What Do the Gods Call the Sky?
Naming the Celestial in Old Norse

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Abstract: The idea that gods, humans, and other beings have different words for the same things is an archaic one attested in several ancient Indo-European texts from India, Iran, Ireland, Scandinavia, and Greece. The 12th century Old Norse poem *Alvíssmál* lists different names for the sky, moon, and sun used among humans, gods, giants, elves, and dwarves. Although similar lists of words used among different supernatural beings exist elsewhere, the Norse list is unique in that it focuses on a vocabulary associated with the celestial. The *Alvíssmál* suggests that while the gods may see the sky as an unwavering vault, this same sky may be a 'tall house' to the prosaic and earthbound giants, and a 'dripping hall' to the dwarves who prefer to dwell underground. This paper argues that the various sets of non-human words for celestial features in *Alvíssmál* hint at an underlying awareness that the celestial world does not necessarily carry a fixed meaning, but can be imbued with a range of different interpretations based on the observer's culture and environment.

This paper explores a curious Old Norse text, the *Alvíssmál,* a dialogue characterized by an extraordinary number of rare and obscure words. The unknown author of this brief text is clearly showing off his immense erudition by studding his verses with *hapax legomena.* But is the *Alvíssmál* nothing more than a lexicographer's showpiece? This paper argues that the obscure words in this text were not chosen simply for their extreme rarity, but also for their ability to capture, in poetic form, some essential features of various supernatural beings that inhabit the cosmos of the Norse imagination.

The 12th century Old Norse poem *Alvíssmál* ('The Speech of the All-Wise') consists of a dialogue between the thunder god þórr (Thor) and a

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dwarf by the name Alvíss ('The all-wise one').[1] For some reason that is not made clear in the text, the dwarf claims to have been promised the hand of þórr's daughter in marriage. þórr is strongly opposed to the match - he really thinks his daughter can do better - and he challenges the dwarf to demonstrate his worthiness by answering a series of difficult questions about the names gods, elves, dwarves, humans and others use for various aspects of the cosmos. The dwarf immediately shows off his great erudition by rattling off obscure terms used among various beings in the cosmos for the sun, moon, sky, earth, etc. But unfortunately for the all-wise dwarf, his learning is more theoretical than applied, for even though he knows what the sun is called among gods, elves, dwarves, giants, and those who dwell in hell, he forgets to watch the actual sun as he is listing these rare words. The sun rises while the dwarf is still talking, and Alvíss is promptly turned to stone when hit by its rays. And þórr's daughter is, presumably, now free to find a more suitable husband.

The idea that gods, humans, dwarves, giants, and other beings have different words for the same phenomena is not unique to this Old Norse text. The notion that gods, demons and others may use words that differ from ordinary human speech is an archaic one attested in several ancient Indo-European texts from India, Iran, Ireland, Anatolia, and Greece as well as Scandinavia. In the sacred text *Avesta* from Iran, dating to around 1000 BCE, the gods (*ahura*) and demons (*daeva*) use different words for the same concepts and objects.[2] While the words of the gods are emotionally neutral or positive and often stylistically elevated, the vocabulary of the demons carries negative emotional connotations.[3]

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[1] Although some scholars have argued that the poem is older (see for example Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie,* 3 vols, (København: G. E. C. Gad, 1894-1902), I find Heusler's arguments for a later date convincing (Andreas Heusler, 'Heimat und Alter der eddischen Gedicte: Das isländische Sondergut', *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 116 (1906): p. 264 ff). For the dating of the poem, see also Paul Acker, 'Dwarf-lore in *Alvíssmál*', in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology,* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 213 and Bernt Ø. Thorvaldsen, 'The Dating of Eddic Poetry', in *A Handbook of Eddic Poetry: Myths and Legends of Early Scandinavia,* ed. by Carolyne Larrington, Judy Quinn, and Brittany Schorn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p.72.

[2] Hermann Güntert, *Über die ahurischen und daevischen Ausdrücke im Awesta. Eine semasiologische Studie* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1914). p.1f.

[3] Cp. Tatyana Elizarenkova, *Language and Style of the Vedic Ṛṣis* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), p.75.

