

# DO ISLAND LANGUAGES EXIST?

A research note from the Nordic countries

[Received November 12th 2020; accepted December 2nd 2020 – DOI: 10.21463/shima.109]

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**ABSTRACT:** This critical report-cum-position statement summarises several workshops and conference panels recently held in three Nordic countries—Denmark, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands—based in developing the concept of island languages. It puts forward the epistemology and ontology of these sessions. The role these gatherings are playing in encouraging a more linguistically mandated direction within island studies and the study of island languages, especially in the Nordic countries and Europe, is summarised.

**KEYWORDS:** language contact, linguistic isolates, linguistics of islands, sociolinguistics

Do island languages exist?

Islands as distinct research sites have been given little specific attention by linguists. The physical segregation, distinctness, and isolation of islands from mainland and continental environments may provide scholars of language with distinct and robust sets of singular and combined case studies for examining the role of islandness in any appreciation of language. Writers have argued that mountain languages and desert languages may yield special properties of languages, and one may wonder whether island languages are special as well. Catford (1977) and Everett (2013), for example, observed that there are more ejectives in mountain languages. Zettersten (1969, p. 138) is, as far as we know, the only scholar who suggested some possible common properties for island languages, believing them to be more conservative, having special vocabulary, and displaying so-called pristine place names, names for which the act or event of creation are known. Other scholars have examined the degree to which isolation, island biogeography, and time since first settlement explain variation in language diversity among Pacific islands.

Nichols (1992) found that there is an association between genetic and structural diversity on the one hand, and the types of areas in which groups of languages are spoken in. One factor she identified was the spread of peoples throughout a region, and another was an accretion zone or a residual zone. The first would be a range with little or no population

movement, leading to relative linguistic homogeneity, and the latter are characterised by linguistic diversity, strong contact influences and new language groups moving in, often in mountainous areas. However, whether distinct and particular sociolinguistic and typological phenomena can be attributable to islands and their islandness and vice versa remains virtually unexplored.

The possibility of there being anything specific and peculiar about languages spoken on islands as compared to languages spoken on mainlands and continents has been the explicit topic of two meetings, one each in Denmark and Iceland, with two other associated meetings about island languages, one each in Denmark and the Faroe Islands.<sup>1</sup> The topics of these events are worth bringing to the attention of Island Studies scholars. Some of the languages discussed at these gatherings are located on islands where creoles and other contact languages are spoken, e.g. in the Caribbean, others are found on islands where there is a colonial settler language, e.g. and Iceland, and the Faroe Islands, and others again are on locations where there is an indigenous language or a newly-developed non-creole language, e.g. the Lesser Antilles, where English, French, English creoles, and French creoles have replaced the indigenous languages. This variety of locations, geographies, and language contact results have led us to pose an overarching question borne from all the four events: Is there anything special socially, linguistically, grammatically, and typologically about the languages of islands? And if so, can we talk about such a thing as an island language?

#### What might island languages be? The four instalments

Island Studies as a discipline is by definition geographically vast. The topics scholars working within the field grapple with are also spread well. Relations involving islands and the languages spoken on islands have been treated to some extent in island studies (e.g. Ronström, 2009). However, an explicit consideration relating island studies and language studies and linguistics is pending.

‘Exploring Island Languages’ workshop, Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies, Aarhus University, Denmark

In April 2018, Peter Bakker and Joshua Nash invited 12 specialists to participate in a workshop entitled ‘Exploring Island Languages’ at Aarhus University. Each speaker shared knowledge of a specific language spoken by a speech community living on a particular

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<sup>1</sup> The conceptual foundation for an explicit focus on island languages was based in several probing discussions between Joshua Nash and Peter Bakker in early 2018 about the nature of islands and their cultures, the languages of and on islands, how researchers have done linguistics and language documentation on islands, and whether or not there is anything special or marked about these languages. The first workshop—‘Exploring island languages’—took place at Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies, Aarhus University, on 30 April 2018 (the results of this meeting are published as Nash et al, 2020). The second meeting focused explicitly on island languages and that one took place at the University of Iceland in Reykjavík on 26 April 2019. The other two events, a scientific round table with 25 participants to discuss the need for a European scholarly network of creole and contact languages scholars held on 6th–7th December 2018 at Sandbjerg Estate, near Sønderborg, Denmark, and the tenth *Fraendafundur* (literally ‘meeting of cousins’) between the University of Iceland and University of the Faroe Island on 16th–18th August 2019, also dealt with topics of interest to island languages.

