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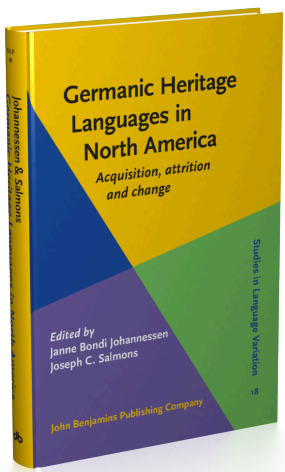


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# Reexamining Icelandic as a heritage language in North America

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This chapter presents a general description of North American Icelandic (NA Icelandic), a heritage language spoken by a few hundred speakers in language conclaves on the Northern Plains of the United States and Canada. The description is mainly based on studies of the development of Icelandic as a heritage language in intense contact with English in North America (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006). Generalizations about features of the NA Icelandic lexicon, morpho-syntax and phonology are presented in an effort to lay the groundwork for the next stage of NA Icelandic heritage linguistics. Finally, a possible future research agenda for NA Icelandic is outlined that is in line with the recent discussion about the importance of heritage languages for our understanding of the acquisition and loss of language (Benmamoun et al. 2010).

**Keywords:** North American Icelandic, heritage languages, general description, language attrition, language acquisition, multilingualism, language contact

## 1. Introduction

Prompted by a recent paradigm shift in heritage language research, this chapter will present available corpora and previous general descriptions of North American Icelandic (NA Icelandic), a heritage language spoken by a few hundred speakers in language conclaves on the Northern Plains of the United States and Canada. The goal is to compile available resources and outline a possible research agenda for NA Icelandic that is in line with the recent discussion on the importance of heritage languages for our understanding of the acquisition and loss of language. A definition of a heritage speaker as presented by Polinsky (2008) is adopted here:

> … a heritage speaker of language A is an individual who grew up speaking (or only hearing) A as his/her first language but for whom A has been replaced by another language as dominant and primary. (Polinsky 2008: 40)

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As Polinsky (2008) points out, an important characteristic of heritage speakers is that they are not a homogeneous group (see also Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006), nor have they had formal instruction in the heritage language. This last point is important as a renewed interest in Icelandic as a heritage language has encouraged many Canadians and Americans of Icelandic descent to study the language as a second language. This had led to proficiency in a variety that is closer to Icelandic as it is spoken in Iceland and is therefore outside the scope of studies of heritage languages.

Over twenty-five years ago when this author first encountered NA Icelandic, immigrant languages were studied from the standpoint of variation and the effect of the interaction of language and society on language development (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006). Those first studies were descriptive and examined immigrant languages as derivatives of the languages as they were spoken in the "old country." The goal of previous linguistic studies of NA Icelandic was to illustrate the developments of Icelandic as a heritage language, with a narrowing functional range and disintergrating social networks (Milroy 1987), in intense contact with English in North America, and compare to the development of modern Icelandic as a fully fledged national language in Iceland (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006).

Recent developments in heritage language linguistics have altered views about how their study can contribute to an understanding of the development of bilingual grammars and the role of input in the language acquisition process, in addition to what they can tell us about language variation and attrition. In addition to several chapters in the present volume, especially Westergaard and Andersson and Johannessen, see Putnam and Sánchez 2013, Putnam and Arnbjörnsdóttir 2015, Polinsky 2011, Benmamoun et al. 2010, Kim et al. 2009, Montrul 2008). This paradigm shift has rekindled interest in investigating NA Icelandic, especially now that the numbers of speakers are dwindling. With fewer speakers, the opportunity to fortify existing naturalistic corpora with specifically elicited data diminishes. North American Icelandic lends itself well to the study of features associated with heritage languages. It is spoken by a population that learned it as a first language until about age 5 or 6 when formal schooling began and English was introduced. Initial acquisition may have been fortified by early literacy in the L1 Icelandic as many consultants claim to have been able to read Icelandic before starting to learn English. NA Icelandic is also important for the study of heritage languages because immigration to the Icelandic conclaves stopped almost completely after about 40 years in 1914. That means that the language developed for over 60 years as a heritage language with minimal influence from Icelandic in Iceland. Icelandic is an interesting addition to the heritage language flora in different ways. Unlike Swedish and Norwegian, Icelandic has modest geographic variation. It is spoken by a tight knit community of speakers with a cultural and linguistic purism streak. Icelandic also has a rich morphology the development of which is interesting to study in contact with English.

The goal of this paper is to lay the groundwork for the next stage of NA Icelandic heritage linguistics. First the historical background of North American Icelandic and its speakers is outlined. This is followed by an overview of available corpora and

previous descriptive studies. Generalizations about features of the NA Icelandic lexicon, morpho-syntax and phonology are presented in the fourth section. These generalizations were chosen because of their perceived relevance to the current (and future) theoretical discussion within heritage language linguistics. The discussion is heavily influenced by Benmamoun, Montrul and Polinsky's white paper on heritage linguistics (2010). In the final section some suggestions for further research will be presented.

## 2. Background: Icelandic emigration to North America

North American Icelandic is spoken by descendants of emigrants from Iceland who settled in the Midwestern regions of the United States and Canada. Emigration from Iceland to North America began in the 1870s and ended (almost entirely) in 1914. Almost fifteen thousand Icelanders are documented to have emigrated between 1874 and 1914 (Kristjánsson 1983). From the end of immigration in 1914 up until 1975 there was limited communication between Iceland and the Icelandic immigrants in North America with the exception of the exchange of letters (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006).

Icelanders settled in many areas of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, but mainly in Winnipeg and in the Interlake on the shores of Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba in Canada and in North Dakota in the United States. Many of the immigrants settled initially in "New Iceland," a tract of land on the shores of Lake Winnipeg that was reserved for Icelanders alone. "New Iceland" was a self-governing language enclave for almost a decade with its own government and written laws in Icelandic. Later some of the settlers moved on to North Dakota and to other areas of North America. Today, speakers of Icelandic as a heritage language may be found in and around the original settlements but also as far as the West Coast of the US and Canada (Bessason 1967, Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006).

