

Airports and Islands: The Icelandic Gender System and Some Standardization and Reformation Attempts

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1 Introduction

Sentences like (1) can now occasionally be heard on the news in Iceland. For many (possibly most) speakers of Icelandic, myself included, they sound odd in the context provided here:¹

- (1) ??**Þrjú** greindust með COVID-19 á Keflavíkurflugvelli
three.N.PL.NOM were.diagnosed with COVID-19 at Keflavík Airport
í gær.
yesterday
“Three were diagnosed with COVID-19 at Keflavík Airport yesterday.”

The following example sounds completely natural, on the other hand, as a headline in a newspaper:

- (2) **Þrjú** syntu út í Viðey í gær.
three.N.PL.NOM swam out to Viðey yesterday
“Three swam out to Viðey island yesterday.”

Similarly, the examples in (3) are both fine:

- (3) a. **Þrír** greindust með COVID-19 á Keflavíkurflugvelli
three.M.PL.NOM were.diagnosed with COVID-19 at Keflavík Airport
í gær.
yesterday
“Three were diagnosed with COVID-19 at Keflavík Airport yesterday.”
b. **Þrír** syntu út í Viðey í gær.
three.M.PL.NOM swam out to Viðey yesterday
“Three swam out to Viðey island yesterday.”

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This will probably seem surprising to readers who are not native speakers of Icelandic since the English translations suggest that (1) is the same as (3a) and (2) the same as (3b). But a careful look at the interlinear glosses will reveal that *þrjú* ‘three’ in (1) and (2) is *neuter plural* (N.PL) but *þrír* in (3) is *masculine plural* (M.PL). But why would N.PL be odd in (1) but not in (2)? How could airports and islands influence the gender of numerals in different ways?² And why would N.PL be odd in an example like (1) but M.PL fine in both (3a) and (3b)? And there is more to the story. The English translations do not show that for most speakers (3a) just means that *three people* were diagnosed with COVID-19, (3b) suggests that a group of three *male swimmers* swam to the island but (2) implies that the swimmers were *mixed group* (or possibly all genderqueer, see section 6). How is that possible?

Before attempting to answer these questions, it is necessary to present an overview of the gender system in Icelandic. So in section 2 I will describe the main characteristics of this system and section 3 will concentrate on the difference between grammatical and referential gender.³ In section 4 I will answer the questions raised in this introduction and describe some (in my view mistaken) attempts to standardize or reform Icelandic gender rules. I will then conclude by adding some comparative notes on Faroese and Swedish in section 5 and summarizing the discussion in section 6.

2 Grammatical gender

Icelandic nouns come in three genders as illustrated in (4):

- (4) M: *forseti* ‘president’, *hestur* ‘horse’, *svanni* ‘woman (poetic)’, *stóll* ‘chair’,
ótti ‘fear’
 F: *kona* ‘woman’, *kind* ‘sheep’, *skyttu* ‘shooter, hunter’, *skeið* ‘spoon’, *tillaga*
 ‘proposal’
 N: *barn* ‘child’, *naut* ‘bull’, *skáld* ‘poet’, *fljóð* ‘woman’, *borð* ‘table’

The grammatical gender of nouns is *inherent*. As can be seen from the examples in (4) it is not directly related to “natural gender” (or sex). Although most nouns denoting female humans are feminine, it is possible to find masculine and neuter nouns denoting females. In addition, words denoting things and concepts can be masculine, feminine or neuter as shown. This grammatical (or arbitrary or uninterpretable) gender has obviously no relation to sex.

Adjectives, most pronouns and the numerals 1–4 *inflect* for gender, on the other hand. When used attributively they agree in grammatical gender with the noun they modify—and also in number and case as shown in (5):

2 Viðey is a small island within swimming distance (for good swimmers) from Reykjavík.

3 The terms *natural gender*, *semantic gender* and *biological gender* have also been used for what I am calling *referential gender* in this paper. Kramer (2015) and Ingason (2016) use the term *interpretable gender* in much the same sense, relating it to feature interpretation in the Minimalist Framework and Distributed Morphology. The reason for my selection of the term *referential gender* will become clear below.

- (5) a. *góður* *forseti*
 good.M.SG.NOM president.M.SG.NOM
þrjá *svanna*
 three.M.PL.ACC woman.M.PL.ACC
- b. *allar* *skyttur*
 all.F.PL.NOM hunter.F.PL.NOM
vondri *tillögu*
 bad.F.SG.DAT proposal.F.SG.DAT
- c. *stórt* *naut*
 big.N.SG.NOM bull.N.SG.NOM
góðu *skáldi*
 good.N.SG.DAT poet.N.SG.DAT

This kind of agreement (or concord) is strictly grammatical and completely obligatory (see, e.g., Grönberg 2002; Norris 2012; H. Á. Sigurðsson 2015; Thórhallsdóttir 2015a; E. F. Sigurðsson 2017; Thorvaldsdóttir 2017). Thus the form of the numeral in (5a) has to be masculine because *svanni* ‘woman’ is masculine, and the feminine form of the numeral would be strictly ungrammatical although *svanni* denotes a woman. Similarly, the masculine form of *góður* ‘good’ cannot be used attributively with the neuter word *skáld* (cf. (5c)) even when it refers to a male poet.

