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## Tonality in earlier Icelandic

**Abstract:** The paper reports evidence from poetics and poetry that in pre-reformation Icelandic a boundary signal was present in words historically corresponding to accent 1 and *stød*-words in modern Scandinavian. This phenomenon disappeared in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Icelandic, but its existence at earlier stages sheds light on the origin and even the synchronic characteristics of the Scandinavian phenomena.

### 1. Introduction

In the long history of research on the origin of the distinction between Scandinavian accent 1 and accent 2 and the *stød*-phenomenon in Danish two historical interpretations have been most prominent. One proposal traces the phenomenon back to Proto-Nordic times, the time of the syncope, and the other looks for the origins in Common Nordic times after the year 1000. According to the former hypothesis, the distinction arose as a side effect of the great syncope. Words that lost a syllable in the syncope supposedly developed accent 2 whereas accent 1 characterised words which were unaffected (cf. Oftedal, 1952; Riad, 2014: 235). In the other scenario, the distinction is seen as having arisen later, namely in connection with the development of new disyllables in Common Nordic (medieval) times, through epenthesis and the addition of the definite article.

In the following we adopt the second hypothesis, based among other things on arguments put forth by Oftedal (1952), who says:

“The Scand. dialects of the tenth century ... probably had an accentuation characterizing words as opposed to sequences of words, a ‘Grenzsignal’ ... All polysyllabic words ... had the non-distinctive accent which became Accent 2, while all sequences of one stressed syllable plus one or more stressless or weakly stressed syllables not belonging to the same word, had the accentuation which later developed into Accent 1 ...” (Oftedal, 1952: 221)

In this view a boundary signal was retained in originally monosyllabic words like Icelandic *fagr* > M(odern)I(celandic) *fagur*, M(odern)Sw(edish) *fager* ‘fair’ becoming disyllabic through vowel epenthesis, and the same is true of the definite form *hest#inn* > MI *hestinn* MSw *hästen* ‘the horse’, which became normal disyllables when the affixed article developed from being a clitic into a normal inflectional ending.

As is well known, Modern Icelandic and Faroese do not make use of the accent distinctions. This raises the question of whether the distinction originally arose in

these languages and was later lost, or whether it never developed, and the other side of the same question is how to explain the rise and (remarkable) stability of this marginal feature in an otherwise unstable and heterogeneous area like the mainland Scandinavian linguistic area.

Our findings, described below, suggest that Old Icelandic indeed had some tonal features that correspond to the distinctions that lead to the development of the *stød* in Danish and the tonal distinction in Swedish and Norwegian dialects, but that these distinctions disappeared or were not phonologized in the systematic way that they did in the sister tongues. We base this conclusion on evidence on the one hand from the 13<sup>th</sup> century Third Grammatical Treatise and on the other from late medieval Icelandic poetry. The crucial time in this development is the quantity shift and reorganisation of Icelandic quantity and phonotactics which occurred in or around the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2. Evidence from medieval Icelandic scholarship

The Third Grammatical Treatise (TGT), written by Ólafr Þórðarson, Snorri Sturluson's nephew, is sometimes taken to show that 13<sup>th</sup> c. Icelandic had a tonal opposition, similar to the Scandinavian accent distinction (see e.g. Myrvoll & Skomedal, 2010). This relates to several comments, describing what the author calls *hljóðs grein* 'sound distinction', some sort of prosodic property with three values: (*hvöss* 'sharp'), (*þung* 'heavy'), (*umbeygilig* 'bent, bendable'). This is obviously an attempt at applying to Icelandic the distinction made by Greco-Roman scholarship between the three accents or tones, acute, grave and circumflex. The 'sound distinction' is mentioned in several places in the treatise, including the following passage (our italics):

*Hvöss hljóðs grein er sú, er skjótliga er fram færð með upphöldnu hljóði sem þessi samstafa, hvat. Þung hljóðs grein er sú, er af lítillátu hljóði hefz ok dregz niðr í enn lægra hljóð sem hin fyrsta samstafa í þessu nafni hareysti. Umbeygilig hljóðs-grein er sú, er hefz af lítillátu hljóði ok þenz upp sem hvöss hljóðs-grein, en fellr niðr at lyktum sem þung hljóðs-grein svá sem þetta nafn hraustr.* (Jónsson, 1927: 24–25.)

