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OLD WORDS AND OBSOLETE MEANINGS IN MODERN ICELANDIC

Abstract This paper examines a certain subset of the vocabulary of Modern Icelandic, namely those words that are labelled as ‘ancient’ in the *Dictionary of Contemporary Icelandic* (DCI). The words were analysed and grouped into two main categories, 1) Words with only ‘ancient’ sense(s) and 2) words that have modern as well as an obsolete older sense. Several subgroups were identified as well as some lexical characteristics. The words in question were then analysed in two other sources, the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (ONP) and the *Icelandic Gigaword Corpus* (IGC). The results show that the words belong to several semantic domains that reflect the types of texts that have survived until modern times. Most of the words are robustly attested in Old Norse sources, although there are a few exceptions. Large majority of the words can be found in Modern Icelandic texts, but to a varying degree. Limits of the corpus material makes it difficult to analyse some of the words. The result indicate that the words labelled ‘ancient’ can be divided into three main groups: a) words that are poorly attested and should perhaps not be included in the lexicographic description of Modern Icelandic; b) words that are likely to occur sometimes in Modern Icelandic; c) words that function as other inherited Old Norse words and perhaps do not require a special label or should have an additional sense in the DCI.

Keywords Modern Icelandic, Old Norse, historical lexicology

1. Introduction

The topic of this paper relates to the history of the vocabulary of Modern Icelandic. Old Norse/Icelandic has a continual text tradition from the 12th century until modern times and is structurally conservative. Most of the basic vocabulary of Modern Icelandic comes from Old Norse. The aim is to take a closer look at those words that specifically refer to the medieval language and have limited use but are recorded in lexicographic descriptions of the contemporary language. The paper is organized as follows: After the introductory section the sources for investigating old words and obsolete meanings are discussed. In section 3 there is an account of a survey of the words found in *The Dictionary of Contemporary Icelandic* (DCI) that have received diasystematic labelling as being ‘ancient’, i. e. belonging to the medieval language. I subsequently group these words into categories and subcategories, based on lexical criteria. I look at how these words are attested in the medieval sources for comparative purposes. I then look at how they are used in the contemporary language, based on results from modern corpora. Finally, there are some concluding remarks.

2. The sources for old words and obsolete meanings

What constitutes an old word, or an obsolete meaning is not very clear-cut. The approach taken in this paper is looking at the work of lexicographers and how they have chosen to label words in dictionaries. The caveat for this approach is that such labelling is not always consistent and is likely to include some judgment calls of individual editors. However, there are no obvious alternatives available.

Taking dictionary labelling as starting point we have a way to examine more closely how labelled words are used in other sources, such as reference works for the medieval language

as well as modern language corpus resources. For the investigation discussed in section 3 below I used the three resources that are further described in the following subsections.

2.1 The Dictionary of Contemporary Icelandic (DCI)

The source for the primary data is *Íslensk nútímamálsorðabók* or The Dictionary of Contemporary Icelandic (DCI). This is a recent online dictionary project established at the Department of Lexical Research and Lexicography at the Arni Magnusson Institute for Icelandic Studies in Reykjavík and edited by Halldóra Jónsdóttir and Þórdís Úlfarsdóttir (cf. DCI). This dictionary was launched in 2016 and contains around 56000 headwords covering the core vocabulary of modern Icelandic with new words and phrases added regularly as well as new examples of usage. Newly added material in the dictionary reflects the use in actual texts and is based on the Icelandic Gigaword Corpus (cf. Steingrímsson et al. 2018). In addition, the dictionary contains information on inflexion of words, by linking to another web-based resource: The database of Icelandic Morphology (Bjarnadóttir/Hlynsdóttir/Steingrímsson 2019).

DCI is a monolingual dictionary, but based on the multilingual dictionary ISLEX, which is also published and managed by the same institute. ISLEX is an online Icelandic dictionary between Icelandic and the other Nordic and Scandinavian languages, i. e., Danish, Swedish, Faroese, Norwegian Bokmål, Norwegian Nynorsk as well as Finnish. The lexicographic data generated by the ISLEX-project was subsequently used to create the new modern Icelandic monolingual dictionary (cf. Jónsdóttir/Úlfarsdóttir 2019). The dictionary accounts for the active vocabulary of Icelandic from around 1950 to the present day.