In a predicative position adjectives, pronouns and numerals also typically show gender agreement with the relevant noun:⁴

- (6) a. *Stólarnir eru dýrir.*
 chair.the.M.PL are expensive.M.PL
 “The chairs are expensive.”
- b. *Tillagan er góð.*
 proposal.the.F.SG is good.F.SG
 “The proposal is good.”
- c. *Skáldið er mjög frægt.*
 poet.the.N.SG is very famous.N.SG
 “The poet is very famous.”

Finally, the grammatical gender of a noun also determines the gender of the personal pronoun that refers to it:

- (7) a. *Þetta er stóllinn. Ég keypti hann í IKEA.*
 this is chair.the.M.SG I bought him.M.SG in IKEA
 “This is the chair. I bought it at IKEA.”
- b. *Skyttan villtist og hún fannst ekki ...*
 hunter.the.F.SG got.lost and she.F.SG was.found not
 “The hunter got lost and he (or she) was not found ...”

4 In (6) and most of the following examples I will only use nominative forms since case is largely irrelevant for the points I want to make. Hence case will not be indicated in the interlinear glosses unless it is particularly relevant. In general, irrelevant grammatical details will be omitted from the interlinear glosses.

- c. *Barnið er syfjað. Það svaf illa.*
 child.the.N.SG is sleepy.N.SG it.N.SG slept badly
 “The child is sleepy. He (or she) slept badly.”

In (7a) the masculine form of the third person pronoun *hann* ‘he’ agrees with the grammatically masculine noun *stóll* ‘chair’. Similarly, in (7b) the feminine pronominal form *hún* ‘she’ agrees grammatically with the feminine noun *skyttta*. It does not imply that the hunter was female (hence the “he (or she)” in the translation). Finally, it is normal to use the neuter pronominal form *það* about a child, as in (7c).

The description just given holds for grammatical gender in Icelandic. But there is more to the gender story as will be explained in the next section.

3 Referential gender vs. grammatical gender

3.1 Introducing referential gender

Assume we are looking at a race and commenting as follows on the runners that have just finished:

- (8) a. *Hann var svakalega fljótur!*
 he.M.SG was extremely fast.M.SG
 “He was extremely fast!”
 b. *Ekkert smá fljót!*
 nothing small fast.F.SG
 “How fast she was!”
 c. *Ókei. Öll þrjú komin í mark.*
 OK all.N.PL three.N.PL come.N.PL to goal
 “OK. Now all three have finished.”

In (8a) the masculine singular pronoun *hann* is obviously used to refer to a male runner we have been observing. The gender of the pronoun is thus not determined by any particular noun in the discourse but rather by the sex of the runner we have been observing (deictic reference). The predicative adjective *fljótur* would also be masculine singular in this case, as indicated. Similarly, the gender of the feminine singular adjective *fljót* in (8b) is not determined by any noun in the sentence or in the preceding discourse but just by the fact that a female runner is being referred to. Finally, we could use the neuter plural forms *öll þrjú* as in (8c) to refer to a particular mixed group of runners we had been waiting for. A less elliptical statement would be (9):

- (9) *Nú eru þau öll þrjú komin í mark.*
 now are they.N.PL all.N.PL three.N.PL come.N.PL to goal
 “Now all three of them have finished.”

In all these cases the gender of the adjectives, pronouns and numerals is determined by the sex of the persons being referred to. Hence I will refer to this as *referential gender*.

Now consider the case of adjectives and indefinite pronouns (or quantifiers) used substantively in general statements about humans, i.e., adjectives and pronouns that are not modifying any particular noun or referring to a particular person or group. In such instances referential gender is impossible since nothing in particular is being referred to and anaphoric reference to a preceding noun is not possible either since there is no such noun. Then Icelandic uses *unmarked* or *default grammatical masculine* (see, e.g., Rögnvaldsson 2013; Grönberg 2002; Thráinsson 2005; Thórhallsdóttir 2015a, *passim*):

- (10) a. **Enginn** má yfirgefa húsið.
nobody.M.SG may leave house.the
“Nobody is allowed to leave the house.”
- b. **Allir** græða á verðbólgunni.
everybody.M.PL profit from inflation.the
“Everybody profits from the inflation.”
- c. **Þeir** sem hlustuðu á þáttinn í gær heyrðu ...
those.M.PL that listened to program.the yesterday heard ...
“Those who listened to the program yesterday heard ...”
- d. **Ef einhver** hringir, segðu honum þá að ...
if someone.M.SG calls tell him.M.SG then that ...
“If someone calls, then tell them that ...”

