

Article

A 150-Year Debate over Surnames vs. Patronymics in Iceland

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Abstract: Iceland stands out in today's Europe due to the fact that most Icelanders use patronymics rather than surnames. However, a small percentage of Icelanders do have surnames inherited in a fixed form. The first surnames were adopted in the 17th and 18th centuries. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, increasing numbers of Icelanders were taking up surnames, often Danicized or Latinized versions of Icelandic patronymics or place names. The practice became controversial with the rise of the independence movement, which was closely connected to linguistic purism. The use of surnames in Iceland has been debated since the 19th century. Whereas the other Nordic countries introduced legislation requiring citizens to have surnames, Iceland went in the opposite direction, forbidding new surnames starting in 1925. However, the surnames that were already in use were allowed to remain in circulation. This created an inequality which has haunted Icelandic name law discourse since. Having a surname in Iceland has often been linked with social prestige, and surnames have been perceived as a limited good. Since the 1990s, the fraction of Icelanders with surnames has increased through immigration and some liberalizations in the rules regarding the inheritance of existing Icelandic surnames. In the name of gender equity, surnames can be inherited along any line, not only patrilineal. Since 1996, immigrants seeking Icelandic citizenship are no longer required to change their names, and their children can inherit their surnames. The category of *millinöfn* (middle name), surname-like names that are not inflected for gender, was introduced in the 1996 law; some Icelanders with *millinöfn* use them as surnames in daily life even if they officially have patronymics. Despite the expansion in eligibility to take surnames, the basic principle that no new Icelandic surnames are allowed remains in the law and remains a point of contention. Many of the same themes—individual freedom vs. the preservation of cultural heritage, national vs. international orientation, gender equity—have recurred in the discourse over more than a century, reframed in the context of contemporary cultural values at any given time.

Keywords: Iceland; surnames; patronymics; name law



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1. Introduction

One of the “exotic” features of modern Iceland’s international image is the fact that most Icelanders lack inherited surnames, but use patronymics (or in rare cases metronymics; see Guðrún Kvaran 1996). It is associated with the conservatism of the language (preserving the Nordic tradition), the smallness of the society (everyone is on a first-name basis), and in general with romantic ideas of Iceland as “primitive” or “authentic”. For some Icelanders, the distinctive naming practice is a source of national pride, but for others an inconvenience in international contexts.

Relatively few people, especially outside Iceland, are aware that the tradition has been maintained with the help of restrictive laws. While the other Nordic countries passed legislation requiring citizens to take surnames starting in the 19th or early 20th centuries (Denmark 1828, Sweden 1900, Finland 1920, Norway 1923), Iceland went in the opposite direction, with a ban on new surnames starting in 1925. Already at that point the question had been debated for generations, with “camps” recognizable as following the national tradition vs. international trends. The declinability of surnames has been a recurrent issue, connecting name practices to the tradition of linguistic purism in which the morphological

conservatism and complexity of the Icelandic language are seen as essential to its nature, which is threatened by an influx of indeclinable names (Willson 2002, Forthcoming).

Although Icelandic name law has been liberalized somewhat starting in the 1990s, the ban on the adoption of new surnames by Icelanders stands, although it is widely recognized as discriminatory. Bills for more liberal name laws are proposed much more often than they pass. Some elements of the discourse have recurred many times over the past 150 years, although the framing has evolved.

The history of surname use in Iceland and Icelandic personal name law has been described, inter alia, by Kvaran and Arnarvatni (1991). The long debate over surnames has recently been discussed in detail by Páll Björnsson (2021) and the social connotations of surnames by Benný Sif Ísleifsdóttir (2013, 2015a, 2015b). As these writings are in Icelandic, the present paper gives a brief presentation in English of the development of Icelandic laws on surnames since the early 20th century and some central themes in the discourse surrounding it.

