

Icelandic – past, present, future

Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson

Professor Emeritus in Icelandic Language and Linguistics

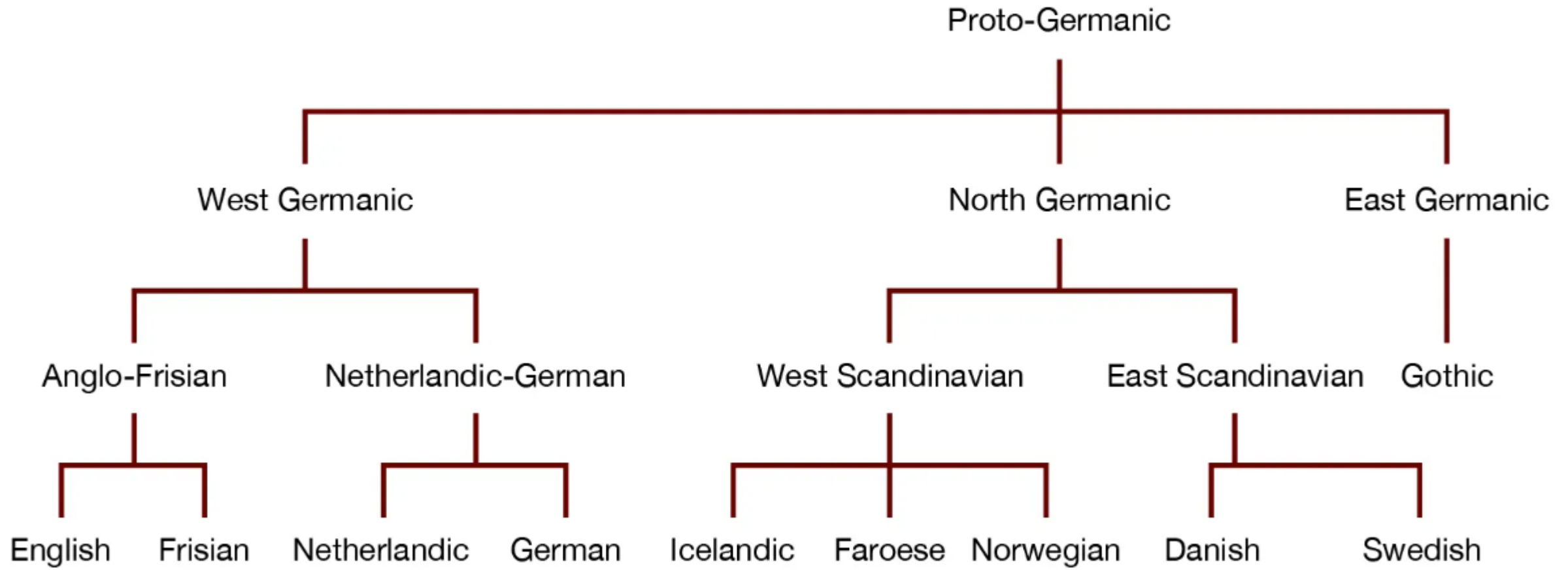
AUGUST 23, 2024

Questions



- Has the Icelandic language changed?
- Can Icelanders read the old manuscripts?
- Was Icelandic heavily affected by Danish?
- Are Icelanders language purists?
- Is Icelandic a difficult language to learn?
- What is the present situation of Icelandic?
- How could Icelandic be affected by change?
- What is the future of Icelandic?
- Why should we want to preserve Icelandic?

The Germanic languages



The stability of Icelandic



- “Among the Nordic languages Icelandic stands out [...] for its relative historical stability. Compared with its cognate neighbors in the same period Icelandic has, during its history of about one thousand years, undergone little change. It is a well-known cliché that the modern language is identical with the language of the classical period of literary flowering in the Middle Ages. Of course, this view, though understandable as an expression of the centuries-old linguistic and literary experience of the native layman, involves an exaggeration; for some parts of the language, in particular the phonological system, or at least some of its subsystems, have undergone radical changes in the course of time.”

