

New Studies in the Manuscript
Tradition of *Njáls saga*

The *historia mutila* of *Njála*

WESTERN
MICHIGAN
UNIVERSITY

Edited by

Emily Lethbridge and Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir

MEDIEVAL
INSTITUTE PUBLICATIONS

For private and
non-commercial
use only

Northern Medieval World

MEDIEVAL INSTITUTE PUBLICATIONS

Western Michigan University

Kalamazoo

Copyright © 2018 by the Board of Trustees of Western Michigan University

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
are available from the Library of Congress.**



**For private and
non-commercial
use only**

ISBN: 9781580443050

eISBN: 9781580443067

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in, or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the written permission of both the copyright owner and the author of the book.

Every effort has been made to obtain permission to use all copyrighted illustrations reproduced in this book. Nonetheless, whosoever believes to have rights to this material is advised to contact the publisher.

The Historical Present Tense in the Earliest Textual Transmission of *Njáls saga* An Example of Synchronic Linguistic Variation in Fourteenth-Century Icelandic *Njáls saga* Manuscripts

Ludger Zeevaert
Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies

Introduction

The following chapter presents results from the part of the project “The Variance of *Njáls saga*” (see introduction to this volume, p. xiv) that was concerned with synchronic linguistic variation in the earliest manuscripts of the saga (from the fourteenth century) and adds findings from a project that is concerned with variation in postmedieval *Njáls saga* manuscripts.¹ Linguistic variation in Old Icelandic texts is mainly analyzed in the framework of historical linguistics, that is to say, research on phonological, morphological, and syntactical change over a longer period of time. Variation in the use of certain linguistic constructions, however, can also be found between contemporaneous manuscripts, for example between the five parchment codices and eight fragments that constitute the oldest text witnesses of *Njáls saga*. In the fourteenth-century manuscripts of *Njáls saga*, variation can be detected on all linguistic levels, but the part of the “Variance of *Njáls saga*” project that is concerned with synchronic variation in the oldest manuscripts focuses mainly on grammatical variation above the lexical and morphological level. It does not consider phonological and morphological variation (which is investigated by Haraldur Bernharðsson in this volume), nor does it consider the type of lexical variation that derives from copying mistakes. Such scribal errors are of vital interest for the part of the project concerned with stemmatological questions (see Alaric Hall and Ludger Zeevaert in this volume). However, for an overall explanation of systematic, synchronic linguistic variation, the incidental, unsystematic deviations of a scribe from her/his exemplar are of little interest.

Synchronic Linguistic Variation: Stylistic Variation?

Several of the typical constructions that could be identified as linguistic variables by a comparison of parts of the text in different fourteenth-century *Njáls saga* manuscripts also play an important part in descriptions of typical Icelandic saga style.² This is especially the case with narrative inversion and the historical present tense, and from a linguistic point of view, it seems to be appropriate to treat variation in the fourteenth-century manuscripts of *Njáls saga* that does not involve differences in meaning as stylistic variation. Varieties of a language are usually classified as either historical (language periods), geographical (regional dialects), social (social dialects), or as dependent on certain circumstances (styles).³ For manuscripts produced in fourteenth-century Iceland, a language community without a pronounced dialectal or social differentiation, linguistic change or geographical or social dialects would be expected to play only a minor role.

In our case, however, the application of the concept of style (in the linguistic sense) also meets with some obstacles. The choice of a certain stylistic variety is usually described as being dependent on differences in speaker, addressee, subject matter, and situation.⁴ Even here, we would not expect many differences between manuscripts reproducing the same text and involving scribes and commissioners with comparable backgrounds. However, we do find variation in the usage of certain constructions between different manuscripts that originally go back to one archetype and otherwise follow their exemplars very closely, which means that some scribe/scribes, at some time, must have changed certain grammatical characteristics that are usually described as being typical of a certain style.

The Historical Present Tense

What is the Historical Present Tense?

Nondiachronic linguistic variation between manuscripts is not a subject that has been studied extensively in research on Old Icelandic texts, which was for a long time mainly occupied with the reconstruction of a “best” text that comes as close to the original archetype as possible and could be the basis for further literary or linguistic research. Only recently, and mainly initiated by the so-called “New Philology” proclaimed in the 1990 edition of *Speculum*, has a reorientation in Old Norse philology taken

place that assigns single manuscripts a value as independent literary (and linguistic) witnesses.⁵ New developments in the field of digital humanities provide the means to meet the technical and methodological requirements of this approach.⁶

For a number of reasons, the use of the historical present tense in the fourteenth-century manuscripts of *Njáls saga* seemed an appropriate area for a practical test of the methods developed in the project “The Variance of *Njáls saga*,” on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a valid means of verifying the basic hypotheses of the project concerning synchronic linguistic variation in Old Norse manuscripts:

- a. In a comparison of two fourteenth-century manuscripts of *Njáls saga*, Reykjabók (AM 468 4to) and Þormóðsbók (AM 162 B 8 fol.), differences in the use of the historical present tense could be identified.
- b. The XML transcriptions and the system of grammatical mark-up used in the project constitute a good basis for a systematic and quantitative analysis of this grammatical feature.
- c. Previous research treats the historical present tense as a typical stylistic feature of the Icelandic sagas but was not able to give a conclusive explanation of the phenomenon, which means that further research might be of more general interest.

One of the aims of the project “The Variance of *Njáls saga*” was to explain the linguistic differences we find in the earliest transmission of the saga in witnesses from the fourteenth century. It is known from previous research that some of the earliest manuscripts exhibit more archaic features than others, and it is tempting to assume that those stylistic differences have to do with different literary environments, different audiences, or different purposes of the text.⁷ In this context, the use of tenses seems to be a rather interesting field of research. Differences in the tense system that can be found between closely related Germanic languages like Icelandic, Swedish, and German, but also between German dialects (for example the use of certain grammatical forms to express aspectuality or differences in tense agreement), may have their origins in stylistic differences that ended up as different grammatical standards. Differences in the frequency of the usage of a certain grammatical form might then be interpreted as the conscious or unconscious modification of a stylistic variable by a scribe.

The term *historical present tense* usually denotes instances of present tense in narrative texts which can be replaced by the simple past tense without a change in meaning.⁸ As it is common in the analysis of historical language stages, this definition goes out from modern language use which is then contrasted with the language use in the historical language stage. In other words, we describe the historical present tense as the use of the present tense in cases where native speakers of contemporary English, German, Swedish, Icelandic, and so on would use the past tense.⁹ This definition excludes the use of the present tense in direct speech but also in descriptions that are still valid at the time of the composition of the narrative.¹⁰ The following example from chapter 7 (KG 7.83–84) illustrates the differences in the use of the historic present tense that can be found between different fourteenth-century manuscripts of *Njáls saga*:

AM 162 B β fol. (1ra29–30): Nv riðr (ride-PRS.3SG) *hun* heim af þingi. *Rutr var* (be-PST.3SG) *heimcomin* oc fagnar (welcome-PRS.3SG) *henne* vel.

Reykjabók (5v18): Nv riðr (ride-PRS.3SG) *hvn* heim af þingi. ok *var* (be-PST.3SG) *hrutr* heim *kominn* ok fagnaði (welcome-PST.3SG) *henmi* vel.

Gráskinna (6r15): Nv reið (ride-PST.3SG) *hon* heim af þingi. *oc var* (be-PST.3SG) *Rutr* heim *cominn* oc fagnaðe (welcome-PST.3SG) *henne* vel.

[She rides/rode home from the Thing; Hrut had already come home and he welcomes/welcome her warmly.]¹¹

The use of the historical present tense is known from several other (Indo-European) languages; examples from Ancient Greek, Latin, Middle High German, Old English, and Old Irish texts (among others) are discussed in the scholarship.¹² In addition to this, it is described as a typical feature of oral narratives.¹³ Its usage in Old Icelandic texts has been the subject of several studies that will be discussed in the following paragraph.

