An old tongue's new tricks

The strange reinvention of Icelandic

A language both ancient and modern

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IT IS hardly surprising that Icelanders have names for the many different fish that abound in their surrounding waters—the various types of cod, herring and so on which they have been catching for centuries. It is rather more surprising that they have not just one word for the coelacanth, but three. After all, the living fossils of the Indian Ocean's depths hardly impinge on their Atlantic way of life—and if an Icelander found a pressing need to talk about them, why not just use the Greek word, as other nations do? But Icelanders are keen namers of things—and would never dream of simply adopting a transliterated version of someone else's word. So they call the coelacanth *skúfur*, which means "tassel". Or *skúfuggi*: tassel-fin. Or sometimes *forniskúfur*: "ancient tassel" [listen to a spoken pronunciation here].

Icelanders are fiercely proud of their tongue and stay actively involved in its maintenance. On Icelandic Language Day they celebrate those

among the population of 340,000 who have done the most for it. They love the links it gives them to their past. Ordinary Icelanders revel in their ability to use phrases from the sagas—written around eight centuries ago—in daily life. The commentator who says that a football team is *bíta í skjaldarrendur* ("biting its shield-end") [spoken] as it fights on in the face of great odds, is behaving quite normally in borrowing an image from ancient tales of Viking derring-do (one of the castles in the British Museum's 12th-century Lewis chess-set records the metaphor in walrus ivory).

The result is something close to unique—a language that is at the same time modern (it can happily express concepts such as podcasting), pure (it borrows very few words from any other tongue) and ancient (it is far closer to the ancestral Norse tongue than its increasingly distant cousins, Danish and Norwegian). Its complex grammar has barely changed in almost a thousand years and has a distinct old-worldliness. But if, like the *forniskúfur,* Icelandic is a living fossil, it is a lovely and lively one.

Ingólfur Arnason brought the first settlers from Norway to Iceland in 874AD. They spoke the common language used throughout Scandinavia often called "donsk tunga" ("Danish tongue") or, by others, some version of "northern" (the origin of "Norse", "Norwegian" and "Norman"). From early on they were particularly keen on using it to write things down; much of what is known about Viking culture comes from Icelandic texts. In the 13th century Snorri Sturluson produced the Prose Edda, one of the earliest and most important accounts of the antics of Thor, Frigg, Loki and their kith and kin. Icelanders also looked self-consciously at their own history, producing the sagas: generation-spanning tales of family, honour, feuds and outlawry that fall somewhere between history and myth. They are remarkable documents; Milan Kundera, a Czech novelist, once remarked that they would be rightly considered "an anticipation or even the foundation of the European novel" if only they had been written in a language anyone else spoke.

They came from the land of the ice and snow

Religious works also got recorded on sheepskin parchment. In 1000 a close-run decision at the *Alþingi* (an annual parliament) saw the Icelanders trade in Odin for the Holy Trinity. Fairly soon, theological texts were being translated into Icelandic; the common tongue became "a respectable alternative to Latin" centuries before the Reformation brought a comparable transition in the rest of Europe, according to Kristján Árnason, a linguist at the University of Iceland.

The idea that scholars and clerks needed to take seriously the language people actually used was not unique to Iceland. Dante Alighieri, a Tuscan poet, made the same argument in "De Vulgari Eloquentia". But he did so, tellingly, in Latin—and in the early 14th century. Iceland's "First Grammatical Treatise", which explored ways to write Old Norse using the Latin alphabet, was written by an unknown hand 150 years earlier.

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The wealth of early vernacular literature and scholarship is one reason Icelandic is preserved in its ancient form, with a complex grammar other Scandinavian languages have lost. (Icelandic has three genders

and four cases, which affect the endings on nouns and adjectives based on their roles in sentences. For the most part the continental Scandinavian languages have lost a gender and almost all of their case systems. Icelandic verbs have six forms for the six grammatical persons. The others have stripped this down to one.) Another reason for preservation was straightforward isolation. Iceland is 700km (380 nautical miles) of rough ocean from the nearest inhabited land, the tiny Faroe Islands—which have their own grammatically conservative Scandinavian language. One study of more than 2,000 languages found that those with few speakers that are spoken in small areas with few neighbours tend to have precisely the kind of complexities Icelandic and Faroese have retained and Danish has abandoned. "Big" languages can keep Icelandic-style intricacy—Russian is one that has done so. But they are the exception.