A sharp (*acute*) accent is one which is quickly produced with an upheld sound like this syllable, *hvat* 'what'. A heavy (*grave*) accent is one which starts from a humble sound and drags down to an even lower sound like the first syllable in this name (*noun*), *hareysti* 'noise (literally: loud-vocalisation)'. A bent (*circumflex*) accent is one which starts with a humble sound and inflates like a sharp accent, but falls down in the end like a grave accent as in this name, *hraustr* 'healthy'.

Although there is doubt about how exactly to interpret the description of the Icelandic examples, it is clear that the author is referring to prosody or tonal pat-

terns and trying to correlate them to the classical distinctions. And regardless of whether this in any way fits the structure of Icelandic data, some of the examples which the author provides, illustrating the poetic use of these phenomena, may give an insight into the tonal structure of 13<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic. One of the examples is the following:

(1)

Um hljóðs greina skipti verður sem Einar kvað ('An interchange (or substitution) of sound distinctions may occur as Einar composed'):

Víst erumz hermd á hesti  
hefir fljóð ef vill góðan.

(Jónsson, 1927: 45)

Explaining the meaning of this couplet Ólafr tells us that the text is not to be taken literally, and there is a twist based on rephrasing and sound distinctions (*með sundrtekningum ok hljóðs greinum*). Thus *víst erumz hermd á hesti* 'certainly I hate a horse' can be paraphrased as: *legg ek á jó reiði þokka* 'I have angry feelings (*reiði þokka*) toward a horse (*jór*)' (literally: 'lay I on horse anger feeling'). But this may be phrased differently as: *legg ek á Jóreiði þokka góðan* (with the addition of *góðan* from the end of the second line) 'I have warm feelings (*góðan þokka*) toward *Jóreiði* (a woman's name)'. This word play is based on the similarity between *á jó* (on horse-ACC) *reiði* (anger-GEN) *þokka* (feeling) and *á* (on) *Jóreiði* (a woman's name) *þokka* (feeling) [which is good]. These two phrases would have been distinguishable with the help of intonation or accentual structure. And the poetic riddle goes on regarding the line *hefir fljóð ef vill* 'the woman may be had, if one wants', which is paraphrasable as *konu má ná* 'a woman may be acquired'. But with a different prosody this can take the form: *konu Mána* (a man's name) 'Máni's wife'.

In the explanatory notes following the example, it is said that the usage or literary figure involves changes in meaning and punctuation, and crucially for us, *hljóðs grein*. Unfortunately it is not easy to make clear sense of the interpretation; manuscripts do not agree and the text may well be corrupt. But all in all, although the word play involved is extremely far-fetched, and the terminology not too clear, it is obvious that we are dealing with tonal phenomena or intonation. In particular the difference between *má ná* (may reach) and *Mána* (man's name, literally: moon-GEN) is significant, as we shall see.

Another example of tonal distinctions being played with in poetry involves a distinction between a definite form *á bæ#num* 'the farm' and a DAT.PL form *bæn+um* 'prayers', illustrating the barbarism of adding an accent:

(2)

Ef væri bil báru  
brunnins logs sú er unnum  
(opt geri ek orða skipti  
einrænliga) á bænum.

