

Development of Faroese children's literature.

Challenges in a minority society

Føroyskar barnabókmentir. Avbjóðingar hjá eini smátjóð

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Úrtak

Í greinini, sum er grundað á ein fyrilestur, ið varð hildin á ráðstevnu hjá Ibby (*The International Board on Books for Young People*) í Santiago de Compostela í 2010, verður sagt frá, hvussu føroyskar barnabókmentir hava ment seg, serliga við denti á bókaútgávu fyri einum lutfalsliga lítlum málbólki.

Í Føroyum hava kvæði, sagnir, ævintýr og annar skaldskapur livað sítt fríska lív á manna munni, líka síðan fólk hava sett búgv á oyggjunum, meðan skrivaðu bókmentirnar eru av nýggjari uppruna. Fyrsta upprunaføroyska barnabókin kom út í 1958, um somu tíð sum føroyskir lærarar settu bókaforlag á stovn við tí greiða endamáli at geva út barnabøkur á føroyskum.

At geva út bøkur í Føroyum er ikki ein løtt uppgáva, fyrst og fremst tí bara umleið 50.000 fólk tosa føroyskt mál og eitt føroyskt forlag tí ikki hevur fyrimunin av einum stórum solumarknaði.

Annar trupulleiki er so tann, at føroyskir rit-høvundar og kanska serliga barnabókarithøv-

undar hava stríðst fyri, at føroyskt mál verður viðurkent sum skaldskaparmál millum føroyingar sjálvar. Hetta tí at føroyskt er so ávirkað av donskum, og at danskt hevur kenst líka natúrligt, ja í mongum førum natúrligari at lesa hjá flest fólki enn teirra egna mál, føroyskt.

Abstract

The first children's book published in Faroese was the renowned Robinson Crusoe by the English author Daniel Defoe. This was in 1914 and many welcomed the book, but there were also quite a few who were unhappy about it. They felt that the publication in Faroese was a provocation against Denmark or Danish language in the Faroes (Sigurðardóttir, 1990). The opposition against Robinson Crusoe in translation sheds light on a problem, which the Faroese book market has suffered and partly still suffers, namely people's attitude towards their mother tongue.

Although today's opposition against Faroese is not comparable to that generated by publish-

ing a book in 1914, language is still a very sensitive topic in children's books. The problem is first and foremost caused by the Faroes' political situation, as a part of the Danish kingdom, which has meant that the language used in public administration, school, church and parliament in the Faroes was Danish.

The Faroese have always spoken their own language, but have only recently started writing it. Only in the latter half of the 19th century steps were taken to generate a Faroese grammar. We must also bear in mind that written Faroese was not taught in Faroese schools until 1920, and it was not until 1937 that the Public School Act was amended, making Faroese, rather than Danish, the teaching language.

History

Although the teaching language was Danish, not all teachers followed orders, of course, and some taught in Faroese instead. Faroese children's first encounter with written stories was in school textbooks. The first beginner level Faroese reader was published in 1908. Many of these readers were repeatedly reprinted until the 60's and 70's. The stories in these

books are thus the cultural foundation for today's adult population.

As indicated in Table 1, very few children's books were published up until 1956, only 19 between 1914 and 1956.

The Faroese Teacher's' Association's Publishing Company (BFL short for Bóka-deild Føroya Lærarafelags) was founded in 1956 and is today the largest children's book publishing company in the Faroes. It was founded by teachers, who realized the importance of accelerating the publication of books for Faroese children.

The first book originally written in Faroese by a single author is the title *Gray Duck* (*Gráa dunna*) by Sigurð Joensen. It was published in 1958. After this only 37 children's books were published in Faroese until 1972, most of which (21) were translations. Publishing was haphazard and based on volunteer effort and enthusiasm. Very little funding was available. Under such circumstances it is clearly safer to publish books that are already well-known and therefore more likely to sell. The books published were so-called classics. Today we might question whether some of these books were actually children's books at all.

