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Testing Vocubular Clarity in insular Scandinavian

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Abstract: Vocubular Clarity is a proposed restriction on the behaviour of inflectional classes and affixes grounded in the idea of synonymy avoidance. The proponents of Vocubular Clarity claim that it holds true for Icelandic and Faroese nominal inflections. In this article, data from these languages is examined and difficulties which have not been previously addressed are pointed out. It is argued that the Vocubular Clarity approach is somewhat vaguely specified. In particular, it needs a clear operational method for distinguishing affixes and stem allomorphy. Without this, it remains uncertain whether it makes any testable predictions. The paper shows that while the theory is intuitively appealing, it is – even under fairly generous assumptions – difficult to reconcile with the insular Scandinavian data.

Keywords: Vocubular Clarity, Faroese, Icelandic, inflection, morphology

1 Introduction

For many decades, the search for language universals has been a prominent feature of the linguistic enterprise. While enormous effort has been expended on syntax, morphology has not escaped the attention of would-be universalists. In the seemingly bewildering chaos of the inflectional patterns of the world languages, scholars have sought common patterns or ordering principles. One such suggested pattern is the No Blur Principle (NBP), also referred to as the Vocubular Clarity (VC) approach (Carstairs-McCarthy 1994; Cameron-Faulkner and Andrew 2000; Carstairs-McCarthy 2010; Carstairs-McCarthy 2014). The NBP/VC is a suggested restriction on the behaviour of inflectional affixes. A handy operational definition is given by Hans-Olav Enger:

If there are several affixes signalling the same morphosyntactic value, either all of them or all but one must also signal inflection class uniquely. (Enger 2013: 348)

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Enger (2013: 348) illustrates this with a table, which I reproduce here as Table 1.

Table 1 presents a set of potential affixal inflection patterns. For a given morphosyntactic feature or combination of features, e.g., nominative singular, various patterns are conceivable. Our four hypothetical inflection classes could each share an affix (row 1) or they could all have different affixes (row 2). Furthermore there might be a default affix shared by three classes and a special affix used by one (row 3). Similarly, the default suffix might encompass two classes while the two remaining classes each have their own suffix (row 4). All four cases reviewed so far are allowed by the NBP/VC. In row 5, we encounter a disallowed pattern. Two inflection classes share one affix while two other inflection classes share another affix. This breaks the principle that all but one affix must signal inflection class uniquely.

Table 1: Potential affixal inflection patterns (class-identifying affixes in boldface, class-defaults in plain type, blurred affixes in italics); NBP/VC rules out pattern 5.

	Inflection class I	Inflection class II	Inflection class III	Inflection class IV
1	a	a	a	a
2	b	c	d	e
3	f	f	f	g
4	h	i	j	j
5 (disallowed)	k	<i>l</i>	k	<i>l</i>

The NBP/VC is theoretically rooted in considerations of synonymy avoidance (Clark 1993). It is an elegant idea which is worth testing. Two languages which have been discussed in this context are Icelandic and Faroese, collectively referred to as insular Scandinavian. Though Müller (2007) pointed out some apparent problems with Icelandic nominal inflection, Carstairs-McCarthy (2010) argues that on closer inspection the Icelandic data are in harmony with the theory. Building on Carstairs-McCarthy's analysis of Icelandic, Enger (2013) examines Faroese nominal morphology and argues that it too supports the NBP/VC.

In the present article, I critically reevaluate the Faroese and Icelandic data. Various difficulties lead me to believe that the NBP/VC is not supported by these languages. I begin with a fairly detailed overview of Faroese inflection, pointing out a number of inflection classes which Enger neglects and some associated problems. I then treat two selected problems from Icelandic inflection which seem to me to be particularly difficult to reconcile with any form of the NBP/VC.

2 Faroese

Faroese is a North Germanic language spoken by ca. 50,000 people in the Faroe Islands. It has preserved much of the rich nominal morphology of Old Norse but with a number of innovations and significant dialectal variation. The written standard is highly artificial and influenced by Icelandic. It does not correspond closely to any spoken dialect. Claimed generalizations about morphology should, of course, be checked against actual spoken languages rather than artificially constructed norms. Thus, I will refer to dialect data in the ensuing discussion whenever relevant, but for convenience I will use the standard orthography.

Enger (2013: 354) analyses Faroese nouns as having twelve inflection classes (“main declensions”). He says this is “based in particular on the reference grammar by Thráinsson et al. (2004)” (Enger 2013: 353), but as we shall see there is no clear correspondence between Enger’s classes and the nineteen classes of the handbook.

To be sure, Enger cannot be faulted for doing his own analysis, especially since there is no standard accepted number of Faroese inflection classes. To illustrate, Lockwood’s grammar gives 3 inflection classes for masculine nouns, 4 for feminine nouns, and 3 for neuter nouns, for a rather modest total of 10 classes (Lockwood 1955: 28–38). For a much more expansive view, Poulsen et al.’s (1998) dictionary of Faroese gives 53 paradigms for masculine nouns, 34 paradigms for feminine nouns, and 34 paradigms for neuter nouns (Poulsen et al. 1998: 1429–1434), for a total of 121 classes. This excludes proper names, which have some intricacies of their own and are listed separately (Poulsen et al. 1998: 1466–1480).

