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Islands in the sea of text: Icelandic on the World Wide Web

Abstract: The World Wide Web makes it much easier for students who are learning a foreign language to gain access to "authentic" text of various types, which can serve as a "window" into the target language community. The search capabilities of the Web make it possible for students to compare many examples of a given word or phrase. Students can also investigate whether a specific expression occurs in this gigantic "corpus" and obtain a rough idea of its frequency. This paper describes a few exercises which are intended to help students (a) to understand the main points in a difficult text and guess its nature even if they do not understand it fully; (b) to investigate aspects of grammar and usage, such as inflections, case usage, choice of preposition, the productivity of prefixes and suffixes, and the use of individual words, and to use this information to correct their own compositions; and (c) to learn about the country where the target language is spoken. In these exercises, students are asked, for instance, to look up names and addresses in the Icelandic telephone directory (simaskra.is), to look up various case forms of Icelandic place names in order to determine whether the preposition *í* (in) or *á* (at) is used with a specific name, and to find neologisms with the prefix *jóla-* (Christmas). The exercises are described; sample responses from students at the University of Manitoba are shown; an attempt is made to assess the success of the exercises and possibilities for future development are discussed.

I. Introduction: A new world

The globalization of information through the World Wide Web has brought about a revolution in language learning. The Net greatly increases students' access to foreign languages and language communities.

Before, instructors collected newspaper articles and bus tickets as tokens of their journeys to the other world in order to prove to students that this world existed. Now students can watch the latest TV news on the Web, plan trips and participate in chat board discussions. Students have developed second sight! But they still need the guidance of a shaman (teacher) in order to find their way through this alien world.

The Web offers many advantages as a source for language instruction. It makes it easy to access up-to-date, "authentic" text which relates to current events and is thus "alive" (e.g., news). Web materials also reflect a broader range of linguistic registers that do printed sources, including examples of usage which is closer to spoken language. In addition, the search capabilities of the Web offer various possibilities which help to shed light on language use. The Net can also serve as a window to the language community – another world.

On the other hand, the use of the Web as a corpus also entails many challenges. It presents an overwhelming, unknown quantity of ever-changing information, in which "mistakes" of all kinds and deviations from accepted usage are common – in short, anarchy.

II. Fishing or drowning?

Both linguists and translators use the Web as a tool. The needs and interests of these groups have many things in common with those of language students, but are not identical to the latter.

Many linguists have made use of the possibilities presented by the Web to gather material for linguistic research. The Net is used especially to study linguistic innovations and deviation from norms. However, care must be taken when using examples from the Web.

The Web reflects "linguistic performance" rather than "linguistic competence." This implies that Web materials contain a great many "performance errors." A single example does not suffice to demonstrate that a given usage is grammatical. Keller and Lapata (2003) have, however, shown that there is a correlation between the frequency of search results and native speakers' grammaticality judgements of particular combinations of words. But how many examples are needed?

Negative evidence and "missed opportunities" are also important questions. If a certain string is not found on the Web, does that mean that it is not grammatical? The quantity of text is also relevant. The Web contains significantly fewer data representing Icelandic than English, but also much less "junk" (e.g., mechanical translations and writing by non-native speakers – although such data are also of interest in other contexts).

Translators often use translated pages and terms as a parallel corpus in their search for translational equivalents. They search for examples of terms, expressions and word usage. This applies especially to those who translate into a language which is not their native tongue, but those who translate into their own native language also need at times to search for examples of specialized vocabulary or usage or to confirm their own instincts. Of course, translators also use Web dictionaries and other such aids.

To what extent are the needs and methods of linguists, translators and language learners alike/different? Volk urges linguists, "We will all have to learn to fish in the waters of the web." (Volk 2002: 9) While linguists fish for data, students are rather drowning in the flood of information. They search for a rope, a life jacket or a skerry to cling to until they can learn to swim in the sea of the new language.

Linguists who use the Web as a corpus generally work with languages that they know well. Students must apply source criticism to the data which they find. How can students distinguish among "correct" language, informal usage and performance errors? Language students also have to learn grammatical concepts at the same time as they learn the language, while linguists presumably already have a firm grasp of these concepts. Students should not isolate grammar from content, but unite the two.

