

# North American Icelandic: The Only Variety of Icelandic Spoken Outside Iceland?

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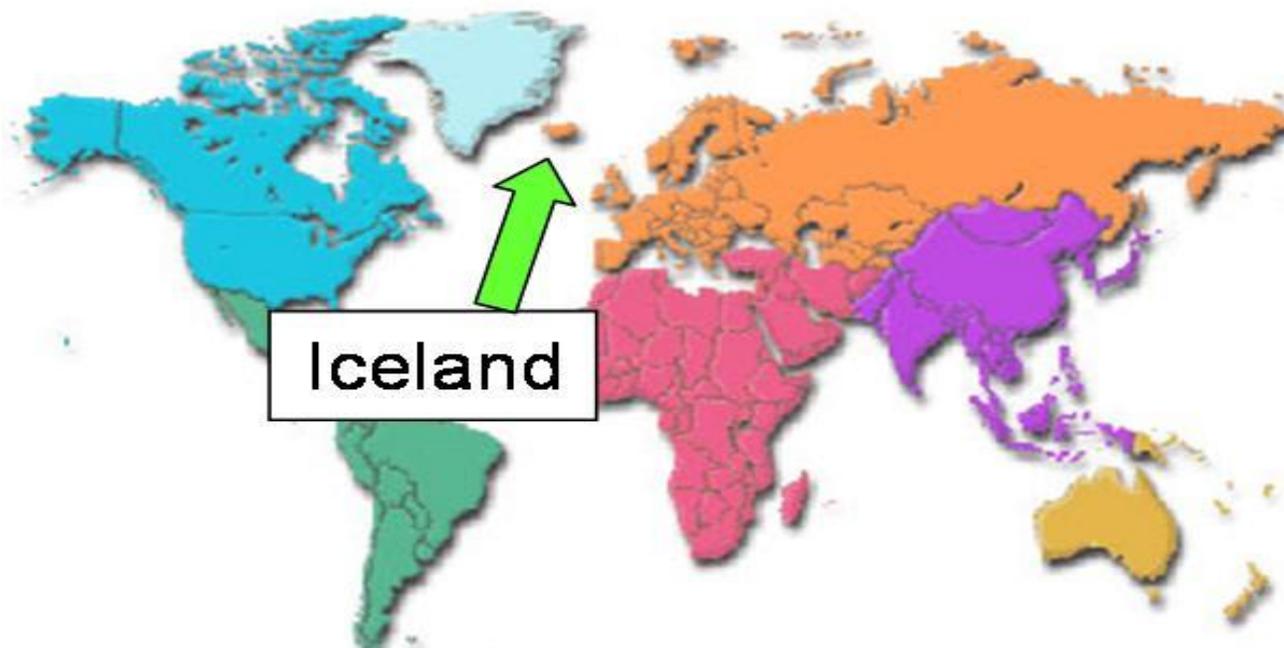
University of Iceland