The masculine forms *enginn*, *allir*, *þeir*, *einhver* in (10) have a generic meaning and no particular reference.⁵ Neuter is not the default grammatical gender in this kind of context. Neuter singular is completely impossible in (10a) and (10d) as they would then mean “Nothing is allowed to leave the house” and “If something calls ...”. If neuter plural were used instead of masculine plural in (10b) and (10c) it would be interpreted as referential gender, referring to a particular mixed group (males and females) that had been mentioned earlier or clearly understood from the context. The translations of (11) are meant to reflect this:⁶

- (11) a. **Öll** græða á verðbólgunni.
everybody.N.PL profit from inflation.the
“They all profit from the inflation.”
- b. **Þau** sem hlustuðu á þáttinn í gær ...
those.N.PL that listened to program.the yesterday ...
“Those (of the group) that listened to the program yesterday ...”

5 Example (10d) (from Thórhallsdóttir 2015a) is particularly interesting since here the masculine personal pronoun *hann* is used to refer back to the grammatically masculine indefinite pronoun *einhver* ‘someone’. Note that in the English translation I have used *them* rather than *him* since *someone* has no grammatical gender and hence *him* could be wrongly understood as referring to a male caller. Note, however, that it is also possible to leave *honum* out, as one could in English too: “If someone calls, then say that ...”. More on this issue below.

6 Note that this does not mean that it is not possible to find examples like (11b) that are meant to have generic non-referential reading. Like (1) and (21), for instance, such examples tend to be used in recent years by those that want to reform the Icelandic gender system (see also the discussion in section 6).

Similarly, using feminine plural would imply that a particular group of female persons was being referred to, e.g., *Þær* (F.PL) *sem hlustuðu á þáttinn í gær ...* ‘Those (of the group of females) that listened to the program yesterday ...’.

So far we have seen that the gender of adjectives, pronouns and numerals in Icelandic is either determined by agreement with the nouns they modify (grammatical gender, grammatical agreement) or by the sex (natural gender) of the individuals they refer to (referential gender, referential agreement). In some instances, however, there is a choice between the two types of gender (or agreement) as will be described in the next subsection.

3.2 Optionality

Consider the following pair of sentences:

- (12) a. *Alþingi kjs forsætisráðherra ... Er hann rétt*
parliament elects prime.minister.M.SG is he.M.SG appropriately
kjörinn ef ...
elected.M.SG if
‘The parliament elects the prime minister ... He or she is appropriately
elected if ...’
- b. *Forsætisráðherra heimsótti ... Manitobaháskóla þar sem*
prime.minister.M.SG visited Manitoba.university there that
hún ...
she.F.SG
‘The prime minister visited ... the University of Manitoba where she ...’

Example (12a) is a statement about governmental procedures in Iceland and describes how to go about electing a prime minister. In that example the masculine pronoun *hann* is used, agreeing with the grammatically masculine noun *forsætisráðherra* ‘prime minister’—a case of *grammatical agreement*. But because English nouns do not have grammatical gender, this sentence cannot be translated directly into English. It would not be appropriate to translate *hann* in this instance simply as ‘he’ since it does not refer to a particular male person. Hence I have added ‘or she’ to the translation (cf. also (7) above—for many speakers of English it would also be possible to use *they are* in context of this sort). Example (12b), on the other hand, is taken from a report on a visit by the Icelandic prime minister to Manitoba, Canada. Because the Icelandic prime minister at the time was a woman, it was entirely natural to use the feminine pronoun *hún* to refer to her—a case of *referential agreement*.

Now note that grammatical agreement would also have been possible in (12b). In that case the journalist would have used the masculine pronoun *hann* to refer to the grammatically masculine noun *forsætisráðherra*, as is done in (12a). This kind of optionality is not uncommon and it will obviously vary which option is preferred. Consider the following examples (taken from the big corpus *Risamálheild*, <https://malheildir.arnastofnun.is/>):

- (13) a. *skáldið ídealíserar hana ekki, en það ...*
poet.the.N.SG idealizes her not but it.N.SG
‘The poet doesn’t idealize it, but he (or she) ...’

- b. *skiftir allmiklu máli fyrir skáldið ... því að hann ...*
 plays considerable role for poet.the.N.SG because he.M.SG
 “plays a considerable role for the poet because he ...”
- c. *skáldið hefur þurft að valda þeim vonbrigðum þar sem*
 poet.the.N.SG has had to cause them disappointment because
hún ...
 she.F.SG
 “the poet has caused disappointment for them because she ...”

