

GOTHENBURG MONOGRAPHS IN LINGUISTICS 37

**Language change vs. stability
in conservative language communities:
A case study of Icelandic**

Finnur Friðriksson

Academic dissertation in Linguistics, to be publicly defended,
by due permission of the Faculty of Arts at University of Gothenburg
on December 19, 2008, at 09:15 a.m.,
in Lilla Hörsalen, Humanisten, University of Gothenburg,
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

FACULTY OF ARTS

Department of Linguistics

2008

Abstract

Ph.D. dissertation in general linguistics at University of Gothenburg, Sweden, 2008

Title: Language change vs. stability in conservative language communities: A case study of Icelandic

Author: Finnur Friðriksson

Language: English, with a summary in Swedish

Department: Department of Linguistics, University of Gothenburg, Box 200, SE 405 30 Göteborg

Series: Gothenburg Monographs in Linguistics 37

ISBN: 978-91-977196-3-6

This dissertation is a study in language stability. Icelandic, which is regarded by many as a prime example of a stable language, is chosen as a vehicle for an examination of this field. A study, which involves a number of alleged ongoing changes in modern Icelandic, is conducted in order to determine whether or not the language can still be characterized as stable and, if the answer is positive, to identify the conditions which support this stability. The data used, which have been collected from a total of 108 informants chosen on the basis of a set of social criteria, consist primarily of informal group conversations which were analysed with respect to the relevant linguistic variables. 52 of the informants also submitted written material, not produced specifically for the purpose of the thesis, and this was analysed in the same way. Furthermore, all informants were interviewed to obtain information on their social background, the structure of their social networks, and on their attitudes towards and awareness of the alleged changes.

The results regarding language use indicate that Icelandic can still be characterized as a stable language. Thus, examples of the alleged changes appeared quite infrequently in the data and their distribution amongst the age groups included is indicative of stable variation rather than change in progress. With respect to attitudes and awareness, the informants generally display both a high level of awareness of the alleged changes and a high level of negativity towards them. Furthermore, a pattern emerges which indicates a relationship between attitudes and usage, such that an informant's negative attitude towards a given non-standard form decreases his or her likelihood of using it. The results also indicate that other factors, such as strong linguistic nationalism and a stability-oriented language policy, are instrumental in creating the sociolinguistic conditions in Iceland which support language stability, and it is argued that these conditions will generally result in language stability. At the same time, it is pointed out that other conditions, specific to other language communities, need to be taken into consideration before this generalisation is made.

Keywords: language stability, attitudes to language, linguistic nationalism, language planning, social networks, Icelandic, 'dative sickness', case inflections, 'new passive', 'am-to-frenzy'