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Phonology and Syntax of Icelandic - A Real Time Project

The Project „Linguistic Change in Real Time in the Phonology and Syntax of Icelandic“ started in 2010, when it received a three year grant from The Icelandic Research Fund. The project seeks answers to the following theoretical questions:

- To what extent do adult speakers change their language?
- Are some aspects of language more susceptible to gradual change than others?

In the phonological part of the project some 200 speakers will be interviewed for the third time in about 65 years and some 400 for the second time in 25 years. Our main focus is on four phonological variables in Icelandic, but we collect information about all known geographically or sociolinguistically conditioned variables, many of which seem to be on their way out. The four variables that we concentrate on can be seen as pairs, two of them are found in North-Iceland (aspirated stops after long vowels; voiced sonorants before /p,t,k/) and two in the South-East (special monophthongal pronunciation, the so-called *hv*-pronunciation). Our hypothesis is that certain aspects of language may be more susceptible to gradual change in real time than others and the variables in question appear to be well suited to test this hypothesis. A small pilot study indicates, for instance, that moving from the relevant dialect area (the South-East) to Reykjavík does not affect both variables to the same extent. We suggest that this might be due to linguistic or structural differences between the variables rather than (just) sociolinguistic ones. This will be investigated in greater detail in the project.

In the syntactic part we will test a subset of speakers who were found to have acquired a syntactic innovation some 10 years ago (at the age of 16 years). It has been claimed that this innovation may disappear as speakers reach adulthood. This claim can now be tested and it will shed a new light on the nature of this interesting innovation.