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Intimate engagements with language: creative practices for inclusive public spaces in Iceland

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses an artistic event "Emotions Icelandic Awakes" organized by the Reykjavik City Library as part of the national celebrations for Icelandic Language Day. It examines the potential of affording genuine attention to language as a matter of emotional inquiry for the process of intercultural exchange. We reflect on the role of public institutions in providing an inclusive space that facilitates intercultural communication and where agency and language ownership is discursively determined by the participants. We consider inclusive public spaces as places of 'enacting hospitality' and counterspaces that may help to deconstruct the hegemonic position of Icelandic language in contemporary public discourse regarding immigrants in Iceland.

Greinin fjallar um viðburð Borgarbókasafnsins "Tilfinningar sem tungan vekur" í tilefni af degi íslenskrar tungu. Viðburðurinn er dæmi um skapandi aðferð til að draga fram tilfinningalegar víddir tungumáls og varpa ljósi á tungumálið sem viðfangsefni fjölmenningarlegra samskipta. Skoðað er hlutverk opinberra stofnana í að skapa opinn vettvang sem gefur færi á tjáningu ólíkra radda til að stuðla að samskiptum, þar sem þátttakendur sjálfir skilgreina orðræðuna um að tilheyra samfélagi. Við rýnum í opin almenningsrými með jafnan aðgang allra og sem mögulegt er að endurskilgreina, sem rými mótvægis er varpa ljósi á ríkjandi valdamisræmi og ráðandi orðræðu um aðlögun innflytjenda á Íslandi og tengsl við hreintungustefnu.

KEYWORDS

Public spaces; inclusion; linguistic integration; immigrants; artistic methods; Iceland

LEITARORÐ

Náin sambönd við tungumál: Skapandi aðferðir fyrir opnari almenningsrýmum í Reykjavík

Introduction

'Can you break up with a language? I never want to talk you again, but you are always in my mind. How are the first encounters with the Icelandic language? Loving and warm or cold and difficult? Soft or hard? Was it love at first sight? Is studying Icelandic a stormy relationship with a language?'

With these provocative questions, the Reykjavík City Library invited Icelandic learners and immigrants living in Iceland for a participatory event as part of the annual celebration of *Dagur íslenskrar tungu* (Icelandic Language Day) in November 2019. The event was organised in collaboration with Ós Pressan, a non-profit literary collective that publishes an annual multilingual literary journal. It was proceeded by a survey conducted in language schools and consisted of two artistic performances (one based on movement and dance in the library space and one delivered as a manifesto utilising books as artistic objects), three readings (one poetry reading and two short stories), and an exhibition in the main hall of Reykjavík City Library. The organisers' main

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purpose was to challenge dominant pragmatic approaches in Icelandic public discourse that perceive language as a mere tool of communication and an essential element of migrants' integration. Instead, by giving voice to foreign-born[1] artists, the event emphasised diverse and occasionally conflicting emotions involved in the process of language learning as well as aesthetic aspects of Icelandic and embodied linguistic practices.

In this article, we discuss this event as an example of creative practice that applies literary and artistic methods to articulate symbolic and affective dimensions of language, language acquisition, and the development of multilingual subjectivity (Kramsch, 2009). We present the societal context and underlying assumptions informing the event, outline its implementation and analyse texts performed by invited foreign-born artists in order to reflect on the potential of affording genuine attention to language as a matter of emotional inquiry for the process of intercultural exchange and mutual understanding. Finally, we put special emphasis on the role of public institutions, such as the Reykjavík City Library, in providing inclusive spaces that enable the expression of diverse voices and experiences where agency and language ownership is discursively determined by the participants (Bradley et al., 2018; Damery & Mescoli, 2019; Jeffery et al., 2019). We consider inclusive public spaces as places of 'enacting hospitality' (Harvey, 2018) and counterspaces, deconstructing the hegemonic position of Icelandic language in contemporary public discourse with regard to immigrants in Iceland, largely informed by linguistic purism (Þórarinsdóttir, 2010). In this way, we contribute to this special issue by discussing artistic intervention facilitated by the City Library as a means of intercultural dialogue beyond the national construction of standard language and example of powerful attempt at social justice.

The article is a collaborative work by two academics (first and second author), both of whom share the experience of being migrants in Iceland and both engaged in different community projects; a practitioner and (at that time of the event) manager of multicultural projects at the Reykjavík City Library (third author); and a writer of Polish-origin, cultural animator, and one of the founders of the literary collective Ós Pressan (fourth author). The latter two authors were also the initiators and facilitators of the event discussed in this paper.