Another factor is that Iceland was unpopulated when settled. Conquest often leaves "substrate" influences on the language of those taking charge. And class was largely irrelevant; the prestigious written language was spoken by educated and illiterate alike. The result, say many Icelanders, is that they can read 13th-century sagas "like a newspaper". Such claims should be taken with a pinch of the island's black salt. The grammar may have changed little, but the sagas assume knowledge of kinship ties and myths that modern Icelanders must learn about at school. Many compare the difficulty of reading them to English-speakers' struggles with Shakespeare. But that is still extraordinary; the sagas were not written in Shakespeare's time. They were written a century before Chaucer.

To fight the horde, and sing and cry

The stability of Icelandic is a subject for debate and speculation. Its lexical purity is more easily explained. It has borrowed many words in its history. But in the 17th century Icelandic intellectuals began to kick them out. A Danish-Icelandic dictionary shows how different the two cousins have become. Danish has borrowed a slew of pan-European words: *passiv*, *patent* and *pedicure* appear on one page. The Icelandic

equivalents
are *hlutlaus* [spoken], *einkaleyfi* [spoken] and *fótsnyrting* [spoken]. A huge stock of words with Latin and Greek roots is shared across almost all European languages, from “telephone” to “address”. Not so with Icelandic. “Telephone” is *sími*, from an old Norse word for “thread”. “Address” is *heimilisfang* [spoken]—literally, the place where one may be caught at home. A foreigner encountering Icelandic-only signage is usually unable to decipher a single word. Forbiddingly long compound words like *hjúkrunarfræðingur*(nurse) [spoken] have no familiar elements (*Hjúkrun* comes from roots for “serving” and “caring”, and *fræðingur* is a specialist). The letters ð and þ, representing two “th” sounds (the first as in “this”, the second as in “thin”), add to the exotic feel.

That said, some words do look similar to English
ones: *bók*, *epli*and *brauð* are “book”, “apple” and “bread”. This is because the Scandinavian languages, like the west Germanic languages (English, Dutch and German), share a proto-Germanic ancestor. More overlapping vocabulary comes from the fact that Viking invaders left some words behind in England: “knife”, “leg”, “husband”, “window” and even “they” (*þeir* in both Old Norse and modern Icelandic).

To English ears, this means that many words, bewitchingly, are neither as alien as *hjúkrun*, nor as easy as *bók*, but both familiar and not. To be ill is *veik*, or “weak”. Something’s price is its *verð*, or “worth”. To wait is *bíða*, or “to bide”. A fever is *hita*, or “heat”. Put together *höfuð*, “head”, and *verk*, cognate to words like “work” and “wrought”, and you get a headache, *höfuðverk*. Thus to learn Icelandic feels a little like becoming pre-modern, or entering a fantasy. “She is biding at home, heat-weak and head-wrought” is the sort of diction you might imagine for characters in “Game of Thrones” (filmed partly in Iceland, as it happens).

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Some of these similarities, though, can mislead. An English-speaker who knows that *dóm* is cognate to the English word "doom" may find the Reykjavik building marked *dómsmálaráðuneytid* [spoken] rather menacing. But it is just the ministry of justice: "doom" in English was once mere judgment; only later did it take on first the meaning of condemnation, then ruin.

It is not clear in quite what way J.R.R. Tolkien meant the word when he named the climactic locale in "The Lord of the Rings" Mount Doom. But as a philologist interested in Norse and other ancient tongues, and keen on the archaic, he certainly knew his Icelandic. The name of the wizard Gandalf is taken from the Eddas. The Tolkiens' Icelandic nanny, Adda, not only took care of the children; part of her role was to help him practice Icelandic. Mrs Tolkien was not pleased by the attention.

