

**LANGUAGE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL IDENTITY
ICELANDERS' ATTITUDES TO DANISH IN TURBULENT TIMES**

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Abstract

This article examines the co-existence of Danish and Icelandic in 19th-century Iceland, together with Icelanders' attitudes towards the two languages in times of upheaval in Icelandic and Danish history. The Danish language played an important role in the two countries' common history. It was necessary for Icelanders in communication with Danes, and their key to study and advancement, as many of them sought further education in Denmark. Danish was also very dominant in public administration. In Icelandic schools, Danish was taught as a foreign language, in addition to which many people independently acquired at least a reading knowledge of the language.

The first signs of urbanisation appear in Iceland in the 19th century. In the leading trading villages, not least in Reykjavík, a relatively high number of Danish merchants and officials resided. There the influence of Danish culture and language on society was clearly visible, while in the countryside traditional Icelandic culture prevailed. Use of Danish had a symbolic significance. It was considered a sign of refinement to use Danish, as it indicated the person belonged to the Danish-Icelandic elite. Respect for the Icelandic language and love of Icelandic literature have traditionally been strong in Icelandic culture. Both the language and culture played a major role in growing national consciousness, not only in Iceland but also in neighbouring countries. New currents flowed from Copenhagen, where nationality, language, literature and history were leading issues of the day. Interest in the Icelandic language and literature in neighbouring countries encouraged nascent nationalism among Icelanders, further reinforcing the position of the language and culture.

All of this affected Icelanders' attitudes towards Danish and their mother tongue. Just as the influence of German was criticised in Denmark, many in Iceland feared that Danish posed a threat to Icelandic. In tandem with the growing strength of the independence movement, changes in attitudes towards Danish appear. Danish loan words and slang were viewed with disapproval and the danicised Icelandic of public officials criticised. The Icelandic language was regarded as most appropriate in Iceland. Even Danish instruction in primary schools was opposed, as it was seen as detrimental to ability in the mother tongue.

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Introduction and focus

Sociolinguistic theory underlines the close links between language and identity. Language is viewed as a social phenomenon and the relationship between language and society, past or present, is expressed in varying attitudes towards language while language usage reflects varying social status and interpersonal relationships. Language thus flags the user's social relationships and group, while attitudes towards language can reflect assumptions concerning the status or function of a language or language variant,¹ e.g. if use of a certain language or language variant conveys prestige or low status.² Sandøy³ points out that the identifying function of the language is one of the characteristics accorded to the language when it serves as a cultural object. This function is often highlighted in connection with regional or social identity, and is also of significance in connection with standardised national language. Thus use of a certain language can serve to signal that a person identifies him- or herself with or belongs to a specific social group, reflecting a consciousness of social or national identity.

During Iceland's lengthy dependency towards Denmark,⁴ Danish played an important role as the language of communication for Icelanders in their contact with Danes. Under Absolutism, Icelandic was subject to strong linguistic pressure from Danish, especially the written language, which left its imprint on the administrative and

¹ Tore Kristiansen, 'Sprogholdninger og sprogpolitik' in Tore Kristiansen, Frans Gregersen, Erik Møller og Inge Lise Pedersen (eds.), *Dansk sproglære*, Dansk lærerforening, Copenhagen, 1996, pp. 315–37 and Mike Holt and Paul Gubbins, 'Introduction' in Mike Holt and Paul Gubbins (eds.), *Beyond Boundaries: Language and Identity in Contemporary Europe*, Multilingual Matters Ltd., Clevedon/Buffalo/Toronto/Sidney, 2002, pp. 1–10.

² This is supported by research on Danes' attitudes to Danish dialects (e.g. Kristiansen, 'Sprogholdninger og sprogpolitik', pp. 315–21 and Tore Kristiansen, 'Language attitudes and language politics in Denmark', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, vol. 159 (*The Sociolinguistics of Danish*), 2003, pp. 57–71), which shows there are major differences with regard to how prestigious the dialects are considered to be. In addition, mention could be made of research on immigrants' languages, which shows that there is a hierarchy of ranking with certain immigrants' language, e.g. Turkish, Urdu, Arabic and Swahili at the bottom, while Scandinavian languages are ranked below English, French, German and Spanish (e.g. Jens Normann Jørgensen 'Language hierarchies, bilingualism, and minority education in the Nordic Countries' in J. N. Jørgensen and C. Horst (eds.), *Et flerkulturelt Danmark: Perspektiver på sociolingvistik, sprogpedagogik, dansk som andetsprog*, Danmarks Lærerhøjskole, Copenhagen, 1995, pp. 87–105 (here pp. 87–89).

³ Helge Sandøy, 'Språkomgrepet, språkholdningar og purismen' in Helge Sandøy, Randi Brodersen og Endre Brunstad (eds.), *Purt og reint: Om purisme i dei nordiske språka*, Volda University College, 2003, pp. 19–36 (here p. 32).

⁴ Iceland became a part of the Danish-Norwegian kingdom in 1383, and the relationship lasted until the establishment of the Icelandic republic in 1944.

legal language.⁵ Presumably the influence of Danish was greatest, however, during the 19th century, when various circumstances in both Denmark and Iceland promoted the use of Danish. Growing consciousness among Danes of Danish nationality as well as the cultural and political currents of the time were of major significance. The vernacular had replaced Latin as the language of instruction in Danish schools at the University of Copenhagen, as well as in other higher educational institutions, and a steadily growing number of textbooks in Danish were published. This meant that knowledge of Danish was a prerequisite for persons studying in Denmark. The Danish press grew in strength and ever more books, periodicals, newspapers and weekly magazines were published in the mother tongue.⁶ Secular literature of this sort was in high demand in Iceland.⁷ At this time, Iceland was undergoing wide-reaching demographic and social changes, many of which encouraged use of Danish by Icelanders. At the same time, new ideological and political trends were gaining a foothold, which would have a major impact on Icelanders' national consciousness and their attitudes towards their mother tongue and to Danish.

This article aims at casting some light on the various political, ideological and social relationships which were of significance in 19th-century Iceland and Denmark, and how they affected Icelanders' attitudes to their mother tongue and Danish. The focus is on the status and function of the Danish language in Iceland, and on how attitudes to Danish changed during Iceland's struggle for independence during the 19th century and until 1918, when Iceland became a sovereign state. This is a period of upheaval in the two countries' common history, during which new political and ideological currents became dominant, bolstering consciousness of national identity and democratic rights. Selected examples illustrate important social and political relationships which encouraged Danish culture and the use of Danish, while at the same time the independence struggle and growth of national identity among Icelanders altered their attitudes towards Danish. In addition, the role of the student community in Copenhagen

⁵ Peter Skautrup, *Det danske sprogs historie* III, Gyldendal, Copenhagen, 1968, p. 116 and Auður Hauksdóttir. 'Dansk sprog i Island i et historisk perspektiv', *Danish History of Language* (in publication), see www.dsl.dk.

⁶ Skautrup, *Det danske sprogs historie* III, pp. 6, 79–81, 139–42 and Ole Feldbæk, 'Skole og identitet 1789-1848' in Ole Feldbæk (ed.), *Dansk identitetshistorie 2: Et yndigt land 1789-1848*, C.A. Reitzels Forlag, Copenhagen, 1991, pp. 253–324, (here pp. 253–68).

⁷ Auður Hauksdóttir 'Danske minder i Island: Om mødet mellem dansk og islandsk kultur', *Danske studier*, vol. 106, 2011, pp. 5–49.

and the students' contact with Danish scholars and the world of Danish culture in the national awakening and attitudes to both languages are described.

The discussion of Icelanders' struggle in support of their language, i.e. of the relationship between Danish and Icelandic, has through the years often been portrayed as a one-sided, national struggle, where Icelanders had to fight alone for their rights against the Danish master and the distinct dominance of Danish. Less frequent, however, is any attempt to examine the changing attitudes towards language and language development in a broader perspective, for instance, in the light of significant social, political and ideological developments in neighbouring countries and how these contributed to the linguistic situation and attitudes to languages. By many indications, this was an extremely complex relationship, involving a large number of different factors extending far beyond the narrow national scene in each country and with an impact transversing national boundaries. The following sections focus on how changes in Icelanders' attitudes to their mother tongue and Danish are connected to local and external factors which made their presence felt during the above-mentioned period.

Language has generally had a key function in the establishment of the European national states which replaced the former kingdoms and empires. In many instances language was the decisive political legitimation for the creation of a nation, even though other factors such as geography, history and religion were also of significance.⁸ In our part of the world, language has been central in fuelling the growth of national identity. Adriansen⁹ emphasises that the mother tongue became a central aspect of national identity and one of the principal tools used in creating nation states in the Danish realm and in most of Northern and Central Europe. In tandem with increased national consciousness and democratic rights in Denmark in the 18th and 19th centuries, Danish gained strength in many areas of society, while at the same time attitudes changed towards German, which came to be regarded as a threat towards Danish.¹⁰ Similar developments can be seen elsewhere in the Nordic countries. In many respects this is

⁸ Holt and Gubbins, 'Introduction', pp. 1–5.

⁹ Inge Adriansen, *Nationale symboler i Det Danske Rige 1830-2000 II: Fra undersætter til nation*, Museum Tusulanums Forlag, Copenhagen, 2003, p. 29.

¹⁰ Skautrup, *Det danske sprogs historie* III, pp. 23–25 and 143–50; Vibeke Winge, 'Dansk og tysk 1790-1848' in Feldbæk (ed.), *Dansk identitetshistorie* 2, pp. 110–49; Adriansen, *Nationale symboler i Det Danske Rige 1830-2000 II*, pp. 30–34.

reminiscent of the situation in Norway, where Danish rule had long had a strong linguistic influence.¹¹ As consciousness of Norwegian identity grew in the 19th century, the dominance of the Danish language and culture came in for criticism, cf. Henrik Wergeland's campaign to promote Norwegian language and culture and later Ivar Aasen's establishment of New Norwegian, based on the language of the rural population, as a Norwegian alternative to the Danish-coloured standard Norwegian. The latter was rooted to a large extent in the towns and cities, where Danish language and culture prevailed¹². During the Icelanders' struggle for independence changes in attitudes towards Danish can also be discerned, as it came to be regarded as a threat to the mother tongue and the use of Danish in Iceland to clash with Icelandic identity. In fact, the situation was more complicated than that. The major role which the mother tongue had in connection with the promotion of Danish national consciousness also encouraged Icelanders' use of Danish. Controversy concerning the dominance of the German language appears to have influenced Icelanders' attitudes towards their mother tongue. The realisation that the Icelandic language and literature played a substantial role in the promotion of Danish and Scandinavian/Nordic identity,¹³ without doubt contributed to strengthening the Icelanders' own national identity and sense of cultural significance. Here one must bear in mind the central role which nurturing of language and literature has always had in Icelandic culture, cf. that Iceland had through the ages a well-established written language, together with the fact that the study of Icelandic literature was active and widespread. Translation of the Bible into Icelandic as early as 1584 was also of decisive significance in establishing Icelandic as the language of the church and in the instruction of children and youth for confirmation. Extensive translation activity and consciousness of the cultural value of the language and literature for Icelanders strengthened the mother tongue. This is witnessed by early initiatives in language purism following the Reformation, where the classical literature served as the linguistic model.¹⁴ Both

¹¹ Skautrup, *Det danske sprogs historie* III, pp. 111–15 and Lars S. Vikør, *The Nordic Languages: Their Status and Interrelations*, Novus Press, Oslo, 1993, pp. 51–55.

¹² Rasmus Glenthoj, *Skilsmissen: Dansk og norsk identitet før og efter 1814*, University Press of Southern Denmark, Odense, 2012, pp. 287–303.

¹³ E.g. Rasmus Kristian Rask, *Vejledning til det Islandske eller gamle Nordiske Sprog*, Schubotheske Forlag, Copenhagen, 1811; Skautrup, *Det danske sprogs historie* III, pp. 153–57; Lorenz Rerup, 'Fra litterær til politisk nationalisme: Udvikling og udbredelse fra 1808 til 1845' in Feldbæk (ed.), *Dansk identitetshistorie* 2, pp. 325–90; Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen, 'Grundtvig og danskhed' in Feldbæk (ed.), *Dansk identitetshistorie* 3: *Folkets Danmark 1848-1940*, C.A. Reitzels Forlag, Copenhagen, 1992, pp. 9–187 (here pp. 9–25).

¹⁴ Kjartan G. Ottósson, *Íslensk málhreinsun: Sögulegt yfirlit*, Íslensk málnefnd, Reykjavík, 2009, pp. 14–28.

linguists¹⁵ and historians¹⁶ have pointed out that the phenomenon of language purism in Iceland can be traced back beyond the romanticism and nationalism of the 19th century. They mention in this connection writings by Arngrímur the Learned (from around 1600) and his book *Crymogæa*. As a result, the Icelandic language held a strong position from the start.

Icelandic rural culture meets Danish town culture

Wide-reaching demographic, political and social changes occurred in 19th-century Iceland, in which Danish language and culture would play a central role. The first signs of towns began to appear in trading stations near the good harbours, where Danish merchants were located. For centuries, Iceland had been primarily a rural society, with the population spread thinly around the country, where traditional Icelandic culture prevailed. As urbanisation set in, it created a basis for the modernisation of the society and a nascent town environment where Danish language and culture was prominent. Near the end of the 18th century six settlements were granted town status. One of them was Reykjavík, the country's future capital, where the first real urban development soon followed. At the same time, Danish merchants were allowed to winter in Iceland and, following the abolition of the Danish trade monopoly in 1788, additional merchants and their employees began to reside more or less permanently in the country.¹⁷ They were concentrated in the leading trading locations, with their status giving them considerable weight in the society. The growth of towns eventually created a certain rift between traditional Icelandic rural culture and the imported foreign/Danish town culture, where the Danish language acquired a symbolic function as the language of the refined class. Not that there were any major towns to speak of; in 1801, for instance, 307 of the country's 47,240 inhabitants resided in Reykjavík. However, the town's population grew steadily, to 1149 of a total population of 59,157 by 1850. A century later, in 1901,

¹⁵ See further Kristján Árnason, '„Á vora tungu“. Íslenskt mál og erlend hugsun', *Skirnir*, vol. 178, no. 2, 2004, pp. 375-404.

¹⁶ Loftur Guttormsson, 'Leikmannsþankar um málstefnu og menningu', *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, 12 July 2001 and Ingi Sigurðsson, *Erlendir straumar og íslensk viðhorf: Áhrif fjölbjóðlegra hugmyndastefna á Íslendinga 1830-1918*, Iceland University Press, Reykjavík, 2006, pp. 148-49

¹⁷ Christina Folke Ax, 'De uregerlige: Den islandske almue og øvrighedens reformforsøg 1700-1870', PhD thesis, University of Copenhagen, 2003, p. 36.

residents of the capital numbered 6,682 of the total population of 78,470.¹⁸ It was of major significance for the development of Reykjavík as the capital that within a relatively short period several of the most important offices, institutions and administrative functions were located in the town or its environs. The schools of the country's two episcopal seats were merged in the Latin grammar school at Hólavellir in Reykjavík,¹⁹ and from 1807 onwards the Bishop of Iceland resided in the town.²⁰ The High Court was transferred to Reykjavík around the turn of the 19th century and from 1820 onwards it was the residence of the Governor. The conclusive move was the convening of the newly resurrected national assembly Althingi in Reykjavík in 1845.²¹

Danish culture and the use of Danish characterised the trading centres to a large extent. This was especially true of Reykjavík, where a relatively large number of Danish merchants and tradesmen, as well as Danish and Danish-leaning Icelandic officials, lived and formed somewhat of an elite. In many respects, its sayings and doings would set the trend for others. Apart from using Danish, the culture of the elite was distinguished by its lifestyle, manners and dress. Research by Ax²² of the estates of the deceased shows that their possessions differed from that of the general public, i.e. they possessed objects which were not found among commoners, such as silver cutlery, trays and bowls, salt shakers, and coffee and tea services. Better-off men followed European fashion, wearing jackets, vests and boots, and dressing “in the Danish style”, as the European fashion was called, distinct from local fashion, became more and more popular.

Danish homes also differed from Icelandic ones, both architecturally and in terms of their size and construction materials. While traditional Icelandic houses were built primarily of stone and turf, Danish homes were constructed of wood. The imported houses were larger than native Icelandic ones, with higher ceilings, many windows and partitions dividing them into various rooms with differing functions. All of this created a

¹⁸ *Hagskinna. Sögulegar hagtölur um Ísland*, Guðmundur Jónsson og Magnús S. Magnússon (eds.), Statistics Iceland, Reykjavík, 1997, pp. 49, 66–67.

¹⁹ From 1786-1804 the grammar school was located on Hólavellir, near the centre of modern-day Reykjavík. In 1805 it was transferred to the Governor's residence at Bessastaðir, just south of Reykjavík, and subsequently moved back to the capital in 1846, where it has operated since then (Guðlaugur Rúnar Guðmundsson, *Skólalíf: Starf og siðir í latínuskólunum á Íslandi 1552-1846*, Iðnú, Reykjavík, 2000, p. 9).

²⁰ Lýður Björnsson, ‘Öld hnignunar og viðreisnar. Almennt yfirlit’ in Sigurður Línadal and Magnús Lyngdal Magnússon (eds.), *Saga Íslands VIII*, Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag and Sögufélag, Reykjavík, pp. 3-289 (here pp. 233–37).

²¹ Björn Þorsteinsson, *Ísland*, Politikens Forlag, Copenhagen, 1985, pp. 207–8.

