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ICELANDIC DIALECT CLASSIFICATIONS

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of Icelandic dialect classifications. Icelandic shows little geographical variation compared to other Nordic languages, but there are differences on the phonological and lexical level. However, no traditional dialectological studies describing the distinct linguistic varieties and linking them to well-defined geographical areas were conducted. The first field studies had other aims, either to document the language from a lexicographic perspective or to map the distribution of phonological features. The study of pronunciation, which focused mainly on ten specific phonological variables, was highly influential and the more recent studies used similar methods and, whenever possible, the same informants. In these studies, the main interest has been on language change and whether social factors such as age and social status have any effect on the use of dialect features. Together these studies form a longitudinal study of the distribution of phonological variation from a generational and geographic perspective.

Keywords: lexicography, phonology, syntax, sociolinguistics, longitudinal study, Icelandic

Name: íslenska [islenska]

Language-code: ISO 639-1: is, ISO 639-2: isl

CLASSIFICACIONS DIALECTALS DE L'ISLANDÈS

Resum

Aquest article ofereix una visió general de les classificacions dialectals de l'islandès. Aquesta llengua presenta poca variació geogràfica en comparació amb altres llengües nòrdiques, però hi ha diferències a nivell fonològic i lèxic. No obstant això, no s'han fet estudis dialectals tradicionals que descriguin les diferents varietats lingüístiques i les vinculin amb àrees geogràfiques ben definides. Els primers estudis de camp tenien altres objectius, o bé documentar la llengua des d'una perspectiva

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lexicogràfica o bé cartografiar la distribució dels trets fonològics. L'estudi de la pronunciació, centrat principalment en deu variables fonològiques específiques, va tenir una gran influència i estudis més recents van utilitzar mètodes similars i, sempre que fou possible, els mateixos informants. En aquestes recerques, l'interès principal es va centrar en el canvi lingüístic i si factors socials com ara l'edat i l'estatus social tenien algun efecte en l'ús de les característiques dialectals. En conjunt, aquests estudis constituïen una recerca longitudinal de la distribució de la variació fonològica des de les perspectives generacional i geogràfica.

Paraules clau: lexicografia, fonologia, sintaxi, sociolingüística, estudi longitudinal, islandès

FLOKKUN ÍSLENSKRA MÁLLÝSKNA

Útdráttur

Þessi grein gefur yfirlit yfir íslenskar mállýskur og þróun þeirra. Landshlutabundin tilbrigði í íslensku eru lítil í samanburði við önnur norræn mál en eigi að síður er nokkur svæðisbundinn munur í framburði og orðaforða. Engar hefðbundnar mállýskurannsóknir þar sem leitast var við að lýsa heildstæðum málafræðum og tengja þau við vel afmörkuð landfræðileg svæði voru gerðar á Íslandi framan af. Fyrstu stóru athuganirnar á svæðibundnum málmun höfðu annað markmið, annaðhvort að skrásetja og lýsa tilbrigðum í orðafari í orðabókasamhengi eða að kanna útbreiðslu staðbundinna framburðareinkenna. Stór rannsókn sem beindist einkum að tilteknum hljóðkerfislegum breytum hafði mikil áhrif og í síðari tíma rannsóknum hafa svipaðar aðferðir verið notaðar. Þá hafa þessar rannsóknir að hluta beinst að sömu málhöfum og fyrr og þær hafa öðrum þræði snúið að málbreytingum og því hvort málfélagslegir þættir eins og t.d. aldur og þjóðfélagsstaða hafi áhrif á þróun mállýskubundinna framburðareinkenna. Saman fela þessar rannsóknir í sér langtíma athugun á útbreiðslu hljóðkerfislegra tilbrigða með tilliti til landfræðilegrar dreifingar þeirra og tíðni frá einni kynslóð til annarrar.

Lykilorð: orðabókafræði, hljóðkerfisfræði, setningafræði, félagsmálfræði, langtímarannsóknir, íslenska

1. General remarks

Icelandic is the language spoken in Iceland, an island in the North Atlantic of about 103,000km² (see Map 1).



Map 1. Map of Iceland and Northern Europe (<https://ian.macky.net/pat/map/neur/neurblu.gif>)

Icelandic is a West-Nordic language of the North-Germanic group of the Indo-European language family. It is closely related to Faroese and Norwegian, in particular West-Norwegian dialects. Icelandic, which in its older form (ca 1550) is often referred to as Old-Norse, was brought to Iceland during the settlement period which began around 870. The early settlers of Iceland arrived from Norway, in particular the southern and western part, as well as the Faroes and Norse settlements in the British Isles. The language that emerged during this period has been claimed to be a levelling of West-Nordic dialects (Guðmundsson 1977: 316, Árnason 2003: 247-249, 2011: 13) with traces of Gaelic, preserved in a few personal names and place names (Guðmundsson 1997: 121-199).

Iceland (Map 2) is sparsely populated, and the habitation is mainly close to the coast. Large parts of the island are mountainous, and its central part is an uninhabitable wilderness.



Map 2. Map of Iceland (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Iceland.svg)

Before 1900, Iceland was rural and most inhabitants lived on small farms (Svavarsdóttir 2021). Travels and transport between farms or districts were often challenging, but, nevertheless, Icelandic communities have not been isolated for long periods of time. Throughout history, there has been considerable internal mobility in the country. It was common that families moved from one farm to another, sometimes repeatedly, and the same land was rarely occupied by more than one or two generations of farmers. Seasonal fishing also drew farmers and farmhands to fishing stations every year, often far away. Later, after the onset of urbanization, many workers travelled from the towns for seasonal work in the country or in fishing villages around the coast, especially young people. Also, many youths attended secondary or grammar schools far away from home, living in dormitories together with peers from other parts of the country (Guðmundsson 1977: 318-321).

The most populous area, Reykjavík with surroundings, developed late in history. In 1901, only 9,417 inhabitants (12% of the total population) were registered in the area that now forms the capital region. During and after the second world war the process of urbanization accelerated, and, in 2020, the population in the capital area was 236,528 (71%) (*Sögulegar hagtölur*). After the mid-20th century, many areas outside the capital region have gone through a process of depopulation, especially rural communities and small fishing villages.

