

SUMMARY

A history of the Kings of Norway, or any such national chronicle, is particularly well suited to an analysis of linguistic agentivity because there are many main characters, and though their fortunes may rise or fall, the author is most likely trying to portray them in such a way as to augment national prestige. His personal conscious bias is furthermore superimposed upon the unconscious cultural matrix of the period and country in which he lives. Both are reflected in the author's syntax, because the way in which he presents his material necessarily involves conscious and unconscious choices as to what he elects to tell his audience, and what he omits. This bias may be measured by considering the amount of involvement a grammatical subject has in its own sentence, or phrased linguistically, by considering the degree of "agentivity". This may range through four identifiable categories: a) no involvement, as in impersonal sentences, b) passive involvement, where the subject is acted upon, or only referred to, c) considerable involvement, where the subject acts, and d) complete involvement, where the subject not only instigates the action, but completes it as well. Sentences with subject that act are described as agentive; those with non-acting subjects are non-agentive. The hierarchy is thus: impersonality to passivity to agency to completive agency. The principal linguistic tools available to an author for conveying the impression of agentivity are the aspects he chooses to put on his verbs and the roles he gives the human nouns in his sentences. In this paper I have demonstrated that verbal aspect and the roles of human nouns function together to imply degrees of involvement in saga action, that consecutive stative sentences function as scene changers and section markers, and that the broad use of completive aspect renders the style choppy and matter of fact. By choosing agentive subjects the author emphasizes the assertiveness of his characters; conversely the consistent choice of experiencer or patient subjects serves the impression of helplessness or fearfulness.

The Medieval Norsemen have the image of being movers and shakers, strong people who shaped their own destiny. The words and actions of their contemporaries never portray them as indecisive from the prayer "A furore Normannorum libera nos, Domine", 'Deliver us, Lord, from the fury of the Norsemen!' to the 994 report in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle of the armies of Olaf and Sveinn "doing as much damage as any host could do in burning, harrying and slaughter, both along the coast and in Essex, Kent, Sussex, and Hampshire,"¹ down to the recruitment of Vikings for service in the Varangian Guard of the Emperor in Constantinople. That the Norsemen believed it themselves can be shown from their own writings, where they appear as doers, finishers of things they begin, and only pejoratively as drifters. In this paper I will demonstrate that the author's choice of sentence subject and verbal aspect is linguistic proof of his point of view. A history of the Kings of Norway, or any such national chronicle, is particularly well suited to an analysis of linguistic objectivity because there are many main characters, and though their fortunes may rise and fall, the author is most likely trying to portray them in such a way as to augment national prestige. His personal conscious bias is furthermore superimposed on the unconscious cultural matrix of the period and the country in which he lives. Both are reflected in the author's syntax, because the way in which he presents his material necessarily involves conscious and unconscious choices as to what he elects to tell his audience, and what he omits. This bias may be measured by considering the amount of involvement a grammatical subject has in its own sentence, or phrased linguistically, by considering the degree of "agentivity". This may range through four identifiable categories: a) no involvement, as in (the most extreme example) impersonal sentences, which have no subject at all; b) passive involvement, where the subject is acted upon, or merely referred to; c) considerable involvement, where the subject acts; and d) complete involvement, where the subject not only instigates the action, but completes it as well. Sentences with subjects that act are described as agentive; those with non-acting subjects are non-agentive, or objective. The hierarchy is thus: impersonality to passivity to agency to completive agency. The principal linguistic tools available to an author for conveying the impression of agentivity are the aspects he chooses to put on his verbs and the roles he gives the human nouns in his sentences.

First let us investigate the function of human noun subjects. When a child reports "The milk spilled," he is doing something we all do, transforming the world of responsibility into a world of happenings. Conversely, we are all familiar with the explanations of non-technologized tribes which convert natural happenings into the doings of strange gods.² In fact the child is converting a sentence whose subject ought to show completive agency (he instigated and completed the spilling himself) into one of passivity (the milk suffered the spilling). It is useful to conceive of the core of the sentence as a verb accompanied by one or more noun phrases, as 'the child' and 'the milk' in the example. The relationship of each noun phrase to the verb, and through the verb to the other noun phrases in the sentence, can be defined in terms of syntactic features: one noun phrase may be the doer, another the person or thing acted upon, another the person who perceives something. There are probably

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seven or eight syntactic roles in all. They never appear in one sentence, and only three are commonly available as subjects. When the other syntactic roles appear as the grammatical subject of a sentence, it is the result not of a general stylistic tendency, but rather of language-specific lexico-syntactic irregularity. Such appearances, therefore, are not useful in a discussion of subject types. The three most frequent subject roles are those of Agent, Experiencer, and Patient. Briefly, Agents are doers, Experiencers are perceivers, and Patients are acted upon or referred to. The grammatical subject itself is a superficial feature of the sentence: it is a manifestation of the underlying structure -- that is, of the syntactic relationship of the verb to the nouns in the sentence -- but not itself the underlying structure. This can be illustrated by the parallel of sentences like:

Harold burned the house down.
 The house burned down.

or with an Icelandic twist:

Haraldr brenndi húsið til kaldra kola.
 (Harold burned the house to cold coals.)
 Húsið brenndi til kaldra kola.
 (The house burned to cold coals.)

