, þá verðr at tala fyrir sóknarfólki yðru hversu þat skal halda langaföstuna.'
>
> 'Á þenna máta', sagði Jón flæmingi, 'nú er komin lentin, hvern mann kristinn komi til kirkju, gjöri sína skripin, kasti burt konu sinni, maki engi sukk, nonne sufficit, domine?'
>
> Þá hló Laurentius ok mælti: 'Ekki skilr fólkit hvat lentin er.'
>
> Sagði hann erkibyskupi ok gjörðu þeir at mikit gaman, en fengu Jóni nokkorn afdeiling sinnar beizlu því at hann var mjök bráðlyndr ef ei var svá gjört sem hann vildi.
>
> The next thing to relate is that Laurentius was with Archbishop Jörundr in Niðarós, and always studied the laws of the Church

> which Master Jóhannes the Fleming read him. They were also good friends with each other. It seemed very funny to Laurentius that he struggled away at speaking Norse but still made so little progress. On one occasion, Jón the Fleming spoke to Laurentius: 'I'd like it if you could have a word with my lord about him granting me St Mary's here in the town, because it's currently *vacans*.'
>
> Laurentius replied, 'How could that happen when you can't speak Norse?'
>
> 'I can say what I need to', said Jón, 'and what I'm required to.'
>
> 'So let's suppose', said Laurentius, 'that it's the first day of Lent, and you have to tell your parishioners how they should celebrate Lent.'
>
> 'Like this', said Jón the Fleming: 'Now *lentin* has arrived, each Christian person should come to Church, do his *skripin*, throw away his wife, make no disorder, *nonne sufficit, domine*?'
>
> Then Laurentius laughed and said: 'The people won't understand what *lentin* is.'
>
> He told the archbishop and they had a good laugh about it, but they gave Jón a share of his request because he was very hot-tempered when he didn't get his way.

In the manuscript spelling (AM 404 4°), Jón says: 'Nu er kominn lentin huorn mann christinn komi til kirkiu, giori sẏna skripin, kasti burt konú sinne, maki einginn suk. nonne suffitardus' (ed Árni Björnsson 1969: 17); Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir's reading *sufficit Domine* is an emendation.

This passage offers a vivid, well poised, and amusing view of the kinds of linguistic adaptation which Low German-speaking churchmen might undertake in thirteenth-century Norway, including an exceptionally rare representation of the Norse of a second-language speaker (for a comparable, but L1, use of style in direct speech see Taylor 1994–97). The descriptions are lively and the dialogue realistic. Jón's attempt at Old Norse is appropriately ridiculous and comically blunt. Thereafter, Jón lurches into Latin, a neatly deployed code-switch presumably indicating the language in which the rest of the conversation has been taking place: for Laurentius and Jón at least, Latin is a handier *lingua franca* than their native varieties of Germanic.

While no doubt shaped primarily by a narratorial desire for comic effect, Jón's words offer valuable insights into the kinds of second-language features with which Low-German speakers might be associated in thirteenth-century Norway and/or fourteenth-century Iceland. Low German vocabulary pervades the speech and deserves close scrutiny: it almost certainly tells us more about medieval Icelanders' *perceptions* of how Low German-speakers might talk than how they actually *did* talk, but that is sociolinguistically valuable information in its own right. Laurentius focuses on *lentin* as the foreign term. This certainly a West Germanic word rather than an Old Norse one (cf. *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*: s.v. *lentin*, where this is the only attestation). However, Jón seems to be using the word to mean 'Lent', and this is a distinctively English usage: in the rest of the West Germanic world, the word meant 'spring' (OED, s.v. *lenten*; Schiller–Lübben 1878: s.v.; Verwijs–Verdam–Stoett 1885–1941, s.v. *LENTE*). Whoever was behind the punchline of this anecdote, then, seems to have conflated English and Low German here (itself providing an interesting hint at Nordic acquaintance with English). Indeed, the main terms for 'Lent' in Old Norse and Middle Low German, such as Old Norse *Langafasta* and Middle Low German *Vasten*, have a common Germanic origin, making Jón's confusion here particularly unlikely for a Flemish-speaker. Meanwhile, *skripin* does not seem to be a real word in any language: it must be echoing Old Norse *skript* 'penance', either representing Jón's fumbling of the correct word; a mock-Low-German loan; or perhaps the Norse-speaking storyteller's own fumbling attempt to introduce real Low German words into Jón's speech. *Máti, maka* and *sukk* are all Low German loans in Old Norse, giving Jón's speech a strongly Low German inflection (de Vries 1962: s.vv.; cf. Veturliði Óskarsson 2003: 280, 282). That said, their presence in Jón's speech has a double edge: Einarr Hafliðason's Old Norse is itself not untouched by Low German loans. *Máti* and *sukk* are widely attested in Old Norse and remain in Modern Icelandic. *Maka* is rare, occurring only here; in various versions of *Óláfs saga helga*, starting with the oldest version; and in *Alexanders saga*. Gudbrand Vígfússon suggested that both the example in *Laurentius saga* and the one in *Óláfs saga* 'seem to be put into the mouths of foreigners trying to speak Norse' (Cleasby–Vígfússon 1957: s.v. *maka*), but this is not certain, and in some later versions of *Óláfs saga* the verb is placed in the direct speech of Óláfr himself (see citations in the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, s.v.), while in *Alexanders saga* it is used by Alexander the Great with no apparent suggestion of for-

