

JALT2007

Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

Language and national identity: The case of Iceland

Address at JALT2007

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Following is the text of an address given at JALT2007 by Thordur Aegir Oskarsson, Ambassador of Iceland to Japan

Dear participants
I would like to thank the organizers of JALT Conference for offering me the opportunity to give a presentation on Iceland here today with a particular focus on the role of our language, Icelandic. It is important to begin this by addressing briefly the history of Iceland, the youngest inhabited country in Europe, as it reflects how and why our language has survived.

Iceland is the second largest island in Europe after Great Britain. Iceland has a total area of 103,000 square km, almost one third of the size of Japan. Compared to Japan, Iceland is still a small country with the population of 300,000. About two-third of the population live in the capital city Reykjavik and the neighbouring towns.

If you look at a map and see how far north Iceland is, Iceland may seem like a very cold place. But actually the climate is rather mild because of the warm ocean current coming from the Gulf of Mexico to the North Atlantic where Iceland is located.

The average temperature in Reykjavik in January is minus 1-2°C, considerably warmer than Hokkaido. Aurora Borealis or Northern Lights can be seen from early September to the beginning of April.

The average temperature in Reykjavik in July is about 20°C so we don't have a hot and humid summer like Japan.

Iceland is geologically a young country, formed 10 million years ago and the process of its formation is still ongoing. It is located on the two tectonic plates called the American and European Tectonic Plates. They are drifting apart at a rate of 2.5 cm per year.

History

The first people known to have come to Iceland were Irish monks or hermits in the eighth century, who left on the arrival of the Vikings from Scandinavia, who settled Iceland in 870 - 930. Iceland was thus the last European country to be settled. The Vikings brought with them Celtic people from Ireland and Scotland as slaves, so the origin of the Icelanders is Nordic and Celtic.

The first Icelandic settler, Ingólfur Arnarson, arrived in Iceland in the year 874, which means that Iceland has a history of over 1100 years. In the following sixty years there was a constant influx of people from Norway to Iceland. In the year 930 around 50,000 people lived there.

In the beginning, Iceland did not have a king or a government, but in 930 it was decided to establish a parliament called "Althingi". This is the oldest Parliament in the world. There the laws of the country were decided and decisions based on them formulated.

One example of the democratic nature of the Icelandic Althingi is the decision on Christianity. Some Christians among the settlers were very religious. They demanded that Christianity be made the state religion in Iceland. After a debate at the Parliament in the summer of 1000 it was finally decided that in order to preserve peace in the country, Christianity should be made state religion, but people would be free to believe in whatever they wanted in privacy. This manner of changing the religion in a democratic and peaceful way is exceptional in the world.

In the following centuries the Parliament, Althingi, was the only organ of political, legal and judicial power in Iceland. However, there was no executive power. All important decisions were made at Althingi and it was up to the people to carry them out. The lack of executive power led to the loss of independence and in the thirteenth century internal feuds and power struggles arose between powerful families and people found it difficult to solve them by traditional means.

From the outset, the ruling class was Nordic, making the language and the culture of Iceland purely Scandinavian. There are, however, traces of Celtic influence in some of the Edda poems, in names and in the appearance of present day Icelanders.

Icelanders produced great literary works in the Icelandic language and the representative ones are "Sagas" and "Edda" written in the 12th and 13th centuries. The Sagas are historical

novels on people who lived in Iceland in the earlier times. (870-930) The Edda is a collection of poems which are originated from Scandinavian myths and heroes legends in the North Europe.

Icelanders are proud of their literary heritage. The Sagas can be compared with “Genji tales”. Some of the Sagas have been translated into Japanese.

The Sagas are and have been throughout the centuries extensively read by Icelanders. Along with the country’s isolation for almost 700 years, the literature played an important role in preserving the language.

So the roots of the Icelandic language lie in the Old Norse culture of the Middle Ages, about which we would know very little if it were not for the medieval Icelandic literature.

The Icelandic language has changed little compared to the other Nordic countries. It was in the 16th century that the name for the language, Icelandic, was established, thereby distinguishing it from the Old Norse language which developed in Scandinavia.

