

Language Purism and Gender

Icelandic Trans Activists*

and the Icelandic Linguistic Gender Binary

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Abstract In this essay, the authors offer the case of Iceland as a “language frontier” for the trans* community, given the nationalistic linguistic context and the deeply gendered nature of the Icelandic language. We begin by briefly outlining the legal situation with respect to trans* identification and the ability to transition. We then outline the conflict over terminology in the context of the Icelandic language and Icelandic national identity. Using empirical interview data, we discuss the difficulty Icelandic poses as a language for trans* identified people, given the deeply gendered nature of the language. We see no easy solution to this complex problem of language, nationalism, and identity.

Keywords gender binary, trans* identities, language frontier, Icelandic language, Icelandic nationalism

The global, transnational nature of trans* movement organizing has mixed effects in nationalist linguistic contexts. In particular, when “correct” or “inclusive” language regarding trans* identified people involves the importation of English terminology into another language, this form of verbal hygiene may be seen as anglophonic imperialism (Cameron [1995] 2012). Further, the use of English language terminology by trans* people in social movement organizing can add to the perception that trans* identities themselves are foreign, exterior to the nation and the polity (Szulc 2015). Iceland offers one example of some of these issues. Language issues are always important in Iceland, given the close connection of the Icelandic language with national identity. Icelandic is a deeply gendered language, which makes for particular difficulties for anyone who wishes to challenge traditional (cis)gender norms, roles, and forms of expression.

In this essay, we offer a case study of Iceland as a “language frontier.” We begin by briefly outlining the legal situation with respect to trans* identification and the ability to transition. We then outline the conflict over terminology in the

context of the Icelandic language and Icelandic national identity, with particular attention paid to two “language boards”—the Personal Names Committee (Mannanafnanefnd) and the Icelandic Language Committee (Íslensk málnefnd)—which are tasked with protecting the national language especially from incursions from foreign languages. Finally, using empirical interview data, we will discuss the difficulty Icelandic poses as a language for trans* identified people, given the deeply gendered nature of the language. This is particularly difficult for those who do not wish to identify as either male or female. We shed light on this predicament with examples that relate to speech practices, personal names, and simple forms of expression.

Trans* Equality in Iceland

Iceland is a Nordic welfare state (*norrænt velferðarríki*), and this context also shapes the situation of trans* identified people in Iceland in complicated ways. Although gender reassignment is legally recognized, nondiscrimination laws do not include gender identity, and, until recently, a number of outstanding legal questions remained concerning Iceland’s trans* community. The transgender community is small in Iceland, and an independent transgender group, Trans Ísland, was formed in 2007. A member of the organization estimated the entire trans* population of Iceland to be perhaps fifty people (Pepin 2012). According to our respondents, most trans* people in Iceland have gone abroad to complete the transition process until recently, and the number of trans* persons who have changed their name is considerably higher than those who have undertaken their transition process in Iceland (Norðfjörð 2013: 22). Beginning in 2009, the Ministry of Health conducted a formal review of matters relating to gender reassignment surgery, including oversight of the process and the resolution of legal issues regarding changing one’s name and gender in official records (Danish Institute of Human Rights 2010). The resulting report led to proposed legislation from the Ministry of Health. The legislation was passed in 2012 by the Alþingi (Parliament [Alþingi 2012a]).

The stated purpose of this legislation, which went into effect on June 27, 2012, is to “guarantee individuals with gender identity disorder equal legal status with others, in keeping with human rights and human integrity” ([Markmið laga þessara er að] tryggja einstaklingum með kynáttunarvanda jafna stöðu fyrir lögum á við aðra í samræmi við mannréttindi og mannhelgi) [Alþingi 2012a]). The law defines as transgender an individual who, from a young age, perceives having been “born into the wrong sex, and [has] a desire to belong to the other sex” (Alþingi 2012a). The legislation also establishes that the National University Hospital will house a team of specialists on gender identity disorder (GID), and also that the Ministry of Health will appoint a panel of experts to administer the

gender change process. The role of the medical specialists is to “supervise the diagnosis and recognized treatment of individuals with gender identity disorder” (Alþingi 2012a). Once someone has been diagnosed with GID, the expert panel notifies Registers Iceland (Þjóðskrá Íslands), an agency that registers different information on Iceland and its residents and issues certificates, passports, and identification cards. After that, the person can change the relevant legal documents, including changing their name to a name approved for their new gender. (We will have more to say on this below.) Another purpose of the law is to make it easier for people who complete the transition process outside Iceland to obtain the legal documents that they need in Iceland. The law also contains provisions for those who wish to return to their original gender. The explanatory notes on the bill state that even though no one in Iceland has sought to revert to the previous gender, the procedure for such cases must be taken into account; the bill makes a reference to Sweden, where 15 out of 650 persons, or about 2 percent, have reported wishing to revert to the previous gender since 1972 (Alþingi 2012b: 19).

