

Guðrún Kvaran

The Icelandic Language Council: past, present and future

Abstract (Icelandic)

Greinin fjallar um Íslenska málnefnd í fortíð, nútíð og óvissri framtíð og reynt verður að lýsa stuttlega stöðu tungumálsins í dag eins og beðið var um í bréfi til fyrirlesara þar sem settar voru fram tólf spurningar. Ekki eiga allar spurningarnar við um Íslenska málnefnd í dag en þeim sem út af standa svarar Ari Páll Kristinsson hjá Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum.

Eftir stuttan inngang verður í öðrum kafla sagt frá stofnun Íslenskrar málnefndar og hvaða þörf menn sáu fyrir slíka nefnd fyrir rúmri hálfri öld. Rakin verða helstu viðfangsefni nefndarinnar framan af og gerð grein fyrir þeim breytingum sem urðu á starfi hennar við sameiningu fimm stofnana í íslenskum fræðum 2006. Í þriðja kafla eru talin upp verkefni Íslenskrar málnefndar eftir 2006. Sagt er frá norrænni málstefnu og hvaða áhrif hún hafði á gerð íslenskrar málstefnu sem Alþingi samþykkti 2009. Í tengslum við málstefnuna voru samþykkt lög um íslenskt mál og íslenskt táknmál árið 2011. Þar er lýst hlutverki Íslenskrar málnefndar og viðfangsefnum hennar sem ekki hafa breyst frá 2006.

Fjórði kafla greinarinnar segir frá aukinni notkun ensku víða í þjóðfélaginu, m.a. vegna fjölda ferðamanna. Íslensk málnefnd hefur undanfarin ár gert í vaxandi mæli athugasemdir við slíka notkun þegar hún telur að lögin um tunguna hafi verið brotin. Nefnd verða þrjú dæmi af fjölmörgum. Í fimmta kafla eru nefnd verkefni sem brýnt er að sinna í náninni framtíð en í sjötta kafla er stuttlega rætt um kosti þess að norrænu málnefndirnar vinni saman og það gagn sem Íslensk málnefnd telur sig hafa af tengslum við EFNIL.

Abstract (English)

This article is about the Icelandic Language Council in the past, the present and the uncertain future, and gives a brief account of the present status of the Icelandic language, as requested in the letter to lecturers where twelve questions were posed. Not all of these questions are relevant to the Icelandic Language Council today, but those which are not are answered in the contribution of Ari Páll Kristinsson from the Arni Magnusson Institute of Icelandic Studies.

After a short introduction, Section 2 discusses the founding of the Language Council and the need that was identified for such a council more than half a century ago. The main duties of the council in the initial phase are described, as well as the changes in its work that took place due to the merger of five institutes of Icelandic studies in 2006. The third section deals with the present tasks of the Icelandic Language Council. The Nordic language policy is discussed, together with its impact on the formulation of an Icelandic language policy, which was approved by the Icelandic parliament in 2009. In conjunction with the language

policy, legislation about the Icelandic language and Icelandic sign language were passed in 2011. This legislation also sets out the role of the Icelandic Language Council and its duties, which have not changed since 2006.

The fourth Section is concerned with the increasing use of English in wide parts of society, in part because of the fast-growing tourist industry. The Language Council has in the past few years increasingly objected to instances of such usage in the public domain where the 2011 law has, in its opinion, been violated. Three examples, out of numerous others, are mentioned. The fifth Section discusses challenges for the near future and the last Section the benefits of cooperation with the Nordic language councils and the connections to EFNIL.

1. Introduction

Compared to the countries of the European Union and the European Economic Area, Icelanders are a small nation. Just over 340.000 people live in the country, of whom 10.6% are of foreign origin. Only Icelandic and Icelandic sign language have the status of official languages in the country. Icelandic has been spoken since the beginning of settlement in the 9th century. It has of course been subject to external influences, which have mostly affected the vocabulary. Danish was the main source of influence, because Iceland was part of the Danish kingdom for almost 500 years until the founding of the republic in 1944. Since the 18th and increasingly since the 19th century, in particular in the wake of the romantic movement, danicisms were opposed and efforts were made to create Icelandic words to replace them. Nowadays Danish influences are almost nil, but the impact of English has increased instead, in particular in popular culture and within technological areas. On the other hand many terminology committees are in operation, creating new specialist terminologies within numerous fields of study, for instance in engineering, mathematics, physics, medicine and biology, so that it is possible to teach all these disciplines in Icelandic at university level. Technology is advancing more quickly than the ability to come up with Icelandic specialist terminology as rapidly as needed, however, despite a general interest in the country in limiting the number of foreign words in well written texts. Standards are also looser when it comes to the spoken language, and English is very visible in advertisements.