Most of the speakers of Icelandic live in Iceland. Outside Iceland, the language is spoken almost exclusively by Icelanders that live abroad for longer or shorter periods of time. However, in the years 1871-1914, around 16,500 Icelanders emigrated to Canada and the United States (Kjartansson and Heiðarsson 2003: 102). In both countries, Icelandic communities emerged, the largest one being the Icelandic community in the Canadian province of Manitoba. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the community ran schools, churches and libraries for speakers of Icelandic, and published books, magazines and weekly newspapers which formed an important contribution to Icelandic culture at the time. In the Icelandic communities in North America, a new variety of Icelandic emerged, a variety that was shaped by the close contact with the English language. In previous studies, North American Icelandic has been described as one homogenous variety (e.g., Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006). However, due to the geographical distance between the settlements, it is likely that some of the Icelandic speaking communities developed their own subvarieties which have not been documented. After the second world war, North American Icelandic yielded for English, and, since then, the number of native speakers has been decreasing gradually. During the first decades of the 21st century, North American Icelandic was considered heading towards language death (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006; Arnbjörnsdóttir, Thráinsson and Bragason 2018, 2023).

Even if Icelandic has in practice been the official language in Iceland since the country gained sovereignty in 1918¹ the status of the language has been viewed as

¹ Also before, Icelandic had been the dominant language for internal/domestic communication, with the majority of speakers being monolingual in Icelandic.

uncontested and thus not in need for support through legislature. It was only in 2011 that the legal status of Icelandic, as well as Icelandic sign language, was certified by law.

Icelandic language policy has been described as conservative and puristic. The opposition to foreign influence, notably reflected in the reluctance to accept lexical borrowings, was strengthened by the 19th and early 20th century struggle for independence from Denmark, even though purism has a longer history in Iceland (Árnason 2003: 273-275). The language ideology, supported by the majority of Icelanders, is linked to a strong literary tradition that can be traced back to the medieval literature (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson 2010: 104), and, consequently, great emphasis has been put on the preservation of the written language.

Since the dawn of linguistic studies in Iceland, it has been the view of many linguists and laymen that the Icelandic language does not have any dialects (e.g., Kuhn 1935: 24 and Benediktsson 1961-1962: 72). This is partly due to the conservative language ideology mentioned before, or as Benediktsson (1961-1962: 72) puts it: “[t]he alleged historical unity of the language through the ages naturally leads to the assumption of complete synchronic unity at any particular time during its development, also at the present time”. The Danish dialect scholar Kristensen (1924: 295) points out that no other geographical areas in the Nordic countries show so little dialect variation as Iceland. Yet, scholars such as Hægstad (1910), Kristensen (1924) and Dahlstedt (1958) maintain the existence of Icelandic dialects. Ultimately, the existence or absence of dialects in Iceland depends on the definition of the term dialect. If dialect is defined as a geographically bound language variety that shows distinct differences from other varieties on *all* linguistic levels, that is lexically, phonetically, morphologically, syntactically and pragmatically, Icelandic does not have any. The geographic variation is too minor and mostly limited to phonetics/phonology and vocabulary, though geographic variation on other language levels, e.g. inflectional and syntactic, also exists (cf. Karlsson 1993 and Sigurðsson 2017). However, if the term is defined in a broader way as *any* geographical variety of a language, Icelandic shows variation that can be described in terms of geographical dialectology.

Perhaps it is due to the wide-spread understanding that there are no traditional dialects in Iceland that 19th and 20th century linguists did not offer any extended fieldwork on dialect classification for Icelandic. The earliest attempts to categorize Icelandic dialects were made by Scandinavian linguists that focused on linguistic variation in the Nordic region, mainly Hægstad (1910) and Kristensen (1924). However, these early papers that addressed dialects were sketchy and not based on actual data or fieldwork. As in most later studies on Icelandic dialects, Hægstad and Kristensen base their classification mostly on a few phonological variables. As Kristensen (1924: 301) points out, the morphological and lexical differences between Icelandic dialects are even smaller than on the phonological level.

2. Classifications

2.1 Sigfús Blöndal and Jón Ófeigsson (1920-24)

In the early 1920s, Sigfús Blöndal (1874-1950) and his co-workers published an Icelandic-Danish dictionary. The focus was on contemporary language, both written and spoken. As a consequence of the emphasis on spoken language, registering dialect variation became an important part of the lexicographic work.

2.1.1 Framework: Isoglottic dialectology and lexicography

The Icelandic-Danish dictionary (Blöndal 1920-1924) is still the largest dictionary of modern Icelandic and it has been an important source for later lexicographic works and linguistic studies. The focus on contemporary language, including everyday communication and dialect variation in lexis and pronunciation in different parts of the country, lead to an extensive registration of dialect features in the dictionary. The dialect information was based on earlier observations and investigations by various scholars, as well as the lexicographers' own studies and their analysis of older material.

It was presented both in the introductory chapters of the dictionary, and in the lexical entries themselves.

2.1.2 Classification of dialects and subdialects

Jón Ófeigsson (1881-1938) was responsible for the phonological part of the dictionary. He wrote a detailed introductory overview on Icelandic phonetics and phonology, including a chapter on dialect variation (Ófeigsson 1920-1924: xxvi-xxvii). In this overview, not supported by any maps, he registered two main dialects: southern (*sunnlenska*) and northern (*norðlenska*), distinguished by five phonological variables, see Table 1.

variable	examples	southern variant	northern variant
long vowel + stop	<i>láta</i> 'let' <i>taka</i> 'take'	unaspirated stop [lau:ta] [t ^h a:ka]	aspirated stop [lau:t ^h a] [t ^h a:k ^h a]
sonorant + stop	<i>synti</i> 'swam' <i>hálfka</i> 'slippery ice'	unvoiced + unaspirated [sɪŋtɪ] [hau ^l ka]	voiced + aspirated [sɪnt ^h ɪ] [hau ^l k ^h a]
dental fricative + stop	<i>maðkur</i> 'worm'	unvoiced + unaspirated [maθkvr]	voiced + aspirated [maðk ^h vr]
onset <hv>	<i>hvalur</i> 'whale'	fricative [x ^(w) a:lvr]	aspirated stop [k ^h va:lvr]
before [ð]	<i>hafði</i> 'had' <i>sagði</i> 'said'	voiced fricative [havðɪ] [sayðɪ]	unaspirated stop [hapðɪ] [sakðɪ]

Table 1. Phonological differences between southern and northern Icelandic dialects (based on Ófeigsson 1920–24: xxvi-xxvii)

In addition, Ófeigsson distinguished a northwestern (*vestfirska*) and a southwestern (*suðurnesjamál*) subdialect of the southern variety, as well as an eastern dialect (*austfirska*) sharing a couple of features with the northern (notably aspirated postvocalic stops), and others with the southern dialect (e.g., the pronunciation of initial <hv> as a fricative [x^(w)]). A subdialect of the eastern dialect was *hornfirska* in the southeast. The subdialects shared most of their features with either the southern or

the northern variety, and were, apart from these, characterized by one or more phonetic features of their own.

Even if the variety characterized by a merger of the unrounded long mid-high front vowels [ɪ] and [ɛ], as well as of the corresponding rounded [ɣ] and [œ], was categorized as a southwestern subdialect in Ófeigsson's overview (*suðurnesjamál*), he noted that it actually occurred in other areas as well, i.e. the east and the southeast. The merger is, however, not counted among the characteristic features of these dialects, and interestingly such pronunciation is furthermore said to be "considered plebeian and avoided by all cultivated people" (Ófeigsson 1920-1924: xxvii). This is the only feature that was noted as stigmatized.

Geographic variation in the pronunciation of Icelandic had been observed in earlier sources, and the terms that Ófeigsson used in the 1920s for naming the dialects and subdialects had been used in Icelandic at least since around 1700 (Jónsson 1964: 66). His contribution was primarily to give a complete overview of the language variation based on these sources. This introductory overview is followed up by Ófeigsson's phonetic transcriptions within the dictionary entries. He transcribed all headwords, and a number of inflectional forms, in most cases showing dialect variation in pronunciation where appropriate, even if rare variants were not always displayed.

In addition to dialect variation in pronunciation, the dictionary offers extensive information on lexical variation, especially in the form of markers on words or expressions with a limited geographical distribution, or on meanings, that were only confirmed within a particular area. Some of these markers indicate large areas like e.g., northern Iceland (NI = *Norðurland*), while others refer to a smaller district, even a single town or county (Rvk = *Reykjavík*, Þingv = *Þingvallasveit*).

Information on the distribution of lexical entries, expressions, or meanings of words in the dictionary are, in addition to Sigfús Blöndal's own collection, based on earlier investigations. Björn M. Ólsen (1850-1919), his friend and former teacher, had made some field trips in the late 19th century to collect vocabulary from everyday speech in different parts of the country (Blöndal 1920-1924: viii, x; Kvaran 2001). He had, however, not been able to process and publish the material himself and handed it

over to Blöndal for inclusion in his dictionary. The author Þórbergur Þórðarson (1888-1974), an enthusiastic lay linguist, had started to collect words from the spoken language, including dialect vocabulary, and the earliest part of his collection was also used for the dictionary (Thórðarson 1920: 90). The extensive lexicographic archives, compiled since the 1940s from 16th to 20th century written texts as well as 20th century comments on spoken language, confirm the regional distribution of many words and meanings indicated in Blöndal's dictionary, even if there are instances where the markers do not seem to be fully appropriate.

Interestingly, there are some mismatches between the dialect labels of lexical entries and their phonetic transcription in the dictionary, as there are cases of words, which were labelled as limited to a particular area but transcribed with variable pronunciation. The noun *hrokaræða* is e.g., marked as north-eastern (*Þing*), and all the users would therefore be expected to pronounce it with an aspirated stop, [k^h], but nevertheless, the unaspirated variant is transcribed as well. Likewise, the word *hvíki* 'corner', marked as south-eastern (*ASkaft*) and therefore expected to be pronounced only with an initial fricative, [x^(w)], is also transcribed with [k^hv]. Despite such inconsistencies, the dictionary contains the most complete description of dialect variation in Icelandic available at the time, though it didn't include any dialect maps. It was, therefore, an important milestone and a basis for further studies.

Stefán Einarsson (1897-1972) made some studies in eastern Iceland in 1930 to get a clearer picture of the geographical boundaries between phonetic variants in the area, both between the typical northern and southern dialect features and of more local features, described in Ófeigsson's overview. He presented his results on the so-called voiced (northern) vs. the unvoiced (southern) pronunciation, appearing e.g., in *kompá* 'notebook' with either [mp^h] or [mp], quantitatively in tables according to counties, farms and individuals (Einarsson 1932a: 36-37; 1932b: 540-546), as shown in Table 2.

Observed in	total	<i>p, t, k</i>	<i>b, d, g</i>	total	<i>p, t, k</i>	<i>b, d, g</i>
	farms	farms	farms	indiv.	indiv.	indiv.
Skriðdalur	9	8	6	20	11	10
Vellir	5	3	2	6	4	2
Skógar	2	2	0	4	4	0
Fljótsdalur	6	6	3	15	12	3
Fell	8	7	2	12	10	2
Eiðþinghá	5	4	2	9	6	3
Hjaltast þh.	6	6	1	7	6	1
Total	41	36	16	73	53	21

Table 2. An example of a table presenting results from Einarsson's (1932b: 540) research in eastern Iceland, aimed at ascertaining the border between northern and southern dialect variants, here the aspiration (*p, t, k*) vs. unaspiration (*b, d, g*) of intervocalic stops in the Fljótsdalshérað-region, a central inland area in the east. The table shows the number of farms where he found instances of each variant, as well as the number of individuals applying the features, in seven communities in the region.