Previous Research on the Historical Present Tense in Old Icelandic

Grammatical Approaches

Wood bases his account of the historical present tense on the use of the present tense to express what he calls *nonterminal aspect*, that is to

say the description of actions, circumstances, or conditions that, in the consciousness of the narrator, are not yet terminated.¹⁴ He assumes generally an aspectual significance of the use of the historical present tense—it is used to mark the boundary of an indirect quotation.¹⁵ Wood gives an English translation of an example where a present participle of a verb of saying is followed by a past-tense verb to indicate indirect speech that he characterizes as resembling sequences of simultaneous aspect.¹⁶ He posits a contrast between past-tense verbs used for terminal statements and present-tense verbs used for nonterminal, continuous aspect and gives as a typical example a sequence from *Egils saga*: “Þórólfi þótti þat fýsilegt, ok fá þeir til þess orlof af konungi; búaz síðan—høfðu skip gott ok fçruneyti; fóru þeir leið sínar [*sic*], er þeir vátu búnir. En er þeir koma í Torgar, þá senda þeir Sigurði menn ok láta segja, at ...”¹⁷

Torgilsteit, too, assumes verbal aspect to be the explanation for the use of the historical present tense in Old Icelandic but comes to the exact opposite of Wood’s conclusion.¹⁸ In a corpus containing material from *Morkinskinna* and *Flateyjarbók*, he finds a preference for the use of the historical present tense for verbs with nondurative (punctual) aspect.¹⁹ In his analysis of a text sample from *Hulda*, however, he finds only five occurrences of the historical present tense (all with nonpunctual verbs) and excludes the material from his analysis because it does not support his findings.²⁰

Kiparsky assumes that the historical present tense in modern European languages has a dramatic function as it is described for oral narratives where its usage indicates that the narrator becomes closely involved in the story and makes the listener feel like an eyewitness to the events.²¹ For the earlier stages of Indo-European languages (including Old Icelandic), however, he rejects this function and presumes that here, the present tense has inherited the function of the early Indo-European injunctive and is used as an unmarked tense form. Kiparsky discusses examples from Greek, Latin, Old Irish, and Old Norse texts, and explains the historical present tense as a result of conjunction reduction. In conjoined structures, repeated occurrences of the same tense become subject to “an optional rule of conjunction reduction which deletes recurrent instances of identical constituents, generally in a direction from left to right,”²² and they appear in the form unmarked for tense, which is the present tense. The fact that modern European languages do not exhibit this reduction is explained by a difference in deep structure: in older Indo-European deep structure, tense (in contrast to verbal categories like person, number, or

voice), was expressed by adverbs, that is to say constituents, whereas in the deep structure of the modern daughter languages, they are represented as syntactic features on verbs.

Kossuth, in “The Linguistic Basis of Saga Structure,” starts her analysis of the historical present tense in Old Icelandic, which is part of a “syntax of narrative,” with a reference to Kiparsky’s work. Unfortunately, the text on which her own analysis is built, a chapter from *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* in Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*, is, according to Kossuth, rather untypical for what she assumes to be the usual pattern of tense usage in Old Icelandic, that is, an inconsistent change between present and past tense or, as she calls it, “Kiparskian tense shifts.”²³ In the text sample analyzed by Kossuth, Snorri uses the present tense for the introduction of the paragraph, switches then to the past tense in the narrative part, and ends the paragraph with a rather frequent change of tenses. Kossuth is obviously aware of the fact that different manuscripts of the same text show variation in the use of tenses and assumes that later scribes might have changed Snorri’s original style in the direction of either a more rule-based or a more irregular use of tenses, but she does not draw any conclusions from this finding. In a second text sample, the *Heimskringla*-prologue, Snorri, according to Kossuth, uses in the introductory part “almost an aspect system,” with activity and experiencer sentences in the perfect tense, stative sentences in the present tense, and agentive-perfective sentences in the past tense.²⁴ In the rest of the paragraph, as is typical for Snorri, the past tense is used.

What remains a bit confusing is that the treatment of tenses which Kossuth described as typical for Snorri;²⁵ that is, a change of tenses from section to section rather than within the same section, is, according to Kiparsky, typical for Classical Latin (Caesar), but not for Old Icelandic.²⁶ Caesar, according to Kiparsky, is representative of the latest stage in a development where conjunction reduction of inflectional categories is lost and “the historical present does not always count as a past tense in sequence of tenses, but already optionally counts as a true present,”²⁷ whereas Old Icelandic is said to be still at the second stage where the present tense is used as an unmarked tense in conjunction reduction.

Discourse-Functional Approaches

Earlier approaches to the historical present tense in Old Icelandic literature favor a discourse-functional explanation for the use of the historical

present tense. According to Lehmann, it is mainly used for a scenic and visual presentation of events in a narrative.²⁸ It is used to frame the story, mark important episodes, and to convey sensual impressions to the hearer/reader, but it is also typical for transitions between different episodes. Lehmann sees a connection with an oral narrative style for which the historical present tense is typical and explains the decline of its usage with a stronger orientation towards a written style. Sprenger comes to exactly the opposite conclusion.²⁹ She assumes that the present tense is the unmarked form of oral narratives, and thus of the earlier family sagas, where the past tense is used to emphasize important statements and actions. For the later sagas, however, she states a change of style influenced by clerical written language use, where the unmarked tense form was the past tense and thus the present tense had to be used for emphasis.

It should be mentioned that profound experts on the language of the sagas such as Andreas Heusler do not try to find explanations but treat the historical present tense—or rather the rapid change between present and past tense—as a very popular but completely random stylistic device: “Das Präsens historicum ist im aisl. Erzählstile ungemein beliebt, ohne doch je durch längere Strecken durchzugehen. Auch ein neuer Abschnitt kann im Präsens einsetzen. Oft geht es zwischen Präs. und Prät. rasch hin und her [...]”³⁰ Visser, in his *Historical Syntax of the English Language*, expresses a similar view: “In the Old Norse sagas the present tense is so frequently used that one gets the impression that it was felt as entirely on a par with the preterite,”³¹ and Hollander suspects “that the authors are guided, not so much by a delicate and unerring sense of tense values as by the conscious or unconscious endeavor to avoid the monotony of a long string of presents or preterits.”³²

Quantitative Approaches

One reason for the inconsistent, contrary, and very often mutually exclusive explanations given in previous research on the use of the historical present tense in the Sagas of Icelanders seems to be that the analyses referred to above are often based on single examples from only a few sagas that are able to support a certain hypothesis, whereas contradictory data is excluded from the analysis. Quantitative approaches show huge differences in the frequency of the historical present tense in Sagas of Icelanders between different texts. Sprenger found 60 percent use of the historical present tense in *Heiðarviga saga* but a considerably lower percentage in

younger sagas (although she does not quantify the difference).³³ Hallberg found between 3.2 percent and 78 percent instances of the historical present tense in forty Sagas of Icelanders.³⁴ Torgilstveit, who examines three manuscripts of the sagas of Norwegian kings, found between 3 percent and 50 percent usage of the historical present tense in the same part of the text in the different manuscripts.³⁵

Sprenger and Torgilstveit explain the huge differences in their material with a development of saga style over time. Hallberg's results do not show a correlation between estimated age of a text and the use of tenses; he thus assumes that the individual style of the authors has to account for the observed variation. Both Sprenger and Hallberg use normalized editions for their analysis which, for two reasons, is highly problematic in itself: frequent verbs are very often truncated in the manuscripts and do then not allow for a determination of tense: f. G. = *segir* (say-3PRS) *Gunnarr* or *sagði* (say-3PST) *Gunnarr*. In the normalized editions used by Sprenger and Hallberg, abbreviations are silently expanded. In chapter 75 (KG 75.41–2), for example, *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol.) reads: *hvergi mun ek fara .f. G. ok fua villda ek at þv gerðer* (27ra32–33). In Einar Ólafur Sveinsson's edition this is rendered: "Hvergi mun ek fara," **segir** *Gunnarr*, "ok svá vilda ek, at þú gerðir." ["I will not leave," says Gunnar, "and I wish you wouldn't either"].³⁶

In addition to this, a considerable amount of variation in the use of tenses can be found between manuscripts from the same time:

Pormóðsbók (11vb8): NU eggjar (egg on-3PRS) *Starkaðr* fína menn

Gráskinna (40r30): (S)ipán egiaði (egg on-3PST) *ftarkaðr* menn
fína

[Starkad then urged his men on.]

