

The Origin and the Purpose of the Conservativeness of Icelandic

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## Abstract

Given the fact that Icelandic is a language regarded as a prime example of a conservative language (Friðriksson, 2008), Icelandic is chosen as the object for the examination of the study of language policies and sociolinguistics in this essay. Generally, conservativeness or stability in a language is determined by the country's language policy. However, the language policy of Iceland particularly has some different orientations from those general language policies such as those of Turkey and Norway; one is that the government's interference in Icelandic language policy is apparently little, and one is that the neologisms in Icelandic are considerably thorough as shown in the fact that even the terms of information technology are coined from the Icelandic's own root (Ministry of Education, 2001). Also, even having already passed 70 years since Iceland's independence from Denmark, the language policy, mainly coining neologisms, is still very active on Iceland (Kaisaki, 1996). This essay aims to clarify what the cause of the conservativeness of Icelandic language policies is, and what the purpose of the conservative language policy is.

### The Origin of Conservativeness of Icelandic

Norse people, mostly Norwegians, started to settle in Iceland in the ninth century, and they brought one dialect of Old Norse language, which was the common language among Vikings, to Iceland. It is known that modern Icelandic has not changed very much since that time, shown by the fact that modern Icelanders have no problem in reading and understanding ancient texts in Icelandic (Ministry of Education, 2001). Illustrating why it was possible for Icelandic to maintain the grammar over a long period is one purpose of this essay, approaching from the two dichotomous elements: external conditions and internal conditions.

In addition, the vocabulary of Icelandic is also focused on in this essay. In modern times, as the technology rapidly develops, it is inevitable for official languages to have a new word for the technological terms. Nevertheless, Icelandic has a strong tendency of linguistic purism; that is, Icelandic tends to avoid using loanwords. Rather, they make new words from the words in Icelandic itself. This essay aims to illustrate how the features of Icelandic have long been preserved and in what purpose modern Icelandic has been “purified.”

### **Primary Factors of Preservation of Icelandic**

#### **External Conditions**

Firstly, external conditions are that Iceland has not had a significant influence from other languages. As stated above, Iceland had been an uninhabited island until the Norse people began settling in the ninth century. On such an isolated island, interaction with

outlanders was scarce. If a language doesn't have much interaction with other obviously different languages, in a sociolinguistic term suggested by Kloss (1967), "Abstand languages," it is generally said that the language has a tendency to keep its old linguistic features over a long time, as shown in the example of language island. This is a natural phenomenon, because languages contact affects both languages and they often share particular grammatical characteristics. Such a phenomenon is called language union. One representative example is a language union of Balkan, in which Albanian, Greek, South Slavic, and Romanian. They share characteristics such as that the genitive case and dative case are merged, and use of conjunctive mood is used instead of infinitive form which is lost (Joseph, 1999). Such a grammatical characteristics mutual with other languages cannot be seen in Icelandic; rather, the grammar maintains the old form, and this shows that Icelandic has not had significant contact with other languages.

On the contrary, a language that has much interaction with or influence from other languages, English, for example, had historically constantly been influenced by French, and thus English has lost most of the traditional grammatical inflections and conjugations of Old English; that is, the grammar has got much simpler. Also, English has borrowed approximately 75 percent of the whole vocabulary from French (French Centre for Humanities, 2014). As some scholars have proposed with the Middle English creole hypothesis, English is a language sometimes interpreted as a creolized language with Old

English and French as a result of Norman Conquest; that is, modern English is a mixture of those languages as a result of language contact. Against English that was simplified in the course of history, Icelandic has not become grammatically simpler; therefore, this fact also shows Icelandic has not had any influential language contact.

Nevertheless, Iceland has a long history of being ruled by Denmark. During that period, Danish language was a language for the communication with Danes of course. Not only the less language contact, but also the effort of ancient Icelanders to preserve their language is noteworthy.

### **Internal Conditions**

The internal conditions that composes the current conservativeness of Icelandic is its language homogeneity within the territory of Iceland. Considering the fact that the language can never be separated from society, all languages have language variants, which are often categorized as dialects, and these language variants are sometimes connected to nationalism, shown with the example of the Catalan language in Valencia, Spain. However, according to Karlsson (2004), even though Iceland is not so small an island, there are hardly language variants. Icelandic has developed without any derivation of dialects. The reason why Icelandic language has been unified for about 900 years is not clear, but one reason might be urbanization.

The population of Iceland is about 320,000, and about 175,000 of it live in the

Capital Region, and the area of entire Iceland is about 100,000, which is the 108th in the world (Statistics Iceland, 2011).

Also, the geographical conditions are the reason of the unity of Icelandic language. Because such geographical features as active volcanoes and glaciers are difficult for humans to live with, the habitable area is limited. These geographical facts are often elements of a generation of language varieties. This type of language formation is called a language island, which is a simile of an isolated situation of a language variety because of geographical features; in fact, in Nara Prefecture, Japan, Japanese is generally spoken in Keihan accent, but in one particular area called Okuyoshino, Japanese is spoken in Tokyo accent exceptionally (Nitta, 2008).

