

# The Use of English in Iceland: Convenience or a Cultural Threat? A Lingua Franca or Lingua Detrimental?

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**Abstract** – The Icelandic language has been the primary criterion for national identity and has played an important role in the image of Iceland within the Nordic countries. The article traces the role of how linguistic nationalism gained an indisputable position for the Icelandic language as the foundation of national identity in the country. During the period of independence struggle, Danish, the language of the colonizers, was considered to be enemy number one of the Icelandic language, but in recent times English has taken over that role. Equipped with the historical dimension of the role of Icelandic and Danish within the process of national identity-making in Iceland, the article aims to analyze the ongoing discourse on the alleged threat of English dominance in Icelandic society. Specific focus will be on the use of English as lingua franca in Icelandic businesses operating at an international level. In recent years the number of Icelandic corporations expanding their operation across the globe has multiplied. Recently some of these companies changed their official language of internal communication from Icelandic to English. This change stirred up great controversy, reflected in the media discourse and on blog sites on the Internet.

**Keywords** – Culture, identity, power, language, language policy, linguistic capital, symbolic power

## Introduction

In September 2007 a heated debate broke out in the Icelandic media over the role of Icelandic in Icelandic society on the one hand and the alleged intrusion of English on the other. The cause of the conflict were the words of Sigurjón Árnason, CEO of Landsbanki, who said in passing in an interview that it was perhaps

unavoidable for Icelandic financial companies operating abroad, to switch over to using English at their headquarters

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in Iceland. That would enable the bank to hire some foreigners to work in all kinds of detailed analytical jobs, where specific skills are required.<sup>1</sup>

The editorial of the *Morgunblaðið* daily responded immediately to Árnason's statement and said:

Is the Icelandic language an unusable language? Is it time to cease struggling to maintain a specific language in a society counting only several hundred thousand people? Is Icelandic a burden, hampering the success of Icelandic businesses? Has the Icelandic language become a yoke to the Icelandic nation? Or is the opposite true: As soon as Icelandic disappears, then all the specific characteristics of the Icelandic nation are lost and the nation will disappear into the ocean of nations [...]

And the editorial went on:

The Icelandic language is the foundation of Icelandic culture. That culture is the soil and foundation of the current welfare, which now rules in Iceland. Rather than assaulting the tongue, an offence in its defence should be carried out.<sup>2</sup>

A year later at the collapse of the Icelandic financial system, an article under the headline "A Blessing in Disguise" could be found in the same newspaper, which said, "With the collapse of the Icelandic financial system, the biggest threat to the Icelandic language is gone, at least for now."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Óhjákvæmilegt fyrir íslensk fjármálafyrirtæki í útrás að taka upp ensku sem vinnmál í höfuðstöðvum sínum á Íslandi. Þannig yrði þeim kleift að ráða útlendinga til starfa við ýmsa bakvinnslu sem krefst menntunar." "Enskan vinnmál á Íslandi? [English a Working Language in Iceland?] 2007: 13.

All translations from Icelandic are my own.

<sup>2</sup> "Leiðari: Íslenska eða enska?" [Editorial: Icelandic or English?] 2007: 44. Since its foundation in 1913, *Morgunblaðið* daily has been a staunch supporter of linguistic purism and nationalism. The paper has a regular column on the Icelandic language and language use.

<sup>3</sup> "Íslensk tunga hagnast best. Með falli íslenska fjármálakerfisins er helsta ógn íslenskrar tungu úr sögunni, að minnsta kosti í bili." Helgason 2008: 1.

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Icelandic has never been spoken by more people than today, over three hundred thousand speakers. It is the mother tongue of more than 90% of the inhabitants of Iceland. Written Icelandic has never been more vibrant, with a flourishing publication of books, magazines, journals and papers, and thousands of bloggers expressing themselves on blog sites on the Internet. Yet many people worry about the prospects for Icelandic in a world where English is becoming increasingly dominant. A global lingua franca, like English, certainly makes it possible for people from different corners of the globe to work together on many different levels, providing tremendous advantages. But it also raises questions about whether this advantage might be a curse in disguise, which in the long run will squeeze the life out of a relatively small language like Icelandic. The quotations above echo these sentiments and are a part of an ongoing debate on the Icelandic language and its role and status in the process of national identity-making in Iceland.

Before addressing this topic, it is necessary to shed light on the “current state of affairs” in Icelandic society. Since the onset of this research in early 2008, Iceland has undergone some of its most sudden and intense economic turmoil in modern history. For the best part of the past decade, the Icelandic economy and the society as a whole were marked by unprecedented growth and expansion, followed by a higher standard of living. Icelandic businesses, particularly within the financial sector, which so far had operated only on the home market, entered the international business arena after privatization of the largest state-owned banks in 2003. In the forefront were businessmen nicknamed “útrásarvíkingar” (the word literally means a Viking who conquers new lands), who were regarded as national heroes in Iceland, living testaments to the brave and daring “Viking spirit.” Their achievements put Iceland once and for all “on the map” as a player amongst players of the rich and powerful, and simultaneously carried Iceland’s reputation to the farthest corners of the world.

This international “success” came, however, to an abrupt end in October 2008 when three of Iceland’s largest banks collapsed with immeasurable ramifications. All these banks had major international operations. The country has since witnessed unprecedented economic crisis, mass unemployment, social unrest, and political upheaval. Internationally the country’s name and reputation have suffered and

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the name “Iceland” has become synonymous with financial blunder of disproportionate measures. The country is currently under the supervision of the International Monetary Fund.<sup>4</sup>

With a reputation in ruins—due, in the eyes of many, to irresponsible and reckless behaviour particularly by the leaders of these banks and other businesses—many Icelanders feel that their country’s image at the international level is in a shambles and will take years to repair.

Long before the economic collapse, the use of English at these companies’ headquarters had stirred up considerable controversy in Iceland, which is part of a much older debate about the role and status of the Icelandic language within Icelandic culture and society, a discourse that pertains to the production and reproduction of national culture and identity as well as the image and representation of the country at home and abroad. Within that discourse, the role of the Icelandic language, and more recently the use of English, loom large.

