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### Article abstract

This paper provides an overview of Icelandic language politics in the face of the challenges brought on by the modern media in a small country. It starts with a short glance at the beginnings of Icelandic linguistic politics in the nineteenth century to reveal the basic ideological premises and show how they have been maintained in national discourse on the Icelandic language and the media. It then examines how the Icelandic national consensus on linguistic purism has been shaken by technological and political developments, in short the advancing globalisation of the media. These developments are reflected in the practices of media translation and changing attitudes towards translation.

# Iceland's "Egg of Life" and the Modern Media

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## RÉSUMÉ

L'étude présente un aperçu de la politique linguistique en Islande qui, en sa qualité de petit pays, est particulièrement sensible à la confrontation avec les médias modernes. Elle débute par un bref historique de la politique linguistique islandaise, qui puise ses racines au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, afin d'introduire ses bases idéologiques et de démontrer à quel point ces dernières ont pu perdurer dans le débat national sur la langue et les médias. Elle traite ensuite de la manière dont le consensus sur le purisme linguistique a souffert des développements politiques et technologiques, bref de la mondialisation des médias. Ces développements transparaissent dans les pratiques de traduction des médias ainsi que dans l'approche évolutive de la traduction.

## ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of Icelandic language politics in the face of the challenges brought on by the modern media in a small country. It starts with a short glance at the beginnings of Icelandic linguistic politics in the nineteenth century to reveal the basic ideological premises and show how they have been maintained in national discourse on the Icelandic language and the media. It then examines how the Icelandic national consensus on linguistic purism has been shaken by technological and political developments, in short the advancing globalisation of the media. These developments are reflected in the practices of media translation and changing attitudes towards translation.

## MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

globalisation, linguistic purism, media translation, nationalism, native language ideology

## 1. The Metaphor and Native Language Ideology

The metaphor 'egg of life' stems from a fairy tale collected in Iceland in the nineteenth century in the spirit of the Grimms' brothers.<sup>1</sup> The tale tells of a young man kidnapped by giants. He observes them throwing an egg between them, their 'egg of life,' as if they were playing with a ball, the difference being that if this egg falls and breaks, they die.

The metaphor has been continually used in the latter part of the twentieth century for a number of concepts, of which two stand out: the concept of freedom or liberty and the concept of the Icelandic language as a kind of 'nerve of life' for the Icelandic nation.<sup>2</sup> The Icelandic word for 'egg of life' is so common in the latter use that it can be used with a definite article to refer directly to the Icelandic language itself.<sup>3</sup> That such a metaphorical use is taken as self-evident betrays a great deal about the way Icelanders think of their language. It shows the value of the Icelandic language, as a *mythomoteur* of Icelandic national identity to use Anthony Smith's coinage (1988: 15). The Icelandic language is one of the prime identification instruments in the Icelanders' conception of themselves as a nation, not simply because they share

it as a language, but primarily because it is conceived of as a living link to the medieval literature written in Iceland between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. The idea, or fact, as many would claim, that we can read these medieval texts without the aid of translation is taken as proof positive of the Icelandic people being at one with their ancient forefathers in a linear continuum that in itself is justification for our existence as a nation.<sup>4</sup>

Such a conception of the language and the old literature is not as self-evident as it might seem, but the consensus on this issue is still very strong. Scholars and authors who have cast doubt on this linear unity of the Icelandic language and its literature were until recently few and far between. The post-cold-war or the postmodern quest to find out or deconstruct what national identity actually is has produced a flurry of articles that at least question the premise of unity, even if they confirm it in the end. During the nineties there was a steady outflow of articles on the pros and cons of linguistic purism. The decade opened with Kjartan Ottósson's publication of a history of Icelandic linguistic cleansing which he shows as having a tradition dating back to the Renaissance. This is perhaps not so surprising, when one considers that the Renaissance was not only a movement that went back to the ancients for models, but also a movement that put the use of native language to the fore. Dante's *De Vulgari Eloquentia* is probably the pioneering example of this. Native language ideology is, in fact, a common European phenomenon since the Renaissance and the Reformation. The Bible translations are the obvious case in point, but one can add to that, for example, the establishment of the Académie Française, the German language societies of the seventeenth century, numerous tracts on the improvement of native languages and native language poetics, such as the one in German by Martin Opitz in the early seventeenth century. These are only a few examples that show a trend that culminated in the publication of native language grammars and dictionaries and the establishment of chairs in the vernacular within universities that had previously only taught Latin and Greek.<sup>5</sup>

Native language ideology did not, however, assume political and even revolutionary dimensions until the eighteenth century, when it was coupled with the awakening of modern nationalism, and became one of its prime vehicles in many cases. This was certainly the case in Iceland, where the linguist Rasmus Kristian Rask initiated the establishment of an Icelandic literary society that still publishes the journal *Skírnir*. Following that, in the 1830s a group of Icelandic students in Copenhagen started the literary journal *Fjölnir* with an openly nationalistic agenda. In Icelandic historical discourse, this group is behind the major ideological renewal of Icelandic culture that took place in the nineteenth century. For generations of Icelanders they were, and indeed remain national heroes, who raised the Icelandic phoenix from the ashes of centuries of oppression and colonisation.

