

L2 Accent in Icelandic: Folk ideas and attitudes

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1 The transformation of a homogenous society

- Until recently, Iceland has had “no indigenous minorities, nor has it had any sizeable immigrant communities” (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson 2010: 207)
- Significant increase in immigration and numbers of L2 speakers within a short period of time
- Little research on L2 accents in Icelandic (Bade 2018, 2019, 2023, 2024, 2025, 2025b)

Immigrants



Statistics Iceland

Percentage of immigrants, Statistics Iceland 2023

L2 speakers' voices

- “Some of them have a hard time getting a job and are told that they do not speak well enough if they have an accent.” (Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir 2004: 144)
- “We who move here are often asked where we come from and how long we have been here. The responses are either some conditional acceptance or we are shamed. Sometimes we are told that we speak good Icelandic and that it would be nice if more people were as diligent in learning the language.” (Nichole Mosty 2018)
- “Yes, you can see how happy people is when you are trying, but not everyone. This accent, it takes a long time to get Icelandic accent. People do not want to understand what I am saying, I noticed this as well.” (Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir & Pamela Innes 2017: 25)
- “There is also criticism if you do not speak perfect Icelandic. Uhh even more than –‘You cannot speak Icelandic you better go’. It is even worse than your skin color; being a foreigner not knowing the language.” (Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir & Pamela Innes 2017: 25)

2 Sociolinguistic variation and evaluation in Iceland



- The Icelandic language is central to the construction and preservation of Icelandic identity (Hálfðanarson 2001; Skaptadóttir & Innes 2017)
- Strong beliefs about the language's homogeneity and purity, shaped by standard language ideologies (Árnason 2004; Kristinsson & Árnason 2024; Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson 2010; Kristinsson 2017)
- Members of the speech community share the same linguistic norms (Árnason 2005; Guðmundsdóttir 2022; Kristinsson 2017; cf. also Labov 1972; Spolsky 2004)
- Stable and well-defined evaluation system for L1 Icelandic, leading to “a firm belief in **correctness**” (Milroy 2001: 535; bold in original)

2 Sociolinguistic variation and evaluation in Iceland

- Markedness along lines of:
 - (i) lexical choice (cf. *slettur*, e. *blemishes*):
 - (a) tölvupóstur
 - (b) ímejl/e-mail
 - (ii) some morpho-syntactic variation (cf. *þágufallshneigð*/*þágufallssýki*, e. *dative substitution* /*dative sickness*):
 - (a) Mig langar að fara.
Me (ACC) want to go.
 - (b) Mér langar að fara.
Me (DAT) want to go.



Source: handritinheima.is

2 Sociolinguistic variation and evaluation

- Little regionally distributed phonological variation that is partly receding (Friðriksson, Angantýsson & Bade 2024) and not evaluated as non-standard in comparison to the majority pronunciation
- *harðmæli* (e. *hard speech*) vs. *linmæli* (e. *soft speech*)
 - sápa [sau:p^ha] vs. sápa [sau:pa], e. *soap*
 - láta [lau:t^ha] vs. láta [lau:ta], e. *let*
 (examples taken from Árnason 2005: 368)
- *harðmæli* characteristic for the North of Iceland, *linmæli* for the South of Iceland, including the capital Reykjavík
- The existing phonological variation is not socially marked but *harðmæli* is deemed more attractive (Guðmundsdóttir 2022)



3 Some prominent features in L1 Icelandic pronunciation

- Preaspiration before /pp tt kk tl tn kn/
 - /pakki/ [p^hahci], e. *package*
 - /þetta/ [θɛhd̥a], e. *this*
- Devoicing of sonorants before fortis stops
 - *hempa* [hɛmp̥a], e. *gown*
 - *mennta* [mɛnt̥a], e. *educate*
 - *hjálpa* [çaul̥pa], e. *help*
- [t]-epenthesis in /ll nn rl rn sl sn/
 - /varla/ [vard̥la], e. *hardly*
 - /fullur/ [fʏdl̥ʏr], e. *full*
 - /barn/ [bard̥n], e. *child*

3 Folk linguistics: studying language users' beliefs

- Folk linguistics: Concentration on linguistic laypeople's perceptions and beliefs (e.g., Preston 2010, 2018; Niedzielski & Preston 2003)
- “[F]olk linguistics seeks to discover the overt categories and definitions speakers have of linguistic matters.” (Niedzielski & Preston 2003: 44)
- Examining lay perceptions can contribute to uncovering underlying ideologies about language, ultimately providing “a window into speakers’ cultural beliefs” (Preston 2018: xxi)

3 Folk linguistics: studying language users' beliefs

- Studies directed at perceptual dialectology conducted by Preston (1999, 2010) resulted in folk distinctions between the categories 'pleasantness' and 'correctness'.
- Methods from perceptual dialectology aim at getting an idea of how linguistic facts are linked with geographical ones in the folk mind (Preston 1996, 1999; cf. also Bade 2023, 2025a; Bijvoet & Fraurud 2015; Cornips 2018; Cramer 2016; Hundt et al. 2010; Kristiansen 2004)
- Distinction between etic and emic knowledge:
 - Concepts and categorizations regarded as meaningful and appropriate by common language users, i.e. emic knowledge, can diverge from etic knowledge, i.e. knowledge that is seen as important by the scientific community (Lett 1990)

4 Evaluations of L2 accents

- L1 speakers rate L2-accented speakers generally lower in status and prestige than individuals who speak the standard variety, which can give rise to bias and discrimination towards the L2 speaker (e.g., Barrett, Cramer & McGowan 2022; Gluszek & Dovidio 2010; Levon, Sharma & Ilbury 2022)
- Some factors can influence evaluations of L2 accent:
 - Stereotypes regarding certain nationalities (Frumkin 2007; Kristiansen 2001)
 - Perceptions of a speaker's personal traits and social status (Cargile & Giles 1997; Ryan & Bulik 1982)
 - Attitudes towards accented speech in general (Lindemann 2002; Niedzielski 1999)
 - Familiarity with the accent (Carey, Mannell & Dunn 2010; Flowerdew 1994; Moyer 2013; Winke & Gass 2013)
 - Perceived degree of accent (e.g. Ryan, Carranza & Moffie 1977; Lindemann 2003)
 - Intelligibility and comprehensibility (Derwing & Munro 1995, 2015; Kennedy & Trofimovich 2008)

4 Research questions

- (I) What voice-placing strategies do “the folk” have, and what emic themes are connected with voice-placing strategies?
- (II) What folk themes lie behind evaluations of L2 accents in Icelandic in reaction to the established categories of ‘pleasantness’ and ‘correctness’?
- (III) What conclusions can be drawn from the results of questions (1) and (2) in terms of an evaluation system concerning L2 speech?



5 Data and methods

- Qualitative methods with quantitative reference for voice-placing
- Use of focus groups and verbal guises
- Five focus groups:
 - Themes provided by 32 L1-speaker folk representatives
 - Semi-structured discussion guide
 - Voice-placing task with world maps
 - Evaluations of correctness and pleasantness
 - Free elaboration in reaction to six verbal guises
- The guises:
 - Five L2 speakers of Icelandic (from Denmark, Lithuania, the Philippines, Poland, and the US) and one L1 speaker
 - Text: short, grammatically sound children's story (18-24 seconds)
 - A phonological analysis of the guises was performed on the L2-speaker guises measuring distance from L1 majority pronunciation
- Analytical tools drawing on grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Glaser & Strauss 1967)

Example: world map marked by one participant



7 Results:

7.1 Voice-placing strategies



7.1.1 Familiarity with accent

7.1.2 Cultural or linguistic stereotypes

7.1.3 Perceived phonological features in L1 and L2 speech

7.1.1 Familiarity with accent

- (1) Emma: “Yes, I said Poland. I thought that I have somehow heard so much of this kind of Icelandic. This was somehow so familiar. I found this so normal.”

7.1.1 Familiarity with accent

- (2) Vigdís: "I thought she was Polish."
Sunna: "I thought so too."
Kolfinna: "I also think that I've heard this before. I marked Poland and around there."
Vigdís: "'glúgga' [kluk:a] and 'obna' [ɔpna]
Kolfinna: "Mmh, I thought I recognized that, which I didn't do with the first two [i.e., the Lithuanian and American guises]."
Atli: "Yes."
Vigdís: "There are a lot of Poles here in Iceland, who have learned Icelandic. They just speak exactly"
Sunna: "like this."
Vigdís: "Yes, I found this to be very similar to them [...]. Of course, we think that it's Poland because there are so many Poles here. And this accent is somewhat similar to it, their accent."

7.1.2 Cultural stereotypes

- (3) Sigurður: "This reminded me of Germans who have lived here for quite some time. [...] I found it striking how much effort she put into this. And that is very German."
- (4) Ásta: "I just guessed Germany because I find Germans so damn efficient at learning Icelandic if they want to."

7.1.2 Cultural stereotypes

- (5) Kári: “Well, I guessed Scandinavia. But I doubt that this was a Dane because I have known Danes who have lived here for 30–40 years and they can speak neither Danish nor Icelandic.”

