

The Semantics of Icelandic Spatial Orientation*

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For some years now semantics has been in disrepute among responsible linguists, especially in America, thanks largely to the severe strictures passed upon it by Leonard Bloomfield. The standard set up by him for "a scientifically accurate definition of meaning" included nothing less than "a scientifically accurate knowledge of everything in the speaker's world" (1933: 139). This admittedly impossible demand has naturally discouraged linguists from attempting many serious studies of the problems of meaning. In recent years some attempts have been made which one can only describe as half-hearted and highly speculative. Among these may be mentioned discussions by Eugene Nida (1951); C.C. Fries (1954); Rulon Wells (1954), and Shiro Hattori (1956). Nida provided a complete system of 'semes', dividing first into linguistic and non-linguistic meanings (linguisesemes; ethnosesemes), then each of these into semes (the meanings of morphemes), episemes (grammatical meanings), and macrosemes (the meanings of constructions). For each seme (in a particular context) he provided a sememe which was the sum of the related semes. Fries also divided into linguistic and non-linguistic (socio-cultural) meanings, but included under the former both lexical and structural meanings. Wells does not offer any system for the classification of meanings, but makes a statement which may point toward a revision of the dominant Bloomfieldian view of meanings: "I conclude that whatever Bloomfield's valid point may have been, we cannot accept his formulation of it." Hattori's system uses sememe for the meaning of a word (or alternatively a morpheme) but makes no provision for semes, episemes, or macrosemes, except that the overall meaning of a sentence is called a semasieme. None of these discussions goes very far in grappling with the basic question of how we know what the meaning of a form is, or how we can determine the number of semes or sememes which a form may have. Nida's system is the most elaborate, but there seems little value in having different names for the meanings of morphemes, taxemes and constructions: it is not the meanings that are different, but the structures of the forms themselves, so that these names are generally redundant.

Bloomfield held out the prospect that the extension of scientific knowledge would enable us to make progress in semantics also. The model of definition, in his opinion, was the formula of the natural scientist: "We can define the names of minerals, for example, in terms of chemistry and minerology, as when we say that the ordinary meaning of the English word 'salt' is 'sodium chloride (NaCl)'" (1933: 139). The catch here is in the word 'ordinary', which excludes all the meanings of salt that are ignored and remain largely unexplained by the scientific definition. It is of course possible to hand over to the anthropologists (a mythical body of men [sic] who will someday have

* Originally published in *Word* 13: 447-460 (1957). Reprinted in *Cognitive Anthropology*, Stephen A. Tyler (ed.). New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston 1969, pp. 330-342.

analyzed everything men do) the task of defining the transferred uses of salt and similar words ('Ye are the salt of the earth'). But linguists will for a long time to come be asked to supervise the making of dictionaries, even though they have to cooperate with technicians in every field of knowledge to make them. Dictionaries are arranged by linguistic forms, not by the structure of the topics defined, and the definitions that go into them are the responsibility of linguists. Hence it should be profitable to explore the problems of semantics on a body of selected materials. As Bloomfield indicated, it may be helpful here to start with terms which are susceptible of scientific definition, or in other words, have measurable coordinates. This occurred to me while reading two valuable articles by Stefán Einarsson on terms of direction in Icelandic (1942, 1944). Here is a carefully collected body of information from a clearly defined speech area concerning the meanings of the terms for the four cardinal directions (N E S W) and some others associated with them. These directions are easily determined in clear weather by any observant person and knowledge about them has been a part of western tradition as far back as we have any records. Yet Einarsson's study begins with the observation: "There is perhaps no category of words that shows more dialectical difference of usage in Modern Icelandic than the words of orientation" (SE 37).¹