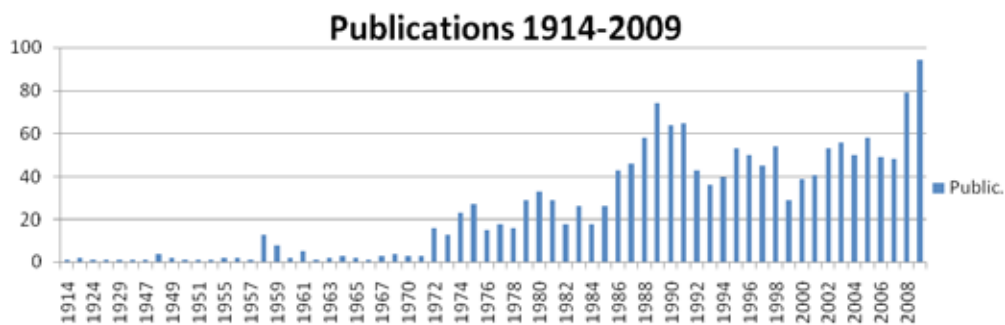


Fig. 1. Source: Statistics Faroe Islands (Hagstovan) and author's calculations

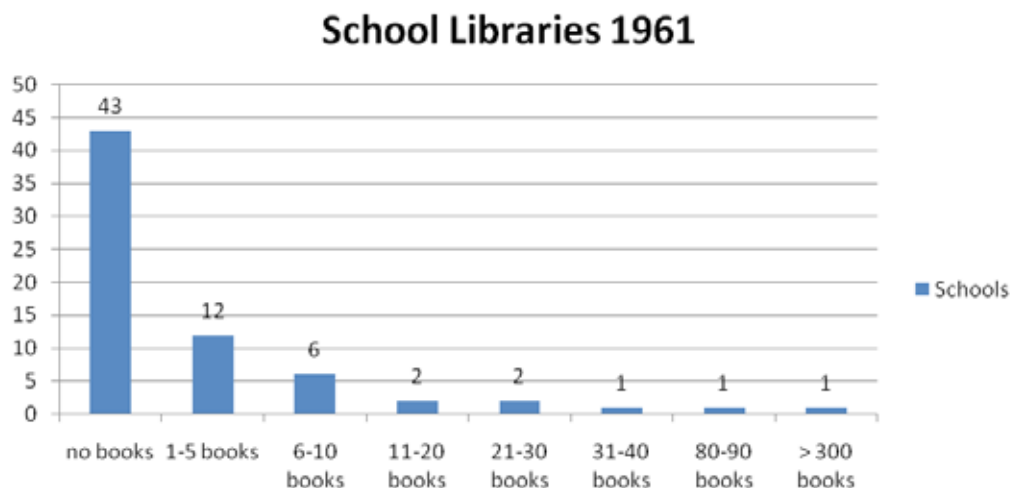


Fig. 2. Source: Faroese Teachers' Association 1898-1998 (Føroya Lærarafelag)

Few people wrote in the Faroes and even fewer wrote for children. This is why books based on Faroese children's reality are few and far between. The situation with regards to books in Faroese schools was dire at the time, as was found by a survey conducted in 1961. (Fig. 2)

The figures shocked the education authorities. That same year funding was allocated to schools for purchasing books, and BFL received its first annual public appropriation of DKK 6000 for publishing. In 1963 there were only 28 schoolbook titles in Faroese, so publishers had their work cut out for them. As indicated in Table 1, after 1970 a change was slowly underway in Faroese children's literature.