DCI includes some words that belong to earlier stages of the Icelandic language, as well as some words from Old Norse. These words are labelled in the dictionary database and are a part of a system of diasystematic labelling the dictionary employs to supplement the lexical information. These labels indicate specialized or restricted use of a particular word or meaning. The labels are considered a helpful tool for the user to get more detailed information about use of a word and include several linguistic registers. There are 24 such labels and they include: “informal”, “formal”, “old”, “old-fashioned”, “ancient”, “poetic” and “pejorative” (the 24 labels are discussed in Jónsdóttir/Úlfarsdóttir 2019, p. 18). The use of this labelling is mostly based on the subjective evaluation and judgment of the dictionary editor when editing a dictionary entry, although some can be defined by more concrete criteria, e. g. poetic words. Some words can receive more than one label, e. g. “ancient” and “poetic” or “old-fashioned” and “informal”.

As this investigation is into the vocabulary of the oldest recorded stage of the language and how it is reflected in a modern lexicographic description, I was primarily interested in words labelled ‘old’ or ‘ancient’. I wanted to find out exactly how these categories are defined and what kind of words were included in each one.

When looking at the words with the labels ‘old’ vs. ‘ancient’ the difference between them is clearly visible. Words labelled ‘old’ are used in early modern Icelandic texts, many of them referring to elements of the old agricultural society of Iceland before the 20th century. An example is the word *héraðsskóli* ‘district school’ which refers to a special kind of school common in the 19th century but no longer operating. Another example is *hórdómsbrot* ‘indecent offence’, which is a legal term over an offence that no longer is punishable. Neither of these words are very old and are not found in Old Norse sources. Since I was more interest-

ed in the oldest part of the vocabulary, I decided to limit this investigation to the words labelled *fornt* ‘ancient’. These older words can easily be extracted from the dictionary and further analysed.

2.2 A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose (ONP)

For investigating the distribution and use of words in the medieval text sources I use the main lexicographic description of the language of medieval Iceland, namely *A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (ONP). This dictionary project is hosted at the University of Copenhagen and aims to semantically analyse an extensive collection of citations from all genres of Old Norse prose texts. This dictionary has been online since 2010 but was enhanced and re-launched in 2019 (ONP Online). ONP covers the period from the oldest preserved texts (from around 1150) up until the late Middle Ages (around 1540 for Icelandic). This dictionary seeks to render the lexicographic material as close to the original sources as possible giving a lot of attention to textual detail (cf. Johannsson/Battista 2014). The project has a complicated history as it has gone through the process of transitioning from print to a digital version in the middle of a multi-volume publication which has led to some internal discrepancies in the organization of the dictionary entries (cf. Johannsson/Battista 2016). The dictionary accounts for all preserved genres of prose texts, with large number of examples of word use and various supplementary secondary information about text types, manuscripts, provenience, and date of earliest use so it is well suited for studies into the vocabulary of the period and its semantic development.

The dictionary of Old Norse Prose is very expansive, and its citation collection includes 5–10% of all the texts produced in the medieval period. It is very likely that words labelled as “ancient” in a modern Icelandic resource would be found in this dictionary. One can assume that ONP has recorded the usage and some attestations of every word perceived to belong to the vocabulary of medieval Icelandic.

2.3 The Icelandic Gigaword Corpus (IGC)

The Icelandic Gigaword Corpus (IGC) is a large depository of Modern Icelandic texts and currently consists of over 1500 million running words. The corpus is tagged so each word contains information about a morphosyntactic tag and lemma. In addition to this each text is accompanied by bibliographic information. This corpus has been used in different language technology projects. More information about IGC and other related Icelandic corpora can be found Steingrímsson et al. (2018) and Steingrímsson/Barkarson (2020).

The IGC is a useful tool to investigate the distribution and use of particular words, such as the ones under scrutiny here, in Modern Icelandic texts. Since the corpus is tagged it can search for different inflectional forms of a particular headword. The IGC is therefore well suited for checking the prevalence of the words labelled as ‘ancient’ in the DCI to see how they are attested in Modern Icelandic text data.

3 The current investigation

The starting point for the current investigation is all the words in DCI that are labelled ‘ancient’. The stated reason why certain words receive this label in the dictionary is that the editors wanted to include words that students can expect to come across when pursuing

their studies in Icelandic (cf. DIC). Since such words are not part of the active vocabulary of Modern Icelandic, they are labelled in this way to indicate to the users that these words are outside of the expected scope of the dictionary but could be encountered in some specialized context.

To obtain the data on these words I contacted the editors of the dictionary and asked them for a list of the relevant words along with all the information that is also part of the lexical description found in each entry in the dictionary. The information received allowed me to construct a small database with some of the key information about the words.

The DCI is a monolingual dictionary, and the definition of the word is usually rendered by giving a short explanation. This is clearly visible in Figure 1, which contains a typical entry from the DCI.

