



## Development of Faroese children's literature. Challenges in a minority society

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**Abstract:** The Faroes are an island society under the Danish Crown. The language spoken on the islands is Faroese, which is rooted in Old Norse. Another trait of the Faroes is that, although we have managed to maintain Faroese as the national language, Danish has had a great influence on the islands. Faroese poetry has flourished as an oral tradition ever since the islands were first settled, but our written literature is more recent. The first Faroese children's book was published in 1958, at about the same time as Faroese teachers founded a publishing company with the explicit aim of publishing children's literature in Faroese. Publishing books in Faroese is no easy task, first and foremost because Faroese is only spoken by around 50,000 people and therefore does not have the advantage of a big market. In addition to the limited market, another problem affecting us is that authors, and perhaps particularly children's books authors, have fought for the recognition of Faroese language by the Faroese population. First and foremost because Faroese is influenced by Danish and therefore the Danish language feels as natural, and for many people more natural, to read than Faroese. In the presentation I will discuss the development of Faroese children's literature, particularly emphasizing the challenges of publishing for a relatively small target audience.

**Key words:** language recognition, bilingualism, limited market, idealism.

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

Although today's opposition against Faroese is not comparable to that generated by publishing a book in 1914, language is still a very sensitive topic in children's books. The problem is first and foremost caused by the Faroes' political situation, as a part of the Danish kingdom, which has meant that the language used in public administration, school, church and parliament in the Faroes was Danish.

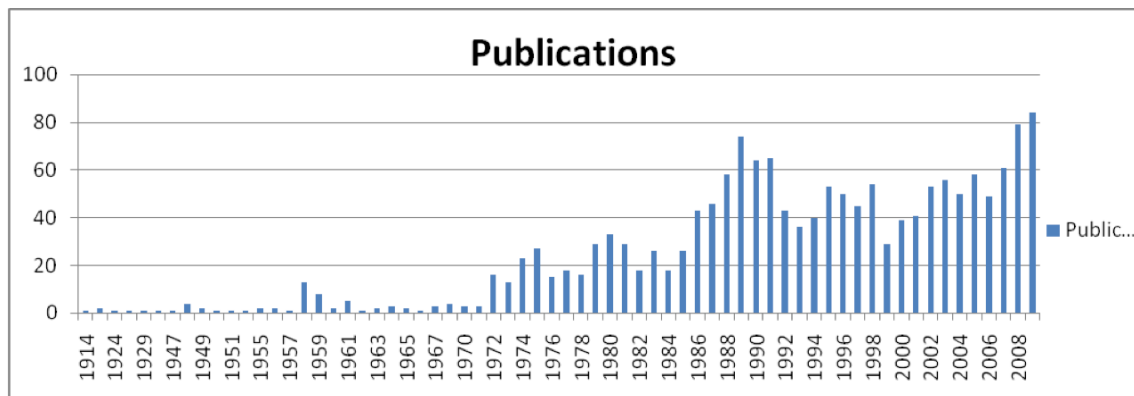
The Faroese have always spoken their own language, but have only recently started writing it. Only in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were steps taken to generate a Faroese grammar. We must also bear in mind that written Faroese was not taught in Faroese schools until 1920, and only in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



## History

Although the teaching language was Danish, not all teachers followed orders, of course, and some taught in Faroese instead. Faroese children's first encounter with written stories was in school textbooks. The first beginner level Faroese reader was published in 1908, and the second in 1923. These readers were repeatedly reprinted until the 60's and 70's. The stories in these books are thus the cultural foundation for my generation today.

