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Vocabular Clarity and insular Scandinavian: A response to Þorgeirsson

In his article "Testing Vocabular Clarity in insular Scandinavian", Haukur Þorgeirsson (HT) discusses the analysis of Faroese noun inflection presented in Enger (2013a). It is rewarding to see that the NBP/VC motivates careful consideration of alternative analyses and additional facts.

HT raises valid questions and interesting challenges, including issues that were not dealt with in sufficient detail by Enger (2013a); yet I cannot agree with his main conclusions. Given space limitations, this reply will concentrate on some central points of disagreement (rather than on issues where I must simply stand corrected). These points include the analysis of the genitive (where there seems to be a misunderstanding), issues of segmentation, and how to deal with zeroes. The issue of zeroes also leads me to suggest that one previously accepted counter-example is perhaps not quite as strong as it may seem.

1 The Faroese genitive

On one point, the Faroese genitive, there may be a misunderstanding. My claim was that "the only case where we had to resort to the combination of gender *and* number is also the case that is no longer part of the living language, and thus must have been a problem to native speakers" (Enger 2013a: 362). This does *not* mean that the Faroese genitive was a violation of the NBP/VC. To resort to both gender and number is appropriate in the NBP/VC approach; the point is that the most powerful tool in the NBP/VC toolbox had to be used to handle the genitive, which thus came out as different – more "marked" – than the other cases. HT objects to this reasoning on the grounds that

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> the most straightforward way for languages to correct NBP/VC violations ... would be to modify the relevant inflectional endings. A wholesale abandonment of a morphosyntactic category seems like an extreme reaction. I find it more likely that the weakening of the Faroese genitive is motivated by syntactic rather than morphological reasons. (p. 517)

It is not obvious that *either* syntactic *or* morphological reasons must be assumed for the demise of the Faroese genitive; both might be relevant. For the demise of the case system in the closely related Mainland Scandinavian languages, several factors may be at play, including morphological ones (Enger 2013b and references therein).

That "a wholesale abandonment of a morphosyntactic category" would seem "an extreme reaction" towards possible blurring is consistent with the widespread idea that inflection exists solely to do what syntax would have it do. Yet morphology has an independent status. Recent research makes it very clear that morphology is not merely reactive. There are independent morphological ("morphomic") patterns that actually spread diachronically (and therefore presumably have some reality for speakers) – see for example, Maiden (2016) for a catalogue of strange, unexpected alternations further detailed in other studies.

For the remainder of this paper, I will set the genitive aside, as my claim was not that it was a violation, and, as too HT accepts, it is marginal.

2 Segmentation in Faroese – and in general

HT discusses many relevant Faroese patterns. With regard to Faroese noun classes in the plural, he concludes that they conform to NBP/VC predictions, "though perhaps in a somewhat trivial way". I do not find that comment entirely justified; from HT's own description of the Faroese facts, it appears that plural suffixes conform perfectly to the NBP/VC, and *a priori*, they did not have to. The suffixes could have looked different, and they could have been distributed differently.

Accordingly, I shall concentrate on patterns in the singular, as described by HT. I have left out the genitive (in line with the argument in Section 1).

2.1 The masculine

Let us first consider Faroese masculine noun classes in the singular (excluding the genitive), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Faroese masculine noun classes (singular).

	hundur	*vøllur*	*ketil*	*tími*	*rakstur*	*trælur*	*riddari*
NOM.SG	ur	ur	–	i	–	ur	i
ACC.SG	–	–	–	a	–	–	a
DAT.SG	i	i	i	a	i	i	a

For each case, according to the NBP/VC, there can only be one suffix, the "class-default", that covers more than one class. Other suffixes should be "class-identifiers", covering only one class each. At first glance, however, Faroese seems to present massive blurring: in the nominative, *-ur* covers three classes (and would thus seem a good candidate for class-default status), but *-i* covers two classes (not just one), as does Ø (zero). In the accusative, zero covers five classes, *-a* two. In the dative, *-i* covers five classes, and *-a* two. So the principle seems to be violated in all three cases.

However, I would like to argue that this violation is only apparent. Once the plural suffixes have been set aside, there is no reason to treat *riddari* and *tími* as two classes, as they inflect identically. The *riddari* class may therefore be disregarded. In turn, the dative and the accusative case no longer constitute a violation of NBP/VC: in the dative, *-i* is the class-default, covering five classes, while *-a* emerges as the sole class-identifier (covering only *tími*); in the accusative, once *riddari* is put to one side, *-a* is the identifier of *tími*.