Migration and linguistic integration

There is a common belief that learning the local language in a new country is key to integration. It is typically expected that linguistic integration enables the social and economic inclusion of immigrants, allows for their cultural belonging, and secures the social cohesion of the receiving state. Although knowing the host country's language can indeed facilitate migrants' social participation and enlarge their employment options (Chiswick & Miller, 2001), such views somehow imply that successful integration firmly relies on migrants' linguistic competence. However, many studies show that improved language skills rarely ensure migrants' social mobility which is rather conditioned by labour market segmentation and discrimination often experienced by ethnic minorities (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Simultaneously, understating the integration process as reduced to language acquisition may give a false impression that migrants are entirely responsible for their social and economic marginalisation. This assumption further suggests that improved language skills primarily benefit migrants themselves, supposedly helping them to access the local community and enabling their socio-economic advancement. In this sense, the host country's language tends to embody a *happy object* which, according to Sara Ahmed (2010), is an object accumulating positive affective value, perceived as essentially good and one which promises happiness in return for loyalty.

Such perspectives on integration and language attainment hardly consider the diverse migration contexts, motivations, predispositions, and aspirations of migrants, as well as personal dimensions of language learning (Clarke & Hennig, 2013). Contemporary migrations predominantly originate in global inequalities, even if voluntary, they are frequently driven by perceived economic necessity or actuated by demands of capitalism. In fact, conceptualised as static linguistic objects, national

languages maintain powerful tools of differentiation and discrimination, serving as gatekeepers and a means to control migration (Wodak & Boukala, 2015), while stigmatising fluid linguistic practices emerging in multicultural settings. At the same time, international mobility and growing ethnic diversity challenges typically assumed isomorphism between place, nation, and culture, further questioning the hegemony of national languages. Consequently, sociolinguists increasingly advocate reframing language as appropriated by speakers in order to give recognition to plural modes of communication (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007) and so to democratise language education and the process of immigrants' integration (García, 2017).

Hans-Jurgen Krumm (2013) argues, 'language acquisition cannot be analysed as a cognitive process alone, but language acquisition is always embedded in concrete social, historical, and individual biographical situations and that is heavily emotionally charged' (p. 167). Immigrants' integration process in general, and language education in particular, need to be placed within a larger context, including the social positioning of immigrants in the receiving state and their structural incorporation. In the following section, we outline the linguistic ideologies in Iceland as reflected in the integration policy regarding immigrants in order to demonstrate how the local language environment affects immigrants' attitudes towards Icelandic.

The linguistic environment in Iceland

In Iceland, where language played an important role in the country's struggle for independence and the process of constructing distinctive national identity in the nineteenth century (Hálfdánarson, 2001; Sigurðsson, 1996), speaking Icelandic is closely intertwined with social and cultural membership (Skaptadóttir, 2007). Nationalist discourses inform prevailing protective language policies formulated around the notion of purity. The overall objective of governmental language planning has been to resist any changes and cultivate an established standardised form of Icelandic, typically presented as relatively consistent with its medieval form. This is implemented for instance by directives on correct pronunciation and prevention of the adoption of loanwords (Hilmarsson-Dunn, 2006; Leonard & Árnason, 2011). Appointed committees create lists with Icelandic translations of specialised and present-day words, such as computer terminology. Furthermore, the official language policy recommends that usage of Icelandic should be actively promoted in all spheres of public and cultural life (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010; Menntamálaráðuneyti, 2008). Anthropologist Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir (2010) argued that the ideology of linguistic purism in Iceland bears characteristics of secular religion and serves as a powerful social control tool. Any forms of grammatical, lexical, or phonetic alterations from the standardised traditional corpus are disregarded as impurity or contamination. Furthermore, non-standard speech results in stigmatisation of the speaker and operates as the primary basis for class division in Icelandic society. 'The idea of linguistic pollution,' observed Gísli Pálsson (1989), 'becomes one of the means by which inequalities are justified and reproduced' (p. 135).

Since the Icelandic language is perceived as an intrinsic and critical element of Icelandic identity, its maintenance becomes vital for the endurance of the nation (Hálfdanarson, 2005), compelling authorities to ensure that an unbroken or uncorrupted linguistic tradition is passed on to future generations. Constituting a small speaking community of less than 300,000 'native' speakers (Statistics Iceland, 2020), many Icelanders see their language as endangered by processes of globalisation and expanding foreign[2] influences, especially due to the widespread prevalence of English (Rögnvaldsson, 2016; Þórarinsdóttir, 2011). Likewise, the growing number of immigrants living in Iceland (amounting to 15% of the total population in 2020) has been frequently framed as a threat to the future of the Icelandic language (Íslensk málnefnd, 2018; Menntamálaráðuneyti, 2008). Especially, the growing number of immigrants in frontline service jobs not speaking Icelandic causes strong public concerns.

