

Tongue Twister

by Jelena Ćirić

Ah, the Icelandic language. It's the ancient tongue of Vikings, filled with beautiful yet frightening words like *ferdaáætlun* (how many different a's can there be?), *battakandi* (three t's in a row? Is that legal?) and *tunglsljós* (do they even have room for all those consonants on an island?). Icelandic is often portrayed as an impossible language to learn. I can tell you it's not: because I did it. Or more accurately, I *am* doing it – you never really finish learning a language. Although it is certainly a myth that Icelandic is impossible to learn, we who put ourselves to the task, face unique challenges. Yet our success is not only important for our own survival on this rock in the North Atlantic, but also for the nation as a whole – and even the Icelandic language itself.

Loaded language

Though many immigrants have disproven the myth that Icelandic is impossible to learn, it's still perceived as more difficult than other languages. “The complexity of the grammar is often the characteristic of Icelandic which most frightens people – when they see the charts – declinations, conjugations,” says Ana Stanicevic, who teaches Icelandic as a Second Language at the University of Iceland and is herself an immigrant to the country. This complexity was the very aspect that attracted Ana to the language: like its four cases which mean there can be up to 16 ways to spell and say each noun. “On the other hand, Serbian has seven cases, and no one talks about how impossible it is to learn,” Ana says of her mother tongue. “Another thing that adds to the difficulty is that the vocabulary is so foreign. The words for telephone and computer, for example, are similar in most European languages, and easily recognisable.” In Iceland, however, a new word is coined for each new phenomenon. The Icelandic word for computer, *tölva*, was formed by combining the words *tala* (number), and *völva* (prophetess). Ana says this characteristic of the language is as much an advantage as a disadvantage. “Even if it isn't transparent in that it doesn't have many international words, Icelandic is so descriptive. You can understand any word if you can break it down into its parts.”

“My teaching style is to show that Icelandic isn't difficult, it's different,” Ana asserts. “And you can overcome that, with a bit of will. When I stand in front of my students, as someone who doesn't speak Icelandic as a mother tongue, I am proof of that.”

Strictly speaking

Many foreigners, however, still struggle with Icelandic for years without noting much progress. One obstacle seems to be the lack of resources that cater to their needs. “We haven't done enough to develop good teaching materials and good courses.” Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson, professor emeritus in Icelandic Language and Linguistics at the University of Iceland, tells me. “Iceland was for a long time a homogenous society, then suddenly it's flooded by people who can't speak Icelandic, and we don't know how to react.” The change certainly was sudden. In the last two decades, foreigners have multiplied nearly fivefold, from 2% of the population to nearly 10% today. Recognising

and providing for the needs of this new demographic has been a game of catch-up for the country.

Icelanders as individuals are also struggling to adapt to the growing diversity of their neighbours. Many are unused to hearing their native language spoken with an accent or grammatical errors, and their reactions are not always helpful. While immigrants I spoke to experienced judgement for not speaking Icelandic, their attempts to practice were often ill-received by native speakers. “When some foreigner shows up who is learning the language and doesn’t speak perfect Icelandic, we lose patience and either start correcting them, which leads them to stop trying, or we just switch over to English, so people don’t get any practice,” Eiríkur says. “We are raised with the idea of speaking ‘proper’ Icelandic,” he tells me by way of explanation. If Icelanders want the language to prosper, it’s clear that they will have to open their ears to all its forms – imperfect or otherwise. Behind each accent and error is a person with much to contribute to a rapidly changing country.

Good as their word

Changing Icelanders’ attitude toward their language, however, is no easy task. “In some ways the language is the only cultural inheritance that Iceland has, and it truly is precious. It’s a big part of Icelanders’ identity and a huge source of pride,” Ana says, referring to the 1,000-year-old sagas, chronicles written in Old Norse, yet still largely intelligible to speakers of modern Icelandic.

Immigrants challenge the very idea of what it means to be an Icelandic. “For a long time, it was true that if you were an Icelandic, you spoke Icelandic. Or you speak Icelandic, therefore you’re an Icelandic,” Ana tells me. “A good example is the sign you see at Keflavík Airport when you land. In English it reads ‘Welcome to Iceland,’ but in Icelandic it reads ‘Welcome home.’ It’s assumed that if you understand Icelandic, you call Iceland home. It’s still hard for people to accept that today, there are people who are not Icelandic but speak the language fluently.”

