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National language policy and planning in Iceland – aims and institutional activities

Abstract (English)

In this article, dominant attitudes to language planning in Iceland are addressed, as well as the general aims of national language policy for Icelandic.¹ Grammatical, orthographic and lexical purism is a cornerstone of traditional Icelandic language culture and language ideologies, and the general public is, by and large, supportive of corpus planning efforts such as the coining of Icelandic neologisms, standardisation of orthography, and communication of advice on proper language usage. However, Icelanders in general also seem to be somewhat pragmatically selective when it comes to language choice – and some status planning efforts that seek to promote the use of Icelandic rather than English in certain domains of use are not always warmly welcomed, e.g. by representatives of business enterprises.

Institutional language planning activities in Iceland are described, in particular those carried out at the Language Planning Department of the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies. The principal tasks of the Department concern corpus planning.

The paper also provides a brief general account of the language situation in Iceland.

Útdráttur (Icelandic abstract)

Í þessari grein er fjallað um ríkjandi viðhorf til íslenskrar málstýringar og almenn markmið opinberrar málstefnu fyrir íslensku. Hreintunguhyggja, sem varðar í senn málkerfi, rithátt og orðaforða, er hryggjarstykkið í hefðbundinni íslenskri málmenningu og málhugmyndafræði og almenningur er yfirlétt hlynntur formstýringarviðleitni, svo sem því að búa til ný íslensk orð á grunni eldri orðaforða málsins, að samræma rithátt og að veita ráðgjöf um vandaða málnotkun. En jafnframt virðast Íslendingar almennt vera nokkuð tilbúnir til að láta skammtímanytsemi ráða vali á tungumáli í samskiptum – og ýmiss konar viðleitni til stöðustýringar, sem miðar að því að efla notkun á íslensku fremur en ensku á ákveðnum notkunarviðum, er ekki endilega vel tekið t.d. af hálfu fulltrúa fyrirtækja.

Fjallað er um opinbera málstýringu hjá stofnun(um) sem sérstaklega er falið að gegna slíku hlutverki samkvæmt lögum, einkum þau verkefni sem sinnt er á vegum málræktarsviðs Stofnunar Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum. Meginverkefni málræktarsviðsins eru á sviði formstýringar.

Í greininni er einnig veitt stutt almennt yfirlit um málsamfélagið og stöðu tungumála á Íslandi.

¹ I wish to thank Emily Lethbridge for her comments.

1. The language situation in Iceland: An overview

Icelandic is the sole “official language” of the state and municipalities in Iceland, while Icelandic Sign Language is the only “recognised” minority language in the country. For a detailed account of the language profile of Iceland, various aspects of language policies and their history, language education and present language legislation (amongst other things), see Hilmarsson-Dunn/Kristinsson (2013), and Kristinsson (2016).

Icelandic is a member of the North Germanic (Nordic) language group, and it resembles Modern Faroese, and also some Western Norwegian dialects. The structure and basic vocabulary of Modern Icelandic is still quite similar to Old Norse, the common ancestor of these languages. Old Norse was spoken in early medieval times in Scandinavia, the Faroes, and Iceland, and in some parts of the British Isles and Greenland, by people of Nordic origin. Written medieval sources in Old Norse are abundant and many of the texts that are held in high regard were written in Iceland in the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries. These texts are still readily accessible today to the average native speaker of Modern Icelandic, without specialisation in linguistics or literary studies. The strong linguistic heritage which ties Modern Icelandic to Old Norse, and to medieval Icelandic/Nordic literature, plays an important role in Icelandic language ideologies, and has been of importance for language policy and planning in Iceland, historically and today (cf., e.g., Árnason 2003, 274).

The Icelandic language community as a whole, and language practices in general in different layers of society in Iceland, have traditionally been described as quite homogenous (cf. e.g. Leonard 2011). Linguists generally assume that while there is a slight difference between Northern and Southern Icelandic in the pronunciation of a few consonants in a certain phonological context, this variation does not constitute different “dialects”. In other words, there is only one linguistic variety of Icelandic. This holds for Iceland itself; different varieties of Icelandic did, however, develop among the descendants of Icelandic immigrants in North America, in the 19th and early 20th century.

Proficiency in English is, by and large, reasonably good among Icelanders. In certain domains English is commonly used on a daily basis – for instance in the tourism industry, some businesses, banking, academia and university teaching. While the status of English is strong in some domains in Iceland, Icelandic is undoubtedly the principal daily language. Icelandic is the uncontested language of instruction in primary and secondary education, and it is (still) the most common language of instruction at Icelandic universities and colleges, particularly at the bachelor level (where about 80% of courses are in Icelandic). The cultural scene in Icelandic is thriving. For instance, in 2017 some 750 books were published in Icelandic. There are also dozens of periodicals and journals in Icelandic, as well as a number of radio and TV stations that broadcast in Icelandic.