The screenshot shows the website 'Íslensk nútímamálsorðabók' (Icelandic Modern Lexicon) by Árna Magnússonar. The search bar contains 'atgeir' and the search button is 'Leita'. Below the search bar, there are navigation links: 'Forsíða', 'Um verkefnið', 'Hafa samband', and 'Tilvítun í orðabókina'. The search results for 'atgeir' are displayed, including the word 'atgeir' with the label 'no kk', a definition 'vopn til að höggva og stinga með, höggspjót', and a list of related words such as 'atburðalífill', 'atburðarás', 'atburður', 'atferli', 'atferlisfræði', 'atferlisfræðingur', 'atferlismeðferð', 'atferlisstefna', 'atfylgi', and 'atgangur'. The word 'atgeir' is highlighted in a dark orange box at the bottom of the list. The label 'fornt' is shown in light brown color.

Fig 1: The headword *atgeir*. The word is defined as ‘weapon for slaying or stabbing, bill’. The label *fornt* ‘ancient’ is shown in light brown colour

In total there are 65 items that are labelled as ‘ancient’ in DCI. The first step in the investigation was to take a closer look at these words to see if they had any identifiable common features, or if any patterns could be observed.

3.1 The survey

A survey of the ‘ancient’ words revealed that they can roughly be divided into two main categories. The first category includes words or lexical items that are part of the medieval linguistic registry and do not have different modern meaning. All in all, there are 49 items that belong to this first category. The second category are words that also exist in Modern

Icelandic but have a different meaning than in the medieval language, in most cases having acquired a new sense that is also listed in the DCI. All in all, there are 16 items that belong to this second category.

The words from the first category are listed in table 1 in alphabetical order along with some morphological information and translated dictionary definitions as well as subgroup (sub) (see section 3.2 and 3.3 below).

Word	Gram.	Mor	Definition	Sub
<i>atgeir</i>	n m	c2	a 'casting spear'	bat
<i>ben</i>	n f/n	b	wound	bat
<i>bifröst</i>	n f	c2	rainbow	rel
<i>bleyði</i>	n f	b	cowardness	soc
<i>bolöxi</i>	n f	c2	axe for chopping wood	bat
<i>brullaup</i>	n n	c	wedding	soc
<i>bryntröll</i>	n n	c2	long shaft axe with a spear point	bat
<i>dæll</i>	adj	b	friendly, comfortable	alt
<i>eiðsvari</i>	n m	c2	compurgator, sworn follower	leg
<i>fírrast</i>	v	b	avoid (s-t)	spec
<i>fjörbaugsgarður</i>	n m	c3	legal punishment of lesser outlawry	leg
<i>fjörráð</i>	n npl	c2	plan to kill someone	bat
<i>forvitri</i>	adj	c2	1. clairvoyant, 2. very wise	rel
<i>geirlaukur</i>	n m	c2	garlic	alt
<i>goðorðsmaður</i>	n m	c3	a chief in medieval Iceland	leg
<i>gás</i>	n f	b	goose	alt
<i>harðhugaður</i>	adj	c2	who is rough and harsh	bat
<i>heimskringla</i>	n f	c2	earth/world	soc
<i>hjálmvölur</i>	n m	c2	tiller (on a boat)	naut
<i>hrjóða</i>	v	b	drive people of a ship (in battle)	bat
<i>híð</i>	n n	b	see <i>híði</i> animal den/lair	alt
<i>húðfat</i>	n n	c2	sleeping bag from sheep skin	soc
<i>hörgur</i>	n m	b	1. pagan temple/shrine, 2. pile of rocks	rel
<i>jarteikn</i>	n f	c2	omen	rel
<i>jarðarmen</i>	n n	c2	turf, sod	rel
<i>knör</i>	n m	b	ship/boat	naut
<i>knörr</i>	n m	b	ship/boat	naut
<i>krosskirkja</i>	n f	c2	cross shaped church	rel
<i>liðsbón</i>	n f	c2	asking for help	bat
<i>log</i>	n n	b	light, fire	alt
<i>menntur</i>	adj	b	be educated	soc

