

English in Icelandic – A comparison between generations

ÁSTA SVAVARSDÓTTIR

1. Introduction

No finst det i og for seg ikkje *reine* språk. Alle språk, jamvel islandsk, har ulike former for språklån og språkblandingar. (Brunstad 2003: 7)

These are the opening words of a new collection of papers on language purism, and the “jamvel” (even) reflects the widespread view that Icelandic is an exceptionally, “pure” language, in the sense that its vocabulary is more or less free from foreign influence, at least in the form of direct lexical borrowing. This is the image that many Icelanders have of their language, and the image they present to others. The impression one gets from reading or listening to public language use, i.e. in the media, does support this view, as foreign lexical elements are not prominent in such texts, whether spoken or written. Quantitative research on foreign linguistic influence in modern Icelandic is scarce, but the little there is points in the same direction. A pilot study of three small text samples, one of which consisted of domestic news in a national newspaper, shows that words originating in English were only 0.3% of the total number of running words in such texts, and less than 2% of the total number of lemmas or lexemes, proper names included (cf. Svavarsdóttir (forthcoming)). Similar results are emerging in an ongoing comparative research project on lexical borrowing in the Nordic languages (including Finnish),¹ and, furthermore, they indicate that Icelandic has indeed proportionally the fewest borrowings of all the languages in question.

¹ The project, led by Helge Sandøy, is called *Moderna importord i språka i Norden* (cf. <http://www.hf.uib.no/moderne/>). The part of the research referred to here is a quantitative study of borrowings in newspaper texts, and the information on preliminary results comes from an unpublished report draft by Bente Selback; a report with the final results is due in late 2004.

Despite the fact that lexical borrowings seem to be comparatively rare in everyday language, at least as far as newspapers are concerned, anxieties over an increasing foreign influence on Icelandic, especially from English, are often voiced, and it is generally believed that even if English borrowings may be few in writing they are certainly much more frequent in speech. The pilot study, mentioned above, included a comparison of different texts with respect to the number and frequency of lexical items derived from English. The texts were categorised by two variables, spoken vs. written and formal/impersonal vs. informal/personal, and the results did indeed show a clear difference, especially with respect to the second variable. The informal and personal texts, whether spoken or written, contained strikingly more instances of English words than the more formal and less personal ones. Lexical items of English origin were, however, comparatively rare, even in these text types, as they amounted to no more than 0.7% of running words in the two informal categories taken together (Svavarsdóttir (forthcoming)).

In the present paper, lexical borrowings from English are looked at in connection with another external factor, namely the age of the speakers. Young people are frequently claimed to use more code-switching and borrowings than older people do, and the study presented here seeks to verify this hypothesis. In the second chapter, the status of English in Iceland and the attitudes towards it will be discussed briefly, especially with respect to the increased knowledge and use of English in the last few decades. The study is described in Section 3. It consisted in an analysis of the lexical impact of English carried out in a collection of personal diary entries by a number of Icelanders. The number and distribution of word forms of English origin were analysed with respect to the age of writers, and the types and nature of English elements are considered and described on the basis of examples extracted from a selection of the texts. The results support the claim that young people tend to use more words from English than older people, and that the choice and usage of these words among the younger generation is in some respects different from the usage of older speakers. The final chapter contains a general discussion and a brief conclusion of the study.

2. The status of English in Iceland

The status of English in the Icelandic educational system changed when a new curriculum was introduced in 1999. It then replaced Danish as the first foreign language taught in schools, and English is now compulsory