Apart from such tables, there was an extensive discussion of variation in postvocalic aspiration and other variables, although he did not present any maps of the isoglosses. Besides the phonetic features, he studied dialect variation in the use of words signifying directions, both the cardinal points: *suður* 'south', *norður* 'north', *vestur* 'west' and *austur* 'east', and words such as *inn* 'in', *út* 'out', etc., and how they were paired to mark opposite directions in different localities, not always consistent with the compass or the maps (Einarsson 1952). In the case of eastern Iceland, he connects the results concerning words used for directions with the distribution of the phonetic variants. Furthermore, he compares the dialect boundaries, i.e. the isoglosses, with the boundaries between trade districts in eastern Iceland during the Danish trade monopoly 1602-1787, and discusses their impact on language variation (Einarsson 1932a, 1932b).

2.2 Björn Guðfinnsson (1940s)

The first comprehensive investigation of geographical variation in Iceland based on fieldwork was conducted by Björn Guðfinnsson (1905-1950), a teacher of Icelandic in grammar school, who later became professor of Modern Icelandic language at the

University of Iceland. Guðfinnsson's goal was to document phonological variation in Iceland and its development. In order to achieve this, he conducted extensive fieldwork across the country.

2.2.1 Framework: Isoglottic dialectology

Guðfinnsson's aim was to systematically collect data on Icelandic pronunciation, using a scientifically rigid method, and to describe the differences in a phonological framework. However, as Benediktsson (1961-1962: 79-80) concluded, "[s]ome points in Guðfinnsson's methodology will seem surprising to the scholar in the well-established, tradition-bound West-European dialectology." Benediktsson explained that the reason for Guðfinnsson's methodological decisions were partly due to his pedagogical view. His main aim was not to reconstruct the pronunciation of the past, but rather to map the current state. Thus, instead of focusing on traditional dialect speakers, i.e. local individuals of the oldest generation, Guðfinnsson's informants were mainly school children. He and his assistants visited all school districts in Iceland between 1941 and 1944.

To document the pronunciation variation, Guðfinnsson invited all children at the age of 10-13 to participate in the study. The pronunciation was elicited by using four different test methods that supplemented each other: a reading test, a conversation test, direct inquiries about pronunciation, and a writing test.

In total, 6,520 children took part, i.e., 93% of the children between 10 and 13 (Guðfinnsson 1949). However, Guðfinnsson did not only interview local inhabitants, as would be expected in traditional dialect studies. In his study, children that had moved into the area from other parts of Iceland or had non-local parents were interviewed as well and included in the statistical analysis. The children's background was documented on index cards along with the results from the interview (Guðfinnsson 1946: 112). In addition to the school children, Guðfinnsson researched a group of adults in the same areas. Considering both children and adults, the total number of people that participated in Guðfinnsson's investigation was around 10,000, which is 8% of the total population of Iceland at the time (Guðfinnsson 1949: 354).

Guðfinnsson identified ten different phonological features, all included in Ófeigsson's description. According to the pronunciation of each variant, he categorized the informants as follows:

- (A) pure: informants only using the (presumed) dialect variant
- (A/B) mixed: informants using both variants on at least one occasion
- (B) absent: informants not using the (presumed) dialect variant

The results for each informant, i.e., his or her choice of variants, were marked on an index card along with their background information (cf. Guðmundsdóttir 2017: 170-171). Guðfinnsson's original archive is preserved at the National and University Library of Iceland and is still used as an important source for linguistic research. His results were presented in two monographs (Guðfinnsson 1946, 1964).

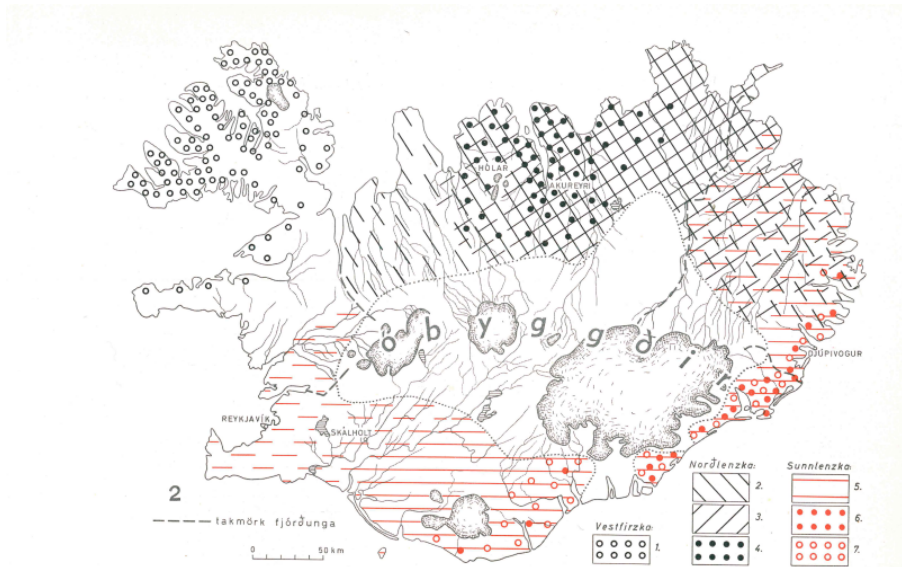
2.2.2 Classification of dialects and subdialects

Although Guðfinnsson (1946) investigated ten different dialect features in Iceland, he only analyzed the spread of one of those variables in his book: aspirated (post-/intervocalic) stops ([p^h, c^h, k^h, t^h]), which occur mostly in Northern Iceland, and unaspirated stops ([p, c, k, t]) which are the main variant elsewhere. As an example, 0.7% of the informants in Reykjavik (southern variant) used aspirated stops and 86.3% of the informants in the town of Akureyri (northern variant) (Guðfinnsson 1946: 156). Besides the core areas that show clear preference for a specific phonological feature, Guðfinnsson also identified areas in which the two variants competed, and intra-individual variation was common (mixed pronunciation).

