

## IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING ICELANDIC AND CONNECTING WITH THE SPEAKING COMMUNITY

### Abstract

The Icelandic language has a central role in defining Icelandic nationality. Given its importance in defining Icelandic nationality and as a precondition for citizenship, the article studies what learning the Icelandic language means for the growing numbers of immigrants who have arrived in Iceland in recent years. This ethnographic study presents immigrants' perspectives on learning the language to be able to participate at work as well as gain access to the language community and Icelandic society in order to examine theory-based questions regarding processes of inclusion, exclusion and integration. Our study shows that although language is promoted as an important aspect in inclusion into Icelandic society, many of our participants who have attended classes but work mostly with other immigrants experience the language requirements instead as a boundary marker in terms of participation and belonging in Icelandic society.

### Keywords

Nationality • Icelandic language • immigrants • inclusion • exclusion

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Having changed relatively little for centuries, Icelandic is often presented as a pure language threatened by larger languages that will pollute it (Hálfðánarsson 2001; Innes 2015; Skaptadóttir 2007; Þórarinsdóttir 2010). Thus, language policies for protecting the purity of the language have been enacted several times in Iceland (c.f. those discussed in Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson 2010). With growing numbers of people acquiring Icelandic as their second language, questions arise about what it means to be Icelandic and the language's role in defining who can lay claim to belong to Icelandic society and culture (Hálfðánarsson 2003). In fact, language has been one of the most prominent topics in debates about the growing number of foreign citizens in Iceland in recent years (Skaptadóttir 2007; Þórarinsdóttir 2010). This article examines immigrants' experiences of learning Icelandic, depicts their perspectives on learning the language as part of gaining access to the language community and Icelandic society and explores processes of inclusion and exclusion by focusing on the role of language.

Sharing a common language is often seen as an important aspect in uniting a nation or an ethnic group and distinguishing it from others (Eriksen 2010; Hobsbawm 1996). Balibar says that there are 'two competing routes' to the way in which ethnicity is produced so that it seems to be natural: one is language and the other race (1991: 96). He notes that commonly these are combined in people's minds 'for "the people" to be represented as an absolutely autonomous unit' (Balibar 1991: 96). Both, he says, are applied to show that the

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national character is inborn, but Balibar claims that language is more concrete, as it links people to an imagined common origin through ever renewed written texts and speech. What is pivotal, he claims, 'is not only that the national language should be recognised as the official language, but much more fundamentally, that it should be able to appear as the very element of the life of a people' (Balibar 1991: 98). Balibar points out that for language to be 'tied down to the frontiers of particular people, it needs an extra degree of particularity or a principle of closure, of exclusion' (1991: 99).

Many scholars have shown the importance of the Icelandic language in the construction and the maintenance of Icelandic national identity (Hálfðánarsson 2001; Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson 2010; Þórarinsdóttir 2010). During the struggle for independence in the late 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, the language was emphasised and standardised as part of the construction of Icelandic nationality, and as Hálfðánarson points out, at this time, people began to perceive of their national identity as innate and self-evident (Hálfðánarson 2001). Þórarinsdóttir (2010) proposes that linguistic nationalism in Iceland is reflected in the way in which new words have to be made for new objects and in the ways that schools and media present Icelandic as pure. She claims that one of the main roles of Icelandic nationalist language policy has been to draw a line between 'us' and 'them' (Þórarinsdóttir 2010: 193). Pálsson (1989) has shown how such ideas regarding the language conceal class differences amongst Icelanders, reinforcing the idea

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of a shared, homogeneous national and class identity. The public discourse often claims that racism never existed historically in Iceland and is thus not a concern in the present (Loftsdóttir 2013), allowing speakers to deny that racism informs the distinction between 'us' and 'them'. Kristmannsson (2004:292) points out how language allows a perceived connection with the past not only because 'Icelanders speak Icelandic but because through the medieval literature one can connect directly to the past', precisely one of the points that Balibar (1991) argued makes language a potent vehicle for asserting shared identity.