The link to the ancient sagas and their language was one of the cornerstones of Icelandic nationalism and became fully integrated into the Icelanders' conception of themselves. Through this link Icelanders of the nineteenth century were able to distinguish themselves fully from the colonising *other*, the Danes, and support their claim to nationhood with a culture that was more original and pure than that of the Danes themselves. This seems to have worked wonders, for the Icelandic struggle for independence was almost entirely peaceful and the Danish state relinquished its authority slowly but surely. The Danes even went so far in the 1970s as to return to their former

colony the major extant manuscripts written in Iceland, an act equivalent perhaps to the British returning artefacts at the British Museum to Egypt and Greece.

## 2. Ancient Icelandic and Modern Media

When Iceland entered the media age in the twentieth century, the discourse on the role of the Icelandic language and its preservation was therefore fully in place, the consensus was that Icelandic was an ancient and unique language and that Icelanders should preserve it and preferably enrich it only with the basic vocabulary extant in the old texts. This has meant that the resistance against borrowings from foreign languages has been great and neologisms have been put under the demand of 'transparency,' meaning that any new word must be created from the so-called basic vocabulary of the medieval manuscripts and extant morphemes of the same vocabulary. This can be done by giving an old and obsolete word a new meaning, like *sími* for telephone, a word that apparently denoted thread in old texts. Another way would be to create a transparent word with Icelandic morphemes, such as *sjónvarp* for television, where *sjón* denotes sight and *varp* denotes to throw or cast, an obvious echo from the English 'broadcast.' This practice, added to which are of course pure translation borrowings, has led to some very peculiar coinages in some cases which are rarely or never used, and on the other hand it has also successfully introduced words into common usage.

The Icelanders were, however, unprepared for the media age. Of course, newspapers developed similarly as elsewhere and Icelandic radio was introduced in 1930, but with the advent of film and later of television, video and the internet it became financially impossible to respond by establishing native language media to counter the inflow of foreign influences. At first, nothing was done. Foreign films shown before the war had, if anything, Danish subtitles. During the war and twenty years after, films were shown without any translation at all. In place of a translation, a minor genre of paratexts was developed, the so-called programme, a folded leaflet that gave the plot of the film (Bernharsson, 1999: 874-885). The cultural inertia in the face of the new medium may be due to several reasons. First, there was the inability to produce films in the Icelandic language, although there were some putative attempts made in the fifties. Secondly, the cultural élite may have considered the cinema as an unimportant factor in Icelandic culture, since it represented popular culture, as opposed to the "true" literary culture that harked back to the medieval sagas. Thirdly, Icelandic film distributors claimed it was not financially viable to subtitle films for small Icelandic audiences (Bernharsson, 1999: 876).

## 3. The First Shock of Mass Media

Then in the early sixties, everything changed. The American military base situated in Keflavík started broadcasting more widely than before due to improved technology. Suddenly the broadcasts could be seen even in Reykjavík, which is about 50 kilometres away from the base. This sudden influx of American TV culture raised hairs in several political camps. The left saw it not only as additional proof of increasing American hegemony, but also as a threat to the Icelandic language. Many others in different parts of the political spectrum concurred. Thus even many of

those who were pro-NATO and pro-American found this unacceptable. The Icelandic 'egg of life' was threatened again and something needed to be done. In 1964, a select and apparently cross-partisan group from the Icelandic elite called for the establishment of Icelandic television to counter foreign broadcasting in the country, primarily, if not solely, to protect the Icelandic language. According to Björn Bjarnason, a former Minister for Education and Culture, a new "Fjölnir" group of national heroes was apparently born (2001: 35-39). After considerable controversy, in which the cold war politics of the day were mixed, the Icelandic parliament decided to start up an Icelandic television channel. This news had a curious effect on the finances of cinema film distributors who suddenly saw subtitling as a viable option, so they invested in the necessary equipment a year before the Icelandic channel went on air in 1966 (Bernharsson, 1999: 885).

This first channel was and is still state run and financed by licence fees on the British model. It has, however, never realised the explicit objective of being purely Icelandic. The majority of the material it broadcast then was foreign and much of it in English as is indeed still the case.<sup>6</sup> But since there were translations provided, this was not a problem anymore, the 'egg of life' was apparently not in danger of falling if Icelandic subtitles or voice-overs were added.