Richard and Margaret Beck Lecture

University of Victoria

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# Iceland

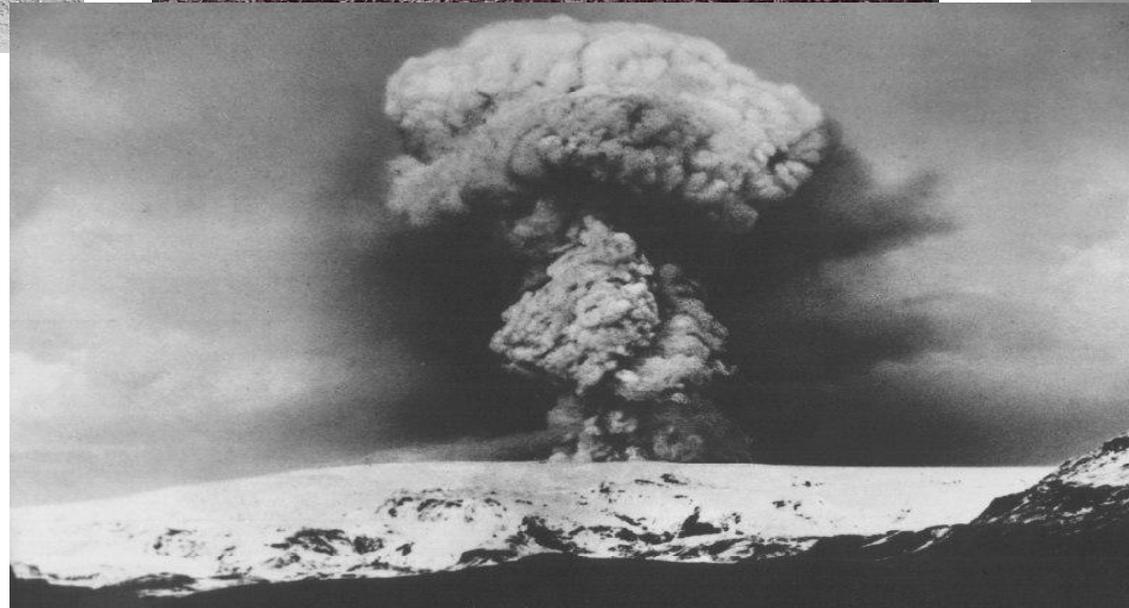


- Nordic Welfare State
- 330.000 inhabitants
- Icelandic
- Literature and Culture
  - Saga and Eddas