An opposition between the language of gods and spirits versus the regular speech of humans can be seen in the Homeric epics of ancient Greece as well. These items of 'divine vocabulary' in the Homeric texts are elevated, poetic, and rare words, and can be understood as 'sacred archaisms'.[4] Scholars have also investigated the language of spirits in Greek and Roman literature more broadly, and comparable examples of divine speech have been identified in ancient Hittite texts from Anatolia.[5] Sanskrit ritual texts from India contain examples of demons speaking a dialect that differs from that of the gods, and a distinction between the language of gods and the language of men is also found in early Irish texts.[6] While scholars of Old Norse do not make this argument, it might be possible to see the idea that superhuman beings may have different names for things than humans do as an ancient Indo-European one.

While the *Alvíssmál* poet may have been inspired by an inherited Indo-European notion of different vocabularies used among gods, humans, and other beings, the main concern here is what the poet *does* with this inherited literary trope. The notion of separate vocabularies for gods, humans, and others in not attested elsewhere in Norse literature and plays no part in the many conversations between humans and other beings in Norse myths; the humans and their non-human counterparts always appear to understand each other perfectly. So why does the *Alvíssmál* poet ascribe such highly specialized vocabulary to each race of beings? While the idea of separate human and non-human vocabularies may be an old Indo-European one, it is a trope that is here used to a new and striking effect by the Norse poet.

The words that gods, elves, and giants use in the *Alvíssmál* are uncommon and poetic terms and are certainly well suited to showing off the poet's lexicographical virtuosity, but I argue that these rare words also express something significant about the role of various supernatural beings in the Norse poetic imagination. The words identified as belonging to human speech in the text are common vocabulary items used in Old Norse,

[4] Emil Smith, 'Gude- og dæmonsprog', *Maal og minne* (1918), pp.9–18.
[5] Willy Theiler, 'Die Sprache des Geistes in der Antike', in *Sprachgeschichte und Wortbedeutung: Festschrift Albert Debrunner* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1954), pp.431–40; J. Friedrich, 'Göttersprache und Menschensprache im hethitischen Schrifttum', in *Sprachgeschichte und Wortbedeutung: Festschrift Albert Debrunner* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1954), pp.135–39.
[6] Calvert Watkins, 'Language of Gods and Language of Men: Remarks on Some Indo-European Metalinguistic Traditions', in Jaan Puhvel, ed., *Myth and Law Among the Indo-Europeans: Studies in Indo-European Comparative Mythology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970), pp.1–17.

while many of the words of the 'others' in the Norse cosmos are only found in this text. Some scholars have suggested that the peculiar words used by non-human beings in this text constitute an exercise in linguistic creativity, or may be taboo terms (and thus not meant to be uttered by humans?), but I hope to demonstrate that the words used here to name various parts of the cosmos have a deeper symbolic significance as well.[7] I argue that the various sets of non-human words for cosmic features in *Alvíssmál* serve a very specific literary function and hint at an underlying idea that the cosmos does not carry a fixed meaning, but can be imbued with a range of different mythical interpretations based on culture and environment.

In turning to the text of the *Alvíssmál* itself, beginning with stanza 9, the words that are used to describe the various parts of the cosmos are intriguing:

> 9) Þórr said:
> Tell me, Alvíss -
> you know everything -
> what is the earth called,
> the one that lies before everyone
> in all the worlds?[8]
>
> 10) Alvíss said:
> It is Earth to men and Meadow to the Æsir,
> and the Paths to the Vanir,
> Much-Too-Green[9] to the Giants, Growth to the elves,
> and the High Holy ones call it *Aurr*.

The word ascribed to humans in the Old Norse text, *jǫrð,* is a common Old Norse word for 'earth', attested both in prose texts such as Snorri's *Edda* and *Egil's* Saga, and in the verses of the *Vǫluspá*. The Æsir, on the other hand, call the earth *fold,* which means 'meadow' or 'fertile plain'.[10] This

[7] See Smith, 'Gude- og dæmonsprog', p.9; Lennart Moberg, 'The Language of Alvíssmál', *Saga-Bok* 18, (Viking Society for Northern Research, University College of London, 1970-1973): p. 23; Peter Hallberg, 'Elements of Imagery', in *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), pp.47–48; Carolyne Larrington, *The Poetic Edda.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.105.