In (13a) we have a case of grammatical agreement, where the neuter pronoun *það* agrees with the grammatically neuter singular noun *skáld* ‘poet’. Hence we do not know whether the poet in question was male or female so *það* is translated as ‘he (or she)’. In examples (13b) and (13c) on the other hand, we have referential agreement and hence it is clear that *hann* in (13b) refers to a male poet and *hún* in (13c) refers to a female one, as reflected in the translations.⁷

As described in section 2 above, this kind of optionality is not possible when the inflected word (adjective, pronoun, numeral) is used attributively. In such cases grammatical agreement with the noun modified is obligatory.

Now note that the cases just discussed involve the agreement of personal pronouns. As described by Thórhallsdóttir (2015a), grammatical agreement in Icelandic seems to follow the agreement hierarchy proposed by Corbett (2006: 207):⁸

- (14) attributive > predicate > personal pronoun

As stated above, grammatical agreement of attributive adjectives is obligatory and we have just seen some examples where grammatical agreement of personal pronouns is optional, i.e., it can be “overridden” by referential agreement. This is not unexpected if Corbett’s hierarchy is correct: grammatical agreement of personal pronouns should be weaker than that of attributive adjectives. Since grammatical agreement of predicate adjectives should be weaker than that of attributive adjectives but stronger than that of personal pronouns, according to the hierarchy, it might be possible to

7 Interestingly, referential gender seems to necessarily override grammatical gender in the case of conjoined subjects of the following type (cf. the discussion in Thorvaldsdóttir 2017: 15, Thorvaldsdóttir 2019: 6):

- (iii) *Ófríska skáldið og þýska konan eru ánægðar/?*ánægð.*
 pregnant poet.the.N.SG and German woman.the.F.SG are happy.F.PL/?*N.PL
 “The pregnant poet and the German woman are good.”

The adjective ‘pregnant’ modifying the neuter noun *skáld* ‘poet’ shows that the poet must be a woman. The noun phrase *þýska konan* ‘the German woman’ obviously refers to a woman and referential agreement (F.PL) on the predicate adjective ‘happy’ seems natural and grammatical agreement (N.PL) very odd although conjoined noun phrases of different genders would normally trigger grammatical N.PL agreement of predicates.

8 Corbett’s hierarchy also includes relative pronouns (between predicates and personal pronouns), but these are omitted here as Modern Icelandic uses non-inflecting relative conjunctions almost exclusively rather than relative pronouns. Note also that Thorvaldsdóttir (2017, 2019) has shown that gender resolution in the case of conjoined noun phrases is not predicted by Corbett’s hierarchy but rather by an individuation hierarchy (human > animal > countable object > uncountable abstract). The effects of conjunction on agreement will not be further discussed in this paper.

find instances of predicative adjectives where referential agreement overrides grammatical agreement, although it should be more difficult than in the case of personal pronouns. But at a first glance it seems that grammatical agreement is the rule and referential agreement typically impossible, as Þórhallsdóttir has pointed out (2015a: 271, *passim*). The following is a case in point (modelled on examples in her paper):

- (15) *Löggurnar voru ?*blautir/blautar/?*blaut eftir rigninguna*
 cops.the.F.PL were wet.?^{*}M/F/?^{*}N.PL after rain.the
 “The cops were wet after the rain.”

The noun *lögga* ‘cop’ is feminine, and even if you knew that the cops in this particular incident were all male, it seems very difficult to use the M.PL form *blautir* ‘wet’ in this context.⁹ Similarly, even if you knew that this was a mixed group of male and female cops, the N.PL form *blaut* ‘wet’ seems inappropriate. The grammatically agreeing F.PL form *blautar* appears to be the only possibility.

It is, however, possible to come up with, and find, examples of predicates showing referential rather than grammatical agreement. Observe the following (based on examples in Þórhallsdóttir 2015a: 273)¹⁰:

- (16) a. *Krakkarnir mínir eru ánægð í skólanum.*
 kid.the.M.PL my.M.PL are happy.N.PL in school.the
 “My kids are happy in school.”
 b. *Foreldrar mínir eru skilin.*
 parent.M.PL my.M.PL are divorced.N.PL
 “My parents are divorced.”

These examples are particularly interesting because the attributive possessive *mínir* ‘my’ shows (obligatory) grammatical agreement in both instances (M.PL possessives agreeing with the preceding M.PL nouns) whereas the predicatives *ánægð* ‘happy’ and *skilin* ‘divorced’ are N.PL forms showing referential agreement.

Now although the noun *krakkar* ‘kids’ need not refer to a mixed gender group, the noun *foreldrar* ‘parents’ certainly does most of the time in written sources. This might be a part of the reason for the fact that a quick search in the corpus *Risamálheild* mentioned above produces about three times more hits of the grammatically agreeing combination *krakkarnir* (M.PL) ... *ánægðir* (M.PL) than the referentially agreeing combination *krakkarnir* (M.PL) ... *ánægð* (N.PL), whereas the grammatically agreeing combination *foreldrar* (M.PL) ... *skildir* (M.PL) is only found five times and the referentially agreeing *foreldrar* (M.PL) ... *skilin* (N.PL) over 60 times.¹¹

9 It is perhaps a bit better if one sticks in *allir* ‘all’ (M.PL): *??Löggurnar voru allir blautir* ‘The cops were all wet’, as pointed out to me by Halldór Ármann Sigurðsson.