Back to politics. In the year 1262 Iceland lost its independence and came under the Norwegian crown where it remained until 1397 when it came under the Danish crown along with Norway. It was not until 1904 that Iceland was given home rule and then full autonomy in 1918, but continued a personal union with the Danish king. At this stage, with the full autonomy in 1918 the government of Iceland could start to regulate on language matters.

According to a treaty between Iceland and Denmark, Iceland could decide in a referendum whether it wished to become independent or to stay in the union with the Danish

king. This referendum took place in 1944 and it was decided by a vast majority of the population to become independent. The Republic of Iceland was formally proclaimed on June 17th 1944, at Þingvellir, where the first parliament, Alþingi, was established a thousand years earlier.

This struggle for independence that really took off in the 19th century never involved weapons or violence. Our munitions were our language, our history and culture, that formed the core elements of the national identity of the Icelandic people. These were the factors that inspired the leaders of the independence movement. These leaders and our national heroes were mostly writers and poets.

Iceland’s location midway between the two continents of Europe and North America makes it important to have contacts in both directions. The Icelandic people have through the ages been dependent on goods and necessities imported from other countries. For many centuries the contact was mainly towards Europe, but with massive increase of fish export in the 20th Century the contact towards the USA has been of great importance. There has always been considerable interaction between Iceland and the Nordic countries. Through several centuries of Danish rule, Copenhagen served the Icelanders as the window to the world. This was where Icelanders travelled for trading, solving problems with the authorities or getting education and cultural inspiration, making Danish the language of communication.

During most of its history the Icelandic nation was among the poorest in Europe. Considering our natural resources this is quite understandable. Iceland has no forests, oil, coal, metals or minerals nor is it economically feasible to harvest

common crops such as corn or wheat. Our natural resources are in essence the fishing grounds around the island and the renewable energy resources. It was the arrival of modern technology and new production methods, especially for the traditional fishing industry, that made the efficient use of our natural resources feasible and in fact completely reversed the living conditions in Iceland.

Currently Icelanders enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the world with GDP per capita over 50,000 USD, the fifth place in the world. We have managed to put our wealth into good use as Iceland has a developed system of social services, where the state ensures good basic living conditions for all members of society. Education is basically free, including University education, as students only pay a nominal fee. The health care system is of highest standard and hospital treatment is free of charge. It is also worth mentioning that the pension system is in a extremely good shape with enough funds to meet the challenges of the aging of the population.

Due to the modest population of Iceland the necessity for everyone to contribute has always been of critical importance. Therefore Icelanders have been quick to adopt labour-saving technologies to facilitate our lives. Iceland is in the forefront of utilizing new information technology in daily life, using the Internet and mobile phones more than any other country. The Internet is accessible to 85% of the nation either at work or at home and over seventy percent are using the Internet on a daily basis. There are 9 mobile phones for every 10 people.)

Through these changes we have come to learn that even a very small state can make an organized and successful

response to globalization. Globalization and information technology have given small states opportunities on a scale never witnessed before.

Our success is based on three main pillars, the resources of the sea, energy and human resources

Ocean

With better ships for fishing and new opportunities in foreign trade at the beginning of the 20th century Icelanders were able to utilize the rich fishing grounds around the country. Today the Icelandic fishing fleet is one of the most advanced and modern in the world. The productivity of this fleet is very high, with less than four thousand fishermen catching around two million tons of fish every year. Thus, the vast sea, which surrounds the island and separates it from other countries, has become a valuable asset instead of the obstacle that kept the country very isolated for centuries.

In the past, rivers and waterfalls used to hinder internal travel and transportation and therefore development in Iceland. Today these same waterfalls and rivers have become an immensely valuable source of inexpensive renewable energy, which is harnessed for modern industrial production through the construction of hydro-electric power stations.

Even volcanic activities have been a great blessing for us as they have created a source of wealth in the form of hot springs and geothermal energy. Presently 90% of all houses in Iceland are heated with geothermal energy, which is also harnessed for low-cost electric production. About 54% of Iceland's energy use comes from geothermal energy.