The pioneers in the genre was among others the author Steinbjørn B. Jacobsen, who, together with painter Bárður Jákups-son, began publishing books for young children set in Faroese nature. Two other authors, Maud Heinesen and Marianna

Debes Dahl made their debut in the seventies, with books centred on Faroese children- and youth's everyday life. In the field of picture books, changes were happening as well: Elin Bjørg Højgaard wrote *A Troll's life (Trøllalív)*, dealing with the topical issue of gender equality, and at the same time told a story with Faroese inspiration, featuring trolls living in the mountains, and Martin Næs together with the illustrator Martin Joensen published a realistic picture book about Faroese children's daily life. This is the beginning of putting down in words the condition of children in a modern Faroese society.

As Table 1 demonstrates, publishing for children in Faroese really takes off in 1986, when BFL creates its children's book club and starts publishing co-produced books. After this the publication of children's books grows constantly. There is a clear shift, 26 children's books were published in 1985, compared to 43 in 1986.

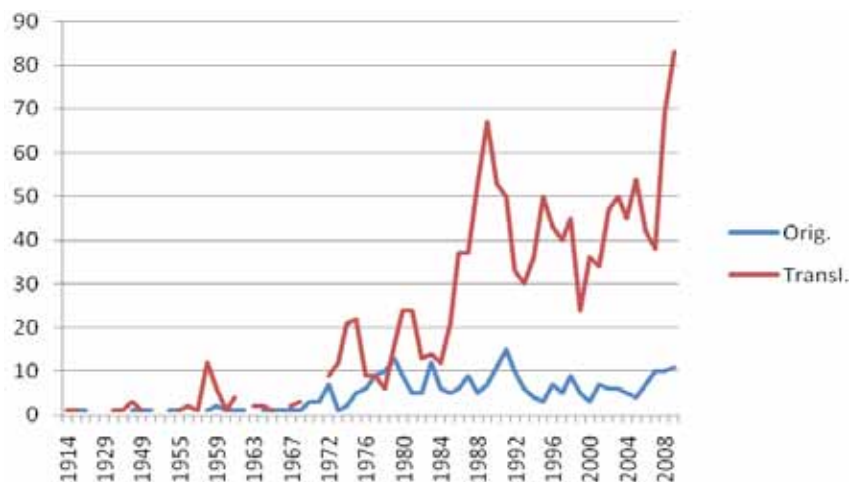


Fig. 3. Original and translated children's books. Source: Statistics Faroe Islands (Hagstovan) and author's calculations

Book club and co-production

In 1985 BFL hired a person specifically to take charge of publications. Up until then the BFL board had managed publications, but had come to realize that this setup was unsustainable. The financial situation had been very negative in the early 80's and publications almost haphazard. But now many changes were afoot: Publishing was given a stable framework, the book club guaranteed the sale of a certain number of books whenever a new title was printed, and in order to ensure that new books were always available for the club, a more focused effort was made to enter into co-production agreements with publishers abroad. At the time, with new and different types of publishing, there was a great deal of criticism of the fact that more original Faroese titles were not published. The concern that children would not identify

with the stories was frequently repeated (MI, 1978 nr. 5).

Until then the view of Faroese books had been that as long as they were Faroese, they were good. This is not surprising given the virtual nonexistence of Faroese children's literature. However this view gradually changed. Little by little people started demanding certain standards, both readers, and certainly also publishers. BFL's chief editor directly stated that the main reason so few original Faroese titles were printed was that:

„... very little such material is written, which is of publishable quality.“
(Ingrið Sondum: Bókin undir lesiglasið, 1990, p.40).

