

Icelandic in an International World

How Music, Movies and Other Forms of Art Are Integral to Linguistic Protection and Revival

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The day I discovered that Icelandic existed was through the channel Music Choice. I was 12, and “Little Talks” by Of Monsters and Men had recently blown up internationally. On this day, in some suburban living room, I became enamored by the funny little P-looking letter tucked within the about the artist section on the corner of the screen: “Of Monsters and Men consists of Nanna Bryndís Hilmarsdóttir, Ragnar Þórhallsson...”

Over the last year or so I had been flirting with the idea of learning another language. My sixth grade elementary school teacher taught us Latin for two weeks during our Ancient Rome unit, and I had tried to learn enough Dutch to write a diary inaccessible to my nosy younger brother. And in this moment, as my eyes rested upon this elusive not-P, I realized my destiny rested in front of me: to become the intolerably quirky girl I dreamed of being, I needed to teach myself Icelandic.

Twelve years later and *tala ég góða íslensku*. Some of my oldest and dearest friends are Icelanders who I either met online or in-person through other friends during the several times I would visit the country and crash their classes at Háteigsskóli and later at Menntaskólinn við Hamrahlíð. I have also built a network of *íslandsvinir* and Icelanders living in the same cities as me.

I only got as far as I did thanks to luck and privilege. All of the content on Icelandic Online was free at the time. Most of my flights were paid for by stupefied family members through the now-defunct Wow Air (may it rest in peace). Besides getting a free place to stay, I was gifted with plenty of books and DVDs by my friends, their parents, and one very kind teacher. I engulfed myself into the Icelandic music culture, translating lyrics and following unknown bands on social media. And as a white

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American teenager learning the language for fun, I wasn't treated with the same linguistic prejudice as many people of colour living in Iceland.

Why was I successful in my plight to learn Icelandic? How can one successfully encourage others to learn and speak the language? And what is the Icelandic government missing?

For the last six years I've lived in Quebec, the only fully French-speaking province in Canada. While their population eclipses Iceland's by 23 times, and the number of French speakers in the province being 17,000 times bigger than that of Icelandic language, Quebecers experience a similar threat to their language. Like Iceland, Quebec has had a surge of migration by largely non-French speakers, either from abroad or from one of the English-speaking provinces. Like Iceland, Quebec's culture is saturated by English music, television and movies. Like Iceland, Quebec gets a large portion of its revenue from the tourism industry. However, unlike Iceland, Quebec has been, for better or worse, very proactive in the promotion of the French language.

The government offers free French classes to immigrants that often comes with financial aid. In April of 2024, the Quebec government announced that they were investing roughly 603 million CAD into the promotion of French over the next five years, 187.3 million CAD specifically going to expand the accessibility of French media on streaming services. I've even seen stickers on the doors of corner stores asking customers to be patient as the shop owner is learning French.

However, through the collateral impact of prioritizing French, the non-French speaking communities throughout the province suffer. Native English speakers, who settled the area around the same time as the French colonists, lack certain services and resources in English that French speakers get. One time, during an ER visit, I spoke to a Canadian man who didn't speak any French while we waited to get admitted. While I only had to wait for around three hours, he had been there for about ten; there apparently were no doctors who could serve him in English. However, once my nurse found out I was a native English speaker, he switched to English with ease.

This irony is amplified by Quebec's minimal effort in protecting and promoting the Indigenous languages spoken throughout the province. Despite Quebec currently holding the largest share of Indigenous language speakers in Canada, the government has only pledged to invest 300 million CAD into Indigenous languages and cultural initiatives, about half of what they are investing into the French ones.

While this is still a generous amount of money, this is pale in consideration to the genocide committed by the Quebec and Canadian governments. Most notably, for over 160 years, the Canadian government committed several acts of genocide against the Indigenous Nations, most notably through residential schools. Clergymen, paid by the Canadian government, stole Indigenous children from their homes and relocated them to "schools" where they were "re-educated". These children were subject to countless forms of abuse, and were not allowed to speak their languages or participate in their cultures.

After the closure of the last residential school in 1997, Indigenous activists pushed the Canadian government to officially recognize their role in the genocide. These activists were and continue to be paramount in the protection and promotion of their languages.

Music also has the ability to guard certain cultural lineages, especially in places like Louisiana. Speakers of Creole, and other variants of Louisiana French declined greatly after the United States government mandated both English-only education as well as segregation by race. The protection of the French language became a secondary issue to ones more pressing, like the Civil Rights movement.

The tide started to turn after the Second World War, where French soldiers discovered Creole and its usefulness in interpreting between French and English on the battlefield. French-speaking American soldiers returned home to Louisiana with a renewed love for their culture. What followed was a sort of cultural renaissance, with the creation of genres like zydeco, jazz, swamp pop, and ragtime. As the music became well known throughout the States, more and more mainstream, predominately white singers began to adopt and appropriate certain aspects from genres, leading to things like rock and roll.

All of these cultural movements led to action by the Louisiana government, who in 1968 created the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL). This, in turn, continued another sort of revival to the language, with people now deliberately creating books, music, and other forms of art in French. While there is still a lot of work to preserve Louisiana French, it is likely that without this intervention these dialects would be extinct.

Cultural and linguistic investment is also paramount to protecting and encouraging Icelandic. As artists who sing in languages besides English gain popularity, people who may be completely disconnected from the culture become interested. Bands like BTS and Bad Bunny have directly increased enrolment in Korean and Spanish through fans who knew little or nothing about those cultures before the popularity of the bands. Even native Icelandic speakers benefit from musical artists performing in their native language. Since the Irish-language rap group Kneecap went viral last year, the interest in Gaelic has soared. If the Icelandic people encouraged internationally acclaimed singers like Laufey or Of Monsters and Men to release songs or covers in Icelandic, perhaps it would continue to grow interest in the language in and out of Iceland.

More easily accessible Icelandic media internationally would also help the language grow. Through my years of learning Icelandic, I've met many Icelanders who grew up abroad and speak little to no Icelandic. While they're interested in learning and connecting with their culture, the lack of materials available to them renders learning/maintaining their levels of Icelandic nearly impossible. New parents abroad even struggle to provide engaging, popular material in Icelandic to their children. If Icelandic TV shows and movies were available on more streaming services online with Icelandic subtitles, then more Icelanders abroad would be able to hold on to their

culture and language. And much like the “Kneecap Effect” in Ireland, the increase in Icelandic TV shows and movies internationally would increase the “coolness” of the language, and also help Icelanders abroad maintain their skills.

However, the best solution to saving Icelandic may just rely on being patient, empathetic and diligent. Both as a learner and as a speaker, the only way to save Icelandic is to put effort into understanding others.

As a language learner, it is easy to feel ashamed and embarrassed by your accent. Mine is so thick that some people still have a hard time understanding me. But it is better to speak with an accent than to not speak at all. So speak it with mistakes. Speak it half in English if you need to. But be proud of your mistakes. Be proud of your accent. It is a testament to your hard work and your strength. And communicate that you are learning. If an Icelander really wants to protect their language and culture, they will learn to understand accents.

On top of this, unlike some places like the United States, almost every Icelander is multilingual, meaning that the plights of the language learning experience do not fall on deaf ears. Whether it is English, Danish, or one of the several other languages taught in Icelandic schools, every single person understands what it is like to learn more than one language.

As an Icelander, the best thing to do is be flexible, patient and curious. One of my favourite customers at my waitressing job and I became close because I had to speak to her in broken Spanish and she would speak to me in broken French. And while many of our conversations end up in English, we both give each other a positive experience in speaking the languages we have not quite mastered yet. *Þú getur það sama.*