MARIA BONNER and KAAREN GRIMSTAD

Munu vit ekki at því sættask

A Closer Look at Dialogues in *Hrafnkels saga*

To say that conflict and negotiation of power in order to gain honor are the name of the game in the Icelandic sagas is stating the obvious. Recent book-length studies like Jesse Byock's *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (1982), William I. Miller's *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (1990) or Preben Meulengracht Sørensen's *Fortælling og ære: Studier i islændingasagaerne* (1993) bear witness to the continuing scholarly interest and research into these issues, with the goals of providing coherent literary readings of the saga texts and shedding light on actual social conditions in thirteenth-century Iceland. Encouraged by an intellectual climate in which new questions can be asked and new tools applied to the old texts in order to try to answer these questions, colleagues from anthropology, sociology and legal studies have joined the ranks of the philologists, historians and literary scholars in investigating Old Icelandic texts. In the present study a linguist, interested in describing language usage[1], and a literary scholar, interested in understanding a work of art, have collaborated on an analysis of dialogue in an Icelandic family saga. The success of such a collaboration depends — as Hundsnurscher (1994: 77) pointed out — on whether linguists can contribute to the understanding of a work of art. We found that the gap between our disciplines was not so great, especially not if dialogue analysis is seen as a special form of very close reading. Combining our interests and expertise proved fruitful in investigating the characters' pragmatic skills in the verbal stage of the power game.

Hrafnkels saga[2] seemed an obvious choice for this kind of study for

[1] To use Marcel Bax's wording: "Sprachgebrauchskonventionen in einer (bestimmten) historischen Sprach(gebrauchs)gemeinschaft zu beschreiben und diese Konventionen zu erklären" (Bax 1983: 3).

[2] We have used Jón Helgason's edition of *Hrafnkels saga* (1950). References indicate page and line.

several reasons. Within the corpus of Icelandic family sagas it is noted for its exceptional amount of dialogue,[3] its small cast of characters, and a plot which dramatizes a conflict that is unusual for saga conflicts because it pits a couple of small farmers against a powerful chieftain. Economical though the story may be, all the standard saga ingredients in the competitive negotiation of power are present; the characters make choices, reach decisions and then face the consequences of those decisions. Furthermore, it is typical class reading material and as such can benefit from a tool that provides a fuller description of the expectations and assumptions that the characters and consequently also the thirteenth-century audience would have been aware of, expectations and assumptions we might otherwise miss as readers in the twentieth century.

Hrafnkels saga has been a popular focus for scholarly investigations, and there are a number of critical readings of this text. However, in general, there appear to be two basic contemporary lines of interpretation. Readers like Theodore M. Andersson (1988) and Hermann Pálsson (1971) see the saga as an exemplum and stress the ethical issue of arrogance and pride which cause downfall and loss of power, followed by repentance and reform which bring about recovery of power; these readers consider Einarr to be innocent and the initial killing immoral. Readers like Klaus von See (1979) or Óskar Halldórsson (1976) detect no moral flaw in Hrafnkell to begin with, although they may still consider Einarr to be innocent, and stress the issue of realistic power politics in medieval Iceland, where a chieftain is a chieftain and the social status quo remains fixed. In order to arrive at a satisfactory interpretation of the meaning of the story, i.e., why the story was considered tellable, we know that we must look for judgments of the characters' behavior expressed by the community in the saga, judgments which may reflect the attitude of the contemporary thirteenth-century audience. Using this approach, we can view *Hrafnkels saga* as a cautionary tale exhibiting the medieval two-part structure that Andersson describes, in which "[the protagonist] passes through the same or analogous adventures twice, the first time with negative results but the second time with positive results leading to ultimate success" (Andersson 1988: 295). If we adapt Meulengracht Sørensen's model for how power politics work in the saga society to

[3] According to two different estimates, somewhere between 42 % (Nordal 1958: 40) and 53 % (Gordon 1939: 3) of the narrative is rendered in direct speech (see also Slater 1968: 37).

this two-part structure (Meulengracht Sørensen 1993: 187–211), we might say that in his youthfully aggressive pursuit of honor and power related in the first part of the story, Hrafnkell makes a tactical mistake, but learns from his error and is able to adjust his behavior in the second part so that by the end of the saga he has become an established chieftain with much more power and prestige than in the beginning. This is the position he holds successfully until his death. His performance, both in the first and second parts of the story, is judged by the community in the saga in accord with collectively accepted guidelines for how chieftains may behave; when he acts in a recklessly aggressive way and tries to set his own rules by swearing an oath, he meets with failure, but when he acts in a socially acceptable way, he is successful.

As a story about the development of a chieftain, *Hrafnkels saga* can certainly profit from a closer look at dialogues. They are a rich source of information since they don't tell, but actually show social interaction. Only at first glance dialogue analysis might seem a tool mainly suitable for understanding contemporary spoken discourse. But if we consider the way in which the characters in the sagas are presented by their actions rather than by their feelings or thoughts, we see that we get to know them very much in the same way as we encounter real people; we can only gain insight by observing them, interpreting their verbal and nonverbal action in context, studying the reaction of others to them. In other words, we get to know them in exactly the same way as we get to know communication partners today. In both cases we have no direct access to a speaker's intended meaning; we can only interpret what happens and speculate about underlying assumptions and intentions.

