

## **Iceland's tech imports are killing the Icelandic language**

Jake Flanagan, <https://qz.com/420342/icelands-tech-imports-are-killing-the-icelandic-language/>

“I think Icelandic is not going to last,” Jón Gnarr, comedian and former mayor of Reykjavik, [tells PRI](#). “Probably in this century we will adopt English as our language. I think it’s unavoidable.”

The culprit, according to Gnarr, is packaging. Despite numbering among the most developed countries in the world, Iceland sustains itself on a trade model typical to less affluent places: exporting primarily raw or lightly processed natural resources and importing consumer goods. After refined petroleum and aluminum oxide, major imports include automobiles, aircraft, pharmaceuticals, and computers. These items often arrive from or by way of English-speaking countries (Canada, the United States) or companies; meaning proficiency in English is required for a range of everyday tasks, from deciphering a car-owner’s manual, to measuring a dose of acetaminophen.

According to PRI, anglicization begins in the delivery wards: “Births take place with the aid of medical devices whose instructions are in English, so hospital staff must be able to read English.” But penetration of the language goes beyond the practical—there are cultural impetuses, too. Ari Páll Kristinsson, who leads language planning at the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, told PRI that, at Icelandic funerals, it’s not uncommon for friends and family to memorialize loved ones with English-language songs.

Iceland has a rich history of linguistic diversity. Dark Age settlers spoke Norse and Gaelic. Seventeenth and eighteenth-century traders and fishermen brought German, Dutch, French, and even Basque. The island was under revolving-door rule of Danish and Norwegian monarchs, who imposed their respective languages on as well. But the biggest linguistic shakeup arrived with the Second World War, when American and British forces set up camp to repel what was thought to be an inevitable German invasion. (Iceland was a sovereign kingdom in personal union with Denmark at the time; with Copenhagen falling to the Nazis by 1940.) At the height of American occupation, 40,000 soldiers were stationed on the island—far outnumbering native-born Icelandic men.

According to Egil Helgason, [writing for The Grapevine](#) (an English-language newspaper published in Reykjavik), “cultural influence from the States pervaded” during those days. “Icelanders aspired to drive American cars, the only television station in the country was run by the US military, their radio stations pumped out Elvis Presley to rock hungry Icelandic youth.” And the Icelandic government didn’t do much to combat the allure. “By comparison, the only Icelandic radio station allowed to operate at the time, which was state-run, only seemed to feature symphonies, folklore and long weather reports,” Helgason writes.

But what started as reasonable affinity for the most culturally impactful language on Earth has evolved into a language-killing dependency. “Our everyday lives are becoming more and

more dependent on devices operated by computer technology, devices that more frequently are operated with voice command,” wrote Ingibjörg Rósa Björnsdóttir in [a 2013 column for The Grapevine](#). She spoke with Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson, a professor of Icelandic grammar, who added, “The more our everyday lives become a field where we can’t use our mother tongue—which is not something happening to an isolated group of people, but all Icelanders—the more danger it is that people give up on the language, thinking: ‘Why bother learning this language, why don’t we just switch over and start using English so we can be competitive in a modern world?’”

A 2012 report ranked Icelandic among the 30 likeliest European languages to succumb to “digital death” in the next 100 years, beaten out only by Maltese in terms of risk. Though Google has made a small effort to offer Icelandic voice-services for its software and devices, Rögnvaldsson doesn’t believe it’s a sustainable arrangement: “We don’t have any control over this; it is Google that owns this technology and we can’t use it for just any devices we have here. Google can decide at any point to stop offering this service or start charging us for it or whatever,” he said.

Realistically, major tech-development firms aren’t likely to prioritize an Icelandic-speaking population of just over 300,000. The market simply isn’t big enough to offer an Apple or Google or even Nokia any real value. The solution, according to Rögnvaldsson, is for Icelanders concerned with the future of their language to engineer their own software and devices: “We need to create our own software, that we have ownership of and can use however we like.”