W.H. Auden—a great fan of "The Lord of the Rings"—was also entranced by Iceland's stories and language. He liked the local smoked lamb and dried fish less, preferring to live on endless coffee and cigarettes during his stay there in the 1930s. And he disliked some of the island's other devotees, too. In a letter to a friend he described

catching a bus "full of Nazis who talk incessantly about *Die Schönheit des Islands* [the beauty of Iceland], and the Aryan qualities of the stock." This is the downside to a reputation for isolated, undiluted purity. The country remains the recipient of unwelcome attention from fascists. David Duke, a former leader of the Ku Klux Klan, has said that "there's only one country anymore that's all white, and that's Iceland. And Iceland is not enough." Paul Fontaine, a journalist at the *Reykjavík Grapevine*, says that white-supremacist comments on the newspaper's Facebook page warn Iceland not to "make the same mistakes" as other countries: letting in asylum-seekers or Muslims.

This is one reason why Ari Páll Kristinsson, head of the island's language planning council, cringes at the idea of linguistic "purity", and suggests shyly that one speak simply of the "Icelandic vocabulary tradition". But he works hard at keeping the language as close to uncontaminated old Norse as is feasible. Compared to other countries with the same goal, his team does very well. In France, an Academy of 40 grey-haired worthies pronounces on what is and is not proper French and terminology committees in government ministries busily coin new words. The French, merrily ignorant of most of their pronouncements, continue to *liker* posts from Facebook friends and *bruncher* with their real-world friends regardless. In Iceland Ari Páll and his staff of three listen to what the public wants and get listened to in turn. The council has around 50 unofficial groups of enthusiasts with an interest in language as well as subjects such as cars, electrical engineering, computers or knitting. Those committees suggest new words with solid Norse roots, taking in the council's advice on how to make them fit the sound and grammar of Icelandic.

In perhaps their most famous example of purist creativity, when a word for computer was needed in the 1960s, the planners coined *tölva*, combining *tala* ("number") and *völva*, an old word for prophetess. When doctors started talking about AIDS using the English acronym rather than its long, literal Icelandic translation, *heilkenni áunnins ónæmisbrests* [spoken], the committee coined two shorter

alternatives: *alnæmi* [spoken], something like "all-susceptibility", and *eyðni*, which sounds like the English term, but comes from the Icelandic *eyða*, meaning "to destroy". When Icelanders started saying "podcast", the council quickly responded with *hlaðvarp* [spoken], from roots meaning "charge" (squint and you can see *hlaða* as a distant cousin to "load") and "throw".

Peace and trust can win the day

The country welcomes new people, even as it makes its own new words. The foreign-born now account for over 10% of the population. Many come from eastern Europe (though Iceland is not in the EU, they don't need visas) but there are also Thais and Filipinos. In 2004 American racists reacted with particular bile against a *Grapevine* cover story featuring a Kenyan woman in Icelandic national dress. Guðni Jóhannesson, the president (who is also a historian, and a friend of your correspondent), says that Iceland's fishing industry might collapse without foreign workers. Iceland may be the world's only country with a "Herring Era Museum" (*Síldarminjasafn*). But fish-processing survives largely thanks to Poles willing to endure harsh factory conditions.

