

The Adaptation of the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN) to Faroese

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This paper describes the adaptation of the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN) to Faroese. It first provides a brief overview of the Faroese language and language learning context in the Faroe Islands, and then the adaption process is described. The use of MAIN in the Faroe Islands until now is outlined as well as the future research contexts in which the use of MAIN could be valuable.

1 Introduction

Children's narrative skills provide rich insights into their language development during childhood (Boudreau, 2008; Andreou & Lemoni, 2020). Extensive research on narratives has been conducted across different populations, including comparisons between monolingual and multilingual children, investigations of both (or more) languages of multilinguals (Bohnacker, 2016; Gagarina et al., 2016; Lindgren & Bohnacker, 2020, 2022), and studies including both typical and atypical populations (Altman et al., 2016; Lindgren et al., 2023 for an overview). These studies have provided important and valuable knowledge about children's narrative skills, demonstrating that narratives are not only useful tools for assessing children's language skills, but they can also adequately identify language impairment in both monolingual and multilingual children (Boerma et al., 2016; Peña et al., 2020; Tsimpli et al., 2016). Monolingual children, as well as multilingual children with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), have been found to differentiate from typically developing children in their production of narratives, namely in the linguistic aspects, such as limited lexical diversity and fewer morpho-syntactically complex sentences (Andreou & Lemoni, 2020). It is important to be able to differentiate between multilingual children with a lack of language experience and multilingual children with DLD (Hamdani et al., 2024), allowing early support and interventions that can help develop language skills and reduce long-term impact on language development.

Narrative skills can be assessed with the tool named the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN; Gagarina et al., 2019). MAIN is a picture-based assessment tool that has been developed by international researchers to sample, analyze, and assess children's comprehension and production of narratives. MAIN has been adapted to more than

90 languages around the world. It is developed and designed to assess narratives in children from multilingual and multicultural backgrounds by carefully choosing the story scripts, characters, and pictures that are neutral and suitable for children from a variety of different cultural backgrounds, and it is adapted for socio-linguistical features. This was done so that the pictures can reflect the different regions and cultural environments of the children (e.g., on the pictures chicken legs are depicted instead of a sausages) and so that they can recognize the color of particular animals (revised version Gagarina et.al., 2019). The MAIN instrument consists of four parallel picture sequences that constitute the MAIN stories: *Cat*, *Dog*, *Baby Birds*, and *Baby Goats* with six pictures each. A scoring sheet has been developed for calculating the macrostructure dimensions (i.e., story structure, story complexity) and the number of internal state terms produced in a story. It also allows the assessment of narrative comprehension questions.

Narratives generate naturalistic-like samples of language skills, making MAIN a valuable tool in data collection as well as for clinical settings. The tool affords insight into a multilingual person's languages, allowing to analyze and compare the narratives produced by people who learn more than one language (Gagarina & Lindgren, 2020). For further readings regarding the MAIN material see De Cat (2022) which highlights the usefulness of MAIN as well as opportunities and challenges in the analysis of MAIN in her article (De Cat, 2022).

The current paper gives a brief overview of Faroese and the language learning context of the Faroe Islands. It describes the adaptation process as well as insights gained from using the MAIN material in a small pilot study in a Faroese context.

2 The language learning context in the Faroe Islands

Faroese is the language spoken in the Faroe Islands. The population of the Faroe Islands is 54.648 (Statistics Faroe Islands, 2024), and an estimated number of 21,000 speakers are living abroad (Norðurlatlantsbólkurin á Fólkatingi, 2009). Faroese is the language used in everyday communication and societal aspects, but due to the historically close language contact, Danish has played a role in the language environment especially in written context, e.g., in church services, contact with Danish authorities, in some of the school textbooks, but also in films in the television and cinemas, text on imported goods, etc. (Petersen, 2010). Children attend compulsory school from the age of 6–7 to 16, and most children attend daycare from around the age of one year old. Both Danish and English are obligatory subjects in compulsory school from the age of around 9 years old. Although children are exposed to Danish and English partly through digital platforms and partly through teaching later, on an individual level toddlers and young children can be considered monolingual since they do not use Danish or English in everyday communication.