Einarsson's studies bring out the fact that in addition to the meanings which jibe with the compass directions, these words have meanings that vary from community to community.² In Einarsson's native valley of Breiðdalur in southeast Iceland people speak of going *east* when they are actually going *northeast*, and contrast it, not with *west* but with *south*, when they are actually going *southwest* (1942: 37). In the easternmost fjords of Iceland, however, the terms north and south were used approximately as on the compass. But no sooner does one pass into the northeast section than the terms are reversed, and east is used about southeast, while north is used about northwest. The reader is referred to Einarsson's articles for the details, which are sometimes quite startling, as when a man traveling directly south (from Strandir) may speak of himself as going north (to Húnavatnyssysla), or conversely, a man directed to go south (from Grindavík on the Reykjanes peninsula) may find himself traveling due north (to Narðvík) (1942: 43-44). In his analysis of the materials Einarsson distinguishes between two kinds of meaning, the 'approximately correct' ones, which follow the compass, and the 'dialectical', also called 'pregnant', and sometimes 'incorrect' meanings, which do not. He finds a mixture of these meanings, not only in present-day speech, but also in the sagas and other medieval texts, and he sets up tables to show the respective percentages in various sources. He discusses also the possibility of localizing sagas on the basis of their 'dialectical' terms, which might presumably, betray the origin of their anonymous authors. The picture that emerges is of a usage in which all speakers retained as one meaning the terms the 'correct' compass direction, and then added to it a confusing variety of other meanings, varying from community to community, and scarcely the same to any two speakers. It is as if one said that in Iceland N meant not only north but also every other possible direction of the compass. If a man in Eyjafjörður says he is going N to Langanes, and the map show that he will be traveling almost due E, then presumably one will have to say that E is one of

the meanings of N, since it is, in Bloomfield's words, a part of the situation that calls forth this linguistic form. The linguist however, would like to raise some of the following questions and try to make the data answer them: are these meanings really as varied as they seem? Is the division into 'correct' and 'incorrect' entirely satisfactory? Are the 'pregnant' meanings truly dialectical, or can they be fitted into an overall national system of orientation? Is it possible to reduce this multiplicity to a finite number of semes and sememes, with specified relationships in terms of their distributions? It will be the purpose of this paper to attempt an affirmative answer to this last question.

If we examine Einarsson's summary of the 'approximately correct usage,' they leave no doubt that the Icelanders know now the true cardinal directions and have known them since their emigration from Norway in the Ninth Century (SE 46, 282). Not only did they bring with them the terms *norðr*, *austr suðr*, *vestr* and their derivatives, but they even had intermediate terms for finer discrimination, some of which were based on the contour of the Norwegian west coast: *landnorðr* 'NE', *utnorðr* 'NW', *landsuðr* 'SE', and *utsuðr* 'SW'. Newer terms have been created in some usages, such as 'NE', etc.³ Now in the absence of compasses it is obvious that these directions could be determined only by celestial observation. According to Einarsson this system is still used at sea, where celestial observation is the only one available. It is also used on maps, which by definition are oriented according to the cardinal directions. It is used about the weather, also a celestial phenomenon. But on the land usage is divided. It appears from Einarsson's data that celestial observation must also be the basis of orientation within an immediate neighborhood. One says e.g. north of the church (*fyrir norðan kirkjuna*) and this means the cardinal direction. There are also cases mentioned by Einarsson of tributary valleys distinguished as *Norðurdalur* for N and *Suðurdalur* in the midst of areas where E otherwise is substituted for N. The explanation here is presumably that the original naming took place under circumstances where valleys could be seen at once, say from their confluence or from the separating ridge, and a celestial observation made on the spot.

For the data show clearly that whenever such direct observation was impossible, the 'incorrect' orientation dominates. We may therefore hazard the guess that Einarsson 'incorrect' orientation is associated with coastwise travel (by land or sea) and can be correlated with the conformation of the land in Iceland.

This hypothesis is amply borne out by a careful study of the examples given. If we choose as a sample Einarsson's own native valley, we find that it is a fjord valley running NW to SE on the southeast coast of Iceland. Speakers in this valley needed to distinguish four directions, none of which was cardinal: up and down to the valley (which they called 'in' and 'out') and across the valley towards the next valley to the NE or towards the next valley to the SW. The former they called E and the latter S, thus contrasting two terms which normally are not opposites. Why these two, and not, say, N and W? The reason is clearly that the ultimate goal of the path that led them into the neighboring Valleys was, respectively, E and S. It should be explained at

this point that the cardinal terms are used regularly about all forms of travel into the respective quarters of Iceland. Travel from any point in one quarter to travel into another quarter is described in terms of the goal: E means going to Eastern Iceland, as administratively defined since 965 A.D. (Gjerret 1925: 36).

