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Sound, Voice, Speech – and Silence – in Old Norse Culture and Ecology

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The main aim of this article is to study the relationship between various types of sounds, voices, and speeches, as described in Old Norse literature, and more specifically to investigate what sounds fill the presumed silence when humans chose not to speak. Using the three-partite sonic system, as presented in the so-called Second and Third Old Norse Grammatical Treatises as a starting point, the article moves on to deploy the theoretical framework of embodied, embedded, extended and enacted cognition (4E cognition) as a structural scaffolding for the analysis. Examples from various translated and indigenous Old Norse text show that the lack of human speech is usually complemented by the sounds and effects of human actions, their body language, the tools they use, as well as the sounds of natural, supernatural, and divine agencies. The article offers a new understanding of the integral value and symbolism of human silence in Old Norse literature and culture, thus highlighting its significance in an ecology that otherwise abounds with a rich variety of sounds and voices.

Medieval rhetorical discourse includes explicit discussions of the nature of sounds and voices, based on the work of such authors as Donatus and Priscian, among others.[1] These discussions exist also in the Old Norse context, and more specifically in two of the four Old Norse grammatical Treatises, namely *The Second Grammatical Treatise* (SGT) and *The Third Grammatical Treatise* (TGT). The latter of these is attributed to the skald and scholar Ólafr Þórðarson hvítaskáld, who was closely affiliated to two other famous writers and historians, namely Snorri Sturluson and Sturla Þorðarson.[2] As explicated in detail in the introductory article of this special issue, the SGT states that sound is everything that can be heard and distinguishes between inarticulate sound produced by the natural elements (water, sea, rocks, earth) and music

[1] See Boynton 2016, which is reviewed in greater detail in the introduction of the special issue.

[2] For *The Second Grammatical Treatise*, see Raschellà 1982. For *The Third Grammatical Treatise*, see Finnur Jónsson 1924.

(referred to as *hljóð*); the sounds made by birds and animals that are unintelligible to most men (referred to as *rǫdd*, voice); and men's speech, which is referred to as sound (*hljóð*), voice (*rǫdd*), and speech (*mál*). The latter is deeply embodied; it is closely related to breath and the use of the tongue and lips. It is contingent on cognitive faculties as reason and memory, and it is intelligible and articulate. Ólafr's TGT describes a similar categorization of sounds, but with some further nuances: sounds can be produced by alive and lifeless entities. The sounds produced by lifeless entities include sounds made by the elements, as well as music, possibly referring to the sounds made by instruments. Some of the entities that are alive do not have consciousness/reason (plants, trees, etc) but they may still have a voice (*rǫdd*). Humans, on the other hand, can produce bodily sounds (clapping their hands or stamping their feet), or meaningful but inarticulate sounds such as crying or sighing, and they have meaningful, articulate, and writable voices through their speech. The latter category, just as explained in the SGT, is both embodied, as it demands the use of the lungs, the tongue, the lips and the ears, but it is also contingent on cognitive faculties, such as reason, wit, consciousness (*vit*) and understanding (*skyn*). The final aspect of the sound-system described in the TGT is that some of the sounds, such as music, are classified as heavenly and celestial harmony (*cælestis armonia*; *himnesk hljóða-grein*). Further, in the very beginning, the TGT mentions spiritual sounds, related to the holy scripture, even though this category is not explained any further (Finnur Jónsson 1927: 22).

In short, the SGT and the TGT propose a three-partite hierarchical sonic system incorporating sounds, voices, and human speech, depending on the degree of liveliness of the agent, the availability of consciousness/wit, and the mode of bodily and cognitive engagement. These sounds, voices and speeches provide the aural dimension of a universe and an ecology, comprising of humans; natural elements, plants, and animals; things and musical instruments; and heavenly energies.

The main aim of this article is to discuss these concepts not as part of a hierarchy, but in relation to each other, by investigating what sounds and voices fill in the 'void' caused by the lack of human speech, as articulated in Old Norse literature.[3] The lack of human speech will in this article be referred to as silence (for the sake of convenience). Silence and pauses in speeches have certainly been acknowledged as significant, meaningful, and integral to human articulate communication.[4] When discussing

[3] My focus will be on voluntary silence or a choice not to speak, and not on the lack of ability to speak. For a discussion of the latter theme, in conjunction with other disabilities, such as deafness, see Tirosh 2020. On the use of silence as a literary device to reveal the consequences of enforced silence in three Icelandic sagas, see Aune 2015.

[4] See work on sign-language for example Ziolkowski 2010; Bruce 2007; see also the Introduction of the special issue.

sound and silence, it is relevant to note that the Old Norse word *hljóð*, has the double meaning of (1) silence, hearing (*biðja/kveðja sér hjóðs*, meaning 'to beg/ask for a hearing'), and (2) sound, musical sound, tune. This, in itself, legitimates this investigation of the relationship between sound/voice and silence. Therefore, here I will discuss what happens during presumed silences, i.e. when humans chose not to speak. How is this silence articulated and described in Old Norse texts: Does the narrator explain that a person is silent, or is the silence *shown* and *filled in* by some other communicative expression? As prompted by the grammatical treatises, the relationship between sounds, voices and speeches will be studied not only within a human cultural context, but also within its integral ecology and cosmology.

