English or Icelandic?
-communication in Icelandic multinational companies

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs
Agnes Björk Helgadóttir
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Agnes Björk Helgadóttir

Kt.: 150380-5619

Leiðbeinandi: Hulda Kristín Jónsdóttir

Pétur Knútsson

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Summary

This essay touches on the topic of English as a communication method in Icelandic multinational companies (MNCs) and how it affects the companies. What benefit the companies see in using English and what faults? What does the future hold? This essay also touches on the debate that has risen in Icelandic society due to the use of English in these companies, as well as the debate overseas surrounding language use on the international market. This debate is the foundation for my essay. I also contacted number of Icelandic companies in hopes of getting information from them on their language policy, as well as seeking sources from books, articles, foundations and legislations. In an effort to create a little background for the reader I will be going little into the history of the two languages, as well as the efforts Icelanders have made to protect the language and the status the English language has in the international community. From there the essay continues on to its main subject, Icelandic MNCs and their language policies, the reasons behind the use of English, and the implications for the companies, as well as Icelandic society. To top off the discussion I brought up a rising concern inside the international market, i.e. that good English skill is not enough to have a successful company on the international market. There is an increased demand in international business for other languages as well as English.
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Introduction

In a time of great technological advances in communication and travel the world is becoming smaller and the demand for a joint language to further ease communication between people of different nationalities has increased. English seems to be the choice, not because it is superior to the other languages or easier to learn. The reason seems to lie in the history of its native speakers. The United Kingdom’s colonizing in the new world and the USA’s role in world politics over the past decades has had a great influence on the status of the English language in the present day. Various other facts have played a part in reasserting the status of the English language but for the purpose of this essay I will focus on the use of English in Icelandic multinational companies (MNCs).

English has been playing an increasingly larger role in Icelandic MNCs and the question is whether English is replacing Icelandic as the official language of Icelandic MNCs. The complications of substituting Icelandic with English in Icelandic MNCs could be significant and it remains to be seen if they will benefit Icelandic MNCs. The use of English in MNCs is increasing everywhere (Frederiksson, Barner-Rasmussen and Piekkaru, 2006) so this development is not isolated to Iceland. The use of the English language is considered necessary for the companies to be competitive on the international market and this is considered especially true for Icelandic MNCs; their home country being a small, isolated island with a small population that makes for a small client base. The use of English in Icelandic MNCs has been debated in Icelandic society in the past few years. Those in favour for the use of English in Icelandic business life maintain that English is necessary for Icelandic MNCs to survive and be competitive. The main concern for those against the use of English is the survival of the Icelandic language. Their worry is that the use of English will cause a contamination of the Icelandic language despite its rich history.

1. The International Languages

The use of a common language has long been needed as a method of communication between nations with different mother tongues. “Many languages have been used around the world as contact languages for international trade and communication.” (Rogerson-Revell, 2007; 104) Since Roman times there have been a number of lingua francas in Europe, including English, Greek, Latin, French and
German have been extensively used in Europe and have been referred to as the ‘Big Languages’ in Europe. (Rogerson-Revell, 2007) “Nevertheless, they are not the only languages used for international communication in Europe.” (Rogerson-Revell, 2007; 104) The most widely used business language in Europe may very well be English but the use of other languages has increased. In a survey conducted by Haged on language use in European businesses and it revealed, among other things, that the use of German has increased in central and Eastern Europe, especially with the accession of new Eastern European states into the EU. (Rogerson-Revell, 2007) “Hagen also claims that in order to do cross-border business successfully, companies need to be able to communicate in all three of Europe’s ‘Big Languages’, namely English, German and French.” (Rogerson-Revell, 2007; 106)

1.1. What About the Other World Languages?

In today’s world markets are opening up and companies are expanding their business, moving into previously unattainable markets. “Globalization increases the need for better language skills and cultural literacy in business.” (Harðardóttir, 2004) Companies should be careful in putting too much trust in the English language in international business, like Icelandic MNCs have done, according to Bjarna Harðar, dean of the business department at the University of Akureyri. He goes on to say that English is not always valid. This was demonstrated in the result of the REFLECT-project. We need to rethink the value we place on the English language. Bjarni says that it is important to give young people the opportunity to acquire skills in a third language. This should be on an equal level to their English education. (Harðardóttir, 2004)