²² Ax, ‘De uregerlige’, p. 34.

very different environment with regard to furnishings, household objects and possessions.²³ Homes of the well-to-do were furnished with sofas and armchairs, tea tables, mirrors, dining tables and chairs, draperies and tablecloths.²⁴ Furthermore, the lifestyle, entertainments and hobbies of the elite reflected Danish town culture, with its clubs and societies, balls, concerts and theatres.²⁵ Theatre productions were often in Danish²⁶ and at the request of Danish residents, church services in the Reykjavík cathedral were held regularly in Danish from 1805 to 1894.²⁷

Urbanisation paved the way for a certain level of specialisation in business, trades and administration. Schools gradually replaced home instruction in the towns and an increasing number of trades and functions appeared in the capital. Those changes were of major significance for the development of the Icelandic language. New lifestyles, knowledge, and phenomena called for Icelandic words which did not exist. Development of the school system gave a broader scope to instruction than merely religious, creating a need for textbooks in Icelandic in school subjects. And, as was the case in Denmark,²⁸ standardisation of language was eventually placed on the agenda. Since the new types of clothing, novel objects and living customs were brought to Iceland by Danes or Icelanders via Denmark, it was not unusual to borrow the Danish terms used for these phenomena. This was especially true of vocabulary which concerned living conditions and daily life in towns, as well as new fields of knowledge.²⁹ Here it must be borne in mind that Danish and Icelandic are closely related languages and therefore it was simple enough to reach for Danish expressions. But there were also other factors involved. Apart from a lack of suitable terms, it also made a difference that there was seen to be a certain prestige in being able to use Danish for effect. Because of the use of the language by the elite, Danish functioned as a social marker; by drawing on Danish, people could display their superior class or knowledge. As a result, many Icelanders, especially public officials

²³ Auður Hauksdóttir, 'Danske minder i Island', pp. 26–29.

²⁴ Ax, 'De uregerlige', p. 34.

²⁵ See further Christina Folke Ax, 'Islændingene og de danske købmænd i Reykjavík 1770-1850' in Søren Mentz (ed.), *Rejse gennem Islands historie – den danske forbindelse*, Gads Forlag, Copenhagen, 2008, pp. 75–90 and Auður Hauksdóttir, 'Danske minder i Island', pp. 33–36.

²⁶ Auður Hauksdóttir *Lærereens strategier - Elevernes dansk: Dansk som fremmedsprog i Island*, Nordisk Ministerråd, Copenhagen, 2001, pp. 27–28 and Auður Hauksdóttir, 'Dansk sprog i Island i et historisk perspektiv'.

²⁷ Auður Hauksdóttir, 'Danske minder i Island', pp. 25–26.

²⁸ Henrik Galberg Jacobsen, *Ret og skrift: Officiel dansk retskrivning 1739-2005*. Bind I, University Press of Southern Denmark, Odense, 2010, pp. 112–39.

²⁹ See further Auður Hauksdóttir, 'Danske minder i Island', pp. 38–40 and Auður Hauksdóttir, 'Dansk sprog i Island i et historisk perspektiv'.

and scholars, were more than willing to use Danish – even when the situation did not call for it,³⁰ as witnessed by the many examples of Danicisms in Icelanders' use of their mother tongue. Use of Danish was greatest in the trading towns, while in the country the language remained much less affected, both regarding form (corpus effects) and function (domain effects). The growing cultural rift between town and country, and the Danish language's dominance over Icelandic concerned the linguist and scholar Rasmus Kristian Rask, who dwelt in Iceland in 1813-15, cf. the following description in one of his private letters:

Actually, to tell you the truth, I think that Icelandic will soon die out, I expect hardly anyone will understand it in Reykjavík in 100 years' time, and hardly anyone in the country in another 200 years after that, if everything continues as it has done up until now and no strong barriers are set up, every other word of even the best people is Danish; among the common people the language will hold out longest.³¹

As a Danish dependency, Iceland's contact with Copenhagen was close and existed on many fronts. Contact with the central administration was especially extensive and in this context use of Danish was necessary. The Danish officials lacked knowledge of Icelandic and as a result many texts concerning Icelandic affairs were written in Danish. This also applied to a large extent to correspondence between officials who, with the exception of local bailiffs, corresponded with one another in Danish, even though they were Icelandic. Furthermore, the minutes of the meetings of the Reykjavík municipal council were written in this language.³² In the commercial sector all accounting and records were kept in Danish, although it is not clear to what extent communication was in this language.³³ By contrast, the Icelandic language held sway in the sparsely populated, agricultural areas, where contact with Danes was less and traditional Icelandic culture thrived. Here the tradition of reading and practicing literature played a major role. In addition, it was of great significance for the status of the Icelandic language that it was the language of the

³⁰ Auður Hauksdóttir, *Lærerens strategier - Elevernes dansk*, pp. 19–28.

³¹ Rasmus Kristian Rask, *Breve fra og til Rasmus Rask*, Louis Hjelmslev (ed.), Det Danske Sprog og Litteraturselskab and Ejnar Munksgaards Forlag, Copenhagen, 1941, p. 164.

³² Jón Guðmundsson, 'Um mál vort Íslendinga', *Ný félagsrit*, vol. 9, 1849, pp. 69–85.

³³ Klemens Jónsson, *Saga Reykjavíkur I*, Steindór Gunnarsson, Reykjavík, 1929, p. 259.

church, and mandatory instruction of children therefore was in Icelandic. In this respect the situation in Iceland differed from what it was in Norway and the Faroe Islands.

Having two languages of administration was not without problems. The use of Danish required Icelandic officials to have a good command of that language, and since laws, rules and regulations were often published in Danish, reception of these texts assumed a reading ability in the language which did not exist, or existed only to a limited extent, among the general public. It was of great significance for the Danish proficiency of public officials that they had been educated in Denmark; the University of Copenhagen for centuries had served as the most important seat of learning for Icelanders.³⁴ After Danish had replaced Latin as the language of instruction at the University of Copenhagen at the end of the 18th century, Danish became of even greater significance for Icelanders than previously, since knowledge of Danish was a prerequisite for admission to the university and to be able to pursue studies there. To accommodate this need, Danish instruction was increased in the grammar school in Iceland. Many persons travelled to Denmark to learn a trade or get other practical training, and it was not uncommon for Danish tradesmen to live and work for longer or shorter periods in Iceland. In many circles, the ability to read Danish gave eager readers the possibility of reading for both edification and pleasure. The publication of modern secular literature in Icelandic and translated works was limited and therefore a variety of reading material in Danish of this sort, e.g. novels, periodicals, newspapers and later weekly magazines, was in high demand among Icelanders. Sources show that the motivation for learning Danish was high and many Icelanders taught themselves to read the language.³⁵ This is apparent, for instance, from the introduction to the first Danish textbook of 1853, where the author writes that since he came to Reykjavík:

... not so few laymen – mainly promising youths from the countryside – have made major efforts to learn to understand Danish. Some of them, who stayed here, have asked for instruction in the language from me, while some have only asked me to point them out a book, from which

³⁴ Jón Helgason, *Hvad Københavns Universitet har betydet for Island*, Dansk-Islandsk Samfunds Smaaskrifter 15–16, Copenhagen, 1926 and Jakob Benediktsson, 'Hafnarháskóli og Íslensk menning', *Lærdómslistir: Afmælisrit 20. júlí 1987*, Mál og menning and Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, Reykjavík, 1987, pp. 206–19.

³⁵ Auður Hauksdóttir, *Lærerens strategier - Elevernes dansk*, pp. 29–34.

they could most easily learn to understand the language on their own, and it has seemed to me, as might in fact only be expected, that this desire has been growing. I have also previously been aware of this desire from men, because I have known farmers, and successful farmers at that – who have taken the time to read Danish books with such diligence, that they learned to understand the language practically without instruction or help.³⁶

In the previous section, the focus was on the influence of Danish language and culture in Iceland. In this context it is important to underline that this influence was strongest in the towns, where only a small portion of the population lived. Research thus shows that the effect applied only to a limited extent to the language of the countryside and among the common people. This is apparent from the many letters written by commoners as well as folk tales and legends related by young and old, farmers, ministers and servants from all parts of the country. With the exception of a few ecclesiastical expressions and secular terms connected with officialdom and trade, the vocabulary is on the whole free from foreign loan words.³⁷ The use of Icelandic as the language of the church and mandatory religious instruction in the mother tongue, together with an established written language and widespread encouragement of Icelandic literature, without doubt contributed to maintaining and reinforcing the Icelandic language. In this context it is worth bearing in mind the huge difference in the status of the native language in Greenland and the Faroes compared with the status of Icelandic in Iceland; in the two former countries Danish was much more dominant in society, including in the church and in schooling.³⁸ Apart from this the positive attitudes towards Icelandic language and literature among Danish scholars without doubt contributed to strengthening the status of the Icelandic language.

³⁶ Sveinbjörn Hallgrímsson, *Dálitil dönsk lestrarbók: með íslenskri þýðingu og orða skýringum, ætluð þeim, sem tilsagnarlaust byrja að læra dönsku*, Einar Þórðarson, Reykjavík, 1853, pp. III–IV.