Around 72% of the total energy needs are served by these renewable resources of hydropower and geothermal power. This means that we have to import 25 % of our energy in the form of fossil fuel. That energy source is almost exclusively used for our fishing boats and automobiles. Today we have are only using about 17% of our potential energy resources. It is a very unique position among the developed countries, to have still large sources of competitively priced hydroelectric and geothermal energy remaining to be harnessed.

Human resources

The third and the most important source responsible for this success are the human resources. It is the people that translate resources into wealth. With our small population we have been very efficient in that regard. We are blessed with many positive aspects that make this possible as the demographics in Iceland support this development in a fundamental way.

First, Iceland has one of, if not the highest birth rate of the developed economies in Europe and our population is growing, not declining as in most European countries. Furthermore this population is the youngest in Europe with median age of 35 years. Second, we have the highest participation of people in the labour market as presently about 80% of Icelanders in working age, that is people aged 18 to 70 are active in the labour market. What is also very important is that around 80% of women in Iceland work outside the home.

Last but not least we have an excellent education system that has provided us with a well-educated personnel. Let me focus a little on the issue of language teaching in our education system.

Because of the unique position of Icelandic, Iceland's geographical situation, and its relations with other countries, Icelanders have long had a comprehensive understanding of and acknowledged the need to learn foreign languages and to become familiar with the cultures of other countries.

Nothing very new as such was the legacy of the Vikings, as well as the pattern among officials and educated Icelanders through the ages.

Therefore, for decades instruction in foreign languages has comprised a major part of the curriculum at both compulsory and upper secondary school level. In addition, there is an old tradition for Icelanders to study abroad, first and foremost at university level. Today 20% of Icelandic students at the university level are studying abroad, most of them in post-graduate studies. Furthermore almost all academics and many specialized workers in Iceland study or work abroad for some years in during their studies.

For historical and cultural reasons the principal focus in foreign language teaching and learning was for a long time on Danish. In practice, for the last few decades the greatest emphasis has, however, been placed on knowledge and ability in English, despite the fact that English was the second compulsory foreign language taught in the schools until 1999, when it replaced Danish as the first compulsory foreign language. Students receive extensive encouragement to learn English from the surrounding environment, through television, for example, as well as the cinema (films in

Iceland are not dubbed), music, the Internet and from the society as a whole. Other foreign languages lack this out-of-school support and have been given less emphasis, both officially and unofficially, partly as a result of the dominance of English.

The extensive business dealings, as well as the variety of political and cultural co-operation, that Icelanders have with other nations call for a solid knowledge of languages and an understanding of the cultures of other peoples. The Nordic nations have established formal relations in various areas, largely via the Nordic Council. Communication is in Danish, Swedish and Norwegian, and participating Icelanders, like the Finns, must be able to speak one of these languages fluently. Co-operation with European nations in various areas via the EES agreement, stresses the need for knowledge of European languages. Growing relations with East Asian countries are also creating a need for knowledge of the languages and culture of these countries. Yet Icelanders rely largely on English in these exchanges.

As I said English receives most attention in the educational system and it holds a special place both with regards to the stimulation students receive to use the language and their motivation to learn it. There is no argument among Icelanders about the need to know English. For this small language community a good knowledge of English has become just as important as numeracy, literacy and computer competence.

Small-scale foreign relations

Due to this rather isolated geographical location and the

great importance of foreign trade, foreign relations have always been of paramount importance for Iceland. With increased globalization in every aspect of international activity, whether it is trade, security or communications, the challenges for this small state have increased rapidly. It is clear that individual states, particularly smaller states, cannot on their own overcome all these challenges, or enjoy to the full extent the opportunities and benefits that the globalization process has to offer.

Therefore Icelanders have full understanding of the importance of international co-operation and today Iceland is a member of about fifty international organisations and institutions, and within these organisations and institutions decisions are made which have a direct impact on our daily lives and surroundings. Just to add that in order to guard our interests abroad Iceland has a foreign service of about 200 personnel (compared to 5000 in Japan) and operates 22 embassies and missions around the world.

From a political, social, and cultural standpoint, Icelanders consider themselves European, even if you can detect considerable American cultural influences in Iceland, which I must say is can be to a large extent be traced to the importance that the U.S.-Icelandic defence agreement has in our foreign policy.

