

**13<sup>th</sup> Annual EFNIL Conference**

*Language use in public administration – theory and practice in the European states*

Helsinki, 8 October 2015

Ari Páll Kristinsson:

***Language in public administration in present-day Iceland.  
Some challenges for majority language management***

## **Introduction**

**Icelandic *de jure* the sole official language of Iceland**

**Icelandic is the native language of about 90% of the population**

**About 330,000 inhabitants**

**About 30,000 first and second generation immigrants**

**About 300 people active users of Icelandic Sign Language**

**Scandinavian languages enjoy special status in a few administration and information settings.**

**English: Some isolated examples of legal provisions where English has been granted limited status in administration along with Icelandic.**

## **Outline of the rest of the presentation**

**(1) the status of Iceland and Icelandic vis à vis the EU and EU judicial language**

**(2a) the use of Icelandic vs. English,**

**(2b) the situation of some minorities in Iceland**

**(3) Icelandic language legislation – contains a provision on *plain language* in public administration**

## **Iceland vis à vis the EU, and Icelandic legal language vis à vis EU texts**

### **Iceland a member of the EEA Agreement**

A dialogue has taken place between the EU and Iceland on Iceland's status as a candidate country. It clarified that the government has no intention of resuming the accession process, that any commitments made by the former government in the accession process are superseded by the new policy and that the EU should take action in view of the fact that Iceland can no longer be considered a candidate country [...] At the same time, emphasis is placed on reinforcing the implementation of the EEA Agreement and on closer collaboration with the EU on that basis.

*(Ministry for Foreign Affairs (2015))*

<http://www.mfa.is/tasks/european-co-operation/questions-and-answers>

**Translation Centre of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs**

**Staff 34 people**

**Icelandic terminologies have been greatly enriched over the past quarter of a century**

**Some concerns about putative negative linguistic effects**

**Not corroborated by research**

## **Icelandic vs. English on Icelandic territory and in Icelandic administration**



## Act

### **on the status of the Icelandic language and Icelandic sign language.**

THE EXECUTANTS OF THE POWERS OF THE PRESIDENT OF ICELAND  
under Article 8 of the Constitution, the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the Althingi and the  
President of the Supreme Court,  
*make known:* the Althingi has passed this Act, and we confirm it by our signatures:

#### Article 1

##### *National language – official language.*

Icelandic is the national language of the Icelandic people and the official language in Iceland.

#### Article 2

##### *The Icelandic language.*

The national language is the common language of the people of Iceland. The government authorities shall ensure that it is possible to use it in all areas of the life of the nation. Everyone who is resident in Iceland shall have the opportunity of using Icelandic for general participation in the life of the Icelandic nation as provided for in further detail in separate legislation.

#### Article 3

##### *Icelandic sign language.*

Icelandic sign language is the first language of those who have to rely on it for expression and communication, and of their children. The government authorities shall nurture and support it.

All those who need to use sign language shall have the opportunity to learn and use Icelandic sign language as soon as their language acquisition process begins, or from the time when deafness, hearing impairment or deaf-blindness is diagnosed. Their immediate family members shall have the same right.

#### Article 4

##### *Icelandic Braille.*

Icelandic Braille is the first written language of those who have to rely on it for expression and communication. All those who need to be able to read Braille because of impaired vision shall have the opportunity to learn Icelandic Braille as soon as they are able to do so.

## Article 5

### *Language policy.*

Central and local government authorities shall be responsible for preserving and enhancing the Icelandic language and shall ensure that it is used. Regarding language policy and the status of the Icelandic language, collaboration with the Icelandic Language Committee shall be sought (*cf.* Article 6).

Central and local government authorities in Iceland shall encourage the development, study, teaching and dissemination of Icelandic sign language and in other ways support cultural activities, education and awareness-raising for deaf, hearing-impaired and deaf-blind people. Regarding a language policy and the status of Icelandic sign language, collaboration shall be sought with the Icelandic Sign Language Committee (*cf.* Article 7).

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture shall monitor the implementation of this Act and may call for reports from individual executive institutions for this purpose.

## Article 6

### *The Icelandic Language Committee.*

The Minister shall appoint the Icelandic Language Committee; its term of appointment shall be four years at a time. Sixteen persons shall sit on the Icelandic Language Committee.

Furthermore, the committee may offer one or two persons seats on the committee if it considers this to be of advantage for its work. Each of the following shall nominate one person to the committee: the National Broadcasting Corporation, the National Theatre, the Association of Icelandic-Language Teachers, the Icelandic Writers' Union, the Union of Icelandic Journalists, the Professional Terminology Society (*Íðorðafélagið*) on behalf of individual professional terminology committees, the Icelandic Association of Translators and Interpreters, Icelandic Standards, the Icelandic Library and Information Science Association (*Upplýsing*), the Association of Icelandic Non-Fiction Writers (*Hagþenkir*) and the Union of Local Authorities in Iceland. The Standing Committee of the Rectors of Icelandic Higher Education Institutions shall nominate two persons to sit on the committee. The Minister shall appoint two persons without nomination; one of them shall be the chairman, the other the vice-chairman. Furthermore, the Minister of Welfare shall appoint one representative from the immigrant community. The Icelandic Language Committee shall divide responsibilities between its members.

