

## SMALL TO SMALL

# Small to tiny: A case of Icelandicisation?

*Magnea Matthíasdóttir*

I was twenty-four when I was first asked to translate a book from Danish to Icelandic. “Piece of cake”, I thought when offered the job, “I studied Danish in school for years and I’ve lived and studied in Denmark so I know the language pretty well. I also have some experience as a translator, admittedly only from English, having translated fairy-tales for children, short stories and a few articles for magazines, but translating a book can hardly be that different, can it?” So I said yes. The next few weeks were – well, very instructive.

Translating between two ‘small’ languages, for instance between Nordic languages, is often more complicated than translating from a large linguistic area or a *lingua franca* like English into a tiny language like Icelandic, which nowadays has a little more than 300,000 native speakers. The influx of translations from a ‘big’ language into the smaller culture is greater than from less widely spoken languages, resulting in general familiarity with ideas, phrases, expressions etc. stemming from the larger culture and subsequently adopted by the smaller, not only from

books and written text but on many levels, from films and popular TV-series, all kinds of multimedia, radio and the Internet, and from many other influencers. This familiarity with the larger culture makes translation of recurring idioms and phrases easier up to a point (somebody else has already done the heavy lifting, maybe even the translator herself) and there is less need to explain certain phenomena and idiosyncrasies to a smaller culture target audience that already knows them. Translating literature from a smaller and/or less known culture for the same audience is altogether a different story, even when that culture is closer to the translator’s own, as is the case with Denmark and Iceland. As an example, both Danish and Icelandic children know a lot about Halloween, an imported custom from the USA, but little about celebrating *fastelavn* (like dressing up in costumes on Ash Wednesday) in the other’s country, where traditions are different. Therefore, a translator might have to add some explanations to the text when translating a children’s book from a Nordic language or otherwise adapt it to the target audience but

doesn't have to make as many changes, if any, in a translation of an English text.

### Iceland became independent in 1944

The Nordic languages, other than Finnish, Sámi and Kalaallisut (Greenlandic), were once the same language, Old Norse, which the Icelanders used to call *dönsk tunga* or Danish tongue. After 1200 the language started to diverge and develop into different vernaculars, which later became the national languages spoken today in the Nordic countries. (We Icelanders pride ourselves on speaking the original language, but that's not really true, although our language is probably closest to the old tongue.) Historically, culturally and even politically we have much in common and the Icelandic people's connection to Denmark goes a long way back, as Iceland was under Danish rule for centuries, until we became an independent state in 1944. As we kept our own language, this meant that since the Middle Ages on we have felt bound to translate any and all Danish names, be that of people or places, into Icelandic or at least 'Icelandicise' them in some way. For instance, the rest of the world may think that the Danish monarch's name is Margrethe; we Icelanders invariably call her Margrét Þórhildur. Accordingly, the Danish crown prince is Friðrik, but for some mysterious reason his wife is not called María but Mary, maybe because she comes from Australia and we don't find it necessary to translate non-Nordic names. They are not family.

Why am I telling you this? Well, because the name of the protagonist and the title of the first book I translated from Danish was a two-letter word with more than

one meaning in that language and no natural equivalent in Icelandic. It could be translated by numerous different words, or rather one of them depending on the context, and none of those words are used as a given name in Icelandic. I anguished over this particular problem for days but ended up using the Danish name unchanged and tried to scramble though any wordplay that might be lurking in the text, probably with a very ham-fisted translation. Fortunately, this was a serious novel for adult readers and there weren't that many. Or I missed them, which is always a possibility.

**“Danish used to be the first foreign language we learnt – now it's English”**

### Some school textbooks were in Danish

Danish used to be the first foreign language we learnt in school – now it's English. Many generations of Icelanders, up until the year 2000 or so, sincerely believed that being able to read *Donald Duck* in Danish and do translation exercises to test our grammatical knowledge and vocabulary between Danish and Icelandic made us fluent in the language, a delusion that was quickly eroded on our first visit to Denmark when nobody could understand what we said and we couldn't understand the natives. Nonetheless some of our textbooks in school were in Danish if



*Magnea J. Matthíasdóttir has a Master's degree in Translation Studies from the University of Iceland. She has translated many books for all age groups from English and Danish into Icelandic and twice been awarded for her work. She was chairman of the Icelandic Association of Translators and Interpreters in 2013-2017 and the association's delegate in CEATL for 5 years.*

*Magnea J. Matthíasdóttir  
Photo: Private Archive*

we didn't have an Icelandic alternative. Literary works, originally written in Russian or even Spanish and French, that had been translated into Danish, were then translated into Icelandic, Danish being the intermediary language. Danish literature – well, not so much. After all we could easily read the original. Or not.

In hindsight I realise that many of the numerous almost insurmountable problems I encountered in my first 'real' translation job are quite common and basically par for the course. New vocabulary had to be acquired, 'false friends' – more frequent in closely related languages – avoided and functional translations and turns of phrases found, in order to deliver an

adequate version of the original book in a different language. This was in the dark days before the Internet and Google, so finding answers and solutions was more complicated and time-consuming than it is now. Suffice to say that the results were less than sterling. I'd probably have done better with an older text by a different writer, maybe H.C. Andersen or Martin Andersen Nexø. After all, that was what my schooling had prepared me for – a sturdy (if antiquated) vocabulary in fishing and agriculture. But I finished the translation and the book got published, so that was that.

Now I just hope nobody ever, ever finds it on a dark and obscure shelf in the library and decides to read it.