Table 1



Source: Statistics Faroe Islands and author's calculations

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

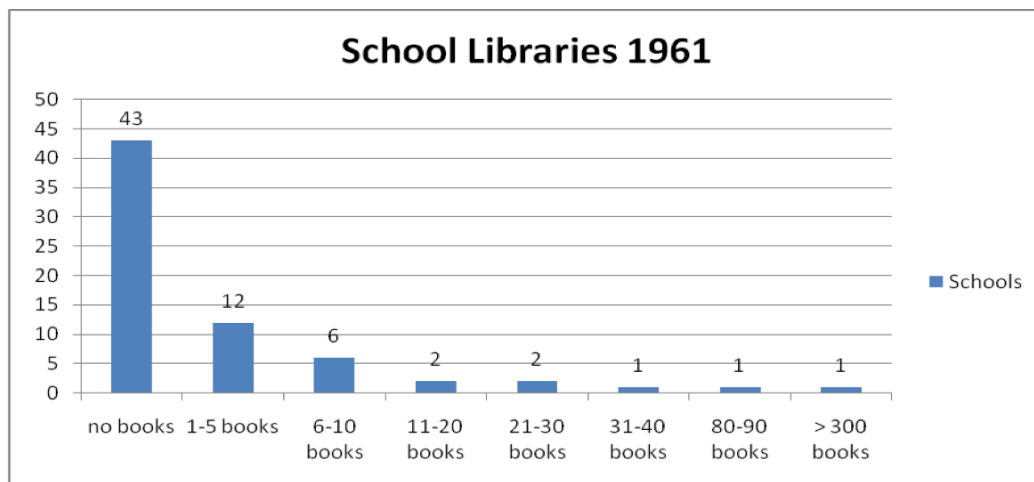
Bókadeild Føroya Lærarafelags (The Faroese Teacher's' Association's Publishing Company) (BFL) was founded in 1956 and is today the largest children's book publishing company in the Faroes. It was founded by teachers, who realized the importance of accelerating the publication of books for Faroese children, perhaps first and foremost schoolbooks. When Føroya Skúlabókgarunnur (The Faroese School Book Fund) was set up two years later, BFL gradually began focusing on children's literature rather than textbooks.

The first book originally written in Faroese by a single author is the title "Gray Duck" by Sigurð Joensen. It was published in 1958. That same year BFL published 12 small picture books, an enormous undertaking at the time. After this only 37 children's books were published in Faroese until 1972, most (21) were translations.



Publishing was haphazard and based on volunteer efforts and enthusiasm. Very little funding was available for it. Under such circumstances it is clearly safer to publish books that are already well-known and therefore more likely to sell. The books published were so-called classics by authors such as Thorbjørn Egner, Hector Malot, Jonathan Swift, Jules Verne, James F. Cooper and Howard Pyle. Today, however, we might question whether some of these books were actually children's books at all. Few people wrote in the Faroes and even fewer wrote for children. This is why books based on Faroese children's reality are few and far between. The situation as regards books in Faroese schools was dire at the time, as was found by a survey conducted in 1961.

Table 2



Source: Faroese Teachers' Association 1898-1998

The figures shocked the education authorities. That same year funding was allocated to schools for purchasing books, and BFL received its first annual public appropriation of DKK 6000 for publishing. In 1963 there were only 28 school book titles in Faroese, so publishers had their work cut out for them.

As indicated in Table 1, after 1970 a change was slowly underway in Faroese children's literature. One of the pioneers in the genre was author Steinbjørn B. Jacobsen, who, together with painter Bárður Jákupsson, began publishing books for young children set in Faroese nature. Their work features simple stories about little animals, which young Faroese children are familiar with.

One original Faroese title published in 1977 was *Trøllalív* (A troll's life) by Elin Bjørg Højgaard.



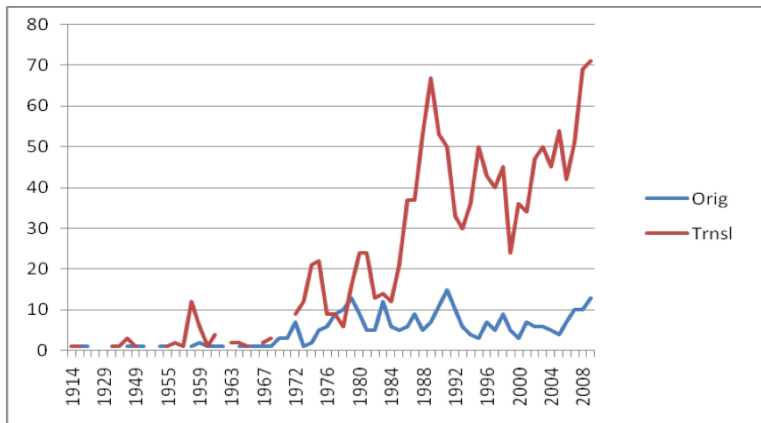
It was probably the first Faroese children's book to deal with the topical issue of gender equality, and at the same time it told a story with Faroese inspiration, featuring trolls living in the mountains. In 1979, proclaimed UN International Year of the Child, the book *Per og eg* (Per and I) by Martin Næs was printed. This is a realistic picture book about Faroese children's daily life. This is the beginning of putting down in words the condition of children in a modern Faroese society.