The article begins with a synopsis of the historical emergence of surnames in Iceland, the debate over them in the 19th century, and legislation on personal names passed in the 20th century. Next, there is a discussion of the personal name committee introduced in the 1990s. The following sections focus on recurrent themes in the discussion of surname law: the declinability of names, issues of gender equity, and the comparison of the name rights of Icelanders and foreigners. Finally, there is a discussion of the category of *millinöfn* “middle names”, which were introduced in 1996 as a compromise between banning and permitting surnames.

2. Surnames in Iceland

The first surnames used by Icelanders were taken by members of the learned elite starting from around 1700. The patronymics of Icelanders who studied in Denmark were registered in Latinized forms without being used as fixed surnames (Sigurðsson, Páll 1993–1994, III 400). According to Kvaran and Arnarvatni (1991, p. 70), the first surname was *Vídalín*, a Latinized version of the place name *Víðidalur*, used occasionally by Arngrímur “lærði” [the learned] Jónsson (1568–1648) and later adopted by his grandchildren as a surname. *Thorlacius*, based on the personal name *Þorlákur*, soon followed. Many early adopters belonged to the learned elite and some had spent time in Denmark. Icelanders living in Denmark often adopted surnames, e.g., Danicizing their patronymics to end with *-sen* or adapting Icelandic place names (e.g., *Blöndal* < *Blöndudalur*, *Briem* < *Brjánslækur*) (Sigurðsson, Páll 1993–1994, vol. 3, p. 400). Icelanders who emigrated to North and South America in the late 19th century took up surnames there (whether by choice or according to the law of the land); some urged Icelanders back home to do the same (Páll Björnsson 2017, p. 154; 2021, pp. 38–40). However, others opposed this innovation. According to Páll Björnsson (2021, pp. 22–23), the first article published in an Icelandic paper objecting to the proliferation of surnames appeared in *Norðra* in 1857 and may have been written by its editor, Sveinn Skúlason. The nineteenth-century discourse associated surnames with towns and emphasized the urban–rural contrast (Páll Björnsson 2021, pp. 28–30). The pace of name changes may have slowed somewhat with the rise of the independence movement in the mid-nineteenth century (Kjartan G. Ottósson 1990, p. 139), but surnames were on the rise when the first Icelandic name law was passed in 1913; it permitted the adoption of surnames with the permission of *Stjórnarráð* [the Ministry Offices] (Kjartan G. Ottósson 1990, p. 140). In 1925, a law was passed which forbade new surnames: “Ættarnafn má enginn taka sér hér eftir” (*Lög um mannanöfn 1925*, article 2) [Henceforth no one may take a surname]. However, the surnames that had already been adopted were allowed to remain in circulation:

Þeir íslenskir þegnar og niðjar þeirra, sem bera ættarnöfn, sem eldri eru en frá þeim tíma, er lög nr. 4110. nóv. 1913 komu í gildi, mega halda þeim, enda hafi þau ættarnöfn, sem yngri eru en frá síðastliðnum aldamótum, verið tekin upp með löglegri heimild, sbr. 9. gr. þeirra laga. Sama er og um þá erlenda menn, er til landsins flytjast. Þeir íslenskir

þegnar og börn þeirra, sem nú bera ættarnöfn, sem upp eru tekin síðan lög nr. 41 1913 komu í gildi, mega halda þeim alla ævi ([Lög um mannanöfn 1913](#)). Konur þeirra manna, sem rétt hafa til þess að bera ættarnöfn, mega nefna sig ættarnafni manns síns.

[Those Icelandic subjects and their heirs who now bear surnames that are older than from the time when law no. 41, 10 November 1913 came into effect may retain them as long as those surnames that are younger than from the most recent turn of the century were adopted with legal permission, see article 9 of that law. The same applies to the foreign people who move to the country. Those Icelandic subjects and their children who now bear surnames that were adopted after law no. 41 of 1913 came into effect, may retain them throughout their lives. The wives of those men who have the right to bear surnames may name themselves with their husbands' names.]

