

Can language of the Vikings survive English onslaught?

By Ragnar Jónasson

1 "Coffee and kleina" reads a large sign at a roadside coffee shop by one of the main roads in Reykjavik. Not so many years ago, such a billboard would simply have read: "Kaffi og kleina" – in the language of the Vikings, the official language of Iceland.

2 It is a privilege of the few to be able to read and write Icelandic, a language understood by only around 400,000 people worldwide. Icelandic, in which the historic Sagas were written in the 13th and 14th centuries, has changed so little since then that we can still more or less read them as they were first written.

3 But Iceland is not so isolated anymore, and there are signs its language is facing challenges never seen before. Following the economic crash of 2008, and the subsequent collapse of the Icelandic currency, tourism has emerged as the largest industry in Iceland, with 2.5 million tourists expected to visit a country of 350,000 people in 2018 alone.

4 And everyone is catering to the tourists in English, of course. At restaurants and coffee shops, people frequently use English rather than Icelandic. Companies are rebranding themselves in English. The importance of tourists to the economy is rapidly making English not only a second language in the service industry, but almost the first language.

5 8. Icelanders have always been very proud of their literary heritage, boasting that we write and read a lot of books. However, Icelanders bought 47% fewer books in Icelandic in 2017 than they did in 2010, a very sharp decrease in a matter of only six years.

6 Will Icelandic soon become the second language of Icelanders? All languages evolve, but so far Icelandic has adapted to technological changes by creating new words for modern inventions such as the telephone (sími), TV (sjónvarp), email (tölvupóstur) and computer (tölva). Further evolution is, of course, 9. But with the ubiquity of English, is the Icelandic language at risk of disappearing more or less completely? And if it is in danger, should we make an effort to save it?

7 The government, led by a prime minister who holds a degree in Icelandic literature, has recently proposed that the state should reimburse 25% of the costs of publishing books in Icelandic. This legislative proposal could turn things around. On a smaller scale, but with similar objectives in mind, myself and fellow crime writer Yrsa Sigurðardóttir set up a debut



author award last year in Iceland to encourage emerging authors to keep writing in the language.

- 8 There is another sign of salvation on the horizon, from an unlikely source. Icelandic rap has been growing in popularity in recent years, and the leading artists in that genre usually write their lyrics in Icelandic, rather than English. Looking at the top songs in Iceland on Spotify, there are four Icelandic rap songs in the Top 5 – all performed in Icelandic. 11 .

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