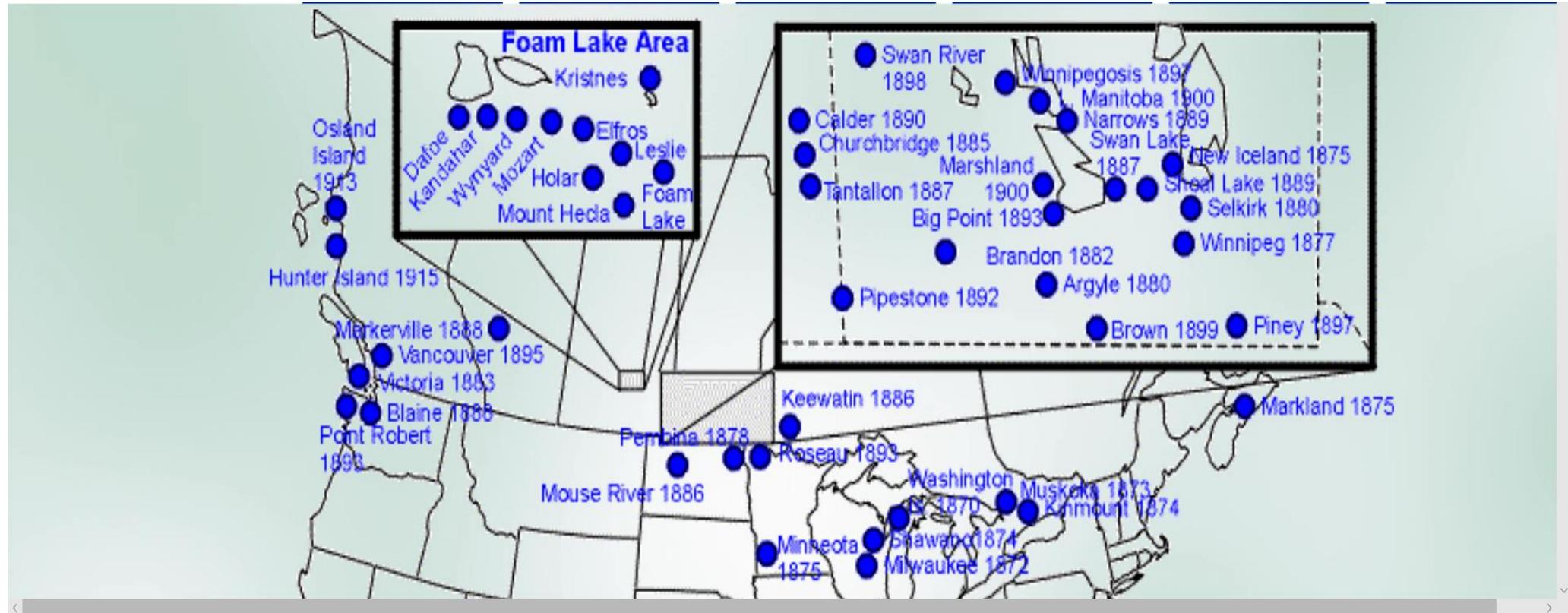
# Iceland in the 19th Century



# 1874-1914: 15.000 Icelanders Emigrated



# Major Icelandic Settlements in America



<https://www.icelandicroots.com/emigration-where-to>

<a href="#">Province or territory</a>	Icelandic Canadian	Percent Icelandic
<a href="#">Canada</a>	94,205 <sup>[1]</sup>	0.3%
<a href="#">Manitoba</a>	30,025	2.6%
<a href="#">British Columbia</a>	22,600	0.5%
<a href="#">Alberta</a>	17,075	0.5%
<a href="#">Ontario</a>	13,130	0.1%
<a href="#">Saskatchewan</a>	9,010	0.9%
<a href="#">Quebec</a>	835	0.01%
<a href="#">Nova Scotia</a>	620	0.07%
<a href="#">New Brunswick</a>	325	0.04%
<a href="#">Yukon</a>	200	0.6%
<a href="#">Newfoundland and Labrador</a>	155	0.03%
<a href="#">Northwest Territories</a>	120	0.3%
<a href="#">Prince Edward Island</a>	95	0.07%
<a href="#">Nunavut</a>	20	0.06%



Winnipeg

Howe Lane



Winnipeg Time Machine.com

Part of East Ward 1875  
St Boniface in the distance



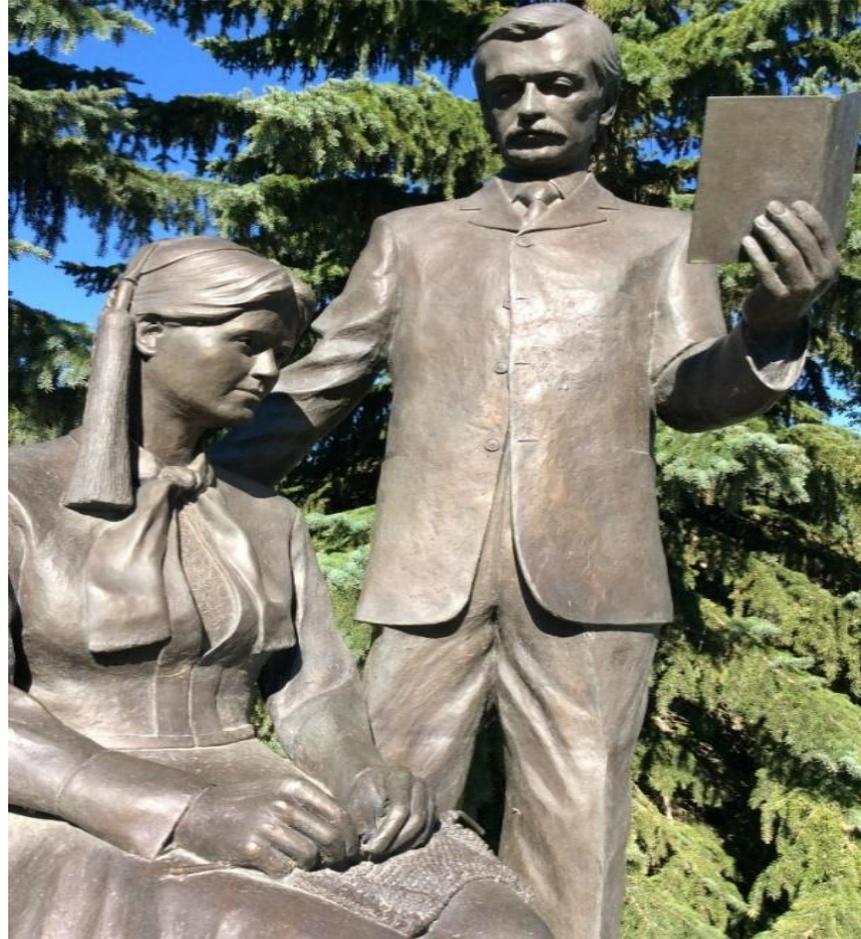
# Old Ways: Kaffi



# New Ways



# Culture: Real and Imagined?



Statue near Wynyard, Saskatchewan

# Reason for Survival of Icelandic: Literacy

- The first Icelandic newspaper in North America was *Framfari* (*The Progress*), published in New Iceland between 1877 and 1880.
- Between 1879 and 1910, eight other publications originated in Gimli.
- In 1886 the Icelandic newspaper *Heimskringla* (*The World*) was founded.
- *Lögberg* was founded in 1887, partly in opposition to *Heimskringla*. Both were published in Icelandic.
- They were combined in 1959 into *Lögberg-Heimskringla*, published in English. The oldest continuous ethnic newspaper published in Canada.