English is often helpful in communication situations between people of different nationalities. People, however, do appreciate it when the attempt is made to communicate with them in their own language. (Harðardóttir, 2004) “This is a show of respect to the local culture, puts them in higher esteem, and creates an atmosphere of equality, which in turn stimulates communication and business.” In England many export companies believe that they can’t overcome the cultural threshold they are faced with in their business overseas, as well as they face language difficulties. (Harðardóttir, 2004)

In 2007 the European Union held a conference under the title ‘Language means business’ and the general consensus seemed to be that language skills were important to the future. Victome Etienne Davignon, president of a committee on the social
responsibility of European companies, which operates within EU’s business council, maintains that further study on the relation between language skills and business is needed. The result of the latest study shows that the two are connected. (Jóhannsdóttir, 2007) “Each and every one needs a mother tongue and to be good in their mother tongue because that is necessary to the thought process.” (Jóhannsdóttir, 2007) Davignon continues on saying that other languages can be necessary to express these thoughts, but they should be used more as a support. (Jóhannsdóttir, 2007)

In companies economical growth and business administration languages are becoming the basic factor according to António Gomes de Pinho, board chairman of the Portuguese cultural institution Serrealves Foundation. During EU’s conference reference was made to a recent study that showed that even though English was key language in international business there was an increased need for other languages. The study showed that around 25% of companies considered their employees needed to improve their English skill. Furthermore, the study showed that additional 25% of companies thought they needed employees with skills in German and French, as well as skills in Spanish and Russian. (Jóhannsdóttir, 2007) “Many companies, especially the larger ones, put increased focus on growing business with the East and they needed employees that spoken the languages of these countries, for example Chinese and Arabic.” (Jóhannsdóttir, 2007)

Language skills are an important asset to MNCs and not just skills in English. Other languages, such as Chinese, French, Spanish, etc., are becoming increasingly more important in international business. English is not to be considered as an all around solution and there is a need to put more focus on language education. That would in all probability increase the opportunities of Icelandic MNCs. It is, however, not to be forgotten that good skills in ones mother tongue is the foundation for learning other languages. (S. B. Huldudóttir, 2007)

2. English Connects Europe Together

English is the language that connects Europe together according to Business Week article. (Ólafsdóttir, 2001) “Research on the use of English in globalised companies has demonstrated that businesses sets great store by communication know-how, language skills like directness and politeness, and also the courage and willingness to speak a foreign language.” (Bjørge, 2007; 191) This could be translated to companies, i.e. if a company does not have employees that have good English skills then the company is
not valid on the international market. Good English skills can give people an advantage on the job market, i.e. good language skills make people applicable for better positions, make demands for better pay and etc. This is an attitude which is not isolated to the mainland of Europe. (Bjørge, 2007)

The requirement for good language skills, in English among other languages, is becoming more important on the Icelandic job market and in Icelandic society in general. A Scandinavian research conducted by Gallup, researched Icelanders attitude towards English influences and language politics; it became evident that the attitude towards English had changed. The new image of the modern Icelander was partly that he/she should be skilled in the English language. The research also showed a link between good English skills and income. (Geirsdóttir, 2006) Geirsdóttir (2006) also says that English seems to hold the key to a good quality of life, more than Icelandic does, as people that have good English skills get higher pay and better job positions.

There are three reasons for why people choose English over their mother tongue according to Scandinavian research. The first and most obvious reason is efficiency. Companies choose English to make multinational communication easier. The second reason, not as common, has to do with symbolic value or respect. The companies consider English more eloquent or better than the language of the region they are operating in. The third reason for the use of English is ignorance or poorly thought out position. (Kristinsson, 2001) People have a tendency to overestimate their skills in the English language, as well as the skill set of other people. They, therefore, do not see the problem in using a different language than their mother language, even in complicated situations. (Kristinsson, 2001) English is, however, not the only choice to use in these situations.

2.1. English is the Choice of MNCs

MNCs need a corporate language; a language that makes their information’s available to the world. (Charles, 2007) English seems to be the common choice. “The benefit of using English as a reporting language comes as the firm exposes itself to potential investors, raising its investor base and decreasing its value discount.” (Jeanjean, Lesage og Stolowy, 2010; 202) The challenges that arise regarding languages and communications are not just the concern of non-English speaking countries. The multinational companies must implement language policies and strategies that take into account the challenges that employees might face in their work. (Charles, 2007) “When
multinationals from English-speaking countries go local in different parts of the world, they are faced with the problem of how best to communicate in their new environments, both within and outside the company.” (Charles, 2007; 261) Charles (2007) puts forward the question if English is always the answer or if there could be a place for the local language as well?

