

THE ICELANDIC LANGUAGE AT THE TIME OF THE REFORMATION: SOME REFLECTIONS ON TRANSLATIONS, LANGUAGE AND FOREIGN INFLUENCES

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Abstract

The process of the Reformation in Iceland in its narrow sense is framed by the publication of the New Testament in 1540 and the whole Bible in 1584. It is sometimes believed that Icelandic language would have changed more than what it has, if these translations had not seen the day.

During the 16th century, in all 51 books in Icelandic were printed. Almost all are translations, mostly from German. These books contain many loanwords, chiefly of German origin. These words are often a direct result of the Reformation, but some of them are considerably older. As an example, words with the German prefix *be-* were discussed to some length in the article.

Some loanwords from the 16th century have lived on to our time, but many were either wiped out in the Icelandic language purism of the nineteenth and twentieth century, or never became an integrated part of the language, outside of religious and official texts. Some words even only show up in one or two books of the 16th century.

The impact of the Reformation on the future development of the Icelandic language, other than a temporary one on the lexicon was limited, and influence on the (spoken) language of common people was probably little.

Keywords

The Icelandic Reformation, printed books, the New Testament, the Bible, loanwords, the German prefix *be-*.

Introduction

The Reformation in Iceland is dated to the year 1550, when the last Catholic bishop in Iceland, Jón Arason of the Hólar diocese in Northern Iceland, was executed. The change from Catholicism to Lutheranism had, however, been underway for some two decades, first quietly and secretly, but from 1540, there had been Lutheran bishops in the diocese of Skálholt in Southern Iceland, first Gissur Einarsson (b. 1512, d. 1548) and after him Marteinn Einarsson (d. 1576). In 1541, Bishop Gissur Einarsson translated King Christian III's Church Ordinance from 1537/1539, which was formally accepted in the diocese at the legislative institution of Alþingi the same year. Ten years later (1551/1552), it was accepted in the diocese of Hólar.

The Reformation can thus be said to have begun around 1540, and interestingly, this is the year when the New Testament was printed in Icelandic.¹ The whole Bible came out

¹ An overview in English of the Reformation in Iceland is in Kalinke 1996, 24–44. See also Ottósson 1990, 14–23.

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Correction notice (August 11, 2020): Alignment and spacing in examples 1–6 have been changed for better legibility.

in print in 1584, and it may be said that these two books frame the process of the Reformation in Iceland, in its narrow sense.

The New Testament is the oldest preserved book printed in Icelandic,² and its publication marks clearly the beginning of a new era, both in book production and in the field of religion. To have this text accessible in the mother tongue was one of the most important concerns for the Lutheran reformers in North Europe. The Icelandic translation contains a short prologue attributed to King Christian III, which affirms the legitimate position of the translation. In the sixteenth century, there was only one small printing press in Iceland at the diocese of Hólar, probably set up around 1535, and until 1550, this print shop was under the control of the Catholic bishop. Therefore, it was obviously not possible to print the Icelandic-Lutheran translation of the New Testament in Iceland, so the book was printed in Denmark.

The translator of the New Testament, Oddur Gottskálksson, was the son of a Norwegian former bishop of Hólar, Gottskálk Nikulásson (b. 1469, d. 1520) and his Icelandic mistress.³ The translation is primarily made from Luther's German text, probably an edition from 1530, with comparisons to the Vulgate version. The translator seems to also have had access to Erasmus of Rotterdam's translation from Greek (Kalinke 1996, 43; Kvaran et al. 1988, XXIII–XXIV; Nordal 1993, 15; Helgason 1929, 176). The Icelandic translation contains Luther's original prefaces, except the preface to the Book of Revelation, as well as Luther's marginal notes.

Oddur Gottskálksson was probably more fluent in Norwegian than in Icelandic when he started his work in Skálholt shortly after 1535, as he was primarily brought up with his father's family in Bergen. However, and in spite of many German loanwords, characteristic of the time, and a syntax that sometimes sounds disturbingly German (Helgason 1929, 202, 207; Westergård-Nielsen 1946, L), the language of the translation is surprisingly rich and varied, and has often been praised.⁴ It is, at least, easy to verify by comparison that its style is more lively, rich and idiomatic than many, perhaps most, Icelandic contemporary printed works of the Reformation era.