eign overtones (cf. ed. de Leeuw van Weenen 2009, and the original Latin, ed. Colker 1978: 195). While *maka* is rare, then, it may not have been obvious to a West Norse-speaker around 1300 that it was not on the same road to acceptance as *máti* and *sukk* (cf. Modern Swedish *maka* and Modern Danish *mage*). Jón's usage of *sukk* as a direct object of *maka* 'make' might be thought unidiomatic: as the citations in the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* show, *sukk* is almost always used in prepositional phrases to mean 'squander' (e.g. 'Hallgerðr var fengsǫm ok stórlynd, enda kallaði hon til alls þess, er aðrir áttu í nánd, ok hafði allt í sukki', 'Hallgerðr was acquisitive and had a big personality; she was always asking for anything that others in the neighbourhood had, and squandered everything', *Njáls saga* ch. 11, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954: 33). It is also used in the singular, whereas Jón's 'einginn suk' seems, if it is not intended to show incorrect gender, to be plural: *sukk* is neuter and, giving Jón the benefit of the doubt, we could reasonably understand the scribal 'einginn suk' as a seventeenth-century spelling of the neuter accusative plural *engin sukk*. Strikingly, though, the other main example of a construction like Jón's recorded by the DONP occurs elsewhere in *Laurentius saga*, but this time in the narratorial voice: 'sá atburðr gjörðiz einn tíma á Völlum at kennslupiltar gjörðu sukk í kirkjunni þar á Völlum' ('on one occasion, this event took place at Vellir: that the schoolboys were making a racket in the church there at Vellir', ed Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1998: 226, quoting B [ch. 5]; A [ch. 2] is almost identical). *Sukk* here could be singular or plural, so again it would be possible to give Jón the benefit of the doubt and take his usage as idiomatic. *Maka engin sukk* may have been intended to sound odd, but if so the joke may have been close to the bone for Einarr Hafliðason. It seems likely that Einarr was aware of the foreign resonance of the vocabulary he put in Jón's mouth; but if, at one level, *Laurentius saga* laughs at Jón's propensity to stuff his Old Norse with convenient Low German loans, at another it tacitly admits to Old Norse's acceptance of the greater part of those loans—and implies that Low German-speaking clerics had a role in introducing and embedding them. At the same time, though, Einarr was not so familiar with Low German that he did not get confused (or repeated someone else's confusion) about the semantics of *lenten*.

The morphology of Jón's speech shows some confusion, and this is broadly consistent with the development of Continental Scandinavian. Jón uses the accusative *hvern mann* instead of the nominative *hverr maðr*, echoing the Continental levelling of this irregular nominative singular noun to *mann*.

That said, the *mann* form is not unknown in medieval Icelandic manuscripts, possibly through Norwegian influence (Stefán Karlsson 2000a [1978]: 186), and the inflection of the other substantives is as expected (unless we take 'einginn suk' as showing either the wrong number or gender). Jón also appears to be untroubled by subjunctive verbs. This may show the limitations of Einarr's literary artifice in providing true-to-life representations of second-language Norse-speakers; but it could also reflect the similarity in form and usage of third-person singular Middle Low German and Old Norse subjunctive endings, whereby Jón would have found subjunctives fairly easy to handle; this mood was, after all, to have a relatively long life in Continental Scandinavian (Mørck 2002–5, 1146). It is probably fair to say that the narrator behind Jón's speech focused on lexicon and style more than grammar, but that they did register the phenomenon of morphological confusion, and associated it with L2 Norse.

We cannot take *Laurentius saga*'s portrayal of Jón flæmingi's Norse at face value, then, as the exact words a Low German-speaker might utter. But we can read it as representative of the kind of features which Norse-speakers associated with the L2 Norse of native Low German-speakers, and representative of some of the sociolinguistic contexts in which the Norse of L2 speakers might be heard. In its literary way, the passage provides a sociolinguistically plausible image of a Low German native speaker making the most of existing loans in Norse and pushing the envelope with new ones; and doing so from a prestigious and public social position, from which his language might influence that of native speakers. The next section explores how these conclusions rest on simplistic assumptions about source value and cannot be accepted straightforwardly. But none of the conclusions is sociolinguistically implausible and, in a context where evidence is generally lacking, all are useful in providing evidence-led perspectives from which we can interrogate our existing understanding of Norse-Low German language contact:

1. Low German and Norse were not, contrary to common assumptions, considered mutually intelligible. Moreover, the acceptance of Low German loans into Norse did not simply entail native speakers' enthusiasm for all things German, but a sometimes antagonistic relationship—whether the kind of friendly antagonism shared by Jón flæmingi and Laurentius or the more serious kind between Jón and the chapter of Niðarós.