[8] All translations from Old Norse are the author's unless otherwise indicated.

[9] For discussion of this term, see below.

[10] *Fold* is also attested in the poetic *The Waking of Angantýr.*

word signals that the earth, from the perspective of the Æsir, is a pleasant place where things grow. The Vanir, a group of fertility deities that includes the love goddess Freya, her twin brother Freyr and the sea god Njörðr, are apparently more restless than the Æsir; for them, the earth consists of paths to wander along. The giants, who dwell in the bleak mountainous world of *Jötunheimr,* are perhaps less enchanted with the earth's fertility than the gods; they refer to the earth as *ígræn,* 'Much-Too-Green'.[11] The elves, who are closely associated with fertility in Norse mythology, call the earth 'Growth'; much like the Æsir, they see the earth as a rich and fertile place. It is unclear who the *Uppregin* ('the high holy ones' or 'the powers on high') might be; they are clearly separate from the gods in this stanza.[12] To these high and abstract powers, the earth is *aurr,* (literally 'gravel' or 'loam), a loaded mythological term that suggests a rich and fertile soil with a life-giving quality.[13] This stanza suggests that while the earth and its abundance and growth may be appealing to the elves and

[11] The term *ígræn* is rendered 'ever-green' in Paul B. Taylor and W. H. Auden , *The Elder Edda* (New York: Random House, 1967), p.80 and 'splendid-green' by Larrington, *The Poetic Edda,* p.106. The í- which modifies *græn* must here be understood as an intensifying prefix; see Leiv Heggestad, *Gammalnorsk ordbok.* (Rev. ed. Oslo: Det norske samlaget, 1958), p. 339 and Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary.* (2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p.317, and is also interpreted this way in Sveinbjørn Egilsson, *Lexicon poeticum antiquae linguae septentrionalis: Ordbok over det norsk-islandske skjaldesprog* (2nd ed. København: S. L. Møllers bogrtykkeri, 1913), p. 323. For a close parallel in Old German, see Oskar Schade, *Altdeutsches Wörterbuch* (2nd ed. Halle a. S., 1872-1882), vol. 1, p.444, under the discussion of *in-/i-.* An Old English parallel can be seen is words like *in-frōd* ('very wise') and *in-dryhten* ('very noble'). Although Larrington's translation 'splendid-green' captures the intensifying quality of the prefix, I am following Egilsson in taking the term *ígræn* in both an intensifying and derogatory sense here.

[12] Taylor and Auden, *The Elder Edda,* p. 80, render the term 'high gods', while Larrington, *The Poetic Edda,* p.81, translates 'the Powers above'.

[13] Taylor and Auden, *The Elder Edda,* p. 80, translate 'clay' here, while Larrington, *The Poetic Edda,* p. 106, renders the term 'loam'. *Aurr* is used in *Vǫluspá* 19 to describe a substance that keeps the world tree, the ash Yggdrasill, moist: 'a tall tree, drenched with shining loam…', from Larrington, *The Poetic Edda,* p. 6. The phrase *aurgum forsi* 'loam-filled flood' is used in *Vǫluspá* 28, also in reference to watering the world tree: 'She sees, flowing down, the loam-filled flood from Father of the Slain's pledge…', from Larrington, *The Poetic Edda,* p. 7. The term *aurr* is also part of the name of the primordial giant Aurgelmir/Ymir, from whose body the world is formed.

the Æsir, there might exist even higher powers beyond both the Æsir and the Vanir who associate the earth with the creation and sustenance of life.

11) þórr said:
Tell me, Alvíss -
you know everything -
what is heaven called,
the one that all know
in all the worlds?

12) Alvíss said:
Heaven it is called by men,
the Arch by gods,
the Vanir call it Wind-Weaver,
giants the World Up There,
elves the Fair-Roof
and dwarves the Dripping Hall.