Since the number and nature of inflection classes is critical to evaluating the NBP/VC, we cannot proceed without examining the details.

2.1 Masculine nouns in Faroese

Enger recognizes seven inflection classes for masculine nouns, represented by the sample words *hundur* ‘dog’ (I), *vøllur* ‘field’ (II), *lutur* ‘thing’ (III), *ketil* ‘kettle’ (IV), *akur* ‘field’ (V), *faðir* ‘father’ (VI), and *tími* ‘time’ (X). He argues that *vøllur* (II) and *lutur* (III) differ only in stem allomorphy but not in grammatical endings. Since the NBP/VC is only meant to apply to affixes, these classes can be merged in this context. This is reasonable enough and I will follow the same practice. Enger argues that by the same argument *ketil* (IV) and *akur* (V) can be merged and again I have no objection. We are now left with five inflection classes.

Table 2 shows the inflection of Enger’s five masculine inflection classes. Faroese nouns have four cases in the singular (nominative, accusative, dative, genitive) but in the plural, nominative and accusative always have the same endings.

Table 2: Faroese masculine declensions according to Enger (2013: 361).

hundur	I	II/III	IV/V	VI	X
	<i>vøllur</i>	<i>ketil</i>	<i>faðir</i>	<i>tími</i>	
NOM.SG	ur	ur	–	–	i
ACC.SG	–	–	–	–	a
DAT.SG	i	i	i	–	a
GEN.SG	s	ar	s	s	a
NOM.PL/ACC.PL	ar	ir	ar	ar	ar
DAT.PL	um	um	um	um	um
GEN.PL	a	a	a	a	a

When Enger’s inflection classes are compared with those of Thráinsson et al. (2004), a number of differences appear (Table 3).

Table 3: Comparison of masculine inflection classes.

Sample word	Enger (2013)	Thráinsson et al. (2004: 78–83)
<i>hundur</i>	I	1
<i>vøllur</i>	II	4
<i>lutur</i>	III	4
<i>ketil</i>	IV	2c
<i>akur</i>	V	2a
<i>faðir</i>	VI	irregular
<i>tími</i>	X	5
<i>rakstur</i>	absent	2b
<i>trælur</i>	absent	3
<i>bóndi</i>	absent	6

Enger does not explain why he considers *faðir* one of the “main declensions”. Not only is the word irregular, it is essentially absent from the spoken language. Even on a very expansive view of what constitutes an inflection class, *faðir* seems like a questionable inclusion. Also unexplained is the absence from Enger’s analysis of inflection classes 2b, 3, and 6 in Thráinsson et al.’s (2004) system. These classes are represented by the words *rakstur* ‘operation’, *trælur* ‘slave’, and *bóndi* ‘farmer’ and have the following inflections (Table 4).

Table 4: Additional masculine inflection classes.

	<i>rakstur</i>	<i>trælur</i>	<i>bóndi</i>
NOM.SG	–	ur	i
ACC.SG	–	–	a
DAT.SG	i	i	a
GEN.SG	ar	s	a
NOM.PL/ACC.PL	ar	ir	ur
DAT.PL	um	um	um
GEN.PL	a	a	a

Since the inflection class *bóndi* only comprises two words (*bóndi* and *frændi* ‘relative’), Enger may have regarded it as too insignificant to include. No such reason can apply to *trælur*, which Thráinsson et al. (2004: 81) describe as “a common and relatively straightforward paradigm”. The *rakstur* paradigm is less common but if that is the reason why Enger excluded it from his discussion, it is certainly not mentioned explicitly.

One class of nouns yet to be discussed is deverbal agentive nominals ending in *ari*, such as *riðdari* ‘knight’. In the written language, these nouns are declined like *tími*, but this is not true for any colloquial variant. In Norðoyar and Eysturoy, they have the nominative/accusative plural ending *a*. Elsewhere, the ending is *ir* (Thráinsson et al. 2004: 353). To be sure, prescriptivist works for Faroese schoolchildren (e.g., Henriksen 1980: 13; Davidsen and Mikkelsen 1993: 188–189; Andreasen and Dahl 1997: 72–73) caution against the spoken variants and this may have had some effect on educated speech (cf. Hagström 2005: 1757: “the tendency to alter speech in the direction of the written language is discernible also in morphology”).

One interesting paradigm which Thráinsson et al.’s handbook does not set up as an inflection class is found only in proper names. The name *Dávur* has the form *Dáva* in the oblique cases, and a number of other names (at least *Sjúrdur*, *Tróndur*, *Tóurur*) can take this inflection as well (see Hammershaimb 1891: lxxxii; Lockwood 1955: 29–30; Andreasen and Dahl 1997: 212). This pattern is an innovation in Faroese, with no corresponding declension in Old Norse. Since the pattern seems to introduce NBP/VC violations in the oblique cases, it is not obvious how NBP/VC proponents would explain it. It is unclear to me how widespread this declension is – it may have been largely suppressed by prescriptivists – and I will not treat it further here.