2. Given the evidence for the unwillingness of local populations to understand or learn Low German, we can infer a model of language contact in the thirteenth century which involved neither mutual intelligibility nor Norse-speakers learning German. We might infer rather that Low German-speakers, by necessity, learned Norse.

3. In adopting Old Norse, Low German-speakers had recourse to the genetic similarity of their native language to Norse, encouraging them to use Low German vocabulary; their Norse tended to exhibit the morphological simplifications characteristic of adult learners of a second language.

As I have discussed above, meanwhile, most work on Low German influence on Old Norse has taken it as a given that mercantile contact was the pre-eminent vector for influence, with researchers' frame of reference focusing unquestioningly on the Hanseatic world. However, while an emphasis on the ecclesiastical sphere is a genre feature of *Laurentius saga* and need not be at all representative of prevailing language-contact situations in thirteenth-century Norway, the saga's vivid portrayal of the Church as a context for thirteenth- to fourteenth-century language contact and, potentially, change, is compelling. Jón's request for the benefice of St Mary's church in Niðarós, it should be emphasised, is not a minor one: this was an important and lucrative benefice (Sigurdson 2011: 182). Both the passages quoted emphasise that a churchman with pastoral duties was expected to communicate with his parishioners in Old Norse—not to mention his colleagues. While there is no reason to doubt the prestige and influence of the language of the Hansa in later medieval Scandinavia (see for example Tiisala 2007), it is not self-evident that it enjoyed such dominance earlier on (cf. Kala, 2003 on German in relation to Estonian in Tallinn). Absence from the runic corpus hardly proves a negative, but it is at least worth observing that despite being used extensively for mercantile purposes, attesting to colloquial as well as formal varieties of Norse, and representing multilingualism in the form of Latin (and even Greek and Hebrew), the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century runic inscriptions from the Bryggen in Bergen are not noted for showing Low German influence (cf. Schulte 2012, Spurkland 2012). The story of Jón flæmingi deserves to be taken seriously as we look for plausible vectors of Low German influence on Old Norse.

## 3 Writing Norse-German contact in later fourteenth-century Iceland

As I have emphasised, *Laurentius saga* was composed by Einarr Hafliðason, who knew Laurentius well and might have been repeating the story of Laurentius's dealings with Jón flæmingi just as his mentor and friend had told it to him. Even then, however, it was Einarr, in fourteenth-century Iceland, who chose to write the anecdote down: whether it tells us about Laurentius's self-presentation to his Icelandic pupils, or what his pupils found memorable about him, it tells us something about fourteenth-century Icelandic metalinguistic discourses. Moreover, the account might be ascribed more to Einarr's imagination than to Laurentius's experience: Sigurdson has called this section of the saga 'highly fanciful' and shown the predilection of Einarr and his circle for relating implausibly aggrandising accounts of Icelanders abroad (2011: 189–96, quoting 182). Einarr's representation of Jón's Norse, vivid though it is, might therefore represent no more than a caricature of L2 Norse with little basis in reality. It is therefore imperative to assess what the narrative might have meant to Einarr and his audience as part of source-criticism, but also as an analysis of fourteenth-century Icelandic discourses about Low German. Since the fourteenth century was a time of rapid linguistic change in Icelandic, *Laurentius saga* offers important insights into Icelandic identity at that time. Einarr Hafliðason would, indeed, himself make an interesting case study of Latin- and Low German-influence on fourteenth-century Icelandic, not least because his section of the *lögmannsannáll* survives in an autograph copy (AM 420b 4to), albeit to a large extent compiled from earlier sources (Rowe 2002); suffice to say here that the Low German influence on his lexicon is, as my discussions above imply, readily apparent. In this section, I gather a range of information which is fairly well known to scholars of Icelandic literature and history but which has not been adduced in the context of historical sociolinguistics before to explore the speech community from which Einarr wrote *Laurentius saga* and its attitudes to language change.

Consider the remaining narrative about Jón flæmingi's language in *Laurentius saga* (ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1998: 244 [ch. 15]), which follows directly from the previous anecdote quoted:

> Einn tíma kómu mörg Íslandsför til Niðaróss ok vóru á margir íslenzkir menn; vildi síra Laurentius þeim öllum nokkot til góða gjöra. Þar kom millum annarra sá maðr er Klængr steypir hét ok

frændi Laurentii ok honum heimuligr. En sem Jón flæmingi sá þat, vildi hann gjöra honum nokkot athvarf ok talaði einn tíma við Laurentium á latínu ok mælti:

'Kennið mér at heilsa á þennan yðar kompán upp á norrænu.'