10 Sentences like the following (based on an example suggested by Halldór Ármann Sigurðsson), calling for referential agreement of the predicate adjective, are probably more difficult for many speakers out of the blue:

- (iv) *Læknirinn var nýtskrifuð.*
 doctor.the.M.SG was newly.graduated.F.SG
 “The doctor was newly graduated.”

11 It is possible that writers tend to avoid the masculine plural form *skildir* ‘divorced’ in this context because it is homophonous with masculine plural *skyldir* ‘relate’ although the spelling is different.

But this is not a new phenomenon. In her study Þórhallsdóttir searched for agreement with the masculine plural nouns *krakkar* ‘kids’, *foreldrar* ‘parents’ and *húsbændur* ‘masters’ in a corpus of 19th century letters. She concludes (2015a: 280) that referential (her semantic) agreement was favored over grammatical agreement for all these words in the corpus.

Given the fact that the choice between grammatical and referential agreement is sometimes optional and sometimes not, it is not surprising that language planners have wanted to formulate prescriptive rules about it. Þórhallsdóttir (2015a: 274) puts it this way:

The national language standard of Modern Icelandic has prescribed grammatical gender agreement, as a general rule of thumb . . . Formal agreement certainly holds in the case of attributive modifiers and it is recommended for predicate targets, but judgments are sometimes less strict about the choice of personal pronouns.

There is some evidence that younger speakers of Icelandic do not follow this prescription (see Helgadóttir 2011) and “linguists have observed an increased tendency to use semantic [= referential] agreement” (Þórhallsdóttir 2015a: 284). But one might ask why it should be necessary to prescribe rules about this. Wouldn’t speakers be better off trusting their intuition about when grammatical agreement is appropriate and when referential agreement is?

A different and more recent “prescription” has been aimed at the use of default grammatical masculine exemplified above. This will be discussed in the next section when the different acceptability of the examples in (1)–(3) will be explained.

4 Airports and islands revisited

4.1 Referential neuter plural vs. default grammatical masculine plural

Example (1) is repeated here for convenience:

- (17) *??Þrjú greindust með COVID-19 á Keflavíkurlflugvelli*
 three.N.PL.NOM were.diagnosed with COVID-19 at Keflavík Airport
í gær.
 yesterday
 “Three were diagnosed with COVID-19 at Keflavík Airport yesterday.”

As explained above, the judgment is based on the assumption that (17) was heard on the news (on the radio or TV). The N.PL *þrjú* is not a default (or unmarked or generic) form of the numeral *þrír* ‘three’ and since it is used substantively in this example (there is no overt noun that it modifies), it calls for referential interpretation. But news about the travellers diagnosed with COVID-19 at the airport typically do not tell us anything more about them. They are just *counted* and we are typically not told whether they are all male, all female or a mixed group. We don’t know who they are and hence referential agreement is not possible and the default or unmarked grammatically masculine form *þrír* ‘three’ would be appropriate in this context. That is why the N.PL form *þrjú* sounds odd in (17).

By contrast, a newspaper headline refers to something that will be discussed in more detail in the article below it. Consider the headline (2), repeated in (18):

- (18) **Prjú** *syntu út í Viðey í gær.*
 three.N.PL.NOM swam out to Viðey yesterday
 “Three swam out to Viðey island yesterday.”

As stated above, this sounds perfectly natural. The reason is that reading a headline like this, the reader automatically expects to be told that this was a particular mixed group of swimmers and hence the N.PL in the sentence sounds natural. It is an example of referential agreement where the reader will be told something about the persons that are being referred to.

Similar explanations hold for the interpretation of the sentences in (3), repeated in (19):

- (19) a. **Þrír** *greindust með COVID-19 á Keflavíkurflugvelli*
 three.M.PL.NOM were.diagnosed with COVID-19 at Keflavík Airport
í gær.
 yesterday
 “Three were diagnosed with COVID-19 at Keflavík Airport yesterday.”
 b. **Þrír** *syntu út í Viðey í gær.*
 three.M.PL.NOM swam out to Viðey yesterday
 “Three swam out to Viðey island yesterday.”

Because the M.PL *þrír* ‘three’ is the default form, it is perfectly natural in the context of the airport news in (19a). The listener will just assume that this is about the *number* of travellers diagnosed as stated and not expect any further information about them. The example in (19b) is ambiguous, on the other hand. The most natural interpretation is that three male swimmers swam out to Viðey island yesterday and the choice of the masculine plural form *þrír* is an example of referential agreement. This is because the reader expects to be given more information about the swimmers after the headline. Hence it is automatically assumed that the writer would have used the F.PL form *þrjár* if this was in fact a group of three female swimmers or the N.PL form *þrjú* if it was a mixed group. But it is also possible to interpret (19b) as containing the default masculine plural form *þrír*, which would imply that some sort of counting of swimmers crossing the sound over to Viðey was at issue (e.g., three today, five yesterday, etc.).

