

# The Faroese Auxiliary Verb munna\*

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As a teacher of Faroese to non-native speakers, I have naturally made extensive use of W.B. Lockwood's *An Introduction to Modern Faroese* (1955). Though excellent in many respects, this is a pioneering work, and as is to be expected there is much in it that is imprecise, incomplete and occasionally even misleading. It would be gratifying indeed if Lockwood himself or some native Faroese scholar would undertake a complete revision of the book. While we wait for that happy day, however, it will clearly be helpful if as many points of Faroese grammar as possible can be more fully elucidated. Henriksen 1983 has already added considerably to our knowledge, and Sandqvist 1980 has provided a number of interesting insights. In a modest way I have myself attempted to expand Lockwood's description of certain points of Faroese syntax (see, e.g., Barnes 1977, 1981a, 1981b, 1986a, 1986b). In this brief article, I want to discuss a relatively minor point, but one which, in the way it is presented by Lockwood, could easily lead

students and fellow linguists astray. It concerns the use of the verb *munna*.

Lockwood's account of the modal auxiliary *munna* is as follows (pp. 147-8; for easy reference the whole paragraph is quoted here more or less *in extenso*):

§ 148. *munna* (§ 77, 6) means »may, can, I suppose« etc.:

*Tað man vera so.* That may be so. I suppose it is so.  
*Man tað vera so?* Can that be so?

*Regin smíðar sær ein leyp til at bera tøð í; hann man ætla sær at velta nógv í ár.* Regin is making himself a basket to carry manure in; I suppose he intends to cultivate a lot of ground this year.

*Eg hugsí, at teir munnu fara at koma aftur skjótt.* I think they'll be coming back soon.

Even though *munna* usually expresses an element of uncertainty, it may also correspond to English »will«, e.g.: *tað man óivað vera beinari* that will doubtless be more correct.

In the past tense it may often be translated by »would« (referring to past time):

*Hanus mundi vinna, haldi eg, tí hann er so kvikur.*  
Hanus would win, I think, for he is so quick.

*Vit kendu hana ikki og skiftu lágmæltir orð um, hvussu hon mundi eita.* We did not know her and in low tones asked each other what her name would be.

*Mundi »Tjaldrið« fara í gjáramorgunin?* Would »The Oyster Catcher« sail yesterday morning?

*Tað mundi ikki vera sjáldan, at fátækir menn finga við til gávís.* It was, one may suppose, not uncommon for poor men to receive wood as a gift.

\* Part of the research for this article was supported by a grant from the British Academy, to whom I should like to record my gratitude.

When followed by the supine the past tense expresses the idea of »nearly, almost, hardly«:

*Tarvurin mundi dripið meg.* The bull nearly (almost) killed me.

*Tey mundu ikki kent meg.* They hardly knew me.

Contrast the meaning of the following sentences:

*Eg hugsí, hon mundi detta.* I think she fell, would fall, has fallen.

*Eg hugsí, hon mundi dottið.* I think she nearly fell.

*Mundi eingin Føroyingur vera førur fyri at taka lut í hesum samráðingum?* Was there not a Faroeman competent to take part in these discussions?

*Mundi eingin Føroyingur verið førur fyri at tikið lut í hesum samráðingum?* Would not a Faroeman have been competent to take part in these discussions?

Clearly, it is always difficult to explain the use of modal auxiliaries in a few lines, but where brevity is the keyword, two basic requirements, it seems to me, ought to be fulfilled. First, the essential meaning or meanings of the auxiliary must be put across as unambiguously as possible. Second, the exemplification must support the description and provide typical and clear instances of the contexts in which one may expect to find and use the verb in question. As I shall try to show, Lockwood's account fails in both respects.