Old Norse literature of various genres is especially suitable for investigating the articulation of silence (i.e. the lack of speech) because when compared to Latin, French and English texts, Old Norse texts are known for their characteristic style of brevity of expression, understatements, and reduction or even exclusion of elaborate and detailed descriptions of psychological and emotional states. In other words, at first glance, Old Norse culture seems more silent. The Old Norse eddic poem *Hávamál*, containing many proverbs and words of wisdom, includes a clear recommendation on the topic of silence, str. 6–7:

At hyggjandi sinni skylit maðr hrœsinn vera,
heldr gætinn at geði;
þá er horskr ok þǫgull kømr heimisgarða til,
sjaldan verðr víti vǫrum;
þvíat óbrigðra vin fær maðr aldregi
en manvit mikit.
Inn vari gestr, er til verðar kømr,
þunnu hljóði þegir,
eyrum hlýðir en augum skoðar;
svá nýsisk fróðra hverr fyrir.
(*The Poetic Edda*, ed. Pettit, p. 80)

One shouldn't be boastful of one's brains,
but rather be reserved of mind;
when a wise and reticent man comes to homesteads,
misfortune seldom befalls the wary;
for one never gets a more unfailing friend
than great common sense.
The cautious guest, when he comes to a meal,
is silent with strained hearing;
he listens with his ears and looks with his eyes;
so every wise man spies things out before himself.
(*The Poetic Edda*, trans. Pettit, p. 81)

These two strophes illustrate clearly *Hávamál*'s, and traditional Old Norse attitudes towards silence: it is related to wisdom and integrity.[5] This legitimates a study of the role and the sound of silence within the Old Norse cultural context, as it has the potential to reveal different ideologies concerning the relationship between articulate voices as opposed to inarticulate sounds in medieval culture.

Before we start, three comments on method: First, in order to juxtapose the Old Norse material to the European, the study will encompass both original Old Norse

[5] See McKinnell (2014) for a further discussion of silence in *Hávamál*.

texts and translations. This comparison will reveal how European perceptions of voice, sound, and silence are adapted to Old Norse literature, culture, and ecology.[6] Further, even though many Old Norse texts are preserved exclusively in younger manuscripts, in this article, the texts will be studied as text-works translated and written down during the thirteenth century, reflecting various attitudes to sound, voice, speech – and silence – in the Old Norse literary context as a whole. The two grammatical treatises providing the theoretical explications on sound were written and are preserved from this same cultural context, and even though I will not be looking for direct parallels or discrepancies between the grammatical and literary sources, it is significant that they circulated and were known in the same cultural context. It may be expected that different literary genres may reveal different attitudes to speech and silence, and in the context of this article, it is this variety of sound-cultures that I am particularly interested in. Even though not all genres can be studied in detail in this context, texts from different genres are intentionally read in juxtaposition to each other.

Second, the analysis of the articulation of silence in Old Norse literature will be pursued by tracking both explicit *mentioning* of silence, but also implicit *showing* of silence. As human cognition is embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended (4E cognition),[7] communication involves not only the exchange of words that can be heard, but also non-verbal body-language that must be seen or experienced or felt by the body; enacted responses and behavior; movement in and engagement with the cultural and natural environment; usage of various objects and tools. In other words, even if people are silent verbally and no speech can be heard, they may still communicate and thus fill the silence with many different types of audible or visual responses. The combination of silence and other embodied or enacted reactions is what forms and conveys the full meaning of the discourse. Because of the importance of all these aspects of human cognition for our understanding of the meaning of voiced and silent communication, they will be used as a structuring scaffolding of the analysis in this article. The examples of sounds or communication will be grouped depending on whether they are expressed through action (enacted cognition), or through the body (embodied cognition), through the use of various objects or tools (extended cognition), or in dialogue with nature (embedded cognition). As discussed in the introductory article of the special issue, embodied, enacted, extended and embedded

[6] Various recent posthumanistic and ecocritical studies focus on the sounds produced by animals, other non-human and supernatural beings. For references, see the introductory article in this special issue.

[7] See Newen, DeBruin & Gallagher 2018; see also the introductory article of this special issue.

aspects of communication, in addition to verbal and voiced utterances, were central in many medieval rituals and contexts, such as in the liturgy, or in monastic institutions where sign language was used extensively, or during any other medieval performances. The aim here is to review how Old Norse literature describes what silence, i.e. the lack of human speech, may have sounded and looked like, and what it may have meant in various communicative contexts, as described in Old Norse literature.[8]
This takes us to the third comment on the methodology: in the introductory article of the special issue, we discussed sound on intra- and extradiegetic levels. In this article, the focus will be on intradiegetic level, as we will study the sound of silence as conveyed in literary sources. Nonetheless, it will be relevant to discuss whether different modes of articulating silence in literature may also reveal different attitudes and degrees of appreciation of voiced vs silent communication in Old Norse culture.

Action speaks louder than words
The first category of silent communication, *shown* through enacted engagement, may be exemplified, firstly, with an episode from *Breta sögur*, which is the translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*. Geoffrey's Latin text is the oldest version of the story about King Leir and his three daughters, that is later used also by Shakespeare. The story demonstrates well that it is not words, but actions and appropriate behavior that matter most in a relationship. The moral of the story is the same in both the Old Norse and the Latin version, but the articulation is different. To start with the Old Norse version: When time comes for the king to divide his inheritance between his three daughters, he asks them all how much they love him. While two of his daughters express their love for him through elaborate verbal explications, they betray him later on. The third daughter, Cordeilla, is much more moderate in her verbalization of love. She is not completely quiet, but she answers with few words and moderately:

> hvat ma dott*ir* v*n*u foðor sínvm meira en sva sem sœm*ir* ok sva vil ek þer vnna se*m* bezt sam*ir* at goð dott*ir* vn*n*i goðv*m* foðvr *ok* sva mik*it* gott se*m* ek ma þ*at* vil ek þ*er* vn*n*a. (*Breta sögur/ Hauksbók*, eds. Eiríkur & Finnur Jónsson, p. 249)

[8] Important references to existing studies of the episodes will be included in the footnotes, but the focus in these is most often on emotions, embodiment, or embeddedness, and not silence as such. The aim of the article is not an all-inclusive coverage, but some additional examples will also be given in the footnotes.

> How can a daughter love her father more than that which is granted? Therefore, I shall love you so far as it is befitting that a good daughter loves a good father, and I will love you as much as I can. (*Breta sögur*, ed. and trans. Black, pp. 24–25)

Cordeilla's statement promotes moderation in terms of verbal excess, as well as appropriateness between behavior and response to the behavior: one gets what is befitting. Despite this relatively moderate statement, later she demonstrates her absolute and unconditional loyalty and love for her father when he needs her (*Breta sögur*, ed. and trans. Black, p. 29), unlike the two other daughters who have declared unconditional love but betray him. This episode promotes the significance of demonstrating one's own standpoint and emotions through one's actions, rather than communicating them through 'empty' words.

