

## INDEFINITE PRONOUNS IN FAROESE

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### 1. Introduction

This paper is part of a more extensive study of the pronouns summur, nakar and onkur (= 'some', 'any') in the Nordic languages. In what follows, I shall confine myself to an analysis of the synchronic Faroese system. My primary concern will be the presentation of the semantic categories that separate the three pronouns. They are fundamental in an adequate description of the differences between the Nordic languages.

In other words, I intend to describe the different meanings that emerge, for instance in sentences 1-3:

- (1) Hann var heima nakrar dagar
- (2) Hann var heima summar dagar
- (3) Hann var heima onkrar dagar  
'He stayed at home {some} days'

### 2. Semantic Categories

#### 2.1. Existential quantifiers

The three indefinite pronouns are similar but not identical. One common feature is the fact that all three are existential quantifiers, i.e. they all express a part of the total set which the nominal with the pronoun can refer to, or, to be more specific, they refer to a subset. The opposite is the universal quantifier, i.e. the pronoun allur, which indicates exactly the total set.

#### 2.2. Existence

An implication of the existence of the referent is an important semantic feature in this pronominal system. Summur and onkur have this implication, whereas nakar does not. The fact that onkur and summur express +existence means that they cannot be combined with negation, doubt, conditional sentences or questions connected with the referent.

- (4) Vit vita at tað hevur verið ein amerikanari á mánanum. \*Men hevur tað verið onkur á Mars? 'We know that there has been an American on the moon. But has {anyone} been on Mars?'

- (5) ?Aldrin finna summir lærarar brillur sínar aftur. 'Never do {some} teachers find their glasses.'

The first sentence is unacceptable. In the last sentence, the location of aldri implies that it is the occurrence of the referents of summir that is negated, which makes the sentence less acceptable. In (4) and (5) nakar must be used - in the singular.

The distinction between nakar and onkur will appear in the conversation in (6):

- (6) A: Var nakar inni? 'Was {anybody} in there?'  
B: Jú, onkur var inni. 'Yes, {somebody} was in.'

The opposite use of the pronouns would give incorrect sentences. Still, the following is possible:

- (7) Er tað onkur av tykkum sum hefur tikið bókina? 'Is it {any} of you who has taken the book?'

In this case, the referents of tykkum do exist, and the question is not whether they exist or not.

Nakar is not marked for  $\pm$ existence. Being unmarked for the feature 'existence' could be called the main function of nakar, and that is why we use this pronoun in places where there are restrictions as to summur and onkur.

However, the plural pronoun nakrir presupposes the existence of the referents:

- (8) Nakrir færoyingar fóru niður at lesa. '{Some} Faroese went to Denmark to study.'

If the existence had been unclear as for instance in a question, the singular pronoun would have been used.

The main function of onkur is to mark unambiguously the assertion of existence, this can also be seen in the fact that typical sentences with onkur also consist of other modal components, as in

- (9) Onkur kemur í hvussu er. '{Somebody} will come in any case.'

### 2.3. Referential meanings

#### 2.3.1. Specific reference

Specific reference tells us that the pronoun refers to someone specific (one or more persons), someone who in principle it is possible to designate in the surroundings. They do not have to be designated, but the speaker is indicating the possibility of doing so.

The pronoun summur cannot be used with specific reference. Nakar in the singular can have specific reference, but does not need to. It is unmarked for this

feature. Nakrir in the plural has specific reference, as in (8) above. This means that the speaker had some specific Faroese in mind when phrasing his sentence as he did, and in principle, he should be able to specify who they are. Summir does not have this capacity:

- (10) Sum áður nevnt, so er ymiskt hvussu vísustevnur kring Norðurlond eru háttadar. Summar eru stórar, summar mest fyri vísufólkið sjálvt o.s.fr. (14. sept. 4/7-87 s. 3.) 'As mentioned above, these ballad festivals in the Nordic countries are organized in different ways. {Some} are large, {some} are mostly arranged for the singers themselves, and so on.'

No one can require of the person uttering sentence (10) that he should be able to specify the referents of summar.

- (11) \*Eg møtti summum studentum í býnum í gjár. 'I met {some} students in the city yesterday.'

This sentence refers to one specific event, and in doing so, it requires a reference to certain individuals, i.e. a specific reference. Thus, summir becomes impossible.

However, the following sentence with the pronoun nakrir is acceptable:

- (12) Eg møtti nøkrum studentum í býnum í gjár.

The singular pronoun nakar is not marked for specific reference. In example (6) above, we have seen examples of ÷specific, whereas in sentence (13), nakar has +specific reference.

- (13) Tú skalt fáa nakað. 'You will certainly get {something}.'

Onkur does not have specific reference, as can be seen in (9) above.