Accordingly, the integration policy directed to immigrants puts great emphasis on linguistic integration. The Government Policy on the Integration of Immigrants issued by the Ministry of

Social Affairs in 2007 explicitly states that '[k]nowledge of the Icelandic language is the key to Icelandic society and can be a deciding factor in the successful integration of immigrants into Icelandic society' (Ministry of Social Affairs 2007, p. 2). The document instructs, that '[a]s a general rule, Icelandic language education for immigrants should include education about Icelandic society, its values, cultural heritage and the rights and obligations of citizens (2007, p. 8).' Evidently, migrants need to learn Icelandic, not only for pragmatic and communication purposes, but also in order to comprehend the local culture, which is identified as conducive to becoming fully-fledged members of society. Even if the document uses the term 'integration,' the way it promotes learning Icelandic echoes assimilationist logic by recommending the utilisation of language classes to inculcate migrants into the norms and rules of Icelandic society.

Moreover, recognising language skills as a 'deciding factor' implies that mastering Icelandic will result in socio-economic advancement, while simultaneously, insufficient competence will preclude the social inclusion of immigrants. The 2018 resolution of the Language Committee, which consulted authorities on issues relating to the Icelandic language, pinpointed that a lack of Icelandic skills has a negative effect on quality of life and leads to the segmentation of society and to discrimination (Íslensk málnefnd, 2018). Besides implying that linguistic competence directly corresponds with immigrants' well-being, this statement frames immigrants as responsible for economic polarisation and social inequalities, in a covert way. Yet, assuming linguistic integration as a prerequisite for social inclusion neglects common evidence that increased social participation and embodied knowledge actually strengthens motivations to learn the language and helps to improve language skills. Consequently, conditioning social inclusion on the learning of Icelandic, instead of working as a means of integration, renders Icelandic language as an instrument of exclusion.

The Government Policy on the Integration of Immigrants further states:

> It is the policy of the Icelandic government—approved by the entire nation—to protect the Icelandic language. It is the **shared property**[3] of the Icelandic nation and contains its history, culture and self-awareness […] Governmental support of Icelandic language education for immigrants serves the **dual purpose** of speeding up their integration into society and strengthening the position of the Icelandic language. (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007, p. 6)

This passage demonstrates that the linguistic integration of immigrants pertains to official language policy, focused on preservation and enhancement of the Icelandic language as a national heritage. Teaching Icelandic to immigrants is then one way to ensure language continuity.

The emphasis on preserving the language and language purity puts a lot of pressure on immigrants – not only to learn, but also to speak a standard version of the language. Relative linguistic homogeneity in Iceland and a lack of regional dialects pose challenges to learners speaking Icelandic with an accent. A study by Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir and Pamela Innes (2017) indicated that many immigrants have been subjected to unfriendly responses to their incorrect, or incomplete Icelandic. One of their interlocutors of Asian origin commented, '[I]f you don't speak perfect Icelandic, it is worse than your skin colour' (Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017, p. 25). During her research, Stefanie Bade (2019) observed considerable hostility among the native population towards Icelandic spoken with foreign accents, especially towards those categorised as Eastern European or with Asian accents. The way immigrants speak Icelandic immediately discloses their foreign origin, and may trigger certain ethnic stereotypes affecting attitude towards the speaker.

Given the pervasive ethnic segregation of the labour market and concomitant ethnic segmentation of Icelandic society, speaking with a foreign accent tends to determine one's social position. In this way, Icelandic reproduces social boundaries between migrants and the local population. It has also been used to control access into the country. When migration to Iceland intensified in the 2000s, compulsory training and language tests were applied, constraining possibilities for legal residence (Innes & Skaptadóttir, 2017). Moreover, Icelandic has been commonly used to regulate,

position, and stipulate opportunities in the labour market (Wojtyńska & Skaptadóttir, 2021a) as well as access to welfare assistance (Wojtyńska & Skaptadóttir, 2021b). Inevitably, the multiple forms of discrimination that migrants face in Iceland, coupled with the entrenched linguistic nationalism, affect migrants' attitudes and emotions towards learning Icelandic. The most recent statement of the Language Committee (Íslensk málnefnd, 2020) acknowledges the negative effect of the dominant public discourse on the learning motivations of immigrants. The Language Committee indicates its wish to promote non-judgmental attitudes towards those learning the Icelandic language, yet does not specify how to achieve it.