Some scholars of modern times have even gone so far as to claim that the Icelandic language would have changed notably more than what it has, if Oddur's translation – and later in the century, the whole Bible – had not seen the light of day. This view is maybe not as prominent now as it was at one time, but it is not unheard of today. A little exaggerated view on a text's language preserving impact as it may be, it cannot be denied that very much in the wording of the latest Bible translations still comes directly from Oddur's almost 500 years old translation (Friðjónsson 1997, XXVIII–XXIX).

During the sixteenth century, 44 books in Icelandic were printed in the country and in addition six books in Icelandic in Denmark and one in Germany, in all 51 books that we know of. Only one book in Latin was printed in Iceland in this period. Apart from a law

² A brief note in the "Rechnungsbuch der Sunte Annen Broderschop der Islandsfahrer in Hamburg" from 1530 mentions printing of a text in Icelandic. However, nothing is known about the subject matter nor who ordered the work (Þorsteinsson 1960, 97), and nothing else is known about printed books in Icelandic before 1540.

³ About Oddur Gottskálksson's birth year, see Helgason 1929, 3–5; cf. Nordal 1933, 11–12.

⁴ See, for example, Kvaran et al. 1988, XXVII–XXVIII; Friðjónsson 1997, XXVIII–XXIX.

book in two editions, two calendars (one printed as a supplement to another text) and two booklets, only religious Lutheran-Evangelic literature was published in the country in this period.

Almost all of the texts are translations, mostly from German. It is of interest that the translators until 1600, at least those of the prose parts of the translated texts, are only eight in all. Oddur Gottskálksson translated seven books, five out of six bishops of the period translated over 30 books, thereof bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson (Hólar 1571–1627) 21 books or more, bishop Gissur Einarsson (Skálholt 1540–1548) two, bishop Marteinn Einarsson (Skálholt 1549–1557) two, bishop Gísli Jónsson (Skálholt 1558–1587) two, and bishop Ólafur Hjaltason (Hólar 1552–1569) three. Four books were translated late in the century by pastor Guðmundur Einarsson and the scholar Arngrímur Jónsson the learned translated two books.

Besides the New Testament of 1540 and the whole Bible in 1584, there are various texts from or connected to the Bible (*Biblia Laicorum*, *Fons Vitæ*, *Solomons Book of Wisdom*, *Wisdom of Sirach*); four books on the story of the Passion; six books of sermons; nine religious handbooks; six books of various religious texts; three books with prayers; five catechisms or learning introductions – Luther's Small Catechism for children came for example in 1594; four books with hymns and psalms; and one book contains eulogies.

Thus, it can be said, that the small print shop at Hólar, where the New Testament could not be printed in 1540, came to be one of the most important tools for the Lutheran reformers when preaching the new faith. Eight books were published the first 20 years, between 1540 and 1560, 11 books between 1561 and 1580, and 32 books from 1581 to 1600.

The works of Oddur and Guðbrandur have been praised for their language, while many other works of the same period either have been criticized for rigid and foreign style with many foreign words, or have not been discussed much at all. Both the New Testament of 1540 and the Bible of 1584 have been examined thoroughly in two important monographs (Helgason 1929; Bandle 1956), but most of the other books still wait to be studied by linguists.

The Language

At the time of the Reformation, Iceland was formally under Danish rule.⁵ Church ties with Norway had, however, remained as strong as before, as Iceland was under the Norwegian church province until 1537, and many of the Icelandic bishops of the period were Norwegian.⁶ The same was true of trade relations with Norway, at least until the mid-fifteenth century. Formal relations with Denmark continued for more than half a millennium, that is to say until 1944, when Iceland became a republic.

