

Language ideology and standardisation in Iceland

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LANGUAGE AND IDEOLOGY IN THE EARLY PERIOD

It can be claimed that the standard modern Icelandic language is more or less the same idiom as the language of classical Old Icelandic literature, in terms of morphology and syntax at least. To the extent that this is true, this linguistic continuity and modern homogeneity renders Icelandic unique in the European context. There is no reliable reference to linguistic variation or problems of norm selection in the early grammatical literature of Iceland, and Icelandic's relative linguistic homogeneity over such an extended period of time is an anomaly (Árnason 2003a, 2004; Guðmundsson 1977).

Few attempts have been made to reconstruct language ideologies in early Iceland, i.e. shared beliefs about language which serve to rationalise and justify certain linguistic usages within a speech community. Although the literary language can be said to form a sort of norm or standard, it is difficult, strictly speaking, to discuss the early period in terms of standardisation. However, an argument can be made for some kind of linguistic ideology having been present almost *ab initio*, i.e. shortly after the settlement of Iceland in the ninth century. Twelfth century texts such as Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* ('The Book of Icelanders') contain references which border on the ideological. Although Ari is writing at an early period in Iceland's history, it is clear (but surprising) that the author has an 'Icelandic' perspective, as implied by the very name of the text.

In addition, one of the objectives of the twelfth century First Grammatical Treatise, which proposes a spelling standard for the writing of Icelandic, may have been to create a kind of Icelandic linguistic self-awareness. One finds passages such as: 'I have written an alphabet for us Icelanders too' (Benediktsson 1972: 208), and it is interesting to note that reference is *not* made to the Norwegians. The very fact that Ari wrote in the vernacular rather than in Latin, which was probably not an obvious choice at the time, restricted his audience to Norse (or rather Icelandic) speakers – rather than opening it to a more international audience. There is in the text an expectation that legal codes are written in the 'national' language, but interestingly the author refers to it as generally *vár tunga* ('our language') and not explicitly *íslenzk*. The First Grammarian chose not only to write in Icelandic, but also to use Norse (and not Latin) terminology or calques such as *raddarstafr* (not *vocalis*) and *samhljóðandi* (not *consonans*). The Latin terms must have been readily available and yet in a process reminiscent of the much later linguistic purism of the nineteenth century, the Norse terms were used.

It might thus be said that the First Grammatical Treatise and *Íslendingabók* represent the first evidence of Icelandic cultural nationalism, or at least a confident cultural self-awareness on the part of the authors. The First Grammarian may be invoking ideology when he clearly defines the Icelanders and implies that the 'them' are those who do not speak (or at least write) the Icelandic language. In thinking about language and ideology in early Iceland, one should also consider the Prologue of the *Snorra Edda*, a handbook of poetry written in the 13th century. It represents a remarkable early linguistic awareness and at the same time a strong belief that the Nordic heritage and language was a noble culture on a par with Græco-Roman literature. The whole venture of writing this unique handbook of poetry can in fact be taken as a sign of an ideological inclination toward elevating the status of the vernacular to the same level as Latin or Greek. Icelandic may be unique in the sense of its relative linguistic

homogeneity which has prevailed over the course of a millennium, but also because of its culture of persistent linguistic self-awareness.

But although some of the early grammatical literature could be interpreted to be ideological in nature, the meaning of ideology (if there was one) in the medieval period is likely to have been very different from any understanding of the term in a modern context. In linguistic discussions today, ideology tends to be often coupled with ideas of preservation, standardisation and nationalism. What we can say is that there was a very early linguistic awareness in Iceland and that there seems to have been a pre-occupation with the Icelandic language, the language of the poets and the sagas.

NORM-MAINTENANCE

The maintenance of this norm has been the objective of language planners in Iceland through the centuries. (For a recent overview on language planning and language policy in Iceland see Hilmarsson-Dunn and Kristinsson 2010.) The basis of the norm is a body of revered texts (the Icelandic sagas as well as Eddaic and skaldic poetry) and the lack of dialect fragmentation over the course of a millennium has enhanced the perception that it is a relatively homogeneous, archaic treasure that is being preserved. The lack of norm variation may have facilitated subsequent language planning because it meant the object of language policy was something that was commoditised, i.e. there is wide-spread agreement on the social symbolism of the variation that exists.

