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Is Icelandic really dying out?

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the current Language situation in Iceland based on a rise in discussion about possible linguistic threads due to increased immigration and tourism as well as globalization. To answer the question if Icelandic is indeed moving towards being an endangered language, I explore the issue by examining three key questions.

1. Why are Icelanders so insecure about their Language changing?
2. How do Languages Die?
3. How much is Icelandic used Today?

Due to geographical and social isolation as well as harsh living conditions, Icelanders formed a strong bond between their national identity and their language. They are known for being proud of Icelandic, especially since it remained so resilient and unique since the settlement in the 9th century. Nowadays, with an increase in external linguistic influx, natives appear insecure and threatened in the preservation of their language. Language Death occurs when there are no speakers left, often caused by political or social prohibition of using the language. Iceland's population is becoming more diverse but overall, it is growing, resulting in a higher number of Icelandic speakers. The culture is blossoming and there is development in teaching Icelandic due to the increase in demand. For the first time in history, Icelandic is undergoing changes, but it remains far from being at risk of disappearing.

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Preface

The inspiration and idea for this paper started back in 2017 when I first came to Iceland. I was equally surprised and intrigued by the sound of Icelandic. I have now lived here for the past six years, learned the language, and developed an even bigger interest in the current situation. As much as I understand the beauty and pride that lies within every language, I feel like the discourse around Icelandic changing has turned rather negatively which I do not think is necessary. I want to thank all my friends in Iceland and Germany who listened to me trying to make sense of what I was experiencing. Thank you to my dear friend Apríl for all the hours you pushed me to continue researching and writing. Thank you to my partner Iðunn, for academically and emotionally supporting me through this process. Lastly, I want to thank my supervisor Anh-Dao who has been a great support and inspiration with all her knowledge and patience.

This thesis was written solely by me, the undersigned. I have read and understand the University of Iceland Code of Ethics (https://english.hi.is/university/code_of_ethics) and have followed it to the best of my knowledge. I have correctly cited to all other works or previous work of my own, including, but not limited to, written works, figures, data or tables. I thank all who have worked with me and take full responsibility for any mistakes contained in this work. Signed:

Reykjavík, 09.September 2024

Isabella Tache

1 Introduction

After living in Iceland for the past six years, I have noticed an increasing discourse surrounding the changing nature of the Icelandic language. Icelanders often express concerns about the younger generation not speaking grammatically correct Icelandic, the widespread use of English in public institutions, the incorporation of English words into the Icelandic vocabulary, and the tendency of Icelanders to switch to English too quickly when interacting with foreigners who are learning Icelandic (Icelanders Switch to English Too Quickly - RÚV.is, 2018). These discussions are often driven by a deeper fear of losing Icelandic altogether, which is seen as a cornerstone of Icelandic culture and identity (Holmarsdottir, 2001).

This fear is often coupled with a tendency to blame the rising levels of immigration for the perceived erosion of the language, or to criticize those who have not yet mastered Icelandic, rather than examining the issue in its full complexity. As a result, a growing divide is emerging between native Icelanders and newcomers, exacerbated by a lack of research and education on how to navigate these linguistic and societal changes.

Questions arise about whether the government is providing fair educational opportunities for those who need them, such as ensuring that the application requirements are offered in other languages than Icelandic, as well as the availability of materials for non-Icelandic speakers, and whether Icelanders themselves are adapting to the changes occurring in their country.

The modern Icelandic language, remarkably, remains largely unchanged from the language used in classical Old Icelandic literature (Friðriksson, 2009), particularly in terms of structure and grammar. This continuity makes Icelandic unique in Europe, where

linguistic uniformity over such a long period is uncommon. Icelandic holds this status by default, reinforced by laws governing education, the courts, cultural institutions, and the Icelandic Language Council. Despite being historically monolingual due to Iceland's geographical isolation and small immigrant population, recent years have seen a significant increase in immigration (Immigration in Iceland, 2023), making Iceland more linguistically and ethnically diverse than ever before.

Throughout its history, the Icelandic language has absorbed influences from various languages, including Latin, Old English, German, and Danish, yet it has remained resilient, maintaining its grammatical structure and sentence composition (Holmarsdottir, 2001). However, in today's society, the influence of English is more pervasive, potentially posing a greater challenge to the integrity of Icelandic than previous foreign influences.

Icelanders have historically shown great pride in their language (Hálfðanarson, n.d., Friðriksson, 2008), treating it with respect and care. Yet, discussions about the status and future of Icelandic are increasingly prominent, with differing opinions on whether the language can survive the ongoing social changes.

This thesis aims to explore the roots of these fears, assess their validity, and consider whether Icelandic is truly at risk of extinction or whether Iceland as a society has yet to learn to adapt to linguistic and societal transformations. To address these questions, I will first examine Iceland's history of immigration and the characteristics of its early society, followed by an analysis of the concept of Language Death and how the Icelandic government and society are responding to these changes.

2 Literature Review

The next chapter will review relevant literature to provide context for the themes and discussions explored in this thesis.

The two recurring thoughts in this paper are Icelander's strong national identity with a strong bond to their culture and language and the growing feeling of threat by external linguistic changes. As an Icelander living abroad for most of her life Holmarsdóttir (2001) writes about Icelandic being an important part of her identity, as well as her pride towards the blossoming culture in Iceland. She explains how resilient grammar and minimal amounts of linguistic influences of Greek and Latin result in this unique language. Friðriksson (2009) and Hálfðanarsson (n.d.) explore the history of Icelandic and confirm the long-existing feeling of pride amongst Icelanders towards their language. Chapter 3 aims to form an understanding of why the fear of losing their language seems particularly strong in Iceland, beginning with the settlement that according to Tomasson (1997) and Leonard (2012) was coloured by linguistic and societal isolation. Having a rather small population strengthened the bond between language and national identity (Harrison, 2007) resulting in Icelanders continuously trying to preserve and protect their language. Chapter 4 discusses alleged threads towards the Icelandic Language leaning on Kristín Loftsdóttir's (2020) and Skaptadóttir's (2011) research on immigration in Iceland, from the beginning until today, which supports the argument of rapid changes, causing a feeling of insecurity within Icelandic society. Additionally, Huijbens and Jóhannesson (2019) write about the rapid increase in tourism that causes an increase in the usage of foreign languages in Iceland followed by an alleged decrease in the usage of Icelandic. The term 'Language Death' is explained in chapter 5 to form a base for comparison to the

current situation in Iceland. In his book 'When Languages Die' (Harrison, 2007) writes about endangered languages and what causes them to be in that position, followed by the five stages of Language Death researched by Janse and Tol (2003). Harrison's theory provides the foundation for the argument of this thesis that Icelandic is indeed not an endangered language, contrary to the rhetoric of many Icelanders.