³⁷ Jakob Benediktsson, 'Þættir úr sögu íslenzks orðaforða' in Halldór Halldórsson (ed.), *Þættir um íslenzkt mál: eftir nokkra íslenska málfraeðinga*, Almenna bókafélagið, Reykjavík, 1964, pp. 88–109.

³⁸ Skautrup, *Det danske sprogs historie* III, pp. 115–16 and Birgitte Jacobsen, 'Colonial Danish', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, vol. 159, 2003, pp. 153–64.

Copenhagen and the national awakening

Numerous scholars have pointed out the importance of Copenhagen in the establishment of Icelandic national identity and Icelandic independence. This includes the historian Björn Þorsteinsson, who referred to Copenhagen as “the cradle of Icelandic national freedom”.³⁹ In Copenhagen, the fertile soil was formed for a flourishing student milieu, where notions of Icelandic nationality could take root and circulate in speech and writings. The Icelandic colony was in contact with Danish scholars and Danish cultural life, which was of major significance for the ideological and cultural debate and for political and social developments in Iceland. Thus new ideological, political, social and cultural currents most often made their way to Iceland via Copenhagen.⁴⁰ This was the case, for instance, for the patriotic and Nordic sentiments which were prominent around the turn of the 19th century, cf. the emphasis placed on Danish as the language of instruction and on Danish language and Danish history as subjects in the new grammar schools after Guldberg's grammar school regulation of 1775 and the significance of these subjects in general instruction under the 1814 Schools Act.⁴¹ According to Adriansen, the Danish language was held in only limited esteem until around the mid-1700s. Those languages found within the Danish realm varied in status depending upon whether they had a written language or not. This is evident from the fact that on the occasion of the monarch's birthday he received honorary lyrics written in Latin and French, and the state's four languages: Danish, German, Icelandic and Saami, i.e. in the two leading European languages and those of the Danish kingdom which had an established written language.⁴²

Up until that time German had a dominant status in many of the areas of the absolutist monarchy, but in the subsequent era a change in attitude favoured the mother tongue which, together with historical developments, played a key role in building Danish identity. With regard to studies of Danish language and history, Nordic literature acquired a not insignificant role, cf. the establishment of societies focusing on the

³⁹ Björn Þorsteinsson, *Island*, pp. 204–6.

⁴⁰ Ingi Sigurðsson, *Erlendir straumar og íslensk viðhorf*, pp. 22–24.

⁴¹ Ole Feldbæk in A. E. Christensen, H. P. Clausen, Sven Ellehøj and Søren Mørk (eds.), *Danmarks historie 4: Tiden 1730-1814*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen, 1982, pp. 236–37.

⁴² Adriansen, *Nationale symboler i Det Danske Rige 1830-2000 II*, p. 29.

history, language and literature of the Nordic countries.⁴³ One of the aspects of the struggle for the mother tongue was to reduce the influence of dominant languages, especially strong influence from German, on Danish. In this connection Rask's great interest in how languages were related, including Nordic languages, and his theories of the Icelandic language as the parent language and main source for modern Nordic languages, were of great significance. Rask's instruction book *Vejledning til det Islandske eller gamle Nordiske Sprog* was published in 1811. In his foreword, Rask accounts for the importance of the Icelandic language for Danes. He explains that the government eagerly devotes its attention to the nation's antiquities, their preservation and interpretation, and given this he scarcely needs a long apology for his attempt to present "the construction and structure of the old Nordic language of our forefathers, i.e. an Icelandic grammar."⁴⁴ Rask regarded Icelandic as crucial for Danes because of its key function for a thorough knowledge of the Danish language and for understanding of the oldest existing Danish literature, such as ancient laws, sayings and documents.⁴⁵ The background to this is that Icelanders emigrated from Norway, taking with them the language where "the most significant and best remains of ancient Nordic linguistic genius are preserved for us".⁴⁶ The language later gained ground, as Icelanders cultivated their language with "so much care, that Icelandic soon became recognised as more appealing and purer than the Norwegian language itself, even though it basically was the chief language, and soon lost its coarser forms".⁴⁷ Here Icelandic differed, for instance, from Danish, the purity of which had been spoiled, not least by German influence.

Rask credits the purity of the Icelandic language⁴⁸ to the country's remote location, limited communication with other nations and the tradition of actively practicing, creating and reading literature. Rask was very interested in Icelandic and took the trouble of learning the language. He made the acquaintance of Icelandic students living in the university residence Regensen, becoming close friends with several of them, who later became influential officials, including Grímur Jónsson, Bjarni Thorarensen and Bjarni Thorsteinsson, who later became district governors of Iceland, and Hallgrímur

⁴³ Hans Bekker-Nielsen, 'Norrøn filologi' in Povl Johs. Jensen (ed.), *Københavns Universitet 1479-1979 IX: Det filosofiske fakultet 2*, G.E.C Gads Forlag, Copenhagen, 1979, pp.145–76.

⁴⁴ Rask, *Vejledning til det Islandske eller gamle Nordiske Sprog*, p. V.

⁴⁵ Rask, *Vejledning til det Islandske eller gamle Nordiske Sprog*, pp. X and LV.

⁴⁶ Rask, *Vejledning til det Islandske eller gamle Nordiske Sprog*, p. 237.

⁴⁷ Rask, *Vejledning til det Islandske eller gamle Nordiske Sprog*, p. 238.

⁴⁸ Rask, *Vejledning til det Islandske eller gamle Nordiske Sprog*, p. 239.

Scheving, who was a scholar and a strong advocate of Icelandic and later became an influential teacher at the school at Bessastaðir.⁴⁹ Rask never tired of discussing the Icelandic language with students and scholars, showing great interest in its history, current status and potential development. In one of his letters Rask argued how important it was for the development of the language that there were books in Icelandic on current subjects, written in a clear and well conceived language. In addition, it was decisive, he maintained, that textbooks be written in Icelandic and that modern foreign literature be translated into Icelandic.⁵⁰ As previously mentioned, Rask visited Iceland in 1813-15, where he realised that the linguistic situation was not quite as idyllic as he had described a few years earlier in his book on Icelandic grammar. To counteract unfavourable developments, he made a major effort to awaken the Icelanders to consciousness of the significance of their language for their identity. He was one of the founders of *Hið íslenska Bókmenntafélag* (the Icelandic Literary Society), which was founded in 1816 with two branches, one in Reykjavik and one in Copenhagen, with the objective of defending the Icelandic language. Rask himself compiled a reader,⁵¹ which was published by the Icelandic Literary Society. He also participated in establishing *Det nordiske Oldskrift-Selskab* (the Society for Nordic Antiquarian Writings) in 1825, serving as its first chairman.⁵² Both the Literary Society and the Nordic Antiquarian Writings Society were expressions of the interest in Denmark for medieval Nordic literature, where Icelandic was especially strong.

Among those contemporary currents which the students in Copenhagen made the acquaintance of, and which would acquire major significance in the 19th century, were ideas of democratic rights and nationalism, inspired by German philosophers, including theories of Johann Gottfried von Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte on the role of the mother tongue for an ethnic group or nation and the nation state.⁵³ Similar ideas are

⁴⁹ Björn Magnússon Ólsen, 'Rasmus Kristján Rask 1787-1887', *Tímarit hins íslenska bókmenntafélags*, vol. 9, 1888, pp. 1-53.

⁵⁰ Rask. *Breve fra og til Rasmus Rask*, pp. 36-37.

⁵¹ The book, which is entitled *Lestrarkver handa heldri manna börnum með stuttum skiringargreinum um stafrofið og annað þartil heyrandi* (A Reader for the Children of Better Citizens, with brief explanatory notes on the alphabet and related subjects), was published in 1830.

⁵² Jørgen Steen Jensen, 'Det Kongelige Nordiske Oldskrift-Selskabs stiftelse 1825', *Det kongelige Nordiske Oldskriftselskab, Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie 1975*, Herman H.J. Lynge & Søn, Copenhagen, 1977, pp. 5-19 (here p. 5).

⁵³ Guðmundur Hálfðánarson, 'From Linguistic Patriotism to Cultural Nationalism: Language and Identity in Iceland' in Ann Katherine Isaacs (ed.), *Language and Identities in Historical Perspective*, Pisa University Press, Pisa, 2005, pp. 55-67 (here p. 55).

found in the book by Danish professor Laurits Engelstoft of 1808, *Tanker om Nationalopdragelsen betragtet som det virksomste Middel til at fremme Almeenaand og Fædrelandskiærlighed* (Thoughts on National Education, regarded as the most effective means of promoting public spirit and love of the fatherland). Here Engelstoft argues that love for the mother tongue cannot be separated from love of country, and that a nation's language is an expression of its character.⁵⁴ Engelstoft's book made a strong impression on many Icelanders,⁵⁵ including Baldvin Einarsson, who published the periodical *Ármann á Alþingi* in 1829-1833, which discussed the problem of the status of Icelandic. The great respect enjoyed by Engelstoft among Icelanders is evident in his election as honorary member of the Icelandic Literary Society.⁵⁶ According to Adriansen, there are certain parallels between the works of Fichte and Engelstoft, including the view of both, that language was a crucial factor in national education. There is an interesting difference, however, in that Fichte argues that certain qualities are linked with speaking an original language. He maintains that German-speaking peoples have an advantage over the French, for example, since they speak the same language as in ancient times.⁵⁷ It is not inconceivable that the Icelanders saw certain parallels here with German and their own language, cf. Rask's conception of Icelandic as a proto-language or the old Nordic parent language.