There is an additional reason why *tími* and *riddari* are not problematic for the NBP/VC. All the word-forms in the *riddari* class are trisyllabic, so the *riddari* class is motivated "extra-inflectionally" (extra-morphologically), i.e., by properties outside of inflection. When the choice of affixes is determined extra-inflectionally, the NBP/VC does not have to apply. The NBP/VC principle is meant to ensure that complete affixal synonymy does not arise, but if two affixes correlate with different extra-inflectional properties – for example by affix A being an index of (phonological) stem shape P and affix B being an index of stem shape Q, or affix A being an index of gender G and affix B being an index of gender H – then A and B differ and the NBP/VC is already complied with.

We may now turn to the nominative. As it has been established that *riddari* can be disregarded, the suffix *-i* does not present a problem for the NBP/VC principle. The remaining problem is *rakstur* and *ketil*, which share a different suffix (zero) than the word classes. In other words, zero covers two classes, while the obvious candidate for default status, *-ur*, covers three. However, *rakstur* actually *ends in* the sequence *ur*. The fact that no NOM.SG suffix is posited for a noun whose stem ends in what looks *exactly* like the NOM.SG suffix does

not have to be accidental. A sequence of unstressed *ur* + unstressed *ur* is, to the best of my knowledge, not attested in Faroese. In other words, we may assume a haplology constraint here.[1] Thus, *rakstur* may be merged with *hundur* + *vøllur* + *trælur*.[2] As a consequence, *-ur* emerges as the class-default affix, while *-i* is the class-identifier for *tími*, and zero is the class-identifier for *ketil*. In view of these observations, there is now no blurring in the masculines.[3]

The interesting *Dávur* pattern raised by HT (not included above) is, on his account, found "only in proper names". Again, if a class is uniquely motivated by extra-inflectional information, it is no violation of the NBP/VC. However, the issue may merit more detailed examination than I can offer here.

2.2 The feminine

Table 2 presents the feminine singular inflection classes. There is no NBP/VC violation here, but much extra-inflectional motivation. The feminines that have no suffix in the singular are monosyllabic; *tunga* and *ævi* stand out from the other classes both in being bisyllabic and in ending in a vowel in all word-forms.

Table 2: Faroese feminine noun classes (singular).

	ár	*ætt*	*tunga*	*nátt*	*mús*	*ævi*
NOM.SG	–	–	a	–	–	–/i
ACC.SG	–	–	u	–	–	–/i
DAT.SG	–	–	u	–	–	–/i

2.3 The neuter

Table 3 presents the neuter singular inflection classes. As in Table 2, there is no NBP/VC violation here either, but there is extra-inflectional motivation. The issue of segmentation comes up for *dømi*, as HT rightly points out. As for its

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1 A possible parallel is found in English; the POSS.PL of *child* is *childr-en-s* with distinct PL and POSS suffixes, but the POSS.PL of *girl* is just *girl-s'*, with what seems a single or fused suffix.
2 Now, readers may object that there is a difference between *rakstur* and *hundur* in the dative; compare *rakstri* vs. *hundi* (not **hundri*). Yet this objection may be turned around: due to Faroese phonology, the NOM.SG of *rakstur* could hardly be **rakstr*; it had to be *rakstur*.
3 Another argument on the zero suffix is presented in Section 3; the argument presented there also suggests that *rakstur* and *ketil* are not problematic for the NBP/VC principle.

Table 3: Faroese neuter noun classes (singular).

	reiður	*eyga*	*dømi*
NOM.SG	–	a	–/i
ACC.SG	–	a	–/i
DAT.SG	i	a	–/i

dative singular, there may be a connection between the absence of a suffix –
here -*i* – and the fact that the stem ends in *i*. As with *rakstur* above, I would not
see this as accidental: since a sequence of two unstressed *i*'s seems at least rare
in Faroese, we may again entertain the possibility of a haplology.[4] In that way,
dømi is accounted for. As we are now focusing on the singular only, *eyga* can be
analyzed as having no suffix.

   Looking across genders, we can observe that feminines like *ævi* and neuters
like *dømi* inflect identically (and are extra-inflectionally motivated, in that they
belong to different genders). The *reiður* class of neuters inflects like the *rakstur*
(+ *hundur* + *völlur* + *trælur)* class of masculines. There is one suffix spanning two
"macro-classes" (in the sense of Carstairs-McCarthy 1994: 745) in the NOM.SG,
where -*i* is the class-default. In the DAT.SG, -*i* is also the class-default. In short, I
still can see no NBP/VC violation in Faroese.