The Faroese society has to a large extent been monolingual, with the exception of the contact with Danish and English, but during recent years, there has been a growing migration (from 1.5% to 5.5% of the population) from countries other than the Nordic countries (Hayfield, 2024). This has resulted in a more diverse linguistic landscape with a larger part of the population being multilingual than earlier. This is also the situation in daycare and schools, which now include more children learning Faroese as a second language than before. Faroese

as an additional language is a newly developing field. Just recently (2024) the first teachers of Faroese as a second language have received their diplomas while teaching materials, legislation, curriculums, courses, and evaluation materials are being developed and improved at this stage.

These circumstances give a rather unique language learning environment for several reasons. First, the number of speakers of the language is small compared to other languages. Second, research on the acquisition of Faroese as a mother tongue is limited as well as the quantity of materials provided in Faroese (e.g., books, cartoons, radio- and television programs, offers on digital media, teaching materials, etc.). In addition, the situation with the increasing immigration number highlights the need for research and development on a wide range of materials regarding both first and second language acquisition.

3 A brief description of Faroese

Faroese is a North-Germanic language deriving from Old Norse. Faroese shares several similarities with other Nordic languages, and typological and structural studies characterize Faroese as the ‘Central Nordic language’ among the Nordic languages (Jacobsen, 2022; Petersen, 2011).

A simplified overview of Faroese is provided here (see Thráinsson et al., 2023, for a comprehensive description of Faroese). Faroese has a relatively more complex grammar than English regarding inflectional morphology (e.g., the case system). In Faroese, verbs fall into two main classes: weak and strong, and they are inflected for person, number, and tense. Nouns are inflected for two numbers: singular and plural, and four cases – nominative, accusative, dative, and genitive (only the first three are fully productive in Faroese today), and fall into three grammatical genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter. Nouns can be indefinite or definite which is added as a suffixed article. Table 1 shows inflections for the word *kúgv* ‘cow’.

Table 1. Inflections for the word *kúgv* ‘cow’ from www.sprotin.fo (online dictionary for Faroese).

Number	Case	Indefinite	Definite
Singular	nominative	kúgv	kúgvín
	accusative	kúgv	kúnna
	dative	kúgv	kúnni
	genitive	kúgvar	kúgvarinnar
Plural	nominative	kýr	kýrnar
	accusative	kýr	kýrnar
	dative	kúm	kúnum
	genitive	kúgva	kúgvanna

The inflections affect the words phonologically (e.g., the /ú/ is manifested as different sounds). These changes of the word can pose a challenge for children to identify different inflections of the same word form (Rasmussen & Bleses, 2018). This could also be the case for new speakers of Faroese; specifically, these stem changes and irregularities can pose an initial challenge in learning the language. Another feature regarding Faroese language concerns modification of word forms used in Child Directed Speech (CDS). Specifically, there is a frequent use of ‘baby-word forms’ e.g., *mua* for the adult word form *kúgv* ‘cow’, which is derived from the sound the

cow makes, but is also seen in other words not originating from sounds as in *geggar* for *skógvar* ‘shoes’. This simplification of the target word forms is used in communication with toddlers, possibly to assist learning inflected words where the former mentioned stem changes and irregularities occur (Rasmussen & Bleses, 2018). However, research in this area is still in its early stages. Future studies will enhance our understanding of learning Faroese as an additional language.

Regarding lexicon, it is mostly Germanic with loanwords from other non-Germanic languages (Jacobsen, in press). As mentioned in the introduction, the Faroese language reflects the influence of its historical contact with Danish. This is evident in many Danish loanwords, primarily in spoken language, which are often combined with Faroese pronunciation and inflections. However, there is also an effort to create new Faroese words to replace these loanwords (Jacobsen, 2001; in press). This results in there often being two variants for different concepts, one often more spoken variant and one used more in written language. This results in quite a difference in which words are used in spoken and written language in Faroese.

4 Adapting MAIN to Faroese

The translation and adaptation of the Faroese version was conducted based on the revised English version of MAIN (Gagarina et al., 2019) and followed the guidelines for adapting MAIN to other languages (Bohnacker & Gagarina, 2020). The Icelandic (Ragnarsdóttir, 2020) and Danish (de López & Knudsen, 2020) versions were examined to analyze their approaches to the adaptation process. The author of this paper translated the version into Faroese. Then, two linguists and native speakers of Faroese checked and revised it in terms of consistency and the use of adequate concepts; but there were a few issues on word forms left to take a position on. The new version was then used in a pilot study comprising four children (described in Section 5) and revised with some minor language changes resulting in the present version.