Modern Icelandic (and also Old Norse or Old Icelandic) is taught as a second language at dozens of foreign universities around the globe. Moreover, hundreds of foreign students study Icelandic as a second language at the University of Iceland and at other Icelandic institutions and study programmes.

The only traditional indigenous minority language in Iceland is Icelandic Sign Language. It is the first language of about 300 people, while others have also learnt some Icelandic Sign Language, e.g. relatives of the native users, and also teachers, interpreters, and others. While native users of Icelandic Sign Language also know written Icelandic to some extent, interpretation between Icelandic and Icelandic Sign Language is needed for face-to-face communication, e.g., crucially, in the health care system. Signers in Iceland are provided with a certain amount of interpreter hours per year free of charge.

The historically straightforward correspondence between the ethnicity of the population in Iceland and having Icelandic as their mother tongue has been changing in recent years. Over a period of only twenty years or so (since about 1996), the proportion of immigrants in Iceland has risen from about 2% to about 10%. These immigrants are either foreign citizens or people who have acquired Icelandic citizenship. The largest single group of immigrants in Iceland are Poles. The cultural and ethnic profile of Icelanders has thus become more complex than it was only about two decades ago.

One might say that from a European perspective, consequently, the language profile of Iceland is becoming more “normal” or “common”, rather than being an exception to most other countries in Northern Europe. Icelandic spoken with a foreign accent is increasingly a part of everyday language experience, for example on Icelandic national broadcast media. Traditionally, native speakers of Icelandic were not accustomed to hearing Icelandic spoken in a foreign accent. This is not the case today.

While Icelandic remains the single official language in Iceland, and is by far the most common language for everyday communication, the Icelandic labour market today carries a multilingual profile, particularly in fields such as hotels and restaurants, cleaning services, and the construction industry. This can be illustrated by an example such as the following. In 2017, one of Iceland’s largest labour unions addressed its members in a poster in the following six languages (in this order): Icelandic, English, Polish, Lithuanian, Filipino, and Thai. The text on the poster read “Know Your Rights”. The language choice in the poster would have seemed rather strange some 20 years ago, but it is not unusual today to address different language groups in their own languages in a language situation or message like this.

Most immigrants have learnt Icelandic to some extent, and several of them speak Icelandic fluently. A number of them choose to communicate with native Icelanders mostly in English. For many situations and encounters this seems to be accepted language behaviour by a large section of the native population, and

consequently these immigrants are not necessarily under any pressure to acquire fluency in Icelandic, as long as they can communicate adequately in English.

2. Aims and dominant attitudes to national language planning in Iceland

As for dominant language attitudes in Iceland, a core theme of Icelandic language ideologies is grammatical, orthographic and lexical purism for Icelandic (cf. Ottósson 1990; Vikør 2010). This is evident in general language discourses, in polls, and in other investigations into Icelandic language attitudes (cf., e.g., Kristinsson 2014; Leonard/Árnason 2011; Kristiansen 2010).

Language and usage is a very common topic of daily discussion among ordinary people in Iceland, for example on forums such as Facebook and other social media, in the hot tubs at Icelandic swimming pools, at parties, and so on. The perceived deterioration of the Icelandic language is also a common theme of such discourses. It is quite common for ordinary people to come up with ingenious ideas for new lexical items (purist neologisms), either for fun or out of necessity, e.g. to attain a particular goal. In addition, a few terminology committees, and some groups of translators and text book authors, are very active in the systematic lexical cultivation of particular fields of expertise, for example in medicine, physics, computer science, trade, education theory and biology (in particular terminology for plants and fish).

The public is, in general, supportive of corpus planning efforts, such as the coining of Icelandic neologisms, the standardisation of orthography, and the giving/receiving of advice on proper usage. This is not surprising as it is consistent with the prevailing protectionist language ideologies in Iceland, cf. above.