(Jónsson, 1927: 46)

'If the woman I love were at prayers / in the house – I often make private discourse'

The commentary says: *Hér er bænum sett fyrir bænum* 'Here *bænum* is replaced by *bænum*. According to this the definite form *bæ#num* (dat. of *bær* 'farm') had a different *hljóðs grein* 'sound distinction' from *bæn+um* (dat. pl. indefinite form of *bæn* 'prayer'), and the ambiguity is whether the woman is at prayers, or simply alone in the house (giving a chance for an amorous encounter). According to the diacritics used here, originally proposed by Ólsen (1884: 68), the acute accent replaces the circumflex. But this does not fit well with the introductory remark stating that a sound distinction is added. It should rather be the other way around, the grave accent being added to the sharp one, creating a circumflex. There is obviously some confusion here, and the manuscripts do not agree. The basic source of the problem in interpreting this is of course the ambiguity involved in the word play or punning. The text can be interpreted either way and we do not necessarily know which reading is to be considered basic, original or correct, and which is the "barbarism". But this does not mean that the testimony of the example is worthless: the forms *bæ#num* and *bæn+um* were close enough to be used for punning in this way, and at the same time they could be kept apart by a prosodic distinction, which, as we note, corresponds to the distinction between accent 2 and accent 1. (This distinction later disappeared, as we shall see, since the forms in question are totally homonymous in Modern Icelandic.)

We thus have in 13<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic two minimal pairs distinguished by tonal structure: *konu Mána* 'Máni's wife' vs. *konu má ná* 'woman may be had/reached', and *bæn+um* 'prayers' vs. *bæ#num* 'the farm'. We suggest that the definite form *bæ#num* had a juncture, signaled by a fall, which could be seen corresponding to what later became *stød* in Danish and accent 1 in Norwegian and Swedish. A similar fall was presumably also likely to show up optionally in a phrase like *má ná* with the two words uttered apart. On the other hand in disyllables like *bænum* and *Mána*, this fall from the accentual peak would have occurred later in the word, creating the seed for accent 2. This is illustrated in (3):

(3)

	Juncture (early fall)	No juncture (later fall)
a.	bæ # num 'the farm-DAT'	bæ.num 'prayers-DAT'
	H L (H L)	H L

- b. *má ná* 'can catch'      *Má.na* 'man's name'  
 HL (HL)                      H L

What happened in the definite form was that any optional stress that might have been on the original clitic was deleted, and the article became a normal inflectional ending, leaving the tonal pattern intact by tonal stability. (As regards the phrase *má ná*, both verbal forms would retain their stressability, and the infinitive *ná* may even have been stronger. But some phenomena in Old Icelandic poetry suggest that phrasal stress, unlike in Modern Icelandic, may have been left strong, which could mean that the first accent in a phrase was or could easily be stronger than its following sister.)

### 3. Evidence from late medieval Icelandic poetry

In Myrvoll and Skomedal's interpretation of the word play with *bæ#num* and *bæn+um* they suggest that the *dróttkvætt* meter (which is the form of the half stanza in (2)) does not allow the cadence of a verse to be filled by a word with accent 1 ("Óláfr reknar openbert með at versemålet krev tonem 2", Myrvoll & Skomedal, 2010: 90). As they point out, this is somewhat difficult to confirm for early poetry since the words which would test this constraint normally do not occur there. Nevertheless, the idea is intriguing and deserves further exploration.

If Old Icelandic had something resembling the Scandinavian tonal distinction, it should have had two main sources of disyllabic words with accent 1. Firstly, there are words with the suffixed article, such as *hest+inn*, 'the horse' and secondly there are words with an epenthetic vowel, such as *hestur* (< *hestr*) 'a horse'. The suffixed article is almost entirely absent in early poetry, not only in the cadence but anywhere in the line. The development which turned *hestr* into *hestur* only arose in Icelandic around the year 1300 so these words are also absent in early poetry.

