

# From Linguistic Patriotism to Cultural Nationalism: Language and Identity in Iceland

Guðmundur Hálfðanarson

University of Iceland



*Áhyggjur afstöðu íslenskunnar voru áberandi í fréttum í byrjun árs 2006, en þá var því spáð tungan myndi að öllu óbreyttu hverfa á næstu hundrað árum. Þessi umræða ber vott um mikilvægi íslensks máls fyrir þjóðarvitund á Íslandi, en þrátt fyrir að íslensk náttúra saki á sem helsta tákni fyrir íslenska þjóð, þá er tungumálið enn í forgrunni þegar þjóðin er skilgreind. Að hluta til bera þessar umræður vott um alþjóðlegar áhyggjur afstöðu “smærri” mála nú á tímum hnattvæðingar, en þær eiga þó ekki síður ratur í íslenskri þjóðmálaumræðu síðustu tveggja alda. Í upphafi 19. aldar tóku menn eins og Tómas Semundsson og Jón Sigurðsson að nota tungumálið í pólitískum tilgangi, þ.e. hugmyndin um að íslenskan væri ein elsta og göfugasta tunga Evrópu var nú notuð sem röksemd fyrir sjálfstæði íslenskrar þjóðar. Þessi hugmynd endurspeglar sigur þjóðernisstefunnar í nágrannalöndunum, ekki síst í Danmörku, þar sem hugsjónir heimspekinga á borð við Þjóðverjana Jóhann Herder og Jóhann Fichte leiddu til þess að hið danska konungsríki breyttist smám saman í þjóðríki. Í umræðunni nú má greina merki um þessar gömlu áberslur í skoðunum manna um tunguna, sem sýna að hugsjónir sjálfstæðisbaráttunnar lifa góðu lífi í nútímanum.*



Guðmundur Hálfðanarson (1956) was educated at the University of Lund, Sweden, University of Iceland, Reykjavík, and Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. He is professor of history at the University of Iceland, specializing in European social and intellectual history, with special emphasis on the history and theory of nationalism. Among his latest publication are *Íslenska þjóðríkið – upphaf og endimörk* (The Icelandic Nation State – Origins and Limits, 2001) and with H. Jensen and L. Berntson, *Europa 1800–2000* (2003).



“The foundations of [our] language are cracking,” the leading daily newspaper in Iceland, *Morgunblaðið*, declared recently in a front-page headline. The article described a conference held in Reykjavík the day before, where a group of concerned citizens discussed the conditions and future of the Icelandic language in the era of globalization. According to the reporter, the speakers at the conference were alarmed by the linguistic development in Iceland, as both the grammatical structures of the Icelandic language and vocabulary used were changing rapidly, at the same time as pronunciation becomes more unclear every year. One of the speakers quoted predicted that unless drastic measures were taken to improve the linguistic education in Iceland a century from now Icelandic will not be spoken in the world.

In part, the alarm expressed at the conference is related to general concerns about the future of so-called ‘small languages’, at a time when English is penetrating linguistic communities all over

the world<sup>1</sup>. “A language is not an ornament,” the writer Andri Snær Magnason, reminded the audience in his talk, “but primarily a basis for communication, a channel for memories, experience, and values”. That is, if a language disappears or changes drastically, the knowledge and ideas of one generation cannot be carried on to the next and, hence, great cultural values will be lost. But the conference was also a sign of the central position of language in the construction of Icelandic identity. The chief-editor of the largest publishing house in Iceland reflected on this side of the story, as he pondered the question what distinguishes Icelanders from other peoples of the world. In his view, two things “form the basis of our (i.e. the Icelanders’) existence and justify that this small population group can be called a nation. On the one hand, it is the country, the Icelandic nature, and, on the other, this distinct language, Icelandic”<sup>2</sup>.

It is, of course, a well-known practice to relate national identity and language, as languages are frequently regarded as the primary markers of nations and the most effective cultural systems of integrating national communities<sup>3</sup>. Put more simply, languages separate “us” – the speakers of one particular language – from “them” – or all those who speak other languages. In this way, languages create divisions between linguistic groups, at the same time as they unite linguistic communities internally. Moreover, languages also link the present generations of “us” with past generations of speakers of the same language – and, in the same manner, they also connect the present speakers with future generations of the users of the same language. In this sense, a nation is a collective group of past, present and future generations, living in the same geographic space, and united by the same language and memories. In the words of the philosopher and former rector of the University of Iceland, Páll Skúlason, the individuals who make up the nation “have collective consciousness and collective will because their mind is formed and nurtured by the same culture where history preserves the customs of the forefathers, the country preserves their endeavours, and the language their thoughts”. What makes the formation of this collective national consciousness and will possible, he continues, is the awareness of the fact that “we share the same history, the same country, and the same language”<sup>4</sup>. This comment is a variation on a common theme in the Icelandic cultural and political discourse. Its classic expression is found in a poem by the poet Snorri Hjartarson, where he invokes the true trinity of country, nation, and language,<sup>5</sup> comparing them with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit of the Christian tradition.