This episode appears in book 2 of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, where the content of Cordeilla's honest answer is the same, but it is longer and its verbosity is greater:

> Est uspiam, pater mi, filia quae patrem suum plus quam patrem praesumat diligere? Non reor equidem ullam esse quae hoc fateri audeat nisi iocosis uerbis ueritatem celare nitatur. Nempe ego dilexi te semper ut patrem et adhuc a proposito meo non diuertor. Et si ex me magis extorquere insistis, audi certitudinem amoris quem aduersum te habeo et interrogationibus tuis finem impone. Etenim quantum habes tantum uales tantumque te diligo.

> Father, is there any daughter who would presume to love her father more than a father? As far as I am concerned, no one would dare to say that, unless she were trying to conceal the truth with playful words. Certainly, I have always loved you as a father, and will not be diverted from that course now. If you persist in trying to get more out of me, hear the true love I bear you and put an end to your questions: you are worth what you have, and that much I love you. (Geoffrey of Monmouth, Book Two, pp. 38-39).

The moral of the answer is the same, but a comparison between the Latin and the Old Norse passage highlights the significance of silence in Old Norse culture in two different ways. First, the Old Norse translator literally silences the character, by making her speech shorter and less elaborate. As saying goes, action speaks louder than words, but such translating strategies make the enacted responses speak even louder. Second, the shortness of the speech in the Old Norse version allows for it to be read

as a meta-comment that argues for the negative value of excessive speech and conversely promotes the positive value of integrity, silence and appropriate action, not unlike the Eddic poem *Hávamál*.[9]

From the indigenous Old Norse corpus, *Njáls saga* presents us with a communicative episode, which even though not entirely void of verbal-exchange, is nonetheless fully understood through its enactment of radical and fatal actions. Chapter 48 of the saga includes the episode where Gunnarr hits his wife Hallgerðr because he is suspicious that she is serving food that has been stolen. When he asks where the food is from, she answers arrogantly and tells him that it is not his duty to worry about food and cooking. Her actions, probably in combination with her words, trigger his unfortunate verbal and enacted response — *'Illa er þá, ef ek em þjófsnautr,'— ok lýstr hana kinnhest* (*Njáls saga*, p. 124) (It is a bad thing if I'm a partner to a thief' — and he slapped her on the face.) (*Njál's saga*, trans. Robert Cook, p. 57) The saga relates that she answers him, but her speech is not given in direct form, unlike his speech: *Hon kvazk þann hest muna skyldu ok launa, ef hon mætti* (*Njáls saga*, p. 124) (She said that she was going to remember this and to repay him for the deed, if she could.) (*Njál's saga*, trans. Robert Cook, p. 57) There and then, the evening continues, and the couple hosts their guests, even though some of the food was stolen.

Much later, Gunnarr is in a precarious situation, when he is attacked by many of his enemies in his own house and the string of his bow gets destroyed, jeopardizing his ability to protect himself (ch. 77). His wife and mother are in the house with him, and he reaches out to his wife Hallgerðr for help:

> 'Fá mér leppa tvá ór hári þinu, og snúið þit móðir mín saman til bogastrengs mér.' 'Liggr þér nǫkkut við?' segir hon. 'Líf mitt liggr við,' segir hann, 'því at þeir munu mik aldri fá sóttan meðan ek kem boganum við.' 'Þá skal ek nú', segir hon, 'muna þér kinnhestinn, ok hirði ek aldri hvárt þú verr þik lengr eða skemr.' (*Njáls saga*, ch. 77, p. 189)

> 'Give me two locks of your hair and you and my mother can make a bow's string for me.' 'Does anything depend on this?' [she asks.] 'My life depends on this,' he says, 'as they will never manage to harm me as long as I can use my bow.' 'I will

[9] Other examples from Old Norse translations may be given from *Pamphilus saga*, which thematizes the verbalization of feelings, and other enacted methods when words do not work, such as tricks and manipulation. For a discussion, see Eriksen 2024, ch. 7.

> now,' she says, 'remind you of the slap you gave me, and I don't care if you manage to defend you for a long or a short time.' (*Njál's saga*, trans. Robert Cook, ch. 77)

Hallgerðr's response is here given in direct speech (unlike in the previous exchange), which emphasizes its vocality and audibility. In addition, it contains much more than the words she says as it also includes her choice not to help her husband and, in this way, to facilitate his death. This enacted response belongs to the discourse they had earlier in the saga about the appropriateness of serving stolen food, which ended with him slapping her. In other words, Gunnarr's enacted cognition (his slap) is responded to by Hallgerðr through her own enacted communication (refusal to help her husband). Interestingly, even though she responds to his deed with a deed, her response is complemented by one of the famous one-liners, so typical of the genre: 'I will now remind you of the slap you gave me.' Even though she is not completely silent, the brevity of her verbal answer gives the central-stage position to the enacted response. The saga literature is full of examples of this kind, and their commonness may also be seen as an explanation for the changes and adaptations made in translations, such as *Breta sögur*, where a verbal exchange was reduced to the minimum, while an enacted response was promoted as more efficient and important.

Silence and embodied response

The next couple of examples reveal how bodily reactions are important means of communication, even when literary characters are silent and speech-less. In these cases, it is people's bodies that communicate their feelings and thoughts instead of their words. In *Ívens saga*, which is the Old Norse translation of Chrétien de Troye's romance *Yvain*, there is a scene, when Laudine, the lady of the so-called Red Knight in the French version, sees her dead partner after Yvain has wounded and killed him. The Old Norse saga tells us that *hún syrgði ok æpti sinn harm; stundum fell hún í óvit* (she mourned and moaned loudly in her grief; now and then she fell into a swoon) (*Ívens saga*, pp. 50–51). The verb *at æpa* means 'to scream, to yell,' but in this case, she is not screaming words, but she is rather wailing and moaning, mourning audibly, but inarticulately, i.e. without speaking words. The saga adds that she occasionally grabs her own neck and attempts to kill herself, thus adding on to the gravity and desperation of Laudine's embodied response to the sight of her dead husband.[10]