island or archipelago: Amager in Denmark, Annobon in Equatorial Guinea, Faroe Islands, Haiti, Iceland, Japan, the Lesser Antilles, Pitcairn Island, Reta in Indonesia, Réunion in the Indian Ocean, Saint Croix (Virgin Islands) and Vanuatu. While the notion of ‘islandness’ was the common denominator, the languages discussed were sociolinguistically and typologically diverse. The decision to include a variety of languages facilitated the objective: to answer the question ‘Is there anything unique about island languages?’ The questions discussed there revolve around the rate of replacement of island languages, the fact that language isolates are seldom found on islands, and the existence of special grammatical properties in spatial orientation. A resultant position paper was published (Nash et al, 2020).

### Islands of Cognition: International perspectives on linguistic diversity and human cognition, Reykjavík, Iceland

The Islands of Cognition conference, organised by Jón Simon Markússon, was held at the University of Iceland in Reykjavík on 26th April 2019. This second instalment built on and extended the pilot ‘Exploring Island Languages’ workshop. The islands and archipelagos represented were the Caribbean, Faroe Islands, Greenland, Iceland, Indonesia, Pitcairn Island and the Virgin Islands. This meeting solidified the epistemology and conceptual foundations of the Island Studies conferences as its own series and research focus within island studies.

The conference focused on specific attributes of each language or language type to gain insight into the constraints imposed by domain-general cognitive functions on the structural diversity characteristic of language. Additionally, research by scholars at the University of Iceland into first and second language acquisition, cognitive and usage-based grammar was presented. The conference showcased original research conducted from the cognitive perspective with the ultimate aim of demonstrating how domain-general cognitive processes such as comparison, analogy, categorisation, schematisation, and entrenchment facilitate language acquisition, language usage, frames of spatial reference, and language change focusing on island languages. The nine speakers came from six countries and work at one of three institutions of higher education: Aarhus University, the University of Greenland and the University of Iceland. The papers focused on a particular island language or type of island language: Faroese, Greenlandic, Icelandic (both as L<sub>1</sub> and L<sub>2</sub>), Crucian (St. Croix in the Caribbean), Pitcairn (South Pacific), Reta (Indonesia) and creole languages (often spoken on islands) in general.

### Frændafundur 10: Tórshavn, Faroe Islands

‘Frændafundur’ is a triennial conference, hosted alternately by the University of Iceland and the University of the Faroe Islands. The objective of this collaboration is to enhance knowledge of the languages, literatures, cultures, histories, nature, and biodiversity of these two island nations. Accordingly, the conference consists of multiple workshops, held concurrently, at which research and ideas are presented to researchers from a variety of fields and working at multiple institutions. The official languages of the conference are Icelandic and Faroese, although papers have been given in English and mainland Scandinavian languages.

The conference was held from 16th–18th August 2019, for the tenth time, by the University of the Faroe Islands. Jón Símon Markússon and Joshua Nash participated in the workshop ‘Setningafrøði, leksikalisering og onnur málslig viðurskipti’ (‘Syntax, lexicalisation and other linguistic phenomena’). While the workshop was not devoted to Island languages per se, despite the general theme of Icelandic, Faroese and/or comparison between the two, a section of the workshop was devoted to the papers ‘Cognitive (re)organisation of frequent and entrenched paradigmatic relations in Insular Nordic’ (Jón Símon Markússon) and ‘“Fut you mark a chicken?” (Why can’t you mark a chicken?): Chicken, goat and tree marking on Pitcairn Island’ (Joshua Nash). Other participants of the workshop, whose affiliations include the University of Iceland, the University of the Faroe Islands and the University of Minnesota, expressed enthusiasm for further inquiry into the potentially unique features of languages spoken on islands. In the context of the Faroe Islands, and given the specific focus of those scholars present on the Insular Nordic languages, it is fair to say that bridges were built between likeminded researchers. It is hoped that the initiative to present ideas on the uniqueness of island languages at *Frændafundur 10* will pave the way for yet further collaboration with scholars whose research focuses on languages spoken on islands, with a view to accounting for the nature of communication systems that function in island environments.