This attitude toward language has placed it at the centre of identity formation in Iceland, albeit in growing competition with the other core element mentioned above, i.e. the Icelandic nature. For this reason, concerns about the “health” and “future” of the Icelandic language have strong political implications, because many believe that if the language changes, then the national compact will automatically dissolve. The history of this political opinion is not often discussed in Iceland, simply because it is regarded as natural or given, rather than historically constructed or construed. Here I want to trace the genesis of this idea in Iceland, because the relations between language and political identity have, indeed, been fluid through the last three centuries in Iceland as they have been in other parts of Europe.

## LINGUISTIC PATRIOTISM OR INTEGRATION

In 1835, the first issue of the journal *Fjölnir* was published in Copenhagen by four Icelandic university students and young intellectuals, three of whom lived in Copenhagen but one in Iceland. In an address to the readers, one of the editors, the theologian Tómas Sæmundsson, discussed the role

of language in the constitution of nations in general, and role of the Icelandic language in particular. "Language is one of the chief characteristics of the humankind, and the supreme and clearest testimony to its merit," he argued, "and languages are the chief characteristic of nations. No nation will emerge until it speaks a distinctive language, and if languages die, then the nations die also, or turn into different nations ..." Icelanders should be proud, he concluded, "to speak one of the oldest languages in the western part of Europe, which is with their literature and ancient history the basis for their national glory ..." For this reason, everyone "should strive for preserving and investing in this valuable treasure, which is the common property of all those who can be called Icelandic" <sup>6</sup>.

Around the mid-19 century, this line of argument had become more or less hegemonic in the small community of students and intellectuals in the capital, Copenhagen, and was gaining ground among the few who showed any interest in discussing politics in Iceland at the time. Moreover, in the 1840s, under the guidance of the philologist and political activist, Jón Sigurðsson, it gradually developed into full-blown nationalism, resisting the integration of Iceland into the emerging Danish nation-state. According to Sigurðsson, a nation was not only a cultural community, but had also to be governed according to its own traditions in order to develop materially and spiritually. "When the government of Iceland is considered," he wrote in 1841, on the occasion of the establishment of a new Icelandic provincial assembly, "it has been more Danish than Icelandic for a long time, that is, unnatural rather than natural. When one nation wants to rule over another, they must be very similar, but if they are very dissimilar, the servile nation must either copy everything from the other, or it must show courage and pursue its right, so it can fulfil its divine destiny ..." <sup>7</sup> Sigurðsson's definition of the nation was more or less the same as Sæmundsson's, as he thought languages turned nations into what they were. Language "describes the thoughts of the nation and all the mental endeavour which is the basis and preparation for its material ventures ..." He also feared the deterioration of the Icelandic language, "because it is proven in all world history that with the degeneration of the language, the nations have degenerated, and linguistic regeneration has followed, or rather heralded, the regeneration of nations" <sup>8</sup>.

Although it was never mentioned at the time, these speculations reflect a radical paradigm shift in the Icelandic political discourse in the first decades of the nineteenth century, which in turn was a reaction to the political development in Denmark and ideological debates in Europe in the same period. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, there were serious doubts in Iceland about maintaining a separate linguistic culture on the island, because it impeded all interaction with the centre of the state. "I deem it not only to be useless," the Icelandic rector of the Latin School in Skálholt, Bjarni Jónsson, wrote in 1771,

but also very harmful, to preserve the Icelandic language. As long as the Icelanders spoke the same language as the other Nordic nations, everyone regarded them highly; but at the present time, since their language has become incomprehensible to others, they are treated with disdain. This hampers their transactions with other nations, in their trade and conduct. Why should one be so persistent in this respect? Let us follow the Norwegian and Faeroese examples and take up the Danish language, as we are under Danish rule and in communication with the Danish people <sup>9</sup>.

The rector's suggestion did not receive much support in Iceland, in part because there was no forum for public debates in the country at the time, and therefore issues of this sort were rarely

discussed openly. In part, it was also rejected because the Danish authorities showed no interest in the proposal. The main reason for this was, without doubt, the particular status of the Icelandic language in Scandinavia at the time. Since the early seventeenth century, it was generally believed that Icelandic was a relic of an ancient culture, or the original language that had been spoken by all the Scandinavian peoples in the Middle Ages<sup>10</sup>. One of the originators of this idea was the Icelandic humanist, Arngrímur Jónsson, who claimed in his description of Iceland, *Crymogæa sivi rerum Islandicarum*, published in Hamburg in 1609, that Icelanders alone still spoke the language of the Viking age in its original form. Once upon a time, this tongue had been called “Danish,” he wrote, then “Norwegian” or “Norse” (“Norvegica, *Norræna*”), but now it “merits to be called Icelandic, because it is used only in Iceland in its unchanged form” (“meritò Islandica vocatur, quod eâ integrâ soli utantur Islandi”)<sup>11</sup>.

The pride in the Icelandic language among Icelandic intellectuals, as the Nordic original language, *Ursprache*, originated in and was maintained by the strong interest in Icelandic manuscripts and sagas in the capital. The king of Denmark employed scores of Icelandic students to transcribe manuscripts in the Royal Library, because they could read the old script which was illegible for most educated Danes. In the eighteenth century, as the Danish authorities began to investigate the economic situation in Iceland, they came to the conclusion that this remote province of the realm was both underdeveloped and poor, and thus fairly marginal to the Danish state. Culture remained, however, the redeeming quality of Icelandic society, as to Danish intellectuals, the language used in Iceland was the key to their own nation’s past. “While the old language is preserved,” the Danish linguist Rasmus Christian Rask wrote to an Icelandic friend in 1817, “the nation in Iceland is among the most important ones in Europe ...” But if Icelanders begin to import Danish words and expressions into their daily vocabulary, he continued, then other nations would lose interest in both the people of Iceland and their country, looking at them as mere barbarians<sup>12</sup>.