Due to Guðfinnsson's premature death, the report was completed and published twenty years later by his assistants Ólafur M. Ólafsson and Óskar Ó. Halldórsson (Guðfinnsson 1964). Although both books describe with much accuracy the geographical spread of each phonological feature by presenting tables for each school district, the two volumes contain no dialect maps and no general classification of dialects. Instead, Guðfinnsson stresses that the different phonological features do not completely overlap and that each core area is surrounded by mixed areas. Thus, he

argues, Icelandic does not show sharp isoglosses like some closely related languages such as Norwegian. However, as pointed out by Dahlsted (1958:37), this may be a consequence of the methodological differences between the Icelandic and Scandinavian dialect studies.

Based on Guðfinnsson's investigation, the Swedish dialectologist Dahlsted (1958) created the two first dialect maps of Iceland: archaisms and innovations in Icelandic pronunciation. He identified three main dialects in Iceland: North-Western, Northern and Southern. The map of archaisms is shown in Map 3.



Map 3. Dahlsted's dialect map based on Guðfinnsson's (1946) study of phonetic variables among school children. Westnorthern dialect: 1. Monophthongs vs. diphthongs before [ŋ] (*ng/nk* in writing). Northern dialect: 2. Inter-/postvocalic aspirated stops. 3. Voiced sonorants in front of *p, t, k*. 4. Audible *g* [k] in the consonant cluster *ngl*. Southern dialect: 5. Word initial *hv-* pronounced as [x^w] (rather than (northern) [k^hv]). 6. Consonant clusters *rn* and *rl* pronounced [rn, rl] without a *t*-insertion (i.e. [(r)tn, (r)tl]). 7. Monophthongs before *-gi* [ji].

As Figure 4 shows, Dahlsted's interpretation of Guðfinnsson's results differs slightly from Ófeigsson's first dialect classification. Instead of seeing the northwest variety as a subcategory of the southern one, Dahlsted listed it as one of three main varieties of Icelandic.

2.3 RÍN (1980s)

In the 1980s, Höskuldur Thráinsson and Kristján Árnason initiated a project called RÍN (*Rannsókn á íslensku nútímamáli* ‘An investigation of Modern Icelandic’). The project had a twofold purpose: to give an overview of the phonetic/phonological variation in Icelandic in the early 1980s, and to show the changes that had taken place in the distribution of dialect variants since Björn Guðfinnsson carried out his research 40 years earlier (see Section 2.2; cf. Árnason 1987, 2005: 364-425; Árnason and Thráinsson 1983, 2003; Thráinsson and Árnason 1984, 1986, 1992, 2001).

2.3.1 Framework: Isoglottic dialectology and variationist sociolinguistics

The methodology of the RÍN-project was inspired by the framework of variationist sociolinguistics of Labov (1972) and others, not only considering the geographical but also the social distribution of the phonological features investigated (Thráinsson & Árnason 1984, 1992: 94-96). The just over 3,000 informants, distributed around the country seeking to represent the population satisfactorily, were classified according to typical sociolinguistic factors like age, gender, social status, etc., as well as their origin.

The intended comparison with Guðfinnsson’s results affected the RÍN-methodology in two ways: By putting a special emphasis on two of the five age-groups defined in RÍN, the 12–20 years old, i.e. those of approximately the same age as Guðfinnsson’s informants were, and the 46-55 years old, i.e. the age group (and partly the same people) that had been “tested” 40 years earlier, and in applying reading of texts similar to those used by him (Thráinsson & Árnason 1992: 94).

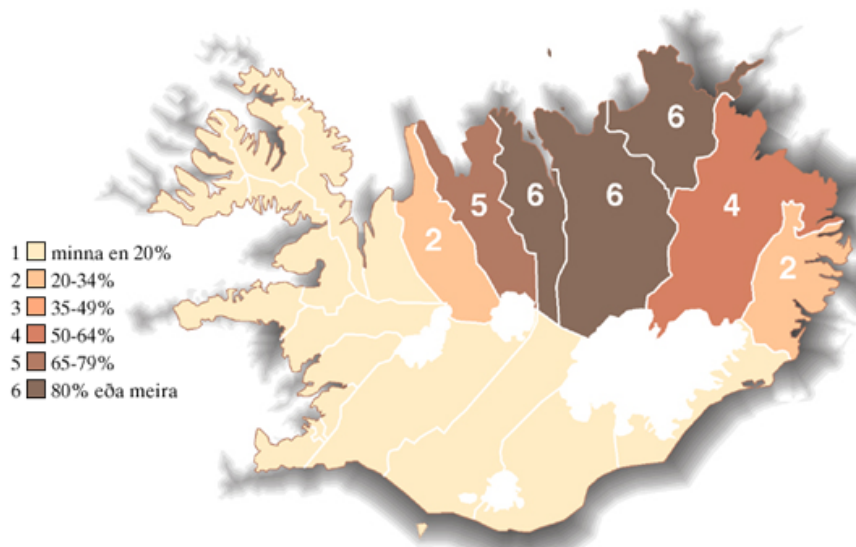
Innovations in methodology applied in RÍN are due to both linguistic and technological development. Recordings of all interviews enabled more precise registering of results, as they could be better controlled by repeated listening. Previous to the reading of a text, the testing sessions consisted of an interview about the background of the informant and a discussion and naming of objects shown to them in

photocopied drawings – focusing on the lexical items and drawing away the informant’s attention from their pronunciation. Instead of Guðfinnsson’s rough classification of the individual’s pronunciation of each variant into pure, mixed or absent, in RÍN each variant of the variables was assigned a particular value, which were then used to calculate the mean value for each variable in the speech of informants and in geographical and/or social groups (Thráinsson & Árnason 1992: 96). This yields a more nuanced picture than Guðfinnsson’s analysis.