In the last chapter, I clarify the usage and importance of Icelandic today by using literature that explores the current linguistic status in Iceland. Kristinsson (2019) touches upon the educational system as well as the general law regarding language in Iceland and states multiple times that Icelandic is the language of instruction in public facilities as well as in less formal settings. Furthermore, Skaptadóttir and Innes (2017) conducted interviews with foreign students at the University of Iceland enrolled in the Icelandic as a Second Language BA programme, regarding their experiences with the teaching methods. These authors conclude that the expectations for foreigners living in Iceland are increasing whilst on the other hand, many locals seem to be less concerned about modifying their nationality to accommodate the newcomers (Jensen, 2014).

3 Iceland Society and Language in Isolation

3.1 Settlement

When the first settlers came to Iceland around the 9th century, the only living thing to be found was the Arctic fox (Sveinbjarnardóttir, 2012). All other life, such as sheep, cows, horses and even rats came sailing with explorers and enslaved people from Western Europe. In the Icelandic Book of Settlement (*Icelandic: landnámabók*) Ingólfur Arnarsson is said to be the first permanent settler, arriving in 874 AD.

Iceland is located just above the Arctic Circle which is the reason for its overall low temperatures. Between the years 1931 and 1960, the average temperature in the warmest month of July only reached around 11 degrees Celsius (Tomasson, 1977) which often does not give nature enough time to grow essential sources for humans and animals.

Materials to build shelter or housing were limited, making it especially challenging for people to get through the winters. Some may even say it is surprising how Icelanders survived until today since they were not dealt the easiest cards. Due to the weather conditions building a life on this isolated island in the middle of the Atlantic was rather difficult. There were limited options for growing food for animals and humans, and the winters were often extremely long and cold which led to a rough way of living a short life. According to Tomasson “no other European people has been so persistently ravaged by natural calamities” (Tomasson, 1977), considering epidemics, volcanic eruptions and floods that minimised the already small population. With all of the above and the fact that it was a long and dangerous journey to even get to Iceland, isolation left its mark on Icelandic society and, above all, its language.

3.2 Society

Iceland was not only isolated from other societies but also isolated itself within its own.

One reason for that is the way of settling which differed, for example, from Norway or the Faroe Islands. Instead of forming villages or cities, Icelanders settled into isolated farmsteads which meant that the only input and influence came from within.

Furthermore, the anti-vagrancy law '*vistarband*' obliged people who did not own sufficient property to work for other farmers, resulting in a lack of diversity in the employment market (Willson, 2014). Marriage matches were made with people from different households but not with maximal local distance, so there was little to no prospect for dialect mixing (Leonard, 2012). Children spoke like the adults they were surrounded with and since there was no change within society and no influence from others, the language stayed the same until the beginning of the 20th century. To this day, Icelandic is considered to have little real dialectal variation, despite some claims to the contrary. For instance, people from northern Iceland, such as Akureyri, tend to pronounce letters like 'k' and 'p' more strongly when they appear in the middle of words compared to those from the South (Heimisdottir, 2015). However, whether these pronunciation differences are significant enough to constitute distinct dialects remains a topic of ongoing debate.

Due to this isolation in location, society and language, Iceland has not experienced as much development or change through external influence as other countries, which can be considered as a reason for the fear of change in modern society.

This next chapter will focus on small populations and aim to use this comparison to better understand Iceland and its society. With that in mind, Iceland's population is unique due to harsh living conditions and therefore that shall be considered in the next chapter.

3.3 Small population

Countries with small populations often exhibit heightened concern about the potential loss of their language and culture. This apprehension is rooted in several factors, including the limited demographic base, the influence of globalisation, historical experiences, and the intrinsic connection between language, culture, and national identity (Janse & Tol, 2003).

Historically, the Icelandic population frequently experienced declines due to challenging living conditions or natural catastrophes. One example is the formation of the Eldhraun lava field in the 18th century which was at the time the largest natural disaster in Iceland for the past 1000 years (*Eldhraun Lava Field and the Eruption in Laki Volcano*, n.d.). The eruption took place in South Iceland between Vík and Kirkjubæjarklaustur and lasted from the 8th of June 1783 until the 7th of February in the following year. It was not the lava itself that caused the population to shrink by 20% but the effects of the lava flow and ash fallout. There were around 49.000 people living in Iceland at the time and it is believed that 9000 lost their lives due to the eruption. (*Eldhraun – Iceland Road Guide*, n.d.). Sunlight couldn't reach the island anymore, resulting in extreme weather which led to diseases and famine. The lava flow caused two rivers to dry out whilst making its way down the mountains to the village where people lived. That time is also referred to as "*Móðuharðindi*" and has not only shaped Icelandic society but also provided scientists with valuable information about volcanic eruptions. Jón Steingrímsson, a priest at the time, documented the course of the

eruptions in his diary called “*Eldritið*” and is said to be the first person to write about flowing lava (*Eldhraun Lava Field*, n.d.). He has also been described as the Provost of Skaftafell who led his parish through Laki eruption and received the epithet “Fire-cleric” (Árnadóttir, 2023).

Small populations inherently have fewer speakers of their native language, which increases the risk of language attrition (Wurm, 1991). The pervasive influence of English, driven by its status as the primary language of international business, science, and entertainment, often overshadows minority languages. Global cultural trends propagated through media, technology, and travel, further contribute to cultural homogenisation (Balogun & Aruoture, 2024). Nevertheless, the crucial factor when it comes to maintaining a language is how it is being used and how its development is being supported. In Iceland, there are strong external linguistic influences such as adapting to the English language due to globalisation. Yet the country is constantly working towards not replacing Icelandic with English which will be discussed in Chapter 6. Those who have been to Iceland before know that there are no language difficulties because most Icelanders can communicate in more than one language. Though Icelandic is an important part of their identity and culture, Icelanders are aware that in order to communicate on an international level, they need to learn other languages (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010).