Apart from normal and expected innovations in vocabulary – both domestic and loanwords – and some changes in pronunciation, the language spoken in Iceland at the time of the Reformation was more or less the same as what we encounter in the oldest

⁵ On the connection between Iceland, Norway and Denmark in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, see e.g. Þorsteinsson 1985, 94–95, Þorsteinsson & Grímsdóttir 1989, esp. 245–247, and 1990, 67ff.

⁶ See a brief overview of foreign bishops in Iceland 1238–1520 in Óskarsson 2003, 74–75.

surviving written texts from the second part of the twelfth century. As far as we can tell, the *language form*, i.e. morphology and syntax, had not changed to any significant degree from what it was at the time of the settlement around 900. The inflection system was largely the same, and also the syntax was more or less unaltered.⁷ The vocabulary was much less influenced by other languages than the vocabulary of the mainland Nordic languages, even if various loanwords had, of course, entered Icelandic through time, especially from Old English and Old High German, even from French and the Classical languages.

One of the reasons for this is, of course, the remote geographical location of Iceland out in the North Atlantic. Among other things, this meant that natural language contacts between Icelandic and other languages were bound to be limited. Certainly, there were contacts of various degree between Icelanders and foreigners through the centuries, e.g. with Norwegian merchants, foreign bishops, and in the fifteenth century with English fishermen.⁸ These contacts are not, however, fully comparable to the interaction that happens when real speakers of different languages meet face to face as geographically adjacent population pairs.⁹

Another important factor to have in mind is that at the time of the Reformation, Icelandic had been in use as a written language without interruption for four hundred years. More or less all texts of a secular kind were written in Icelandic; law texts, charters, contracts, letters, etc., and of course, all the vast Icelandic prose literature and poetry.¹⁰

There are several other reasons that could be listed that help to explain the Icelandic language's resistance to change and its homogeneity,¹¹ but I believe that these two are probably the most important ones, the limited contacts with other languages and the long writing tradition. In a readable and a truly elegant article from 1968, well worth to refresh the memory of, the American-Norwegian linguist Einar Haugen describes the situation of Icelandic at the end of the Middle Ages in the following way:

In spite of its small population, Iceland had three factors in its favour: the physical remoteness, which saved its popular speech from participating in the extensive changes of the continental vernaculars; an extraordinary medieval tradition of literary production, which was revered and diligently studied until it was familiar to nearly everyone; and a type of fishing-ranching economy, which promoted mobility and inhibited the formation of local dialects. (Haugen 1972, 277)

⁷ See e.g. Pétursson 2005.

⁸ Curiously, almost without any influence at all on the Icelandic language; cf. Óskarsson 2003, 69–72.

⁹ Cf. for example Thomason 2013, 31ff.

¹⁰ The clergy used, of course, various liturgical texts in Latin, and it is believed that not less than 1,200 liturgical manuscripts (probably much more) must have existed at any given time in pre-Reformatory Iceland. Only a very few texts in Latin have, however, been preserved to our time (see Gunnlaugsson 2017, spec. 173–175).

¹¹ See Guðmundsson 1977; Sandøy 1994, 40ff.; Sandøy 2001, 127f.

Today, the formal character of the language is still more or less the same as in the twelfth century. Of course, the Icelandic language was to some extent affected by Danish through the centuries. The Danish influence is, however, limited to the vocabulary and is considerably less than one might expect after such a long time of mutual relationship.

The impact of the Reformation on the future formal development of the Icelandic language was rather limited, and in a broad time-context, especially influence on the (spoken) language of common people was little (Ottósson 1990). Two of Iceland's largest cultural monuments belong, however, to this period, the New Testament and the Bible 1584. These two books, and to a lesser degree the Reformation publications in general, set a standard for the religious language, and until the nineteenth century, the language of the Church was largely based on the texts that were published in the sixteenth century. Through these works, the Reformation surely left strong cultural marks on the language, of which the most obvious are found in various metaphorical language of biblical origin, still well alive in Icelandic of our day. There are, for example, hundreds of biblical proverbs, sayings and fixed expressions to be found in the modern language, and according to one of the leading specialists on the subject, professor emeritus Jón G. Friðjónsson at the University of Iceland, such phrases seem to be more prominent in Icelandic than in many of its neighbouring languages (Friðjónsson 1997).

