

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.

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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.

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

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