



# Is the Icelandic Sign Language an endangered language?

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# Is the Icelandic Sign Language an endangered language?

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## Abstract

Icelandic Sign Language (ÍTM) is a minority language, only spoken by the Deaf community in Iceland. Origins of the language can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century but for more than 100 years the language was banned as other signed languages in the world. After Stokoe's pioneer work in 1960, research on signed languages became more widespread and slowly attitudes and legislations towards signed languages became more positive. This holds true for ÍTM, a language with no more than 2–300 speakers. Late in the twentieth century, ÍTM was finally allowed in education of Deaf children and interpreter education started at the University of Iceland, giving the speakers (signers) opportunity to live, work and be educated in their first language. In 2011 there was a turning point in the campaign for the recognition of ÍTM as the first language of the Deaf, when Act No 61/2011 entered into force. Despite these positive changes, ÍTM is claimed to be threatened and possibly an endangered language. This is partly due to evolutions in technology, but also, attitudes play a role, both within Deaf community itself and governmentally. In younger generations the number of signers is declining and the gap between generations is getting bigger.

**Keywords:** Icelandic Sign Language, endangered, attitude, Deaf

## The Icelandic Sign Language community

Icelandic Sign Language (ÍTM) is the only traditional indigenous minority language in Iceland. It is the first language of about 250 people; in addition, about 50 Deaf<sup>1</sup> immigrants speak the language and a variety of different sign languages. Recent estimates of L2 speakers vary, but according to Thorvaldsdóttir & Stefánsdóttir (2015) there are 1000–1500 hearing speakers of ÍTM. As the majority of deaf children are born into hearing families (Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan 1996) signed languages are seldom passed from one generation to another. Within the American Sign Language Community Deaf children having Deaf adults are about 5–10% (Neidle et al. 2000) but many scholars have argued that in most communities this number is even lower, like in the Australian Deaf community where children having Deaf relations in older generations are approximately 3% (Johnston 2006). In the ÍTM community only one Deaf child has Deaf parents and there is hereditary deafness in only two families, meaning that almost no Deaf child in Iceland gets his/her first language, Icelandic Sign Language, passed on from his/her parents. Interestingly, in the immigrant families that have moved to Iceland and speak ÍTM as L2, this number is much higher, 9 Deaf children have Deaf parents and families with hereditary deafness are three.<sup>2</sup>

## Is the Icelandic Sign Language endangered?

The issue of ÍTM being endangered and even facing extinction has been discussed a lot in the community of

ÍTM for a few years now. In a report by the Committee on Icelandic Sign Language in 2015, it is stated that ÍTM is endangered as the number of L1 signers is declining (Stefánsdóttir et al. 2015). The Committee discusses two relevant issues in this context, that the language is not being passed on to younger generations, and, the governmental apathy to supply the resources needed in order to maintain the language. Even though the language has been recognized by law in 2011 (Act no. 61/2011) it is given the status “threatened” in the *Ethnologue; Languages of the World*, mainly built on the fact that the language is losing users as children are not learning the language as L1 users. Many sign languages face the same situation (see UCLAN: Cataloguing endangered sign languages).

## Ways to preserve the Icelandic Sign Language

At least three issues are to be discussed, all of them which are making an attempt to save ÍTM from being endangered. The first one draws on documentation and awakening within the Deaf community: Since 2015 there has been made an attempt, both by the Deaf Association and by individuals, to attract the attention of the members of the community of ÍTM, to what they can do to preserve and distribute their language. Muncie (2017) has led a project that had the goal of building the foundation of the ÍTM corpus and has made effort to get people to participate and document their language. Another interesting point of view was introduced by Hauksson (2018) in a

<sup>1</sup> Here I follow the convention of writing Deaf with an uppercase D when referring to a group of people who share a language and a culture whereas lowercase deaf is used to refer

to the audiological condition of not hearing (see Padden & Humphries, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Information from the Icelandic Association of the Deaf and the Communication Centre for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

recent master thesis in Cultural Studies at the University of Iceland. Hauksson, who is himself a child of Deaf parents and grew up in the Deaf community, states that ÍTM is facing extinction if no changes occur to prevent that from happening. In his thesis Hauksson analysis discourse arising from two governmental institutions and comes to the conclusion that there is a wide-spread societal ignorance about the role and function of ÍTM in the lives of deaf people. The third issue concerns the immigrants that are a fast-growing part of the Icelandic sign language community, many of those come from Deaf families where deafness is hereditary. By this, a new generation of L1 signers is now a part of the ÍTM community, giving new hope to those wanting to prevent and strengthen the language. The fact that Deaf are sometimes said to be “a nation without a land” and even consider themselves a diaspora nation, begs the question whether this will prevent ÍTM from extinction.

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