### 2.3.2. General and singular reference

These semantic properties involve the question of reference to one or more individuals. The plural of the three pronouns indicates general reference.

The singular pronouns will not indicate singular reference in the same way. In particular, it should be mentioned that in the singular the pronoun 'onkur' in Faroese usually has general reference when connected to a definite noun:

- (14) Hon gekk bara inn í okkurt húsið og biddaði sær mat. 'She simply entered {some} houses and begged for food.'

In sentence (14) there is an assertion in the nominal that it is 'some houses'. Here the nominal is formally in the singular, but semantically it is plural.

- (15) Onkun dagin situr hann heima og arbeiðir. '{Some} days he stays at home with his work.'

This implies several days, and the point is that it implies arbitrary days. In this case, onkur has thus no specific reference.

### 2.3.3. Distributive reference

Distributive reference becomes relevant only when there is a general reference. +Distributive indicates that the referents do not form a unit, that they do not occur in groups, for instance. The semantic property, act or assertion expressed in the sentence applies to every single referent/member of the subset.

Summir is marked +distributive. If we compare sentences (1) and (2) above, we see that summir has distributive reference, because in this case, it must be a matter of days that were not consecutive. Nakrir in sentence (1) will probably in most cases be understood as reference to a collective quantity of days, i.e. with collective reference. However, the pronoun nakrir is unmarked in relation to this semantic feature; this can be seen in sentence (16), which has distributive reference:

- (16) Nakrir studentar koma higar hvønn dag. '{Some} students come here every day.'

This is not the case in (17):

- (17) Tað fóru nakrir við Norrønu til Norra í gjár. '{Some} persons took Norrøna to Norway yesterday.'

The implicit existential construction, as in (17), is a construction that introduces or presents a subject in a single occurrence act or in a single occurrence situation. In other words, this can be combined with the unmarked nakrir, but not with the distributive reference of summir:

- (18) \*Tað fóru summir við Norrønu til Norra í gjár.

Onkrir in the plural is unmarked as to collective or distributive reference, as in (19):

- (19) Onkrir studentar fara niður at lesa. '{Some} students go to Denmark to study.'

In this case, it can be a matter of one event, in other words, that they went collectively and that the act thus took place once, or it might be that these students went at different times, so that it was a matter of several acts.

Because of this unmarkedness, onkrir (pl.) can occur also in constructions like (20), which "enforce" the meaning of a single occurrence and thus collective reference.

- (20) Tað fóru onkrir við Norrønu til Norra í gjár.

The singular pronoun onkur + a noun in the definite has a 'distributive reference'. This means that in sentence (15) above, the person in question does not stay at home for several days in a row, but 'some days now and then'. The days are not consecutive, and one could say that the formal singular refers unambiguously to the days standing apart.

#### 2.4 Logical operator

There are various definitions of 'operator'. However, in this connection, the point is that quantifiers and adverbs, for instance - which are included among the operators - have a scope in which they dominate, or are superordinate in the logical structure. The interesting semantic features are most easily revealed when more operators occur in the same sentence, the sentence being the largest syntactic structure. We might have a problem of "collision" between two scopes, or, in other words, we must make sure that the hierarchy between the operators is correct.

We have seen an example of "collision" in sentence (5). The sentence creates confusion of perception, because we are used to an information structure where the operator to the left has the widest scope, and the negation in aldrin is in this case in conflict with the feature +existence in summir.

"Summir" must always be superordinate in the hierarchy of operators, and with the operators in the reverse order, sentence (5) is correct:

(21) Summir lærarar finna aldrin brillur sínar aftur.

The fact that summir must have a superordinate status can also be seen in the relation to the quantifier hvör ('each, every'):

(22) Summir lærarar | möta á skrivstovuna | hvönn dag |

'{Some} teachers appear at the office every day.'

This can be paraphrased in the following way: 'There are teachers, and every single of the subset of the teachers appears at the office every day'. The point is that the assertion 'appear at the office' is valid every day, and the assertion 'appear at the office every day' is applicable to every single member in the subset 'some teachers'.

As long as the scope extends from the operator and to the right, the information structure is well-formed, and in sentence (22) above, hvönn dag is within the scope of summir lærarar (some teachers). If we reverse the order of quantifiers so that the assertion becomes 'some teachers appear at the office' and make this appli-

cable to every day, the sentence has gone wrong, i.e. 'there are days, and to every one of them it applies that summir lærarar appear at the office'. This means that sentence (23) with a normal intonation is not quite good:

(23) ?Hvønn dag mæta summir lærarar á skrivstofuna.

If, on the other hand, we put the emphasis, or stress, on the first component, the sentence becomes fully acceptable, but only because stress is a way of indicating the fact that the component has been moved out of its scope, i.e. that (23) becomes synonymous with (22).

