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The Icelandic language in business and commerce in Iceland

Abstract

Í greininni verður fjallað um stöðu íslenskrar tungu í verslun og viðskiptum bæði innanlands og erlendis. Sagt verður frá væntanlegri málstefnu sem lögð verður fyrir Alþingi í nóvember og tekur m.a. á íslensku í viðskiptalífinu. Síðan verður þeim átta spurningum, sem fyrirlesararnir voru beðnir um að taka tillit til, svarað út frá íslenskum veruleika í dag. M.a. verður rætt um innanhúss samskipti innan fyrirtækja sem starfa á Íslandi en eiga einnig viðskipti við útlönd. Komið verður að auglýsingum í fjölmiðlum, námskeiðum fyrir erlenda starfsmenn á Íslandi og fleira sem viðkemur samskiptum Íslendinga og erlendra starfsmanna. Að lokum verður rætt um það hvað mikilvægast er fyrir íslenska tungu ef hún á ekki að verða undir á viðskiptasviðinu.

1. Introduction

In my paper I have the intention to describe the status of the Icelandic language in business and commerce in Iceland. The main task of the Icelandic Language Council has for over a year been to write a draft of the first official Icelandic language policy. This was requested by the minister of education who has for her part already accepted the proposals suggested by the council about aims and actions. The language policy was presented publicly on November 16th, the official Icelandic language day, and was proposed for parliamentary resolution the following week (Íslenska til alls 2008). Eleven areas of the national life, that the Language Council considered most important to study, were selected, one of them being language in business and commerce, which will be my topic in this paper.

2. The eight leading questions

When I offered to give a talk last summer no one suspected what was to come in the Icelandic financial- and business world. The state of Icelandic companies was good, both in the domestic and the international markets, a far cry from what it is today. But although many things have taken a turn for the worse, the status of the Icelandic language is the same as before, and that is our only concern here. I will answer as far as possible the eight leading questions sent by the organizers of this convention, which they requested were to be considered in the report. I will describe the situation like it was before the bank-crisis. I consider the problems temporary, already there is rebuilding going on, and the status of the Icelandic language will be the same, whether the companies are small or large. The following is based, among other things, on the studies performed for the language policy by the Language Council.

2.1 The first question

The first leading question was whether companies in Iceland use a different language than the official national language for internal communications. The Icelandic economy became in a relatively short time much more internationalized than it had been before. Many Icelandic companies set up workstations outside of Iceland with non-

Icelandic employees, and in addition the number of foreign employees of companies in Iceland – specialists and non-specialists alike – increased dramatically. Foreign investors own shares in Icelandic companies and sit on their boards of directors. Therefore there has been an increase of other languages than Icelandic, primarily English, being used as the language for communication in business and commerce within Iceland.

In some areas, for example the construction industry, until recently a part of the workers did not use Icelandic at work, but other languages instead, sometimes one among themselves (for example Polish) but another one (usually English) for communicating with their Icelandic superiors. In commerce and service foreign workers increased greatly the past few years and very often they had to work and communicate with Icelandic customers in English because they were not sufficiently proficient in Icelandic. Now, amidst an economic depression, the situation has changed already. Foreign workers, e.g. in the construction industry, mostly Polish, are now returning home, because less work is available, and it may be expected that in these areas the primary language will again be Icelandic, with some foreign languages mixed in.

About six months ago a survey was made on behalf of the Icelandic Language Council on what language was used for communications in the countries' largest companies (Karlsson/Jónsdóttir 2008). These were banks, export companies, companies in the production industry and service industry. On an European scale the companies are small, but rather large on the Icelandic scale. All the companies were domestic, since few international companies have established themselves in Iceland, with the exception of foreign shop franchisees run by Icelanders. 51 companies were contacted and replies came back from 50. In 31 of the companies e-mail was written exclusively in Icelandic, in 4 of them it was almost only in English, but about equally Icelandic and English in 7 companies. Meetings were mostly conducted in Icelandic in 26 of the companies, exclusively in Icelandic in 21, but only in one company exclusively in English.

Protocols were exclusively written in Icelandic in 24 companies, mostly in Icelandic in 19, only in English in 4, but equally in Icelandic and English in 3. The results were different when the homepage was concerned. 28 companies had their homepage both in Icelandic and in English, but only 12 exclusively in Icelandic. 4 companies had an exclusively English homepage. The survey also revealed that although Icelandic was still the primary language of communication in most of the companies, English was usually or often used if there was one foreigner in the group. Language use can therefore vary according to the various departments of the companies. More and more Icelandic companies that have branches in other countries, conduct the meetings of their stockholders in English, even though the meetings are most often held in Iceland, and the majority of those attending is Icelandic. Yearly reports of many Icelandic companies and various documents regarding their operations are also exclusively in English, even though the companies are in majority ownership of Icelanders.

2.2 The second question

The second question deals with the perceptions and attitudes of the employees and of interlocutors regarding the issue of language used within companies. The answer is that the general public in Iceland, including Icelandic employees of most companies,

want to use Icelandic as the language for communication for as long as possible, but admit that it may be necessary to use a foreign language if someone present is foreign and has to be able to participate in discussions and decisions. Most often English is used, but also Danish, when the person concerned is from a Nordic country. It is well known that people from the Nordic countries can quite well communicate in Scandinavian, that is in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish, or a mix of the three languages. Trade unions do not interfere in language use in the workplaces, but in several cases foreign workers are offered courses in Icelandic for a minimal fee or for free. The trade unions support foreign workers in learning the language, but also the ministry of education and often the company that employs the worker, for example hospitals, nurseries and retirement homes and the larger companies. This is done with that in mind that the foreign workers can more easily adapt to the Icelandic society if they are able to express themselves and participate in workplace discussions and communicating with their wards. Issues of security are also considered.

