



North American Icelandic

Recent developments

Höskuldur Þráinsson
and Sigríður Magnúsdóttir



Research questions

The general question:

- What is North American Icelandic (NAmlce) like today and how is it developing?

Why is it interesting to know this?

- *Descriptive interest:*
 - We want to **know more about this language** (just as we want to know about Icelandic Icelandic (Icelce) and other languages) and be able to describe it
- *Theoretical interest:*
 - The changes that have occurred and are occurring in NAmlce can tell us something about the **nature of linguistic change** (e.g. the interplay between language-internal forces and social forces)
 - The properties of NAmlce can help us understand the **nature of heritage languages** in general (cf. Birna's talk earlier)
 - We want to **know about its role in the cultural identity** of people of Icelandic descent in North America (cf. Daisy Neijmann 2018)



Outline of the talk

- Existing information about NAmIc before 2013 (see the overview by Birna & Höskuldur in *Sigurtunga* 2018)?
- Description of the linguistic part of the research project *Heritage Language, Linguistic Change and Cultural Identity* (Mál, málbreytingar og menningarleg sjálfsmynd, MMMS), supported by the Icelandic Research Fund 2013–2015. PIs Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Höskuldur Þráinsson.
- Some linguistic results of the MMMS project (pronunciation, inflection, syntax ...)
- Concluding remarks



Existing information about NAmIcelandic in 2013

Sources of our knowledge about NAmIcelandic before 2013:

- Records of the language, spoken and written, such as:
 - **letters and diaries** (e.g. *Bréf Vestur-Íslendinga I–II 2001–2002, Burt – og meir en bæjarleið* 2001)
 - **recordings and transcripts** (e.g. *Sögur úr Vesturheimi* 2012)
 - **writings by Icelanders** in North America, e.g. in local newspapers and journals (most of it proofread, though, except to some extent the announcements and advertisements).
- Various linguistic studies, such as:
 - **overviews** (e.g. Stefán Einarsson 1937, Haraldur Bessason 1967, Clausen 1986, Gísli Sigurðsson 2001, Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006)
 - **loan words** and their adaptation (e.g. Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason 1894, Vilhjálmur Stefánsson 1903, Haraldur Bessason 1984a,b, Gísli Sigurðsson 1984)
 - **names** (e.g. Haraldur Bessason 1958, Gerrard 1975, 1979)
 - **pronunciation** (e.g. Clausen 1984, Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir 1987, 1990)
 - **syntax** (e.g. Salbjörg 2008 – see also Salbjörg & Höskuldur 2017)



Collection of linguistic data in the MMMS project

- literature review (see Birna & Höskuldur 2018)
- compilation of existing materials (letters, diaries, recordings ...) and analysis of this (e.g. by Elma Ólad. 2013)
- collecting unpublished written materials (letters in archives) and analysis of these (Sigríður Mjöll 2014, 2018)
- three field trips to North America to collect new data:
 - Manitoba, spring 2013
 - Alberta, British Columbia, Washington state, spring 2014
 - North Dakota, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, fall 2014

Various papers presentations have been based on this material, including master's theses – and some of the papers in *Sigurtunga*.