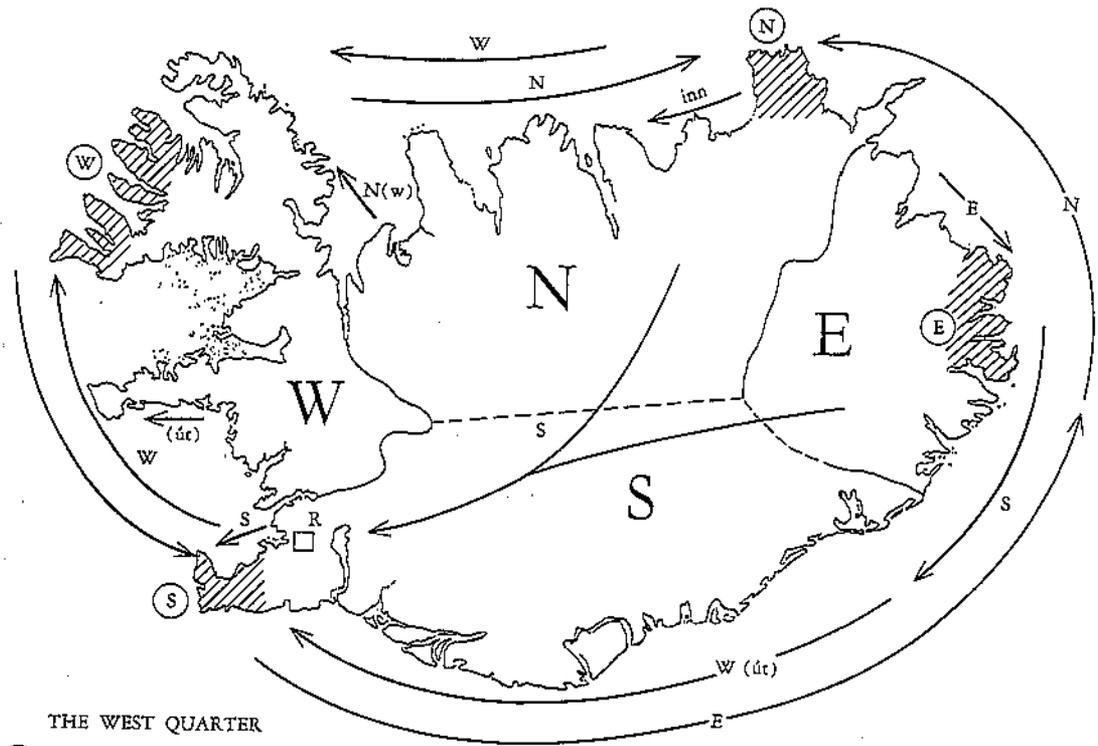
In order to distinguish this kind of orientation from that which is used in the immediate neighborhood, we may say that there are two kinds of orientation: *proximate* and *ultimate*. Proximate orientation is based on celestial observations; but ultimate orientation is based on social practices developed in land travel in Iceland. Proximate orientation involves the immediate judgment of the eye. But ultimate orientation requires a different process. In the days when these usages were established, most travel in Iceland was on horseback over trails that crossed the valleys. Most of these valleys sent their rivers out to the roundish coast at approximately right angles, especially in the East and North. These trails were about as far from being straight lines, amenable to celestial orientation, as anything could be. Before reaching his goal, the traveler might have to proceed in all four directions of the compass as he turned and twisted to take advantage of gullies, plains, fords, slopes, and river courses, while avoiding the most rugged features of the landscape. But since Icelandic settlement consists of a thin line of localities around an uninhabitable central mass, the course taken by the traveler followed in general a line parallel to the coast. This line led all around the island into each of the four quarters, and anyone traveling along the line could say he was going in the direction of the next quarter until he actually arrived in that quarter.