The statement: »*munna* ... means 'may, can, I suppose' etc.« — together with the initial examples — is a reasonable preliminary, but by providing English equivalents at the outset, Lockwood erroneously suggests that these will normally suffice to render *munna* into English. What is lacking here is a brief account of the main semantic area the verb covers. This is all the more essential in that without it Lockwood's next suggestion, that 'will, would' provide suitable English renderings of *man*, *mundi*, is likely to lead most readers astray. Like many auxiliary verbs English 'will, would' can have numerous different meanings,

and it is not clear from what Lockwood says, nor from his examples, which meaning or meanings the pair has when translating *munna*. The suggestion does seem to be made, though, that whatever their sense the one thing they do not express is doubt: »Even though *munna* usually expresses an element of uncertainty, it may also correspond to English 'will'.«

It is not too hard to gauge the general sense of the examples:

- (1) *Tað man óivað vera beinari*
- (2) *Vit kendu hana ikki og skiftu lágmæltir orð um, hvussu hon mundi eita*

The precise function of *man* and *mundi* remains somewhat obscure, but the adverb *óivað* in (1) and the two initial clauses in (2) indicate the approximate semantic area in which we are moving, and it is possible to envisage certain types of context in which this use of *munna* might be appropriate. Considerably more impenetrable are two of the further examples, and their lack of an obvious context amply reveals the inadequacy of the suggested English rendering of *munna*:

- (3) *Hanus mundi vinna, haldi eg, tí hann er so kvikur*
- (4) *Mundi »Tjaldrið« fara í gjáramorgunin?*

As a native speaker of English, I find the use of 'would' here at best opaque. My students have tended to take 'Hanus would win' as part of a conditional construction, while 'Would »The Oyster Catcher« sail yesterday morning?' seemed to them uninterpretable. In the absence of further



explanation, the meaning of *mundi* in (3) and (4) seems likely to elude most users of Lockwood's manual.

After this batch of examples, we move, as can be seen, to ones that illustrate a rather different meaning of *mundi*, *mundu*: »When followed by the supine the past tense expresses the idea of 'nearly, almost, hardly'.« The two initial sentences demonstrate the point reasonably clearly. However, the contrastive pair that follows, far from clarifying the matter further, introduces various kinds of uncertainty. Most native speakers of Faroese I have consulted (some of whom would replace *hugsi* with *haldi* 'think') affirm that the embedding of *hon mundi dottið* under a verb of 'thinking' is inappropriate in all but a few contexts. As one put it: »*Hon mundi dottið* is a statement you would normally only make if you knew it had happened; it's something you either know or don't know.« In fact, the matrix clause *Eg hugsi* adds little or nothing to the contrast between *mundi detta* and *mundi dottið* and could with advantage be omitted altogether. With or without *Eg hugsi*, however, the precise nature of the contrast remains unclear. On the one hand we have *mundi dottið* with the sense 'nearly fell', but on the other a phrase about which the only certain thing seems to be that it does not mean 'nearly fell'. Exactly what it does mean is obscured by the wide range of English equivalents and the difficulty of perceiving an appropriate context for such an utterance.

It is the second contrastive pair, however, that causes most of my students (and, I would imagine, most users of the manual) the greatest difficulty, for here the metaphorical ladder really is pulled from under

them. That *mundi vera* means 'was' is only slightly problematic, for Lockwood has already indicated that in certain, undefined, contexts *mundi detta* can mean 'fell'. But having just learnt that *mundi*, *mundu* + supine »expresses the idea of 'nearly, almost, hardly'«, it is upsetting immediately to be given an example in which *mundi verið* is translated not 'was almost' but 'would have been'. Yet native speakers all confirm that Lockwood's translation here is accurate.

Clearly something has gone awry with the presentation of *munna*. If a new edition of Lockwood's *Introduction* is ever contemplated, it would be an advantage if this paragraph were completely rewritten. The notes that follow are intended as the basis of a discussion about what such a new paragraph might usefully contain.