- (Prof. Hreinn Benediktsson)

From Codex Regius



fra egi oc goðvm

Ēgír `er` aǵro naf(n)ǀ

het gýmír han hafði bvit afom aǀ þa er han hafði fengit ketil in micla sem nv er sagt. Til þeirrar vezlo com opin oc frig kona hanf. Þorr com eigi þviat han var iastr vegi. Sif var þar kona þórf. Bragi `oc` íþvn kona hanf. Tyr var þar han var einhendr fenrif vlfr sleit hand af hanom. þa er han var bvdin. Þar var niorþr oc kona hanf scaði. Freyr oc freýia. Uðar son opins. loki var þar. Oc pionvsto men freyf. beygvir oc beyla. Mart var þar asa oc alfa. Ēgír atti tva pionvsto men fimafengr oc elder. þar var lyfi gvǀ haft fyr eldz liós. Sialft barfc þar aǀ. þar var griþa ftadr micl. Men lofoðo mioc hverfo goðir pionvsto men egif voro. Loki matti eigi heyra þat. ocdrap han fimafeng. þa scóco esir sciol do fina oc oppo at loca. ocelto han bræt tǀ scogar. enw þeir foro at drecca. Loci hvarf aptr oc hitti vtǀ eldi loci qvad(d)ǀ han.

Normalized spelling, old and modern



- Ægir, er ǫðru nafni hét Gymir, hann hafði búið ásum ǫl þá er hann hafði fengið ketil inn mikla sem nú er sagt. Til þeirrar veizlu kom Óðinn **ok** Frigg, kona hans. Þórr kom eigi því at hann var í austrvegi. Sif var þar, kona Þórs, Bragi ok Iðunn, kona hans. Týr var þar, hann var einhendr, Fenrisúlfr sleit hönd af hánunum þá er hann var bundinn. Þar var Njörðr ok kona hans, Skaði, Freyr ok Freyja, Víðarr, son Óðins. Loki var þar ok þjónustumenn Freys, Byggvir ok Beyla. Margt var þar ása ok álfa. Ægir átti tvá þjónustumenn, Fimafengr ok Eldir. Þar var lýsigull haft fyrir eldsljós; sjálft barsk þar ǫl; þar var griðastaðr mikill. Menn lofuðu mjök hversu góðir þjónustumenn Ægis váru. Loki mátti eigi heyra **þat** ok drap hann Fimafeng. Þá skóku **æsir** skjöldu sína ok **æpðu** at Loka ok eltu hann braut til skógar en þeir fóru at drekka. Loki hvarf aftur ok hitti úti Eldi; Loki kvaddi hann:
- Ægir, er öðru nafni hét Gymir, hann hafði búið ásum öl þá er hann hafði fengið ketil hinn mikla sem nú er sagt. Til þeirrar veislu kom Óðinn **og** Frigg, kona hans. Þór kom eigi því að hann var í austurvegi. Sif var þar, kona Þórs, Bragi og Iðunn, kona hans. Týr var þar, hann var einhentur, Fenrisúlfr sleit hönd af honum þá er hann var bundinn. Þar var Njörður og kona hans, Skaði, Freyr og Freyja, Víðar, sonur Óðins. Loki var þar og þjónustumenn Freys, Byggir og Beyla. Margt var þar ása og álfa. Ægir átti tvo þjónustumenn, Fimafeng og Eldi. Þar var lýsigull haft fyrir eldsljós; sjálft barst þar öl, þar var griðastaður mikill. Menn lofuðu mjög hversu góðir þjónustumenn Ægis voru. Loki mátti eigi heyra **það** og drap hann Fimafeng. Þá skóku **æsir** skjöldu sína og **æptu** að Loka og eltu hann braut til skógar en þeir fóru að drekka. Loki hvarf aftur og hitti úti Eldi; Loki kvaddi hann:

The fight against Danish influence



- Influence from Danish in the 16th to 19th centuries
- Rasmus Christian Rask, in a letter in 1813
 - “Honestly, I think that Icelandic soon will die. I predict that nobody in Reykjavík will understand it after hundred years, and hardly anyone in the whole country two hundred years from then, if everything continues as hitherto and no barriers are built. Even in the language of the best men, every other word is in Danish. The language will remain longest among the common people.”
- Fight against Danish influence in the early 19th century
 - Inspired by romanticism and nationalism

Málhreinsun – the language norm



- Málhreinsun – language clensing
 - Fight against Danish influence in vocabulary and syntax
 - Reversal of internal changes
- Development of Icelandic language standard or norm
 - In the late 19th century
 - Became more pedantic in the early 20th century
- This norm has basically been unchanged for a century
 - But needs to be relaxed

Is Icelandic a difficult language?



- Icelandic is often considered a very difficult language
 - By people trying to learn the language
 - Icelanders even take pride in speaking a difficult language
- Icelanders are not used to hearing “faulty” Icelandic
 - They often react by switching to English
- All languages are difficult
 - If the aim is native speaker competence
- Icelanders need to be more tolerant
 - Of foreign accents, errors in inflection and syntax, etc.

Strong status – increased pressure



- Icelandic is used in all domains of society:
 - Government and administration
 - Education
 - Business and commerce
 - Mass media
 - Cultural life
 - Internet
 - Face-to-face communication
- Societal changes:
 - Explosion in tourism
 - Foreign workers and immigration
 - Use of English in higher education
 - Globalization and globalized attitudes
- Technological changes:
 - Smartphones and tablet computers
 - YouTube and Netflix
 - Interactive video games
 - Language technology

Icelandic and modern technology



ENGLISH ESPAÑOL 中文 (CHINESE)
The New York Times

Icelanders Seek to Keep Their Language Alive and Out of 'the Latin Bin'



A law book written on calfskin in 1363 on display at a museum in Reykjavik, Iceland. Icelanders long prided themselves on reading epic tales written on the material, but their language is being undermined by the use of English. Egill Bjarnason/Associated Press

Support The Guardian Subscribe Find a job Sign in / Register Search

News Opinion Sport Culture Lifestyle More

World Europe US Americas Asia Australia Middle East Africa Inequality Cities Global development

The Guardian International edition

Iceland

Icelandic language battles threat of 'digital extinction'

Iceland's mother tongue and cultural identity is drowning in an online ocean of English



Jon Henley in Reykjavík

@jonhenley
Mon 26 Feb 2018 11.50 GMT



863



▲ Young Icelanders spend a large part of their lives in an almost entirely English digital world. Photograph: Alamy

Unlike most languages, when Icelandic needs a new word it rarely imports one. Instead, enthusiasts coin a new term rooted in the tongue's ancient Norse past: a neologism that looks, sounds and behaves like Icelandic.

What might happen



- Direct influence from English increases
 - On vocabulary, syntax, inflection, pronunciation, ...
- Icelandic loses domains of language use
 - Technology, commerce, tourism, higher education ...
- Icelandic input during the critical period decreases
 - Less Icelandic stimulus during acquisition might lead to increased variation in younger speakers
- Icelandic loses prestige
 - Young people find it old-fashioned and incomplete

Challenges



- Why might foreign influence be more serious this time?
 - Quantity – English is all around us, all day
 - Younger recipients – children in the language acquisition period
 - Interactivity – much more influential than receptive input
- The greatest challenge is teaching Icelandic to immigrants
 - To insure their inclusion in society
- What we need to do:
 - Offer more courses, develop teaching material, train teachers
 - Change our attitudes toward “incomplete” Icelandic

Conclusion



- Language is essentially a social phenomenon
 - Must adapt to the needs of society at any given time
- The Icelandic language norm is partly outdated
 - Needs to be relaxed somehow
 - Must tolerate variation and novelties in usage
 - Must **not** be used to discriminate people
- Our mother tongue is an integral part of us
 - Our private property but also public property
- These different roles must be respected

Thank you!

eirikur@hi.is