

Gender inclusive language in Iceland

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Modern Icelandic – brief description

- Morphologically complex language
- Three grammatical genders
- All nouns have an assigned grammatical gender
- Nouns that assign member categorization tend to be masculine

Masculine (hann, he)

málfræðingur (linguist)
Íslendingur (Icelander)
unglingur (teen)

Feminine (hún, she)

manneskja (person)
fyrirmynd (role model)
hetja (hero)

Neuter (það, it)

barn (child)
fólk (people)
skáld - (poet)

Modern Icelandic – brief description

- The gender of the noun determines the use of other gendered categories: adjectives, past participles, pronouns, numerals
- Also three genders in plural!

Eintala			
	Karlkyn	Kvenkyn	Hvorugkyn
Nf.	allur	öll	allt
þf.	allan	alla	allt
þgf.	öllum	allri	öllu
Ef.	alls	allrar	alls

Fleirtala			
	Karlkyn	Kvenkyn	Hvorugkyn
Nf.	allir	allar	öll
þf.	alla	allar	öll
þgf.	öllum	öllum	öllum
Ef.	allra	allra	allra

Icelandic language policy

Drafted by The Icelandic language committee and issued by the parliament

2009

- **Conservation:** To keep the language system intact in order to ensure that speakers of Icelandic can read older texts
- **Strengthening:** To enrich the language by creating neologisms and Icelandic terms and thereby make Icelandic useable in all contexts

2020-2030 (yet to be processed by the parliament)

- **Conservation**
- **Strengthening**

+

Tolerance: acceptance that speakers may have different knowledge of Icelandic

Inclusion: to make sure that no one is left out

Work on Gender-inclusive language in Iceland

The Árni Magnússon

Institute for Icelandic studies

- Research institute for Icelandic language & culture
- Department of Icelandic
 - Lexicography
 - Language technology
 - Language consultation

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What has been done?

- Research institute for Icelandic language & culture
- Department of Icelandic
 - Lexicography
 - Language technology
 - Language consultation



- New entries into dictionaries
- Ongoing revision of dictionary definitions and examples of use
- Research on possible gender biases in databases
- Research on gender in written and spoken language

But we get very few direct questions about gender from the general public.

Work on Gender-inclusive language in Iceland

Icelandic language committee

What has been done?

1. Office based at The Árni Magnússon institute for Icelandic studies
2. 16 members representing different interest groups:
 1. State radio/TV
 2. Teachers' union
 3. Authors and translators etc
3. Advisors for the Icelandic government
 1. by giving an annual report,
 2. draft the official language policy
 3. issue spelling rules and dictionary

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What has been done?

- Report on gender inclusive language, response to a inquiry from an MP (pro) and a citizen (against) regarding the official opinion of the committee
- Colloquium on the same topic, both sides represented
- Publication on the topic
- The committee has not taken a stance in the debate

Main topics for Icelandic

1. Inclusion of non-binaries
2. Occupational titles and member categorizations
3. Grammatical masculine in plural as gender neutral form?

1. Inclusion of non-binaries

- *hán* – new pronoun for non-binary individuals, inspiration from Sweden
- Other neologisms introduced by the LGBT community (e.g. *kvár* ‘non-binary individual’, *stálp* ‘non-binary youngster’)
- Adjectives, pronouns and numerals take neuter (recommendation from the LGBT community)

hán fn

persónuformafn (3. persóna) í hvorugkyni, notað um fólk sem skilgreinir sig hvorki sem karlkyns né kvenkyns (tekur með sér lýsingarorð í hvorugkyni)

D/EMI: *hán er rauðhært*

hán persónuformafn, 3. persóna hvorugkyn

Athugið: Orðið beygist eins og hvorugkynsnafnorð. Í fleirtölu er formafnið *þau* notað.

	Eintala	Fleirtala
Nf.	<i>hán</i>	--
Þf.	<i>hán</i>	--
Þgf.	<i>háni</i>	--
Ef.	<i>háns</i>	--

hán **pron**

Personal pronoun (3 pers.) in neuter, used for non-binary individuals (takes adjectives in neuter)

Ex: *hán er rauðhært*

hán be.3p redhaired.n

2.A Members' categorization and occupational titles

- No official recommendation on the issue, some individual efforts
- Official titles have changed in exceptional cases, e.g. due to new demands on education
- Tendency towards a common, gender-inclusive term rather than gender specific variants.
- Some companies/organizations use feminine titles, to make gender more visible: *forstýra* (female director)

2.B Attempts to avoid *–maður* (man)

- *-fólk* (people) only used in plural
 - lögreglumenn > lögreglufólk (police)
 - útvarpsmenn > útvarpsfólk (radio presenters)
 - hestamenn > hestafólk (horse riders/owners)
 - Norðmenn > *Norðfólk (Norwegians)
- *-manneskja* (person)
 - björgunarsveitarmanneskja (member of the rescue team)
 - manneskja ársins (the person of the year)
 - formanneskja (head, chairperson)

3. Neuter plural as gender inclusive pronoun/adjective/past participle/numeral?

Allir velkomnir (trad.)

all.m welcome.m

Öll börn velkomin!

all.n children welcome.n

Öll velkomin! (new norm?)

all.n welcome.n

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Consequences

- Especially the young feel it is more inclusive.
- Works well in fixed phrases such as „everybody is welcome“.
- But... entails a grammatical change that has certain consequences for the language structure.
- Has created generational differences. Speakers may interpret the meaning in different ways.
- Does not work in all contexts or for all lexical items.
- Often certain inconsistency regarding declension and choice of gender in the same sentence.

nemendur skólans urðu **vör (varir)** við manninn
*the pupils at the school **noticed** the man*

og voru **hrædd (hræddir)** við hann.
*and were **afraid** of him*

State radio 4 sept. 2024,
website



A heated debate!

- An Icelandic politician published a letter in a newspaper calling gender inclusive language, as it is used on the state radio, “bullshit”.
- More people got involved and gender inclusive language is labelled *nýlenska* (newlandic) in public debate.
- State radio/television was blamed for using gender inclusive language and thereby not fulfilling their duty as being a linguistic role model.
- In the spring, the ministry of culture called in a meeting with the director to discuss their language policy.
- The debate continues, e.g. on popular discussion groups on Facebook.