As noted at the outset, it is, I think, essential to try and explain the general semantic impact of *munna* before presenting the reader with a range of possible English translations. With modal auxiliaries the choice of English equivalents will naturally vary widely from context to context, style to style and person to person. A massive battery of examples would be needed to provide the reader with information equivalent to that which could be included in a brief description of the verb's essential semantic features – and in a textbook, space for such copious exemplification is not normally available.

What information does *munna* then convey? In what contexts is it appropriate to use it? Except in those cases mentioned by Lockwood where *mundi* is combined with a supine and means 'nearly, almost, hardly', and in archaic style where it can sometimes

indicate the future, it seems for the most part to function much like the Norwegian modal adverbs *nok*, *sikkert* (in interrogative clauses: *mon (tro)*), i.e., the principal semantic feature it lends to the clause in which it stands is doubt. In declarative clauses a note of uncertainty is introduced into the speaker's or writer's attitude to what he is affirming or denying. In positive questions doubt is expressed about what is predicated of the subject, while in negative questions the doubt applies to the negation itself and the speaker or writer thus indicates his belief in the correctness of what is predicated of the subject. Depending on the context, *munna* may appear with full or weakened semantic content. Occasionally it is semantically empty and functions merely as an expletive particle.

Further examination of Lockwood's examples, and the addition of others will help to show the kind of contexts in which *munna* may be used and with what effect.

Most statements presented as factual by a speaker can be altered to an expression of opinion by the addition of the appropriate form of *munna*. Thus, a speaker who says:

- (5) Tað er so 'It is so'

affirms that that is indeed the way 'it' is or 'things' are. If *man* is added, as in Lockwood's first example, the statement becomes one of personal opinion, and the certainty of (5) is removed. It is often satisfactory when rendering *man*, *munnu*, *mundi*, *mundu* + infinitive into English to turn the infinitive into a finite form in the same tense as the auxiliary and to add 'I suppose', as Lockwood does in a couple of his English translations. If the other de-

clarative examples of *munna* + infinitive Lockwood gives are examined, it will be found that they confirm this analysis. Thus:

- (6) Hann man ætla sær at velta nógv í ár

as a statement of opinion contrasts with the factual:

- (7) Hann ætlar sær at velta nógv í ár  
'He intends for himself (i.e., he intends) to cultivate much this year'

Matters are slightly more complex in the next two examples. The matrix verb *hugsa* 'think' and the adverb *óivað* 'doubtless' convey varying degrees of uncertainty themselves, and whereas *óivað* only introduces slight doubt, it is arguable that where *munna* is embedded under a verb meaning 'think, believe' it is semantically more or less redundant. In the particular example:

- (8) Eg hugsí, at teir munnu fara at koma aftur skjótt

it is also redundant as a tense marker, since tense is here supplied by *fara at* 'be going to, will'. Something of the flavour of (8) can perhaps be conveyed if we translate it: 'I think they're most likely going to come back soon.' And if 'I would think' is substituted for 'I suppose', (1) repeated as:

- (9) Tað man óivað vera beinari

will come out fairly naturally as: 'That is doubtless more correct, I would think.'

Lockwood's three examples of *mundi* + infinitive in declarative clauses do not deviate from this pattern, though once again



two are complicated unnecessarily by the inclusion of *halda* and *hugsa* 'think, believe'. Thus (3) repeated as:

- (10) Hanus mundi vinna, haldi eg, tí hann er so kvikur

means: 'Hanus most likely won, I think, because he's so quick.' If we omit *haldi eg*, the doubt is still conveyed by *mundi*, and we can render the resulting sentence: 'Hanus won, I suppose, because he's so quick.' In:

- (11) Tað mundi ikki vera sjáldan, at fátaekir menn finga við til gávis

Lockwood's translation brings out the sense of *mundi* admirably, but if one replaces 'one may suppose' by 'I suppose' no violence is done to the Faroese original and a more consistent pattern (and thereby greater clarity) is achieved. The final example in this trio:

- (12) Eg hugsi, hon mundi detta

is so context-free, that it is difficult to determine the precise meaning of *mundi*. That is presumably the reason for the bewildering range of English equivalents offered. However, the inclusion of *Eg hugsi* presumably indicates that the basic 'I suppose' sense is the one intended here, and the rendering: 'I think she most likely fell' seems appropriate.