2.2 Neuter nouns in Faroese

Enger recognizes two classes of neuter nouns, represented by *reiður* ‘nest’ (VII) and *eyga* ‘eye’ (XI). Their inflections are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Faroese neuter declensions according to Enger (2013).

	<i>reiður</i>	<i>eyga</i> ^a
NOM.SG	–	a
ACC.SG	–	a
DAT.SG	i	a
GEN.SG	s	a
NOM.PL/ACC.PL	–	ur ^b
DAT.PL	um	um
GEN.PL	a	na

^aEnger consistently misspells *eyga* as *auga* and incorrectly gives the genitive plural ending as *a*. ^bThe written language maintains a distinction between *i(r)* and *u(r)* endings that does not correspond to any living dialect. The living dialects which do distinguish between *ir* and *ur* have mostly generalized *ir* as a plural ending. As far as the nominal endings go, the written language seems to correspond to certain late eighteenth-century dialects (Hagström 1967).

For the plural ending of *eyga*, Enger very reasonably chooses the spoken form *ur* rather than the Icelandicized *u* often found in the written language. But again, he has, without explanation, left out some inflection classes discussed in Thráinsson et al. (2004); see Table 6.:

Table 6: Comparison of neuter inflection classes.

Sample word	Enger (2013)	Thráinsson et al. (2004: 83–85)
<i>reiður</i>	VII	1b
<i>eyga</i>	XI	3
<i>barn</i>	absent	1a
<i>dømi</i>	absent	2

The *barn* class can be regarded as having the same affixes as the *reiður* class so its exclusion is warranted. But this is not the case for *dømi*, which inflects as in Table 7.

Table 7: Inflection of *dømi* ‘example’.

NOM.SG	<i>dømi</i>
ACC.SG	<i>dømi</i>
DAT.SG	<i>dømi</i>
GEN.SG	<i>dømis</i>
NOM.PL/ACC.PL	<i>dømir^a</i>
DAT.PL	<i>dømum</i>
GEN.PL	<i>døma</i>

^aThe *dømir* plural form is normal in the spoken language while the written language often has *dømi*.

This inflection class presents difficulties in extracting the inflectional endings. In this regard, Thráinsson et al. (2004: 84–85) offer a number of options. The first possibility they present is given here in column a of Table 8.

Table 8: Four possibilities for analysing the *dømi* paradigm.^a

	analysis a	analysis b	analysis c	analysis d
NOM.SG	–	i	–	–
ACC.SG	–	i	–	–
DAT.SG	–	i	i	i
GEN.SG	s	is	s	s
NOM/ACC.PL	r	ir	r	ir
DAT.PL	um	um	um	um
GEN.PL	a	a	a	a

^aNote that Thráinsson et al. (2004: 84–85) do not explicitly set up these four analyses. Analysis a is what they have in their table, and then the short comments following it suggest these different options.

But in the next breath, they talk about “-ir in the plural”, which would imply analysis b. And then they state the following: “Whether the word-final -i in the Dsg. is the inflectional ending or the stem-final -i is not particularly important in this connection” (Thráinsson et al. 2004: 85). This raises the spectre of analysis c.¹ It is all well and good for handbook authors to say that choices like this are “not particularly important” as they can analyse

¹ Petersen (2009: 202–209) has a related discussion. Concerned with the problem of extracting grammatical gender from inflectional endings, he assumes that words like *dømi* have a null ending in the nominative singular.

their paradigms in whichever way seems most pedagogically effective, aesthetically pleasing, or historically accurate. But for the morphologist tasked with testing universal claims, it is critical to choose the analysis which best fits with speakers' competence. Unfortunately, I have no solid method available for doing this.

One principle might be to minimize stem allomorphy, which would bring us to analysis b, where the only allomorph is *døm*. But this might be felt to obscure the connection between the *dømi* class and the *reiður/barn* class. We could, then, assume two allomorphs *dømi* and *døm*. If we assume that *dømi* is present when possible and *døm* elsewhere, we get analysis a. This has the virtue of making the nominative, accusative, and genitive singular endings of the *dømi* class identical to those of the *barn/reiður* class. But we could try to increase the resemblance with the *barn/reiður* class even further, and assume the *døm* allomorph for the dative singular, which brings us to analysis c. A possible objection to analyses a and c is that they assume a nominative/accusative plural ending of *r*, something found in no other inflection class. If we, instead, assume a *døm* allomorph for this case, we get the plural ending *ir*, which is frequent in other inflection classes. This brings us to something like analysis d but this is open to the charge of opportunism and unlikely to persuade everyone. I am, thus, at a loss. I don't feel I can confidently dismiss any possibility so I will proceed with all of them in mind.

I might now be accused of wasting time on nitpicking, but I think the issues here are close to the heart of the matter. How do we determine affixes? How do we delineate inflection classes? If a theory such as the NBP/VC is to be tested, these questions cannot be handwaved away or left to each researcher's whim. Nor is *dømi* an unusual example. Confronted with issues of this kind in Latvian, Carstairs-McCarthy notes:

[I]t is entirely plausible that stem-affixes boundaries should not always be easily locatable by the language-learning child's brain. Alternative analyses may plausibly coexist, temporarily and perhaps even permanently, in one speaker's morphological competence. (Carstairs-McCarthy 2014:71)

I agree that this is possible, perhaps even likely. But the potential for multiple analyses greatly complicates the task of empirically testing the NBP.