The Old French version is a bit more extensive, as expected, but a significant difference for us here is that she is even more dramatic in her embodied reaction, and

[10] For other discussions of the emotionality of this episode, see Sif Rikhardsdottir 2017: ch. 1, pp. 25–56.

not least, she is not as inarticulate as the lady in the Old Norse version. The first part of the grieving scene is described as follows:

> Mais de duel faire estoit si fole
> C'a poi que'ele ne s'ochioit.
> A la feÿe s'escrioit
> Si haut qu'ele ne pooit plus,
> Si recheoit pasmee jus.
> Et quant ele estoit relevee,
> Aussi comme femme desvee
> S'i commenchoit a deschirer,
> Et ses chaveus a detirer.
> Ses chaveus tire et ront ses dras,
> Et se repasme a chascun pas,
> Ne riens ne le puet conforter. (lines 1,150–161)

> But she was so crazed with grief that she was on the verge of killing herself. All at once she cried out as loudly as she could and fell down in a faint. When she was lifted back to her feet, she began clawing at herself and tearing out her hair like a madwoman;
> her hands grabbed and ripped her clothing and she fainted with every step. Nothingcould comfort her. (*Arthurian Romance*, p. 309)

In this version, the lady also grieves so vehemently that she gets exhausted of her own wailing, she faints, and when she recovers, her torments continue, she rips her clothes in pieces, she pulls her own hair, until she faints again; but her pain is never relieved, nonetheless. Sif Rikhardsdottir has argued that one reason for the intensity of the scene in the Old French version may have been that mourning was meant to be a public social performance to a much greater degree than in the Old Norse context, where the description of the embodied reaction is more subdued (Sif Rikhardsdottir 2017a: 41–42). Further, Chrétien's text includes more details about the later stages of her grieving. After the knights is buried, 'she remained all alone, frequently grasping her throat, wriggling her hands and striking her palms, as she read her psalms from a psalter illuminated with gilded letters' (Chretien de Troyes, p. 312). The embodied mourning is a lot alike the reactions described in the Old Norse version, with the exception of one element: reading of the psalms in the Old French version is a clear distinction from the Old Norse version, where such activity is not

included in the grieving process. Even though it is not made explicit whether the reading of the psalter is voiced or silent and inwardly, it is certainly a different form of expression that is verbal and articulate, clearly connected to textuality and spirituality and thus reminding much more of the concept of speech and voice, rather than sound. Audible or not, the reading of the psalter in the Old French version is omitted in the Old Norse version, where the mourning entails only inarticulate moaning, wailing and strangling-attempts. As in the example from *Breta sögur*, the silencing of articulate communication emphasizes and gives even greater priority to the meaning and significance of the embodied response.

Silent but embodied responses are numerous in the Icelandic sagas too. *Egils saga* includes the famous episode when Egill goes to the court of king Aðalsteinn of England after his friend Þórólfr has been killed by the king's troops. Egill enters the hall, sits in the high seat facing the king, casts his shield before his feet but keeps his helmet on his head, holds his sword across his knees and occasionally draws it partly out, and then clashes it back into the sheath (*en þá skelldi hann aftr í slíðrin*). He sits upright, with his head bent forward. This silent but stark and unavoidable physical presence is made even more visual by a detailed description of Egill and his body:

> Egill var mikilleitr, ennibreiðr, brúnamikill, nefit ekki langt, en ákafliga digrt, granstœðit vítt ok langt, hakan breið furðuliga, ok svá allt um kjálkana, hálsdigr ok herðimikill, svá at þat brá frá því, sem aðrir menn váru, harðleitr ok grimmligr, þá er hann var reiðr; hann var vel í vexti ok hverjum manni hæri, úlfgrátt hárit ok þykkt ok varð snimma skǫllóttr. (*Egils saga*, ÍF, ch. 55, p. 143)

> Egil was large-featured, broad of forehead, with large eyebrows, a nose not long but very thick, lips wide and long, chin exceeding broad, as was all about the jaws; thick-necked was he, and big-shouldered beyond other men, hard-featured, and grim when angry. He was well-made, more than commonly tall, had hair wolf-gray and thick, but became early bald. (*Egil's saga*, ch. 55, p. 100).

This description effectively zooms in on Egill's physical and embodied presence and response. By focusing on his visual appearance, the author/narrator stages a pause in his narrative – the series of actions is interrupted by a descriptive sequence that stresses Egill's visual and embodied presence. After this narrative pause through such a poignant and detailed portrayal of Egill's body, the saga continues: Egill sits there, and he drags one of his eyebrows down towards the cheek and the other up to the roots of the hair. Many scholars have pointed out how this episode reveals the em-

bodied nature of Egill's emotionality. What is more important for us here is that he is not only emotional in his embodiment, but that this embodiment is also silent. He does not speak, nor does he drink, even when the drinking horn is passed by him. In other words, he does not participate in any verbal or social discourse but imposes his own silent presence onto the scene and defines the discourse in this embodied and silent way, by simply twitching his eyebrows up and down.

Even though no words are exchanged, the king seems to read Egill's embodied response quite well; he knows why Egill is there, namely, to get compensation for his friend's death. The king takes off a silver arm-ring from his own arm and sends it over to Egill with the help of his sword. Egill takes it and puts it on his own arm. He is still silent, but the saga tells us that now his brows go back to their natural place. After that, he puts down his sword and his helmet and returns to regular social participation. He starts drinking and most significantly for us here, breaks his embodied silent and inarticulate response with highly articulate words: he recites a verse and starts talking to the people around him. This is a prime example of embodied silent response, of which there are plenty in the sagas. [11] The example demonstrates that embodied silent responses were acknowledged as a legitimate way to respond in Old Norse culture. In the episode discussed above, the narrator's 'words' and focus on Egill's physical appearance and presence strengthen the validity of his embodied response. Such attitudes toward the meaning and weight of inarticulate embodied response may explain the changes in the description of Laudine's emotional response in the translations of *Yvain*, from embodied but also articulate and spiritual to simply embodied.