This means that the use of tenses as found in a normalized edition is neither representative for the language of a certain period in language history nor for the individual style of a certain author or scribe but is heavily influenced by the stylistic preferences of the twentieth-century editors. With a corpus consisting of (strictly) diplomatic transcriptions of different manuscripts, these problems can be avoided. Unfortunately, the compilation and analysis of electronic manuscript corpora is a very time-consuming enterprise, and so the following analysis of selected chapters of the thirteen earliest manuscript witnesses of *Njáls saga* can only be a first step in this direction.

The use of the historical present tense as it is found in the Sagas of Icelanders deviates from the use of tenses in modern texts in a way that obviously makes it necessary to come up with an explanation for the deviation. The grammars of modern European languages describe the use of tenses in written texts as governed by grammatical rules, and such a grammatical explanation was also proposed for the historical present tense in Old Icelandic (see above pp. 152–54). In my view those explanations are not satisfactory, however, and it is especially problematic that different approaches built on the same hypothesis and the same text corpus come to diametrically opposite conclusions.³⁷ Very often, these explanations are based on single examples that are generalized, and counterexamples are either not considered or are treated as exceptions that have to be explained in a different way. Torgilsteit, in “Historisk presens på norrønt,” the only corpus-based approach, is not really an exception to this because he excludes a part of his corpus that is not in accordance with his explanation from his results.³⁸

These surveys do nevertheless give interesting insights that may be useful for an analysis of variation in the use of tenses in different manuscripts of *Njáls saga*: in some cases dramatic differences in the use of tenses can be observed between different texts, certain verbs/types of verbs occur with an extraordinarily high number of instances of the historical present tense, and the frequency of the historical present tense diminishes obviously over time.

Methodological Approach

The following analysis of the use of the historical present tense in the fourteenth-century manuscripts of *Njáls saga* does not primarily intend to explain the use of this stylistic device in Old Icelandic texts. The main focus lies on the examination of stylistic variation, in this case the use of the historical present tense or past tense, in the narrative parts of different *Njáls saga* manuscripts from the fourteenth century.

A major problem of conducting a representative analysis of the use of tense in all fourteenth-century *Njáls saga* manuscripts lies in the fact that none of the manuscripts covers the complete text, and the distribution of the lacunae in the different text witnesses reduces the number of chapters present in a larger number of manuscripts.³⁹ Single chapters from different parts of the saga were chosen for the analysis in such a way that every fourteenth-century manuscript is represented in the corpus with at

least one chapter. The chapters chosen were analyzed in all manuscripts preserving this chapter. This means that the total amount of analyzed text differs substantially from manuscript to manuscript, and, for the smaller fragments, the text stems from different parts of the saga which most likely behave stylistically differently (due to different contents, a different amount of direct speech etc.).

The analysis includes all thirteen extant *Njáls saga* manuscripts from the fourteenth century (see table 6.1).

Table 6.1 Preservation of the chapters analyzed for this study in the different manuscript witnesses (it is likely that fragment β and Þormóðsbók were originally part of the same book).

Chapter	7	8	37	44	45	60	86	134	135
<i>AM 162 B β fol.</i>									
<i>Þormóðsbók</i>									
<i>AM 162 B ζ fol.</i>									
<i>Óssbók</i>									
<i>AM 162 B ϑ fol.</i>									
<i>AM 162 B \varkappa fol.</i>									
<i>AM 162 B η fol.</i>									
<i>Hítardalsbók</i>									
<i>Skafinskinna</i>									
<i>Gráskinna</i>									
<i>Reykjabók</i>									
<i>Möðruvallabók</i>									
<i>Kálfalækjarbók</i>									

Note: The white squares represent lacunae in the manuscripts.

The analyses were performed on XML-transcriptions that by and large follow the conventions used for the MENOTA-archive for Medieval Scandinavian texts (www.menota.org).⁴⁰ One part of the corpus consisted of diplomatic transcriptions of five of the fragments that were, for the most part, automatically supplemented with a normalized (modern Icelandic) text, the identification of shorter text entities (“sentences”) common to all manuscripts, a morphosyntactic annotation, and tags for clause boundaries and direct speech.

A second part of the corpus was based on transcriptions that were done by students at the University of Iceland,⁴¹ produced for BA or MA theses, for example. These transcriptions were originally not thought of as sources for linguistic research and did not contain segmentation or linguistic annotation, which I therefore added by hand.

Three manuscripts were not existent or only partly existent as XML-transcriptions. For Möðruvallabók, I compiled a normalized, segmented, and annotated transcription based on Andrea van Arkel-de Leeuw van Weenen's printed type-facsimile edition (1987). Parts of Reykjabók and Gráskinna were available in transcriptions done by Beeke Stegmann and Emily Lethbridge; I added a segmentation and grammatical annotation to the chapters already transcribed from these two manuscripts. For the remaining chapters from Reykjabók, I prepared normalized, linguistically annotated versions based on photographs of the manuscripts in a similar way as for Möðruvallabók. For the remaining chapters from Gráskinna, I produced diplomatic and normalized, segmented and grammatically annotated transcriptions.

Analysis

Differences in the Frequency of the Historical Present Tense between Manuscripts

As a first step in the analysis, I counted all instances of present-tense finite verbs in the chapters in question with the help of XSLT stylesheets based on suitable XPath-expression. Direct speech was excluded from the counting.⁴² Figure 6.1 shows the results for chapter 37, which is contained in seven of the thirteen manuscripts.

Given the large differences in the frequency of the present tense between the single manuscripts (2.22 percent for Möðruvallabók, 9.68 percent for Gráskinna) it seems rather unlikely that the use of the historical present tense in the analyzed manuscripts of *Njáls saga* can be attributed to grammatical rules of the type suggested by Wood, Torgilsteit, Kiparsky, and Kossuth (as outlined above) that were universally valid for fourteenth-century Icelandic. It is hard to think of a reasonable explanation as to why scribes who produced copies at about the same time that otherwise show no signs of grammatical deviations from what has to be assumed normal for fourteenth-century Icelandic, in some cases would follow those rules and in other cases not. It should be pointed out that, at this stage, a differentiation between clear cases of the historical present

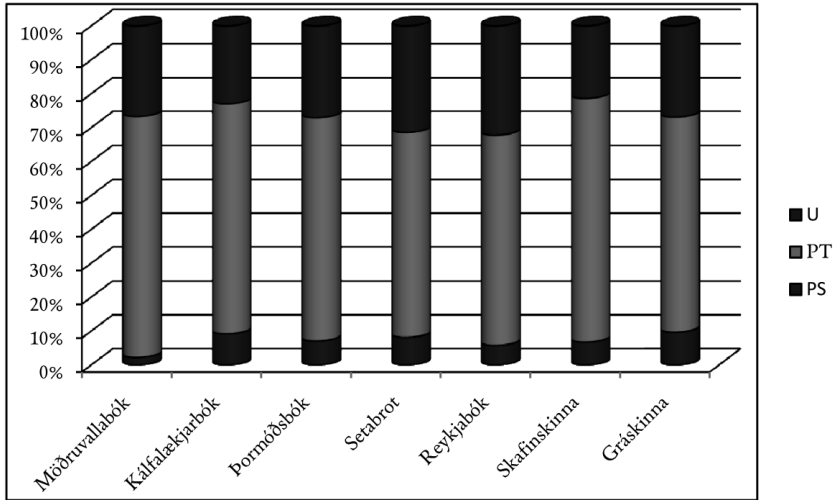


Figure 6.1 Frequency of the historical present tense (PS) in chapter 37 in different manuscripts.

Note: U: unknown (illegible in the manuscript or word abbreviated so that the tense is not clear), PT: past tense.

tense and other instances of the present tense outside of direct speech (narratorial comments, topographical descriptions etc.) was not made. It was assumed, though, that the amount of such uses of present tense was similar in all manuscripts so that the deviations in the use of present tense had to be attributed to different frequencies of the historical present tense.