In positive questions, as noted, *munna* normally expresses doubt about what is predicated of the subject (while also marking tense), and Lockwood's two examples, one direct and one indirect, illustrate this

well. The translations, however, must be altered to something like: 'Did Tjaldur sail yesterday morning, I wonder?', 'We ... asked each other what she might (possibly) be called' (cf. *Hvussu man hon eita?* 'What is she called, I wonder?'); the function of *munna* will then be apparent. Nor, on its own, is there much of a problem about the first in the contrastive pair of negative questions that concludes Lockwood's remarks on *munna*: Once again *munna* marks tense, and the doubt it characteristically expresses applies to the negation ('Was there really not a Faroeman ...?'); the writer is thus indirectly affirming his belief in the existence of a Faroeman competent to take part in the negotiations. The relationship of this to the second negative question and of that to the other examples of *mundi*, *mundu* + supine is more complex and requires the introduction of additional examples.

The use of *munna* to express doubt and mark tense is not restricted to the present and preterite, as shown by the following quotation (from Hammershaimb and Jakobsen 1891, 355):

- (13) Systirin grunaði væl á svarinum,  
Eiríkur gav henni, at hann mundi  
hava dripið Símun  
'The (i.e. his) sister suspected strongly from the answer Eiríkur gave her that he had most likely killed Símun'

Similarly, *Hann man hava dripið hana* means: 'He has killed her, I suppose.'

In Faroese, as in all Scandinavian languages, the present tense can often denote future time. Thus, a sentence such as:

## (14) Hann man eta kjót

can mean: 'He eats meat [regularly], I reckon', 'He is eating meat [now], I reckon', or 'He'll/he's going to eat meat, I reckon'. Future time is also implicit in straightforward conditionals, in which *munna* may sometimes be used, e.g. (Hammershaimb and Jakobsen 1891, 330):

## (15) Og tók hann stórafjós av og breyt niður, mundi tað verða honum og øðrum til meina

'And if he took [the] big byre away and pulled [it] down, it would surely be of him and others to [the] suffering (i.e., it would surely bring suffering upon him and others)'

— a reported speech equivalent of the direct:

## (16) Og tekur tú stórafjós av og brýtur niður, man tað verða tær og øðrum til meina

'And if you take [the] big byre away and pull [it] down, it will surely be of you and others to [the] suffering'

In conditionals, *mundi*, *mundu* when followed by an infinitive thus correspond to English 'would' (with the added feature [+ doubt]) in contrast to non-conditionals such as (10-12) where they simply denote uncertainty and mark tense. Naturally, if *mundi*, *mundu* + infinitive is the non-conditional preterite equivalent of a present-tense Verb Phrase with future meaning, it will correspond (leaving aside the main semantic feature [+ doubt]) neither to a simple past nor (unambiguously) to

'would' in English, but rather to 'was going to', as in:

(17) Guðrun bað hann steðga eina løtu — maðurin mundi vera skjótur aftur  
'Guðrun asked him [to] stay a bit — the (i.e., her) husband was doubtless going to be quick back (i.e., return quickly)'

Counter-factual conditionals in Faroese may also involve the use of the preterite of *munna*, but in this case combined with a supine rather than an infinitive, e.g. (Jakobsen 1898-1901, 165):

## (18) Soleiðis gekk tað eina langa tíð, og idla mundi verið burtur úr, um ikki ein maður, Sakaris nevndur ... hevði hildið seg mentan at beina trøðlið burtur

'Thus it went [on for] a long time, and bad would doubtless have been out of, if not a man, Sakaris named, had reckoned himself capable to clear the troll away (i.e., bad would doubtless have come of it, if a man named Sakaris had not reckoned himself capable of getting rid of the troll)'

