

ARI PÁLL KRISTINSSON

Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies,
Language Planning Department, Reykjavik, Iceland

**BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS: ON LANGUAGE SITUATION
AND LANGUAGE POLICY IN CONTEMPORARY ICELAND**

ABSTRACT

Iceland's literary tradition, conservative linguistic heritage and ideologies of linguistic purism have been a major strand in Icelandic national identity. The preservation of linguistic and literary continuity is a principal objective of overtly expressed Icelandic culture policies. At the same time, the advent of globalisation has entailed increased everyday presence of an international language, along Icelandic, in important spheres of modern life. There are concerns that this has impact on reading habits, linguistic input, and language environment in general. Against this background, the present paper offers a description of prevailing Icelandic language ideologies, modern linguistic practices, language policies, and the possibilities and limitations of present-day language management efforts.

KEYWORDS: language management, language policies, language ideologies, Icelandic, prestige planning.

ANOTACIJA

Islandijos literatūrinė tradicija, konservatyvus kalbinis paveldas ir kalbinio purizmo ideologijos – svarbi Islandijos nacionalinės tapatybės dalis. Išsaugoti kalbinį ir literatūrinį tęstinumą yra pagrindinis atvirosios Islandijos kultūros politikos tikslas. Tačiau dėl globalizacijos svarbiose šiuolaikinio gyvenimo srityse vis labiau įsigali tarptautinė kalba. Tai kelia susirūpinimą, nes kinta skaitymo įpročiai, veikiamas kalbos tvarumas ir kalbos aplinka apskritai. Atsižvelgiant į šį kontekstą, šiame straipsnyje aprašomos vyraujančios islandų kalbos ideologijos, aptariama šiuolaikinė kalbinė praktika, kalbos politika ir šių dienų kalbos tvarkymo galimybės bei apribojimai.

ESMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: kalbos vadyba, kalbos politika, kalbos ideologijos, islandų kalba, prestižo planavimas.

1. LANGUAGE SITUATION

1.1. Historical background

Icelandic is a North Germanic ('Nordic') language. Structurally it is close to Modern Faroese, and to some Western Norwegian dialects. More distant Nordic relatives are Swedish, Danish, and Eastern Norwegian / Norwegian Bokmål. Modern Icelandic bears strong resemblance to its linguistic ancestor, Old Norse, which was spoken in the ninth to the thirteenth century in Scandinavia, the Faroes, and Iceland, in some parts of Britain, and in other places where the Vikings and Nordic merchants travelled in medieval times. Voluminous texts in Old Norse / Early Icelandic are preserved, and many of them are held in high regard, such as the so-called Family Sagas, the Poetic Edda, Sagas of Kings, etc. These texts were mostly written in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, mainly in Iceland, and partly in Norway. The language of the texts is still broadly accessible today to the average reader of Modern Icelandic, without specialization in linguistics or literary studies. This is because Modern Icelandic retains most Old Norse grammatical categories and basic vocabulary, while considerable changes have taken place in the phonological system.

1.2. Linguistic characteristics

Modern Icelandic nouns, adjectives, pronouns and the numerals 1–4 have four grammatical cases. There are three grammatical genders for nouns, adjectives, most pronouns and the numerals 1–4. Verbs are conjugated according to tense, person, number, mood and voice. Thus, structurally, Icelandic has largely kept many of the Old North Germanic grammatical characteristics.

One feature of Modern Icelandic is also worth mentioning: the personal name system. Most Icelanders still use patronymics, or matronymics, i.e., you can choose between using your father's or your mother's first name to form your last name, with *son* 'son' or *dóttir* 'daughter' added. As an example, my father's first name was *Kristinn*, thus I am *Kristinsson*, while my sisters' surname is *Kristinsdóttir*. While most Icelanders use their fathers' or mothers' first names for their surnames, some people do use family names, as is the most common custom in Western Europe (e.g., *Jóhanna Schram*), or a mixture of both methods (e.g., *Jóhanna*

Adolfsdóttir Schram). Another interesting characteristic of the Icelandic name custom is that you never address people by their surname alone; the default is the first name(s), only optionally followed by a surname. This holds for all members of society, regardless of their status and position.