3. What will it be Icelandic or English?

The Icelandic language has always been a crucial part of Icelandic history and there has always been unity among Icelanders to protect the language. There has been increased use of English in Icelandic society in the past few years and it seems to split public opinion; those for the use of English in Icelandic society and those for the protection of the Icelandic language. Loudest arguments for the use of English in Icelandic society have come from the Icelandic business community, although not the only arguments. English, as well as other languages, is necessary for international business. There is a need for a common language, a language that can bridge the gap between two individuals with different mother tongues. There are concerns among people in Icelandic society that the use of English in Icelandic MNCs comes at the cost of the Icelandic language.

In 2007 the comments made by Sigurjón Þ. Árnason, former bank director of Landbanki Íslands and Ágúst Ó. Ágústsson, the chairman of Alþingi business committee, on the situation of English in Icelandic society were met with hard opposition. Árnason claimed that it would be inevitable for Icelandic finance companies, which are trying to enter the international market, to adopt English as their work language. Ágústsson, however, wanted to turn the focus to government and to making it bilingual, Icelandic and English. (S. B. Huldudóttir, 2007) Turning the focus back on Icelandic companies, Vilhjálmur Egilsson, executive director of Samtök atvinnulífsins, said that:

“work language of a company must take aim of the companies needs. Therefore companies operating on the international market or companies that need to hire foreign experts should be able to choose English as their second language or work language.” (S. B. Huldudóttir, 2007)
He continues on to say that in the future Icelandic society needs to adjust to the fact that there are many people living in Iceland that neither speak nor understand the Icelandic language. (S. B. Huldudóttir, 2007)

These discussions have caused a response from the president of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, and the former minister of education, Þorgerður Katrín Gunnarsdóttir. The president of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, said: “There is no argument for putting the Icelandic language aside if universities and companies are to succeed, and it is questionable to maintain that the Icelandic language can’t be an equal to the world languages in invention and economic life.” (Jóhannsson, 2007) Even though the expansion of Icelandic companies into the international market is exciting it should not put the Icelandic language in second place, according to Gunnarsdóttir. (Jóhannsson, 2007) “The Icelandic language is the key to our life; it is also the key to the expansion and should underline our individuality in the international community.” (Jóhannsson, 2007)

3.1. Why is English versus Icelandic Debate so Controversial in Iceland?

The Icelandic language has a long and proud history, although, it has not always been called the Icelandic language. Iceland was settled in 874 by Vikings from Norway fleeing tyranny in their country. These people spoke Old Norse and in that time Danish was the common language of the people of Scandinavia. (Stofnun Sigurðar Norðdal, 2004) With time the language divided into dialects and the differences between the dialects increased. These dialects are now the Nordic languages; Norwegian, Faroese, Swedish, Danish and Icelandic. In the earlier years there really was not much difference between the dialect in Iceland and the dialect in Norway. The difference did not start to become clear until the 13th and 14th century due to changes in both dialects and now there really can be talked about two different languages. (Stofnun Sigurðar Norðdal, 2004)

The Icelandic language is a great part of the Icelandic national identity and something that the Icelandic people have always taken great pride in. The Icelandic language is the language of the ancestors; the strong Vikings that fled tyranny and built a home on this harsh island. Behind the Icelandic language lies a great literary tradition that produced Snorra-Edda, Völuspá and Hávamál among others. Icelanders have always prided themselves in being able to read this old literature without much difficulty. The Icelandic language has changed and developed through the year. This
fact makes it highly unlikely that Icelanders read these literatures as easily as they claim. Their proclamation, however, demonstrates the pride they have in their language. The Icelandic language may have undergone fewer changes than the other Scandinavian languages but it has nonetheless changed significantly. (Stofnun Sigurðar Norðdal, 2004)

In recent years the greatest worry has come with the arrival of new inventions and these new inventions require their own Icelandic words, not just adjusting the pre-existing words. This has been the main function of Íslensk Málnefnd or The Icelandic Language Committee. The Icelandic Language Committees main role is to advice the Icelandic government on matters involving the Icelandic language. They put forward suggestion about language policies to the minister of education, as well as, they make yearly evaluation of the status of the Icelandic language. The Language Committee can take the initiative to point out what is done well and what can be done to improve the use of the Icelandic language in public domain. (Íslensk málnefnd, 2010) According to the committees platform their main focus today is to secure the standing of the Icelandic language in Icelandic society, i.e. that the Icelandic language continues to be the first language choice of Icelanders. In 2009 Alþingi (Icelandic congress) declared their support for the Icelandic Language Committee’s suggestions that Icelandic will be used in all aspects of Icelandic society. (Íslensk málnefnd, 2009)

4. The Spread of English

“The history of English is a story of cultures in contact during the past 1,500 years. It understates matters to say that political, economic, and social forces influence a language. These forces shape the language in every aspect, most obviously in the number and spread of its speakers, and in what is called “the sociology of language,” but also in the meaning of words, in the accents of the spoken language, and even in the structures of the grammar. The history of a language is intimately bound up with the history of the people who speak it.” (Baugh and Cable, 2002; 1) The English language is today widely considered the new lingua franca, i.e. “any language serving as a medium between different nations” (Oxford University Press, 2003; 1603); the successor of Latin. The English language status as the new lingua franca comes from the number of speakers it has. English, although not the most widely used native language in the world, has the most speakers. (Baugh and Cable, 2002; 1) English has a
great number of speakers that are second language speakers and foreign language speakers in combination with its native speakers.

The expansion of the English language is relatively new and has happened rather quickly. “English has, for over 150 years, been recognised as a world language.” (Hurn, 2009; 299) 1.5 billion people speak the English language, either as their first and second language, (Hurn, 2009) and the number of people that speak it as a second language far outnumber those who speak it as their mother tongue. (Charles, 2007)

“It is spoken in much of the former British colonies in international organisations, e.g. UN, OPEC, NAFTA, in science and technology, on the internet, air-traffic control, the media, computer-speak, in the academic world, in pop music and, above all, in business.” (Hurn, 2009; 299)

In addition to this the English language the official language in nearly 50 countries. (Hurn, 2009) The value of the English language is therefore considered to be great, politically, educationally and economically. For English to hold on to its position as the most used international language in business, there is a call for a development of International English. (Hurn, 2009)

4.1. The New Lingua Franca

“The spread of English is commonly seen as a ‘language problem’ threatening to engulf and replace indigenous European languages.” (Rogerson-Revell, 2007; 106)

“Despite socio-political concerns about the spread of English, its prevalence in international business is largely accepted as a pragmatic necessity by many business organisations and practitioners, for whom it is part of their everyday professional lives.” (Rogerson-Revell, 2008; 339) In its role as a lingua franca English can present linguistic and cultural challenges, especially since interactions between speakers whose native language is not English are increasing. (Rogerson-Revell, 2008) Many researchers have become to think that the use of English does not have to be negative. (Rogerson-Revell, 2008) “As Spichtinger argues ‘one can speak German as one’s national language and English as one’s European language’.” (Rogerson-Revell, 2008; 339-340)

4.1.1. Lingua Franca and Communication Issues

“The mobility of Europe’s boundaries and people within them, together with growing opportunities for cross-border trade, adds to the complexity of language use
across Europe and doubtless encourages the development of an international language or languages.” (Rogerson-Revell, 2007, 105) As said earlier, the use of English as lingua franca does present both linguistic and cultural challenges. (Rogerson-Revell, 2008, 339) Non-native English speakers (NNES) with different mother tongues use English to communicate with each other, as well as, to communicate with native English speakers (NES). A study made by Rogerson-Revell revealed a number of issues for the NNES. (Rogerson-Revell, 2007; 117)

“These range from comprehension difficulties, i.e. processing fast or quiet speech, which seems to be a problem shared by participants with both high and lower English language proficiency, through difficulties in both comprehension and production, due to vocabulary limitations, which seem to relate to speakers whose self-assessment of their language proficiency (particular in speaking) is relatively low, to difficulties in managing interactions appropriately. This last category appears to relate particularly to participants who rate their own language ability relatively high but who nevertheless feel they have difficulty in high-speed discussions, particularly trying to interrupt or express a particular viewpoint.” (Rogerson-Revell, 2007; 117)