Word	Gram.	Mor	Definition	Sub
<i>Mikligarður</i>	n m	c2	the capital of East Roman empire, Byzantium	soc
<i>mundlaug</i>	n f	c2	basin for washing hands	alt
<i>nátt</i>	n f	b	night	alt
<i>prímssigning</i>	n f	c2	primary baptism of pagans	rel
<i>rann</i>	n n	b	house, home	alt
<i>rögn</i>	n npl	b	pagan gods	rel
<i>serða</i>	v	b	penetrate (sexually)	soc
<i>sjálfðæmi</i>	n n	c2	self-judgment	leg
<i>skógarmaður</i>	n m	c2	outlaw	leg
<i>skóggangsmáður</i>	n m	c3	outlaw	leg
<i>skóggangur</i>	n m	c2	outlawry	leg
<i>strandhögg</i>	n n	c2	foray 'strandraid'	bat
<i>sýr</i>	n f	b	sow (i.e. female pig)	alt
<i>valköstur</i>	n m	c2	pile of dead bodies from battle	bat
<i>vígur</i>	adj	b	capable of battle	bat
<i>vöttur</i>	n m	b	mitten	soc
<i>öndvegissúla</i>	n f	c2	one of two pillars on each side of a high seat	soc
<i>örendi</i>	n n	b	1. to run out of breath / give up 2. to die	spec

Table 1: All the words in category 1 with grammatical mark-up and morphological information, n= noun, n= neuter, f=feminine, m=male, pl=plural, adj= adjective, v= verb, b=basic (uncompounded), c2=compound of two element, c3=compound of three elements

The words from the second category are listed in table 2 in alphabetical order along with some morphological information, translation of the dictionary definition, the old (obsolete) definition as well as subgroup (see section 3.2. below).

Word	Gram.	Mor	New sense	Old sense	Sub
<i>aðsókn</i>	n f	c2	attendance	attack	bat
<i>bjóða</i>	v	b	offer	order something to someone	soc
<i>blóðrás</i>	n f	c2	blood circulation	blood flowing, loss of blood	bat
<i>drottinn</i>	n m	b	god, christ	master, lord	soc
<i>friðland</i>	n n	c2	sanctuary	safe place	soc
<i>ljósta</i>	v	b	strike	strike down in battle	bat
<i>lyfting</i>	n f	b	lifting up something	steering platform at the back of ship	naut
<i>skeina(st)</i>	v	b	wipe a child's behind	be wounded	bat
<i>skipti</i>	n npl	b	exchange	interaction	soc
<i>skör</i>	n f	b	brink	footrest	spec
<i>skrælingi</i>	n m	b	offensive: barbarian	native of North-America	soc
<i>skuggsjá</i>	n f	c2	'the glass of time'	mirror	spec

Word	Gram.	Mor	New sense	Old sense	Sub
<i>snekkja</i>	n f	b	yacht	long-ship	naut
<i>staðfestast</i>	v	c2	confirm	take up residence	soc
<i>völva</i>	n f	b	prophetess	sibyl	rel

Table 2: All the words in category 2 with grammatical mark-up and morphological information, see table 1 above for abbreviations

In addition to these words, there are 76 words that receive the label ‘poetic’ and some of those appear to be Old Norse as well. Since the ONP dictionary does not include the poetic language, these words have been left out of the discussion here except for the three words that are both labelled ‘ancient’ and ‘poetic’: *bifröst* ‘rainbow, bridge’, *knörr* ‘ship’ and *rann* ‘house/home’.

3.2 Category 1

In this subsection I will look closer at this category to try to identify its characteristic features. This is the larger group of words and can be divided into several subgroups mostly based on semantic domains, but also other criteria (last column in table 1). Some of the words are clearly definable as having a particular meaning, such as weapons like *atgeir*, (cf. Fig. 1), whereas other are less concrete and often have a more wide-ranging meaning, such as *liðsbón* ‘asking for assistance/troops’. I was able to identify seven relatively clear subgroups and assigned every word to one of those.

3.2.1 Battle words (11)

These are words that refer to a battle or fighting and include weapons as well as other terms relating to violent confrontations: *atgeir* ‘a casting spear’, *ben* ‘wound’, *bolöxi* ‘a kind of axe’, *bryntröll* ‘long shaft axe with a spear point’, *fjör ráð* ‘plan to kill someone’, *harðhugaður* ‘who is rough and harsh’, *hrjóða* ‘drive people of a ship (in battle)’, *liðsbón* ‘asking for assistance/troops’, *strandhögg* ‘military loot’, *valköstur* ‘pile of dead bodies from battle’ *vígur* ‘capable of battle’.

3.2.2 Legal words (7)

These are the words relating to legal status, punishment, ownership and similar things having to do with official positions: *eiðsvari* ‘compurgator, sworn follower’, *fjörbaugsgarður* ‘legal punishment of lesser outlawry’, *goðorðsmaður* ‘chief in medieval Iceland’, *sjálfðæmi* ‘self-judgment’, *skógarmaður* ‘outlaw’, *skóggangsmáður* ‘outlaw’, *skóggangur* ‘outlawry’.