This paper will put this discourse into a historical and contemporary perspective, starting with linguistic nationalism in Iceland, reflecting on the status and fate of Danish—the language of the colonizer—and continuing to the present with the ever-increasing presence of English. The historical dimension is necessary in order to answer the following questions that will be addressed in subsequent sections: does the use of English in Icelandic businesses pose a threat to the Icelandic language and/or the image of the Icelandic culture? Is there a conflict of interest between the Icelandic business sector and the “gatekeepers” of culture and language? If so, is anyone’s claim to power at stake?

In line with the anthropological approach emphasizing the relation between culture, history, language, and identity, whether of individuals, groups, or nations and their relations to power, this paper rests upon critical theory looking at language as a locus of social order, power, and individual consciousness.<sup>5</sup> It is worth emphasizing that within the critical theory discourse, the discipline’s agenda has

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<sup>4</sup> Daniélsson & Zoega 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu 1991; Gal 1989; Ortner, Eley, & Dirks 1994.

shifted from the search for structures to theories of practice that allow for an exploration of the interplay between both structure and agency.<sup>6</sup> In the spirit of Bourdieu's *The Outline of Theory of Practice* (1977), this anthropological approach to practice therefore regards the notion of history as central. Here, notions of power and hegemony are also pivotal in order to understand how culture is continually produced and reproduced over time. This understanding of culture, power, and history has, in turn, shed light on anthropological studies of language. Central to the critical theory approach towards language is the concept of language as a symbolic capital and the source of identity formation, an understanding which is of great importance to the present discussion.<sup>7</sup> In this approach, language is viewed as a combination of discourse, symbolic capital, and a site of identity formation and negotiations. By applying the approach of critical theory to analyze the alleged threat of the dominance of English on the image of Iceland, language, culture, and national identity, Michel Foucault's notion on discourse and power will also be applied.<sup>8</sup>

The methodology of the research is a combination of discourse analysis of spoken material, such as conferences and on radio programmes, and textual analysis of written material as it appeared in the printed media and scholarly writings. Formal and informal interviews were conducted with representatives within the companies using English as a lingua franca and with linguists. Two-thirds of the ten interviews were recorded and transcribed.

### Country, Nation, Language— Historical Roots of the Holy Trinity

In the spirit of linguistic nationalism, language, nation, and country have in Iceland been regarded as inseparable entities. Frequently cited by the country's leaders, this notion is echoed in the poem by Snorri Hjartarson, "Land, þjóð, tunga, þrenning sönn og ein."<sup>9</sup> For the national leaders and the general public alike, the Icelandic language is

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<sup>6</sup> Ortner et al. 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu 1991; Gal 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Foucault 1980.

<sup>9</sup> Hjartarson [1952] 1981: 72.

the cultural symbol that makes them a nation, distinguishable from other nations. This notion has its roots in the fight for independence when the Icelandic language became a political tool used in order to consolidate and construct the Icelandic nation.<sup>10</sup>

Traceable back to the German Romantic philosophers Herder and Fichte, linguistic nationalism had a great impact upon language policy in Iceland, as was the case in many parts of Europe.<sup>11</sup> In Iceland, however, its impact was greater than in most places. At the core of linguistic nationalism lies the idea that nations possess an immutable character and that national cultures are more or less self-contained entities with definite and clear-cut boundaries.

In line with Herder's ideas, the early Icelandic nationalists firmly believed that language carried within it the "spirit of the nation," which for them was the language of the settlers. According to the nationalistic myth, all misfortune the "nation" had experienced was more or less due to evil foreign influences or stemmed from people within who were ready to sacrifice the well-being of the nation for the achievement of their own good, culminating in submission to a foreign political power.<sup>12</sup> The same attitude was applied to foreign linguistic influence, which was considered to pollute the alleged purity of the language and consequently the "true spirit" of the nation. Equipped with the arms of linguistic nationalism, the emerging intelligentsia and political leaders in the 19th century began the struggle for independence by heralding a campaign against all foreign words, particularly Danish.<sup>13</sup>

Danish, the language of the former colonial power, had for centuries been the language of the administration and most of the public administrators had been Danes. In the 19th century this gradually changed and Icelanders took over. Moreover, Danish was abolished as the official language of administration, followed by a campaign aimed at uprooting all usage of Danish within the

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<sup>10</sup> Þórarinsdóttir 1999; Hálfðanarson 2003; Ottósson 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Berlin 1992; Barbour & Carmichael 2002; Blommaert 1996, 2006; Caviedes 2003; Hálfðanarson 1993, 2003; Spolsky 2004; Þórarinsdóttir 1999, 2004; Wright 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Aðils 1922.

<sup>13</sup> Ottósson 1990; Þórarinsdóttir 1999.

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administration as well as all traces of Danish from the vocabulary. This act was both a symbolic and an actual challenge against the colonial power.<sup>14</sup> The linguistic agenda of purism simultaneously produced a new language of authority, as the leaders within the independence movement took it on themselves to coin new Icelandic terms for the fast-growing political concepts emerging.<sup>15</sup>

A formal institution, on a par with language academies in Europe, called the Icelandic Language Institute (Íslensk Málstöð) was not formed until the early 1960s. Nevertheless, the impact of purism had reigned supreme in the country since the dawn of nationalism and was further established through the emerging institutions of the newly founded state in the early 20th century. More recently, the Icelandic Language Institute and another body called the Icelandic Language Committee (Íslensk Málnefnd) have both been very active in protecting and safeguarding the boundaries of the Icelandic language.<sup>16</sup>

In the discourse on national identity-making, demarcation of boundaries between “us” the Icelanders and “them” the non-Icelanders or non-Icelandic was—and is, albeit to a lesser degree—of utmost importance. The image of a pure language, uncontaminated by foreign influence, was high on the political agenda throughout the 20th century, as reflected in the emphasis in the school curriculum as well as within the dominant discourse.<sup>17</sup> The dissemination of this perspective was very successful. So much so, that throughout the 20th century it became a matter of loyalty to the national cause to protect the language from possible contamination, such as grammatical errors, and to secure the language borders from unwanted foreign words—referred to as “stains” (*slettur* in Icelandic) on the mother tongue—seeping into the language from abroad. If words were not considered to have “earned citizenship in the Icelandic language,” they were considered to be exceptionally dangerous by the staunchest

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<sup>14</sup> Ottósson 1990.

