Standardization, prescription, description and theory: Icelandic inflection

The main tenet of the standardization of Icelandic inflection is purism, i.e. a fight against foreign influence and spurious change. The standard is set as closely to the Golden Age of Old Icelandic as possible, and the idea seems to be that the language is seen as a precious metal, to be kept untarnished and pure (Kjartan Ottósson 1990). The history of Icelandic language purism is closely linked to the fight for Icelandic independence, with firm roots in the 19th century, but effective standardization is a 20th century phenomenon, based on official language policy. With laws on the compulsory education of children in 1907, the importance of strict guidelines of right and wrong was greatly enhanced.

Where inflection is concerned, the focus of the purists is mainly on uninflected foreign words, on a resistance of the drift of words between inflectional classes and changes in inflectional classes (involving one or more inflectional forms). A corollary of the guidelines of right and wrong is an avoidance of variant forms, and thus some variants are considered less desirable or unacceptable, simply for the sake of standardization. The standard descriptions of Icelandic inflection are traditional grammar books, based on a long history of research, but the focus of these works is a general (and partial) description of the inflectional system as a whole, without an extensive coverage of vocabulary. The result of standardization based on generalizations from these sources can result in oversimplification without firm grounding in research.

The grammar books are greatly influenced by purism, with the result that a part of the vocabulary is neglected. Bisyllabic neuter loanwords are a case in point, but their stem structure deviates from native words, e.g. ópíum. The dative singular ending -i is, in the textbooks, said to be universal in strong neuter nouns, with very few, listed exceptions. Research carried out in the context of the Database of Modern Icelandic Inflection (Kristín Bjarnadóttir 2012) does in fact show extensive variation between variants with the endings -i/-0.

The creation of the Tagged Icelandic Corpus (the MIM Corpus, Sigrún Helgadóttir et al. 2012) and other Icelandic text collections and corpora make it possible to validate the descriptions of Icelandic inflection, as described for Russian in Brown & Evans 2012. The topic of the proposed paper is the effect of extensive empirical data on the traditional descriptions of Icelandic inflection, using the neuter dative singular -i/-0 variants as a focus, and the implications of such research on the standardization of Icelandic inflection.

References