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## 1. Orthography and pronunciation

### 1.1 Introduction

It is sometimes said that there is a relatively large “gap” between orthography and pronunciation in Faroese. The reason is that the modern Faroese orthography goes back to a spelling reform that was introduced in the middle of the 19th century, a reform that was etymologically and morphologically (or morphophonemically) based rather than phonetically and the “new” orthography replaced earlier variants that were more phonetically based. As a result, phonetic dialectal differences are as a rule not reflected in modern Faroese spelling whereas they were in the spelling used in the early 19th century.<sup>1</sup> As is typical of languages that have a spelling system that is both etymological and morphophonemic in nature, several homophonous words are spelled in different ways in Faroese, or, to put it the other way around, several words that are written differently sound identical. There is, for instance, no phonetic difference between *laga* ‘order, direct’ and *laða* ‘load, build’; *lag* ‘position, state’ and *lað* ‘pile; courtyard’. This obviously creates some complications for students of Faroese, since there is not a one-to-one correspondence between sounds and letters. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that the relationship between spelling and pronunciation is in fact quite regular in Faroese, much more so than in English, for instance. It is just sometimes different from what you might expect (although that will also depend to some extent on your background). Thus while the relationship between sounds and letters probably seems pretty straightforward to many readers in words like *bilur* [þi:lur] ‘car’ and *funnin* [fun:in] ‘found’ (not necessarily to native speakers of English, though!), it is presumably more unexpected in words like *kúgv* [k<sup>h</sup>ǵv] ‘cow’ and *mín* [m<sup>i</sup>:n] ‘my’. For this reason it is useful to have an overview of the basic relationship between letters and sounds at the beginning of a book like this. This is given on the following pages, listing vowels, consonants and some consonant clusters separately. Dialectal differences will only be mentioned sporadically. For a more detailed account of these the reader is referred to chapter 6 (see also the extensive discussion of the development of Faroese orthography in 7.3).

### 1.2 Vowels

One of the major reasons for the so-called “gap between spelling and pronunciation” is the fact that long and short vowels have undergone rather different phonological changes in the history of Faroese (see chapter 7). Vowel length was distinctive in Old Norse. Thus the first vowel in the word *lita* ‘look, see’ was long whereas the first vowel in *lita* ‘(to) color’ was short. Old long /i/ has developed into the diphthong [ui(:)] in Modern Faroese but it is still represented by *í* in the

<sup>1</sup> Some difference between Faroese orthography before and after the spelling reform can be seen in the text samples in chapter 7.

orthography. Old short /i/ is still a monophthong in Faroese and represented by *i* in spelling. Either vowel can be long or short in the modern language, however, depending on the environment. The basic rule for vowel quantity is that a stressed vowel in native Faroese words is short when followed by two or more consonants. Otherwise it is long. This can be expressed semi-formally as (1):<sup>2</sup>

- (1) V → V: /\_\_ C<sup>1</sup> (= stressed vowels are lengthened  
[+stress] when no more than one consonant follows)

(1) is a common way of expressing the rule of vowel length which is found with some variations in Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish. This formulation implies that short stressed vowels are the “default” form and then they are lengthened in a certain environment.

While we will return below to the question how best to formulate the vowel quantity rule (the versions in (1) and fn. 2 are equally suitable for our purposes at the moment), it should be pointed out here that there is one main exception to this formulation of it: In most of Faroese (except for the dialect of Suðuroy) stressed vowels are long before the consonant clusters listed in (2):

- (2) Long stressed vowels before *pr*, *pl*, *tj*, *tr*, *kj*, *kr*, *kl*, *sj*:<sup>3</sup>  
*daprir* ‘sad’, *epli* ‘potato’  
*vitja* ‘visit’, *Petra* (name)  
*vekja* ‘wake up’, *akrar* ‘fields’, *bekla* ‘walk crookedly’  
*tysja* ‘rush’