Laurentio þótti mikit gaman at Jóni ok sagði: 'Heilsaðu honum svá: Fagnaðarlauss kompán!'

'Ek undirstend', sagði Jón, 'at þetta mun vera fögr heilsan, því at gaudium er fögnuðr, en laus er lof,'—gengr síðan at Klængi steypir, klappandi honum á hans herðar ok mælti: 'Fagnaðarlauss kompán!'

Hinn hvessti augun í móti ok þótti heilsunin ei vera svá fögr sem hinn ætlaði.

Nú mælti Jón flæmingi við Laurentium: 'Ek forstend nú at þú hefir dárat mik, því at þessi maðr varð reiðr við mik.'

Another time, a lot of sailings from Iceland arrived at Niðarós, and many Icelandic people were aboard; Síra Laurentius wanted to do something good for them. Amongst others came a person called Klængr steypir, who was a kinsman of Laurentius's and close to him. And when Jón the Fleming saw that, he wanted to hang out with him, and at some point spoke to Laurentius in Latin and said 'Tell me how to greet this friend of yours in Norse'.

Laurentius thought of a great joke to play on Jón and said, 'Greet him like this: *Fagnaðarlauss kompán*! ['damned dude'; lit. 'joyless dude']'

'I understand', said Jón, 'that this must be a nice greeting, because fögnuðr [Old Norse, 'joy'] is *gaudium* [Latin, 'joy'] and *laus* [Latin, 'praise'] means *lof* [Old Norse 'praise'].' So he went up to Klængi steypir, clapping him on the back, and said '*Fagnaðarlauss kompán*!'

The man narrowed his eyes at him and then the greeting didn't seem as *fögr* [attractive] as Jón thought.

So then Jón the Fleming spoke to Laurentius: 'I now understand that you tricked me, because this man was angry at me.'

Previous commentary on this passage has emphasised its amusement value and rather elaborate deployment of Norse-Latin false friends (Bjarni Guðnason, Jakob Benediktsson and Sverrir Tómasson 1993: 149). It can be

read as emphasising the same themes in Jón's struggles with Norse as the previous one: it is perhaps of interest that the unusual but transparent formation *fagnaðarlauss* is opaque to Jón while the Low German loan *kompán* seems untroublesome. At first glance, Jón's use of the West Germanic loans *undirstanda* and *forstanda* ('understand') looks like it might echo the language of a native Low German-speaker, but again, *undirstanda* and (in a slightly more nordic form) *fyrirstanda* are both attested in the narratorial voice in the B-text so this is less clear-cut that at first sight (ed Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1998: 353, with *fyrir standa*, where A lacks a corresponding sentence; p. 404, with *undirstanda*, where A, p. 403, has the more traditional *skilja*; 413, where A and B both have *undirstanda*).

My own experience certainly attests to the continued enthusiasm of Scandinavians for playing Laurentius's trick (cf. Power, 1998–2001: 311). However, I can't say I've ever actually known anyone to fall for it; the false friends may do more to inflate the audience's sense of its own Latinity than to represent a likely misunderstanding by Jón; and the passage has an analogue emphasising a literariness which indicates the importance of understanding it within the distinctive textual and sociolinguistic environment in which its author Einarr lived. The analogue is *Gísls þáttr Illugasonar*, specifically as it appears in the L-version of *Jóns saga helga*, a biography of Jón Ögmundarson (1052–1121), the first bishop of Hólar. Einarr knew a version of *Jóns saga*, and we can be fairly certain it was this one (Foote 2003: ccxxviii). Here, the eponymous Gísl is the leader of a group of hostages (fittingly, given that his name means 'hostage') sent by the Norwegian king Magnús berfœttr Óláfsson, putatively in 1102, to the court of King Muircheartach Ó Briain of Munster. A Norwegian member of Gísl's group claims to speak Irish, and greets the King. His greeting, perhaps uniquely in Old Norse, is given in Irish (albeit, in the surviving manuscripts, badly corrupted). Far from being the ingratiating greeting intended, however, it turns out to mean 'bölvaðr sér þú, konungr' ('may you be damned, King'). Fortunately, the king takes this in his stride (ed Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Haldórsson, and Foote 2003: 227; cf. Power 1998–2001). Whatever the provenance of his own account of Jón flæmingi's 'fagnaðarlauss kompán', Einarr almost certainly saw his text resonating with this one, as another example of the motif of a little linguistic knowledge being a dangerous thing.