Icelandic nationalism portrays language and biological origin as highly interconnected, with the Icelandic language viewed as a distinctive feature and a hallmark of Icelandic nationality (Hálfðánarson 2001, 2003; Hearn 2006). This position has been supported by the fact that Icelandic language has mainly been confined to Icelanders and the very few non-Icelandic speakers are portrayed as having a historical, genealogical tie to Iceland (Bessason 1967; Bragason 2001; Helgason 2014). With a growing number of people who speak the language without the common roots or from an emotional attachment but more for the instrumental purpose of participation in society, new questions arise regarding what one needs to do to be included and be able to claim to belong to Icelandic society (Yuval-Davis 2011).

For migrants in a global and transnational world, the connections with nation states and national languages are more complex than that described by nationalistic discourses (Vertovec 2004; Levitt & Glick Schiller 2003). Often, the assumptions of nationalistic discourses generally, and certainly the ones underlying the Icelandic nationality construction, are founded on the idea that there is a strong association between language and nationality informed by the philosophical arguments of Humboldt, Herder and other German language philosophers in the 1800s (Oakes 2001:9-29; Tulasiewicz & Adams 1998:5-6). However, in the current world order, people may be connected to two or more nation states in different ways (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2003) and many are bi- or multilingual. Moreover, mono-, bi- and multilingual speakers may use their languages in ways that mark political, ethnic and nationalistic stances and so create or diminish boundaries between themselves and others, thereby increasing the social meaning of each language form (Tulasiewicz & Adams 1998:8-13). Whilst we live in times characterised by greater global mobility (Bauman 2000), international population flows are still to a large extent ordered by state regimes. Entry regulations and immigration policies control the flow and integration of immigrants to host societies. Along with nationalistic ideologies, these policies help maintain social divisions and must be included in our analysis of the processes of inclusion and exclusion (Eriksen 2007; Fassin 2011; Innes & Skaptadóttir 2016).

In many countries, laws and regulations regarding immigration and access to citizenship are becoming stricter than before, particularly where language is one of the factors emphasised (Fekete 2006). Increasingly, immigrants in Europe have to show a certain amount of integration, such as language competence, to gain rights (Joppke 2007). Borevi (2010) says that increased course requirements and exams to prove knowledge reflect changing ideas regarding immigrant rights in Europe. Before, securing immigrants' rights used to be seen to lead to integration into the new society, whereas now, lack of integration is given as a reason for denying people rights. Jensen (2014) analyses portions of the debates in the Norwegian and Danish parliaments concerning methods of integrating immigrants into the two societies. He argues that the differences in approach and rhetoric used by members in the two bodies are influenced by

the sense that national identity can or cannot be shaped voluntarily and whether the nation should adapt to incomers. States, then, will develop policies depending on whether or not communal belief in social change exists and whether it is believed that individuals can actively choose to become members.

Responsibility for language teaching varies in European countries. For example, in Norway and Sweden, courses are financed by the state, whereas in the Netherlands, the state does not participate in arranging or paying for the courses (Joppke 2007). Iceland's system is more like the Netherlands' system than that of Norway and Sweden, although course organisers can apply for some funding from the state. Despite the emphasis on language in defining what it means to be an Icelandic, it was not until in the early 2000s, with growing numbers of immigrants, that linguistic ability became a factor in residence permit or citizenship applications (Innes & Skaptadóttir 2016; Albury 2015; Hilmarrson-Dunn & Kristinsson 2010). People coming to Iceland from outside of the European Economic Area (EEA) and European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries must attend 150 h of Icelandic courses to be able to get a residence permit and a work permit. According to laws and regulations that took effect in 2009, passing a language test has been a requirement for citizenship. Despite making these requirements, the government has limited responsibilities for the provision of language courses (Skaptadóttir & Ólafsdóttir 2010). The state, however, has established guidelines on course content, publishing a recommended curriculum for lower level classes in 2008 and one for upper level classes in 2012 (Menntamálaráðuneytið 2008, 2012). Participants in the courses pay a fee, with refunds provided if they are members of trade unions. Only unemployed persons and recently arrived refugees get free courses as part of a work training program.