Finally, the Government Policy on the Integration of Immigrants underlines that Icelandic is 'the shared property of the Icelandic nation' (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007, p. 6). Although this statement leaves the question open over whom is considered to belong within the Icelandic nation, it seems to imply that only Icelanders have the authority to determine correct usage of Icelandic. In order to challenge the regulating position of Icelandic manifested in the purity doctrine, this article's co-authors Dögg Sigmarsdóttir and Ewa Marcinek (later referred to as Dögg and Ewa) aimed for a public event at the Reykjavík City Library that would accommodate diverse voices of immigrants and share manifold experiences related to being a speaker of Icelandic as an additional language.

Inclusive public spaces

The Reykjavík City Library constitutes a public institution designed as an indoor urban open space accessible to everyone (Sigmarsdóttir, 2020). For the last few years, the Library has been actively taking steps to incorporate the growing diversity of Icelandic society in order to become an inclusive space that welcomes multiple voices and critical engagements. With its current policy, the Library is conceptualised as a place to experiment that aims to co-create a social space with users (Reykjavík City Library's Policy 2021–2024, n.d.). By including different people in the process, it hopes to make the Library a relevant space to the broader public and become a place where everyone can access and share knowledge, learn something new, gather or just socialise and seek refuge from the hustle and bustle of daily life. The Library invites users to guide the curation of knowledge, its sharing and cultural programming in order to better represent the society (Reykjavík City Library's Policy 2021–2024, n.d., p. 4). Furthermore, since immigrants' access to public spaces and their visibility is largely structured by their inferior position and socio-economic inequalities, the Library aspires to create a democratic platform that attempts to include marginalised narratives and facilitate intercultural communication and dialogue. In this sense, it wants to provide 'spaces of engagement' that carry the potential of transformative work (Bradley et al., 2020). By inviting disempowered groups, the Library also allows counterspaces to form, which are spaces of expression and enactment of oppositional politics (Hershokovitz, 1993).

The recent projects undertaken by the City Library frequently apply creative methods as a conducive to enabling communication beyond languages.[4] Artistic forms of communication, including narrative methods and fiction-based research have the potential to stimulate empathy, self-awareness, and social reflection (Leavy, 2015), further facilitating social bonding and bridging cohesive behaviour between and within different groups (Otte, 2019). Artistic and participatory projects in spaces such as a library, which are open to the public and free, can therefore be suitable places to bring together migrants and the majority population. Creative projects and art and literature can offer empowering spaces where migrants can participate in society on more equal terms, express their stance, contest simplified imaginaries about migration and mobile subjects, reclaim their agency, and advocate for change (Jeffery et al., 2019). As Damery and Mescoli (2019) argue, 'art offers opportunities for migrants to actively participate in the socio-cultural and political environment in which they reside and to claim various forms of official and unofficial belonging whether it occurs through visibility or invisibility' (p. 1).

'Can you break up with a language?'

The event 'Tilfinningar sem tungan vekur/Emotions Icelandic awakes' was organised in November 2019 as part of the national celebrations for Icelandic Language Day. Icelandic Language Day has been annually commemorated since 1996 on the birthday of the nation's beloved Romantic poet Jónas Hallgrímsson, who was active in the promotion and development of Icelandic nationalism and an influential figure in the Icelandic Independence Movement in the nineteenth century. The primary rationale behind the Day is to honour the Icelandic language and acknowledge its value for Icelandic identity. It aims to underpin the importance of preserving the language, promote its widespread usage, and rouse Icelanders' national pride.

The focus of the event organised at the Library was inspired by Jónas Hallgrímsson's ode to Icelandic language titled 'Ásta' – a female name shortened from Ástríður, meaning 'one loved by gods.' In this poem, Hallgrímsson describes his intimate relationship with the Icelandic language as loving and warm, tender and soft, consisting of words that give pleasure. Personified and depicted as dear to gods, Icelandic commands respect, simultaneously boosting self-confidence and self-regard of those speaking it. The poem inspired subsequent generations of Icelanders that perceived their language as a source of their distinctiveness, and a meaningful constituent of national identity. Accordingly, Dögg and Ewa intended to recognise the emotions that Icelandic awakes in those learning it as an additional language in order to unsettle these implicit normative and barely contested approaches to Icelandic.

Prior to the event, Dögg contacted selected language schools in the capital region that provide classes in Icelandic for adults, including the course 'Vocabulary' for first- and second-year students in the Bachelor's programme 'Icelandic as a second language' at the University of Iceland. In order to provoke individuals to explore their personal relationship with and feelings towards Icelandic, teachers were asked to conduct exercises during their classes and collect words that students loved, hated, found impossible to pronounce, as well as listing the first words they learned and would never forget. Some of the participants were beginners, while others had already acquired advanced language skills in Icelandic. In total, around 200 people contributed to the project and 150–350 words per category were collected. Additionally, an online survey was circulated via social media. Beside questions similar to those distributed in schools, respondents were asked to explain the reasons for their feelings as well as share anecdotes related to learning Icelandic, for instance about experiences of misusing Icelandic words or phrases.