For this reason, Icelanders had a very strong incentive to preserve their language and to guard it from everything deemed to smack of “foreign pollution.” And this became, in fact, the governing attitude toward linguistic development in Iceland – that is, Icelanders were not only to maintain their distinctive tongue, but their language was to be conserved in its pristine form, and cleansed of outside influences. This policy became, for example, one of the main objectives of the first periodical published in Icelandic, *Rit þess íslenska lerdómslistafélags* (the Journal of the Icelandic Literary Society, 1780–1794), as its editors declared that they wanted to “keep and preserve the Nordic language as a beautiful principal language, which has been spoken for a long time in the Nordic countries, and to attempt to purify it of foreign words and expressions”<sup>13</sup>.

## UNIVERSAL OR NATIONAL LANGUAGE?

In the twentieth century, Rector Jónsson’s proposal to abolish the Icelandic language, and to introduce Danish in its stead, served as a warning against all unpatriotic delusions in Iceland<sup>14</sup>. But, in fact, his remark reflects a widespread interest in eighteenth-century Europe for cultural uniformity, as linguistic diversity was seen as one of the main obstacles to progress in human societies. This was a time of great optimism in the perfectibility of man, as the belief in enlightenment and science spread even to the remotest corners of Europe. The French philosopher and mathematician, Condorcet, is symptomatic to this intellectual mood, as he discusses the history of human progress in his book *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humains*, published posthumously

in 1795. His basic premise was that man is by nature a rational creature, meaning that he (and also she, because Condorcet was one of the few champions of gender equality during his time <sup>15</sup>) has the innate capacity of understanding, classifying, combining and separating his perceptions. Beginning in the state of nature, where no real society existed, humanity had moved incessantly towards ever greater enlightenment and liberty. There were, however, numerous obstacles on this forward march towards “real human perfection,” as Condorcet called it. Inequality in wealth and instruction impeded the progress of the human mind, both between nations and between the different classes of people of the same nationality. “Will all the nations in the world,” he asked, “one day approach the state of civilization which the most enlightened peoples have reached, those who are the most free, who have rid themselves most thoroughly of all prejudices, such as the French and the Anglo-Americans?” <sup>16</sup>

One way of solving the problem of uneven development was, in Condorcet’s opinion, to adopt a universal language, because linguistic difference was one of the great dividers in the world, discriminating between nations and also between classes of the same nation. This universal language was to be simple and precise, eliminating the difference between the scientific idiom and the language of the common people. As this language would be common to everyone, it would be the property of no one and, thus, it would not favor one class or one group of people over another <sup>17</sup>.

Although Bjarni Jónsson’s plan of introducing Danish in Iceland was far less ambitious than the French philosopher’s idea of a universal language, as Jónsson did not look beyond the borders of the Danish monarchy, his suggestion was of similar nature. If two languages were spoken in the same state, where one was clearly subordinated to the other, the speakers of the less prestigious language were condemned to a subordinate status in the social hierarchy of the state. Thus, Icelandic might have been regarded as an ancient and very noble tongue, but as long as Iceland had not reached socio-economic parity with other parts of the state, its speakers were treated with disdain. Moreover, as long as Icelanders stuck to their old idiom, Jónsson believed, they were unable to participate fully in the operations of the state and, by implication, to internalize and utilize fully the enlightenment radiating from the capital toward the peripheries of the monarchy.

Romantic nationalists, like Sæmundsson and Sigurðsson, approached this issue from an entirely different angle. Seeking inspiration in Danish nationalism, which was in turn influenced by German idealism, they regarded language to be much more than a communicative tool. The German philosopher and Lutheran clergyman, Johann Gottfried von Herder, laid the basis for these theories, as he regarded languages to be the core of humanity, and the key to people’s self-perception <sup>18</sup>. Moreover, as languages emerged through people’s constant struggle with their environment, they were bound to mirror the natural conditions of the nation who used them, thus linking the national language and the country where the nation lived <sup>19</sup>. In similar manner as traditions and customs were rooted in nature, languages differed between one country and the next. “Compare the mythology in Greenland and India,” Herder wrote in his best known work, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (Ideas on the Philosophy of Human History), “Lapland and Japan, Peru and the mythology of the negroes; the perfect geography of the creative spirit. The Brahmin would hardly evoke an image in his mind when the Icelandic Voluspa was read for him and explained; and the Vedas would be just as abstruse for the Icelander” <sup>20</sup>.