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

### **Book club and co-production**

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

Table 3



Source: Statistics Faroe Islands and author's calculations

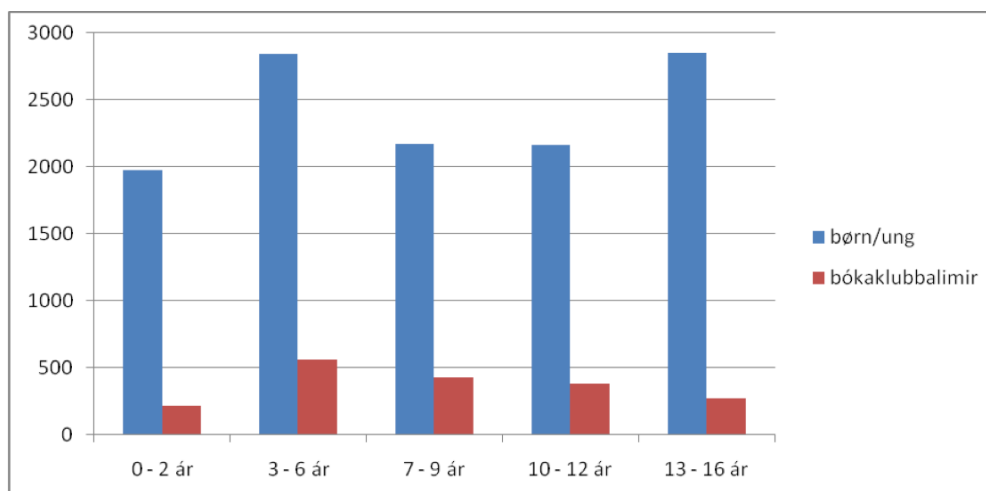
Up until then the view of Faroese books had been that as long as they were Faroese, they were good. This is not surprising given the virtual nonexistence of Faroese children's literature. However this view gradually changed. Little by little people started demanding certain standards, both readers, and certainly also publishers.

In an article BFL's chief editor directly stated that the main reason so few original Faroese titles were printed was that: "... very little such material is written, which is of publishable quality" (Sondum, *Bókin undir lesiglasíð*, 1990: 40).

### Funding and publishing

A decisive factor for publishing in the Faroes is the population size. In April this year, there were 48,650 people in the Faroes, of these 11,990 were aged between 0 and 16 and they are our customer base.

Table 4





Source: Statistics Faroe Islands and Bókamiðsølan

BFL currently publishes around 70 books per year. We usually print around 600 copies of picture and textbooks and 1200 books for very young children. Our publishing schedule is based on age groups; we adapt our publications to groups with an age spread of 3 to 4 years. The book club has around 1800 members; this ensures the sale of around 200 books to each member category, whenever a new title is published. The reduced population makes it very difficult to sell our stock in shops. Although the number of members in the youngest group is lowest, it is easiest to sell books in shops for this age group.

### **Support for publishing children's books in Faroese**

From the very beginning, when teachers took the initiative to establish BFL, much of the work was carried by passion and ideals. It was not uncommon for teachers to take out loans to fund publications, and the print shops were very accommodating and not too exacting about payment due dates. When BFL began its activities in 1956, there was only one book shop in the capital, Tórshavn, so great efforts were made to sell books through schools in villages around the country. Public authorization for this sales method was of great help in places without a book store. In 1961 public funding was allocated for BFL and others to publish, this has ensured a relatively stable financial situation, but it is, of course, never enough.

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

“... in conclusion the monetary cost of providing this crucial support for children's and youth literature is next to nil, whereas we have to recognize that the cultural gain in return is great” (Avmarkaður marknaður (Limited market), 1996: 77).

In 1967 Bókamiðsølan (Centre for Faroese book sales) was founded, and it was of great importance for book sales throughout the Faroes. To this day there are few book stores in the Faroes, so it is vital for sales that there is a centre capable of organizing sales and with book storage facilities.

In 1975 the Nordic Council of Ministers was created. The Council grants



funding for literary translation and the smallest Nordic languages – Greenlandic, Faroese and the Sami languages, enjoy certain special privileges. This translation funding is crucial for us as publishers. BFL cooperates closely with many other Nordic publishers, we benefit from sharing best practices with other professional publishers and this is also an opportunity for us as a small nation to demonstrate our worth and the quality of our authors.