Gendered Personal Names

For everyone born in Iceland, a gender-appropriate forename (first name) or forenames are still required according to Icelandic law. The Personal Names Committee (Mannanafnanefnd) oversees naming in accordance with the Personal Names Act (Lög um mannanöfn No. 45/1996). The committee consists of three members and three alternates appointed by the minister of justice for four-year terms. They are nominated by the faculty of philosophy and the faculty of law of the University of Iceland, one in accordance with a nomination by the Icelandic Language Committee (Alþingi 1996). The Personal Names Act requires “gender appropriate” names, that is, “girls shall be given women’s names and boys shall be given men’s names” (Stúlku skal gefa kvenmannsnafn og dreng skal gefa karlmannsnafn” [Alþingi 1996]). A main purpose of the Personal Names Committee is to preserve Icelandic names and name traditions. Names must be capable of having Icelandic genitive endings, must have become established within Icelandic language traditions, and may not conflict with the linguistic structure of Icelandic. Significantly, no name can be both a woman’s and man’s name at the same time, unless it is based on an Icelandic tradition codified in the explanatory notes of the bill; the Personal Names Committee has to rule in each case as to whether a foreign name will be accepted as either a woman’s or a man’s name (Alþingi 1996).¹ In 2010, the man’s name Hávarr was rejected by the committee, since the way it was written—with double *r* (*rr*) instead of one—conflicted with the ordinary rules of Icelandic orthography, and because this form of writing was not established by tradition (Jónsdóttir 2010: 9).

These laws apply to all children born in Iceland, and until recently also applied to immigrants who wished to become Icelandic citizens. Until 1997, Iceland required immigrants to change their first name to an Icelandic name when applying for Icelandic citizenship (Alþingi 1996; see also Willson 2009). Most Icelanders do not have family surnames; most Icelanders' second names are a patronymic, ending in *-son* or *-dóttir*. Although matronymics are becoming more familiar, both patronymics and matronymics are formed according to Icelandic grammar in the genitive case "with the suffix son in the case of a man or dóttir in the case of a woman," as stated in the Personal Names Act (Alþingi 1996). One example of this is Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, a woman whose mother is Ásdís. Ásdís was a single mother, which is the reason why Ingunn chose to use matronymics in the 1970s (DV 2000: 28). In recent years, it has become more common to use matronymics as well as patronymics, often with one of them signified with a second initial between the personal name and the patronymic/matronymic, for example, Dagur B. Eggertsson, the mayor of Reykjavík, whose mother is Bergþóra, denoted with a *B*.

As Kendra Willson points out, "Iceland is known for an extremely successful policy of linguistic purism," and one aspect of this purism "is a historically strict policy on personal names" (Willson 2009: 8). Iceland chose not to adopt fixed surnames in the early twentieth century, unlike the other Nordic countries, and Icelanders could not adopt new fixed (i.e., family) surnames after 1925 (Willson 2009: 8). The naming system in Iceland is seen as part of national language purity. The explanatory notes accompanying the Personal Names Act state that it would cause irreversible damage if Icelanders "lost the remarkable heritage of their specific Icelandic surnames. Hence they have duties towards themselves, their heirs, and the outside world to preserve this heritage as they can" (Alþingi 1995; author's translation). As Ari Páll Kristinsson notes, the Icelandic Language Committee was created in the 1960s, at a time when there were perceived threats to the language, given the standing presence of American and British troops at the NATO base at Keflavík (Kristinsson 2012: 349–50). Prior to this development, Kristinsson argues, there had already been broad public consensus in Iceland about the importance of maintenance of the language, "characterized by traditional purist language ideology, closely related to Iceland's literary tradition" (Kristinsson 2012: 3). Everyone in Iceland is known by their first name, so a person's first or given name is of primary importance socially. Since matronymics have become more common, the space for inclusiveness and equality has increased, and children of single women often take up matronymics. In addition to Ingunn Ásdísardóttir mentioned above, Heiðar Helguson, a well-known football player in Iceland, has used a matronymic since the age of eighteen to honor his mother (Ormarsson 2011: 20).