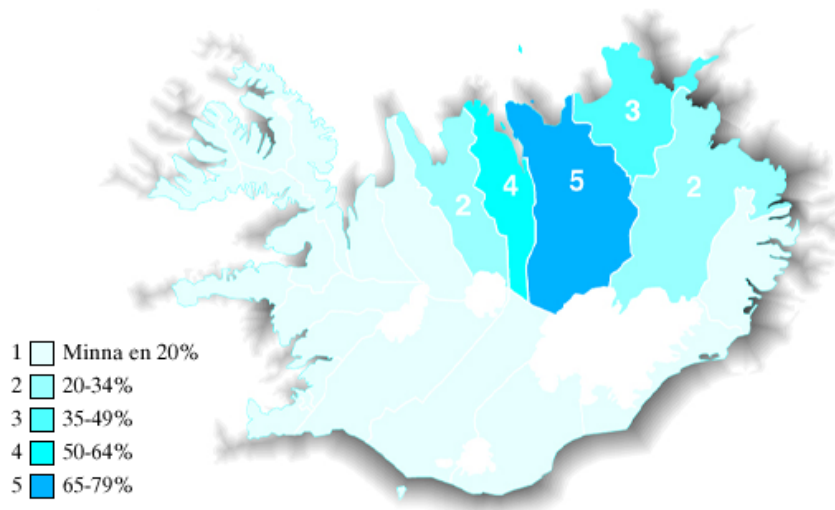
The comparison with Guðfinnsson’s results shows the general tendency that widely distributed and frequent variants had spread during the 40 years’ period, though the less frequent (dialect) variants differed with respect to their resistance. When explaining the changes, the authors refer both to sociolinguistic (external) factors, such as accommodation, social evaluation and attitude, and theoretical linguistics (internal) factors, as e.g., simplification of phonological processes (Thráinsson & Árnason 1992: 113-124).

2.3.2 Classification and dialects

The complete RÍN results have never been published, only articles on the results from districts in the north and the southeast and from Reykjavík, as well as some overviews including other districts. The results are mostly presented quantitatively in tables or graphs, either as percentages, especially when comparing them to Guðfinnsson’s classification into pure, mixed and absent, or as indices showing mean values for variants, stratified for social and/or geographical groups within the RÍN data set. Some of the results have also been presented on dialect maps, though each map only displays the distribution of the variants of a single variable (Thráinsson & Árnason 2001). Maps 4 and 5 show the frequency and distribution of two variables: aspirated inter-/postvocalic stops (*harðmæli*), and voiced sonorants + aspirated stops (*raddaður framburður*).



Map 4. The distribution of the northern “hard” pronunciation, i.e. aspirated inter-/postvocalic stops as in *gata* [ga:t^ha] ‘street’ and *sopi* [sɔ:p^hi] ‘sip’, according to RÍN. The different shades of brown show the mean proportion of the variant for all informants in each area, ranging from less than 20% (1: lightest) to more than 80% (6: darkest) (Thráinsson & Árnason 2001; map by Jean-Pierre Biard).



Map 5. The distribution of the northern voiced pronunciation, i.e. a voiced sonorant preceding an aspirated stop as in *vanta* [vant^ha] ‘(to) lack’ and *hempa* [hemp^ha] ‘cassock’, according to RÍN. The different shades of blue show the mean proportion of the variant for all informants in each area, ranging from less than 20% (1: lightest) to more than 65% (5: darkest) (Thráinsson and Árnason 2001; map by Jean-Pierre Biard).

The comparison with Guðfinnsson’s results shows that the development of these two northern features was quite different, judging by the changes in the speech of

young people in the district of Skagafjörður. The pronunciation of aspirated stops, e.g., in *api* [a:p^hi] ‘ape’, was much more resistant to the change to unaspirated ones, than the voiced pronunciation of sonorants before (aspirated) stops, e.g., in *lampi* [lamp^hi] ‘lamp’, were to the unvoiced variants (plus unaspirated stops). The relative proportion of those who exclusively used the unaspirated variant of the first variable was 10% in the 1940s, rising to 16% in the youngest group in the 1980s. For the second variable, 24% always used the unvoiced variant in the 1940s, whereas 68% of teenagers did so in the 1980s (Thráinsson & Árnason 1992: 106).

2.4 VIS: Variation in Icelandic Syntax (2000s)

In the early 21st century extensive research of syntactic variation was carried out, notably in the project *Variation in Icelandic Syntax* (VIS; Thráinsson et al. 2007, Thráinsson et al. 2013, Thráinsson, Angantýsson & Sigurðsson 2013, 2015, 2017). The Icelandic project was part of a larger inter-Nordic research network, *Scandinavian Dialect Syntax* (ScanDiaSyn), studying syntactic variation in and between the dialects spoken in the whole of Scandinavia. The main purpose was to document variation in syntax and map the sociolinguistic and geographic distribution of variants. Beforehand, there were very few indications of dialect variation in syntax in Iceland, but this had never been systematically investigated, except for a few studies of (stigmatized) syntactic innovations. Part of the Icelandic material is accessible through the *Nordic Dialect Corpus and Syntax Database*.²

2.4.1 Framework: isoglottic dialectology, theoretical syntax and variationist sociolinguistics

The main methodology of the VIS-project was to have informants answer a written questionnaire, primarily giving acceptability judgements of pairs or sets of sentences – a standard method in (generative) syntactic investigations. There were also tasks where the informants were asked to choose between two variants of a sentence, or to

² See <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/>.

fill in blanks in a sentence or short text. In the instructions, the informants were asked to have their everyday speech in mind rather than the standard written language, and recordings of some of the sentences were played for the informants, both to emphasize the intended language register and to ensure that possible differences in stress and intonation would not lead to different interpretations of the syntactic structure and semantics of the sentences. Three questionnaires were presented to the informants, at three occasions between 2005 and 2007. The informants were selected from 26 locations around the country, divided into eight main areas, and from four predefined age-groups (14-15, 20-25, 40-45, 65-70). They should be local in the sense that they were born and bred in the community, had lived there most of their life, and that Icelandic was their native language and their sole language at home. Males and females are equally represented, and the number of participants in each age-group ranged from 160 to 200. The total number of informants for each questionnaire was between 714 and 772. Some of them answered all three questionnaires while others only participated in one of them, so in some cases there were different representatives for the community or age-group from one session to another. In addition to the questionnaires, a small number of informants in some of the locations were interviewed, using a method of semi-structured interviews to elicit reaction to certain constructions (Thráinsson, Angantýsson & Sigurðsson 2013: 47-60), to get material acquired by different methods for comparison. For the same purpose, some available transcriptions of natural spoken language from previous investigations were compared to the results from the questionnaires (Svavarsdóttir 2013).