It has been recognized for decades that one characteristic of good language students is a tolerance for ambiguity (cf. e.g. Ely 1989; Chapelle and Roberts 1986; Stern 1983: 380-383; Naiman, Frohlich and Todesco 1975). Of course, students' tolerance varies. Helping students to develop ambiguity tolerance is one of Brown's (2000: 137) "ten commandments" for language teachers and learners. One purpose of the exercises presented here is to cultivate ambiguity tolerance.

The concept of ambiguity tolerance applies to instructors as well. Student responses to these exercises will vary greatly. Assessment of student performance will be highly subjective. I encourage instructors to be open to students' different strengths and to try to see the strange world of target language text through their students' eyes.

III. The origin of the exercises

The instructional materials which will be described here are not web content created as instructional aids, but examples of how the Web can be used as a resource.

One source of inspiration for these exercises were methods which have been used in conjunction with a course in beginning Russian at the University of California, Berkeley. Ellen Langer has experimented with using textbooks in natural science and other subjects on an elementary school level for language instruction at the university level. Students are encouraged to guess and to use context and their knowledge of the world to identify main points, even if they do not understand every word.

I developed the following exercises to use in the "language laboratory" in a first-year course in Icelandic as a foreign language at the University of Manitoba in 2003-2004. Once a week at the end of the regular class hour the class proceeded as a group to the language lab. I was not satisfied with the materials which were available in the lab, and decided to make use of the fact that the language lab, with computers connected to the Internet, had been reserved for the class once a week in order to experiment with Web exercises. I as instructor was present during the lab hour to answer questions, which was an advantage, but students submitted reports later and generally completed the exercises outside of class time. It would be natural to use these exercises as homework assignments, in a Web course or for independent study.

Instructions were written in both Icelandic and English. The students were permitted to write answers in English.

IV. Sample exercises

1. Economizing dictionary use

The first exercise which will be described is not a Web exercise, but was used for in-class group work. Nonetheless, it derives inspiration from technical innovations relating to long-distance communication and represents the same general principle: students must take a chance with uncertainty and grow accustomed to finding meaning in a text even if they do not understand every word.

Some students tend to be all too dependent on the dictionary and get "stuck" if they encounter a word that they do not understand. In order to encourage them to use the dictionary in moderation, I used the following exercise (with a news text from www.mbl.is):

> *Imagine that you have to order dictionary entries through a cell phone. Each entry costs 100 kr. You can only afford to look up five words in this article. Which words will you choose and why?*

When students are forbidden to look up every single word which they do not understand, they are forced to decide which words matter most - and to dare to guess on the others.

Such a cell phone dictionary service existed in Finland for a while. In real life, however, it is much more common for the cost of looking up words to consist of time - but of course, time is money.

2. The telephone directory

This exercise was used in the first week of instruction in the first-year course. The aim was to practice the alphabet and to present the Icelandic personal name system at the same time.

Various well-known facts and factoids about Iceland relate to Icelandic names: for instance, the fact that most Icelanders have patronymics rather than surnames; that the Icelandic telephone directory is arranged by first name; that strict laws govern which names may be given to children; and that from 1952-1995 foreigners seeking Icelandic citizenship were required to adopt Icelandic names.

This exercise allowed students to become familiar with the structure of Icelandic names, as well as with some famous historical figures, and to investigate whether their own names were attested in Iceland. They were also supposed to retrieve addresses and other information from the online telephone directory simaskra.is and to discover that it was possible to determine various things about a web site even if they did not understand much of the text. I connected the exercise to an in-class exercise in which the names of famous Icelanders were taped to the backs of students' shirts. They were to guess "who they were," arrange themselves in alphabetical order, etc.

> *In class today you have 'been' one of the following famous Icelanders:*
> *Einar Hjörleifsson Kvaran, Þórbergur Þórðarson, Jón Arason (biskup), Halldór Kiljan*
> *Laxness, Björk Guðmundsdóttir, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, Jón Sigurðsson (forseti), Snorri*
> *Sturluson, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, Davíð Oddsson, Ingólfur Arnarson.*
> *1. Arrange the above names in alphabetical order (write 1, 2, 3 etc. beside the names).*
> *2. Look up the person that you 'were,' for example, in reference works or on the Net.*
> *Who is or was this man or woman? When did he or she live? What did he or she do?*
> *Be prepared to tell us about this man or this woman (in English) and write one*
> *paragraph about him or her (in English). Also write down what sources you have used -*
> *for example, titles (and perhaps authors) of books or the URL's of web sites.*
> *3. Look up the same name in the Icelandic telephone directory (simaskra.is). How many*
> *people are there who have that name? Where do they live and what are their*
> *professions?*
> *4. Look up your own name (given name and/or surname) in simaskra.is. Are there any*
> *people in Iceland who have the same name as you do? What can you say about them?*
> *5. Look up some of the phrases we have learned (e.g., 'blessaður' or 'takk') on*
> *google.com or leit.is. Examine a few web sites where they occur. What kind of web*
> *sites are these (e.g., diaries, letters, chat rooms, official web sites, etc.)? How do you*
> *know this? To whom do they belong? Are they all in Icelandic or also in other*
> *languages (which ones)? Give a few examples (URL's), along with observations and*
> *explanations (in English).*