[11] Another episode that reveals Egill's embodied emotionality is his reaction to the news about the death of his own son Bǫðvarr. ch. 81. He gathers the corpse, buries him in the family burial mound and then hides away in his room and in his bed. Once again, the saga states explicitly that no one dared to demand to speak to him. For a discussion of this episode, including the fact that much of the scene is enacted in silence, see Sif Rikhardsdottir 2017b: 77–78. Egill is also silent when he is lovesick and longs for Ásgerðr; once again he does not talk but expresses his emotions through embodied reactions. Another illuminating example of the power of silence, combined with embodied reaction, to express emotional pain may be given from *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*, when Þórðr skáld Kolbeinsson tells his own wife Oddný about the death of the man that she was supposed to marry, Björn. She turns silent, gets sick, and looses her desire to live. The only activity that calms her down is to sit on the back of her horse, and to be dragged back and forward by her husband (ch. 33). On other examples of embodied emotionality in Old Norse literature, see Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir 2023; on grief, from gender perspective, in various Old Norse texts, see Mills 2014; on body language in medieval Iceland, see Wolf 2013.

Extended cognition and the communicative agency of things

The episode discussed above, when Egill was playing with his own sword, pulling it out and clashing it back in, draws the attention to the third aspect of sound in this study, namely the sound made by and with things, instead of verbal speech and communication. From the translated corpus, an example of this mode of communication may be given from *Möttuls saga*, a translation of the Old French *Le Lai du cort mantel* (*Le mantel mautaillié*). This is the story of the magic mantle that is brought to the court of king Arthur and that 'tells' whether and how women have been unchaste and/or unfaithful. The mantle, in this case, is an extended element of the women's cognition and morals, and 'speaks' their truth even when they are silent.[12]

In the Old Norse story, the mantle is described as having been made by an elf-woman with such great and inconceivable skill that nobody understands how it is made. It is embroidered in gold in a beautiful pattern of leaves, a magic charm (*galdr*) is woven into it by the elf-woman, it is made with a specific craft (*list*) and sewn with her special powers (*kraptr*). It is this combination of a charm, craft and power woven in the mantle that makes it possible for the mantle to reveal the misdeeds of every maiden. In Old Norse, *galdr* means magic song, charm, witchcraft, or sorcery, possibly corresponding to Latin *incantatio*; *incantamentum*. Further, it is often used in expressions referring to vocalization – *kvedja galdr*, *segja galdr*, *gala galdr*, meaning 'to put/ to say a spell'. This suggests that the mantel does more than simply show; it magically 'speaks/tells' the truths of the one it is put on. The mantle would also tell different things depending not only on whether but also how a maiden had sinned. In the saga, none of the women admit their own sin, even after they realize and understand how the mantle works, but as we know, the mantle reflects their inner morals and previous actions, and shows them all to be sinful, except for one. The secrets revealed by the mantle have a central role in the rest of the verbal discourse in the saga. Even though the mantle's communicative agency is non-verbal and non-articulate, it is clear and very intelligible, provoking and triggering intense verbal exchanges, public shaming, and social commotion at the court of king Arthur. The charm woven in the mantle reveals the women's secrets and inner truths and even though the communication is nonverbal and inarticulate, it represents clearly and intelligibly the women's souls, morals, and actions.

[12] Other objects that may be studied from a similar perspective, i.e. as producing sounds that represent or express people's emotions and cognition, include horns, weapons, musical instruments, among many others. On the sound of horns, see Miriam Tveit's article in this special issue. For a discussion of the role of music/ musical instruments in *Tristrams saga*, see Eriksen 2025 (in print).

The Old French text, on the other hand, refers to the mantle as a 'work' (*ouevre*), which is characterized as a 'miracle' (*merveille*) (*Le Lai du cort mantel*, ll. 198–199). The mantle is here made by a fairy (*la fee*), but the designation as a miraculous *ouevre* has different connotations than the *galdr* that is woven in the mantle in the Old Norse version. The former triggers stronger associations to textuality and thus articulate verbal communication. *Ouevre* is a term used by many Old French authors, including Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France, and refers to a piece of creative work, or to the collected authorship of a specific writer. We could thus read in a reference to words or a text 'woven in' into the mantle, while the Old Norse version refers more explicitly to magic, art, power. In any case, the Old French term alludes to textuality and articulate communication, while the Old Norse term refers more explicitly to the nonverbal and inarticulate magic, art, and power of the object.

The motive of the mantle with its own communicative agency was very popular in medieval material. It exists in other Old Norse texts such as *Skikkju saga* and *Samsons saga fagra* (Kalinke 2011). In European literature, there are many other objects used in chastity tests, with similar communicative agency. These include drinking horns that spill (their liquid content), if the man's wife has been unfaithful; or knots in shirts and belts that can be opened only by the right person; or gloves, rings, crowns that do not fit anyone else but the chaste one.[13] Another version of the motif popular to this day today in fairy tales, is Cinderella's shoe that tells the prince who his true sweetheart is. A common feature of all these stories, and most importantly for us here, is that all these objects 'tell' or show the truth, even when the characters wish to keep their secrets to themselves and stay silent. These objects become their extended cognition and do the talking for them (Besamusca 2010; Matyushina 2019).

Returning to the indigenous Norse material, the previous example of the silent Egill, drawing out and clashing his sword back in its sheath, may easily be understood as extended communication testifying to the communicative agency of things. In that case, the verb used, *at skella*, means to make a slam or a clash, i.e., to make a sound (Zoega 2004), which confirms this interpretation. Another example from the Old Norse corpus may be given from *Njáls saga*, when Gunnarr is told by one of the servant boys that people talk and accuse him of having cried when Otkell rode him over. This is a major insult, so Gunnarr is expected to defend his honor. Nonetheless, Gunnarr stays calm on the surface and replies that one should not get offended by people's talk. But while some of the people go to bed and others stay up talking and drinking, Gunnarr takes his shield, his sword Ǫlvisnautr, he puts his helmet on and grabs his

[13] For a further discussion of the use of these motives in European medieval literature, with examples, see Kalinke 2013.