Icelandic language policies require immigrants to demonstrate willingness to learn about and adhere to national norms by fulfilling the duties of attending language classes and passing the test required for citizenship. Both Borevi (2010) and Joppke (2007) would note that this imposes upon the individual immigrants and releases the state from responsibility for offering means to satisfy this obligation. Jensen (2014) would find this to indicate that individual immigrants are considered able to modify their nationality and that Icelandic society is not so concerned about changing itself to accommodate the newcomers. What are missing from literature investigating the individual-state responsibility, voluntary-fixed identity and voluntary-coerced integration continua are fine-grained investigations of what happens when immigrants comply with state demands. A study like ours will help to highlight what happens when immigrants conform to state desires, whether they are accepted as a result or whether further elements should be taken into account when theorising about integration policies.

Given the importance of Icelandic language in defining Icelandic nationality, as a precondition for citizenship, and in the labour market, this article focuses on what learning the Icelandic language means for immigrants in terms of participation and inclusion into Icelandic society. Learning the language is promoted as the only way to gain full understanding of Icelandic society and culture (Jónsdóttir, Harðardóttir and Garðarsdóttir 2009; Skaptadóttir 2007), but whilst classes have been made available for migrants, many have little access to the Icelandic language community (Skaptadóttir and Wojtyńska 2008). Thus, the article analyses the experiences of migrants to show how the language offers access to Icelandic social mores and understandings whilst it also may be used as a tool of exclusion and a boundary marker. Drawing on theoretical questions on language, integration and belonging, we ask the following:

Do migrants experience the language as a key for participation in society? And do Icelanders use it to include and exclude migrants from participating in Icelandic society? Following a description of our methods, we discuss how increasing migration into Iceland is changing the context for incomers. Then, we explore the effects of pressure on immigrants to learn Icelandic during the economic recession in order to get access to jobs and Icelandic society. Our aim is to explore whether, despite the state's promotion of language education and the efforts that migrants take to acquire some fluency in the Icelandic language, it continues to be a boundary marker, affecting participation and belonging.

## Methods

The research discussed in this article is based on the data collected separately by the two authors. The first author's research focused on general experiences of migrants and their experiences of inclusion and exclusion, including their experiences of learning Icelandic, whilst the second author's research focused primarily on language learning. Applying ethnographic methods, both authors conducted interviews and did participant observations, taking part in activities and informal discussions with people. The participation, as well as collection and analysis of other relevant data such as policies and laws, deepened the understanding of the topic under study (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007; Bernard 2011). Informal interactions of this sort also allowed the authors to more completely understand and gather the migrants' own viewpoints and voices, making it possible to present their positions more accurately than can data dissociated from the individuals from whom it is collected.

The data analysed in this article from the first author's research is from her participant observations and interviews with 30 persons from Poland and 60 persons from the Philippines. They were recruited using the snowball sampling method. In interviews, she has talked with people in Reykjavik and two other smaller rural towns about their experiences when they first arrived in Iceland unable to speak Icelandic and how they went about learning the language. Whilst members of these groups had different educational backgrounds, the majority of them had arrived in Iceland to work in low-income jobs in production and services that did not require specialisation, after 1996. Participants often raised the topic of learning Icelandic before she initiated the discussion in interviews and informal discussions. These interviews were conducted in English and Icelandic. The data analysed in the article based on the second author's research was collected as part of a study focusing on language teaching methods in Iceland. During this study, she conducted participant observation in Icelandic language classes in Reykjavik schools and had informal conversations and open-ended interviews with students in these classes over a six-month period. Twenty seven students were followed in this way, 11 from Poland, 11 from Southeast Asian countries, 3 from other Eastern European countries and 2 from Western European countries. Again, the topic of learning Icelandic and what participation in language classes has meant for the students was often raised in interviews and conversations before the second author had mentioned it. These interviews were conducted in English.

