Loanwords in Icelandic 19th century private letters

It is rather obvious – although it has never been examined statistically – that the number of loanwords of Danish/German origin decreased radically in Icelandic during the 19th century. It is also a widely held consensus that there was a deliberate opposition to such words. It can be seen e.g. in how examples of the verb *blífa* ‘be, remain’ steadily decreased in Icelandic Bible versions until all instances had disappeared before the middle of the century. Furthermore, we find criticism of certain loanwords in the writings of e.g. *Fjölnismenn*; and newspaper articles, novels and other works also contain ironical or sarcastic use of foreign words, such as the writings of Jón Thorarensen (*Piltur og stúlka*, 1850) and Pórður Ö. Johnson (*Mínir vinir*, 1879). However, it is not certain how the opposition against loanwords was passed on to the public, by whom and what the results were: Did these words disappear more slowly in the language of “ordinary” people – or was it the opposite: Were these words maybe fewer from the beginning in the language of lay people than in that of intellectuals and officials?

The study presented in this paper is based on an investigation of a large collection of unpublished private letters from lay people of 19th century Iceland (ca. 1820–1900). It’s main focus is on certain representative loanwords / groups of loanwords that existed in the language well before 1800, but which have either largely disappeared or somehow been stigmatized in the modern language. Among words that will be searched for are the verbs *ske* ‘happen’ and *blífa*, as well as words with the prefixes/preformatives *an-*, *be-/*bí- and *for-*. The study is still in its early stages (autumn 2012), and lexically interesting objects and questions that arise will be looked into continuously, and promising details will be followed as deemed necessary, with regard to whether they shed light on the investigation or not.

The letter corpus is investigated from the point of view of loanword lexicography, sociolinguistics, standardization, and applied folk linguistics, where pertinent. Among things that will be examined is the frequency of the investigated words; possible instances of code-switching; expressions that may indicate conscious (stylistic, suppressive, humiliating etc.) use of certain loanwords; and meta-linguistic comments about individual words, loanwords on the whole, or on the use of or directions of the use of such words, will be recorded.

An attempt will be made interpret the results: Are there many or few examples of the inspected words in texts of lay people; do such words seem to be neutral or marked in their usage; do they reduce in number during the course of the 19th century, and if so, when does that process seem to begin? Or is their number perhaps relatively even throughout the century – which would suggest that the opposition against them was rather a 20th century phenomenon than belonging the century before. And what can the results reveal about vocabulary and language of ordinary people in the 19th century?