

Arnbjörnsdóttir, Birna. 2006. *North American Icelandic: The Life of a Language*. Manitoba: The University of Manitoba Press. 165 pages.

In her monograph, Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir focuses on North American Icelandic, the language spoken by descendants of the Icelandic immigrants to North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The book is based on Arnbjörnsdóttir's 1990 doctoral thesis at the University of Texas where she examined *flámæli* in North American Icelandic, a phonological transition that was taking place in Icelandic at the time of the emigration. The book is focused on a wider issue than the dissertation, its purpose being to inform the reader about the evolving features of North American Icelandic, not just *flámæli*. It is aimed at a general audience and no background in linguistics is assumed, though certain parts of the book will prove challenging to the general reader.

Most of the data in the book is from the author's extensive 1986 study where she interviewed number of Canadians and Americans of Icelandic descent, and gathered various written materials. The book is thus a good introduction to the Icelandic language as spoken in North America and an obvious starting point for anyone who wants to examine the language further. Sadly, any such research would be forced to rely heavily on Arnbjörnsdóttir's material as most of her speakers were over fifty years old in 1986, and younger generations of Icelandic-Americans and -Canadians have not, by and large, grown up fluent in Icelandic. Her fifty-year old speakers are over seventy years old now and a language that belongs only to the old is a dying language. This makes Arnbjörnsdóttir's book hugely valuable.

The book can be divided into three parts. The first two chapters are basically an overview of the language situation in Iceland today, the emigration to North America, and the status of Icelandic amongst Canadians and Americans of Icelandic background. The next three chapters focus on the lexicon and grammar of North American Icelandic. The last two chapters focus on *flámæli*, a special phonetic change that was fairly widespread in Iceland during the time of emigration, but whose affects proved temporary in Iceland, whereas they survived in North America.

In the first two chapters the author gives an excellent overview of the importance of the Icelandic language, not only to North American Icelanders but also to Icelanders in general. The language and its literature have always been foundational to the Icelandic identity and were crucial in the Icelandic battle for independence from Denmark. These chapters provide all the information

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necessary to understand why the Icelandic language has been preserved as long as it has amongst the descendants of the Icelandic immigrants to Canada and the United States.

Chapter three, which discusses the vocabulary of North American Icelandic, and chapter five, which focuses on the grammar, are both informative and entertaining. Speakers of Icelandic, in particular, will appreciate the subtle dialectal differences that have emerged between speakers in the two places. The author's primary goal is to provide the first outline of the major differences between North American Icelandic and the language as it is spoken in Iceland. As the author points out, more research is needed to distinguish dialectal differences from individual variation. The reason for including a chapter on the collecting of the data between the chapter on the lexicon and the chapter on the grammar is unclear. Is it meant to indicate that the grammar section, but not the discussion of the lexicon, is built on the author's research findings?

The last two chapters of the book focus on the process that linguists refer to as *flámæli*, namely the tendency to merge the open-mid front vowels [ɪ] and [ɣ] with the closed-mid front vowels [ɛ] and [ø], respectively. As noted above, this was a fairly widespread phonological process in Icelandic at the time of the emigration and a considerable number of emigrants came from the areas in Iceland where *flámæli* was common. The fact that *flámæli* was the focus of Arnbjörnsdóttir's doctoral thesis is both a strength and a weakness of these chapters. The discussion of *flámæli* is richly detailed but whereas the first part of the book is general enough not to require any linguistic knowledge, this second part of the book is a little too detailed for a non-linguist. On the other hand, Arnbjörnsdóttir does not give all the detail a linguist might want, leaving these chapters stranded somewhere between a general-interest account and a technical report.

The most interesting claim of the book is that *flámæli* is not a merger of sounds, but that it seems to involve two separate processes: the lowering of [ɪ:] and [ɣ:]—which the author claims is of the same kind as the much earlier lowering of Icelandic vowels—and the diphthongization of [ɛ:] and [ø:]. This interpretation of the process of change is both interesting and plausible but the discussion seems a little weak, the argument not properly supported. For example, a simple spectrogram of the sounds would easily show whether diphthongization has occurred.

The author also claims that the reason why there wasn't a merger of [ɪ] and [ɛ] on the one hand and [ɣ] and [ø] on the other is that [ɪ] and [ɣ] are so common in inflectional endings that if they had merged with [ɛ] and [ø] the inflectional system would have collapsed. I cannot see how this could be true: the inflectional endings are always unstressed and, as only the phonemes /ɪ/, /ɣ/ and /a/ exist as unstressed vowels in Icelandic, it would not lead to any confusion even if /ɪ/

and /ʏ/ were realized as phonetically [ɛ] and [ö] rather than the more usual [ɪ] and [y].

This discussion of changes in pronunciation brings me a major weakness of the book, namely its idiosyncratic treatment of phonetic transcription. Arnbjörnsdóttir claims to use the IPA system, at least for plosives, but there are numerous examples where either another system must be used, or the printer has had difficulty reproducing particular IPA characters. Arnbjörnsdóttir uses [ʀ] for the Icelandic *r*, but in the IPA system, which most phoneticians and phonologists follow, [ʀ] stands for a uvular trill. The Icelandic *r*, however, is an alveolar trill and should be transcribed as [r]. Words such as *varla* [hardly] and *stjarna* [star] are transcribed as [vaʀ̥la] and [stjaʀ̥na] in the book, which conventionally stands for a voiceless (*uvular*) trill and a voiceless sonorant. Most linguists, however, agree that we are really dealing here with the insertion of a plosive between the trill and the sonorant and that the words should be transcribed as [vartla] and [stjartna]. Furthermore, on the phonetic chart for the vowels on page 114 [a] is said to be a *+round* vowel, whereas in fact it is *-round*.

On page 107 Arnbjörnsdóttir talks about the change from *hr* to *r* in North American Icelandic as a simplification, meaning presumably that the [h] has been deleted. However, that is not necessarily the case, as many linguists believe that words that start with *hr*, *hl*, *hm* and *hj* do not have a consonant cluster of [h]+[r, l, n, j] but simply a voiceless sonorant, [ɾ, ʃ, ŋ, ç]. The change is therefore not a simplification of a consonant cluster but a change from an initial voiceless sound to a voiced sound. The voiceless sonorants [ɾ, ʃ, ŋ, ç] do not exist in the English language and it is therefore not surprising that they should disappear from North American Icelandic.

Another more serious problem is the fact that whatever symbol was supposed to mark the lowered and the raised version of vowels does not appear. On page 141, for example, the author talks about the “raising from [ö:] to [ø:].” Nothing graphically distinguishes between the two varieties, which surely must be the fault of the printing. Elsewhere the difference between the lowered and raised versions of the same vowel is sometimes, but not always, indicated by the use of italic vs. roman symbols: thus [ɪ:] vs. [i:]. There are several other mistakes in the phonetic transcription but I will not bother with listing them all.

Despite these imperfections, I would say that on the whole the book is a significant contribution to the field and hugely important for anyone who is interested in the Icelandic language, whether spoken in Iceland or in North America. It evidently seeks to address a general reader and to a large extent succeeds. Though one regrets the avoidable errors in phonetic transcription, it

is an excellent starting point for anyone who is interested in looking for more information on the language as spoken in North America.

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