

## **Variation in gender and number agreement in Icelandic**

### **Abstract**

This paper gives an overview of some types of variation in grammatical agreement observed in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Icelandic and of discourses (scholarly and popular) surrounding these. In Modern Icelandic, there is variation in gender and number agreement in predicate adjectives and anaphoric pronouns in contexts where the semantic gender or number of the referent is different from the grammatical gender or number, particularly in relation to human referents. Semantic agreement refers to a situation in which the grammatical marking on pronouns, adjectives, and verb forms corresponds to the social gender of a person or biological sex of another animal, singular forms are used for individual entities and plural for groups, even if the grammatical properties of the nouns used are different. Agreement within the noun phrase is always grammatical. The most common pattern is grammatical agreement within the clause, but semantic marking in further anaphora; however, particularly in colloquial usage, semantic agreement also appears within clauses. There is also variation in gender and number marking with generic or unspecified human referents. Both situations have been subject to normative discussion, but self-aware language users disagree in their recommendations. There are ongoing efforts by some speakers to change practices in the name of gender equity and inclusion.

**Key words:** Icelandic, grammatical gender, grammatical agreement, anaphora, generic reference, pronouns, language planning, inclusive language

## Introduction

This paper describes variation in gender and number agreement in Modern Icelandic, focusing on situations in which the semantic gender or number of the referent differs from the grammatical properties of the noun used (so-called hybrid nouns). Semantic gender has sometimes been called natural gender. Semantic agreement describes a situation in which the grammatical marking on e.g. adjectives, pronouns and participles corresponds to the social gender of a person or the sex of another animal, rather than to the grammatical gender of the noun used to refer to that organism. In number, semantic agreement applies in cases where grammatically singular forms refer to a single entity and plural forms to a group (although there can be cases in which something can be viewed either way).<sup>1</sup> The distinction has also been called anaphoric vs. deictic reference (Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir 2015a: 273). The emphasis is on human referents.

In addition, I discuss variation in gender and number use in generic and indefinite contexts. Both of these situations have been areas of normative debate, with differing opinions as to how apparent conflicts should be resolved. This discussion unfolds in parallel to and in dialogue with similar debates in other language communities (see e.g. chapters 1 and 2 in this volume on German and Danish). There are differences among national discourses in prevailing views as to which types of strategy better promote equality and inclusion, which are connected to structural differences among languages but also subject to changing trends – the “progressive” discourse in Iceland in the early 2020s takes some positions opposite to those that were regarded as “feminist” in the late twentieth century. In Iceland, generic uses (referring to an unknown group of people or generalizing about all people fulfilling certain conditions) in particular are a

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<sup>1</sup> A distinction between dual and plural was retained in Icelandic in first- and second-person personal pronouns until the eighteenth century (Helgi Guðmundsson 1972), but the historical dual forms (*við* ‘we(dual)’ and *þið* ‘you(dual)’) have been extended to plural usage and the distinction is no longer active.

focus of deliberate attempts to change established practice with the intent of making the Icelandic language less “androcentric” and more gender-inclusive. Advocates of gender-inclusive language also tend to favor semantic agreement in anaphoric pronouns and predicate adjectives, although it is not obvious why this belongs to the same cluster of issues; likely it reflects a preference for iconicity, i.e. a direct correspondence between grammatical and social gender. This paper describes some observed variation in qualitative terms as well as presenting the discourse surrounding this variation as observed in linguistics books and journals, pedagogical fora, popular media and social media. Many of the usage examples are taken from internet sources; the intention is to show the existence of variation. Statements regarding frequency are impressionistic but corroborated by other research.

### **Basics - background on Icelandic**

The North Germanic language Icelandic is distinguished from the Mainland Scandinavian languages (Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish), with which it formed a single language area into the High Middle Ages, by relative conservatism in inflectional morphology and lexicon. Modern Icelandic has three genders (masculine, feminine, and neuter), four cases (nominative, accusative, dative, and genitive), and a large number of inflectional classes, most of which are specific to a single grammatical gender. Gender, number, and case marking are visible on most nouns, adjectives (both attributive and predicative, and including many past participles), and pronouns, although there are also a relatively small number of indeclinable forms. The conservatism of the language has historically been a focus of national identity, central in the path to independence from Denmark between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, and

Icelandic society has been characterized by a high level of language awareness and purism. Puristic efforts in the early twentieth century have been credited, for example, with eliminating many loanwords and some word orders perceived as reflecting Danish or German influence (see Heimir van der Feest Viðarsson 2016), reverting some inflectional paradigms (notably the noun type *læknir* ‘physician’ and mediopassive verbal endings) to forms closer to Old Norse, and stopping a then widespread but stigmatized merger of high and mid-vowels (called *flámæli* or ‘gaping speech’), although some claims regarding the effectiveness of these efforts have been questioned (Heimir van der Feest Viðarsson 2016). On Icelandic purism in general see Kjartan G. Ottósson (1990).

In the decades since independence, however, Icelandic society has changed rapidly, with urbanization, migration, multiculturalism, and shifting norms regarding gender and family structure, in addition to technological changes. While the level of linguistic awareness in Icelandic society remains high, linguistic purism has become less relevant and has come to be seen by many as passé, with connotations of xenophobia and racism. Håkan Jansson (2015) shows that use of loanwords became more prevalent between 1990 and 2010. Icelandic language planning has turned away from avoidance of loanwords and has been more concerned with maintaining the status and use of Icelandic in the face of the ever-increasing presence of English, which has replaced Danish as the most prevalent foreign language in Icelandic society. The impact of exposure to English through the Internet has been a particular focus (Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir and Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson 2018). As across the West, language planning discourse focuses increasingly on human rights, sensitivity and inclusion, not least in matters of gender. While Icelandic linguistic purism has historically been oriented toward the past, focused

on maintaining continuity with the medieval language and literature that have been a focus of national identity and pride, the newer trend could be characterized as a future-oriented moral purism, involving active attempts to change the language and attitudes toward it in hopes of producing a more equitable society.

### **Grammatical vs semantic gender and number**

In Icelandic, pronouns and adjectives agree with nouns in gender and number. In cases where the semantic gender or number of the referent differs from the grammatical gender of the noun, there is variation in agreement, both within the sentence and in broader discourse. Agreement within the noun phrase is always grammatical, as in (1) (from Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir 2015a: 272).

(1) a. Hún er góður/\*góð læknir.

She is good-M.SG.NOM/\*F.SG.NOM doctor(M.).SG.NOM

‘She is a good doctor.’

There is variation between grammatical and semantic agreement in predicate adjectives (including participles). (Examples adapted from Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir 2015a: 271-273.)