During the Reformation in the 16th century and later, church leaders such as Guðbrandur Þorláksson and scholars like Arngrímur Jónsson were very conscious of the value of the norm of the sagas and Eddas for the continuity of Icelandic culture. It was taken to be of paramount importance to present the word of god in the correct way and to follow the rules of venerable poetry in the new Lutheran hymns. It is sometimes said that Arngrímur Jónsson was the first purist and there is a record in his book, *Crymogæa* (1610), of disapproval regarding the influence of traders' language on Icelandic. Eggert Ólafsson, the enlightenment reformer, travelled around Iceland between 1752 and 1757 and described the state of the Icelandic language as 'lamentable', especially the language spoken on the coast. Iceland having been a Danish colony for centuries, the influence of Danish on the Icelandic language in certain contexts was clearly quite strong at this point in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and the anecdotal evidence suggests that Icelandic was threatened to some degree (see Ottósson 1990 for an overview). But historical research indicates that there was little linguistic variation through the centuries. We do not know much about the potential effect that the official or semi-official ideology had on actual language use, but it can be argued that the relatively high level of literacy and the important role that literature played in the culture had a stabilising effect. The changes (mostly phonological) that took place did not cause major problems for writing and orthography, and most of them have been spread over the whole area (Árnason 2003a). The result is that written Old and Modern Icelandic look very much alike, although the pronunciation has changed considerably.

It is in the 19th century when the preservation ideology was coupled with Romanticism and the separatist movement that linguistic purism (mainly against Danish) came to the forefront and language became a political tool. Much of the linguistic and cultural renewal in the 19th century was driven by intellectuals based in Copenhagen. The emphasis was on ensuring the existence of an archaising linguistic 'other', one that is maximally different from Danish and as close as possible to the historical norm and the language of the rural communities on which the linguistic identity was established. This ideology prevailed into the 20th century and today there is widespread support for the language policy of norm-maintenance. It would be wrong to suggest that a standardised written language as such led to homogeneity in the spoken language. We know that the lack of dialectal fragmentation in Icelandic goes deep into its lin-

guistic history, but it appears instead that an early standardised written language was developed alongside a relatively homogenous vernacular.

The Icelandic language has been described in the 20th century as the *fföregg* ‘egg of life’ of the Icelandic nation. This metaphor implies that language is at the root of an Icelandic identity and is a cohesive force. It is this one relatively uniform language that ties all Icelanders to their early written traditions and culture. It acts as a symbol of linguistic continuity. Using the metaphor of an ‘egg’ is also suggestive of the fragility of Icelandic. Although the language is not endangered in any way, the status of such a small language could potentially change quite rapidly.

In accordance with this ideology, archaism is held in high regard – there prevails a romantic notion of preserving a museum piece. Archaism is thought to be indicative of linguistic purity and Icelanders employ metaphors of pathogenic organisms to discuss grammatical phenomena (dative disease, genitive phobia, non-Icelandic words are described as ‘blemishes’). There is a tendency to emphasise (and exaggerate) the homogeneity of the language, to gloss over sociolinguistic differences and to present Iceland as one monolithic language community.

MODERNITY

During the Second World War, Iceland was occupied by the British military and later by the Americans. Ever since, English has been seen as the main threat to the ideology of linguistic preservation. In the 20th century the focus of linguistic purism thus switched from Danish to English and terms like *málvernd* ‘language protection’ and *málrækt* ‘language cultivation’ featured prominently in the discussion. The ‘egg of life’ was thought by some to be threatened by the availability of American television transmitted from the controversial US military base in Keflavík from the early 1960s onwards. Subsequently, the task of preserving the ‘old’ Icelandic language was seen as becoming significantly more difficult with the introduction of new media channels such as video and Internet, the costs and inconvenience of streaming Icelandic and developing local media channels being simply too great for such a small speech community.