The nature of the consonant clusters involved suggests that it is in fact the location of the syllable boundary that matters rather than simply the number of consonants. All the consonant clusters enumerated in (2) are natural syllable onsets in Faroese whereas *tl* would not be, for instance. Hence we get a short stressed vowel before the cluster *tl* (cf. *ætla* ‘intend’) but a long one before *pl* and *kl* as shown in (2).<sup>4</sup>

Most Faroese vowel phonemes have different phonetic quality depending on length. Thus there is both a quantity difference and quality difference between the vowels in *hind* [hɪnɔ̃] ‘female deer’ and *hin* [hi:n] ‘the other (f.)’. Many vowels have diphthongized variants when they are long, but Faroese also has phonemic diphthongs that can be either short or long like other vowels. This is illustrated in (3) (see also section 2.3.2. Here we are ignoring most dialectal differences — these will be discussed in chapter 6.):

<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, the rule could be formulated like this, assuming that stressed vowels are underlyingly long:

(i) V: → V/\_ C<sub>2</sub> (= stressed long vowels are shortened  
[+stress] when at least two consonants follow)

We will assume the formulation in (1), however. — Note that here and elsewhere we simply use the colon (: ) rather than the exact IPA symbol (ː) to indicate segment length.

<sup>3</sup> Note that the “consonant clusters” *tj-*, *kj-* represent the affricate [tʃ<sup>h</sup>] and *sj-* the single consonant [ʃ] so vowel lengthening before them is not in fact an exception to the rule as formulated in (1) although it seems to be on paper.

<sup>4</sup> As we will see in section 2.3.0 below, the rules for Faroese vowel quantity are somewhat more complex than this suggests.

(3) Common correspondences between letters and sounds — Vowels

letter:	long vowel:	short vowel:
á	[ɔa:] <i>hálar</i> ‘slippery’	[ɔ] <i>hált</i> ‘slippery (n.)’
a	[ea:] <i>maður</i> ‘man’	[a] <i>mann</i> ‘man (A)’
æ	[ea:] <i>fær</i> ‘gets (3.sg.)’	[a] <i>fært</i> ‘get (2.sg.)’
e	[e:] <i>frekur</i> ‘obstinate’	[ɛ] <i>frekt</i> ‘obstinate (n.)’
i	[i:] <i>hin</i> ‘the other’	[ɪ] <i>hitt</i> ‘the other (n.)’
y	[i:] <i>fyri</i> ‘for, before’	[ɪ] <i>fyrr</i> ‘earlier’
í	[ui:] <i>mín</i> ‘my, mine’	[ui] <i>mítt</i> ‘my, mine (n.)’
ý	[ui:] <i>býta</i> ‘change, divide’	[ui] <i>býtt</i> ‘changed’
o	[o:] <i>tola</i> ‘endure’	[ɔ] <i>toldi</i> ‘endured’
ó	[ou:] <sup>5</sup> <i>stóru</i> ‘big’	[œ] <i>stórt</i> ‘big (n.)’
u	[u:] <i>duga</i> ‘know’	[u] <i>dugdi</i> ‘knew’
ú	[æu:] <i>súrur</i> ‘sour’	[Y] <i>súrt</i> ‘sour (n.)’
ø	[ø:] <i>sørur</i> ‘empty’	[œ] <i>sørt</i> ‘empty (n.)’
ei	[ai:] <i>feitur</i> ‘fat’	[ai] <i>feitt</i> ‘fat (n.)’
ey	[ei:] <i>deyður</i> ‘dead’	[ɛ] <i>deytt</i> ‘dead (n.)’
oy	[oi:] <i>loysa</i> ‘loosen’	[ɔi] <i>loysti</i> ‘loosened’

As can be seen from the table in (3), the correspondences between the orthography and the phonetics (letters and sounds) are perhaps rather unexpected in some instances, compared to those found in other Scandinavian languages, for instance. Diphthongization is extensive (the relationship between monophthongs and diphthongs will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2 below).<sup>6</sup> But the very fact that a useful table of this sort can be set up indicates the basic regularity of these correspondences. In addition to the regularities listed in (3), however, certain vowel+consonant combinations have a special status in the orthography. Some of the more important ones are listed in (4). Note the special dialect variants of some of these correspondences (these are just some examples of dialectal variation — for more details on dialects see chapter 6 below):

<sup>5</sup> This is the Southern Streymoy variant (including Tórshavn). Dialectally we can also have [œu:] and [eu:] (cf. section 6.2.3.3 below).