2.4.2 Classification of dialects and subdialects

With respect to the distribution of variants, the result was in short that almost none of the many features investigated showed any traces of dialect variation. If the variants were distributed differently in different locations, the distribution was usually quite random and could not be systematically connected to geographic areas (Thráinsson, Angantýsson & Sigurðsson 2015).

There is only one morphosyntactic exception to this, i.e., the acceptability of the attached definite article in certain possessive constructions with a genitive attribute referring to a semantically definite “owner”:

- a. *boltinn* *pabba* *míns*
 ball-DEF daddy-GEN my-GEN
 ‘my daddy’s ball’
- b. *bíllinn* *Jóns*
 car-DEF Jon-GEN
 ‘John’s car’.

The majority of informants rejected such constructions (70-80%), and most of those who accepted it were from two locations in the far north, *Siglufjörður* and *Sauðárkrókur*, where up to 80% accepted a sentence containing the construction, and to a lesser degree in two other locations in north-western Iceland and more surprisingly in the south (Sigurðsson 2017: 86-93). The limited geographical distribution of this variant was already known, in both the northern and north-western areas, but the results show that it still exists as a dialect feature and largely confirm its distribution. This does, however, not alter the overall picture of dialect variation in Iceland, as this feature falls into the main opposition between north and south. The occurrence of similarities between the far north and the north-west are also known from other, now extinct, phonological dialect features.

2.5 RAUN (2010s)

In the 2010s, a new project called RAUN (*Málbreytingar í rauntíma í íslensku hljóðkerfi og setningagerð* ‘Real-time linguistic change in Icelandic phonology and syntax’) was undertaken, to follow up previous research on linguistic variation, and gain insight into the development of dialect variables. In the phonological part, new material was selected from informants that had been previously interviewed in the 1940s and/or 1980s, as well as from a new generation of young informants, to analyse

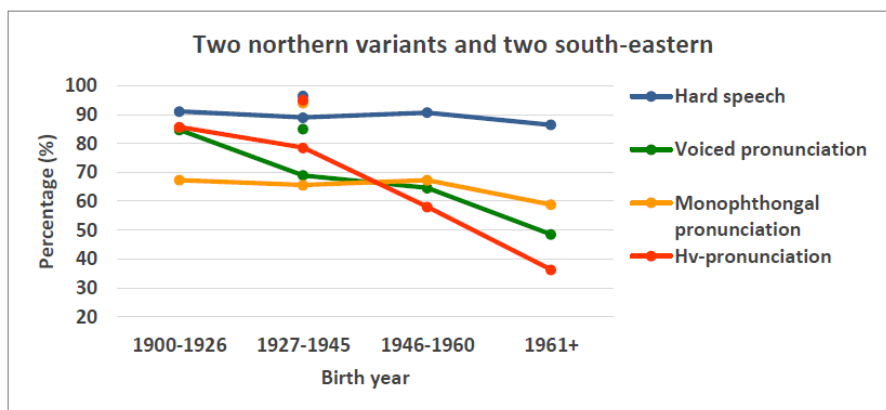
the development of dialect variation in Icelandic over a period of 70 years. As older research, notably the VIS-project, had shown that the distribution of syntactic variants is rarely geographical, the syntactic part of RAUN is not discussed here.

2.5.1 Framework: isoglottic dialectology and variationist sociolinguistics

In RAUN, about 340 of Guðfinnsson's informants (now in their eighties) were interviewed for the second or third time (panel study), approximately 300 other participants in RÍN (now ca 40-65 years) for the second time, and about 240 new teenage informants. Furthermore, Guðfinnsson's original material, preserved at the National and University Library of Iceland, was analysed to break down the results by individuals and thereby enabling a more nuanced comparison between his results and those of later research (Guðmundsdóttir 2022: 96-99). The investigations focused on changes in the distribution of regional variants, using both real-time studies of language change over the lifespan of individual speakers and apparent-time studies consisting of comparisons between generations of young informants at different points in time. The purpose was to try to understand if and how changes in dialect variation proceed over time: Are new speakers the main protagonists of change or do older speakers also change their language use throughout their lifetime?

Höskuldsdóttir (2013) compared the development of three northern dialect variants from the 1940s to the 2010s: the aspiration of inter-/postvocalic stops, the voicing of sonorants before (aspirated) stops, and stops before the voiced fricative [ð], e.g. in *hafði* [hapðɪ] 'had' and *sagði* [sakðɪ] 'said' (rather than the more common fricatives: [havðɪ], [sayðɪ]). She investigated two groups of northern speakers from Guðfinnsson's study: informants who had lived all their lives in the north, and people that had moved to Reykjavík before 1980 (and had not participated in RÍN). Her results show that the dialect variant had in all cases retreated since the 1940s, but to different degrees depending on the variable. Furthermore, the retreat was shown to be greater in the speech of those who moved away than those who lived on in the area.

An extensive study of the development of four variables, including two northern variants (aspirated inter-/postvocalic stops and voiced sonorants + aspirated stops) and two southern variants (initial $[x^{(w)}]$ for *hv-* and long monophthongs before $[jɪ]$), appeared in Guðmundsdóttir (2022). She concentrated on the core areas of the four regional variants, and how they had fared in the speech of the same individuals from adolescence to old age, and across generations over a period of 70 years. Apparent-time comparison in previous studies had indicated that these variants developed differently with respect to both frequency and distribution, and Figure 1, shows that one variant in each area is more stable across generations than the other.



RÍN: Apparent time comparison: Frequency of the northern variants hard speech and voiced pronunciation in north-east Iceland and frequency of the south-eastern variants monophthongal pronunciation and *hv*-pronunciation in south-east Iceland (Skaftafellssýslur). The single dots reflect the frequency in Guðfinnsson's research (most common birth years 1927–1933).