Icelandic is virtually without dialects as such, i.e. in the most common sense of the term ‘dialect’. There is however a particular “Northern accent”, which broadly means that a number of people in the centre of Northern Iceland tend to pronounce intervocalic stops with stronger postaspiration than most other Icelandic speakers normally do. It is a bit of a mystery why such a large and sparsely populated island as Iceland is not divided into clearly separated dialectal regions. Most variation in Icelandic is determined by genre, by medium of communication, by situation, and closeness of conversation participants.

Icelandic has a long history of coining domestic neologisms, and there are myriads of such neologisms in everyday use. Examples: *sími* ‘telephone’, *tölva* ‘computer’, *fikill* ‘addict’, *dagskrá* ‘program’, *ráðstefna* ‘conference’, and so on and so forth. This entails that people who speak the Scandinavian languages (Danish, Norwegian, Swedish) or other Germanic languages, have to make an extra effort in learning Modern Icelandic, as they can not readily decipher the meaning of e.g. Icelandic newspaper texts, since the proportion of so-called international vocabulary is relatively low (particularly in printed material), while native neologisms have been coined as substitutes.

1.3. Language beliefs among members of the speech community

Grammatical, orthographic and lexical purism is a central theme of Icelandic language attitudes and ideologies as has been shown repeatedly in opinion polls and investigations into language discourses (cf., e.g., Ottósson 1990, Árnason 2006, Vikør 2010, Leonard, Árnason 2011, Kristinsson 2014, Jökulsdóttir *et al.* 2019). Language use is often discussed by lay people, and many tend to hold strong opinions, for example when it comes to choosing between different suggestions for new words in the vocabulary. A number of speakers regularly express their worries for what they perceive as deterioration of proper Icelandic language, among the younger generation. While protectionist language ideologies prevail in Iceland, I think that such

attitudes primarily focus on the forms of language, while status issues, i.e. threats to the loss of domains of use, have caused less concern among the general public (cf. Kristinsson 2014).

Due to geography, majority of common speakers of Icelandic were for centuries (esp. in 1400–1800) hardly ever exposed to long-term language contact situations. Contact situations with Danish, and later English speaking groups, became gradually more common in the 19th and 20th centuries. Iceland was occupied by English speaking Allied forces in 1940, and a NATO military base was established and run for many decades after the war. Since the mid-twentieth century, fear of English influence on the Icelandic language has fuelled discourses on domestic language purity. This has not least concerned terminology and modern renewal of lexicon.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, linguistic purism became an important, and influential, feature of Icelandic language attitudes and linguistic practices. Language purism became a significant factor of the self-identity of Icelanders as a nation. Earlier, the main target of purification were loanwords from Danish, while English loans have been the major concern since the latter half of the 20th century. This is evident in nationalist language political discourses. Even the mere existence of Icelanders as a separate nation and their right to independence has been linked with the Icelandic language, preferably in its most ‘pure’ form (i.e., as close as possible to Old Norse, the linguistic stage of the medieval Nordic literary Golden Age).

1.4. Current language situation

Icelandic is used in all aspects of daily life in Iceland: in the government system, in parliament, as medium of instruction in schools (also in tertiary education), in companies, sports, mass media, etc. Publications in Icelandic are massive, for a nation of only about 360,000 people; about 1,000 book titles were published in Icelandic in 2019, an increase compared to previous years. There was a 50% increase in the publishing of books for youths and children in 2019 compared to 2018. Some printed traditional newspapers seem to struggle while written news portals on the web are thriving. There are a number of radio stations and a handful of nation wide TV stations.

While Icelandic is the official language of state and municipalities, there is only one recognized traditional minority language in Iceland, namely Icelandic Sign Language, the first language of about 300 people.