<sup>15</sup> Ottósson 1990.

<sup>16</sup> Icelandic Language Committee (n.d.)

<sup>17</sup> Ottósson 1990.

followers of linguistic purism.<sup>18</sup> In a way, a “pure” Icelandic word became synonymous with a “pure” Icelander. From the onset of public education in the early 20th century, the doctrine of purism was the guiding principle of the school curriculum and other public institutions, and then individuals followed suit. The linguistic border control was further enhanced by the official implementation of neologisms, which started in the 19th century as part of the political agenda of the nationalistic movement.<sup>19</sup> A large quantity of the modern vocabulary in Icelandic is thus coined. The mastering of Icelandic, which is free of foreign “stains” and/or grammatical errors, provides the speaker with a form of what Bourdieu has called linguistic capital—a form of symbolic capital that can be converted into economic and social capital.

For a long time the purists’ argument ruled without criticism.<sup>20</sup> In recent decades, the stronghold of language purity has lessened, but the idea of Icelandic being the primary criterion for nationhood is still strong. A recent study, where interviewees were asked what they thought made them Icelanders, confirms this view as the majority maintained it was the Icelandic language that to them was the most important criterion and the most salient national characteristic of Icelanders.<sup>21</sup> This view speaks of the success of the nationalist agenda and its emphasis on the importance of a separate language. Embedded within this view is the idea, traceable back to Fichte, that only people with their own language have a natural right to

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<sup>18</sup> “Vandað mál er hreint mál [...] Varðveisla hreinleika málsins er þannig landvarnarmál, þar sem heyja verður þrotlausa og miskunnarlausa baráttu. Það dettur engum í hug að veita erlendum manni sem rekið hefur á fjörur okkar, þegar í stað íslensk þegnrettindi. Á sama hátt megum við ekki þegar í stað viðurkenna erlend orð, er slæðzt hafa inn í íslenzku, bera annarlegan svip og eiga erfitt með að laga sig eftir íslensku málkerfi.” “‘Good language is pure language’ [...] The protection of language purity is thus a matter of national defense where a relentless and merciless battle needs to be fought. No one would ever dream of granting immediate citizenship to a foreigner who has happened upon an Icelandic shore. In the same manner, we cannot immediately accept foreign words that have seeped into Icelandic, have a strange appearance, and are difficult to adjust to Icelandic grammar.” Halldórsson 1971: 28.

<sup>19</sup> Barbour & Carmichael 2002; Blommaert 1996, 2006; Caviedes 2003; Spolsky 2004; Þórarinsdóttir 1999, 2004; Wright 2004.

<sup>20</sup> To criticize it was considered tantamount to heresy, as adherence to the doctrine was at the heart of a national belief, sacred to very many Icelanders, in fact akin to a form of secular religion, supported by the state. See Þórarinsdóttir 1999, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Óladóttir 2007.



sovereignty. Hence in the minds of most Icelanders the very existence of the Icelandic nation-state rests upon the notion of a separate language, and to them that language has clear-cut boundaries and is preferably pure and uncontaminated from foreign influences. These ideas are central, not only in the process of national identity-making within Iceland, but also within the intertwined and ongoing process of the construction of the country's image amongst its inhabitants as well as its image presented abroad. The antagonism towards foreign linguistic influences—first Danish, then English—can be better understood in light of these ideas.

Ever since Danish was eradicated from the public sphere in the late 19th century, it has had a peculiar position in Icelandic society. On the one hand, it represented the language of the colonizer and acquired negative connotations of repression, subjugation, and power abuse. Using Danish in Iceland and Danish words within Icelandic, no matter how long they had been used, became stigmatized.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, knowledge of Danish was an asset, and it remained the primary lingua franca and linguistic capital in Iceland well into the middle of the 20th century. Danish opened the doors to both secondary and higher education and was a key to international relations with Denmark and other Nordic countries. So while knowledge of Danish was an obvious asset, paradoxically any traces of it within the borders of the Icelandic language were despised. Until 2006 Danish was the first foreign language learnt in school, when English replaced it after a yearlong controversy both in the parliament and amongst the public. Now pupils start learning English in the fourth grade (age nine), whereas teaching of Danish starts in the seventh grade (age twelve).<sup>23</sup>

The history of English usage in Icelandic society is relatively short in comparison with the long presence of Danish, yet English has replaced Danish as Icelandic's enemy number one in the eyes of all those who act as gatekeepers of the linguistic borders of Icelandic, as will be discussed shortly. Moreover, like Danish was before, English has become the lingua franca for communication with the outside

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<sup>22</sup> Halldórsson 1971; Ottósson 1990.

<sup>23</sup> *Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla—erlend tungumál* 2006.

world for most Icelanders and, last but not least, a definite linguistic capital with guaranteed high international value.

### A Different Linguistic Landscape— The Intrusion of English

In recent decades the use of English as a lingua franca on the international level, whether in politics, businesses, the entertainment industry, or any other kind of international relations, has been ever increasing.<sup>24</sup> This has also been the case in Iceland, but there is more to the impact of English in the country.