Possible explanations for those differences would be differences in the exemplars, unconscious changes during the copying according to a scribe's language use that is different from the exemplar or deliberate changes due to a certain stylistic ideal or to grammatical/prescriptive rules. It is also possible that certain scribes, in general, were more faithful to their exemplar than others, and it is possible too that the degree of faithfulness changes during the copying of a manuscript, which would explain differences in the frequency between different chapters of the same manuscript (see figure 6.3).

Tendencies Common to All Manuscripts

To allow for a detailed analysis, all instances of the present tense outside of direct speech in the different transcriptions were identified and

exported to a text file with the help of XSLT style sheets and XPath queries. The single examples were transferred to a table and labeled according to their category (“genuine” historical present tense, narratorial comments, topographical descriptions, etc.), and gaps caused by deviations in the use of tenses (use of past tense in manuscripts where at least one other manuscript uses present tense) were filled by adding the corresponding verb forms which were identified with the help of unified chapter and sentence numbers (see table 6.2).

Seventy-six passages in the text that contained a verb in the historical present tense in at least one manuscript could be identified, but only in ten (13.16 percent) of those cases did all manuscripts agree with regard to the use of present tense. Present-tense forms of *vera* in examples such as “... og er nú lokið þætti/þrætum þeirra Marðar”⁴³ (KG 8.62–63; “and here ends the episode of Hrut and Mord”),⁴⁴ “Nú er að taka til heima að ...” (KG 37.1; “Now to what was happening at home ...”), “Nú er þar til máls að taka er smalamaður...” (KG 45.63–64; “To return to the shepherd: he ...”), and instances where the narrator comments on the narration (“now I come to the following point in my story ...”), where all manuscripts use the present tense, were excluded from the analysis.

For seven verbs, passages in the text could be found where all manuscripts agree on the use of the present tense. The verbs are: *ríða* [to ride] (twice), *snúa* [to turn around] (twice), *liða* [to pass], *leggja* [to lay], *ferja* [to carry/to bring], *höggva* [to hew], and *sjá* [to see].

The fact that no chapter from the saga is extant in all fourteenth-century manuscripts makes it impossible to compare parts of text with the same content in all manuscripts. To allow, at least, for the determination of a mean value for the use of the historical present tense in fourteenth-century *Njáls saga* manuscripts, all chapters that were chosen for the analysis from the thirteen manuscripts were copied into one XML file for a quantitative analysis.

In total, 223 examples of the historical present tense (5.9 percent of all verbs outside of direct speech) were counted in the sample, fifty examples (1.3 percent) of regular (nonhistorical) present tense, and 2920 examples (76.9 percent) of the past tense. In 605 cases (15.9 percent), tense could not be designated, either because the verbs in question were abbreviated in a way that did not allow for a clear identification of tense or because of damage to the parchment.

Detailed comparison (see table 6.2) shows, on the one hand, differences in the use of the historical present tense between single manuscripts,

but, on the other hand, it is possible to identify a limited number of verbs where the manuscripts show considerable agreement. I assume that these verbs constitute a core area for the use of the historical present tense that is either common to the language use of all scribes or at least was kept unchanged during copying.

Table 6.2 All present-tense verb forms in chapter 60 and corresponding verb forms from all manuscripts.

Chapter, sentence	60,2	60,4	60,5	60,10	60,18
<i>Möðruvallabók</i>	var	hafa	mælti	reið	líður (ek)
<i>Kálfalækjarbók</i>	um*	höfðu	mælti	ríður	líður (ek)
<i>AM 162 B β fol.</i>					
<i>Dormóðsbók</i>	var	höfðu	m.	ríður	líður (ek)
<i>Hítardalsbók</i>					
<i>AM 162 B η fol.</i>					
<i>Óssbók</i>	var	höfðu	m.	reið	líður (ek)
<i>AM 162 B χ fol.</i>					
<i>AM 162 B ϑ fol.</i>					
<i>AM 162 B ζ fol.</i>					
<i>Reykjabók</i>	er	hafa*	mlzi	ríður	líður (ek)
<i>Skafinskinna</i>	var	hafa	segir	reið	líður (ek)
<i>Gráskinna</i>	var	hafa	mælti	reið	líður (ek)

Note: Present-tense forms in bold, narrator's comments (ek) in gray, problematic forms (possible transcription errors, difficult readings) marked with an asterisk.

To gain an overview of differences in the use of the historical present tense with regard to different verbs, a frequency list was produced for occurrences of verbs with the historical present tense in the sample (table 6.3).

The list was based on a Word document containing all examples of present-tense verb forms outside of direct speech. The examples were extracted with XPath-expressions from an XML file containing lemmatized and morphosyntactically annotated, normalized transcriptions of the ten sample chapters in all manuscripts (provided that the chapter in question was extant in the manuscript in question) and the total number

Table 6.3 Frequency of present-tense forms in the sample.

riða	31	fagna	6	hnykkja	2	hætta	1
vera	31	heita	6	keyra	2	kasta	1
snúa	26	fara	5	leita	2	kveða	1
segja	16	hafa	5	ljósta	2	láta	1
höggva	14	kveðast	4	mæta	2	senda	1
koma	11	stefna	4	snara	2	skulu	1
sjá	11	verða	4	svara	2	sýnast	1
líða	10	kljúfa	3	ansa	1	tala	1
færa	7	þakka	3	dveljast	1	þykja	1
leggja	7	finna	2	fésta	1	vilja	1
berjast	6	hitta	2	hlaupa	1	vægja	1

of occurrences of each lemma were added up. With thirty-one occurrences in the sample, the historical present tense is most frequent for the verb *riða*. This can partly be explained by the high overall frequency of *riða* in the text, but this explanation alone is not sufficient. In a frequency list (table 6.4) containing all verbs, regardless of tense form, which was derived from a normalized and lemmatized version of the narrative parts of the ten sample chapters under scrutiny,⁴⁵ the verbs *hafa*, *koma*, and *fara* are clearly more frequent than *riða*. Moreover, semantic aspects do not appear to be causal for the high frequency of historical present tense for *riða*. In *Historisk presens i et utvalg*, the only detailed quantitative, semantically based analysis of the historical present tense in the sagas, Torgilstveit comes to the conclusion that for durative verbs (verbs of motion like *riða*, *fara*, or *ganga* are typical representatives of this verb class), the use of the historical present tense is rather untypical.⁴⁶

Obviously, in the case of *riða*, the connection between semantics and tense is indirect. The historical present tense is found especially frequently at the beginning of chapters.⁴⁷ Its function seems here to be what is described by Kossuth as “scene setting,”⁴⁸ and the protagonists usually cover the distance between frequently changing locations on horseback, which triggers the frequent use of *riða* at the beginning of chapters. Sprenger gives several examples of present-tense forms of *riða* at the beginning of chapters from different sagas.⁴⁹ For *fara* (five examples), the

Table 6.4 Frequency of verbs (present tense, past tense, and tense not identifiable) in the sample.

vera	337	sjá	33	vilja	13
mæla	223	kveðast	32	heita	12
koma	167	berjast	31	ráða	12
hafa	156	þakka	29	skilja	12
fara	131	lýsa	27	þora	12
ríða	92	fá	25	glotta	11
ganga	89	finna	25	kippa	11
taka	88	bregða	23	senda	11
segja	86	búa	23	tala	11
kveða	60	leggja	23	heyra	10
snúa	50	ljósta	22	ljúka	10
eiga	45	fagna	18	mæta	10

Note: The list was compiled from a lemmatized list of verbs (present tense, past tense, and tense not identifiable) in the sample.

same function can be assumed. *Líða* (at the beginning of chapter 7 and in chapter 135) has a comparable function (not a spatial but a temporal connection between episodes).

A second group of verbs that are used with the historical present tense in all manuscripts can, in fact, be characterized as punctual verbs, the verb class that was identified as typical for the historical present tense by Torgilsteit in *Historisk presens i et utvalg*. The verbs are *snúa* (twice), *leggja*, *færa*, *höggva*. But here, too, it is probably not the semantic category that is decisive for the use of the present tense. These verbs are part of the description of two fights (KG 45.24–27, Skarpheðinn against Sigmundur; KG 86.14–16, Kári and the Njálssons against the Earls), and in these two episodes, half of the examples of the historical present tense in the complete sample are found (eighty-five in chapter 45, and thirty in chapter 86).