The MMMS field trips

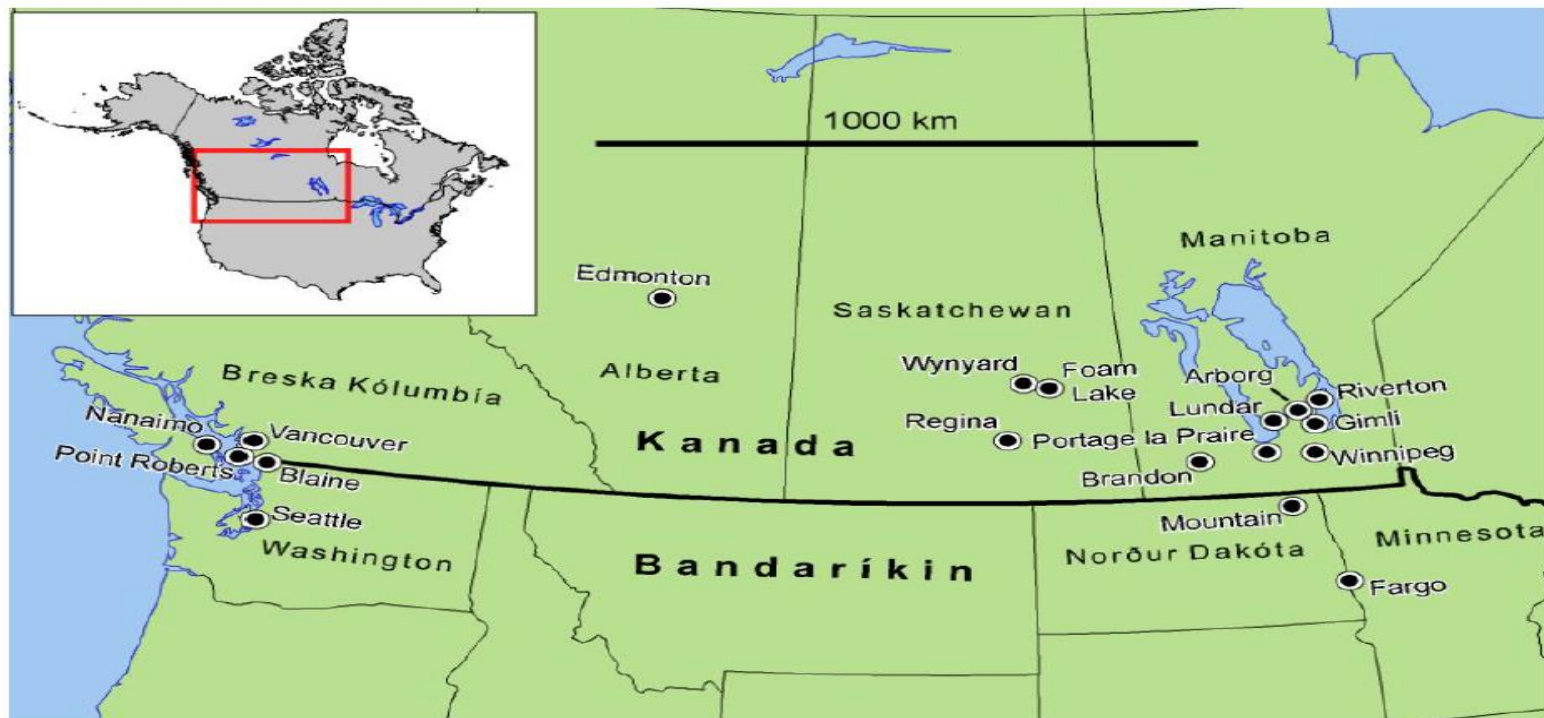


Fig. 1: The places visited 2013 and 2014 (Katrín María 2016:17)

- Total number of speakers interviewed (and tested) in Icelandic: 126 (52 men, 74 women); average age 77 years

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Data elicitation methods in the field trips

- collection of background material (age, gender, occupation ...)
- informal interviews (in Icelandic as much as possible)
- narration (mostly the story “Frog, where are you?”)
- interviews (mainly in English) about the role of the Icelandic language in the cultural identity (Daisy Neijmann 2018)
- various linguistic tests
 - **pronunciation**: identification of pictures, reading of a short passage (Gísli, Katrín María & Margrét Lára 2013, Katrín María 2016)
 - **inflection**: plural formation (Höskuldur & Sigríður 2019), inflection of verbs vs. auxiliary constructions (Kristín M. 2018) ...
 - **syntax**: word order (Birna, Höskuldur & Iris Edda 2018, Jóhannes Gísli 2018), pronouns (Putnam & Birna 2015), auxiliary constructions (Kristín M. 2018), understanding of syntactically complex sentences (Sigríður, Iris & Höskuldur 2018, Iris, Höskuldur & Sigríður 2018, 2019), case marking (Salbjörg & Höskuldur 2017) ...
 - **semantics**: names of household items, body parts, spatial relations and colors (Þórhalla & Matthew 2018)



Some predictions about the pronunciation

- The pronunciation of NAmlce might (still) contain **traces of the relevant local variants** in Iceland (Northern and Eastern Iceland)
- The **close contact with English** might influence the pronunciation of NAmlce.
- Limited use of Icelandic in public domains (schools, administration, broadcasting ...) in North America means that there is neither any standardization of particular variants nor stigmatization of others. So whereas social pressure might support some pronunciation variants in Iceland and help suppress others, we **do not expect any social pressure** to affect NAmlce.