Furthermore, even invented dialogues have to be written against the background of experience with the way people spoke to each other at the time when they were written and have to follow the conventions of communication in a language community in order to be understood.[4] The only difference between real and literary dialogues is that we have to be more careful interpreting the clues and the context and that certain issues, turntaking for example, will not play an important

[4] In Peter von Polenz's opinion (1981: 250) for older periods literary texts are even preferable to nonliterary texts: "Die wahl poetischer texte ist nicht nur eine verlegenheitslösung aus mangel an spontanen dialogtexten; sie hat den vorteil, bewußt geformte, 'verdichtete' dialoge zu bieten, in denen der textinhalt pragmatisch stark strukturiert ist".

role. If we use dialogue analysis as a tool, we can expect to learn about structures of social interaction. We can learn from each dialogue how characters see themselves and the world; we can find out about culturally shared knowledge in the speech community, as well as assumptions about situation, social conventions, and communication partners and their actions.[5] This information allows us to understand better the cultural perspective of the saga audience both inside and outside of the narrative.[6] Thus, we focus on dialogue not as a narrative technique (non-action) but on dialogue as communication (action), on the pragmatic skills of the characters rather than on their rhetorical skills.[7] In sum, our interest is human interaction as it appears in the saga.

Our goal in this study is to gain an understanding of the characters from within by examining their verbal interaction, specifically their strategies for negotiating power.[8] We believe that we can reveal power structures between the fictional characters in the saga, although we cannot automatically assume that these reflect actual conditions in medieval Icelandic society. In particular we wish to find out "what makes Hrafnkell tick" in the initial complication, but this is impossible without paying equally close attention to the discourse strategies of Þorbjǫrn and Einarr. To this end we first focus on the importance of Hrafnkell's oath as a performative speech act and its significance to the

---

[5] For all dialogue partners, real or fictional, medieval or contemporary, it is true what Barbara Sandig (1978: 11) formulated: "Der Hörer erwartet also unter bestimmten Bedingungen, daß der Sprecher sprachliche Handlungen von bestimmter Art (das Was) auf eine bestimmte Weise (das Wie) ausdrückt. Der Sprecher erwartet ebenso, daß unter diesen Bedingungen in dieser Weise sprachlich gehandelt wird. Und er erwartet auch, daß der Hörer vom Sprecher erwartet, daß der Sprecher so handelt". See also Mary Louise Pratt (1977: 86): "There are enormous advantages to talking about literature in this way, too, for literary works, like all our communicative activities, are context-dependent. Literature itself is a speech context. And as with any utterance, the way people produce and understand literary works depends enormously on unspoken, culturally-shared knowledge of the rules, conventions and expectations that are in play when language is used in that context. Just as a definition of explaining, thanking, persuading must include the unspoken contextual information on which the participants are relying, so must a definition of literature". For assumptions see also Hannappel & Melenk (1979).

[6] The audience inside the narrative can be termed the narrative audience, the audience outside the narrative the authorial and actual audiences. For more discussion about different kinds of audiences see Rabinowitz (1977).

[7] For studies of the rhetorical skills of the characters in *Hrafnkels saga* see Dubs (1977) and Slater (1968).

[8] In the long run this can lead to a better and more detailed understanding of what is regular, common, deviating, strange, general, or individual in the behavior of saga characters.

story; we then analyze the four dialogues in the initial complication that lead to the rupture in the relationship between Hrafnkell and Þorbjǫrn and bring on the conflict.

Analyzing communication in an old text

What we describe in the following section are the strategies and intentions of the characters involved. We try to make explicit what they want their communication partners to understand and/or to do. All their verbal action is determined by the situation in which it takes place and by the linguistic form of the utterances. We need therefore to analyze the interactional situation and the form of the utterances in order to understand the characters' intentions. As communication partners we have different roles in different situations. We act in a particular frame of interaction and create and change that frame constantly. This is not quite as trivial as it sounds. In different roles individuals pursue different interests. The roles we are looking at in our dialogues are those social roles selected out of the whole range of roles a person can have that are activated in the creation of the conflict. In a given communication situation the partners can either agree or disagree on their respective roles, share or reject the frame, or negotiate it.

In real spoken dialogue a speaker's intention can to a large extent be deduced from nonverbal clues like gestures, facial expression or intonation. Only in a few cases do the sagas hint at nonverbal behavior that might help to decode intentions.[9] In our case — with the exception of the semiotic quality of the color of Hrafnkell's clothes when he rides to the shieling — we have to rely exclusively on the linguistic form and the context for reading the intentions of the characters.

We do not claim that intuition might not produce the same results in some cases, but we strongly believe that only dialogue analysis enables a reader to communicate possible readings in an unambiguous way, making them verifiable for further discussion, since dialogue analysis "stellt [...] ein Beschreibungsinstrumentarium bereit, das einen differenzierten Zugriff zu den Äußerungsformen und den mit ihnen konventionellerweise verbundenen Handlungscharakteristiken erlaubt" (Hundsnurscher 1994: 103). In order to get a sense of the con-

[9] We may assume that descriptions like, e.g., *hann glotti* most certainly give us information about the quality of interaction.

ventional regularities of the verbal interaction we need to pay attention to all the possible markers of intention, such as form and propositional contents of an utterance, modal verbs and other non-grammaticalized markers of modality, performative expressions, cotext and context. Since we do not have access to the native competence of the Old Icelandic speech community, we have to rely on context in the broadest sense of the term in order to compensate for our lack of the background knowledge that the members of that speech community shared.[10]

Hrafnkell's roles

We cannot understand what makes Hrafnkell tick without detailed knowledge of his basic roles as chieftain and Freysgoði since this knowledge is part of the communication history in all following interactions.

In his role as chieftain Hrafnkell appears to have no competition for power from other chieftains in the area; none are mentioned, and therefore in theory there are no limits to his power.[11] He is portrayed as a *landnámsmaðr* who discovers and takes possession of the land in Hrafnkelsdalr. In his role as first settler he parcels out land to others as gifts which are to be repaid by the loyalty of the recipient (see Miller 1990: 107) and lives at a place called *á Aðalbóli*. This may also be the technical term for the type of landholdings he has, which include rental property (see Byock 1988: 98–101). In his role as farmer he owns livestock, among which is singled out a prized stallion and a herd of mares, clearly valuable for horse breeding.