If we use the normal stress of the first component, the sentence cannot be dismissed totally. It is confusing because of the break with the normal information structure, but we all have a natural urge to find a meaning in our observations (as well as in our perceptions). By interpreting summir as being superordinate, there will be a meaning in sentence (23), and we would probably let such sentences pass as acceptable under favourable conditions. That is how our language works.

Neither onkur nor onkrir is a logical operator, and they therefore have no scope within the assertion. That can be seen from (24) and (25):

(24) Onkur kemur higar hvønn dag. '{Somebody} comes here every day.'

(25) Onkrir koma higar hvønn dag.

These sentences claim that it is true that every day some people (one in (24) and more in (25)) come here. But it is not necessarily the same person or persons who come here every day.

The plural pronoun nakrir can be a logical operator, but whether it has the widest scope depends on its place in the sentence.

## 2.5. Matrix of the semantic qualities

In this brief survey I have presented the categories needed to describe the three indefinite pronouns. On the basis of these categories, the pronouns can be presented in a matrix. The matrix will show that each pronoun must be separated in one singular and one plural form, and in addition, the singular pronoun onkur has several different features following the definite or indefinite form of the noun. The relevant features can be set out as follows:

	exist- ence	spe- cific	general	distri- butive	superord. operator
summur	+	÷	0		+
summir	+	÷	+	+	+
nakar	0	0	÷	÷	0
nakrir	+	+	+	0	0
onkur	+	÷(0)	0	0	÷
onkur + def.noun	+	÷	+	+	÷
onkrir	+	0	+	0	÷

Summur in the singular has not been ticked off for distributive reference because it is difficult to see the relevance of this feature here.

In the matrix I have defined onkur as ÷-specific, but with a zero in parentheses. The minus represents the main tendency, but some of my informants disagree and accept a specific interpretation as well. This is a very difficult point in my analysis, which, it must be stressed, is not yet completed.

### 3. The oppositions

The above matrix shows that there are semantic differences between all the pronominal forms. Because of restrictions caused by these semantic differences the three pronouns often occur in different syntactic constructions. To illustrate the semantic differences more clearly, I will show some cases of opposition in identical syntactical frames.

- (1) Hann var heima nakrar dagar.
- (2) Hann var heima summar dagar.
- (26) Hann var heima onkun dagin.
- (3) Hann var heima onkrar dagar.

As mentioned above, sentence (1) does not express whether the reference is distributive or not. In sentences (2) and (26), the distributive reference is indicated, which means that the days are not consecutive. The difference between (2) and (26) lies in the spontaneous answers from informants, explaining for instance that in (26), the days seem more "accidental", whereas in (2), they seem more "systematic". I will come back to this difference later on.

The difference in meaning between (26) and (31) suggested to me by my informants is that the singular in (26) shows that the days are separated from each other, whereas the plural in (3) allows for some of the days to be consecutive, but not all of them.

In the four sentences cited above, there was only one quantifier, and the distinctions may seem too subtle, so that the informants have to make an effort to put the differences they "feel" are present, into words. More operators make the distinctions more "pressing". In the next examples, two quantifiers are combined:

- (27) Summir studentar koma higar hvønn dag.  
 (28) Nakrir studentar koma higar hvønn dag.  
 (29) Onkrir studentar koma higar hvønn dag.

In these sentences, we need to keep in mind the scopes and the levels of the hierarchy. The logical structure can be paraphrased in this way:

- 27' 'There are students, and it is implied to some of them that I meet every one of them every day', i.e. that the statement "I meet student x every day" is valid for every member in the subset 'some students'.
- 28' 'There are students, and to some specific of them it is implied that I meet them every day', i.e. that it is left open whether I meet them collectively or individually, in other words, whether it is a question of single acts or not. But it is still a matter of me meeting the same students every day. Moreover, nakrir also has specific reference.
- 29' 'There are students, and every day it is implied that I meet someone of these students', i.e. it does not have to be the same student for many days. In this case, onkrir is inferior to the other quantifier, even if it is to the left of the quantifier hvønn (=every), and it is indicated with ÷ in the matrix above. Onkrir does not have specific reference either.

In the examples mentioned earlier, where there was only one quantifier, I pointed out that the informants regarded summar dagar as in (2) somewhat more systematic than onkun dagin. This becomes more understandable now that we see that summir is at the top of the logical hierarchy; it has the widest scope, so that everything that is being said is a true assertion for every referent of the summir. In other words, it is a permanent feature of each of the summar dagar, and out of this a secondary association or a secondary interpretation may emerge, indicating that this is something systematic, for instance "some weekdays", i.e. one refers to a systematic classification, for instance of types.