To investigate Myrvoll and Skomedal's proposal of a tonality restriction in the cadence, we must turn to poetry from the 14<sup>th</sup> century and later. From the time period 1300 up until the reformation in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century we know of five *dróttkvætt* poems where there is a significant use of the epenthetic vowel or the suffixed article. The data are as follows:

(4)

Poem	Epenthesis	Epenthesis in cadence	Article	Article in cadence
Máriuvísur I	1	0	11	0
Vitnisvísur af Máriu	2	0	4	0
Pétursdrápa	10	0	11	1
Allra postula minnisvísur	1	0	3	0
Heimsósómi <sup>1</sup>	14	0	27	0

In a total of 84 cases of epenthesis or suffixed article there is only one which occurs in the cadence. This case is in *Pétursdrápa* 42.6 which has the word *dauðans* (“of the death”) in the cadence. This is not actually counterevidence against a tonality restriction since the word *dauða+ns* is disyllabic even without the addition of the article and thus should have accent 2. The data are, thus, consistent with Myrvoll and Skomedal’s proposal of a tonality restriction in the cadence.

Words with the suffixed article such as *manninn* ‘the person-ACC’, *grundin* ‘the ground’ and *bandið* ‘the band’ only occur line-internally but there is no general restriction against disyllabic words ending in *n* or *ð* in the cadence. Thus, words like *drottinn* ‘lord’, *hugsan* ‘thought’ and *bundið* ‘bound’ freely occur in the cadence. Furthermore, cadence words like *góligr* ‘glorious’ and *virðing* ‘veneration’ indicate that suffixed words are not banned from the cadence.

On a similar note, there is nothing wrong with words ending in *-ur* in the cadence, as long as the *u* did not arise by epenthesis. Words like *móður* ‘of a mother’ and *hálfur* ‘parts’ (plural of *hálf*) freely occur in the cadence while words like *svinnur* ‘wise’ and *bræður* ‘brothers’ only occur line-internally. The following lines illustrate these points:

(5)

*Pétursdrápa* 10.3 tveir **bræður** með tíri (epenthetic *ur*, always line internal)

*Máriuvísur* I 19.5 það hún mjúkláta **móður** (old *ur*, allowed in the cadence)

*Máriuvísur* I 22.7 **bandið** hvert af brúði (words like *band#ið* are always line internal)

*Pétursdrápa* 32.6 lund á himni **bundið** (past participles are allowed in the cadence)

1 *Heimsósómi* is edited in Thorgeirsson (2014). The other poems are edited in Clunies Ross (2007). The editors twice create an unmetrical cadence by emendation (*sendi* > \**sendur*; p. 815; *þandi* > \**þandur* p. 849).

A corpus of five poems may seem unimpressive but as it turns out the cadence restriction does not only hold in *dróttkvætt* but also in the *ferskeytt* meter, which replaced *dróttkvætt* as the bread-and-butter meter of Icelandic poetry around the year 1400. In a corpus of 9084 stanzas of pre-Reformation *ferskeytt* poetry there are thousands of line-internal examples of disyllabic words which should have accent 1. But in the cadence of the even lines these words do not occur, with a tiny number of largely explicable exceptions (Thorgeirsson, 2013:177–178; 225).

In modern Icelandic there is no distinction in pronunciation between words ending in *-ur /yr/* whether the *u* is originally epenthetic or not. The words *móður* ‘tired’ and *móður* ‘of mother’ are homonyms. Similarly, there is no distinction in pronunciation between the words *orðin* ‘the words’ and *orðin* ‘become-PAST.PARTICIPLE’. This is reflected in post-Reformation Icelandic poetry. In a corpus of 8626 stanzas from the period 1550–1950, there are hundreds of examples where words which should have accent 1 occur in the cadence (Thorgeirsson, 2013:184–188; 225).

Since pre-Reformation Icelandic poetry makes a distinction between words like *móður* ‘tired’ and *móður* ‘of mother’ as well as words like *orðin* ‘the words’ and *orðin* ‘(has) become’ this suggests that there was some distinction in the language itself. Since there is no distinction in the modern language and since poetry from the 17<sup>th</sup> century on does not uphold these distinctions, we may suggest that a phonological change occurred sometime around 1600.