He is portrayed as rich and powerful. A *goði* with religious affiliation to Freyr, he builds a temple on his land and presumably collects the temple tax. In his office of priest of Freyr, he dedicates half of all of his most prized possessions, including the stallion, to the god.[12]

---

[10] Here the broadest context means the complete corpus of Old Icelandic texts, keeping in mind the caveat that the stories, texts, and manuscripts which originated and were written down over a period of centuries do not belong to the same speech community in the strict sense of the term.

[11] In this detail there is no disagreement between the saga and *Landnámabók*, where Hrafnkell is mentioned on two lists as the dominant chieftain in the area. See Óskar Halldórsson (1978: 10).

[12] The fact that the narrator refers to Freyr as Hrafnkell's *vinr* —*Hann gaf Frey vin sinum þann hest hálfan* (3: 18–19) — strongly suggests that we should frame the rela-

Associated with his role as chieftain are two distinct behavior patterns: a positive one since he is described as *mentr vel* (2: 17) and *linr ok blíðr við sína menn* (2: 18); and a negative one, since he is *óiafnaðarmaðr mikill* (2: 16–17)[13] and *stríðr ok stirðlyndr við Jǫkulsdalsmenn* (2: 19). That he has fought and won many duels (*einvígi*) and never paid wergeld (*bœtr*) for his victims makes him successful and powerful;[14] the opposing positive and negative characterizations reflect the opinions of different groups, e.g., those who benefit from his power (his thingmen mainly) versus those who have suffered humiliation at his hands (loss of honor because he won't pay them compensation). Initially the audience might perceive him as a protagonist with a perfect score in all his competitive dealings with his peers.

What happens when Hrafnkell swears the oath?

In his role as powerful chieftain and Freysgoði Hrafnkell swears an oath which precedes all other interactions in the saga. Because this is an act that has consequences for the development of the dispute between Þorbjǫrn and Hrafnkell we need to examine the circumstances surrounding his decision to take this action.

Hrafnkell has sworn an oath (related by the narrator): ... *hann strengði þess heit at hann skyldi þeim manni at bana verða sem honum riði án hans vilia* (3: 20–21); and made it public: *allmikit um mælt* (5: 4–5). He has thereby committed himself to taking the action described in the oath if anyone breaks his prohibition, or he risks losing honor,

---

tionship of Hrafnkell to Freyr as one of formal alliance between client and patron. This kind of temporary relationship, known as *vinfengi* or *vinátta*, was clearly an important part of the social fabric of thirteenth-century Iceland and obligated both parties to each other in time of need. An important ingredient in this kind of formal relationship was the transfer of gifts from the client to the patron. See Byock (1982: 42, 95; 1988: 130–32) and Miller (1990: 106).

[13] Understanding the medieval Icelandic connotations of the term *óiafnaðarmaðr* has proven to be problematical. Although the word is frequently associated with excessively aggressive behavior of villains, it can also be used to characterize the main protagonist, as is the case here and in *Fóstbrœðra saga*, so that clearly we can not think in terms of a fixed pejorative value irrespective of other features in the portrayal of the character. For a summary and evaluation of the scholarship on the issue, see Meulengracht Sørensen (1993: 195–97).

[14] In *Vǫlsunga saga* (Chapter 10) the legendary hero Sigmundr boasts that he has never paid wergeld for any of his victims. Behavior that in heroic legend serves to mark the hero positively as invincible and therefore superior is perceived in a family saga by at least part of the community as potentially socially disruptive. See *Vǫlsunga saga ok Ragnars saga loðbrókar* (1906–08: 25).

prestige and power. Here it is well to keep in mind that oral oath-swearing implies an absolute commitment of the strongest kind to the conditions of the oath, something a modern audience might not fully appreciate in our time of mostly written commitments. Although Freyr is not mentioned as the guarantor for Hrafnkell's determination to act, we might assume this to be the case because of his role as Freysgoði and because the horse is a gift to Freyr.

He has in effect created a personal rule, an extension and intensification of the existing socially accepted rule that riding a man's horse without his permission constituted a crime punishable by fines or outlawry, depending on the conditions;[15] an outlaw could of course be killed with impunity.

We are to understand that Hrafnkell can do this in his role as chieftain without competition in the district and because of his success in legal matters (to be deduced from the fact that he has never had to pay wergeld to anyone). This means in effect that he can assume that he has strong support in the community, since no chieftain can maintain his power without support. He can also assume that he has a constituency of thingmen who depend on his power, are satisfied with his support, and will support him (those toward whom he is *linr ok blíðr* and who consider him *mentr vel*).

We must also understand the conditions of his relationship to the horse: economically valuable; a favorite pet addressed as *fóstri minn*; and a pledge of his relationship with Freyr. He obviously assumes that his formal association with Freyr is a positive factor in maintaining his position of power and his honor in the community; by his oath he has placed the horse in a position equivalent to that of a relative or some person that he would be sworn to avenge in a conflict.

We must imagine the effect of the oath on the hearers depending on social status and relationship to Hrafnkell: to some a challenge and a mark of his authority, which might have been Hrafnkell's intention;

---

[15] *Grágás* specifies the punishments for riding horses without the owner's permission in a lengthy section entitled *Vm hross reidir* (*Grágás* 1852: Ib, 61; see also Byock 1988: 28). For the modern reader the important question is what significance people actually attached to this crime. At least in the *A* version of *Ljósvetninga saga* (1940: 20) actions for riding horses without the owner's permission are lumped together with fornication suits and anything else that might do as a means of harassing the enemy. As Miller points out (Andersson & Miller 1989: 33), the implication of this passage is that people normally might consider the crime a matter too trivial and ubiquitous to be formally prosecuted, but that under certain circumstances it could serve as part of a strategy to bag bigger game.

to others a non-issue. Of interest is the consequence for Hrafnkell himself — by this act he places a part of his ability to make decisions to act on a case-by-case basis outside of his control and ties up his name and honor in his obligation to fulfill the oath. We can assume that the killing of an unarmed shepherd was not what he had envisioned.

