

A note on the derivation of Faroese *grind*¹

Kate Sanderson

Úrtak

Tá ið greiða skal fáast á, hvaðani tað føroyska orðið *grind* (bólkur av grindahvalum) stavar, verður vanligá víst til, at orðið stavar frá *grind*, sum merkir skrokkur ella eitt slag av portri. Vanliga verður greitt frá, at henda orðatýðingin av einum bólki av grindahvali antin sipar til, hvussu grindabólkurin skipar seg, tá ið hann svimur saman, ella til mannagongdina, tá ið ein grindabólkur verður rikin, nevniliga soleiðis at ein røð av bátum 'gírða hann inni' á víkum, eins og tá ið seyður verður rikin í rætt. Komið verður við øðrum uppskoti, har ið orðið heldur verður sett í samband við uppøsta atburð og rørslur hvalanna í einum bólki, soleiðis sum norðmaðurin Peder Claussøn Friis í seytjandu øld greiðir frá um *Hvalsgrind*, og eisini sum áíslandskum: *að vera í grindum* ella *grinda sig*, tá ið víst verður til hval, ið savnast í hópatali at parast.

Abstract

The most common and widely used explanation for the derivation of the Faroese word *grind* (school of pilot whales) elates the word's origins to *grind* with the meaning of a framework or gate-like structure. The application of this sense to a school of pilot whales has been popularly explained either by the formation of a school of whales as they swim together, or in relation to the methods used to drive schools of pilot whales, whereby they are "fenced into" bays by a line of boats to prevent their escape, with parallels in sheep herding activities. An alternative to this standard derivation is suggested, in which the word is rather related to the agitated behaviour and movement of whales within a group, as found in the seventeenth century Norwegian description of a *Hvalsgrind* by Peder Claussøn Friis, as well as in Icelandic expressions such as *að vera í grindum* or *grinda sig*, which refer to the shoaling and mating behaviour of groups of whales.

The fact that *grind* only has the meaning of a school of pilot whales in Faroese is a factor which has in many ways enhanced the perception of *grindadráp* (the pilot whale hunt) as a distinctively Faroese activity. It is an element which, as I have discussed elsewhere (Sanderson, 1990; 1992), has been combined in a great variety of compound nouns concerned with various aspects of the hunt, and continues to be incorporated into new terms to refer to more recent aspects of the activity. Furthermore, as pilot whaling in the Faroes has so often been written about in other languages, including English, the term is not infrequently encountered in its Faroese sense in English-language texts describing the Faroes. *Grind* is in fact listed with its Faroese meaning as a separate entry in the latest edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1991), albeit marked as a non-naturalised word in English, and the explanation for its derivation comprises two possible interpretations which I will discuss briefly here.

The earliest known use of the element *grind* in Faroese to refer to small whales is found in the account of whales and whaling in the Faroes contained in a topographical account of Norway, *Noregs og Omliggende Øers sandfærdige Bescriffvelse*, by Peder Claussøn Friis, published in 1632 (Storm, 1881). The section in question was appar-

ently based on the report of a Faroese informant from 1592 (Storm, 1881: 427). In his account of whale hunting in the Faroes, Claussøn Friis connects the use of *grind* for schools of whales with the meaning of *grind* as a kind of wooden or iron lattice-work (*Trellewerck*) or grating (*Riist*), and suggests that the formation of the whales as they swim together resembles such a structure:

Alt hvad som er giort aff Træ eller Jærn udi Trellewerck saa som en Riist (cratis) det kaldis en Grind paa Norske, oc fordi at Hvalerne løbe jeffnsidis hos hin anden oc store hobe, naar de løbe paa læg, da kaldis den Hvalhob en Hvalsgrind, saa som i den tractat om Fiske mere er omrørt (Storm, 1881: 431-32).

(Anything which is made of wood or iron in the form of a trellis/ latticework [*Trellewerck*], such as a grill or gate, is called *grind* in Norwegian, and because these whales swim side by side in large groups when they are mating, then that group of whales is called a *Hvalsgrind*, as was discussed in the treatise on fish.)

This simple yet rather perplexing explanation has often been presented in later accounts of *grindadráp* as the commonly accepted derivation of the word to refer to a school of pilot whales, and is also the first explanation offered by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1991). It has also become something of a convention in many accounts of *grindadráp*, from general descriptions to scholarly works, ever since Claussøn Friis (see Petersen, 1968: 46; Wylie, 1981: 103). The latest example in this long tradition, a description of the

Faroes from 1991, states in its chapter on »The *Grind*«:

The word *grind* means gate. The whales will sometimes stop for a while in a dense school, and scholars believe the name may refer to the fact that a school has the appearance when pausing of a barred gate (Kjørsvik Schei and Moberg, 1991: 123).