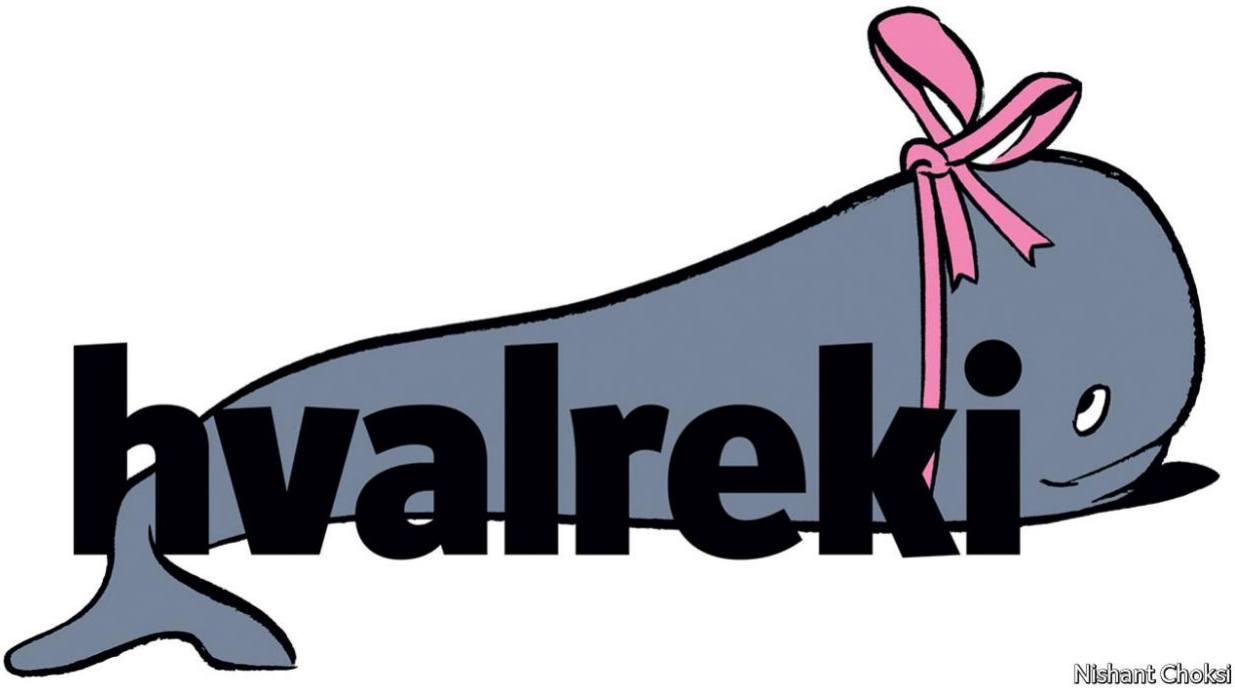
Do these immigrants pose a threat to Icelandic? Not yet, but worries are growing. Subsidised language lessons are available, but support is woefully weak, says Nichole Mosty, who was until recently an American-Icelandic member of the *Alþingi* [spoken]. Her own Icelandic sometimes draws criticism from Icelanders not quite sure if someone with a foreign lilt can represent them in politics.

It takes grit to get past one's early struggles with the language. When Eliza Reid, who is now the first lady, moved to Iceland with Guðni in 2003, she soon started learning Icelandic in earnest. The difficulty was that Icelanders, not used to hearing their language spoken by foreigners, would switch to English before she got the first phrase out. She learned to say "I'm learning Icelandic" pre-emptively to stop them. Some 14 years later she gives speeches in the language—but she makes fun of her own conjugation mistakes as she does so.

Not all new arrivals stay as long. Short-term workers from the EU, like the 2m tourists a year, find they have no need to learn Icelandic. Law requires that signs primarily for Icelanders be written in Icelandic. (H&M, a clothing retailer, recently flouted it with a sign reading "Grand Opening!"). But much of Reykjavik no longer seems to be "primarily for Icelanders".

Technology may pose an even greater threat than foreigners. Icelanders cannot use Siri on their *farsími*s or Alexa at home: Apple and Amazon do not support the language. An Icelandic engineer at Google convinced the company to add Icelandic speech-recognition to Android smartphones, a task that required recording thousands of hours of Icelandic and having it transcribed into text. Google made this data freely available to others. But how much it will be used is not clear. Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson of the University of Iceland says that while Microsoft Windows added Icelandic fairly early, the translation was bad enough that many users stuck with English. It was later improved. But when he recently asked a class of 20-30 native students in his Icelandic university course how many used Windows in Icelandic, not one did.

That it is the language of technology contributes to a sense among the young that English is cool, practical and international, while Icelandic is stolid, difficult and local. When asked, young people repeat their parents' beliefs about the need to keep the language pure. But they adore English. In 2017 Stefanie Bade, a German doctoral student at the University of Iceland, found that listening to recordings of their own tongue spoken with different accents, Icelanders rated the local accent as the most "attractive" and "relaxed", but the American the most "intelligent", "reliable" and "interesting". They gave the American accent the most positive rating overall.



But Icelanders have survived isolation, ice and volcanoes for more than a millennium. It will take more than tourists, foreign workers and Siri to make them give up on their most treasured cultural inheritance. Where else in the world could you find such an arresting word for a lucky windfall—*hvalreki* [spoken], a beached whale that offers months of food? Icelanders will not make the mistake of treating their lovely language as such a happy accident. It is an ongoing achievement to be cherished. It may be something of a living fossil, but keeping it alive is both their duty and delight.

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