from the 5th to the 10th grade, i.e. from the age of 10 to 16. This means that all young people get a formal training in English for at least 6 years, and most of them for another 4 years in secondary schools. The change in the curriculum could, however, be seen rather as a consequence of a general change in the status of English in society at large than as a cause. For Icelanders in the first half of the 20th century, Denmark was the main gate to the outside world, and Danish was thus the foreign language most people learned. This has been gradually changing since the second World War, as the importance of English as a medium of communication has been increasing, not only with respect to Anglo-American countries but worldwide. Icelanders born after 1945 are thus likely to be more proficient in English than in Danish, and to use it more. A recent survey shows that close to 90% of the participants claim to have at least a minimal knowledge of English, and even if their distribution across age-groups is fairly even, there are slightly more young people who know some English than those who are older. When asked about fluency, the difference between age-groups becomes more prominent, however. About 64% of all the participants claimed to know English well, but when analysed by age it appears that 96% of the youngest people (under 29) said they knew English well, whereas only about 68% of the oldest participants (over 50) made the same claim. It is interesting to note that the reverse is true about Danish. Only about 16% of the people asked had a good knowledge of Danish, though this is the language that comes next in terms of the number of proficient speakers, and most of them belong to the oldest age-group, i.e. people born during the second World War or earlier; the same is true of German and Swedish.² Answers to questions on proficiency in such surveys do, of course, reflect people's self-evaluation. This is not necessarily realistic, but the results indicate that a large proportion of the Icelandic population does at least have good enough performative skills in English to make them feel that they master it fairly well, which might for example mean that they can read instructions, get along when travelling, etc., without difficulty. Furthermore, the results indicate that young people do in general know English better than the older generation does. As for use, the difference between age-groups is confirmed by the results of another recent survey, where people were asked about their use of English over the last week. The answers clearly reveal a connection between the age

² The survey referred to was made for the Icelandic ministry of education, and carried out by PriceWaterhouseCoopers in September 2001 (cf. <http://bella.mrn.stjr.is/utgafur/Menntskyrsla.pdf>).

of a person and how much he or she claims to use English; the number of those who use it rarely increases with age (9% of the youngest, but 59% of the oldest age group), whereas the number of people that use it every day decreases with age (35% of the youngest and only 10% of the oldest).³

Formal education is obviously not the only explanation of the high proficiency in English that many Icelanders have, or think they have. If it were, more people would be expected to claim that they have a good knowledge of Danish too, another language they learn for years as part of their compulsory and secondary education. One of the main reasons for this discrepancy is, no doubt, the greater exposure to English than to any other foreign language in Iceland. English is present as a kind of background music in the daily lives of most people, even without them really noticing it, e.g. in lyrics to popular music, in films, etc., though the most widespread channel is, no doubt, television, the great majority of foreign films and television programs shown on Icelandic television stations being in English, and translated by means of subtitles. Constantly hearing and seeing a language in this way is bound to have some effect on the English learner and make his or her task easier, compared to learning a language one never sees or hears outside the classroom.

Another factor is the motivation people get to learn a particular language. The general public attaches great importance to proficiency in foreign languages, most notably in English. Thus, one of the surveys referred to above shows that more than 96% of the participants consider English to be the most important foreign language to know, whereas there is much less agreement with respect to the second most important language, German, Spanish and Danish being the most frequently mentioned, each by 23–25% of the people asked. The importance of knowing foreign languages is, of course, a consequence of the small size of the Icelandic language community, which must rely on other languages for all external communication. This is reflected in the results of one of the surveys, which shows that Icelanders use English considerably more than other Scandinavians; as many as 50% of the Icelandic participants claimed to have used it almost every day, or even often each day, during the previous week, while the mean figure for all the countries is only 29%.

³ The figures come from one part of the project *Moderna importord i språka i Norden* (cf. Footnote 1), which consisted of a questionnaire, presented by telephone in 2002; the results have still not been published, but have been partly presented at conferences and meetings, e.g. by Kristján Árnason in Iceland. A full report is due in 2004, edited by Lars S. Vikør.

Further questions revealed that the use consisted largely in reading, but also in writing and speaking, mostly in the context of work or studies, but to a great extent also in people's spare time. In the other survey mentioned, people were also asked for what purposes they used the foreign language they knew best, which is, in most cases, English (cf. above). The majority of participants (over 50%) mentioned travelling abroad, watching films and television, reading books, newspapers and periodicals, and surfing the Internet. There is, thus, a strong motivation for Icelanders to learn English in the first place, and when it comes to learning and maintaining the knowledge, there are ample opportunities for practice.