From these assumptions, the cause that has preserved the grammatical features of Icelandic is isolation of Iceland, urbanization, and the geographical features of Iceland.

### **Preservation and Cultivation of Icelandic**

#### **Language and National Identity**

Sociolinguistic studies provide a view that language and society are in an indivisible relationship, and therefore use of a language simultaneously includes such social contexts as status, interpersonal relationship, and identity (Hauksdóttir, 2013). In the context of modern Icelandic, the language particularly highlights the national identity, and the language policy according to this national identity is implemented in Iceland.

## Linguistic Purism

The significant feature of the language policy of Icelandic is linguistic purism.

Linguistic purism is a worldwide phenomenon that frequently appears in nation-states that attempt to achieve symbolical independence on a viewpoint of language. In the case of Icelandic, however, it is peculiar that the linguistic purism is still implemented even though a couple of decades have passed since it achieved independent sovereignty (Kaisaki, 1996).

The following four points are suggested as the principles of purism of Icelandic:

to follow the patterns of speech used by ordinary people, especially those from rural areas or those who have moved into urban areas; to follow the style used in classical Old Icelandic literature; to follow the style used by the best writers much read by the ordinary people; to avoid loans, unless they can be easily adopted into the linguistic system. (The Vocabulary of, 2004)

Also, Kaisaki (1996) mentions that the committees for coining neologisms are not created under a command of the government, but are spontaneously created among the experts of every area (p. 3).

To show further explanations of Icelandic neologisms, here are the methods to coin neologisms in Icelandic, morphologically categorized in five: (a) revival of Old Norse words that are almost obsolete, for example *sími* meaning *cellphone* which is a revived word that originally meant *thread* in Old Norse; (b) adding a new meaning to existing words, for

example *hjól* meaning *wheel* to which a meaning *bicycle* was later added; (c) Compounding existing morphemes, for example *flugvél* meaning *airplane* which is a word compounded *flug* meaning *fly* and *vél* meaning *machine*; (d) Use of suffix, for example *sjúkleiki* meaning *illness* which is a word composed of *sjúk* meaning *ill* and the suffix *-leiki* that creates a noun; (e) Use of prefix, for example, *jafnlangur* is an adjective that means “of the same length”, and it consists of the prefix *jafn-* meaning *equal* and *langur* (long) (Smith, 2011). This type was also derivative in Latin and Ancient Greek. Using these methods, Icelandic avoids using loanwords and makes neologisms instead.

The different features of the language purism of Icelandic from other precedent cases is that the doer of the language purism is not government but the “people”; also, it is more appropriate to coin a new word in the manner showed above than to have loanwords, because the Icelandic grammatical structure is highly inflectional.

### **Purpose of the Policy**

Considering the differences stated above, the language policy is supported by Icelanders themselves, and is implemented with their own will. Typical linguistic purism appears when one nation attempts to achieve independence, and apparently the purism of Iceland is one of those typical cases. However, in fact, 70 years have passed from Iceland’s achievement of independence.

Also, taking account of the fact that Iceland has a history the language has barely

changed since 1000 years ago, the linguistic identity for the tradition that has long been preserved by their ancestors even under the rule of Denmark also exists in Icelanders. The language purism is therefore inevitable for protecting the tradition that composes their identity.

### **Extreme Example: High Icelandic**

It is also the fact that some Icelanders think that this purist language policy is sometimes unnecessary from the practical point of view (Kristinsson, 2007).

An extreme result of the linguistic purism of Icelandic is “Háfrónska” (High Icelandic). Háfrónska is a variation of Icelandic that has ultra-purist attitude. This ultra-purism movement is just a small one started by Jozef Braekmans who lives in Belgium, aiming to remove all foreign loanwords from Icelandic. In Háfrónska, even proper nouns are translated into pure Icelandic; for example, Japan is *Morguneyjar*, “Morning islands” in Háfrónska (Orðaskrár, n.d.). This language has no official status in Iceland, and not popular even among Icelanders either, but the emergence of this ultra-purist Icelandic is a symbol that implies the extreme orientation of the language policy of modern standard Icelandic.

### **Conclusion**

This essay has examined the conservativeness of Icelandic in two aspects: the cause and the purpose. The current conservativeness of Icelandic has a different orientation from typical language purist policies, because the linguistic purism of Icelandic has a purpose not

only for nation-state building, but also for protecting the identity and tradition that their ancestors have preserved. In other words, there is a thick pipe between the origin of conservativeness and the purpose of the language policy.

Kaisaki (1996) showed the basic idea of the language policy in Iceland which was proposed in the official committee of Icelandic in 1984, and it described the policy as “language preservation” and “language cultivation” (p. 7). According to this essay, these can be translated as the followings: language preservation is the deed of protecting the tradition of the language; and language cultivation is the deed of making Icelandic appropriate in the modern society where technology is developing in an unpredictable speed.

Language policy is often seen as an unnatural deed that gives artificial influences on natural languages. However, in this essay the language policy of Icelandic showed the inseparable relationship between the society and the language, and it clarified that artificial influences on languages are essential.

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