In these sentences, Harold is the doer, the Agent. The house functions as the Patient, the thing which undergoes the burning. It is appropriate to label the second sentence of each pair a stylistic variant of the first. The writer has, for whatever reason, not specified who set the fire. It is even possible that the fire resulted from spontaneous combustion or lightning, or from carelessness, or an accident. In any case, the Agent is omitted, but the Patient, which is not optional for this verb, is included. Where there is no specified Agent to surface as the grammatical subject, the Patient must do so. Note that this causes no confusion in our understanding of who burned what. It is part of what we know about the verbs 'burn' or 'brenna', that if two nouns are mentioned then the subject is the Agent, and the object is the Patient, whereas if only one is specified, then it is the Patient which has surfaced as the grammatical subject. The word for burn corresponds thus to that for 'spill', as both verbs may be either transitive (with an Agent subject) or intransitive (with a Patient subject). The normal role hierarchy, which applies to Old Icelandic as to other Germanic languages, specifies Agent as the first choice for subject, and Patient will be chosen as subject only if the verb does not allow for an Agent, or at the discretion of the speaker, if the choice of Agent is for some reason blocked. Alternatives like the omission of an Agent provide the user of the language considerable latitude in portraying a character. A writer who wishes to present a strong character will make him the Agentive subject of Doing sentences as often as he can, either by choosing to include Agent subjects when they are optional, as with verbs like 'burn', or by selecting verbs which require Agent subjects over ones with Patient subjects. If the writer wishes to portray a thoughtful, perceptive character, he will seek out many sentences with Experiencer subjects. And finally if he repeatedly chooses

Patient subjects where he might have selected Agents, one can be sure that he considers the character weak and indecisive, certainly not the master of his own destiny. It is very difficult to find unequivocal passages, for a mixture of modes is the rule. But there are enough exceptions to make a paper such as this worthwhile, and one is from Magnússaga ins Góða, where Magnús is full of doubts whether he wants to pit his army against the superior forces of the Vinðr.³

þeim var sagt, at herra Vinðr var kominn nær þeim. Ok var konungr (EXP) allhugsjúkr. Þótti honum (EXP) illt, ef hann skyldi flýja verða, því at hann hafði þat aldri reynt (EXP). Svaf hann (PAT) lítit um nóttina ok song (AGT, deleted) bænir sínar. Eptir um daginn var Mikjálsmessuaptann. En er komit var at degi, þá sofnaði konungr (PAT) ok dreymði (EXP), at hann (EXP) sá inn helga Óláf konung, föður sinn, ok mælti við hann: "Ertu (EXP) nú mjök hugsjúkr ok óttafullr, er Vinðr fara móti þér með her mikinn? Ekki skaltu (EXP) hræðask heiðingja, þótt þeir sé margir saman. Ek mun fylgja þér í orrustu þessi. Ráðið þér (AGT, plural) þá til bardaga við Vinðr, er þér heyrið (EXP) lúðr minn." En er konungr (PAT) vaknaði, þá segir hann draum sinn. Tók þá at lýsa af degi. Þá heyrdi allt fólk í lopt upp klukkuhljóð, ok kenndu Magnúss konungs menn, þeir er verit höfðu í Níðarósi, at svá þótti sem Gløð væri hringt. Þá klukku hafði Óláfr konungr gefit til Clemenskirku í Kaupangi. Þá stóð upp Magnús Konungr (AGT) ok kallaði (AGT), at blása skyldi herblástr.

They were told that the Vinðr army was near. The king was very depressed. He thought it ill to have to flee, for he had never experienced that before. He slept little in the night, and sang his prayers.

The next day was Michaelmas eve. And when the day was near, the king fell asleep and dreamed that he saw king Olaf, his father, and Olaf spoke to him: "Are you now very depressed and fearful because the Vinðr are moving against you with a mighty army? Do not fear the heathens, even though they are many. I will go with you into this battle. Get ready for the battle against the Vinðr when you hear my trumpet." And when the king awakened, then he told his dream. It began to get light. Then all the people heard a bell ringing in the air, and those of Magnus' men who had been at Níðaros recognised it. It was as if Gløð was being rung. Olaf the king had given that bell to the Clemens church in Kaupang. Then Magnus got up and called for the war signals to be given.

In a middle ground between agentivity and non-agentivity lies a whole class of ambiguous verbs, mostly motion verbs, whose subjects may or may not be directing the motion. They range from wander and drift, which are most unlikely to be agentive; to come and go, which just might be agentive; to expressions

containing destinations, which are completive, and quite likely to be agentive. On a scale of agentivity, these verbs must rank between those with objective, i.e. non-agentive, subjects, and those with agentive subjects, for such verbs demonstrate a shift from lesser to greater agency, from motion to action, where the transition is from passivity into completive agency.