Funding and publishing

A decisive factor for publishing in the

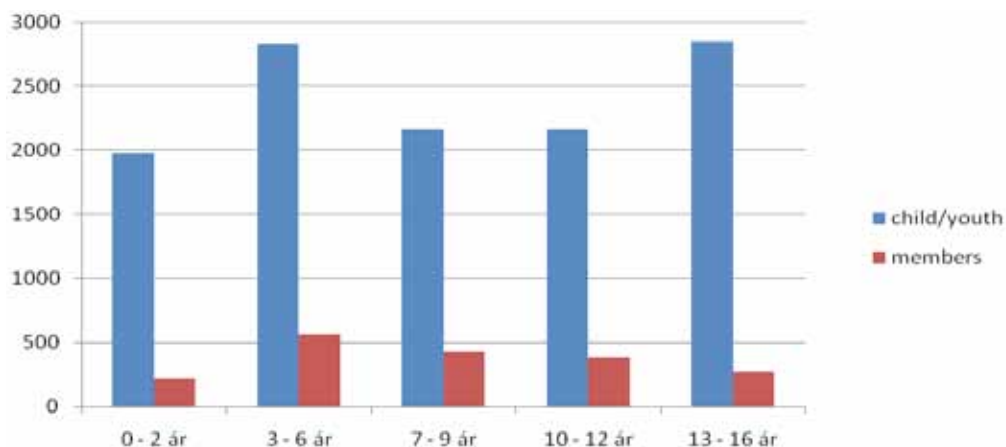


Fig. 4. Source: Statistics Faroe Islands (Hagstovan) and Centre for Faroese booksales (Bókamiðsølan)

Faroes is population size. In April 2010, there were 48,650 people in the Faroes, of these 11,990 were aged between 0 and 16 which is BFL's customer base.

BFL currently publishes around 80 books per year. The publishing company usually prints around 600 copies of picture books and textbooks and 1200 copies for very young children. The publishing schedule is based on age groups. The book club has around 1800 members; this ensures the sale of around 200 books in each member category whenever a new title is published. The reduced population makes it very difficult to sell the stock in shops. Although the number of members in the youngest group is lowest, it is easiest to sell books in shops for this age group.

Support for publishing children's books in Faroese

From the very beginning, when teachers took the initiative to establish BFL, much

of the work was carried by passion and ideals. It was not uncommon for teachers to take out loans to fund publications, and the print shops were very accommodating and not too particular concerning the payment due dates. When BFL began its activities in 1956, there was only one bookstore situated in the capital, Tórshavn, so great efforts were made to sell books through schools in villages around the country. Public authorization for this sales method was of great help in places without a bookstore. Public funding for BFL and others to publish, has ensured a relatively stable financial situation, but it is, of course, never enough.

A report commissioned by the Faroese Minister for Cultural Affairs in 1996, studying the situation of cultural affairs in the Faroes, concluded that public funding granted to BFL returns to the public coffers through wages, fees and taxes.

In 1967 the Centre for Faroese book sales (Bókamiðsølan) was founded, and it was of

great importance for book sales throughout the Faroes. To this day there are few bookstores in the Faroes, so it is vital for sales that there is a centre capable of organizing sales and with book storage facilities.

In 1975 the Nordic Council of Ministers was created. The Council grants funding for literary translation and the smallest Nordic languages – Greenlandic, Faroese and the Sami languages, enjoy certain special privileges. This translation funding is crucial for small publishers. BFL cooperates closely with many other Nordic publishers, and the company benefits from sharing best practices with other professional publishers. It is also an opportunity for a small nation to demonstrate its worth and the quality of Faroese authors.

The greatest support for publishing, however, is the book club, and the possibility to co-produce books, which reduces costs and guarantees regular publications making it easier for BFL to satisfy the need for children's books among today's parents and their children.

BFL has recently launched a more focused marketing effort. A marketing professional has been hired to ensure publicity for publications and increasing sales. It is clear that although there are many members in the book club, book sales in shops are still far too low when looking at Table 4 indicating how many children and teenagers are in the Faroes. One factor that challenges small publishing houses like BFL, is the first PISA assessment carried out in the Faroes in 2006. The assessment yielded a poor rating for Faroese school children's reading skills, and brought to the attention of education authorities and

parents that a great deal more has to be done to boost children's reading skills. The increase in publications as of 2008 is clear in Table 1. This was the year when BFL started publishing easy reading literature together with Nám (formerly known as Føroya Skúlabókagrunnur), a company that publishes books for schools.