3.2.3 Religious words (9)

These are words relating to religious affairs, both pre-Christian and Christian: *bifröst* ‘rainbow’, *jarteikn* ‘omen’, *jarðarmen* ‘long elevated turf under which men would perform ritual to become blood brothers’, *krosskirkja* ‘cross shaped church’, *prím signing* ‘primary baptism of pagans’, *rögn* ‘pagan gods’. Two of the words have two ‘ancient’ senses. The adjective *forvitri* refers to someone who can predict the future but also someone who is ‘very wise’. The word *hörgur* is commonly used in Old Norse to refer to a ‘pagan temple/shrine’, but can also refer more generally to ‘rocky piles’. The word for rainbow *bifröst* is in this subgroup

as the rainbow functioned as a bridge to the realm of the gods in the Pre-Christian religion of the Nordic countries.

3.2.4 Societal words (9)

The words are: *bleyði* ‘cowardness’, *Heimskringla* ‘earth/world’, *húðfat* ‘sleeping bag from sheep skin’, *menntur* ‘who is educated’; *Mikligarður* ‘old name for the capital of East Roman empire, Byzantium’, *serða* ‘penetrate (sexually)’, *vöttur* ‘mitten’, *öndvegissúla* ‘one of two pillars on each side of a high seat’, *brullaup* ‘wedding’. The words cover a broad range of meaning.

3.2.5 Nautical words (2)

These belong to the realm of navigation and sailing: *hjálmvölur* ‘tiller (on a boat)’ and *knör* ‘ship/boat’ also spelled *knörr*. These two variants of the same word are counted as two lexical items even though they are essentially the same word, referring to a particular kind of ship, popular with the Vikings. The variations can be explained as Modern Icelandic spelling vs. Old Norse spelling, but both are known in Modern Icelandic.

3.2.6 Alternative word forms (9)

This subgroup is not based on semantics, but contains words that share the common feature of having some morphological connection to a prevalent modern Icelandic word, while having fallen out of use themselves. The types of words are quite diverse: The adjective *dæll* ‘friendly, comfortable’, is probably listed to explain modern Icelandic antonym *ódæll* ‘naughty’, which is widely used. The modern Icelandic equivalent of *gás* ‘goose’ is *gæs*, a backformation of the plural *gæsir*. The word *nátt* ‘night’ is an earlier sideform of the common word *nótt* and shares some inflectional forms with it. The word *rann* ‘house, home’ is known from certain fixed expression and the verb *rannsaka*, which is cognate to English *ransack*. The word *sýr* ‘sow’ like common Icelandic *kýr* ‘cow’ has an unusual inflectional pattern. The word *geirlaukur* ‘garlic’ shows the same word formation as English *garlic* and slightly different from the common Icelandic word *hvítlaukur*. The word *log* ‘light, fire’ is very similar to its Modern Icelandic equivalent *logi*. The word *mundlaug* ‘basin for washing hands’ is a compound noun of the very common Modern word *laug* ‘pool’ and *mund*, which is an old word for hand, known in certain sayings and *handlaug* is well attested in Modern Icelandic. The final word in this group, *hið* ‘animal den/lair’, has a common modern equivalent, *hiði*, which has the same meaning.

3.2.7 Exceptional words (2)

This subgroup includes two words that do not fit into any of the other groups mentioned. The verb *firrast* ‘avoid s-t’ is somewhat problematic as has a rather wide-ranging meaning and is frequently confused with the verb *fyrtastr* ‘be offended’ in Modern Icelandic. Perhaps it should be counted with the words in 3.2.6 although the similarities between these verbs are superficial. The word *örendi* is only used in a fixed expression *þrjóta örendið* ‘to run out of breath, give up’ which is attested in Old Norse. In DCI it has a second ‘ancient’ sense referring to the last breath before death.

3.3 Category 2

In this subsection I will look closer at this category to try to identify its characteristic features. This category contains words that exist in Modern Icelandic but have both an ‘ancient’ sense and a modern one listed in the DCI. The words can be grouped by semantic domain and other criteria, although there are fewer subgroups represented than in category 1 (cf. last column in table 2).

3.3.1 Battle words (5)

The word *blóðrás* is the common Modern Icelandic word used for ‘blood circulation’. In Old Norse the meaning is quite different as it means ‘blood flowing’ or ‘loss of blood’ and usually in the context of a violent event. The verb *ljósta* means ‘strike’ in Modern Icelandic and usually used about lightning, but in Old Norse it has the meaning of ‘striking someone down in battle’. The verb *skeina* in Modern Icelandic is used about ‘wiping a child’s behind’ after a toilet visit. In Old Norse the meaning is quite different or ‘to be wounded’. The middle voice form of the same verb is also a headword in the dictionary, *skeinast* ‘to be wounded’. The contemporary meaning of *aðsókn* is ‘attendance’, like to a concert or some other event. In Old Norse the word overwhelmingly means ‘attack’, but there are a handful of examples from late sources where the word has acquired the modern meaning.