But this standard does not seem to have spread much to other genres, as can e.g. be seen by comparing sixteenth and seventeenth century non-religious texts in manuscripts to the religious printed books of the same period (Ottósson 1990, 18). The language continued, of course, to be without any real geographical neighbouring languages and the majority of the general public never or very rarely met foreigners. The great amount of existing Icelandic literature since almost 400 years back also continued to live on despite any foreign influences, and in spite of a period of diminished activity in the sixteenth century (Driscoll 2013, 53), the manuscripts that contained these texts were almost as avidly copied in the next centuries as had been the custom in the centuries before.¹² Even that worked for a continued stability of the language.

In this context it is, however, important to keep in mind the strong language purism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which eventually stood for the removal of much of the foreign influences that nonetheless had entered the language in the preceding centuries, especially many Danish/German loanwords.¹³ We need to take care not to let the myth of the “clean language” blind us. There is a significant difference between the language of printed books of the sixteenth century and that of Icelandic of today. The foreign traits in the vocabulary and syntax of the older texts appear peculiar and odd to people of today, as very little of both has survived to modern time. When studying texts from the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, modern scholars might be more aware of German loanwords in Icelandic texts than in Danish or Swedish texts from the same period, simply because such loanwords in modern Danish and Swedish have usually not been driven away as their counterparts in Icelandic.

¹² On manuscript culture in post-Reformation Iceland, see Benediktsson 1981; Júlíusson 2002; Driscoll 2013, esp. 52–53.

¹³ See e.g. Karlsson 2004, 36–38.

Foreign Influences in the Texts

When we leaf through an Icelandic printed book of the sixteenth century, the rather large number of loanwords and a strangely foreign sounding syntax may be what will first catch the eye. In a detailed study from 1946, the Danish philologist Chr. Westergård-Nielsen examined the loanwords in printed texts from the sixteenth century. In all, he lists and discusses around 1,570 words.¹⁴ Most of the words are from German, some probably formed in one of the Nordic languages (Danish or Icelandic), based on German words, and some are more remote words, believed to be introduced through German.

Loanwords in the Icelandic Reformation literature are sometimes considered a direct consequence of the Reformation. This can certainly sometimes be the case, but absolutely not all the foreign words in the printed sixteenth century books are new. The misconception that all the words are recent additions to the Icelandic language is rather unfortunate and can at worst lead to false assumptions concerning the age of a certain text, a manuscript, or historical relations. The fact is that many of the words are considerably older than what we sometimes are led to believe in scholarly discussions about the language of or around the Reformation era. Westergård-Nielsen states himself, quite correctly, that some of the words that he lists in his study can be older, some perhaps as old as from the fourteenth century (Westergård-Nielsen 1946).¹⁵ It cannot, however, be denied, that it is easy to make the mistake of believing that loanwords discussed in a work dealing with sixteenth century printed texts of almost entirely religious Lutheran-Evangelic content, must belong to the Reformation, and that they are all borrowed in that century. It is, unfortunately, not unheard of that scholars have assumed this.

There are things that one needs to keep in mind when we look at the language of these books. First, most of these publications are made for a specific purpose – this is of course obvious. The texts cover topics that were new, and therefore, native words were often not available to the translators and other advocates of the Reformation. They operated in an environment where many of these words were part of a special terminology. There is hardly any doubt that these persons, most or all educated abroad, used foreign terms when discussing Lutheran-Evangelic issues with one another. Moreover, when translating, the easiest way was to borrow a word from the text that was to be translated, which was mostly in German. The Reformation literature was a part of the official language, and Reformation translators and authors wrote for “professionals” rather than for the public. The language of the translations is, therefore, much more the language of officials and

¹⁴ The headwords are around 1,570 and cross-references are around 280.