While the direction to the next quarter might be in terms of that quarter, what about traveling within a quarter? We have seen that in Breiðdalur, Einarsson's valley, which is in the East quarter, the contrast was S (i.e. towards the South Quarter) and E, which here cannot mean 'towards the East quarter', since we are already in it. Einarsson informs us, however, that this usage goes on as far as Fáskrúðsfjörður, but here the 'approximately correct' designations of N and S appear, i.e. N takes the place of E. A glance at the map shows that this fits well with the geography: here the coast turns, as it were, a corner. The N-S usage continues northwards until one gets to Borgarfjörður, and here we find again the use of E, but now opposed to N instead of S. In other words, usage in the NE part of the East Quarter is symmetrical with that of the SE part: in both areas E is used of travel in the direction of the Easternmost valleys of Iceland. But the opposite direction is N (i.e. toward the North Quarter) in the NE, and S in the SE. The Easternmost valleys, from Fáskrúðsfjörður to Borgarfjörður, may accordingly be called the *orientation* area of the East Quarter. Travel towards it is E, but travel within it is N-S, pointing respectively toward the North and the South Quarter, and this extends throughout the rest of the East Quarter in both directions. The symmetry is interrupted only by the interior area of Fljótsdalshérað (and Jökuldalur): here is a district which borders on all three areas of the Eastern Quarter: the NE, the E, and the SE. Travel to the first is N, to the second E, to the third S, and in addition it uses 'out' about certain seacoast districts to the E. The important aspect of this discussion is that the 'approximately correct' orientation of the easternmost fjords falls into the pattern, not as a case of celestial orientation,

but as part of a system of ultimate orientation in terms of the four quarters. Hence it is not 'correct' in Einarsson's sense, except by coincidence; within an orientation area this is what we may expect.

This concept of an orientation area within a quarter as a center of intensity for the ultimate orientation of travelers in the quarter can be applied to the remaining quarters also. If we examine usage in the N quarter, however, we are surprised to find that the orientation area is not the center of the N quarter, its administrative seat, but the peninsula jutting out to the north called Melrakkaslétta. Coming in both directions towards this region (the district of Norðurland eyjarsýsla) the term is N. A glance at the map again shows why: this is the northernmost area of the North quarter. Unfortunately we are not told what people in this district say; but one might expect an 'approximately correct' East and West, parallel to the N-S of the Eastern orientation area. In the part of the North Quarter that lies to the west of the orientation area we might expect eastward travel to be called N (which it is) and westward travel to be called W. This is true when one gets west of Eyjafjörður, the deepest and most important of the northern fjords.⁴ But in the region east of Eyjafjörður the term 'in' (*inn*) has taken the place of W. Two explanations are offered by Einarsson, of which he prefers the second: (1) that the term refers to the depth of the fjord (travel into a fjord was always 'in'); (2) that it refers to the social dependence of the NE region on Eyjafjörður from the earliest times (intensified by the growth of the city Akureyri in modern times). My own preference would be for the first explanation, since Eyjafjörður is the deepest of all the northern fjords, and a natural ultimate orientation would include the notion of going into the fjord or the valley. But this is not susceptible of verification and is of little importance; both factors may have contributed.

If we continue on to the West Quarter, it becomes apparent at once that the Orientation Area here is the extreme tip of the Vestfirðir, pointing to the NW and constituting the westernmost parts of Iceland. Information concerning usage within this orientation area is lacking. The actual directions in the West Quarter are often more N than W, but this is, as we have seen, not relevant. On the peninsula of Snæfellsnes *út* is substituted for W, which is also found in the Southern Quarter as we shall see, but this may here be due to the usual practice of calling movement towards the tip of a peninsula 'out'. The opposite to W (and *út*) is here S, if it leads towards the S quarter, N if it leads towards the N quarter. The Southern Quarter uses E for everything east of Reykjavík, but *út* for the opposite direction, instead of the expected W. This reflects two special situations in this quarter: (1) that the capital city Reykjavík is in the orientation area of the South Quarter, even though it lies in its extreme SW part and is not the southernmost part of the South Quarter; (2) that *út* is here used in a sense which the Icelanders carried with them from Western Norway, viz. W (but N *jálssaga* here has W and may represent the original usage). The skewing of the South Quarter is due in part to its completely different geography from the rest. Instead of a series of valleys opening up separately to the sea, we have here a wide, relatively level strip of land between an inhospitable coast, and the inner wasteland. In this region the word *út* had little application in the sense of 'out to sea'; the usual route



toward the sea led westward toward Reykjavík. Hence *út* took the place of west, but not in the sense of movement into the West Quarter, for which W was still used. The position of Reykjavík as a trading center for this whole area and the mecca of all Icelanders is reflected in its designation as S from all parts of the island. But actually, it is not even as an orientation the southernmost, for travel along the northern shore of the Reykjanes peninsula is considered S from Reykjavík; the opposite is 'in' (so that 'out' is sometimes used for S also).