The next shock came when videos came on the market in the eighties; the pioneers were businessmen who wanted a quick buck and tried to rent videos without translation. Many people also bought cassettes abroad, resulting in a profusion of foreign material without translation. The controversy was minor in this case and the political spectrum united again to a large extent, although there was no recognisable new "Fjölnir" group established, perhaps because the political dimension of the cold war was not relevant in this case. This was also during a time of liberalisation, so all protest against "foreign influence" was weaker than before. The solution to this problem proved to be similar to the first, namely a television channel was founded in 1986, this time a private one, Channel 2. Ironically, however, this channel broadcast even more foreign material than the state run television service.<sup>7</sup> Another side effect of this controversy may be the fact that both TV channels started dubbing most of their material for children, but prior to that, even children's programmes were subtitled to a great extent.

Finally, the Minister of Culture at the time, Sverrir Hermannsson, also became worried about the 'egg of life' and decided to issue a regulation on February 11, 1986, which required Icelandic television channels in Iceland to provide translations with foreign film material. This regulation along with the competition from the private channel made sure that video distributors also had their material translated, albeit with less demands on the keepers of the 'egg.'

#### 4. A Translational Hierarchy

It appears that a hierarchical structure developed in the Icelandic media translation market in the late eighties and well into the nineties. This structure could be seen in both the quality of the translations and the payment for them, which again was reflected in the methods used. The Icelandic National Broadcasting Service, as it calls itself in English, was at the top with both the best paid and the most experienced translators. They also did their cueing themselves, and the channel paid for proof-

readers with university degrees in Icelandic. The private channel, Channel 2, ranked second in payment for translators, but here technicians did the cueing. The translations were also proofread at this channel. The third segment in the market was the video distribution. Here an army of nameless translators (or at least they sometimes must have wished to remain nameless) produced translations as hack work for fixed and very low prices. Cueing was done by technicians but no proofreading. But if the video translations were often bad, cinema translations were often worse, due to problems known internationally. The translators only saw the film once or twice and the technical work was done by people whose abilities were solely within the sphere of technical knowledge. Occasionally the translators had either an imprecise script or a copy of the film rather than both.

This hierarchy is probably the same as in most other subtitling countries, with perhaps the difference that Icelandic channels, in particular the state run channel, were under much greater linguistic scrutiny than might be expected in other countries. The qualitative differences between them are probably mostly due to the method applied and the payment extended for the translation. These criteria are probably the same in most European subtitling countries: the state broadcasting channel uses the most expensive translators and methods and these costs are reduced proportionally in the lower market segments.

### 5. The Second (and Final?) Shock of Mass Media

The next shock came during the Gulf War of 1991. Not because Saddam fired Scuds on Icelandic television channels, but because the private channel, Channel 2, started broadcasting CNN coverage of the war illegally without translation or even Icelandic commentary. This was on January 15, 1991 and the day after the regulatory body of the government instructed the channel to discontinue the broadcasts, which it did not (Bjarnason, 2001: 42). So the Minister of Culture at the time, Svavar Gestsson, a member of a left wing party, simply changed the regulation so the channel could continue its broadcasts (id.: 42). Considerable controversy followed in which the minister was attacked from right and left, but also defended. The minister published an article in the nationally distributed newspaper *Morgunblaðið* on Jan. 29, where he defended his action with liberal arguments more often heard from his opponents. The nation, however, continued making popcorn and happily enjoying Norman Schwartzkopfs commentary on the warfare.<sup>8</sup>

Since the Gulf War controversy the question of linguistic purism in the Icelandic media has somehow lost its edge. It is as if the battle for the preservation of Icelandic that began with establishment of Icelandic television has been quietly lost. The introduction of new technical possibilities, such as the broadband distribution of dozens of TV channels via satellite, has, for example, not caused a stir in Icelandic discourse on language. The same applies to the internet world, and all the computer programmes that are used in the country, including games for children. There have been attempts to get Microsoft to translate Windows into Icelandic, and the above-mentioned Minister of Culture, Björn Bjarnason (2002), even managed to get a contract with Microsoft on the translation of Windows 98, but this has not been followed up by the company in spite of promises to the contrary.<sup>9</sup>

The dying interest in the media in the preservation of the Icelandic language is also reflected in the translation standards maintained, or rather not maintained, by the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service. This channel was the 'flagship' of media translation well into the nineties, and the pinnacle of the above-mentioned hierarchy in the Icelandic market. But with increased competitive pressures and continued financial difficulties, partly brought on by heavy political pressures on the licence fees, the state run channel took up bargaining methods that are more in key with what was sometimes done in the US between the world wars. The contract with the Writer's Union of Iceland, of which most of the translators are members, was not renewed and the translators were given the opportunity of signing a personal contract in which their rates were reduced and they had to relinquish their copyright so that the channel would be able to hand over their translations to American distributors of DVDs. This is apparently due to a clause in contracts of American distributors which requires the translation to be handed over if the "deal" is to go through, surely a violation of the moral right of the translator as a copyright holder of the translation, even if it has been sold to the channel. The above development reflects the reduced importance of the Icelandic language in the media, and perhaps the demise of linguistic purism there, at least in the form in which it has hitherto been practiced. It is almost certain that it will lead to less quality in the long run.