### Sandbjerg creole languages workshop

In December 2018, 25 scholars of pidgin and creole languages from Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Russia, Spain, Sweden, and the UK, with one attendee from Australia, gathered at Aarhus University Conference Center Sandbjerg for a scientific discussion-cum-meeting about the need for a European scholarly network of creole and contact languages. It followed a formula which was previously used for the ‘Exploring island languages workshop’ outlined above. In the scientific section, specific questions were sequentially discussed in a round table format where all participants were given equal space and opportunity to voice their knowledge and opinions about these topics. Participants experienced that the open format of the workshop allowed a relaxed environment whereby knowledge transfer and sharing of views was encouraged. This experimental format was enthusiastically received by all participants. They reported scientific progress in the form of shifting viewpoints and there was an overwhelming desire by the group as a whole for such meetings to continue.<sup>2</sup>

In the past decade, Scandinavia, especially Denmark, has developed into one of the world centres of research on creole languages, competing with Paris, Lisbon, and Mona (Jamaica). The Scandinavian schools of creole studies are characterised by the use of large datasets, rigorous empirical work, and strict methods, including the use of advanced computational techniques (e.g. Bakker et al, 2017, an open access book). Swedish scholars of pidgins and creoles cooperate with Danish creolists (e.g. Bakker et al, 2018, Parkvall et al, 2018). They include Mikael Parkvall, Laura López Alvarez and Anna Jon-And in Stockholm, Eeva Sippola (Helsinki), and Angela Bartens (Turku) and Peter Slomanson (Tampere) in Finland. Some recent contributions to the field from them are: Parkvall et al (2013), Parkvall and Jacobs (2018), Jansson et al (2015), Alvarez and Jon-And (2017), Alvarez (2019), Bartens (2013), Fernández and Sippola (2017) and Slomanson (2018).

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<sup>2</sup> A brief evaluative report and a list of the questions discussed is available at request from Peter Bakker.

Creole languages are almost always spoken on islands and/or coastal regions, reflecting the obvious contact zones of seaborne empires, both European and Austronesian. Colonial populations, often together with their enslaved companions, seem to have wiped out indigenous languages on islands and replaced the original languages there with colonial and creole languages, whereas many mainland creoles coexist with the indigenous languages that survived. Island languages appear to be more vulnerable, an observation that goes against the idea of conservativeness of island languages, probably inspired by the exceptional conservativeness of Icelandic.

## Conclusion and future

Why have researchers researched island languages and why do they continue to do so? For some researchers, it is appealing from a commonsense perspective: islands are often socially and geographically isolated, the cultural traditions that thrive on such islands are often somehow unique due to the relative isolation of the community, and researchers make the logical leap that this uniqueness could also characterise the island community's speech.

Languages spoken in mountainous areas have been claimed to have special features. But why has nothing been claimed for islands? Zettersten's (1969) proposed universals of island languages refer to archaisms in lexicon and structure and innovation in toponymy (placenames), ie shared patterns of change. Schreier (2008, 2017) has used extensive data from fieldwork on the varieties of English spoken in two South Atlantic islands, Tristan da Cunha and St Helena, to launch convincing arguments about the nature of isolation and linguistic change. While an impressive undertaking, what Schreier does not consider at significant depth is whether it is indeed islands themselves, their islandness, and their physical and social geography, which bring about language differences and language change. Schreier's examples are focused largely on linguistic isolation, situations which happen to be housed on islands, rather than claiming anything specific about what an island language may be.