Let us examine how this works by looking at some passages from Heimskringla in the beginning of Harald's Saga Sigurðarsonar, ⁴ which describes the wounding of Harald, and his rescue and recovery, the only Agent subjects are given to Rognvaldr, Harald's rescuer; and to the farmer's son, whereas Harald is everywhere a Patient, or an ambiguous subject.

Hann var á Stiklarstöðum í orrustu, þá er in helgi Óláfr konungr fell. Varð Haraldr (PAT) þá sárr, ok komsk (Ambiguous subject, deleted) í brot með öðrum flottamönnum. Rognvaldr Brúsason (AGT) flutti Harald ór orrustu ok (AGT, deleted) kom honum til bónda nokkurs, er (PAT) bjó í skógi langt frá öðrum mönnum. Var Haraldr (PAT) þar læknaðr, til þess er hann (PAT) var heill. Síðan fylgði sonr bónda (AGT) honum austr um Kjöl, ok fóru þeir (Ambiguous, plural) allt markleiði, þat er svá mátti, en ekki alþýðuveg. Vissi bondasonr ekki til, hverjum hann fylgði (AGT).

He was at Stiklarstadir in the battle when King Olaf fell. Harald was wounded and escaped with other refugees. Rognvald Brusason brought Harald out of the battle and took him to a certain farmer, who lived in the forest far from other people. Harald was treated there until he was well. The the farmer's son accompanied him east to Kjöl, and they travelled only country roads, as much as they could, but not the highways. The farmer's son did not know whom he was accompanying.

At first Harald is the passive sufferer of events he does not control. He is subject of a stative sentence (hann var...), then of a change of state (Varð Haraldr sárr...), then of a passive sentence (Var Haraldr þar læknaðr), and finally of another stative sentence (hann var heill). Each of these has a Patient subject. When he recovers, he is the subject of various motion verbs, whose subjects may or may not be underlying Agents. The ambiguity is appropriate for someone who is not yet in control of his fate. At first the motion verbs are plural, (fóru þeir, riðu þeir), and then singular, and the reader assumes that Harald is taking more responsibility for himself.

Vissi bondasonr ekki til, hverjum hann fylgði. Ok er þeir riðu milli eðiskóga nokkura, þá kvað Haraldr þetta: (Poem). Hann fór austr um Jämtaland ok Helsingaland ok svá til Svíþjóðar. Fann hann þar Rognvald jarl Brúsason ok marga aðra þá menn, er komisk höfðu ór orrustu, menn Óláfs konungs.

The farmer's son didn't know whom he was accompanying. And when they rode through uninhabited forests, Harald recited this poem: (Poem) He went east around Jamtaland and Helsingaland and thus to Sweden. There he found Rognvald Brusason and many others of those who had escaped from the battle, men of King Olaf.

The first Agent subject with Harald in this whole passage introduces the poem (hann kvað...). In the poem he speaks of becoming famous, and after that he stops sharing the ambiguous subjects with those around him, and seems whole again. The first unambiguous Agent subject then is at the beginning of Chapter two, where they get a crew, fengu þeir sér skipan, (the verb fá 'to get' is ambiguous except when the dative is included). Here the use of the reflexive makes it clear that they did something to get the crew together for the ship.

The best tests for agentivity of motion verbs are the inclusion of a destination, which makes the verb completive, and the subject accordingly agentive; and the inclusion of a manner adverb. These adverbs only occur in sentences with Agents, and are thus a reliable indicator of agentivity. In Icelandic, manner adverbs are usually formed with a -liga suffix, and are easily recognized. For example:⁵

þau fóru leyniliga. 'They went secretly'

þá tók hann við þeim sem bezt ok feginsamligast. 'then he received them as well and as gladly as possible.'

Let us examine another passage, this one from the Saga of Harald the Fair.⁶ It starts with a scene setting section three clauses long, in which all human nouns are Patients, and the verbs are stative. This is followed by the presentation of the sons' discontent, where they are Experiencers perceiving their father's Agentivity and resenting it. The third section is their reaction, where they are Agents themselves for six rampaging clauses.

Scene Setting:

þá er Haraldr konungr var fertógr at aldri, þá váru margir synir hans vel á legg komnir. þeir váru allir bráðgorvir.

'When Harald the king was in his forties, many of his sons were grown. They were all "early ripe".'

Experiencer Section:

Kom þá svá (happening, non-agentive), at þeir unðu illa við (EXP), er konungr (Agent, strength) gaf þeim ekki ríki, en setti jarl (Agent, insult) í hverju fylki, ok þótti þeim (EXP) jarlar vera smábornari en þeir (PAT) váru.