The population of Iceland has recently become much more multifaceted than before. In about a quarter of a century, the proportion of immigrants has increased from less than 2% of the total population to about 14% (Statistics Iceland 2020). Some have acquired Icelandic citizenship while most inhabitants of foreign origin are citizens of other countries, who have (temporary) residence permit in Iceland. Poles are by far the largest single group of immigrants, and the second largest are Lithuanians. About 5% of people living in Iceland are Polish citizens (19,000 people in 2019), and about 1% of the population are Lithuanian citizens (4,000 people in 2019; Statistics Iceland 2020).

In 2016, 12.6% of children at pre-primary school age in Iceland had another language than Icelandic as home language, and there are at least about 50 different home languages in the country (Jónsdóttir *et al.* 2018: 10). Some estimates have figures as high as 100 different home languages.

While the status of Icelandic as official language is uncontested, and it is the principal language of daily communication, some branches of the Icelandic labour market have clearly become multilingual, such as tourist services, maintenance, and construction. Many immigrants do their best to learn to speak Icelandic. The demographic changes have entailed that Icelandic spoken with a foreign accent is part of everyday language practices. The Icelandic national broadcast media is no exception. This situation is new to a large section of traditional Icelandic speakers.

Foreign speakers of Icelandic often complain that when native Icelanders hear them speak with an accent, Icelanders are eager to code-switch into English. This of course can be a problem, firstly, as it shows lack of tolerance towards foreign accented speech, and, secondly, this behaviour also deprives the learners of their chances to practice their Icelandic in authentic conversations. It is also true that many of the foreigners are not necessarily fluent speakers of English.

The advent of globalisation entails increased everyday presence of English in (social) media, commerce, academia, popular culture, digital technologies, etc. It is widely perceived

that this is bound to have effect on reading habits, linguistic input in the native language, and allocation of domains of language use in society at large. In a few domains of Icelandic society, English is commonly used (often parallel to Icelandic), for instance in the tourism industry, some businesses, in banking, and partially as mode of instruction at universities. Despite strong presence of English in such domains, Icelandic is without a doubt the principal daily language, it is the language of instruction in primary and secondary education, and it is by far the most common language of instruction at Icelandic universities and colleges. As is the case at universities in other Nordic countries, the native language has its stronghold at the Bachelor levels, while Master programs and Doctoral programs have higher percentages of English medium courses. An investigation in 2014 showed that about 10% of university courses were taught in English in Bachelor programs, and about 18% in English on average for Master programs (Kristinsson, Bernharðsson 2014). Interestingly, there is strong evidence (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2017) that Icelandic college students tend to overestimate their own English proficiencies, and that they struggle when they try to cope with academic English in their studies.

2. EVOLVING LANGUAGE ECOLOGY, AND LANGUAGE POLICY CHALLENGES

In late modernity, Icelandic culture and society is facing choices and challenges as to language management, as concerns language corpus, language status and language acquisition planning (see, e.g., Kristinsson 2014, 2018). A team of researchers has been investigating linguistic practices and attitudes in Iceland the past three years (cf. Sigurjónsdóttir 2019). They are partly attempting to provide evidence that could inform sensible language management efforts to deal with and modify the present language situation, and partly to provide better theoretical insight into language acquisition, development and language contact, in general terms. There is thus ongoing research designed to shed further light on the current language situation in Iceland, not least the status of Icelandic vis à vis English. The overarching goal is to be able to inform the Icelandic public about to what extent they should be concerned for the prospects of Icelandic, and if the increased presence of English is having an influence on everyday Icelandic language use, grammar and semantics. There has been a feeling among some people, teachers for example, that something might be changing rapidly among school

children and youths, in the system of grammar, and in vocabulary. These vague concerns that have been expressed over the past one or two decades have mainly been based on anecdotes and such.