One of the most powerful cultural influences upon Icelandic society and culture in recent times derived from the American NATO base in Keflavík. The base was in operation for over fifty years from 1951 to 2006 when it closed. The presence of the American base was one of the most hotly debated political issues in Iceland during the entire Cold War period. The troops were confined to the base, but civilians sometimes lived outside of its borders. Icelanders opposing the base lamented the cultural impact of its presence, not least the impact of English and the American entertainment culture. Tremendous controversy reigned over the issue of NATO, the base, and “The Yankee” radio (broadcasting from the early 1950s) and TV channel (broadcasting from 1960) in Iceland. Many leading figures in cultural politics felt that these broadcasts were an “invasion into the Icelandic cultural jurisdiction,” a threat that was amongst other things seen as having “polluting effects” upon the language.<sup>25</sup> The American TV channel at the base went on cable—at the request of Icelandic authorities—in the early 1970s, but radio broadcasts continued until the base shut down in 2006. Aside from the influence of English through the American base, Anglophone programmes have been, and still are, dominant in the foreign material broadcast on the Icelandic state television channel (established in 1966) as well as on other privately owned television channels entering the market after the abolition of the state monopoly on radio and television broadcasting

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<sup>24</sup> Crystal 2003; House 2003; Lindgren 2004; Pennycook 1998, 2003; Spolsky 2004; Wright 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Vilmundarson 1964.

in 1985.<sup>26</sup> Non-Icelandic programmes have always been subtitled, never dubbed as is customary in some other countries. Films, whether shown in cinemas or available on DVD, are likewise subtitled. American and English-language material dominate that market.

Other events have added to the increased impact of the English language in Iceland.<sup>27</sup> In 1994 Iceland entered the European Economic Area (EEA), which is based on the same four freedoms as the European Union: the free movement of goods, persons, services, and capital among the EEA and EU countries. Along with the intensifying impact of globalization, facilitated by improved communication technology and international communication, Iceland's membership in the EEA of the free flow undoubtedly played an important role in opening the country's borders in many senses. Of particular interest is the impact of free flow of people and financial capital spurring the aforementioned economic expansion.

Until the 1990s Iceland had been one of the most homogenous nation-states in the world, culturally, religiously, and linguistically. Since then and especially after the turn of the millennium, the country has undergone radical changes due to a sudden and unprecedented surge in immigration. In less than a decade the number of immigrants tripled, nearing one-tenth of the overall population in 2009.<sup>28</sup> The most important magnet for this increase was the increasing demand for labour caused by the economic growth. The presence of immigrants has altered the linguistic landscape. Around eighty percent of the immigrants come from Europe, with Poles by far the largest

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<sup>26</sup> See "Útvarpslög" [Broadcasting Act] (n.d.).

<sup>27</sup> The rise of English as a lingua franca has "a big impact on the institutions of the European Union, and even on European integration. The EU recognizes an official language for every country, and translates all main public documents into all 20 of those languages. But civil servants and committees within the EU's institutions use three main working languages: English, French and German. French has long been fighting a losing battle against the English for 'market share' among the three, with German far behind. The arrival of more countries favoring English will threaten to render French almost as marginal as German." "Europe: After Babel, A New Common Tongue; The European Union" 2004: 33.

<sup>28</sup> "Mannföldi eftir ríkisfangi og fæðingarlandi 1. janúar 2009" [Population by Nationality and Country of Birth, 1 Jan. 2009] 2009.

group, constituting almost half of all immigrants in the country.<sup>29</sup> The number of languages now spoken in Iceland is estimated to be over one hundred and fifty. This sudden surge in immigration has simultaneously called for two things relating to language and language use. First, it called for the teaching of Icelandic as a second language, which had been inadequate for years due to lack of funding, causing severe criticism until the government responded in 2007 by increasing financial support for teaching Icelandic as a second language.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, it called for the use of English as a lingua franca in everyday communication between locals and migrants. Using English as a language of communication might seem unusual, as with few exceptions, it is not the first language of those who use it. However, it underscores the fact that English comes closest to being the global lingua franca that speakers of diverse languages can use in their interaction, no matter how rudimentary their knowledge may be.

From the mid-1990s immigrant workers with no knowledge of Icelandic, and often with only a bare minimum of English, had steadily increased in low-skilled jobs such as cleaning and caring within hospitals and homes for the elderly. A decade later, during the economic boom, almost half of the labour force in the construction industry were migrants. Moreover, the number of immigrant workers with no knowledge of Icelandic and only rudimentary English increased exponentially in frontline positions, particularly in restaurants and low-price supermarkets in the Reykjavík metropolitan and other booming areas. The use of English as the lingua franca was, however, not the official policy of the companies involved, but stemmed from shortages of Icelandic-speaking workers. These awkward circumstances evoked some controversy. Yet they did not arouse equally heated feelings and debates—neither amongst scholars nor laymen—as when the Icelandic international companies officially announced that they would use English as a language of communication amongst its workers in writing and/or speaking.<sup>31</sup> These different reactions call for another analysis.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> “Innflytjendur og einstaklingar með erlendan bakgrunn 1996–2008” 2009.

<sup>30</sup> *Íslenska með breim—er líka íslenska* 2008; *Stefna ríkisstjórnarinnar í málefnum innflytjenda* 2007; Skaptadóttir 2007.

<sup>31</sup> See “Neita að láta erlent fólk afgreiða sig” [Refuse to be Served by Foreigners] 2007: 1; “Útlensku starfsfólki sýndur dónaskapur” [Foreign Staff Subjected to Rude

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It was the free flow of capital between EEA and EU member states granted by EEA membership that facilitated the operations and investments of Icelandic companies abroad, where the newly privatized banks played a major role. Simultaneously, international operations of firms within other sectors, such as in biotechnology, Internet games, and specialized industrial productions, to name a few, also increased. Immigrants and Iceland's increased participation in international business are only part of the picture, and increased tourism intensified the impact of the English language as well.

Everyday life in Iceland is highly influenced by and exposed to English because of its dominant role as an international lingua franca and its powerful impact through various kinds of entertainment media and the Internet. In higher education and science, a large proportion of textbooks across most disciplines at the university level are in English. Moreover, all universities offer courses taught in English, some only selected courses, while in others whole programmes are available.<sup>33</sup> The state-run University of Iceland, the largest university in the country, is the only university to implement a specific language policy concerning the use of Icelandic, emphasizing its use in teaching, research, and within the administration.<sup>34</sup> University professors in favour of offering courses in English argue that it attracts international students and prepares the Icelandic students for participating in international relations, thus making them more competitive.<sup>35</sup> Due to its massive spread and impact, understanding of English is very common. Further adding to the increased impact of English was the international expansion of Icelandic companies, where more and more businesses adopted English as the lingua franca for their staff members. With headquarters in Reykjavík, many

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Behaviour] 2007: 8; "Leiðari: Tvítýngdur hversdagsleiki" [Editorial: Bilingual Everyday Life] 2007: 14.