The “hard” pronunciation

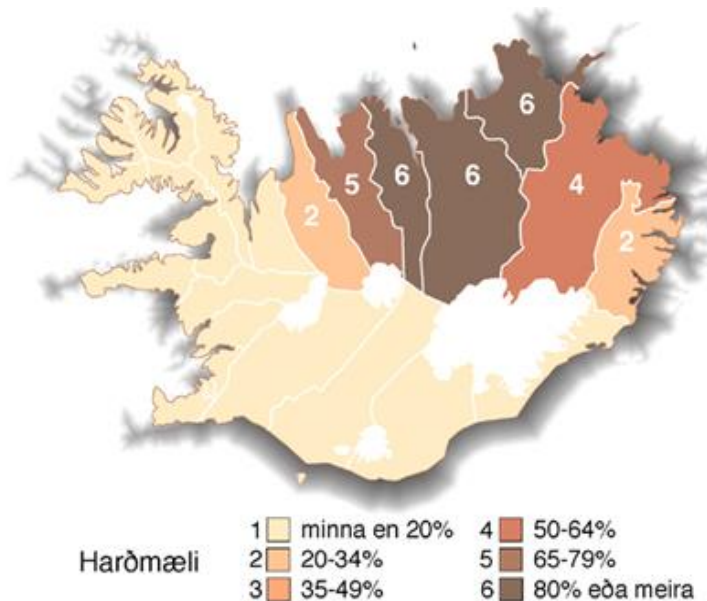


Fig. 2: Distribution of the “hard” pronunciation of /p,t,k/ in Iceland in the 1980s (Höskuldur & Kristján 2001)

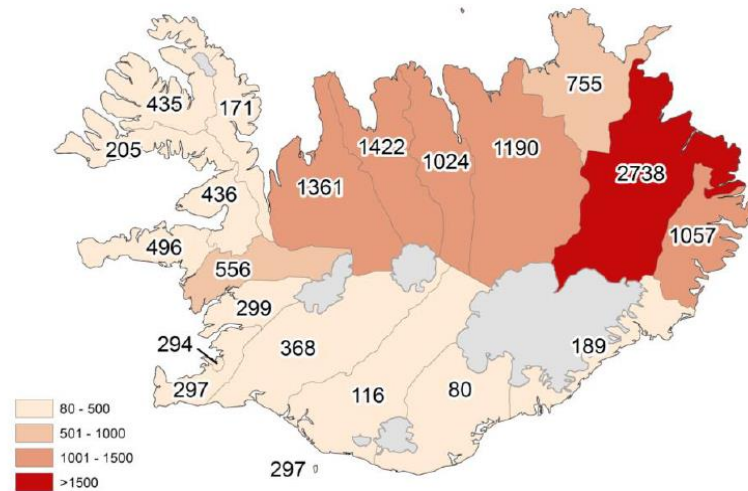


Fig. 3: Origin of the Icelandic immigrants in North America 1870–1914 (Katrín María 2016:4, based on Júníus 1983)

The “hard” pronunciation in NAmIce

consonants (and examples of test words)	Always “hard” pronunciation	Occasionally “hard” pronunciation	Never “hard” pronunciation	Total N of speakers who participated
/p/ after long vowels (<i>pípa</i> , <i>hlaupa</i>)	43,5% (30)	13% (9)	43,5% (30)	69
/t/ after long vowels (<i>fata</i> , <i>hveiti</i> , <i>bátur</i> , <i>feitur</i>)	37% (24)	34% (22)	29% (19)	65
/k/ after long vowels (<i>lykill</i> , <i>víkingur</i> , <i>strákur</i> , <i>sykur</i>)	39% (29)	33% (24)	28% (21)	74
mean /p,t,k/	40%	27%	33%	

Table 1: Percentage of NAmIce speakers having the “hard” pron. when identifying relevant pictures

- As shown by Katrín María (2016), the **“hard” pronunciation is relatively strong** in NAmIce, as had been observed in previous research (see e.g. Clausen 1984, Gísli Sigurðsson 2001).
- This is **not surprising**, given the background of the original immigrants (cf. above) – and the fact that there is not really any clearly “soft” pronunciation of /p,t,k/ in this context in NAm English.

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The “voiced” pronunciation of /lp, lk, lt, mp, nt, nk/

