

Ari Páll Kristinsson

# Language in public administration in present-day Iceland: some challenges for majority language management

## Abstract

Stjórnsýslan á Íslandi stendur frammi fyrir svipuðum úrlausnarefnum og gerist annars staðar í álfunni. Enda þótt íslenska sé lögum samkvæmt eina opinbera tungumálið er hún alls ekki eina mál stjórnvalda og stofnana í samskiptum við borgarana. Til skýringar er það rakið hvernig Vegagerðin notar ensku á skiltum, að hluta til ásamt íslensku. Vikið er einnig að tungumálum minnihlutahópa á Íslandi. Greint er frá stöðu Íslands sem EES-ríkis og þýðingum lagatexta. Sagt er frá þeirri nýjung í íslenskri löggjöf að kveðið er á um einfalt og skýrt málfar í textum hins opinbera. Rakin eru dæmi um viðleitni opinberra aðila, annars vegar Ríkisskattstjóra og hins vegar Landspítalans, til að koma skilaboðum skýrar á framfæri við notendur þjónustunnar. Öll viðleitni til málskýrðar í opinberum textum fer vel saman við hinar auknu kröfur í samfélaginu um gagnsæi í ákvörðunum og óskir um endurskoðun á efni og orðalagi stjórnarskrárinnar.

## 1. Introduction

The challenges facing Icelandic language management today are similar in nature, while different in detail, to the sociolinguistic, economic, political and judicial issues in other European states. Language management needs to take into account, among other things, the status of English as a communication language, as well as the issue of linguistic diversity and current demographic developments.

The outline of the paper is as follows. In section 2, the status of Iceland and Icelandic vis à vis the EU and EU judicial language is discussed. Section 3 contains a discussion on recent legislation concerning the status of Icelandic as the official language in Iceland, and addresses the status and presence of English in Iceland and in Icelandic administration. The situation of some linguistic minorities in Iceland is also briefly described. Section 4 addresses the issue of ‘plain language’, and the legal provision on ‘plain language’ in public administration. Two recent cases of efforts to ensure clarity of communication in Icelandic administration are described, and the role of digitalised administration is touched upon. Section 5 contains some concluding remarks on plain language against the backdrop of increased demands for transparency in administration.

## **2. Iceland vis à vis the EU, and Icelandic legal language vis à vis EU texts**

As an EFTA-nation, Iceland has been a member of the European Economic Area (EEA) Agreement since 1994. The EEA agreement is between Iceland, Norway, and Liechtenstein on the one hand, and the EU on the other.

Negotiations for Iceland's membership of the EU were opened in 2010. Accession would have involved the recognition of Icelandic as one of the official languages of the EU. However, membership negotiations were stopped in the wake of the parliamentary elections in Iceland in 2013. The current situation (2015) is explained on the website of the Icelandic Foreign Ministry in the following way:

A dialogue has taken place between the EU and Iceland on Iceland's status as a candidate country. It clarified that the government has no intention of resuming the accession process, that any commitments made by the former government in the accession process are superseded by the new policy and that the EU should take action in view of the fact that Iceland can no longer be considered a candidate country [...] At the same time, emphasis is placed on reinforcing the implementation of the EEA Agreement and on closer collaboration with the EU on that basis. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2015)

The implementation of the EEA Agreement in Iceland has, among other things, entailed large scale translations to incorporate EEA legislation into national law. At present, the Translation Centre of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs has a staff of 34 people. The implementation of the EEA Agreement continues to be a priority in Iceland, as shown in the citation above, even if the present government of the country is unwilling to continue negotiations for EU membership. Therefore, in the foreseeable future, the Translation Centre will continue to translate into Icelandic the regulations, directives, decisions and recommendations adopted under the EEA Agreement. Consequently, EU related texts will, directly and indirectly, continue to have some effects not only on Icelandic legislation as such, but also on Icelandic terminologies, and possibly on Icelandic legal language use.

On the whole, this is no bad news for Icelandic language management. In a vast number of fields of science and technology, Icelandic terminologies have been greatly enriched over the past quarter of a century, thanks to the translation and terminology work of the specialists at the Translation Centre, and their co-operating specialists in various ministries and other administrative bodies. This has brought considerable benefits to the adequacy of the Icelandic language for political, economic, technical and scientific discourse.

No serious research has yet been carried out into the influence of EU texts on Icelandic judicial language in general; for example regarding the clarity, or otherwise, of legal texts. In popular Icelandic language policy discourse, concerns have occasionally been raised about some putative negative linguistic effects that are

believed to be traceable to EU sources, in particular regarding the clarity of texts, and sentence length. The proponents of such views have yet to prove that this has influenced texts that are originally written in Icelandic.