In small populations, language and culture are often deeply intertwined with national identity. The preservation of a unique language and cultural heritage is seen as essential to maintaining a distinct national character (Harrison, 2007). For many, the native language is not merely a means of communication but a repository of cultural knowledge,

values, and traditions. Losing the language is perceived as losing a core component of what defines the nation and its people. This is also the case in Iceland resulting in a widespread feeling of nationalistic pride and a strong need for preservation amongst Icelanders (Harrison, 2007).

The fear of losing language and culture among countries with small populations is deeply rooted in demographic, historical, and sociocultural factors. The limited number of speakers, the pressures of globalization, historical experiences of cultural suppression, and the intrinsic connection between language and national identity all contribute to this anxiety. Understanding these factors highlights the importance of supportive policies and initiatives aimed at preserving linguistic and cultural diversity in an increasingly globalized world (Romaine, 2000).

4 Immigration and Tourism

A very common mechanism for humans is to blame the loudest and most visible variable in case of feeling unsafe or disrespected; (Malle et al., n.d.) even though the cause for it often is an underlying issue that is being overlooked. An example could be a child in school who is bullying others and consequently being punished by the teachers. While it is necessary to address the harm caused to others, in such a case, educators should also closely examine the child's home environment and support system to identify any underlying factors that may be contributing to the child's behaviour.

This analogy refers to immigration and tourism in Iceland, which both have been increasing immensely in the past decades and therefore caused various reactions by the locals. As mentioned in the chapter above, Iceland has been mostly homogenous and monolingual for the longest time (Sveinbjarnardóttir, 2012). With globalisation but also international dangers because of political struggles or consequences of climate change there is a general increase in migration (Immigration in Iceland, 2023). The definition of globalization varies depending on the perspective of the individual discussing it. However, one point of agreement between those that are for and against globalization of globalization is its "tendency of economic activity to expand beyond national borders" (Subaşat, 2015). This paper will also refer to this aspect of globalization. Some people are on the move because they hope for a better life and others are left without choice in order to survive. As with so many other occurrences, immigration has not really been a part of Icelandic history though it most definitely is now. The following chapter analyses immigration in Iceland from its beginnings to this day and discusses the consequences and outcomes for the country.

4.1 History of Immigration

The history of immigration in Iceland is an interesting point of research as it began much later than in most other countries. The other Nordic countries experienced international immigration in the 1960s due to the economic boom and Sweden even strengthened its labour market earlier on with foreign workers mostly from outside Western and Northern Europe in the 1950s. Iceland did not experience significant immigration up until the beginning of the 21st century (Kristín Loftsdóttir et al., 2020).

Immigration and emigration

The term migration has two key components that need to be defined: immigration and emigration where immigration refers to the movement of people to the country in question and the term emigration refers to people moving out of their country of origin (Magnússon, 2013). Whilst Sweden, Denmark and Norway experienced an increase in immigration, Iceland exclusively underwent an increase in emigration, due to the high unemployment rate, caused by the collapse of the herring industry in the 1960s (Kristín Loftsdóttir et al., 2020). Statistics show that nine out of a thousand Icelanders emigrated, mainly to places with high local distances such as Australia or New Zealand, but also often returned after some time (Kristín Loftsdóttir et al., 2020). Living in Iceland had not been easy or comfortable at times, due to poverty and lack of opportunities for socio-economic development but also due to natural disasters. In the 20th century alone, Iceland suffered three separate volcanic eruptions that took many lives and forced the remaining to

rebuild theirs. That and the well-known harsh winters influenced the decision of many to locate to places far away (Magnússon, 2013).

Further developments regarding migration in Iceland can be observed internally when people began to move away from rural areas into bigger cities with the prospect of different work and education opportunities (Skaptadóttir, 2011). Although the fishing industry has always been a stable and ever-expanding industry with a constant increase in the need for a workforce, they had reached their biological limits of enlarging the companies any further, which significantly contributed to the internal movement out of the countryside. Additionally, the development of stronger vessels resulted in a decrease in demand for human workforces. Along with that, after generations of working in the fishing and farming industries, people wanted to explore new sectors and shift their image of being a less developed and primitive nation (Skaptadóttir, 2011).

4.1.1 The Development of Immigration in Iceland in the early 20th century

In the 20th century, the relationship between Iceland and Denmark played a crucial role in shaping both nations' histories. Having been under the rule of Norway and, later, since the early 19th century Denmark, always having had a deep longing for independence, Iceland gained some sovereignty through the Act of Union in 1918. The monarchy continued and was still ruled by the Danish Crown, but Iceland received its own flag and was now able to handle internal affairs all by one's self.

This situation caused a high migration flow between Denmark and Iceland which can still be seen nowadays. Many Danish Royals settled in Iceland which created a strong bond between the two societies. In the 19th century, urbanization brought a notable number

of Danes to Reykjavík, where their language and culture, which differed greatly from Iceland's rural traditions, became dominant in the city. As national pride grew, many Icelanders began to view the spread of Danish and the use of Danish words as a threat to their native language. However, with increased independence and Iceland ultimately becoming a republic in 1944, these attitudes gradually became more balanced (Hauksdóttir, 2016). Furthermore, Icelanders went to Denmark to study or form other collaborations in the art and literature sector. Now, more than a hundred years later, Danish is still taught in Icelandic schools from the 7th grade on and motivates many young people to emigrate to Denmark for secondary education (Hauksdóttir, 2016).

During the Second World War Iceland was first occupied by the British and then later on by the Americans. It was as appealing for Icelandic women to meet men who shaved their beards and had more developed social standards as it was for the American soldiers to connect to beautiful foreign women (Hilmarsdóttir, n.d.). This period is also known as “Ástandið” (Icelandic for “the situation” or “the condition”) and describes how hundreds of local women were romantically involved with American soldiers who had at times made up half of the male inhabitants. Children that were conceived in these marriages are called “ástandsbörn” (Icelandic for “children of the situation/condition”) and tightened the American-Icelandic relationship. Not all relationships between foreign soldiers and Icelandic women lasted, leaving many children in the care of nurses. As adults, these individuals often felt a deep desire to learn about their heritage (Hilmarsdóttir, n.d.).