According to Guðmundur Hálfðánarson,⁵⁸ ideas of Icelandic nationality were always closely connected with attitudes to the Icelandic language. It appears from the sources that ideas of the significance of the mother tongue for Icelandic identity were quick to gain support and eventually affected Icelanders' attitudes to their mother tongue and to Danish. It is not unlikely that the controversy which arose in Denmark, directed against the dominant position of the German language relative to Danish, influenced Icelanders and that they have seen parallels between the Danish-German and the Icelandic-Danish language struggle.

⁵⁴ Adriansen, *Nationale symboler i Det Danske Rige 1830-2000 II*, pp. 31–33.

⁵⁵ Nanna Ólafsdóttir, *Baldvin Einarsson og þjóðmálastarf hans*, Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, Reykjavík, 1961, pp. 13–14.

⁵⁶ Auður Hauksdóttir, *Lærerens strategier - Elevernes dansk*, p. 23.

⁵⁷ Adriansen, *Nationale symboler i Det Danske Rige 1830-2000 II*, p. 32.

⁵⁸ Guðmundur Hálfðánarson, *Íslenska þjóðríkið: uppruni og endamörk*, Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag and ReykjavíkAkademían, Reykjavík, 2007, p. 16.

It was, however, the Romantic period which would be the decisive factor in awakening Icelandic national identity. The Romantic focus on nature, history and aesthetics was of great significance for the selection of themes in Icelandic literature where, in the spirit of Romanticism, the language was nurtured and the Old Norse cultural heritage honoured. And this artistic development presented challenges to the modern Icelandic language. New poetry using ancient metres and verse forms, with motifs from the Saga Age quickly became popular among the Icelandic population. The central position of Icelandic language and literature among leading Danish poets was also significant, especially Oehlenschläger and Grundtvig, who to a large extent sought the subjects of their works in the sagas and Old Norse myths.⁵⁹ According to sources, as a young writer Grundtvig was enamoured of Icelandic and was said to have regarded Danish as a degenerate offspring.⁶⁰ The enthusiasm for Icelandic, cf. the conception of the Icelandic language as a type of “Nordic Latin” and the “mother” of the Scandinavian languages, without doubt reinforced Icelanders' awareness of the significance of their mother tongue. Furthermore, the interest which Danish Romantic poets, scholars and other influential persons showed in Icelandic medieval literature and the role it played in supporting Danish national identity and culture without doubt contributed to a national consciousness and sense of cultural self-esteem among Icelanders. This interest is attested to, for instance, by the great emphasis which Danish scholars placed on researching the medieval literature and translating it into Danish. The interest for Nordic studies was also manifest in the establishment of the chair in Nordic languages at the University of Copenhagen.⁶¹ It can also be pointed out that even today the history of Danish literature is introduced with literature written in Icelandic, admittedly in a Danish translation. The attitudes referred to towards the Icelandic language in Denmark are clearly evident in the following quote from *Peder Hjorts Danske Børneven*,⁶² which was first published in the 1840s and eventually printed a total of 10 times. The quote is taken from a section of the book on the Danish realm, and refers to Iceland as one of the two northern dependencies:

⁵⁹ Adriansen, *Nationale symboler i Det Danske Rige 1830-2000* II, pp. 99–139 and Sune Auken, *Sagas spejl: Mytologi, historie og kristendom hos N. F. S. Grundtvig*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen, 2005, pp. 38–54.

⁶⁰ Lundgreen-Nielsen, ‘Grundtvig og danskhed’, p. 65.

⁶¹ Bekker-Nielsen, ‘Norrøn filologi’, p. 157.

⁶² *Peder Hjorts Danske Børneven* was a reader intended especially for schools other than the grammar schools.

Because of their remote island location, the Icelanders, our honourable countrymen, still speak the same ancient language, which at the time of the introduction of Christianity was the usual in all three Nordic kingdoms. Their forefathers have with great diligence collected and written down a great variety of important tales of ancient Nordic life, customs, religion and occurrences, which we would have a very imperfect knowledge of without their hard work. The manuscripts they created have since then been printed for the instruction and entertainment, not only for Nordic peoples, but for many in the entire world. It is these books which are called Edda [Great-grandmother], Heimskringla, the Sagas etc. This wonderful thirst for knowledge still prevails in the country and provides the Icelander, in his humble isolation, with real joy.⁶³

It is interesting that this reader, which was read by many generations of Danish non-grammar schools, also made its way to Iceland, where it was used, for instance, in Danish instruction at beginner level in the grammar school around the mid-1800s⁶⁴ and also in the school Flensborgarskólinn in Hafnarfjörður⁶⁵ in the 1880s.⁶⁶ The Danes' enthusiasm for the Icelandic language and literature, in other words, could be read about in Danish instruction in Iceland.

A greater interest in their native language is clearly evident in several periodicals written in Icelandic and published by Icelandic students, writers and scholars in Copenhagen in the 19th century. These include the previously mentioned *Ármann á Alþingi* (publ. 1829-32), *Fjölnir* (1835-47) and *Ný félagsrit* (1841-1873). Apart from being written in Icelandic, they sometimes discussed the language and especially its position relative to Danish. In one of the issues *Ármann á Alþingi* criticises Danish slang and writes ironically of the mongrel language of mixed Danish and Icelandic.⁶⁷ Another

⁶³ Anna Hjort, *Peder Hjorts Danske Børneven. Især for borger- og almueskoler*, Gyldendalske Boghandels Forlag, Copenhagen, 1877, p. 132.

⁶⁴ *Skólaskýrsla fyrir Reykjavíkur lærða skóla árið 1850-1851*, S. Egilsson (ed.), Prentsmiðja landsins, Reykjavík 1851 and *Skýrsla um hinn lærða skóla í Reykjavík for 1851-52*, Prentsmiðja landsins, Reykjavík, 1853.

⁶⁵ Flensborgarskólinn was at that time one of two secondary modern schools in Iceland.

⁶⁶ Guðni Jónsson, *Minningarrit Flensborgarskólans 1882-1932*, Nemendasamband Flensborgarskólans, Reykjavík, 1932, p. 54.

⁶⁷ See e.g. Baldvin Einarsson in Loftur Guttormsson (ed.) *Uppeldið varðar mestu: Úr Ármanni á Alþingi*, Rannsóknastofnun Kennaraháskóla Íslands, Reykjavík, 1995, p. 38.

example of the critical focus on the position of Icelandic relative to Danish can be seen in Konráð Gíslason's article⁶⁸ in *Fjölnir*, which was based on an address he delivered to a gathering of Icelanders in Copenhagen in 1837. According to the article, Icelandic had made some advance in the most recent decades. Voices were no longer heard saying it should be replaced by Danish, and Icelandic was said to have found its place in the nation's thoughts. Nonetheless, Konráð Gíslason⁶⁹ regards it as a problem how careless many people are in their use of the Icelandic language and how extensively it is coloured by Danish expressions and idioms. As a third example, a two-part article by Jón Guðmundsson,⁷⁰ was published in *Ný félagsrit* with the title “Um mál vort Íslendinga” (On our Icelandic language).⁷¹ At this time the discussion of German influence on Danish was very prominent in Denmark and various people proposed to make language cleansing and purity a priority.⁷²

Debate in Iceland focuses on the language situation

Until 1835 there were no newspapers in Reykjavík. This changed with the advent of the monthly paper *Sunnanpóstur*, which was published in 1835-38. From 1846 to 1849, the newspaper *Reykjavíkurlitinn* was published once a month and in 1848 the paper *Þjóðólfur* was established, which was published twice monthly. Other newspapers and periodicals followed in subsequent years.⁷³ Newspapers and periodicals dealing with subjects of current importance were of major significance for the language. They provided a forum for communication and debate, where a broad public could obtain information on subjects which were currently in focus, including the problem of the position and function of Icelandic relative to Danish. This type of communication required a renewal of the vocabulary, i.e. it was necessary to find or create words for new knowledge and for practical and technical innovations. A more extensive publication of current texts in Icelandic raised the question of standards for the mother tongue and the

⁶⁸ Konráð Gíslason, ‘Ágrip af ræðu áhrærandi íslenzkuna’, *Fjölnir. Árrit handa Íslendingum*, vol. 4, 1838, pp. 19–28.