## The Icelandic context of growing immigration

In the past two decades, immigration to Iceland has grown extensively. Foreign citizens were 1.9% of the population of Iceland

in 1996, reached 7.4% in 2008 and were 7% of the population in 2015 (Statistics Iceland n.d.). Most people come from Europe with people from Poland making up about one-third of all foreign-born residents of Iceland. This large increase in just over a decade means many migrants have only lived in Iceland for a relatively short time. The primary reason for migration to Iceland has been work related, but family reunification has been an important reason as well (Júlíusdóttir, Skaptadóttir & Karlsdóttir 2013). In the mid-1990s, people began to arrive on temporary work permits primarily to work in fishing, food production and service industries. The growing construction industry attracted many workers, especially after 2006, when the temporary restrictions on new member states of the European Union (EU) were lifted. Immigrants at this time were primarily viewed as a temporary work force, that there was no government policy on integration of immigrants until 2007 is a clear indication of this (Wojtyńska, Skaptadóttir & Ólafsson 2011; Wojtyńska & Zielinska 2010). By 2007, foreign citizens residing in Iceland made up 6% of the population (Statistics Iceland n.d.), about 9% of the work force and were becoming more prominent in service-related positions involving interaction with Icelanders (Skaptadóttir 2011). Projections of immigrant arrivals predicted that this percentage would rise in the economic climate of the time (Alþingi 2007: Table 4). Resulting from the increasing visibility of foreign workers, forecasts of greater numbers of immigrant arrivals in future years, and the realisation that many of these workers were residing in Iceland for extended periods, lawmakers began to draft policy to deal with the foreign-born segment of the population.

The government policy on immigration and integration from 2007 states the importance of 'securing that everyone have the same opportunities and become active participants in society in most areas of life' (Félagsmálaráðuneytið 2007: 2). The Icelandic language is presented in the policy as the key to integrating immigrants and securing their participation in Icelandic society. The policy states that adult immigrants in and outside of the labour market should have access to good Icelandic teaching and that this should include learning about Icelandic society. It states, furthermore, that:

The policy of the Icelandic government – approved by the entire nation – is to protect the Icelandic language. It is a shared property of the nation and contains its history, culture and self-awareness. It is also a tool for social interaction and a key to participation in the nation's life. Powerful support of Icelandic language education of immigrants serves the dual purpose of speeding their integration into society and to strengthen the position of the Icelandic language. (Félagsmálaráðuneytið 2007: 6)

This statement presents a dual view of the Icelandic language and what it offers to immigrants. Referring to the language as both a national symbol and a communication tool is not usually done in the expectations for language learning by immigrants.

Since this policy was put forward in 2007, much has changed in Icelandic society because of the opening of the common labour market to the new member states of the EEA in May 2006, the economic crash in 2008 and its aftermath. Opening the common labour market to new member states of the EU meant the majority of immigrants (including Poles) no longer had to apply for a work permit and were no longer required to take 150 h of Icelandic language to remain indefinitely in Iceland. During the years following the economic crash, knowledge of Icelandic language was, however, emphasised even more than before (Skaptadóttir 2015). People were able to work in diverse jobs without any language requirements before 2007, but

these jobs often became unavailable for those not speaking good Icelandic (Wojtyńska & Zielinska 2010).

## Effects of Settling in Iceland and Employment on Immigrants' Learning of Icelandic

The majority of the immigrants who have arrived in Iceland entered the labour market shortly after their arrival but had not learned Icelandic. They usually did not have the opportunity to attend courses until after they were employed. Knowing the language was, until recently, not a precondition for getting a job. During the first days and weeks at work, they commonly understood little or nothing of Icelandic. Many of them, though, got jobs where they worked side by side with other people from their country of origin and could, therefore, speak their mother tongue with their co-workers. Our research results show that people often found out about Icelandic classes through their employers and co-workers. When asked by the first author about the greatest obstacles they faced when moving to Iceland, most participants mentioned the Icelandic language first and then the other things such as the weather and dark winter. A woman from Poland, for example, said that besides being away from her children, not knowing Icelandic was the most difficult thing for her during her first few months in Iceland. She said:

It was a great problem not to know Icelandic. I did not know anything. Where I was working there was a Polish floor manager and he spoke Icelandic, Polish and English. He helped a lot, helped the Polish people. It was a big problem. But now I can talk a little bit, a little bit Icelandic.