Fights are usually closely associated with the dramatic structure and narrative climax of Sagas of Icelanders,⁵⁰ and research into oral narratives has shown that the use of the historical present tense (Vannebo calls it *dramatisk presens* [dramatic present]⁵¹) is typical for oral narratives,⁵² having

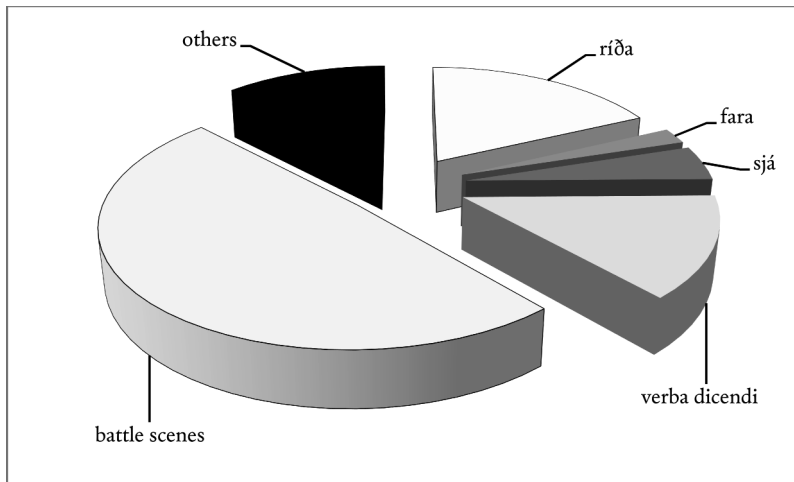


Figure 6.2 Frequency of verbs with the historical present tense

the function of a *Vergegenwärtigung*,⁵³ or to “make present” especially dramatic episodes in a story. It is either used as a consciously applied stylistic device that aims to include the listener directly in the events, or the narrator switches to the present tense because he unconsciously transfers himself mentally to the narrative situation, which is then mentally visualized in the form of a movie. Oral narratives of course played a part in the development of the Icelandic saga tradition,⁵⁴ but, for a written text like *Njáls saga*, it is more plausible to see the historical present tense as the conscious application of an originally typical oral stylistic device in a written text, in the sense of *konzeptionelle Mündlichkeit* [conceptual orality].⁵⁵

This mental visualization might be an explanation for the high frequency of the use of the present tense with *sjá* [see] in the sample (eleven examples). In this context, it is interesting that Adelswärd, in her analysis of forty-three oral narratives of moose hunts, finds the historical present tense mainly in connection with the climaxes of her stories—that is, the appearance of the moose and the shot—with verbs of perception (the hunter seeing or hearing the moose) playing an especially important role.⁵⁶

According to Wood, verbs of saying display the highest frequency of occurrences of the historical present tense of all Old Norse verbs.⁵⁷ In Torgilstveit’s *Morkinskinna* corpus, too, *segja* is the verb with the highest percentage of present-tense use. Previous research has only explained this fact rather vaguely. Wood cites examples of the twofold use of verbs

of saying in constructions such as “Kveldúlfr svarar, sagði at hann var þá gamall...” [Kveldúlfr answers, said that he was old then], where he assumes simultaneous aspect to be an explanation for the use of present tense (that is, the answering and the saying happening simultaneously).⁵⁸ Generally, however, he assumes free variation in the use of tenses with verbs standing for “to say.” An example of this is the change between past and present tense for *segja* introducing the direct-speech utterances of different speakers in dialogues.

Vannebo, in contrast, characterizes this change as typically oral and interprets it as an uncertainty on the part of the narrator with regard to simultaneity versus anteriority of (verbal) citations, or alternatively, as self-correction, to clarify temporal reference.⁵⁹ An explanation for this assumed insecurity is not given by Vannebo, but Visser states that verbs of saying introducing quotations from “eminent men living in the past” in Old English texts often stand in the present tense to emphasize the timeless value of the utterances.⁶⁰ Visser also discusses the influence of colloquial speech on present-tense verbs of saying where they introduce direct speech, but he rejects this idea as not convincing, at least for the older stages of English.

Results

Functions of the Historical Present Tense

In the manuscripts analyzed for the present study, present-tense forms are comparably frequent, but certainly not to the same degree as in Torgilsteit’s *Morkinskinna* corpus, where present tense is more frequent than past tense for the verbs *kveðast*, *svara*, and *segja*. In the *Njáls saga* corpus, all verbs of saying occur more frequently with past tense than with present tense, and no example of a verb of saying could be found where all manuscripts agree on the use of the present tense. One problem is, of course, that verbs of saying are abbreviated more often than other verbs in a way that does not allow for an identification of tense.⁶¹ This is true for 64 percent of the occurrences of verbs of saying in the corpus; only 3 percent occur in the present tense.

To summarize the results: a comparison of the use of tenses in the thirteen earliest manuscripts of *Njáls saga* showed two main functions of the historical present tense that could be found in all manuscripts, firstly, the framing of chapters, that is to say the connection of different episodes, and, secondly, the visualization of particularly dramatic episodes.

Table 6.5 Tense used with verbs of saying in the sample.

	tense not identifiable	present tense	past tense
segja	381 (89%)	16 (4%)	32 (7%)
mæla	76 (34%)	0	147 (66%)
kveða/kveðast	48 (52%)	5 (5.5%)	39 (42.5%)
svara	26 (60%)	2 (5%)	15 (35%)
spyrja	9 (21%)	0	34 (79%)
ansa	0	1 (50%)	1 (50%)
tala	0	1 (9%)	10 (91%)

Present Tense as Unmarked Tense?

This result is definitely interesting, but it does not give an explanation for the fact that beyond those two functions, the manuscripts exhibit a rather high proportion of variation in the use of tenses. An observation made by Kari Tenfjord might possibly lead to a clearer picture. On the basis of a comparison of the system of anaphora in Norwegian and Vietnamese, Tenfjord (in “Historisk presens” and in “Utfordringer i møtet”) concludes that Old Icelandic, just like modern Vietnamese, allows for a much more extensive dropping of anaphoric pronouns—for example in coordinating constructions (main clauses connected with “and”)—than modern Norwegian (or modern English).⁶² In the following example, the object pronoun *it* can be left out in Vietnamese but not in English (or Norwegian):

Bà để cuốn sách ấy ở đâu?
 she put piece book the be where
 [Where did she put the book?]

Bà để trên bàn.
 she put surface table
 [She put (it) on the table.]⁶³

In Old Icelandic, examples for the omission of the object pronoun comparable to the Vietnamese example can be found:

honum var fengin leynilega harpa, ok sló hann [-] með tánum
 [A harp was secretly brought to him, and he played (it) with his toes.]⁶⁴

In Vietnamese, in contrast to English (or Norwegian), the verb does not have to be marked for tense because the temporal reference is established by the adverbial, as is seen in the following example:

hôm qua tôi về
 yesterday I come back
 [Yesterday I came back.]⁶⁵

Tenfjord, departing from Kiparsky, assumes that the historical present tense in modern Norwegian, characterized as vividly reporting present, works differently to Old Icelandic, where it can be described as the use of an unmarked tense in contexts where a precise marking of tenses is not necessary (*tom anafori* or “zero anaphora”), just as in Vietnamese.