So it happened that they were dissatisfied that the king did not hand over the kingdom to them, but established an earl in each county, and they thought the earls less well born than they.

Reaction Section:

Þá fóru til á einu vári Hálfðan háleggur ok Guðrøðr ljómi með mikla sveit manna (AGTs) ok komu á óvart Rognvaldi Mærajarli ok tóku hús á honum ok brenndu hann inni (AGT) við sex tigu manna. Þá tók Hálfðan (AGT) langskip þrjú ok skipaði (AGT) ok siglir (AGT, destination included) síðan vestr um haf, en Guðrøðr settisk (AGT) þar at londum, sem áðr hafði haft Rognvaldr jarl.

One spring Halfdan hálegg and Guðrøðr ljómi took a large troop of men and surprized Rognvald the earl of Mæri, and took his house and burned it down upon him and 60 men. Then Halfdan took three longships and stocked them and sailed west to sea, while Guðrøð established himself on the earl's lands.

In direct contrast with the style of Harald's Saga, is a speech in Magnúss Saga ins Góða by Queen Astrid, in which she is promising to support Magnus. Almost every sentence shows her commitment and the speech has a very strong, assertive tone.⁷

Þar var þá ok Ástríðr dróttning, er átt hafði inn helgi Óláfr konungur. Hon fagnaði forkunnar vel Magnúsi, stjúpssyni sínum, ok lét þegar stefna fjölmennit þing, þar sem kallat er á Høngrum. En á því þingi talaði Ástríðr ok sagði svá:

Hér er nú kominn með oss sonr ins helga Óláfs konungs, er Magnús heitir, ætlar nú ferðsína til Noregs at sökja föðurarf sinn. Er mér skylda mikil at styrkja hann til þessarar ferðar því at hann er stjúpssonr minn, svá sem þat er öllum kunnigt, bæði Svíum ok Norðmönnum. Skal ek hér engan hlut til spara, þann er ek hefi fong á, at hans styrkr mætti mestr verða, bæði fjölmenni þat, er ek á forráð á, ok svá fé. Svá þeir allir, er til þessir ferðar ráðask með honum, skulu eiga heitla mína vináttu fullkomna. Ek vil því ok lýsa, at ek skal ráðask til ferðarinnar með honum. Mun þat þá öllum auðsýnt, at ek spari eigi aðra hluti til liðs meðar við hann, þá er ek má honum veita.

And there lived also Queen Astrid, who had been married to Holy King Ólaf. She welcomed her stepson Magnús most heartily, and immediately had a numerous assembly summoned at a place called Hangrar. At this assembly Queen Astrid spoke as follows:

With us here is the son of Holy King Ólaf, whose name is Magnús. He now plans to proceed to Norway to recover his patrimony. I have great good reason to support him in this endeavor, for he is my stepson, as all know, both Swedes and Norwegians. I shall not be sparing of either the followers I have or my goods. So all who are willing to follow him in his expedition shall be assured of my whole-hearted friendship. I shall also let it be known herewith that I shall join him in this expedition. Thus all can see that I shall not be sparing for his support of any other thing which I am able to supply him with.

Then, when there are objections to her speech, Astrid contrasts the weakness

of her people in past events with the possibility of desirably aggressive future actions:

Ástríðr svarar: Allir þeir, er nokkurir hreystimenn vilja vera, munu ekki æðrask um slíkt. En ef menn hafa látit frændr sína með inum helga Óláfi konungi eða sjálfir sár fengit (former weaknesses), þá er þat nú drengskapr (future strength) at fara nú til Nóregs ok hefna þess.

Astrid answers: All those, who want to be any kind of courageous men, will not be frightened by such as this. For if men have lost their kinsmen with King Olaf the saint, or been wounded themselves, it is heroism now to travel to Norway and avenge this.

In addition to the use of deep structure Agents with a majority of verbs, the author employs the causative auxiliary láta and the modal auxiliary of speaker's intent skulu. Both show strength and decisiveness: láta provokes agentivity in a second party, e.g. lét stefna þing implies that Astrid caused someone else to act to bring together the congress. The modal auxiliary skulu is an even stronger Agent marker. It means roughly, "I will see to it that..." So when Astrid says skal ek hér engan hlut til spara 'I will spare no means', or þeir allir skulu eiga heimla mína vináttu fullkomna, 'They shall all have the resources of my full friendship', she is promising her personal involvement in the outcome. Similarly, skulu is used for giving orders:⁸

En er þeir höfðu tjaldat, þá mælti Ásbjörn, "Nú skuluð þér vera eptir hér ok bíða mín" 'When they had pitched tent, then Ásbjörn said, "Now you shall stay behind and wait for me'

and

Konungr svarar, "þér skuluð ráða" 'You shall decide'.