<sup>6</sup> Petersen (2000b) reports on formant measurements of long and short vowels in Faroese (his own Vágur dialect). The main results for the pairs of long and short monophthongs can be summarized as follows (the numbers indicate Hz (cycles per second) and the basic rule of thumb is that a high vowel will have a low F1 and a low vowel a high one; and a front vowel will have a high F2 and a back vowel a low one, as can be seen from the following table):

	i:	ɪ	e:	ɛ	ø:	œ	u:	ʊ	o:	ɔ
F1	300	420	460	560	450	520	260	350	440	510
F2	2000	1630	1550	1250	840	1030	470	650	430	540

This overview supports the general claim that the long variants are generally higher (= lower F1) than their short counterparts.

## (4) Special vowel+consonant combinations

letter combinations:	phonetic value:	dialect variants:	examples:
-ógv-	[εǰv]	In Suðuroy [ɔǰv]	<i>nógv</i> 'plenty'
-úgv-	[Iǰv]		<i>kúgv</i> 'cow'
-ang-	[εǰǰ]	Sunnanfjørðs [aǰǰ] <sup>7</sup>	<i>langur</i> 'long'
-angi-	[εǰǰɪ]	Sunnanfj. [aǰǰɪ]	<i>langir</i> 'long (m.pl.)'
-ank-	[εǰk] <sup>8</sup>	Sunnanfjørðs [aǰk]	<i>banka</i> 'knock'
-eingi-	[ɔǰǰɪ]	In Nólsoy [aǰǰɪ]	<i>eingin</i> 'none'
-einki-	[ɔǰǰɪ]	In Nólsoy [aǰǰɪ]	<i>beinki</i> 'bench'

Note that the diphthongs in the last two sets of examples have a tendency to monophthongize.

## 1.3 Consonants

The letters *ð* and *g* do not as a rule have any phonetic value intervocally or word-finally after a vowel:<sup>9</sup>

(5) <i>laða</i> 'pile up, stack'	[lɛ:a]	<i>laga</i> 'make, arrange'	[lɛ:a]
<i>lað</i> 'stack'	[lɛa:]	<i>lag</i> 'layer'	[lɛa:]

Loanwords written with an intervocalic *g* are an exception to this, e.g. *pedagogur* 'pedagogue', *sýnagoga* 'synagogue'.

Faroese has extensive "palatalization" of /g,k/ (see chapter 2) but these are as a rule not represented in the orthography. Thus the letter *g* in initial position stands for an alveopalatal [ǰ]<sup>10</sup> before the front vowel symbols *i, y, e, ey*. Similarly, initial *gj* stands for an alveopalatal [ǰǰ], as does *dj*. This is illustrated in (6):

(6) letter combinations:	pronunciation:	examples:
<i>g</i> before <i>i, y, e, ey</i>	[ǰ]	<i>givin</i> 'given', <i>gyrðin</i> 'flexible', <i>geva</i> 'give', <i>geyla</i> 'yell, shout'
<i>gj</i>	[ǰǰ]	<i>gjarna</i> 'willingly; usually'
<i>dj</i>	[ǰǰ]	<i>djarvur</i> 'blunt, bold', <i>djór</i> 'animal'

<sup>7</sup> The expressions "sunnanfjørðs" and "norðanfjørðs" mean 'south of' and 'north of' the "fjord" or sound Skopunarfjørður, which separates Streymoy (where Tórshavn is) and Sandoy (see the dialect map in chapter 6). As will be discussed in chapter 6, this fjord is a major dialect boundary in Faroese.

<sup>8</sup> Except for certain (relatively recent) loanwords like *banki* 'bank', *tanki* 'thought' (Dan. *tanke*), where we have [a] in all dialects, i.e. *banki* [ɔaǰɪ], *banka* [ɔaǰka] 'bank (A)', etc.).

