

ICELANDIC

– at once ancient and modern –





The Icelandic language community

About 300,000 people know Icelandic, and most of them live in Iceland. Icelandic is the only official language of the Republic of Iceland. The connection between the residents and the national language could hardly be simpler to envision because the vast majority of the population (about 97%) have Icelandic as their mother tongue. Iceland is also a country nearly without dialects. It is rare, if not unique, in the world for so large and sparsely populated a country not to be conspicuously divided into regions with dialects. Icelandic has been spoken in Iceland since the country was settled in the latter part of the 9th century and has changed relatively little since then.

Use of the language

Icelandic is used in all aspects of daily life in Iceland: in the government system, schools, companies, sports, mass media, etc. In languages, there can be a considerable difference in the spoken and written forms, but this difference is relatively small in

Icelandic. Forms of address in daily communications are relatively informal, with formal pronouns and verb forms no longer being customary, and people use each other's Christian name in conversations.

Relationship to other languages

Icelandic belongs to the northern branch of Germanic languages within the Indo-European family of languages. Icelandic is most closely related to Faroese and various West Norwegian dialects and more distantly related to Danish and Swedish. Other Germanic languages related to Icelandic include English, Dutch and German.

The Icelandic alphabet

**Aa Áá Bb Dd Ðð Ee Éé Ff Gg Hh Ii Íí Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo
Óó Pp Rr Ss Tt Uu Úú Vv Xx Yy Ýý Þþ Ææ Öö**

Diacritical marks above vowels indicate neither accent nor length but a different sound value than for the corresponding letter without the mark. For example, A is pronounced [a], while Á stands for the diphthong [au]. The most unusual letters in the Icelandic alphabet are Þ and Ð. Þ is pronounced as "th" in think and Ð as "th" in they.

Þ has been used continuously in Icelandic from the beginning. Icelanders adopted the letter for manuscript writing, based on an English model, but the letter was also known in the runic alphabet used by Nordic people before they adopted the Latin alphabet. The letter Ð also originates in English writing. At least, it was used in Old English and Old Saxon and is found in Icelandic manuscripts from the 13th century.

The Icelandic system of grammar

Icelandic has many categories of inflected words and verbs. Nouns, adjectives, pronouns and the numerals 1-4 have four cases. There are three genders of nouns. Adjectives, most pronouns and the numerals 1-4 are also declined in three genders. Verbs are conjugated according to tense, person, number, mood and voice.

Óskar er svangur og dapur

[ouskar ɛ:r svaʏŋkør ɔ:ɣ ta:pør]

Helga er svöng og döpur

[helka ɛ:r svœyŋk ɔ:ɣ tœ:pør]

Barnið er svangt og dapurt

[partneð ɛ:r svaʏŋt ɔ:ɣ ta:pørt]

“Óskar / Helga / The child is hungry and sad”

Ég ber [jɛ:ɣ pɛ:r]

Þú berð [θu: pɛrð]

Við berum [ve:ð pɛ:røm]

“I / You / We carry”

The basic word order in Icelandic is subject - verb - object, but because of how diverse the inflection of words is, the word order is fairly flexible.

These sentences have the same basic meaning in Icelandic:

Bróðir minn (my brother) keypti (bought) bókina (the book).

Bókina (the book) keypti (bought) bróðir minn (my brother).



Icelandic name customs

In Iceland it is still common to identify oneself with one's father or mother and use Christian names rather than surnames in communications. The last name is formed from the Christian name of the father (most common practice) or mother (much rarer). The possessive form of the parent's name is put first and either -son (son) or -dóttir (daughter) appended. Often the same Christian names occur again and again in the same family.

Óskar Eiríksson's father's name is Eiríkur Haraldsson. Óskar's last name (i.e., Eiríksson) simply means that his father's Christian name is Eiríkur. Óskar's wife's name is Helga Bjarnadóttir since her father's name is Bjarni Ólafsson. Although Helga married Óskar, her name did not change.

Eiríkur Haraldsson & Sigríður Þráinsdóttir

Óskar **Eiríksson**

Bjarni Ólafsson & Gyða Björnsdóttir

Helga **Bjarnadóttir**

Óskar and Helga have four children named Sigríður, Gyða Björk, Daði and Bjarni. Three of them chose to identify themselves with their father, Óskar, and one with his mother, Helga. A label on the family home's doorbell lists all those living there:

***Helga Bjarnadóttir
Óskar Eiríksson
Sigríður Óskarsdóttir
Gyða Björk Óskarsdóttir
Daði Óskarsson
Bjarni Helguson***



Even though this is a six-person family, the people use five different last names.