3.3.2 Societal words (6)

The Modern Icelandic *friðland* means ‘sanctuary’, e. g. for wild animals or birds. The meaning in Old Norse is broader and seems to be more like ‘safe place’. The verb *bjóða* ‘offer’ or ‘invite’ is a very common verb in Modern Icelandic but in Old Norse this word also has another meaning that is now lost in the contemporary language, which is ‘to order someone to do something’. The word *drottinn* is very common in Christian context and refers to both God and Christ as ‘lord’. In Old Norse the meaning was often more worldly and meant something like ‘master’, although the word could also refer to Christian deities. The word *skipti* means ‘to exchange something’ or ‘switch something out’ in Modern Icelandic, but in Old Norse it could have the meaning ‘interaction or communication between people, although this word has several meanings already in medieval times. The word *skrælingi* is pejorative or offensive in Modern Icelandic and means something like ‘barbarian’ or a ‘primitive human’. In Old Norse this term occurs in sagas about the Viking explorations in North America and refers to the inhabitants of the western continent, native Americans and Inuits. The verb *staðfestast* means ‘to be confirmed’ in Modern Icelandic, but in the medieval language it could also mean ‘to take up residence’, but this meaning is lost in contemporary Icelandic.

3.3.3 Religious words (1)

A *völva* ‘sibyl’ is a soothsayer in medieval sources and in Modern Icelandic it is used to refer to a prophetess that prominently figures in certain tabloid newspapers every year to make a prediction for the new year.

3.3.4 Nautical words (2)

The word *lyfting* can have the meaning ‘lifting something’ in Modern Icelandic whereas in Old Norse it has a more concrete meaning as ‘a steering platform at the back of ship’. The Modern Icelandic word for ‘yacht’ is *snekkja* and in Old Norse this word refers to a particular kind of ship called *longship*.

3.3.5 Exceptional words (2)

There are three words that fall a bit outside the groups accounted for so far. These are *skör* which in Modern Icelandic means ‘brink’, but in Old Norse has commonly a more concrete meaning of ‘footrest’. The word *skuggsjá* is somewhat unique in the sense that it has acquired a secondary restricted meaning in Modern Icelandic as ‘filter, the glass of time’ and lost its Old Norse more concrete meaning as ‘mirror’.

3.4 The results of the survey

The survey of the words labelled ‘ancient’ reveals some of their characteristic features. The division into subgroups is mostly based on subject fields that seem to be somewhat clearly definable. It is likely that the prevalence of the subgroups observed is that these groups reflect the types of texts that have been preserved from the medieval period, which are primarily sagas, i. e. stories of heroic achievements, religious texts and legal material. The subject matters of these texts often include concepts and concrete things related to the structure of the medieval society and frequently involve travel, conflict and legal disputes.

The two categories identified show some difference in the number of subgroups, as no category 2 words can be grouped as belonging to the legal domain or the alternative wordform subgrupp. The reason might simply be lack of data as the category 2 words are somewhat fewer in number. However, it could also indicate that some subgroups contain words that are more susceptible for acquiring a new meaning or changing meaning than others. This would have to be investigated further.

The words that fall under the heading 3.2.6 are somewhat different from the rest as they are not defined by semantic criteria, but rather formal characteristics. Some of them could also be grouped according to their semantic domain, even though most of them do not fit into any of the other subcategories. Here a preference has been made to classify these words in relation to their modern Icelandic variants or related words, as this would be the primary reason for their inclusion in the DIC. Their semantic domain is less relevant.

The survey of the words under scrutiny here illustrates the features of the words that belong to an earlier period that are likely to be relevant in modern context. The survey also reveals the types of words and meanings that dictionary editors consider appropriate for receiving the diasystematic label ‘ancient’ when describing the vocabulary of a modern language.

3.5 Attestation in Old Norse

The next step in the investigation was to look at the attestation of all the words in the surviving prose text corpus of Old Norse as it is recorded in the ONP dictionary. The purpose of this is twofold: Firstly, to check if the information from this source is in line with the information found in the DCI. Secondly to find out how well these words are attested, i. e., how many examples there are of each word in the documented vocabulary of medieval prose. Of course, the documented vocabulary does not reflect the prevalence of these words in Old Norse, as many registers of the language are not written down and the surviving texts do not necessarily give an accurate picture of word use. Furthermore, even if we accept these caveats the information is not always completely straightforward as the ONP dictionary is incomplete and many of the headwords have not yet been edited in a structured

dictionary entry. Nonetheless, all the citations are accessible in ONP, so the user can get some idea about the use and meaning of any word, even the ones that are unedited.