What happens in Dialogue I?

In the first dialogue (4: 1 ff.) Þorbjǫrn orders Einarr to leave the farm and get a job somewhere else (I, 1). The roles activated are those of father and head of household and son and one of many dependents whom he is legally obligated to maintain. This means Þorbjǫrn can assume that he has the authority to order his son to do something. The assumption is shared by Einarr since he obeys the order without questioning it as such. Þorbjǫrn justifies his order anyway by stating that he cannot support more dependents (I, 1a), that the reason is his poverty (I, 1f) and by claiming that it is not lack of love for his son (I, 1d). In order to downplay his authority, flatter his son and make him inclined to obey, he predicts that Einarr will get a good job (I, 1b) and that he will improve his lot in life (I, 1h) compared to his brothers and sisters (I, 1g).

Þ (I, 1) **Þorbjǫrn mælti til Einars, at hann mundi leita sér vistar nǫkkurrar*[16]
(I, 1a) *því at ek þarf eigi meira forvirki en þetta lið orkar er hér er,*
(I, 1b) *en þér mun verða gott til vista,*
(I, 1c) *því at þú ert mannaðr vel.*
(I, 1d) *Eigi veldr ástleysi þessari brottkvaðning við þik,*
(I, 1e) *því at þú ert mér þarfastr barna minna;*
(I, 1f) *meir veldr því efnaleysi mitt ok fátækð;*
(I, 1g) *en ǫnnur bǫrn mín gerask verkmenn;*
(I, 1h) *mun þér þó verða betra til vista en þeim.*

Einarr shows his dissatisfaction by reproaching his father for his lack of foresight (I, 2a) and contradicts his father's unrealistic prediction (I, 1h) by stating the counterevidence (I, 2b). His final statement (I, 2c)

[16] * marks passages in indirect speech.

shows, however, that he intends to obey the order since disagreeing with the consequences of the order, rather than with the order itself, presupposes obeying. So here we talk about a conflict of interests between father and son, not a conflict of power.

E (I, 2a) *Of síð hefir þú sagt mér til þessa,*
(I, 2b) *því at nú hafa allir ráðit sér vistir þær er beztar eru,*
(I, 2c) *en mér þykkir þó ilt af hafa órval af.*

In sum, Einarr perceives his own position as lack of social power in this interaction and tries to even the score somewhat by repaying his father with a reproach, which raises doubts in the audience about Þorbjǫrn's ability to plan ahead and strategize.

What happens in Dialogue II?

In the second dialogue (4: 13 ff.) the situation is that of a job interview. Hrafnkell acts here as the potential employer and good householder, presumably *linr ok blíðr við sína menn*, and a goði whose religious affiliation is to Freyr. Einarr is the job applicant who is *mikill ok vel mannaðr* but at the same time has nothing to lose. After the opening greeting, Einarr asks for a job (II, 2).

H (II, 1) **Hann heilsar honum vel ok glaðliga*
E (II, 2) **Einarr leitar til vistar við Hrafnkel*

Hrafnkell as employer reproaches Einarr, of whom he claims otherwise to have a good opinion (II, 3b), for unwisely waiting too long to look for a job (II, 3a). This is a repetition of Einarr's reproach to his father, on whom the ultimate blame for this mistake can be placed. In the first dialogue Einarr's *of síð* (I, 2a) clued the reproach; here Hrafnkell's *svá síð* is less explicit than *of síð* and might not necessarily mean a reproach, but asking why seems to be a very common form for reproaches and makes Hrafnkell's intention quite clear. As effect on the hearer, we can assume that everyone knew that you have to look for a job early, so doubts raised in the audience about Þorbjǫrn's competence in Dialogue I are reinforced here. Hrafnkell informs him that he has one job left to offer (II, 3c) but hedges it by assuming that Einarr will consider it beneath his dignity (II, 3d), presumably in order

not to humiliate Einarr. The hedge functions as a claim of the sincerity of his previous claim that he would have given Einarr a good job if he had applied early (II, 3b). At the same time he arouses Einarr's curiosity, presuming that the poor lad has no choice and pursuing his own interest to get a better shepherd than he might otherwise hope to get. His strategy is successful since Einarr asks for further information.

H (II, 3a) *Hví leitaðir þú þessa svá síð,*
(II, 3b) *því at ek munda við þér fyrstum tekit hafa.*
(II, 3c) *En nú hefi ek ráðit qllum hiónum nema til þeirar einnar iðiu*
(II, 3d) *er þú munt ekki hafa vilia.*
E (II, 4) **Einarr spurði hver sú væri.*

Hrafnkell gives the information (II, 5), thereby offering the job tentatively. Einarr contests Hrafnkell's assumptions that he is picky about the work (II, 6a), but sets conditions about the salary (II, 6b). This is more likely to be interpreted as bare necessity to make sure he can sustain himself than an attempt to beef up the job and get more than normally expected from this type of work.

H (II, 5) **Hrafnkell kvazk eigi mann hafa ráðit til smalaferðar, en lézk mikils við þurfa.*
E (II, 6a) **Einarr kvazk eigi hirða, hvat hann ynni, hvárt sem þat væri þetta eða annat,*
(II, 6b) **en lézk tveggia missera bjǫrg hafa vilia.*

Hrafnkell then makes a formal job offer (II, 7a) and accepts Einarr's conditions (II, 7c). He sets the employer's terms of the work agreement with the usual shepherding duties (II, 7b), but also with the additional duty of looking after the horses (II, 7e–f). Acting now as chieftain and supreme authority, he forbids Einarr to ride the stallion without permission even in a case of utter need (II, 7h) by informing him of his widely publicized oath to kill anyone who does this (II, 7i). By stipulating that all the mares are available for riding (II, 7j–k) he interprets the prohibition as a minor inconvenience and thereby a non-issue for a shepherd. What follows is an example of metacommunication: Hrafnkell frames his interdiction as a warning by adding the proverb that the one who warns (i.e., Hrafnkell) another (i.e., Einarr) bears no more responsibility for any consequences (II, 7m) and stating explicitly that Einarr has been warned (II, 7n). In this

way he emphasizes the importance of the correct interpretation in order to avoid any misunderstanding.