2.3 Feminine nouns in Faroese

Enger recognizes three classes of feminine nouns, represented by *ár* 'oar' (VIII), *ætt* 'generation' (IX), and *tunga* 'tongue' (XII); see Table 9.

Table 9: Faroese feminine declensions according to Enger (2013: 361).

	<i>ár</i>	<i>ætt</i>	<i>tunga</i>
NOM.SG	–	–	a
ACC.SG	–	–	u
DAT.SG	–	–	u
GEN.SG	ar	ar	u
NOM.PL/ACC.PL	ar	ir	ur
DAT.PL	um	um	um
GEN.PL	a	a	a ^a

^aSome words of this class have *na* in the genitive plural; e.g., *søga* – *sagna* (Thráinsson et al. 2004: 90). It would be reasonable to split the *tunga* class in two on this basis, but since neither Enger (2013) nor the handbook does so, I will refrain from it as well.

Yet again, Thráinsson et al.’s (2004) handbook has more inflection classes (see Table 10).

Table 10: Comparison of feminine inflection classes.

Sample word	Enger (2013)	Thráinsson et al. (2004: 86–91)
<i>ár</i>	VIII	1a
<i>ætt</i>	IX	2
<i>tunga</i>	XII	5
<i>livur</i>	absent	1b
<i>nátt</i>	absent	3
<i>mús</i>	absent	4
<i>ævi</i>	absent	6

The *livur* ‘liver’ class has the same endings as the *ár* class and can reasonably be merged with it for our purposes. But there is no obvious reason for leaving out *nátt* ‘night’, *mús* ‘mouse’, and *ævi* ‘life span’. They inflect as in Table 11.

Table 11: Additional feminine inflection classes.

	<i>nátt</i>	<i>mús</i>	<i>ævi</i>
NOM.SG	–	–	ævi
ACC.SG	–	–	ævi
DAT.SG	–	–	ævi
GEN.SG	ar	ar	ævis
NOM.PL/ACC.PL	ur	–	ævir
DAT.PL	um	um	ævum
GEN.PL	a	a	æva

In the analysis of *ævi*, it is, again, rather unclear what the inflectional endings are. The following possibilities, as presented in Table 12, can be envisaged.

Table 12: Three possibilities for analysing the *ævi* paradigm (Þráinsson et al. (2004)).

	analysis a	analysis b	analysis c
NOM.SG	–	i	–
ACC.SG	–	i	–
DAT.SG	–	i	–
GEN.SG	s	is	s
NOM.PL/ACC.PL	ir	ir	r
DAT.PL	um	um	um
GEN.PL	a	a	a

Þráinsson et al. (2004: 90) present an analysis of type *a* but concede that other possibilities exist and that the choice is “unimportant for our purposes”.

The genitive singular needs some discussion. Despite the existence of compounds like *ellisheim* (‘nursing home’, from *elli* ‘old age’, which declines like *ævi*), Þráinsson et al. are reluctant to concede an *s*-genitive for this inflection class, preferring to analyse the *s* in *ellisheim* as a “linking phoneme” used to form compounds. But since the primary purpose of the Faroese genitive is to form compounds, this distinction seems undermotivated. I side with Petersen and Adams (2009: 43) in analysing the genitive of *elli* as *ellis*.

Some (but not all) feminine names ending in *n* have a special declension with *a* in the accusative and *i* in the dative (*Elin*, *Guðrun*, *Katrin*, *Kirstin*, *Malan*, *Marin*, *Marjun*, *Sólrun*). This pattern is an innovation in Faroese, but it is not set up as an inflection class in the handbook and I will not further discuss it (see Lockwood 1955: 33; Andreassen and Dahl 1997: 212; Andreassen et al. 2000: 34).

2.4 Analysis of the Faroese data

In the preceding sections, I have attempted to establish a reasonably careful and consistent picture of the Faroese nominal inflection patterns. By excluding patterns found only in highly infrequent words (e.g., *faðir*, *bónði*), I arrive at the sixteen patterns presented in Table 13.

We recall that the NBP/VC stipulates that:

If there are several affixes signalling the same morphosyntactic value, either all of them or all but one must also signal inflection class uniquely. (Enger 2013: 348)

Table 13: Faroese inflection classes, a new analysis.

	<i>hundur</i>	<i>vøllur</i>	<i>ketil</i>	<i>tími</i>	<i>rakstur</i>	<i>trælur</i>	<i>riddari</i>
NOM.SG	ur	ur	–	i	–	ur	i
ACC.SG	–	–	–	a	–	–	a
DAT.SG	i	i	i	a	i	i	a
GEN.SG	s	ar	s	a	ar	s	a
NOM.PL/ACC.PL	ar	ir	ar	ar	ar	ir	ir/a
DAT.PL	um	um	um	um	um	um	um
GEN.PL	a	a	a	a	a	a	a
	<i>Reiður</i>	<i>eyga</i>	<i>dømi</i>				
NOM.SG	–	a	–/i				
ACC.SG	–	a	–/i				
DAT.SG	i	a	–/i				
GEN.SG	s	a	s/is				
NOM.PL/ACC.PL	–	ur	r/ir				
DAT.PL	um	um	um				
GEN.PL	a	na	a				
	<i>Ár</i>	<i>ætt</i>	<i>tunga</i>	<i>nátt</i>	<i>mús</i>	<i>ævi</i>	
NOM.SG	–	–	a	–	–	–/i	
ACC.SG	–	–	u	–	–	–/i	
DAT.SG	–	–	u	–	–	–/i	
GEN.SG	ar	ar	u	ar	ar	s/is	
NOM.PL/ACC.PL	ar	ir	ur	ur	–	r/ir	
DAT.PL	um	um	um	um	um	um	
GEN.PL	a	a	a	a	a	a	