(2)a. Gestirnir verða áreiðanlega blautir/blaut þegar þeir/þau koma inn.

guest(M.)-PL.NOM=DEF.M.PL.NOM will-be.PRES.3PL undoubtedly wet.M.PL.NOM./N.PL.NOM

when they.M.PL.NOM/N.PL.NOM COME.PRES.3PL in

‘The guests will undoubtedly be wet when they come in.’

(2)b. Krakkarnir mínir hafa alltaf verið ánægðir/ánægð í skólanum.

kid(M.)-PL.NOM=DEF.M.PL.NOM my.M.PL.NOM have.PRES3PL always been

satisfied-M.PL.NOM/N.PL.NOM in school(M.).DAT=DEF.M.SG.DAT

‘My kids have always been satisfied at school.’

Beyond the clause, e.g. with anaphoric pronouns, semantic agreement is more common, although grammatical agreement also occurs (as in 2a above).

As Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir (2015a: 274) observes, this is consistent with the hierarchy postulated by Corbett (2006: 207; 2012: 95):

Attributive > predicative > relative pronoun > personal pronoun

Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir (2015a: 274) also notes that agreement of relative pronouns is generally not relevant for Icelandic, as most relative clauses are introduced with non-inflected forms *sem* (and the older *er*) that have been argued to be conjunctions rather than pronouns (Höskuldur Þráinsson 1980).

However, semantic agreement even within the clause is also common particularly in informal registers and younger speakers’ usage. This situation occurs most often with predicate adjectives.<sup>2</sup> There are disagreements among language planners and other self-aware language users such as writers as to recommended usage. Semantic agreement can be said to show a higher degree of iconicity – a transparent correspondence between the gender and number of the referent and of the term used. Grammatical agreement exploits a different type of flexibility in the language – the possibility of referring to the same entity using words with different grammatical properties – and permits some ambiguity with respect to the gender of the referent.

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<sup>2</sup> As Icelandic has reflexive possessive pronouns – citation form *sinn*(m.sg.nom) – which are used when an object or prepositional object is possessed by the subject of the clause, and which agree in gender, number and case with the possessed noun but are the same for all third-person possessors regardless of gender and number, it is rare to find a single-clause situation in which a possessive pronoun would show a distinction.

## Previous research

Grammatical agreement in Icelandic has been addressed from a number of perspectives, including descriptive grammar, historical linguistics, generative syntax, sociolinguistics and normative discourse. These discourses connect to one another: sociolinguistic studies compare practices to norms; normative recommendations are informed by practice, history, and what appears in formal accounts to be logically consistent. Formal and descriptive studies from the 1990s focus on subject-verb agreement in person and number. Agreement of predicate adjectives and anaphoric pronouns come more into focus after the turn of the millennium 2000, at the same time as proposals for language reform in the interest of gender equity emerged as a theme in the discourse, one which intensified particularly starting in the mid-2010s.

In a descriptive tradition, Jón G. Friðjónsson (1990-1991) discusses agreement with conjoined subjects: whether verbs and predicate adjectives agree with the conjoined noun phrase as a whole, as in (3a), or with the last conjunct, as in (3b) (Jón G. Friðjónsson 1990-1991: 79).

(3a) Áhuginn og eftirvæntingin gagntók hugi okkar / var mikil

Interest.nom-DEF.M.SG.NOM and anticipation.nom-DEF.F.SG.NOM captivate.PST.3SG

mind.PL.ACC our / be.PST.3SG great.F.SG.NOM

(b) Áhuginn og eftirvæntingin gagntóku hugi okkar / voru mikil

Interest.NOM-DEF.M.SG.NOM and anticipation.NOM-DEF.M.SG.NOM captivate.PST.3PL mind.

PL.ACC our / be, PST.3SG great. N.PL.NOM

‘The interest and anticipation captivated our minds / were great’

He notes that different speakers prefer different agreement patterns, and points out differences between the treatment of countable vs. non-countable and abstract vs. concrete nouns. When the conjoined subjects are concrete and countable, there is agreement with the conjoined phrase, but when they are abstract and uncountable, there is a tendency for a predicate adjective to agree with only the second conjunct and singular verb forms may be used.

(4a) Bókin og blaðið eru týnd. (Jón G. Friðjónsson 1991: 84)

book(F.SG.NOM)-DEF.F.SG.NOM and paper(N.SG.NOM)-DEF.N.SG.NOM be-PRES.3PL lost.N.PL.NOM

‘The book and the paper are lost’

(b) Velmegun og tækni er mikil/?eru miklar. (Jón G. Friðjónsson 1991: 85)

Well-being.F.SG.NOM and technology(F.SG.NOM) be-PRES.3SG great.F.SG.NOM / ?be-PRES.3PL  
great.F.PL.NOM

‘Well-being and technology are great.’

Word order also influences agreement. This is one context in which agreement shows variation both among speakers and sensitive to subtle semantic factors and information structure. He also give examples involving person agreement on verbs when the subject contains conjoined pronouns or a quantifier or demonstrative pronoun along with a personal pronoun (81). In these cases he views third-person agreement as more natural even when the pronoun is in the first or second person, as in (5).

(5) Mörg ykkar vita/?vitið

Many.N.PL you.PL.GEN know.PRES.3PL/?2PL

Many of you know

This could be viewed as an example of a preference for grammatical over semantic agreement inasmuch as the formal subject is the third-person quantifier although the overall reference is to a second-person entity specified in the genitive modifier.

Working in a generative framework, Halldór Ármann Sigurðsson (1990-1991) also examines subject-verb agreement and agreement of predicate adjectives within the clause, contrasting clauses with nominative and non-nominative subjects. Many non-nominative noun phrases, often with the semantic role of experiencer, have been argued to function in Icelandic as syntactic subjects (see e.g. Höskuldur Bráinsson 2007: 146-180 and references cited there). However, they do not show subject-verb agreement as do nominative subjects; rather, finite verbs appear in third-person forms and participles in the neuter singular form. Number (but not person) agreement with a nominative object is sometimes observed. In another article, Halldór Ármann (1992) focuses on the lack of subject-verb agreement in clauses with a dative subject and nominative object, noting variation in judgements regarding number agreement in a small sample (N = 9) of Icelandic linguists in examples like (6).

(6) Henni leiddust/leiddist strákar

She.SG.DAT be.bored.by.PST.3PL/3SG boy.PL.NOM-DEF.M.PL.NOM

‘She was bored/annoyed by the boys’

While Halldór Ármann Sigurðsson prefers number agreement with the plural nominative object, some other speakers in his sample prefer to have only 3sg verb forms with non-nominative objects. Halldór Ármann argues that agreement (both subject-verb and of predicate participles) is independent of grammatical functions such as subjecthood. Predicate participles show gender and number agreement in passive clauses in which the accusative subject of an active clause

alternates with a nominative subject in a passive clause, whereas in passive clauses formed with verbs that take objects in the dative or genitive case, that argument retains its lexical case, the finite auxiliary verb vera ‘to be’ appears in 3sg forms, and the participle is in the neut3sg or supine form. (Examples adapted from Halldór Ármann Sigurðsson 1991: 39.)