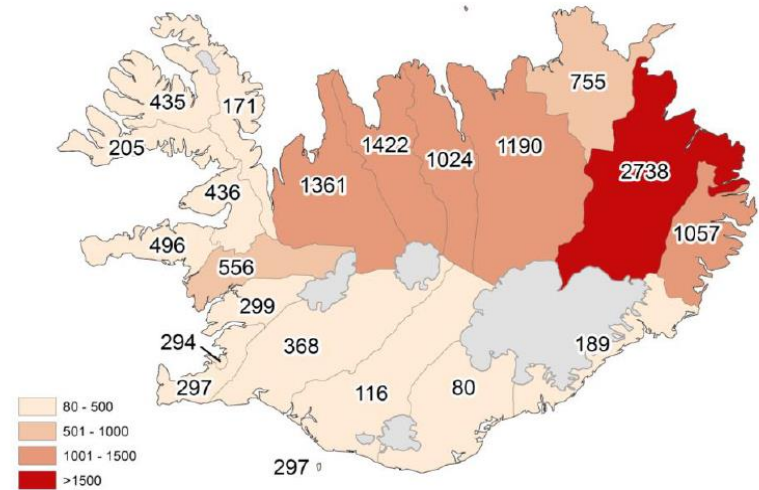
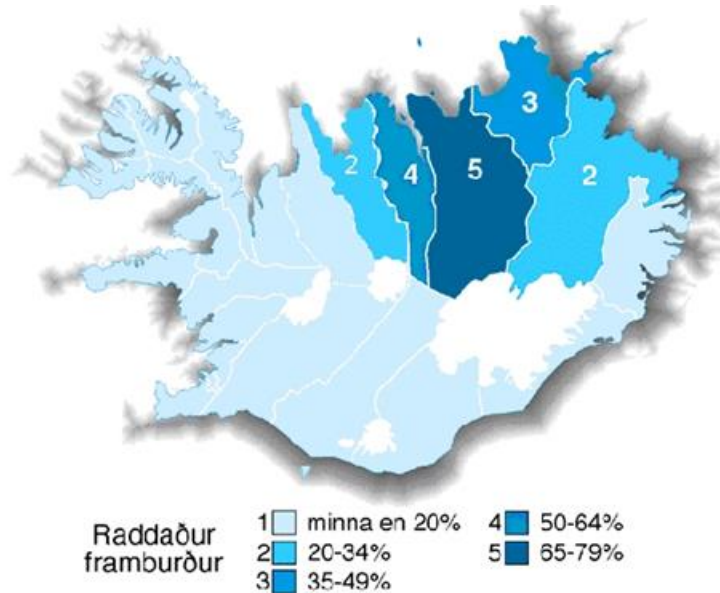


Fig. 4: Distribution of the “voiced” pronunciation of /lp, lk, mp, nt, nk .../ in Iceland in the 1980s (Höskuldur & Kristján 2001)

Fig. 3: Origin of the Icelandic immigrants in North America 1870–1914 (Katrín María 2016:4, based on Júníus 1983)

The “voiced” pronunciation of /lp, lk, lt, mp, nt, nk/

consonants (and examples of test words)	Always “voiced” pronunciation	Occasionally “voiced” pronunciation	Never “voiced” pronunciation	Total N of speakers who participated
/mp, nt, nk/ (<i>lampi, svampur, fimmtán, svunta, banki</i>)	16% (10)	31% (19)	53% (33)	62
/lp, lk/ (<i>stelpa, hvolpur, mjólk, fólk</i>)	8% (6)	24% (17)	68% (49)	72
/lt/ (<i>bolti</i>)	2,5% (1)	0	97,5% (39)	40
mean /lp, lt, lk, mp, nt, nk/	9%	18%	73%	

Table 2: Percentage of NAmIcelandic speakers having the “voiced” pron.

- As shown by Katrín María (2016), the **“voiced” pronunciation is quite weak**, as had been mentioned by previous researchers (see e.g. Clausen 1984, Gísli Sigurðsson 2001).
- This **is surprising**, given the background of the original immigrants – and the fact that there is not really any “voiceless” pronunciation of /lp, lt, lk, mp, nt, nk/ in NAm English (and voiceless /l,m,n/ don’t really exist in English).
- Note the “hierarchy” of the voiced/voiceless clusters, especially the status of /lt/.

“Flámæli”

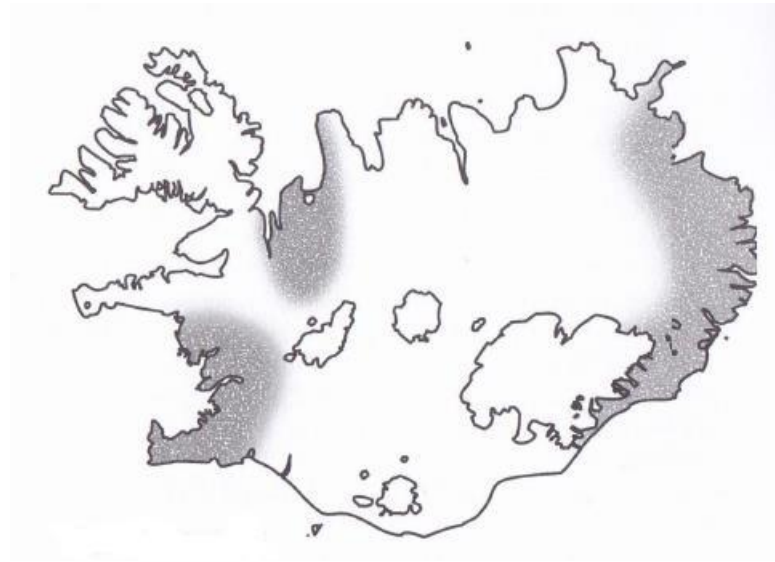


Fig. 5: Distribution of the “flámæli” of /i,u,e,ö/ in Iceland in the 1940s (Kristján Árnason 2005:396)

