

Abstract

Gender agreement in the history of Icelandic

Those who have studied the use of grammatical gender in Icelandic, synchronically or diachronically, have until now been unable to draw conclusions from detailed research on this topic, due to the lack of empirical studies and data collections. Therefore, scholars have based their conclusions on the Icelandic language standard, on the use of the genders in present-day Icelandic, and on comparative evidence (see, e.g., Bonner 1999, Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir 2009). In recent years, there has been considerable progress in Iceland in developing research tools for morphological, morphosyntactic and syntactic research. One team of linguists is currently working on the project *Language Change and Linguistic Variation in 19th-Century Icelandic and the Emergence of a National Standard* (http://www.arnastofnun.is/page/a_research_lclv19); the group collects material for corpora of 19th-century texts, printed material (newspapers, journals) and private letters, and applies them for the analysis of language change. A diachronic treebank, *Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus*, developed at the University of Iceland, ([http://www.linguist.is/icelandic_treebank/Icelandic_Parsed_Historical_Corpus_\(IcePaHC\)](http://www.linguist.is/icelandic_treebank/Icelandic_Parsed_Historical_Corpus_(IcePaHC))) has also revolutionized access to texts from all periods of the history of Icelandic.

As a result, it is now possible to investigate gender use more efficiently than before in Icelandic texts from the 12th to the 20th century. One can, e.g., check whether the traditional use of the generic masculine was quite consistent until the 20th century when the proponents of feminist language planning started demanding changes.

This paper will focus on gender agreement in the history of Icelandic, taking examples from different periods. The language standard of the 20th century demands grammatical gender agreement in sentences like (a) below.

- (a) *Krakkarnir voru blautir þegar þeir komu inn*
'The kids (m.pl.) were wet (m.pl.) when they (m.pl.) came in'

Structures (b) and (c), violating agreement, are, however, common in present-day Icelandic.

- (b) *Krakkarnir voru blautir þegar þau komu inn*
'The kids (m.pl.) were wet (m.pl.) when they (n.pl.) came in'
- (c) *Krakkarnir voru blaut þegar þau komu inn*
'The kids (m.pl.) were wet (n.pl.) when they (n.pl.) came in'

The new research tools can throw light on the age, origin and distribution of such deviations from traditional gender agreement – by making it possible to compare private letters and published texts from the period of the emergence of the national standard and by facilitating search in texts from an 800-year period.

References

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