(7)a. Hann opnaði dyrnar<sup>3</sup>.

He open-PAST3SG door(F.PL).ACC=DEF.F.PL.ACC

‘He opened the door’

b. Dyrnar voru opnaðar.

door(F.PL).ACC=DEF.F.PL.ACC be.PAST3PL open-PPART.F.PL.NOM

‘The door was opened.’

(8)a. Hann lokaði dyrunum.

He close-PAST.3SG door(F.PL).DAT=DEF.F.PL.DAT

‘He closed the door.’

b. Dyrunum var lokað. (Event reading.)

door(F.PL).DAT=DEF.F.PL.DAT be.PAST.3SG close-PPART.N.SG.NOM

c. Dyrnar voru lokaðar. (State reading.)

door(F.PL).NOM=DEF.F.PL.NOM be.PAST.3PL close-PPART.F.SG.NOM

Halldór Ármann does not discuss pronominal anaphora or the types of constructions that have been targeted by reform efforts in the twenty-first century.

From a historical perspective, but with connections to discussion of norms and reforms, Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir (2015a) reports on the use of anaphoric pronouns in emigrant women’s letters from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, considered to represent vernacular Icelandic

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<sup>3</sup> Dyr [f.pl](#) ‘door’ functions as plurale tantem.

with relatively little influence from prescriptive norms. These data show variation, but some preference for semantic agreement (neuter plural) in predicate adjectives and anaphoric pronouns with nouns that normally refer to groups of people with mixed genders. Another pattern found in the letters is the use of neuter singular forms to refer to groups of people, as in (9) (Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir 2015a: 281)

(9) Guðrún Ólafsdóttir, frænka okkar, og synir hennar býr allt saman í Winnipeg.

Guðrún Ólafsdóttir cousin(F.SG).NOM POSS.1PL and sons(M.).PL.NOM live.PRES.3SG  
all.N.SG.NOM together in Winnipeg

‘Guðrún Ólafsdóttir, our cousin, and her sons all live in Winnipeg’

Here not only the predicate quantifier but also the verb shows singular agreement. Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir suggests that this pattern may reflect an implicit *fólk* (n.sg) ‘people’, which typically shows n.sg agreement although the referent is semantically plural. However, as noted below, Þorbjörg Þorvaldsdóttir (2019) observes examples in twentieth- and twenty-first century Icelandic of non-agreeing *það* (n.sg) when the antecedent shows low individuation.

Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir compares the practices observed in the emigrant women’s letters with the recommendations of “feminist language reformers” (285) at the start of the twenty-first century, who call for the use of the neuter plural *pau* ‘they’ in generic contexts (referring to an unknown group of people) in lieu of the “traditionally” prescribed masculine *þeir* ‘they’. Guðrún argues that the generic use of neuter plural *pau* does not have a tradition in vernacular Icelandic practice, although it is standard in referring to mixed-gender groups in anaphoric contexts. In other writings (2005, 2008, 2009, 2022), Guðrún has criticized such language reforms.

Finnur Ágúst Ingimarsson (2020), a student of Guðrún's, discusses the history of the use of neuter gender words in reference to humans in Icelandic against a background of Germanic and Indo-European historical linguistics. His discussion builds on John Ole Askedal's (1973) study of the use of the neuter plural in the history of German. The use of neuter plural (rather than masculine) forms to refer to mixed-gender groups of people is a Germanic innovation connected with syncretism of dual and plural forms. While Hiersche (1963) had claimed that *þau* (n.pl) was used in Old Icelandic only for groups of two people of different genders and *þeir* (m.pl) for larger groups, Finnur Ágúst also finds medieval examples of *þau* with larger groups, as in modern Icelandic (2020: 31). Finnur Ágúst further assembles a list of neuter gender nouns that have been used to refer to humans in historical texts, including poetic synonyms (*heiti*) from Old Norse poetry and words used in Bible translations, analyzing these nouns by semantic category and comparing them to cognates and equivalents in other languages. The thesis culminates in a discussion (66-87) of current debates over inclusive language and the use of pronouns, including both the traditional *það* 'it' (n.sg) and the recently introduced *hán* (n.sg), an innovative pronoun used by non-binary and gender nonconforming people mainly since 2015, discussed below). Finnur Ágúst contemplates why the new Bible translation (discussed below) replaces both masculine plural and masculine singular forms in generic statements with neuter plural rather than neuter singular and why a novel pronoun *hán* is preferred over the existing neuter 3sg pronoun *það*. He argues that the perception that the latter is pejorative stems in part from the analogy to English, which does not have the same type of gender system as Icelandic.

Sociolinguistic studies by Anna Helgadóttir (2011) and Birkir Freyr Jóhannesson (2011) present survey data on the use of grammatical gender in the speech of young people, based on written

questionnaires conducted in schools. Birkir Freyr Jóhannesson's multiple-choice questionnaire consists of 16 items, including nine examples involving anaphoric pronouns and seven featuring predicate adjectives. The majority of respondents choose grammatical agreement in both types of constructions. It is, however, unclear to what extent the answers reflect actual language use in less controlled situations. Anna Helgadóttir's study includes a comparison group of adults and suggests that a tendency toward semantic rather than grammatical agreement is increasing.

Language planning/normative discourse includes voices advocating "traditional" usage and formal consistency (e.g. Guðrún Kvaran 2002), as well as voices promoting deliberate innovations in the name of social equity, particularly feminism and queer activism. The rise in visibility of sexual and gender minorities also influences the discourse on grammatical agreement. Examples in which it is assumed, for instance, that *ófrískur* or *óléttur* adj. 'pregnant' implies a female referent (see e.g. Einar Freyr Sigurðsson 2018, Finnur Ágúst Ingimarsson 2020: 10) or that an individual's parents will be of different genders (see exchange between Hallberg Hallmundsson 1996 and Þórarinn Eldjárn 1996, discussed below), appear less obvious with shake-ups in family norms and in the correlation between social gender and traits that have traditionally been associated with the concept of biological sex. The use of grammatically neuter pronouns to refer to people has historically been perceived as depersonalizing and pejorative (cf. Baldur Sigurðsson 1999), but with inventions of new terms for persons of non-binary gender this may also be changing.