The question of the status (as well as the form) of Icelandic used to be very clear and simple: Icelandic was the language of the Icelanders, and not anybody else. However, the trend of advancing globalisation has brought about two fundamental changes. On the one hand, Icelanders started using other languages (principally English), for example in pop music, education and science. On the other hand, immigrants to Iceland have now started using Icelandic. This has made the sociolinguistic situation more complex and language attitudes seem sometimes to be contradictory: people who demand that immigrant workers use Icelandic are eager to show their own proficiency in English at work, for example. Although the main issue is a status problem and centres around the value and domain of Icelandic vs. English, in public debate and folk-linguistics the discussion is mostly about form: preserving the pure form of the standard, strengthening it and getting rid of the loanwords.

With rapid urbanisation, it would seem increasingly that Reykjavík and its surroundings now form the norm centre. The only potential alternative to the Reykjavík norm would seem to be the North and Akureyri. In the early 20th century the speech of the people in the North of Iceland was often seen to be better and less corrupt, although these perceptions are now gradually changing. The main result of a survey completed in the 1980s was that majority variants were gaining ground regardless of geography (Árnason 2003a; Árnason and Thráinsson 2003). This suggests that the typical pattern regarding change is being repeated, namely that innovations end either by spreading throughout the community or being ‘driven back’ and superseded by more common variants. An interesting case in point is the so-called

flámæli or ‘slack jawed speech’, a merger of mid-high and mid-low front vowels, which started in the 19th century in more than one location. This variant was heavily stigmatised, and the 1980s survey showed that it was virtually extinct. Here public opinion and official policy were in agreement, and it is not totally clear which was the more influential.

DEMOTISATION OR DESTANDARDISATION?

The form of the modern Icelandic ideal standard has been clearly defined: it is ‘pure Icelandic’ which is effectively the language of the sagas. When it comes to defining ‘non-standard usage’, the myth has been that there is no such thing. And there are no clear definitions of low or local varieties, comparable to what one finds in many other societies. However, there is a clear distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ usage (*málfar*). Most of the examples of ‘bad’ usage come from the speech of the younger people, and manifest themselves in terms of lack of phonetic clarity and the use of foreign ‘stains’ or ‘blemishes’. If one were to define a form-function mapping which could be used in this context, one could talk in terms of ‘pure’ Icelandic vs. ‘impure’ Icelandic as two separate (high vs. low) varieties. Alternatively, one might label these simply as different styles or registers.

In any case it is clear that the advent of English has not (from the functional point of view) ‘destandardised’ Icelandic in favour of English, creating for example an exogenous standard. There is arguably some degree of ‘demotisation’ in the sense that the (formal) puristic demands on official language use are not as strict as they used to be. It seems to be the case that ‘impure Icelandic’ is gaining ground both by form changes, so that Icelandic today is commonly spoken in public (including prime time TV presentations of the daily news) with features which used to be associated with ‘impure’ Icelandic, and by functional changes so that some sort of low variety is allowed to be heard in new domains, like radio and other media.

Features of this ‘impure’ Icelandic speech are being adopted by younger people, who also evaluate this way of speaking more positively than other ‘accents’. It is thus likely that the modern and ‘less pure’ Icelandic is replacing ‘pure’ conservative Icelandic as the ‘best language’, especially when the evaluative perspective is ‘speaker-dynamism’. In other words, modern, ‘less pure’ speech indexes an ‘effective, straightforward, self-assured, interesting, cool...’ persona – i.e. a successful media personality. It is ironic that a significant number of young Icelanders think that speaking English has some prestige, but that ‘non-standard’ Icelandic is at the same time defined principally in terms of use of *slettur* (i.e. English words).

THE CURRENT IDEOLOGY

The current ideology is still the one of linguistic continuity or ‘holding the thread’. The role of the Icelandic Language Council (established in 1964), according to the recently passed law (2006) is to advise authorities on the matters of the Icelandic language (*málefni íslenskrar tungu*) and put forth proposals for an official language policy. It can of its own accord comment on good or bad treatment (*meðferð*) of the language in official domains. As before, the priority is the preservation of the form, but in a document ratified by the Icelandic parliament in 2009 the main objective is a status one, to secure the use of Icelandic in all spheres of society.

