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Standards and style: language-internal variation in Modern Icelandic

Abstract (English)

While Icelandic is often described as being relatively homogeneous in relation to linguistic forms in geographical as well as in social terms, investigations have, in fact, revealed patterns of grammatical and lexical variation in language use which correlate with factors such as age, education, geography and, in particular, with different communicative settings, such as planned vs. less planned texts, formal vs. less formal, different styles of written and spoken language and standard vs. non-standard use. Recent studies have also focused on speaker evaluation of texts of different styles and on attitudes to speakers of foreign-accented Icelandic. This chapter reports on a few of these studies in order to throw light on language-internal variation in Icelandic. Language policy implications are also discussed briefly.

Abstract (Icelandic)

Íslensku er gjarna lýst sem einsleitu tungumáli í þeim skilningi að tiltölulega lítill breytileiki sé í málnotkun fólks eftir búsetu og öðrum félagslegum þáttum. Athuganir hafa eigi að síður leitt í ljós ákveðin mynstur þar sem viss einkenni í málfræði og orðaforða fylgja tilteknum aldri, menntun, búsetu og ekki hvað síst mismunandi aðstæðum, hversu skipulagður eða undirbúinn talaður eða ritaður texti er, hve formlegar aðstæðurnar eru, hver stíllinn er, hvort heldur í rituðu eða töluðu máli, og hversu nákvæmlega staðli um vandaða íslensku er fylgt. Einnig liggja fyrir nýlegar niðurstöður um mat málnotenda á textum með mismunandi málsnið og úr rannsókn á viðhorfum málnotenda til íslensku með erlendum hreim. Í kaflanum er greint frá nokkrum af þessum rannsóknum í því skyni að varpa ljósi á breytileika í íslensku. Einnig verður vikið að því hvernig þetta snertir málstefnu.

1. Introduction

While this chapter is about language-internal variation in Icelandic, it is not my intention to reject the traditional claim that Icelandic is an unusually homogeneous language and that this language differs in this respect from its closest linguistic and geographical neighbours, Faroese and Norwegian. There is, indeed, only one variety of Icelandic in Iceland from a linguistic point of view, and terms such as geolect, regiolect or sociolect could be misleading in a description of varying density in the distribution of linguistic features in relation to social variables. Having said that, the aim of this chapter is to shed light on some of the nuances of

Icelandic language use, and on linguistic variation, that do exist and sometimes correlate with external factors. It also appears that variation in Icelandic at different linguistic levels – phonology, (morpho)syntax, style and lexicon – tends to be in some way connected to speakers’ evaluation of appropriate versus inappropriate style in particular communicative situations. This has implications for language policy, in connection with language beliefs or ideologies, and corpus management alike.

2. Phonology

In the 1940s, the Icelandic linguist Björn Guðfinnsson (1946, 1947) mapped Icelandic pronunciation variation onto a few social variables, notably geographical location. These pronunciation differences are probably the best-known examples of language-internal variation in Modern Icelandic. In the 1980s, changes were traced in these relationships between the 1940s and the 1980s (Thráinsson/Árnason 1992). The use of almost all local accents had decreased very much or totally disappeared. One of the variables was, however, still of particular importance, i.e. the use of aspirated vs. unaspirated intervocalic stops. The speech community is very much aware of this variance: it is not rarely a topic of folk-linguistic observations and discussions on proper pronunciation, and also for stereotyping people from either Northern Iceland or from Southern Iceland.

“Northern”: intervocalic /p, t, k/ pronounced [p^h, t^h, k^h] E.g. *láta* [lau:t^ha] ‘let’

“Southern”: intervocalic /p, t, k/ pronounced [p, t, k] E.g. *láta* [lau:ta] ‘let’

The “Southern” variant is called *linmæli* (‘soft speech’) in Icelandic while its “Northern” counterpart is *harðmæli* (‘hard speech’). Guðfinnsson’s (1947) handbook for teachers contains a general description of pronunciation variants along with comments on whether each variant was, in his view, desirable or not. Guðfinnsson (1947) proposed that the “hard speech” variants should be preferred and taught to pupils in schools throughout the country.

In his earlier research, Guðfinnsson (1946) had found that in the capital Reykjavik, in south-west Iceland, 92% of 10- to 13-year-old children used the unaspirated variant.

Guðfinnsson (1946) comments:

nú á síðustu árum hefur verið allmikil tízka linmæltra manna, fullorðinna, hér í höfuðstaðnum að reyna að temja sér harðan framburð, og þekki ég ýmis dæmi þess, að þeir hinir sömu menn leitast við að hafa áhrif á framburð barna sinna. (1946, 159)

[in recent years it has become quite customary among soft speech-speaking adults here in the capital to try to acquire hard speech, and I know that a number of them try to influence the pronunciation of their children (transl. APK)]

Guðfinnsson's (1946) comment suggests that "hard speech" enjoyed a higher status than "soft speech" and that some people tried to acquire it instead of their "soft speech". Guðfinnsson's (1947) proposals that "hard speech" be proclaimed standard pronunciation were never formally accepted. Yet it is generally assumed that they had a considerable influence in the Icelandic Broadcasting Service, in theatres and in schools (Jónsson 1998).