Skulu is also the modal used in oaths, interestingly enough, not in the request for an oath, but only the swearing:⁹

Jarl spyrr, hvers hann vildi beiðask. Konungr segir:
Enskis annars en þú farir ór landi ok gefir
svá upp ríki yðart ok sverir þess eidda, at þér
haldið eigi orrostu heðan í frá gegn mér. Nú vinnr
Hákon jarl Óláfi konungi síða, at hann skal aldri
síðan berjask í móti honum.

'The earl asks, what he wants to request. The King says, nothing other than that you will leave the country and renounce your lands and swear this oath, that you will not engage in battle against me from now on. Then Earl Hákon swears to King Ólaf the oath that he will never fight against him.

As if the assertive verbs weren't enough, many of Astrid's nouns also show agency: hlut, þann er ek hefi fong á 'resources within my grasp'; and er ek á

forráð á 'which I have control of'; and heimla mína 'my resources'. Fong, 'grasp', forráð 'control', and heimla 'resources' are all nouns which presuppose the agency of the noun governing them. So the noun fong assumes the act of an agent grasping, just as the noun forráð assumes a controlling agent. C.f. in Olafs Saga Tryggvasonar, Var þar til forráða ríkr maör 'A powerful man was in charge here', where the agency of the subject maör is made clear by the adjective ríkr. Heimla is the weakest of the three nouns, since it means 'support' or 'resources' and thus it may or may not have an underlying agent. Because Astrid's speech is otherwise so strong, it is reasonable to assume the intention behind the word.

Impersonal sentences, having no grammatical subject, are those with least involvement of all. The subject-less sentence is quite common in saga style, and may be derived from several different sentence types, only some of which are truly impersonal. The most common subject-less sentence is merely the result of the deletion of the second of two identical noun phrases in adjacent clauses. This superficial source of subject-less sentences has no effect on the issue of agentivity, since the reader does not have trouble identifying the missing subject, for it is in fact missing rather than non-existent. For example,¹⁰

Síðan fór jarl (AGT) austr í Vermaland, ok dvaldisk (PAT, deleted) þar lengi um vetrinn.

Then the earl travelled east to Vermaland and (he) stayed there long into the winter.

A second source for subjectless sentences, the passive, has a more interesting impact, for the original subject is missing and not usually recoverable. A passive sentence is subjectless when the active sentence it is derived from has no accusative object. Since only accusative objects may become the grammatical subject of passivized sentences, those sentences whose verbs take genitive or dative objects will be subjectless when passivized. Passives are interesting in general, for they are a stylistic device for shifting emphasis away from the original subject, most often an Agent or an Experiencer. As such they involve a choice on the part of the writer to disrupt the usual Agent/subject hierarchy in favor of a Patient subject or none at all. Passives are not very common in Heimskringla, except for the usual formulas: X er nefndr 'X is named'; þess er getit 'it is mentioned'; þá var sagt 'Then it was said', and similar; and as in the examples below¹¹ in which the deleted Agent is 'everybody' or 'anybody', and thus is well expressed by a passive, circumventing the need to specify exactly who the Agent is.¹¹

en varð engi sigr unnin
No victory was won (by anyone).

Konungr segir, at þetta mun kallat illt verk.
the king says that this will be called an evil deed.

ok kom svá at lykðum, at sættarfundr var stefndr í Elfi milli Haralds konungs ok Sveins konungs.

And the result was that a reconciliation meeting between King Harald and King Sveinn was set at Elfi.

There are fewer occasions when the writer turns away from a definite Agent in favor of a passive, for example¹²:

Sú sætt var eiðum bundin.
This conciliation was bound by an oath.

Lauk svá þeirri stefnu, at Haraldr var til konungs tekinn ok vígðr konungsvígslu inn þrettánda dag í Pólskirkju.

And the meeting ended with Harald being chosen king and consecrated on the thirteenth day later in Paul's Church.

Simple deletion of an agentive subject is another alternative when one wished to avoid the usual role hierarchy. This is the only type of impersonal mentioned in Gordon's text¹³. Like the passive it is of considerable interest to us, because its use is a conscious stylistic maneuver. Though these constructions are rare in Old Icelandic in general, they were exceptionally hard to find in Heimskringla, a fact which is puzzling, but might just indicate that Snorri was bilingual, not just to the extent of knowing a foreign language, but that he spoke two (or more) natively. If this were true, it would not be surprising if he avoided a syntactic type which was only typical of one of his languages. I only suggest this because I was unable to find more of this type of impersonals; to gain a truer indication of this, one would have to make a count of impersonal constructions of this type in Heimskringla and others of Snorri's works, then compare it with a count of those from contemporary works, and follow through with investigations of other typically Old Icelandic structures. Deleted Agent impersonal sentences are more common with modal auxiliaries:

at ekki mátti við hann mæla.
that it was not possible to speak with him¹⁴

To illustrate this type of impersonal construction, I would like to cite three examples from other sagas, Droplaugarsonar Saga and Hrafnkels Saga: ¹⁵

Laust á fyrir þeim hríð mikilli.
There broke loose upon them a great storm.

