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Implications of Ideology

Iceland and the So-Called Nordic Language Community

The “Nordic language community” is more of an ideal than a reality. Also, a distinction must be made between a primary and a secondary Nordic language community. Danish is a compulsory school subject in Icelandic primary schools, and this is not uncontroversial in Iceland, and Icelandic youths tend to use English rather than Danish (or “Scandinavian”), for communication in “Nordic situations”. Yet, it is unlikely that the Icelandic curriculum will change on this point in the foreseeable future, since Iceland ascribes to the “Nordic ideology”, of which the (imagined) Nordic language community is an integral part. But what is a “Nordic language community”? Is it real?

Nordic – in particular: Scandinavian – political and cultural discourses often refer to a “Nordic language community” (Danish: *nordisk sprogfællesskab*; Swedish: *nordisk språkgemenskap*; Norwegian: *nordisk språkfællesskap*). If one accepts the existence of such a phenomenon in the first place, there are at least two types: a primary and a secondary Nordic language community.¹ Native speakers of the three Scandinavian languages (Norwegian, Swedish and Danish) supposedly belong to the primary Nordic language community, and native speakers of non-Scandinavian languages in the Nordic region, who use some Scandinavian for inter-Nordic communication, are considered to make up the secondary community.

While it is generally assumed in traditional Nordic discourses that Danish, Norwegian and Swedish are mutually comprehensible, the term “semicomcommunication”² has been used, since native Scandinavian speakers generally need “a little goodwill”³ for such communication to run smoothly.

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The idea of a Nordic language community seems to be more important to Scandinavians than to the rest of us. Indeed, the term *Nordic language community* is often used by Scandinavians in a narrow sense for their *inter-Scandinavian communication* alone, without reference to communication in a Scandinavian language with native speakers of other languages in the Nordic region.⁴

Learning Scandinavian

Members of the secondary Nordic language community are people like myself, who have learned some Danish, Norwegian or Swedish as a foreign or second language. This second language acquisition takes place partly in schools and courses, and partly informally, for example, if we move to one or more of the countries where Norwegian, Swedish and Danish are principle languages.

Our language proficiencies vary greatly. This depends presumably not only on how long we have studied the Scandinavian language in question, but also on the linguistic structures of our own native languages. For me, for example, as a native speaker of Icelandic, large sections of Scandinavian vocabulary

are quite different, and even if the syntactic structures of Icelandic and the Scandinavian languages are rather similar, I am very likely to make a number of grammatical errors when speaking Scandinavian, for example, as to the order of verbs and adverbials in subordinate clauses (e.g., instead of “... at hun ikke er her”, I tend to use the incorrect word order “... at hun er ikke her”). In Icelandic (as in Finnish), there is always primary stress on the first syllable of a word. Therefore, Danish words such as *papir* (“pap-IR”) can be problematic for me when speaking Danish.

My problems are not all that serious, though. Faroese and Icelandic belong to the same language group as Scandinavian. (More precisely, these island languages share linguistic features primarily with dialects of Western Norway, and to a lesser extent with Eastern Norwegian, Danish and Swedish. However, despite common origin, Icelandic and Western Norwegian dialects are not at all mutually comprehensible in modern times.) I suspect that it might be even harder for speakers of Sámi, Finnish, Meänkieli, Greenlandic, Vietnamese or Arabic, for example, to acquire a Scandinavian language, since their native languages are typologically very different from Scandinavian.

Multilingual Iceland

Obviously, there are many more languages spoken in the Nordic countries than those mentioned above. For example, a recent survey among pupils in primary schools in Reykjavík showed that more than 100 different languages are spoken in their homes in Reykjavík.

There have been great demographic changes in the past two decades in Iceland, in that immigrants from Poland, Lithuania, Thailand, the Philippines and many other countries make up (in 2017/2018) about 10.6 percent of the Icelandic population, instead of only about 2.1 percent in 1996. The largest single group of immigrants is from Poland. Polish speakers, about 14,000 in number, are about 4 percent of the present population in Iceland (about 40% of all immigrants). The second

largest group of immigrants are Lithuanians, about 2,300 people, i.e. about 0.6 percent of the Icelandic population.⁵

Danish citizens in Iceland are far lower on this list, i.e. about 0.25% of the population, the Faroese and Greenlanders included.⁶ However, about 1% of the Icelandic population were born in Denmark.⁷ The reason for this must be that a number of Icelanders live temporarily or for extended periods in Denmark (today about 12,000 people, about one-third students, according to the Icelandic Embassy in Copenhagen).

Danish in Iceland

There are strong historical and cultural ties between Iceland and Denmark,⁸ as Iceland was under Danish rule from the 14th to the 20th century. (The country gained political independence from Denmark in 1918, and the Republic of Iceland was founded in 1944.) Therefore, one might perhaps have expected extensive communication in Danish in Iceland. This is not the case. However, due to historic and cultural reasons, Danish has been taught in Iceland since the first primary schools were founded in the latter half of the 19th century.⁹ Today, the Icelandic curriculum guide stipulates that both Danish and English are compulsory subjects. Previously, pupils had Danish first, from grade 5, and English later. This changed in 1999, when it was stipulated that English comes first, followed by Danish, usually in grades 8-10. Danish is also taught to some extent at upper secondary school and at the University of Iceland. It has been estimated that 6-7% of Iceland's education budget is spent on teaching Danish.¹⁰

Danish is not generally considered to be a particularly popular school subject. I recall a comment made by my late mother-in-law, who was a teacher of Danish in a primary school. She remarked once: “I could always manage to keep control of the youngsters in my classroom, even though I taught Danish.”