2. Language planning activities until 2006

Question 2 from EFNIL asked how language planning activities are organised within the country at present, and if this differs from how they were organised in the recent past. Language purism in Iceland has an interesting history which is concisely summarised in Vikør (2010) and the references cited there. In the first half of the last century, organised activities to create neologisms started in Iceland. A committee for Icelandic terminology in the engineering sciences has been

operational since 1919. The University Dictionary, which was founded in 1946 as an institute with the aim of compiling a historical dictionary, was assigned a separate annual budget for publishing collections of neologisms. The coordination of work on terminology within various scientific and technological areas and the publication of the collections entailed a substantial burden for the Dictionary, until its board of directors requested changes in working practices. This led in 1962 to the creation of a special committee affiliated to the Dictionary, the Terminology Committee. Its advice about the choice of new Icelandic words and their formation was much sought after, but also, and increasingly, general guidelines for good Icelandic usage were in demand. This task soon became too big to be handled by the directors of the Dictionary, and the suggestion was made to the ministry of education to form a separate council that would take care of terminology issues and guidelines for proper use of the language. This was accepted, and the Icelandic Language Council was founded in 1964. It had three members until 1980 when they became five, and the Council was assigned a special secretariat that took care of communication with terminology committees and responded to queries. In 1985 a law regarding the Icelandic Language Council took effect. It stated, among other things, that an Icelandic Language Centre should be founded and directed jointly by the Language Council and the University of Iceland. Further changes were made to this law in 1990, the main change being an increase of the number of council members to 15, appointed by the ministry of education at the suggestion of various institutions and societies.

In 2006 new legislation was passed which implied extensive changes to the Icelandic Language Council and the Icelandic Language Institute. The Institute was combined with four other institutions in the field of Icelandic studies and the new institute was named the Arni Magnusson Institute for Icelandic Studies. Most of the tasks of the Language Institute were transferred to the Language Planning Department of the new institute.

The Icelandic Language Council did not become part of the Arni Magnusson Institute, but acquired a new role which is described in the next section.

3. The Language Council, official language policy and language legislation

In this section I will answer the third question, about the role of the Language Council in relation to language legislation and official language policy.

Following the institutional reorganisation in 2006 mentioned in the previous section, the current tasks of the Language Council were clearly spelled out. The principal duties of the Council are now:

- to provide scholarly advice to the government in all matters concerning the Icelandic language,

- to make recommendations to the Ministry of Education and Culture about Icelandic language policy,
- to issue an annual report on the status of the language,
- to praise on its own initiative commendable instances of language use in public settings and point out cases where it sees a need for improvement,
- to write rules on spelling, which apply *inter alia* to the teaching of spelling in schools and are issued by the Ministry of Education.

The Language Council immediately began working on the tasks assigned to it in the new legislation. As a model for an Icelandic language policy, the Council relied on a recent Declaration on a Nordic Language Policy that was signed by all the ministers of culture and education of the Nordic countries in 2006 and published in 2007, and also on the Danish language policy published in the booklet *Sprog til tiden* (2008). Considerable time went into the selection of those areas of public life that were most important to investigate. They ended up numbering eleven. Data was gathered, and eleven symposia were held to ensure that each area would get proper coverage. The symposia were considered a success and propositions for a language policy were presented to the Ministry of Education and announced on the *dagur íslenskrar tungu* [*day of the Icelandic language*] in 2008. The Parliament discussed the propositions and on March 12, 2009 agreed on an official Icelandic language policy, under the title *Íslenska til alls* [*Icelandic for all purposes*]. The Ministry of Education is in charge of implementing the language policy in cooperation with the Icelandic Language Council. A committee has been in place since 2009, comprising two representatives of the ministry and two from the Language Council, and this meets monthly to discuss the next tasks.

In the first chapter of the Icelandic language policy the importance of having legislation about the Icelandic language was emphasised. Work on such legislation soon started, with the chairperson of the Icelandic Language Council leading the preparatory committee. The committee delivered an extensive report to the ministry in 2010 and in 2011 the Parliament adopted a law about the status of the Icelandic language and Icelandic sign language.

The Council relies in its activities mainly on the two documents mentioned, “Icelandic for all purposes” and the “law about the status of the Icelandic language and Icelandic sign language”. Both these documents are referred to when the Council has a reason to point out violations of the language policy and the law of 2011 in public usage, e.g. in the media, in advertisements and on public signboards.

In accordance with the legislation, the Icelandic Language Council took part in the formulation of a language policy for governmental departments and for the City Council of Reykjavik.

4. The Language Council's participation in language debates in Iceland

The Council has no authority to prohibit the excessive use of English in public usage, but when considered appropriate it sends letters to the parties in question, pointing out violations of the law and the language policy. Often the council's comments appear in the media, and in these cases support from the general public is not usually lacking. On the website of the Council there is a list of the addressees of such letters and the reasons for the complaints, stating also whether a reaction was received or not. I will just mention three cases.

