Review of North American Icelandic: The Life of a Language

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A curious phonological feature of North American Icelandic is flámæli (“skewed speech”). The term refers to the apparent mergers of two sets of front vowels: on the one hand (I) and (E), and on the other hand (Y) and (ø). Flámæli was widespread in certainly one of the areas of Iceland that witnessed considerable emigration to North America in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and was brought to the New World in the speech of the immigrants. It was found in three regional dialects of Icelandic up until the last few decades when, through official efforts, it was eradicated since the mergers created homonyms that were considered to cause communication problems.

North American Icelandic: The Life of a Language, a revised and updated version of the author’s University of Texas at Austin doctoral dissertation, is an examination of flámæli in North American Icelandic. As Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir points out, “Investigating apparent vowel mergers or Flámæli in NA Icelandic affords us a unique opportunity to follow the linguistic development of this specific phonological feature, free of official and public stigma, under conditions that accelerated its spread.”

The sociolinguistic study is conducted within a larger framework of examination of North American Icelandic, spoken primarily in Icelandic settlements in Manitoba and North Dakota, but which is now in the last stages of attrition. Indeed, one of the purposes of the book is “to offer a possible explanation of the life cycle of North American Icelandic from its inception to its eventual demise.” The first three chapters provide a survey of the linguistic and social context of North American Icelandic. Among other things, the author gives a statistical overview of speakers of North American Icelandic, considers the factors that have influenced the retention of Icelandic in North America (such as the tradition of home education and literacy) and the forces that will lead to its eventual attrition (such as the narrowing functional range of Icelandic), and discusses the lexicon of North American Icelandic on the basis of published sources and interviews conducted by herself and others. The last four chapters have more of a linguistic orientation. In these, the author describes the two communities (New Iceland, Manitoba; and Mountain, North Dakota) where she conducted her field work, and gives a brief presentation of the morphology, syntax, and phonology of North American Icelandic, which then leads into an analysis of flámæli, the topic of the last two chapters. Following an overview of the results of studies of flámæli in Iceland, the author presents her findings in North American Icelandic, on the basis of which she concludes that “Flámæli is a property of long vowels” and hypothesizes that “Flámæli is a two-part process; the lowering of [I:] and [Y:] as a continuation of changes within the vowel inventory of Icelandic and the diphthongization of the mid vowels [E:] and [ø].”

With her North American Icelandic, Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir has done the fields of Modern Icelandic and North American Icelandic studies a true service. The volume, which is a joy to read, is extraordinarily informative and certainly the most comprehensive study of North American Icelandic to date. Kirsten Wolf, Department of Scandinavian Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison.