

# English Influence on the Icelandic Lexicon

GUÐRÚN KVARAN

## 1. Introduction

The study of loanwords has until now not played an important role in Icelandic linguistic research, and only a few articles have been written on foreign influence on modern Icelandic. In the last decades English influence on the language, especially on the vocabulary, has grown considerably, and as a result there has been an increasing interest in loanword studies, and in the roles loanwords have to fulfil to be adapted to the language. In 2001, *A Dictionary of European Anglicisms* was published as a result of the study of English influence on sixteen European languages, Icelandic being one of them, and this study has become the inspiration for further studies within this field. A year later the volume *English in Europe* came out, with a collection of papers on English influence on the same European languages, among those a paper on Icelandic (Kvaran and Svavarsdóttir 2002). A detailed study of loanwords and foreign words in modern Icelandic has not yet been carried out, but a large project under the auspices of the Nordic Language Council is now under way, investigating the attitude towards loanwords in all the Nordic countries, and the adaptation of loanwords including hybrids and calques.

Here I intend to discuss the influence of English on the Icelandic language. I will deal briefly with the importance of language policy for the preservation of the language. This will be followed by a discussion of the question what criteria a foreign word has to fulfil to be accepted as a loanword in Icelandic. Finally I will discuss English influence on word formation.

## 2. Icelandic language policy and language purism

It is well known that Icelandic language policy is conservative, and that the language was for a long time relatively free from foreign influence, compared with many other European languages. Language purism goes back a long time; it started in the sixteenth century, and it is still actively practised. The structure of the written language is mostly the same as at the time of the settlement of Iceland. Of course the language has undergone changes, especially in the area of phonology, but an Icelander can without great difficulty read everything that has been written from the time of the sagas until this day. Of course, he or she has to look up some words and phrases that are now outdated or have changed their meaning. But a strict language policy can cause a dichotomy between the spoken and the written language. One word is used in colloquial speech, and another one in a written text, the choice of words being either domestic or foreign, depending on the context where they are used. Because language policy has concentrated on keeping the written language pure, studies of foreign influence are in many ways difficult, especially for older stages where native speakers are no longer available as informants. One can assume that the influence on the spoken language was more widespread than can be concluded from the written texts. This is clear from several Danish loanwords that came into the language in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. They are hardly to be found in print, but they are still frequent in colloquial speech among older people.

No studies have been carried out to find out in what contexts and in what styles English words are most common in Icelandic, but as most of them have been used in colloquial language and slang, their fate has been to become outdated and forgotten. Thus, many words that were very common during World War II no longer exist, e.g. *kar* "car", *görl* "girl", *sjúr* "sure" and *monningur* "money" (Kress 1966:15–17).

But the attitude towards foreign words is slowly changing. If one consults the only existing Icelandic monolingual dictionary, one notices that in the first two editions there are relatively few English loanwords (*Íslensk orðabók* 1963 and 1983). Several Danish loanwords had been chosen as lemmas, but many of them were marked with a question mark to show that they were not desirable. On the other hand, one finds foreign words that have no question marks indicating that they have been treated more leniently than many others. These are words mostly used by artists and educated people, but seldom by the general public, as

e.g. *lýrik* (lyric) and *dogma*, and various cultural words used within literature and the arts. In the third edition (*Íslensk orðabók* 2002) the policy has changed. The question mark is gone, and many more English loanwords have been accepted. Some are old, others are new and mostly used in colloquial speech, e.g. *bögga* “bug”, *djobb* “job”, and *sjitt* “shit”. When the book was published, the new policy attracted considerable attention, and many were of the opinion that the editors had gone too far in their tolerance.

### *3. English influence on the language*

The earliest foreign influence on Icelandic came from Danish and Low and High German. English sailors first started visiting Iceland in the fifteenth century for the purpose of fishing and trading, and there was close contact between the nations for a while. This period, which has been called “The English Century” in Icelandic textbooks of history, contributed several English loanwords to the language, mainly related to merchandise, sailing, and fishing. These words were mostly assimilated, and a native speaker would not be able to recognize them without some knowledge of etymology and language history.

It can be argued that direct and intensive influence of English first started during the Second World War. Iceland was an occupied country, first by British troops, and later by US forces, who later set up military bases under the auspices of NATO. During the war there were more English-speaking people living in Iceland than native inhabitants. The contact with Denmark was broken off, while the connection with the English-speaking world became closer, and the Anglo-American influence has been growing ever since.