<sup>9</sup> This does not hold for *g* if it begins a new morpheme as in compounds or prefixed words, for instance, as in *ógoldin* 'unpaid', *hágváður* 'highly intelligent'. The letter *ð*, on the other hand, is completely "silent" in most Faroese words (i.e. does not represent any speech sound in the modern language), except in a few -ðr-combinations (which stand for [ǰɪ], cf. the examples in (11) below). — See also the glide insertion (hiatus) rules in chapter 2.

<sup>10</sup> As this affricate is usually not voiced (or at least not fully voiced, cf. e.g. Rischel 1961: XXV), it might be more accurate to represent it with [ǰ̥]. But we think this might lead to confusion so we have not done so here.

Similarly, the letter *k* in initial position stands for an alveopalatal [tʃ<sup>h</sup>]<sup>11</sup> before the front vowel symbols *i, y, e, ey*. In addition, initial *kj* stands for an alveopalatal [tʃ<sup>h</sup>], as do *tj* and *hj* in most words.<sup>12</sup> This is shown in (7):

(7) letter combinations:	pronunciation:	examples:
<i>k</i> before <i>i, y, e, ey</i>	[tʃ <sup>h</sup> ]	<i>kima</i> 'peal, chime', <i>kykur</i> 'living', <i>kemur</i> 'comes', <i>keypa</i> 'buy'
<i>kj</i>	[tʃ <sup>h</sup> ]	<i>kjaftur</i> 'mouth'
<i>tj</i>	[tʃ <sup>h</sup> ]	<i>tjörn</i> 'pond', <i>tjóvur</i> 'thief'
<i>hj</i>	[tʃ <sup>h</sup> ]	<i>hjallur</i> 'storehouse', <i>há</i> 'with'

Note that no palatalization takes place before the vowel symbols *i, y, ei*, since all of these represent back vowels (more precisely: diphthongs the first element of which is in each case back, namely [ui:] and [ai(:)], respectively, cf. (3)).<sup>13</sup>

Palatalization also occurs (or occurred historically) when *s* is followed by *j*, by *k* + the vowels listed in (7) or by *kj, tj*. This is illustrated in (8):

(8) letter combinations:	pronunciation:	examples:
<i>sj-</i>	[ʃ]	<i>sjógvur</i> 'sea'
<i>sk-</i> before <i>i, y, e, ey</i>	[ʃ]	<i>skimast</i> 'look around', <i>skjldur</i> 'related', <i>skera</i> 'cut', <i>skeyt</i> 'sheet, lap'
<i>skj-</i>	[ʃ]	<i>skjótt</i> 'soon'
<i>stj-</i>	[ʃ]	<i>stjølur</i> 'lower end of a corn bundle' <sup>14</sup>

Palatalization will be dealt with in more detail in chapter 2.

Several other consonant combinations may seem rather opaque to those unfamiliar with the language in the sense that the letter-sound correspondence is not immediately obvious. The most important ones are listed in (9)–(13):

(9) letter combination:	pronunciation:	examples:
<i>hv-</i>	[k <sup>h</sup> v] <sup>15</sup>	<i>hvar</i> 'where', <i>hvalur</i> 'whale'

<sup>11</sup> Since both /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ are voiceless as a rule, the main difference between them must be one of aspiration, or "voice onset time" (VOT), as between the stop series /p,t,k/ and /b,d,g/. We indicate this by writing [tʃ<sup>h</sup>] for the "hard" affricate and [dʒ] for the "soft" one.

<sup>12</sup> Dialectally, for instance in Eysturoy and Suðuroy, *tj-* in words like *tjóður* 'tether' is not palatalized but pronounced [t<sup>h</sup>ʃ]. — *hj-* sometimes stands for [j], e.g. in words like *hjarta* 'heart', *hjálp* 'help (noun)', *hjálpa* 'help (verb)'. —

<sup>13</sup> As will be discussed below, palatalization does not occur in loanwords like *Kina* [k<sup>h</sup>i:na] 'China', for instance, although here an [i:] follows the velar. This suggests that the palatalization from a velar stop to an affricate is not productive anymore.