It should be pointed out that "hard speech" is perceived to correlate better with spelling than "soft speech" does since the intervocalic phonemes /p t k/ are normally written with the letters *p*, *t*, *k* in Icelandic orthography. In word initial position, e.g. *tala* [t^ha:la] 'speak', these stops are aspirated in the language of speakers of "hard" and "soft" speech alike.

Many people in Iceland today have "mixed speech" in the sense that they use unaspirated intervocalic stops in everyday or informal style but often shift to using aspirated ones in public speeches, when reading aloud, on formal occasions and the like. Thus, there is still a marked tendency to assign prestige status to the "hard speech" variant.

A recent study (Hlynsdóttir 2016) on language attitudes corroborates the assumption that "hard speech" generally enjoys a higher status in the speech community than "soft speech". When asked which pronunciation feature people found more beautiful, the majority chose "hard speech", i.e. not only people from traditional "hard speech" areas in northern Iceland, but also people from all over Iceland responded that "hard speech" was a more beautiful variant than the pronunciation used by the majority. Not only are such conscious attitudes towards "hard speech" more positive than towards the unaspirated intervocalic stops: a matched-guise study also revealed that, subconsciously, Icelandic native speakers evaluate "hard speech" as being more attractive than "soft speech" (Hlynsdóttir/Guðmundsdóttir 2018).

2.1 Attitudes to foreign accent

There have been great demographic changes over the past two decades in Iceland in that immigrants from Poland, Lithuania, Thailand and many other countries are now about 10% of the population, instead of the mere 2% they represented in 1996. Using the verbal-guise technique, Bade (2018) investigated how native Icelandic speakers evaluate foreign-accented Icelandic speech. Her findings suggest that women and those over 60 were, in general, more positive in their evaluation of foreign-accented Icelandic speech than men and those under 60. Her results also suggested that those accents that were perceived as "Western", i.e. American, German and Danish accents, were preferred to immigrant accents which the Icelandic participants perceived as being Eastern European or Asian. In other words: Icelandic native speakers are more positive about foreign-accented Icelandic if they think the accent is influenced by a Western European mother tongue.

3. (Morpho)syntax

Researchers have carried out comprehensive investigations into some syntactic innovations in Icelandic and these have been partially mapped onto a few social variables. The choice of oblique case, accusative vs. dative, for subjects with a few verbs (cf., for example, Jónsson/Eyþórsson 2003; Eyþórsson 2017) is among the best known morphosyntactic variants. The choice of accusative or dative with the verbs in question is closely linked to normative attitudes as the accusative is considered standard while the dative subject is an innovation and is deemed non-standard. For most people, the latter goes by the derogatory term of “dative sickness” while linguists usually prefer a more neutral term, such as “dative tendency”. This particular “tendency” is very often the topic of folk-linguistic observations on language use in Iceland. Thus, using the dative with a handful of verbs (*langa* ‘want’, *vanta* ‘need’ and a few others) in such constructions has some stigma attached to it. This is probably one of the best-known sociolinguistic markers in Icelandic.

standard speech

<i>Hana</i>	<i>langar í</i>	<i>ís</i>
She-ACCUSATIVE	wants	ice cream
‘she wants some ice cream’		

vs.

non-standard speech

<i>Henni</i>	<i>langar í</i>	<i>ís</i>
She-DATIVE	wants	ice cream
‘she wants some ice cream’		

This “dative tendency” is no novelty, though, as the first known examples of the change from the accusative to dative subject case with these particular verbs are about 150 years old now. From a grammatical point of view, the change seems somewhat trivial. A number of Icelandic verbs require the oblique case (and not the nominative, which is most common) for nominals in subject position. Most such verbs require the dative, as a matter of fact, e.g. for a number of verbal constructions that refer to “liking” or “preferring” something, and this is uncontroversial language use:

standard speech

<i>Henni</i>	<i>þykir</i>	<i>góður</i>	<i>ís</i>
She-DATIVE	considers	good	ice cream
‘she likes ice cream’			

<i>Henni</i>	<i>finnst</i>	<i>góður</i>	<i>ís</i>
She-DATIVE	feels	good	ice cream
‘she likes ice cream’			

Thus, the tendency to use dative-case subjects with a few more verbs such as those meaning “wanting” (*langa*) and “needing” (*vanta*) something is a most logical change, from a syntactic and semantic point of view. Yet, choosing the dative and not the accusative with the verbs *langa*, *vanta* and a few more, is frowned upon by guardians of proper usage. It is very hard to find examples of the use of the dative with *langa*, *vanta*, etc. in edited written language.

The “dative tendency” is more common among younger than older Icelanders (Eyþórsson 2017) and it is more frequent in the language of children whose mothers are less well educated (Jónsson/Eyþórsson 2003). As for geography, it is generally more frequent in the countryside than in the capital Reykjavík, and when different neighbourhoods in Reykjavík are compared, the non-standard usage is more frequent in eastern Reykjavík suburbs than in western Reykjavík, which reflects general differences in average levels of education in the neighbourhoods (*ibid.*).