This period marked a significant time for Icelandic society as it began to experience its initial changes related to immigration. The influx of individuals from predominantly

Western countries introduced new cultural dynamics and perspectives. However, the limited diversity of these immigrants meant that the changes were relatively modest, allowing Icelanders to maintain their cultural identity without necessitating substantial adaptation to or integration with other cultural practices. Consequently, while there was exposure to new cultural influences, the overarching societal framework remained largely unchanged, limiting the need for Icelanders to learn how to effectively blend with a broader range of cultures.

4.1.2 The Immigration Boom in the 2000s

Even though the immigration rate in Iceland doubled in the late 1980s, it was still only at around 4 per 1000 inhabitants (Kristín Loftsdóttir et al., 2020) and many of those coming from another Nordic country or the United States. The 20th century did not have a strong impact on the immigration rate in Iceland, though there were refugees from Hungary, Vietnam, Germany, Kosovo, Poland, Iran, Pakistan and Iraq coming to Iceland between 1939 and 1999 (*Quota Refugees in Iceland from 1956*, n.d.). The late 21st century marked a significant period of demographic transformation for Iceland, a nation previously characterised by a relatively homogeneous population. This decade saw an unprecedented immigration boom, fundamentally altering the socio-economic and cultural landscape of the country.

The Icelandic economy experienced significant growth in the late 1980s and early 1990s, driven by liberalisation policies, increased foreign investment, and a booming fishing industry that was decided to be privatised (Kristín Loftsdóttir et al., 2020, Magnússon, 2013). This economic prosperity created a demand for labour that the local workforce

could not meet, leading to the recruitment of foreign workers. By 1996, 70% of all new work permits granted to foreign workers in Iceland were issued to firms hiring workers for the fishing industry (Skaptadóttir, U. D.,2011). Icelandic women, on the other hand, decided to leave their small fishing towns behind and move to the bigger cities seeking out higher education or work in different sectors such as nursing, elderly care or pedagogy. This drastic decrease in the female labour market caused a chain migration primarily led by women from Poland and the Philippines who often brought family or friends (Magnússon, 2013, Skaptadóttir, 2011).

Furthermore, Iceland's entry into the European Economic Agreement (EEA) in 1994, which enabled the free and legal movement of workers between member states, significantly influenced the immigration flow. Eastern European countries, such as Latvia and Lithuania, Cyprus and Estonia and especially Poland gladly took the opportunity to look for work abroad, especially after the travel restrictions in Poland were lifted in 1989. The agreement that came into effect in 1994 led to a significant immigration surge in the early 2000s. By 2008, at the peak of the economic boom, immigrants—those born abroad to foreign-born parents—made up 8.6% of Iceland's population (Kristín Loftsdóttir et al., 2020). Today around 23.000 people with a Polish migration background live in Iceland, making up more than 6% of the entire nation (Iceland, n.d.).

4.1.3 Overview of Immigration in Iceland Today

Historically characterised by emigration, Iceland's migration patterns have undergone significant changes over the past few decades. Political stability, high quality of life and the strong economy Iceland managed to maintain in recent years draw the attention of

many to immigrate, alone or with their families, and the popularity does not seem to be decreasing. In 2009, there were approximately 24.000 residents with foreign citizenship residing in Iceland; by 2024, this number had more than doubled to around 63.000 (Statistics Iceland, 2023).

Immigrating can be a necessity in cases of unsafe financial or even life-threatening conditions such as a war or the threat of persecution in the country of departure. In the case of Icelandic immigration, the majority of people who started migrating at the beginning of the 21st century after the political liberations in the late 1990s, were hoping for better job opportunities or new life experiences (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2013) which usually leads to a temporarily restricted form of migration. The statistics of net migration in Iceland around the financial crisis of 2008 show a slight decrease in the general population of Iceland (StatisticsIceland, 2023). Nevertheless, despite the increasing emigration, a relatively substantial number of new immigrants continued to arrive in Iceland and the immigration rate for foreign citizens during the crisis period exceeded that of the early 2000s (Kristín Loftsdóttir et al., 2020). By the time of the financial collapse, the number of male immigrants had exceeded the number of female immigrants, of whom the majority worked in the construction industry, which was suffering immensely. However, unlike in other examples of immigration, people decided to stay, indicating their initial purpose of coming to Iceland as temporary workers had shifted towards immigrating indefinitely (Kristín Loftsdóttir et al., 2020).

An example of temporary immigration is Germany after the Second World War, which was facing a significant need for labour to rebuild the country. As a result, individuals from Italy, Spain, Greece, Portugal, and Turkey immigrated, taking on roles as "guest workers"

to aid in the reconstruction efforts. While some of these workers chose to remain in Germany permanently, many returned to their home countries once the work was completed (Schmidt, n.d.).

Lastly, with the boom in the tourism sector which played a big role in the recovery of Iceland's economy as well, the immigration rate peaked again. Similarly to the first big wave of immigration, most people came from EEA member states, especially Poland. Their immigration rate grew exponentially exceeding Danes and Filipinos. According to Statistics Iceland, Poles are still the largest group of immigrants in Iceland, with a total of 63.000 inhabitants. The second-largest group is Lithuanians, though their population barely exceeds 4,000 (StatisticsIceland, 2023). Danes are right behind with a similar amount of people, and the Philippines remains the largest Asian group with around 2500 individuals.

4.2 Mass Tourism

Aside from immigration, the steady increase in tourism has had an effect on Iceland's society and culture. To accommodate the high number of people travelling to Iceland, the infrastructure and culture offered have been adapted, making it often seem as if English was the primary language in Iceland. Locals complain about big tour buses disturbing the traffic in the cities and menu signs on the streets being written in English. Whilst tourism is Iceland's biggest source of economic income and therefore highly welcomed, it seems also to cause Icelanders to feel threatened by the amount of foreign language usage (Huijbens & Jóhannesson, 2019).

Since the advent of affordable international flights in the 1990s, global tourism has experienced substantial growth. Travel has become more accessible and affordable, making it a commonplace activity for those seeking to engage in contemporary cultural dialogues. While tourism brings numerous cultural and economic benefits, it also incurs significant costs. Iceland, having been one of the early victims of the 2008 financial crisis, has since become heavily dependent on tourism (Huijbens & Jóhannesson, 2019), leading to a largely uncontrolled and rapid increase in tourist numbers. In the 1990s, Iceland received approximately 140.000 foreign tourists annually. By 2014, this number had surged by 458%, with over 700.000 tourists visiting according to the Icelandic Tourist Board (Ferðamálastofa Icelandic Tourist Board, n.d.). This dramatic rise in tourism has transformed Iceland into a tourist hotspot. The primary concern is the government's relaxed approach to these significant demographic shifts, which has strained the country's infrastructure and negatively impacted the local population's attitudes toward tourism (Helgadóttir et al., 2019).

Consequently, the job market has adapted, with a proliferation of hotels employing staff who are not required to speak Icelandic, as most tourists and many residents are proficient in English. This shift has led to English often becoming the preferred language in workplaces and social settings (Gunnarsdóttir, n.d.).

With their long history of isolation and gradual population decline, the sudden influx of linguistic diversity has caused many Icelanders to feel a sense of insecurity (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2018). In the capital, Reykjavík, this shift can be particularly overwhelming for the elderly and others who have not always felt obligated or required to speak another language besides Icelandic. A study by Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir researched

the daily exposure to receptive (reading and listening) and productive (writing and speaking) English for people living in Iceland. The results show that 51%, or 378 respondents, reported hearing English for one to four hours a day, while 41%, or 301 respondents, indicated that they only speak it once a month or less. This indicates that though many people know and understand English, almost just as many are not comfortable or used to using it in their daily lives (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2011).

Many houses have been converted into tourist shops or hotels, and restaurant menus are often primarily in English, with Icelandic translations being secondary, if available.

Essential stores, such as hardware stores for residents have been pushed to the outskirts of the city, increasing dependence on cars. Although this phenomenon is not unique to Iceland, the country's small size and rapid changes make it feel especially threatening to its society (Helgadóttir et al., 2019).

Chapters 4 'Iceland Society and Language in Isolation' and 5 'Immigration and Tourism' aim to give insight into why Icelanders seem so insecure by the ongoing linguistic changes. The long years of isolation and famine strengthened the bond and fascination between Icelanders and their culture and language. Nowadays, with rapid changes in language due to immigration, tourism and globalisation and the consequential increase in usage of primarily English but also other foreign languages, Icelanders fear their native tongue to be threatened. The following chapter 6 'Language Death' explains how languages disappear or "die out", to create a base for comparison to the current situation in Iceland.

5 Language Death

In his book “When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World’s Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge” David Harrison begins by comparing Languages to animal species. Just like these species, languages often have a long history and take time to evolve and “serve the needs of a particular population in their environment” (Harrison, 2007). He explains how, these days, languages are dying out faster than species. Out of the 6912 distinct human languages spoken in 2001, only half are expected to survive this century. While this may sound extreme, he goes on to provide concrete reasons for 'language death,' suggesting that we should use terms like 'language shift' or 'threatened languages' instead, since languages are not living organisms.

Janse (Janse & Tol, 2003) refers to the five stages of endangered Languages which are in the process of fading. The number of young speakers and children is especially important when arguing about the level of endangerment within a language. The fewer speakers there are, the higher the level of danger and “total death is declared when no speakers are left of a particular language variety in a population that had used “(Mufwene, 1998), or here referred to as Stage 5 of Language Death. In order to evaluate if Icelandic is an endangered Language we need to compare these criteria with the current situation in Iceland.

1. Stage 1: A *potentially endangered* language is a language that stops being the preferred dominant language of children and causes them to learn their native language imperfectly.
2. Stage 2: A language is *endangered* if there are little to no children speaking it anymore and the youngest ones have already reached adulthood

3. Stage 3: A language is *seriously endangered* if the youngest speakers are middle-aged or older.
4. Stage 4: A *terminally endangered* language occurs if there are only a few elderly people left to speak the language

Currently, there are 383.726 people living in Iceland, where around 330.000 of them are Icelandic citizens expected to speak Icelandic. The official language in kindergartens and other educational facilities for children and young adults is Icelandic (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010). These numbers are nowhere near the criteria of the five stages mentioned above and are rather expected to steadily increase as talked about in chapter 4.1.3. on immigration in Iceland today.

Languages disappear when they are being replaced by another one, or their speakers are not allowed to speak them any longer (Harrison, 2007), like in the case of Ös, a language spoken by less than a hundred people in Siberia. These languages are being pushed out of society and the economy, resulting in a decrease in its value. Speakers often have no one to speak with and forget a lot due to lack of practice. These prohibitions are often for politically and socially discriminating reasons in the hope of a monolingual country (Harrison, 2007). In the example of Tofa another language that originated in Russia, young speakers often lost interest because it simply did not benefit them in their day to day lives. Due to political disagreements between the younger and older generation there is a lack of interest in communicating any further, pushing the original language spoken by the elderly away.

Furthermore, natural disasters or famine can cause a big decrease in speakers of a country's language. Iceland is known for having suffered numerous natural disasters often erasing a high percentage of the already small population. It is therefore a good example for proving that even isolation, disease, disasters and a rather small population do not result in immediate language 'death'.

The most common fear of language shift or actual endangerment of a language today is the current process of globalisation. It is not only the trade market and most economic markets that are being operated on a global level but also scientific research, education, communication culture and leisure, meaning the value and use of English have increased and challenges in some countries maybe even the value of their native language (Kristín Loftsdóttir et al., 2020).

There are various reasons for Language Shift or Language disappearance but ultimately it occurs when a subordinate language suffers a decrease in speakers whilst the dominant language experiences an increase and trumps what often is the native language of a community until it eventually disappears (Harrison, 2007). If a country is monolingual to begin with and then includes another language in the society, sooner or later, one language will take the upper hand due to a higher level of accessibility or international value (Atifnigar et al., 2021). The first language though will only be overcrowded where there is no active development. "Icelandic is the sole official language of the state and municipalities in Iceland" (Kristinsson, 2019).

Besides the growth of the Icelandic population through immigration and also wealth, there are other reasons supporting the theory of Icelandic being anything but an endangered language. An article from 2001 written by the Icelandic author Halla B.

Hólmarsdóttir demonstrates the blossoming Icelandic culture and constant language development, saying that “Icelandic language and culture is stronger than ever” (Holmarsdottir, 2001) which will be thoroughly discussed in the following chapter.