The number of Icelandic heritage speakers is not known. According to the Census of 1931 there were 19,382 persons who claimed Icelandic ancestry in all of Canada. Of the 82% of those who listed Icelandic as their primary language, 73% were born in North America. By 1961 the numbers of people of Icelandic descent had risen to 30,623 in Canada and 8,669 in the US. In 1986, 14,470 persons in Canada as a whole claimed Icelandic ethnic origins and of those, 6,980 lived in Manitoba. Of the 6,980, 305 claimed that Icelandic was their first language and 800 said that they had grown up with English and Icelandic as home languages (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006). The 2001 Census for the whole of Canada did not have a category for Icelandic ethnic origin, but the numbers in Manitoba alone had risen to 25,735 (up from 6,980 in 1986) for those who had Icelandic ancestry on one side and 4,785 who claimed to be of Icelandic background on both sides. This rise in numbers of Icelandic ancestry is most likely an indication of the increased interest that third and fourth generation immigrants have in their origins. In the census from 2001 there were not enough speakers of Icelandic to warrant a separate category and the numbers are therefore unavailable. It is an indication of how few speakers are left, though, that some of the

categories for other heritage languages had as few as 70 speakers (www.statcan.ca) (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006).

Many scholars have commented on the longevity or long survival of North American Icelandic especially given the number of emigrants (fewer than 15,000) and the fact that immigration went down to a trickle after 1914. There was not the kind of renewal that is known from other immigrant groups (Bessason 1984, Haugen 1956). People of the third and fourth generations from immigration still spoke the language in 1986, when the author collected linguistic data in the "settlements." The speech of the informants seemed fluent or, at least at the time, the lack of fluency, or a "slow speech rate" (Polinsky 2008), did not seem to be a noticeable factor warranting further examination.

Icelanders settled in rural communities where they were the dominant group, had their own governance and published papers and books in Icelandic. They also continued traditions of literary practice such as teaching children to read Icelandic prior to formal education. The Icelandic immigrants kept up the tradition of home schooling but established English schools immediately upon arrival. Bilingualism was encouraged (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006).

Icelandic was used almost exclusively by the early immigrants and many informants claimed to have been able to read Icelandic prior to the start of formal schooling. These informants do not therefore fit neatly into Benmamoun et al.'s (2010: 15) view that lack of literacy is a common characteristic of heritage speakers. Crucially though, these heritage speakers' language acquisition may have been fortified by early literacy, even though they were not all comfortable reading Icelandic as adults (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006). Icelandic has survived in these communities beyond the three-generation paradigm. Icelandic in North America diverged enough from Icelandic to be considered by Bessason (1984) a variety in its own right.

NA Icelandic consists of several regional subvarieties, familylects and idiolects. That is, different settlements may have developed separate dialectal features as suggested by many of the consultants, but so did families and even individuals. Subvarieties are thus made up of familylects and idiolects, both in the traditional sense as having the general idiosyncratic characteristics of individual speakers, and also reflecting the different ranges of embeddedness of English influences into the grammar of Icelandic that vary vastly from speaker to speaker (Stefánsson 1903, Bessason 1967, 1984, Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006).

After the initial decades of isolation, the linguistic situation in the Icelandic settlements in North America over more than a 130 year period constitutes a high contact situation, where NA Icelandic is a heritage language whose speakers have shifted their loyalties towards the dominant language, English.

Variation in the speech of adult bilinguals in heritage situations is social as well as grammatical. The contexts for language use become limited to friends, relatives, acquaintances, i.e., the most informal registers. When one of the languages is almost entirely relegated to the most informal speech situations, there is an added probability that language use, and therefore input, becomes variable making perception, and

thus acquisition, more difficult. Changes that are characteristic of the most relaxed register, or most informal speech, become prevalent. This is the case for NA Icelandic. Children who initially grow up speaking Icelandic go to school and bring home English, the younger siblings follow, and soon the children have a life in common that is outside the realm of the language of the parents. While the parents (i.e., those who learned English) were Icelandic-dominant bilinguals, the children, in most cases, become English-dominant. As the children's center of existence moves outside the home, English takes over, even in the most intimate speech situations. Formerly tightly knit social networks begin to disintegrate, new people move in who do not speak Icelandic, and children and grandchildren move on. English becomes the medium for transactions outside the family and with younger persons. Opportunities for language production diminish and along with that metalinguistic awareness in the heritage language and comprehension of the language exceeds the ability to produce the language (Putnam and Sánchez 2013). The level of metalinguistic awareness and unfamiliarity in speaking the language with non-intimates may affect consultants' performance as much as their general proficiency in the language and should be a consideration in research methodology (Benmamoun et al. 2010: 16).

Linguistic purism runs deep in Icelandic culture and found its way to the NA Icelandic settlements in the form of loyalty to the old language by many, as exemplified by the frequent newspaper articles deploring the condition of Icelandic in the "colony." Many NA Icelanders were avid readers of newspapers, books and poetry as seen in the prolific publishing of Icelandic texts by NA Icelanders (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006). Some of the consultants from the 1986 corpora mentioned that they themselves did not speak 'proper' Icelandic, often followed by a suggestion that they knew people who did. Comments like the following were quite common: "*hann pabbi talaði ósköp fallega íslensku*" 'my father spoke beautiful Icelandic' and "*amma kunni að tala rétta íslensku*" 'my grandmother knew how to speak correct Icelandic' and even "*börnin tala íslensku en eru nógu gáfuð til að tala hana ekki fyrir framan aðra*" 'the children speak Icelandic but they are smart enough not to speak it in front of others.' Others commented that their way of speaking was not the same as in Iceland but that it worked for them (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006). The author had an opportunity to take part in two social occasions in 1986 in Mountain – the centennial anniversary of the first Icelandic church in North Dakota, and an "Icelandic" picnic. Very little Icelandic was spoken on either of these occasions except in groups were one or more guests from Iceland were present. One informant remarked that the only time she could think of when Icelandic was used outside the home these days was at the funeral of a prominent "Icelander" out of reverence for the deceased.