Hopefully, plain language initiatives in the EU, affecting the original documents that are subsequently translated into all the languages of the EEA Agreement, will prove successful.

However, one must acknowledge that there is a limit as to how far this can be achieved. The purpose of many legal and scientific texts is to describe highly complicated subjects. Complicated matters must often be rendered in every detail in law, and if this entails complicated texts, then there is no easy way round the problem (either in the original texts or in translation), since one is obliged to comply with the originals. In other words, if someone sometimes needs to read a paragraph more than once in order to fully grasp the content, the problem is not necessarily just a linguistic one.

### **3. Icelandic vs. English on Icelandic territory and in Icelandic administration**

#### **3.1 Overview**

Icelandic is *de jure* the sole official language of the Icelandic state and municipalities, and it is also the first language or native language of about 90% of the present inhabitants.

While all travellers in Iceland – students and business people alike – encounter some presence of English in daily life in Iceland, English is not recognised as an official language.

In Icelandic legislation there are some occasional examples of legal provision where English has been granted limited status in administration along with Icelandic. Such examples involve aviation control, some specific technical standards, some international agreements that only concern a limited number of people, and applications for international registration of trademarks (Hilmarsson-Dunn/Kristinsson 2013, 140-141).

English is the first foreign language in the curriculum at elementary schools, and Danish is the second foreign language at school. Icelandic and the Scandinavian languages are not mutually intelligible. For historic, geographic and cultural reasons, Danish and the other Scandinavian languages enjoy in a few instances special status in Icelandic administration and information settings.

Official Icelandic language policy, drafted by the Icelandic Language Council and approved unanimously by Parliament in 2009, is strongly coloured by the threat that English is taking over in more and more spheres of daily life in Iceland (Íslenska til alls 2009). In particular, concerns are raised about the language of international businesses that operate branches in Iceland, and about the language

of computers and software. This not only concerns the private sector, but the public sector as well; in particular the question of the language of instruction in tertiary education, and language choice in academic publishing. In all these sectors, and many others, Icelandic is perceived to be yielding to English. Icelandic language technologies are still underdeveloped, and even if a group of experts had already presented a realistic plan for the future of Icelandic language technology, only about 10% of the necessary funding is allocated in the national budget for the year 2016.

### 3.2 Legislation

In 2011, the Icelandic Parliament passed a “Law on the Status of Icelandic and Icelandic Sign Language” (*Lög um stöðu íslenskrar tungu og íslensks táknaðs*). The legislation was instigated, at least in part, by the Icelandic Language Council. Since 2011, legislation has stated explicitly that Icelandic is the official language (Art. 1); that Icelandic is the language of schools, of Parliament, of the courts, of central and local government authorities, and other institutions (Art. 8); and that Icelandic is the language of Iceland in the international arena (Art. 12). (A separate article is devoted to plain language, and this is addressed in section 4 below.)

Among the effects of the 2011 legislation is that if Icelandic official bodies use English and not Icelandic in administration today (where this is not explicitly sanctioned by other legislation), one can now refer to Articles 1 and 8 of the language law if one wishes to complain.



Fig. 1: An Icelandic traffic sign (2015). The English word ‘CLOSED’ signals that a road has been temporarily closed to all traffic

There was an incident in 2013 which can perhaps serve as an example. This was also, in a sense, a test case for the effectiveness of the 2011 legislation relating to language choice in public administration in Iceland.

In September 2013, the Icelandic Road and Coastal Administration put up new digital traffic signs showing only the English word *CLOSED* if a road had to be closed to all traffic due to storms or poor driving conditions (see Fig. 1).

Previously there had been old fashioned signs in both English (*No entry*, *Impassable*, etc.) and Icelandic (*Allur akstur bannaður*, *Ófært*, etc.) see Figure 2. Thus, until recently, a ‘parallel language policy’ had in fact been followed in such cases.