Einarr agrees to the work terms, including the prohibition against riding the stallion which he, too, appears to regard as a non-issue (II, 8). Stating that he is not going to put himself in such an unfortunate position by riding the horse counts as a promise not to do so.

H (II, 7a) *Ek geri þér skjótan kost*
(II, 7b) *þú skalt reka heim fimm tøgu ásauðar í seli ok viða heim ǫllum sumarviði.*
(II, 7c) *Þetta skaltu vinna til tveggia missera vistar.*
(II, 7d) *En þó vil ek skilia á við þik einn hlut sem aðra smalamenn mína.*
(II, 7e) *Freyfaxi gengr í dalnum fram með liði sínu;*
(II, 7f) *honum skaltu umsiá veita vetr ok sumar.*
(II, 7g) *En varnað býð ek þér á einum hlut:*
(II, 7h) *ek vil at þú komir aldri á bak honum, hversu mikil nauðsyn sem þér er á,*
(II, 7i) *því ek hefi hér allmikit um mælt, at þeim manni skyldi ek at bana verða, sem honum riði.*
(II, 7j) *Honum fylgja .xij. hross;*
(II, 7k) *hvert sem þú vill af þeim hafa á nótt eða degi, skulu þér til reiðu.*
(II, 7l) *Ger nú sem ek mæli,*
(II, 7m) því at þat er forn orðskviðr at eigi veldr sá, er varar annan.
(II, 7n) *Nú veiztu, hvat ek hefi um mælt.*
E (II, 8) **Einarr kvað sér eigi mundu svá meingefit at ríða þeim hesti er honum var bannat, ef þó væri mǫrg ǫnnur til.*

At this point his own pessimistic assessment of his chances has been realized since his job is really the leftovers and carries no social honor with it, but at least his employer is well disposed towards him. Although Einarr has tried to set conditions, he has avoided a conflict by not questioning any of Hrafnkell's terms. By accepting the dregs he also presumably prevents further conflicts with his father. Interestingly only Hrafnkell speaks directly, while Einarr's request and responses are reported. This might be an indication of Einarr's weak position in this dialogue.

What happens in Dialogue III?

In the third dialogue (8: 6 ff.) Hrafnkell takes the role of someone whose favorite pet has been tampered with. He assumes the role of avenger, interrogator and judge. At first Einarr insists on his role as dutiful shepherd, but then agrees to the role of culprit Hrafnkell has assigned to him. Hrafnkell as chieftain and employer appears alone and in dark clothing and initiates the interaction with a general greeting and seemingly neutral question, directed at both Einarr and the milking women (III, 1). The dark clothing clues the audience both inside and outside the saga on the hostile frame of the interaction.

H (III, 1) **Hann spurði hversu þeim fœri at.*

Einarr alone responds to the question, and the milking women fade into the background because only the interaction between Hrafnkell and Einarr is important (although we can keep them in mind as audience to this dialogue, witnesses of the killing and possibly the ones who will report this event to Þorbjǫrn). Einarr informs his employer about the loss and finding of the thirty sheep, assesses the loss of the sheep as bad (III, 2a–b), but their recovery as good (III, 2c), thereby placing the stress on his performance as shepherd. This can be read as an attempt to reframe the interaction in order to avoid any questions about riding the horse. He has reason to "read" the ominous message in the clothes and to assume that Hrafnkell is not on a neutral visit. Stressing his performance as shepherd is therefore an attempt to save face, as well.

E (III, 2a) *Illa hefir mér at farit,*
(III, 2b) *því at vant varð .xxx. ásauðar nær viku,*
(III, 2c) *en nú er fundinn.*

Hrafnkell rejects Einarr's frame (III, 3a) by rejecting the topic and specifying that this is not about lost sheep; they become totally unimportant (III, 3c) when a man's honor is at stake. He requests Einarr to confess (III, 3d). The form of the question with the negative adverb and the modifier *nǫkkut* indicates clearly that the speaker does not ask for information, but knows that his prohibition has been violated and intends to get a confession.

Einarr's options are to confess or deny. His statement (III, 4) can be

read as a confession with *mega* indicating that he now shares Hrafnkell's frame, i.e., that this was not the inquiry of a sympathetically concerned employer, but rather a form of questioning a suspect about a possible crime. That is at least the reading Hrafnkell acts upon. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that Einarr only admitted that Hrafnkell's assumption about riding the horse was true, but did not confess to breaking his word. He may have shared a common assumption that riding a horse without permission was, after all, only a minor offense (see footnote 15). But Hrafnkell's reaction leaves no doubt that the real issue is breach of contract, and that is a serious offense.

