

Language and Identity: The Case of North American Icelandic

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Examinations of North American Icelandic have largely focused on phonological, morphological, syntactic, or lexicographic aspects with limited attention given to sociolinguistic topics. However, the most recent study of North American Icelandic, *Sigurtunga: Vesturíslensk mál og menning* (2018), includes an account of historical sociolinguistic circumstances (Svavarsdóttir) and discussion of the symbolic role of language as it relates to identity (Neijmann). We have started a new project to contribute to this growing field of work that examines notions of identity in Icelandic heritage communities as reflected in participant responses to a series of questions about their own associations between language and heritage identity.

Arnbjörnsdóttir (2015) mentions an unpublished and informal survey of language attitudes that she distributed in an Icelandic American community in North Dakota in 1986. Fifty people were surveyed, but the 2015 article only discusses findings on language use. Our sociolinguistic study, which also uses a survey, aims to get a sense of how important knowledge of Icelandic is as a component of identity for North Americans with Icelandic heritage. To date, our survey has had 349 responses from over 30 states in the United States, and 6 Canadian provinces. We provided the survey in two formats; one online through the survey software Qualtrics, and another that could be filled out by hand and sent to us. The survey is comprised of 25 questions, 16 of which are open-ended to allow respondents to be as detailed about their thoughts and experiences as they liked.

We asked, for example, “How important is communicating in Icelandic to your identity as someone of Icelandic heritage?” The answers are more or less evenly distributed (Table 1), but show a correlation between the level of self-described language ability and how important communicating in Icelandic is to a respondent’s sense of identity as someone of Icelandic heritage (Table 2). Immediately following this question is an open-ended question, “Have your views on this changed over time?” 43% of respondents said “No” with 28% of those saying that it has always been “Not at all important”. 35% said “Yes” with a third of those expressing some degree of regret or sense of loss that they could either not speak Icelandic at all or well enough.

- (1) *Our parents were told it was important to assimilate and speak only English. I feel like my heritage was taken away from us.*

Interestingly, 21% of the respondents gave some other indication of their attitudes toward Icelandic and/or English. Some of those in this third group expressed a concern for the preservation of Icelandic, and a fear of its vulnerability to English, while many others elected to describe whether or not they wanted to learn Icelandic, and why they have or have not been successful in learning Icelandic.

- (2) *Interested but no time to learn, no one to speak it with, and Icelanders speak English beautifully!*

Very little has been done of this kind of work for the various heritage languages often discussed at WILA. Thorough analysis of many individual attitudes can help us to understand the complexity of language’s role as an element of identity in heritage language communities.

Table 1. “How important is communicating in Icelandic to your identity as someone of Icelandic heritage?”

Answer	%	Count
Extremely important	16.94%	52
Very important	14.66%	45
Moderately important	21.82%	67
Slightly important	26.71%	82
Not at all important	19.87%	61
Total	100%	307

Table 2. Degree of importance broken down by self-described language ability of respondents with the following answers

Answer	Fluent	Near Fluent	Fair	Limited	None
Extremely important	46%	14%	17%	17%	6%
Very important	5%	11%	22%	46%	16%
Moderately important	3%	3%	15%	51%	28%
Slightly important	0%	0%	3%	54%	43%
Not at all important	2%	0%	2%	20%	77%

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