It belongs in the picture to state that complementary to the four orientation areas there are four which we might call dis-orientation areas, or rather *transitional* areas between the four quarters. Between S and E, in the narrow strip of land between Vatnajökull and the sea, we learn that both *út* and *sudur* are used for westward travel, thus combining usages of the S and E quarters (SE 40). But in the old Literature the usage of the S quarter is not found here, so that it may have spread eastward (SE 280). Between E and N there is the valley of Vopnafjörður, where it is reported that S is used for travel to the easternmost fjords, but E for the nearest area (SE 42). Between N and W the transition area is Strandir, the eastern coast of the Vestfirðir, and administratively a part of the West Quarter. But the extreme northern extension of this coast has evidently led to an association of it with the North, and so there appears to be a divided usage, mostly N but also W (as in *Héraðssaga Borgarfjarðar* SE 43); cf. also *norðrrið Horn* from *Sturlu Saga* (269) and *norðarr á Strandir* from *Reykðöla* (SE 272). Travel from Strandir into the North Quarter is N even when it is almost due South. Between the W and the S Quarter Borgarfjörður appears to be transitional. In Breiðdalur and elsewhere in the E they call it S, but in the S Quarter they call it W; in Reykjavík usage W doesn't start before further West, and one says 'up' in Borgarfjörður, thus treating it as if it were part of the S Quarter (SE 45).

We conclude from this survey of the usage of cardinal terms that a common feature of all 'incorrect' and some 'correct' meanings is that they are used for *ultimate* rather than *proximate* orientation. In this situation the terms are used about destinations and directions ranged along a line of travel parallel to the Icelandic coast, such that each term applies to that part of the line which goes from one of the orientation areas in each quarter to the orientation area of the next. These areas are the geographically easternmost, northernmost, and westernmost regions of the island, plus Reykjavík and the peninsula of Reykjanes as the southernmost, though it is not geographically so. As here defined, each term has two and only two senses: one used in proximate orientation (corresponding reasonably well with the cardinal directions) and one used in ultimate orientation (for traveling, based on the four quarters of Iceland and their extreme extension in the cardinal directions). Since these two are in complementary (social) distribution and show a semantic relationship (one-to-one correspondence of orientation), they constitute only one sememe. What does this mean for the analysis of meaning? Primarily that the degree of discrimination of such terms depends on the choices available. On the sea each one depends on the identification of celestial bodies; but in land or coastwise travel the existence in most places of only two possible directions of travel reduced the possibilities of landwise orientation to

two, and these were chosen not in terms of the celestially observable direction of travel, but in terms of the ultimate destination of the road, as moving towards one of the four orientation areas.

In so far as the usage described above are general, they can not be described either as dialectal or incorrect. Within their social situation they are correct, and they are not local, but form a proper meaning of the terms which could be regarded as university Icelandic. There are, however, two limitations on this generality: one is the substitution of *inn* for W in the region east of Eyjafjörður, another the substitution of *út* for W in the South Quarter. These are genuinely local and dialectal, though they can be associated with other usages of the same words. To do so would require us, however, to enter deeply into the problem of the transverse terms of orientation those which apply to the movement up and down the valleys, or in and out. It is striking that in those regions where *inn* and *út* are substituted for W, *fram* has taken their place: in the N to mean up the valley, in the S to mean towards the sea. But the northern usage is here old, and extends into the E and W quarters as well; it is found also in western Norway, and represents a usage back probably to the first settlements of the west Norwegian valleys. In spite of its absence from most sagas (like other usages of this area). This is more probable than Einarsson's reluctant hypothesis of spread from the Fljótsdalshérað area. In the N quarter the use of *fram* in this sense permitted *inn* to be adopted for W (east of Eyjafjörður); in the S quarter the non-use of *út* in the sense of toward the sea permitted *fram* to be adopted in this sense (so also SE 281).