⁶⁹ Konráð Gíslason, ‘Ágrip af ræðu áhrærandi íslenzkuna’, pp. 19–20.

⁷⁰ Jón Guðmundsson, ‘Um mál vort Íslendinga’, *Ný félagsrit*, vol. 9, 1849, pp. 69–85 and ‘Um mál vort Íslendinga’, *Ný félagsrit*, vol. 11, 1851, pp. 54–63.

⁷¹ The article contains, among other things, an historical overview of important initiatives concerning the Icelandic language and its position.

⁷² Skautrup, *Det danske sprogs historie* III, pp. 149–50.

⁷³ Kjartan G. Ottósson, *Íslensk málhreinsun*, pp. 77–79.

status and function of the Icelandic language. According to Baldur Jónsson the first newspaper article on the Icelandic language was published in *Reykjavíkurbósturinn* in 1847 entitled “Um móðurmálið” (On the mother tongue), written by Þórður Jónsson.⁷⁴ Here he discusses how a nation's language functions as a mirror, with the situation of the language reflecting the education of the nation. If the language is clumsy, stiff and lacks words it can safely be assumed that the nation has not reached a high level of real education and knowledge. According to Þórður Jónsson, the mother tongue is the most effective means of maintaining nationality, encouraging patriotism and strengthening a sense of community. Icelanders' neglect of their native language, their treasure, which many foreign scholars and experts have gone to the trouble of learning, is therefore a matter of concern. It is pointed out that the country's leading public officials in some regards have prioritised the use of Danish at the cost of the mother tongue, which is contrary to law.⁷⁵

Here it is worth mentioning that in 1831 it was enshrined in law that those laws which concerned Iceland were to be printed in Icelandic and Danish⁷⁶ and in 1844 a demand for ability in Icelandic was made in the appointment of Danish officials, cf. “that anyone seeking an appointment as an official in our land Iceland, must have acquired such ability in the language of that country that he can at least understand it and make himself understood to the inhabitants”.⁷⁷ This requirement was not enforced, however, and as a result in subsequent years stricter provisions were added. The mother tongue also gained ground in other areas.

Even though the great significance of language instruction at the grammar school in Bessastaðir for students' command of and attitudes towards Icelandic has always been underlined, the language was not a separate subject of instruction.⁷⁸ This was changed with a new regulation in 1846, which entered into force in connection with the transfer of the grammar school from Bessastaðir to Reykjavík. Here it is stated that Icelandic should be taught in all four year classes of the school's instruction and that the goal of the

⁷⁴ According to Baldur Jónsson reliable sources testify that the article was written by Þórður Jónsson, see further in ‘Þórður Jónsson’ Baldur Jónsson (ed.) *Þjóð og tunga: Ritgerðir og ræður frá tímum sjálfstæðisbaráttunnar*, Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, Reykjavík, 2006, pp. 57-58.

⁷⁵ Þórður Jónsson, ‘Um móðurmálið’, *Reykjavíkurbósturinn*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1847, pp. 49–55.

⁷⁶ *Lovsamling for Island IX*, Høst, Copenhagen, 1860, p. 817.

⁷⁷ *Lovsamling for Island XIII*, Høst, Copenhagen, 1866, p. 46.

⁷⁸ Jón Guðmundsson, ‘Um mál vort Íslendinga’, p. 72.

instruction was: “ ... in part through this language to give students general grammatical concepts, in part to enable them to write their mother tongue correctly, purely and tastefully, in part to acquaint them with the history of Icelandic literature.”⁷⁹ In the lowest classes Icelandic and Danish were the school's principal subjects. A section on the grammar school in Iceland in the University of Copenhagen yearbook of 1846 describes the status of the Icelandic language as native language instruction and of Danish as foreign language instruction:

... that the same demands are made in Icelandic as are made here in Danish, i.e. that students shall be able to present a written treatment of a subject of their own choice and demonstrate knowledge of Icelandic literature; b. that Danish has the same status in instruction as the German language does here, in other words, students are trained in translation from Danish to Icelandic and writing in Danish or written translation from Icelandic to Danish; [...].⁸⁰

It is interesting that the text likens the status of Danish in Iceland with that of German in Denmark. This further underlines the influence of the linguistic debate in Denmark on the situation in Iceland.

Danish and Danish instruction - ambivalent attitudes

The objective of Danish instruction at the grammar school was to prepare students for further study in Denmark. Access to higher education played an enormous role for the individuals and for Icelandic society in general; in this connection knowledge of Danish was an absolute prerequisite. It is important to bear in mind here, how much knowledge is required to be able to study in a foreign language.⁸¹ Sources also show that it was not without difficulty for all the students to satisfy the linguistic demands.⁸² Around the middle of the 19th century there were scarcely any other schools in Iceland than the

⁷⁹ *Lovsamling for Island XIII*, p. 437.

⁸⁰ Hannibal Peter Selmer: *Aarvog for Kjøbenhavns Universitet og øvrige højere undervisningsanstalter for 1846*, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, 1847, p. 189.

⁸¹ Auður Hauksdóttir, *Dansk som fremmedsprog i en akademisk kontekst: Om islændingenes behov for danskkundskaber under videreuddannelse i Danmark*, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, 2012.

⁸² Auður Hauksdóttir, 'Dansk sprog i Island i et historisk perspektiv'.

grammar school. General instruction of children initially took place in the form of home instruction, while after 1850 the first primary schools were established in population centres. By 1874 there were six primary schools in Iceland, one in Reykjavik and the rest in small villages around the coast. In subsequent years, the number of schools grew until in 1887-88 they numbered 30. According to a report on the activities of 20 of these schools for the 1887-88 school year, Danish was among the subjects taught in 16 schools.⁸³ When additional types of studies were established towards the end of the 19th century, e.g. agricultural schools, secondary modern schools, women's colleges and navigation schools, Danish was also among the subjects taught there, in addition to which a large portion of the material in other subjects was in Danish.⁸⁴ In other words, at the same time as Icelanders made an effort to counteract the influence of Danish on their native language, knowledge of Danish served as their key to education and a career.

As previously mentioned, the Icelandic parliament Althingi was re-established in Reykjavik in 1845. In the following years demand for greater democratic rights grew ever more vocal, emphasising that Icelanders themselves should assume responsibility for their affairs. The results are visible, among other things, in important steps which were taken in the area of education. A seminary was established in 1847, for instance, and a medical school in 1876. A decisive step was taken towards independence in 1874, when Iceland received a constitution on the country's specific affairs.⁸⁵ In tandem with increased national consciousness and additional democratic rights, there is a growing number of examples of criticism of the use of Danish. This is in line with what research has indicated regarding the role of language in nation-building.⁸⁶ As far as the written language was concerned, classical Icelandic was the ideal⁸⁷ and the quality of the language spoken by rural inhabitants, which had not been influenced by the Danish-coloured language of the towns, was emphasised. These attitudes towards Icelandic are also expressed in the publication *Árný*, which Icelanders in Copenhagen sent to the mother country on the occasion of the new century. In one of the articles, Finnur Jónsson,

⁸³ Jón Þórarinnsson, 'Löggjöf um barnauppræðing á Íslandi', *Tímarit um uppeldi og menntamál*, vol. 1, 1888, pp. 81–98 (here pp. 95–97)

⁸⁴ See further Auður Hauksdóttir, *Lærereis strategier - Elevernes dansk*, pp. 34–38.

⁸⁵ Björn Þorsteinsson, *Island*, p. 225–27.

⁸⁶ Holt and Gubbins, 'Introduction', pp. 1–5 and Adriansen, *Nationale symboler i Det Danske Rige 1830-2000 II*, pp. 29–57.

⁸⁷ Svavar Sigmundsson, 'Purisme og nation på Island' in Helge Sandøy, Randi Brodersen og Endre Brunstad (eds.) *Purt og reint. Om purisme i dei nordiske språka*, Volda University College, 2003, pp. 65–83 (here p. 73).

professor at the University of Copenhagen, urges the use of medieval Icelandic writings and a good Icelandic, as was nurtured in many rural areas, as the model for modern written Icelandic.⁸⁸

The use of Danish was criticised especially where Icelandic could be used more easily, in addition to which Danish borrowings and slang in spoken and written language were frowned upon. Gradually criticism was also directed against instruction of young children in Danish, e.g. in the article “Um menntun og uppeldi barna” (On the education and upbringing of children) in 1890. This points out the problem of people, especially in towns and fishing villages as well as in the countryside to a certain extent, who do not understand foreign languages, tending to use Danish words with Icelandic inflections. This confusion is due partly to ignorance and partly to a certain prestige conveyed by the use of Danish, which should be viewed as unsuitable for both the mother tongue and the language of the brother country. The following are mentioned as examples of the large number of Danicisms which are often used by Icelanders in the towns: *kokkhús* (Dan. køkken), *spísskamess* (Dan. spisekammer), *frúkostur* (Dan. frokost), *að spíssa* (Dan. at spise), *að spásséra* (Dan. at spadsere) and *skúra* (Dan. skure/skrubbe).⁸⁹ The author explains that among the uneducated languages are viewed as one of the most important things children should learn. In this connection the author expresses the view that “the only language which should be taught in primary school is the mother tongue, and that should also be taught as well as at all possible”.⁹⁰ The article “Móðurmálið”⁹¹ (The Mother Tongue) in the periodical *Vestri* in 1910, published in Ísafjörður, states that many people wish to protect the Icelandic language and maintain it unpolluted - both in written and spoken form. In this connection the importance is emphasised of each individual doing his or her best to prevent foreign influence from ruining their native language. There is no mistaking the negative attitude towards Danicisms. Foreign words are likened to weeds, poisoning the language. Despite the emphasis on preserving the language pure and clean, there are many people who use foreign words and slang – even people who have received a good education. The advertisements seem to be the worst. The following

⁸⁸ Finnur Jónsson, ‘Íslenskan: Fáeinar athugasemdir’, *Árný*, Fjelag íslenskra stúdenta í Kaupmannhöfn, Copenhagen, 1901, pp. 49–69.