halberd. The halberd 'sings' loudly (*ok sǫng í honum hátt, Njáls saga* (ÍF), p. 136), the saga says, and his mother Rannveig hears that. She approaches her son and asks him if he is angry, as she has never seen him like that. Now, he is quiet: he does not respond and just rides away. When she goes back to the group who is still up and drinking, she says:

> 'Hátt kveðið þér', segir hon, 'en þó lét hæra atgerirrinn, er Gunnarr gekk út', Kolskeggr heyrði ok mælti: 'Þat mun eigi engra tíðenda vita.' 'Þat er vel,' segir Hallgerðr; 'nú munu þeir reyna, hvárt hann gengr grátandi undan þeim.' (*Njáls saga* (ÍF), p. 136)

> 'You are talking loudly,' she said, 'but Gunnar's halberd was even louder when he went out.' Kolskegg heard this and spoke: 'That means no small news.' 'This is good,' said Hallgerd, 'Now they can find out whether Gunnar will be crying when he leaves them.' (*Njal's saga*, transl. Cook, p. 91)

Through this announcement, Gunnarr's mother refers to the audibility of Gunnarr's response, but not in terms of his own words, but in terms of the noise he makes when he engages with his halberd. His men understand immediately what this means, and so does his wife, who elegantly refers back to the original crying-insult that causes this audible reaction. This episode presents another example of both enacted cognition (i.e. Gunnarr does not respond verbally, he just rides off in an affected way, which may suggest that he is on his way to revenge his honor), as well as extended cognition, because Gunnarr expresses himself inarticulately but audibly and comprehensively through the way he handles his weapons. And even though he is silent, the halberd reveals his mind and intentions, by producing an audible sound, that is interpreted and understood correctly by his mother, his men, and his wife.

A last example of the communicative agency of things may also be given from a king's saga, namely the saga about Óláfr Tryggvason in the compilation *Heimskringla*. The relevant episode is from the end of the saga, from the battle at Svolder, when the king's enemies have taken over all his ships and there is only one ship left, Ormrinn, where the king and his surviving troops are fighting from. One of the king's men Einarr þambarskelfir is trying to kill as many of the enemies as he can with his bow and arrow, when a person called Finn, shoots back at Einar and hits Einar's bow in the middle. Next time, Einar tries to shoot an arrow, his bow breaks in two. The king asks him, what it was that broke/ tore/ braked so loudly (*hvat brast þar svá hátt*). Einar answers, *Nóregr ór hendi þér, konungr*. (It was Norway [falling] out of your hand,

king).[14] The verb *bresta* may refer both to the breaking of the bow, but also to the sound it makes in that moment. This episode may be seen as pointing towards the tragic end of the battle and of the king's life, but here it serves as an excellent example of how an inarticulate sound is used masterfully by the narrator as part of the discourse. The inarticulate sound made by the breaking of the bow is interpreted verbally or translated by Einarr in this famous one-liner. Nonetheless it is the breaking of the bow that is audible for the king, and this is the sound that signals to him his imminent future, even though at this point he is still reluctant to accept it.

Embedded cognition and the sounds of the environment

In the example from *Möttuls saga*, we remember that the mantle was made by an elf-woman, which may insinuate that some of its qualities may possibly be due to its super-natural origin. In the following, we will investigate a few more examples where human silence is replaced by or filled with sounds from the natural and supernatural world. Examples of this kind will allow us to discuss the embeddedness of human existence and cognition within its natural environment, which includes animals, nature itself, as well as God or devilish creatures.

One very appropriate example of sounds produced by animals that fill in the silence of men from the translated material, is the song of the nightingale from the short story *Laustik*, which is based on Marie de France's *lai Le Rossignol*. The story is about two neighbors, one of whom is in love with the wife of the other, and she loves him back. The Old Norse story tells us that from her chamber, she could talk to her sweetheart (*hon ræða við unnasta sinn*; *Strengleikar*, p. 102). Then at the beginning of summer, the nightingale starts singing a very beautiful melody. The narrator explains:

> Sa er þa var ælskandi matte miok ihuga af fuglanna songum þat er honum likaðe at ælsca.
>
> Then he who was a lover could because of the songs of the birds, deeply contemplate whatever it pleased him to love. (*Strengleikar*, p. 104)

The bird's song reflects the lovers' emotional state, as well as it inspires and triggers their contemplation: the bird's song fills in the void of human silent contemplation and emotionality. The lovers fix their attention on each other and in the moonlight, they stand by their windows and listen to the bird singing, without talking. When

[14] *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, ch. 108. p. 362–363.

confronted by her husband, the lady explains that she is simply listening to the beautiful song of the bird, which, as known, does not convince him of her innocence. He therefore projects his jealousy to the little bird and kills it. This enacted response confirms the symbolic significance of the bird as a representation of their love, and of its songs as the main communicative strategy between the two lovers.

The Old French version is not very different. It also tells of the lovers' sweet talking and about the *laustic* that starts singing at the beginning of summer, and how that inspires their 'sweet thoughts' (*Laustic*, trans. Sjoaf). The rest of the narrative is very similar to the Old Norse version.

There is, however, one difference between the two versions that is relevant for us here. In the Old French version, the two lovers chat while listening to the bird: *qui échange avec lui paroles et regards* (And the lady, at her window, higher, / speaks, and looks, only desire.) (*Laustic*, v. 68, trans. Sjoaf). In the Old Norse version, the lovers are, as usual, not so chatty, and they exclusively listen to the bird's singing. The translator may have cut out that second reference to the conversation just to reduce the repetition, but it still makes the characters quieter, and the song of the bird emerges as the sound that fills in their silence, and that expresses their emotions and thoughts. In any case, in both versions, the laustic's song is symbolic of their love and their relationship and fills the communicative space between them. This communicative space is otherwise relatively silent, also because of the secret nature of their love, which is however directly embedded and audibly celebrated by its natural surroundings.

