

# LT3212 – Assignment 4: The Sound System of Icelandic

Samuel Kwan-lok Lo

## 1. Introduction

Icelandic is a Germanic language spoken in Iceland, with little dialectal variation (Árnason, 2015). This essay describes the consonants, vowels, and diphthongs of Standard Icelandic, the native language of the majority of the population of Iceland.

## 2. Consonants

Table 1 presents the consonant inventory of Icelandic which consists of 30 consonants classified into seven place categories and six manner types. The seven places of articulation for the consonants include bilabial, labiodental, dental, alveolar, palatal, velar, and glottal, whereas the six manners of articulation are plosive, nasal, trill, fricative, approximant, and lateral approximant.

Consonants	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p p <sup>h</sup>			t t <sup>h</sup>	c c <sup>h</sup>	k k <sup>h</sup>	
Nasal	m̥ m			ɲ n	ɲ̟ ɲ̟̥	ŋ̊ ɲ̟̥	
Trill				ʀ r			
Fricative		f v	θ ð	s	ç	x ɣ	h
Approximant					j		
Lateral approximant				l̥ l			

Table 1: Consonant inventory of Icelandic (a voiced consonant on the left and a voiceless one on the right in each cell).

A notable feature of the Icelandic consonant inventory is the lack of voiced plosives which occur in most European languages. Instead of a voicing distinction, the plosives in Icelandic have a contrast in aspiration, which is quite unique among the European languages. Another feature peculiar to Icelandic that is not seen in many of the world's languages is a voicing distinction for the nasals and *l/r*-liquids.

In Icelandic, the stop consonants, either plosives or nasals, are categorized into four places of articulation, including bilabial, alveolar, palatal, and velar, as illustrated in the word examples given below. In each place category, there are unaspirated and aspirated plosives or voiced and voiceless nasals.

/p/: búa /'pu:a/ "to live"	/p <sup>h</sup> /: pottur /'p <sup>h</sup> ɔhtyr/ "pot"
/t/: Danmörk /'tanmœrk/ "Denmark"	/t <sup>h</sup> /: taka /'t <sup>h</sup> a:ka/ "to take"
/c/: gjöf /cœ:v/ "gift"	/c <sup>h</sup> /: kjósa /'c <sup>h</sup> ou:sa/ "to vote"
/k/: glas /kla:s/ "glass"	/k <sup>h</sup> /: kort /k <sup>h</sup> ɔrt/ "map"
/m/: lamb /lamp/ "lamb"	/m̥/: lampi /'lampi/ "lamp"
/n/: níu /'ni:jy/ "nine"	/n̥/: hnífur /'ni:vyr/ "knife"
/ɲ/: lengi /'leɲci/ "long time"	/ɲ̥/: banki /'paɲci/ "bank"
/ŋ/: hringur /'riŋkyr/ "ring"	/ŋ̥/: þungt /'θuŋt/ "heavy"

As for the Icelandic fricatives, their places of articulation include labiodental, dental, alveolar, palatal, velar, and glottal. The labiodental, dental, and velar categories consist of a voiced and voiceless equivalent, while the alveolar, palatal, and glottal ones only have a voiceless variant. The word examples illustrating the fricative consonants in Icelandic are given below. Note that in the word vatn /va<sup>h</sup>tn/ "water", /<sup>h</sup>/ denotes the pre-aspiration of a plosive in word-medial or word-final position, which is a special feature of the plosives in Icelandic.

/f/: fáni /'fauni/ "flag"	/v/: vatn /va <sup>h</sup> tn/ "water"
/θ/: þjóna /'θjouna/ "to serve"	/ð/: maður /'maðyr/ "man"
/s/: saga /'saya/ "story"	
/ç/: hjól /çoul/ "wheel"	
/x/: sjúkt /'sjuxt/ "sick"	/y/: dagur /'tayyr/ "day"
/h/: háll /'hautl/ "slippery"	

As for the *l/r*-liquid consonants, there are four alveolars in Icelandic, with two trills and two lateral approximants. Both the trills and lateral approximants have voiced and voiceless variants as illustrated by the word examples given below, together with the single voiced palatal approximant.

/r/: rangur /'raunkyr/ "wrong"	/r̥/: hrafn /r̥apn/ "raven"
/l/: lög /lœy/ "law"	/l̥/: hlæja /'l̥aija/ "to laugh"
/j/: jörð /jœrð/ "earth"	

### 3. Vowels

There are eight vowels or monophthongs in Icelandic as shown in Table 2. The eight vowels include five peripheral vowels that form a balanced inverted triangular vowel space, in which there is an unrounded high front /i/ and a rounded high back /u/ at the two top corners together with an unrounded mid front /ɛ/, a rounded mid back /ɔ/, and an unrounded low central /a/. Within the vowel space, (i) there is a pair of high front lax vowels, an unrounded /ɪ/ and a rounded /ʏ/, although the tense rounded high front /y/ equivalent is non-occurring in Icelandic; and (ii) there is a rounded mid front /œ/.

Vowels	Front	Central	Back
High	i		u
High lax	ɪ      ʏ		
Mid	ɛ      œ		ɔ
Low		a	

Table 2: Vowel inventory of Icelandic (an unrounded vowel on the left and a rounded one on the right in each cell).

According to Plotkin (1974), the Icelandic vowels vary in length when they are realized in speech, though the variation is completely predictable in relation to the stress produced on the vowels. The length variation is applied to vowels of any type, including the lax vowels /ɪ/ and /ʏ/. Note that the lax /ɪ/ and /ʏ/ are similar to the tense vowels being able to occur in open syllables. The eight vowels in Icelandic are illustrated by the words given below.

/i/: Ísland /'istlant/ "Iceland"	/u/: úr /ur/ "clock"
/ɪ/: linna /'lɪna/ "to stop"	/ʏ/: viku /'vi:kʏ/ "week" (ACC, DAT, GEN)
/ɛ/: gera /'cɛra/ "to do"	/œ/: örn /œrtɪn/ "eagle"
/a/: tala /'tʰala/ "to speak"	/ɔ/: þorp /θɔɾp/ "village"

### 4. Diphthongs

There also five diphthongs in Icelandic as listed in Table 3. The five monophthongs /i u ɛ œ a ɔ/, except for the two lax vowels /ɪ/ and /ʏ/, are found as a component vowel in the diphthongs, despite that the mid back vowel /ɔ/ is represented with /o/ in the diphthong /ou/.

Diphthongs	End with a front vowel	End with a back vowel
Gliding from mid to high	ei œi	ou
Gliding from low to high	ai	au

Table 3: Diphthong inventory of Icelandic.

From Table 3, it can be seen that all the five Icelandic diphthongs begin with a mid or low vowel gliding to a high vowel, front or back, at the end. The word examples illustrating the five diphthongs are as follows.

/ei/: teikn /t <sup>h</sup> eiħkn/ "sign"	/ou/: lón /lou:n/ "lagoon"
/œi/: brauð /prœið/ "bread"	/au/: á /au:/ "river"
/ai/: sækja /'sai:ca/ "to fetch"	

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, this essay has illustrated the Icelandic sound system. The consonant inventory is moderately large, due to the occurrence of some special consonants which are unique to Icelandic and rare in many other European languages. The inventories of vowels and diphthongs of Icelandic are relatively simple and small in size.

## References

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