¹⁵ Westergård-Nielsen 1946, XXIV–XXV. In fact, some words or word-stems in Westergård-Nielsen’s survey appear as early as in texts or manuscripts from the thirteenth century or around 1200, for example *bílfí* n. ‘luxurious living’ (c. 1280); *forprísa* v. ‘to praise’ (1285); *kanceler* m. ‘chancellor’ (1285); *kórr* m. ‘choir’ (1250–1300); *lektía* f. ‘a lesson’ (c. 1170); *listugr* adj. ‘skilled’ (1275–1300); *óaflátliga* adv. ‘incessantly’ (c. 1200–25); *palmr* m. ‘palm-tree’ (c. 1200); *rikuligr* adj. ‘magnificent’ (c. 1225); *tigl* n. ‘tile, brick’ (c. 1280); *vei* interj. (an exclamation of grief etc.) (1225–50). Some of the dates are those of the manuscripts containing the words, so the texts (and the words) can be older. (Translations of the words are taken from the Internet version of Cleasby & Vigfusson 1874.)

bureaucrats than that of common people, and many of the loanwords that we encounter in them never became the property of the people.

Secondly, sixteenth century language should be compared to the language of the fifteenth and the fourteenth centuries rather than merely or mostly with classic Old Icelandic of the twelfth–thirteenth century, as sometimes is done. Even if there are only few Icelandic fifteenth century literary texts to compare with, we do have many public documents, such as deeds and charters, from that century, and a comparison with these can be fruitful. In them we find, in fact, quite many of the loanwords that are characteristic of the sixteenth century printed books.

Be-words in Reformation Icelandic

We can look at one special group of words, the so-called *be*-words, that is, words with the German prefix *be-*, such as the verbs *befala* ‘command’, *begeira* ‘desire’, *begripa* ‘understand’, *behalda* ‘keep, retain’, *beretta* ‘tell’ and *beskatta* ‘tax’.¹⁶ As a coherent word-group, they are easy to recognize and to form an opinion about.¹⁷ The Nordic languages borrowed a great many words of that type in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries.

Such words are often considered rather typical for the Icelandic Reformation literature, and are often especially mentioned in surveys.¹⁸ However, they are, in fact, often quite older than that, and we can find many of them in documents from the fifteenth century.

In Icelandic sixteenth century Reformation books, at least 32 *be*-words are to be found, according to Westergård-Nielsen’s study. As can be seen below, some of the words are compounds or derivatives and some of them may have been formed in Icelandic. Therefore, they should not without reservation be defined as genuine loanwords. They are, however, also a part of the borrowing tendency of the time. The prefix is very often written *bi-*¹⁹ in Icelandic sources and in some dictionaries, e.g. in the Dictionary of Old Norse Prose in Copenhagen (ONP), but not for example in Fritzner 4, except in cross-references. For the sake of simplicity, all the examples will in the following be given with the prefix variant *be-*.

According to the collections of the Old Norse dictionary in Copenhagen and my own studies of loanwords in Icelandic charters from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, fourteen of these 32 words seem to appear for the first time just in the printed books of the Reformation:²⁰

(1) *befalan* f. ‘command’ 1540

besetinn p.p. / adj. ‘possessed’ 1599

¹⁶ For a closer look at these words and their history in Icelandic, see Óskarsson 2015; and for an overview of *be*-words in Norwegian, see Simensen 1992.

¹⁷ In Norwegian, *be*-words are a part of the well-known “anbeheitelse” words that language purists have long struggled against (Akselberg 2005, 1829), and even in Faroese, Danish and Swedish there has been resistance to German loanwords with *be-*, see further Óskarsson 2015, 11–12.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Karlsson 2004, 34; Ekberg 2005, 1304, 1306.

¹⁹ See an explanation of that in Óskarsson 2015, 3–4; cf. Óskarsson 2003, 195–197.

²⁰ The meanings given in the examples are approximate.