No cultural adaptations were required, as the stories and context were suitable for children in the Faroese context. The challenges related to translation and adaptation primarily involved deciding which word to use when addressing the child, particularly when two different terms existed for the same concept. The goal was to select the word variant most likely to be familiar to the child.

It is important to choose the right word forms with respect to CDS, and it must be taken into consideration that the prompts in MAIN are based on words that are used in oral communication, and not to choose word forms that might have been more appropriate in written language. The following words (in English) were predicted to give some challenges for the children: ‘butterfly’, ‘bush’, ‘water’, and possibly ‘fishing rod’, but for different reasons. The word ‘butterfly’ has two variants in Faroese *firvaldur* and *summarfuglur*. The former is one of the replacement words (neologisms) with inspiration from Icelandic (old Norse), and the latter is a loan from Danish. Both words are used in Faroese, but the former might be used more frequently in writing. Regarding the word ‘bush’, there is a word for this concept in Faroese *runnur*, but the Danish loanword *buskur* could also be heard in speech. The word *runnur* is predicted not to be a part of small children’s vocabulary, at least not for all children. Regarding the word ‘water’ (as in the sentence ‘the ball is rolling into the water’) the natural wording

according to the picture would be *bólturin rullar á sjógv* ‘the ball is rolling into the sea’, but *rullar út í vatnið* ‘the ball is rolling into the water’ could also be used. The Faroese word for ‘fishing rod’ is *tráða*, but it might be expressed as *fiskistong* by some children, inspired by the Danish word *fiskestang*. However, this is more speculative than the other words (see Jacobsen, in press, for more on this topic). Moreover, the word *fuglur* ‘bird’ has in Faroese also the baby-word form *bibbur*, which could be expected to be used by some children. Since the instrument can be used with children as young as three, and children at that age often already use adult-like word forms, baby words are not expected to be common – but their occasional use may still occur (Rasmussen & Bleses, 2018). In English the stories begin with ‘One day...’, but in Faroese, they begin with *Einaferð var tað...* ‘Once there was’, which is the classical way to begin a story or a fairytale, making it more suited to children than the literal translation. However, the primary concern is to ensure that the words used in the story scripts and comprehension questions are translated appropriately to Faroese in a way that they accurately reflect the intention of the original instrument and are appropriate for the target population – rather than focusing on the words the children themselves use. The adaptation process has taken the above considerations and improvements into account.

The Faroese version of the translated story scripts (for the Model Story and/or Retelling mode) are a little bit shorter than the original stories counted in words. One of the factors that affects the length of the stories is the addition of suffixes, such as the definite article that was mentioned earlier. An example of this is the Faroese translation of the English sentence ‘The cat let go of the baby bird’ (8 words) which becomes *Kettan slepti fuglaunganum* (3 words) in Faroese. A similar structure is observed in Icelandic MAIN *Kötturinn slepti unganum* (Ragnarsdóttir, 2020). However, the adaptations are comparable both between the two parallel stories *Cat* and *Dog*, and between *Baby Goats* and *Baby Birds*, and to the original stories with regards to the story components and direct meaning of the sentences as recommended when adapting the instrument (Bohnacker & Gagarina, 2020).

Another challenge related to the translation of the manual was choosing words for the description of the material, and instructions on how to administer MAIN. Both the word *assessment* and *narrative* posed certain challenges because it is difficult to translate into words that cover the content precisely. Ultimately, the words *meting* ‘assessment’ and in some instances *kanna/kanning* ‘to test/a test’, and the word *frásøgn* ‘narrative’ (which also encompasses meanings like ‘report’, ‘story’, and ‘announcement’), were chosen. Following Bohnacker and Gagarina (2020), who advise that the adapted version should be “worded in a way that is authentic and idiomatic” (p. xx), we chose these words to capture the content of the instrument as closely as possible.