⁸⁹ Hjálmar Sigurðsson, ‘Um menntun og uppeldi barna’, *Tímarit um uppeldi og menntamál*, vol. 3, 1890, pp. 59–86, (here p. 68).

⁹⁰ Hjálmar Sigurðsson, ‘Um menntun og uppeldi barna’, p. 75.

⁹¹ Þórður Jónsson, ‘Um móðurmálið’, pp. 49–55.

are mentioned as examples of Danish words heard in everyday speech: *For-middagur* (Dan. formiddag), *slagta* (Dan. slagte), *að taka feil* (Dan. tage fejl), *dama* (Dan. dame), *karafli* (Dan. karaffel), *pent* (Dan. pænt), *tau* (Dan. tøj), *dragt* (Dan. dragt), *presis* (Dan. præcis), *kaffiselskap* (Dan. kaffeselskab) and *vel-bekomme*.⁹² As these examples show, there has been a major change in attitudes towards Danish and Icelandic in the space of a few decades, i.e. what was previously regarded as refined and classy is now no longer appropriate.

Apart from the situation in Iceland, the altered attitudes towards Danish can also be viewed in the light of the currents of the time and the political situation in Denmark around the end of the 19th century, which supported the Icelanders. These new currents include naturalism and its focus on social issues and social criticism. Icelandic students in Copenhagen and influential writers and politicians, such as Hannes Hafstein and Matthías Jochumsson, were in contact with Georg Brandes, which meant that Icelandic interests as well became the subject of debate.⁹³ In his writing on the occasion of Danish students' visit to Iceland in celebration of the turn of a new century, Brandes expressed his hope that the trip to Iceland would leave a lasting imprint on minds in Iceland. "This poor, great island, with its proud past and all too limited present has, admittedly, been governed shamefully by Denmark, just like the Danish people themselves have been, for as long as anyone can remember." The oppression, according to Brandes, has been felt even more sorely in Iceland than in Denmark, and the humiliation therefore all the greater, as it was "carried out by people who did not speak the language of the country and behaved like complacent and self-interested lords towards a so-called dependency".⁹⁴ For this reason he considers it important that the students clearly express to Icelanders that the Danish nation does not endorse the treatment of Icelanders by Danish governments. And make them understand that:

... the cream of Danish youth have never forgotten what Danish culture owes to Iceland and Icelanders. This neglected island has given us, in an ethical sense, the most manly and in an artistic sense the most outstanding narrative literature that the Nordic states have ever

⁹² Höskuldur (s.n.), 'Móðurmálið', *Vestri*, vol. 9, no. 28, 1910, pp. 109–10.

⁹³ Auður Hauksdóttir, 'Danske minder i Island', pp. 23–24.

⁹⁴ Georg Brandes, *Samlede Skrifter. Danmark III*, Gyldendalske Boghandel Nordisk Forlag, Copenhagen, 1919, p. 421.

produced. Certainly Denmark has never produced such manly figures as are in *Njál's saga*, never in the thousands of years that Denmark has existed has artistic character portrayal reached the heights and mastery as it has here. From this manliness we have reached, when we for the second time became European, the manliness expressed in Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales.⁹⁵

Scandinavianism was also of significance for the Icelanders' case, as it encouraged a feeling of Nordic fellowship. Within the alternative folk school tradition, which emphasised things Nordic, the focus turned to national and folk tradition. All of this was wind in the Icelanders' sails. The struggle for independence became more pressing and emotions ran high, both among conservative and radical politicians and opinion-shapers in Denmark and Iceland. When the party *Venstre* came to power in Denmark around the turn of the 20th century, the time was ripe for radical changes with regard to Iceland's status towards Denmark. In 1904, Iceland was granted Home Rule, and the writer and influential politician Hannes Hafstein became the first Icelandic minister residing in Reykjavík. During the Home Rule period Iceland gained control of ever more areas of its affairs. This is visible in the establishment of new avenues of education, i.e. a teachers' college in 1907 and law school in 1908. The largest and most significant step, however, was taken in 1911, when the University of Iceland was established. It eventually took over the role of the University of Copenhagen as the highest seat of learning for Icelanders.

And now the course was set in earnest towards Iceland's full independence. The more pointed political controversies left their mark on political debate and attitudes towards Danish and the Danes. In many areas the political debate reveals a striking contrast between, on the one hand, Danish attitudes towards Iceland and the Icelanders and, on the other hand, Icelanders own identity and self-image.⁹⁶ This is borne out by, among other things, the conflicts which arose in connection with the Colonial Exhibition held in Tivoli in 1905.⁹⁷ Also interesting are Brandes's reactions to the Icelanders'

⁹⁵ Brandes, *Samlede Skrifter. Danmark III*, p. 422.

⁹⁶ E.g. Gunnar Þór Bjarnason, *Upp með fánann: Baráttan um uppkastið 1908 og sjálfstæðisbarátta Íslendinga*, Mál og menning, Reykjavík, 2012.

⁹⁷ A description of the controversies between Danes and Icelanders which arose in connection with the exhibition is given in Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson, 'Af reiðum Íslendingum: Deilur um Nýlendusýninguna 1905' in Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson, Kolbeinn Óttarsson Proppé and Sverrir Jakobsson (eds.), *Þjóðerni í þúsund ár*,

political struggle. In two articles written under the pseudonym of Jens Piter Jespersen he criticises the Icelanders for going too far in their demands for independence. In the article “Amagers Løsrivelse” (The secession of Amager) Brandes writes in a mocking, ironic tone of the cocky Icelanders, who have blocked the way for the Danes, as they find it without question that Danish fishermen have no right to fish in Icelandic waters and deny that Danish-born persons should enjoy equal rights in the country with natives. “If Iceland's present advises them moderation, they will recall proudly Iceland's past.” In the second article, “Amagers Flag” (The flag of Amager), he writes about the absurdity of the Icelanders' demand to have their own flag.⁹⁸ The turnaround which can be seen in Brandes's writings shows clearly how great were the interests at stake and how sensitive the subjects concerned, for both Icelanders and Danes. That emotions ran high is also evident in the fact that influential Danes found it important to change their direction and contribute to positive relations between Danes and Icelanders. This applies, e.g. to Prime Minister Zahle, who was one of four initiators of the establishment of the Dansk-Islandsk Samfund (Danish-Icelandic Society) in 1916.⁹⁹

The controversy over independence is clearly expressed in the changes in attitudes towards the Danish language and Danish instruction throughout the society. Danish was now seen to be the most serious threat towards the mother tongue but apart from this the contemporary debate reflects a certain conflict between Icelanders' attitude towards the symbolic function of the Danish language and its communicative value. On the one hand, Icelanders were in various ways dependent upon being able to communicate in Danish and, on the other hand, the use of Danish, especially spoken Danish, became viewed as symbolising a lack of national identity, while at the same time, the ability to read Danish was seen as important. As has been pointed out, the Icelanders' language on the formal side was crawling with Danicisms. The situation was considered to be worst in the towns, and it was feared that these unsuitable linguistic customs would also extend into rural areas, where the Icelandic language was still preserved clean and pure. Danish novels, it was said, were read more than were sagas. To

Iceland University Press, Reykjavik, 2003, pp. 135–50 and Bjarne Stoklund, ‘Island på udstilling: Paris 1900 og Tivoli 1905’ in Søren Mentz (ed.), *Rejse gennem Islands historie – den danske forbindelse*, Gads Forlag, Copenhagen, 2008, pp. 144–62.

⁹⁸ Brandes, *Samlede Skrifter. Danmark III*, pp. 424–30.