Results of an informal survey of attitudes towards Icelandic by Icelandic Americans in North Dakota in 1986 provide a good picture of the use of Icelandic in North Dakota. Out of fifty people surveyed, thirty-two said they had spoken Icelandic exclusively to their parents and grandparents and most often to their siblings as preschool aged children. As adults, the same individuals speak Icelandic mostly to their siblings and not exclusively so. Most participants in the survey were able to read and

write Icelandic as children. Those surveyed who always spoke Icelandic as youngsters, ranged in age from forty-five to eighty-six at the time they were surveyed in 1986. Only three speakers were under sixty-five (Arnbjörnsdóttir 1990). North American Icelandic is spoken by bilinguals who, in 1986, used it almost entirely in the most familiar and intimate situations at home and with family and friends. They use English on all other occasions. The consultants seemed to be able to speak with some fluency, mostly with a natural speech rate. This differs from Polinsky's heritage language informants, whose language was characterized by slow speech rates (Polinsky 2008).

## 3. Previous linguistic research and available resources

North American Icelandic is a threatened heritage language with very few speakers left. Early studies focused on describing NA Icelandic, especially the NA Icelandic lexicon, and three main corpora have been collected that contain examples of NA Icelandic speech. Two of those were collected for ethnographic purposes with a focus on linguistic and cultural adaptations to a new way of life in a new environment. One corpus, collected by the author, focused on examining linguistic and social variation in NA Icelandic.

### 3.1 Early studies

The first reference to special characteristics of North American Icelandic speech in the linguistic literature is Vilhjálmur Stefánsson's article (1903) on English loanwords (nouns) in the variety of Icelandic spoken in North Dakota. At the time, Vilhjálmur estimates that there are about three thousand speakers of Icelandic in North Dakota. The purpose of his description is to shed light on how gender is assigned to new loanwords in the NA Icelandic lexicon along with reflections about their pronunciation. He provides a list of 467 nouns, 176 of which have been assigned neuter (sometimes words ending in -l, -ll; 137 masculine (e.g., English words ending in -r, -er); and 44 feminine. A further 110 words could have two or three genders depending on the speaker (Stefánsson 1903: 362). Stefánsson (1903) points out that there is "no uniformity of pronunciation" among loanwords in the speech of Icelandic immigrants living in North Dakota (355). He also mentions the variation in the degree of "mixing" amongst individuals in the settlement (Stefánsson 1903: 355). Some speakers might borrow heavily from English while many "use scarcely one of the words" in his list. It is therefore difficult to determine the degree of integration of the words on his list into NA Icelandic. It is not clear whether any of the words on his list come from spontaneous code switching, but the same variation in assimilation of loanwords in the speech of different individuals seems to be true today.

The bulk of what is known about the NA Icelandic lexicon comes from Haraldur Bessason's (1967) important article on borrowings in NA Icelandic based on interviews

he conducted in the early sixties. Bessason's examination of the NA Icelandic lexicon appeared in the journal *Scandiavian Studies* in February 1967. The study is based on thirty interviews Bessason conducted with NA Icelanders in 1963 and 1964. This is a decade prior to renewed interactions between Iceland and the heritage speakers in Manitoba. His consultants were 10 speakers from the Geysir district and 20 from Winnipeg. The conversations were casual and taped and excerpted on a card index. Five of the consultants were born in Iceland and came to Canada at an early age. Fifteen were second generation and ten were third generation Canadians in 1963–4 (born between 1917 and 1932).

Haraldur presents an analysis of lexical developments in NA Icelandic adopting a categorical system created by Haugen (1956). The categories were pure loanwords such as *beisment* (basement) and *address* (address); loanblends such as *drugbúð* (drugstore) and *sprústré* (spruce tree) and also loan shifts that include words which "have the appearance of an Icelandic word or phrase even though they occur in a new context" (Bessason 1967: 122). Examples of these are *blakkborð* (black board) and *kar* (car). Bessason (1967) concludes that nouns are the largest category of words borrowed into NA Icelandic followed by verbs and adjectives. He suggests that pure loan nouns are "brought into harmony with the largest declension types of the Icelandic grammar" (129). There is one exception to this; NA Icelandic proper nouns such as family names and place names have become Anglicized and are not declined according to Icelandic morphological rules. Names retain their English characteristics in otherwise Icelandic speech parts. This is the case for the twenty-five or so Icelandic place names approved for Manitoba by the Canadian Board of Place Names (Bessason 1967: 137). Names like *Arborg, Baldur, Gimli, Mikley,* and *Lundar* are found on Manitoba maps and pronounced according to English phonetic rules. In his article, Haraldur Bessason discussed the adaptation of Icelandic names and naming customs into English from a patronymic system ending in -son and -daughter to a family name system. Adoption of family names was not random. Bessason divides them into two main groups, one group containing names derived from the person's place of origin, the other involving Anglicizing the Icelandic last name.

Haraldur Bessason presents a list of 360 loan words, 47% of which have neuter gender, 29% have masculine gender and 20% are feminine. Only 4% show variation in gender. This list is compiled some 64 years after Vilhjálmur´s taxonomy of loan words and it suggests that their use has stabilized.

Very little is known about how second language learners learn grammatical gender and closer inspection of how loan words received gender in NA Icelandic could provide important insight into the universal characteristics of how and why adults seem to be consistent in assigning the same words to the same grammatical categories. This data warrants further examination in light of more recent studies of gender assignment by heritage speakers of Russian and Norwegian (Polinsky 2011, Hjelde 1996).

Before moving on to the structure of NA Icelandic, a few final words about the NA Icelandic lexicon are in order and its relevance to current issues in heritage linguistics. As described by Bessason (1967) and Sigurðsson (1984), the lexicon of North

American Icelandic reflects a changing culture, a changing way of life in the new world demographically and diachronically. NA Icelandic has numerous lexical additions; both borrowings and neologisms mostly in semantic fields related to geography, technology, education, farming and fishing as the settlers shifted from a costal culture to an inland culture, from mixed farming and fishing to agriculture and lake fishing, from home schooling to formal education. Needless to say almost all of the loanwords come from English as seen above.