# Other Original Publications in Canada 1900-1961

- 41 volumes of poetry
- 22 novels or collections of stories
- 35 volumes of histories, biographies, etc.
- 10 dramas.
  
- Translations and numerous journals and magazines

There must have been a readership for these works?

(Salus, 1971, p. 241)

# Integration

- Matthiasson( 1974) claimed that integration was smooth for most...
  - They were protestant
  - Looked like the English and Scots
  - Were not coming in by the millions...
  - Hard working...?
  - Literate?

# Politics

- 1898 Sigtryggur Jonasson was elected to the Manitoba legislature to represent St Andrews.
- Margaret J. Benedictson, editor of the women's magazine *Freyja* from 1898 to 1910, formed the first women's suffrage society in Winnipeg in 1908.
- Thomas H. Johnson was appointed attorney general and minister of public works for Manitoba in 1915, becoming the first Icelandic Cabinet minister in Canada.
- Dr. George Johnson was Minister of Health for Manitoba before becoming lieutenant governor of the province in his later years.

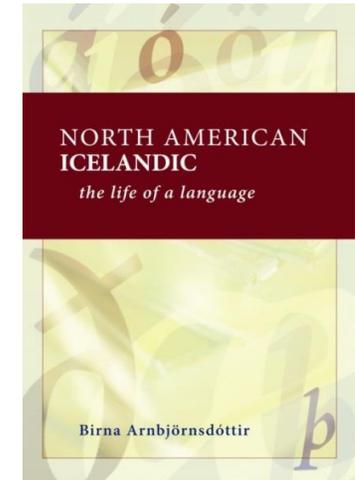
# Survival of Icelandic

- Isolation of communities
  - First settler came to create 'New Iceland'
- Timing of immigration
- Positive view of bilingualism
- Acceptance of biculturalism
- Immigrants came as families with young children

# NA Icelandic: What do we know and how do we know it?

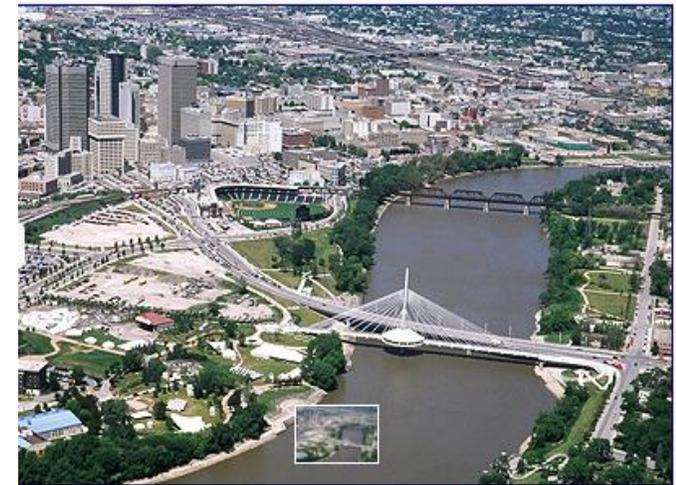
## Early interest

- Debates in the magazines as far back as 1888
- Vilhjálmur Stefánsson (1903) published a paper on new words adopted into Icelandic and the general condition of the language in N. Dakota
- Haraldur Bessason (1967, 1984a,b.)
- Stephen Clausing (1984)
- Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson and Olga Franzdóttir (2012)
- Gísli Sigurðsson (2002 )
- John Matthiasson (1974)
- Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir (1990, 2006)
  - Spoke to over 60 speakers 2-4th generation, men and women, the youngest in their 40's.



# NA Icelandic: Then and Now

- NA Icelandic not a single variety
  - Community lect?
  - Family lect?
  - Idiolect?
  - Degree of embeddedness and influence from English.
- 
- NA Icelandic as a separate, geographically defined variety of Icelandic
  - Certain grammatical and lexical features are consistently found in the speech of a cross-section of NA Icelandic speakers



# Vesturíslenska



## Winnipeg Icelanders

Ég fór o'n í Main street með fimm dala cheque  
Og forty-eight riffil mér kaupði  
Og ride út í country með farmara fékk,  
Svo fresh út í brushin ég hlaupti  
En þá sá ég moose, úti' marshi það lá,  
O my - eina sticku ég brjótti!  
Þá fór það á gallop, not good anyhow,  
Var gone, þegar loksins ég skjótti.