An example of such anecdotal evidence: Researchers had found out that according to PISA measuring, the number of Icelandic children under the age of 15 who had difficulties in reading, evaluating and interpreting a text, had gone from 15% in the year 2000 to 22% in the year 2015. When the news broke in 2018, the Head of the Icelandic Teachers' Union, Ragnar Pétursson, was cited in a newspaper article, as follows:

“Ragnar has criticised local institutions for assigning too little time to [...] Icelandic in the curriculum in elementary schools. However, what’s really saddening is that while Icelandic children spend a lot of time using technological devices that are mostly in English, parents don’t seem to take enough time to talk to them about what they see and read online. “I have been a teacher for 20 years and I can tell you that children have never lived in better conditions than now,” Ragnar says. “But we don’t give children enough of what really matters—time”” (Demurtas 2018).

Overt policies that have been explicitly laid down in writing by Parliament and Government recently, include:

- (1) a detailed official language policy, in 2009 (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2009; ratified by Parliament),
- (2) a separate language legislation on Icelandic and Icelandic Sign Language, in 2011 (Althingi 2011),
- (3) an ambitious language technology program for 2018–2022 (Nikulásdóttir *et al.* 2017; Rannís 2018). The explicit aim of the language technology funding and programme is

“to protect and support the Icelandic language as well as to facilitate the use of new information technologies in the Icelandic community, for the benefit of the public, institutions and companies” (Rannís 2018).

(4) In June 2019, a parliamentary resolution on Icelandic was unanimously passed by the Icelandic Parliament. A nationwide language awareness campaign (*Áfram íslenska* [Go Icelandic!]) is promoted in the resolution, the need to support teacher education is emphasised, as well as the aim of safeguarding Icelandic in the digital domains (Althingi 2019).

While Icelandic is the first language of about 86% of the Icelandic population at present, comprehensive recent polls show that majority of Icelanders claim to hear and read some English on a regular basis, and many of them also claim to use English regularly. The information below is sought from some first results of the comprehensive investigation that has been mentioned earlier in this chapter: For Icelandic 3–5 years old children, about 60% watch English language programmes on channels such as Netflix and YouTube (Sigurjónsdóttir 2019). For the age group 3–12 years old children, about 50% play computer games in Icelandic, while the figure for English language computer games is about 75%; however, the younger children are more likely to play the Icelandic games (Nowenstein *et al.* 2018). As for adolescents and youths, research indicates that increased English language input among 16–20 years old speakers of Icelandic correlates positively with increased insecurity and non-standard use of subjunctive and indicative mood in the Icelandic verbal system (Thórsdóttir 2018).

As was mentioned earlier, majority of Icelanders claim to hear and read some English on a regular basis, and many of them also claim to use English regularly. A survey which was carried out in 2002, showed that about 50% of the respondents at the time claimed to use English almost daily (i.e., read or write or speak English), while 25% of them answered “(almost) never” (Árnason 2006). As for formal or structured acquisition of English, it has been shown (Jóhannsdóttir 2018) that Icelandic children in the 4th grade, who are beginning to learn some English at school, acquire most of their English vocabulary outside of the classroom, based on their motivation to understand English television programmes and pop lyrics, and so on, and through computers, and through their communication with people who do not know Icelandic and communicate in English. In other words, English lessons at school are only a secondary mode of their acquisition of English.

It is a possibility that the two codes, Icelandic and English, have reached some sort of healthy balance, i.e. in a stable parallel language situation, for a variety of encounters and domains in Iceland. The question is rather if this situation makes Icelandic “vulnerable” in Iceland, in terms of forms or function, or both.

One possibility is that perhaps we are not necessarily just primarily experiencing English influence as such, on Icelandic forms and Icelandic domains – affecting and changing how Icelandic is used, and where and when it can be used; but rather that English is an additional code in the community. There could, in other words, be signs of emerging additive bilingualism, English in addition to Icelandic, rather than English “conquering” Icelandic as to domains of use, and as to proficiency in use.