Polinsky (2008) reports a correlation between lexical knowledge and extent of morphosyntactic attrition in heritage speakers of Russian. Benmanoun et al. (2010: 28) cites Hulsen's lexical retrieval studies that examined to what extent Dutch heritage speakers in Australia were able to retrieve nouns in two types of tasks; a picture-naming and a picture-matching task. The Dutch speakers were able to perform the picture-matching task (comprehension) but had difficulty performing the picture-naming task (production). This did not seem to be a factor in the picture-naming task that was part of the author's data collection on naturalistic speech in NA Icelandic in 1986 (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006). It would be specifically interesting to examine the role of early heritage language literacy on retrieval and production ability.

An area of heritage language studies that has not received much attention is the role of multi-word borrowings or chunks in code switching and in general language proficiency and use. Several English phrases and speech conventions from English have been borrowed into NA Icelandic, translated, adapted and are used with some frequency. It would be interesting to revisit the English words and expressions that are found in NA Icelandic and have also found their way into modern Icelandic from English. Some of the NA Icelandic data dates from the late sixties and early seventies and the author's own data from the late eighties. In 2006 when the 1986 study became a book (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006), a reanalysis was necessary for many of the words and phrases in the NA Icelandic data, as they had over the course of 30–40 years become part of modern Icelandic. Again a word of caution: It is very difficult to determine which words are the results of code switching and which are "legitimate" words in the NA Icelandic lexicon. The fact that more than one speaker uses the words could still merely be an indication that speakers are likely to transfer certain types of words and expressions from English to Icelandic. That, in and of itself, would be an interesting area of further study as it would shed light on the language use of bilinguals and when and how they switch from one language to another.

### **3.2** Available NA Icelandic corpora

Three corpora with naturalistic North American Icelandic speech are available for further linguistic study. Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson collected about 60 hours of interviews with about 90 informants in 1972–1973 (Eiríksson 1974). The informants were from Manitoba, North Dakota and British Columbia and the goal was to collect stories and poetry about life in the Icelandic "settlements" in North America for ethnographic

purposes. The corpus includes about 60 hours of data including naturalistic conversation, reading and poetry (www.arnastofnun.is).

Gísli Sigurðsson (1984) collected interviews with twenty informants from Winnipeg and from Gimli, Riverton and Árborg in "New Iceland" in 1981–1982. He collaborated with Haraldur Bessason on the data collection and they developed a guiding questionnaire focusing mainly on work related topics and daily life in the informants' youth. The goal was to gather linguistic and ethnographic data on how Icelandic had been adapted to realities in the New World: new methods of lake fishing, agriculture, the lumber industry, food and anything related to human existence. Gísli made an effort to elicit natural speech. These interviews are now available orthographically transcribed and in digital form at *Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum* in Reykjavík (www.arnastofnun.is). In his language analysis, Gísli focuses on lexical change and used Haraldur Bessason's categorization system from 1967. Gísli divides the categories into (1) loan shifts, (2) loan words, but adds an important category, (3) which includes various characteristics "that cannot be traced to the influence of English" (Sigurðsson 1984).

The third corpus of NA Icelandic was collected by the author as a part of a variation study of NA Icelandic phonology. The author conducted interviews in 1986 with 50 consultants from Winnipeg, "New Iceland" in the Interlake area of Manitoba, around Wynyard in Saskatchewan and from North Dakota in The United States. Interviews with thirty-eight of the informants from North Dakota and New Iceland provide the empirical basis of a book published in 2006 (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006). The consultants were heritage speakers, men and women in age ranging from 30 to 83 years who had acquired the language at home as children. They had not received formal instruction in Icelandic, but many were able to read Icelandic as children prior to the onset of formal education in an English medium school. Many were third and fourth generation immigrants. Data were collected through three types of interview strategies. The first part of each interview was a general conversation (from 20 minutes up to several hours for group interviews). The topics of the conversations were usually the experiences of the informants' ancestors when they came to the new world in an effort to elicit a register where the least amount of attention would be given to speech (Labov 1972). Second, informants were asked, individually, to perform a picture identification task, naming objects or actions illustrated in twenty-six pictures. None of the consultants seemed to have difficulty with this task. Finally, some of the consultant read short passages (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006: 80–82). This corpus is being incorporated into the IcelandicSpeech Corpus,[1] *ÍsTal, Íslenskur talmálsbanki* (https://notendur.hi.is/~eirikur/istal/) for further study and analysis. The general description of the grammar of North American Icelandic presented in the next section is mainly based on the author's study.

1. This work is funded by The Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Research Fund and The University of Iceland Research Fund.

The main emphasis of the 1986 study is on examining the linguistic and social variables affecting apparent vowel mergers in NA Icelandic. Based on the data collected the author also presents a short overview of other grammatical features that characterize North American Icelandic as it was spoken in 1986. These include other aspects of phonetics and phonology (consonant clusters and especially the vowel system), examples from syntax (e.g., case assignment, word order, agreement, use of the subjunctive) and morphological changes. However, much of the data collected still remains to be systematically analyzed.

It is a challenging task at best to collect the appropriate data for the study of heritage languages and identify the methodology best suited for the investigation at hand (Polinsky 2008). No data is available where specific grammatical structures of NA Icelandic have been elicited. The naturalistic corpora described here contain linguistic production by Icelandic heritage speakers with different levels of fluency that may be performance based, i.e., due to a lack of facility with using the language in formal situations, with non-intimates. However, the fact that emigration ended in 1914 and the relative fluency of the remaining speakers in the corpora minimize difficulties in identifying who actually is a heritage speaker, a problem pointed out by Benmamoun et al. (2010: 20). Efforts are currently under way to elicit data specifically for the purpose of examining some of the linguistic features described below.