#### 4. Toward a historical interpretation

So, did old or Old Norse/Icelandic have word accents? This is not our interpretation; we do not assume that Old Icelandic had a systematic or lexicalised tonal distinction of the Scandinavian type, but we have shown that utterances could show minimal distinctions based on the interplay between word phonology and intonation, which might have been lexicalised and become distinctive. Recalling the discussion at the end of Section 2, this may be associated with a final fall at the end of the stems of original monosyllables, which had become disyllabic. It is likely that this fall, which had its origin in intonation, was optional depending on phrasal stress relations, but the emergence of new disyllables opened up the possibility of this being lexicalised as a part of word phonological structure.

In other parts of Scandinavia, the low boundary marker or fall would remain due to tonal stability and lead to the accent opposition.<sup>2</sup> New disyllables like

2 We use the term tonal stability to refer to a phenomenon, known in other languages, where the prosodic or tonal pattern of word forms is retained in spite of changes in segmental or syllabic structure, cf. Iosad (2015, 2016).

fa<sup>1</sup>gr > fa<sup>1</sup>ger 'beautiful' and an<sup>1</sup>d+in 'the duck', with an early fall give MSw accent 1: 'fager and 'anden, whereas words like sumar<sup>1</sup> 'summer' and andi+n<sup>1</sup> 'the spirit' with a later fall get accent 2: MSw <sup>2</sup>sommar and <sup>2</sup>anden. With some minor changes in timing (anticipated or delayed peak alignment, cf. Ladd, 2008: 169 ff.), a situation like the one we propose for pre-reformation Icelandic could easily result in patterns like the one described by Bruce for central Swedish, where accent one has an earlier fall than accent 2.<sup>3</sup> This also provides a likely scenario for the emergence of Danish *stød* as an exaggerated fall in the accent 1 words. And we may assume that the rudiments of this structure formed the basis for the restriction against (potential) accent 1 words in trochaic endings in poetry in spite of their having become disyllabic by epenthesis or by the affixed article becoming a normal ending. But crucially, this restriction is abolished in Icelandic around the year 1600.

We obviously cannot, in this short paper, tell the whole story of the different historical development in the branches of North Germanic, but we suggest that two things must be kept in mind.

The relaxation of the old ban on accent 1 words in the trochaic cadence occurs close to or shortly after the time of the quantity shift, which in Icelandic involved, among other things, the elimination of vowel shortness responsible for the distinction between light and heavy syllables. This event can, again on the evidence of poetry, be dated to the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Árnason, 1980; Thorgeirsson, 2013). It is probably not a coincidence that the tonal distinction and the quantity distinction disappeared about the same time. The result of the quantity shift for Icelandic was what is called in Árnason (2011: 33–34) the 'new order', analysable in terms of metrical stress theory (Hayes, 1995) as moraic trochee. Phonotactically, this means that words have initial stress with heavy syllables, which can be followed by one or more unstressed ones, typically inflectional endings. But, unlike in many mainland dialects, there was no reduction to schwa, or even loss of the final unstressed vowels; the unstressed syllables remained intact, and as mentioned above, the epenthetic vowel and the new definite ending entered into a pre-existent system of ending vowels, originally /ɪ/, /ʊ/ and /a/, later /i/, /y/ and /a/ combined with a limited set of consonants, /n/ and /r/ among them, giving an inventory of ending formatives like /ɪn/, /yr/ and others (/ar/, /an/, /ym/ etc.,

3 " ... the basic accent I-contour [in prefocal position] is characterized by a fall from an Fo-maximum in the pre-stress vowel to an Fo-minimum in the stressed vowel, while the basic accent II-contour contains a fall from an Fo-maximum in the stressed vowel to an Fo-minimum in the post-stress vowel. The fall seems to be somewhat steeper for accent I than for accent II" (Bruce, 1977: 64).



cf. Arnason, 2011: 66–67).<sup>4</sup> These are the ending formatives used to maintain the inflectional paradigms of Modern Icelandic.