On the basis of the data from the project “The Variance of *Njáls saga*,” Tenfjord’s assumption that the use of historical present tense as well as anaphoric reference in Icelandic are discourse conditioned seems to be plausible.⁶⁶ The characterization of the present tense as an unmarked form in the sense of markedness theory is also acceptable:⁶⁷ morphologically, the past tense can be described as an extension of the present tense involving the addition of a suffix or the application of *ablaut*, which means that the past tense is morphologically marked in a way comparable to a masculine noun that is derived from a feminine noun by adding a masculine suffix or head (Ger. *Gans*, Icel. *gæs*, Norw. *gås* [goose] versus Germ. *Gänserich/Ganter*, Icel. *gæsarsteggur*, Norw. *gasse* [gander]), where the feminine form includes the male gender but not vice versa.⁶⁸ In a similar way, the present tense can be used to describe past events, whereas the use of the past tense to describe present events is not possible. Thus, the present tense has a more general significance than the past tense, and the past-tense form contains “more precise, specific, and additional information than the unmarked term provides. For example, in languages containing an opposition between the two grammatical tenses of past and present, the former is always marked and the later unmarked. The general meaning of the past lies in the fact that the narrated event precedes the speech event in time, while the general meaning of the present does not establish a temporal relation between the two events.”⁶⁹

Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that there is a quantitative difference in the use of nouns unmarked for gender and verbs unmarked for past tense. In a corpus of contemporary German (www.deutschestextarchiv.de) the unmarked forms *Gans* [goose] and *Löwe* [lion] were used in 96.2 percent and 97.1 percent of the cases, the marked forms *Gänserich* [gander]

and *Löwin* [lioness] only in 3.8 percent and 2.9 percent; whereas, at least in the *Njáls saga* corpus, it is the marked past tense (marked in the Jakobsonian sense) which is used in 97.7 percent of the cases and the unmarked (historical) present tense only in 2.3 percent. It seems that in the case of a lion, the gender is less important (male and female lions are equally dangerous) whereas, in the case of actions, it usually matters whether they happened in the past or are happening in the present. In the case of narratives, though, it is not necessary to point out that events described occurred in the past. Narratives are built on a mutual agreement between reader and narrator that the narration takes place in a temporal and spatial frame outside of the narrative situation or the act of reading or listening.⁷⁰ The narrative situation is established by certain linguistic and extra-linguistic characteristics that include, among others, tense. Icelandic narratives use *þátíð*, English narratives past tense, German narratives *Präteritum/Imperfekt* (in contrast to the *Perfekt* that in colloquial speech is used to describe concluded actions in the past).

On the basis of the narrative, the reader/hearer constructs a mental representation of the narrative. For the process of reading, it is of little importance whether the actions described in the narrative really took place in the past or whether they are fictional. Also, fictional actions thought to take place in the future are usually narrated in the past tense. However, once the temporal relation between the act of narrating and the contents of the narrative is established, the past tense, which is the neutral or stylistically unmarked tense form in a narrative, can, in single cases, be exchanged with the present tense without running the risk of the narrated events being interpreted as in fact happening in the present. This can be used as a stylistic device for a complete narrative or in single instances in a story.

Scribal Economy?

Aside from the use as dramatic present or as a scene-setting/framing device, however, it is difficult to identify clear patterns for the use of the historical present tense in the *Njáls saga* manuscripts analyzed for this article. The idea that methodological aspects play a role here cannot be excluded. Due to the fragmentary transmission of the earliest manuscripts, only about 5 percent of the text of the saga could be analyzed, and the chapters transmitted in the fragments come from different parts of the text and are thus not directly comparable with each other.

An additional difficulty for a quantitative approach to the use of the historical present tense in the different manuscripts is the fact that

they differ with regard to the proportion of examples of verbs whose tense cannot be determined. This is partly due to some manuscripts being more difficult to read than others because of damage or wear but, first and foremost, due to the fact that some scribes made more use of abbreviations than others. Generally, differences in the quantity of abbreviated verb forms can also be found between different chapters because the number of verbs of saying (which show an especially high frequency of abbreviated forms), varies from chapter to chapter, depending on whether the chapter focuses on the narration of actions or on utterances of the characters. This has an influence on the overall frequency of the historical present tense in the shorter fragments because of the randomness of the chapters surviving in the different fragments.

In chapters with a large amount of dialogue (where most finite verbs are to be found in the direct-speech passages that were excluded from the analysis and where the majority of finite verbs outside of direct speech are verbs of saying that are very often abbreviated), a low number of instances of the historical present tense does not necessarily correlate with a high number of past-tense forms. In extreme cases (for example, in chapter 60), the two manuscripts with the smallest amount of historical present tense (Óssbók and Þormóðsbók) show, at the same time, the lowest number of past-tense forms. The low absolute number of verb forms that can be considered for an analysis of tense usage in this chapter means that making clear statements about differences between manuscripts is rather difficult.

Table 6.6 Use of tenses in finite verbs outside of direct speech in chapter 60.

	PS	PT	U	VBf	PS%	PT%	U%	VBf%
Möðruvallabók	2	23	6	31	6.45	74.19	19.35	100
Kálfalækjarbók	2	17	4	23	8.7	73.91	17.39	100
Óssbók	1	19	10	30	3.33	63.33	33.33	100
Þormóðsbók	1	19	10	30	3.33	63.33	33.33	100
Reykjabók	4	20	4	28	14.29	71.43	14.29	100
Skafinskinna	3	25	4	32	9.38	78.13	12.5	100
Gráskinna	2	26	6	24	5.88	76.47	17.65	100

Note: PS: present-tense verbs (absolute numbers), PT: past-tense verbs (absolute numbers), U: tense unidentifiable, VBf: finite verbs (absolute numbers), PS%: present-tense verbs (percentage), PT% past-tense verbs (percentage), U% tense unidentifiable (percentage), VBf% finite verbs (percentage).

chapter	manuscript	present %	past %	tense un-identifiable	total	rank present	rank past	average un-identifiable
37	AM 132 fol.	2,22	71,11	26,67	100,00	7	2	26,93
	AM 133 fol.	9,20	67,82	22,99	100,00	2	3	
	AM 162 B fol. δ	7,06	65,88	27,06	100,00	4	4	
	AM 162 B fol. ζ	8,14	60,47	31,40	100,00	3	7	
	AM 468 4to	5,75	62,07	32,18	100,00	6	6	
	GKS 2868 4to	6,74	71,91	21,35	100,00	5	1	
	GKS 2870 4to	9,68	63,44	26,88	100,00	1	5	
60	AM 132 fol.	6,45	74,19	19,35	100,00	4	3	21,12
	AM 133 fol.	8,70	73,91	17,39	100,00	3	4	
	AM 162 B fol. γ	3,33	63,33	33,33	100,00	6	6	
	AM 162 B fol. δ	3,33	63,33	33,33	100,00	6	6	
	AM 468 4to	14,29	71,43	14,29	100,00	1	5	
	GKS 2868 4to	9,38	78,13	12,50	100,00	2	1	
	GKS 2870 4to	5,88	76,47	17,65	100,00	5	2	
86	AM 132 fol.	13,11	85,25	1,64	100,00	1	7	6,81
	AM 133 fol.	4,92	91,80	3,28	100,00	8	2	
	AM 162 B fol. ε	5,17	89,66	5,17	100,00	7	4	
	AM 162 B fol. η	10,00	86,67	3,33	100,00	3	6	
	AM 162 B fol. θ	10,20	87,76	2,04	100,00	2	5	
	AM 468 4to	9,84	85,25	4,92	100,00	4	7	
	GKS 2868 4to	5,56	92,59	1,85	100,00	6	1	
	GKS 2870 4to	8,33	86,67	5,00	100,00	5	3	

Figure 6.3 Frequency of historical present tense in different chapters in the fourteenth-century manuscripts of *Njáls saga* (detail).

For similar reasons, consistency in the frequency of the historical present tense is very often not found in different chapters of the same manuscript. It can happen that a certain manuscript might have the highest frequency of historical present tense compared to the other manuscripts in one chapter but the lowest in another. For example, *Möðruvallabók* shows the least amount of historical present tense in chapter 37 of seven manuscripts but the highest amount in chapter 86 of eight manuscripts (see figure 6.3). Figures for mean values of historical present tense in different manuscripts (between 3 percent in *Össbók* and 11 percent in AM 162 B η fol.) thus only have a limited significance.

The comparison of the use of tenses in ten chapters of *Njáls saga* in all fourteenth-century manuscripts is not able to support the hypothesis that certain manuscripts show a certain deviating language use, or systematic changes that can be described as a stylistic ideal, or a set of grammatical rules typical for the language of a certain scribe. It remains to be seen whether a more detailed statistical analysis of the complete textual transmission would make visible interrelations that cannot be detected with the methods applied here. On the basis of the available data, however, the

assumption seems more plausible that, in the corpus analyzed for this publication, not only stylistic but also practical reasons are behind the use of the present instead of past tense in certain manuscripts, that is to say, reasons that are first of all connected to the process of manuscript copying as outlined below.