## 4. Another glance at North American Icelandic as a heritage language[2]

Below, some grammatical features of North American Icelandic are presented. This is not an exhaustive description and the features included were chosen primarily because they are consistently found in the speech of a cross-section of its speakers and because of their perceived relevance to the current discussion in heritage linguistics. We begin with a note on morphology.

### 4.1 Morphology

Morphological changes received a great deal of attention in early descriptive studies of immigrant language attrition. The studies reported collapse of oblique cases, regularizations of verb paradigms and loss of tense distinctions (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006, Karttunen 1977, Lambert and Freed 1982). The vulnerability of morphology to attrition (or incomplete acquisition) is also a prevailing view in the current heritage literature (see discussion in Benmamoun et al. 2010) especially in languages with rich morphological systems. Bar-Shalom and Zaretsky (2008) claim that this is a "hallmark" of heritage languages (281), more so in case markings in nominal than verbal morphology (Benmamoun et al. 2010: 31). The reasons for this are not clear.

2. The title is borrowed partially from a subtitle in Benmamoun et al. (2010).

Benmamoun et al. (2010) suggest that inflectional morphology is extra-syntactic and thus heritage speakers reflect either a reduced ability to perform post syntactic operations or some confusion in the mechanism of case licencing (39).

North American Icelandic shows surprisingly little attrition in its morphology, and although variation is found in the overt marking of case, there are no speakers who display a consistent loss of these distinctions. The case system of North American Icelandic does not differ in major respects from that of Icelandic in Iceland. Nominal case is assigned either by prepositions or by verbs in Icelandic. There are a few characteristics of case assignment that warrant further scrutiny. These will be presented briefly below.

The most consistent characteristic in NA Icelandic morphology is that, unlike in Icelandic in Iceland, proper names of people and places are always in the nominative case regardless of the preposition that precedes them. In case assignment by prepositions in general there appears to be an interplay of transfer of English meaning onto the NA Icelandic form, a collapse of two or more prepositions into one, and other phenomena that warrant further study. The NA Icelandic preposition *fyrir* functions in many cases like the English 'for' and includes the meaning of Icelandic *í* in some cases as in *ég lenti á spítala fyrir tvær nætur*, 'I was in the hospital for two nights.' The Icelandic *fyrir* can have the same meaning as 'for' as in …*búið að gera nýjar blæjur fyrir gluggunum* DAT [….búið að gera ný gluggatjöld fyrir gluggana ACC] '…had made new curtains for the windows' (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006). Although there are some changes apparent in this category, the influence of semantic transfer should not be ignored and awaits further study.

Icelandic nouns are difficult to categorize according to inflectional patterns, as there is no general consensus on the number of declension patterns for Icelandic. Nouns in Icelandic have four cases: nominative, accusative, dative and genitive, and three grammatical genders: masculine, feminine and neuter. In the NA Icelandic data there was some variability in overt marking of case, both by prepositions and by verbs, although this was neither regular nor consistent upon preliminary analysis.

Some examples of regularization of paradigms are found in NA Icelandic verbal morphology. Verbs in Icelandic are divided into two main classes according to the conjugation patterns they follow. There are twenty-four conjugation classes in all, but for our purposes a description of the weak and strong classes suffices. Weak verbs are those whose past tense is formed by adding a suffix that consists of *ð, t* or *d* + vowel – four classes in all. Examples: *kalla* INF *-kallaði* PST, *heyra* INF *-heyrði* PST and *telja* INF *-taldi* PST where the root vowel must also be changed. The strong verb classes have irregular conjugation paradigms and consist of much fewer verbs than the weak class. The strong conjugation paradigms are characterized by the various vowel changes in the verb roots. Note that the term regular and irregular classes are purposely avoided in this context, as they do not neatly apply to verb conjugation classes in Icelandic. Icelandic verbs can have regular endings, but also vowel alternations in the stems (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006).

In the NA Icelandic data the majority of borrowed verbs seem to be conjugated according to the most common verb class exemplified by *kalla-kallaði*. In addition, strong verbs are conjugated as weak verbs, weak verbs are re-categorized and strong verb paradigms are simplified. None of these were extensive in the data but need further study. A few examples where a strong verb is conjugated as a weak verb are included here for illustration. The first line has examples from North American Icelandic and the second example is from European Icelandic.

(1) *maður sem hlaðaði* PST *því* (NAI)
[maður sem hlóð PST því] (EI)
'A man who loaded it'

(2) *hann kveðaði* PST (NAI)
[hann kvað PST] (EI)
'he recited'

(3) *þau hlaupuðu* PST *framhjá* (NAI)
[þau hlupu PST framhjá] (EI)
'they ran past'

(4) *það voru menn sem bjóu* PST *þetta til* (NAI)
[það voru menn sem bjuggu PST þetta til] (EI)
'there were men who made this'

(5) *ég róaði* PST *yfir vatnið* (NAI)
[ég réri PST yfir vatnið] (EI)
'I rowed across the lake'

There are a few examples of loss of umlaut i.e., verbs which have alternations between (a)–(ö), (a)–(ɛ). Notice if this were merely a case of phonetic change i.e., unrounding of front rounded /ö/, the sound would become /ɛ/ as in *kvertuðu /kvɛrtʏðʏ/. This is not the case. The forms in the following examples have the underlying sound /a/ in all forms in the paradigm:

(6) *þeir kvartuðu* PST *undan því* (NAI)
[þeir kvörtuðu PST undan því] (EI)
'they complained about it'

(7) *stúlkurnar sem þær voru að leika sér við talaði* PST *ekkert nema íslensku* (NAI)
[stúlkurnar sem þær voru að leika sér við töluðu PST ekkert nema íslensku] (EI)
'The girls that they were playing with spoke only Icelandic'

(8) *þeir kalluðu* PST *mig Gallann* (NAI)
[þeir kölluðu mig PST Gallann] (EI)
'They called me 'the Gall'

A prominent modification in NA Icelandic morphology is in the case assignment by a category of verbs called impersonal verbs with subjects in oblique cases (quirky subjects). These will be discussed in the next section.