The Icelandic language is thus seen as central to Icelandic national identity, and preserving the Icelandic language is part of the core mission, for instance, of the University of Iceland. The university was established in 1911, before which time a university education was available only outside Iceland; most scholars went to Denmark to receive their degrees. Iceland did not become independent from Denmark until 1944, and language and national identity are thus deeply intertwined. Hence, among the aims of the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, operated within the University of Iceland, is “promoting greater knowledge of the Icelandic language, strengthening it, preserving it in its spoken and written form and providing advice and guidelines on language usage on an academic basis, including, among other things, terminology and neologisms” (Árni Magnússon Institute 2006). Accordingly, there have been continuous attempts at preservation, and importation of non-Icelandic words has been thoroughly monitored. An example of such efforts are the popular “language features” on radio and in newspapers, as described on the Árni Magnússon Institute’s website under the heading “Pure Icelandic?” (Árni Magnússon Institute 2015).

In comparison with the other Nordic countries, Iceland has imported far fewer words. In a study of editorial newspaper texts from the year 2000, Icelandic had twenty-four imported words per ten thousand words of text, in comparison to eighty-seven words in Danish (Sandøy and Kristiansen 2010: 153). This fact has been attributed to the independence struggle, in which the national language had been used as a chief argument for a nation-state (Kristinsson 2012: 346). Those who can read contemporary Icelandic, for example, can also read the Icelandic sagas, which date mostly from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Handritin heima 2001). While for older generations Danish was the primary second language, English is now taught in elementary school and has become the second language of most Icelanders, though it is also seen as the language against which Icelandic needs to be protected most. Although four of the national languages among the five Nordic countries have a common root (Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, and Icelandic), English is commonly used as the lingua franca throughout the Nordic states (Arvidsson 2012: 6).

Choosing a gender-appropriate name, then, also needed to be addressed in the context of Iceland’s new law on the rights of individuals with GID. The law specifically states that part of the legal process requires changing one’s name to a name for the appropriate gender, in accordance with the Personal Names Act. Only one name has been approved for both genders (regardless of gender identity), *Blær*, and the Personal Names Committee generally approves names based on the gender of the person who has or is being given the name (RÚV 2013). This means that most people will be required to change their forename when going through the legal transition process. This, of course, is not completely unique to

Icelandic; as Tam Sanger notes, “most languages just do not have words to encompass a wide diversity of identity markers” (Sanger 2010: 263). Legal categories that cast transgender identities in binary terms fail to include many people who might see themselves as part of the transgender umbrella or spectrum (Hines 2010; Sanger 2010; Monro 2010). This is a common problem when making claims for recognition by the state, even as these claims operate differently in different contexts (Brown 1995). Sanger calls for more empirical studies of trans* in all iterations (issues, identities, resistances, lived realities), with an attention to materiality and lived identity practices (Sanger 2010). We see our study as a contribution to this project, and one that sheds light on the problem of language and translation.

Gendered Language

The Icelandic language is also an example of how language frontiers shape the social and cultural landscape of transgender discourse and existence. Icelandic nouns have one of three grammatical genders: masculine, feminine, or neuter (neutral). Among the language’s complicated grammar rules is that nouns, adjectives, and verbs are all declined for gender. Nouns are declined in four cases: nominative, accusative, dative, and genitive, all of which vary in gender (masculine, feminine, or neuter). Furthermore, there are separate personal pronouns for masculine (*hann*), feminine (*hún*), and neuter (*það*) words. Hence, the gender of a person is interwoven with verbal expression in a complicated way, and the spoken language is entirely permeated with deictic references to the gender of the speaker and addressee. Hence the gender of the subject is always utterly transparent in the language itself, whether written or spoken. A person who expresses that she or he is tired, sad, happy, and so on automatically reveals her or his gender; “ég er leiður” (I am sad) is a male expression, while “ég er leið” is a female expression. If we were to create a hypothetical gender-neutral expression, it would be “ég er leitt,” but this expression is not in use, even among our respondents. In Icelandic all persons have a gender, and thus saying “ég er leitt” would imply that the speaker is an animal or an object.

Thus, even for simple expressions, using a gender-neutral formulation is not compatible with the Icelandic language; it would sound almost as depersonification or objectification of oneself. As one of our respondents noted in conversation (though not in the formal interview), it would be nice to be able to order a cup of coffee without referring to oneself as a thing—but this is not how Icelandic works. Efforts to introduce a gender-neutral pronoun in Icelandic—*hán* (Villiljós 2013)—similar to the Swedish *hen* (Ledin and Lyngfelt 2013) have so far been unsuccessful. This is what we mean when we say gender “utterly” permeates the language, and why it is difficult in Icelandic to be a person and not be gendered as male or female.