<i>befalningsmaður</i> m. ‘officer’ 1584	<i>beslá</i> v. ‘cover, coat’ 1576
<i>befölun</i> f. ‘command’ 1555	<i>besluta</i> v. ‘decide’ 1600
<i>begáfa</i> v. ‘equip’ 1564	<i>betalan</i> f. ‘payment’ 1579
<i>begrípa</i> v. ‘understand’ 1546	<i>bevisan</i> f. ‘prove’ 1584
<i>behrópa</i> v. ‘shout’ 1579	<i>bevisanligur</i> adj. ‘proven’ 1598
<i>beretta</i> v. ‘tell’ 1595	<i>bevisligur</i> adj. ‘proven’ 1598

A closer look reveals, however, that the rest of these 32 words listed by Westergård-Nielsen, that is eighteen words, are older. Some of them (those in example 2 below) are only a bit older, from the same century, but not less than eleven words (example 3) appear already in texts of the century before:

(2) <i>befaling(ur)</i> f./m. ‘command’ 1524	<i>bekvæmiliga</i> adv. ‘fittingly’ 1524
<i>begera</i> v. ‘desire, crave’ 1525	<i>beskermelsi</i> n. ‘protection’ 1515
<i>begering</i> f. ‘request’ 1513	<i>beskerma</i> v. ‘protect’ 1530–40
<i>óbekvæmiligur</i> adj. ‘unsuitable’ 1530–40	
(3) <i>befala</i> v. ‘command’ 1419/1495	<i>betala</i> v. ‘pay’ 1446
<i>begirna</i> v. ‘request’ 1467	<i>betaling(ur)</i> f./m. ‘payment’ 1443
<i>behaga</i> v. ‘please’ 1400	<i>bevara</i> v. ‘keep’ 1461–1510
<i>behalda</i> v. ‘keep’ 1431	<i>bevisa</i> v. ‘prove’ 1443
<i>bekenna</i> v. ‘know; answer for’ 1443	<i>bevising</i> f. ‘proof’ 1483
<i>beleggja</i> v. ‘besiege’ 1450–75	

If we now keep on and search in texts and documents from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries for other *be*-words than those listed in Westergård-Nielsen’s book, we find at least 25 more words of this kind, mostly in handwritten deeds, charters and other official documents:

(4) <i>bedreifelsi</i> n. ‘distress’ 1522	<i>óbekvæmur</i> adj. ‘unsuitable’ c. 1530–40
<i>bedrifa</i> v. ‘practise’ 1453	<i>berykta</i> v. ‘slander’ 1432
<i>befal(n)ingarbréf</i> n. ‘instructions’ 1514	<i>besigla</i> v. ‘seal’ 1534
<i>befalanarmaður</i> m. ‘commissioner’ 1487	<i>beskatta</i> v. ‘take as a tax’ 1484

<i>beginna</i> v. ‘start, instigate’ 1525	<i>beskeðinn</i> adj. ‘sensible’ c. 1500
<i>behendiligheit</i> n. ²¹ c. 1500	<i>beskeðligheit</i> n. ‘good sense’ 1430
<i>behenta</i> v. ‘to be convenient’ 1512	<i>beskermari</i> m. ‘protector’ c. 1530–40
<i>óbehendiligur</i> adj. ‘uncomfortable’ 1496	<i>beskermelsisbréf</i> n. ‘letter of protection’ 1514
<i>óbehindraður</i> adj. ‘not hindered’ 1505	<i>beskermelsismaður</i> m. ‘person under protection’ 1514
<i>behjálpliga</i> adv. ‘helpfully’ 1443	<i>beskerming(ur)</i> f./m. ‘protection’ 1497
<i>behjálpligur</i> adj. ‘helpful’ 1443	<i>bespotta</i> v. ‘spit on’ c. 1520–40
<i>behóf</i> n. ‘need’ 1440	<i>óbetalaður</i> ‘unpaid’ adj. 1446
<i>bekvæm(i)ligur</i> adj. ‘fitting’ c. 1530–40	

According to this, at least 57 *be*-words can be found in Icelandic fifteenth to sixteenth century texts, of which only fourteen really represent the printed Reformation texts. Around 40% of the words (22) are so old that they first appear in fifteenth century texts, some as early as around year 1400. Thus, even if there are these fourteen supposedly brand new *be*-words in the printed texts, it is clear that the arrival of such words in Icelandic was not just a result of the printed books of the Reformation.