As discussed earlier, English is commonly used in Iceland, and, for some situations and domains, sometimes even rather than Icelandic. This happens e.g. in a variety of Icelandic customer services, such as in shops and restaurants, in districts in Reykjavik where there are many tourists and other foreign visitors. At the same time there is much metalinguistic discourse in the Icelandic speech community which reveals negative attitudes among Icelanders to such public use of English in Iceland.

A newspaper article by the Icelandic novelist Ragnar Jónasson (2018) is an example of a rather typical description by native Icelanders who are concerned for the prospects of Icelandic:

“At restaurants and coffee shops, people are frequently greeted in English rather than Icelandic, and often Icelandic will get you nowhere if you want to order food or drink. Companies use English names or are rebranding themselves in English. The importance of tourists to the economy is rapidly making English not only a second language in the service industry, but almost the first language.”

Many examples of such overtly expressed negative attitudes, to what appears to be elevated status of English in public and social space in Iceland, can be found in Icelandic social media. Sometimes, social media commentators are even urging people to boycott shops and restaurants that do not have Icelandic speaking staff or that tend to advertise their commodities

and services in English and not in Icelandic. In other words, while English dominant language practices, as in the Reykjavik tourism industry and some other fields and domains, occur in fluid communication situations of all kind, there are at the same time clear signs of stigmatization of these practices among members of the speech community. This is evidently based on a prevailing ideology in favour of Icelandic that fuels heated endangerment discourses and discourses on purity.

While members of the speech community voice their concerns for the future of Icelandic, it must not be forgotten that Icelandic, the official language of a prosperous modern independent nation state, is listed as no. 1 (institutional) in the traditional EGIDS scale for language vitality. In other words, Icelandic is not at all listed among endangered or vulnerable languages. Its intergenerational transmission is not at risk, and it is both *de facto* and *de jure* Iceland's national language. However, there are some nuances in this respect as to the possibility of so-called digital minoritization of otherwise non-threatened languages, Icelandic included (Drude *et al.* 2018). Traditional language vitality indices may not yet have fully incorporated the digital component of language input. A revised language vitality scale must acknowledge the notion of digital language minoritization (cf. Drude *et al.* 2018).

3. LANGUAGE MANAGEMENT EFFORTS

What are the limitations and possibilities of language management in such situations as the Icelandic one?

As I see it, all three components of language policy (practices, beliefs, management) as described in Spolsky's model (2004, 2009, 2018/2019), come into the picture in one way or another if one attempts to analyse English-Icelandic language contact, and the status relationship between the two languages (as discussed in the previous chapter), from a language policy point of view. If language management is to succeed, one must acknowledge that not only does it modify, but it is also modified by, the two other pillars of language policy, i.e. by practices, and by beliefs (Spolsky's terms). In other words, management is merely one factor of successful language policy. The results of management efforts rely very much on how well they are rooted in actual language practices and the current ideologies in the speech community in question.

In Icelandic language management, ignoring the impact of globalisation on contemporary linguistic repertoires is not an option, and again, neither is major negligence in preserving a rich linguistic and literary tradition which is perceived to be a unique cultural heritage. Thus, there is need for some balanced analysis of the possibilities and limitations of present-day language management efforts.

In what remains of this section, three language management efforts will be briefly discussed.

(1) Obviously, children's time spent in an English language environment (Youtube, Netflix, computer games and so on) can't simultaneously be used for recreation in any Icelandic language fora, and thus it can be argued that the present situation of high English language exposure might result in increased English and decreased Icelandic language input at a critical age period in the life of children. If this is accepted as accurate description of present state of affairs, language management agencies, school administration and the like should press for increased funding to support language technologies and digital development in Icelandic, since such technological solutions could in turn facilitate companies and innovators who wish to invent and market computer games in Icelandic, films in Icelandic that appeal to Icelandic children and youths, and translating and interpreting internationally trending currents in a variety of fields. In addition, Icelandic voice control for devices, Icelandic apps for purchasing, and a variety of other gadgets that use Icelandic, are very important, and not only for their utility as such but also symbolically as this strengthens the belief that Icelandic could very well be used in any aspects of our lives at present.