And some ideological changes may have been taking place. Thus, according to Friðriksson (2008: 80), school curricula from 1989 to 1999 show differences in emphasis. Early in this period it is seen as imperative that a strong link is maintained between the old and the modern language, but later, there is more emphasis on strengthening Icelandic national identity (pre-

sumably because some believe that national Icelandic identity is in some way threatened by globalisation).

In looking to understand better the attitudes that underpin such language ideologies, we must bear in mind that the level of ‘linguistic consciousness’ remains very high in Iceland. The matched guise part of the MIN project was unsuccessful in eliciting hidden values for Icelandic (Ewen and Kristiansen 2006: 46), but this does not mean that they do not exist (cf. Óladóttir 2009; Kristiansen 2010). It seems that Icelandic language attitudes are in fact contradictory. The phonological survey referred to above suggests that phonological variables which are focused (markers) are more sensitive to change, but that the direction is not predictable. In some cases the ‘recommended’ variant gains ground, but in others it loses ground. Variables with low focus (indicators) show a slower rate of change. The basic ideology of preserving the language and securing its place vis-à-vis English has the ‘official’ support of the majority, although the presence of English is very strong indeed.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

Ari Páll Kristinsson has shown that traditional national radio has helped to define a standard for spoken language (broadcasters used to be typically speakers from the North of Iceland). The State Radio (*Ríkisútvarpið*) may have had some standardising effects on the vocabulary too (Kristinsson 2009: 80). However, Kristinsson’s data are from 1995, and the situation may have changed considerably since then. It is our impression that radio is not as dogmatic as it used to be in implementing language policy. It is likely that new radio channels (the first one launched in 1986) have had an effect and perhaps created new ‘communities of practice’ and associated styles or registers.

As for newspapers and other written media, these became established in the 19th century in Iceland, but great changes have taken place. In the middle of the 20th century, Icelandic had four national newspapers, but now there are three; the industry seems to be struggling and losing ground in competition with other media and the Internet. *Morgunblaðið*, the oldest newspaper, tends to be conservative in style and represents a clear norm that most of the written media adhere to. The role of the newspapers still seems to be important in acting as a mechanism to introduce neologisms into the language – a process that has a history and continues to work very well. However, due principally to the use of the Internet, newspaper reading is on the wane. And the form of the written language used in electronic communication, private or public, is undoubtedly less formal than in the printed media. In general, it can be said that public communication has been decentralised so that it is no longer the case that every Icelander reads at least one of the national newspapers and listens to Channel 1 on the State Radio.

American films dominate the cinema culture, but an incipient Icelandic film industry seems to be growing and this may prove to be a medium to promote the language. Icelandic television went on air in 1966 to combat the threat from English, although there is a great deal of English and American content on Icelandic television. It is interesting to note that the threat has been considered to be a linguistic one, as much as one linked to concerns over cultural hegemony. Whilst the threat was recognised, there are few television programmes transmitted in Icelandic, and non-Icelandic programmes are subtitled, rather than dubbed. This means that spoken English is the most commonly heard language in film and television.

CONCLUSION

Language purists are now much less vocal than they used to be, and there has been surprisingly little discussion amongst language planners of the use of English as the language of the

Internet. It is true that there are a high number of bloggers who write in Icelandic, but it is difficult for any small nation language policy to confront the issue of the language of the Internet. Many of the websites that Icelanders look at are inevitably in English. The interest in keeping the language ‘pure’ seems to have subsided slightly in the face of increasing globalisation. Special radio programmes prescribing ‘correct’ Icelandic grammar are no longer on the air, for instance, and there seem to be fewer articles in the newspapers devoted to language. From both the speakers’ and the language planners’ perspectives, the enthusiasm for insisting on the ideology of linguistic purism appears to have begun to wane over the last 20 years. The linguistic ideology in Iceland remains one of ‘holding the thread’ and caring for the well-being of the standard, but it is arguably less actively enforced than it was previously.

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