Thus, according to Herder, every population group, or *Volk* as he called them, possessed its distinctive traditions, which were preserved in the language and culture of the popular classes. Herder’s

line of reasoning was developed in explicit opposition to the universalism of the Enlightenment, as it was represented by philosophers like Condorcet. The only living language approaching universal status in the eighteenth century – or the *lingua franca* – was French, which was underlined by the fact that the Herder's absolute ruler, King Frederic II the Great of Prussia, preferred to speak French rather than German. To Herder, this practice, that is, to speak a foreign tongue, was nothing short of a betrayal of one's nationality, and thus to one's true nature. In his poem, *An die Deutschen* (To the Germans) he decried this deplorable custom:

And you German alone, returning from abroad,  
Wouldst greet your mother in French?  
O spew it out, before your door  
Spew out the ugly slime of the Seine  
Speak German, O you German! <sup>21</sup>

These ideas appealed to Icelandic nationalists not only for their insistence on cultural diversity and devotion to one's linguistic traditions, but also because they – or at least as they were expressed by Herder's successors – stressed the superiority of “authentic” and “organic” to “derived” languages. Here, the Prussian philosopher, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, laid the groundwork with his theories on “living” or “original” languages. What he meant by this was the idea that languages which had developed from their original source in “a continuous transition without a leap”, were really the only true national languages in the world. The reason for this was, according to Fichte, that only such languages could bridge the gap between the “sensuous” and “supersensuous” parts of the human psyche – the former referring to ideas based on objects that humans can perceive directly through their senses, while the latter were the subjective ideas of the mind – or, in other words, only people who spoke an original language could access and understand their innermost feelings and sentiments. From this Fichte concluded that a person who spoke what he termed a living language was, by definition, morally superior to a person who did not: “the former has diligence and earnestness in all things, and takes pains; whereas the latter is easygoing and guided by its happy nature” <sup>22</sup>.

It is clear from Fichte's most famous work on language and nationality, *Reden an die Deutsche Nation* (Addresses to the German Nation), that his ideas were aimed directly at France and the French. The book was written in the shadow of Napoleon's occupation of Prussia, and Fichte wanted to demonstrate that the German language and culture were infinitely superior to the French, in spite of the disparity in military strength between the two nations. He supported this argument by pointing out that German was a living language, while French was really only corrupted Latin <sup>23</sup>.

Although there are no direct references to Fichte in the writings of nineteenth-century Icelandic nationalists, his ideas – which were well known in Denmark <sup>24</sup> – must have been an inspiration to them. Thus, his emphasis on the originality and purity of languages fitted perfectly the image of the Icelandic language in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the original language of Scandinavia. In fact, such ideas rescued Iceland from being regarded as some sort of museum, which time had frozen still for centuries, redefining the country as the home of an original – and, for that reason, living – culture *par excellence*.

## LANGUAGE AND NATIONALITY IN THE AGE OF NATIONALISM

Herder's and Fichte's attitudes toward the formation of states, or the relation between cultural and political communities, were not at all clear. For Fichte, nation and fatherland were much more important concepts than the state, which he saw as merely "the government of human life in its progress along the ordinary peaceful path ..." A state was not "something ... primary and which exists for its own sake, but is merely the means to the higher purpose of the eternal, regular, and continuous development of what is purely human in this nation". He was even hostile toward the idea of one unified German state, as for him federalism was the German method of governing, implying that the unitary and centralized government was a French notion. To him, each German had a double citizenship, "on the one hand, of the state where he was born and to whose care he was in the first instance commended, and, on the other hand, of the whole common fatherland of the German nation"<sup>25</sup>. Herder, similarly, rejected large, composite monarchies, which he described as "an unnatural expansion of states, the wild mixing of races (*Menschen-Gattungen*) and nations under one scepter ... without inner life and sympathy between the various parts"<sup>26</sup>.

Herder's ranting against large monarchies was, in all likelihood, directed against the Holy Roman Empire, if not, yet again, France, but perfectly fitted the Danish monarchy in the mid-nineteenth century. Unified under the king in Copenhagen were provinces as diverse as Denmark proper, the German speaking duchies of Schleswig-Holstein, the North Atlantic islands Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland, in addition to a few African and American colonies, and therefore the Danish state was a classic multi-ethnic monarchy. This situation was universally accepted in Iceland as natural and beneficial until nationalism tore the monarchy apart in the early nineteenth century – even ardent patriots like Arngrímur Jónsson sang the praise of the Danish king, "under whose protection and leadership we have lived, by the grace of god, and will hopefully continue to live in the future ..." <sup>27</sup>. For the nationalist Jón Sigurðsson, Danish government in Iceland was, conversely, "unnatural," and had to be ended; it was "the divine destiny" of the Icelandic nation to rule itself, because every nation had to be governed according to its own traditions.

Jón Sigurðsson's nationalism was firmly rooted in European liberalism, as he promoted not only Icelandic autonomy, but also democracy in Iceland and the establishment of basic individual rights <sup>28</sup>. The best known advocate for this form of nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe was the English political philosopher John Stuart Mill, who saw the nation-state as the primary vehicle for the development of representative government. As the will of the governed formed their foundation, free institutions were more or less impossible in multi-ethnic states, he argued: "Among people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion, necessary to working of representative government, cannot exist"<sup>29</sup>. In order to create a functioning public arena, where people could debate and access the same information, and to secure the bond between the rulers and the ruled, people had to understand and have sympathy for each other. That was unlikely to happen where two nations belonged to the same state, Smith maintained, and therefore he thought nation-states were preferable to composite monarchies.