Another possible interpretation of the song of the nightingale is that it 'tells' of the secret silent love-affair and thus it points towards its inevitable end. This may be supported by medieval *Physiologus* tradition, where some animals sing when dying, as for example the nightingale (and the swan) (Kay 2016: 1005). The laustic, being the symbol of the love-affair, announces thus both the end of the affair, and thus its own death, through its audible song.[15]

In the Old Norse material, there are plenty of examples of such embedded and symbiotic relationships between humans and animals. A well-known example from *Njáls saga* is the close relationship and communication between Gunnarr and his dog Sámr (ch. 76). The dog gives a howl at the moment of its death, a warning which Gunnarr interprets easily as indicating his own imminent death. Once again, the dog's

[15] Another appropriate example of an animal that seems symbiotically attuned to its master's/mistress' cognition is the magical dog that Tristram acquires and that he later sends to Ísönd. The dog sooths their owners' sorrows with its magical and aesthetic appearance and with the sounds made by its bell. See Eriksen, forthcoming.

howl replaces the attackers' silence and their secret approach, and despite its inarticulate nature, it is perfectly comprehensible to the dog's owner.[16]

Old Norse literature is full of other natural or other-worldly sounds, such as storms and winds, which speak on behalf of or with the characters.[17] In a storm-episode in *Laxdœla saga*, where one of the characters dies, his relative listens to the storm and interprets its meaning: *Þar megu vér nú heyra gnýja bana Þorkels frænda*[18] (There we can now hear the roaring of my kinsman Þorkell's killer). In this case the sound of the storm is really audible and impossible to misinterpret, but many other sagas describe people's sensitivity to their natural environment, and the importance of listening when navigating the natural world.[19]

A last category of voice, sound, and audible presences of another agency or entity, that fills in human silence, is the 'voice' of God, or the sounds made by the devil or evil spirits.[20] God shows Himself and speaks to humans in numerous dreams and visions, guiding them in their decision-making by suggesting the right path of actions.[21] In other instances, God may communicate through church bells, as in the episode when Kjartan Óláfsson, Bolli Bollason, and other Icelanders convert to Christianity

[16] The Old Norse corpus is full of other animals that have such direct communicative connection with their owners, such as Óðinn's own ravens Munin and Hugin, whose names even refer directly to their significance for Óðinn's cognition. On this and other examples, see Harriet Evans Tang's article in this special issue.

[17] This example is also discussed in Eriksen 2025 (in print), where it serves to demonstrate how sound impacts individual and narrative development.

[18] *Laxdœla saga*, p. 222

[19] For a detailed discussion of other examples of bad weather in the sagas, see McCreesh 2018. 'Nature" could be defined to also include various supernatural creatures that populate the Old Norse literary universe, everything from giants and dwarfs, to ghosts and the undead. The sounds they produce are not always inarticulate, as may be expected, and have direct impact on people's fate and existence, see for example the interaction between Glámr and Grettir in *Grettis saga* (p. 85).

[20] See the introductory article for the complex meaning of speech and silence in medieval Christianity. For example: God uses speech during the very Creation, but silence may also be seen as God's first language. This motif is not studied extensively based on the Old Norse material, but the speech of Wisdom in *Konungs skuggsjá* may suggest that such a study may be worthwhile. The passage includes a recapitulation of Genesis, and she retells of her central role in the creation, together with God: 'With gentle speech I taught the silent calm its pleasing manner." (*King's Mirror* 2012: 301), referring to both the significance of speech and silence for the balance of creation.

[21] This is a very common literary topos, but one example may be given from Odd Munk's saga about Olav Tryggvason (ch. 13), when God appears to him in a dream and recommends to him to go back to Norway and baptize his people.

after hearing the church's bells and Mass, as described in both *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (ch. 81–82) and *Laxdæla saga* (ch. 40).[22] In hagiography, God's energy leads sometimes to people regaining their speech, and thus demonstrating that human silence or inability to speak is often an excellent occasion for God to demonstrate His powers through miracles.[23] Other times, God's energy leads to human silence, as for example when the pagan spokespeople in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* in *Heimskringla* are silenced down: they lose their speech at the thing and cannot argue against the king (ch. 55). These examples comply well with Christian idea of *vox*, as related to God and the true faith – the sound of the church bells is the voice of God, and having a voice is having the true faith.[24]

However, human voicelessness and silence are other times caused by or inhabited with the sounds of evil spirits. One example is the episode when Egill's creative process or attempt to create articulate praise-poetry for the king (a *drápa*) is disturbed by a bird (*svala*) that twitters (*klaka*).[25] The bird turns out to be the shapeshifter queen Gunnhild, trying everything to prevent him from succeeding to save his own neck (*Egils saga*, ÍF, pp. 182–83). A similar episode is found in the Icelandic *Reykjahólarbók*, in a text about pope Gregory the Great. The episode tells of a deacon named John who tries to write the life of holy Gregory, but his creative process is disturbed by a mean spirit, who blows out his candle and threatens him (see Wellendorf 2012: 290). Such an allusion to the Christian ideology to voice, sound and silence, in *Egils saga* is interesting, but all these examples illustrate also how human voicelessness and silence are on various occasions embedded in the audibility of sounds produced by numerous other natural and supernatural elements, such as animals, storms and winds, God, shapeshifters, or the Devil. Human silence is thus highly meaningful when listened to in juxtaposition to other sounds of ecological contexts.

Narrators' comments on silence

So far, we have discussed examples where human silence was articulated in the narratives through the description of the characters' silent actions and bodily reactions, or through the mentioning of sounds made by other agencies. Even though these examples were here presented as examples of the silence of literary characters, they may

[22] See discussion on church bells in the introductory article of this special issue.

[23] For examples, see Tirosh 2020, especially the last section of the article on hagiographical sources. See also Rakel Diesen's article in this special issue.

[24] See my introductory article in this special issue.

[25] The verb *at klaka* may be understood descriptively, i.e. to say klak, klak, klak. It may also refer to people debating and disputing.

also be characterized as examples of the voice of the narrator, accounting for the characters' silence. Sometimes, the narrator does more than simply accounting, as he also expresses an opinion about the moral and social values of silence.