In Iceland, English is primarily considered a medium for external communication, both with English-speaking nations and as the principal *lingua franca* when communicating with other foreigners. Internally, Icelandic serves all purposes of communication, and there are no clear signs of any drastic changes in that. The existence of an increasing number of foreigners in Iceland has, however, widened the function of English as a *lingua franca* in the last decade or so, as it is increasingly used as such within the country, in communication with tourists and other visitors, as well as with temporary residents, i.e. people of whom it cannot be reasonably demanded that they learn Icelandic. The participation of Iceland in European programs of student exchange, like Erasmus, has for example made it necessary to organise special university courses in English to fulfill the needs of these foreign exchange students. Likewise, English is much used in some high-tech companies, with foreign specialists on the staff. Immigrants are, on the other hand, generally expected to learn Icelandic within reasonable time, even if English is used to communicate with them in the beginning.

This sketchy overview is meant to clarify the present status of English in Iceland, as well as the general English proficiency of the population. To summarise, Icelanders are dependent on foreign languages for all external communication, and at present English is considered by far the most important language. There is, therefore, a strong motivation for learning it, and English has an important role in general education as the first foreign language. Some people have even gone as far as expressing the view that Icelanders should become bilingual in Icelandic and English, though the meaning of bilingualism in this context is not quite clear. Presumably, the idea is simply for them become as fluent in English as a foreign language as possible.

3. *English in Icelandic informal writing*

3.1 The study

The study presented here is based on a collection of unpublished diary entries, all written in 1998. The material comes from a small corpus of spoken and written Icelandic which has been compiled over the last few years, partly in collaboration with other scholars.⁴ Though it is not fully analysed, it has, in the last few years, been used by the present author in a number of vocabulary studies, especially on lexical borrowing (see for example Svavarsdóttir 2003a,b and forthcoming). The texts used here partly coincide with a text sample used in a previous study to represent the category of “informal, personal texts”, which was the category that had most instances of English elements according to the results (Svavarsdóttir (forthcoming)). There is, however, a slight difference in the choice of texts: Whereas the text sample in the former study included obituaries published in a newspaper together with unpublished diary entries of adult writers, the sample in the present study consists entirely of diaries, and these are, furthermore, written by children and adolescents, besides adults. The results from the two studies are, therefore, not entirely comparable.

3.2 Material and methods

The text sample used in the study contains 162 diary entries by the same number of writers. The youngest was born in 1991 and the oldest in 1928, their ages at the time of writing ranging from 7 to 70 years; in a few cases (less than 7%) information on the writers' age is lacking. The total number of running words in the texts is nearly 80,000 and the mean length of entries is about 480 words. A detailed description of the size of the text sample broken down by writers' age is found in Table 1.

⁴ The diaries were compiled by the folklore department at the National Museum of Iceland and a part of them were later published under the title *Dagbók Íslendinga* (Icelanders' diary; Hilmarsdóttir og Gunnarsdóttir (eds.) 1999). For the purpose of this study, however, the original, unpublished entries were used, kindly provided by the department. Other parts of the corpus are newspaper texts from 1997, derived from the database of *Morgunblaðið* for inclusion in the collection of electronic texts at *Orðabók Háskólans* (the Institute of Lexicography), and transcriptions of 31 informal conversations, collected in the ISTAL-project by a group of linguists at the University of Iceland, the Institute of Lexicography and the Iceland University of Education; the conversations were recorded in 2000 and are fully transcribed (for further information: <http://www.hi.is/~eirikur/istal.htm>).

Table 1: The size of the text sample, classified by the age of writers

Age	Running words	Number of entries	Mean number of words per entry
10 and younger	234	2	117
11—20	12,379	49	253
21—30	13,133	31	424
31—40	16,936	27	594
41—50	12,806	20	640
51—60	11,951	14	854
61 and older	6,577	8	822
unknown	4,849	11	441
Total	78.865	162	481