Consider also the gender use in the following headline¹²:

- (20) **Þrír/Þrjár/Þrjú** *sóttu um stöðu skólustjóra í Vík.*
 three.M.PL/F.PL/N.PL applied for position principal.SG.GEN in Vík.
 “Three applied for the position of principal in Vík.”

As the glosses indicate, there is a choice between masculine, feminine and neuter plural of the numeral ‘three’ in an headline of this sort, but the choice depends on the context. If nothing more is said about the applicants, e.g., because they are not known at the time, M.PL is appropriate because it is the default grammatical gender

12 This is based on an example suggested to me by Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir.

in contexts of this sort. This corresponds to the airport example in (17). But if the headline is followed by further information on the applicants, such as giving their names, the gender of the numeral would be referential—a known group of people is being referred to. Then M.PL would be used about a group of male applicants, F.PL if they were all female and N.PL if it was a mixed group.

The distinctions just described are rather subtle and rarely discussed in any detail in the linguistic literature. I don't think they are mentioned anywhere in Icelandic grammars and certainly not in textbooks used in Icelandic schools. They are just intuitions that speakers develop without any direct instruction, as is of course true of most of the intuitions that speakers have about their own language. Reactions to prescribed language use that ignores these intuitions suggest that they are shared by a large number of speakers. (21) is a case in point if intended as an announcement, e.g., for an upcoming event of some sort:

- (21) ??**Öll** *velkomin.*
 all.N.PL welcome.N.PL
 Intended reading: "Everybody is welcome."

Since the N.PL form *öll* 'all' is not the default form of the grammatical gender in examples of this sort, many speakers react to this kind of announcement by asking *Öll hver?* 'All who?' (see, e.g., Thorbergsdóttir 2002: 92). This is because the N.PL calls for referential agreement or referential interpretation. When none is available, the listener or reader is confused, exactly as in the COVID-case in (17) above. The default grammatical masculine plural *allir* does not call for such interpretation. Hence (22) has always been the form of announcements of this sort until recently:

- (22) **Allir** *velkomnir.*
 all.M.PL welcome.M.PL
 "Everybody is welcome."

Here the default grammatical M.PL just means 'everybody', regardless of gender, because nobody in particular is being referred to, whereas the feminine plural *allar* (i.e., **Allar** *velkomnar*) would necessarily get a referential interpretation, just like the neuter plural in (21), and imply that a particular group of females was welcome.

Now compare (21) and (22) to (23):

- (23) *Þið eruð allir/allar/öll velkomnir/velkomnar/velkomin.*
 you.2.PL are.2.PL welcome.M./F./N.PL
 "You are all welcome."

Here the second person plural pronoun *þið* makes it clear that a particular group of people is being addressed and referred to. So if it is an all male group the M.PL form *allir* is appropriate, if it is an all female group the F.PL *allar* is, and the N.PL *öll* is what you use if it is a mixed group. The gender of the adjective meaning 'welcome' is adjusted appropriately in all cases as indicated.¹³

¹³ Similarly, the N.PL is appropriate if one is addressing a mixed group even when the 2.PL pronoun is not used: *Verið öll innilega velkomin!* lit. "Be all (N.PL) sincerely welcome (N.PL)!".

Now it has often been pointed out that language use can be male-oriented or sexist and that one should try to avoid that kind of usage.¹⁴ One case in point is the use of referential M.PL as in *Pið eruð allir velkominir* when addressing a mixed group of people, as just mentioned. That is obviously highly inappropriate and insulting for non-male members of the group. But in attempts to eradicate such male-chauvinistic usage, people sometimes do not pay attention to the difference between grammatical and referential gender. As a result, it has been claimed, in the name of gender equality, that one should not say *Allir velkominir* as in (22) but use *Öll velkomin* as in (21) instead. Many linguists have argued that this is a mistake and based on a misunderstanding, since default grammatical gender (as in (22)) has nothing to do with natural gender or sex. Proponents of this “reform” often maintain, on the other hand, that using masculine plural in contexts like (22) is *bara málvenja* ‘just a linguistic custom’ and it can easily be changed or abolished, just like any other custom. But it is not as simple as that. As argued in this paper, default grammatical masculine is an integral part of the Icelandic system of linguistic rules, where a linguistic rule is to be understood as a part of the knowledge that speakers acquire when they acquire a language and not something that is prescribed by language mavens. Linguistic rules in this sense make it possible to acquire language and they tend to be a part of a larger system. Hence it is difficult to predict what happens if we try to tamper with them. The most likely outcome is confusion.

But what is the evidence that grammatical masculine is in fact the default grammatical gender in Icelandic in the sense described above? More about that in the next subsection.