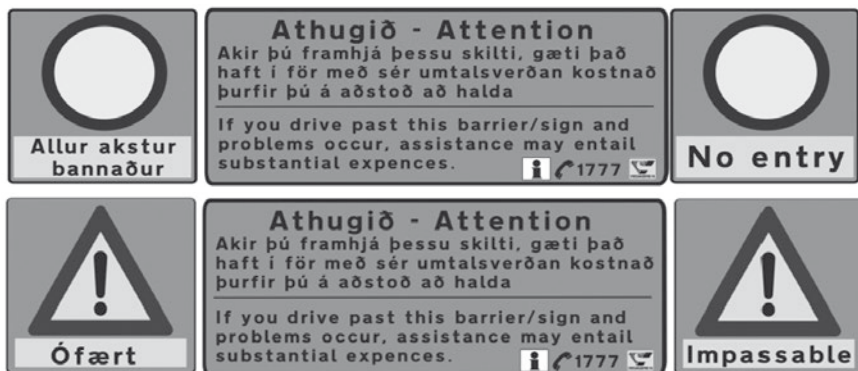


Fig. 2: Old fashioned Icelandic traffic sign. An English/Icelandic parallel language policy was pursued



Fig. 3: A shop in downtown Reykjavik: advertising signs partly in English and partly in Icelandic

The Icelandic Language Council objected to the policy change by the Road and Coastal Administration, and pointed out that the Administration was breaking the 2011 law on the official status of Icelandic. The administration promptly started to reprogram the new digital signs in accordance with the objection from the Icelandic Language Council. This seems to have taken some time, however; there are (in 2015) at least some ‘English only’ signs still left, such as the one in Figure 1.

It is estimated that about 1.5-2 million tourists will visit Iceland in 2016. They come from a variety of different countries; from the UK and the USA and also from France, Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, China, Japan, Spain, Italy, etc. The language of the Icelandic tourist industry is mostly English.

### 3.3 Linguistic minorities

From the account above, it would seem that as far as language status in Iceland and the question of language choice in public administration is concerned, there are two languages involved: the only official language, Icelandic, and English, the *lingua franca* of today. However, there are two types of linguistic minorities in Iceland that can only partly be reached through Icelandic or English, or may not be reached at all.

Firstly, there is the speech community of Icelandic Sign Language. It is the only officially recognised traditional minority language in Iceland. Icelandic Sign Language is the first language of about 300 people, and some 200 people in addition (carers, relatives of deaf people, researchers etc.) have acquired communication skills in Icelandic Sign Language.

Many of the first language users of Icelandic Sign Language have adequate receptive skills in written Icelandic for understanding plain texts in Icelandic, but for active communication with the authorities they need sign language interpretation, and they have the right to enjoy this free of charge, up to a certain limit. Their rights are set out in principle in the 2011 legislation.

Secondly, Iceland’s demography has undergone rapid change over the last two decades. As of January 1, 2015, first and second generation immigrants constituted around 9.4% of the Icelandic population, as opposed to 2.1% in 1996 (*Statistics Iceland*). The immigrants in Iceland, 31,000 in number, speak more than 100 different languages as their first or native language. Slavic and Baltic languages are the most common, along with English; and Thai, Vietnamese, and Filipino are also very common native languages of immigrants in Iceland. Most immigrants have learnt Icelandic to some extent, and quite a few speak excellent Icelandic. Some prefer to communicate with native Icelanders in English only and this appears to cause very few problems; which is interesting from the point of view of Icelandic language management. However, there are always some individuals who need to have important information from the authorities presented to them in their native language, for example in Lithuanian, Polish, Vietnamese or Thai.

### 3.4 Conclusion

To sum up this section, there are a number of challenges that face administrative bodies in Iceland in their choice of communication language, even though legislation has been in place since 2011 which provides for Icelandic as the only official language of Iceland, and the language of the government and municipalities.

## 4. Plain language

### 4.1 General remarks

It has been maintained time and again in Icelandic language planning discourse that one of the benefits of linguistic purism – which has played a major role in the standardisation and elaboration of function of Icelandic – is that it produces more easily comprehensible vocabulary, as opposed to adapting borrowed lexical items such as Latin and Greek based terminology. Thus, proponents of linguistic purism in Iceland have argued for the coining of Icelandic neologisms – not only for the sake of linguistic purity and language preservation for their own sake, but also because of the supposed usefulness of native word formation in terms of semantic transparency, as many borrowings are opaque to native speakers. This implies that vocabulary, and not style, is seen as the major issue in grasping the content of Icelandic texts.

However, concern has also been raised among members of the Icelandic speech community that official documents demonstrate poor and complicated style. Icelandic popular language discourses contain anecdotes on official forms that are supposedly hard to fill in, and on the strange wording of some administrative texts, as well as ridicule of professional jargon and neologisms.