The material was analysed with the help of two different software packages, suites of programs called *WordSmith Tools* (cf. Scott 1998) and *Corpus Presenter* (Hickey 2003). The former was used to retrieve a word list from the entire text sample. This list was then analysed manually. All word forms deriving from English were marked, ranging from proper names and words appearing in quotations in English to fully adapted and established loanwords, including hybrids, i.e. combinations of a borrowed and a native part, such as *bleiserjakki* “a blazer (jacket)”. Furthermore, a few words originating in other languages than English were included as well, i.e. words that have either been transmitted by way of English, or words whose use in Icelandic is likely to be influenced by their use in English, such as *pizza*. The decision to count proper names is questionable, but there are two main reasons for this. The first is that the dividing line between names and ordinary nouns is not always clear and it can be difficult to decide if a particular word belongs to one or the other. Even though it is easy to classify the names of people and places, many fictive names of characters and settings in books, films, etc., occur and can be difficult to handle (is *Barbie* for example to be counted as a proper name?), and names of films, songs, computer programs, etc., are also borderline cases. The least controversial solution was therefore to include all names. The other reason for their inclusion was that by omitting proper names of English origin the statistical results would be skewed unless all other names were omitted as well, and this would have been too time-consuming.

The word forms were not lemmatized but ambiguous forms were analysed by reference to a concordance, made available by the program, to decide if they belonged in the study. In a few cases, where a particular word form was shown to represent both an original Icelandic word and a word deriving from English, such as the form *all* (ambiguous between the English pronoun *all* and the Icelandic *allur*), the examples with non-borrowed items had to be sorted out at a later stage. The output list, which contained well over 500 items judged to be of English origin, was used as the basis for further analysis. This consisted on the one hand of a statistical analysis, carried out by the software, and on the other hand of a qualitative analysis based on a concordance with the word forms in context, retrieved by *Corpus Presenter*.

3.3 Results

The list of word forms judged to be of English origin contains 518 items. These were only single word forms, and combinations, such as the names *John Cage* and *Financial Times*, are thus counted as two each. The distribution of English word forms across age-groups is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The number and proportion of words derived from English, classified by the age of diarists

Group	Age	Diary entries	Running words	Number of word forms from English	Percentage of word forms from English
1	10 and younger	2	234	1	0.43%
2	11–20	49	12,379	99	0.80%
3	21–30	31	13,133	106	0.81%
4	31–40	27	16,936	137	0.81%
5	41–50	20	12,806	34	0.27%
6	51–60	14	11,951	92	0.77%
7	61 and older	8	6,577	11	0.17%
8	Unknown	11	4,849	38	0.78%
	Total	162	78,865	518	0.66%

There are only two entries in the youngest group, both very short (cf. Table 1), which makes the percentage of little value in that case. The results for the other groups show that the distribution of English items is similar across groups 2 through 4, i.e. in texts by writers between 11 and 40 years old, but the proportion decreases considerably in two of the three older groups. It is, on the other hand, quite high in group 6, i.e. among writers in their sixties, and this disturbs the otherwise neat picture that emerges. A brief look at words used in age-group 6 indicates that they include quite a number of proper names, many of them from the same diary entry. This particular entry was written by a person, staying in an English-speaking country at the time of writing, and he mentions names of buildings, streets, people, etc., when writing about his surroundings. The same is true of some entries by younger writers, notably in groups 3 and 4, which include a number of students abroad, and situational similarities may therefore partly explain the quantitative resemblance in the use of English words between group 6 and the younger writers. The examples from group 6 will be returned to in the qualitative analysis below. Finally, writers in group 8 also use comparatively many English word forms. Information on the age of these eleven diarists is lacking, but the subjects and style of these entries indicate that they are rather young and presumably belong mainly to groups 2-4. If that is right, the results do not come as a surprise.

The statistics in Table 2 indicate that there is a difference between younger and older people in the proportional number of words from English they use, though the overall frequency of such words is not very high. This leads to the question of quality: Is there also a difference between generations with respect to the type of English words or in the way they are used? The text samples have not been systematically analysed and compared, nor have the word forms listed been thoroughly categorised and counted, but by using concordance excerpts a general overview will be given of the main characteristics of the form, type and usage of lexical items deriving from English that appear in the diaries. The focus of analysis is on examples from groups 2 and 6, i.e. teenagers and adolescents (11-20 years) on the one hand, and middle-aged people (51-60) on the other, and these are taken to represent the younger and older generation respectively. With respect to the statistical results, it might come as a surprise that the latter group should be chosen in this context, but the reason is very simple: There were so few examples of borrowings in the oldest group that they were considered to be a weak basis for comparison, whereas the number of English words forms in groups 2 and 6 was comparable, i.e. close to 100 in each text sample.