## 6. A Cause Lost Forever?

The success of the second "Fjöltnir" movement in the early 1960s seems, then, to be considerably less than that of the first in the nineteenth century, even if the establishment of an Icelandic television channel in a country of less than 250,000 souls might be seen as nothing short of revolutionary.<sup>10</sup> But since the proportion of Icelandic productions in the programme has never been above 30-40%, according to Statistics Iceland, this success could be seen as qualified. The same might be said of the private channels, the proportion of Icelandic productions has been between 10-20% at best. If this is the preservation of the 'egg of life' it seems to be a little careless. The real preservation of the 'egg of life' in this sphere has thus been entrusted to the translators of Icelandic television, a curiously invisible group within the media system, even if their work represents the majority of what is presented in Icelandic on Icelandic television.

There seems to be a difference in these briefly described attempts to preserve the Icelandic 'egg of life.' The nineteenth century variant with the "Fjöltnir" group was successful, because the Icelanders were freeing themselves from Danish rule, and they had culturally relevant 'evidence,' so to speak, in their link to the old sagas, evidence that had played a role in Danish national building too. The conflict was with a dwindling colonial power that was itself being reduced to the status of a small nation in the course of the nineteenth century.

The relatively fruitless attempts at saving the 'egg of life' with Icelandic productions in the face of modern media failed perhaps on two grounds, aside from the financial ones. First, the American cultural dominance in this sphere was growing during this time and has almost turned omnipotent today. This has meant that a technologically inferior culture like the Icelandic one needed and wanted to absorb the American cultural influences.<sup>11</sup> One need only needs to look at the films offered in Icelandic cinemas in the month of October 2002. The two Icelandic films on show

make up the bulk of the whole production in the country for this year and, according to Statistics Iceland, the proportion of Icelandic films on the market never rose to above 4 percent from 1965-1998. The second point is related to the first in the sense that as a technologically inferior culture, the Icelandic one desires American cultural advantages, which again leads us back to an inner conflict with the ideological system that our nation building had constructed around the language.<sup>12</sup> English became the Jekyll and Hyde of Icelandic culture, adored and despised for its power.

This will not change in the near future, and the only way to keep the 'egg of life' from falling to the ground and breaking is to make use of the only cultural interface a small nation has as a weapon against such power – translation. Not simply translation, but translation that raises standards and is given a proper role in a society that values its 'egg of life' so highly. For the only ones who can maintain the Icelandic language as the 'egg of life' in Iceland are Icelandic translators. Otherwise, it is very likely that the Icelandic fairy tale will be rewritten as Humpty Dumpty.

#### NOTES

1. I want to thank Martin Regal at the University of Iceland for reading this for me and providing valuable suggestions.
2. This has, in fact, led to overuse of the concept for anything "vital" in political discourse; the fish stocks, the school system and other objects of political debate are also given this metaphor to increase their importance.
3. The former president of Iceland, Mrs Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, now Goodwill Ambassador for Languages at UNESCO, repeatedly referred to the Icelandic language as the 'egg of life' in her many speeches dedicated to the conservation of the Icelandic language.
4. See for example a report to the Nordic Council by Ari Páll Kristinsson, director of the Icelandic Language Institute (2001: <<http://www.ismal.hi.is/utredning.html>>).
5. I refer to my forthcoming volume *Literary Diplomacy I: the Role of Translation in the Construction of National Literatures in Britain and Germany 1750-1830* for a more detailed discussion of the development of native language ideology.
6. Statistics Iceland provides detailed tables on the Icelandic media on its website <[www.statice.is](http://www.statice.is)>. Here it is possible to see the origins of the material shown on Icelandic television since 1967.
7. Again I refer to Statistics Iceland.
8. One of Gestsson's major arguments, was that such a governmental regulation on translation, issued by his predecessor, did not provide the results needed. (1991: 16).
9. According to Bjarnason, Microsoft only replied to him from the headquarters in Seattle after an article was published in the L.A. Times on June 29, 1998, on the "war of words" between Icelandic authorities and Microsoft. This was during a time that Microsoft was facing an onslaught of negative news as Bjarnason points out.
10. David Crystal (2000: 129) sees, for example, the establishment of Welsh television as one of the critical factors in the revival of Welsh.
11. In this argumentation I apply Eugene Roosen's theories in his *Creating Ethnicity*.
12. Again I can refer to Crystal (2000: 78), who sees the relentless pressure of dominant foreign media as one of the causes for language death.

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