<sup>32</sup> At this point one can only speculate as to why the use of English between immigrants and native speakers of Icelandic has spurred much less conflict. One reason might be fear towards being accused of anti-immigrant sentiment if one openly expresses criticism towards immigrants. Another probable cause might stem from the assumption that immigrants are only staying temporarily in the country. Interestingly, a debate on the responsibility of Icelanders in this equation—the common tendency to speak only English to immigrants—has yet to occur.

<sup>33</sup> Geirsdóttir 2006: 20–21; Jóhannesson & Blöndal 2007.

<sup>34</sup> "Málstefna Háskóla Íslands" 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Ágústsson 2006; Einarsson 2006b; Leifsson 2006.

companies were running branches in several countries in Europe and around the globe. Staff members were mostly a mixture of locals and international teams. Annual reports began to appear in English along with Icelandic and sometimes in English only. Electronic mail and reports were frequently in English—and other relevant languages depending on matter and place. This ever increasing presence of English within Icelandic society has stirred up controversy and heated feelings.

### A Tug of War

The use of English in Icelandic society is clearly a part of a global development. The power and dominance of English has been hotly debated amongst both scholars and laymen in many countries around the globe, Iceland included. The discourse is to some extent part of the colonial legacy and the possibility to acquire an education in one's mother tongue. The bone of contention within this discourse has not least been about whether the dispersion of English and its ever increasing use will seriously weaken or lead to the extinction of small languages like Icelandic.<sup>36</sup> An echo of this sentiment is found in the writings of Icelandic scholars and laymen alike.<sup>37</sup> In line with this, a proposition on Icelandic Language Planning, based upon propositions contributed by the Icelandic Language Committee, was passed by the Icelandic Parliament, the Althing, in April 2009. The proposition suggests that

in times of ever increasing international relations, when the use of foreign languages, particularly English, becomes an ever larger part of Icelandic society, it is vital to secure the status of the Icelandic language.<sup>38</sup>

The proposal also suggests that the Icelandic Language Committee should work towards safeguarding the value of Icelandic in this

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<sup>36</sup> Crystal 2000; Errington 2003; Phillipson 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas; 2000.

<sup>37</sup> Kvaran 2004a, 2004b; Jóhannesson 1998, 2002; Gylfason 2002; “Staða íslenskunnar sem þjóðtungu verði lögfest” [Icelandic a National Language by Law] 2007: 4.

<sup>38</sup> “Á tímum hraðvaxandi alþjóðasamskipta þar sem notkun erlendra tungumála, einkum ensku, verður æ ríkari þáttur í íslensku samfélagi er brýnt að tryggja stöðu íslenskrar tungu.” *Tillaga til þingsályktunar* 2009: 1.

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changed environment, ensuring the continuation of its usefulness in all areas of Icelandic society.<sup>39</sup> A specific chapter on the use of Icelandic in the labour market is to be found in this sixty-four-page document.

Another side of the discourse on English as a lingua franca concerns whether knowledge of English is the key to social mobility and improved living standards.<sup>40</sup> A Gallup poll, conducted in Iceland in 2002 on the view on language policy and the influence of English, revealed that there was a strong relation between knowledge of English and income, i.e., those who use English at work have a significantly higher income than those who do not. “English seems to be a key to a higher living standard rather than Icelandic,” according to the linguist Kristján Árnason.<sup>41</sup>

The discourse in Iceland on the use and impact of English is also, as already mentioned, a part of the discourse on the Icelandic language within the ongoing and intertwined processes of national identity-making on the one hand, and the making of the image of the country on the other. Over the years, the discourse has been characterized by arguments in the spirit of purism and protectionism. On the one hand, there have been warnings against unwanted changes within the language (structure and grammar), and on the other hand, warnings against foreign influence, in the past Danish and nowadays English. Among the staunch supporters of language protection today are many of Iceland’s most prominent figures.<sup>42</sup>

In recent years, the rigorous boundaries of language protection have weakened, yet concerns over “the state of the Icelandic language” occur every so often, causing heated debates. A conference, an article, an interview in a newspaper or other media may be the light

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<sup>39</sup> *Tillaga til þingsábyktunar* 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Crystal 2003; Tollefson 2006.

<sup>41</sup> “Tengsl milli enskukunnáttu og lífskjara” [Link between Knowledge of English and Higher Income] 2006: 7.

<sup>42</sup> Former president Vigdís Finnbogadóttir is one of them, but she has also fought for the importance of teaching foreign languages. The Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Institute in Foreign Languages, hosted at the University of Iceland, was founded in the honour of her language interest.

that ignites the fire. In January 2006 a conference called *The State of the Icelandic Language* stirred such heated arguments.<sup>43</sup> Another whirlwind blew in September 2007, the catalysts being two short articles in the *Morgunblaðið* daily.

In looking first at the conference, the speakers maintained that Icelandic was at a crossroads with hidden and visible dangers lurking all around. A literary critic argued that the language was under such threat—in terms of structural changes in grammar, influenced chiefly by English—that if nothing was done, it would be gone in a hundred years' time. Others argued that it was not too late to react and rescue Icelandic from extermination, granted it was done by joint forces.<sup>44</sup> Dozens of articles appeared in the press in response to the conference, some of which concerned the presence of English, which was threatening in the eyes of many, while others found that fear quite unsubstantiated. A former minister of education and a staunch gatekeeper of the borders of language, culture, and national identity wrote, "People were filled with enthusiasm over the necessity of saving the Icelandic language, the mother tongue itself, the primary characteristic of Icelandic nationality."<sup>45</sup> He then accused historian Guðmundur Hálfðanarson of being an enemy of the Icelandic language, as Hálfðanarson had argued in a radio interview that Icelanders would continue to be Icelanders whether they spoke Icelandic or English, maintaining that national identity was not necessarily based upon a language. Hálfðanarson answered this accusation by refuting the allegation of wishing death upon the Icelandic language and pointed out that many Icelanders speak incorrect Icelandic, some because they are not interested in learning the version of Icelandic the purists favour or because they might be immigrants. Insisting that Icelandic had changed over time and would definitely continue to do so, Hálfðanarson concludes by saying that the minister's argument is a good example of the pitfalls the discourse on the state of the Icelandic language so often falls into, because the

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<sup>43</sup> The conference was sponsored by the Writers' Union of Iceland (Rithöfundasamband Íslands) and the Icelandic Publishers Association (Félag íslenskra bókaútfendna).