## **Discussion of gendered and gender-neutral language**

At least since the 1990s there has been discussion of the “androcentric” nature of the Icelandic language and proposals for ways to make it more gender inclusive. Anna Gunnarsdóttir Grönberg (1995, 2002) regards “default masculine” in Icelandic language use as widespread and problematic, as she perceives it as reflecting implicit androcentrism in Icelandic society. While masculine as an unmarked gender for reference to humans has deep roots in Indo-European (Jón Axel Harðarson 2001, Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir 2008: 107-108), some women and non-binary people – although far from all – feel excluded or discriminated against by this aspect of the language (Grönberg 1995, Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson 2022a: 4)

The notion of “mál beggja kynja” (the language of both genders) was promoted around the turn of the millennium 2000 (Ágústa Þorbergsdóttir 2021). A number of innovations were first presented for a wider public in a 2007 Bible translation that expressly aimed for gender inclusion. In generalizing statements like those in (10) and (11), the traditional generic use of masculine singular (10a) and plural (11a) seen in a 1981 translation are replaced with neuter plural in the 2007 version (10b, 11b).

(10a) Sá sem trúir á mig mun lifa, þótt hann deyi.

DEM.M.SG.NOM REL believe.PRES.3SG in me.ACC will.PRES.3SG live.INF although he.M.SG.NOM die.SUBJ.PRES.3SG

‘The one who believes in me will live, even if he dies.’

(b) Þau sem trúa á mig munu lifa, þótt þau deyi.

DEM.N.PL.NOM rel believe.PRES.3PL in me.ACC will.PRES.3PL live.INF although they.N.PL.NOM die.SUBJ.PRES.3PL

‘Those who believe in me will live, even if they die’

(11a) Sælir eru hjartahreinir.

happy.M.PL.NOM be.PRES.3PL pure.of.heart.M.PL.NOM

‘Happy are the pure of heart’

(b) Sæl eru hjartahrein.

happy.N.PL.NOM be.PRES.3PL pure.of.heart.N.PL.NOM

‘Happy are the pure of heart.’

The translation also changed some nouns, e.g replacing *lærisveinar Jesú* ‘the disciples(m.pl.) of Jesus’ with *vinir og vinkonur Jesú* ‘friends(m.pl) and female friends(f.pl) of Jesus’ and updating ways of referring to homosexual behavior to ones perceived as less pejorative (Auður Eir Vilhjálmisdóttir 2005, Ný biblíufýðing og mál beggja kynja 2007). The translation was criticized for misrepresenting the society depicted in the Bible, as well as for lack of clarity in some points (Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir 2005).

With increasing visibility of trans\* and non-binary persons starting in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the rhetoric has shifted from “mál beggja kynja” (the language of both genders) to “mál allra kynja” (the language of all genders) or “kynhlutlaust mál” (gender-neutral language). The discussion of “gender-neutral language” in Iceland concerns several different areas, as Þorbjörg Þorvaldsdóttir (2022) articulates. The goal of gender-neutral language is to increase “visibility” for women and non-binary persons.

It includes at least the issues of:

1. devising pronouns and other terms and development of agreement practices in reference to non-binary persons
2. feminine and neuter gender forms for job titles

3. replacement of masculine with neuter (singular and plural) in generic human reference
4. use of *man* (n.), historically ‘unfree person’, later ‘maiden’ (poetic) or *kona* (f.) ‘woman’ as alternatives to *maður* (‘one’, etymologically identical to *maður* (m.) ‘human’, ‘man’) in generic reference which is often an indirect way to refer to the speaker.
5. promotion of semantic rather than grammatical agreement in pronouns and adjectives (presumably in order to increase the visibility of the genders of the people referred to).

Discussion of semantic vs. grammatical agreement connects to this discourse in relation to job titles (as a common situation in which the gender of the noun may differ from that of the person fulfilling the role), visibility for non-male persons, and clarity of reference in anaphora.

Different speakers (both native and second-language speakers of Icelandic) have different reactions to these options. Anna Gunnarsdóttir Grönberg (1995: 79) writes, “ever since I began learning Icelandic I have been surprised and offended by the use of masculine pronouns etc. while talking about and referring to women.” Another advanced L2 speaker (p.c.), however, has told me that she experiences the variation in grammatical forms used to refer to the same person as part of what makes the Icelandic language “androgynous and sexy”. I have seen similarly divergent opinions expressed by native Icelanders. I personally feel more at home with variation in gender marking and with using the same job titles for all persons regardless of gender than with enforced iconicity with a proliferation of terms. It is not self-evident that the latter is preferred by or preferable for all queer or other non-male persons.

## Gender mismatches and gendered job titles

Most often the grammatical gender of a noun that refers to a human being corresponds to the “natural” or social gender of the person referred to, e.g. *karl*(*maður*) (m.) ‘man’, *kona* (f.) ‘woman’, *drengur*, *strákur* (m.) ‘boy’, *stúlka*, *stelpa* (f.) ‘girl’. However, there are numerous exceptions. For instance, the word *höfundur* (m.) ‘author’, usually without the definite article, is a common way of referring to the author of the text being read or the text being discussed. This has no feminine form, but women authors may use feminine forms elsewhere in the same sentence, as seen in (12):

- (12) Höfundur er ein af þeim sem tekst á einhvern óskiljanlegan hátt alltaf að vera sein í partí <https://www.laeknabladid.is/tolublod/2022/06/nr/8056> [The author(m.sg) is one(f.sg) of those who in some inexplicable way always manage to be late for parties.]

There are no general-purpose suffixes regularly used to derive feminine nouns referring to people from masculine nouns (cf. e.g. German *-in*, Polish *-ka* and *-yni*). The majority of “professional” job titles are masculine and are used in the same form regardless of the gender of the individual involved. Grönberg (1995) argues that this grammatical practice reflects social attitudes and norms, despite many developments toward social equity in Iceland. She observes that a clear majority of words used to refer to humans, especially professional titles, in a newspaper corpus sample are grammatically masculine. Many of the professional titles date from times when women were excluded from those professions. The fact that even when the titles are not grammatically masculine (the examples most typically cited are *skáld* (n.) ‘poet’ and *hetja* (f.) ‘hero’), there is a tendency to form compounds to specify a woman in the role (*skáldkona* (f.), *kvenhetja* (f.)) indicates that there is an implicit expectation that the person fulfilling the role will

be masculine unless it is otherwise indicated. (Non-binary identities were not part of widespread discourse in 1995.)

Opinions vary across speakers, languages and times as to whether it better serves gender equity to have the same job titles used for everyone regardless of gender (the policy e.g. in Swedish, where job titles with overtly feminine suffixes such as *sjuksköterska* ‘nurse’ and *flygvärdinna* ‘flight attendant’ are used for persons of all genders in these traditionally feminine professions; Swedish no longer has three grammatical genders, so agreement is much less of an issue than in Icelandic) or to make gender visible in job titles by having different versions of the title for persons of different genders (the policy promoted as “feminist” in Poland in the 2020s). In Iceland, some feminine job titles that were in use in the early twentieth century fell out of favor in the later twentieth century. Such titles with *-kona* as a suffix or *kven-* as a prefix have historically been perceived as derogatory. Around the 1980s, some job titles in *-kona* were replaced by forms in *-maður*. Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson (2022b) quotes from Magdalena Schram (1989), who in the 1970s changed from calling herself *blaðakona* (f.) ‘female journalist’ to *blaðamaður* (m.) ‘journalist’, but later reversed her position. In both cases the change was motivated by a desire to promote equality for women; in the first instance to show that the same job was performed by people regardless of gender (second-wave feminism); in the latter, to challenge the idea that she should have to hide or deny a feminine identity in order to project professional competence (in the third wave).