The role of the Icelandic Language Committee shall be to provide government authorities with advice on matters concerning the Icelandic language on an academic basis and to make proposals to the Minister regarding language policy, and also to make annual assessments of the status of the Icelandic language. The committee may take the initiative on drawing attention to things that are well done, and also to where there is room for improvement, in the use of Icelandic in the public sphere.

The Icelandic Language Committee shall compile rules on Icelandic orthography which shall apply, for example, in spelling teaching in schools; these shall be issued by the Minister. Fundamental changes to orthographical rules shall be subject to the approval of the Minister. The office of the Icelandic Language Committee shall be in the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies.

The Minister shall issue regulations on further aspects of the activities of the Icelandic Language Committee.

#### Article 7

##### *Icelandic Sign Language Committee.*

The Minister shall appoint five persons to the Icelandic Sign Language Committee for four years at a time, and the same number of alternate members. The Faculty of Humanities of the University of Iceland, the Communications Centre for the Deaf and Hearing-Impaired, nongovernmental organisations of the deaf and hearing-impaired in Iceland and the Union of Local Authorities in Iceland shall be consulted when appointments are made. The Minister shall choose the chairman and vice-chairman of the Icelandic Sign Language Committee. The role of the Icelandic Sign Language Committee shall be to provide government authorities with advice on matters of all types concerning Icelandic sign language and to support the development of Icelandic sign language and its use in the life of the Icelandic nation.

The office of the Icelandic Sign Language Committee shall be in the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies.

The Minister shall issue regulations on further aspects of the activities of the Icelandic Sign Language Committee.

#### Article 8

##### *Official language of the government authorities.*

Icelandic is the language of the Althingi, the courts, the government authorities (both central and local), schools at all levels of the educational system and other institutions that are involved in executive actions and that render services to the public.

#### Article 9

##### *Interpreting and sign-language interpreting for government authorities.*

The right to the services of an interpreter and the obligation of the courts to seek the assistance of authorised interpreters and sign-language interpreters are laid down in the Code of Civil Procedure and the Code of Criminal Procedure.

Government authorities shall strive to ensure that persons who do not understand Icelandic are able to have their necessary business transacted and acquaint themselves with the contents of documents and official statements, etc., which concern them.

Article 10

*Language policy of central and local government authorities.*

The language used in the functions of central and local government authorities, or on their behalf, shall be tasteful, simple and clear.

Article 11

*Professional, technical and scientific vocabulary in Icelandic.*

Government authorities shall take measures to have professional, technical and scientific vocabulary in Icelandic develop steadily, be accessible to everyone and be used as widely as possible.

Article 12

*Official language in the international arena.*

Icelandic is the official language of Iceland in the international arena.

Article 13

*Obligations of central and local government and the status of Icelandic sign language.*

Central and local government authorities shall ensure that all those who need Icelandic sign language services have access to them. Central and local government authorities shall be responsible for preserving Icelandic sign language, developing it and contributing towards its use. Priority shall be given to ensuring that Icelandic sign language terminology in all professional, technical and scientific spheres can develop and that it is used.

Icelandic sign language is of equal status to Icelandic as a medium of expression for interpersonal communication, and discrimination between individuals on grounds of which language they use is prohibited.

Article 14

*Commencement. Repealed provisions.*

This Act takes immediate effect. On commencement of this Act, Article 9 of the Act No. 40/2006, on the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, stands repealed.

*Done at Reykjavík, 7 June 2011.*

**Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir. Ásta R. Jóhannesdóttir. Ingibjörg Benediktsdóttir.**

(L.S.)

*Svandís Svavarsdóttir.*

**Icelandic Road and Coastal Administration put up new digital traffic signs in 2013**



## **Linguistic minorities**

**300 users of Icelandic Sign Language (ÍTM)**

**first and second generation immigrants about 10% of the population**

**about 2% in 1996**

## **Legal provision on plain language**

### **Art. 10 of the language legislation (2011):**

#### ***Málfarsstefna ríkis og sveitarfélaga.***

**Mál það sem er notað í starfsemi ríkis og sveitarfélaga eða á vegum þeirra skal vera vandað, einfalt og skýrt.**

**‘one shall use standard, simple, and plain language in the functions of the state and municipal authorities’.**

**some concerns about poor and/or complicated style in official documents**



**Example:**

**Icelandic tax authorities (Directorate of Internal Revenue)**

**Gjöld:**

Ofgr. staðgreiðsla og álag	-173.602					-173.602
Gjald í Framkv.sjóð aldraðra	10.159					10.159
Útvarpsgjald	5.934	5.933	5.933			17.800
Slysatr.gjald v/ heimilisstarfa	450					450
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<b>Samtals</b>	<b>-157.059</b>	<b>5.933</b>	<b>5.933</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>-145.193</b>

Inneign að fjárhæð **145.193**

**The National University Hospital of Iceland**



***ómskoðun***

(purist lexical item)

**‘ultra-sound scanning, ultrasonography’**

***fósturgreining***

(purist lexical item)

**‘foetus analysis’**

**vs.**

***sónar***

(borrowing)

**Complaints about opaque texts**

**Power in society**

**Demand for transparency in administration**

**Plain language**

**Digitalized administration**