At the same time Icelanders are deeply aware of the importance of preserving their independence and national identity. Something that can be said to reflect an island mentality—with well-defined borders, national identity, and geographic isolation—and the memory of a hard-fought, although peaceful, struggle for independence.

As I said before the process of globalization has offered small states like Iceland opportunities that did not exist before. Iceland has acted rapidly and strongly upon these opportunities by reforming the domestic economic activities so they can better compete in the new international environment. Globalization has also greatly impacted Iceland in many different areas such as politics, trade, business, investment and environment.

This has led to profound changes in Iceland's position in international affairs. The scope of Iceland's activities abroad has broadened immensely. Numerous services and industries are now engaged in exports, and Icelandic companies have become influential participants in the business sectors of neighbouring countries. The foundations for these increased external activities were built by means of favourable trade agreements and a sensible promotion of Icelandic interests abroad.

Important tool in this success is and has been the knowledge of foreign languages.

The one critical factor in making full use of the globalization process has been that Iceland is a member of the so – called European Economic Area that gives Iceland full access to the markets of the European Union and many of its cultural programs.

Other international activities are also in a important manner built on the capacity to communicate effectively.

That is relevant as regards our membership in the United Nations. Iceland joined the United Nations on 18 November 1946 and has always attached great importance to the United Nations and its broad agenda in security, human rights and in fighting poverty and discrimination. Icelanders recognise

the need to contribute according to our capacity to the nations of the world who do not enjoy the same security and prosperity as we do, bearing in mind that Iceland was one of the poorest countries in Europe at the start of the last century. Important part and related to the UN activities in Japan is that in Iceland we have two departments of the United Nations University. These are the United Nations University Fisheries Training Programme and the Geothermal Training Programme.

The same is relevant for our immediate security.

For its basic security Iceland has relied on two pillars; membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the bilateral defence treaty with the United States. Iceland has no military and never has since back in the Viking times.

We have a defence agreement with the United States since 1951. In 1949 Iceland, due to its strategic location, became a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. During the Cold War period the most important contribution of Iceland to the common defences of NATO was the land facilities for the US defence force. Last year the United States notified Iceland that they would be closing the base and the last US military personnel left Iceland this september. The cultural effects of the 50 years of US presence in Iceland were great. It served to sharpen our debate about the preservation of our own language and at the same time injected English into the society.

Nordic cooperation

The Nordic Cooperation has been extremely successful since its initiation right after the second world war. It has

covered all aspects of daily life, social issues, cultural issues and political cooperation. Although membership of the Nordic countries to international organisations is different in important aspects, these five states have always consulted on the broad spectrum of international affairs. This co-operation in general, which in the heavy seas of international politics has often proven a source of strength for Iceland, has had immense cultural value for my country.

Iceland-Japan

Then what about the bilateral relations between the small state, Iceland, and the global power, Japan? I can safely state that the cooperation between Iceland and Japan has in recent years become broader, deeper and more extensive than ever before. There culture and language has become increasingly important in that context.

Aside from the ever-stronger Icelandic-Japanese political partnership over the past years there have also been opened up new and promising venues in such areas as tourism, education, and technology. This should not come as a surprise. Even if cooperation in the fishing and energy sectors has underpinned the bilateral relationship, the Japanese and Icelanders also share many cultural traits: a respect for their historical heritage with an entrepreneurial spirit expressed in what may be termed an enthusiastic receptivity of the modern, and of new ideas-whether in realms of culture or commerce. This simultaneous embracing of the old and new is, in my view, one of most visible strengths and future potentials in Japanese-Icelandic relations.

Tourism has grown remarkably in Iceland in the past years. Yet only about 6,000 of the 400 thousand visitors arriving in Iceland are Japanese but the number is rapidly growing, up from 2,500 in 1997.

Iceland appeals to Japanese, and we even share some cultural traits, for example by both appreciating –onsen. Iceland is blessed by its natural geothermal resources, and from these resources various types of hot-water treatments have been developed over the years. Some of you might even know the famous Blue Lagoon.