One example of such a narrator's comment from a translated Old Norse text may be given from *Parcevals saga*, the Old Norse translation of Chrétien's *Perceval*. In the saga, Parceval visits the castle of the Fisher king and fails to break the curse placed on him and the castle as he stays silent and does not ask the right questions, as he does not know how to socialize properly. The narrator then comments:

> Svá sem maðr má vera ofmálugr sér til meina, svá má hann ok vera ofþögull sér til skaða, þvíat hvárttveggja má mein gera, ofmælgi ok ofþögli.
>
> Just as a man may be too talkative to his own injury, so may he also be too silent to his own undoing. For both may do harm, excessive talking and stubborn silence. (*Parcevals saga*, pp. 150–151).

With this comment, the narrator fills in but also explains the consequences of the silence committed by Parceval. This comment would have been a direct trigger to the audience, inviting them to reflect on the repercussions of being too talkative as opposed to knowing when to be silent, and vice versa. The result of Parceval's silence is that in the morning, when he wakes up, the Fisher king and his entourage have disappeared, and the castle is empty.

This explicit narrator's comment is an addition by the Old Norse translator or a later scribe. The Old French *Perceval* certainly contains the same episode, where the Grail is described much more explicitly, and the narrator comments that '[Parceval] kept more silent than he should have' (Chrétien de Troyes, *The Story of the Grail*, p. 421). It is somewhat ironic that the addition in the Old Norse version concerns the importance of knowing when to be silent (and not), while so often actual conversations between the characters are silenced.

An explicit narrator's comments about the value of silence from the indigenous Old Norse corpus was already given at the very beginning of the article: the poem *Hávamál* explicitly praises the virtue and wisdom of silent men, an ideal that was truly well reflected in all the other examples from Old Norse literature. The saga-material includes also numerous explicit narrator's comment, having proverbial character, and an example may be given from *Hrafnkels saga*, where one of the characters exclaims: *En vit munum opt þess iðrask, en vit erum of málgir, ok sjaldnar mundum vit þessa iðrask, þó at vit mæltim færa en fleira*. (We may often regret when we talk too

much, and more seldom do we regret when we talk less rather than more) (ch. 7). This is part of a direct speech by a character, but the statement may certainly be read as a meta-comment praising the value and power of remaining silent.

Concluding remarks

All examples discussed in this article revealed that, in Old Norse literature, if and when humans do not respond with their speech, they respond in other ways. They respond through actions, sometimes much later than the event that triggered the response. They respond through specific body language, facial expressions, but also diverse bodily reactions, including weeping, moaning, fainting, and attempts to take one's own life. Other times, people's minds, thoughts and emotions are revealed by the way they use various objects that produce sounds, and yet other times human silence is caused, filled, or replaced by the sounds made by animals, storms and winds, God or devilish powers. These were all literary descriptions of what silence, here defined as the lack of human speech, sounds and looks like: lack of speech does not mean a lack of communication, nor a lack of sound.[26] In addition, sometimes such descriptions were elaborated on or explained through explicit and additional narrator's comments. Both these modes of articulating silence – either through telling or showing in the narrative, or by explaining through an explicit comment – may be seen as literary techniques that would have invited the readers/ listeners of the texts, medieval and modern, to tune into the soundscape of the medieval universe and ecology as described in the sagas. The way the silence was articulated would have allowed the audience to engage in imaginative immersion, to hear the silence with their inner ears and, especially with the help of explicit narrator's comments, to reflect on the meaning and virtue of silent as opposed to voiced verbal responses. Such a complex and multimodal literary scaffolding of the soundscape of the Old Norse medieval world and ecology in literature testifies also to the significance of sound and silence in the culture.

Another point follows from the fact that in all cases where we investigated Old Norse translations, the characters in the Old Norse translations were more silent – they either did not speak, while the Old French characters spoke, or they spoke less, or their sounds were less articulate. Further, the sounds made by the other agencies were either louder or appeared louder, seen in juxtaposition to the silence of the human voices. Such changes in the translations may have been caused by, at the same

[26] For a discussion on 'absence", defined in more general terms, see Cole 2016. He concludes that absence is always relative and not absolute, and that absence triggers and activates both the literary characters, and the readers, to immerse in the literary entanglement to a greater degree.

time as they would have reinforced, the Old Norse cultural ideal that silence is a sign of wisdom. Making the characters more silent in the Old Norse translations, leads to the turning-up of the volume of the sounds made by things, actions, bodies, animals, and nature. This is of course only a preliminary conclusion, and further studies on the topic are necessary to confirm or nuance such understanding.[27] Nonetheless, it is a well-known characteristic of Old Norse translations that they are usually shorter than their original source-text; they reduce narrator's comments, as well as dialogues and emotional monologues. Such changes and adaptations are well-known literary features, that in this study, have emerged as important signifiers to the way human silence was valued and appreciated in Old Norse literature and culture. When interpreted as part of an enacted, embodied, extended, and embedded communication, silence emerged as a meaningful communication mode, necessary for making sense of and understanding the literary, cultural and ecological discourse.

To return to our starting point: the SGT and the TGT suggested a hierarchical structure between human speech, voice, which also is something animals and birds have, and sounds produced by human bodies, things, and natural elements. Nonetheless, our few examples from Old Norse literature indicate a less hierarchical relationship and a higher degree of interchangeability between speech, voice, and sounds. Human silence, i.e. a lack of speech, in combination with other enacted, embodied, extended, and embedded modes of communication, becomes a fully comprehensible mode of communication, even the preferred mode sometimes, and it emerges thus as both a common and meaningful literary motif in many sagas, and a cultural ideal in Old Norse society. Human silence is indeed always filled in by voices and sounds from the other elements of the ecology. Speech, voice, sounds — and silence — alternate as mediums for symbiotic interaction and communication between humans, objects, nature and the supernatural. In other words, by listening to the human silence in Old Norse texts, we have heard the sounds of the whole ecological system, including human bodies, weapons and other objects, animals and nature, magical energies and heavenly creatures, all contributing to and forming the sonic ecosystem, which humans navigated by means of their 4E cognition.

[27] Such future studies may include the study of the soundscape in various literary genres; the study of voice and sound depending on gender; or the study of changes in descriptions of voice and sound in various manuscript versions of one and the same text.

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