7.1.3 Phonological features in L2 speech

- (6) Freyja: “No, I think that maybe a little noticeable with foreigners is exactly this, PP and LL and NN and some kind of blow [*blástur*]”

7.1.3 Phonological features in L2 speech

- (7) Hugrún: “I thought Germany to begin with but then she said ‘glöð’, then I felt it to be Denmark so I wrote Denmark. She said something like ‘glö’ (imitates a Danish accent).”

7 Results

7.2 Pleasantness and correctness



7.2.1 Pleasantness and familiarity with accent

7.2.2 Pleasantness and listener effort

7.2.3 Correctness and listener effort

7.2.4 What is correct?

7.2.1 Pleasantness and familiarity with accent

(9) Hanna: “I think this has also to do with how used we are to people speaking with different stress than we do.”

(10) Dagbjört: “Just very pleasant. [...] And something I have often heard before. Because I think it is Nordic [...]”

Edda: “Relatively similar to Icelandic.”

5.2.1 Pleasantness and familiarity with accent

(11)Dagur: “Yes, she just spoke Icelandic like an Icelandic, almost. It is, you know, if you measure, if you measure pleasantness according to how similar something is, that you don’t need to learn something new or get accustomed to something new, then that was pleasant.”

7.2.2 Pleasantness and listener effort

- (12) Margrét: "One doesn't contemplate, one doesn't need to think about it."
- (13) Ágúst: "It's like when one listens to a recital and then there's a really strange word in between. That ultimately distracts one from the first words afterwards and you need to concentrate on figuring out 'Wait, what did she say?'"
- (14) Vigdís: "This wasn't directly unpleasant, but more, like, one needed to concentrate. [...] If we hadn't had the text in front of us, one could have misunderstood something."

7.2.3 Correctness and listener effort

- (15) Steinar: "I managed to understand her. That's why I consider it [her Icelandic] to be right."
- (16) Steinar: "I, uh, I think it [Icelandic] is right when you can understand it."
- (17) Atli: "Because I understood everything that she said without any effort."

7.2.4 What is correct?

- (18) Margret: “Then, of course, this pronunciation was not like the one we learn. But that does not mean that she did something wrong, but it wasn’t the same.”
- (19) Jón: “Yes, because there is nothing grammatically wrong with this Icelandic, but whether the accent is right or wrong. It’s just not equally good. It’s different from Icelandic.”

8 Summary and concluding remarks

(I) What voice-placing strategies do “the folk” have and what emic themes are connected with voice-placing strategies?

- Three main voice-placing strategies
 - perceived familiarity with an accent
 - resorting to cultural stereotypes,
 - perceptions of phonological features in L2 speech.
- Indications that L1 speakers of Icelandic try to identify an L2 speaker's origin by resorting to whether they are familiar with the accent, and by utilising information on the demographic composition of Icelandic society, as many participants do with the Polish speaker.
- Drawing on beliefs about L2 proficiency in Icelandic and cultural stereotypes.
- Some conceptualisations of what linguistic and paralinguistic features are idiosyncratic for L1 pronunciation, and some evidence that distinct features, i. e. perception of raised /œ/ and realisation of /u/ as /ʊ/ are connected with L1 speakers of Danish and Polish, respectively.

8 Summary and concluding remarks

(II) What folk themes lie behind evaluations of L2 accents in Icelandic in reaction to the established categories of 'pleasantness' and 'correctness'?

- Pleasantness: Familiarity and listener effort emerged as relevant folk themes
 - Perceptions of increased familiarity appear to translate into evaluations of higher pleasantness.
 - Listener effort is a relevant theme, with results indicating a straightforward relationship between reduced levels of listener effort and increasing pleasantness.
- Correctness: Listener effort emerged as a significant category
 - Indications that the value attached to the concept of listener effort is important for the overall evaluation of accent in the Icelandic context.
 - However, further investigations are needed to uncover folk conceptualisations of listener effort and its entanglement with perceptions of accentedness as well as judgments of correctness.

8 Summary and concluding remarks

(III) What conclusions can be drawn from this for the evaluation system for L2 speech?

- Considering the traditional evaluation system for the L1 and language users' firm beliefs about correctness (cf. Milroy 2001: 535), participants' accounts suggest that different evaluation measures apply to the assessment of L2 accents in Icelandic.
- However, since judgments of correctness for the L1 built mostly on the appropriateness of lexical forms and originality of morphological characteristics – and not on deviation in pronunciation – it is less surprising that L1 users of Icelandic refrain from assessing L2 accent along lines of correctness.

Takk fyrir!

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