A second explanation for the derivation of *grind* is also connected with the sense of gate, but is linked rather to the methods of capture than the characteristics of the whales themselves. The Oxford English Dictionary provides the following explanation:

Others explain it as referring to the mode of capture, the whales being fenced or penned in by a line of boats (1991).

and Kjørsvik Schei also goes on in her account to explain this alternative:

It is also possible that the name simply refers to the old method of chasing the whales into a trap by closing some kind of gate behind them (Kjørsvik Schei and Moberg, 1991: 123).

As concerns the first interpretation of *grind* as a kind of barrier formed by the whales themselves, it seems unlikely that this is what really lies behind its semantic development to become a school of pilot whales. Regardless of how motionless the whales may seem when »pausing«, it is difficult to conceive of a large group of whales as re-

sembling in any way a grid-like structure or framework, nor in them representing a barrier to those encountering them together, especially on the open sea. I would suggest that if in fact there is any connection with gates, it is more likely to be explained by the second interpretation, in the sense of penning in, such as with sheep in a fold. Müller (1882), for example, draws attention to the similarities of herding whales and sheep, (*»The driving of a grind is very like the driving of a flock of sheep«*, Müller, 1882: 7) and prefers an explanation of *grind* associated with the idea of enclosing the whales into the bay by barring their escape through the mouth of the bays with the boats. In this respect we can also compare the term *caa'ing* whale used of pilot whales in Shetland, which derives from the mode of capture (driving), rather than from the natural characteristics of the whales themselves.

Grind in the sense of a pen or enclosure, then, is a possible explanation given the methods by which the whales are driven (like sheep) into the bay with no possibility of escaping. Both interpretations depend on a direct connection between the use of *grind* to refer to schools of pilot whales, and the sense of *grind* as a gate or barrier. Foote (1964) has reviewed this meaning of the word *grind* and its use in older sources as this relates to its occurrence in *Færeyin-ga saga* (*The Saga of the Faroe Islanders*) and its use for conjuring purposes in chapter 40 of the saga. Without going into the detail of Foote's discussion, there is little to support a case for any mythological or magical connections contained in the use of

grind to refer to schools of whales in Faroese. Indeed, there seems to be another possible explanation for the derivation of *grind* which is quite unrelated to the sense of gate.

If we look again at Claussøn Friis's account of *grind*, we find that he actually points to another explanation for the use of the term, quite different from any connections with frameworks or gates, but which he has associated with an unrelated meaning of the same word. He says that: *»... because these whales swim side by side in large groups when they are mating, then that group of whales is called a Hvalsgrind, as was discussed in the treatise on fish.«* The *»treatise on fish«* to which he refers here is included in his discussion of fish and whales in his natural history. In this section he describes the behaviour of *Trold-Hvale* (troll whales), the most dangerous and belligerent kind of whale:

Oc er Hvallen mest farlig naar hand løber i Brun eller paa Leeg, thi daa er hann medst grum, dertill med løbe de oc mange hundrede i Haab oc jage effter hin-anden oc det kalder man Hvalsgrind.... (Storm, 1881: 67)

(And the whale is most dangerous when he gathers to mate, for that is when he is most ferocious, and further to this many hundreds congregate in a large group and chase each other and that is known as a *Hvalsgrind*.)

Claussøn Friis's expanded explanation of the term *Hvalsgrind* here points to a perception of a school of whales, not in terms of the outward appearance of the school in

its entirety, nor in methods of capture, but in terms of the behaviour of the whales when they come together in large groups, to »løber i Brun eller paa Leeg«.

With Claussøn Friis's account in mind, it is useful to turn to Icelandic sources for comparison, and in particular the second entry of *grind* in the Icelandic etymological dictionary, *Íslensk Orðsifjabók* (Blöndal Magnússon, 1989). The dictionary lists *grind* as a separate entry in its meaning of pilot whales, and also casts doubt on the common explanation of a school of whales forming some kind of gate or barrier. Rather, it is suggested that the word is more likely to be connected with expressions such as *að vera í grindum* or *grinda sig*, which refer to the shoaling and mating behaviour of groups of whales, known in Icelandic as *hvalavaða*. The expression *að vera í grindingum* also refers with the same sense to dogs and cats, and in this respect it is interesting to compare Claussøn Friis's expression »løber paa Leeg« (translated as »coupling« in Sterpin's English translation of Lucas Debes (Debes, 1676: 171) with modern Danish expressions such as *løbetid*, such as in *hunden er i løbetid* - the dog is in season/on heat. Blöndal Magnússon also points to comparable uses of Icelandic *hlaupa* and *ganga*. Certainly, Claussøn Friis's description of a *Hvalsgrind* of large whales stresses the movement and activity of the whales, and the potential danger they pose to seafarers when encountered in large groups.