Whys and wherefores

Many students of Icelandic I spoke to point to another factor as their main obstacle in learning Icelandic: motivation. “You don’t need Icelandic, if I’m being honest,” Chus Munguía, who moved to Iceland 11 years ago, tells me. “On a daily basis, I don’t use it at all. That’s the main barrier. Most of my friends are foreigners, and my Icelandic friends have no problem at all with speaking English. You can live a full life in Iceland without speaking Icelandic.”

Mariska Moerland, who moved to Iceland almost five years ago, says her lack of proficiency in the language often makes her feel left out. Fitting Icelandic lessons into a busy life, however, is a challenge. “I’ve followed several evening courses. You work during the day and follow a language course after work. You have to do your homework for the class, too, so you’re pretty busy when you’re doing that.” She would like to see

more workplaces offering Icelandic during work hours. “That would be a huge motivation. Then you’re not tired after the work day and you can focus.”

Though there is a wealth of jobs, entertainment, and social activities in Iceland that don’t require any knowledge of Icelandic, some aspects of the society are nevertheless closed to those who don’t speak it. Keeping up with local news or politics, as well as legal processes like buying a house can be more of a challenge for those who don’t speak the language. “Everything that is written is just a wall for you,” says Antonio Mitag, who moved to Iceland in 2016. “Whenever you need information you can’t get it. You have to specifically ask someone who speaks the language to translate each and every time.” Many foreigners I spoke to felt their lack of language was also a barrier to making Icelandic friends. In addition, the majority of Icelandic literature, television shows, and live events are not translated, making them inaccessible for those who don’t speak the language.

It bears pointing out that immigrants must learn Icelandic at their own expense, as the Icelandic government does not ensure free language education for new residents. While most workers’ unions will reimburse as much as 75% of the cost of courses, workers must pay dues for several months before they can take advantage of the policy. By this point, many immigrants will have built up a social network in English or their mother tongue and may feel even less motivated to learn Icelandic. Immigrants who are not working union members, such as freelancers or new parents on leave, are left paying for courses entirely out of pocket.

Such obstacles were pointed out ten years ago in a report published by the Ministry of Education on language policy. “There is a need for good and inexpensive Icelandic education and a lot of encouragement in order for people to undertake the task of learning Icelandic,” the report reads. “Unfortunately, the obstacles along the way are too numerous.” Ten years later, the same rings true, and the stakes are even higher.

A language in danger?

At the same time as a record number of foreigners are taking on Icelandic, its usage among native speakers may be changing dramatically, “Icelandic has faced more pleasure from the outside in recent years than ever before. This is due to both social changes and technological changes,” Eiríkur tells me. Due to increasing numbers of immigrants and a desire to cater to a growing number of tourists, Eiríkur says, the areas in which Icelandic is used are shrinking. Smart devices and home technology systems are becoming more prevalent in Icelandic homes, and with them, the use of English. “You go to the store and see kids maybe one year old in a cart with a smartphone or tablet. Most often what they’re watching is not in Icelandic.”

The changes seem most marked in younger generations, who are not only using more English, but see themselves as global citizens. “I think young people’s connection to the country and the language is weaker than it was before. They want to travel, study abroad, and so on. And they know that Icelandic is not very useful abroad.” In many

ways a complex, ancient language understood by relatively few is the very antithesis of the sped-up global society which craves fast results and universal appeal.

“If people know they can’t use Icelandic outside of Iceland, and if they know they can’t even use Icelandic everywhere in Iceland, and if they can’t even use Icelandic everywhere in the home, then you ask yourself – why should we continue to use this language which isn’t useful to us except in a very limited way?” Indeed, what is the “usefulness” of culture or identity in a society focused on quick profit and global relevance? It’s easy to see how young Icelanders’ weakening connection to their own language could become yet another obstacle immigrants face in learning Icelandic.

Opening doors

For the moment, however, it’s clear that the Icelandic language is an integral part of Icelandic culture. The Ministry of Education agrees. “In order to be able to participate fully in Icelandic society and to take full advantage of the quality of life it offers, it is necessary to have a grasp of the language,” its aforementioned report reads.

Yet making Icelandic learning more accessible for immigrants doesn’t only benefit the learners, but Icelandic society as whole, “Very few Icelanders know about this whole world of international residents who exist in Iceland with so much to offer this country, who know the language, and are making an effort to learn,” Ana tells me enthusiastically. “It’s incredible to walk into a classroom of students who are all educated doctors, teachers, accountants, programmers – who speak many languages. It’s a treasure. I’d love to see free courses for everyone who moves to Iceland to live and work. It’s a dream that is possible to realise and all benefit from it, especially the country .”

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