The results are shown in table 3. When there were multiple senses in the semantic structure, I was usually able to assign a word to a particular sense, and in such cases the total number of citations is shown in parenthesis (i. e. all senses).

Cat	Headword	ONP	IGC
1	atgeir	45	195/149
1	ben	58	211/26*
1	bifröst	2	17902/6
1	bleyði	20	3
1	bolöxi	50	5
1	brullaup	196	24
1	bryntröll	14	15
1	dæll	44	1960/8*
1	eiðsvari	20	0
1	firrast	55	94
1	fjörbaugsgarður	10	32
1	fjör ráð	68	46
1	forvitri	28	20
1	gás	23	139/11*
1	geirlaukur	1	15
1	goðorðsmaður	26	267
1	harðhugaður	3	0
1	heimskringla	17	1514/182
1	híð	9	1
1	hjálmvölur	22	0
1	hrjóða	38	12
1	húðfat	49	3
1	hörgur	22	138
1	jarðarmen	12	192/190
1	jarteikn	264	70/52
1	knör	42	89/41
1	knörr	>knör	775/266
1	krosskirkja	7	102/41
1	liðsbón	8	31
1	log	33	N/A
1	menntur	27	172/123
1	Mikligarður	24	1300
1	mundlaug	52	13

Cat	Headword	ONP	IGC
1	nátt	284	277/190*
1	prímssigning	7	6
1	rann	4	N/A
1	rögn	2	175/15*
1	serða	8	72/64*
1	sjálf dæmi	106	1563
1	skógarmaður	52	282/129
1	skóggangsmáður	2	17/16
1	skóggangur	7	41
1	strandhögg	44	512
1	sýr	5(12)	243/15*
1	valköstur	34	26
1	vígur	61	124/38*
1	vöttur	7	258/14*
1	öndvegissúla	17	203
1	örendi	5	330
2	aðsókn	37	21996
2	bjóða	799*	622172
2	blóðrás	93	1488
2	drottinn	98(188)	18475
2	friðland	34	6522
2	ljósta	329	5693
2	lyfting	34	3579
2	skeina	22	311
2	skeinast	57	16
2	skipti	40(135)	247,605
2	skrælingi	10	151
2	skuggsjá	3	168
2	skör	18(42)	7494
2	snekkja	29	3169
2	staðfestast	56	1678
2	völva	22	1437

Table 3: The number of attestations for each word in A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose (ONP) and the Icelandic Gigaword Corpus (IGC)

Most of the words are quite common, with more than 10 instances recorded in the ONP database. It is of course likely that common words are more prone to show up in Modern Icelandic context, either in texts discussing the medieval society or citing certain passages from older literature. The verb *skeina/skeinast* can be separated here according to formal criteria, whereas *knör/knörr* is reflective of the same word.

3.6 Attestation in Modern Icelandic

The final step of the investigation was to look at the attestation of these words in Modern Icelandic. This was done by looking at examples from the Icelandic Gigaword Corpus (IGC) (Steingrímsson et al. 2018). This source can provide detailed information about the prevalence of individual words based on structural criteria, but not semantic criteria. Therefore, analysis of category 2 words is very difficult, except where the examples are relatively few.

The results of the analysis are shown in table 3 above. The numbers indicate the absolute number of occurrences of the word before and after filtering separated by dash if there was a difference. I tried to filter out proper names and obvious errors if it was manageable (manual filtering indicated by an asterix *). There were examples of almost all of the words identified as ‘ancient’ in the DCI, but most of them are relatively rare. In what follows I will discuss the attestations of selected individual words.

Three words did not come up at all when searching the IGC. These are the nouns *eiðsvari*, *hjálmvölur* and the adjective *harðhugaður*, which is also rather rare in ONPp. It is unlikely that these words show up in dictionary searches as they are uncommon and doubtful whether they should be included in the contemporary description of Icelandic vocabulary. The same is to say about the word *híð*, which only occurs once, in a poem.

There were also two words which showed up in the corpus, but the actual examples were hard to find because of noise in the data. The word *log* gets confused with the English word *log* and *rann* is mostly limited to fixed expressions *í eigin ranni* ‘in own home’, *í sama ranni* ‘in the same home’ when it is not confused with other lemmas. For these words I was not able to count the examples in any meaningful way.

Other rare words are *bleyði*, *húðfat* and *bolöxi*, which occur only in handful of examples. The word *prímsigning* is also rare and only occurs when discussing medieval society.