Comprehension and fluency seem to be the main issues for NNES at the moment. The study showed that NES are aware of difficulties for NNES in using a foreign language in business. (Rogerson-Revell, 2007; 117) “Many also showed an intuitive to the needs of NNESs and of how to modify their own NES language use in international contexts.” (Rogerson-Revell, 2007; 117) Despite this response from NESs, many NNESs felt that there was not enough effort made by the NESs to adjust their speech, to make themselves understandable to the NNESs. (Rogerson-Revell, 2007)

4.1.2. The Future of English as Lingua Franca

As said in the previous chapter English is not the only language used in international business. German, French and Spanish are likely to challenge English in some parts of the world as lingua franca, as will Mandarin and Hindi. (Hurn, 2009) “English will remain the major international language and is likely to widen its acceptance as the global language.” (Hurn, 2009; 304) Native speakers of English need to develop simpler forms of English to use in the business world. Forms that foreign users understand more easily and acquire fluency more quickly. In coming years the number of people speaking
English with a good degree of fluency will increase and their number will easily exceed the number of English native speakers. (Hurn, 2009)

5. The Present Situation in Icelandic MNCs

The Icelandic business community has sought ways to keep itself competitive. One of the options that have been debated is whether or not to implement English as the official language of the Icelandic MNCs. There has been a heated debate in Icelandic society for a couple of decades now over the affects of English on the Icelandic language and the quick rise of the Icelandic economy in the beginning of this century has only fuelled this debate.

The number of Icelandic MNCs that use English as their communication method increases every year, although only few have declared English as their official language. There are no formal numbers available on how many of Iceland’s MNC’s use English as a communication method and to what extent they use it. I, therefore, made an informal enquiry on the subject. I sent e-mails, which can be seen in Appendix A, to number of Icelandic MNCs to get an idea to what extent these companies use English in their day-to-day communication.

5.1. Actavis

In response to my e-mail the spokesperson from Actavis said that English is the official language of the company, despite the fact the company has no official language policy. She continued on saying that despite that fact the language of individual markets is used extensively, like for example Icelandic in Iceland. The company has no records on what language is used in communication between employees and customers. (Böðvarsdóttir, personnel communication, December 29, 2009)

5.2. Össur

The official language of Össur is English. The company does not have any numbers on how much of the company’s communication is done in English and how much is in Icelandic. The decision to change the company’s official language was made five years ago and the announcement made to the employees. The reason behind the change was that it was considered impossible to run a multinational company without using a language that everyone understands. (Thoroddsen, personnel communication, December 13, 2009)
5.3. KPMG

Andrés Guðmundsson from KPMG said in his response to my email that the official language of the company is Icelandic and that they had no plans to change it. Most of KPMGs clients are Icelandic and reports and other projects are written in Icelandic. They also service foreign clients and work with foreigners and in those cases the language most often used is English. Instructions, standards and teaching material are often in English but in communication inside the company Icelandic is dominant language. According to Andrés KPMG has two foreigners working for there now and their needs are attended to specifically. (Guðmundsson, personnel communication, December 8, 2009)

5.4. The Icelandic Banks

The situation of the banks may have change significantly with the fall of the Icelandic economy in the fall of 2008 but prior to that the banks were active on the international market and needed to be able to compete. That meant adaptation and that meant the use of English. Jónas Sigurgeirsson, head of investor relations for KB-bank, maintains that in 2006 English was in fact the language of KB-bank and had been for some time. (Geirsdóttir, 2006) English is used in all board meetings, as number of the board members are of foreign nationalities, and the annual reports are published in English. Sigurgeirsson says that the company’s e-mails are usually both in English and Icelandic, although on some occasions it is only in English. He goes on saying that Icelanders working in banking must be bilingual and that he cannot see the threat to the Icelandic language. English is solely a work related language. (Geirsdóttir, 2006)

In Íslandsbanki English has to a considerable extent the banks communication language according to the banks publicist Vala Pálsdóttir. (Geirsdóttir, 2006) The bank has foreign employees and foreign branches and therefore much of the banks communication is conducted in English. (Geirsdóttir, 2006) “On the other hand the core operation here in Iceland is conducted entirely in Icelandic and we apply ourselves to speak good quality Icelandic.” (Geirsdóttir, 2006) Pálsdóttir maintains that the banks expansion has not damaged the status of Icelandic inside the bank, however, it was necessary to pick a common language for all of the banks employees and English was the language of choice. She goes on saying that employee e-mails are usually in Icelandic although it depends on the nature of the mail and who are communicating.
Everyone is working in increasing access for foreign investors to companies that are registered on the Icelandic market according to Pálsdóttir. To do this it is vital for the companies to have their information in English, that way there is equality on the market. (Geirsdóttir, 2006)