Guttormur J. Guttormsson  
(1878-1966)



# Lexicon

- Kar
- Bryggja
- Loggahús
- Póní
- Stasjón
- Skonkur
- Greid
- Blakkborð

Farmari

Músdýr

Baslari

Þorpari

lifa, mæta

fyrir (fyrir, í um,)

# Expressions not considered to be Standard Icelandic 25 years ago but are heard in Iceland today

*Hvurnig er ég að gera?*

'How am I doing?'

*Hluturinn er að það er búið að eyða...*

'the thing is...'

*Koma upp með*

'come up with'

*að hafa band við Ísland*

'to have ties to Iceland'

# Case

...eins og þeir gátu borðað af fisk\_ (acc.)

[eins og þeir gátu borðað af fiski (dat.)]

'...all they could eat of fish'

. ...það var ákaflega mikil hjálp fyrir þeim

[það var ákaflega mikil hjálp fyrir þau]

'that was a great help to them'

Unrest in subjects that take Oblique Cases-  
vanta, langa.

Mér (dat.)langar til að tefla

[Mig (acc.) langar til að tefla ]

'I want to play chess'

...þeim vantaði að vera þar sem var nógu mikill viður

[þeir þurftu að vera (vildu vera?)þar sem var nógu mikill viður]

'...they needed to be where there was enough wood'

# Use of Reflexives Adopted from English

Hún hafði börnin í kringum sig

'She had the children around 'herself''.

Maður gerði vel að halda í sér bara lífinu .

'one did well to keep oneself alive'

Hann bjó hjá ömmu sína og afa og langafa hans

[Hann bjó hjá ömmu sinni og afa og langafa sínum]

'He lived with 'self's' grandmother and his grandfather'

# No Subjunctive in NA Icelandic

Hann skrifaði þeim að hann mundi ekki vera (yrði ekki) kallaður í herinn.  
'he wrote to them that he would not be called into the army'.

Þeir vildu nú ekki trúa mér að ég kom (kæmi) frá Kanada  
'they would not believe me that I came from Canada'

Sumir sögðu að hann hafði (hefði) átt að keppa  
'some said that he should have competed'

Ég hélt að það var (væri) miklu kaldara  
'I thought it was much colder'

# Adverb Placement V2

Hún var fjórtán ára þegar hún fyrst kom frá Kanada

[hún var fjórtán ára .þegar hún kom fyrst frá Kanada]

'she was fourteen when she first came from Canada'

Doris stundum talar íslensku

[Doris talar stundum íslensku]

'Doris sometimes speaks Icelandic'

. ..við aldrei notuðum...

[við notuðum aldrei...]

'we never used ...'

# Phonology: Flámæli

Loss of distinction between [I] og [E]

*viður* 'wood' and *veður* 'weather'

Loss of distinction between [Y] og [ö]