During the last decade the contact with English has increased considerably because of globalization and information technology. The internet, the World Wide Web, satellitetelevision and the availability of material on CD-Rom are now parts of Icelandic everyday life. What direct influence this will have on the language is not to be foreseen at the moment, but it will without any doubt affect vocabulary as well as syntax. Even if many will try to fight this influence by constructing neologisms, the development will be difficult to arrest. In ten years' time a study of English influence on Icelandic will undoubtedly arrive at entirely different conclusions than a study that is carried out today.

#### 4. *Adaptation of loanwords*

For a long time only one Icelandic word was used as a term for words having their origin in other languages. It was *tökuorð* “loanword”, which literally means “a taken word”, i.e. a word that has been taken from another language. All words that were fully adapted to Icelandic were loanwords, others, that were only partly adapted or not adapted at all, were, and still are often referred to as *sletta*, which means “splash, dash, splotch”, and is a rather negative term. Now it is quite common to distinguish loanwords from foreign words, as is done in Scandinavia and Germany, i.e. a loanword is a fully adapted word, and it is considered as part of the Icelandic vocabulary; on the other hand, a foreign word, *framandorð*, is not or only partially adapted, and is not accepted by the general public as a part of the vocabulary, because it “feels foreign”. *Sletta* is used when a speaker uses foreign words, either for the sake of convenience or to show his knowledge of foreign languages, without assimilating them at all. But what criteria has a loanword to fulfil to be accepted as part of the Icelandic vocabulary? In fact there are four criteria:

1. The word must fit Icelandic phonological rules.
2. The word must fit Icelandic morphological rules.
3. The accent must be on the first syllable.
4. The word has to be written with Icelandic letters so that there is a regular connection between writing and pronunciation.

If a word fulfils all these criteria it can be called a loanword; if, however, it only fulfils some of them, it will not be accepted, and is a foreign word. But sometimes fulfilling these criteria is not enough. A word can fulfil all of them but is still looked upon as a foreign word because it “feels foreign”. The word *blók* “bloke” for example fulfils all four criteria, as we will see later, but it is still not accepted as an Icelandic word; it is almost identical with the English word in its pronunciation and it “feels foreign”. But let us look more closely at these four criteria with anglicisms in mind, starting with phonological adaptation.

##### 4.1 Phonological adaptation

To a greater or lesser extent all anglicisms have to undergo some phonological adaptation to be accepted as loanwords. This process is of three main types: 1) the English sound is replaced with a similar sound or sound sequence in Icelandic, if the English sound has no correspondence in Icelandic, 2)

phonological processes, regular in Icelandic, but non-existent in English, are used to make words fit into the Icelandic system of pronunciation, and 3) an English sound is reinterpreted as one of two Icelandic phonemes where an Icelandic differentiation is systematic, but non-existent in English (Kvaran and Svavarsdóttir 2002:88–89). I will only choose a few examples.

Some English consonants are not to be found in the Icelandic phonological system. These are the voiced stops, the affricates, some of the sibilants, and a [w]. All stops are unvoiced in Icelandic, and the same goes for the anglicisms. The stops [p,t,k] and [b,d,g] are kept apart by aspiration. It is also worth mentioning that stops are palatalized when followed by a front vowel. The same goes for most anglicisms, e.g. *gír* “gear”, *gin* “gin”, *gel* “gel”, but not for all. The words *geim* “party” and *keip* “cape” are pronounced with *g* and *k* without the usual palatalization. The same applies to a [g] before the central-front diphthong [æi] in *gæi* “guy” where Icelandic words have a palatal stop.

As no affricates exist in Icelandic, English affricates have to be exchanged for other sounds. It is most common to use a cluster of a dental stop and a voiced palatal fricative [j], as e.g. in *tékka* “check”, *tjakkur* “jack”, where the stop is aspirated, or *djúsi* “juice”, *djók* “joke”, *djassi* “jazz” without aspiration.

Only one sibilant is used in Icelandic, the dental unvoiced [s]. For the English voiced [z] the Icelandic [s] is used, but for the English palatal sibilant the cluster [sj] is rendered in all positions, e.g. *sjoppa* “shop”, *sjó* “show”, *-sjón* “-tion”. The cluster [sj] is also used where the English word has an affricate like in *sjans* or *séns* (note that *é* stands for *je*) “change”, and [s] is usually used for an affricate in final position like in *bridds* “bridge”.

No rounded [w] exists in Icelandic, and the English sound is regularly replaced with the voiced fricative [v] as e.g. in the frequent exclamation *vá* “wow”.

These are the most regular changes that take place by way of adaptation of English words to Icelandic pronunciation. If this adaptation does not take place, and the words are pronounced in the English way, they do not count as loanwords. This e.g. is the case with the exclamation *Jesus!*, which is very frequent but always with an English pronunciation.

## 4.2 Morphological adaptation

All loanwords, including anglicisms, have to fit into a declensional paradigm that already exists in the language. They have to follow its inflectional rules, and other special rules, such as vowel mutation, if needed. Nouns are inflected

for gender, number and case, and the same goes for adjectives which, moreover, have distinct forms in definite and indefinite noun phrases. The verbs are inflected for person and number, in both the present and the past. This applies to the indicative as well as the subjunctive.

Although Icelandic has almost thirty different paradigms for nouns, only a few declensional classes are available for borrowings. The results of a study of the adaptation of some English loanwords made by Eyvindur Eiríksson (1975) showed that neuter was the gender acquired by most nouns, whereas feminine words were comparatively few. All neuter borrowings were assigned to the same strong declension; the masculines were divided between two classes, one strong and one weak, and most feminines received weak declension. Compared with the situation today these facts have not changed.

If we look at the examples already mentioned, most of them are neuter, i.e. *bridds*, *djobb*, *djók*, *geim*, *gel*, *gin*, and *sjó*. Other examples are *breik* "break", *bati* "byte", *dóp* "dope", *greip* "grapefruit", *lúkk* "look", *meik* "make-up", *meil* "e-mail", *sjampó* "shampoo", *sjeik* "(milk)shake", and *teip* "tape".

The masculines that get strong declension are inflected as *-stems*, i.e. they acquire the endings *-s* in nominative singular and *-ar* in nominative and accusative plural (*girs* – *gírar*), e.g. *gír*, *djass*, *djúss*, *sjans/séns*, *tjakkur*, already mentioned, and *beis* "military base", *bitill* "Beatle", *heddfónn* "headphone", *stáll* "style", *trukkur* "truck". Most masculines, however, have weak declension, i.e. they acquire the endings *-a* in genitive singular and *-ar* in nominative and accusative plural (*jeppa* – *jeppar*), as e.g. *gæi*, *hamborgari* "hamburger", *jeppi* "jeep", *maskari* "mascara", *plebbi* from "plebeian = primitive", *sjéffi* "chef", *skáti* "scout", *tékki* "check", and *túristi* "tourist".

Very few feminine anglicisms have strong declension. As an example the word *blók* "bloke" can be mentioned: it acquires the endings *-ar* in genitive singular and *-ur* and a vowel mutation (umlaut) in nominative and accusative plural (*blókar*– *blakur*). Words ending in *-ik*, like *grafík* "graphic", *lýrik* "lyric", *pólitik* "politics", *traffik* "traffic" get the ending *-ur* in genitive singular, but no plural, and words with the suffix *-sjón*, as e.g. *aksjón* "action", have the endings *-ar* in genitive singular and *-ir* in nominative and accusative plural (*aksjónar*– *aksjónir*). As *-sjón* is not accepted as an Icelandic suffix, *aksjón* counts as a foreign word, but not as a loanword.

Most feminine borrowings have weak declension characterised by the ending *-u* in genitive singular and *-ur* in nominative and accusative plural (*þæju*–*þæjur*), for example *disketta* "diskette", *þæja* "(sweetie) pie", *skrifta* "script-girl", *skvísa* "from English squeeze", *sjoppa* "shop".

Some words have two genders and are inflected accordingly, e.g. *keip* and *djúsi* which are either masculine or neuter, and *kóki* “coca cola” which exists both as feminine and neuter.

As already mentioned, adjectives in Icelandic are inflected for gender, number and case. If the anglicisms are to be accepted they have to fit into the declensional system, e.g.:

Masculine	Feminine	Neuter
dópaður “doped”	dópuð	dópað
húkkaður “hooked”	húkkuð	húkkað

Most of the borrowed adjectives, however, get no inflectional endings at all, and are not accepted as loanwords even if they are adapted phonologically and graphemically, e.g. *bræt* “bright”, *kúl* “cool”, *röff* “rough”, *töff* “tough”.

All borrowed verbs follow the same pattern, i.e. they enter the most regular class of weak verbs, receive the infinitive ending *-a*; they form their past tense with the suffix *-aði*, and the past participle with *-aður*, e.g.:

Inf.	Past tense	Past part.
bögga bug’	böggaði	böggað
blöffa “bluff”	blöffaði	blöffað
díla “deal”	dílaði	dílað
húkka “hook”	húkkaði	húkkað
meila “send e-mail”	meilaði	meilað
seifa “save”	seifaði	seifað

### 4.3 Accent and spelling

It is a general rule in Icelandic that the accent is placed on the first syllable. If it is placed somewhere else the word cannot be accepted as a loanword but it is an unassimilated foreign word like e.g. the verb *délita* “delete” from computer language.

Anglicisms are quite frequent in colloquial speech. If, however, they are to find their way into the written language, they have to fit in

graphemically, as we have seen from the examples already mentioned. Accent marks are used in Icelandic on vowels to represent a sound quality that is different from the unmarked vowels. Marked or unmarked vowels are used in anglicisms according to Icelandic pronunciation, e.g. *díla* “deal” where [í] represents a front unrounded high vowel, and *dópa* where [ó] represents a back diphthong.

The letters [c], [q] and [w] do not exist in the Icelandic alphabet. Instead [k] and [v] are used in anglicisms, e.g. *kók* “coca cola”, *skáti* “scout”, *skvísa* “from squeeze”, *víski* “whisky”. In Section 4.1 the adaptation of English sibilants and affricates has already been discussed.

Very few examples of anglicisms are to be found where the English word has a [th] in an initial position. [th] becomes a dental unvoiced fricative [þ], as in *þriller* “thriller” and *þema* ‘theme’, the latter possibly a loanword from Danish.

In colloquial speech or slang we find foreign words, mostly anglicisms, in the modern language, where both form and meaning are borrowed, e.g. *aids*, *bodylotion*, *bowling*, *jetset*, *ketchup*, *laptop*. If they are written at all, Icelandic letters are favoured, *eids*, *boddílósjón*, *bóling*, *djetsett*, *ketsjöpp*, *lapp topp*. All these borrowings have their equivalences in Icelandic words (*eyðni*, *húðkrem*, *keila*, *potulið*, *tómatsósa*, *fartölva*).

## 5. Loan-translations and hybrids

The most frequent type of new words in Icelandic, both neologisms and anglicisms, are compounds. They are made out of two or more parts, already existing or partly existing in the language. Most common are the so-called loan-translations, where each part of the word is Icelandic, but both structure and meaning are a direct translation of the corresponding part of the foreign word, usually an English one. In computer language words of this kind are frequent, e.g. *gagnagrunnur* and *gagnasafn* for “database”, *stýrikerfi* “operating system”, *lyklaborð* “keyboard”, *aðgangsorð* “password”, *tölvukerfi* “computer system”, *örtölva* “microcomputer”. Other examples are *augnskuggi* “eyeshadow”, *bráðabani* ‘sudden death’, e.g. in golf and football, *fegurðarblundur* “beauty sleep”, *flugpóstur* “airmail”, *geislaprentari* “laser printer”, *heilapvo* og *heilapvottur* “brainwash, brainwashing”, *hnattvæðing* “globalization”, *loftþúði* “air-bag”, *upplýsingatekni* “information technology”, and *örbylgjuofn* “microwave oven”.

Another group of compounds are hybrids, where a part of a word is foreign but another part Icelandic, e.g. *bisnessmaður* “businessman”, *bjúttblindur* “beauty sleep”, *bleiserjakki* “blazer jacket”, *ginflaska* “bottle of gin”, *popptónlist* “pop music”, *slæðsmynd* “slides”, and *videómynd* “video film”.

Derivation is an active way of word formation in the general language, especially the use of suffixes. With regard to foreign words, derivation is mostly used in hybrids. Foreign suffixes as *-isti* “-ist”, *-ismi* “-ism”, and *-sjón* “-tion” have been borrowed from English (or Danish) as parts of foreign words, but they have not been accepted as suffixes in Icelandic, and are not productive in word formation. The suffix *-ari*, replacing English *-er*, on the other hand, is a very productive way of forming anglicisms, e.g. *hakkari* “hacker”, *hamborgari* “hamburger”, *prentari* “printer”, *rappari* “rapper”, *rokkari* “rocker”, and *purrrkari* “dryer”. It is also added to words that have no *-er* in English, e.g. *poppari* “person playing in a pop band” and *pönkari* “punk” which in this way fit into the declensional system and get inflectional endings.

## 6. Conclusion

In this article I have tried to explain the situation in Iceland today with regard to loanwords, language policy and the old tradition of language preservation. I have also discussed what criteria a foreign word has to fulfil to be accepted in a language with a complicated inflectional system. Even if language purism is a negative term for many Icelanders, it is still acknowledged by the majority of the people as very important for the preservation of the Icelandic language today. Until now, relatively few anglicisms have been accepted in Icelandic as loanwords, and foreign words come and go. But times are changing, Icelandic society is constantly under the pressure of new influences from a diminishing world and increasing globalization, and the methods used today are unlikely to be sufficient to protect the language from English influence on the vocabulary and structure of the language.

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