H (III, 3a) **Hann kvazk ekki at slíku telia,*
(III, 3b) *eða hefir ekki verr at farit?*
(III, 3c) *Hefir þat ok ekki svá opt til borit sem ván hefir at verit, at fiárins hafi vant verit.*
(III, 3d) *En hefir þú ekki nǫkkut riðit Freyfaxa mínum hinn fyrra dag?*
E (III, 4) **Hann kvezk eigi þræta þess mega.*

Hrafnkell as the aggrieved party is required by the oath to take the action he swore to take; he accuses and reproaches Einarr (III, 5a–b), referring explicitly to the terms of the contract regarding the horse to which Einarr had agreed; he claims that he might have overlooked this one offense (III, 5c) — to be understood that there is no honor to be gained from killing a shepherd anyway — but states that he is forced to keep his word by reminding Einarr that he has publicized his oath (III, 5d). This can be read as further evidence that the oath was meant as a challenge as well as a sign that it has dawned on him that swearing an oath has negative consequences, namely that it takes away the power of making case-by-case decisions. The final praise of Einarr's forthrightness (III, 5e), aimed at Einarr and the outside audience, can be seen as a mitigating gesture to Einarr's posthumous reputation: he broke his promise, but confessed like a man and didn't lose all his honor. Aimed at the milking women, it can be viewed as a statement they will communicate to Einarr's father.

H (III, 5a) *Fyrir hví reittu þessu hrossi er þér var bannat,*
(III, 5b) *þar er hin váru nóg til er þér var lofat?*
(III, 5c) *Þar munda ek hafa gefit þér upp eina sǫk*
(III, 5d) *ef ek hefða eigi svá mikit um mælt;*
(III, 5e) *en þó hefir þú vel við gengit.*

Hrafnkell justifies the killing with the (reported) statement that nothing good will come of men who do not fulfill their *heit* (III, 5f), thereby declaring his own behaviour to be socially acceptable and Einarr's to be socially unacceptable. In Hrafnkell's case failure to keep his word would lead to loss of standing in the community. Since Einarr has confessed, Hrafnkell assumes that he has the right to kill him and immediately acts on this assumption (III, 5g).

(III, 5f) **En við þann átrúnað at ekki verði at þeim mǫnnum er heitstrengingar fella á sik,*
(III, 5g) **þá hlióp hann af baki til hans ok hjó hann banahǫgg.*

We note that Einarr offers no defense of his action. A modern reader might find his lack of defense somewhat strange since after all the horses had run away and were not available for riding. We might expect that he would at least try to use this to defend himself and contradict Hrafnkell's statement (III, 5b). Here we have an indication that the story at this point is not about true or false assumptions about what really happened, but rather about keeping a contract. Einarr's has been the classic choice between two evils: either breaking his contract by losing the sheep or by riding the horse.

What happens in Dialogue IV?

In the fourth dialogue (8: 27 ff.) Þorbjǫrn has the role of the dead man's father, claimant and poor farmer. He has a social obligation to seek some kind of compensation for his son and requests wergeld (*sonarbœtr*) from Hrafnkell (IV, 1).

Þ (IV, 1) **[Nú tekr hann hest sinn ok ríðr yfir á Aðalból ok] beiðir Hrafnkel bóta fyrir víg sonar síns.*

Hrafnkell seems insecure about his own role. As a powerful chieftain he never pays wergeld, but in this case he admits a flaw on that perfect score and modifies his role to that of the generous good neighbor who can afford to make big gifts. First the slayer and chieftain Hrafnkell refuses to pay *fé*. By claiming that he has slain often enough (IV, 2a), never paid *fé* (IV, 2b) and that people will have to put up with it (IV, 2c), he intends to remind and intimidate the claimant; however,

he admits that he made a mistake when he swore the oath by stating that saying too much is more likely to cause regret than saying too little (IV, 2i–j). He also claims to regret that it resulted in his killing Einarr by identifying it as a bad killing (IV, 2d), most likely not for moral reasons, but because it brought him no honor. So he gambles for material gain instead. His strategy for "selling" the somewhat ambiguous offer of patronage is quite remarkable: as a result of Hrafnkell's initial refusal to pay money Þorbjǫrn has lost face; for this insult Hrafnkell tries to make good by claiming that Þorbjǫrn is a longtime neighbor with whom he has enjoyed a good relationship (IV, 2e–g) and that this is true for his relationship with the dead man as well (IV, 2h). By means of this last claim he insists on the previous claim that he used to soft-pedal the killing of Einarr (III, 5c). He assumes that this will calm Þorbjǫrn down, and he takes for granted that he has the power of self-judgment and that his offer of patronage and protection for him and his family for the rest of his life will be accepted (IV, 2l–v), especially since he seems to leave some decisions to Þorbjǫrn (IV, 2t–u). He states that this is to be the final settlement between them (IV, 2w). He tries to prevent any objection or refusal on Þorbjǫrn's part by stating the assumption that people will consider the gift for Einarr generous or even too generous (IV, 2x).

H (IV, 2a) **Hann kvazk fleiri menn hafa drepit en þenna einn*
(IV, 2b) *er þér þat eigi ókunnigt at ek vil øngvan mann fé bœta,*
(IV, 2c) *ok verða menn þat þó svá gǫrt at hafa.*
(IV, 2d) *En þó læt ek svá sem mér þykki þetta verk mitt i verra lagi víga þeira, er ek hefi unnit;*
(IV, 2e) *hefir þú verit nábúi minn langa stund*
(IV, 2f) *ok hefir mér líkat vel til þín,*
(IV, 2g) *ok hvárum okkar til annars;*
(IV, 2h) *mundi okkr Einari ekki hafa annat en smátt til orðit ef hann hefði eigi riðit hestinum.*
(IV, 2i) *En vit munum opt þess iðrask er vit erum of málgir,*
(IV, 2j) *ok sialdnar mundum vit þessa iðrask þó at vit mæltim færa en fleira.*
(IV, 2k) *Mun ek þat nú sýna at mér þykkir þetta verk mitt verra en ǫnnur þau er ek hefi unnit.*
(IV, 2l) *Ek vil birgia bú þitt með málnytu í sumar en með slátrum í haust;*
(IV, 2m) *svá vil ek gera við þik hvert misseri meðan þú vill búa.*