When we test this principle against the data, it becomes immediately clear that it does not hold. In the nominative/accusative plural, we have five inflection classes with the affix *ar*, which must then be regarded as the default affix for this value. If the NBP/VC is to hold up, every other affix must be unique to its inflection class; however, this is not the case. There are at least three inflection classes with the ending *ir* and another three with the ending *ur*. In their most modern pronunciation, the *ir* and *ur* plural endings have merged but this leaves us with an equally unacceptable result for the NBP/VC.

When confronted with problems of this kind, the proponents of the NBP/VC have argued that while the principle may not hold for the inflection system as a whole, they argue that singular and plural could each be considered as separate domains. We can test this weaker claim against the Faroese inflections. If we define inflection classes solely on the basis of the plural endings, we get only the five or six classes in Table 14, depending on the analysis of *dømi* and *ævi*:

Table 14: Faroese inflection classes defined solely on the basis of the plural.

	<i>hundur etc.</i>	<i>vøllur etc.</i>	<i>tunga etc.</i>	<i>eyga</i>	<i>reiður</i>	<i>dømi/ævi</i>
NOM.PL/ACC.PL	ar	ir	ur	ur	–	r/ir
DAT.PL	um	um	um	um	um	um
GEN.PL	a	a	a	na	a	a

We can say that the Faroese plural upholds the NBP/VC though perhaps in a somewhat trivial way since two of the cases (DAT.PL and GEN.PL) have the same endings for almost all nouns. The singular is more interesting and here we end up with the nine classes shown in Table 15:

Table 15: Faroese inflection classes defined solely on the basis of the singular.

	<i>hundur/trælur</i>	<i>vøllur</i>	<i>rakstur</i>	<i>ketil/reiður</i>	<i>tími/riddari</i>
NOM.SG	ur	ur	–	–	i
ACC.SG	–	–	–	–	a
DAT.SG	i	i	i	i	a
GEN.SG	s	ar	ar	s	a
	<i>eyga</i>	<i>dømi/ævi</i>	<i>ár/ætt/nátt/mús</i>	<i>tunga</i>	
NOM.SG	a	–/i	–	a	
ACC.SG	a	–/i	–	u	
DAT.SG	a	–/i	–	u	
GEN.SG	a	s/is	ar	u	

The NBP/VC cannot be maintained for three cases of the singular. In the nominative, we have two classes with *ur* and two with *a*. Depending on the analysis of *dømi* and *ævi*, we might also have two classes with *i*. For the dative we have four or five classes with *i* and two with *a*. However, Enger (2013: 357) proposes an analysis of *eyga* without inflectional endings in the singular, removing these problems. This analysis may be preferable, but in order to establish universal laws about affixes and inflection classes we need a clear theory on how to establish affixes and inflection classes in the first place.

However we choose to analyse *eyga* and *dømi*, we cannot avoid a breach of the NBP/VC in the genitive. At least two inflection classes have an *s*-ending while at least three have an *ar*-ending. Enger concedes this point but argues that it is a “highly desirable result” since the Faroese genitive has a weak status in the modern language. He notes that “the case that may seem problematic for the NBP/VC (at least at first sight) is exactly the one that speakers have eliminated”

(Enger 2013: 357).² Enger appears to be suggesting here that there is a causal relationship between the NBP/VC violation and the weakening of the genitive as a morphosyntactic category. This is a bold idea. One would think that the most straightforward way for languages to correct NBP/VC violations (which might arise from phonological developments or other means) would be to modify the relevant inflectional endings. A wholesale abandonment of a morphosyntactic category seems like an extreme reaction. I find it more likely that the weakening of the Faroese genitive is motivated by syntactic rather than morphological reasons (cf. the discussion in Thráinsson et al. 2004: 248–252).

As an alternative to splitting the inflection classes by number, Enger looks at the classes for each gender separately. Since NBP/VC violations require at least four inflection classes, we do not need examine the neuter any further, as it only has three. The feminine has six inflection classes but the results depend on the analysis of *ævi*, which I will not further discuss. The masculine inflection classes (Table 16) merit a second look.

Table 16: Faroese masculine inflection classes.