Icelandic authorities have decided to do their best to live up to this challenge, by allocating huge sums to a language technology program in 2018–2022, and through a fund that supports the publication of interesting books for youths and children.

(2) Various, seemingly non-language related socio-economic efforts may be relevant if they aim at facilitating more quality time for young families, preferably resulting in increased traditional language input, and thus facilitating successful intergenerational transmission of Icelandic. This not only concerns basic communication skills in Icelandic, but also strengthens and promotes secure proficiency, richness in means of expression, larger vocabulary,

knowledge of the meaning and use of old idiomatic phrases that still are in use by older generations of speakers of Icelandic, etc.

It can be mentioned in this context that Icelandic labour unions for people employed by the Icelandic state and municipalities, have recently negotiated their wages and terms. Interestingly, two of the largest unions put as a top priority not necessarily so much higher wages *per se*, but shorter work weeks. In Iceland, a normal work week has been 40 hours. At the time of writing (May 2020) a number of labour unions and their employees have agreed on shortening it to 36 hours, on average. A major argument for a shorter work week is increased frequency of burn-out in many official professions such as among teachers and nurses. Another common argument for a shorter work week is the need for employees to be able to spend more time with their children, and other family members. A side-effect of fewer working hours, when this will be fully implemented, is that young children could gain a few more hours of native language input in communication with their parents. (That is, if their parents use the extra time for reading to them and talking to them, and not only to stare at their own digital devices.)

As is often the case in language policy, various social development and changes can have positive or negative side-effects that have an impact for language policy and management as well. Thus, language policy often comes about as a result of a side-effect of the implementation of other policies.

(3) Finally, Iceland's parliament (Althingi) unanimously passed a resolution in June 2019, on strengthening Icelandic as the official language in Iceland. The resolution highlights three principal goals; firstly, that Icelandic be used in all fields and domains in Icelandic society – an objective which also was the major topic of the present official language policy in Iceland, adopted by parliament in 2009; secondly, to promote teaching of Icelandic, and also teacher education and training, where special attention is paid to teaching Icelandic to non-native speakers. The third goal is ensuring the safe future of Icelandic in the world of digital language use.

The 2019 parliamentary language policy resolution, mentioned above, came along with a proposed three-year plan, 2019–2021, and the language awareness project *Áfram íslenska*. The first point, of a total of 22 points in the three-year plan, is to raise awareness about the importance of the Icelandic language, its value, and its uniqueness.

The importance of positive attitudes to language was repeatedly emphasised in an explanatory memorandum laid before parliament in support of the resolution (my translation):

“Positive attitude to [Icelandic] and increased awareness is crucial in order to ensure continued use of [Icelandic] in every domain of the society”

“Positive debates and education in society about the diverseness of Icelandic is important for new speakers of the language”

“In teacher education, it is important to promote positive attitudes to the Icelandic language so that [the prospective teachers] can spread this among their future pupils”

In the resolution, status issues are emphasised, and some corpus planning factors are explicitly mentioned (e.g. terminologies), as well as factors pertaining to acquisition planning (e.g. teaching Icelandic as a second language).

In other words, this language management effort addresses the classic major components of language planning, i.e., status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning.

In addition to this, the proposed language management plan also strikes me as an attempt at prestige planning in the Icelandic context, since the importance of positive attitudes is explicitly stated as a principal goal, and as a prerequisite for successful implementation of the other language management factors.

To sum up: The notion of *awareness* and *attitudes* is among the key factors of the recently launched language plan.

In the field of language policy and planning studies, the term *prestige planning* has been introduced (cf. e.g. Haarmann 1990). This has to do with modification of attitudes. In a sense, prestige planning could be said to belong to the ‘ideology and beliefs’ component if applied to Spolsky’s (2004) model (cf. Ager 2005), which I mentioned earlier.