Hina bar skjótt eptir er lausu riðu.
Those who rode free were carried after them quickly.

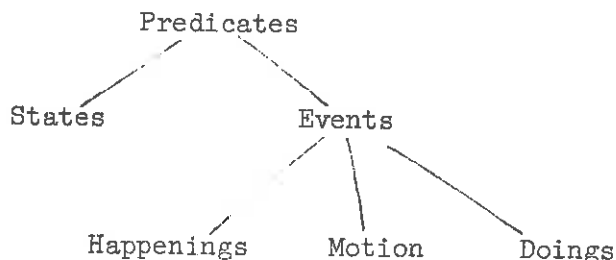
þat er vænna, aðr kveld komi, at þar klœi lítt.
It is more likely that there won't be much scratching by evening.

In each of these the Agent subject is deleted, but otherwise the syntax is the same as if it were included. In the first example, the deleted Agent is the one who loosed the storm, obviously some superior, or even divine, force. In

the second example, the omitted subject is merely horses, and one might assume it was omitted merely for emphasis on the more important riders. The third sentence is most interesting, for Helgi is looking forward to the battle that evening with grim anticipation. By omitting the subject, he lends an air of absoluteness and finality to the statement, that even something simple like scratching will not be possible by evening, for himself, and implied in the omission, for anyone else either.¹⁶ These deleted-Agent impersonals are generally used when the event is outside the control of human agents, that is, when it is caused by chance or some outside force. Obviously a passage with many of these impersonals would reflect the human subject's helplessness in the face of other powers. If there were in addition a noticeable number of ambiguous subjects with motion verbs, passive sentences, and human Patient subjects, then it would be clear that the character portrayed was out of control. Perhaps because the national pride of the Norsemen was too great to allow themselves to see themselves in that light, or perhaps they simply didn't view the world as Patients but rather as Agents, such a passage is extremely rare in Heimskringla. That they do occur in English is established¹⁷, but whether they exist with any frequency or consistency in Old Icelandic is very questionable.

Finally there is a large number of lexically impersonal verbs, which specify no subject as part of the syntax they require, in the same manner as verbs which govern a dative or genitive object instead of an accusative one. Because their impersonality is lexical, these verbs are not available for stylistic manipulation, and therefore are of interest in a discussion of agentivity only in the following sense: Whenever a writer consistently chooses verbs without Agent subjects in preference to those with Agent subjects, there must be some reason for this choice. In Old Icelandic the lexical impersonals mostly take Experiencers as the non-nominative noun they govern, and must be reckoned with Experiencer subjects, that is, with non-agentive ones.

Now let us turn to the idea of verbal aspect. I use the term in the sense of the German Aktionsart. If one examines the range of action types, the first distinction which strikes the mind is that of action vs. no action. This is usually referred to as a distinction between event (action) and state (no action). Events are also of two types, according to the nature of the grammatical subject: Doings--in which the grammatical subject is the doer (the Agent), and happenings, in which the grammatical subject is not the doer, but the person or thing acted upon (the Patient). One might visualize these distinctions in a tree diagram.¹⁸



Sentences which characterize a status quo are described as stative, for example, from Ynglingasaga¹⁹:

Jorundr ok Eiríkr váru synir Yngva Alrekssonar.
Jorund and Eric were sons of Yngvi Alrekson.

Veðr stóð af landi.
There was a storm offshore.

Þat var siðvenja í þann tíma...
It was the custom in those times...

These and all other stative sentences define the location, nature or condition of their subjects. In Saga literature they function as a starting point for the action, signalling the beginning of a new section or a change of scene. Take for example this exceptionally long stative section at the beginning of chapter 34 in Ynglingasaga²⁰:

Braut-Onundr átti son, er Ingjaldr hét. Þá var konungr á Fjadrýndalandi Yngvarr. Hann átti sonu tvá við konu sinni. Hét annarr Álfr, en annarr Agnarr. Þeir váru mjök jafnaldrar Ingjalds. Víða um Svíþjóð váru í þann tíma heraðskonungar. Braut-Onundr réð fyrir Tíundalandi. Þar eru Uppsalar. Þar er allra Svía þing. Váru þar þá blót mikil. Sóttu þannig margir konungar. Var þat at miðjum vetri. Ok einn vetr, þá er fjölmennt var komit til Uppsala, var þar Yngvarr konungr ok synir hans. Þeir váru sex vetra gamlir. Álfr, sonr Yngvars konungs, ok Ingjaldr, sonr Onundar konungs, þeir efldu til sveinaleiks, ok skyldi hvárr ráða fyrir sínu liði.