The seventeenth century account by the Icelandic naturalist, Jón Guðmundsson, describes small whales in a similar manner:

»þeir eru miög vandþecktir á siö, er þeir vada sem vöðusela vada« (Hermannsson, 1924: 6 - »they are known to be dangerous at sea, when they congregate in large groups, as seals do.«) The species discussed by Guðmundsson seems to be a blend of killer whales and pilot whales, but the significant aspect here is his mention of the way in which they *vada* (*vaða* - shoal; congregate in a large group) like seals. A similar expression in Faroese, *at grindast*, refers to the behaviour of pilot whales when they are close together in a tight group, at which time some of the group can be seen to bob up and down in an upright position. Müller provides the following description of this behaviour:

It is an interesting sight to observe, from an elevated plain on shore, a grind when it »grinder«. Now and then some of the whales stand erect in the water, with their heads above the surface, seeming to spy. Others float quietly on the surface. The main body swims around, stowing the herd together, so that some in the middle find it difficult to get below water. (Müller, 1882: 7)

Although it is commonly thought that they are »resting« when they do this, pilot whales have also been observed to display such behaviour during the actual driving. In fact, very little is actually known about the reasons for this behaviour in this species (Desportes, pers. comm.).

In his lexical collection from the late eighteenth century, Svabo also explains *grindast* in the sense of a school of pilot whales swimming at the surface as they rest

(Matras, 1966 – »holde sig i vandskorpen (om Marsviinflokke, naar de hvile sig«). However, under *grindast* Matras includes in his edition an entry from Mohr's manuscript with the same sense found in Icelandic sources: »være i Rid, coire (de cetis)« (»mating (of whales)«), a sense which we may presume was also known to some extent in the Faroes at the time these compilations were made in the eighteenth century. In this connection it is also interesting to note a recorded metaphorical use of the term *grindast* to refer to people:

Tá menn standa tættir í flokki og óstillir og nakað yvrisligir ella fyrisligir: teir standa og grindast (Orðasavnið, Fróðskaparsetur Føroya).

(When men stand close together in a group, restless and somewhat excited or agitated, they are said to stand and *grindast*)

This example shows the use of *grindast*, not in the sense of resting, but in the sense of agitated or excited movement within a group, rather than the outward appearance of the group as forming any kind of barrier-like structure. In this respect it is more suggestive of the description Claussøn Friis gives to large whales in a *Hvalsgrind* than any association with gates.

How can all this be explained in connection with the meaning of *grind* as a school of pilot whales today? To offer an alternative to the hitherto common explanations for the derivation of *grind*, I would suggest the word derives from expressions such as *grindast* associated with the characteristic

behaviour of whales themselves rather than to their outward appearance as a single entity, or to the methods by which they are hunted. It is therefore unlikely that the word developed from *grind* in the sense of a framework or gate-like structure. Rather, it was associated with schools of whales in the sense outlined by Blöndal Magnússon as large groups of (mating) whales, the behaviour of which was characterised by their agitated movement within the group. As is characteristic of pilot whales when they *grindast*, the adoption of an upright position in the water (possibly associated with mating activity, although this has not been verified), would easily have accommodated its connection with expressions such as *hlaupa* or *ganga* (running or walking) in Icelandic, and *løbe* in Danish, and their use in expressions connected with the mating behaviour of land animals. Various species of baleen whales and toothed whales have been observed to adopt an upright position during courtship and mating behaviour (Evans, 1987: 186-7).

In its Faroese usage, then, the noun *grind* was more likely related to *grindast* in the sense of »whales congregating in large groups to mate«, and the subsequent general meaning of »a large group of whales«, for example in the compound *Hvalsgrind* mentioned by Claussøn Friis, and then came to refer more specifically to that large group of whales most commonly found off the Faroes, namely »a school of pilot whales«, through a normal process of semantic narrowing. Claussøn Friis's simple equation of two quite distinct meanings may reflect the fact that the latter meaning

of *grind* was no longer known in Norway (nor in the Faroes for that matter) at the time of his writing. The matter is complicated by the fact that there is very little evidence to indicate how far back the use of *grind* to refer to schools of whales in the Faroes dates, although we may assume from the term *Grindamørcke* (*grind-fog*), as mentioned in Claussøn Friis's account, that it was already well-established in the context of whale hunting in the Faroes by the end of the sixteenth century.

With respect to the connection so frequently made between *grind* (a school of pilot whales) and gates, it is not surprising that this explanation has been so highly favoured, given the methodological similarities between driving whales and driving sheep which have been so often noted in the many accounts of the hunt over the years. As I have attempted to point out, however, there seems to be little real substance to such interpretations of the derivation of *grind*. Rather they have become a self-perpetuating component of popular representations of *grindadráp*. From a strictly etymological point of view, they would appear to require further investigation.

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Note

- ¹ This article has been adapted from the Appendix to the author's Master of Philosophy thesis, *Grindadráp – A textual history of whaling traditions in the Faroes to 1900*, University of Sydney, 1992 (unpublished).

Kate Sanderson
Oscar Larsensvej 15
N-9007 Tromsø
Norge