2.3 The third and fourth question

The third question is about whether there are in the country companies that use languages other than the national language in contacts with customers, in marketing, and in advertising. The fourth question asks about the perceptions and attitudes of customers and the general public on the use of languages other than the official language of the country in advertising, commercials, job opportunities, or the like. As these questions are closely related I will answer them both at once. No company known to me uses another language than Icelandic in customer communications or marketing domestically, and such a move would undoubtedly meet with very great general disapproval. The state radio is a medium that is extensively used for advertising. It has established its own language policy. It says e.g.: “Advertisements shall be in flawless Icelandic and presented with a good pronunciation. Given a special reason the radio director can however allow singing or talking in a foreign language in advertisements“.

The state television adheres to the same policy. The law on monitoring illegal business practices and market transparency from 2005 states that advertisements meant to appeal to Icelandic consumers shall be in Icelandic. The same applies for general terms of service providers and guarantee statements in writing. The mass media themselves demand the law to be followed in advertising, and advertisements are seldom seen in newspapers in other languages than in Icelandic. Advertisements that are only published in foreign languages are primarily notices for general meetings in companies operating in part abroad and on the other hand some work-advertisements. In such cases both Icelandic and a foreign language are used, mostly English, for stockholders meetings but usually Polish in the case of work-advertisements. Work-advertisements in foreign languages are regarded differently if an Icelandic advertisement is published as well.

2.4 The fifth question

The fifth question concerns the language or languages which are typically used by companies in international business and commerce. It is easily answered. English is the dominant language in international business, although both Scandinavian and Ger-

man are used in business directed to the Nordic countries or Germany. It must be said, however, that English is fast pushing the Scandinavian languages aside, though it is still mandatory in Iceland to learn Danish in primary and high school. Younger people prefer using English for communicating with the Nordic nations, on the grounds that those who can use their native language in all sorts of business, negotiations and debates, have the advantage over those forced to use a foreign language. It is well known that one can say what one wants in one's native language, but only what one knows how to express in a foreign language. German and French are not any more both mandatory subjects in Iceland, as they were for decades, and have been to some extent replaced by Spanish, Italian, Russian and Japanese. Many have been concerned about English becoming for Icelanders the main language of communication with foreign countries, since the increased use of English carries with it the danger that Icelandic starts declining and even vanishes completely from certain areas of the business world. Such a loss of domain would be irreplaceable. They believe that the status of the Icelandic language would weaken, if it were not any longer useable in all areas of the Icelandic society and Icelanders could no longer count on being able to work and do business in their native language in their own country. That would entail a distinct loss of quality of life for Icelanders. Furthermore the growth of Icelandic specialist vocabulary would stop for the lost areas and Icelandic language use and the extant specialist vocabulary could be lost. Therefore it could prove very difficult to regain lost domains. My remarks should however not be taken to imply that we should eradicate English or other languages from business and commerce in Iceland. The use of English or other languages is indispensable in international communications. The goal is rather to insure the co-habitation of Icelandic and English in an environment where Icelandic is the main language of communication, that is to insure that Icelandic is on an equal footing with English in business and within companies domestically, that an Icelandic vocabulary develops normally in business and commerce and that increased foreign communication is not at the expense of the Icelandic language in Iceland.

2.5 The sixth question

The sixth question on whether the choice and use of language is regarded as factors contributing to the success or failure of business and commerce in Iceland is easy to answer. Customers and the general public domestically regard more positively companies that use Icelandic as the language for communication. An Icelandic company that would start using English or another foreign language to communicate with Icelanders would not enjoy respect or popularity. It would most probably be forced to change its policy if it did not want to go under. Business abroad is a quite different matter. It is perfectly clear of course that abroad one has to use a foreign language. Icelandic is not useable in international business, since so few people abroad are capable of using it in writing or orally.

2.6 The seventh and eight question

The questions seven and eight regarding specific laws or other official regulations drawn up by the government or other political institutions for the use of languages by

and within companies in my country I have already answered. The laws that have to do with language and business mainly deal with language in advertising, but also states that general conditions of service providers, and guarantee statements in writing, must be in Icelandic. In other respects the choice of language is not legislated, neither regarding business domestically nor Icelandic business abroad.

3. Conclusion

This is the situation as it has been until now. Following the financial crisis no one knows what is to come next. Many people have lost much and for the foreseeable future business abroad will be low. But although much has been lost the nation still has one thing in common: the language. The Icelandic Language Council will therefore continue undaunted to fight for the use of Icelandic in all areas of society, including in business and commerce. The language policy that is being developed and I mentioned at the start of my presentation has the suggestion that Icelandic companies should be encouraged and supported as possible in forming a clear language policy for themselves with the aim of insuring the status of the Icelandic language in the economic life. Forming a policy on language use should be a natural part of all policy-making in Icelandic companies. As I said before the aim cannot be to eliminate the use of foreign languages in an international working environment, but foreign languages cannot replace Icelandic, rather the Icelandic language must retain its place among other languages.

If the goals of the Icelandic Language Council should to be reached it is important that there will be a positive discussion in the community and within companies about the benefits of Icelandic as the primary language in the Icelandic economic life and the qualities of life that entails for Icelanders. The responsibility for this lies with the nation itself. If Icelanders are to be able to purchase goods and services in Iceland in Icelandic and work in Iceland using the Icelandic language, laws and regulations will not be sufficient if the nation does not side with the Icelandic language. As the situation is today I have no concern that this will not be the case.

4. References

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