It seems normally to be possible in such conditionals to insert either the infinitive or the supine of the auxiliary *hava* 'have' between *mundi*, *mundu* and the supine of the lexical verb. In the case of (18) this would give: *idla mundi hava verið burtur úr* or *idla mundi havt verið burtur úr*. The double supine construction appears to be the more common, possibly because otherwise there would be identity of form with the different function of *mundi* *hava* exem-



plified in (13). It might in fact be thought that with the three possibilities: *mundi hava* + supine, *mundi havt* + supine and *mundi* + supine, and three principal functions: tense marker + uncertainty, counter-factual conditional and the »near-miss« function documented by Lockwood (that in which *mundi*, *mundu* + supine »expresses the idea of 'nearly, almost, hardly'«), speakers would have restricted each construction to one particular function, but so far at least no consistent matching of form and function seems to have taken place. In the case of certain other modal auxiliaries there is at least a clear-cut two way distinction, e.g.: *kundi fingið* 'could get/could have got', *kundi hava/havt fingið* 'could have got', *skuldi gjørt* 'ought to do/ought to have done', *skuldi hava/havt gjørt* 'ought to have done', but with *munna* the rules seem less rigid and therefore less obvious. Even the »near-miss« construction may at least sometimes include the supine of *hava*. Thus, several informants affirm that if (13) is altered to read:

- (19) Systirin grunaði væl á svarinum,  
Eirikur gav henni, at hann mundi  
(havt) dripið Símun

(i.e., with or without *havt* in place of *hava*), the sense is: 'His sister suspected strongly from the answer Eirikur gave her that he had almost killed Símun.' Given the tendency in Faroese for one supine to attract another (cf. Lockwood 1955, 141-3) and the somewhat hazy semantic dividing lines between the constructions we have been discussing (*mundi* + infinitive '[+ past]', I suppose', 'was going to, I suppose', 'would surely/doubtless'; *mundi* + *hava* + supine

'had most likely'; *mundi* ± *hava/havt* + supine 'would surely/doubtless have'; *mundi* ± *havt* + supine 'almost [+ past]' (i.e., 'would surely/doubtless have if something had not intervened')), it is after all perhaps not entirely surprising that there should be some degree of overlap.

However this may be, the rudimentary analysis I have just attempted does at least make it possible to understand the contrast between Lockwood's final pair of examples:

- (20) Mundi eingin Føroyingur vera førur  
fyri at taka lut í hesum samráðingum?

means, as has been indicated, something like: 'Was there really no Faroeman capable of taking part in these negotiations?', while:

- (21) Mundi eingin Føroyingur verið førur  
fyri at tikið lut í hesum samráðingum?

which could be expanded: *Mundi eingin Føroyingur hava/havt verið førur fyri ...*, is a counter-factual conditional meaning approximately: 'Would there really have been no Faroeman capable of taking part in these negotiations [if they had been held]?'.

Clearly a great deal more could be said about the uses of *munna*. Most modal auxiliaries in the Germanic languages provide formidable problems of description and *munna* is no exception. Nevertheless, by scratching at the surface of the problem I hope I have at least elucidated one of the murkier passages in Lockwood 1955, and if I am lucky I may even have opened up the ground a little for further investigation and discussion.

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## Úrtak

Greinin byrjar við at gagnmeta lýsingina av føroyska hjálparsagnorðinum *munna* í *An Introduction to Modern Faroese* eftir W.B. Lockwood. Síðan verður dømt um grundmerkingarnar hjá *munna* eins og um útvegir at endurgeva hesar merkingar eintýtt á enskum. Í tí ljósi verða dømi Lockwoods kannað av nýggjum. Nýggj dømi verða síðan lögð afturat, summpart til at vísa á, at *munna* er uppi í nógv fleiri orðasambondum og setningagerðum enn Lockwood tekur fyrí, og summpart til at greiða upp ávísar eftirstøðuspurningar í framseting hansara.