A direct relation between a high number of verbs indeterminable for tense and a low amount of historical present tense cannot be shown.⁷¹ The η fragment, which has the highest overall amount of historical present tense (11 percent), at the same time displays the highest number of forms not determinable for tense. Nevertheless, at least in cases of variation of tense between manuscripts where the present tense does not have an obvious function in discourse (dramatic or scenic present), abbreviations do play a role, although less direct. In many cases, medieval Icelandic writing practice allows for the abbreviation of a present-tense form of a verb but not of the past-tense form. This relates to the fact that the system of abbreviations used in Old Icelandic texts is based on the (late) antique Latin system that was, of course, designed to fit the morphological system of Latin. This system contains abbreviations for the combination vowel + ⟨r⟩ that could be transferred to the present-tense endings of Icelandic weak verbs, *-ar* and *-er/-ir*, but not abbreviations for the past-tense endings of weak verbs with a dental suffix, which are a peculiarity of Germanic languages. As a consequence, Icelandic scribes did not have an abbreviation for the dental suffix at their disposal, but, by using the abbreviated present-tense form of weak \bar{o} -verbs, a substantial amount of space and parchment could be saved: for example, *fagn̄* (*fagnar*) for *fagnaði* (KG 7.84, Kálfalækjarbók 7r16, AM 162 B β fol. 1ra30, KG 37.63–64, AM 162 B ζ fol. 1v9); *þakk^r* (*þakkar*) for *þakkaði* (KG 37.39, Kálfalækjarbók 17v22, Þormóðsbók 2rb17); *sva^r* (*svarar*) for *svaraði* (KG 37.54, Kálfalækjarbók 18r4); *sna^r* (*snarar*) for *snaraði* (KG 45.31, Þormóðsbók 4vb25); *ka^r* (*kastar*) for *kastaði* (KG 45.55, Reykjabók 24v22). At first sight, it may seem rather unlikely that a scribe would change the tense of verbs for such purely practical reasons, but a comparable case from another Germanic language is described by Visser: in Middle English, the historical present tense is exclusively used in poetry in cases where the present-tense forms fit better with rhyme and/or meter than the past-tense forms.⁷²

Especially frequent words, among them verbs of saying (*segja*, *svara*), are often abbreviated as suspensions, that is to say only the first letter is written and the suspension is indicated with a dot. As tense in Icelandic verbs is either marked with a suffix or with *ablaut*, suspended

verbs are not marked for tense. A scribe copying a manuscript would read the text he wanted to copy (this action presupposing a mental phonological realization of the text and the expansion of abbreviated forms) and store the words in his short-term memory in order to be able to write them down again (scribes did not copy single letters but short semantic units or phrases). This might have led to the fact that different scribes expanded different suspended verb forms differently (*s.* → *segir* or *sagði*, *sv.* → *svarar* or *svaraði* etc.). The same is true for finite forms of *kveðast* which are often abbreviated as contractions, that is to say the vowels are left out and only the consonantal frame remains ($\bar{q}z \rightarrow kveðst$ or $\rightarrow kvaðst$). In contrast, the past-tense form of *mæla*, *mælti*, is clearly recognizable in the contracted form (*mli*) as a past-tense form because of the final *-i*, and for *mæla* no cases of variation of tense between manuscripts were found.⁷³

The reconstruction of the mental processes of scribes in the fourteenth century remains highly speculative, of course, and the direction of a change of tense from one manuscript to another, together with clear reasons for it, can be determined only in rare cases. In the following example from chapter 60 (KG 60.6), it seems probable that the past-tense form *höfðu* was changed by the scribe of Reykjabók to *h^a* (*hafa*) because there was not enough space on the page for the unabbreviated past-tense form (“|” indicates a line-shift in the manuscript).

Reykjabók (31v28–29): *nv hafa | þeir þetta til varna*

Þormóðsbók (10va24): *oc höfðu þeir þessa vornina*

Óssbók (2rb28): *oc höfðu þeir þessa vornina.*

A comparison with other manuscripts shows, however, that besides the two fragments, Þormóðsbók and Óssbók (which probably are closely related manuscripts⁷⁴), only Oddabók has the supposedly original past-tense form, whereas all other manuscripts use the present-tense form.

Reykjabók (31v28–29): *nv hafa | þeir þetta til varna*

Möðruvallabók (23rb39): *Nu hafa þeir þetta til varna.*

Þormóðsbók (10va24): *oc höfðu þeir þessa vornina*

Óssbók (2rb28): *oc höfðu þeir þessa vornina.*

Skafinskinna (25v5): *nu hafa þeir þetta til uarna.*

Gráskinna (39r7–8): *Nv hafa þeir þetta til varna*

Oddabók (20v1): *oc höfðu þeir þat til uarna*

AM 136 fol. (34v33–34): *haffa þeir nu þessa vörn*

AM 555 a 4to (24v10): *ok hafa þeir nu þessa vörn*

Conclusion

In this article, differences in the use of the historical present tense in different manuscripts from the same time were analyzed as an example of synchronic linguistic variation in the manuscripts of *Njáls saga*. The analysis was based on the working hypothesis that different scribes made use of different styles which were probably connected to different functions or contexts of reception for different manuscripts. Irrespective of whether such different functions of manuscripts really can be shown (this question is treated in Susanne M. Arthur's chapter in this volume), this hypothesis could not be confirmed on the basis of the available data. The manuscripts analyzed show a common stock of forms of the historical present tense that can be explained discourse functionally but, in addition to this, forms that can be found only in part of the manuscripts and cannot be explained systematically.

In my opinion, the most probable explanation of this type of variation is that the use of the present tense instead of the past tense is not generally ungrammatical in narratives but is determined by rules at the discourse level. When copying manuscripts, however, the focus of the scribe is directed at shorter semantic units (clauses, phrases) so that mechanisms working at the discourse level may be out of the scribe's sight. This may lead to the scribe expanding abbreviated verb forms that are grammatically ambiguous, not on the basis of the discourse context but subconsciously on the basis of grammatical correctness within a shorter semantic unit. Different scribes can come to different conclusions about how to expand certain abbreviations, which then leads to variation between manuscripts.

NOTES

¹ "Gullskinna. Postmedieval transmission and reception of a lost medieval parchment codex." Funded by the Icelandic Research Fund, grant number 152342-051.

² See Zeevaert, "Mörkum Njálu!"; cf., e.g., Þorleifur Hauksson/Þórir Óskarsson, *Íslensk stílfraði*, 273–93.

³ For a detailed description, see, for example, Coseriu, *Sprachkompetenz*.

⁴ Coseriu, *Sprachkompetenz*, 59 and 75.

⁵ Nichols, "Philology in a Manuscript Culture"; Wenzel, "Reflections on (New) Philology"; Cerquiglini, *In Praise of the Variant*; Driscoll, "The Words on the Page."

⁶ See, for example, the electronic edition of the *Codex Regius* of the Poetic Edda (http://www.arnastofnun.is/page/vefutgafa_eddukvaeda); the digital edition of selected *fornaldarsögur* manuscripts in the project *Stories for All Time* (<http://nfi.ku.dk/fornaldarsogur/>); Shillingsburg, *From Gutenberg to Google*; Kondrup, *Editionsfilologi*, 421–88; Sahle, *Digitale Editionsformen*; Zeevaert, “Mörkum Njálu!”; Zeevaert, “IceTagging the ‘Golden Codex’”; Zeevaert, “Easy Tools.”

⁷ See Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir and Zeevaert, “Við upptök Njálu,” 164.

⁸ Thoma, “The Function of the Historical Present Tense,” 2374.

⁹ This is what Tenfjord, in her investigation of the historical present tense in Old Icelandic, calls “translatørgrammatik” [translator’s grammar], “Historisk presens,” 213.

¹⁰ Geographical descriptions, descriptions of customs, cf. Wood, “The So-Called Historical Present,” 107–8.

¹¹ The English translations in the examples from *Njáls saga* are based on Cook’s (*Njáls Saga*) translation. The morphological annotation follows the Leipzig glossing rules (<https://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/resources/glossing-rules.php>), “PRS” stands for present tense, “PST” for past tense.