Here is an example of a student response to items 2-5.

2. Björk Guðmundsdóttir was born in Reykjavik, Iceland, on November 21, 1965. At the age of five she was enrolled in music school where she studied flute and piano for ten years. At the age of eleven she made an album with the help of her mother and friends entitled Björk which had many cover songs from bands such as the Beatles, but only one song that she wrote herself. She started to form punk bands by 13, first Exodus, then Tippi Tikarrass, then K.U.K.L. and in 1987, Einar Orn, Siggi Baldurson and Björk formed a new band, called The Sugarcubes, with Thor Eldon, Magga Ornolfsdottir and Bragi Olafsson. By 1992 they had 4 albums and they were ready to go their separate ways. In 1993, Björk released her first "real" solo album, called Debut. It was followed by Post in 1995, Telegram in 1996, Homogenic in 1997, Selmasongs in 2000, and her most recent, Vespertine in 2001. Björk has one son named Sindri and she is divorced.

3.) There are 7 women in Iceland presently named Björk Guðmundsdóttir.

- *Björk Guðmundsdóttir, nemi, Gónhóli 20,   260 Njarðvík*
- *Björk Guðmundsdóttir, sjúkraliði, Eikarlundi 17,   600 Akureyri*
- *Björk Guðmundsdóttir, prentsmiður, Miðhúsum 14,   112 Reykjavík*
- *Björk Guðmundsdóttir, hjúkrunarfræðingur, Heiðarhjalla 14,   200 Kópavogur*
- *Björk Guðmundsdóttir, Breiðvangi 46,   220 Hafnarfjörður*
- *Björk Guðmundsdóttir, Tryggvagötu 6,   101 Reykjavík*
- *Björk Guðmundsdóttir, landslagsarkitekt FÍLA og skipulagsfr, Brunnstíg 1,   220 Hafnarfjörður*

4.) There are no women in Iceland named [student's name].

5.) The sites I found were: 1-www.sniglar.is/frett.asp?id=150
- *2-www.geocities.com/burtmedboltann/index2.html*
- *3-www.gummijoh.net*
- *1- is a motorcycle website. I know this because there are pictures of motorcycles on the page. It is printed only in Icelandic. It belongs to "Sniglar."*
- *2- is a sports page. I know this because there is a picture of a man in a soccer uniform. It is only in Icelandic. It belongs to "Bönnum Boltann."*
- *3- is an entertainment site. I know this because some of the site is in English. It is in English and Icelandic only. It belongs to "Sniðugur Strákur."*

It can be seen from this response that the student has made use of general knowledge about the world and the "Web world" to find information. Although she may not have every detail correct ("Bönnum boltann" "Let's ban football" is presumably a slogan rather than a club), her interpretation of the web sites is sensible and convincing. She appears to be quite knowledgeable about Björk.

When I presented these exercises at a "Share Fair" in Berkeley in the spring of 2005 I discovered, much to my disappointment, that Björk Guðmundsdóttir on Tryggvagata was no longer listed in the telephone directory.

3. Translations as Rosetta stones

On the Day of the Icelandic Language (November 16, the birthday of the poet Jónas Hallgrímsson [1807-1845]), we examined a web site containing Dick Ringler's translations of poems by Jónas.

Ringler's translations are far from literal. In fact, he has been criticized for taking liberties with the meaning of the poems (Amory 2004, Cook 2004). Amory (2004) maintains that such loose translations neither meet the needs of those who are attempting to understand the poems in the original nor of those who know no Icelandic. I felt, however, that these "liberal" translations had a great deal to offer students in the first-year course in Icelandic as a foreign language.