The exercise exemplified an attempt at creative inquiry about the language. Students were invited to look at words separately from the larger linguistic structure and communication affordance, to explore their acoustics and visual impact, turning them into objects of aesthetic gaze. For instance, one survey participant commented, 'the first time I **saw** Icelandic I was amazed by the letter ð' [our emphasis]. Another person recalled,

> I miss the sound that Icelandic had, when I was not able to understand a word of it. To me it always sounded like a magical tongue, the sound of the waves or the melody of the leaves. Now that I understand it, it has lost the magical properties it had and I would give a lot to be able to hear it once more the way I did.

The students were also asked to modify, recombine, and affectively appropriate the Icelandic words into their own linguistic repertoire. While encouraging sensual reflections and a playful approach to language, the exercise opened up to linguistic agency, empowering students of Icelandic to actively engage with the language and so it allowed for more fluid language practices in line with assumptions of translanguaging (García, 2017).

Gathered material comprised the groundwork for the final output, which was the event at the Library. The words collected among the language students and in the online survey were written down on the Post-it notes and displayed at the event venue's main hall of the Reykjavík City Library. Each category of words was assigned to different colours of Post-its: pink for loved words, orange for difficult words, green for hated words, and yellow for words that one learned

Figure 1. Expert from the exhibition at the Library (photo: Dögg Sigmarsdóttir).

first and will never forget. The notes were then placed randomly on windows and walls in the Library space, forming a colourful collage representing different emotions accompanying learning process (see Figure 1).

Selected foreign-born artists living in Iceland were invited to the event. Three of them were involved in the Ós Pressan collective and two were members of Reykjavík Ensemble, a multilingual theatre company. All had moved to Iceland as adults and were based in the capital region. While all were proficient in English, they also had some competency in Icelandic and experience of learning Icelandic in both formal and informal settings. Prior to the event, they received the collected words and anecdotes as possible material with which to work. In what follows, we present each contribution and discuss the main issues raised by them as they represent different, intimate ways of engaging with the Icelandic language.[5]

While most of the artists chose a verbal form of expression, Juliette Louste – born in France, a performing artist, dancer, choreographer and producer working with local theatres and theatre projects – decided to translate language into movement. As a highly emotional, universal and embodied way of expression, dance carries the potential to transcend the boundaries of national languages. During the breaks between the readings, Juliette danced around the people gathered in the Library (see Figure 2). The performance was improvised. It started with Juliette coming down the stairs of the Library and stepping on a bench in front of the Post-its with Icelandic words written on them. She picked up random notes, read them out aloud and communicated them through movement. To engage with the audience, Juliette handed over some of the Post-its to those attending, disassembling part of the display.

Her performance expressed the energy and sound of the language by turning attention away from the meanings of the words and towards the rhythm and the melody of Icelandic. This mirrors the common experience of new immigrants, who are first exposed to the aesthetic and acoustic elements of the language; an experience some even miss once they have reached greater competency, as the survey participant quoted above. Dancing with the words, Juliette also accentuated the embodied communication practices – the use of the body to express oneself on the one hand

Figure 2. Dance performance by Juliette Louste (photo: Dögg Sigmarsdóttir).

and the physical impact of the spoken words on the other; both also reflected by the next performing artist.

Elena Ilkova**,** a translingual writer born in North Macedonia, read a short story written in English, but occasionally interspersed with Icelandic. It predominantly illustrated the ups and downs of the learning process and its impact on self-image and personal development. In a humorous manner, Elena brought attention to the conflicting emotions accompanying the beginner student, including constant confusion, hesitation, and self-doubt. The story opens with a short exchange between Kasia, a fictional Polish girl, and her Icelandic neighbour, after a sudden noise in Kasia's apartment caused by broken glass. To communicate what happened, Kasia combined simple Icelandic, onomatopoeic words, and bodily expressions. 'This was how she talked nowadays. Hands and legs. Head and eyes,' the narrator explained.