¹² von Fritz, “The So-Called Historical Present”; Emery, *The Historical Present*; Herchenbach, *Das Präsens historicum*; Visser, *An Historical Syntax*; and Kiparsky, “Tense and Mood.”

¹³ Adelswärd, “Plötsligt”; Fludernik, “The Historical Present Tense”; Wolfson, “The Conversational Historical Present.”

¹⁴ Wood, “The So-Called Historical Present,” 107.

¹⁵ Wood, “The So-Called Historical Present,” 107: “*bað hann fara heim í Skotland’ en Aðalsteinn vill fá honum at vingjof skilling silfrs ...*” [(he) asked him to go home to Scotland, “but Aðalsteinn wants to give him a shilling of silver as a friend’s present.”]

¹⁶ “He asked him to go home to Scotland saying Athalstein would give him ...,” Wood, “The So-Called Historical Present,” 107.

¹⁷ Wood, “The So-Called Historical Present,” 108: “*Þórolfur found that desirable, and they obtain the kings leave; [they] prepare themselves—[they] had a good ship and [good] crew; [they] went their way, when they were ready. But when they come to Torgar, they send men to Sigurd and let [them] tell [him], that ...*”

¹⁸ Torgilstveit, “Historisk presens på norrønt.”

¹⁹ Torgilstveit, “Historisk presens på norrønt,” 35–36, 38, and 44.

²⁰ Torgilstveit, “Historisk presens på norrønt,” 39.

²¹ Kiparsky, “Tense and Mood,” 30.

²² Kiparsky, “Tense and Mood,” 43.

²³ Kossuth, “The Linguistic Basis,” 138.

²⁴ Kossuth, “The Linguistic Basis,” 139.

²⁵ “There is a nice example at the beginning of chapter 27 of *Óláfs Saga Trygvasonar*, in which Snorri uses the present tense to introduce the section,

switches to the past for a narrative section, then switches back and forth,” Kosuth, “The Linguistic Basis,” 136. It has been pointed out that Snorri’s authorship is not universally accepted (see for example the critical discussion in van Nahl, *Snorri Sturlusons Mythologie*, 47), but to replace Snorri’s name with an anonymous author would not resolve the obvious contradictions in Kosuth’s and Kiparsky’s argumentation.

²⁶ Kiparsky, “Tense and Mood,” 38.

²⁷ Kiparsky, “Tense and Mood,” 38.

²⁸ Lehmann, *Das Präsens*.

²⁹ Sprenger, *Praesens historicum*.

³⁰ “In Old Icelandic narrative style the historical present tense is extraordinarily popular but is not contained over longer stretches of text. Also new paragraphs may start with the present tense. Often there is a rapid change between present and past tense,” Heusler, *Altisländisches Elementarbuch*, 128.

³¹ Visser, *An Historical Syntax*, 706.

³² Hollander, “Das Präsens historicum,” 75–76.

³³ Sprenger, *Praesens historicum*, 48.

³⁴ Hallberg, *Stilsignalement*, 207.

³⁵ Torgilstveit, *Historisk presens i et utvalg*, 78–79.

³⁶ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 183.

³⁷ Lehmann, *Das Präsens*: present tense is used for emphasis; Sprenger, *Praesens historicum*: past tense is used for emphasis; Wood, “The So-Called Historical Present”: present tense is used for durative aspect; Torgilstveit, *Historisk presens i et utvalg*: present tense is used for punctual, nondurative aspect.

³⁸ Torgilstveit, “Historisk presens på norrønt,” 35f., 38, and 44.

³⁹ The most complete text, Reykjabók (AM 468 4to), covers about 95 percent of the saga, the fragment AM 162 B β fol. only ca. 5 percent.

⁴⁰ For a more detailed description and discussion of the method, see Zeevaert, “Mörkum Njálu!”

⁴¹ Bjarni Gunnar Ásgeirsson, Liv Mostad-Jensen, Beeke Stegmann, Þórdís Edda Jóhannesdóttir.

⁴² For a description of this approach, see Zeevaert, “Mörkum Njálu!”

⁴³ Reykjabók has *þretum* (DAT.PL of *þreta* [quarrel]) for *þetti* (DAT.SG of *þáttur* [episode]) in the other manuscripts.

⁴⁴ The English translations are taken from Robert Cook’s (*Njáls’ Saga*) translation.

⁴⁵ For details on this approach, see Zeevaert, “Mörkum Njálu!”

⁴⁶ In Torgilstveit’s corpus, *riða* is used only twice; one of his examples has past-tense form, the second occurrence is an example for the historical present tense, see Torgilstveit, *Historisk presens på norrønt*, 46, 49.

⁴⁷ See Sprenger, *Praesens historicum*, 12.

⁴⁸ Kosuth, “The Linguistic Basis,” 126.

⁴⁹ “Praesens historicum,” 12–13.

⁵⁰ “As Theodore Andersson has shown, the climax almost invariably is a major battle in which at least one major character is killed,” Lönnroth, *Njáls saga. A Critical Introduction*, 78.

⁵¹ Vannebo, *Tempus og tidsreferanse*, 160–165.

⁵² See also Adelswärd, “Plötsligt.”

⁵³ Vannebo, *Tempus og tidsreferanse*, 162.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, 38–41.

⁵⁵ See Koch and Oesterreicher, “Schriftlichkeit und Sprache,” 587.

⁵⁶ Adelswärd, “Plötsligt,” 8.

⁵⁷ “The So-Called Historical Present,” 107.

⁵⁸ “The So-Called Historical Present,” 107.

⁵⁹ Vannebo, *Tempus og tidsreferanse*, 163, 165.

⁶⁰ Visser, *An Historical Syntax*, 728.

⁶¹ In Hreinn Benediktsson’s list of typically suspended words (suspensions are abbreviations that contain only the first letter of a word followed by a dot which makes it, in the case of verbs, impossible to determine the tense) the only examples for verbs are *segja* [say], *svara* [answer], and *mæla* [speak], *Early Icelandic Script*, 87.

⁶² Thoma and Zeevaert, *Klitische Pronomina im Griechischen und Schwedischen*, 41, describe a comparable difference between Old and modern Swedish in the use of anaphoric pronouns. In Old Swedish clitic object pronouns can be used instead of the full forms of the pronouns to mark continuity of reference. Such weak pronouns are a typical feature of the spoken language, and they are no longer used in the modern written standard of Swedish.

⁶³ Tenfjord, “Utfordringer i møtet,” 31. The English translations are based on Tenfjord’s Norwegian translations.

⁶⁴ Tenfjord, “Historisk presens,” 212.

⁶⁵ Tenfjord, “Utfordringer i møtet,” 31.

⁶⁶ A comprehensive and systematic analysis of anaphoric reference has not yet been performed in the project, but preliminary observations show differences between the different manuscripts in this area (noun, pronoun, zero).

⁶⁷ See, for example, Jakobson, “The Concept of Mark.”

⁶⁸ Jakobson, “The Concept of Mark,” 138, describes this issue using an example likewise taken from the animal kingdom where the unmarked form is a masculine substantive which implies no sexual specification whereas the feminine form is marked for sex.

⁶⁹ Jakobson, “The Concept of Mark,” 138.

⁷⁰ According to Bühler, *Sprachtheorie*, 102, 107, the reference point (*origo*) of the deictic system, the *Zeigfeld der menschlichen Sprache*, is defined by location, time and person (*hier, jetzt, und ich*), and from this *origo* the speaker refers to other points in space and time.

⁷¹ This assumption seems to lie behind a rule of thumb often applied by editors of Old Icelandic texts and communicated by teachers of Old Icelandic to

expand the abbreviation *f.* as present tense of the verb *segja* [say] but the abbreviation *mli* as the past tense of *mæla* [speak].

⁷² Visser, *An Historical Syntax*, 711–18.

⁷³ The problem was already addressed in Jakob Benediktsson's review of Ulrike Sprenger's book *Praesens historicum*, 240.

⁷⁴ See Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Studies*, 89–90.



**For private and
non-commercial
use only**