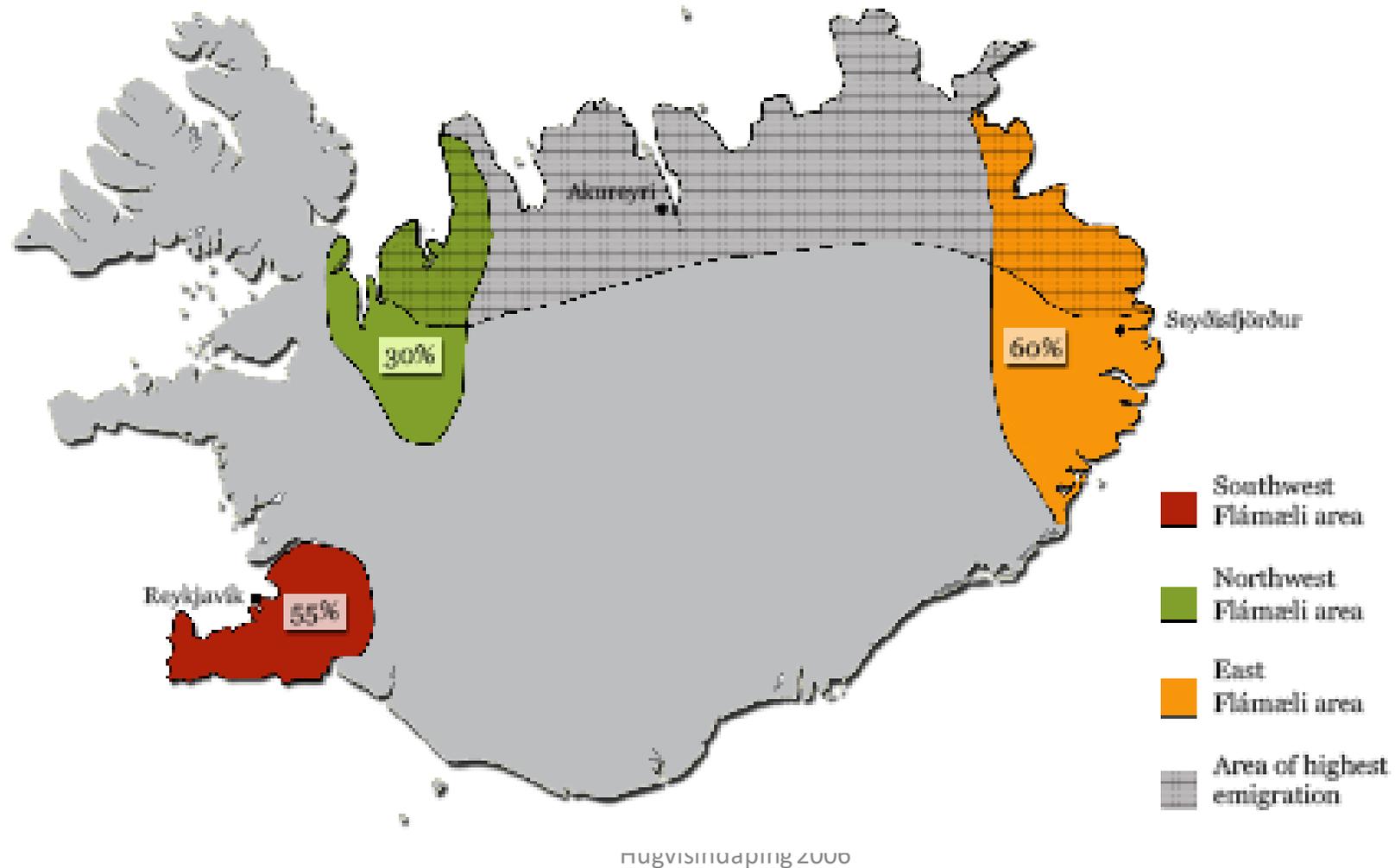
*flugur* 'flies' and *flögur* 'chips'

# Björns Guðfinnsson's Studies of Flámæli in Iceland

- Research for the purpose of language “beautification” in 1941-1949
- 6250 speakers or 20% of Icelanders
  - All in all: every 12th Icelander
- Children from the age of 10-13 years
  - 93% of all children in this age group in Iceland
- Tried to elicit natural spoken language and warned against written language as a source.

# Flámæli found in three areas in Iceland in 1941-1946

- Map2



# Flámæli was stigmatized in Iceland

- Björn considered Flámæli corrupt Icelandic ('sound mistake', 'screwed speech')
- Would lead to confusion in reading and writing
- Proposed that pronunciation be improved through the education system
- "the only feature of pronunciation which has been systematically opposed at all levels of instruction with the result that it has been claimed that it is losing ground in the youngest generation ..." (Hreinn Benediktsson 1959)
- In 1986, Flámæli almost non-existent in Icelandic in Iceland (RÍN 1984)

# The news didn't reach North America!

- Has spread in NA Icelandic from 1- 4th generation
- Confined to long vowels
- Women are more likely than men to have Flámæli
- Speakers in N. Dakota are more likely than speakers in “New Iceland” to have Flámæli.

# More systematic studies – 30 years later

- More specific grammar tests
- Comparison with older speakers in Iceland
  - Plural
  - Word order
  - Complex sentences.