1. Icelandic athletes used their first names as identifiers on their kit until about two years ago when the football federation decided to allow patronyms/matronyms on the backs of their jerseys. This was in response to requests from professional players who argued that it would make it easier for them to be recognised by managers of foreign teams and increase their opportunities on the market. Here are two examples:

- Ragnar Sigurðsson has a father by the name Sigurður. He now uses the patronym written in English Sigurdsson, but he also uses the letter R (for Ragnar) because two players in the team have fathers by the name of Sigurður.

The Icelandic women's football team wanted to do the same as the men and had patronyms/matronyms printed on the back of the jerseys.

- Rákel Hönnudóttir is the daughter of Hanna (gen. Hönnu) and uses the matronym Hönnudóttir (-dóttir (daughter) is used for women just as -son is used for men).

This change was not well received by the public, as expressed through comments in newspapers, in e-mails, on Facebook and in phone calls, to me among others. The Language Council sent a letter to the football federation in 2016 that was published in the daily newspapers and on the internet, but has not received any response.

Earlier this year (2017) the men's national basketball team decided not to follow this new approach but to stick to the old tradition of using first names when playing in an Icelandic team.

- Jón Arnór has been an accomplished player with many foreign teams, among others in the NBA league. He is Stefánsson, the son of Stefán, and is known by that name abroad. When he plays in the Icelandic national basketball team, however, the old tradition is used and Jón Arnór is printed on his jersey.

Some may think that this is not an important issue, but it matters to a large part of the general public and to the Icelandic Language Council. Each and every domain that is lost weakens the foundations of the language.

2. The second example concerns The National Gallery of Iceland, a public institution. For many years it has operated a coffee shop. Two years ago the shop was leased to a new operator that named the coffee shop “Mom’s Secret Café”. The Language Council wrote a letter, pointing out a breach of the law and the Icelandic language policy where it says that “advertisements intended for Icelandic consumers shall be in Icelandic”. No answer has been received as of yet.

3. The third example is the international air terminal in Keflavík. The terminal was enlarged a few years ago and changed greatly in appearance. A new company, Isavia, took over the day-to-day operations through a contract with the ministry responsible. Throughout the terminal, new signs and display boards were set up where English took the primary place, with Icelandic in second place and in smaller letters. This raised a lot of protest and a number of people wrote negative comments on Facebook. The Language Council wrote a complaint to the operating company but has not received an answer. The Council also wrote to the ministry and received an answer in which the council’s viewpoint was accepted, but nothing has happened since.

Numerous other examples could have been brought up, but these will have to suffice. A lot of time goes into writing such letters, which have so far not been very effective. The Council plans to invite spokespersons of important public institutions and associations to a meeting and discuss directly their responsibility to protect the language. Perhaps that will be more effective.

5. The Language Council’s plans for the near future

Question seven asks what strategies the institution is planning to follow in the short term and in the longer term. The Language Council is appointed for a period of four years at a time and I can only answer for the period until the end of August 2019.

A much-discussed topic, which is the focus of the Language Council’s activities in 2017, is the diminishing vocabulary of Icelandic children and adolescents. They take full advantage of modern technology, for example in computer games, YouTube and smartphone apps where everything is in English. Teachers have complained that many children can find English words more easily than Icelandic words when answering questions. Teenagers between 13 and 18 years old (particularly boys) read few, if any, books in Icelandic and their ability to express themselves in writing has declined. The Council’s last public symposium in connection with the “Day of the Icelandic Language” in November 2017 was devoted to the importance of writing skills in Icelandic for vocational training and employment in society, as well as for the cultural issue of preserving the ties between the population and the rich and still vivid literary tradition of the country.

The Council also plans to revise the language policy. The present one is now nine years old and much has changed in Icelandic society during that time, due among other things to the increased number of tourists visiting the country. Several issues that were a priority in 2008 have changed for the better. The University of Iceland, for example, set itself an ambitious language policy in 2016. Other things have remained unchanged or deteriorated, such as the excessive use of English on billboards and in advertising. Greater emphasis has to be placed on the reception of immigrants and their opportunities to become proficient in a new language, thus making it easier for them to adapt to Icelandic society. Their proficiency is no less important for the Icelandic language than the proficiency of Icelanders themselves in order to prevent the language losing its defining characteristics that include, among other things, the inflection system, the vocabulary and the naming system.

6. Cooperation with the Nordic Countries and EFNIL

The last question from EFNIL concerns the coordination of the Council's activities with institutions in other countries. The Icelandic Language Council has for decades had a good relationship with all the Nordic language councils and, as mentioned before, it participated in writing the Nordic Declaration of Language Policy in 2006. These councils meet every year to discuss matters of common interest related to the languages. The Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway and Sweden) have of course more in common than the other Nordic countries (The Faroe Islands, Greenland, Iceland and Finland), but they can all learn from each other, discuss mutual problems concerning their languages and return from a meeting with new knowledge to discuss at home.

The same applies to the yearly meetings of EFNIL. The nations that are members of EFNIL have a lot in common and all of them can learn something new from other nations. The languages are all equally big and equally important, even though the nations may differ greatly in size. There is no such thing as a "small language".

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