	<i>hundur</i>	<i>vøllur</i>	<i>ketil</i>	<i>tími</i>	<i>rakstur</i>	<i>trælur</i>	<i>riddari</i>
NOM.SG	ur	ur	–	i	–	ur	i
ACC.SG	–	–	–	a	–	–	a
DAT.SG	i	i	i	a	i	i	a
GEN.SG	s	ar	s	a	ar	s	a
NOM.PL/ACC.PL	ar	ir	ar	ar	ar	ir	ir/a
DAT.PL	um	um	um	um	um	um	um
GEN.PL	a	a	a	a	a	a	a

With more than one unique ending, the genitive singular, again, does not meet the NBP/VC. But the nominative/accusative plural violates the principle as well, with *ar* and *ir* both having multiple representatives. Enger fails to note this because he does not include the *trælur* inflection class.

² The same breach of the NBP/VC in the genitive occurs in the corresponding Icelandic inflection classes. Possibly, Enger would argue that the Icelandic genitive is, like its Faroese counterpart, ultimately doomed. To be sure, there are some contemporary indications that the Icelandic genitive is in decline (Kjartansson 1979; Svavarsdóttir 1994; Kjartansson 1999; Þorsteinsdóttir 2009). These claims should, however, not be blown out of proportion. A study by Friðriksson (2011) found a relative frequency of non-standard usage at 1.3% in the spoken language and 0.7% in the written language and “the majority of the instances of deviation from the standard appear simply to be the odd slip of the tongue or the pen rather than any indication of a systematic change of any sort” (Friðriksson 2011:36).

After analysing the inflection classes first by number and then by gender, Enger tries analysing the data by considering number and gender simultaneously. He notes: “Once we allow *both* gender and number as factors relevantly correlating with declensions, the remnant blurring in the genitive disappears as well” (Enger 2013: 362). This, however, is only true if we omit the *rakstur* inflection class, which Enger never discusses.

In sum, the Faroese data provide little support for the NBP/VC; the whole theory, therefore, seems to make weak and vague claims and predictions. Furthermore, several questions remain open, which complicate the analysis: What inflection classes are to be included? In cases like *eyga* or *dømi*, in what principled way do we decide what the affixes are? Should inflection classes be grouped on the basis of number (singular vs. plural), on the basis of gender, or on a combination of number and gender? What do we learn from the fact that in some combinations, the Faroese data will violate the NBP/VC in multiple ways and in some only the genitive will be affected? It also appears that several factors complicate the analysis of Faroese: the marginal status of the genitive, the morphological differences between the dialects and the artificial nature of the written norm. I believe that Icelandic presents a better test case for the NBP/VC.

3 Icelandic

Icelandic is a language spoken by some 300,000 people in Iceland. It is closely related to Faroese but has a somewhat richer and more conservative morphology. The Icelandic nominal genitive is a much more active part of the language than the vestigial Faroese one. The written norm corresponds well morphologically with the spoken language and there are next to no dialectal differences. A full analysis of Icelandic inflection classes would test the reader’s patience, so I have chosen to focus on the facts which are most relevant to the NBP/VC.

On its weakest interpretation, the NBP/VC should apply only within the domain of a particular number combined with a particular gender. Using this interpretation, Carstairs-McCarthy (2010: 231) argues that essentially all apparent problems in Icelandic disappear. But Carstairs-McCarthy’s data is incomplete. I will now look at two particular cases.

3.1 Icelandic female names

In dealing with inflection classes defined solely on the basis of the singular for a particular gender, I find it natural to discuss proper names. Female names are of

feminine gender and usually only occur in the singular, so I will build my discussion on that basis.

The overwhelming majority of Icelandic female names fall neatly into five inflection classes.³ To get an idea of the prevalence of each class, I have examined lists of the 100 most common first names and 100 most common second names in contemporary Iceland.⁴ After discarding the many names common to both lists, I ended up with 136 regularly inflected⁵ names, distributed as shown in Table 17.

Table 17: Frequency of common Icelandic female names by inflection class.

<i>Björk</i>	20 %
<i>Hildur</i>	8 %
<i>Steinunn</i>	11 %
<i>Sigrún</i>	18 %
<i>Helga</i>	43 %

The inflection of a name is not predictable by phonological factors.⁶ To illustrate the variety involved, Table 18 shows five sample names from each inflection class.

Table 18: Sample female names by inflection class.

<i>Björk, Rakel, Ástrós, Eir, Rut</i>
<i>Hildur, Aðalheiður, Unnur, Sigríður, Ilmur</i>
<i>Steinunn, Margrét, Þórdís, Agnes, Berglind</i>
<i>Sigrún, Katrín, Björg, Elín, Dagný</i>
<i>Helga, Anna, Halldóra, Magnea, Brynja</i>

³ Convenient (but not error-free) handbooks of Icelandic inflections include Kress (1982) and Thomson (1987). The most theoretically ambitious attempt to define the nominal inflection classes is Svavarsdóttir (1993). The most thorough overview of Icelandic morphology, with copious references to previous works, is Kvaran (2005).

⁴ The lists I used are available online from Statistics Iceland under <http://www.statice.is/Statistics/Population/Names>, as “Second names in double names of females 1 January 2005” and “Female names 1 January 2014”.

⁵ The only common name which arguably has an irregular inflection is *Sif* nominative/accusative/dative *Sif*, genitive *Sifjar*). I omitted this name from my analysis.

⁶ This is not to deny that there are some tendencies, e.g., monosyllabic names tend to fall into the *Björk* class.