Most Icelanders' names are formed in this manner, but a certain number of surnames also exist.

Icelanders never use their last names alone. One would never refer to someone as just “Eiríksson” or “Bjarnadóttir”. One must use either the full name (Óskar Eiríksson, Helga Bjarnadóttir, etc.) or just the Christian name alone. Last names are therefore much less important in Iceland than is customary elsewhere. The Icelandic telephone directory, for example, is organised by Christian names first, then by last names:



Guðjón Baldursson
Guðjón Þór Baldursson
Guðjón Baldvinsson
Guðjón Benediktsson
Guðjón Bragi Benediktsson

Icelandic language policy

The Icelandic language policy has two main components: on the one hand, continuing preservation of the language (of the system of grammar and the basic vocabulary) and, on the other, development of the language, not least to help keep its vocabulary abreast of new conditions and ensure the use of Icelandic in as many areas as possible.

Icelanders have set the goal of being able to speak and write about all subjects in their mother tongue since the status of Icelandic as a national language requires that it be possible to use it in all fields. New words are continuously being formed to keep pace with developments in technology and the sciences.

The Icelandic government has now launched a language technology campaign to encourage the development of software and equipment enabling the use of Icelandic in computer equipment and computer-controlled devices.

General agreement prevails in Iceland about the language policy, and the foundation for cultivation of the Icelandic lan-





guage is the interest of the general public. Many people enjoy trying to create new Icelandic words. This activity is not at all tied to institutions or government decisions. The Icelandic Language Council, for example, primarily provides consultancy and dissemination of information regarding language usage and neologisms, but it is not at all the custom in Iceland for the government to have words produced that the public is then obligated to use!

Technical terminology efforts

Associations and individuals in a diversity of specialist areas see to the currency of Icelandic vocabularies in the relevant fields, and diverse lexicons of Icelandic technical terminology are published. Here, computers, engineering, automobiles, medicine, accounting and psychology can be mentioned. Icelandic has in fact been a language of science from the earliest times because many Icelandic scientists in the Middle Ages wrote about their fields in their mother tongue and not just in Latin.

Vocabulary

Many new words have been added to the Icelandic vocabulary since the beginning, as is natural over so long a period since the national life has been transformed. Some of the old words have also acquired new meanings in addition to the old ones. However, most common words in the language look exactly the same today as they did 1100 years ago, i.e., words, such as höfuð (head), auga (eye), himinn (sky), haf (ocean), þú (you), kýr (cow), gras



(grass), móðir (mother), faðir (father), ganga (walk), etc. An enormous number of neologisms have since enriched the Icelandic language, especially in the 19th and 20th century, to meet contemporary needs. Most of the new words are formed from older words and parts of words. Taking an image from environmental protection, one could speak of vocabulary recycling!

Neologisms and their transparency

Neologisms are most often formed by joining existing words or parts of words together in a new way.

*From the words **veður** and **fræði** (weather + science), the neologism **veðurfræði** (meteorology) was formed.*

*From the words **bill** and **skúr** (car + shed), the neologism **bilskúr** (garage) was formed.*

*From the prefix **al-** (all) and the word **næmi** (openness to), the neologism **alnæmi** (AIDS) was formed.*

*From the word **tölur** (pl.) (numbers) and **-va**, which is the ending of the word **völva** (prophetess), the neologism **tölva** (computer) was formed since the function of the first computers was especially to perform calculations, and they seemed to have a supernatural ability for this compared to people!*

*From the past participial form of the verb **þjóta** (speed), the neologism **þota** (jet) was formed.*

The meaning of many of the words formed in this way is rather transparent. Words like veðurfræði, bílskúr, etc., are self-explanatory. Furthermore, this procedure circumvents the problem of finding out how to incorporate foreign words like meteorology or garage into the Icelandic system of grammar and writing. It is often not at all clear how one should write, pronounce and decline unfamiliar words of this kind in different languages.

Loanwords

Icelandic nevertheless has some loanwords that have been adapted to Icelandic pronunciation, writing and inflection.

*The word **bíll** (car) comes from the Danish, **bil** (shortened form, cf. automobile). Other loanwords include **banani** (banana), **kaffi** (coffee), **tóbak** (tobacco), etc.*

*“Hún fór á **bilnum** út í **búð** og keypti mikið af **tóbaki**, **kaffi** og **banönum**.”*

(She drove the car to the store and bought a lot of tobacco, coffee and bananas.)