In some cases feminine terms for traditionally female professions have been replaced by grammatically masculine, more official titles that are intended to apply to all genders, for

instance *flugfreyja* (f.) ‘stewardess’, *flugþjónn* (m.) ‘steward’ > *flugliði* (m.) ‘flight attendant’; *hjúkrunarkona* (f.) ‘nurse’ > *hjúkrunarfræðingur* (m.) (a more official term). There are not established suffixes or strategies for forming grammatically neuter job titles. The colloquial form *lögga* (f.) ‘cop’ for *lögregluþjónn*, *-maður* (m.) (*-kona* (f.)) ‘policeman, police officer’ is a relatively rare example of a feminine form used for all genders. Another case of a feminine job title is *ljósmóðir* (f.) ‘midwife’, literally ‘light mother’. There were no male midwives active in Iceland as of 2019, but a male Norwegian midwife was quoted in Icelandic media as being proud to use the term for himself (Alma Ómarsdóttir 2019). The term *ljósfaðir* (m.), literally ‘light father’, has also reportedly been used (Þórunn Guðmundsdóttir 2002, Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson 2021). In any event, it is common for a masculine job title to be used for a woman, while the opposite configuration is much rarer – one of Grönberg’s (1995) arguments that grammatically masculine job titles are not really gender-inclusive but encode androcentric social attitudes.

As stated above, cases of gender mismatch, e.g. where a masculine term is used to refer to a person known to be female, usually agreement within the clause follows grammatical gender. Beyond the individual clause, it is more common for semantic gender to prevail when this is known, but opinions regarding prescriptive recommendations vary among conscious language users. For instance, Guðrún Kvaran (2002) states that grammatical agreement even in cases of anaphora beyond the clause is correct according to Icelandic norms, as in (13).

(13) Skáldið kom fram á kynningunni. Það las úr óbirtum ljóðum sínum.

The poet(n.sg) appeared at the presentation. It(n.sg) read from its(reflexive.pl.dat)<sup>4</sup> unpublished poems.

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<sup>4</sup> The reflexive possessive pronouns do not show a distinction in the gender of the possessor.

However, she also mentions that “Í dæmum sem þessum er oft reynt að umorða þannig að ekki leiki vafi á við hvað er átt” (In examples like this often attempts are made to rephrase so that there will be no doubt as to what is meant). This seems an acknowledgment that the practice that Guðrún Kvaran describes as correct is not typical for actual usage.

In an exchange from 1996, translator Hallberg Hallmundsson cites examples of what he calls “kynferðisleg misnotkun fornafna” (sexual abuse of pronouns). For Hallberg, this refers to agreement not with the grammatical gender of a noun but with the gender of its human referent, as in (14).

(14) Sjálfur var skáldið eins og jurt . . . (Þórarinn Eldjárn 1983: 10)

Himself(m.sg) the poet(n.sg) was like a plant

Hallberg here prefers the practice recommended by Guðrún Kvaran (2002) above. Hallberg quotes his own review (in English) of the story “Hetjusaga” (heroic story) by Hrafn Gunnlaugsson, from his collection *Þegar það gerist* (When it happens, 1989):

What shocked me in the story, however, was the linguistic perniciousness, particularly the consistent reference to *skáld* (poet or creative writer in general), a neuter word in Icelandic, with a masculine pronoun! For such treatment of the language, the *skáld* of *Þegar það gerist* deserves only one response: it ought to be ashamed of itself! (Hallberg Hallmundsson 1990, quoted in Hallberg Hallmundsson 1996)

Writer Þórarinn Eldjárn (1996) responds by saying that the insistence on grammatical gender was the real abuse. Þórarinn gives examples which he regards as absurd, shown in (15).

(15a) Ég elska foreldra mína af því að þeir hafa alltaf verið svo góðir við mig.

I love my parents because they(m.pl.nom) have always been so good(m.pl.nom) to me

(b) Ég spurði þennan boldangskvenmann hvort ég mætti ekki sofa hjá honum.

I asked this rowdy female person(m.sg.acc) whether I could sleep with him(m.sg.dat)

Þórarinn's reply ends with a ditty that makes use of the fact that Hallberg's name is based on the neuter noun *berg* (n.) 'rock, mountain'.

Oft er notað eðliskyn

þótt annað segi málfræðin.

Málið verður þannig þjálft.

Þetta veit nú Hallberg sjálft.

Often natural gender is used/though the grammar says otherwise./The language becomes  
supple that way./This is known to Hallberg itself(n.sg.nom).

The barb here of course depends on the pejorative connotations of referring to a person with a neuter gender pronoun, which is understood as implying inanimacy – at least in 1996.

**Semantic vs. grammatical resolution – sample internet data**

Examples of nouns whose grammatical gender or number typically differs from that of the referent are *fólk* ‘people’ (n.sg), *foreldrar* ‘parents’ (m.pl), and *krakkar* ‘kids’ (m.pl).

Within the clause both m.pl and n.pl agreement with *foreldrar* are common, as in (16).

(16a) foreldrarnir eru báðir pólskir

<https://hlidaskoli.is/systur-tilnefndar-til-islenskuverdlauna-unga-folksins/>

The parents are both(m.pl.nom) Polish(m.pl.nom)

(b) foreldrarnir eru að kynna hvort öðru.

<https://akur.hjalli.is/Upplýsingar/Foreldrafelagid>

The parents(m.pl.nom) are getting to know each(n.sg.nom) other(n.sg.dat)

(c) Báðir foreldrarnir

eru íslenskir <https://www.dv.is/frettir/2022/3/31/logmadur-fodurins-itrekar-ad-brottnumdu-bornin-fra-noregi-seu-i-haettu-thad-er-astaeda-fyrir-thvi-ad-domurinn-daemir-umgengni-svona-litla/>

Both(m.pl.nom) parents(m.pl.nom) are Icelandic(m.pl.nom)

Beyond the simple clause, it is more typical to see neuter plural, as in (17).

(17a) Foreldrar mínir hafa áhuga á skiptum fyrir jóli. Til dæmis langa helgi. Þau búa í miðbæ Reykjavíkur.

My parents are interested in an exchange before Christmas. For instance a long weekend.

They(n.pl.nom) live in the center of Reykjavík.

(b) Foreldrar mínir eru ekki samkvæmir sjálfum sér – stundum er allt í lagi að gera víska hluti en stundum ekki. Þau eru ekki sammála um hvað ég eigi eða fá

My parents are not consistent(m.pl.nom) – sometimes it is okay to do certain things but sometimes not. They(n.pl.nom) do not agree on what I have or get.

(c) foreldrar mínir eru góðir og mig langar mjög að kynna þau fyrir þér.

<https://is.observatoriodepaliativos.org/Damit-klarkommen-dass-deine-Eltern-homosexuell-sind-10132>

my parents are good(m.pl.nom) and I very much want to introduce them(n.pl.acc) to you.

Similar variation is observed with other nouns, such as *krakkarnir* ‘the kids’ (m.pl), as in (18).

(18a) Krakkarnir eru orðnir svo stórir

The kids have become(m.pl.nom) so big(m.pl.nom)

(b) Krakkarnir eru fyrir lifandis löngu búin að fá nóg af plockfiski

The kids have long since had(n.pl.nom) enough of fish stew

Of course I do not know the gender makeup of the particular groups of parents or kids in all instances. However, the impression is maintained that both grammatical and semantic agreement are found with predicate adjectives in informal internet discourse, while semantic agreement appears much more frequent beyond the clause.

### **Number agreement and collective terms**

An analogous mismatch between grammatical and semantic properties occurs with collective nouns that are used to refer to groups of people. With *fólk* (n.sg) ‘people’ or *þjóð* (f.sg) ‘nation’,

singular agreement is used both within the clause and in larger discourses. Ethnic and national groups and states as actors are commonly referred to with demonyms that are grammatically masculine plural, and this agreement also persists beyond the clause. Unlike the use of masculine terms with generic reference and some job titles, these terms have generally been treated as unproblematic (notwithstanding attempts by Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson (2024) to call attention to their gendered nature).

An individual of a different gender can be singled out of the collective *fólk* (n.sg) ‘people’, as in (19).

(19a) Ég er ein af því fólki (overheard)

I am one(f.sg.nom) of those people(n.sg.dat)

(b) Supatta Soodchit er ein af fólkinu okkar í borginni.

[https://www.facebook.com/Reykjavik/posts/10159018705380042/?locale=is\\_IS](https://www.facebook.com/Reykjavik/posts/10159018705380042/?locale=is_IS)

Supatta Soodchit is one(f.sg.nom) of our people(n.sg.dat) in the city.

The noun *þjóð* (f.sg) ‘nation’ shows f.sg agreement even beyond the simple clause, although this may reflect personification, as seen in (20).

(20a) Öll þjóðin er komin með niðurgang af öllum þeim hörmungar meðulum sem Jóhanna og Steingrímur hafa gefið henni. (Source: visir.is).

<https://mennsemhatarikisstjornina.tumblr.com/post/43672628097/%C3%B6ll-%C3%BEj%C3%B3in-er-komin-me%C3%B0-ni%C3%B0urgang-af-%C3%B6llum-%C3%BEeim>

The whole nation(f.sg.nom) has gotten diarrhea from all the terrible treatments that Jóhanna and Steingrímur have given her(f.sg.dat).

- (b) Þjóðin er, eins og naerri má geta, ... mjög óánaegð með stjórnendurna, en henni er haldið í skefjum með leigðu herliði frá Frakklandi og Austurríki og lögregluþjónum...

The nation is, to put it mildly, very displeased(f.sg.nom) with those governing, but she(f.sg.dat) is restrained by mercenary soldiers from France and Austria and policemen.

- (c) Vá hvað íslenska þjóðin er erfið í sambúð... Aldrei hægt að gera henni til geðs því það er allt ómögulegt sem gert er. <https://twitter.com/GardarArni/status/1490691334784655362>

Wow, the Icelandic nation is difficult(f.sg.nom) to live with ... It is never possible to please her(f.sg.dat) because everything that is done is impossible.

States as political actors are commonly referred to by demonyms in masculine plural forms, rather than e.g. the name of the country – hence e.g. *Íslendingar* (m.pl) ‘Icelanders’ rather than *Ísland* (n.sg) ‘Iceland’, *Svíar* (m.pl) ‘Swedes’ rather than *Svíþjóð* (f.sg) ‘Sweden’, *Bandaríkjamenn* (m.pl) ‘Americans’ instead of *Bandaríkin* (n.pl) ‘the United States’, etc., as seen in (21). Demyonyms in masculine plural forms may also be used to describe cultural generalizations. Generally in these cases grammatical m.pl agreement persists in the larger discourse, even though presumably any nation includes persons of different genders and the characterizations are not restricted to men.

- (21a) Á meðan aðrar þjóðir slást um að útvega hanska, grímur, sýnatökupinna og aðrar nauðsynjar í veirusmituðum heimi, þá standa Finnar vel að vígi með birgðir sem þeir hafa safnað saman allt frá lokum síðari heimsstyrjaldarinnar. Það má segja að Finnar séu

nokkurs konar skátar Norðurlanda; ávallt viðbúinir því að þriðja heimsstyrjöldin skelli á  
<https://www.ruv.is/frett/2020/04/13/hamingjusamasta-thjodin-er-vidbuin-thvi-versta>

While other nations(f.pl.nom) compete in providing gloves, masks, sample swabs and other necessities in a virus-infected world, the Finns(m.pl.nom) are well-prepared with supplies that they(m.pl.nom) have collected since the end of the Second World War. One might say that the Finns(m.pl.nom) are the scouts(m.pl.nom) of the Nordic countries – always prepared(m.pl.nom) for the Third World War to break out.

(b) Íslendingar eru fyndnir. Þeir tala mikið á fundum

<https://medium.com/@andresjons/%C3%ADslendingar-eru-fu-7d598ccb6130>

Icelanders(m.pl.nom) are funny(m.pl.nom). They(m.pl.nom) talk a lot at meetings.

Terms like *Íslendingar* (m.pl) ‘Icelanders’ or *þjóðin* (f.sg) ‘the nation’ still seem generally to be accepted in Icelandic discourse, despite a recent suggestion by Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson (2024), one of the most active and visible advocates of grammar reform, that masculine deomononyms are problematic.

### **Polysemous *maður***

The word *maður* (m.) has been a recurrent topic of debate. Like corresponding nouns in many other languages, it has dual meanings of ‘human being’ and ‘adult male human being’. In addition, it functions as an indefinite pronoun with generic reference (‘one’, cf. e.g. German or

Swedish *man*), often as an indirect way to refer to the speaker (cf. Einar Freyr Sigurðsson 2008, Grönberg 1995: 94-95).