6 Icelandic in the current context

The Icelandic language, despite concerns about its future, is unlikely to disappear due to several key factors. Central to the preservation of Icelandic is the deeply rooted national pride that has historically driven the continuous development and adaptation of the language. This cultural pride fosters a strong collective commitment to maintaining Icelandic as a living language, reinforcing its usage across generations. Additionally, Iceland's growing popularity as a destination for both tourism and residency has led to an increase in population, including a rising number of immigrants (*Iceland*, n.d.). This demographic shift has amplified the demand for Icelandic language education among foreigners, further supporting the language's vitality. In response to these changes, the Icelandic government has implemented language policies designed to facilitate the integration of newcomers while ensuring the preservation and promotion of Icelandic (Dís Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017). These policies not only aid immigrants in learning the language but also contribute to its ongoing evolution and relevance in a globalized world. Through these combined efforts, Icelandic continues to thrive, making its disappearance unlikely in the foreseeable future.

6.1 National Pride

There is a deep sentiment of pride within Icelanders which might be rooted in the long period of isolation after the settlement, the miserable years of poverty and natural disasters but also in the fact that Icelandic survived all these years and unlike other Scandinavian languages did not bend or change. Despite some changes in pronunciation, structure and grammar have remained steadfast to this day (Holmarsdottir, 2001). Even today, around 1100 years after the first person ever set foot onto the island, the language

is still so well preserved that its speakers are indeed the only ones out of the Scandinavian countries able to read old Norse sagas in their original form. That alone results in many Icelanders feeling proud of their language and origin (Hálfðanarson, n.d., Friðriksson, 2008).

This pride and fascination within Icelanders towards their language is not an occurrence or invention of the present times, it seems that it has rather been like that since people settled on the island. Since then, it has been more consistent than the language itself. What started as a fascination and enjoyment of their own language, has now turned into a tradition. The first Grammatical Treatise is documented in the 12th century and shows, that even then authors refused to adapt to Latin or Greek words but would rather make their own Icelandic words (Stefán Karlsson, 2013). The word *vowel*, rooted in the Latin term *vocalis*, has been adapted into other Scandinavian and European languages, nevertheless, Icelanders have by now invented two words for it. *Raddarstafr* (*Icelandic for voice letter*) has now been modernised into *sérhljóð*, with no connection to the Latin original (Stefán Karlsson, 2013).

The 13th century in Iceland is also referred to as the literary olden age, as it is the creating century of various Icelandic sagas. These sagas shaped Icelandic society and, in combination with the already existing linguistic characteristics (Friðriksson, 2008), led them to believe in a unique language culture. These beliefs last until this day and contribute immensely towards the national pride and strong need to preserve and protect the archaic parts of the language.

In his book, Baldur Jónsson wished that the people of his time would avoid using Danish and German influences in their language. Instead, he encouraged them to embrace the

“richness and genius” of their own native language. In cases like these, I think it is safe to say, that pride and acknowledgement of one's own culture and language on that level, can be slightly intertwined with patriotism and nationalism. Even when it was more practical to adapt to terms from other languages, Icelandic writers at the time always decided to choose the other way (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010). His views are quite similar to today's discussions about Icelandic language policies.

This pride results in researchers saying that Icelandic has a long-standing tradition of linguistic stability and is often regarded as a prime example of a highly stable language community (Friðriksson, 2009, p. 39).

For Icelanders, their language represents their independence from past colonisers like Denmark; it is their way of communicating within their small yet ever-growing community, and it ultimately is a big part of their identities; also, for those who grew up abroad (Holmarsdóttir, 2001). In connection with their pride and strong sense of identity, Icelanders are known for creating a fair amount of art and entertainment, resulting in a rich cultural landscape that is primarily expressed in Icelandic. There are several books, magazines and newspapers published every year, as well as podcasts, movies and radio shows. The national theatre either translates international plays into Icelandic or creates new ones (Kristinsson, 2019). In conclusion, Icelandic is a written language with a culture that is “blossoming now more than ever” (Holmarsdóttir, 2001).

6.2 Iceland's Language Development

If a language is considered dead or disappeared due to a lack of speakers, that signifies that a language undergoing change and development is indeed very much alive. And whilst the pride and power of Icelandic partly lies in its steadiness and preservation, it still

is a language with constant growth and expansion. The important difference between Icelandic and other languages is the fact that words of foreign origin that have often been adapted as such are being fully translated into Icelandic. Holmarsdóttir (2001) explains how languages like Latin or Greek have no influence on the Icelandic vocabulary, which is why *philosophy* is translated to *heimspeki*, meaning world wisdom, and *mathematics* is known as *stærðfræði*, roughly translating to size studies (Íðorðabankinn, n.d.). Other European languages like German, Dutch, Spanish or French do pronounce these words in accordance with their respective languages, but they still derive from the original Latin or Greek words. Medical students, no matter where in the world, have to learn the Latin terms for anatomy, diseases and medication, whereas Iceland even translates in that field (Lindholm & Vanhatalo, 2021). Of course, the Latin term is known and doctors are allowed to use it, but the preferred term for day-to-day language use is in Icelandic. An example of this is the term muscular atrophy which translates to *vöðvarýrnun* (Íðorðabankinn, n.d.i). Most material used in tertiary education in Iceland is either in English or one of the other Scandinavian Languages which not only gives students unlimited access to knowledge but also facilitates their entry into careers on an international level (Kristinsson, 2019). Nevertheless, according to the School Acts of Education in Iceland, the language of instruction shall be Icelandic (*Education*, n.d.).

The Department of Humanities at the University of Iceland is actively working on researching, developing and preserving original materials. Article 3 of the Laws and regulations lists five key points that demonstrate the function of this institution.

1. Creating and preserving original material and making it accessible to the public

2. Researching manuscripts and conducting research regarding the Icelandic Language
3. Strengthening and promoting the Icelandic language and preserving its written and spoken form
4. Cooperating on a national and international level, promoting the teaching of Icelandic
5. Publishing linguistic work

(Law and Regulations about the Institute of Árni Magnússon for Icelandic Studies, n.d.)

To preserve the linguistic depth of Icelandic, this department also researches and publishes new Icelandic terms for words that exist in other languages.