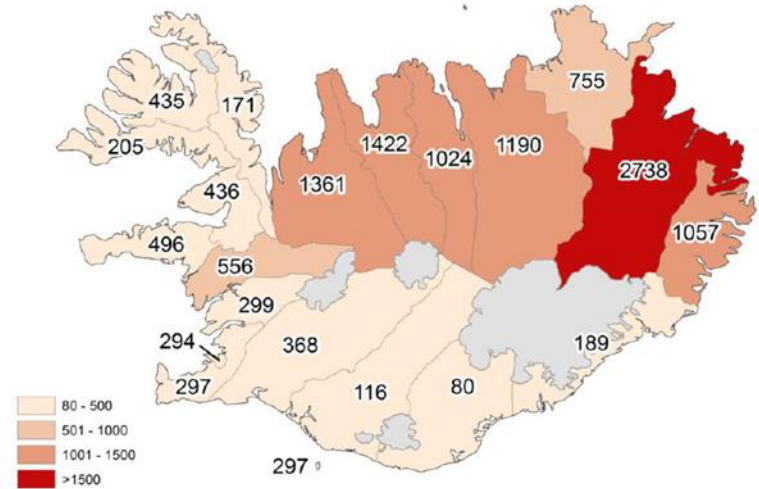


Fig. 3: Origin of the Icelandic immigrants in North America 1870–1914 (Katrín María 2016:4, based on Júníus 1983)



“Flámæli”

Vowel (and test words)	Always “flámæli ”	Occasional “flámæli”	Never “flámæli”	N of speakers who could name the relevant pictures
/i/ (<i>lykill, spil, sykur</i> ...)	36% (27)	33% (25)	31% (23)	75
/u/ (<i>fluga</i> ...)	46% (24)	12% (6)	42% (22)	52
mean /i,u/	41%	23%	36%	
/e/ (<i>speni, nef, sleði</i> ...)	0% (0)	8% (5)	92% (61)	66
/ö/ (<i>vökva, sög</i> ...)	6% (3)	4% (2)	90% (46)	51
mean /e,ö/	3%	6%	91%	

Table 3: Percentage of NAmIce speakers having “flámæli” (long vow.)

Vowel (and test words)	% of tokens with flámæli
/i/ (<i>lykill, spil, sykur</i> ...)	52%
/u/ (<i>fluga</i> ...)	52%
mean /i,u/	52%
/e/ (<i>speni, nef, sleði</i> ...)	3%
/ö/ (<i>vökva, sög</i> ...)	8%
mean /e,ö/	6%

Table 4: Percentage of tokens (long vowels) pronounced w. “flámæli”



“Flámæli”

- So **“flámæli”** is **still common** in NAmlce, just as it was when Clausen (1984) and Birna (1987, 1990) did their research and as noted by other researchers (e.g. Gísli Sig. 2001).
- It is **more common in the pronunciation of /i,u/** than /e,ö/, as originally pointed out by Birna (1987, 1990, 2006).
- It is **more common that might have been expected** on the basis of the origin of the settlers.
- Although the lack of social pressure (e.g. no stigmatization in NAmlce) may have contributed to the **preservation** of “flámæli”, it does not really explain the **spread** of it to speakers with background in the non-flámæli areas of Iceland.



Inflection

Knowledge of inflection is of two kinds:

- Knowing how to **inflect common words** (which may inflect irregularly)
- Knowing **the general inflectional rules**, which makes one able to apply them to new words/words one has never heard inflected (including loan words!)
- The development of these two kinds of inflectional knowledge can easily be seen in **child language**.



Plural of Icelandic nouns

The English plural rule: Add an /s/ (pronounced [s], [z] or [iz])

Plural of Icelandic nouns – much more complicated:

- depends on the gender of the noun: masc., fem., neuter
- is partially predictable, though:
 - weak masc. nouns ending in *-i* get an *-ar*-plural: *koddi* – *koddar* ‘pillow’
 - weak fem. nouns ending in *-a* get an *-ur*-plural: *kona* – *konur* ‘woman’
 - weak neut. nouns ending in *-a* get an *-u*-plural: *eyra* – *eyru* ‘ear’
 - strong neut. nouns are identical in singular and plural (*rúm* – *rúm* ‘bed’) except that if there is an *-a-* in the stem: *-a-* turns into an *-ö-* in plural (so-called *u*-umlaut): *glas* – *glös* ‘glass’

Icelandic children “know” most of this (subconsciously) by the age of 6 (see Indriði, Sigurður & Benedikt 1986) and Icelandic adults know all of it (Höskuldur & Sigríður 2019)



The Icelandic “*wug*-test”

by Höskuldur & Sigríður, based on Berko’s idea (1958):

Hér er einn bolti



Hér eru tveir



Hér er ein darga



Hér eru tvær



A known word: ‘Here is one *bolti* (‘ball’). Here are two _____’