It is repeatedly recognized in commentary that the unequal surname rights are a problem (e.g., [Um frumvarp 1990](#), p. 21). Already in 1881 it was expressed that a mixed system in which some people had surnames and others patronymics was unstable:

Siður sá, að kenna sig við föður sinn eða móður, er því mjög gamall hér á landi. Hann var áður algengur um öll norðurlönd, en þó Íslendingar nú einir haldi honum eptir, eins og þeir einir hafa varðveitt þá tungu, sem áður var töluð um öll norðurlönd, virðist engin ástæða til að leggja hann niður og taka upp í staðinn ættarnöfn þau, er lögboðin hafa verið annarsstaðar. En annaðhvort virðist nauðsynligt að gera; að halda því ástandi, sem nú er, getur, þegar fram í sækir, leitt til ýmissa vandræða. ([Jónsson and Ólafsson 1881](#), pp. 610–11).

[The practice of identifying oneself through one's father or mother is hence very old in this country. It was previously common throughout the Nordic countries, and although now only the Icelanders maintain it, as they alone have preserved the language that was previously spoken throughout the Nordic countries, there seems to be no reason to abandon it and instead take up the surnames that have been stipulated by law elsewhere. But it seems necessary to do one thing or the other; to maintain the situation as it currently is may in the long run lead to various difficulties.]

Jón Jónsson and Jón Ólafsson's comment does not specify what those difficulties are. Ambiguity as to whether a name is a surname or a patronymic can generally be avoided by forbidding surnames ending in *-son*, which was part of their proposal (article 3, [Jónsson and Ólafsson 1881](#), p. 610). The mixed system has survived for nearly a century and a half since their statement, through many social, administrative, and technological changes. Nonetheless, it has been a topic of perennial controversy.

Because the early adopters of surnames tended to belong to the upper and upwardly mobile classes, having a surname has been perceived as a status symbol, somewhat analogous to aristocratic names in other European countries ([Benný Sif Ísleifsdóttir 2013, 2015a](#)); surnames have been compared to protected trademarks ([Benný Sif Ísleifsdóttir 2015b](#)). Those who had surnames were reluctant to relinquish them, at the same time as the prevalent ideology of linguistic purism favored maintaining the patronymic system. This tension has been an intractable knot in Icelandic name law discourse ([Um frumvarp 1990](#), pp. 17–19).

Although bills for new name laws were proposed regularly over the decades ([Frumvarp 1956, 1973, 1981](#)), a new one did not pass until 1989 (taking effect in 1991). However, the 1925 name law was not consistently enforced; Halldór [Halldórsson \(1961, p. 329\)](#) characterized it as the Icelandic law most frequently violated, along with the ban on importing nylon stockings.

The 1991 law included a means for enforcement, in the form of the personal name committee (see next section) and the requirement that a name be in the official name registry (*mannanafnaskrá*) before a person could be registered with that name in the national registry (*Þjóðskrá*). This new enforcement brought attention to the law with attendant dissatisfaction.

A revised law was passed just a few years later ([Lög 45/1996 um mannanöfn 1996](#)). The provision that "Eiginafn skal vera íslenskt eða hafa unnið sér hefð í íslensku máli" (article 2, [Kvaran and Arnarvatni 1991, p. 81](#)) [a given name must be Icelandic or have established a tradition in the language], which Halldór Ármann [Sigurðsson \(1993, pp. 9–25\)](#) discussed

as ambiguous, was replaced by the similarly ambiguous specification “Eiginnafn skal geta tekið íslenska eignarfallsendingu eða hafa unnið sér hefð í íslensku máli” (Lög 45/1996 um mannanöfn 1996, chp. 2, article 4) [a given name shall be able to take an Icelandic genitive ending or have established a tradition in the Icelandic language]. Rules pertaining to naturalized citizens and their children were also liberalized. However, the personal name committee was maintained, although the mode of the selection of members changed slightly. Although individual clauses of this law have been amended or eliminated since (notably as an effect of the Gender Autonomy Act of 2019, Lög um kynrænt sjálfræði 80 2019), it remains in force at the time of writing (2023), while five proposals for substantially more liberal name laws, two of them presented to parliament twice in successive years, have failed to pass (Frumvarp 2006, 2014, 2015, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022). (One law related to personal names, on their registration in the national registry, did pass in 2011 (Frumvarp 2011; Lög um breyting 2011)). In discussion of the various failed bills, both before and after the new laws of the 1990s, the problem of surnames appears to have been a particularly difficult point.