Braut-Onund had a son named Ingjald. At that time Yngvarr was king in Fjadrýnd. He had two sons with his wife. One was called Alf, and the other Agnar. They were the same age as Ingjald. In those days there were district-kings in most of Sweden. Braut-Onund ruled over Tíund, where Uppsala is, and the assemblies of all the Swedes are held there. There were many great sacrifices there, and many kings in attendance. It was midwinter, when they were held. One winter, when a great crowd was at Uppsala, Yngvar the king and his sons were there too. They were six years old. Alf, Yngvar's son, and Ingjald, king Onund's son were playing battle games, and each was to be in charge of his own troops.

Note that the majority of the sentences with human subjects have deep structure Patients, and the verbs are overwhelmingly stative, defining the location or relationship of the Patient-subjects. This is also true of the sentences without human subjects, for they also state the location or nature of their subjects. The first Agent is with the verb ráða, and it is an open-ended activity, as is the second Agent, efla's subject, which starts the action of the chapter. As soon as something happens, in this case, the game between the two boys, the typical saga form moves into the realm of events, and stative sentences are scarce. Unlike other literary genres, saga literature is characteristically lean on stative sentences and correspondingly rich in events.

Event sentences are of two types, according to the agency of their subjects. Those event sentences with Patient subjects are called happenings. They usually depict a change of state or location, for example:²¹

ok varð sá bardagi eigi langr.
and this battle was not long.

Eptir þat þognuðu þeir báðir.
After that they both fell silent.

En er tréit kom á landi, þá braut þat.
And when the tree came to land (washed ashore), it broke.

til þess er hann deyfði.
until he became deaf.

Many happening verbs have parallel causatives, and thus provide the opportunity to choose between agentivity and objectivity, as in the examples above of houses burning and milk spilling. Such parallel or paraphrased choices are also sometimes available for stative verbs, which makes possible a strong and a weak version of many common expressions:²²

Eiríkssynir váru mjök í hernaði (weak) í Austrvegi, en stundum herjuðu (strong) þeir í Nóregi.
The sons of Eric were harrying much of the time in the East, but sometimes they harried in Norway.

En hann drap (strong) þá báða. Þangbrandr dvaldisk tvá vetr á Íslandi ok varð þriggja manna bani (weak).
And he killed them both. Thangbrand spent two winters (years) in Iceland, and was the killer of three men.

Eru menn ófúsir... (weak) 'Men are unwilling'
Menn vilja vera... (strong) 'Men want to be...'

Magnús konungr var þann vetr yfir Nóregi (weak)
King Magnus ruled (was over) Norway that winter.

Magnús konungr réð þá bæði fyrir Danmörk ok Nóregi. (strong)
King Magnus ruled (administered) both Denmark and Norway.

There is more to say about aspect than the distinctions of state vs. event, and objectivity vs. agentivity. Both happenings and doings may be completive or not. Uncompleted (called imperfective) happenings are processes: 'it rained' or 'he grew', in contrast to 'it rained three inches' or 'he grew up', which are perfective, since they imply a conclusion to the process. Doings, while all agentive, may also be perfective or imperfective. Even though they may take a long time to finish, perfective acts are marked for completion, whereas imperfective activities have no necessary end. The difference between what I

have called "considerable" involvement and "complete" involvement is a function of the interaction of agent and aspect. In doings ("considerable" involvement) the agent acts, but does not complete his deed, whereas in deeds ("complete" involvement) the act is finished. Thus the difference between the open-ended activity of the verbs 'to Play' and 'to mourn' in the examples below, and the completive acts of the verbs 'to strike' and 'to reconcile' in the completive examples following them.²³

Doings: þeir léku sér.
They were playing.

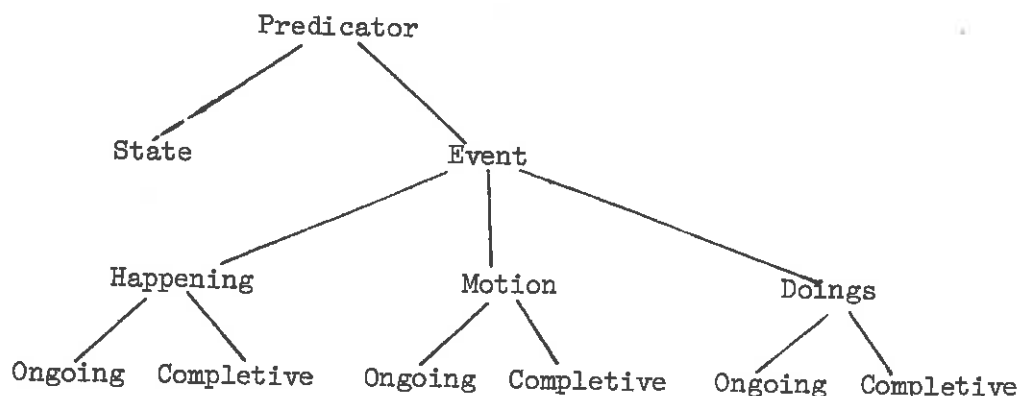
þæði vinir ok óvinir grétu dauða hans.
both friends and enemies mourned his death.

