

Icelandic language at risk; robots, computers can't grasp it

April 22 2017, by Egill Bjarnason



In this photo taken Saturday, April 15, 2017, Salome Sigurjonsdottir, 10, tests a voice-controlled television in an electronics store in Reykjavik. Sales assistant Einar Dadi said none of his TVs understood Icelandic. The revered Icelandic language, seen by many as a source of identity and pride, is being undermined by the widespread use of English both for mass tourism and in the voice-controlled artificial intelligence devices coming into vogue. (AP Photo/Egill Bjarnason)

When an Icelander arrives at an office building and sees "Solarfri" posted, they need no further explanation for the empty premises: The

word means "when staff get an unexpected afternoon off to enjoy good weather."

The people of this rugged North Atlantic island settled by Norsemen some 1,100 years ago have a unique dialect of Old Norse that has adapted to life at the edge of the Arctic.

Hundslappadrifa, for example, means "heavy snowfall with large flakes occurring in calm wind."

But the revered Icelandic [language](#), seen by many as a source of identity and pride, is being undermined by the widespread use of English, both for mass tourism and in the voice-controlled artificial intelligence devices coming into vogue.

Linguistics experts, studying the future of a language spoken by fewer than 400,000 people in an increasingly globalized world, wonder if this is the beginning of the end for the Icelandic tongue.

Former President Vigdis Finnbogadottir told The Associated Press that Iceland must take steps to protect its language. She is particularly concerned that programs be developed so the language can be easily used in digital technology.

"Otherwise, Icelandic will end in the Latin bin," she warned.

Teachers are already sensing a change among students in the scope of their Icelandic vocabulary and reading comprehension.

Anna Jonsdottir, a teaching consultant, said she often hears teenagers speak English among themselves when she visits schools in Reykjavik, the capital.

She said 15-year-old students are no longer assigned a volume from the Sagas of Icelanders, the medieval literature chronicling the early settlers of Iceland. Icelanders have long prided themselves of being able to fluently read the epic tales originally penned on calfskin.

Most high schools are also waiting until senior year to read author Halldor Laxness, the 1955 winner of the Nobel Prize in literature, who rests in a small cemetery near his farm in West Iceland.

A number of factors combine to make the future of the Icelandic language uncertain. Tourism has exploded in recent years, becoming the country's single biggest employer, and analysts at Arion Bank say one in two new jobs is being filled by foreign labor.

That is increasing the use of English as a universal communicator and diminishing the role of Icelandic, experts say.



In this photo taken Saturday, April 15, 2017, a law book penned on calf-skin in

1363 is displayed at a museum in Reykjavik. The revered Icelandic language, seen by many as a source of identity and pride, is being undermined by the widespread use of English both for mass tourism and in the voice-controlled artificial intelligence devices coming into vogue. (AP Photo/Egill Bjarnason)

"The less useful Icelandic becomes in people's daily life, the closer we as a nation get to the threshold of giving up its use," said Eirikur Rognvaldsson, a language professor at the University of Iceland.

He has embarked on a three-year study of 5,000 people that will be the largest inquiry ever into the use of the language.

"Preliminary studies suggest children at their first-language acquisition are increasingly not exposed to enough Icelandic to foster a strong base for later years," he said.

Concerns for the Icelandic language are by no means new. In the 19th century, when its vocabulary and syntax were heavily influenced by Danish, independence movements fought to revive Icelandic as the common tongue, central to the claim that Icelanders were a nation.

Since Iceland became fully independent from Denmark in 1944, its presidents have long championed the need to protect the language.

Asgeir Jonsson, an economics professor at the University of Iceland, said without a unique language Iceland could experience a brain drain, particularly among certain professions.

"A British town with a population the size of Iceland has far fewer scientists and artists, for example," he said. "They've simply moved to the metropolis."

The problem is compounded because many new computer devices are designed to recognize English but they do not understand Icelandic.

"Not being able to speak Icelandic to voice-activated fridges, interactive robots and similar devices would be yet another lost field," Jonsson said.

Icelandic ranks among the weakest and least-supported language in terms of digital technology—along with Irish Gaelic, Latvian, Maltese and Lithuanian—according to a report by the Multilingual Europe Technology Alliance assessing 30 European languages.

Iceland's Ministry of Education estimates about 1 billion Icelandic krona, or \$8.8 million, is needed for seed funding for an open-access database to help tech developers adapt Icelandic as a language option.

Svandis Svavarsdottir, a member of Iceland's parliament for the Left-Green Movement, said the government should not be weighing costs when the nation's cultural heritage is at stake.

"If we wait, it may already be too late," she said.

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