The intertextual relationship between *Jóns saga helga* and *Laurentius saga* is characteristic of a distinctive, clerical, literary culture which—almost

uniquely in a time and place where sagas are normally anonymous—can be reconstructed around Einarr, known to scholars as the North Icelandic Benedictine School (Sverrir Tómasson 2006: 168–71). The School is noted for writing in a distinctive 'florid' style, characterised by Latinate syntax, and Latin and Low-German loan-words, which is readily apparent in the L-version of *Jóns saga helga* (Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson, and Foote 2003: ccxvii–ccxix). We owe much of our information about this group and their personal relationships to *Laurentius saga* itself: the 'school' represents a tight-knit (if not always agreeable) group of elite earlier fourteenth-century churchmen associated particularly with the diocese of Hólar: the known key members, their salient offices, and their (principal) Norwegian connections are represented in Figure 1. Most of the members of the school whom we can name were pupils of Laurentius, and although we can securely link them with only a small number of texts (still a rare achievement in the study of medieval Icelandic literature), the appearance of other texts in the florid style indicates that these people or their colleagues were among the most prolific writers in medieval Iceland, translating, editing, or composing biographies of saints and bishops, and romances; and taking a significant role in the development of administrative literacy on the island. It is undoubted that members of this group read each other's work, and wrote to some extent with their friends in mind. This group, then, provides one important context for understanding Einarr's accounts of Jón flæmingi's multilingualism.

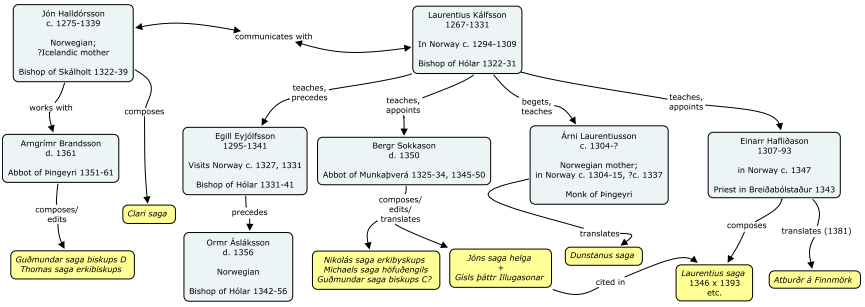


Figure 1: The Northern Icelandic Benedictine School: the social network of Einarr Hafliðason, summarising principal known Norwegian connections; listing indicative ecclesiastical offices; and including most certainly ascribed writings.

Strikingly, the interests of the North Icelandic Benedictine School included, besides the predictable elite political, religious, and ideological issues of the day, a fascination with multilingualism. As their prose style and commitment to translation suggests, the group was acutely conscious of their relationship, as Old-Norse-speakers, with Latin—a point which deserves a much fuller historical-sociolinguistic study than is possible here. *Laurentius saga* is laden with references to Laurentius's distinctive Latin skills and the power they conferred in his world. The concern with multilingualism went beyond Latin, however; it is perhaps characteristic that the central character of the miracle-story *Atburðr á Finnmǫrk*, which Einarr translated from Latin, is a Sámi-Norse interpreter (ed Kålund, 1908–18: I 57–59). While the account of Gísl's band in the court of Muircheartach Ó Briain in the L-version of *Jóns saga helga* almost certainly derives from a lost, older text (Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson, and Foote 2003: cclxiii–cclxvii), it is telling that it is this version alone (likely by Einarr's friend Bergr Sokkason: Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson, and Foote 2003: ccxxv, ccxxviii) which quotes the multilingual exchange. Medieval Icelandic romance shows a rare interest in multilingualism (Kalinke 1983; cf. Kalinke 2008 and Hughes 2008 on *Clári saga*). The intellectual, in some ways xenophilic tenor of the North Icelandic Benedictine School did not prevail in fourteenth-century Iceland; Einarr relates how the prodigious but poor young Laurentius is bullied at school not only for his poverty but also his learning (B ch. 5, ed Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1998: 228–29), a story which may reflect the sympathies of Laurentius's pupils as much as the experiences of their master. We can speculate that they perceived themselves as a vibrant, outward-looking, but embattled—one might even say geeky—intellectual community. While Einarr clearly expected his readers to laugh at Jón flæmingi, he also expected them to be familiar with and interested in the tribulations of language-learners; and at the same time he expected them to understand his text as a literary construct.

Icelanders like Einarr had a close relationship with Norway and Norwegian. Ties between Iceland and Norway were perhaps at their closest in the first half of the fourteenth century, and Icelandic elites saw themselves as integral to their Norwegian archbishopric and to Norwegian royal governance (Sigurdson 2011). They saw their language as essentially the same as Norwegian: Icelanders' early tendency to refer to Old Norse as *danska* (with *norrœna* possibly a synonym of this) was being superceded by a pref-