As for domains of language use, according to opinion polls (Kristiansen 2010, 65-67) the general public in Iceland is relatively negative (compared to the other Nordic nations), e.g. with regard to the use of English as a workplace language in Icelandic enterprises. But such status concerns, i.e., about the wholesale use of other languages than Icelandic in certain domains such as commerce, technology, etc., are less prominent in everyday language discourses among Icelanders than questions about purism and usage (i.e., corpus issues). There is possibly some gap between overtly expressed language attitudes (cf. Kristiansen 2010, as above) and language practice in this regard. Various status planning efforts, e.g. those initiated by the Icelandic Language Council (see Kvaran, this volume) that seek to promote the use of Icelandic rather than English in as many domains of use as possible, are not always warmly welcomed by representatives of businesses, tourism agencies, and other local groups who would like to see their activities and operations in Iceland as part of international competition, and consequently tend to use English instead of Icelandic, e.g. in advertising, in board meetings, in public presentations, in service situations etc.

In short, with regard to dominant language attitudes in Iceland, the Icelandic speech community is perceived to have a protectionist language culture; however, this is deep-rooted ideologically primarily in relation to the forms of the language, while Icelanders in general seem to be more “pragmatic” as to domains of language use (Kristinsson 2014).

As far as the aims of national language policy and planning in Iceland are concerned, official bodies, in particular the Icelandic Language Council and the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, seek to promote the central themes of traditional Icelandic language culture and language ideologies that have been outlined above. This is also in conjunction with overt policies that have been explicitly laid down in writing by Parliament and Government recently, i.e. as official language policy in 2009, and as language legislation in 2011 (on the contents of these documents see Kvaran, this volume).

3 On institutional activities, division of tasks, and cooperation

As for activities carried out by particular national language planning agencies in Iceland, two official institutions are of importance in this regard, i.e., the Icelandic Language Council and the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies (notably its Language Planning Department). These two institutions cooperate closely. There is, however, a clear division of tasks. On the role of the Icelandic Language Council, see Kvaran, this volume. The operations of the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies are described briefly below.

The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies is a research institute that operates in close cooperation with the University of Iceland. The institute conducts research in the field of Icelandic literature and the Icelandic language (primarily on onomastics, lexicology, terminology, and LPP studies). In addition, the institute has other roles concerning Icelandic and Medieval Nordic language and literature studies. Among these is the preservation of collections of language and literature resources, such as medieval manuscripts (containing mythological texts, the Icelandic Sagas, and other historic material), and also folkloristic material, and historical and contemporary sources on Icelandic words, and place names. The institute strives to make its collections and resources accessible to the Icelandic public and to scholars in Iceland and abroad. The institute also coordinates courses and cooperates in teaching Icelandic (and Old Norse) as a second language, both in Iceland and at universities worldwide. In recent years, language technology projects have become an increasingly important field of activities at the institute, and at the time of writing (December 2017), the Icelandic government and parliament have allocated considerable funding for language technology for Icelandic in the period 2018-2022.

Among the tasks of the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies is

[P]romoting greater knowledge of the Icelandic language, strengthening it, preserving it in its spoken and written form and providing advice and guidelines on language usage on an academic basis, including on, among other things, terminology and neologisms. (*Lög um Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum* 2006 [Act on the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies]).

The Language Planning Department at the institute is devoted to the tasks of “providing advice and guidelines on language usage”. The Department provides the Icelandic population with language consultancy, and it publishes guidelines on proper language use, word formation, orthography, and other corpus planning matters. The Department promotes and supports terminological activities in a number of different fields of expertise (medicine, engineering, etc.), and a special Term Bank is operated for that purpose. Moreover, the Department provides the Icelandic Language Council with secretarial and consultancy assistance. While the publication of rules for spelling and punctuation is the formal responsibility of the Icelandic Language Council, in accordance with the Icelandic Language Act (*Lög um stöðu íslenskrar tungu og íslensks tákn máls* 2011 [Act on the Status of Icelandic and Icelandic Sign Language], see Kvaran, this volume) the Language Planning Department assists the Council in both preparing and publishing these.

Icelandic is not a “pluricentral” language, as it is not an official or “recognised” language in any countries other than Iceland. Therefore, questions hardly ever arise on corpus planning cooperation (in the strict sense) across borders. However, while Icelandic and the central Scandinavian Languages are not mutually intelligible, the Language Planning Department at the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies cooperates to a certain degree with similar bodies in the other Nordic countries. There is a tradition of Nordic conferences and meetings on language planning in general, for discussing methods in language consultancy, dissemination of advice, and so on. EFNIL is an important forum for European cooperation with regard to matters of language policy and planning. There is also some cooperation in the field of terminology between the Language Planning Department at the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies and other Nordic and European parties. A number of multilingual terminologies have been published or are under preparation as a result of such cooperation.

In short, the principal tasks of the Language Planning Department at the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies concern Icelandic corpus planning, while the activities of the Icelandic Language Council are primarily in the field of status planning.

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