Here Alvíss informs þórr that the sky is called *himinn* among humans. This is the ordinary Old Norse word for the sky. The gods, however, call it *hlýrnir,* a rare word for 'heaven', also attested once in Snorri's *Skaldskaparmál* as a skaldic term. This word is related to *hlýr*, which means the bow of a ship or the curve of a cheek. *Hlýrnir* may therefore refer to the arched vault of heaven. Whereas the gods' word for the sky suggests stillness and architectural structure (an arch), the restless Vanir use the term *vindófni,* or 'Wind-Weaver' for the sky, a term which hints at movement, creation, and activity. The earth-bound and prosaic giants, on the other hand, simply call the sky *uppheim,* 'the World Up There' or 'the Tall House'. The elves, however, express their appreciation for the sky's beauty by calling it *fagraræfr,* 'Fair-Roof'. The dwarves, who dwell underground and don't much care for the sky, refer to it as *drjúpansal,* 'the Dripping Hall', perhaps indicating that it rains too much for their taste out under the open sky.

13) þórr said:
Tell me, Alvíss -
you know everything -
what is the moon called,
the one that men see,

in all the worlds?

14) Alvíss said:
Moon it is called by men,
the Ball by gods,
and the Vanishing Wheel in Hel,
Haste by giants,
Brightness by dwarves,
by elves the Counter of Years.

Here, humans call the moon *máni,* which is the common Old Norse word for the moon. The gods use *mýlinn,* a term of unclear meaning only attested in this one verse and once in the *Helgakviða Hundingsbana*. The word seems be related to the verb *mylja,* 'to crush, to mill (flour)'. Why the association of the moon with milling? I would suggest that this rare word *mýlinn* may relate to the ancient Indo-European idea of the 'World Mill', where a rotating millstone moves across the still firmament, turning the cosmos and regulating the seasons.[14] It is not inconceivable for the moon to function, in the view of the Norse gods, precisely as a sort of cosmic mill-stone that causes the changing seasons. The *Alvíssmál* goes on to inform us, intriguingly, that the moon is called 'the Whirling Wheel' or possibly the 'Vanishing Wheel' (*hverfanda hvél*) in hell (*helju í*).[15] The interpretation 'Vanishing Wheel' makes sense here as a reference to the waning of the moon. One might speculate that the tormented denizens of hell are so pessimistic in their outlook that they focus more on the moon's monthly disappearance from the sky than on its light during the rest of the

[14] See for example Viktor Rydberg, *Undersökningar i germanisk mytologi,* Vol. 1, (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1886) and Clive Tolley, 'The Mill in Norse and Finnish Mythology', *Saga-Bok* 24 (1995): pp.63–82.

[15] Erik Noreen, 'Til *Alvíssmál* 14', *Studier i nordisk filologi* 4-5 (1913-1914), p.2. Albertsson associates the phrase with the moon and draws comparisons to a parallel passage in *Hávamál* 84, see Kristján Albertsson, 'Hverfanda hvel', *Skírnir* 151 (1977): p.58. Von See connects the phrase to Norse translations of Boethius' 'wheel of fortune', see Klaus von See, 'Was ist Heldendichtuung?' in *Europäische Heldendichtung,* ed. by Klaus von See (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978), p.24. Joseph Harris , like Albertsson, connects the phrase *hverfande hvél* here to *Hávamál* 84, which describes the hearts of women being shaped on a turning wheel, but also to the wheel of the moon, see Joseph Harris, Eddic Poetry', in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide,* ed. by Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.108–109.

month. The moon is called *skyndi* ('Haste') by the slow giants, who seem disturbed by the moon's rapid journey across the sky. The treasure-loving dwarves are drawn to the moon's luster and call it *skin,* 'Brightness'. The elves, however, refer to the moon as 'the Counter of Years' (*ártali*), indicating their awareness of the role of the moon in time reckoning. Since they call it the counter of years rather than months, one might even speculate that time moves more quickly for the elves than for humans.

> 15) Þórr said:
> Tell me, Alvíss -
> you know everything -
> what is the sun called
> that is seen by men,
> in all the worlds?
>
> 16) Alvíss said:
> Sun it is called by men,
> *sunna* by the gods,
> by dwarves Dvalin's Toy,
> by giants Always Glowing,
> by elves the Fair Wheel,
> and All-Bright by the sons of gods.