The problem was, however, that the world is not divided into neat cultural unities, where people speaking the same language and possessing common history live in communities totally detached from each other. As Mill readily admitted, there "are parts even of Europe, in which different nationalities are so locally intermingled, that it is not practicable for them to be under separate governments". What is more, in some cases Mill thought it was preferable for ethnic communities

to be integrated into, and merged with, larger and more advanced nations. “Nobody can suppose that it is not more beneficial to a Breton, or a Basque of French Navarre,” he wrote,

to be brought into the current of the ideas and feelings of a highly civilized and cultivated people ... than to sulk on his own rocks, the half-savage relic of past times, revolving in his own little mental orbit, without participation or interest in the general movement of the world. The same remark applies to the Welshman or the Scottish Highlander, as members of the British nation<sup>30</sup>.

At the same time as Mill draws our attention to the complexity and ambiguity in the relations between language, identity, and the form of government, he offers no indication of how it is to be decided which nations are worthy of self-determinations, and thus to retain their language, and which nations are not. To him, Icelandic demands for autonomy would undoubtedly have sounded just as absurd as Breton or Welsh claims for separate political status. Similar doubts set their mark on the Icelandic nationalist struggle during much of the nineteenth century, as even the nationalist hero, Jón Sigurðsson, had serious reservations about the viability of an Icelandic nation-state. In the end, Sigurðsson’s vision was realized, as Iceland became sovereign state in 1918 and a fully independent republic in 1944. It has fared reasonably well on its own, as at present it ranks among the wealthiest nations in the world. But doubts about its future are lingering still, as people are increasingly uncertain about the future of a “small” language in times of increasing dominance of English. There is not much factual evidence to support these fears, because Icelandic seems to be thriving, but they are an integral part of the existential angst of the age of globalization. At the same time as political boundaries seem to be disappearing, cultural divisions are dissolving into “the electronic ether of our modern means of telecommunication”, to quote the French philosopher Paul Virilio<sup>31</sup>. The question is, therefore, if the “end of geography” will lead to a global cultural uniformity, where everyone will speak in one tongue.

## LINGUISTIC NATIONALISM IN THE GLOBAL ERA

Predictions of the imminent death of the Icelandic language are not new. Almost two centuries ago, or in 1816, the linguist R.C. Rask expressed his concerns about its future, guessing that it would take less than a century for Icelandic to disappear entirely from the budding provincial capital, Reykjavík, and in another century he expected the native language of Iceland to be totally extinct<sup>32</sup>. Although Icelandic is still spoken in Reykjavík and, indeed, all around the country, this forecast is still repeated in Iceland today. The reasons for these concerns are many. First, the old belief in the conservative nature of the Icelandic language, and its importance as a living remnant of Proto-Norse, makes people wary of all linguistic change in Iceland. Thus, it is not enough to speak a distinctive language to fulfil the nationalist dream in Iceland, but the language spoken has also to be as close to its medieval form as possible. This is an old idea in Iceland, as the humanists of the seventeenth century hailed the Icelandic language as the original tongue of Scandinavia. This ideal was renewed by the cultural nationalism of the nineteenth century and it continues to live on in the Icelandic political discourse.

Second, and related to this, language has played a crucial role in Icelandic nationalism. Why should we care about the language of this small nation, Matthías Johannesson, a poet and former



editor of *Morgunblaðið* asked in his talk at the language conference in Reykjavík mentioned before. The reasons are many, he argued, and they remind Icelanders of the successes they have had by using the language, of “the legacy it has preserved, and it is through this legacy that the nation has acquired and cultivated its nurturing pride”. It was only because of the language, he concluded, that the nation had managed to establish a sovereign and independent state, and thus the language is seen both as a defining marker of the nation and a tool in the struggle for its self-determination<sup>33</sup>.

The role of language in constructing and maintaining national identities is certainly one of the great political issues of the modern times. Scholars like the American sociolinguist Joshua A. Fishman have stressed this side of linguistic politics, arguing, in the same vein as Herder, that “the essence of a nationality is its spirit, its individuality, its soul. This soul is not only reflected and protected by the mother tongue but, in a sense, *the mother tongue is itself an aspect of the soul*, a part of the soul, if not the soul made manifest”<sup>34</sup>. Whatever opinions we have on the theory of national souls, or *Volksgeist* to use Herder’s term, languages continue to be crucial for people’s social and political identity. Thus, although globalization has eradicated numerous boundaries between cultural areas, just as Condorcet predicted, this has not created one universal culture. In fact, cultural minorities in multi-ethnic states like Canada continue to take pride in their linguistic cultures, in spite of the dominance of the majority language of the state<sup>35</sup>. The concerns about the future of the Icelandic language are of similar nature. They show that a large proportion of Icelanders care about their language, and as long as this is the case, there is no reason to believe that the repeated dire predictions about its imminent death will come true.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Linguistic diversity is high on UNESCO’s agenda, as the agency estimates that around half of the 6000 languages spoken in the world are endangered, see report from UNESCO Ad hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, “Language Vitality and Endangerment” (published 13 March 2003), on [http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/file\\_download.php/4794680ecb5664addb9af1234a4a1839Language+Vitality+and+Endangerment.pdf](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/file_download.php/4794680ecb5664addb9af1234a4a1839Language+Vitality+and+Endangerment.pdf). See also *Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights* (1998), <http://www.linguistic-declaration.org/versions/angles.pdf>.
- <sup>2</sup> The conference was given an unusually large room in the newspaper as it was both reported on in a front-page article in “Morgunblaðið”, *Undirstöður tungumálsins eru að bresta*, (The foundation of the language is cracking) and in another in the center spread, *Tungumálið er farvegur minninga, reynslu og gilda*, (The language is a channel for memories, experiences, and values), see “Morgunblaðið”, 23 January 2006, pp. 1 and 20-21. See also P. Valsson, *Um framtíð málsins að gefnu tilefni*, “Morgunblaðið”, 1 February 2006, p. 24.
- <sup>3</sup> See P. Spencer - H. Wollman, *Nationalism. A Critical Introduction*, London 2002, pp. 76-80.
- <sup>4</sup> P. Skúlason, *Forsendur sjálfsteðis*, “Tímarit Máls og menningar”, 55, 4, 1994, p. 77.
- <sup>5</sup> S. Hjartarson, *Marz 1949, Á Gnitahéiði*, Reykjavík 1952, p. 17.
- <sup>6</sup> T. Sæmundsson, *Fjölnir*, “Fjölnir”, 1, 1835, p. 11.
- <sup>7</sup> J. Sigurðsson, *Um alþing á Íslandi*, “Ný félagsrit”, 1, 1841, pp. 94-95.
- <sup>8</sup> J. Sigurðsson, *Um alþing*, “Ný félagsrit”, 2, 1842, pp. 63-64.
- <sup>9</sup> B. Jónsson, *Korte Forslag til Islands Opkomst*, 28 August 1771. Icelandic National Archives, Rtk. 18. 7. 1770–1771. The Archives of the First Royal Commission, Litra Oo–Zz.
- <sup>10</sup> See for example M. Malm, *The Nordic Demand for Medieval Icelandic Manuscripts*, in G. Sigurðsson - V. Ólason (eds.), *The*