We can even go still further in our search and analysis, and compare the word stems. Then we see that various words formed to the same *stems* as seven of these fourteen supposedly “new” words, do in fact appear in older texts:

(5) Reformation texts	Older texts
<i>befalan</i> 1540, <i>befölun</i> 1555, <i>befalningsmaður</i> 1584	<i>befala</i> 1419, <i>befalanarmaður</i> 1487
<i>betalan</i> 1579	<i>betala</i> 1446, <i>betalingur</i> 1443, <i>óbetalaður</i> 1446
<i>bevisan</i> 1584, <i>bevisanligur</i> 1598, <i>bevisligur</i> 1598	<i>bevisa</i> 1443, <i>bevising</i> 1483

This means that in fact only seven actually new *be*-word-stems appear in the printed books of the sixteenth century:

(6) <i>begáfa</i> v. ‘equip’ 1564	<i>besetinn</i> p.p. / adj. ‘possessed’ 1599
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²¹ Probably ‘ingenuity, adroitness’ cf. ONP.

begrípa v. ‘understand’ 1546

beslá v. ‘cover, coat’ 1576

behrópa v. ‘shout’ 1579

besluta v. ‘decide’ 1600

beretta v. ‘tell’ 1595

Moreover, of course we will never know if some of these may have been used in now lost Icelandic documents, or in other communication in the fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries. Two of them are at least to be found in Norwegian documents from the fifteenth century, *begrípa* 1436 and *beretta* 1420, and *besitja* in a Norwegian document from 1389, written in Swedish/Danish.²²

Almost all the *be*-words of the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries, together with virtually all other earlier and later borrowed *be*-words, eventually disappeared fully from Icelandic in the nineteenth to twentieth centuries (Óskarsson 2015). With a few exceptions, they are not mentioned in Icelandic dictionaries of today. In the main modern Icelandic dictionary, *Íslensk orðabók*, 3rd ed. (2002), seventeen *be*-words of nine word stems have enjoyed the favour of the editors, but most of them are though marked as old or obsolete. Only one *be*- (or *bí*-) word is listed in the most recent Icelandic-English dictionary, *bísperrtur* adj. ‘self-assured, proud’, a word first attested in Icelandic in the mid-nineteenth century, and in fact not without a doubt a loanword (Hólmarsson et al. 2009).²³

Closing Words

Loanwords in Icelandic printed books of the sixteenth century are sometimes a direct result of the Reformation, but often they are considerably older, as was discussed here. Some of the loanwords have lived on till our time, but many of them were either wiped out – for not to say “cleaned away” – by the Icelandic language purism of the nineteenth (and twentieth) century, or just never became an integrated part of the language, outside of religious and official literature. Some of them even only show up in one or two books of the sixteenth century.

A preliminary comparison of the words listed by Westergård-Nielsen (1946) with the Modern Icelandic dictionary from 2002 (*Íslensk orðabók*) indicates that at least around 700 of Westergård-Nielsen’s 1,570 loanwords, found in Icelandic sixteenth century printed books, are not included in this main dictionary of Modern Icelandic. Further, the dictionary marks some 280 of the loanwords that are included as old or obsolete and around 30 loanwords are marked in some other way, as historical, poetical, informal or religious, which suggests that they have a limited use on the modern language. (A more detailed account of this is under preparation by this author.) This reflects the result of the language purism, but it may give us the impression that the Icelandic language came to us unaffected by the Middle Ages and the Late Middle Ages. This is not at all the case, but it cannot be denied that the Low and High German influence of the thirteenth to sixteenth or seventeenth centuries reached Iceland just as a splash, compared with the

²² See Fritzner 4, 46, 48 and 49, and further *Norges gamle Love* 1912, 14.

²³ The word was not in the first edition from 1989. – In his Icelandic etymological dictionary, Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon (1995 p. 57) seems not to be fully certain about the word’s foreign origin.

flood of loanwords, which poured over Denmark and Sweden and caught Norway as a somewhat lighter wave (Helgason 1931, 37).

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