Traditionally, Icelanders have held their language in high regard; they have been proud of their old native language, and indeed, purist efforts seem to enjoy public support (Jökulsdóttir *et al.* 2019). Quantitative as well as qualitative research (Árnason 2006, Óladóttir 2009) has shown that there are overwhelmingly positive attitudes among Icelandic speakers towards their

native language. But, as been mentioned above, for further consolidation of attitudinal factors, the government and parliament have now launched an awareness campaign which among other things has as an explicit goal to modify language attitudes, and this could perhaps be analysed as prestige planning efforts.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In Greek mythology, Scylla and Charybdis refer to mythical monsters, one on each side of a treacherous sea strait. Metaphorically, delivering Icelandic linguistic and literary heritage to the younger generations of Icelandic speakers is like travelling in unsafe waters where you neither wish to be captured by the gleam of a single global communication code and its concomitant homogenous popular culture, nor by the monster on the other side which appears as destructive isolationism and parochialism. My claim is that informed language policies can indeed enable safe navigation between Scylla and Charybdis. I have mentioned a few facts about the present language situation in Iceland, and there is ongoing investigation that is aimed at quantifying and interpreting the impact of modern smart technologies on language input and language attitudes among Icelandic children. One of the most important factors for a successful journey into the future is the development of Icelandic language corpora and affordable and accessible language technology infrastructure, and linguistic tools and technical gadgets based on written and spoken modern Icelandic, as well as computer games and films carrying Icelandic content which can appeal to children and youths in their native tongue (cf. Kristinsson 2016).

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BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS: ON LANGUAGE SITUATION AND LANGUAGE POLICY IN CONTEMPORARY ICELAND

Summary

In late modernity, Icelandic culture and society is facing important choices and challenges as to language management. The advent of globalisation entails increased everyday presence of English in (social) media, commerce, academia, popular culture, digital technologies, etc., and there are concerns that this impacts, among other things, on reading habits, linguistic input, and allocation of linguistic domains in society at large. While Icelandic is the first language of about 86% of the Icelandic population at present, majority of Icelanders claim to hear, to read and use some English on a regular basis. About 60% of Icelandic 3–5 years old children watch English language programmes on channels such as Netflix and YouTube (Sigurjónsdóttir 2019). Concerns have been raised that such extensive English language environment on a daily basis is bound to have negative implications for traditional Icelandic language culture, i.e., firstly, for language attitudes in general, as English is favourably viewed, and, secondly, for the native grammar and lexicon, since it is suspected that linguistic input in Icelandic will decrease proportionally as English language input increases.

In Icelandic language management, ignoring the impact of globalisation on contemporary linguistic repertoires is not an option, and again, neither is major negligence in preserving a rich linguistic and literary tradition which is perceived to be a unique cultural heritage. Thus, there is need for some balanced analysis of the possibilities and limitations of present-day language management efforts. One of the most important factors for safe navigation between Scylla and Charybdis is the development of Icelandic language corpora and affordable and accessible language technology infrastructure, and linguistic tools and technical gadgets based on written and spoken modern Icelandic, as well as computer games and films carrying Icelandic content which can appeal to children and youths in their native tongue. Other ways of supporting intergenerational transmission of written and spoken Icelandic include socio-economic efforts that aim at facilitating more quality time for young families, preferably resulting in increased linguistic input in traditional Icelandic.

Icelandic authorities have decided to do their best to live up to this challenge, among other things by allocating huge sums to a language technology program in 2018–2022, and through a fund that supports the publication of interesting books for youths and children. Iceland’s parliament (Althingi) unanimously passed a resolution in June 2019, on strengthening Icelandic as the official language in Iceland. The resolution highlights the need to raise awareness about the importance of the Icelandic language, its value and its uniqueness; and to promote teaching of Icelandic, paying special attention to non-native learners, and the principal goal is that Icelandic be used in all fields and domains in Icelandic society.

ARI PÁLL KRISTINSSON

Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies

Laugavegur 13, IS-101 Reykjavík

aripk@hi.is