Figure 1. Apparent-time development of four regional variants in Iceland according to RÍN (1980s; from Guðmundsdóttir 2022: 339)

In her studies, Guðmundsdóttir investigated and compared the frequency of the variants, on the one hand in the speech of young informants from three generations, i.e. adolescent speakers in the 1940s, 1980s and 2010s, and on the other hand in the speech of individuals over their lifespan, i.e. the same informants at three points in time. She showed that the local variants are receding rapidly in the speech of young people, and that changes are clearly led by new generations of speakers. The development is more complicated when it comes to individuals and differs between variables. In some cases, the local variant is fairly stable across the lifespan, causing a considerable generational difference between contemporary speakers. In others,

speakers are apt to change their pronunciation during their lifetime, especially before middle age, reducing generational differences.

The development of the northern inter-/postvocalic aspirated variants and the southern initial [x^w] pronunciation is similar, both being fast receding in the speech of young people but relatively stable across the lifespan, whereas the pronunciation with voiced sonorants followed by an aspirated stop in North Iceland has receded both from one generation to the next and in the speech of individuals over their lifespan. Southern monophthong before *-gi* [jɪ] receded rapidly between the 1940s and 1980s but stabilized after that, both generationally and individually, and its frequency had even slightly increased among individual speakers (Guðmundsdóttir 2022: 245-246).

In her dissertation, Guðmundsdóttir seeks explanations of the general development as well as the differences between the four variables in both intra- and extra-linguistic factors, such as the linguistic differences between variants of the four variables, language attitudes and societal changes, e.g., urbanization, mobility and economic situation. Her results indicate that various interacting factors are at play.

2.5.2 Classification of dialects

The RAUN-project was focused on the development of dialect variants in their core areas, not on drawing up (new) isoglosses. The results show a general decrease in the frequency of local variants from the 1940s to the 2010s in both northern and southern dialects, especially from one generation of young speakers to the next. This development in the heart of the respective dialect areas strongly suggests that the geographical distribution of these variants has also decreased during the 70 years covered in the data, even if the current analyses cannot exactly pin down the present-day isoglosses.

3. Discussion

Despite numerous observations of local linguistic features in various sources at least since the late 17th century (e.g., Hægstad 1910, Kristensen 1924, Kuhn 1935, Blöndal 1920-1924), Icelandic linguists and laymen alike have argued that the Icelandic language does not have dialects. That is true to the extent, that in comparison to the other Nordic languages, Icelandic shows little geographical variation. The lack of major linguistic variation is connected with the relatively limited structural changes in the language throughout the centuries. Furthermore, the unity has been explained in terms of high internal mobility throughout history, a strong literary tradition that can be traced back to medieval times, and a conservative and puristic attitude towards language which is coloured by the fact that Iceland was under foreign rule until 1918.

It is perhaps due to the lack of clear dialect boundaries as well as the widespread belief that the Icelandic language has not changed much through the ages, that the history of dialect studies in Iceland differs from most other West-European countries. While linguists in the other Nordic countries collected data from elderly people that were considered to speak “pure” dialects, the first major, systematic dialect study in Iceland, conducted by Björn Guðfinnsson (1946, 1966), focused on documenting the current status by interviewing school children including both local inhabitants and those who had moved to the area. In other words, his aim was not to look for something “old” and “genuine” and he was not attempting to map out different Icelandic dialects from a holistic perspective. Instead, Guðfinnsson’s study focused on a limited set of phonetic variables and documented the distribution of variants using statistical methods. Guðfinnsson’s choice of methodology may have exaggerated the differences between the dialect situation in Iceland and other parts of Northern-Europe. His results showed that Icelandic lacked the clear isoglosses that were found in Sweden and Norway (Dahlsted 1958: 37).

The chosen method in Guðfinnsson’s study had its advantages and disadvantages for Icelandic dialect studies. The main advantage is that the early studies were made with theoretical rigor and that they were innovative and modern in many respects. The data were elicited by four different testing methods that complimented each other,

the tests were repeated in the exact same manner in each school district, and the results were based on an unusually large number of informants. Finally, the collection of data was carefully documented (Guðfinnsson 1946, 1966) and the investigation could therefore be repeated by using the same methods and partly the same informants in later studies, i.e., RÍN in the 1980s and RAUN in the 2010s. In that way, the three major studies on phonological variables in Icelandic form one longitudinal study that enables comparisons from various perspectives. Together, these studies have cast a light on the development of the main phonological variables in Iceland, for example showing to what extent they are transmitted from one generation to another, whether they are stable in the speech of individuals throughout their lifetime, and how and if social factors such as age and social status affect the use of traditional dialectal features.

A limitation of the Icelandic tradition of dialect research is its strong focus on phonological variation. The vast majority of studies address a limited set of phonological variables and other potential differences have tended to be overlooked. However, a number of lexical studies, carried out since the late 19th century, should not be forgotten, even if they have not been as systematic nor as extensive as the large phonological studies. They were continued in the 2nd half of the 20th century by collecting information on words and expressions in everyday spoken language, including their geographical spread. The data were mainly collected through a weekly radio program where listeners were encouraged to share their knowledge on the use of various lexical items. The Lexicographic Institute at the University of Iceland (*Orðabók Háskólans*) was responsible for the program and archived the answers and comments made by the informants. The archive is now preserved at the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, and this material offers many possibilities for future research on regional lexical variation.

Regarding the future, the results from the most recent studies show that the numbers of speakers that use traditional features of Icelandic dialects have been steadily shrinking. Phonological variants that have characterized specific areas are less common among the younger generations, and recent studies on syntax do not indicate

any geographically bound differences in sentence structure with one exception of a northern variant in possessive constructions.

In ten or twenty years, a follow-up on some of the older studies would cast light on the impact of internal mobility, migration, internationalization, and digital technology on Icelandic dialects. Will geographically bound variants survive during the digital age, or will they fade away? Perhaps the future will bring new linguistic varieties based on other social factors. Therefore, in addition to studies that follow-up on the older Icelandic studies, it is also important to explore new methods and linguistic theories.

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