A made-up word: ‘Here is one *darga*. Here are two _____’

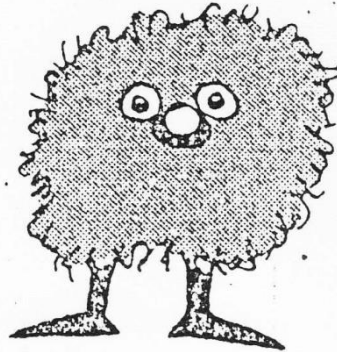
- The form of the numeral (*einn* (m), *ein* (f), *eitt* (n); *tveir* (m), *tvær* (f), *tvö* (n)) reveals the gender of the noun.
- So if the plural is known or predictable, the task should be “easy” 😊 .

The Icelandic *wug*-test

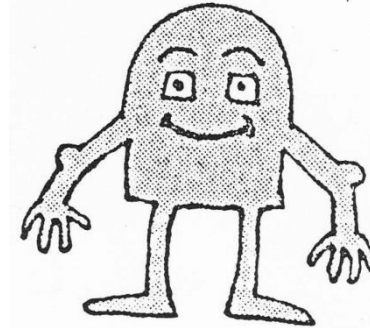
More characters (created by Kjartan Arnórsson):



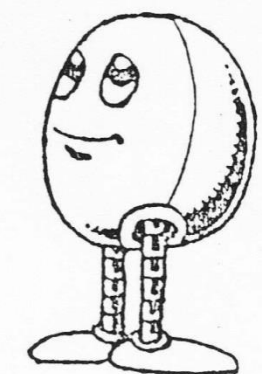
(einn) sútur



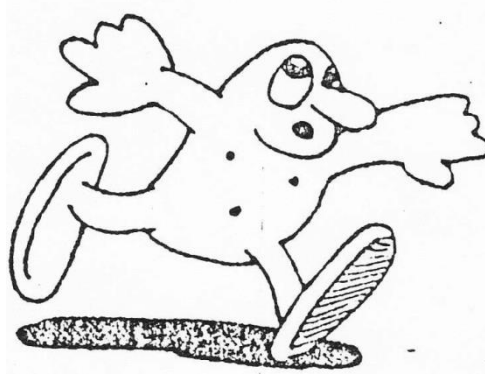
(ein) kraða



(eitt) kas



(einn) teill



(ein) kíma



(eitt) lún

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Words in the Icelandic *wug*-test

Inflection, gender	Known words (some more regular than others)	Made-up words (predictable plural)
strong		
m	hundur, selur, hnífur, bekkur, kjóll, gaffall, hamar, fótur	teill, þetir
f	sól, nál, þvottavél; sög; mús, bók	
n	rúm, ljón kerti; blað, tjald, glas	lún; kas, darm
weak		
m	koddi, fáni, bolti	neli
f	sápa, kona; panna	kíma; kraða, darga
n	eyra auga	

- Some of the known words are **irregular** or show some kind of **stem variation**.
- All the made-up words have predictable plural (are regular), although some should show certain **stem variation**.
- 15 speakers of NAmIce took the Icelandic *wug*-test.