3. The Personal Name Committee

The 1991 law largely repeated the content of the 1925 one, but innovated a means for enforcement. A personal name committee (*mannanafnanefnd*) was appointed to review novel given and middle names before they could be registered with the national registry or added to the list of official names. Under the 1991 law, the committee consisted of two members chosen by the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Iceland and one selected by the Faculty of Law (Svavar Sigmundsson 1992, p. 87). Under the 1996 law, one member is selected by the Faculty of Humanities, one by the Faculty of Law, and the third by the Icelandic language committee (*íslensk málnefnd*) (Lög 45/1996 um mannanöfn 1996, chp. 8, article 21).

Much resentment over the law focuses on the committee, whose members have at various times attempted to explain that it is not their task to have opinions about names (e.g., Baldur Sigurðsson 2008; Snorri Másson 2019). There have, however, been differences among different committees in their interpretation of the law and a trend toward a broader interpretation of such concepts as “geta tekið íslenska eignarfallsendingu” [be able to take an Icelandic genitive ending], “ekki brjóta í bág við íslenskt málkerfi” [not be inconsistent with the Icelandic language system], or “ritað í samræmi við almennar ritreglur íslensks máls” [written in accordance with general Icelandic orthographic principles] (Lög 45/1996 um mannanöfn 1996, chp. 2, article 5).

4. Declinability

A central issue in the debate over surnames since the 19th century has been whether they are consistent with the Icelandic language system and whether they pose a threat to it. Most surnames in use in Iceland have been treated as indeclinable (apart from an optional gen.sg. -s) (Ingólfur Pálmason 1987). Icelandic surnames were often intended for international use (hence, e.g., the avoidance of the specifically Icelandic letter *þ* in the recommendations in *Nöfn Íslendinga* 1915, seen for instance in the surname *Thors* rather than *Þórs*) and adapted into forms reminiscent of Danish, which does not show the elaborate inflections that Icelandic has. Another reason surnames are not declined is that there is resistance to using either a masculine or feminine declension for names that can be applied to different genders. The indeclinability of surnames has been a recurrent theme in the surname debate, with opponents appealing to a potential threat to the Icelandic inflectional system posed by indeclinable surnames. I have argued that in the early 20th century debate, discussion of the declinability of surnames was used as a coded way of expressing views on broader issues such as Iceland’s relationship to Denmark (Willson 2002). The fear that indeclinable names will lead to a breakdown of the Icelandic inflectional system is part of the theme of the fragility of the language that has pervaded Icelandic language planning discourse (Willson Forthcoming). Icelandic differs from other living

Germanic languages in the conservatism of both its vocabulary and its inflectional system. The archaic language, providing a direct connection to the medieval literature, has been an important factor in Icelandic national identity, particularly through the independence movement. The Norwegians and other Mainland Scandinavians are sometimes said to have “lost their language” when the language changed enough that they could no longer read medieval texts:

Norðmenn glötuðu málinu vegna þess að þeir áttu engan [sic] bókmentir á eigin máli að lesa. Við hjeldum málinu vegna þess að forfeður okkar í tuttugu liði, höfðu aðgang að því, að lesa það, sem þeirra eigin feður höfðu skrifað. (Ajax 1936, p. 3) [The Norwegians lost the language because they had no literature to read in their own language. We maintained the language because our ancestors for twenty generations had access to reading what their own fathers had written.]