Landsbanki Íslands has also made changes according to development on the open market. (Geirsdóttir, 2006) “English is used to a considerable extent but despite that board meetings are still conducted in Icelandic as well as all internal communication between Icelandic employees.” (Geirsdóttir, 2006) There is no doubt that the banks situations on the international market have changed as a result of the economic crash of 2008. It remains to be seen what affects that will have on the banks language policies.

5.5. Straumur

The CEO of Straumur investment bank is William Fall and he comes from the United Kingdom. This influences in house communication according to Jóhanna Vigdís Guðmundsdóttir, the head of the banks public relation office.” She continues on by claiming that the use of English does not get in the way at all as majority of the banks employees have considerable knowledge of the English language. (Jóhannsson, 2007) Majority of the banks employees live overseas and therefore e-mails that are sent to all employees are written in English. Internal communications in each country are though in the language belonging to country in question, i.e. Icelandic in Iceland, Finnish in Finland, etc. The bank’s annual reports are published both in Icelandic and in English as stockholders are off multiple nationalities. (Jóhannsson, 2007)

5.6. Marel

Marel has subsidiary companies all over the world so there have been talks about changing the company’s official language to English and if it would increase efficiency within the company. The point of making that change has, however, not been reached and within Marel all communication with Icelanders is conducted in Icelandic. Lára Hallgrímsdóttir said, in 2006, that Marel’s homepage is in English and other languages, however, not Icelandic. She maintains that the company is very interested in maintaining a website in Icelandic but as majority of their clients are foreign and as such they are the company’s priority. (Geirsdóttir, 2006) “There is a will within the company to cultivate the Icelandic language as we see ourselves as an Icelandic company and in the future I can’t see that changing. When the connections increase and
markets grow overseas it happens automatically that English language enters the company.” (Geirsdóttir, 2006) Since the publication of that article Marel has established a homepage in Icelandic, www.marel.is.

5.7. deCode

English is the work language of deCode according to Berglind Ólafsdóttir, deCode’s publicist. Berglind says that all work documents are written in English, however, when it comes to distribute information to employees English and Icelandic play equal part as 10-15% of the employees are of foreign nationality. When it comes to meetings English is only used if someone attending the meeting is of foreign nationality, otherwise Icelandic is used. (S. B. Huldudóttir, 2007)

6. A Possible Danger to the Icelandic Language

The development in Iceland seems to be that English is considered the second official language. “This is what the language committee considers to be among the things most dangerous to the Icelandic language” (S. B. Huldudóttir, 2007) says Þórarinn Eldjárn, author and vice chairman of the Icelandic Language Committee. This development is constant, reoccurring topic in meetings held by the Icelandic Language Committee. Eldjárn is afraid that if people start considering English as a necessity in the work place and institutions Icelandic would become a language only used in the homes. This would decrease the value of the language; it would not be valid in all aspects of society. (S. B. Huldudóttir, 2007)

Eldjárn says that Icelanders over estimate their language skills and with the development continuing on this path the result will be bad English instead of proper Icelandic. The only way to prevent this would be to increase language education, to get people with proper language skills. (S. B. Huldudóttir, 2007) Furthermore, teachers should teach their students to think in Icelandic about the subject they are learning. That way they will have something special, something no one else has, the Icelandic point of view. The Icelandic language will first be in danger when Icelanders stop thinking in Icelandic. When people lose their ability to think in their mother tongue they lose their unique position, i.e. their ability to put forth their unique perspective, their national perspective, and to be able to think in ones mother tongue is necessary even though the execution is done in another language. (Jóhannsson, 2007)
The situation of the Icelandic language is not all bad, according to Ari Páll Kristinsson, the chairman of Icelandic language center (Íslensk málstöð). (Geirsdóttir, 2006) He continues on saying that the discussion must be kept alive. The project of protecting the Icelandic language is a never-ending one. (Geirsdóttir, 2006) The increased use of English in Icelandic society worries Kristinsson but he claims that Icelanders are in better position to protect their language than other countries, as most of them have the same mother tongue. (Geirsdóttir, 2006) However, in recent years there has been an increase of immigrants moving to Iceland searching for employment and/or better life. The children of these new settlers have the ability to become bilingual with the right care, i.e. taking good care of their mother tongue and providing them with proper lessons in Icelandic. When people are considered bilingual it usually means that they are highly or equally skilled in a language other than their mother tongue. These individuals could be an asset to Icelandic society and to Icelandic business. (Arinbjörnisdóttir, 2001)