As many people saw their work in Iceland initially as temporary, learning the language was not always a priority. Their goal was primarily to earn money and support their family back in the country of origin (Skaptadóttir & Wojtyńska 2008). Even though many had spent years in Iceland when interviewed, they did not preclude plans of moving back to their country of origin and some had already invested in housing there. In spite of the claim that they intended to stay only temporarily in Iceland, our results show that people usually started taking Icelandic courses soon after becoming employed and all had attended some courses. Some of the courses focused on work-related language, which was what many of the participants preferred. People working in fish processing, food production or construction often emphasised that they wanted to learn practical things in Icelandic that would help them better understand work-related conversations and were happy with courses offered at work during work hours, because they were working long hours or on shifts and had difficulty finding time to include a course as well.

One of the participants, a divorced Polish woman whose children remained in Poland during the first two years after her arrival in Iceland, said that at first her only purpose was to gather enough money to allow her children to join her. However, after her children arrived, she had difficulties attending the evening language courses, because she had no relatives to look after her children. A few years later, the language was no longer a barrier for her because, little by little, she had managed to learn the language well enough to get by in Icelandic. She expressed great satisfaction with the workplace-organised Icelandic course for employees during working hours. She repeatedly stated that her co-workers attended the course not only to fulfil the hours required to get the work and residency permit but because they wanted to improve their Icelandic and make their daily

lives easier. She described the freedom she experienced from being able to talk directly to her supervisor without having to depend on others to speak for her or to the doctor about personal matters without involving her children as translators. It is clear from these interviews that the participants were primarily concerned with practical purpose of learning the language so as to function better at the workplace shortly after their arrival.

## Effects of Course Structure on Immigrants' Learning of Icelandic

In spite of the potential temporariness of their stay and that people from the EU and EEA countries are no longer required to learn Icelandic since 2006, studies show that the majority of immigrants want to learn the language (Jónsdóttir, Harðardóttir & Garðarsdóttir 2009; Skaptadóttir 2007; Wojtyńska, Skaptadóttir & Ólafsson 2011). Their knowledge of Icelandic depends, however, on many things, such as the kinds of courses available to them, their educational background and whether opportunities to attend class and participate in the Icelandic language community are available to them.

One thing that those who took classes point out is that the group they were with in class affected how productive the course was for them. When the student body was too diverse in terms of mother tongue, former education or desire to learn Icelandic, they did not feel satisfied with their growth in class. Both authors spoke with people who had taken classes including students from divergent geographic and national backgrounds. In class, English often became the go-to language for explanations, particularly when the teachers suspected that students could not understand directions and clarifications in Icelandic. Some reported that they thought they learned more English than Icelandic in these mixed classes, whilst others complained that this use of English effectively excluded them. Especially in rural villages, highly educated and illiterate learners were together in a class, often with teachers not trained to teach about literacy. This occurred in classes within Reykjavík, too, and the second author witnessed frustration amongst teachers and students in classes with diverse levels of literacy preparation.

Many of the participants in our studies worked shifts and, therefore, had difficulties in attending courses available to them. Others lived in small villages where there were only a few courses in Icelandic, mostly for beginners. A few had been forced to take the beginners' course repeatedly to fulfil the requirement of at least 150 hours of Icelandic courses for residence and permanent work permits. Several teachers noted that this practice does little to expand students' knowledge of Icelandic (Innes & Skaptadóttir 2016). After a long and demanding day at work, many found it difficult to attend an evening course, do the homework that came with it, and care for children. Cost was also an issue, and despite the refund from their trade union, some thought that they paid too much. Whilst some stated that they had learned little or nothing from the courses, others saw the classes as a stepping stone and continued studying on their own after the classes ended. They watched television and read easy material such as horoscopes and obituaries in the newspapers.