## 4.2 Impersonal verbs

Impersonal verbs assign oblique cases (accusative, dative or genitive) to their subjects (often referred to as quirky subjects). Impersonal verbs do not agree in person and number with their subjects and are always in the 3rd person. Impersonal verbs in Icelandic can be subdivided according to their thematic roles into accusative subjects (about 175) and dative subjects (about 300) (Jónsson 1997–1998). There are also a handful of genitive subjects that will not be discussed here.

Verbs like *langa* 'want/long for,' *vanta* 'need,' and *gruna* 'suspect' have accusative case. Others carry dative case such as *þykja* 'seem to be/believe to be,' *finna* 'perceive/feel,' *vera illa við/vera vel við* 'like/dislike,' and *sýnast* 'to appear.'

The change in impersonal verbs with quirky subjects in North American Icelandic seems to be caused by three processes interacting: The first one is a preference for dative subjects where accusative subjects would have been 'appropriate'. This process is found in all varieties of Icelandic in Iceland. There are two processes likely caused by transfer from English. The first is a shift which causes a recategorization of impersonal verbs as personal verbs that now receive nominative case. The second is the relexification of several verbs into one, *vanta,* the cognate of English 'want' which has become a personal verb with nominative case in North American Icelandic (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006). These two processes are referred to as nominative preference below.[3]

The extent of dative preference and nominative preference in impersonal verbs in the speech of the emigrants to North America is not known, nor the extent of its use in Iceland at the time of the emigrations although its existence is documented in the 19th century (Viðarsson 2009). Below are some examples of dative preference.

In the examples below the verb *langa* has retained its meaning in NA Icelandic and should retain the accusative subject as in *hana langar í köku*, but the subjects have dative case which is in line with the phenomenon found in European Icelandic (EI).

(9) *Henni* DAT *langaði* (NAI)
[Hana ACC langaði] (EI)
'She wanted'

(10) *Mér* DAT *langar til að tefla* (NAI)
[Mig ACC langar til að tefla] (EI)
'I want to play chess'

The following examples of dative preference are not found in Icelandic in Iceland. Here the verb *langa* has been collapsed into *vanta* in NA Icelandic.

(11) *Svo vantaði henni* DAT *náttúrulega að vita hvað það væri* (NAI)
[Svo langaði hana ACC náttúrulega að vita hvað það væri] (EI)
'Of course she wanted to know what it was'

3. This is also called dative substitution and nominative substitution.

(12) …*þeim* DAT *vantaði að vera þar sem var nógu mikill viður* (NAI)
[þeir NOM þurftu að vera (vildu vera?) þar sem var nógu mikill viður] (EI)
'…they needed to be where there was enough wood'

In the following examples from NA Icelandic the verbs have become regular personal verbs and assign nominative case to their subjects. In the first example, the subject is in plural nominative and the verb agrees. In Icelandic in Iceland the subject is in the dative case:

(13) …*þeir* NOM PL *voru* PST PL *illa við úlfana* (NAI)
[…þeim DAT PL var PST SG illa við úlfana] (EI)
'…they did not like the wolves'

(14) …*pabbi* NOM *var nú alltaf illa við það* (NAI)
[…pabba DAT var nú alltaf illa við það] (EI)
'…dad never liked that'

(15) … *ég* NOM *var alltaf illa við fisk* (NAI)
[… mér DAT var illa við fisk] (EI)
'I always disliked fish'

All of the subjects below are experiencer subjects and do not fall into the category of subjects associated with nominative preference above. The phrases *að vera vel við* 'to like' or *að vera illa við* 'to dislike' have dative experiencer subjects in Icelandic. In this case one would expect few deviations given the tendency to use dative above, but the preferred case is nominative and the subject and verb also agree in number as in personal verbs.

The verb *þykja* 'seem to be/believe to be' also has a dative subject in Icelandic in Iceland but in the examples from NA Icelandic the preference for nominative subject is clear. This is seen in the sentence below that has a coordinated/conjoined subject yet the verb retains the singular form where one might expect a plural form consistent with personal verbs.

(16) … *mamma og pabbi* NOM *þótti voða gaman* (NAI)
[… mömmu og pabba DAT þótti voða gaman] (EI)
'… mom and dad liked it'

(17) … *unga fólkið* NOM *þótti þetta erfitt* (NAI)
[…unga fólkinu DAT þótti þetta erfitt] (EI)
'…the young people thought it was difficult'

The North American Icelandic verb *vanta* 'need' has almost entirely been given the function of its English cognate 'want' and is used as such to cover the meaning of Icelandic verbs like the impersonal *vanta* and *skorta* (both with accusative subjects), and regular personal verbs like *þurfa*, *þarfnast* and *vilja* (all with nominative subjects). The meaning of these verbs has been collapsed into the meaning of English 'want' and relexified into the personal verb *vanta* in NA Icelandic.

(18) *Ég* NOM *mundi ekki vanta að vera … .* (NAI)
[ég NOM mundi ekki vilja vera] (EI)
'I would not want to be'

(19) *Maður gerði það sem maður* NOM *vantaði* (NAI)
[maður gerði það sem maður NOM vildi] (EI)
'One just did what one wanted'

In the sentences above, the verb 'want' overtly represented by *vanta* in NA Icelandic has the semantic function or meaning of *vilja* in Icelandic in Iceland. *Vilja* is a regular verb with a nominative subject.

The results reported here support an overall thesis that speakers might try to reconcile the cognitive and grammatical function in case assignment. However, the results also suggest a more complex process wherein three factors interact. Two of these processes are possibly the result of transfer from the dominant language: one due to relexification and subsequent recategorization of impersonal verbs as personal, the other due to meaning shift and recategorization as impersonal verbs become personal. The third process is the dative preference found also in Icelandic in Iceland and may be a simplification process that reduces the number of variables available to the speakers in case assignment of impersonal verbs. The next obvious step is to place the data described above into the theoretical context of the nature and development of impersonal verbs in general and into their role in the development of heritage language grammars in particular. This process also suggests that developmental processes may be more complex than simple surface features may suggest.

