

Just For Fun: Icelandic!

A Summary

- Iceland is a small island country in the north Atlantic. Its population is only about 368,000 people, less than half that of North Dakota. Its capital is Reykjavik.
- Icelandic is a member of the Germanic language family, which includes Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, German, Dutch, and English, as well as a few others.
- The closest relatives of Icelandic are the other Scandinavian languages: Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, and Faroese.
- Icelandic is a direct descendant of Old Norse, the language of the Vikings.
- Iceland is famous for its medieval literature. The modern Icelandic language has not changed much from Old Norse, and Icelanders can read medieval literature without much difficulty.
- The Eddas are a collection of poems and tales of Norse mythology. They are divided into the Poetic Edda and the Prose Edda. The Poetic Edda (also called the Elder Edda) contains poems about Norse deities and heroes. The Prose Edda (also called the Younger Edda) is a manual of poetic techniques and contains many mythological stories. It was written by Snorri Sturluson around 1220.
- Another kind of medieval Icelandic literature, the Sagas, are mostly historical or realistic tales of Viking voyages and battles.
- The works of J.R.R. Tolkien borrow heavily from Icelandic literature. The names of Gandalf and the dwarves were taken from the Eddas. Elves and dwarves were described in the Eddas. Many events, beasts and monsters in Tolkien's stories parallel those of Norse mythology from the Eddas.
- Icelandic has some unusual letters:
 - Ð, ð - like the “th” in “the”
 - Þ, þ - like the “th” in “thing”
 - Æ, æ - like “eye”
 - Ö, ö - no English equivalent; like in German *mögen* or French *soeur*.
- Icelandic uses accent marks. For example, A sounds like “a” in father, but Á sounds like “ow” in cow. Practice this word: *Skáldskaparmál*
- Icelandic grammar is relatively complex and irregular.

- There are not many recognizable borrowed words in Icelandic because of the country's “linguistic purism” (the desire to maintain the purity of the language by coining new words for new concepts, instead of borrowing them from other languages). Here are some examples of words for modern concepts that were created from native Icelandic roots:

• *Rafmagn* – “electricity”

• *Sími* – “telephone”

• *Tölva* – “computer”

- At the same time, since both Icelandic and English are in the Germanic language family, you can find a lot of fun cognates (words that are similar in two languages). Here are some examples:

Hár (hair), Móðir (mother), Faðir (father), Veður (weather), Hundur (dog), Köttur (cat)

- Some basic words and phrases:

Hæ (Hi!)

Bless bless (Good-bye)

Takk (thank you)

Sjáumst! (see you later)

Íslenska (Icelandic)

Ég tala bara smá íslensku (I speak only a little Icelandic)

- An Icelandic tongue twister:

Ái á Á, á á í á.

(Grandpa from “Á” farm has a sheep in a river)

Don’t forget that Á is pronounced like the “ow” in cow!