# NA Icelandic as a Heritage Language?

- Renewed interest in Heritage languages
- Research projects in Scandinavian settlements in North America
- What can heritage languages tell us about the nature of :
  - Language acquisition
  - Language attrition
  - The development of language when the functional range is narrowed
    - What features of language are vulnerable to change and which are not?
- Why do some languages survive longer than others?

# 3 Field Studies 2013-2014

- **Manitoba:** Winnipeg, Gimli, Riverton, Arborg, Lundar, Portage la Prairie
- **Saskatchewan:** Regina, Wynyard, Foam Lake
- **Alberta:** Edmonton
- **British Columbia:** Vancouver, Nanaimo
- **North Dakota, USA:** Fargo, Mountain
- **Washington, USA:** Point Roberts, Blaine, Seattle
- **Consultants: 126 men and women**
  - Average age: 77 years ( 26–98)
  - Icelandic was spoken to some degree in every consultants childhood home
  - Half spoke I and English from early childhood, half began speaking English when they started school.
  - One fifth had learned how to read Icelandic before they started school
  - Very few read Icelandic now.



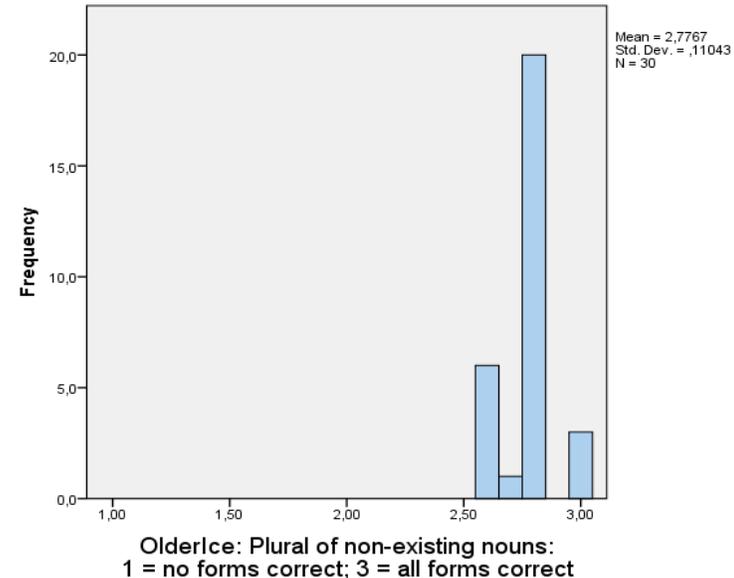
# Methodology

1. **General conversation**
2. **Pronunciation and Phonology:** Picture identification, short text.
3. **Morphology: Plurals and Case.**
4. **Syntax: Reflexives, Subjunctive.**
5. **Meaning: Categorization of shapes, colors etc...**
6. **Sentence comprehension ( e. *language processing* )**



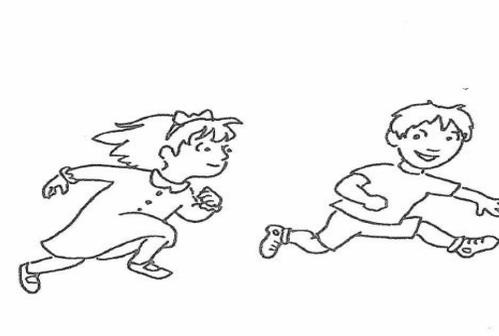
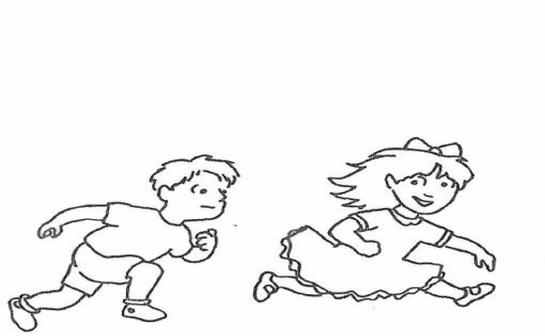
# Plural: Real words and fillers

30 elderly Icelanders compared with 60 Canadians and Americans of the same age (Average: 77 years (69–89)).



Very little difference between groups: Mainly one filler: *eitt buni – tvö* \_\_\_\_ (hk, sbr. *kerti*).