Feminine nouns in Icelandic always have identical accusative and dative forms. The endings of the five classes are as shown in Table 19.

Table 19: Inflectional endings of female names (with each class marked by a representative name).

	<i>Björk</i>	<i>Hildur</i>	<i>Steinunn</i>	<i>Sigrún</i>	<i>Helga</i>
NOM	–	ur	–	–	a
ACC/DAT	–	i	i	u	u
GEN	ar	ar	ar	ar	u

We can see immediately that the accusative/dative endings violate the NBP/VC: two of the classes have an *i*-ending and two others have an *u*-ending. How could this violation be explained by the NBP/VC?

One possibility would be to claim that one of the five classes is somehow too insignificant to matter. If it contains only a few names those might count as irregular, rather than constituting a proper inflection class. As we saw earlier, the *Hildur* class accounts for only 8% of the most common names. It would be misguided, though, to think of this class as too small to count. Recall that the NBP/VC only makes any predictions if there are four or more inflection classes. With five inflection classes, the smallest must contain fewer than 20% of the words. If we decide that only inflection classes including more than 10% of domain words are significant enough, we have further restricted the claim so much as to make it nearly meaningless. In this, I fully agree with Cameron-Faulkner and Carstairs-McCarthy (2000: 819), who note that “the NBP is meant to be tested on the basis of entire inflection class systems, not of subsets of such systems created by pruning away small or unproductive classes”.

Another solution is proposed by Carstairs-McCarthy. He argues that for feminine nouns without *a* in the nominative the *u*-ending in the accusative/dative “appears ‘primarily’ on stems with the abstract-noun-forming suffix *ing* or *ung*” (Carstairs-McCarthy 2010: 230). This allows him to suggest that “for some speakers, a syntagmatic factor (the identity of the preceding suffix) cross-cuts and overrides paradigmatic factors influencing vocabulary choice” (Carstairs-McCarthy 2010: 230–231). This explanation could apply to common nouns like *bygging* or *kenning*, but it ignores the significant number of proper names that have this inflection (the *Sigrún* class above).⁷ As the examples in Table 18 show,

⁷ Less crucially, the situation with the common nouns is more complicated than Carstairs-McCarthy’s source (Kress 1982: 66) implies. There is some variation between speakers, but in typical modern speech all feminine nouns ending in *-ing* have *u* in the accusative and dative

these names are not limited to a particular suffix. As far as I can see, this fact renders the proposed explanation untenable.

A third possible response to the data would be to accept that the NBP/VC is violated and then predict that this should cause the system to change or collapse. So we should ask: Are there any incipient changes in one of the inflection classes which could alter the system? In fact, there is a well-documented tendency for the *Sigrún* class to replace its genitive ending of *ar* with *u*. In a recent test, a sentence containing a *Sigrún* word with a *u* genitive was tried on speakers from different age groups with the results shown in Table 20 (Þorsteinsdóttir 2009: 179).

Table 20: Experiment on *u* genitive for the *Sigrún* inflection class.

Age group	Speakers accepting sentence	Speakers rejecting sentence
50+	1	14
25–50	7	8
15–25	12	3

This innovation does not remove the NBP/VC violation in the accusative/dative, but it does add a new violation to the genitive. If the *Sigrún* and *Helga* classes were in the process of merging, this would fit well with the NBP/VC, but this is not what is happening: there is no observed tendency for the *Sigrún* words to add a nominative *a* or for the *Helga* words to drop theirs. Nor is there any tendency for the *Sigrún* and *Steinunn* classes to merge, which would be another solution.

Finally, a reviewer suggests that *a* in the *Helga* class could be considered a part of the stem. On this view, the incipient changes in the genitive of the *Sigrún* class would in fact be a merger between these two classes and the resulting system would be free of NBP/VC violations. This analysis elegantly “solves” the problem but there is no independent motivation for *a* being part of the stem, nor am I aware of any previous morphological description of Icelandic taking that path.

Carstairs-McCarthy (2014: 71) is clearly aware of the possible methodological pitfalls in cases like this and asks: “Could we not ‘save’ the Principle at the cost of making it empirically vacuous, by counting any inconvenient affix as part of the stem?” This is a valid question and gets to the heart of my criticism.

while the words ending in *-ung* need to be treated on a case-by-case basis. For example, the noun *sundrung* ‘division’ often adds a *u* in the accusative/dative but the noun *nýjung* ‘novelty’ almost never does so. It is sometimes stated that *u* is found in the dative and not the accusative (Thomson 1987: 167), but this is not true for the modern language.

Carstairs-McCarthy argues that children’s brains opportunistically analyse inflection patterns to fit with convenient structural principles, such as the NBP/VC. This might well be true and if the NBP/VC were a proven fact it might justify an analysis which is ruthlessly opportunistic in counting affixes as part of the stem. But we cannot use the principle to prove the principle so we would need some independent evidence.

3.2 Icelandic strong masculine nouns

Icelandic has a great variety of inflectional patterns for masculine nouns. Limiting the discussion to masculine, singular nouns ending with *ur* in the nominative and zero in the accusative, we still must reckon with four inflection classes (see Tables 21 and 22), which I have given arbitrary names for convenience:

Table 21: Four inflection classes of strong masculine nouns.