As mentioned above, the texts from the older group contained many proper names. Counting only personal and place names, including street names, these account for approximately half of the English word forms. Other names, such as brand names like *cheerios* (a common type of breakfast cereal), *Herbalife* (a slimming product) and *iMac* (a computer brand), names of programs and other computer tools like *Microsoft* and *Photoshop*, and names of television stations and newspapers like *CNN*, *Sky* and *Financial Times* may be added to that. Furthermore, there is one instance of an English citation in these texts, written in quotation marks:

1.

Það sem á ensku nefnist “*story telling*” og við mundum kalla frásagnarlist what in English is called “*story telling*” and we would call *frásagnarlist* (narration)

This leaves comparatively few borrowings, some of them appearing in hybrids. Most of them have been adapted to Icelandic, at least to some degree, and among them are old and established loanwords, such as *kex* “biscuit(s)” (from *cakes*, presumably transmitted via Danish and introduced as early as the 19th century) and *romm* “rum”. More recent borrowings are e.g. *bridge* “(contract) bridge”, *E-mailinu* “the E-mail” (dative form), *pizzu* “pizza” (accusative), *faxa* “to fax”, *meika* “to make”, and *tankur* “tank” (three examples with different grammatical forms), as well as hybrids like *vinnudressinu* ‘the work dress’ (dative). Two hybrids, containing English word forms that are otherwise not used in Icelandic, seem to be a direct consequence of the writer’s stay abroad (cf. above). One is *bronsunarstofuna* ‘a tanning salon’ (dative), patterned on the Icelandic word *sólbaðsstofa* with the same meaning and some English word containing the part *bronze* or *bronzed*. The other is the combination *low-fat mjólk* “low-fat milk”, usually called *léttmjólk* in Icelandic, though in the present surroundings of the writer the English word for the product is, of course, the one generally used (and is probably printed on the carton he sees at breakfast).

Let us now take a look at the youngest diarists and their texts. The type of English words found in these texts is quite different from the other sample. Proper names are comparatively few, no more than about 10% of the words, only counting personal and place names, but other names can be added to these, e.g. names of shops such as *Galaxi* and *Intersport* (both Icelandic shops), titles of films and television programs, like *Primary*

Colors, *Circle of friends* and *Southpark*, brand names as e.g. *Cheerios* and *Coco Puffs*, *Pepsi Max* and *Snickers*, names of computer programs like *Exel*, etc.. Furthermore, a special type of proper names is to be found in these texts, i.e. English nicknames youngsters choose for themselves for use on the Internet, such as *Cavedog* and *The Geniuz*. These entries also contain a number of established loanwords, some of them completely adapted, e.g. *gel* “(hair) gel”, *gengi* “the gang” (dative), *hamborgarar* “hamburgers”, *sjoppu* “a (small) shop” (accusative), *stressa (sig)* “(to put oneself) under stress”, and *tvisti* “twist (the dance)” (dative), and others only partially adapted, such as *pizzu* “pizza” (accusative), *roastbeef*, *kiwi* “kiwi fruit”, *video* and the frequently used interjection *ok* (i.e. *okay*). Presumably, these words could just as well have appeared in texts of the middle-aged writers. That is less likely for some of the other words in these entries, however. Some are recent borrowings, adapted to a greater or a lesser extent, and others might be classified as instances of code-switching, though it is difficult to draw the dividing line between those two types of interference in a principled way. One is the word *irc*, which derives from the English abbreviation IRC (Internet Relay Chat). It is used as a regular noun in the Icelandic texts, and is morphologically adapted, though the spelling has a *c*, a letter that does not belong in the Icelandic alphabet. Furthermore, it is a recurring word and its classification as a lexical borrowing therefore seems justified. Other similar words, used in connection with the Internet, are e.g. *nick*, a shortening for *nickname*, also used as an ordinary noun, and *sörfa* “to surf”, which has been adapted orthographically as well as morphologically. The following are examples of such words in context:

2.

ég fann einhvern annan sem notar *nickið* mitt á *ircinu*

I found somebody else who uses my *nick+def.* (acc.) on the *IRC+def.* (dat.)