# Understanding Complex Sentences



- a. Stelpan eltir strákin.
- b. Strákurinn er eltur af stelpunni.
- c. Strákurinn er eltur.
- d. Það er elt strákin.
- e. Hvaða stelpa eltir strákin?
- f. Hvaða strákur eltir stelpan?
- g. Það er stelpan sem eltir strákin.
- h. Það er strákurinn sem stelpan eltir.
- i. Strákin er stelpan að elta.
- j. Strákin eltir stelpan.

- Einföld germynd (Simple active)
- „Löng þolmynd“ (m. fors.lið)
- „Stutt þolmynd“
- „Ný þolmynd“
- Spurt um frumlag
- Spurt um andlag
- „Frumlagsklofning“ (gerandi fremst)
- „Andlagsklofning“ (þolandi fremst)
- Kjarnafærsla með hjálparsögn
- Kjarnafærsla með aðalsögn

# Complex Sentences

Tested NA Icelandic speakers and East Icelandic speakers. Older and younger speakers (30 pr. group) (ave. age: 77 yrs and 35 yrs.)

Setningagerð	Vestur-Íslendingar	Eldri Heima-Íslendingar	Yngri Heima-Íslend.
Germynd	99,5%	100%	100%
Spurt um frumlag	98,0%	100%	100%
Frumlagsklofning	97,0%	99,4%	100%
Nýja þolmyndin	97,0%	97,2%	100%
Andlagsklofning	68,9%	92,8%	98,3%
Löng þolmynd	59,4%	91,7%	100%
Stutt þolmynd	58,1%	98,9%	100%
Kjarnafærsla m. hjálparso.	30,3%	94,4%	98,9%
Spurt um andlag	10,6%	98,9%	100%
Kjarnafærsla m. aðalsögn	9,7%	85,6%	98,9%

# Subject Case

(1) *Fiskur er hollur matur*

(Nom) **Ég/Mig/Mér/Mín** borða(r) fisk á hverjum degi.

Fall sem er valið	Þátttakendahópur		
	Vestur-Íslendingar	Eldri Heima-Íslendingar	Yngri Heima-Íslendingar
Nefnifall	82,5%	100%	100%
Þolfall	8,7%	0	0
Annað	8,8%	0	0

(2) *Þetta var hryllingsmynd.*

(Dat.) **Ég/Mig/Mér/Mín** leiðast svona bíómyndir.

Fall sem er valið	Þátttakendahópur		
	Vestur-Íslendingar	Eldri Heima-Íslendingar	Yngri Heima-Íslendingar
Nefnifall	41,6%	0	0
Þolfall	11,9%	2,2%	0
Þágufall	33,7%	97,8%	100%
Annað	12,8%	0	0

# Subject Case - Accusative

Langar (want)

(1) *Það er langt síðan ég ferðaðist síðast.*

**Ég/Mig/Mér/Mín** langa(r) aftur í ferðalag.

Fall sem er valið	Þátttakendahópur		
	Vestur-Íslendingar	Eldri Heima-Íslendingar	Yngri Heima-Íslendingar
Nefnifall	54,1%	0	0
<b>Polfall</b>	9,9%	75,0%	90,0%
Þágufall	25,3%	21,7%	8,3%
Annað	10,7	3,3%	1,7%

# Summary of Results

- Plural
  - NA Icelandic speakers use plural much like Eastern Icelandic speakers for common nouns.
- Understanding Complex Sentences
  - Some NAlce. speakers have difficulty understanding complex sentences that depend on case knowledge. But as do older Eastern Icelandic speakers
- Case Assignment
  - Some unrest in case assignment among speakers of NAlcelandic.

## Summary of Results

- Many Canadians and Americans of Icelandic descent still speak fluent Icelandic (native-like) even though they have never been to Iceland
- Most speakers grew up speaking Icelandic along with English after they started school
- Most have few occasions to speak Icelandic and hardly ever read it
- Proficiency varies greatly
- The younger the speaker the less likely to speak Icelandic.

# Results

- Certain complex features of language learned late are vulnerable
  - Complex/irregular before regular
- Needs sustained input to survive
  - More complex sentences characteristic of formal language
  - Fewer occasions to use formal language
- Age in general affects language processing
  - Less so for bilinguals
- Culturally determined meaning outlives language
- Language and Identity.

Takk fyrir!

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