4.2 More evidence for default grammatical masculine in Icelandic

In section 3.1, several examples were given as evidence for the neutrality or unmarkedness of grammatical masculine in the contexts given. Here are some additional ones (the examples in (24) are proverbs):

- (24) a. *Margur heldur mig sig.*
 many.M.SG thinks me self
 “Many people think that I am like them.”
 b. *Ýmsir eiga högg í annars garði.*
 various.M.PL own blow in other.M.SG.GEN home
 “Many people have been wronged by other people.”
- (25) *ríkir fátækir fatlaðir blindir*
 rich.M.PL poor.M.PL handicapped.M.PL blind.M.PL
 “the rich, the poor, the handicapped, the blind”
- (26) *einn tveir þrír fjórir*
 one.M.SG two.M.PL three.M.PL four.M.PL

The last example means that when you are not counting anything in particular, e.g., just “counting to ten”, you use the masculine form of the numerals 1–4 (the only ones that inflect in Icelandic).

14 For an overview of research on language and gender in Icelandic see Friðriksson (2017).

We can conclude, then, that there is ample evidence for the claim that masculine is the default grammatical gender in Icelandic.¹⁵

5 Comparative notes and concluding remarks

Before we conclude, a few comparative notes on the gender systems of Faroese and Swedish are useful to shed light on gender systems in general and their different developments.

5.1 Default grammatical gender in Faroese

Like Icelandic, Faroese distinguishes three grammatical genders. The Faroese gender system is very similar to the Icelandic one (see, e.g., Thráinsson et al. 2012: 61, *passim*; Petersen 2009; Thórhallsdóttir 2015b). But as pointed out by the researchers referred to, it seems that neuter is (or is becoming) the default grammatical gender in Faroese in contexts where masculine is in Icelandic. Observe the following, for instance:

- (27) a. *Øll vælkomin.*
all.N.PL welcome.N.PL
“Everybody is welcome.”
- b. *tey ríku tey brekaðu*
the.N.PL rich the.N.PL handicapped
“the rich, the handicapped”
- c. *eitt tvey trí¹⁶*
one.N.SG two.N.PL three.N.PL
“one, two, three”

As indicated in the interlinear glosses, Faroese uses grammatical neuter in all these instances, whereas Icelandic would use the default grammatical masculine, as illus-

15 For reasons of space I have concentrated on differences between grammatical and referential gender in the context of humans, where masculine is the default grammatical gender. I have not discussed predicative and passive constructions where agreement with the subject fails because of case marking. Finite verbs, predicative adjectives and passive participles only agree with nominative subjects. In the context of oblique subjects the finite verb normally shows up in the 3.SG and the adjective/participle in the N.SG, regardless of the person and number of the subject (see Thráinsson 2007: 238ff.):

- (v) a. *Stelpunum var kalt.*
girls.the.SG.DAT was.3.SG cold.N.SG
“The girls were feeling cold.”
- b. *Okkur var bjargað.*
we.PL.DAT was.3.SG rescued.N.SG
“We were rescued.”

In contexts of this sort, then, one could argue that 3.SG is the default form of the non-agreeing finite verb and N.SG the default form of the non-agreeing adjective and passive.

16 The numbers 1–3 are the only ones that inflect in Faroese and the neuter forms illustrated are the ones that would be used when “counting to ten”, see, for instance, Thráinsson et al. (2012: 114).

trated in the preceding sections. Thráinsson et al. (2012) and Petersen (2009: 20 fn. 2, 125, passim) take this to indicate that neuter is the default grammatical gender in contexts of this sort. Remains of the default grammatical masculine can still be found in Faroese, however, in contexts like the following (see, e.g., Thráinsson et al. 2012: 132 fn. 34):

- (28) a. *Er nakar inni?*
 is anybody.M.SG in
 “Is anybody in?”
 b. *Hvønn tosaði tú við?*
 who.M.SG talked you to
 “Who did you talk to?”

It is possible, of course, that Icelandic will change in the same direction as Faroese has, but only time will tell.

5.2 Grammatical gender and gender neutrality in Swedish

Swedish, like other Mainland Scandinavian languages, typically distinguishes two genders of nouns, common (or non-neuter) gender and neuter. This affects the agreement of the indefinite article, for instance:

- (29) a. non-neuter: *en mann en kvinna en student en bok ...*
 a man a woman a student a book
 b. neuter: *ett barn ett hus ett förslag ...*
 a child a house a proposal

The masculine personal pronoun *han* ‘he’ is used to refer to male persons or animals, *hon* ‘she’ is used to refer to female ones as illustrated below (C is used here as an abbreviation for common gender):

- (30) a. *Kungen kommer inte. Han er sjuk.*
 king.the.C comes not he is sick
 “The king won’t come. He is sick.”
 b. *Kon äter inte. Hon er sjuk.*
 cow.the.C eats not she is sick
 “The cow won’t eat. She is sick.”