In an interview Haraldur Bessason, former dean of the University of Akureyri, was asked why a small nation like Iceland should fight to keep their own language. (Jóhannsson, 2007) Bessason was quick to answer: “I don’t think people are fighting to keep it. The national language has been a part of us from the beginning. And I don’t think anybody with any sense wants retire it.” (Jóhannsson, 2007) About the issue of legalizing English as the work language of the banks and other MNCs, Bessason says they might just as well legalize English as the language of hotels and boarding houses during the summer time. (Jóhannsson, 2007) He continues on to say: “I can’t see any sense in it. And I am kind of surprised that there isn’t legalization that opposes it. It isn’t possible to legalize something that doesn’t exist. Bilingualism doesn’t exist in Iceland like it does in Canada, where English and French have equal right within the law.” (Jóhannsson, 2007)

Bessason suggested that Icelandic and English education should be increased, that would be the more sensible option. The banks can make English the banks only language; however, making this change does not turn the bank employees into skilled English speakers. Bessason added that he didn’t like that any institution could declare English as their main language. Bessason also pointed out something he thought had not occurred to those wanting to legalize English as a second language in Iceland. (Jóhannsson, 2007) That is “the respect that the world has for Iceland is strongly linked to our language heritage.” (Jóhannsson, 2007) “If the nation decided to retire their
language, it would lose respect among sensible people.” (Jóhannsson, 2007) Bessason says, like so many others, that the Icelandic language is a big part of being Icelandic. (Jóhannsson, 2007)

The Icelandic language has grown and developed over the years. This is greatly due to a very conscious effort made by the Icelandic government through the Icelandic Language Committee to create new words for new inventions. If languages stop developing and their validity decreases, i.e. it is used in fewer areas of society. “Icelandic vocabulary has adjusted to the needs of the Icelandic people and enriched as Icelandic culture has become more variable and multicultural. Close cohabitation with other languages unavoidably leads to words travelling between each other. The use of loan words isn’t necessarily a sign of languages decay.” (Arinbjörnsdóttir, 2001) Many linguists believe that decreased usage of languages is a great factor in language deaths. (Arinbjörnsdóttir, 2001) Many fear that this will be the fate of the Icelandic language due to the increased usage of English in Icelandic society.

**To Summarize**

Common language is a necessity for communication between individuals with different mother tongues. This has been a reality in our world for centuries and today English fulfils this role. English is, however, not the only language being used. In recent years the use of German has increased and claims have been made that for MNCs to succeed they need to be able to communicate in English, German and French. Another point that has made is that people appreciate when an effort is made to communicate with in their own language and therefore it would benefit MNCs to have employees skilled in the language of the country they are operating in. Therefore, there is a need for good language education, on all levels of education, in variety of languages. This will create future employees for MNCs that are qualified language speakers, not just in English. In the future the development will in all probability create a need for people that are both skilled in languages and cultural literacy, i.e. people that know the appropriate and non-appropriate behaviour of different cultures.

Today English is the language that connects Europe together; meaning that without good English skills people and companies are not valid on the international market or at least the European market. Good English skills give people and companies competitive advantage on the market, i.e. better business deals, better job positions, better pay, etc. This is also the development in Iceland; good English skills have almost become
mandatory when applying for job. The modern Icelander is supposed to possess good English skills as English is the key to get better quality out of life. Claims made by high-ranking people from the Icelandic business community about the situation of the English language and its future within Icelandic society have been met with strong objections by many, among them the president of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson.

The Icelandic language has a long history, one that the Icelandic people are very proud of. The Icelandic people connect their national identity to their language and there has been a very conscious effort made to protect the language, i.e. through the creation of new words. This has been the main function of the Icelandic Language Committee. In recent years the Icelandic Language Committee has extended their role in the protection of the Icelandic language. They provide advice to the government on how to protect the language. The greatest worry of the Icelandic Language Committee is that people begin to consider the English language a necessity and the Icelandic language will just be used in homes. This can only be prevented with increased language education, preserve people’s ability to think in their mother tongue and get them to realize that good skills in their mother tongue is the foundation good skills in other languages, not just English.

