

Variation and standardization from a historical perspective

– the case of 19th century Icelandic –

The paper will be a presentation of a new research project, *Linguistic Variation and the Emergence of a National Standard in 19th Century Icelandic*. Fundamental changes took place in Icelandic society in the 19th and 20th centuries, which affected the language in various ways. During this period, the status of Icelandic changed from that of a remote minority language in the Danish kingdom to a national language in a sovereign state, used in all spheres of society. In assuming the role of an official language, a common linguistic norm had to be defined and developed. We are focusing on the beginnings of the standardization of Icelandic in the 19th century, and studying its linguistic, sociolinguistic and ideological foundations. At this time, there were no official institutions in the country that could propose a standard, which thus largely came to be formed by influential individuals.

The dominant model for the emerging standard was the medieval language and the attitudes tended towards language purification, both with respect to variants deriving from post-medieval language change and from language contact. The questions we want to answer concern the nature and the spread of internal and external linguistic changes; the distribution of linguistic variants and their correlation with sociolinguistic and stylistic factors; and the influence of expressed opinions on linguistic features and of organized intervention on the linguistic development. Earlier research has revealed the importance of the medieval linguistic model in 19th and 20th century language ideology, but it has never been investigated empirically if and how contemporary linguistic and sociolinguistic factors affected the proposed standard.

We will be analyzing selected linguistic variables, relevant with respect to the standardization, by applying a variationist approach and methodology. We apply two corpora of written texts from the 19th century as a basis for our analysis, one of private letters and other personal writings, and the other of newspapers and journals. Indications of an emerging standard are both sought in actual language use and in contemporary views on language use expressed in 19th century newspapers and textbooks. The frequency and distribution of different variants are studied and correlated with stylistic and sociolinguistic factors in order to reveal their potential influence on the choice of standard variants. The results of the project will contribute to our understanding of how and to what extent linguistic changes can be affected by language standardization.

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