Many Scandinavian dialects underwent a quantity shift similar to the Icelandic one, but others have retained a distinction between heavy and light stress syllables (*kortstavighet*) (see e.g. Ivars, 1996; Monsson, 2012). And the relation between the strong or heavy vs. unstressed or reduced syllables was different. True, there was epenthesis in words like *fagr* > MSw. *fager* ‘fair’ and affixation in definite forms, but there also occurred a widespread neutralisation of vowel qualities in the unstressed syllables. This meant fewer distinctions in endings so that more information was concentrated in the stressed syllable (see e.g. Bandle, 1973/2011; Skautrup, 1968 I: 224–227).

The other thing to consider in this context is the fundamental difference between Icelandic and the sister tongues in the development of morphological structure, which is that Icelandic kept the old system more or less intact, whereas Swedish and Danish simplified inflections as well as undergoing drastic changes in phonotactics and word structure. This was closely connected with the development of the new contact varieties in towns like Stockholm and Copenhagen (see e.g. Moberg, 1989, 2004; Skautrup, 1968 II: 28–63). The result was the emergence of a new written variety, Dano-Swedish of the reformation period, a typologically different idiom from Old Norse, based on the urban dialects. Great parts of the lexis in these varieties were borrowed from German and the morphological structure was simplified. The simplification of the morphology may have been partly due to the weakening or neutralisation in the unstressed syllables mentioned above, but it is just as likely that it was mainly due to a mixture effect or sort of creolization in semi-communication between Northerners and German speaking immigrants in the developing urban communities (see e.g. Elmevik & Jahr, 2012). In this situation, one can imagine that the tonal distinctions and the *stød*-phenomenon remained as substratal characteristics or native effects in the new varieties. Thus the new idiom would have a different “accentuation” (in a broad sense) according to whether it was used by native Danes, Swedes or Norwegians. And since accent 1 and *stød* are the special case, it would seem that a sort of “*stød*-first scenario” is worth considering as an alternative, supplying additional insights into the “double peak scenario” and the “peak delay scenario” discussed by Iosad (2016).

<sup>4</sup> The original epenthetic vowel fits into the preexistent system and develops in the same way as the stem vowel: *hundur* [hyndyr] ‘dog’ (both with fronted /y/ < /u/).

## 5. Implications for synchronic analyses

As is well known, two basic approaches have been proposed when it comes to the synchronic analysis of the tonal distinction in Modern Scandinavian, one assuming that accent 1 is the default tonal marker, and consequently accent 2 the marked one (cf. e.g. Riad, 2014; Kristoffersen, 2000), and the other seeing accent 1 as the marked structure in disyllables (see e.g. Wetterlin, 2010; Lahiri et al., 2005; Kristoffersen, 2006; Wetterlin & Lahiri, 2015). Since our perspective is a historical one, we do not have much to say about the formal analysis of the modern tonal systems and the *stød*, but the story presented here seems to fit well into the latter approach. Wetterlin & Lahiri (2015) have argued that the tonal distinction derives from the Danish *stød* as the marked value, which in turn stems from the /h/ of the affixed article in words like *arm?in* 'the arm'. Our findings agree with this proposal regarding accent 1 (and *stød*) as the marked value, since it originates as a special marker of disyllables deriving from original monosyllables. And it is easy to interpret the creak realizing the Danish *stød* as an exaggerated tonal fall. But obviously our findings do not support the idea that *stød* developed out of the /h/ of the definite article, which would have to assume some sort of analogical transfer of the aspiration or glottalization into epenthetic forms like *fager* 'fair'. We take the whole phenomenon to be tonal, which seem to be phonetically much more plausible.

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