



THE FUTURE OF THE ICELANDIC LANGUAGE

Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at
Scandinavia House

New York
10 May 2018

Dear guests – *kæru vinir!*

According to written sources – the Saga of the Greenlanders and the Saga of Erik the Red – it was over a thousand years ago that Norse or Icelandic words were first spoken on this great continent we now know as North America. Archaeological remains have since confirmed these testimonies. What we do not know, however, is what the voyagers from Iceland and Greenland actually said on this historic occasion. It is tempting to guess that when they had land in sight somebody on the vessel – the *knörr* – exclaimed: “*Ek sé land*”, “I see land”.

The Norse entourage then built camp, they hunted, they encountered and had skirmishes with the indigenous peoples. But then they left for good, there was no permanent Norse settlement.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Icelandic scholar and writer Sigurður Nordal speculated what might have happened if they had persevered. It was not totally unthinkable, Nordal wrote, that the Norse adventurers could ultimately have had the upper hand in conflicts with local tribes. They would then begin to farm the land, gradually more people would arrive from Greenland and Iceland and Norway. The foothold would last. Leifur Eiríksson, Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, Þorfinnur Karlsefni, Þórdís Eiríksdóttir and others who ventured into the unchartered waters to the west of Greenland would not return.

Guðríður did give birth to Snorri Þorfinnsson in the new world, the Sagas say, but then we would later have had Þórdís Snorradóttir and Þorfinnur Snorrason, and so on and so forth. The settlement of Vinland, the good land of the wine, would succeed, and as Sigurður Nordal concluded in his thought experiment, the Norse language would survive on this vast continent.

At the start of this millennium, the popular thinker Jared Diamond wondered in the same vein as Nordal did. What if the Norse had stayed here? “In that case,” Diamond wrote in his bestseller, *Collapse*, “Vinland might have undergone a population explosion, the Norse might have spread over North America ... and I as a twentieth-century American might now be writing this book in an old Norse-based language like modern Icelandic or Faeroese, rather than in English.”

Þetta gerðist ekki. This did not happen. History took another turn. English became the predominant tongue on this vast continent. Furthermore, it is now the only language in the world that is truly global. But let us not forget that it has its Norse flavour. Before and around the time of the voyages to North America, Vikings were busy raiding the British Isles, leaving their indelible mark on Old English. “I ... might now be writing this book”, Diamond wrote. “*Ég mætti nú rita þessa bók,*” we can say in modern Icelandic, and Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir and Leifur Eiríksson could have used the very same words; so little has my mother tongue changed over the centuries.

English, this fluid and flexible language, has also adopted Icelandic words and expressions. In English, a geyser erupts, and people can go berserk – *ganga berserksgang*. Now, I understand that this is of no concern to protagonists of the English language, or native English speakers in general. Conversely, in Iceland we are increasingly concerned with the incessant and increasing influence of English on the Icelandic language. Just like it is impossible to determine which Norse word was first uttered in this part of the world, we will never know which Icelander it was who first used English slang instead of perfectly good and proper Icelandic words. Nor do we know for sure when that might have happened. A smart guess, however, would be that such events occurred with ever greater intensity after the occupation of Iceland by British troops in 1940, and then the arrival of U.S. forces the following year. At that time, Icelandic intellectuals quickly complained about English words corrupting the ancient and pure Icelandic language.

The struggle had begun. Then other invasions ensued: Rock’n’roll and television, including radio and TV stations at the U.S. military base at Keflavík. And at stake was not only the purity of the Icelandic language, it was felt, but Icelandic culture. Examples of worries and indignation abound. In 1981, the board of Icelandic State Television – the only service which reached the whole country – gave in to popular pressure and agreed by the narrowest of margins to

approve the broadcast of *Dallas*, the popular soap opera. The public was pleased but if readers' letters in Icelandic newspapers are to be believed some people foresaw the end of Icelandic culture, the end of Icelandic nationhood.

What would they think now? In today's world we have countless TV stations instead of the single linear state broadcaster, we have the Internet and we have mobile phones. We give a *læk* on Facebook and when we conduct searches we do not necessarily use the verb *leita* but rather the new-fangled *gúggla*.

And we have computer games. The latest craze is *Fortnite*, the popular pastime of youngsters in Iceland today. When they enter that virtual world they talk about "*að join-a*", "to join" but not the proper Icelandic expression, *taka þátt*; they decide to "*battle-a*", i.e. to join battle but not *berjast* as you should say in Icelandic; they search for a grenade, not a *handsprengja* and they enter the safe zone, not *öruggt svæði* or even the old word *vébönd*, used for instance to denote the weaponless land around the old legal assemblies, the *þing*.

The intrusiveness of English does not only occur through individual words or expressions. The whole structure of the language is giving in. Sentences are often filled with nouns instead of verbs, which is more in line with Icelandic conventions, and adolescents, in particular, use oversimplified conjugations. One linguist has predicted that in a generation or so, the accusative will have vanished almost completely. Conversely, *dativitis* – the incorrect use of the dative case – has become an epidemic. Also, the subjunctive has come under threat and, apparently, the vocabulary of many teenagers is miniscule. Recently one teacher lamented that smart high-school students did not know what simple words like *umburðarlyndi* or *beinlínis* meant – tolerance and exactly in English. And in academia, another subsection of society, the emphasis on international publications and the welcome inflow of international students has weakened the status of Icelandic.