Considering these constraints, Icelandic presents a number of challenges for anyone who wishes to challenge traditional binary categories of gender. “Given” or first names—the name by which everyone is known in Iceland—must be approved by the Personal Names Committee and are gendered in a binary manner, with almost all names specifically identified as “male” or “female.” In addition to the binary-gender second name traditions of *-son* and *-dóttir*, it is also difficult to escape from the gender tyranny of the Icelandic language in ordinary everyday conversation and expression. The close ideological and political connection between Icelandic independence, national pride, and the Icelandic language also makes it all the more precarious to challenge the gendered structure of the language.

How Trans* People Deal with Language

We conducted twenty-five interviews in an Icelandic case study during the summers of 2013 and 2014 based on a theoretical sample and a snowball method, asking respondents to identify additional possible respondents, consisting of queer people, trans* people, and feminist activists (Josephson, Einarsdóttir, and Sigurðardóttir 2016). The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Icelandic, except for one that was conducted in English. Of our respondents, eight identified as trans*, and all identified as Icelandic except for one. Themes were identified from the transcripts, which were then entered in the qualitative data analysis software Atlas for further analysis. All names in this article are pseudonyms. Our working language is English, which we believe ensures the confidentiality and anonymity of our participants.

In the following, we shed light on how language frontiers shape the social and cultural landscape of transgender discourse. First, we address the Icelandic language tradition and its consequences for trans* existence, and second, the resistance of the younger generation to comply with the gendered tyranny of the Icelandic language. In Iceland, the struggle of trans* people for name change has been met with more and lengthier resistance than the issue of gender reassignment surgery (GRS) and treatment. GRS has been practiced in Iceland since 1996, owing to supportive individuals within the medical profession in Iceland in the 1990s, particularly the director of health at the time, Ólafur Ólafsson (Alþingi 2012b). As Iceland has a public health system, GRS is free of charge except for additional plastic surgery for “cosmetic” reasons (Alþingi 2012b; Josephson, Einarsdóttir, and Sigurðardóttir 2016). Much more resistance has surrounded the cultural aspects of trans* existence, such as personal names, name change, and language issues. Name change was one of the most important issues for the organized trans* movement, Trans Ísland, upon its founding in 2007. The struggle for recognition of name changes at the national registry was more than only a

symbolic matter. According to existing practice before the 2012 law on trans* issues, trans* individuals had to have completed a GRS transition in order to get their name changed. For trans* people moving to Iceland from abroad, a new Icelandic identity number, and hence a gender-appropriate name, was a condition for medical services, including nonmedical procedures such as beard removal (Baldursdóttir 2008). Hence, the name issue was at the core of the personal identity of trans* people, reflecting a deep sense of physical and subjective exclusion and marginalization.

The act allows people to obtain a new identity number and change their name after they have been diagnosed with GID and have “been under the [medical specialist] team’s care for at least eighteen months and . . . ha[ve] been living in the other gender for at least one year” (Alþingi 2012a). This requires regular appointments with the overseeing doctor. Our interviews with leading figures in the Icelandic trans* movement reveal that this change has been the most important victory of the movement until now. Although the legal improvements are conceptualized in medical and pathological terms, and the name change provisions remain directly linked to the medical establishment, the trans* community nonetheless regards this as a success. While some of our respondents acquiesce to this fact, some of the younger interviewees find their own ways to resist. Olivia, a young, radical activist among our participants, for instance, does not take this too seriously and keeps a certain distance from her doctor. “He wants me to meet him every two to four weeks, I try to see him two to three times a year . . . we don’t agree on the appointments.”

Another of our respondents who sees the struggle for trans* rights as a form of language activism is Pat, another activist who identifies as transgender and wants gender to be fluid. Pat is not planning to transition and rejects categorization. Pat refers to her/himself as either he or she and has both a male and female name. Pat sees the name issue as political: “There is some politics behind it . . . also for myself. I wanted to be able to use both names [female and male] and express my gender identity depending on how I felt when I woke up each morning, you see. I wanted to use the name that fit me at the moment, because names are so extremely gendered.” This fact is even more obvious to our respondent who is of foreign origin. Noting that he is often (mis)read as “a gay guy,” he explains that it is even more difficult to escape gender labeling in Iceland than in other countries because of the language: “I feel that it’s a lot more like pronouns [are] used all the time, like people are gendering language also, if anything . . . Icelandic is so gendered so it is just there all the time.”