Zettersten did not search for any shared features, and neither have we discussed specifically which grammatical features may constitute what might be termed a prototypical island language. However, we have suggested that there are several intriguing links involving the social history of certain islands, with repercussions for its languages, such as orientation systems, language and isolation, language contact, the rareness of language isolates on islands, and some hints of how island geographies affect grammar (see Nash et al, 2020 for examples). Paradoxically, islands seem to be contact zones with exceptional degrees of fluctuation as well as conservatism. The most conservative Germanic varieties are spoken in Iceland, but also in a valley in the middle of the Swedish mainland (Elvdalian or Dalecarlian; Dahl, 2009). Similarly, the newly emerged dialect of Danish that emerged in a suburb of Aarhus in Denmark (Zachariassen, 2019), can be seen as connected to a multiethnic metaphorical island community. And Faroese, despite its isolation, has changed considerably since the islands were populated from Europe, as rapidly as mainland Danish changed, which is known as a language with an exceptionally high rate of change.

Strikingly, less than a handful of islands, except those of the size of a continent, are home to language isolates, which suggests that islands are contact zones rather than isolated from the rest of the world. Obviously, populations may be more easily replaced or merged in islands, with radical consequences for language discontinuity. The fact that there are so

few language isolates on islands could be because of size and population restraints. Numerically or militarily advantaged populations reaching an island may replace the original population within a short time period, because there are fewer easy escape possibilities as compared to terrestrial situations. In other locations populations can flee to mountains, deserts, or to other less accessible environments. They are more able to preserve their language on large land masses than on islands. Thus, the replacement rate is higher on islands than elsewhere.

Travel by water was much more common in the past than it is today (cf the famous study of the Brunlanes peninsula in Norway by Trudgill, 1974). One has to disentangle the geographical and modern metaphorical resonances of the terms ‘insular’ and ‘isolated’. A definition of an island as a site of physical removal and segregation might be difficult to substantiate. Language isolates are rarely spoken on islands; on the contrary, many islands appear to be contact zones. In the case of Iceland also, the island is connected to, not separated from, other places by water; human habitation is mostly coastal, and travel by boat may be easier than travel across the inhospitable interior. This has been argued by Fortescue (2018) to explain the different orientation systems of Iceland (overland travel by the coast is relatively easy) versus Haida Gwaii (the Queen Charlotte Islands), where ocean travel is easier because of dense forestation.

Recent work in literary studies has emphasised transmarine connectivities across the North Atlantic as well – the sea being that which connects, rather than divides, and that is argued for the British Isles and Ireland. Rouse (2016), for example, summarises the case for “the fiction of maritime British insularity”. This may illustrate the relative insularity of geopolitical entities like Iceland, Faroe Islands, the Shetland and Orkney Islands, where varieties of Old Norse were once used. Places like Iceland have certainly been more isolated (and one can think, from whom or what?) in some historical moments than others. As insularity is socially produced as well as reflective of some kind of geographical situation, it is worth realising that degrees of insularity are to a large extent historically contingent.

The Austronesian migrations, first from Taiwan, and then through much of the Philippines, Melanesia, and Oceania, were probably partly triggered by lack of space on the islands of outmigration (Bellwood, 2017). This also showcases how waterways really were highways that minimally hindered and often facilitated the movement of populations. Although not necessarily a statement of the reality of island languages, but indicative of a strong trend, in the case of the Austronesian languages, the linguistic outcome of disappearing phonemes is compelling; the further east the Oceanic languages are spoken, the fewer consonants are found in the languages (Trudgill, 2004).

Finally, we should mention the language spoken on North Sentinel Island, one of the Andaman Islands and probably the blankest spot on the map of the world’s languages. We know very little if anything about the language(s), and it remains unclassified. Sentinelese might represent the ultimate conceptualisation of an isolated island language. The population must have come from elsewhere, at some point in time, by water. Perhaps Sentinelese will eventually show that islandness can be a characteristic of a language if it is not influenced by other kinds of languages, shaped according to specific geographical and topological conditions that constitute a part of their speakers’ everyday reality and possibly even influence their cognitive relation to the environment.

The meetings about possible properties of the languages of islands summarised above, and the discussions held there are offered here as a basis of further thinking about the nature of the interaction between languages and their incident environments, with implications for linguistic typology, in our case, grammar, social typology and cultural history, language contact, and the study of isolates. We hope that these case studies, presentations of data, and arguments have muddied the theoretical water within island studies enough to stimulate more thinking regarding the character of languages spoken on islands and how relative ogeographical isolation might have an impact on language. We hope these ideas float beyond the expanses of the Nordic seas and islands to other parts of our world of islands.

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