- Manuscripts of Iceland*, Reykjavík 2004, pp. 101-107; and A. Walette, *Sagens svenskar. Synen på vikingatiden och de isländska sagorna under 300 år*, Malmö 2004.
- <sup>11</sup> A. Jónsson, *Crymogaea sive rerum Islandicarum libri III, Arngrimi Jonae Opera Latine Conscripta*, vol. II, *Bibliotheca Arnamangeana*, vol. X, ed. in J. Benediktsson, Copenhagen 1951, book I, ch. III, pp. 25–30. *Extracts of Arngrim Jonas an Islander, his Crymogaea or History of Island* were published in *Purchas his pilgrimes*, London 1625, vol. III, pp. 654-668.
- <sup>12</sup> See for example a letter from the Danish linguist R.C. Rask to an Icelandic friend (18 Nov. 1817), *Brjef frá Rask*, “Tímarit Hins íslenska bókmenntafélags”, 9, 1888, pp. 90-91.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ens Íslenska Lærdoms-Lista Felags Skraa*, 4; Magnússon, *Fræðafélög og bókaútgáfa*, pp. 189-196.
- <sup>14</sup> See J. Jónsson, *Dagrenning. Fimm alþýðuerindi*, Reykjavík 1910, pp. 23-24.
- <sup>15</sup> Condorcet, *Equisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humains*, Paris 1795, p. 367; see also Condorcet, *Essai sur la constitution et les fonctions des assemblées provinciales*, Paris 1788, vol. I, pp. 17-20.
- <sup>16</sup> Condorcet, *Equisse d'un tableau historique*, cit., p. 328.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 346, 362-363, 375-378, and *passim*.
- <sup>18</sup> See F.M. Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought. From Enlightenment to Nationalism*, Oxford 1965, p. 57; and I. Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment. Vico, Hamann, Herder*, Princeton 2000, pp. 189-194.
- <sup>19</sup> J.G. von Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, in B.L. Suphan (ed.), *Herders sämtliche Werke*, Berlin 1891 [1772], vol. V, pp. 101-102.
- <sup>20</sup> J.G. von Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, in B.L. Suphan (ed.), *Herders sämtliche Werke*, Berlin 1887 [1784–1791], vol. XIII, p. 303.
- <sup>21</sup> J.G. von Herder, *An die Deutschen*, in B.L. Suphan (ed.), *Herders sämtliche Werke*, Berlin 1881, vol. XXVII, pp. 128-130; the translation is taken from E. Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 3rd. ed., London 1966, p. 59.
- <sup>22</sup> J.G. Fichte, *Reden an die Deutsche Nation*, in I.H. Fichte (ed.), *Johann Gottlieb Fichte's sämtliche Werke*, Berlin 1846 [1807–1808], fourth address, vol. 7, pp. 311-327; the quotes are taken from G.A. Kelly's translation, *Addresses to the German Nation*, New York 1968, pp. 45-61.
- <sup>23</sup> G. Hálfðanarson, *Language, Ethnicity and Nationalism: the Case of Iceland*, in G. Hálfðanarson (ed.), *Racial Discrimination and Ethnicity in European History*, Pisa 2003, pp. 196-197.
- <sup>24</sup> F. Lundgreen-Nielsen, *Grundtvig og danskhed*, in *Dansk identitetshistorie*, vol. III, *Folkets Danmark 1848-1940*, Copenhagen 1992, p. 162.
- <sup>25</sup> Fichte, *Reden*, cit., pp. 284-294 (translation of quotes taken from Kelly, *Addresses*, cit., pp. 118-127).
- <sup>26</sup> von Herder, *Ideen*, cit., pp. 384-385.
- <sup>27</sup> Jónsson, *Crymogaea sive rerum*, cit., p. 10.
- <sup>28</sup> See G. Hálfðanarson, *Íslenska þjóðríkið – uppruni og endimörk*, Reykjavík 2001, pp. 77-96.
- <sup>29</sup> J.S. Mill, *On Representative Government*, in J. Gray (ed.), *John Stuart Mill on Liberty and Other Essays*, Oxford 1991 [1861], p. 428.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 430-431.
- <sup>31</sup> P. Virilio, *Un monde surexposé: fin de l'histoire ou fin de la géographie*, “Le monde diplomatique”, August 1997, p. 17.
- <sup>32</sup> Þ. Jóhannesson, *Saga Íslendinga*, vol. VII, *Tímabilið 1770–1830. Upplýsingaröld* Reykjavík 1950, pp. 430-431.
- <sup>33</sup> “Tungumálið er farvegur minninga, reynslu og gilda”.
- <sup>34</sup> Fishman, *Language and Nationalism*, cit., p. 46.
- <sup>35</sup> See Kymlicka, *Politics in the vernacular*, cit., pp. 203-220 and *passim*.



## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barnard F.M., *Herder's Social and Political Thought. From Enlightenment to Nationalism*, Oxford 1965.
- Berlin I., *Three Critics of the Enlightenment. Vico, Hamann, Herder*, Princeton 2000.
- Condorcet, *Equisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humains*, Paris 1795.
- Condorcet, *Essai sur la constitution et les fonctions des assemblées provinciales*, Paris 1788.
- Fichte J.G., *Reden an die Deutsche Nation, Johann Gottlieb Fichte's sämtliche Werke*, Fichte I.H. (ed.), Berlin 1846 [1807–1808], vol. VII.
- Fishman J.A., *Language and Nationalism. Two Integrative Essays*, Rowley 1973.
- Hálfdanarson G., *Language, Ethnicity and Nationalism: the Case of Iceland*, in G. Hálfdanarson (ed.), *Racial Discrimination and Ethnicity in European History*, Pisa 2003.
- Herder J.G. Von, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, in Suphan B.L. (ed.), *Herders sämtliche Werke*, Berlin 1891 [1772], vol. V.
- Herder J.G. Von, *An die Deutschen*, in Suphan B.L. (ed.), *Herders sämtliche Werke*, Berlin 1881, vol. XXVII.
- Herder J.G. Von, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, in Suphan B.L. (ed.), *Herders sämtliche Werke*, Berlin 1887 [1784–1791], vol. XIII.
- Hobsbawm E.J., *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge 1991.
- Jónsson A., *Crymogaea sive rerum Islandicarum libri III, Arngrimi Jonae Opera Latine Conscripta* vol. II, *Bibliotheca Arnmanageana*, vol. X, ed. in J. Benediktsson, Copenhagen 1951.
- Jónsson B., *Korte Forslag til Islands Opkomst, 28 August 1771*, Icelandic National Archives, Rtk. 18. 7. 1770-1771. The Archives of the First Royal Commission, Litra Oo–Zz.
- Kedourie E., *Nationalism*, 3rd. ed. London 1966.
- Kymlicka W., *Politics in the vernacular: nationalism, multiculturalism and citizenship*, New York 2001.
- Malm M., *The Nordic Demand for Medieval Icelandic Manuscripts*, in Sigurðsson G. - Ólason V. (eds.), *The Manuscripts of Iceland*, Reykjavík 2004.
- Mill J.S., *On Representative Government*, in Gray J. (ed.), *John Stuart Mill on Liberty and Other Essays*, Oxford 1991 [1861].
- Sæmundsson T., *Fjölur, Fjölur*, 1, 1835.
- Sigurðsson J., *Um alþing á Íslandi, Ný félagsrit*, 1, 1841.
- Sigurðsson J., *Um alþing, Ný félagsrit*, 2, 1842.
- Spencer P. - Wollman H., *Nationalism. A Critical Introduction*, London 2002.



### SOURCE

The journal *Fjölur* came out for the first time in 1835. It was edited by four young Icelanders, who had studied together first in Iceland and later at the University of Copenhagen. One was the poet and naturalist Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-1845), who became the best known roman-

tic poet in Iceland. Another was the lawyer Brynjólfur Pétursson (1810-1851), who served as the head of the Icelandic office in the Danish ministries in Copenhagen when he died. The third was Konráð Gíslason (1808-1891), a linguist, and later professor at the University of Copenhagen. The fourth, and the one who wrote the following piece, was Tómas Sæmundsson (1807-1841), theologian and newly appointed Lutheran pastor in Iceland. All four seemed destined for illustrious careers, but the untimely deaths of all but Gíslason cut short their participation in Icelandic political and cultural life.

The following lines are taken from the address to the readers of the first volume of *Fjölnir*, introducing the editorial policy of the new journal. Sæmundsson listed four main principles which would guide the publication: the first was utility (*nytsemin*), the second beauty (*feegurðin*), the third truth (*sannleikurinn*), and the fourth reason (*skynsemin*), and thus combining the ideals of the Enlightenment and romanticism. The following is how he explained the second of these principles, beauty.