It is not uncontroversial that Danish is still part of the Icelandic curriculum.¹¹ A number of Icelanders have publicly expressed the view

(in newspapers and various debates) that the pupils' time could be better spent at school, either for more lessons in Icelandic language and literature, for more English lessons, or for learning another foreign language instead of Danish (Spanish, for example). Many of the critics are indeed in principle "pro-Scandinavian", in the sense that they acknowledge the value of a foreign Nordic language in the curriculum; however, they would prefer another Scandinavian language to Danish in Icelandic primary schools (Swedish, Norwegian Bokmål, or Swedish spoken in a Finland Swedish accent). A major reason for this is that Danish pronunciation causes problems for most students. A survey among Icelandic upper secondary school students suggested that 64 percent of them found the Danish language "hard to speak", and 48 percent found it "hard to listen to".¹²

However, there are no signs today that education authorities in Iceland will abolish Danish as a compulsory school subject. An important argument is that learning Danish is, by extension, also a gateway into Norwegian and Swedish society. Thus, in addition to being able to communicate with the 5.5 million Danish speakers, studying Danish is supposed to provide access to the extended Nordic community.

Communication practices

A study into comprehension of Scandinavian languages among 15-20 year-old Icelandic adolescents showed that fewer than 40 percent of them understood native speakers of Norwegian, Swedish and Danish who approached them asking (in their native languages) for directions to the Nordic House in Reykjavík.¹³ Most of the Icelandic youths in the study (80%) were inclined to switch into English in this communication situation. Much in the same vein, many Icelanders have reported anecdotally that if they try to begin a conversation in Denmark or another Nordic country in a language that they believe to be some sort of Danish, they are likely to get a response in English.

This is of course a frustrating experience for someone who has invested in Danish studies at school for 3 years or more. Consequently, the use of English is often seen as a practical and easy option. Using English also has the obvious advantage for a foreigner in a Scandinavian country that you are not as likely to be at a "disadvantage" in a communication situation with the locals. It might be a more positive communication experience if both parts have "equally poor" English skills.

As to the more formal situations where Icelanders are supposed to use a Scandinavian language, such as when giving a talk, speaking at a formal meeting or presenting written documents, at work or at school in Scandinavia, the question of proper and correct language use arises. Even if everyday conversation in broken Scandinavian in informal settings is not likely to affect one's carrier negatively, this may be the case for the more serious occasions.

Brink¹⁴ interviewed 31 young citizens from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Greenland and the Faroes who live and work in a neighbouring Nordic country. The aim of her study was to test how inter-Nordic communication takes place in practice. She found that 11 of the 31 interviewees had an immediate comprehension of the neighbouring language. The remaining Scandinavians claimed that they needed on average 2-3 months for further acquisition – and the Finns and the Icelanders needed 5 months before they were able to communicate with some ease in the Scandinavian countries. Brink's¹⁵ subjects reported a significant amount of use of English in Nordic communication. This is hardly surprising, at least as far as the Icelandic participants are concerned, given the results in Børestam.¹⁶ According to Brink's¹⁷ results, the Nordic participants in her study use English as a tool for communication when Scandinavian does not work well, and English is often preferred in the more formal situations, while Scandinavian is instead associated with social gatherings and informality.

In Östman and Thøgersen's¹⁸ interview study, participants from Nordic countries (except Greenland) were asked to consider

the statements “Inter-Nordic communication should be conducted in Norwegian, Danish or Swedish” and “It is quite acceptable and merely an advantage to conduct inter-Nordic communication in English”.¹⁹ It comes as no surprise that the Icelanders and the Finnish-speaking Finns were the least “pro-Scandinavian” and the most “pro-English” in their evaluation of these statements.

Brink’s,²⁰ Börestam’s²¹ as well as Östman and Thøgersen’s²² results are hardly encouraging for Danish teachers in Iceland. Firstly, it appears that the students might need to keep studying the language on arrival in Scandinavia anyway, and secondly, the students tend to communicate in English in Scandinavia.

As Icelanders come to study at Scandinavian universities, particularly at postgraduate levels, they often attend courses that are taught in English and not in the Scandinavian language of the host country, and most doctoral theses are written in English nowadays. The proportion of English at Nordic universities

and in academia has increased greatly since the turn of the millennium.²³ This fact does not help in encouraging foreign Nordic students to learn Scandinavian properly, even if they are going to study at a university in Scandinavia.

Ideology rather than practice

The “Nordic language community” construct is less based on language practices than on an ideology of a common culture of the Nordic region.²⁴

In an article,²⁵ myself and my colleague draw the following conclusion, which can still be said to be valid:

The will to belong to a Nordic community is so important that even Nordic peoples that do not belong to the primary Scandinavian language community have implemented education policies that accord with the overarching cultural policy.²⁶

Noter

1. On this distinction see e.g. Løland (1997, 20-21).
2. Haugen (1987).
3. Haugen (1987, 71).
4. See Uri (2005).
5. Statistics Iceland (2018).
6. Statistics Iceland (2018).
7. Statistics Iceland (2018).
8. See e.g. Hauksdóttir (2016).
9. Hauksdóttir (2016).
10. Hannesdóttir (2010, 354).
11. See e.g. Hannesdóttir (2004, 52).
12. Dal (2000).
13. Börestam (2015).
14. Brink (2016).
15. Brink (2016).
16. Börestam (2015).
17. Brink (2016).
18. Östman and Thøgersen (2010).
19. Östman and Thøgersen (2010: 106).
20. Brink (2016).
21. Börestam (2015).
22. Östman and Thøgersen (2010).
23. See e.g. Gregersen (ed.) (2014).
24. See e.g. Haberland (2004, 7); Hannesdóttir (2004, 53).
25. Kristinsson and Hilmarsson-Dunn (2012).
26. Kristinsson and Hilmarsson-Dunn (2012, 233).

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