<sup>44</sup> Huldudóttir 2006: 20–21.

<sup>45</sup> "Menn fylltust eldmóði um nauðsyn þess að fylkja liði til bjargar íslenskrri tungu, sjálfu móðurmálinu, frumeinkenni íslensks þjóðernis." Gíslason 2006: 25.



language so often becomes a political symbol in the eyes of people, rather than being a living instrument of communication.<sup>46</sup>

Let us now look at the two—very short—newspaper articles appearing in the autumn of 2007 also causing a frenzy over Icelandic in newspapers, radio shows, and blog sites. The first one contained an interview by the foreign correspondent of the *Morgunblaðið* daily in London with Sigurjón Árnason, then the CEO of one of Iceland’s largest banks. In the interview he argued that it might be necessary for the bank to shift from Icelandic to English at the bank’s headquarters in Reykjavík. (His words are cited at the beginning of this paper). The bank was currently operating in several countries abroad and was the last of the Icelandic banks operating internationally to issue its annual report in English. The second article that caused havoc was written by Ágúst Ó. Ágústsson, a young MP of the Social Democratic Alliance, Samfylkingin.<sup>47</sup> Writing on the Icelandic financial system, he suggested in passing that it would be worthwhile to consider whether the public administration should become bilingual, as it would make Iceland more accessible to foreign investors and facilitate international relations.

Ágústsson’s suggestion of a bilingual administration triggered disputes over factual and/or fictional bilingualism (Icelandic and English), reviving an older controversy when a conference report from the Icelandic Chamber of Commerce on the future of Iceland had argued that Icelanders lived with an unusual paradox: Icelandic is the foundation of the nation’s sense of political independence, yet simultaneously it is one of the greatest obstacles in international relations.<sup>48</sup> The report, which argued for the importance of enhancing teaching of English in Icelandic schools, was fiercely criticized for provoking debates on whether Iceland was already bilingual or should aim at becoming so or not.<sup>49</sup> Linguist Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir pointed out that using the term “bilingual” in this context was a misnomer, as

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<sup>46</sup> Hálfðanarson 2006: 36.

<sup>47</sup> Ágústsson 2007.

<sup>48</sup> *Viðskiptaþing: Ísland 2015* [Annual Business Forum: Iceland 2015] 2006.

<sup>49</sup> See Einarsson 2006b; Leifsson 2006.

the proposition called for the need to be fluent in other languages, not necessarily the need to be bilingual.<sup>50</sup>

Both articles appearing in late September 2007 spurred great controversy in the media and on blog sites. On October 1st, Ólafur R. Grímsson, the president of the republic, even felt prompted to respond to this in his speech at the commencement of the parliament. He stated,

There is no sensible reason for pushing Icelandic aside so that the universities and corporations can rank among the best in the world. It is questionable to argue that Icelandic could not continue to be on par with the world languages in fields of science and business.<sup>51</sup>

*Morgunblaðið* responded to these articles in its editorial (see quotations on first page) and issued a special edition on language and society.<sup>52</sup> The following headlines appearing in *Morgunblaðið* tell a story: “Is English Becoming the Second Official Language in This Country?”<sup>53</sup> “English for Business—Icelandic for the Public,”<sup>54</sup> “English a Working Language in Iceland?”<sup>55</sup> Most articles echoed a fear towards English where Icelandic would be pushed aside and asked whether it was feasible to offer courses or programmes in English in schools, particularly at the university level, and whether English was good for

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<sup>50</sup> The debate also resonated of debates on “the state of knowledge of English” in Iceland, where many claimed that Icelanders’ knowledge of English was overestimated. That was also the view of two English scholars specializing in bilingualism interviewed for this study. Interview with Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hulda K. Jónsdóttir, 18 Feb. 2009.

<sup>51</sup> “Ræður 2007” [Speeches 2007] 2007. See also Jóhannsson & Blöndal 2007. The President is here referring to the goal of the University of Iceland set in 2006 to rank amongst the one hundred best universities in the world; see “Stefna og markmið” [Policy and Goals] n.d.

<sup>52</sup> Jóhannsson & Blöndal 2007; “Staða íslenskunnar sem þjóðtungu verði lögfest” [Icelandic a National Language by Law] 2007: 4.

<sup>53</sup> “Er enskan að verða hitt opinbera málið hérlandis?” [Is English Becoming the Second Official Language in This Country?] 2007: 22.

<sup>54</sup> Blöndal 2007.

<sup>55</sup> “Enskan vinnumál á Íslandi? [English a Working Language in Iceland?] 2007: 13.

international relations either in the form of EU membership or in terms of business relations and further growth.<sup>56</sup>

A Gallup poll conducted in 2002 asked respondents if they agreed to English becoming the language of communication at an Icelandic workplace, and over 80% said no. At the same time they argued that they would not mind working in an English-speaking environment in order to improve their knowledge of English. Linguist Árnason wonders whether these conflicting views might indicate that people might oppose the influence of English on a societal level but approve of it when it profits them personally.<sup>57</sup> Hanna Óladóttir's research on Icelanders' views towards Icelandic presented similar conflicting opinions.<sup>58</sup>

### Whose Business Is It Anyway?

Those who have expressed fear of the domination of English are nevertheless well aware of the necessity for Icelanders to have a good understanding of English. However, they want to keep its presence and influence on Icelandic society and language in check.<sup>59</sup> Amongst those are representatives of various language policy bodies who have expressed grave concerns over the influence of English in Iceland. "English is now regarded as the second official language in the country. We in the Committee consider this to be one of the greatest dangers to the Icelandic language," said the vice-chairman of the Icelandic Language Committee and author Þórarinn Eldjárn in an interview. And he warned that if English was to be considered the only suitable language in which to conduct business in Iceland, it would run the risk of leaving Icelandic merely as a kitchen language, thus risking a great devaluation of its use in a broader social context.<sup>60</sup>

A closer look at the businesses in Iceland using English as a working language shows that this practice has clear boundaries. All

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<sup>56</sup> Einarsson 2006a.