Icelandic and other languages

The Icelandic school system has long placed heavy emphasis on the teaching of foreign languages. In addition to Icelandic, everyone learns English and Danish in compulsory school, and many add French, German or Spanish in upper secondary school.

Many language communities in Europe, and indeed throughout the world, are facing the fact that the use of English has increased in various fields. This is also perceptible in



Iceland. On the other hand, constant innovation in the Icelandic vocabulary and diverse cultural activities in Icelandic conduce to the ability of Icelanders to continue using Icelandic under all circumstances, just as before.

History of Iceland

Iceland was settled (especially by Norwegians) in the latter part of the 9th century, and the land became a commonwealth with the establishment of the Althingi (Parliament) in 930. Following domestic strife, Icelanders swore allegiance to the Norwegian king in the 13th century, and later the country, along with Norway, came under the Danish crown. It was not until 1918 that Iceland regained sovereignty, and the Republic of Iceland was founded in 1944. Despite foreign dominion for centuries, the general populace's use of language never manifested much foreign influence.



Icelandic is at once an ancient and modern language

Icelandic is by and large the language that the Nordic people spoke in the Middle Ages throughout most of the Nordic countries as well as in demarcated regions of England, Ireland, Scotland (along with the Shetland Islands, the Orkney Islands and the Hebrides), some parts of France and Russia and as far south as Constantinople. Icelandic was also the language of Leifur Eiríksson who went to America in 1000.

Two examples of Icelandic text - the same language!

Gunnar reið til búðar Rangæinga og var þar með frændum sínum. Margur maður fór að finna Gunnar og spyrja hann tíðinda. Hann var við alla menn léttur og kátur og sagði öllum slíkt er vildu. (Njáls Saga, 13th century.)

(Gunnar rode to the Rangá River people's tent and stayed there with his relatives. Many went to see Gunnar and ask him for news. He was easygoing and cheerful with them all and told them everything they wanted to know.)

Brotist var inn í heimahús í Jakaseli í fyrradag. Lögreglan segir að þjófarnir hafi haft á brott með sér skartgrip, myndbandstæki, fartölvu, farsíma, debetkort og fleira. Málið er í rannsókn. (Newspaper item, 2001.)

(A home on Jakasel was broken into the day before yesterday. The police said that the thieves had taken jewellery, a VCR, a laptop computer, a mobile telephone, a debit card and other things. The matter is under investigation.)

Modern Icelanders have no problem reading and understanding ancient texts in Icelandic. It is extremely unusual for a language to undergo so little change over so long a period. Actually, the pronunciation changed considerably (from the 12th to the 16th



Flateyjarbók

century), especially of vowels, but this had little effect on the written language. The structure of sentences and the system of inflection has changed very little.

Numerous idioms, phrases and replies from ancient literature still live on vigorously in everyday Icelandic.

*The saying **koma einhverjum í opna skjöldu** (“take someone by surprise”) is taken from military lore and literally means “to come at someone from behind or from the side”, i.e., where the shield gives no protection, since **opinn skjöldur** means “the backside of a curved shield”.*

Deep-rooted written language

The oldest preserved texts in Icelandic were written around 1100. Many of them are actually based on material like poetry and laws, preserved orally for generations before being written down. The most famous of these, which were written in Iceland from the 12th century onward, are without doubt the Icelandic



The Bible 1584

Sagas, the historical writings of Snorri Sturluson and eddaic poems. There have been Christian texts in Icelandic at least since the 12th century, and there is an extensive legal code from the 13th century.

Parts of the Bible and international scholarly treatises are among the oldest texts in Icelandic, and the Bible was printed in its entirety in Icelandic in 1584. The Odes of Homer were translated in the 19th century, and translations of all the major works of Shakespeare are available in Icelandic. Dynamic relations with the cultural world outside Iceland have fertilised the writing of Icelandic literature and scholarly treatises from the beginning.

The Icelandic language and literature

The continuity of the Icelandic language and literature surfaces in the fact that the Icelandic authors of the 20th century, such as the Nobel prize winner Halldór Laxness, wrote in the same language as, for example, Snorri Sturluson, one of the foremost authors in the Nordic countries in the 13th century.

The works of poets and authors have always found favour with the Icelandic public. Books are still the most popular Christmas gifts, not least biographies and memoirs.

Interest in Icelandic studies

Numerous foreigners engage in Icelandic studies. Many do so because of interest in the country and its people, because of commercial ties or for other practical reasons, for example, plans to settle in Iceland. Others learn Icelandic from an academic interest in the language and Icelandic literature, such as being able to read the Icelandic Sagas and other Icelandic writings from the Middle Ages in the original language.



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