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The Phonology of Icelandic and Faroese

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This addition to the Phonology of the World’s Languages series is unusual in that it attempts to cover the phonological description of two distinct, albeit closely related, languages. For many decades the author (henceforth K.Á.) has been a leading authority in the synchronic and historical phonology of Icelandic, particularly in areas relating to prosody (syllable structure, quantity, metrics, stress and intonation), and has recently published a comprehensive tome of a handbook on the phonetics and phonology of Icelandic for the educated public (Íslensk tunga I: Hljóð, Reykjavík, Almenna bókafélagið, 2005). The decision to cover both languages in a single work is motivated by the fact that they share many of the same noteworthy phenomena such as preaspirated stops, short diphthongs and various morphophonological alternations affecting vowels and consonants. At the same time there are substantial differences between the two, due to divergent historical developments that have taken place in each language, and the focus in the book is as much on highlighting these (often somewhat subtle) differences as it is on describing the shared traits. The challenge with a text like this one is, of course, to keep the presentation from becoming too confusing for the uninitiated reader who is not familiar with either language and who must therefore struggle to keep straight what has been said about each. While the book occasionally falls somewhat short in this respect, K.Á. has done an admirable job overall in navigating around these inherent problems.

The book is organized into five parts, each consisting of multiple chapters. Part I (‘The historical and theoretical setting’) describes what is known about the sound system of Common West Nordic, the closest common ancestor of the two languages (Ch. 1), and outlines the main historical developments from this stage to the Modern Icelandic and Faroese systems described in later chapters (Ch. 2). Some theoretical assumptions regarding the analytical scope of the book, and aspects of formal representation used in some later chapters, are laid out as well (Ch. 3). Part II (‘The modern sound systems’) describes the vowel systems of Modern Icelandic (Ch. 4) and Faroese (Ch. 5), and likewise the consonant inventories of the two languages (Chs. 6 and 7, respectively). In Part III (‘Systemic relations and syllable structure’), K.Á. turns his attention to the ways in which syllable structure impacts on segmental contrasts, licensing different inventories of vowels (Ch. 8) and consonants (Ch. 9) in different types of positions. Special attention is given to the interplay of quantity and prosodic structure, and the characterization of the segmental long-versus-short opposition (Ch. 10). To a certain extent, this topic carries over into the first half of Part IV (‘Segments and syllables on phonological levels’), which deals with the phonology of aspiration, and preaspiration in particular, in the two languages (Ch. 11). This is followed by a single chapter describing all other segmental alternations, or ‘morphophonemics’, of the two languages (Ch. 12) – vowel alternations (umlaut, ablaut), vowel-zero alternations (syncope, epenthesis, elision in hiatus), hardening of fricatives and (in Faroese) of glides, palatalization, prestopping of sonorants, stop excrescence, glide insertion, and more – and the way in which these are sensitive to different levels of morphological structure. The book ends with Part V (‘Rhythmic structure’), which describes patterns of stress and prominence at the level of the word (Ch. 13) as well as sentence-level phrasing, rhythm and intonation (Chs. 14 and 15).

The decision to open the book with two chapters devoted to the (pre)history of the two languages is understandable, given K.Á.’s expertise and research interest in historical phonology as well as the long scholarly tradition of comparative-historical and philological studies on the Scandinavian languages and on Icelandic historical phonology in particular. However, these chapters as written are a challenging entry point for anyone who does not already have some familiarity with Modern Icelandic (and/or Faroese) phonology, especially as regards the vowel system and the dependence of vowel length on syllable structure. Such readers would
be advised to set chapters 1 and 2 aside until they have at least skimmed the later chapters covering these topics first (Chs. 4, 5, 8 and 9). The problem is exacerbated by an unfortunate number of errors or inconsistencies in transcriptions, such as when the phonetic value of á in Old Icelandic (the long counterpart of a) is given variously as [aː], [aː] or [ɑː], or when the low front unrounded vowel, after being rendered as e [ɛ] in chapter 1, suddenly has its long counterpart represented as æ [æː] without explanation in chapter 2. Specialized terminology is sometimes introduced in a vacuum, such as when we see in-text references to the First Grammatical Treatise (p. 4) and the ‘First Grammarian’ (p. 6) before that work has been properly introduced and cited (p. 7), or when reference is made to Government Phonology and syllabifications like aus.t.r or bâ.t.s (p. 16) without any citations or cross-references to later chapters.

In his treatment of the phonological systems of Icelandic and Faroese, K.Á. focuses largely on the segmental units themselves, their decomposition into features or elements, their patterns of contrast and distribution, and the way that this patterning relates to syllable structure and prosody. Unlike in typical generative treatments, morphophonological alternations are largely set aside. The area which is examined in most detail, and from an often refreshingly novel perspective, is the vowel system and the way in which vowel quality and length interact with each other and with syllable structure. K.Á. raises a number of arguments in favor of a ‘diasystem’ analysis that takes long vowels and short vowels as essentially occupying separate and somewhat independent vowel systems – despite the fact that vowel length is largely predictable from syllable structure. This is especially clear for Faroese, where numerous vowel quality changes and mergers have obscured the relation between long and short alternants (e.g. Icelandic [øyː]/[øy] and [ɛː]/[ɛ] correspond to Faroese [ɛi]/[ɛ] and [ɛː]/[ɛ]; but K.Á. argues that Icelandic, too, shows evidence pointing in the same direction. Another notable aspect is K.Á.’s discussion of the nature of the long-short contrast itself, in which he argues that vowel shortness, not length, is the special, marked term of this phonological opposition.

This book is a welcome addition to the existing literature on the phonology of Icelandic, and even more so to the almost nonexistent literature on the phonology of Faroese. While certain portions of the book are likely to be somewhat challenging for readers with no prior familiarity with either language, K.Á.’s work contains a great richness of empirical detail, analytical argumentation and thought-provoking metatheoretical discussion that is well worth the effort.

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