(IV, 2n) *Sonu þína ok dœtr skulu vit í brott leysa með minni forsió*
(IV, 2o) *ok efla þau svá at þau mætti fá góða kosti af því.*
(IV, 2p) *Ok alt er þú veizt í mínum hirðslum vera*
(IV, 2q) *ok þú þarft at hafa heðan af,*
(IV, 2r) *þá skaltu mér til segia*
(IV, 2s) *ok eigi fyrir skort sitia heðan af um þá hluti sem þú þarft at hafa.*
(IV, 2t) *Skaltu búa meðan þér þykkir gaman at,*
(IV, 2u) *en fara þá hingat er þér leiðisk;*
(IV, 2v) *mun ek þá annask þik til dauðadags.*
(IV, 2w) *Skulum vit þá vera sáttir.*
(IV, 2x) *Vil ek þess vænta at þat mæli fleiri at siá maðr sé vel dýrr.*

But Þorbjǫrn rejects Hrafnkell's gift anyway (IV, 3), thereby blocking the negotiations, and here we speculate why, given the fact that he is in a position of much lower status and power, a beggar who couldn't be a chooser, one would think. To this end, we can examine the ambiguity of Hrafnkell's offer, which because it includes care and protection for Þorbjǫrn and his family also means that he will be dependent on the powerful chieftain who will gain possession of his farm, thereby disinheriting his children — so the "gift" is not without a considerable amount of material gain for the giver, both in prestige (Hrafnkell's assessment of people's positive reaction to his gift and hint that they may feel he is overdoing it) and in land. Þorbjǫrn may feel that by accepting this gift he loses more than he gains and gives away too much to the slayer, whereas a clear transfer of payment as assessed by arbitration might work entirely to his benefit. In *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhǫggs* (1950: 77) the chieftain Bjarni makes a similar gift offer to the poor farmer Þórarinn when he pretends that he has killed Þórarinn's son in a duel; the old farmer accepts the gift reluctantly and comments on the situation — that poor people have no power to refuse chieftains whatever they want and that the promises of chieftains are not worth much to poor people because they are not reliable.

Þ (IV, 3) *Ek vil eigi þenna kost.*

Hrafnkell is caught completely off guard by Þorbjǫrn's rejection; since he has already refused to pay *fé* (IV, 2b) and has framed his offer as the final settlement (IV, 2w), his question (IV, 4) indicates that he has no idea what his neighbor is thinking and may even constitute a re-

proach: How dare you challenge me? He is certainly surprised to discover that at least two of his own assumptions are false, namely that his communication partner knows his place in society and that he therefore understands that the chieftain should have the power to decide the outcome of the negotiation, not the poor farmer. By asking Þorbjǫrn what he wants he signals that he has lost control of the topic, the dialogue, and, temporarily at least, of his power. This means serious loss of face to an unworthy opponent.

H (IV, 4) *Hvern viltu þá?*

Sensing that he has the upper hand, Þorbjǫrn now mounts a challenge to Hrafnkell's authority and insists on being treated as an equal by repeating his original request and specifying its conditions: that arbitrators should decide the amount and kind of compensation, not Hrafnkell (IV, 5). He must assume that Hrafnkell is vulnerable after his admission that killing Einarr was the worst thing he had ever done.

Þ (IV, 5) *Ek vil at vit takim menn til gerðar með okkr.*

This assumption proves false since Hrafnkell insists on his original refusal to pay compensation determined by arbitration by stating his reason, namely that Þorbjǫrn has misjudged his status by behaving like Hrafnkell's equal (IV, 6a). This is by any account an inviable position in saga society, and thus Hrafnkell refuses to accept the role Þorbjǫrn has assumed for himself. This leads to the breakdown of negotiations because Hrafnkell on being challenged has now given up his good-neighbor role and reverts to his role of powerful chieftain. Stating that under these conditions reconciliation is not possible (IV, 6b), he closes the door to further negotiations. He rejects Þorbjǫrn in his role as equal finally and absolutely, which implies that he withdraws his original offer.

H (IV, 6a) *Þá þykkisk þú iafnmentr mér,*
(IV, 6b) *ok munu vit ekki at því sættask.*

In contrast to the previous dialogues power and status become the topic in this dialogue. Both communication partners agree that some compensation is appropriate, but they disagree on the kind of compensation. Negotiations break down over the question of who will

have the power to decide the terms of the settlement: the powerful chieftain who makes his own rules or the arbitrators on behalf of the claimant.

How close did we get?

We set out in our study to gain an understanding of the characters through their verbal interactions, focusing on their intentions and strategies for negotiating power and getting their way. What have we learned about them as individuals, and what can we say drives them towards the irreconcilable rupture that constitutes the saga conflict?

Negotiation of power is not an issue in the first three dialogues. In the first dialogue the line of authority between father and son is clear, and we find that Einarr is no rebel; rather he agrees, albeit somewhat sullenly, to do what his father wants. Similarly, in the second dialogue the very nature of the situation precludes any negotiation of power between employer and job applicant. The third dialogue presents a situation in which a modern reader might expect some negotiation to take place, but Einarr offers no defense of his action. Here Hrafnkell is in complete control of the interaction. In the fourth dialogue the communication partners compete in getting the upper hand; Þorbjǫrn is so stubborn and determined that he surprises Hrafnkell, who expected no opposition, and blocks him from dictating the terms of the agreement.

By examining these interactions we get a sense of what to expect from the characters in the future. Þorbjǫrn has shown himself to be a man prone to misjudging situations. Although he succeeds in sending his son away in the beginning, his timing is off, causing his favorite son to get a bad start in a job that carries no respect. Although he blocks Hrafnkell from exercising self-judgment, he misjudges the situation when he has hopes of getting Hrafnkell to pay him arbitrated compensation. A poor farmer should know that he is not likely to achieve a victory over a chieftain with a perfect score.