According to this stanza, humans use the common Old Norse word for the sun, *sól,* while the gods prefer a rarer word, *sunna*.[16] The dwarves refer to the sun as 'Dvalin's toy', *Dvalins leika.* 'Dvalin' is a common dwarf name, and the idea that the bright sun itself may be a dwarf's plaything could be seen as appealing to the dwarves. But this stanza also hints at the possibility that dwarves can be outsmarted. The word *leika* also has another meaning; it means not only 'plaything' or 'toy', but also 'trap'. This name for the sun should signal to the dwarf Alvíss, then, that he as a dwarf needs to beware of the sun. But he remains oblivious to the warning inherent in the old dwarf name for the sun and keeps showing off his knowledge of the vocabularies of the races that inhabit the world – until he is caught in the rays of the sun and turned to stone at dawn. The giants, ever practical in outlook, refer to the sun as *eygló,* 'Always Glowing'. The elves reflect on the sun's beauty when referring to it as 'the Fair Wheel' *(fagrahvél*). It is unclear who 'the sons of gods' (*ása synir*) in this stanza are; they may be

[16] Lennart Moberg, 'The Language of Alvíssmál', p.303.

a younger generation of gods or another class of beings altogether. The fact that they refer to the sun as *alskír,* 'All-Bright', suggests that they, like the elves, recognize the sun's brilliance.

Why did the poet of the *Alvíssmál* represent the gods, giants, Vanir, elves, and denizens of hell as using these words in particular? I argue that the words that are associated with each class of beings in the *Alvíssmál* are also meant to articulate the poet's view of those beings and their role in the Norse mythic cosmos. The words which the poet of *Alvíssmál* attributes to the Æsir are associated with stillness, grandeur, and slow movement. They convey a sense of the world as majestic architecture, still and splendid. The Vanir, on the other hand, appear to see the world as full of life and movement and change, in perfect accordance with their role as guardians of fertility and growth. The elves, themselves bright and beautiful, are quick to appreciate the beauty of the world as well. But their awareness that the moon is the measure of years also associates them with the passage of time. Since there is ample evidence in Norse texts to tie elves to ancestors and the blessed dead, their association with years that pass makes sense here.[17] The giants, slow, practical and earthbound, fail to see the beauty of the world, and their language lacks any sort of poetic sentiment. The dwarves, who love to hoard treasure underground, are drawn to bright things, like the sun and moon, while they fail to appreciate the beauty of the open sky. But their greed can also become their downfall; while they imagine the sun as another bright thing that can be owned, they fail to understand its power and can – like *Alvíss* – turn to stone in its rays. While speaking of the sun as an object to be possessed, the dwarf himself turns into a mere thing, a stone.

Through the intricate vocabulary of the text, the *Alvíssmál* poet conveys the idea that interpretations of the cosmos reflect the observer; a lofty god will see the world as splendid, a fertility god will see it as full of life and creative potential, an elf will see it as fair to behold while noting the

[17] See for example Nils Lid, 'Um finnskot og alveskot: Eit område av norsk sjukdomsmagi', *Maal og Minne* (1921): p.37, Jan de Vries, 'Über Sigvat's Álfablót-Strophen', *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 7 (1932-33): p. 74, and Hans Kuhn, 'Alben' in Hans Kuhn: *Kleine Schriften,* Vol. 4 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1978): p.269. Elves are also associated with burial mounds and the dead in Anglo-Saxon literature, see Sarah Semple, 'A Fear of the Past: The Place of the Prehistoric Burial Mound in the Ideology of Middle and Later Anglo-Saxon England', *World Archaeology* 30 (1998): pp.109–126, and Alaric Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender, and Identity* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007).

inevitable passing of time, and a giant will see the world as bleak and barren. Taken together, these different visions of the world, conveyed through the rare words of the *Alvíssmál,* help destabilize the notion that the cosmos has a fixed inherent *meaning* of any kind. The sky, sun, and moon are understood in an architectural mode by the gods, a generative mode by the elves and the Vanir, a lithic mode by the earthbound giants, and a mercenary mode by the dwarves. By juxtaposing these different visions of the cosmos, the *Alvíssmál* presents an implicit theory of the relationship between external reality and cultural experience: the cosmos does not have a fixed meaning; its interpretation is always dependent on the observer's culture and environment. And yet the *Alvíssmál* playfully suggests that while meaning is always culture-dependent, the cosmos has an immense power beyond all attempts to classify and name its components, as demonstrated by the tale of the dwarf who knew six obscure Old Norse words for the sun, but still was turned to stone by its rays.