In view of the consistency in usage which has been demonstrated above, it may be questioned whether the use of so-called 'incorrect' terms in itself is sufficient to localize a saga. Both 'correct' and 'incorrect' terms may agree with local usage and at the same time be known to people from other communities, since the underlying principle is the same for the whole country. Only if an author can be shown to violate local usages of the kind mentioned in the preceding paragraph can we be sure he was unfamiliar with the region. An author telling a story from a particular region would naturally take that region as his point of orientation in telling about the Húnavatnssýsla he would not say that he went N, just because he himself happened to come from Borgarfjörður where this would be the proper thing to say if one were going to Húnavatnssýsla from that region. It would be a poor author indeed who could not imaginatively place himself in the scene of his narrative and state movements in terms of this orientation. Although Ari fróði came from Snæfellsnes in the W, he quite naturally used the terms W and N about directions west and east from Eyjafjörður, as did the natives of that regions (SE 266). Of course, it does not follow that these usages have remained unchanged since Old Icelandic times: Einarsson believes he has found a change in the E quarter, a S-N orientation in the S-E and E-N (SE 275). But the evidence is far from conclusive, since the sagas may have been under literary influence. That both the proximate and the ultimate senses came from Norway is made probably by the existence of similar usages in modern as well as ancient Norwegian. And the familiar case of the Eastern and Western Settlements of the Norsemen in Greenland falls easily into the same of ultimate orientation:

the coastwise travel from W to E was almost due S, but it led ultimately past the tip of Greenland and then across the sea to the E.

It is my belief that the meanings of the terms here studied have been completely accounted for (as far as the data go). These meanings are not to be equated with the totality of situations in which the words can be used, but with the diacritic futures of those situations which the words trigger. The common feature of all 'incorrect' and some 'correct' meanings was found to be a social situation here described as *ultimate orientation*. Within this situation of travel in a coastwise direction around an island, most communities permitted only two choices. This meant that only two terms were necessary, those of the nearest orientation areas in either direction. These were selected, not on the basis of an exact astronomical orientation, but from the experience of travelers whose familiarity with the extremities of Iceland's four quarters provided areas of reference which corresponded to the four terms for the cardinal directions. *Meaning* may thus be defined as *the capacity of a symbol (a linguistic form) of discriminating between those messages that could be conveyed in a given social situation*. This definition is reminiscent of the formulations of recent information theory, but was arrived at independently and without benefit of the mathematical implications of that theory. The writer does not, therefore, share the regrets of Quine, as cited by Wells (249), that "we have so frequently to content ourselves with a lame partial synonym plus stage directions. Thus is glossing 'addled' we say 'spoiled' and add 'said of an egg.'" These are the prime elements of meaning: a situation (an egg) and a discrimination (spoiled): the chemical definition of addling is irrelevant (unless, of course, this is the message we happen to want).

Endnotes:

¹ SE denotes two papers by Einarsson (1942, 1944). The number following SE is page reference, e.g. SE 265 refers to the first page of the second article.

² With the author's permission, his map of Iceland prepared for those articles is herewith reproduced [redrawn for this volume] for the orientation of the reader.

³ Locally there are usages combining other directional terms, e.g. *út og upp* 'out and up' for NE, *inn og niður* 'in and down' for SE, etc.

⁴ Einarsson notes (SE 43) that in Skagafjörður it is usual to say *austur hlúsank*. Halldór Sigurðsson, a native of Hrítafjörður, informs me that this is common in his community also, as well as in other parts of northern and western Iceland. He also says *austur Melrakkaslétu* and *Langanes*. Since all three of these lie east of Eyjafjörður, but within the area generally regarded as north, it is clear that Eyjafjörður serves as a kind of orientation area of its own, at least for local communities. The same speakers refer to the whole area of pingeyjarsýsla as N, but to communities within the area as E. As Einarsson points out, this situation merits further investigation.

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