Some words are well attested as proper names, but when those are filtered out not many examples remain. This is especially noticeable for *Bifröst*, which is a name of an Icelandic educational institution as well as a placename and well attested as such. There are only a few examples of the word being used as a common noun in the meaning ‘rainbow’ or ‘bridge’ and they are almost all from poetry (and also labelled as such in DCI).

The use of the older form of the word for goose, *gás*, occurs mainly in fixed expression *gjaldagagl fyrir gás*. Most of the other examples in the corpus that are filtered out are of the plural *gæsir*, which is the regular plural of *gæs*, the Modern equivalent and of the placename *Gásar*.

The adjective *dæll* is affected by much noise in the data as many of the examples are erroneously tagged as participle forms of the verb *dæla* ‘pump’. The actual adjectival forms turned out to be much fewer. Another word that was difficult to analyse because of similar problems was *vöttur* which got confused with the word *vatt* ‘watt’, a measuring unit for

electric power. The actual examples of this word turned out to be rather few and only referring to old handiwork and museum pieces.

Other words were also not as prevalent as the initial search indicated and required some manual analysis. The examples of the regular noun *ben* frequently turned out to be abbreviations of the common name *Benediktsson*, but those were not counted. More scrutiny of the search results for some other words resulted in large reduction of examples, such as in the case of *rögn* and *sýr* which also had proportionally many erroneous examples and the same is to say about the adjective *vígur*.

The numbers of examples for *skógarmaður*, *krosskirkja*, *heimskringla* are not as many as appear at first glance, as they can also refer to proper names. Even when they have been filtered out the word *skógarmaður* in most cases refers to a member of a YMC club and not an outlaw. This restricted meaning is not registered in DCI. *Krosskirkja* refers to a shape of a church that was common in ancient and medieval times and is mostly found in such context. *Heimskringla* is a famous literary work, but the word is also sometimes used in Modern Icelandic as a very formal way of referring to the earth.

Some words that clearly refer to medieval societal and religious phenomena are *fjörbaugsgarður*, *skóggangur*, *brullaup*, *hörgur*, *öndvegissúla* and *knör(r)*. The last one is not predominantly poetic although it is labelled as such in DCI. Other words that are found in texts discussing medieval matters seem often to be used as Modern Icelandic words, such as *liðsbón*, *fjör ráð* and *jarteikn*, mostly by politicians. The same is to say for the phrase *gan-ga(st) undir jarðarmen*.

The word *strandhögg* has many examples, has acquired a more figurative meaning and seems to be used as a fully functioning Modern Icelandic word meaning ‘make an impression/dent’ in sentences like *erlendir bankar munu gera hér strandhögg* ‘foreign banks will make a dent in the market here’.

The words with the highest frequency in the ICG are *Mikligarður* and *sjálfðæmi*. The prevalence of those words can be explained as *Mikligarður* is a name of a supermarket which is mentioned more often than Byzantium. The word *sjálfðæmi* is quite frequent, especially in parliamentary speeches, and seems to mean the same as in Old Norse, i. e. the act of judging oneself or deciding for oneself how to act, e. g. *framselja sveitarfélögum sjálfðæmi um upptöku gjaldsins* ‘grant power to the municipalities to decide for themselves whether to charge this fee’.

In general the words in category two are much more frequent as the more common meaning of those words in contemporary language, more often than not, is quite different from the one in the medieval language and impossible to find the relevant examples if they exist. The main exceptions are *skrælingi* and *skuggsjá* and they often refer to medieval context.

4. Conclusions

The current investigation into this limited part of the vocabulary of Modern Icelandic has revealed several characteristics of the words labelled ‘ancient’ in the Dictionary of Contemporary Icelandic and their distribution in old and new source.

The survey of the words revealed how they can be divided into two main categories. The characteristic features of several subcategories were identified as well as some factors that could help explain the observed distribution.

Further comparison with Old Norse lexicographic data revealed that most of the words in question are well attested common Old Norse words, although there are some noticeable exceptions.

The analysis of modern Icelandic corpus data shows that we can divide the words into three distributional groups. The first group contains a few rare words, that are not part of the active vocabulary of Modern Icelandic and would most likely not be encountered by students. Such words could be omitted from a contemporary lexicographic description without drastic consequences. The second group is the largest one and contains most of the words that are well attested in Old Norse sources and frequently referred to in Modern Icelandic contemporary culture. It is therefore helpful for learners of Icelandic and other dictionary users to be able to look up the meaning of these words when they encounter them. The third group of words, which is also not big, are words that should perhaps not be labelled as ‘ancient’ or should receive an additional sense in the DCI, as they are fully functional lexical entities in Modern Icelandic and are used as any other contemporary Icelandic words.

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