### 4.2 Legal provision on plain language (2011)

The law on the status of Icelandic and Icelandic Sign Language (2011) contains a provision on plain language. Art. 10 reads like this (English translation below):

10. gr. *Málfarsstefna ríkis og sveitarfélaga.*

Mál það sem er notað í starfsemi ríkis og sveitarfélaga eða á vegum þeirra skal vera vandað, einfalt og skýrt.

‘Article 10. *Language policy of central and local authorities.*

The language used by central and local authorities in the execution of their tasks, or on their behalf, should be in accordance with good usage, simple and clear.’

This was the first time that the notion of plain language was explicitly mentioned in Icelandic legislation on language.

## 4.3 Two examples of plain language initiatives

### 4.3.1 The tax authorities

Every adult citizen in Iceland receives an annual report from the Icelandic tax authorities about whether she/he has to pay additional tax for the previous year, or, conversely, if the authorities owe her/him (for example if the authorities had made her/him pay too much tax in advance). The results that the Internal Revenue send out show a ‘minus’ sign in front of the sum if the government owes money to the citizen, while there is no ‘minus’ sign in front of the sum if the citizen owes the government. It seems counter-intuitive to most people that a sum which an individual is going to receive is shown with a ‘minus’ in front. This has been criticised as an example of opaque messages from the authorities. The directorate has now reformed the written communication with citizens, providing another results page along with the original one. In the new sheet, blue is used to indicate a sum that the citizen will receive, while the sum is in red if she/he owes the government.

The Icelandic tax authorities have in fact been excellent pioneers in many respects as far as digital administration is concerned. Tax return forms are mostly filled out and delivered online and generally, excellent explanations are provided.

### 4.3.2 The pregnancy and maternity wards at The National University Hospital

In 2015 the The National University Hospital hired a team of people to investigate how women who seek services in the pregnancy and maternity wards at the hospital experience their visits, whether the information provided is adequate, how easily they can find rooms and services on arrival in the hospital buildings, etc. The investigation team invited a sample of the female population in the country to take part in the survey. Among the results were that some signs in the pregnancy and maternity wards were imperfect, and sometimes there were, for example, no signs to show which floor of the building one found oneself in.

From the point of view of Icelandic language management, it was interesting to learn that it proved problematic for some of the participants that the hospital in some cases used the purist Icelandic term *ómskoðun* (‘ultra-sound scanning, ultrasonography’). In common Icelandic usage, the more frequent word for this is the borrowing *sónar*. (A Google search for the string *fór í ómskoðun* ‘went for an ultrasound’ in web pages in Icelandic gives about 850 results, while the string *fór í sónar* ‘went for an ultrasound’ gives about 45,000 hits.) On the hospital’s information website there are some instances of parallel usage, with a slash stroke between the two variants: *ómskoðun/sónar*. However, in most cases only the purist Icelandic word *ómskoðun* is used there. According to news reports, there are plans to react to the results of the survey by making signs with the word *sónar* more visible.





Fig. 4: Ultrasonography at a pregnancy ward

This case is interesting in that it may be interpreted as a counterexample to the dogmatic stance in traditional Icelandic language policy discourses, mentioned above, that native word formation is superior to borrowings in terms of semantic transparency. The *sónar* example suggests that using the purist lexical item, *ómskoðun*, may be counterproductive if plain language is the goal.

#### 4.4 Digitalised administration

Administration in Iceland is increasingly digitalised, and the use of paper documents is decreasing. Computer use is widespread. Iceland has the highest percentage of Internet users in Europe – about 96.5% (Internet Live Stats 2015). It should therefore be technically feasible to use computers, digital files and websites in every field of administration in Iceland. Whether this enhances plain language efforts satisfactorily in the future is another matter.

### 5. Concluding remarks

Popular discourse and criticisms concerning complicated and opaque official documents may, in part, mirror a power struggle in society – a struggle over who is in charge of the reality that language is supposed to describe and who decides on which concepts are used, their semantic content, and how they are combined.

In the wake of the economic collapse in Iceland in 2008, there were heated debates about the need for strengthening democracy and transparency in Icelandic society. There was a call for ‘direct democracy’, for online referendums and for frequent opinion polls on a variety of matters. Also, there were complaints that the current constitution is not written in ‘common style’, and that it contains ‘too many legal terms’, with the result that the constitution is comprehensible only to

lawyers and to the ‘elite layers’ in Icelandic administration. In Iceland, a political party known as ‘The Pirates’ have digital administration, transparency, open data access, and direct democracy on the top of their political agenda. According to polls in late 2015, the Pirates are the most popular party in Iceland, scoring about 35%.

Demands for transparency in administration go hand in hand with aims of plain language in general.

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