	I	II	III	IV
NOM	ur	ur	ur	ur
ACC	–	–	–	–
DAT	i	–	i	–
GEN	s	s	ar	ar

Table 22: Sample nouns by inflection class.

Class I:	<i>hestur, flokkur, garður, hundur, gangur</i>
Class II:	<i>dalur, hrekkur, skítur, drengur, gripur</i>
Class III:	<i>fríður, skurður, kostur, fundur, vinur</i>
Class IV:	<i>staður, salur, grautur, drykkur, munur</i>

The genitive shows two classes with an *s*-ending and two classes with an *ar*-ending, a straightforward breach of the NBC/VC. As a glance at the sample words will confirm, the variation in the dative and the genitive cannot be predicted by the phonological shape of the word (though there are some tendencies; see Magnússon 1984).

Aware that the Icelandic genitive singular presents certain problems, Carstairs-McCarthy believes that the case nevertheless “illustrates the sort of contribution that vocabular clarity can make towards understanding observed vacillations within the system” and that we can “go so far as to predict vacillations that should be likely to arise”. He goes on to make such a prediction:

So one is inclined to predict that the brain will be tempted to treat *s* and *ar* as differentiated by gender within a single large class ..., *ar* being for feminines only and *s* for non-feminines. If so, masculines that are indicated as having *ar* in the genitive singular ... should tend to replace it with *s*. ... Icelandic may be on the way towards reducing the number of singular-only vocabularies by combining the first two of them. (Carstairs-McCarthy 2010: 243)

It is praiseworthy to make empirical predictions grounded in a particular theoretical approach, but one wonders what sort of time-frame is to be expected here. As far as I can see, Icelandic inflectional classes have defied the NBP/VC for a thousand years and are not likely to align themselves with the theory anytime soon. Indeed, some developments since Old Icelandic seem to go in the opposite direction to Carstairs-McCarthy's prediction: some masculine names previously ending with *s* in the genitive now usually take an *ar* ending (e.g., *Höskuldur*).

4 Conclusions

I have argued that the No Blur Principle/Vocabular Clarity approach does not hold in a meaningful way for Faroese inflection classes. For the Icelandic data, I have tested the NBP/VC in its weakest form on the feminine and masculine singular and found that it does not make correct predictions. In each case, I have tried to make reasonable assumptions on how NBP/VC should be applied but many issues of interpretation arise.

For future work in the area it is crucial that NBP/VC proponents clarify how to delineate an inflection class. The main difficulty is to find a principled way in which inflectional affixes are to be distinguished from stem allomorphy. If NBP/VC aspires to be a theory that makes empirical claims, it needs to be formulated clearly enough to be falsifiable.

I am not optimistic that the NBP/VC can be salvaged. What are the implications if it cannot? Enger suggests that the alternative is that “anything goes”:

An important issue in this respect is whether speakers are able to learn any arbitrary indexing of stems and exponent sets. Obviously, one possible answer is “yes”; that is, “anything goes”. In principle, such an answer is a somewhat unattractive hypothesis in any field of study and unlikely to trigger much interesting research on any issue. In practice, the idea that “anything goes” would predict that inflectional resources can be distributed in lavish and unpredictable ways ... Psychologists as well find the “anything goes” idea questionable in that they tend to assume that there must be some constraints on learning and memorization – including inflectional morphology. A more interesting alternative therefore consists in a restriction on affixal inflection, viz. the No Blur Principle (NBP) or Vocabular Clarity (VC). (Enger 2013: 346)

In my view, we should not set up a dichotomy between “anything goes” and the NBP/VC. If the NBP/VC turns out to be falsified by the evidence, we are not forced to conclude that there are no constraints to morphological complexity. Surely, there are limits to what sort of system a human can easily learn. But it is not clear that those limits are based on absolute rules such that one type of system is learnable and a slightly different system is unlearnable. Rather, we must reckon with different degrees of complexity. If “blurring” of inflectional affixes plays a role in determining the complexity of a system, it may be one factor among many in a structure that may be better described in quantitative rather than qualitative terms. The proponents of NBP/VC have already moved some distance in this direction. Enger notes:

While Baerman presents a sound counter-example to NBP/VC from Nuer (a Nilo-Saharan language), it is not sufficient cause for rejecting the VC as long as we accept that empirical universals tend to have counter-examples and morphological universals are few and far between (Enger 2013: 365)

Carstairs-McCarthy (2014: 59) also seems persuaded that Baerman’s (2012) counterexample has some validity. In the face of this, the position he stakes out is as follows:

[T]he Principle deserves a place in an overall theory of how inflectional morphology operates, but its effects are obscured or overridden in some circumstances that are not yet well understood. (Carstairs-McCarthy 2014: 61)

While this may be an acceptable position to take, considering the difficulties the NBP/VC has encountered so far in a variety of languages, it is not clear that the principle can be said to be empirically established, even as “a universal tendency” (Enger 2013: 365). But this does not necessarily entail that chaos reigns. Any new or refined proposals on the limitations of morphological complexity should be welcomed and evaluated with an open mind.

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