erence for calling their language *norrœna* in the sense 'West Norse', emphasising Norwegian–Icelandic linguistic identity (Leondard 2012: 121–28). Icelanders exploited this identity by producing manuscripts for export to Norway (Ólafur Halldórsson 1990 [1965]; Stefán Karlsson 2000b [1979]). Einarr's other accounts of Laurentius's time in Norway emphasise the fascination which the metropolitan contexts of this foreign land held: Einarr delays his plot not only by introducing Jón flæmingi but also, for example, by discussing the fireworks which Laurentius saw at the royal court in Bergen—also, incidentally, created by a Fleming, emphasising both Flemings' prominence in Norway and their association with arcane learning (B ch. 10; ed Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1998: 237–38). However, this does not mean that fourteenth-century Icelandic clerics were starved of access to Norwegian culture. Figure 1 emphasises the degree of exposure which members of the North Icelandic Benedictine School had to native-speakers of Norwegian varieties of Norse: they all worked closely with Norwegian bishops; most were taught by Laurentius, who had spent at least fifteen years living there and had (had) a Norwegian concubine; some had grown up in Norway before coming to Iceland, and they were friends of those who had not; most are known to have spent time in Norway.

This closeness to Norwegian culture is unlikely to have been ideologically unproblematic. Iceland had a long standing love-hate relationship with its more powerful neighbour (see in a sociolinguistic context Leonard 2012: 116–43; *Laurentius saga* has even been understood as making a case against appointing Norwegian bishops to Iceland, though this seems unlikely: Sigurdson 2011: 210–13). Still, as their Latin- and Low German-influenced language attests, the North Icelandic Benedictine School were not only acutely conscious of Norway's linguistic innovations but, at least in the lexis of their prose, more inclined than their countrymen to embrace them. The fourteenth century seems to have been a critical time for the divergence of Icelandic and Norwegian: the Low German loans and nascent morphological simplification in (some varieties of) Norwegian, and the tendency of Norwegian to converge with the previously divergent East Norse varieties, must have been palpable to well-travelled Norwegian and Icelandic elites alike. In the event, Norwegian changed much faster than Icelandic, but it is not impossible that fourteenth-century Icelanders expected and wished their language to change in step with Norwegian. Phonologically and, insofar as Icelandic has changed at all, morphologically, the fourteenth century was probably

the time of greatest change in Icelandic, with most of the changes which distinguish Old from Modern Icelandic either becoming dominant in our manuscript record or finding their first written attestations during that century. Typologically similar, albeit seldom identical, developments to most of these were taking place in at least some Norwegian varieties around the same period (Schulte 2002–5a, b; Mørck, 2002–5), and though the evidence is merely circumstantial, contact between Icelandic and Norwegian, of which Icelandic clerical elites seem likely to have been important vectors, is an obvious suspect for provoking or encouraging changes (Stefán Karlsson 2004: 11–23).

Moreover, the fourteenth century bears witness to spellings in Icelandic manuscripts consistent with a few other changes in Norwegian which have not made their way into Modern Icelandic (Stefán Karlsson 2000a [1978]). I take my examples of the following relatively prominent trends from the autograph text of Einarr's *lögmannsannáll* (ed Storm 1888: 231–78, s.aa. 1–1361); the autograph charters ascribed to him (for which see Stefán Karlsson 1963: xxxix) tell a similar story.

- Analogical cancellation of u-mutation. This is rare in Einarr's writing, but apparent: 'stallaru*m*' for *stǫllurum*; 'anduduzst' for *ǫnduðust*; 'allum' for *ǫllum* (ed. Storm 1888: 259, 261, 270, s.aa. 1277, 1284, 1332).

- *hr-, hl-* > *r-, l-*. Contexts for this change are limited, but it seems to be uniform for Einarr, with *lutr* regularly for *hlutr* (ed Storm 1888: *passim1*, albeit with an instance of 'hlupu' p. 277, s.a. 1360) and 'reppa' for *hreppa* and 'Rafn' for *Hrafn* (ed. Storm 1888: 273, s.a. 1341; 260, 261, 273, s.aa. 1283, 1283, 1342).

- Analogical levelling of verb-forms. Einarr presents only one example of this, but it is characteristic of one of the main kinds of levelling, the analogical reintroduction of *v-*: 'vurdu' for *urðu*, 3rd person past plural of *verða* (ed. Storm 1888: 262, 271, s.aa. 1299).

These changes have traditionally been taken as evidence that Icelandic scribes were adapting their written language to Norwegian norms to facilitate book-exports (and then extending these habits to their other writing; Stefán Karlsson 2000b [1979]; 2004: 47–49), but Stefán Karlsson has suggested that some such spellings represent phonological developments in spoken Icelandic like those in Norwegian (2000a [1978]: 185–86), a scenario

paralleled by Haukur Þorgeirsson's case (2013: 234–56) for the development of a two word-tone system in fourteenth-century Icelandic similar to that which survives in most Norwegian varieties (but which, in Haukur's reading, was lost from Icelandic in the sixteenth century).[2] Either scenario is pertinent to the present study: learned Icelanders were conscious enough of Norwegian's phonological divergence from their own Norse to try to adapt to it in writing, and/or some elite Icelandic-speakers were early adopters of forms consistent with Norwegian innovations which did not ultimately take root in Icelandic generally.