Students learn about Jónas' life, work and times. They appreciate the texts as literature and develop a feeling for the rhythm of the poems, alliteration and end-rhyme - characteristics which are central to the reader's experience of Jónas' poetry in Icelandic but which generally disappear in literal translations (cf. Silja Aðalsteinsdóttir 2007).

> *Go to the web site http://www.library.wisc.edu/etext/Jonas. It is primarily in English. Read the articles about Jónas' life and works. Write down something which you found interesting or curious in the articles. There are also poems by Jónas in Icelandic and English with notes and it is even possible to listen to some of them. Choose one poem. Read it in English. Look at the Icelandic text as well. Are there words in it which you know? When you know what the text means, can you guess which word ought to mean what? Has the translator changed anything in the meaning of the text? If the poem is long, you do not have to look at all of it; one or two verses will do. What do you think of this poem? Does it remind you of anything else you have read? Do you have anything else to say about it?*

Through this exercise, students "discover" the differences between the original and the translation and become aware of translation problems.

Examining a text the meaning of which is more or less familiar but not entirely so helps students to develop their reading ability. Familiar words become "islands in the sea of text" – fixed points in the billowing poem.

4. Christmas words: neologisms and productivity

This exercise was used in December in the first-year class.

> *What compound words beginning with* jóla- (Christmas) *do you find? Can one perhaps add* jóla- *to the front of almost any noun? Make your own words with* jóla- *and explain what is meant by them (it is all right to do this in English). Then check whether "your" words exist somewhere on the Net.*

Students' suggestions included *jólarusl* (Christmas trash), *jólavonbrigði* (Christmas disappointment), and *jólareikningar* (Christmas bills). This shows that even isolated words can show considerable self-expression.

It may seem absurd to have students create new words when they are still struggling to learn the words which already exist in the language. I believe, however, that creating neologisms has many advantages as an exercise for a language class. Students come to recognize word formation processes, patterns in the language which will help them to parse and to understand unfamiliar words.

Playing with the language and being creative helps students to appropriate it and to feel more at home in the new language. Students are never at a loss for words if they can create their own.

The Icelandic practice of creating neologisms rather than using loan words, an aspect of the strong tradition of linguistic purism, is a salient and well-known characteristic of the Icelandic language. My experience as a second language speaker of Icelandic is that the practice of neologism is democratic: even non-native speakers can coin words. I encourage students to become active participants in this aspect of Icelandic culture, the process of renewing and "improving" the language.

5. Places and cases

This exercise was used in the second semester of the first year. The intention was for students to learn about places in Iceland - and, at the same time, about the use of cases and prepositions.

> *1. Pick an Icelandic place name, e.g. off the map or based on your previous knowledge. (You can also try making up your own place name and see whether it actually exists!) Do a Web search on that name in the nominative case (base form). What kinds of results do you find? What kind of place is this (e.g., town, farm, district)? Where is the place? Is there only one place by this name in Iceland?*
> *2. Then try a search on the same place name in other cases (accusative, dative, genitive). Do you find the same web sites as before? Do you find more web sites or fewer? What can you find out about the use of this place name? For example, is the preposition* í *or* á *used with this place name to mean 'to, at, in'? Is the preposition* frá *or* úr *used to mean 'from'?*
> *3. Return to the Icelandic telephone book, www.simaskra.is. In what case are street addresses given in the directory? How about the names of towns and municipalities? Names of people and businesses? Choose one or more streets. Who lives on this street? Does anyone famous live there? Are there any businesses on the street? Has anything noteworthy happened there?*

This exercise is intended to help answer the question, "What are cases for?" Case is a concept which most English-speaking students find alien and difficult to understand. Through Web searches, students see that different inflected forms occur in different contexts. At the same time, they learn to use the Web as a usage dictionary: to check the use of prepositions with place names.

Students must also be able to identify different case forms in context in order to understand texts and to learn to use cases correctly. In this exercise, they need to recognize the difference between nominative and dative, for instance, in order to be able to look up an address in the telephone directory.

V. Conclusion

The Web offers diverse possibilities as an aid to language instruction. It is possible to use the Net and its search capabilities to train reading ability and grammar as well as to educate students about the people who speak the target language and the countries where they live.

Here, I have only discussed written texts, but of course the Web also contains sound recordings, moving pictures and much more which can be harnessed for language teaching.

However, in order to swim in this sea rather than sink, both students and instructors must have open minds and tolerate uncertainty and even chaos. Have fun.

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