⁹⁹ Finnur Jónsson, ‘Tilbageblik over Dansk-Islandsk Samfunds 10-aarige virksomhed 1916-1926’, *Budbringer*, vol. 10, 1926, p. 2.

correct this serious situation, primary schools were encouraged to cease instruction of Danish. On the other hand, teaching of Danish as a foreign language was to continue in youth instruction and in secondary modern schools.¹⁰⁰ In 1907, the first Schools Act was passed, which made schooling compulsory for children aged 10-14 years. Criticism of teaching Danish rather than teaching which took place in Danish and negative attitudes towards Danes coloured the pedagogical debate, cf. the following quote from Jónas Jónsson – later editor and Minister of Education – in a private letter from the Askov folk school in 1907:

Two words that I think about again and again: Danish and Icelandic, and I'd like to tell you my conclusion, if it might be of any benefit to you. Icelandic is being ruined, there's no doubt about it. The teachers are much to blame for this. They nourish the serpent that they should hate and destroy. I have done this, too, without accusing myself. The teachers use foreign textbooks and put more effort and care into teaching Danish than their native language. I doubt whether any nation in the world has its children learn in a foreign language without being forced to do so [...]. We need to have textbooks in Icelandic no matter how much it costs. Just ridiculous is the pretence and ignorance which results in people, who know that they will only be studying for several weeks, all the same begin by learning the evil Danish and can hardly write a letter in Icelandic. Of course this is mostly the fault of teachers and "cultivated" persons who mix together mangled foreign words into long and complicated sentences, ruining the language.¹⁰¹

The dominance of the Danish language in towns was once again viewed as a problem. Nonetheless, people were of the opinion that as long as there was to be Danish instruction, the towns should be given priority, as here the period of schooling was longer and teachers could be found with the requisite competence to teach the language.¹⁰² The sources mention the children's desire to learn foreign languages, but it was seen as debatable to what extent primary schools were capable of allocating time for Danish

¹⁰⁰ H.J., 'Á við og dreif', *Skólablaðið*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1909, pp. 3–4.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Guðjón Friðriksson, *Saga Jónasar Jónssonar frá Hriflu I: Með sverðið í annarri hendi og plóginn í hinni*, Íðunn, Reykjavík, 1991, p. 30.

¹⁰² 'Dönskukensla í barnaskólum', *Skólablaðið*, vol. 2, no. 19, 1908, p. 74 and Svafa Þórleifsdóttir, 'Tilhögun kenslu í barnaskólum', *Skólablaðið*, vol. 7, no. 5, 1913, pp. 72–75.

instruction. Furthermore, parents' wishes for Danish instruction were criticised, as this was more likely to be regarded as an indication of vanity than an assessment of the children's needs.¹⁰³ The conflict between the language's communicative and symbolic value is also evident in a certain ambivalence in Icelanders' attitude to various types of linguistic skills in Danish, cf. that there was support for the importance of being able to read Danish and other Nordic literature, while deprecating expressions were used regarding the spoken language, e.g. *at pludre* (to blather) in Danish.¹⁰⁴ Reading ability existed within a much larger group than was the ability to speak Danish, which was class-linked to a greater extent and primarily limited to the towns. The criticism against teaching children Danish gradually gained support. A report on children's instruction for the 1914-15 school year shows a visible reduction in Danish instruction. According to the report, Danish instruction was now carried out in all town schools, but only in 2 of the 20 rural schools with a fixed location. In schools taught by peripatetic teachers Danish instruction was mentioned in 4 of 19 schools.¹⁰⁵ Thus attitudes towards Danish instruction changed with increased national identity and greater independence. People were especially critical of Danish instruction for young children.

Conclusion

The above discussion has provided an account of the status and function of the Danish language in Iceland in the 19th century and up until Iceland's autonomy in 1918, as ideas of Icelandic nationality sprouted and flourished. During this period ideas of democratic rights and national development became prominent in society and romantic nationalism in literature. The focus was directed at the mother tongue and interest in Nordic languages, literature and history was high. Icelandic language and literature came to play a not insignificant role here. Like other research,¹⁰⁶ the sources provide support for the central role which the native language played in fostering national identity among Icelanders.

¹⁰³ 'Dönskukensla í barnaskólum', p. 74.

¹⁰⁴ 'Dönskukensla í barnaskólum', p. 74.

¹⁰⁵ 'Barnafræðsla árið 1914-15', *Hagskýrslur Íslands*, nr. 16, Statistics Iceland, Reykjavík, 1918, pp. 10-11 and 22-23.

¹⁰⁶ Holt and Gubbins, 'Introduction', pp. 1-5 and Adriansen, *Nationale symboler i Det Danske Rige 1830-2000 II*, p. 29.

During the 19th century, wide-reaching demographic changes occurred in Iceland, and the first towns were established. Here the Danish language and culture dominated. Besides functioning as the language of communication in contact with the Danes, the use of Danish signalled membership of the Danish-Icelandic elite. It was regarded as prestigious to use Danish and as a result many people were prompted to show off in speech or writing in order to show their social status by so doing.

The Icelandic language and literature has always held a central place in Icelandic culture, cf. early efforts at language purification, and with growing national consciousness the focus on the mother tongue as a bearer of national identity grew still further. New periodicals created a forum for debate on current affairs, including the linguistic situation, and new types of secular writings challenged and reinforced the Icelandic language in a variety of ways. In tandem with growing Icelandic national identity and stronger demands for independence, attitudes towards Danish moved in a negative direction. Danicisms in Icelandic came to be regarded as a threat against the mother tongue and in certain contexts use of Danish, especially spoken Danish, was viewed as an indication of subservience to the Danes. The sources show that attitudes to an Icelandic sprinkled with Danish loan words became much more negative during the course of the 19th century. Consciousness of the value of classical Icelandic literature and its significance for the Icelandic language played a major role, leading to positive regard for what came to be regarded as the classical, clean and pure language. This language, which would serve as a model for modern Icelandic, was found principally among the country's rural inhabitants. In contrast to this, the Danish-coloured language of the towns was regarded as degenerate or spoiled. The interest and attention of Danish scholars for the Icelandic language and literature without doubt contributed to increasing linguistic consciousness and cultural self-esteem among Icelanders, and thus helped to strengthen the language. How the changing circumstances altered attitudes to Danish and Icelandic fits well with sociolinguistic research and theories on the role which social situations and the relationship between language and society play in determining attitudes to language and language use. Similarly, the theory provides support for how the use of Danish and Icelandic respectively marks the relations to social groups and nationalities, cf. the function of language as a social marker.

In the course of just over a century, enormous changes can be detected in attitudes towards Danish. Far less prestige is attached to using the language and especially to the occurrence of Danicisms in Icelandic. The native language strengthens its status within the school system and Danish acquires a well-defined status as a foreign language. Conceptions of the clean and pure language, as it appears in the sagas and among the rural population, become dominant as an ideal for language use. Many of these aspects are reminiscent of attitudes towards Norwegian in Norway, where the linguistic ideal became linked to dialects in the rural areas, while the Danish-influenced speech of the towns came in for criticism.

The Danish language was of communicative value for Icelanders, cf. its function as the language of communication in contact with Danes in Iceland and Denmark. Apart from that, Danish functioned as a key to Danish cultural life and to education and a career. In Copenhagen, Icelanders became acquainted with the leading ideologies and political currents of the time, which to a large extent contributed to Iceland's independence and to strengthening the Icelandic language. In this connection it becomes apparent that the picture which emerges of Icelanders' struggle for their language and independence is not of such limited national scope as many have tended to assume. On the contrary, it turns out that the struggle for many of the political rights and ideologies, which Icelanders were waging, was also taking place in neighbouring countries, including in Denmark and Norway. Here political attitudes and social relations were also more decisive for a person's standpoint than nationality, cf. the fact that many Danes and Norwegians supported the Icelanders' cause. Apart from that there were cultural, linguistic and historical circumstances in Iceland, which both the Danes and Norwegians could make use of in their struggle for national identity and democratic rights. In many respects it is evident that the struggle for independence and language was neither so narrowly national nor black-and-white as people have often tended to assume.

The examples selected here appear to be well suited to illustrate the various attitudes to the Danish language and to the mother tongue in a turbulent time in the shared history of Iceland and Denmark. Here it must be emphasised that the writings collected originate primarily from periodicals, history- and text books, and other writings

where public debate was carried out. The texts from periodicals focus on current affairs and what was publicly considered to be correct. It is not certain, however, that this picture fits perfectly with the general attitudes and practice of laymen. There is therefore every reason to underline that these only represent a few fragments of an exceptionally complex picture, involving many political, historical, social and personal relationships.

With greater independence, the number of Danes in Iceland declined, resulting in a gradual disappearance of Danish from everyday life in Iceland. The long shared history had, however, left its mark on Icelandic culture in many ways which can still be observed today, for instance, in Danish loan words and idioms. Despite various controversies during the struggle for independence the lengthy dependence had contributed to multifaceted personal and cultural connections and mutual interests. As a result, contact remained close and took place on many fronts, even after Icelanders had achieved their desired independence. For this and other reasons, Danish continued to be a key foreign language subject for Icelanders. Increased contact with other Nordic countries, however, gave Danish instruction a broader focus, namely to function as Icelanders' key to the rest of the Nordic area.