

Icelandic and Faroese orientation systems compared with the Greenlandic: absolute or relative?

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Orientation systems found around the North Atlantic Rim – those of Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe islands – have much in common, although two quite unrelated language families are involved. This has more to do with comparable geographical situations than with mutual influence. Thus it is not by chance that the Norse settlers of Greenland distinguished a ‘western settlement’ from an ‘eastern settlement’ where the former actually lies due north of the latter. The actual orientation of North-South-East-West terms also varies around the coasts of Greenland. Perhaps most noteworthy, however, is the fact that all three regions display ‘absolute’ systems that function differently (though in a predictable manner) at different spatial scales, ranging from the individual house and its surroundings, via specific stretches of coast, up to the cardinal, celestially based frame applying to the whole country. The same terms are often used at all levels, disambiguated by context. The broadest scale is typically used out at sea and the narrower ones on land. There are of course also differences between the systems of the three regions, reflecting their different cultural and technological backgrounds, methods of navigation, and the geographical alignment of their convoluted coastlines – in the case of the Faroes further complicated by the mesh of waterways separating the individual islands. There is a diachronic aspect discernible too in the development from earlier to later historical stages. It is argued that the distinctions of scale are more relevant than the difference between ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’ frames of reference, since in all three regions the basic orientation parameters combine traits of both types.