The idea is to make the tertiary level help strengthen the language by ensuring there is an Icelandic word for every word ever used. This even affects day to day life where words like *radio*, *TV*, or *computer* are translated into *útvarp*, *sjónvarp*, and *tölva*. Icelandic is known for being a literal language based on its history of endless winters that could only be filled with one's own imagination and interpretation. Taking the word *tölva* as an example, it is an assembly of the words *tala* (*plural tölur, English for number/s*) and *völva* (*English for fortune teller*).

This characteristic of the Icelandic Language policy is nothing new and actually has been around since the 12th century when the first Grammatical Treatise was written (Friðriksson, 2008). It seems to be something stuck in the veins of Icelanders to replace words of any other language with their own, even if it is a language like Latin that managed to survive in one way or another in most of our mother tongues.

Nowadays, the influence of English is stronger than ever, yet Icelanders are still not fully giving in. Even the people of the generation that grew up with internet access and an unofficial type of bilingualism do not arbitrarily adopt words into their own language; it is at least going to be shaped into fitting. The word "to joke," for example, exists in Icelandic as "að djóka," where not only its spelling and pronunciation have been adapted, but its declension has also been modified to be grammatically correct. Another example is the Icelandic word for *Calzone*, a type of pizza where it is folded in the middle. Icelanders call it *hálfmáni* (*English for halfmoon*), which again demonstrates the strong literal usage of language, as well as the stubbornness of providing Icelandic speakers with an option in their native language at all times (Friðriksson, 2008).

The episode "Denglish" in the German podcast "Wissen Weekly" (Scheurell, n.d.) discusses the influence of English on German and explores whether this poses a threat to the German language. In a conversation with a professor who researches Anglicisms, it is explained that people adopt words from other languages only when there is a need for them in their own. He confirms that this process of adaptation is not arbitrary; it is only lasting and significant if the borrowed words can be made to fit the grammatical rules of the native language. This need for an additional word is often the consequence of a new invention, but can also occur when there is a lack of describing an emotion or a process. Icelandic is known for having multiple words for the same occurrences that slightly differ in detail. The word *rain*, for example, can be translated into different words, depending on what kind of rain it is. A gentle rain, more moist than wet would be called *úði* (*English for drizzle*), whereas its opposite would be referred to as *demba* (*English for dump*) (Íðorðabankinn, n.d.). Therefore, it is more common for Icelanders to spread unique

Icelandic vocabulary rather than adapting words from foreign languages to be able to articulate themselves with more depth.

Drawing on the points made in this chapter it is clear that the English language, along with other languages has had a strong influence on the Icelandic language. The language is clearly submitted to change which in the context of language Death or Shift is a positive development and suggests that the language is anything but dead. Not only does the government work strongly towards keeping the language alive, by having it the official language of the state, offering most education exclusively in Icelandic and inventing new words in any higher-up educational field, but the society itself intuitively finds a way to make most words and slang sound Icelandic.

6.3 Popularity of Iceland and the following growth in Teaching Icelandic

As demonstrated in the chapter above, it can be interpreted that, Icelanders did not need a lot of people to grow their pride towards their language by exclusively using their own words and translating internationally used terms fully into Icelandic. Nevertheless, some companies such as Microsoft or Google are refusing to offer their programmes in Icelandic, due to the low number of speakers. The popularity of Iceland plays, therefore, an important role in working towards the perception of Icelandic not being strong or important enough. Around 1 million tourists are coming to Iceland every year, trying to get an insight into the Icelandic culture, by visiting museums and natural hotspots as well as speaking to locals to gain a better understanding of life in Iceland. Additionally, a few of them fall in love and decide to stay, which is why the educational sector for foreigners

studying Icelandic is constantly growing as well (Lindholm & Vanhatalo, 2021, Tómas, 2023)

The University of Iceland offers two different programmes for studying Icelandic as a Second Language. There is a three-year-long BA Programme that covers grammar, linguistics and conversational Icelandic to depth and the Practical Diploma, which is a one-year study created for beginners and exchange students who take an interest in the basics of the Icelandic language (Benediktsson & Ragnarsdóttir, 2020). According to the news outlet Vísir.is (Tómas, 2023) around 640 people applied for the BA-Programme for the upcoming year 2023/24, whereas between the years 2009 and 2018, there was only an average of 83 applicants per year (Benediktsson & Ragnarsdóttir, 2020). The classes are as internationally diverse as can be and it is often people who have already lived in Iceland for a while and want to perfect their language skills.

The School of Humanities at the University of Iceland has had Icelandic courses available since 1954 (Hjartardóttir, 2000), and due to the growing popularity of those, their teaching assessments and offers have developed immensely. A qualitative research paper from 2020 writes about students' experiences in these two programmes (Dís Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017). Two of the three research questions in the paper are connected to the teacher's performance and use of educational skills. The outcome was very positive, with the majority of students being satisfied with their teacher's performance (Dís Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017). Emphasis should be placed on the existence of this research and how it shows the growing interest of people in learning Icelandic and the resulting adaption of the educational sector towards that. Grammar has always been the main focus when teaching Icelandic and the methods would be traditional didactic teaching. This has been

modernised by now, with an equal focus on linguistics and conversational Icelandic, as well as group projects and a less authority-based classroom dynamic. The amount of teachers with migration backgrounds is growing as well and according to the students' experiences, this is often a positive thing. Learning from someone who went through the same struggles and therefore can often understand better where the difficulties lie, can be very helpful, especially in language teaching.

Besides courses at the University of Iceland (*Icelandic: Háskoli Íslands / HÍ*), there are various other facilities, such as The Tin Can Factory, Mímir and Icelandic Online, that offer courses for Icelandic learners. These are created for people in a full-time job, people with families or people who do not have the educational background to enrol in a University degree. Students are asked to take a short test in order to assign them to a fitting teaching level. The Tin Can Factory offers a wide range of time slots, to facilitate people with all kinds of schedules (*The Tin Can Factory*, n.d.).

6.4 Government and Policies

As explained in Chapter 5 on Language Death, a previously dominant language can only disappear when people stop speaking it. As discussed above, there are different reasons why people decide to or are forced to do so, but there are also organisations and laws that work towards preserving a language. Language policy operates discussions on rights and access to language, appropriate educational policy and ultimately language planning. Moreover, language planning is the realisation of language policy (Troike et al., 1988).