Results of the Icelandic *wug*-test

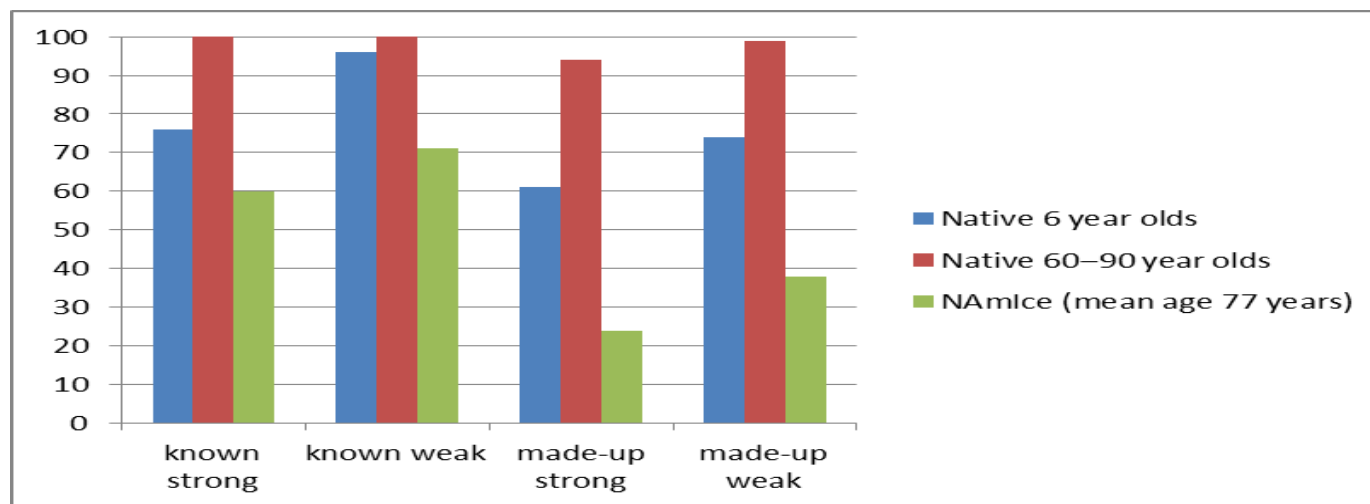


Fig. 6: Results of the Icelandic *wug*-test in Icelce and NAmIcel

- Speakers of NAmIcel typically **know the plural of familiar words** (on the average 60–70% of the words tested), as do native 6 year olds (75–95% of the the words tested) and (older) adults.
- Most speakers of NAmIcel **do not seem to have internalized the general rules for plural formation** like children do.
- This may be a general characteristic of heritage speakers.

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Word order

Two (related) types of differences between Icelandic and English:

- Relative position of the **finite main verb** and selected **adverbs**:

(1) a Eve sometimes speaks Icelandic.
b Eva talar stundum íslensku.

- Relative position of the **subject** and the **finite verb** when the sentence begins with a non-subject:

(2) a Then I bought a horse.
b Þá keypti ég hest.

Since the **verb** is in **2nd position** in both word order types in Icelandic, this is often referred to as “the verb-second phenomenon” – V2 for short – and Icel. called “a V2 language”



Word order

Prediction:

- The fact that English is not a V2-language might influence the word order of NAmIc.

Anecdotal evidence from NAmIc (Haraldur Bessason 1967, Clausen 1986, Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006):

- | | | | | |
|-------|---------|--------|----------|--------------------|
| (1) a | Við | alltaf | notum | vacuumið. |
| | we | always | use | the vacuum cleaner |
| b | Í kvöld | hann | fer | heim. |
| | tonight | he | goes | home |
| c | Fyrst | við | fiskuðum | í norðurendanum. |
| | first | we | fished | in the north end |

We wanted to study this tendency in more detail and quantify it (see Elma Óladóttir 2013, Birna, Höskuldur and Iris 2018, Birna and Höskuldur 2018).



Word order

Speakers of NAmIcel were asked to choose between two word order variants.

Word order variants					N that selected	%
1 a	Kristín	talar	stundum	íslensku	12	63.2
	Kristin	speaks	sometimes	Icelandic		
1 b	Kristín		stundum	talar	7	36.8
	Kristin		sometimes	speaks		
2 a	Á morgun	sjáum	við	það	9	52.9
	tomorrow	see	we	it		
2 b	Á morgun	við	sjáum	það	7	41.2
	tomorrow	we	see	it		

Comments:

- The NAmIcel speakers were more likely to select the (Icelce-like) V2 variant than the (English-like) V3 variant, although the latter was favored by some.
- Icelce speakers (both younger and older, tested by Iris Edda Nowenstein) always selected the V2 variant.



Case marking

Some facts:

- Icelandic has a complex system of **case marking** (Nom, Acc, Dat, Gen)
- Although children growing up in Iceland master most of the case marking system relatively early, it tends to be **difficult for learners of Icelandic as a second language**.
- Acquisition of case marking appears to be difficult for **heritage speakers**.
- There is some **variation** in case marking in Icelandic, especially subject case marking (* means 'not used', **green** means 'standardly accepted', **red** means 'non-standard' (=used by many but frowned upon in schools and corrected by proofreaders):

(1) a	Hún /*Hana/*Henni she(Nom/*Acc/*Dat)	datt. fell	[most common type]
b.	*Hún/ Hana / Henni she(*Nom/ Acc / Dat)	langar í ís. wants ice cream	[several verbs]
c.	*Hún/*Hana/ Henni she(*Nom/*Acc/ Dat)	er illa við fisk. dislikes fish	[several verbs]

Case marking

Predictions for NAmIcel:

- We might expect to find the **similar kind of variation** in case marking as in Icelce (e.g. the tendency to use **Dat subjects** instead of the standard **Acc subjects** with certain verbs, cf. above).
- We might expect to find **evidence for simplification** of case marking, e.g. generalization of the most common subject case, Nominative – possibly because of English influence.