With this context, we can return to *Laurentius saga*. Its author was intellectually interested in multilingualism; personally and politically invested in Icelandic-Norwegian unity; intimately familiar with Norwegian varieties of Norse; arguably aware that Icelandic was to some extent changing in line with them; and, in some respects, inclined to adopt innovative forms in line with Norwegian developments (at least in his written language). It seems clear that, for fourteenth-century Icelanders like Einarr, one of the key meanings of the Icelandic priest Laurentius and the Norwegian archbishop Jǫrundr laughing together at Jón flæmingi's incompetence in *norrœna* was that it affirmed the identity of *norrœna*'s Icelandic and Norwegian varieties. It seems likely, however, that in recounting the story, Einarr also unwittingly exposed his anxiety about that the precariousness of that identity—a precariousness which was manifested as both a linguistic and political marginalisation as Norway came under Danish control in the late fourteenth century and Icelandic elites found themselves increasingly shut out of Nordic trade and politics.

Laurentius's amusement at his friend's struggles with Old Norse is reminiscent of the complex identity politics of modern European small languages:

[2]A rough, electronically based survey of the *Diplomatarium Islandicum* (ed Jón Þorkelsson et al. 1857–1932), using the poorly optically-character-recognised copy downloaded from http://baekur.is/bok/000197700/Islenzkt_fornbrefasafn_sem, suggests that while very rare in nouns, the fourteenth-century cancellation of *u*-mutation was more common in relevant forms of the high-frequency adjectives *allr* and *margr* (perhaps occurring in 7% of fourteenth-century occurrences of these words), and more common again in the first- and third-person past plural weak verb endings *-ǫðum* and *-ǫðu* (perhaps accounting for 15% of fourteenth-century occurrences of these inflections). This hints at morphological and/or phonological conditioning of the changes, which would be more characteristic of natural language variation than scribal convention. Likewise, *h-* loss is most frequent within personal names, then within attestations of the high-frequency noun *hlutr*, and least frequent in other common nouns. These investigations would require a much more accurate and contextually sensitive expansion to deserve any credence, but at least suggest that fuller investigation would be worthwhile.

I can attest anecdotally to the pride which many present-day Icelanders (and Finns) take in the belief (and in stating the belief) that their language is unlearnable—or at least unlearnable for non-natives associated with historically or currently dominant cultural powers like Denmark (for Iceland), Sweden (for Finland), or Britain and America (for both; for immigrants from the developing world, there is, paradoxically, a stronger assumption that they can and must learn the local languages). In *Laurentius saga*, in place of the Danish- or English-speaker of today, it is a learned, southern scholar, apparently fluent in French, Flemish and Latin, who is at the sharp end of the unlearnability topos. This kind of discourse privileges the vernacular as an arcane form of knowledge unique to its native speakers, yet also deprecates it as inevitably marginal to international communications (cf. McDonald 2009: 121, on *Nítíða saga* and Hall, Richardson, and Haukur Þorgeirsson, forthcoming on comparable discourses of locality in *Sigrgarðs saga*). In the case of Jón flæmingi, if we understand *Laurentius saga* to suggest that he did get (a share in) a prestigious and lucrative benefice, the meta-discourse of language-learning perhaps also encodes or echoes a measure of jealousy at the figure of the foreigner, privileged with prestigious knowledge and education which was relatively inaccessible in Scandinavia, being able to win jobs there over the heads of locals (with Icelanders, once again, being construed in this interpretation as locals to Norway).

## 4 Conclusions

*Laurentius saga* is an underrated source for the history of Low German in medieval Scandinavia, and offers a rare if not unique medieval representation of the spoken Norse of a native Low German-speaker. The passages which I have been analysing are short, and their significance is not to be overstated. Einarr's account of Laurentius strikes a personal and anecdotal tone and it is hard to doubt that much of what he reports reflects tales Laurentius himself told. But Einarr's account is also highly literary, certainly echoing and possibly purposefully deploying literary tropes; his writing of Jón flæmingi's L2 Old Norse is very unlikely to be a linguistically precise representation of real speech.

Of the various conclusions I have drawn above from the account of Jón flæmingi, the most straightforward, albeit somewhat speculative, is that Einarr was fascinated by multilingualism and used his account of Jón as

a vehicle for emphasising the unity of Icelandic and Norwegian varieties of West Norse at the period in Icelandic history when this unity mattered most to elite Icelanders, but when it was becoming clear that unless the Icelandic language sustained or accelerated the pace of ongoing changes, it was liable to become quite different from its Continental sister. If this is correct, the story gives us a valuable window into the discourses of Icelandic language and identity in the fourteenth century. This line of argument could be consolidated with a deeper study of Einarr's language, and a fuller examination of his metalinguistic discourses more generally.