Even if ephemeral and limited, the conversation made Kasia happy and proud since, for the first time, she 'chitchatted with a neighbour entirely in Icelandic.' Encouraged by this positive experience, she decided to describe her encounter for her Icelandic class assignment. While cleaning up broken glass, Kasia suddenly realised that she had confused two Icelandic words: *hreinsa* (to clean) with *hringja* (to call), which made her run to consult a dictionary. Despite this slightly depressing setback that she chose to see as yet another lesson, Kasia started to draft her homework. She wrote, 'Í dag var gaman. Rosalega gaman' (*Today was fun. Very fun*). As the story unfolds, we witness Kasia writing something, consulting the dictionary, checking Google, erasing what she wrote, and starting all over again. Eventually, she concludes in self-doubt, as the narrator comments, 'She wouldn't be sure in her Icelandic, she wasn't sure in her English, and she doubted big-time her Polish.'

The initial joy and enthusiasm of learning, gradually transformed into discomfort felt quite physical, as the author described how 'Kasia exhaled loudly all the pain that the effort to understand this sentence even in English filled in her chest.' Shortly after, Kasia felt frustrated and desperate enough to exclaim, 'Ég hata að læra tungumál … ' (*I hate to learn language*) as the narrator commented, 'Damned, she hated herself.' At the end, resigned and subdued, Kasia modified her essay into a short and simple statement: 'Með öðrum orðum: þessi dagur var venjulegur dag' (*In other words: this day was usual*). 'It wasn't,' observed the narrator, 'but she didn't have enough language to describe it.'

With this ending, Elena evokes a quite common experience among language learners in adjusting (or reducing) the content of the message to available and familiar vocabulary. Not able to find the correct words or to write them in the correct form to describe a real event, Elena's protagonist was forced to retreat to simple and safe statements, which made her feel that in Icelandic, she and her life are presented as dull and deprived from any entertainment. That linguistic impotence renders her a different person from whom she considers herself to be.

Rather than speaking in one's native language, which may feel transparent and intuitive, practicing an additional language – especially for the beginner – is associated with endless thinking and re-thinking, self-questioning, and checking the correct usage of words. The persistent awareness of the language makes it feel like a tangible entity, an actual and acute obstacle. The annoying inability to express oneself clearly affects one's identity and self-respect. The failure to understand, which manifests in Kasia's physical chest pain, evokes Alison Phipps' (2013) discussion of unmooring languages linked to movement, which likely entails loss of stability, loss of certainty, safety, and security. As apparent in Elena's story, migrants' relationships with the language of the receiving society can be troubling and loaded with complex emotions, including anxiety, despair, and shame (cf. Sevinç & Dewaele, 2018).

The feeling of helplessness and powerlessness following one's inability to communicate fully also appeared in one of the poems read by Ewa Marcinek (already introduced as one of the facilitators of the event and co-author of this article):

> I will always remember my first conversation in Icelandic.
>
> In a supermarket.
>
> "Viltu poka?" Would you like a bag?
>
> "Já, takk."
>
> In my mother tongue *poka* sounds like *show me*.
>
> Viltu poka? Would you like to show me who you are?
>
> Please believe me, I would if I knew how.

Ewa's mother tongue is Polish. She is fluent in English and an intermediate in Icelandic. In her poetry, increasingly written in English, Ewa often appropriates words from Icelandic and plays with their overlapping meanings to create new meanings and open new interpretations. In this poem, the pronunciation of the Icelandic word *poka* (bag) reminded her of Polish *poka* (show me) – a colloquial form of the verb *pokazać* (to show). Finding this correlation triggered a sense of yearning for being able to express oneself sufficiently, the contestation that one has no words to show one's authentic self. Similar to Elena's story, Ewa refers to the condition of being mute due to lack of adequate vocabulary, but perhaps also alludes to the condition of feeling silenced by not being heard (and possible lack of will to listen exhibited by the Icelandic majority), and hence the disempowering capacity of the language. The poem also demonstrates that for bi- or multilingual subjects, languages do not constitute separate code systems but are entangled, enabling speakers to move across semiotic boundaries (cf. García, 2017; Kramsch, 2009).

In another poem, Ewa observes:

> Sometimes I feel like a three-tongued monster, a forked soul. Each tongue has its own life, own stories to tell, own chances to grab. Each tongue stretches and reaches out searching for something more.

Challenged by living in a multilingual environment, inclined to use different languages in different situations in her daily life, Ewa aligns her experience with a split identity, represented by separate tongues that seem to become independent from her consciousness, taking control over her ego. Each language constitutes a distinct individual, depending on socio-linguistic circumstances. While 'within

a homogeneous cultural group, languages express implicit values and beliefs that form a coherent reality' (Aden & Eschenauer, 2020, p. 104), in the multicultural landscape, one could say that the reality becomes ambiguous and confusing. Consequently, Ewa calls herself a 'monster', that, in a sense, normalises monolingualism while simultaneously shows the inconspicuous repercussions that language acquisition has on the perception of self and its power to control the person.