2.4 Segmentation is difficult *in general*

Many basic questions regarding segmentation remain unsolved, independently of
the NBP/VC discussion (see, e.g., Spencer 2012). So, while it is a difficult question
how to determine affixes or how to delineate inflection classes, these issues are
not unique to the NBP/VC endeavour. I agree with HT that "we need a clear theory
on how to establish affixes and inflection classes" (p. 516), but I find it unrealistic
to expect this "in the first place". The clear definitions may not be fully estab-
lished at the outset; they may be subject to later revisions – they are something we
wish to find in the end. Importantly, the distinction between stems and affixes
(and, consequently, the existence of stem-affix boundaries) has, presumably,
claim to psycholinguistic plausibility; for example, children produce such forms
as *breaked, broked*, before they stabilize on *broke* (Clark 1998: 377–379).

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4 Such a haplology will incidentally also take care of *dømi* + *ir* in the plural. As HT points out,
"the plural ending *ir* … is frequent in other inflection classes" (p. 512).

Morphologists of different persuasions have rejected the NBP/VC as too strong, and yet HT finds it "empirically weak".[5] Perhaps this difference of opinion between HT on the one hand and morphologists such as Stump, Spencer, and Marantz on the other is partly due to the fact that HT expects all definitions to be clear at the outset.

Eventually, the NBP/VC may turn out to be "a first approximation" (Baerman 2014: 3; Enger 2016). Yet much linguistics so far has probably been about first approximations; it seems unlikely that we shall make progress anywhere unless we are willing to put some issues on hold. While HT is clearly right that "we cannot use the principle to prove the principle" (p. 522), the literature contains many cases of genuine uncertainty about stem-affix boundaries; in such cases, the possibility of an analysis compatible with the NBP/VC means that the data in question should not be regarded as solid counterevidence, either.

3 Icelandic female names and Ignore-Zeroes

In his Table 19 (p. 520), presented here as Table 4, HT raises an interesting issue with regard to Icelandic proper names for females.

Table 4: Inflectional endings of female names (with each class marked by a representative name).

	Björk	*Hildur*	*Steinunn*	*Sigrún*	*Helga*
NOM	–	ur	–	–	a
ACC/DAT	–	i	i	u	u
GEN	ar	ar	ar	ar	u

The relation between the *Hildur* and *Steinunn* classes resembles the relation between the Latin third-declension subclasses exemplified by *rex* (i.e.,/re:g-s/) and *consul*. Outside of the NOM.SG, they have the same endings (SG -*em, -is, -i:, -e*; PL -*e:s, -e:s, -um, -ibus, -ibus*). Traditionally, they are considered the same class, with the proviso that the *consul* subclass is suffixless in the NOM.SG. It is not that *consul* has a different suffix from *rex* in the NOM.SG; rather, *consul* has no suffix at all there.

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5 An adherent of the NBP/VC may feel "damned if I do and damned if I don't".

The NBP/VC is a constraint on how competing affixes can be distributed. What we are witnessing in Icelandic female names and Latin *rex/consul* is something different: an affix competes with a bare stem form, i.e., with no affix (zero) at all. So how does the NBP/VC bear on this? Carstairs-McCarthy (1994: 739–740, 747–748) suggested, after some hesitation, that zeroes did count in the same way as regular affixes, but he also mentioned the alternative possibility, namely that the contrast between an affix and a bare stem in a particular feature combination (e.g. NOM.SG) does not suffice to assign the affixed lexeme and the bare-stem lexeme to different inflection classes. We shall now explore the implications of this alternative "ignore-zeroes" interpretation (also found in Carstairs-McCarthy's 2010: 119 later monograph).

The NBP/VC requires that any given affix signal, say, either "NOM.SG" (a class-default affix) or "NOM.SG, *Hildur*-class" (class identifier); what is not allowed is an affix that signals "NOM.SG, *Hildur*-class OR *Sigrún*-class". In HT's Table 19, we find no NOM.SG affix of the latter kind. If we assume the "ignore-zeroes" interpretation, the NOM.SG bare stem in *Steinunn* presents no difficulty. *Steinunn* is affixally identical to *Hildur* in all those forms where *Steinunn* carries an affix, so the *Steinunn* and *Hildur* types belong to one class for NBP/VC purposes. In HT's Table 19, the ACC/DAT seems problematic for the NBP/VC because both *-i* and *-u* appear in more than one class, so neither *-i* nor *-u* is the class-default and neither is a class-identifier. With the *Hildur* and *Steinunn* classes merged, however, in accordance with "ignore-zeroes", ACC/DAT *-i* becomes a class-identifier, *-u* is the class-default, and the bare stem of the *Björk* class can be ignored.

If we assume "ignore-zeroes", the implication from affixal information content to class membership is unidirectional only. If a female name has NOM.SG *-ur*, it follows that it has ACC/DAT *-i* and GEN *-ar*, i.e., that it is in the *Hildur–Steinunn* class; but from the fact that a name is in the *Hildur–Steinunn* class, it cannot be concluded that it has NOM.SG *-ur*, because there is always the possibility that it has no NOM.SG suffix at all (as is the case with *Steinunn*).