3.

til að stytta biðina ákvað ég að “*sörfa*” á *netinu*

to shorten the wait, I decided to surf on the Internet

Other words are totally unadapted, such as *minimum*, *screen-saver*, *on-line* and the interjection *well*. The usage is very close to English too, though it can be left as an open question whether they should be classified as borrowing or code-switching.

4.

var að hitta Fernando *on-line*

just met Fernando on-line

5.

Well, þetta fór allt í góðu með Fernando

Well, everything went well with Fernando

The analysis reveals that despite the fact that the two text samples are quantitatively similar, there is an obvious qualitative difference. While the English words in the former sample, i.e. diary entries written by middle-aged people, consist mainly of proper names and established, usually to a large extent adapted, loanwords, the latter sample, consisting of entries by teenagers, is characterised by the use of recent borrowings, many of which are poorly adapted, besides more established loanwords and names. It should be noted, however, that the style of these age-groups is quite different. The younger group writes quite short entries, approximately 250 words on average, and most of them are informal and sketchy reports on the writer's doings during the day in question. The diaries of the older writers are considerably longer, with a mean length of about 850 words, and even if they are informal they are more carefully composed and many of them could be characterised as a narrative rather than a report. This difference in style is likely to influence the use of borrowings, at least to some extent.

4. *Conclusions*

The main conclusion of the study, presented in the paper, is that lexical borrowings from English in present-day Icelandic are few and constitute an insignificant proportion of the texts as a whole, even in comparatively informal texts like the unpublished diary entries analysed here. This confirms the general view that Icelandic is by and large a “pure” language, in the sense that it does not contain many lexical items from other languages. It does, however, also show a qualitative as well as a quantitative difference relating to the age of speakers. The younger writers clearly use more English words than the older generation, and the words they use consist of more recent and less adapted borrowings besides the established ones used by all age-groups. This difference should not come as a surprise, considering the linguistic situation discussed in Section 2, where it was shown that young people are generally more proficient in English than the older

generation and use it more in daily life. Whether this is a sign of an increasing linguistic influence from English is not clear, though it does not seem unlikely. In the light of the widespread knowledge of English and the extensive use of it by a considerable proportion of the population it is, in fact, surprising that it has not had greater impact on Icelandic, and that its influence is less than in many other languages where English is less wide-spread.

References

- Brunstad, Endre. 2003. Det reine språket. Eit riss av purisme-omgrepet. In: Sandøy, Helge, Randi Brodersen og Endre Brunstad (red.). *Purt og reint*. Om purisme i dei nordiske språka, pp. 1–17. Skrifter fra Ivar Aasen-instituttet Nr. 15. Volda: Høgskulen i Volda.
- Hickey, Reymond. 2003. *Corpus Presenter*. Software for language analysis. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Hilmarsdóttir, Sigurborg and Gunnarsdóttir, Sigprúður (eds.). 1999. *Dagbók Íslendinga*, Úrval úr dagbókum frá 15. október 1998. Reykjavík: Mál og menning.
- Scott, Mike. 1998. *WordSmith Tools Manual*, Version 3.0. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (<http://www.lexically.net/wordsmith>)
- Svavarsdóttir, Ásta. 2003a. Ordbogen og den daglige tale. Om den islandske talesprogsbank (ISTAL) og dens betydning i ordbogsredaktion. In: Hansen, Zakaris Svabo, og Johansen, Anfinnur (eds.). 2003. *Nordiske studier i leksikografi* 6. Rapport fra Konference om leksikografi i Norden, Tórshavn 21.- 25. august 2001, pp. 43—48. Skrifter udgivet af Nordisk forening for leksikografi, Skrift 7. Tórshavn: NFL, Nordisk sprogråd og Fróðskaparsetur Föroya.
- Svavarsdóttir, Ásta. 2003b. Tilpasning af importord i islandsk. In: Sandøy, Helge (red.). *Med 'bil' i Norden i 100 år*. Ordlaging og tilpassing av utalandske ord, pp. 75—81. Moderne importord i språka i Norden I. Oslo: Novus forlag.
- Svavarsdóttir, Ásta. (Forthcoming) English borrowings in spoken and written Icelandic. In: Duszak, Anna, and Urszula Okulska (eds.). *Speaking from the margin: Global English from a European perspective*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