Deeds: Maðr einn barði skrínit.
A man struck the casket.

Ek vil at þú sættir boendir við mik.
I want you to reconcile the farmers with me.

Old Icelandic in general has many fewer activity verbs than completive ones; the figures in Heimskringla characteristically act and move on to a new act. Even stative verbs often have an expressed limiting time span, and motion verbs generally include a destination. Moreover, happenings as well as doings may be perfective, and often are. One result of this, combined with the tendency for short sentences, is the matter-of-fact tone typical of Heimskringla style: "They did this, and they did that, and then they did that..." The effect is of not-tarrying, but moving on to undertake a new thing.

Let us incorporate the completive aspect into the tree diagram:



In summary, let us look at one more text, this one the opening of the Saga of Hálfðan the Black.²⁴

Hálfðan var þá vetrgamall (stative, Patient subject), er faðir hans fell (happening, Patient subject). Ása, móðir hans, fór þegar með hann vestr á Agðir (motion verb, Agent subject, not main character) ok settisk þar til ríkis þess (deed, Agent subject, completive aspect), er átt hafði Haraldr, faðir hennar (stative, Patient subject). Hálfðan óx þar upp (happening, Patient subject). Var hann brátt mikill ok sterkr ok svartr á hári (stative, Patient subject, but note time limit in brátt). Var hann kallaðr Hálfðan svartí (stative, passive, Patient subject). Hann var átján vetra (stative, Patient subject), er hann tók konungdóm á Ögðum (Agent subject, end of scene-setting, beginning of action).

Hálfðan was a year old, when his father was killed. Asa, his mother, took him west to Agdir, and took over the kingdom which her father had ruled. Hálfðan grew up there. Soon he was tall and strong, and he had black hair. He was called Hálfðan the black. He was 18 when he succeeded to the kingdom at Agdir.

In this paper I have demonstrated that verbal aspect and the roles of human nouns function together to imply degrees of involvement in saga action, that consecutive stative sentences function as scene changers and section markers, and that the broad use of completive aspect renders the style choppy and matter of fact. By choosing agentive subjects, the author emphasizes the assertiveness of his characters; conversely, the consistent choice of Experiencer or Patient subjects serves the impression of pensiveness, fearfulness or helplessness. This interplay of verbal aspect and noun roles is a distinguishing feature of the saga style in Heimskringla.

FOOTNOTES

¹The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, tr. G. N. Garmonsway (1953; rpt. J. M. Dent, 1972), p. 129.

²Julian and Zelda A. Boyd, "Action and Motion in Tennyson," Unpublished Article, 1975, p. 3.

³Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk Fornrit Edition in 3 Volumes (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1941-1951), I, 42-43.

⁴Ibid., III, 68.

⁵"Óláfs Saga Tryggvasonar," Heimskringla, I, 266.
"Óláfs Saga Helga," Heimskringla, II, 247.

⁶"Haralds Saga Hárfagra," Heimskringla, I, 130.

⁷"Magnús Saga ins Góða," Heimskringla, III, 4-5.

- 8 "Óláfs Saga Helga," 199, 205.
- 9 Ibid., 38.
- 10 "Haralds Saga Sigurðarsonar," Heimskringla, III, 158.
- 11 "Óláfs Saga Tryggvasonar," 235.
Ibid., 235.
"Haralds Saga Sigurðarsonar," 158.
- 12 "Haralds Saga Sigurðarsonar," 161, 171.
- 13 E. V. Gordon, An Introduction to Old Norse, 1927; rev. A. R. Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957), p. 314.
- 14 "Óláfs Saga Tryggvasonar," 233.
- 15 "Droplaugarsona Saga," Ausfirðinga Sögur, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Íslensk Fornrit Edition (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1950), p. 146.
"Hrafnkels Saga," Austfirðinga Sögur, p. 129.
"Droplaugarsona Saga," p. 161.
- 16 Karen C. Kossuth, A Case Grammar of Verbal Predicators in Old Icelandic, Unpublished Dissertation (U. C. Berkeley, 1974).
- 17 Boyd and Boyd.
Helene Knox, The Metaphysical World of Emily Dickinson, Unpublished Dissertation (U. C. Berkeley: 1976).
- 18 Boyd and Boyd, p. 1.
- 19 "Ynglinga Saga," Heimskringla, I, 44.
- 20 Ibid., 63.
- 21 "Haralds Saga Sigurðarsonar," 133.
"Magnússona Saga," Heimskringla, III, 262.
Ibid., 265.
Ibid., 275.
- 22 "Hákonar Saga Góða," Heimskringla, I, 176.
- 23 "Óláfs Saga Helga," 108.
"Hákonar Saga Góða," 193.
"Magnúss Saga Berfœtts," Heimskringla, III, 232.
"Haralds Saga Sigurðarsonar," 262.
- 24 "Hálfðanar Saga Svarta," Heimskringla, I, 84.

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