The prospect of Icelandic losing its inflections has been presented as a threat to its essential nature: “En nái sníkjumeningin beygingunum úr tungu vorri, þá er slitið sambandið á milli vor og fortíðarinnar, þá er íslenzkan orðin ill danska” (Bjarni Jónsson frá Vogli 1924, p. 1) [But if the parasitic culture gets the inflections out of our language, then the connection between us and the past is broken; then Icelandic has become bad Danish]. Although the idea that language change is equivalent to language loss has become less prominent in Icelandic language planning discourse, debate over whether indeclinable names are liable to influence the Icelandic language system more broadly continues (e.g., Guðrún Kvaran in Svensson 2016 vs. Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson 2019; see further Willson 2023, Forthcoming).

5. Gender Equity and Surname Use

The 1991 law permitted surnames to be inherited along the female line as well as the male. A person was entitled to bear a surname if any grandparent would have had that right according to the new law. This greatly expanded the set of people who are eligible to bear surnames, without permitting the creation of new Icelandic surnames (a policy noted as strange by Baldur Jónsson 1991, p. 2). Svavar Sigmundsson (1995, p. 106) reports 254 cases of surnames adopted in this way by the end of 1994, including 38 in the first two months after the law took effect. Ellen Dröfn Gunnarsdóttir (2005, p. 107) reports a doubling in the fraction of Icelanders from 3% in the 1980s to 6% two decades later. Guðrún Kvaran says in an interview (Valsdóttir and Gylfadóttir 2007, p. 82) that it is more common than people imagine for an older person to take up a surname under the more liberalized law so that his or her grandchildren can in turn do so.

A significant liberalization of the personal name law came with the Gender Autonomy Act (Lög um kynrænt sjálfraði) of 2019. As a result of the law, chapter 2, article 5 of the personal name law “Stúlku skal gefa kvenmannsnafn og dreng skal gefa karlmannsnafn” [a girl shall be given a woman’s name and a boy shall be given a man’s name] (cf. text preserved in Frumvarp 1995) was removed. The principle that given names should be gender-specific had previously been challenged in two court cases, in which the plaintiffs Blær (2013) and Alex (2019) (or their parents) had won the right to use these names for girls although they were listed in *mannanafnaskrá* as masculine (see RÚV = Blær vann mál sitt gegn ríkinu 2013, on the Blær case and Freyr Gígja Gunnarsson 2019 on the Alex case). The ramifications of the decoupling of personal names and gender for the Icelandic inflectional system and onomasticon have yet to unfold (Willson 2023). While this clause applies to given names, an increase in variation in the inflection of names may also influence other name categories.

With the Gender Autonomy Act, persons registered as non-binary have the right to use parentonyms with the neuter suffix *-bur*, or the parent’s name in the genitive form with no further suffix, in lieu of the traditional *-son* or *-dóttir*. I do not have data on the number of people who have taken such names. The use of *millinöfn* without patronymics in daily life is also a strategy used by some people who identify as non-binary.

6. Icelanders vs. Foreigners

A recurrent motif in Icelandic name law discourse is comparison between the name rights of foreigners in Iceland and those of Icelanders at home and abroad (Willson 2017). Surname rights are frequently evoked in this connection.

While the name law of 1925 permitted immigrants and their heirs to retain their surnames, the 1952 law on citizenship included a clause: “Þeir, sem heita erlendum nöfnum, skulu þó ekki öðlast íslenzkan ríkisborgarasrétt með lögum þessum fyrr en þeir hafa fengið íslenzk nöfn samkvæmt lögum nr. 54 27. júní 1925, um mannanöfn.” (Lög um veitingu ríkisborgararéttar 1952, article 2, p. 50) [Those who bear foreign names, shall, however, not be granted Icelandic citizenship under this law until they have received Icelandic names according to law 54, 27 June 1925, on personal names.] Iceland became somewhat notorious for forcing immigrants to change their names.

The liberalization of name law in relation to naturalized citizens and their children was motivated by human rights concerns (see Svavar Sigmundsson 1992, p. 86) (e.g., the right to private and family life guaranteed in article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR 2021), which the European Court on Human Rights has often interpreted as including the right to a name). At the same time, it creates a new division in which not all Icelanders have the same name rights.