Þorbjörg Þorvaldsdóttir (2022) outlines the triple function of the word *maður*: firstly, it can refer to a human being; secondly, to an adult male human; and thirdly, it functions as an indefinite pronoun with generic reference. She suggests that the meaning of “adult male” is most common (it is not specified on what basis this has been determined), and says that psycholinguistic studies show that other meanings of a polysemic word are also “activated” apart from those intended in a particular context. Therefore the existence of the gendered meaning may lead people to favor an interpretation as masculine or association with adult males also in contexts where one of the other meanings is clearly intended. This applies as well to *-maður* as the base for compounds such as professional titles. Others have also argued that because of the existence of the gendered meaning, the use of the word intended in the general sense does not fully include all genders and should be avoided (cf. e.g. Sigurður Sigurmundsson 1996, Jin 2012: 74).

There has been a debate about the extent to which *maður* is gender-specific vs. -neutral in historical as well as in contemporary Icelandic. Christine Fell (1987: 101-106) discusses runic evidence that Old English *man* had the primary meaning of ‘human being’; Old Norse texts retain examples of *maðr* (the normalized Old Icelandic spelling) with this meaning, but there is a gradual shift toward the masculine interpretation (106-107). Lára Magnúsdóttir (2021) argues that in legal language, from medieval codices to the Icelandic constitution, the term *maður* clearly refers to a person regardless of gender, as seen in (22). In the Icelandic constitution

(which dates from 1944), *karl* (m.) ‘man’ is used to contrast with *kona* (f.) ‘woman’ in the clause on gender equality.

(22) Ef maður vegur mann, hvort sem karlmaður drepur konu eða kona karlmann, þá fari útlægur. *Jónsbók* (thirteenth-century law codex<sup>5</sup>):

‘If a person kills a person, whether a man kills a woman or a woman a man, then let [him] be outlawed(m.sg.nom).’

Lára further points out that there are many situations in legal language in which replacing *maður* with *fólk* (n.sg) ‘folk, people’ does not work because *fólk* refers to a group of people rather than a single individual.

Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson (2022b) views the legal usage of *maður* as specific to that genre and somewhat different from other contexts. He points out that while in Old Icelandic texts a woman may be part of a group of *menn*, the singular *maður* is not used for women, and that throughout the recorded history of Icelandic *maður* and *kona* are clearly contrasted.

In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist discourse emphasized seeking equality by including women in the category of *menn* ‘people’, with the slogan “konur eru líka menn” (women are people too) (Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson 2022b). President Vigdís Finnbogadóttir in her 1980 election campaign was quoted as saying, “Það á ekki að kjósa mig af því að ég er kona, það á að kjósa mig af því að ég er maður” (You should not vote for me because I am a woman, you should vote for me

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<sup>5</sup> Presented here with Modern Icelandic orthography following [https://is.wikisource.org/wiki/J%C3%B3nsb%C3%B3k\\_\(2004\)/Mannhelgi](https://is.wikisource.org/wiki/J%C3%B3nsb%C3%B3k_(2004)/Mannhelgi)

because I am a person). A few decades earlier, the fictional protagonist Uglu of Halldór Laxness' *Atómstöðin* (the atom station) (1948: 194) declares “ég vil vera maður” (I want to be a person). Eiríkur, however, views this usage as forced and in conflict with most Icelanders' linguistic intuitions; in his view the term *maður* is not really gender-inclusive (Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson 2022b).

Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson has written many blog posts and columns on gender bias in Icelandic, for instance (2025) on the compound *ökumaður* (m.) ‘driver’: in corpus data “ökumaður var kona” ‘the driver(m.sg.nom) was a woman’ appears more frequently than “ökumaður var karl(maður)” ‘the driver was a man’ and therefore the latter is the default assumption and we should use a different term, such as the rare *ökukona* (f.), for women drivers. In this column he does not provide a recommendation for how to refer to a driver of non-binary or otherwise unspecified gender.

While I appreciate Eiríkur's efforts to point out examples of implicit bias in the language, the programmatic aspect of it is self-reinforcing: he argues that terms such as *maður* that have technically been gender-neutral are not “really” so because there is a statistical slant; therefore they exclude many people and in the name of inclusion we should proliferate corresponding terms with feminine and neuter reference. It would also be possible to recommend deliberate efforts to increase the frequency of their non-gendered use in order to remove the bias.

***Maður, man and kona as indefinite pronouns or “impostors”***

In addition to its use as a noun, *maður* functions in Modern Icelandic as a kind of generic pronoun ‘one’, often an indirect way of referring to the speaker that can be taken to imply that “anyone” in the same situation would behave in a similar way (cf. *man* in e.g. Swedish and German). This use has historically been viewed as reflecting Danish influence and being undesirable from a language planning standpoint (cf. Sigurður Sigurmundsson 1996, Jin 2012: 74). Although pronominal *maður* is frequently used in this way by people regardless of gender, some people perceive it as masculine and do not necessarily recognize it as a different word from the noun (Grönberg 1995: 95, Guðrún Línberg Guðjónsdóttir og Kristján Friðbjörn Sigurðsson 2020). Hence in self-conscious usage, some women use *kona* in this function (cf. *man* > *frau* by some speakers of German). The use in this context is “less grammaticalized” inasmuch as it can be followed by anaphoric *hún* (f.sg) in subsequent clauses, whereas generic *maður* is generally repeated (cf. Aðalgeir Arason 2020).

(23a) ef maður þarf að segja það aftur þá gerir maður/\*hann það.

‘If one has to say it again then one/\*he does so.’

(b) ef kona á um tvennt að velja velur hún/??kona betri kostinn.

‘If (a) woman has two things to choose between then she/??woman chooses the better option.’

(examples from Aðalgeir Arason 2020)

Nor is *kona* interpreted as an indefinite pronoun in all constructions in which *maður* can appear (Einar Freyr Sigurðsson 2018). Some other speakers use the previously archaic or rare *man* (n.) ‘unfree person’; ‘maiden’ (poetic) in this usage (Guðrún Línberg Guðjónsdóttir and Kristján Friðbjörn Sigurðsson 2020). The suffix *-man* (n.) has also been proposed as a base for gender-neutral job titles. Einar Freyr Sigurðsson (2018) views the generic usages of *maður* and

the recently introduced alternatives not as pronouns but “impostors” (Icelandic *hrappur* (m.)), following Collins and Postal (2012): noun phrases that are formally in the third person but interpreted as first or second person. Inasmuch as they are less grammaticalized in this function than is *maður*, the impostors *kona* and *man* behave more like kinship terms (e.g. *pabbi* (m.) ‘dad’, *mamma* (m.) ‘mom’) with which caregivers sometimes refer to themselves when talking to their young children.