Einarr proves to be too passive to have a more interesting fate than ending up as a victim. A son who neither takes initiative nor rebels against his father doesn't deserve better than to be *úr sǫgunni*.

Hrafnkell comes across as a strategist driven by the need for power and control over his power in all his interactions: he succeeds in employing promising young Einarr; he extracts a confession from the

culprit in order to justify killing him; and he manages to frame a takeover of land as a gift. We expect a character with these skills to be successful as long as he makes no strategic mistakes. Central to his strategy at the beginning of the saga is the oath he swears, a powerful device that sets the story in motion. We have to assume that he believes that swearing the oath will allow him to exercise more control over challenges to his authority and thereby contribute positively to his personal power. It is clear that by the end of the initial complication when the conflict has been set, Hrafnkell fully realizes the folly of his act of speech and expresses it in his words to Þorbjǫrn that "we often regret it when we say too much". Although perhaps intended as a challenge to his peers and mark of his authority, the interdiction has in fact been broken by his shepherd, an unarmed dependent, far below him in social status and no challenge to his authority, and the resulting punishment is an act that later in the story proves ironically to diminish his power and honor. An oath is an oath; once uttered it cannot be retracted, and there is no escape clause. Hrafnkell's response in the third dialogue is consistant with this principle.

But also the unarmed shepherd Einarr has made a commitment from which there is no escape: he has promised his employer not to ride the horse. Although it is conceivable that Einarr believed that Hrafnkell would never actually carry out the prescribed punishment because riding other people's horses without permission was commonly regarded as a relatively trivial crime, nevertheless the fact that he offers no defense for his action shows that he is aware that he is guilty of breaking his word. His failure to keep his contract costs him his life.

Here the modern reader is faced with a paradox: two characters, one powerful and the other powerless, respond in opposite ways to a verbal commitment, and as a result both of them come to grief. We might ask ourselves who was right or whether they were both wrong. Our answer has to be the latter. In a society where people had to form alliances of all kinds in order to protect themselves and preserve their honor it was crucial to be able to rely on another man's word. However, a man with power and authority also had the responsibility to stay within the bounds accepted by his peers and other members of the community and not create his own rules. In swearing the oath Hrafnkell pursued the wrong strategy and got caught in his own trap, much like the ancient Greeks who were forced to fight the Trojan War because of the conditions of an oath.

Bibliography

Andersson, T. M. 1988: "Ethics and Politics in Hrafnkels saga". *Scandinavian Studies* 60, pp. 293–308.

Andersson, T. M. & W. I. Miller 1989: *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland.* Stanford University Press, Stanford.

Bax, M. 1983: "Die lebendige Dimension toter Sprachen. Zur pragmatischen Analyse von Sprachgebrauch in historischen Kontexten". *Zeitschrift für germanistische Linguistik* 11, pp. 1–21.

Byock, J. 1982: *Feud in the Icelandic Saga.* University of California Press, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London.

— 1988: *Medieval Iceland. Society, Sagas, and Power.* University of California Press, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London.

Dubs, K. 1977: "The Discourse of Persuasion in *Hrafnkatla*". *Scandinavian Studies* 49, pp. 464–74.

Gordon, E. V. 1939: "On *Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða*", *Medium Ævum* 8, pp. 9–28.

Grágás. Islændernes Lovbog i Fristatens Tid. Vilhjálmur Finsen (ed.), Odense Universitetsforlag, Odense, 1852 repr. 1974.

Hannappel, H. & K. Melenk 1979: *Alltagssprache. Semantische Grundbegriffe und Analysebeispiele.* Fink, Munich.

Hermann Pálsson 1971: *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's Saga.* Munksgaard, Copenhagen.

Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða. Jón Helgason (ed.), Munksgaard, Copenhagen, 1950.

Hundsnurscher, F. 1994: "Dialoganalyse und Literaturbetrachtung". Edda Weigand (ed.), *Concepts of Dialogue Considered from the Perspective of Different Disciplines.* (=Beiträge zur Dialogforschung 6), pp. 77–105. Niemeyer, Tübingen.

Ljósvetninga saga. Björn Sigfússon (ed.), (=Íslenzk fornrit X), Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, Reykjavík, 1940.

Meulengracht Sørensen, P. 1993: *Fortælling og ære. Studier i islændingesagaerne.* Aarhus University Press, Århus.

Miller, W. I. 1990: *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking. Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland.* University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London.

Óskar Halldórsson 1976: *Uppruni og þema Hrafnkels sögu.* Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, Reykjavík.

— 1978: "Hrafnkels sagas ursprung og tema". *Gardar* IX, pp. 5–16.

Polenz, P. von 1981: "Der ausdruck von sprachhandlungen in poetischen dialogen des deutschen mittelalters". *Zeitschrift für germanistische Linguistik* 9, pp. 249–73.

Pratt, M. L. 1977: *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse.* Indiana University Press, Bloomington–London.

Rabinowitz, P. 1977: "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences". *Critical Inquiry* Autumn, pp. 121–41.

Sandig, B. 1978: *Stilistik. Sprachpragmatische Grundlegung der Stilbeschreibung.* de Gruyter, Berlin–New York.

See, K. von 1979: "Die Hrafnkels saga als Kunstdichtung". *skandinavistik* 9, pp. 47–56.

Sigurður Nordal 1958: *Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða.* R. G. Thomas (transl.), University of Wales Press, Cardiff.

Slater, A. S. 1968: "From Rhetoric and Structure to Psychology in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgóða*". *Scandinavian Studies* 40, pp. 36–50.

Þorsteins þáttr stangarhǫggs. Jón Jóhannesson (ed.), (=Íslenzk fornrit XI), Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, Reykjavik, 1950.

Vǫlsunga saga ok Ragnars saga loðbrókar. Magnús Olsen (ed.), (=Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur 36), S. L. Møller, Copenhagen, 1906–08.