Data from the 1970s (Salbjörg 2008, Salbjörg & Hösk. 2017, from *Sögur* ...):

- (1) a. En **hann**, **honum** langar svo til þess. [Dat for Acc]
but he(Acc/Dat) wants it so much
- b. *Ég finnst það. [*Nom for Dat]
I(Nom) think so

Data from the 1980s (Birna 2006):

- (2) a. **Mér** langar að tefla. [Dat for Acc]
me(Dat) wants to play chess
- b. *Þeir voru illa við úlfana. [*Nom for Dat]
they(Nom) disliked the wolves

Case marking

A test used in North America: Selection between alternatives:

- (1) a. Hún/Hana/Henni/Hennar þykir kakan góð.
 she(Nom/Acc/Dat/Gen) finds the cake good
 b. Mennirnir/mennina/mönnunum/mannana vantar peninga.
 the men(Nom/Acc/Dat/Gen) need money

Selection of subject case with “Dative verbs” (over 40 participants):

Case marking alternatives offered	*Nom	*Acc	Dat	*Gen
Strákarnir/Strákana/Strákunum/Strákanna finnst the boys(Nom/Acc/Dat/Gen) find	12.8% (6)	12.8% (6)	70.2% (33)	2.1% (1)
Hún/Hana/Henni/Hennar þykir She(Nom/Acc/Dat/Gen) finds	20.5% (9)	0% (0)	75% (33)	0% (0)
Ég/Mig/Mér/Mín leiðist I(Nom/Acc/Dat/Gen) am bored	8.7% (4)	2.2% (1)	84.8% (39)	2.2% (1)
Konan/Konuna/Konunni/Konunnar blöskraði the woman(Nom/Acc/Dat/Gen) was shocked	22.2% (10)	6.7% (3)	66.7% (30)	2.2% (1)
Average	16%	5.4%	74.2%	1.6%

Comments: Mostly “correct” case selection.
 Some evidence for overgeneralization of Nom, though.

Case marking

Selection of subject case with “Acc verbs” (over 40 participants):

Case marking alternatives offered	*Nom	Acc	Dat	*Gen
Mennirnir/Mennina/Mönnunum/Mannanna vantar the men(Nom/Acc/Dat/Gen) need	15.6% (7)	60% (27)	17.8% (8)	2.2% (1)
Hún/Hana/Henni/Hennar sviður í sárið she(Nom/Acc/Gen/Dat) hurts in the wound	21.3% (10)	55.3% (26)	12.8% (6)	2.1 (1)
Ég/Mig/Mér/Mín langa(r) I(Nom/Acc/Dat/Gen) want	13% (6)	67.4% (31)	17.4% (8)	2.2% (1)
Konan/Konuna/Konunni/Konunnar klæjar the woman(Nom/Acc/Gen/Dat) itches	24.4% (11)	46.7% (21)	26.7% (12)	2.2% (1)
Average	18.6%	57.4%	18.7%	2.2%

Comments:

- Mostly “correct” case selection.
- Some evidence for overgeneralization of Nom as before.
- Some evidence for Dative Substitution (Icel. *þágufallshneigð* or *þágufallssýki*, lit. “Dative Sickness”).



Case marking

Question:

- Is “Dative Sickness” (Dative Substitution) more widespread in NAmIcel than in Icelce?

Some comparison with data from Iceland: Selection of **Dat** case for two of the most common Accusative verbs in Icelandic (cf. Höskuldur, Þórhallur, Ásta & Þórunn 2015):

Verb	NAmIcel speakers	Older Icelce speakers	Icelce teenagers
<i>langa</i> ‘want (to)’	17.4%	13.2%	35%
<i>vanta</i> ‘need’	17.8%	13.3%	43.7%

Conclusion:

- Speakers of NAmIcel are somewhat more likely to select Dat case with the accusative verbs *langa* and *vanta* than older Icelce speakers today but much less likely than Icelandic teenagers today.



Concluding remarks

Some things we have learned about NAmlce:

- **It is still spoken** – although mainly by elderly speakers – and it is important to many speakers of Icelandic descent
- **It differs to some extent** from standard Icelce, but there is considerable variation within NAmlce so it is difficult to generalize about NAmlce as a particular dialect of Icelandic.
- Common features of NAmlce have different sources:
 - **properties of the language that the immigrants took with them** from Iceland around 1900, e.g. parts of the vocabulary (e.g. color words, cf. Þórhalla and Matthew 2018), aspects of pronunciation (e.g. hard pronunciation of /p,t,k/ after long vowels) ...
 - **developments that have parallels in Icelce** (e.g. spread of the voiceless pronunciation of /mp, nt, nk, lp, lk .../, possibly also *flámæli* of /i,u/ and the the Dative Substitution)
 - developments that may have been **influenced by English** (e.g. position of the finite verb)
 - grammatical simplifications and properties of acquisition/attrition that are **common in heritage languages** (e.g. the generalization of Nom subjects, other properties of case marking and agreement (cf. Sigríður Mjöll 2014, 2018), (over-)use of simple auxiliary constructions (Kristín M. 2018), incomplete acquisition of plural formation rules ...

You can learn more about this if you read *Sigurtunga*!