6.4.1 The Official Language

Kristinsson (Kristinsson, 2019) explains that Icelandic is "undoubtedly the principal daily language" not only in business and formal settings but also throughout society. It serves as the official language for the education system, the courts, cultural institutions, and the Icelandic Language Council, and remains unchallenged to this day. (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010)

The language of instruction at any level of education is Icelandic and even in the University of Iceland, 80% of the Bachelor's Degree Programmes are being taught in Icelandic. On top of that it is important to note that the other 20% of the currently offered BA Programmes at HÍ are in other languages, such as Spanish, English, Japanese and German. The only other BA Programme currently offered at HÍ, that does not teach a language is the *International Studies in Education* Programme, which almost exclusively teaches about the Icelandic school system in the first semester. Kristinsson continues by saying that even in workplaces where many of them are in the tourist, banking or business departments and therefore often employed by foreigners or operated on an international level, Icelanders are known for having a rather negative attitude towards using English as the primary language.

Religion is a good example of the historical and traditional depth of people's bond with the Icelandic language. Christianity came almost simultaneously with the settlement period and is, until this day, the largest religious group in the country. Unlike other Scandinavian countries like Norway or even the Faroese that did not translate the bible into their native languages up until modern times, Iceland had a complete translation by the 16th century. There had been language influences primarily from German in the

earlier translated bits and parts. Yet, it is claimed to be of no importance to the development and shaping of the Icelandic Language (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010, Ottoson, 1990).

6.4.2 Immigration Policies

With the above-discussed increased immigration rate in Iceland and the following discourse on the Icelandic language being threatened by strong influences of foreign languages, this chapter explains the responses by authorities and Icelandic society to that matter. First, we will discuss the linguistic requirements for people moving to Iceland and how they have shifted today. Secondly, we will look further into how these requirements are being met including how the Icelandic Government is ensuring the accessibility to learning facilities. Are immigrants no longer willing to learn Icelandic or are they not being equipped with realistic educational goals?

As illustrated in the previous chapters Icelanders have a strong bond with their language which is also mentioned in the policies of the Icelandic government. This government policy on immigration and integration from 2007 states that the Icelandic Language is “a shared property of the nation” (Dís Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017; Félagsmálaráðuneytið, 2007) as well as an important part of becoming part of Icelandic society . It then continues to explain how the dual purpose of teaching Icelandic to foreigners is integration and strengthening the position of the Icelandic language (Skaptadóttir, 2011) and though regulations regarding immigration tightened globally, 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 (Dís Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017).

The first goal mentioned in the Government Policy on the Integration of Immigrants is Icelandic language education for adults. It ensures immigrants' access to good education in the Icelandic Language on and outside the labour market, as well as the availability of materials and courses. Furthermore, it gives detailed instructions on how this education shall take place, with workplaces providing their employees with financial aid and the opportunity to attend classes during work hours. It also covers the fact, that people immigrate from all over the world, which means that there is a collision of learners with diverse educational backgrounds, which must be considered by authorities. This language policy shows that there have been discussions and decisions made as a response to the increase in immigration, that work towards offering equal opportunities in career and society for everyone in Iceland; regardless of origin (Félagsmálaráðuneytið, 2007).

In her research on Immigrants' Experiences of Learning Icelandic, Skaptadóttir collected personal stories in combination with the official language policies. She writes that with the global increase in immigration comes higher expectations towards immigrants in order for them to gain equal rights (Dís Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017). On the other hand, Icelanders' attitude seems to be less concerned about modifying their nationality to accommodate the newcomers (Jensen, 2014), which often results in conflicts between natives and immigrants.

According to Dís Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017 and their findings about language policies, immigrants have to show willingness and interest in learning Icelandic, to achieve full acceptance within the society. Immigrants' experiences though show that the attempt and will is often not enough for natives to accept them. Many speak about how even when trying to speak Icelandic, it is often either met with a response in English or a

confused reaction due to the foreign accent. Nowadays there is an increase in hearing Icelandic with a foreign accent even in the media, yet it still is a rather new occurrence, and it seems like the natives' ears have not yet fully adapted. Unfortunately, this "criticism can increase foreigners' anxiety and decrease their sense of ever fitting into Icelandic society" (Dís Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017), so they stop trying. Many immigrants do speak Icelandic to the extent of being able to get by, but then still choose to speak English in their private lives.

Lastly, many Icelanders complain about not being able to speak Icelandic in grocery stores, bakeries or restaurants which also leads to a big societal gap between them and foreigners. In these discussions, the frustration is mostly directed at immigrants, while the responsibility of employers to train their employees and the state's duty to provide accessible language education are rarely mentioned (Dís Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017).

7 Conclusion

Icelanders have always been a monogenetic, isolated small community that did not experience a lot of external influence. The Language has both changed since the settlement, which adds more intensity to the current situation. Icelanders have not been confronted with cultural or linguistic changes in the past and are therefore fearful of these rapid changes today. However, it is important to recognise that language death—when a language ceases to be spoken by any community members—only occurs under extreme circumstances, which is far from the reality in Iceland. On the contrary, Iceland is experiencing a period of demographic growth, partly fuelled by immigration, which has brought new linguistic and cultural dynamics into the country. It can be interpreted that immigration in Iceland started late but grew quickly, giving society little time to adjust gradually. As a result, this rapid shift created a fear of losing their own cultural identity, and language making them want to protect and preserve it. Rather than diminishing, the number of people speaking and learning Icelandic is actually on the rise. Icelandic is more widely spoken and studied today than at many points in history, suggesting a robust and resilient linguistic community. An important and big part of language development is a consequence of Iceland's blossoming culture, which actively promotes the use of language in contemporary media in Iceland. Due to the national Pride in their Language rooted in their long-lasting fascination with it, the government in Iceland is responding to the transformations, facilitating people with a diverse offer in Language teaching as well as ensuring the Language of Use in workplaces is still Icelandic. In summary, although Icelanders have valid concerns about the rapid changes introduced by global influences, the Icelandic language remains robust and widely spoken. The enduring cultural pride,

proactive government initiatives, and a thriving cultural landscape all contribute to the continued strength of the Icelandic language, ensuring it remains a fundamental aspect of the nation's identity for future generations.

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