

Language as a part of national identity: Icelandic in the newspaper *Framfari*

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When the first Icelanders emigrated to North America, Iceland was fighting for independence from Denmark, and the Icelandic language was an important weapon in that fight. It was used to define the nation and its purity, uniqueness and original character were seen as the key to shared ideology through literature, along with land and history (Hálfðanarson, 2001). But if shared ideology about nationhood relies on the history, land and language, what happens when the land is no longer the same?

In 1875 a group of Icelanders moved to the western shore of Lake Winnipeg, where the Canadian government had reserved for them a piece of land that would only be available to Icelanders. We are so lucky that only two years after the first Icelanders stepped on to the shores of Lake Winnipeg, they started a newspaper, *Framfari*, that lasted for two years. From *Framfari* we get valuable information on those first years of the settlement and it reflects people's sentiments towards the colony, the Icelandic culture and the language. The main goal of *Framfari* had been to publish a newspaper for education, learning and entertainment but also in order to maintain the Icelandic language and ethnicity in the New World (Til kaupenda og lesenda Framfara, 1877). The editorial board saw it as their duty to install a sense of nationalism and educational passion for Icelanders in Canada and to encourage them to maintain their language and literature but also to applaud all true progress among Icelanders in the country, both educationally and practically, in the firm hope that this policy would be better than if the relationship with those back home would break, resulting in the loss of their Icelandic identity in Canada (Boðsbréfið, 1879).

Discussions on language aren't cumbersome in the paper, but we can see that English, with its majority status, was seen as necessary in order to increase people's opportunities, particularly on the job market, and speaking English was desirable. However, at that point, there is no indication of speaking Icelandic or having an Icelandic accent being considered a disadvantage by any means, unlike what was later to be, particularly in Winnipeg (Matthiasson, 1989), and which is common in standard language ideology (Lippi-Green, 1994).

However, the most interesting discussions in *Framfari* have to do with the disputes on the status of New Iceland and the future of the settlement. Some of the settlers still believed in the unity of the history, land and language, arguing that the Icelandic language and identity could only be saved in North America if the Icelandic settlers stuck together, shared a colony, whereas others believed that the language could be saved in the west even if the speakers ventured on to other parts of the country. Then there were the voices that believed the Icelandic identity shouldn't be saved at all and that the settlers would only flourish if they lived among other nationalities and learned from them, arguing that the Icelandic culture was in fact inferior to the English one—a sentiment quite distant from that argued for back in the home country.

In these disputes, the focus was never really on the language itself, but it was the key to the culture and therefore the key to maintaining the Icelandic national identity in North America. This is clear from the argument that while the Icelandic literary legacy was not available in English, the Icelandic language remained crucial. However, in those early years, the disputes were not so much about whether the Icelandic language was a necessary part of the Icelandic national identity, but for how long the Icelandic identity should be kept in North America and whether it was worth maintaining. In fact, in those years the Icelanders in Canada might not have been trying so much to negotiate who they were but rather who they should be.

References

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