<sup>57</sup> Árnason 2005.

<sup>58</sup> Óladóttir 2007.

<sup>59</sup> See for example Jóhannsson and Blöndal 2007.

<sup>60</sup> See interview by Huldudóttir 2007 with the vice-chairman of the Icelandic Language Committee and author Þórarinn Eldjárn.

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the companies involved have a common denominator: their headquarters are based in Iceland, where the workforce is a mixture of Icelanders and others. All are, or have been, operating internationally with branches around the globe, ranging from four to forty countries worldwide.

In interviews with representatives of several of these companies, either in the media or conducted especially for this study, it appeared that in spite of their otherwise different fields of operation, all corporations had annual reports, staff meetings, e-mails and, depending on the situation, spoken communication within their company conducted in English. This practice was applied regardless of whether the firm employed only some hundred or over ten thousand people. All company representatives insisted, however, that on occasions when all attendants at meetings are Icelanders, or the foreigners present are fluent in Icelandic, staff meetings and other spoken communications are conducted in Icelandic. Using English in electronic mail was in some cases the rule, while some companies seemed to play it by ear depending on whether the information needed to be sent to a non-Icelandic speaker later on, in which case information through electronic mail was written in English. With the exception of the now defunct financial firms, all the companies have the greater part of their clientele outside Iceland. Let us look at the companies concerned, first the ones that specialize in the production of various goods and then the financial firms.

A multiplayer online game company established in 1997 fits the description given above. Their product is an online game in English, and English is its working language. Two-thirds of the staff—around two hundred—work at the headquarters, and a little over one-third of the employees are non-Icelandic speaking, coming from various European countries, the Americas, and Australia. Other workers are based at the company's workstations in the U.S. and China. In an interview conducted for this study, a company representative said that in cases where communication was between Icelanders only, it was conducted in Icelandic, but if there was one person who did not speak Icelandic, English was the *lingua franca*. Asked if this policy had stirred any controversy or opposition amongst the Icelandic workers, she said:

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No, not at all, they just slide in smoothly. They take it for granted, this is the case here and they know it. I have never detected anything you could call opposition towards this, neither amongst Icelanders nor others, the Danes, Norwegians or Swedes that work here. You know, it's English here and that's fine.<sup>61</sup>

Spoken communication is in Icelandic between Icelanders, but they switch to English as soon as there is anyone present who does not understand. The company has nevertheless supported the learning of Icelandic for their foreign staff in Reykjavík. The company's representative maintained that although she worked in an English-speaking environment, she had no fear of Icelandic becoming a kitchen language. "I am never more Icelandic, than when I walk out of the workplace at the end of day. I just walk out of this cover, out of this exotic kind of wonderful workplace and into Icelandic." On the other hand, she expressed concerns over the English-speaking frontline workers at supermarkets, restaurants, and other workplaces whose business it is to serve an Icelandic-speaking clientele. She was critical of the lack of concern by the owners of these companies to teach the foreign labour workers Icelandic and had herself, on several occasions, experienced not being understood while speaking Icelandic when asking for assistance at a supermarket. "The owners need to pep up the Icelandic courses for these workers," she said, and added, "It's so different in here where we are almost like aliens," and here she laughed, "living aliens. But then again our game is in English for an English-speaking clientele."<sup>62</sup>

A global company in orthopaedics is another case in point. Around 1,600 people are on the payroll and thereof three hundred at the headquarters, the rest at branches in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia. In Reykjavík the personnel is a mixture of locals and foreigners. In an interview, a company representative was asked if the Icelandic members of the staff had expressed opposition towards the use of English, and she replied, "No not at all, I've never noticed that. It's just something you expect at a company like this one." Then she added,

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<sup>61</sup> Interview, 23 Mar. 2009.

<sup>62</sup> Interview, 23 Mar. 2009.

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It is considered to be quite normal amongst the Icelandic-speaking staff to use English words—i.e., “staining”—particularly professional terms while speaking Icelandic and nobody would ever try to correct that. But if you were giving a talk in Icelandic or preparing any kind of representation of the company in Icelandic, you would not do it.<sup>63</sup>

Other Icelandic international companies using English as a working language are a manufacturer of generic pharmaceuticals, a biopharmaceutical firm, and a company specializing in food processing equipment. They range in size from a couple of thousand employees to over ten thousand, and all of them have operations around the globe. They all use English as a working language in order to ensure that workers are on an equal footing when it comes to international communication, and also “to capitalize on the possible synergies between our various units,” to use wording from a recent bulletin from one of the companies.<sup>64</sup>

What about the financial firms? At the headquarters of Glitnir bank the international department served as the umbrella for all human resource issues within the bank, with the same rule regarding the use of English applying there as in the companies above and the other banks; i.e., all communication was conducted in English in order to ensure that everyone, including the non-Icelandic speaking staff, would understand. The bank had branches in three Nordic countries where most of the staff members were locals speaking their own language between themselves, but conducted all formal communication in English. In an interview, a representative from the human resources department said that the use of English at the bank’s operation in Iceland had pertained mostly to the headquarters. At the various branches around Iceland this was not at all the case, but dissemination of information was increasingly given in English and staff titles were rapidly being filed in English along with Icelandic. Asked if the staff at the domestic branches were annoyed because of this increased use of English, she said:

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<sup>63</sup> Interview, 20 Apr. 2009.