Educational background was an important aspect in people's view towards learning Icelandic. Those who had little formal education in their country of origin found the Icelandic courses quite difficult. They complained that the teaching methods were too formal. Some complained about too much grammar and a few claimed that they did not know what was going on in the classroom. The more highly educated participants, who had finished a secondary school

degree or a college degree, did not criticise the teaching methods and preferred formal methods. Although the more educated generally were not employed where they could apply the education they gained in their home country, they were often working in jobs that enabled them to practice Icelandic, for example, in caring for the elderly or in kindergartens. Only a few, such as nurses, were in jobs where they could apply their education from their country of origin.

Another issue that affects an uncertain percentage of the immigrant population is language learning difficulties. The language test for citizenship can be waived for those with a significant learning disability, but there is no such waiver from taking the 150 hours of language courses necessary for a permanent residence visa. Several teachers and students whom the second author interviewed mentioned that they had taught and been in class with others with severe dyslexia, retention deficits and phonological processing problems. One student in a course specifically for East Asian immigrants self-identified as being severely dyslexic, attributing her illiteracy in both Icelandic and her native language to this cause. She and her teacher found her oral skills to be fine for her level, but her ability to read and write was almost non-existent. The students around her recognised her deficit and made allowances for it when they could, but she was not welcome in reading and writing exercises with the other students, a form of work that this teacher often used. The actual number of immigrants who have serious language learning difficulties is undocumented, however.

## Learning from participation

Many of the participants in our studies claimed that they never used what they learned in classes, as they rarely had opportunities to talk with native speakers. Several of them work with other immigrants, some from the participant's home country, and thus do not have many opportunities for participation in the Icelandic language community. In some cases, especially in smaller fishing communities and some construction projects, people live in special workers' housing. A Polish man who came to work in fish processing said in an interview that he did not meet Icelanders or use what he learned in class the first few years. In the village where he lived, there were many Poles; he worked long days with mostly other Poles and lived in workers' housing. After work, he watched Polish television or chatted on the Internet with friends back home. Only later, after he had married a Polish woman and established a home outside of the workers' housing with her and her children, whose participation in the local school caused both him and his wife to interact with their teachers and parents of their friends, did he become interested in applying the Icelandic he had learned in class.

Those who work in service jobs have a different story to tell and commonly participate more actively in society. Some of them talked about being lucky that they had a job where they were able to use the language. For example, a woman who speaks good Icelandic said in an interview that she feels fortunate that she was lucky to get a job where Icelanders were willing to communicate with her. A young man who plays sports with a group of Icelandic co-workers twice a week said that he learned more Icelandic through this activity than in the workplace. Sports allowed for informal chatting and he could build on what he learned in courses. A woman who had very little education in her country of origin had attended the level one course but claimed that she did not learn anything until she took a cooking course with only Icelandic women. This finally gave her the chance to communicate with Icelandic people in her village.

Many of those who knew Icelandic at the time of the interview had made an effort to communicate with Icelanders or get jobs where they practiced the language at work, such as in care giving work for children or the elderly. It was, however, often difficult as a woman from the Philippines described it:

Every day when I went to work it was hard for me, you know, because sometimes I got so nervous having to go there because I had to speak Icelandic again, and find words to say to them..... Sometimes they laugh at me, the patients sometimes laugh at me, but they correct me.

Activities encouraging students to interact with Icelanders occur in all of the textbooks examined in the second author's study. However, the majority of the interactions that students are asked to engage in are short, service-oriented conversations, such as ordering food at a shop or depositing money at one's bank. Whilst such exercises get students to interact with Icelanders, the dialogues are short, entirely scripted and do not lead into other topics unless the co-participants move beyond the assignment. These assignments encourage students to practice their Icelandic in real-life situations but hardly lead to longer-term interaction between the student and an Icelandic person. Examples of friendships between Icelanders and foreigners exist in the textbooks, but there are no exercises demonstrating how learners might go about establishing a friendship bond with an Icelandic person.