Language and Faroese publishing

A very important issue when it comes to publishing in a small language society such as the Faroese, is mother tongue attitude.

Faroese written language is very young; prior to 1948, when the Faroes were granted home rule, there were only about 350 books in Faroese. (Ársfrágreiðing 1998-1999). So it is not surprising that people are not used to reading in their mother tongue. For centuries all writing in the Faroes was in Danish, and this has had a great impact on the attitude towards our own language. Much has changed in recent years, but Danish remains a link of sorts between Faroese and other languages, and we rarely even really think about it; that is just the way it is.

The opposition against Robinson Crusoe in the early 20th century proves that people did not think it important to publish in Faroese, when we could read in Danish instead. The Faroese had little confidence in the suitability of Faroese as a literary language. When a priest in 1823 translated the Gospel of Matthew to Faroese, the following – not uncommon – reaction stated that:

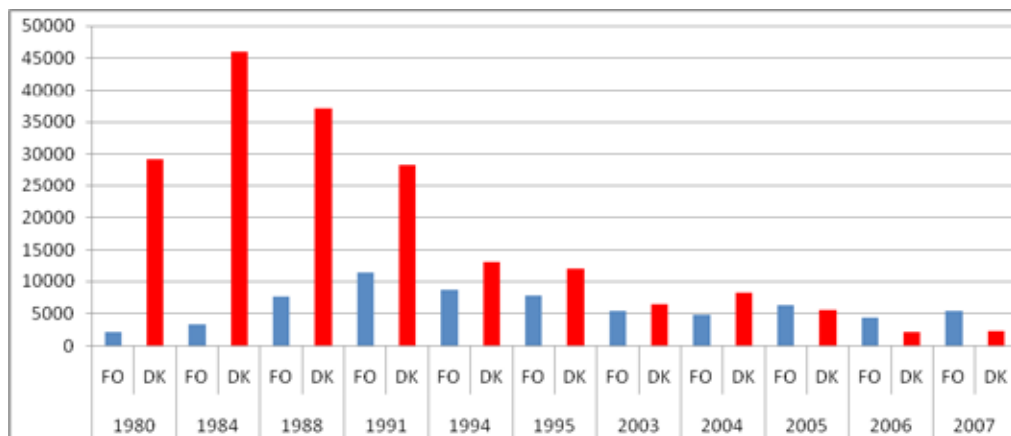


Fig. 5. Source: Býarbókasavnið (Tórshavn City Library)

„... the word is not holy (solemn) enough to describe things so holy. Our language may be good enough for everyday speech, but we prefer to hear about spiritual things in Danish ...“
(Bókin undir lesiglasíð: 31)

Much has of course changed since this review, but it still aptly illustrates the odds stacked against publishers of Faroese books when they first started. In addition to lacking confidence and respect for Faroese, the fact of the matter was that publishers had to start from scratch: there was a lack in vocabulary in certain areas and initiatives taken to bolster the language have not always been a success. In conclusion, I do, however, feel that we can all agree today that our language struggle has been a fruitful one, and although language issues are still hotly debated, most people are happy with the current situation.

The teachers who founded BFL were pioneers in many areas. Table 5 indicates that there has been a major attitudinal

shift over the last five years: In the register of the largest Faroese public library, we find that loans of Faroese children's books have for the very first time surpassed those in Danish.

When we look at the total number of loans however, both fiction and non-fiction books for children, Danish books still top Faroese books. Moreover, even to this day Faroese children read comics almost exclusively in Danish, movies still lack Faroese subtitles and so do digital games. For a publishing company such as BFL, there are still plenty of challenges. Although we do not expect to completely escape other languages, and one could question whether that is a goal in itself, we still have a lot of work to do to strengthen our own language by continuing to publish quality books for children and teenagers in our mother tongue.

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