

## The current status of regionally distributed phonological variation in Icelandic

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Sociolinguistic research on attitudes towards linguistic variation (e.g., Giles 1970; Labov 1966/2006) and folk perceptions of regional variation (Niedzielski and Preston 2003) has shown that those factors can have a direct impact on language use and its development. Although traditional, regionally distributed phonological variation in Icelandic has been comparatively little (Árnason 2011; Auer 2005), it has been an integral part of Iceland's linguistic culture. The existing variation is well documented with three extensive studies on the distribution and development of phonological variants spanning the past seventy years, including studies of linguistic change in real time and apparent time (Guðfinnsson 1946; Thráinsson and Árnason 1992; Thráinsson 2011).

In this talk, we will present selected results of a current overview study, in which 960 informants aged 12–95 from all around the country participated in an online survey with several tasks to both get an overview of the current status of existing phonological variation and attitudes towards it. All informants listened to verbal guises of speakers showing features of regional pronunciation different from those typical of their home area. Then, they answered a questionnaire including a voice-placing task (Niedzielski and Preston 2003) and closed and open-ended evaluation tasks directed at their attitudes towards different regional variation (cf. e.g., Kristiansen 2004) and their own way of speaking as well as descriptions of existing variation concerning speaker awareness and folk conceptualizations. The presentation focuses on four regional phonological variables:

- (1) North-East
  - a. **Hard speech**, i.e. post-aspiration of /p, t, k/ after long vowels: *tapa* [tʰa:pʰa] ('lose'), *líka*, [li:kʰa] ('like'), *bíta*, [pi:tʰa] ('bite') as opposed to lack of such post-aspiration.
  - b. **Voiced pronunciation** ("raddaður framburður") with voiced sonorants before an aspirated stop: *hempa*, [hempʰa] ('cassock'), *mennta*, [mentʰa] ('educate'), *hjálpa*, [çaulpʰa] ('help') as opposed to voiceless sonorants in this position.
- (2) South-East
  - a. **hv-pronunciation** in words like *hvalur*, [xa:lyɾ] ('whale') has a voiceless velar fricative [x] in initial position, as opposed to the general *kv*-pronunciation ("kv-framburður") with [kʰv] in this position.
  - b. **monophthongal pronunciation** ("skaftfellskur einhljóðaframburður"): *bogi*, [pɔ:ji] ('bow'), *magi*, [ma:ji] ('stomach'), as opposed to the more common diphthongal pronunciation ("tvíhljóðaframburður").

In the RÍN project in the 1980s (Thráinsson and Árnason 1992), the northern voiced pronunciation and the southern *hv*-pronunciation showed very clear correlation with age, in the sense that the younger age-groups were less likely to use the variants in question than the older generation, while the northern hard speech and the southern monophthongal pronunciation had relatively equal distribution with respect to age. However, the overall use of the four regional varieties had declined from Guðfinnsson's (1946) study in the 1940s, to a varying degree, with the hard speech being the least endangered variety. Our results indicate that both the voiced pronunciation and the *hv*-pronunciation are fading out, while the monophthongal pronunciation and, in particular, the hard speech are maintained in their respective core areas (Friðriksson, Angantýsson and Bade, 2024).

Common language users refer to the variants in (1) as *norðlenska* ("Northern Icelandic"), as opposed to the majority pronunciation spoken in the Southern part of Iceland, including the capital region of Reykjavík, and referred to as *sunnlenska* ("Southern Icelandic"). Although *norðlenska* and *sunnlenska* are the most prominent examples of folk terms of phonological variation, attitudes towards regional pronunciation have so far played a negligible role in existing research, but new insights indicate that language users' preference of *norðlenska* on an aesthetics scale is mainly traceable to *harðmæli* (hard speech), whereas *raddaður framburður* (voiced pronunciation) is not met with the same positive attitudes (Guðmundsdóttir 2022, 2024).

In addition to the well-established regional pronunciation variables, we will consider two relatively recent phonological variants in Icelandic, i.e. so-called höggmæli, i.e. glottalization and/or debuccalisation of plosives preceding nasals, and affrication of /tj/ clusters in initial position. The distribution of höggmæli was studied in RÍN (Árnason and Thráinsson, 2003), and the data indicated that the phenomenon was very likely to spread further in the near future (see also discussions in Thráinsson and Gíslason, 1993). This variant has not been investigated since then, apart from Sigurjónsdóttir (2021, 2024). The affrication of /tj/ clusters in initial position has been prominent in the speech of younger generations (see Karlsson, 2007) and recent studies have shown that it may be more common among children that grow up with intense digital contact with English (Magnússon, 2019). We will also present new results on the distribution of this phenomenon in our talk.

As for folk beliefs, it appears that, in general, participants consider speech that contains northern features to be clearer than speech that does not. In similar fashion, participants appear to find these northern features to be more easily recognizable, at the same time as they seem to be more closely linked to speakers' self-identity than other regional features. Based on results from interviews with 137 informants who also took part in the online survey, we will provide some new insights into folk beliefs regarding both the regional variants and the more recent (age related) phonological variation.

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