<sup>14</sup> Some *stj-* words are now pronounced with [stj-], either exclusively or alternatively. Thus *stjóri* 'boss' and *stjórna* 'govern' have [stj-] and *stjórna* 'star' can either have [stj-] or [ʃ]. The word *stjóri* 'rope between boat and land' always has [ʃ], on the other hand.

<sup>15</sup> The [v] can become at least partially devoiced in this context and the same is true of other consonants following aspirated initial stops.

- (10) **letter combinations:** **pronunciation:** **examples:**  
 -ll- between vowels [dl]<sup>16</sup> *allir* 'all', *bolli* 'cup'  
 -ll in final position [d̥] *fjall* 'mountain'  
 -rn monomorphemic<sup>17</sup> [ɖn] *jarn* 'iron', *horn* 'horn'  
 -nn- after *ei, oy* [ɖn] *seinni* 'later', *oynni* 'the island (D)'<sup>18</sup>
- (11) **letter combinations:** **pronunciation:** **examples:**  
 -ðr- represents [g̊ɹ] *veðrið* 'the weather', *veðrar* 'rams'  
 -ðg- assimilates to [g̊:] *steðga* 'stop'  
 -ðk- assimilates to /kk/ [h̥k:]<sup>19</sup> *maðkur* 'worm'  
 -gd- may assimilate to [g̊:] *løgdu* 'laid (pl.)'<sup>20</sup>  
 -vd- may assimilate to [d̥:] *høvdu* 'had (pl.)', *høvd* 'head'<sup>21</sup>
- (12) **letter combinations:** **pronunciation:** **examples:**  
 -rs- commonly retrofl. [s̥:]<sup>22</sup> *vers* 'verse', *fýrs* 'eighty'
- (13) **letter combinations:** **pronunciation:** **examples:**  
 -um (unstressed) [ʊn] *hestum* 'horses(Dpl.)'

<sup>16</sup> Note that -rl-, on the other hand, stands for [rl] as a rule, even when there is no morpheme boundary between the relevant segments, cf. *perla* 'pearl', *tyrla* 'helicopter'. — Some old /rl/ combinations are now spelled -ll- and pronounced [dl], cf. *kelling* 'old hag', *valla* 'hardly'.

<sup>17</sup> By "monomorphemic" is meant the situation where *r* and *n* belong to the same morpheme, such as the stem of the word. Thus when *r* + *n* get combined in the inflection of a word, they are pronounced [ɹn]: *bornir* 'carried' (m.pl. of *borin*), *farnir* 'gone' (m.pl. of *farin*). — But there are exceptions to the rule that -rn- is pronounced [ɖn] in the stem of words, cf. *ørn* 'eagle', *torn* 'tower', etc., with [ɹn]. — Note also that the *r* in the plural ending of nouns is deleted in pronunciation before the -n- of the article: *hestar-nir* [hestanɹ] although this is not indicated in the spelling.

<sup>18</sup> In the Suðuroy dialect this also happens after *á, ú, í, ý, ó*, cf. *ánni* 'the river (D)', *frúnni* 'the lady (D)', *kvínni* 'the pen (D)' (from *kvíggj*), *krónni* 'the pub (D)', cf. also section 2.4.6 below. As shown by Sandøy (2001a:132–133), there are interesting differences between Icelandic and dialects of Norwegian and Faroese in the development of these clusters.

<sup>19</sup> There is actually no direct evidence for /kk/ here. But the most universal source of preaspirated stops in Faroese are long or geminate /pp, tt, kk/. Sometimes this source is just suggested by historical development and/or the spelling, sometimes it is suggested by synchronic morphology (such as in past tense forms where the past tense marker /-t/ is added to a stem ending in /-t/ (cf. *flutti* 'moved' of *flyt-a* 'move') or in forms where the neuter ending /-t/ is added to the stem of adjectives ending in /-t/ (cf. *latt* 'lazy (n.)' from *latur* 'lazy'). Since -ðg- assimilates (or assimilated historically) to long *g* (cf. *steðga*) we have here assumed that -ðk- assimilates (or assimilated historically) to /kk/, which would give a preaspirated *k* according to the general preaspiration rule. Preaspiration is indicated here by an [h̥] (for further discussion see section 2.4.3).