Comedian and former Reykjavík mayor Jón Gnarr, born Jón Gunnar Kristinsson, who had taken the name *Gnarr* first as a stage name and then as a *millinafn*, was not allowed to adopt it as a surname and pointed out foreign surnames that were circulating in Iceland in expressing his frustration—suggesting that immigrants have more expansive name rights than native Icelanders. Eventually, he registered a name change in the US, which Iceland was obliged to recognize (Willson 2017, p. 175–76).

7. Millinöfn “Middle Names” as Pseudosurnames

The category of *millinöfn* “middle names” was introduced in the 1996 law (Lög 45/1996 um mannanöfn 1996, chp. 3). It is permitted to give a child a *millinafn* in addition to one or two given names. A *millinafn* shall be derived from Icelandic word stems but cannot have a nominative ending. Names that have established a tradition as only men’s or only women’s names cannot be *millinöfn*. Like given names, *millinöfn* should be written according to Icelandic orthographic principles unless there is a tradition for a different spelling, may not be inconsistent with the Icelandic language system, and may not be such that it can cause trouble for the bearer. A name that does not fill the other criteria is permitted if any of the bearer’s full siblings, parents, or grandparents bore it as a given, middle, or surname (Lög 45/1996 um mannanöfn 1996, chp. 3, article 6). New *millinöfn* also require approval by the personal name committee. People who have surnames are permitted to change them to *millinöfn* (article 7).

The 1991 law forbade the use of surnames as first names (“Óheimilt er að gefa barni ættarnafn sem eiginnafn nema hefð sé fyrir því nafni,” Lög nr. 37/1991 1991, article 2, cf. Svavar Sigmundsson 1995, p. 108) [It is forbidden to give a child a surname as a given name unless there is a tradition for that name.] The category of *millinöfn* was created in order to fill a slot between given names and *kenninöfn* (surnames or patro- or metronymics). A parent’s name in the genitive form with no additional suffix was also permitted as a *millinafn*, hence providing a way to recognize two parents, one in the *millinafn* and the other in the *kenninafn*.

The intention was to appease the desire for surnames among many Icelanders without having them replace patronymics, as people with *millinöfn* also have patro- or metronymics as their official *kenninöfn*. The hope was that people who had the right to surnames would convert them to *millinöfn* (Frumvarp 1995, under “Meginhugmyndir og markmið nefndarinnar”). Rather predictably, these hopes do not seem to have been entirely realized. The privileged status of the pre-1925 “real” surnames persists, with attendant resentment. At the same time, many who officially have *millinöfn* use them as surnames and do not

use their parentonyms in daily life. Guðrún Kvaran (2004) refers to *millinöfn* as “dulbúin ættarnöfn” [surnames in disguise].

Ninety-five *millinöfn* had been registered as of 2004. Most resembled the surnames in circulation in Iceland—often derived from Icelandic place names, disyllabic forms with no overt nominative endings (Guðrún Kvaran 2004). Many are existing surnames (e.g., *Vidalín*). There are eight with the suffix -an (e.g., *Aldan*, *Giljan*, *Hrafnan*), which was introduced into surnames from Celtic bynames found in Old Norse texts (e.g., *Kvaran*) but also attached to Norse roots (following the proposals in *Íslenzk mannanöfn* 1915), e.g., the byname *Liljan*. A few are monosyllabic, recalling given names or general nouns (*Bald*, *Ben*, *Dan*, *Falk*, *Har*, *Ljós*, *Matt*, *Val*) (Guðrún Kvaran 2004).

8. Conclusions

While the preservation of the patronymic system as a whole forms part of Iceland’s national “brand,” many individuals would prefer to have the choice to use surnames instead or as well. Gradual liberalizations of the law motivated by other factors such as gender equity and the rights of immigrants have increased the fraction of the population that has the right to bear surnames, an option which many have used (but not all those who legally can). Others use *millinöfn* as de facto surnames in daily life although they officially have patronymics. Nonetheless, the ban on new Icelandic surnames stands and remains a point of contention in the center of name law discourse, not least because of the upper-class connotations.

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