*Annað atriði, sem við aldrei ötlum að gleýma, er fegurðin. Hún er sameinuð nytseminni, – að so miklu leiti sem það sem fagurt er ætíð er til nota, andlegra eða líkamlegra, – eða þá til eblingar nytseminni. Samt er fegurðin henni eptir eðli sínu aunganveginn háð, heldur so ágæt, að allir menn eiga að gynast hana sjálfrar hennar vegna. Egi nokkurt rit að vera fagurt, verður fyrst og fremst málið að vera so hreint og óblandað einsog orðið getur, bæði að orðum og orðaskipun, og þar sem nýar hugmindir koma fram, og þörf er á nýum orðum, ríður á, þau séu auðskilin, og málinu sem eðlilegust. Það er ljósara enn um þurfi að tala, hvað það er áriðandi, að hafðar séu gætur á málunum, hvurt sem þau eru skrifuð eða töluð. Með þeim hefir mannlegt frjálsræði afrekað meira, enn nokkrum öðrum hlut. Málið er eitt af einkenum mannkynsins, og æðsti og liósasti vottur um ágæti þess, og málin eru höfuðeinkenni þjóðanna. Eingin þjóð verður fyrri til enn hún talar mál útaf fyrir sig, og deyi málin deya líka þóðirnar, eða verða að annari þjóð; enn það ber aldrei við, nema bágingi og eýmd séu komin á undan. Því hróðugri sem Íslendingar meiga vera, að tala einhverja elztu\* tungu í öllum vesturhluta Norðurálfu, er ásamt bókmentum Íslendinga og fornsögu þeirra er undirstaða þeirra þjóðheíðurs; og því heldur sem reynslan ber vitni um, hvað hægt er að verja hana skemdu; því ágætari sem hún er, og hæfari til að auðgast af sjálfrar sinnar efnunum – þess heldur ættu menn að kosta kapps um, að geýma og ávaxta þennann dýrmæta fjársjóð, sameígn allra þeirra sem heitíð geta Íslendingar. – Samt er ekki nóg, að málið sé hreint og ekki blandað neínni útlenzku. Orðin í málinu sjálfu verða líka að vera heppilega valin og samboðin efninu sem í þeim á að liggja, og sama er að segja um greínir og greínaskipun, og í stuttu máli skipulagið allt, í hvaða ritgjörð sem er. Ennfremur verða menn að varast, að taka mjög daufluga til orða, annars er hætt við, að nytsamasta efninu verið vanrækt og fyrirlitið af góðfúsnum lesara. – Það sem nú er sagt um fegurðina, snertir einúngis mál og orðfæri, og gyldir eíns um hverja greín og hvurn þátt, hvaða efnis sem eru; enn þaraðauki ættum við, þegar tækifæri leifa, að leiða fyrir sjónir fegurð náttúrunnar, bæði í mannum sjálfum og fyrir utan hann, og leitast við að vekja fegurðartilfinninguna, sem sumum þykir vera heldur daufl hjá okkur Íslendingum.*

*Málið er í því tilliti svipað sumu víni, að það verður því ágætara þess meir sem það eldist – af því skynsemin þjóðarinnar auðgar það sífeldlega að nýum hugmindum.*

*\* Ad frátekinni Vösku (milli Spánar og Frakklanz) og keltnesku málunum, sem þó að líkindum eiga ekki langt eptir.*

Another issue, which we are never going to forget, is *beauty*. It is combined with utility, – so far as all beautiful things can either be of intellectual or physical use, – or to enforce utility. Yet, beauty is by its nature not dependent upon utility, but rather so superb that all men ought to desire it for its own sake. If literary works are to convey beauty, their language must, first and

foremost, be as pure and unmixed as possible, both in their vocabulary and the order of the words, and where new ideas are expressed, and new words are needed, it is imperative that they are comprehensible to all and fit as naturally to the language as possible. It so obvious that it does not need to mentioned how important it is to scrutinize the languages, both if they are written or spoken. Through them, human liberty has achieved more than through any other means. Language is one of the chief characteristics of the humankind, and the supreme and clearest testimony to its merit, and languages are the chief characteristic of nations. No nation will emerge until it speaks a distinctive language, and if languages die, then the nations die also, or turn into different nations; but that will only happen if suffering and scarcity come first. Icelanders can be even more proud to speak one of the oldest\* languages in the western part of Europe, which is with the Icelandic literature and their ancient history the basis for their national glory; and this is even more important because experience tells us that it can be preserved from damage; the greater it is, and more capable of improving on its own – the more people should strive to preserve and investigate this valuable treasure, which is the common property of all those who can be called Icelandic. – Yet, it is not enough to keep the language clean and free from foreign influences. The words in the language must also be chosen with care, and be equal to the subject which they are to express, and the same must be said of the content and the structure of the content, and, in short the whole organization, in any essay we inspect. Moreover, people have to avoid speaking too indecisively, because if this happens, even an enthusiastic reader may ignore or even despise the most useful material. – What has been said of beauty so far concerns only language and wording, and the same could be said about any article or topic, whatever they deal with; but furthermore, we should, when we have the opportunity, to expose the beauty of nature, both inside of man himself and outside of him, and attempt to awaken the artistic sense, which some think is too weak in us, Icelanders.

Language is, in some ways, similar to wine, that is, its quality improves with time – because the nation's reason endows it constantly with new ideas.

\* Beside the Basque language (spoken in the region between Spain and France) and the Celtic languages, which probably have not many years left.