As to the direct cultural aspects, one of the consequences of globalization is the fact that the distances have become smaller since the physical access to different countries and cultures has become much easier through better transportation and communication. This is reflected in growing cultural relations between Iceland and Japan.

Education is important factor in assuring the competitiveness in the globalized world. Therefore cultural and educational exchanges have an immense potential in aiding and sustaining economic relations. We have witnessed this in Iceland – Japan relations as cultural exchanges have been increasing substantially over the past few years.

A Japanese studies program sponsored by the Japan Foundation was started at the University of Iceland in autumn 2003 and has quickly become the second most popular language program at the University, after English. Scores of Icelandic students are now studying Japanese language and culture, with an enthusiasm rarely experienced before in any language program at the University. At the same time this university, Waseda, with the support of the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture,

launched an Icelandic studies program that has also enjoyed much popularity. We are already witnessing quite a few exchange programs in place between Icelandic and Japanese universities. Because of this we are seeing growing number of Icelandic students coming to study in Japan.

We are also experiencing a greater interest in popular music from Iceland and also Icelandic films. These days even two Icelandic children books are being published here in Japan.

Challenges

All these forces drawing a small homogenous state with its own language into the powerful processes of the modern day globalization are both a blessing and a risk to both our cultural identity and the core of it, our language. Therefore we have intensified our emphasis on preserving our language. I have shortly outlined the foreign relations activities of a small state in order to emphasize the importance of transnational communication in the modern world, a communication based on the uses of foreign languages.

Language policy in modern Iceland is characterised by two central elements: on the one hand the continued preservation of the language, its form and its central vocabulary, and on the other hand the development of the modern Icelandic language, not least the coining of new words in order to apt the language to modern times.

We conduct a policy of linguistic purism, where we try to find Icelandic word for all new phenomena thrust upon us by the global community. This is a daunting and expensive task, but the effort is not questioned by anyone. Examples.

sími (thread), tölva (number/fortune teller), sjónvarp (sight/throw).

Every year we celebrate the Day of Icelandic, actually taking place 16 November last. This event carries with it intense debate on the present situation and future prospects of our language. Presently our language does not have any legal status as the official language of Iceland nor is it defended by the constitution.

Further challenge is embedded in our economic success

Since 2000 there has been an explosion in the number of economic and permanent immigrants in Iceland from 2% to around 5% of the population. The conditions described above, i.e. that Iceland is a small and relatively homogeneous society and that Icelandic is the only official spoken and written language have now called for some special measures for minority languages.

The increased demand that immigrants be able to fully participate in Icelandic society, while at the same time preserving their own characteristics and culture, has led, in the last few years, to government support to meet the needs of the growing number of immigrants by granting them the legal right to special instruction in Icelandic at the compulsory and secondary school level. Laws on compulsory and upper secondary school include clauses covering special instruction in Icelandic for those pupils whose mother tongue is not Icelandic.

Again Icelandic is a language that is spoken by just over 300,000 people. The need to learn a foreign language in

order to communicate with the outside world is an obvious necessity, and results in substantial motivation for language learning. Foreign languages have always been popular subjects in adult education for instance. Yet the teaching of foreign languages in Iceland faces some important challenges. As knowledge of English becomes more and more widespread there is a certain danger of interest in learning other foreign languages decreasing. It is important to continue to require students to learn more than one foreign language.

At the same time it calls for extra efforts in keeping our own language dynamic and strong thereby preserving the core contributor to our national identity. As a known Finnish author Anti Tuuri said: I can write what I will in my own language, but I can only write what I know in other languages.

My former President Ms. Finnbogadottir has also said it is important to learn other languages as that strengthens your sensitivity and respect for your own language.

Language education in Iceland

The Language Teaching System

The Icelandic educational system follows the Scandinavian model, with 10 years of compulsory school (age 6-16 years). At the compulsory school level two foreign languages are required: Danish and English. English has only recently become the first foreign language taught, taking over this place from Danish with the Compulsory Education Act of 1995. It is to be taught for six years, starting at 10 years of age, with Danish taught as the second foreign language for four years, starting at age 12. In the 9th and 10th grade

students can choose an optional third language, most commonly German or French.