Teachers applauded students when they reported that they had a conversation. Students, though, recognised that their teachers can only encourage them, they cannot compel them to participate in this kind of exercise. One Vietnamese woman said that she had tried several times to chat with store personnel about items outside of the immediate shopping experience but was told that her speech was unintelligible. After several such experiences, she does not vary from the normative scripts used to conduct transactions. A Polish man said that he had similar experiences when trying to speak to people at the bakery where he worked. They laughed at him when he mispronounced words, words he was sure they understood from the context, so he sticks only to words he is sure he can pronounce and does not try to expand upon basic statements. Several other people acknowledged that they had similar experiences when they first began speaking Icelandic but, after continuing to talk with the same people, were recognised as reasonably good speakers. It took effort to overcome the sense that one was not understood or welcomed as a speaker, but those who carried on now feel confident that they can engage in at least limited conversations and be understood.

## Changing discourse of immigrants and Icelandic: belonging or participation

A concern with immigrants' lack of interest in learning Icelandic is commonly expressed by Icelanders and has appeared regularly in media. Both authors have encountered Icelanders who complain about not being able to ask foreign staff in shops about the goods. People also express concern that caregivers cannot be understood by their charges, primarily children and the elderly. In such discussions, the irritation is primarily turned against the immigrants, with little mention of employers' responsibility for training employees or to the state's responsibility to make language education readily available. When people begin to speak Icelandic, they get varying responses from Icelanders. On the one hand, people praise immigrants for

trying to speak the language and demonstrating willingness to fit into Icelandic society. On the other hand, they are criticised for not speaking correctly or for speaking with an accent. One woman said:

Yes, you can see how happy people is when you are trying, but not everyone. This accent, it takes a long time to get Icelandic accent. People do not want to understand what I am saying, I noticed this as well.

An Asian woman remembered that the most useful exercise her class completed in their language school was to work up their resumes in Icelandic. She said:

We wrote about ourselves, work we did, and then the teacher corrected it. We liked this exercise very much because it showed we can work in the language and every job wants that now. If my first papers show I cannot write in Icelandic then I won't even get a call about a job. It is not my name but my language they look at.

In these interviews, the divided nature of Icelanders' responses to foreign speakers is evident. There is a certain amount of acceptance and encouragement given to those using the language and, at the same time, they receive a critical evaluation of the language form.

However, other participants raised the issue of Icelanders using language as a factor in the processes of exclusion. A woman from the Philippines, when discussing racism, said:

There is also criticism if you do not speak perfect Icelandic. Uhh even more than –'You cannot speak Icelandic you better go'. It is even worse than your skin color; being a foreigner not knowing the language.

Each person noticed that they were subject to two types of responses from Icelanders, positive reactions because they were trying to speak in Icelandic and sometimes criticism because they were not speaking or writing like a native. The importance of speaking Icelandic to being accepted and welcomed is evident in the comments of the Asian women, showing that there is a measure of truth to the government's assertion that the language is 'a key to participation in the nation's life' (Félagsmálaráðuneyti 2007: 6). However, acceptance of new speakers is not uniform; criticism can increase foreigners' anxiety and decrease their sense of ever fitting into Icelandic society even whilst learning Icelandic.

With the economic crisis in 2008, many recently arrived migrants lost their jobs and had problems with re-entering the labour market (Skaptadóttir 2015; Wojtyńska, Skaptadóttir & Ólafsson 2011). Before the crisis, not knowing Icelandic did not keep immigrants from securing at least low-wage jobs, but after the recession, language became more important than before. A survey conducted amongst unemployed immigrants in 2011 showed that only 2% considered themselves fluent and 12% as good in Icelandic so the unemployed were directed to language classes by the Directorate of Labour with the goal of making them more employable (Wojtyńska, Skaptadóttir & Ólafsson 2011). Job advertisements after the 2008 economic crash were mostly in Icelandic and commonly stated that knowledge of Icelandic was required, even for jobs such as cleaning. The survey showed that 89% of unemployed immigrants had taken courses in Icelandic but the majority still saw their limited knowledge of Icelandic was a primary reason for problems with re-entering the labour market (Wojtyńska, Skaptadóttir & Ólafsson 2012).

