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ON THE FAROESE LANGUAGE*

Faroese is the vernacular of a tiny nation counting only about 45,000 inhabitants of the Faroe Islands, situated between the Faroe Islands and Scotlands. For our livelihood we rely exclusively on fisheries. Our language is descended from the Old Norse language of the Viking Age settlers who came to the islands in the ninth century, and is therefore closely related to Icelandic, the orthography of which was the model for the creation of our etymologically based written form of 1846.

There is evidence that in the Middle Ages Old Faroese was the written language of the Islanders, but by the introduction of the Lutheran Reformation in the middle of the 16th century Danish was introduced as the language of the Church, Court and culture as a whole. As a dependency of Norway the Faroe Islands had in 1380 come under Danish rule together with Norway. But Faroese was not abolished as the spoken everyday language of the people, as well as the bearer of a rich tradition of Medieval ballads and tales. So in due time, when the people in the nineteenth century woke up to national self-knowledge, the language, though roughly treated by Danish influence, nevertheless was still so sound in its core that it was possible to embark upon the ambitious task of restoring it and developing it to become a language fit to meet the demands of modern times. This has been a long and difficult process, which is still going on. It often met resistance both from conservative Faroese, who had got used to the position of Danish as the "high language," and from Danish officials who in the progress of the Faroese language saw a threat to the old ruling position of Danish. But after a long and laborious struggle, eventually by the Home Rule Act of 1948 Faroese was recognised as the main language of the Islands.

According to that Faroese is now the official language in all fields administered by the Faroese Home Rule authorities. The last century has seen an ever increasing publishing activity in the Faroese language, now about 100 book titles a year. Faroese is the language of instruction in all schools, of the Church, the newspapers, and radio and television. But the smallness of the population is of course an obstacle to a fast development in this area, so still it is necessary to lean to another language, in our case for historical reasons, Danish, which is now taught from the third year of school as the first foreign language. But the compact presence of a foreign language is in many respects a severe threat to the integrity of the Faroese language and therefore demands both vigilance and an active language planning. Much has been achieved, but there is no reason to give up in our

* Original: English

time of increasing influence from the "international culture" and its main language, English. The most recent step taken to strengthen the position of Faroese is the establishing of an official language committee, of which I have the honour of being elected the first Chairman.

We who are concerned with the welfare of our language take a vivid interest in all that is done to strengthen and cultivate the languages and cultures of all small nationalities - and are proud and glad to note that some have already seen an example in our struggle to preserve and develop our language.

The topic of your seminar is in our eyes an important one. We wish that your seminar will be a success, and look forward to reading the proceedings in order to get inspiration from them in our continued efforts.