

Managing linguistic prestige

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Data

The main language policy documents and programmes for Icelandic which have been issued by the Icelandic Parliament, Government and the Icelandic Language Council in the 2000s, are as follows:

(1) A language policy programme 2009, drafted by the Icelandic Language Council, ratified by Parliament, and published by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. This detailed document (113 pages) is for the most part on **status planning**, emphasizing the importance of using Icelandic in all domains.

(2) A general language legislation, since 2011. It is mostly on domains of use and language **status**, see for example the following paragraphs:

“Icelandic is the national language of Icelanders and the official language of Iceland”; “Icelandic is the language of the Althingi [Parliament], the courts, the state and local governments, schools at all school levels and other institutions engaged in activities and providing public services”

The law also partly addresses **corpus** matters, cf.:

“The language used in the activities of the state and local governments or activities carried out on their behalf shall be of good quality, easy to understand and precise”

(3) A parliamentary language policy resolution in 2019 came along with a proposed three-year plan, and a language awareness project. The first point in the plan is about raising awareness about the “importance” of the Icelandic language, its “value” and its “uniqueness”. While the document also acknowledges the importance of e.g. specialized vocabulary, and addresses acquisition planning by suggesting improvements in teaching Icelandic as a second language, its reiterated main point concerns the importance of **positive attitudes**, e.g.:

“Positive attitude to [Icelandic] and increased awareness is crucial in order to ensure continued use of [Icelandic] in every domain of the society”

(4) A detailed language policy programme for the period 2021–2030, issued by the Icelandic Language Council (50 pages), opens by underscoring the principal role of **positive attitudes**:

“Positive attitudes to the Icelandic language are the essence of Icelandic language policy”

The policy programme suggests e.g. that positive attitudes can be strengthened by encouraging children and adolescents to watch and listen to podcasts and tv programs in Icelandic (p. 8).

Discussion

While official documents on language policy from 2009 and 2011 mainly concern status planning, the more recent ones, from 2019 and 2021, underscore the importance of attitudinal factors. As a matter of fact, large-scale research into Icelandic language attitudes (2002, and again in 2018–2019) suggests prevailing positive attitudes to Icelandic in every age group. Yet, positive attitudes are now being addressed explicitly in official policies as a principal goal in language management — a prerequisite for successful implementation of other management efforts. This suggests a shift in focus towards overtly attempting to manage linguistic prestige. Such explicit attempts at prestige planning, by policy makers, are a novelty in the Icelandic context.

References

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Theoretical considerations

In language policy and planning studies, the term *prestige planning* (*Prestigeplanung*, Haarmann 1984) was introduced “as a separate functional range”, as all corpus and status planning activities “appear in the light of prestige values which form a network of evaluations and attitudes” (Haarmann 1990:105).

In Ager’s (2005) words, linguistic prestige “is the consequence of the attitude of members of [a particular] society” towards the status relationship between languages or language varieties within the language ecology in question. Also, linguistic variants, different lexical choices etc., in the use of a particular variety, may enjoy different (overt or covert) prestige, and can consequently become targets in prestige planning efforts.

The systems of corpus and status planning are interdependent as illustrated e.g. by Kaplan & Baldauf (1997), and there is also necessarily much overlap as concerns prestige planning.

Spolsky’s (2004, 2009, 2019, 2021) language policy model contains three interconnected components of language policy: (a) language practices, the choice of repertoires and varieties; (b) language beliefs, or established ideologies, which assign values to different choices and forms; and (c) language management, the modification of practices and beliefs, by an institution or group, or by individuals.

Attempts to modify language attitudes, and consequently linguistic prestige, are aimed at the ‘ideology and beliefs’ component of Spolsky’s language policy model.

Summary

While Icelandic language management documents in the early 2000s mainly addressed matters of status planning, more recent ones (2019, 2021) are placing emphasis on attitudinal factors, among other things by underscoring the perceived importance of raising awareness about the “importance” of the Icelandic language, its “value” and its “uniqueness”.

This implies a clear tendency towards explicit prestige management, and it is based on the assumption that prestige ultimately has consequences for language practices.

Spolsky’s (2004, 2009, 2019, 2021) language policy model is broad enough to cover such attempts at prestige management, as the model inherently accounts for attitudinal modification efforts. Acknowledging this particular type of management underscores the interconnectedness between the different components of Spolsky’s model.

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