### 4.3 Anaphoric binding

Heritage speakers seem to have general difficulty in establishing syntactic dependencies at a distance. This includes anaphoric binding relations (Kim et al. 2009, 2010, Polinsky 2006). Benmamoun et al. (2010: 36) call for more data on binding in more heritage languages. Long distance anaphoric binding seems to have almost disappeared from NA Icelandic as seen in the examples below. Obligatory anaphoric binding between an antecedent and anaphor that reside in the same tensed clause is found both in Icelandic and in English. On the other hand, long-distance binding between an anaphor and its antecendent exists in Icelandic across clause and sentence boundaries. This is not found in English. The general consensus is that the presence of subjunctive mood is required for long-distance binding to occur in Icelandic. So any loss of subjunctive mood could have repercussions for anaphoric binding in Icelandic. While clause bound anaphora is intact in NA Icelandic, no examples of long distance binding were found in the data. The first example contains clause bound reflexives, which pose no problem for the NA Icelandic consultants:

(20) *Hún hafði börnin í kringum sig*
'She had the children around 'herself"

(21) *Maður gerði vel að halda í sér bara lífinu*
'One did well to keep oneself alive'

In the instances where long distance binding could have occurred in NA Icelandic, consultants did not produce the forms and show an obvious uncertainty through pauses and hesitations as in the examples below from Sigurðsson (1984) and Arnbjörnsdóttir (2006):

(22) *Þeir$_i$ voru vanir við þetta frá þeirra$_i$ (sínum) heimalöndum*
They were used to it from selfs' (ANPH) home countries
'They were used to it from their home countries'

(23) *Hann$_i$ segir alltaf að mamma hafi verið svo vond við … mig$_i$ (sig$_i$)*
He$_i$ says always that mom was very mean to self$_i$ (ANPH)
'He$_i$ always says that mom was so mean to him$_i$'

The following example is still clausebound, but it seems that the further away from the antecedent, the more difficulty the speaker has in producing the reflexive form.

(24) *Hann$_i$ bjó hjá ömmu sína$_i$ og afa og langafa*
He$_i$ lived with self's$_i$ grandmother and grandfather
'He lived with his grandmother and grandfather
*… <u>hans$_i$</u> (sínum)*
… and his$_i$ great grandfather
…and his great grandfather'

These examples were found in naturalistic data that were not elicited for the purpose of examining anaphora. Anaphoric binding in NA Icelandic is further explored in Putnam and Arnbjörnsdóttir (2015), and also currently in an extensive data collection effort to elicit specific linguistic data on binding in NA Icelandic.

## 4.4 Subjunctive

Montrul (2008) defines an individual's grammar as incomplete when it fails to reach age-appropriate linguistic levels of proficiency as compared with the grammar of monolingual or fluent bilingual speakers of the same age, cognitive development, and social group. She introduces a study on the acquisition of the subjunctive in Spanish referencing Blake (1983), whose subjects did not show categorical knowledge of Spanish subjunctive until after age 10. Heritage speakers who receive less input at an earlier age and no schooling in the language never fully acquire all the uses and semantic nuances of the subjunctive in Spanish, as reported in many studies (see Benmamoun et al. 2010: 45). This is reminiscent of Jakobson's (1968) regression hypothesis, which states that the process of language attrition is the reverse of language acquisition or language learning process. Structures acquired late in childhood would thus be the first to disappear in attrition (see the chapters in this volume by

Johannessen and by Westergaard and Anderssen), or alternatively, late acquired features may not reach the level of fluency required for retention into adulthood supporting a notion of incomplete maintenance rather than incomplete acquisition (Putnam and Sánchez 2013).

The NA Icelandic data revealed some loss of subjunctive but sometimes only in the overt marking of subjunctive. Speakers would sometimes substitute the Icelandic subjunctive forms with the word *mundi,* possibly transferring English 'would' (a form also found in Icelandic in Iceland). The example below shows this (subjunctive forms in Icelandic are in the second line):

(25) … *ég mundi ekki vanta að vera* (NAI)
[… ég vildi SUBJV ekki vera] (EI)
'I would not want to be'

In most cases the subjunctive mood is replaced by verbs in indicative mood as in the examples below.

(26) *Þeir vildu nú ekki trúa mér að ég kom* IND *frá Kanada* (NAI)
[Þeir vildu nú ekki trúa mér að ég kæmi SUBJV frá Kanada] (EI)
'They would not believe me that I came from Canada'

(27) *Ég hélt að það var* IND *miklu kaldara* (NAI)
[Ég hélt að það væri SUBJV miklu kaldara] (EI)
'I thought it was much colder'

For some consultants the loss of subjunctive is very clear as even in a sentence from a reading passage that said 'hefði' SUBJV, the NA Icelandic reader read 'hafði' IND.

(28) *Sumir sögðu að hann hafði* IND PST *átt að keppa* (NAI)
[Sumir sögðu að hann hefði SUBJV átt að keppa] (EI)
'Some said that he should have competed'

Preparations are already under way to examine when Icelandic children acquire subjunctive in order to compare with the development of subjunctive in Icelandic as a heritage language.

## 4.5 Syntax

According to the heritage language literature, syntactic knowledge is resilient under reduced input conditions (see also Johannessen, this volume). This is true of the NA Icelandic data. However, a prominent change in the syntax of NA Icelandic is in the position of the finite verb, especially verb-second (V2). V2-languages require the finite verb to be no further to the right in the clause than in second position, following a clause-initial phrase. Placement of verbs in Germanic languages varies from one language to another. In particular, English separates itself from other Germanic languages

in that it has a very restricted V2 rule. In English, the finite verb remains in situ in the verb phrase (VP) while auxiliaries appear outside the VP (Eyþórsson 1997–1998). Håkansson (1995) reports that her Swedish heritage speakers have native-speaker control of the V2 phenomenon. The Icelandic heritage speakers seem to have varied control of V2, especially in sentences with sentential adverbs, sometimes referred to as "verb-third" (V3). V3-order (where the finite verb follows a sentential adverb) is possible in most types of embedded clauses in Icelandic, but it is severely restricted and heavily marked (Angantýsson 2007). This may explain the variability in the NA Icelandic data. The NA Icelandic examples below contain adverbs that could be categorized as sentential adverbs. In these examples finite verbs are in third position. The first two examples involve main clauses, where the placement of these adverbs is not possible in Icelandic. The third example, however, involving the adverb *fyrst* in an embedded clause, would be possible in Icelandic.