<sup>64</sup> Bulletin issued 4 Sept. 2008, signed by the CEO of the company and sent to the author via electronic mail, 20 Apr. 2009.

No I don't think it was so much towards English as such, I think there was full understanding of the necessity of using it. Although some of us are more fluent in it than others, which causes some annoyance. But it was more like a tension between "us" and "them." The personnel at the domestic branches was not so much part of this international scene as we at the headquarters were. I think they are quite relieved now, that they feel as if we have kind of landed, we were flying quite high, you know. The bank has now taken a complete U-turn as you know. But I, and many in my department, miss the international environment, although we do not miss the splurging and spending."<sup>65</sup>

It was the announcement by the financial firms—in the words of the CEO of Landsbanki—to use English as an official language that spurred the most recent controversy over English versus Icelandic. Ironically, all these big Icelandic banks, Landsbanki, Kaupthing, and Glitnir, as well as Straumur, went bankrupt in the autumn of 2008. The cause for their economic failure, however, hardly stems from their use of English. Other Icelandic companies who adopted English as a lingua franca still remain in business but have after the economic crisis threatened to move their headquarters from Iceland, not because they feel uncomfortable using English but because of Iceland's unstable currency and weak economy.

## Conclusion

On the surface, the discourse on language and culture is about linguistic "border control" and cultural "gatekeeping," but in essence it is a manifestation of culture as a locus of struggle where conflicting interests seem to collide, raising questions about what powers come into play in the reproduction of culture—and here more specifically, national culture, identity, and image—over time.

This article sheds light on the influence of linguistic nationalism in Iceland with its concomitant antagonism towards foreign influences and how it has shaped people's perception of Icelandic national identity and image. It shows how Danish, the language of the former

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<sup>65</sup> Interview, April 8, 2009.

colonizer, had, especially after the onset of nation-making, epitomized evil foreign influences, to be replaced by English in more recent times. For that reason a specific emphasis was placed on the controversy of the ever increasing influence of English in Icelandic society. The discussion shows that the impact of English within Icelandic society took off with the presence of the American NATO base and has in recent decades increased to the extent that exposure to English is both visible and audible on countless levels, through the entertainment media (television, films, music), the Internet, and at the levels of higher education (mostly in form of textbooks). The article also shows that basic knowledge of English is widespread in the country although competence in English might be overestimated, as some of our interviewees and participants in the Icelandic/English debate have argued. The article underscores the fact that Icelandic has never been spoken by more people than it is today, bringing to the fore a parallel growth: on the one hand, in the number of speakers of the Icelandic language, and on the other, the increasing impact of the English language. The latter is a part of the ever increasing use of English as a global lingua franca.

In light of these developments, the article asked if the use of English in Icelandic businesses posed a threat to the Icelandic language and/or the image of the Icelandic culture. The answer to that question depends on how the boundaries of language and culture are defined. If one shares the view of those who are loyal supporters of the nationalist doctrine, the answer is definitely yes. For those with a more relaxed attitude towards either language change and/or English loan words as opposed to coined words, the answer is less definite and might even be in the negative. However, contrary to the fear expressed by many of the loyal supporters, who at times speak as if the use of English as an official language has become standard practice across the board in Icelandic businesses, this article shows that notion to be unfounded. This practice is and has been strictly confined to businesses operating on an international level. The exception is the use of English as a lingua franca in workplaces where non-Icelandic speaking immigrants or foreign workers have been numerous. In these cases no official policy on English as a working language has been stated. This practice has, however, not stirred up equally heated debates or antagonism as the former case. Asking why the responses towards the official application of English as a working language on the one hand and the unofficial application on the other



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are harsh and mild respectively can only be answered with speculations. One might hypothesize that the relatively mild response to the latter is due to the sensitivity of immigration and the often connected volatile issues of xenophobia and prejudice.

The article also asked if there was a conflict of interest between the Icelandic business sector involved and the “gatekeepers” of culture and language and, if so, whose power is then at stake? The article shows clearly that there is a tug of war, a conflict of power between those on the one hand who regard it to be their sacred duty to protect the boundaries of the Icelandic language and, on the other hand, those who are of a different opinion and do not consider this kind of protection to be vital for the future of Icelandic identity or culture, nor for the image of the country. For the defenders of the nationalist agenda, their passionate protectionism is a reflection of the aspect of linguistic nationalism as secular religion in Iceland. Another and related explanation lies in power or conflict of power. In the spirit of critical theory, we can say that the gatekeepers of language and culture in Iceland are threatened because the cultural hegemony their power rests on is threatened. It is threatened as the linguistic territories of Icelandic within the borders of Icelandic culture are now unclear or blurred as opposed to being clear-cut (whether that clarity ever existed except as an ideal is another matter). And this brings us back to the affirmation stated at the beginning, concerning the discourse on language being only superficially about linguistic border control and cultural gate-keeping, but in essence a manifestation of culture as a locus of struggle where conflicting interests collide. This, in turn, raises questions about what powers come into play in the ongoing process of the reproduction of culture: national culture and identity and the image of a country over time. We may conclude this discussion by referring to Bourdieu’s notion on symbolic power as it relates to language. He has argued that words as such, or linguistic utterances, have no power, but rather “the power of language comes from outside”; i.e., it is the social position of the speaker and his or her occupation or status that gives the linguistic utterances authority.<sup>66</sup> This power presupposes the acceptance or recognition of those who are subjected to this power. Bourdieu has also noted that “the language of authority never governs without the collaboration of those it governs.” The language of authority resides “in the social conditions of

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<sup>66</sup> Bourdieu 1991: 109.

production and reproduction of the distribution between the classes of the knowledge and recognition of the legitimate language.”<sup>67</sup> The gatekeepers of Icelandic language and culture have not exercised their power through physical force, but their power is transmuted into symbolic form and thereby given the legitimacy it would otherwise not have. The practice of symbolic power, or more precisely, the condition for its success, rests on the acceptance and the belief of its legitimacy by those who are subjected to it. In the case of the border control of language in Iceland, it seems as if belief in that legitimacy is cracking.

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<sup>67</sup> Bourdieu 1991: 113.

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