Mazen Maarouf, a Palestinian writer from Lebanon and an Icelandic citizen, also reflected on vague implications of multilingual subjectivity. He shared a very personal – though auto-fictional – account from one of his language classes. One day, his teacher greeted him with the name 'Máni' (meaning moon in Icelandic), which he recognised as an Icelandic version of Mazen's name. Although well-intended by the teacher, the word *máni* caused the protagonist anxiety and discomfort:

> I did not tell the teacher that it was not the first time I heard the word *máni*. I knew the word before I got to Iceland. Of course, in Lebanon and Lebanese dialect, *máni* did not mean "moon," but when you say to somebody *máni*, it means he cannot refuse a request from him.

Then Mazen recalled the story of a janitor in his hometown. The janitor was an immigrant and was commonly asked to do different jobs by families living in the building. In one instance, he was accused of a crime he did not commit, but due to his inferior position was unable to defend himself. Therefore, hearing the word again immediately brought back distressful memories for Mazen, so he could not appreciate the new name assigned by the teacher.

Like Ewa's poem, quoted earlier, the story demonstrates that linguistic codes do not form separate, independent systems but can be mutually reinforced. Some words mean and feel differently to language students from how they do to native speakers; they can elicit distant connections and memories. Moreover, Mazen's account imperceptibly and subtly unveils the language position beside its simple communicative (understood as verbal exchange) role, and its concealed capability to imply and reproduce social hierarchies as manifested by unequal power relations between the teacher and the student, first and additional language speaker, local and migrant. It persuasively demonstrates the power of words, especially the power of naming (cf. Bourdieu, 1991). In the seemingly innocent act of Icelandicising Mazen's name, the teacher attempted to accommodate Mazen within the Icelandic community, but simultaneously (even if unintentionally) neglected his autonomy, distinctiveness, and past. In this sense, the teacher enacted what Pierre Bourdieu referred to as 'a symbolic act of imposition' (1991, p. 239). The story provides us with a more general metaphor for the social position of a migrant subject who often finds him/herself disempowered, disenfranchised, compliant, and silenced, not allowed to resist, which was also the focus of the final performance of the event.

The closing lecture, or rather manifesto, was delivered by Sonja Kovačević – born in Austria, a performing artist and activist working independently as well as with local art and theatre collectives. She started her performance by asking Ewa to put together two books – one about learning Icelandic grammar and the other about the ethics of migration – by braiding their pages one by one.

Sonja opened her talk with a quote from Ludwig Wittgenstein – 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent' – again bringing the apparent correlation between linguistic and social inarticulateness, also referenced by previous speakers. However, more than other artists, Sonja emphasised the impact that Icelandic linguistic nationalism, guided by a purity principle, has on the situation of migrants in Iceland in a broader social context. By referring to Wittgenstein's language games, she identifies herself as a player against a personified Icelandic language:

> I noticed that for me my social status is not being defined by how much I can play with the words within the Icelandic language, but it is defined by the Icelandic language itself. A stamp of approval of belonging or a constant reminder of just not being part of the game.
>
> Who is in charge. Is it me or is it the language?
>
> Am I playing with the Icelandic language, or am I playing against it?

> Is it through the language that I can define myself, mould my thoughts, shape the world? Or is it my non capacity to speak the language through which the language shapes me, addresses me a space, gives me a job and a social circle?
>
> The Icelandic language is a very ancient language, being threatened by its own extinction.
>
> Is the language defending itself against me?
>
> Is the language coming out to get me? Assign me jobs that push me to the margins of society?
>
> Or am I just being lazy, unable to mount the hill, unwilling to spend countless hours learning grammar?
>
> Where is the fine line between not trying hard enough and never being good enough?

In her performance, Sonja highlights the othering power of Icelandic ideologies. Typically, Icelandic has been used to determine who belongs to a nation and who does not (Skaptadóttir, 2007). In Sonja's experience, her skills in Icelandic are irrelevant compared with the fact she is not a native speaker, which automatically marginalises her and determines her social position, her job opportunities, and her social network. This contestation renders Sonja helpless in face of the unfair power granted by and ascribed to language, which in consequence – instead of being a communication tool and connecting people – assumes the role of assailant. Sonja also notes that the shared fear of Icelandic as an endangered language turns migrants into imagined enemies.

Sonja concludes with a question, 'Who is going to win this language game?' and asks a few volunteers from the audience to pull apart the two books she had previously asked Ewa to entangle. As expected, it proved impossible, underscoring Sonja's postulation that teaching a host language to migrants must not be separated from ethical considerations. When trying to disassemble the books, participants formed a circle and tried to drag the books in different directions, inevitably making them laugh. When faced with this task, the laughter posed a playful contrast to the heaviness and seriousness of the content of Sonja's performance. It was also a way to engage and unite the audience in a symbolic act of resistance to the dominant ideology and teaching approaches (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Event participants trying to disentangle books (photo: Dögg Sigmarsdóttir).