Foreign language teaching in schools

On the basis of recent laws on compulsory education (1995) and upper secondary education (1996), new national curriculum guides for both these school levels were issued in 1999. The main change concerning the teaching of foreign languages is that English has become the first foreign language in compulsory education and Danish the second foreign language. Instruction in Danish at both compulsory and upper secondary level is partly aimed at maintaining and strengthening ties with other Nordic countries. Despite its close relationship to Danish, Swedish and Norwegian, it is not possible to use Icelandic as a means of communication with these countries. Danish may in certain cases be replaced in school by Swedish or Norwegian for individual pupils.

The National Curriculum Guide for primary and lower secondary levels (compulsory education) prescribes instruction in 2 compulsory foreign languages: English for 6 years, starting at age 10 (5th year of single structure compulsory school) and Danish for 4 years, starting at age 12. During the last 1-2 years of compulsory education pupils at the lower secondary level generally have the option of a third foreign language, usually German, but in some cases French or Spanish.

Both Danish and English are also required subjects in the general course of study in upper secondary school leading to matriculation examination, Danish for 1-2 years and English for 2-4 years, depending on the programme of study and the

organisation of the school. A third foreign language is also required; usually the students can choose between German and French, though in some cases it is possible to elect Spanish as the third language. Students in language study streams also take a fourth foreign language, which is one of the afore-mentioned languages. The teaching of third and fourth foreign languages may be organised as a two-, three- or four-year programme, depending on the school.

In vocational education at the upper secondary level both Danish and English are generally compulsory subjects. The length of study in each language is usually one year.

Considerable changes have taken place in foreign language instruction in recent decades. The aim has been to increase the communicational adequacy of the pupils, but also to develop their reading comprehension and writing skills. Many teachers make an effort to increase the contact of their pupils with “living” foreign languages, for example, through the use of audio-visual instructional materials. Despite the alterations in teaching practices, however, it is safe to say that traditional methods have not yet been displaced, and often instruction is a sort of compromise between the traditional and modern methods.

Training of foreign language teachers

The initial training of teachers for the primary and lower secondary levels is organized at the university level, concluding with a BEd degree. Training currently lasts 3 years (planned to become 4 years). Trainee teachers have two compulsory options for limited subject specialisation. These options may be English or Danish or both.

Foreign language teachers at the primary level may be class teachers without specialization in the foreign language or they may be class teachers with a limited specialization in the foreign language (i.e. who have had a foreign language as one of their compulsory options in a teacher training institution) At the lower secondary level the foreign language teacher is either in the latter category or a specialist subject teacher. At the upper secondary level the foreign language teacher is a specialist subject teacher.

University studies for foreign language teachers of the upper secondary level last at least 4 years, whereof they must complete the equivalent of 2 years of study in their major subject/target language as a minimum, or may take their entire 3 years (e.g. of BA study) in the major subject/target language. The 4th year consists of studies in pedagogy and didactics. When prospective teachers have completed an MA degree or a doctorate, their studies in pedagogy and didactics are shortened to one semester. Teachers qualified to teach at the upper secondary level also have the right to teach at the primary and lower secondary level; in practice, however, they rarely teach at the primary level.

The Language Center is a new facility at the University of Iceland. Regular students of different faculties have the opportunity to take additional credits in Danish, French, German or Spanish. The courses are based on individual study following the methods of autonomous learning and with the help of multimedia. Students have access to a tutoring teacher who helps them plan their own curriculum. They can participate in small group discussions and strengthen their writing skills by methods of process writing, i.e. with the aid of computerized communication canals such as e-mail.

In addition, some of the faculties of the University have offered courses in subject-based language learning, such as French or German for law or for business purposes.

Both the University of Iceland and the University of Education now offer an additional year of study for teachers. In the MPaed program of the University of Iceland language teachers can deepen their knowledge of applied linguistics. And the University of Education offers an extra year for teachers who want to deepen their knowledge of their respective subject area, i.e. mathematics, English, Icelandic, etc.

Distinguished participants, I thank you for your patience today.