Yes, the relative isolation of Iceland and its inhabitants has vanished. In 1968, half a century ago, some 40,000 tourists visited Iceland; last year we had over two million visitors. Very few of these guests speak any Icelandic. Thus, there is no *Flugleiðir* anymore but *Icelandair*, no *Flugfélag Íslands* but *Air Iceland Connect*, and the hotel names *Loftleiðir*, *Saga* and *Esja* are gone, replaced with international brand names. Often restaurants and other establishments have English names.

Furthermore, in this millennium Icelandic society has undergone drastic changes. Today, more than ten percent of all inhabitants in Iceland are either foreign-born or their parents were born abroad. Some of these new citizens speak perfect Icelandic, others can make themselves understood but lack comprehensive vocabulary and mastery of grammar. Many workers are not

necessarily intent on staying in the country for good so they see no reason to learn Icelandic. For instance, a fair number of foreign veterinarians now work in Iceland and communicate in English or other languages. Earlier this week, the Parliamentary Ombudsman censured the Icelandic Food and Veterinary Authority for hiring vets who do not speak Icelandic, but got the reply that it was impossible to find qualified Icelanders or persons with a rudimentary grasp of Icelandic to fill the necessary positions. On construction sites, in fish factories, hotels and restaurants, a multitude of foreign languages can be heard, not necessarily Icelandic.

Society is changing, and what will the future hold in store for us? In a sense, the future has already arrived. The world of voice command or voice recognition has arrived. “Hey Siri”, “Hey Alexa”, “Cortana!” can be heard in Iceland, with questions or commands following this start of a conversation with your mobile phone or other devices. But in this new world, the gadgets do not understand Icelandic. “*Segðu mér Sigríður*” will not elicit a favourable response. Is this perhaps the gravest threat the Icelandic language has ever faced?

On the global stage, the best-known advocate of the Icelandic language is almost certainly one of my predecessors, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir. As President, Vigdís constantly wanted to protect and cultivate our beloved language. After her tenure, she has served as the UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for Languages and spoken of the need to make Icelandic available in the digital world. “Otherwise, [it] will end in the Latin bin,” Vigdís has warned.

Others have raised similar concerns. The most pessimistic persons foresee that Icelandic will simply not survive this latest intrusion, that after a few decades Icelandic will at best co-exist next to English, useless in daily life, stagnant, languid and antiquated.

Dear friends! In a while, the panellists in this symposium on the future of Icelandic will discuss this threat, this apocalyptic vision, the possible death of a language. I will conclude by a few thoughts about how we Icelanders can keep our mother-tongue alive and well in the modern age.

First of all, the battle is not lost. We just need to soldier on, not battle-a or join-a, but continue to counterattack and fend off intrusions. Sigurður Nordal, the writer who imagined the prevalence of Norse in the new world, invented the word *tölva* for computer, the combination of *tala* – number – and *völva* – soothsayer. Speakers of Icelandic never use the word computer; they have this brilliant translation.

Also, we must make sure that we teach Icelandic in a satisfactory manner. We must encourage the publication of books in Icelandic, the making of movies in Icelandic, the creation of computer games in Icelandic. The market is there.

Furthermore, we must guard the teaching of foreign languages to schoolchildren in Iceland, start at an earlier age, even. At the same time, we need to make sure that Icelandic is the main language of use in Icelandic universities. And this is of vital importance: We must improve the teaching of Icelandic to new residents from abroad, and have it affordable. We must be helpful and tolerant. We must accept and understand that those who are learning the language as adults may make mistakes and speak with a heavy accent. Last year, some people criticized a foreign-born member of parliament for not speaking flawless Icelandic. Fortunately, she received wide support, and my Icelandic-Canadian wife Eliza was among those who came to her defence: “I speak with an accent,” she pointed out, “decline words incorrectly, and sometimes say pure nonsense which makes people laugh or they do not understand a thing until I have explained myself again.”

But that is OK! A modern, inclusive and compassionate society needs considerate speakers and listeners. Therefore, we must also accept the presence of English as the language of communication, international education and entertainment in a globalized world. In that spirit, we have to accept some foreign words just like we have always done. The verb *gúggla* is fine as long as it declines the Icelandic way – *gúggla*, *gúgglaði*, *gúgglað*. The word *læk* is fine, a nice neuter noun like *lak* or *ryk*.

Likewise, while we must be accommodating towards the tourists who visit Iceland we should not show some silly subservience. Our visitors come for exotic and unique Iceland; why should they fear strange or incomprehensible words like *Eyjafjallajökull* or *veitingastaður* or *krá* or *hundslappadrífa*? We should have the self-confidence to give our establishments and companies Icelandic names. – *Veitingastaður* and *krá* means restaurant and pub, respectively. *Hundslappadrífa* is more difficult to translate, literally the description of snowflakes as large as a dog’s paw, or snow gently falling down from the heavens in calm weather. And *Eyjafjallajökull* is the name of the volcano which erupted in 2010, halting flight traffic for days in the Western hemisphere. It literally means the mountainous glacier by the islands. I well remember that one U.S. television presenter threw his hands up in the air when the eruption was hot news and exclaimed that this was one unpronounceable name – henceforth he would just call it “I forgot my yoghurt”.

But, dear friends, we will not give up! If we do all this, if we adopt this approach, we are on the right track. Still, everything depends on one thing: We must get Icelandic into our mobile phones and our cars, our refrigerators and our toasters. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we fought for our independence in the actual world. In this new millennium our existence as an independent nation depends heavily on the healthy survival of the Icelandic language. If we lose the language, we lose our identity. If we lose the language,

we lose the link to past generations, our literature and our cultural heritage. We lose and you lose. *Tölum íslensku, gott fólk!* Icelandic tales, good folks!