4. Style and lexicon

4.1 Written, planned, formal vs. spoken, less planned, less formal

As regards planned (formal/written) texts vs. less planned (informal/spoken) texts, intra-speaker variation has been found as non-standard variants have been attested in colloquial spoken language data from individuals who otherwise strive to avoid such features in their written, or planned, texts. Some of these non-standard features are, in fact, marginal or do not occur in edited written language (*cf.* the “dative tendency” described above).

I have investigated some variation in Icelandic radio language, particularly the difference between scripted radio news on the one hand and unscripted radio talk shows on the other (Kristinsson 2009). One of the results was that the choice between two potential variants of a relative clause conjunction – *sem* vs. *sem að* – correlates with whether a radio text is scripted and carefully planned, or unscripted and less planned. The common spoken language variant *sem að* turned out to be used frequently in unscripted radio talk, whether monologues or dialogues while this variant was almost completely absent from scripted radio news. Students are taught at school that *sem að* is not to be used in proper written style, and this seems to have influenced the creation of scripted radio texts as well.

4.2 Borrowings

Lexical borrowings in Icelandic are less frequent in texts that are of the more formal, more planned, written kind, in comparison with less formal, less planned, colloquial, spoken language (*cf.* Graedler/Kvaran 2010; Svavarsdóttir/Paatola/Sandøy 2010). Borrowings such as *dánlóða* (‘to download’) and *djönkfúd* (‘junk

food’) may occur in colloquial spoken language while being consistently avoided in formal texts. Thus, formal texts tends to contain “genuine” Icelandic counterparts, which are often calques, such as *hlaða niður* ‘download’ (lit. ‘to load sth. down’); *ruslfæði* ‘junk food’ (*rusl* ‘garbage, junk’; *fæði* ‘food’). When borrowings are used, they are more or less adapted to Icelandic rules of grammar and pronunciation; e.g. (*computer*)*hacker* = *hakkari* masc., nom.sg.; *hakkara* acc.dat.gen.sg.; *hakkara* nom.pl.; *hakkara* acc.pl.; *hökkurum* dat.pl.; *hakkara* gen.pl.; *euro* = *evra* fem., nom.sg.; *evru* acc.dat.gen.sg.; *evrur* nom.acc.pl.; *evrum* dat.pl.; *evra* gen.pl.

A qualitative investigation by Óladóttir (2009) showed that the general perception among her 24 participants was that the more formal situations and texts require the avoidance of foreignisms. Another investigation, a quantitative one, carried out by myself and Hilmarrsson-Dunn (2013), showed that people aged 18-21 were in agreement with the older generation in our study in that borrowings, and in particular the less adapted borrowings, were not appropriate for edited texts, such as textbooks, printed reports or newspapers. The younger participants in our study had a slightly more “relaxed” attitude than the older ones to the use of borrowings for some less formal genres, such as Facebook statuses and personal blogs (Kristinsson/Hilmarrsson-Dunn 2013, 2015).

Lexical purism is a well-known feature of Icelandic language history and contemporary Icelandic sociolinguistics. The norms of proper Icelandic today are very much coloured by this tradition and the tendency to evaluate language use according to whether “pure” or “less pure” lexemes are chosen prevails.

5. Conclusion

There are linguistic features in Icelandic which correlate to some extent with the social variables of geography, age and education; however, “dialects” would be too strong a term to describe the situation. Thus most variation in Icelandic is very much driven by the choice of style deemed appropriate for a particular genre, by choice of medium, by interlocutors and by situation. For example, the traditionally geographically anchored (northern) “hard speech” pronunciation enjoys prestige status among speakers, irrespective of their geographical origin, and it has been recommended in reading style. Then, in elite metalinguistic discourses, the non-standard syntactic feature “dative tendency” is frowned upon and while it is not uncommon in spoken language, it hardly ever appears in edited publications. Similarly, a particular variant of the relative clause conjunction, a common feature of spoken Icelandic that is deemed less than welcome in writing, is consistently avoided in scripted radio news texts. Finally, the use of lexical borrowings in Icelandic correlates with degree of formality: the more formal, planned and/or edited a text is, the less likely it is to contain lexical borrowings.

All of the variables mentioned above relate to speakers' perception of "good" language use and "correctness"; i.e., which linguistic features are evaluated as appropriate in a given context or for a given genre.

In his theory of language policy, Spolsky (2004, 2009) describes three interconnected components: (a) language practices, the choice of varieties and repertoires; (b) language beliefs, or established ideologies, which assign values to different choices and forms; and (c) management, the modification of practices and beliefs, by an institution or group, or by individuals. In a 2018 paper, Spolsky made two modifications to his model as he now distinguishes between managers with and without authority, and he introduced the term "self-management" as well to account for speakers' attempts to modify their own linguistic repertoire.

As for the challenges for language policy and management that are posed by language-internal variation in Icelandic, I believe that all three aspects of Spolsky's revised theory of language policy are of relevance. The choice of repertoire in Icelandic language practices is intricately linked to the ideologies of proper usage and the prestige status of formal written texts, and this is modified by language management, both by external management and by self-management.

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