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profiles a language that is a grammar lover's dream

Icelandic

Where is it spoken?

Icelandic is spoken in Iceland, a Nordic European island country situated in the North Atlantic Ocean, midway between North America and mainland Europe.

Who speaks it?

Most of Iceland's 360,000 inhabitants speak Icelandic as their mother tongue. It is the national and official language of the country.

When did it emerge?

The history of the Icelandic language begins with the settlement of Iceland in the late 9th century. The settlers were Viking explorers from western Norway, with some from Norse settlements in the British Isles, a small number from Denmark and Sweden, and some Irish and Gaelic-Scottish slaves. The Vikings spoke Old Norse, with many dialectal variations.

Over time, the dialectal differences in the language were eliminated to such an extent that, towards the end of the 10th century, a new and distinct Western Scandinavian dialect had formed. It continued to develop according to its own rules and idiosyncrasies; by the end of the 14th century, Icelandic had become a unique language.

Because of Iceland's remote geographical location, the language has changed relatively little from the Old Norse era compared to mainland Scandinavian languages. Norwegian, Swedish and Danish no longer have grammatical cases, for instance, whereas Icelandic does.

The conservative evolution of Icelandic means that Icelanders can, perhaps with the help of a few footnotes, still read Medieval Icelandic texts, such as the Sagas of Icelanders that were written in the 13th and 14th centuries.

What is it like?

Icelandic is a grammar lover's dream. It is a heavily inflected language. It has four cases: nominative, accusative, dative and genitive, in which nouns, the definite article, adjectives and pronouns are declined (singular and plural). There are three grammatical genders: masculine, feminine and neuter. Verbs are conjugated for person, number, tense, mood and voice. There are three voices: active, middle and passive.

Icelandic is often said to have a very flexible word order due to its heavy inflections. While this is true to an extent, this flexibility is mainly seen in poetry and song lyrics. In everyday speech and writing, Icelandic tends to favour a subject-verb-object order. However, Icelandic is also a verb-second language, meaning that in a sentence that begins with, for example, an adverbial phrase, the finite verb will precede the subject: *Í gær borðaði ég kjötsúpu* ('Yesterday ate I meat soup').

Phonetically, perhaps the most distinguishing feature of Icelandic pronunciation is the use of pre-aspiration and some voiceless consonants, such as a voiceless /n/ and a voiceless /l/. A wonderful example of this is the word for water – *vatn* [va^{h}tn̥]. This is pronounced with pre-aspiration (lots of air) between

the /a/ and the /t/; for the last consonant, it sounds like air is coming through the nose, but with no sound from the vocal cords.

Icelandic is also well-known for its linguistic purism. Icelandic tends not to adopt loanwords for new concepts. Instead, a new term is coined, often recycling older, obsolete vocabulary or deriving new compounds from existing words. The most cited example is probably the word for computer – *tölva* – which is a fusion of the word *tala* ('number') and *völva* ('prophetess'). Another example is *sími*, an obsolete word originally meaning 'long thread' but, in modern Icelandic, 'telephone'.

Although the Icelandic population is, by and large, very supportive of this language policy, some neologisms fail to stick. *Flatbaka* ('flat pie'), for example, did not gain traction and everyone in Iceland prefers to simply eat *pítsa*.

Is it defined as safe, endangered, moribund or extinct?

Although Icelandic is defined as safe, there is currently much debate about its future. This debate centres around the impact of English on the Icelandic language. More specifically, how English threatens to minoritise Icelandic in certain domains, such as online and in the tourism industry.

The online domain is perhaps of greatest concern. A large proportion of our life is now spent in the digital world, and for Icelanders this world is overwhelmingly in English. Some fear that this might eventually lead to the digital extinction of Icelandic. In an excellent article in The Guardian, Professor Eirikur Rögnvaldsson is quoted as saying that young people might no longer be getting sufficient input to build a solid foundation in their own mother tongue.

The government recognises the importance of keeping Icelandic fully functional in all aspects of daily life, and has introduced a five-year plan to develop language technology in order to try to help Icelandic find its place in the digital world.

The tourism industry is also awash with English. Since the financial crash in 2008, the tourist industry in Iceland has exploded. Iceland also has more immigrants than ever (10% of inhabitants). It is not an exaggeration to say that you often hear more English than Icelandic in downtown Reykjavík, and locals cannot always expect to get served in shops and restaurants in their native language. Because most Icelanders speak fluent English, many busniess operators don't see this as a problem. For local customers, however, it often provokes a strong emotional response.

A lot of upset was caused by recent new signage at the Keflavík International Airport, where English was prioritised over Icelandic. Many businesses have also taken up English names, and adverts in shop windows are often in English, either for convenience or in an attempt to attract tourists. Such examples may seem insignificant, but many Icelanders worry that the language is no longer valued and that this kind of erosion will eventually lead to its demise. ¶

Icelandic in five minutes

Fé	'Money' or 'sheep'
Hvalreki	A beached whale' or 'an unexpected stroke of luck'
Þetta reddast	'It will all work out' (a national motto of sorts)
Áfram með smjörið!	'On with the butter!' ('Let's get on with it!', 'Carry on!')
Ási á Á á á á beit	'Ási on the farm Á owns a sheep which is grazing'
Bless, bless	'Goodbye'

Svava Skúladóttir is an Icelandic teacher at University College London's Centre for Languages (CLIE) and runs one-to-one courses online via icelandic-lessons.com.

Find out more

Online

For information about the Icelandic language and culture visit the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies at arnastofnun.is/en.

Articles

Jon Henley (2018) 'Icelandic battles threat of digital extinction', in *The Guardian*, 26 February 2018