(29) *Dolly stundum talar íslensku* (NAI)
[Dolly talar stundum íslensku] (EI)
'Dolly sometimes speaks Icelandic'

(30) … *við aldrei notuðum*… (NAI)
[… við notuðum aldrei…] (EI)
'… we never used …'

(31) *Hún var fjórtán ára þegar hún fyrst kom frá Kanada* (NAI)
[Hún var fjórtán ára þegar hún kom fyrst frá Kanada] (EI)
'She was fourteen when she first came from Canada'

The issue of verb placement (including V2) is being explored in an ongoing project where further data is being elicited specifically to examine the nature of this word order phenomenon in NA Icelandic and its importance to acquisition and attrition.

### **4.6** Phonetics and phonology

The pronunciation of heritage speakers remains an understudied area of heritage linguistics (Benmamoun et al. 2010: 28). The NA Icelandic speakers all spoke with some level of an English accent. Clearly though, the accent differed from the accents of those who have learned Icelandic as a second language. Phonetic and phonological change is a matter of theoretical debate on what constitutes bilingual proficiency as opposed to second language proficiency.

The study reported here examined the social and linguistic constraints which affected the occurence or non-occurrence of one specific feature of NA Icelandic phonology undergoing change, namely *Flámæli*. *Flámæli* 'skewed speech' refers to the apparent mergers of two sets of front vowels, on the one hand /ɪ/ and /ɛ/, and on the other hand their rounded counterparts /ʏ/ and /ö/ so they become homophonous. See examples below.

(32) Loss of distinction between /ɪ/ and /ɛ/
*viður* 'wood' and *veður* 'weather'

(33) Loss of distinction between /ʏ/ and /ö/
*flugur* 'flies' and *flögur* 'chips'

*Flámæli* was considered undesirable language. *Flámæli*, previously a pronounced feature of speech in three geographical areas of Iceland, was stigmatized and through official efforts around the middle of the previous century was almost eradicated from modern Icelandic speech.

These efforts took place around the middle of the last century or about sixty years after the first emigrants left Icelandic in 1873. It is safe to assume that at least some of the emigrants had *flámæli*. The author has argued that in fact the majority of the emigrants did **not** have *flámæli* (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2006). Yet, in NA Icelandic, *flámæli* has developed and spread unchecked by the preservation forces that reversed its spread in Icelandic in Iceland. There is ample evidence to suggest that once in North America, the linguistic conditions as Icelandic became a heritage language were created that caused the vowel mergers to accelerate. The results of the variation study show that the vowel mergers are confined to long vowels, and the younger the informant, the more likely he/she is to have this feature in their speech, women are more likely than men to have *flámæli* and informants in North Dakota are more likely than informants in "New Iceland" to merge the vowels.

Teasing apart the role of input and the effect of intense language contact, but also recognizing the sociolinguistic conditions that frame heritage speakers' language use and may affect structural developments is challenging, but the sociolinguistic conditions cannot be ignored in the development of explanatory theories of bilingual language acquisition and use.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion I would like to summarize why the NA Icelandic data and the preliminary analysis presented here should be of interest to heritage language linguists. First the NA Icelandic consultants are unquestionably heritage language speakers. As Polinsky (2008) has pointed out, one of the challenges inherent in the study of heritage languages is to identify consultants who are actual heritage speakers who have not had formal instruction in the language making them similar to second language learners or even L1 speakers. Because immigration to North America from Iceland ceased in 1914, there was little fortification of the developing language in the new world (letter writing is an exception to this). These are excellent conditions for heritage language development.

Secondly, NA Icelandic is a new language in the pool of languages available for further study. Some corpora exist and efforts are under way to gather more data that

addresses specific structural features of interest to heritage linguists, but also to linguists interested both in property theories and in transition theories of language.

Many of the structural characteristics of NA Icelandic are of interest and are being examined in other heritage languages. The available naturalistic data is important for a reanalysis given a new research paradigm, but the corpora need to be strengthened with elicited data that is collected to address specific grammatical characteristics. Some of the identified characteristics of NA Icelandic are a marked tendency toward phonological neutralization, lexical restriction, simplification and regularization of morphology (Benmamoun et al. 2010), changes in V2 (Håkanson 1995), attrition in the subjunctive (Montrul 2008), changes in the use of anaphora (Kim et al. 2009, Putnam and Arnbjörnsdóttir 2015) and issues related to gender assignment (Polinsky 2011).

Important questions remain unanswered about how reduced input affects language acquisition and regression. It seems relevant that features of morpho-syntax such as subjunctive, long distance binding and V2 in Icelandic as a heritage language may illuminate how features acquired late in the acquisition process may attrite first. Is this due to incomplete acquisition or incomplete maintenance because they are not a characteristic of the caretaker speech the child is exposed to in early childhood (see also Johannessen, this volume, for similar questions)? Or are they caused by attrition of a grammatical system that at some point was "complete" but simplified due to language shift? Or are the features a result of transfer from the dominant language? These questions pose challenges for research methodology in this emerging research field.

Lastly, the description presented above is based on existing naturalistic data. Hopefully it has laid the groundwork for directions in further data collection, especially what type of additional elicited data is needed in order to illuminate specific features of the structure of NA Icelandic phonology and morpho-syntax. New data may also illuminate the role of age and amount and nature of input in language acquisition and regression across the lifespan of bilingual heritage speakers.

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