Now consider the following examples:

- (31) a. *Min bästa student kommer. Hon ...*
 my best student.C comes she
 “My best student is coming. She ...”
 b. *Studenten ska skriva om ett ämne som han eller hon väljer.*
 student.the.C shall write on a subject that he or she chooses
 “The student is to write on a subject of his or her own choice.”

In (31a) a particular female student is being talked about and appropriately referred to by the feminine pronoun *hon*. The example in (31b), on the other hand, is a general statement, e.g., as would be found in academic regulations. In that case the common

gender noun *studenten* cannot be appropriately referred to by using either *han* or *han* since these pronominal forms are gender-specific and thus refer to male (*han*) or female (*hon*) persons. Until rather recently, the solution has been to use *han eller hon*, ‘he or she’, as is sometimes done in comparable situations English.¹⁷ In Icelandic, on the other hand, this is not necessary since the noun *stúdent* is grammatically masculine so the grammatically masculine pronoun *hann* is used:

- (32) *Stúdentinn á að skrifa um efni sem hann velur sjálfur.*
 student.the.M.SG is to write on topic that he.M.SG selects self.M.SG
 ‘The student is to write on a subject of his or her own choice.’

Note that the English translation for (29) is exactly the same as for (31b) because the grammatically masculine *hann* in (29) does not refer to male students but is just grammatically agreeing with the grammatically masculine word *stúdent*, which does not specify natural gender.

Since it is rather clumsy having to use *han eller hon* ‘he or she’ in Swedish contexts like (31b), the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* has been introduced into the language (adopted by the Swedish academy 2014) on the model of Finnish gender-neutral *hän* (Finnish has no grammatical genders). This pronoun is also used to refer to persons who do not want to consider themselves male or female. While there is no need for a comparable solution for Icelandic contexts like (32), because of the different gender system, people who do not want to be referred to as either *hann* ‘he’ or *hún* ‘she’ (nor *það* ‘it’) have suggested that the new gender-neutral personal pronoun *hán* should be used to refer to them instead (see the overview by Sverrisdóttir 2016). That is an interesting proposal and *hán* may catch on in this role, although it is a more limited role than that of the Swedish *hen* as just described.

6 Concluding remarks

In this paper I have given a brief overview of important aspects of the Icelandic gender system. The key to understanding how it works is to appreciate the distinction is between grammatical and referential gender and how it affects agreement, i.e., grammatical vs. referential agreement. Failure to do so has led to some unnecessary and even mistaken reformation attempts of two kinds:

1. Grammatical agreement is sometimes obligatory and referential agreement impossible, e.g., in the case of attributive adjectives (see the discussion around (5) above). But in some instances there is a choice between grammatical and referential agreement in the case of personal pronouns and predicative adjectives (see section 3.2 above). The choices are typically not completely equivalent,

¹⁷ Another way of resolving this problem in English, especially in informal or spoken language, is to use the gender-and-number-neutral *they*, e.g., in contexts like the following (suggested by a reviewer):

(vi) *If you go to the doctor and **they** examine you ...*

See also the discussion of possible translations of (12a) above.

however, since one of the alternatives is based on reference to a particular individual or individuals and the other is purely grammatical. Hence it is highly questionable to recommend the grammatical alternative by a “rule of thumb” in such contexts.

2. Referential masculine is used to refer to male individuals, referential feminine to females and referential neuter is used to refer to mixed groups.¹⁸ So if a teacher is addressing a mixed group of students it is inappropriate to say *Éruð þið allir búnir með verkefnið* “Have you all (M.PL) finished the assignment?”. Instead the N.PL form *öll* should be used, and normally is, I would think (see the discussion in 3.2 above). In general statements, on the other hand, masculine is the default grammatical gender in Icelandic and has no reference to males. This is found in proverbs, for instance, and also in general statements like *Allir græða á verðbólgunni* “All (M.PL) benefit from inflation” and *Allir velkomnir* “Everybody (M.PL) is welcome!” Conversely, using the N.PL form *öll* would call for a referential interpretation, at least in the language of many (and probably most) speakers, since neuter plural is not the default grammatical gender in such contexts (see the discussions around (10)–(11) and (21)–(22)). Despite this, some language reformers have recommended the use of *Öll velkomin* and maintained that the use of M.PL is sexist. It would be if the masculine plural was referential in contexts of this sort but it is not.

This difference between referential and grammatical gender and referential and grammatical agreement explains the story about airports and islands told at the beginning of this article. This difference is subtle and interesting and one should not try to destroy it.

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¹⁸ Although I have typically been using the term mixed groups in this paper in the sense “groups containing male and female members”, it could in most instances also refer to groups that are exclusively made up of genderqueer persons. That does not affect the arguments of the paper.

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Ha! Linguistic Studies in Honor of Mark R. Hale

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