In 2003 we published *Ein halastjørna er komin* (A comet has arrived) together with Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland. In 2006 we published the collection *Spøkilsid, sum flenti* (The ghost that laughed) together with all the other Nordic countries. In 2007 Greenland, Faroes and Samiland co-operated to each produce an original title, which was then translated into all the other languages, and in 2010 all eight Nordic countries are publishing the collection *Elskar- Elskar ikki* (Loves – Loves Not). The greatest support for publishing, however, is the book club, which was set up in 1986, and the possibility to co-produce books, which reduces costs and guarantees regular publications making it easier for us to satisfy the need for children's books among today's parents and their children.

At BFL we recently launched a more focused marketing effort. We have hired a marketing professional to secure publicity for our publications and increase our sales. It is clear that although we feel that we have many members in the Book Club, book sales in shops are still far too low when looking at Table 4 indicating how many children and teenagers there are in the Faroes. One factor that makes this a challenge for us as a publishing house, is the first PISA assessment, carried out in the Faroes in 2006. The assessment yielded a poor rating for Faroese school children's reading skills, and opened the eyes of education authorities and parents to the fact that a great deal more has to be done to boost children's reading skills. The increase in publications as of 2008 is clear in Table 1, this was when BFL started publishing easy reading literature.

### **Language and Faroese publishing**

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

Our written language is very young; prior to 1948, when the Faroes were granted home rule, there were only 350 books in Faroese. So it is not surprising that people are



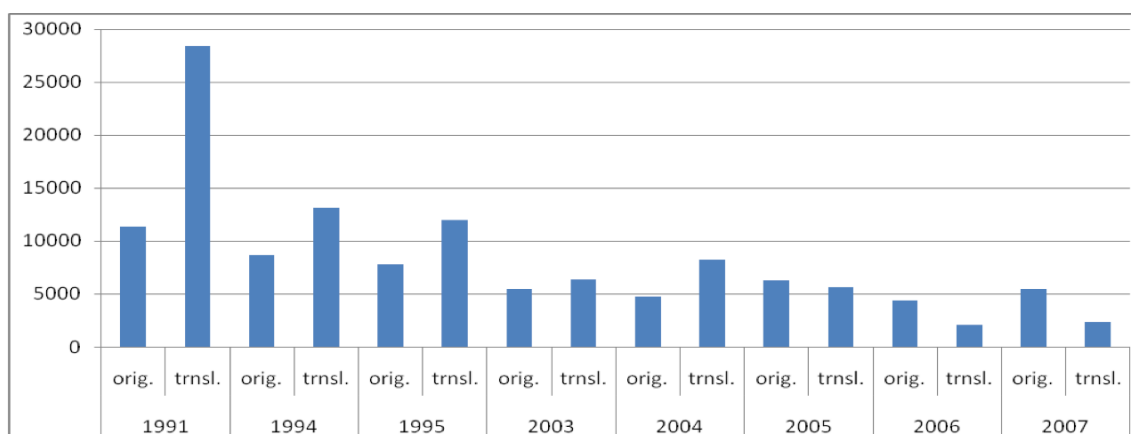
not use to reading in their mother tongue. For centuries all writing in the Faroes was in Danish, and this has had a great impact on the attitude towards our own language. Much has changed in recent years, but Danish remains a link of sorts between Faroese and other languages, and we rarely even really think about it, that is just the way it is.

The opposition against Robinson Crusoe in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century proves that people did not think it important to publish in Faroese, when we could read in Danish instead. The Faroese had little confidence in the suitability of Faroese as a literary language. When a priest in 1824 translated the Gospel of Matthew to Faroese, the following reaction was not uncommon: “the word is not holy (solemn) enough to describe things so holy. Our language may be good enough for everyday speech, but we prefer to hear about spiritual things in Danish...” (Bókin undir lesiglasíð, 1990: 31)

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

The teachers who founded BFL were pioneers in many areas. Table 6 indicates that there has been a major shift over the last five years: In the register of the largest Faroese public library, we find that loans of Faroese children’s books have for the very first time surpassed those of Danish ones.

Table 6



Source: Býarbókasavnið (Tórshavn City Library)





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

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