The language school system, whilst concerned with developing proficiency in its students, has a long way to go in meeting this standard as administrators and teachers admit (Innes 2015; Innes & Skaptadóttir 2016). Workers using Icelandic as a second language are aware of this and, for several of those with whom the second author spoke, choose which jobs to apply for based on their sense of how many native Icelanders would apply for these same positions. If they thought that Icelanders would be interested in the job, usually a higher-paying, skilled position, the language students would not submit their resumes for consideration, thinking that someone with better language skills would get the job regardless of training or previous experience.

## Conclusion

For people moving to Iceland, learning Icelandic is a door opener allowing them to participate and get access to the new society and culture. However, it can simultaneously serve as a tool for exclusion because of the role of language as one of the main symbols of Icelandic nationality. This article has examined immigrants' impressions of learning the language and the opportunities and hindrances they experience in this process. For a long time knowing Icelandic has been seen as one of the preconditions of being able to call oneself an Icelandic, as the language gives access to common culture and history. However, growing numbers of immigrants in Iceland are learning the language primarily for practical purposes of daily life, only rarely because they want to claim access to common roots or out of interest in Icelandic literature or history. Individuals learning Icelandic for instrumental reasons gain freedom in being able to communicate and understand what is happening around them in the country where they live and so learn the language.

However, getting access to the language and the language community has not always been easy, and many immigrants viewed this as the largest hindrance to integration and acceptance. They commonly worked only with other immigrants in a very segregated labour market and so had very little opportunity to practice what they learned in classes. Many of the immigrants arrived with the intention to stay only temporarily and initially were not interested in learning a language they would never use in the future. But upon extending their stay, they became interested in becoming active participants and even citizens.

Current participants in the Icelandic language community are thus no longer only those who can or want to claim common nationality or origin. The examples given above demonstrate how important it is for learners to be welcomed as speakers, as language courses are only one step in learning Icelandic. Learning the language in a course and working in low-income jobs may seem to give a person the chance to participate in Icelandic society, but these do not lead to a sense of belonging or having comprehensive access to the society. In fact, participants' comments show that the segregated labour market leads to othering and exclusion and that language in many people's minds is more of a tool to exclude than to include.

In the discourse about immigrants learning Icelandic, it is not always clear what is expected of them. Does, for example, the demand that immigrants learn Icelandic include a demand of assimilation to the point of becoming Icelandic, or does it involve integration, communication with Icelanders and participation in a multicultural society that recognises the diversity of its population? This is often hard to distinguish, perhaps as a result of the fact that the symbolic status of the language in the definition of being Icelandic is undergoing change.

With the increase in immigration, the number of speakers from different national backgrounds has risen. It has become obvious that recent immigrants do not wish to entirely sever their ties with their home countries or drop their own cultural practices even whilst learning Icelandic and participating in Icelandic society. It is now questionable to assume that a speaker of Icelandic is necessarily from Iceland or has a 'pure' Icelandic background. The language may have been learned as a means of integrating into Icelandic society but does not necessarily mark a desire to become wholly Icelandic in outlook, practice and culture. Iceland is undergoing a change from having an iconic relation between language and culture (see Irvine & Gal 2000) to a more widely interpretable symbolic relation between the two. This leaves open the possibility that Icelanders may come to accept that Icelandic language use may signal only that a person has entered society with willingness to fit into a limited extent and is not, perhaps, intent on devoting themselves entirely to assuming an Icelandic identity.

It is no longer possible to look at Iceland's multicultural society from a narrow angle and objectify culture, language and religion. The present is characterised by constant re-creation of variegation and

the experience of moving to Iceland is different for each individual. The world is ever changing, people move much more than they did previously and researchers must view multicultural societies through a multifocal lens. As the government implements plans to integrate immigrants, it is important that diversity of origin, as well as individual experience and the need to maintain contact with the country of origin, is recognised. Our results indicate that with a more diverse population and within a global context of increased mobility, it seems that there may be a need to a move away from the purist ideology about language that is so common in Iceland and to a more flexible and more inclusive view towards the language.

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