English, like Icelandic, has a long history and its history is intimately connected with the people that speak it. English is the most wide spread language of the world. It does not have the most native speakers but their foreign speakers and second language speakers far outnumber those who speak it as their mother tongue. The spread of English is seen as a threat to indigenous European languages, however, many researcher say that this does not have to be a negative thing. English can be used as a European language and ones mother tongue can be used as ones national language. The threat to the other languages is not the only problem people see with the use of English. People have a tendency to overestimate their language skills, as well as, the language skills of others. This can cause communication problems.

Icelandic MNCs need to keep themselves competitive and one of the ways many of them have sought to do so is to use English in their day-to-day operations. This has caused a debate between those who think the use of English will harm the status of the Icelandic language in Icelandic society and those who think that not using English will harm Icelandic MNCs on the international market. There has been an increase in the number of Icelandic MNCs that use English as communication method, although only few have declared English as their official language. Most of the MNCs use a
combination of English and Icelandic in their day-to-day operations. The worry is that people will start to consider English a necessity and that Icelandic will in time only be used inside the homes. This will decrease the value of the Icelandic language and will probably be the beginning of the end for Icelandic. The only way to prevent this is to put emphasis on language education, especially education in Icelandic as good skills in ones mother tongue is the foundation for learning foreign languages.

**Conclusion**

The Icelandic language may not have many speakers or be wide spread but it is a survivor. It has been a crucial part of Icelandic people from the beginning and it has adapted with the changes that have occurred in Icelandic society through the years. The Danish rule over Iceland did not make it irrelevant and the use of English in Icelandic MNCs will not make it irrelevant. The largest threat to the Icelandic language is if the Icelandic people stop using it. There is, however, a need for continuing conscious protecting of the Icelandic language. Invention of new words and adjustment of the language to the change is society is necessary in the protection of Icelandic. Language education, in both Icelandic and foreign languages, will also play an important part in keeping the Icelandic language relevant. Good language skills in ones mother tongue make it easier to learn and become efficient foreign language speaker, among them English.

English is generally accepted as the new lingua franca in the world of business and considered necessary for MNCs to succeed. Not everyone is happy with this development and they see the spread of English as a problem. It is seen as a threat to indigenous European languages. These have been the views expressed in the debate that has taken place in Icelandic society. Individuals in the Icelandic business community are worried that if Icelandic MNCs do not choose English as their official language they will lose their standing in the international world of business. English is, however, and should not be the only choice. Studies have shown that people appreciate when effort is made to communicate with them in their own language and companies should emphasize on having employees with a wide range of language skills. I believe that by putting emphasis on multiple languages would, without a doubt, benefit MNCs in the long run as there is no guarantee that English will remain in its current place as lingua franca or as the sole lingua franca. Other languages are likely to challenge its place and try and replace it or at least join it as the language of international business.
Icelandic MNCs need to have versatile language skills among their employees but it should not come at the expense of the Icelandic language. The Icelandic language should be able to co-exist within the walls of Icelandic MNCs. Icelandic MNCs should put value in where they come from and appreciate their Icelandic identity, a part of which is the Icelandic language. Their Icelandic identity is what could set them apart from other MNCs out there and they should put emphasis on this, instead of just trying to be one of the many MNCs in the world. They should take pride in their country’s history, culture and language. That is what makes them Icelandic.
Appendix A:

Good morning

I am writing my B.A. essay in English at the University of Iceland. My subject is English as a communication method in Icelandic companies. I am look for assistance and information from Icelandic companies that operate in the international market. I am looking for information on what the official language of the companies is and if any numbers exist about how much of the communication is in Icelandic and how much in English. I am also looking for official company policies on what the official language of the company is and what benefits, providing that the official language is English, the company found in changing the official language from of Icelandic. It also interests me to know from companies that have Icelandic as their official language if it has been discussed to make the change from Icelandic to English and if so, why the company decided not to make the change. I would like to make it clear that my interest is only in documenting what situation is concerning the use of English in Icelandic companies. I will not be choosing sides in my essay.

With regard

Agnes Björk Helgadóttir
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