

Plurilingualism and Language Learning and Acquisition in the Old Norse World

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ABSTRACT

This talk explores the importance of plurilingualism and foreign (or second) language learning and acquisition in Old Norse society by examining episodes from various Old Norse sources. Both stories about fictitious saga heroes and about real-life people, – first and foremost royalty, nobility, clergy and learned men, but also merchants and others, – are used as empirical material. Marianne Kalinke asserted that fluency in foreign languages was seen as essential for both learned individuals and ideal heroes in Icelandic romance (Kalinke, 1983, p. 856). This leads us to ask: *How* did people in the Old Norse world acquire other languages? In this connection, the distinction between foreign language learning (and teaching) and second language acquisition is discussed. Episodes explicitly describing learning (and teaching) languages on the one hand, and self-study on the other hand, are presented; furthermore, this talk highlights instances of bi- or plurilingual communication that are not overtly portrayed as language learning or teaching, but nonetheless indicate the likely prevalence of language acquisition in the Old Norse world. Historical linguistics and language contact studies seem to support the assumption that particularly Saami-Norwegian bilingualism must have been a relatively widespread phenomenon, and it is a reasonable guess that bilingual proficiency in such cases was achieved through “natural” acquisition rather than formal education or conscious and purposeful self-study. Even though there were situations where interpreters were needed for the Norwegians and the Saami people to be able to communicate with each other, they were likely able to understand each other in many other situations. As Classen concludes, “[t]he silence in many literary texts regarding multilingual conditions probably reveals more about the lower hurdles which foreign languages represented at that time than any explicit discussion of linguistic issues” (2013, p. 143).

Keywords *plurilingualism, foreign language education, second language acquisition, Old Norse world*

References

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