This interpretation is admittedly somewhat weaker than the one Carstairs-McCarthy ultimately preferred twenty-two years ago. However, I do not see anything revolutionary or surprising about this weaker interpretation (presupposed also in Enger 2007: 296 and Enger 2013a: 355). After all, the NBP/VC rests, in part, on an analogy between lexemes and affixes. If affixal vocabularies could have zeroes as members, one would have to ask why (traditional) lexeme vocabularies do not. What would a "zero word" mean or look like?

Note, finally, that scholars of Latin have long been happy to assign *rex* and *consul* to the same declension-type, although one of them has the suffix *-s* in the NOM.SG while the other has a bare stem.

4 Nuer

Given "ignore-zeroes", the noun inflection of Nuer (a Nilo-Saharan language) is not quite as good a counter-example to the NBP/VC as previously considered. As presented by Baerman (2012: 470), Nuer has 25 inflection classes. The exponents for each cell in the paradigm are as follows (see Table 5):

Table 5: Affixes in Nuer.

NOM.SG	–	NOM.PL	–, ni
GEN.SG	–, kä, ä	GEN.PL	–, ni, kä
LOC.SG	–, kä, ä	LOC.PL	–, ni

The phonological similarity between *kä* and *ä* is striking. One might imagine a virtual (or Pseudo-)Nuer in which the competing suffixes in the GEN.SG and LOC.SG were, say, *kä* and *u*. In that case, one could not plausibly analyse the GEN.SG and LOC.SG as realized by only one suffix each (or else the bare stem). In actual Nuer, however, there is an option that at least warrants further investigation: we can assign the *k* of *kä* to the stem, whereby there is only one suffix, namely *ä*. Once this is done, the suffixal inventory for every paradigm cell except the GEN.PL is reduced to a maximum of one. Since there is now only one suffix for each cell, assuming "ignore-zeroes" (Section 3), there is no suffixal competition – and no risk of suffixal synonymy or blurring. And the problem for Nuer is solved – except in the GEN.PL. However, in Baerman's Table 7, the GEN.PL suffix *kä* is found only in *one* class (XXV), which has precisely *one* member. In other words, of the 252 nouns described in Baerman's table, only one is potentially problematic. I am not sure that *k* should be assigned to the stem in Nuer; but the possibility merits further attention.

5 Conclusion

HT has raised thoughtful and valid criticism of Enger's (2013a) NBP/VC treatment of Faroese, and he has suggested new problems (from Icelandic). I have argued that his criticism is not as damaging as it may seem.

For one, HT has argued himself that the Faroese plural conforms to the NBP/VC. I cannot agree that this result is "somewhat trivial"; anyway, we agree that the plural does not present blurring. More controversially, I have suggested that the

Faroese singular patterns do not reveal any blurring, either. First, the discussion of the genitive singular may rest on a misunderstanding (Section 1). Second, apparent violations of the NBP/VC in the singular can be discarded in we bear in mind the possibility of haplologies (Section 2) and of extra-inflectional motivation (Section 2). Finally, the Icelandic first names suggest that we should opt for a slightly weaker interpretation of the NBP/VC, viz. "ignore zeroes" (Section 3); this interpretation has already found some support in earlier studies on NBP/VC (Section 3), and it is also warranted on other grounds, simply because "no affix" does not equal "an affix".

The NBP/VC may turn out to be no more than "a first approximation", but this hardly makes it unique in linguistics. Counter-examples have been suggested; one, viz. noun inflection in Nuer, may seem debatable (Section 4), others are less so. Furthermore, the NBP/VC may turn out not to be an independent principle, but rather an epiphenomenon, e.g., of inflectional entropy, as argued by Ackerman and Maalouf (2013).[6] If they are right, then the NBP/VC may have been a good start.

Furthermore, the NPB/VC has seen some achievements, also on the empirical side. For Scandinavian, it has helped us provide an account:
– why the genitive was lost so early (Enger 2013a)
– why the suffix typically associated with the subjunctive and with a non-majority class should spread in Faroese verbs in the present (Enger 2016)
– why a present-tense suffix typically associated with a non-majority class could become predominant in Norwegian (Enger 2007) over a suffix associated with a majority class

Outside of Scandinavian, there are many more cases; for instance, NBP/VC seems to shed light on particular developments in Romance (see Maiden 2004: 104, 2005: 145–146).

In my view, this is not a bad record.

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6 I was unaware of this alternative when submitting Enger (2013a).

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