<sup>20</sup> Usually, however, -gd- stands for [g̊d̥]: *løgð* 'laid (f.)', *høgður* 'hewn' (from *leggja, høgga*).

<sup>21</sup> A *v* does not generally assimilate to the past tense marker *d*, cf. *kravdi* 'demanded' (with [vd̥]).

<sup>22</sup> There are probably several phonetic variants of the /rs/-combination, as has been described in detail by Hagström 1970:347ff. As he points out, the /r/ may also remain and get retroflexed (and devoiced) (see also Barnes and Weyhe 1994:192ff.). This is discussed in the section on consonants in chapter 2 below.

Needless to say, the examples of unexpected relationship between spelling and pronunciation listed above are not exhaustive. The phonetics and phonology of Faroese vowels and consonants will be discussed in detail in chapter 2.<sup>23</sup>

## 1.4 Overview of phonetic transcriptions of Faroese

Since authors writing on Faroese phonetics have used somewhat different phonetic symbols to represent the Faroese speech sounds, it is useful to compare our transcription to the methods used in some of the well known discussions of Faroese phonetics. This is done in the tables in (14) and (15) below. In these tables "orthogr." refers to common representation of the relevant sounds in Faroese orthography. In the case of the consonants, this will necessarily involve considerable simplification since they have many more positionally conditioned variants than the vowels, as discussed in detail in the section on consonants in chapter 2. Further, in these tables "here" means 'in this book', BW refers to the chapter by Barnes and Weyhe (1994), JR to Jørgen Rischel's introduction to *Føroysk-donsk orðabók* (1961), WBL to Lockwood's book (1977) and FO to *Føroysk orðabók* (1998).

(14) Overview of phonetic transcriptions of Faroese vowels:

orthogr.:	long vowels:				short vowels:					
	here:	B&W	JR	WBL	FO	here:	B&W	JR	WBL	FO
á	ɔa:	ɔa	ɔa	ɔa	ɔa	ɔ	ɔ	ɔ	ɔ	ɔ
a	ɛa:	ɛa	ɛa	ɛa	ɛa	a	a	a	a	a
æ	ɛa:	ɛa	ɛa	ɛa	ɛa	a	a	a	a	a
e	e:	e:	e:	e:	e:	ɛ	ɛ	ɛ	ɛ	ɛ
i	i:	i:	i:	i:	i:	ɪ	ɪ	ɪ	ɪ	ɪ
y	i:	i:	i:	i:	i:	ɪ	ɪ	ɪ	ɪ	ɪ
í	ui:	ui	ɔi	ɔY	ui	ui	u <sup>l</sup>	ɔi	ɔY	ui
ý	ui:	ui	ɔi	ɔY	ui	ui	u <sup>l</sup>	ɔi	ɔY	ui
o	o:	o:	o:	o:	o:	ɔ	ɔ	ɔ	ɔ	ɔ
ó	ɔu:	ɔu	ɔu	ɔu	ɔu	œ	œ	œ	œ	œ
u	u:	u:	u:	u:	u:	ʊ	ʊ	ʊ	ʊ	ʊ
ú	ɥu:	ɥu	ɥu	ɥu	ɥu	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
ø	ø:	ø:	ø:	ø:	ø:	œ	œ	œ	œ	œ
ei	ai:	ai	ai	ai	ai	ai	a <sup>l</sup>	ai	ai	ai
ey	ɛi:	ɛi	ɛi	ɛi	ɛi	ɛ	ɛ	ɛ	ɛ	ɛ
oy	ɔi:	ɔi	ɔi	ɔi	ɔi	ɔi	ɔ <sup>l</sup>	ɔi	ɔi	ɔi

<sup>23</sup> Various deletions and assimilations in compound words are not discussed here, although these are as a rule not indicated in the spelling, e.g. *vatnbrunnur* [vamt̥ɹunur] '(water) well'.