### **Non-agreeing *það* ‘it’ (n.sg)**

Some “alternative” agreement systems have been observed in vernacular usage other than the standard usage and that recommended by feminist language planners. In contemporary Icelandic, Þorbjörg Þorvaldsdóttir (2019) points out examples of predicate adjectives in neuter singular form although the subject of the clause has different gender and number characteristics. She views this as a default form used with referents of low individualization, analogous to so-called “pancake agreement” in Mainland Scandinavian languages (from the example sentence (Swedish) *Pannkakor är gott* ‘Pancakes(utrum pl) are good(n.sg)’<sup>6</sup>). Þorbjörg Þorvaldsdóttir (2019) also gives an example of pronominal anaphora showing n.sg with a non-human, grammatically masculine referent:

(24) Fáðu þér bjór ef þú vilt. Það er úti á svölum.

Take for yourself beer(m.sg.acc) if you want. It(n.sg.nom) is out on the balcony.

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<sup>6</sup> Swedish verbs do not show person and number agreement, so the marking on the copula is not an issue.

As mentioned above, Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir (2015a) observes use of *það* ‘it’ (n.sg) to refer to unspecified groups of people in emigrant women’s letters from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, assumed to represent usage relatively unaffected by normalization.

The use of non-agreeing *það* has sometimes been considered disrespectful, not only with human referents. In Halldór Laxness’s novel *Kristnihald undir jökli* (Under the glacier, 1968), the narrator/protagonist “Umbi” objects to the use of *það* in reference to preserved fish (grammatically masculine) (162).

(25) Sunnanmenn gáfu mér lúðuriklín, lánkar ykkur í það? segir sóknarpresturinn.

Einkennilegt að segja “það” um lúðuriklín. Að vísu höfum vér ekki deilisgreini einsog í frönsku, en kurteislegra mál og betri íslenska væri að segja til að mynda: mér var gefinn fiskur, má bjóða þér af honum. (Halldór Laxness 1968: 162)

[The people from the south gave me halibut(m.sg.acc); do you want it(n.sg.acc)? says the parish priest. Strange to say ‘it’ about halibut. Admittedly we do not have a partitive article as in French, but it would be more polite language and better Icelandic to say, for example: I was given a fish(m.sg.nom), may I offer you some of it(m.sg.dat)?]

This shows that non-agreeing *það* has existed in colloquial usage, but that it can be perceived as derogatory.

### **From masculine to neuter in generic human reference**

Icelandic distinguishes among masculine, feminine, and neuter plural personal pronouns in the nominative and accusative cases. The pronoun *þau* ‘they’ (n.pl.nom/acc) is generally used for

conjoined subjects of different grammatical genders or a group of humans known to be of mixed gender. However, for generic use, traditionally masculine forms such as *þeir* ‘they’ (m.pl.nom) have been used to denote human referents and neuter for inanimate ones. Advocates of feminist language reform since around 2000 have promoted replacement of masculine with neuter forms in generic contexts. Neuter plural forms have traditionally been used in these contexts in the closely related language Faroese, a point which is often mentioned in connection with these proposals (e.g. Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir 2015b).

Criticism of the innovations often mentions tradition, the fact that no one has “gender-neutral Icelandic” as a native language, and social ramifications if people who speak Icelandic the way they learned it are labeled as sexist. There are also complaints about comprehensibility, e.g. of the innovative Bible translation (Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir 2005, 2008). Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir (2022) argues that “inclusive language” introduces new ambiguities and does not always fulfill the promise to be gender-neutral.

### **The innovative pronoun *hán* (n.sg)**

Already in 1999, Baldur Sigurðsson talks about the need for a gender-neutral personal pronoun and suggests that in order to fit the sequence with *hann* (m.sg.nom) ‘he’ and *hún* (f.sg.nom) ‘she’, it would be good if it had the form *hVn*. He proposes combining the vowels of the established pronouns. The form *\*húan* would be disyllabic in the nominative form, unlike other personal pronouns, and could theoretically get confused with forms such as *húfan* ‘the cap’ (f.sg.nom), in which the *f/v* often becomes a glide [w]. If the vowels are combined in the

opposite order, *haún*, he predicts that this would quickly come to have the written form *hán* [haun]. Baldur also contemplates the declension of such a pronoun, suggesting (perhaps facetiously) alternating endings borrowed from masculine and feminine pronouns.

The pronoun *hán* came to prominence in the *hýrýrðasamkeppni* (queer word contest) sponsored by the organization Samtökin '78 in 2015. *Hán* has become the most popular option used by people who identify with non-binary gender. The online inflection database BÍN (Beygingarlýsing íslensks nútímamáls) lists the inflection nom. *hán*, acc. *hán*, dat. *háni*, gen. *háns* – hence following the pattern of neuter nouns (rather than adjectives or pronouns). For the plural form, the established n.pl. *pau* is used (acc. *pau*, dat. *þeim*, gen. *þeirra*). There are also a number of other lesser-known “alternative” pronouns such as *hé* and *hín* (Hán).

Samtökin '78 recommends against using “X er hán” as a way of indicating that a person identifies as non-binary, on the grounds that *hán* is a pronoun rather than a noun; the indeclinable adjective *kynsegin* is preferred. This may suggest that some speakers have understood *hán* as a noun. The term *kvár* (n.) has been introduced as a noun to refer to a person of non-binary gender following the *hýrýrðasamkeppni* of 2020 (Lovisa Arnardóttir 2021, *Kvár og stálp meðal nýrra hýrýrða* 2021).

The use of *hán* as a generic pronoun for human referents of unknown gender, as well as for non-binary individuals, has been recommended (Hán) but as of 2022 appears to be relatively rare. Runar Freysteinn (2023) proposes novel pronouns *hrann* and *þein* for generic, gender neutral use, which he feels should be distinguished from use to refer to non-binary and genderqueer persons.

Usage of novel pronouns and the practices connected with the notion of gender-neutral language are in flux. New proposals emerge frequently and it remains to be seen which will be adopted widely. Unlike many previous language planning efforts, this one is not centered on the national language planning body (historically called Íslensk málstöð, since 2006 part of the Árni Magnússon Institute of Icelandic Studies) but is more of a grassroots effort.

## **Conclusion**

The relationship between the formal grammatical category of gender and the social category of gender in Icelandic is convoluted. Although the same pronouns are used for human and non-human, animate and inanimate referents and there are numerous examples in which the gender of the referent and of the referring noun do not coincide, this seems to be experienced by many speakers as somewhat problematic. There is a tendency to try to resolve the contradiction. The main rule is to use “grammatical” gender and number agreement within the sentence, but “semantic” agreement in anaphora within the larger discourse. However, there is variation particularly in spoken and less formal language, with a tendency toward semantic agreement also in predicate adjectives.

Arguments that the Icelandic language is inherently sexist, androcentric and exclusive have become more prominent in recent years. There are attempts to alter use of pronouns in the name of inclusion and equity, notably to replace masculine with neuter forms for generic human references. The use of semantic agreement is also sometimes advocated as one means of promoting visibility for non-masculine persons, although there is disagreement in this matter.

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