The term *trans* has been contested in Iceland, for reasons related to the subject matter of trans* issues but also in linguistic terms. During the time the new act on trans* people was being prepared, critique emerged regarding the title

of the bill, which addressed trans* people in medical terms as “people with GID.” In its review of the bill, the Center for Gender Equality in Iceland² expressed its dissatisfaction with the pathologization of trans* issues as they are embedded in the GID approach, while at the same time suggesting another title for the bill that is no less controversial, that is, “Sex Change” (“Kynskiptiaðgerð”) (Alþingi 2012c). The Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association, Siðmennt, also criticized the GID terminology as degrading for trans* people. While Siðmennt does not accept the term *GID*, the association says it is not ready to suggest a better word (Alþingi 2012d). This hesitation to adopt “trans” likely relates to the broader concern about importing English-language terms into Icelandic. Examples of responses to this concern include international words with the prefix *trans* that are translated into Icelandic, such as *transistor* (*ferðaútvarp*) and *transnational* (*þverþjóðlegur*). This indicates that both the Center for Gender Equality and Siðmennt have doubts about the term *trans* and its anglophone origin, while supporting the struggle of trans* people in all other aspects, particularly in their concern about medicalization and pathologization.

This concern about *trans* and about GID as a pathologization of trans* identities is also reflected in our interviews. While the majority of the trans* community embraces the term, there are a few persons, however, who reject the term for different reasons. In the interviews, some reflect on discourses and meanings attached to the term in the trans* community. We are told that some trans* people object to the term *trans* on the basis that it is not Icelandic, reflecting the strong tradition of language preservation. Others may want to simply identify as a woman or a man after GRS and do not see “trans” as part of their identity after transition—and this sentiment is certainly not unique to the Icelandic trans* community. Jenny, a person among our respondents who has undergone GRS, does not identify as trans* and refuses the term. Jenny identifies as a woman with a transsexual past and feels that she fits best into the group “women.” Donna, a long-term trans* activist, describes “trans*” as yet another dimension in the multiplicity of gender expressions. Hence she sees trans* women as being in alliance with feminism alongside other marginalized groups of women such as black, lesbian, and disabled women—trans* thus being one of many possible intersectional identities. She has no reservations, about either the subject matter of trans* activism or the cultural expressions in the Icelandic language, so she claims “trans woman” as her identity.

Evidently, members of the trans* community have a variety of views regarding the gendered nature of Icelandic as well as regarding the relationship of specific trans* identities and of the gender binary to their own ways of identifying. In general, it was the younger/newer members of the community who were more likely to challenge the gender binary and make reference to terms like *genderqueer*,

which is a loan word used in Iceland. They also were more likely to be involved in international/transnational communities of trans* activists.

Conclusions

Iceland presents a case study in the problem of language and translation in relation to trans* identification and activism, and in relation to gender equality and justice more generally. As a Nordic welfare state, Iceland has a broad societal commitment to equality and fair treatment, as well as a state bureaucracy that is tasked with implementing gender equality. Like other Nordic states, this gender equality bureaucracy is now being tasked with a broader mission, including implementing policies regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, and the trans* community. This commitment to justice and fairness is part of Icelandic national identity—so much so that gender equality is seen as part of Iceland’s foreign policy.

Yet, as we have seen, Icelandic national identity is also intertwined with the Icelandic language, which is deeply inflected with a (cis)gender binary even in simple forms of expression. The gender binary is enforced through the Personal Names Committee, according to dichotomous gendered naming traditions. And *trans* is not an officially approved term, since it is seen as an importation of English into Icelandic. Hence, the 2012 law is structured entirely around the English-derived medical classification “gender identity disorder” (*kynáttunarfandi*)—reflecting both the pathologization of trans* identities and Icelandic language purity—despite the objections of the Center for Gender Equality, which claims that this classification constitutes medicalization of trans* identities. Amid all these contradictions, the trans* community has succeeded in achieving some of its aims, such as the ability to legally transition and change one’s name without GRS. Yet we have also seen the difficulties that someone like Pat, who cannot legally use both of his/her names, continues to face in the Icelandic linguistic and cultural gender context. Given that there is not agreement on the term *trans*, even among those supportive of the trans* community, it is not easy to see how the gender binary might be challenged from within the Icelandic linguistic context.

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Notes

1. Icelandic nouns take different forms that depend on case as well as the gender of the noun; there are four cases.
2. The Center for Gender Equality is the “state feminist” bureaucracy, so it is the formal body within the government that develops and enforces policies related to gender equality.

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