5 Preliminary results using MAIN in the Faroe Islands

The Faroese version of MAIN was used in a Bachelor thesis (Persson, 2023), which serves as a pilot study of the adaptation. This preliminary investigation of the MAIN was administered by a skilled native Faroese speaker, following the guidelines regarding settings, recordings, and ethical considerations. The pilot comprised four monolingual Faroese speaking children from

age 3 to 7 years old. The telling mode was chosen to elicit stories from three of the children, while the model story was used with one child (the youngest one).

The issues that arose from the pilot study concerned the questions of spoken/written language and the Danish loanwords/Faroese replacement words: both *summarfuglur* ‘butterfly’ and *firvaldur* ‘butterfly’ (replacement word) were used by the children, three of them using *summarfuglur* and one *firvaldur*. Regarding the word ‘bush’ on the pictures, it is complicated because some might say *buskur*, which is a Danish loanword, with the according Faroese word *runnur*. The problem with *runnur* is that the word might not be commonly used in CDS. In the pilot study, one child says *runnur* and one says *buskur*. Another child uses *buskur*, but explains: *á einari blómu, í einum træi, ella einum sovorðnum buski* ‘on a flower or in a tree or like a bush’. Another child used the word *grein* ‘branch’ for the concept ‘bush’. Regarding the word *tráða* ‘fishing rod’, only one child used a resembling form, namely *fiskitráða*, which is a kind of reduplication of the word. This shows some insecurity regarding the word form, and the fact that none of the other children are using *tráða* ‘fishing rod’ underpins that this word might not be a part of the vocabulary, at least for the youngest children. Concerning the word ‘water’ and which form to choose, the data showed that one of the children used a third form *havið* ‘ocean’.

To address these issues more objectively, a frequency list was consulted, indicating that *firvaldur* and *runnur* appeared more frequently. However, it did not necessarily help much, as the list is based on written language intended for adults rather than spoken language or CDS. The use of baby-word forms e.g., *bibbur* for *fuglur* ‘bird’ was not noted in these data.

The results showed that the children understood the wordings and comprehended the questions, which is important to ensure relevant responses. The questions regarding the translations were as expected mainly with respect to the different word forms, but regarding the comprehension questions, this can be tackled by letting the child name the concept first, e.g. saying *summarfuglur*, and keep going with that word form (not using *firvaldur*, because the child could perceive this as a correction of the speech).

To sum up, the pilot study showed that it will not affect the narratives, if some choose to say *firvaldur* and some *summarfuglur*. However, if the children put a restraint on themselves not to say for example *buskur* or *fiskistong*, because they have an internal feeling of this being ‘wrong’ wordings, the narratives speculatively could be shorter or more imprecise. But the data demonstrates that children actually use the word forms, also the imperfect ones.

MAIN has also been used to gather data regarding children learning Faroese as an additional language e.g., in assignments during the training of teachers in Faroese as a second language. They used the pilot version in their assignments to elicit data in both Faroese and the child’s additional language and found it very useful. Here, the strength of the instrument testing children in both Faroese and their mother tongue in a structured way was affirmed and they found the tool very valuable to assess child language.

6 Revision process

The pilot study confirmed some issues, which led to a revision of the adaptation. Two words were changed in the process of revising the instrument according to the results from the pilot study. Although there were only 4 children in the pilot study, the language samples

demonstrated the same issues that were in play when adapting the instrument. Another word that was revised was the word for ‘butterfly’; results from a study in Faroese children’s vocabulary acquisition (Rasmussen & Bleses, 2018) as well as the language samples in the pilot study confirmed that the children used the word *summarfuglur* rather than *firvaldur*. Therefore *summarfuglur* was chosen to be included in the present version. This also follows the guidelines for adapting the story script, which states to choose words that are not only simple and frequently used but also acquired early.

7 Future directions

The preliminary results of MAIN from the pilot study should be further investigated in future studies as more data will strengthen the version. As a small language facing unique challenges, it is highly valuable to adapt instruments that can be utilized in both clinical settings and research. There is an immense lack of instruments and materials to assess the language skills of both monolingual and multilingual children in the Faroe Islands. Evaluation and assessment of children’s language abilities are very important for their future language skills and education. Hence, all tools are valuable – as well as sharing them is of great importance with the viability of improving them over time. Hopefully, the adaptation of MAIN will be used in the work with multilingual children and can be one of the factors to improve the diagnosis of language impairment. Consequently, Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives will be beneficial in future research expanding our knowledge of Faroese as an additional language.

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