That said, we should still take Einarr's portrayal of multilingualism in Niðarós seriously. It is too problematic a source to prove anything and implausible in some of its linguistic detail. But it is a good enough source for metalinguistic discourses that we should hesitate to discount, on the basis of much later evidence or sociolinguistic models based thereon, the sociolinguistic scenarios it portrays. We cannot be sure to what extent it reflects the first-hand experience of Laurentius, and to what extent it reflects Einarr's. But whoever's voice is loudest, and however contrived the account, it is the voice of an Icelander who was intimately familiar not only with Icelandic but also Norwegian varieties of West Norse and with the metropolitan life of Niðarós. His audience was equally well informed and must, then, have found *Laurentius saga* at least convincing enough to be funny. The narrator(s) behind the saga, when not carried away by their jokes, were fully equipped to narrate vivid, sociolinguistically convincing, multilingual environments. *Laurentius saga* provides a fairly unequivocal statement that a Low German-speaker could not speak his native language and be understood, even in elite circles, in Niðarós. We might choose to disbelieve the saga, or argue that this incomprehension reflects specific problems with the Flemish dialect, or a specific situation of complex and antagonistic legal discourse, rather than basic mercantile communication. But at the same time, we should at least be open to the possibility that no-one in thirteenth- to fourteenth-century Norway found their language mutually intelligible with Low German, and that, at least in this period, Low German-speakers routinely learned Old Norse to communicate there. After all, despite the Low German influence on their language and their close connections with Norway, Einarr and his audience were apparently ignorant enough of Low German to be untroubled by a punchline which confuses the English and Low German senses of *lenten*.

Notwithstanding the flaws in his own German, Einarr clearly associated the Norse of Low German-speakers with the adaptation of Low German vocabulary to Old Norse based on the etymological similarities between the two, and this represents a plausible mechanism for Low German loans to enter Norse—from the successful, like *sukk*, to the partly successful, like *maka*, to the unsuccessful, like *lentin*. Einarr also associated the Norse of Jón flæmingi with morphological confusion and levelling, albeit not to the same degree that he associated it with loan-words. Perridon (2003: 238) has argued, rightly, that

> the burden of proof lies … squarely with those who claim that a given change in the grammar of a language is the result of language contact. Simple statements of the type *prope hoc ergo propter hoc* ('near it, hence because of it') will not do.

*Laurentius saga* gives us at least a little evidence that the emergence of levelled forms like *mann* for *maðr* sounded to the ears of thirteenth- and certainly fourteenth-century Icelanders like Low Germanisms. Of course, this proves nothing about how language change was actually taking place in Norwegian, but it is at least consistent with the idea that morphological levelling in Norse might indeed have originated with the L2 Norse of Low German-speakers. This reading is consistent with the arguments of Jahr (1999 [1995]) and Trudgill (2010), who see a key source of morphological simplification in the history of Norse as the spreading of features characteristic of adult learners, who struggle with morphological complexity.

Finally, Einarr's account alerts us to the underappreciated possibility that churchmen were an important vector of language contact between Low German and Norse in the crucial thirteenth- to fourteenth-century period when Norse varieties must have been opening up to massive Low German influence. Historiographically, sociolinguistics is rooted in capitalist and to some extent secularist societies, so historical linguists borrowing interpretative frameworks from sociolinguistics may unwittingly have underestimated the power of the medieval Church as an engine for language-change, in favour of focusing on trade networks (cf. Hall 2010: 73–74 on Anglo-Saxon England). Veturliði Óskarsson's study of Old Icelandic diplomas emphasises the degree to which Low German loans in Icelandic can be associated with ecclesiastical and secular governance—implemented to a large extent by the clerical class to which Laurentius and Einarr belonged. While this is perhaps to be ex-

pected from a study of diplomas, Veturliði also emphasises that elsewhere in Old Icelandic this vocabulary is most commonly found in bishops' sagas and romances, genres particularly closely associated with that same clerical class (2003: 356; cf. Johansson 2000; Kalinke, 2008). Moreover, he finds that the commercial activities of English and German fishermen in fifteenth-century Iceland had little effect on the language. Veturliði sounds almost apologetic when he writes (2003, 355; cf. 352) that

> a number of words from MLG show up already early in the fourteenth century and there are a few in charters and other documents dated to the thirteenth century, but most of these words are not representative of the actual influence of the language spoken by the German Hansa merchants.

But both Veturliði's evidence and *Laurentius saga* encourage us to consider whether, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, instead of the Hansa, one of the key interfaces between Low German and Norwegian, and one of the most effective mechanisms for promoting Low German influence, was the Church. Laurentius saga helpfully emphasises the degree to which Low German-speaking ecclesiastical personnel, perhaps with pastoral duties but undoubtedly with prestigious positions among native-speaking clerics, might have promoted Low German loans and adult-learner features in native speakers' Old Norse.[3]

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