Discussion: towards hospitable public spaces

The participative event discussed in this article, organised by the Reykjavík City Library for the annual celebration of Icelandic Language Day, represents a form of community work and an example of creative engagement with growing ethnic diversity in Iceland. Through collaboration with foreign-born artists, it channelled immigrant voices, otherwise almost invisible, in public debate about immigrants' inclusion, preoccupied instead with the issues of linguistic integration, teaching Icelandic and the provision of language courses; hence largely reducing integration to the process of language acquisition. Differently, the event focused on the affecting, social and ideological aspects of language, besides being a mere tool of communication. Although language and language practices were the main focus of the event and the artistic inquiry, it engaged with larger issues of immigrants' positionality and social equality, as well as attempted to counter against social discrimination.

The artistic performances included in the event reflected on distinctive yet interconnected aspects of being an immigrant in Iceland and learning Icelandic. They demonstrated conflicting emotions related to the process of language acquisition and its impact on the subjective self, that tend to be omitted in current discussions about education of Icelandic as an additional language. The invited artists provided an embodied and affective contextualisation of migration experiences and diverse learning trajectories, exposing silent dynamics of language and power. They showed how language and language ideologies reflect and reproduce inequalities and reinforce migrants' inferior social positions, and also how Icelandic can be exercised as a means of exclusion. Conceptualising Icelandic as a prerequisite for integration, may particularly impede the possibility of other forms of communication and participation in the society. The presented texts brought attention to the role of the host society in the language-learning process, which goes beyond the perspective of the individual learners. Although the artists who took part in the event did not object to learning Icelandic, they contested the decisive role of language in determining their social positions, opportunities, and rights in Iceland. As the public discourse about migrants' integration has been largely overshadowed by Icelanders' fears of the deterioration or vanishing of the national language, due to growing ethnic and linguistic diversity and the expanding presence and ubiquity of English; like many migrants in Iceland, the artists found themselves in an uncomfortable position between policies of linguistic purity and the struggle for recognition of their own identity.

These, often very personal artistic interventions, afforded the capacity to engage the audience and inspire their sense of empathy and rapport, demonstrating the potential for developing mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue. The experiences of linguistic xenophobia, imposing practices, and unquestioned, normative approaches to Icelandic language acquisition were shared by a large part of the audience, mobilising a sense of community. This was additionally strengthened by the occasionally occurring laughter and playfulness of some of the performances. Besides making the event enjoyable and captivating, it created bonds within the group of Icelandic and foreign origin participants. Moreover, self-reflecting jokes about incidents of misunderstandings allowed to distance oneself to experienced discrimination, transferring humour into a nonviolent form of resistance. Recent work on counterspaces has highlighted the importance of playful interactions, and of employing humour and laughter as a peaceful fight against oppression (Cruz et al., 2021). Likewise, Anne Pomerantz and Nancy Bell (2011) argued that humour can serve as a safe house for language students and constitute 'a rich resource for the construction of spaces in which students can [..] critique institutional/instructional norms, and engage in more complex and creative acts of language use' (p. 149).

Hence, the artistic inquiry became a means to connect people across nationalities and languages and assemble temporary spaces of resistance to combat linguistic hostility and ethnolinguistic nationalism in Iceland. It raised questions – even if occasionally uncomfortable for the native majority – about the status and future role of the Icelandic language in an increasingly multicultural society. The event worked towards destabilising the entrenched position of national languages,

often constructed as a static linguistic object (and part of national heritage), independent of the speaking community as has been already abundantly debated among sociolinguists who emphasise approaches to languages as appropriated by its speakers (García, 2017; Makoni & Pennycook, 2007). By problematising the hegemony of Icelandic, the event opened for a more plural mode of communication and advocated acknowledgement and embrace of emerging multilingual spaces and fluid forms of linguistic practice. By inviting foreign-born writers, the organisers contributed to breaking away from the monolingual paradigm of Icelandic literature, supporting their struggle to receive adequate professional recognition (Hoffmann et al., 2020; cf. Yildiz, 2013). Moreover, the discussion undertaken by the event unsettles institutionalised formal language education in Iceland, often perceived as unsatisfactory by students (Hoffmann et al., 2021). Yet, we are aware that despite the potential for bringing marginalised voices to the ongoing debate in Iceland, the art-based participatory project may have limited public resonance and visibility (Harvey, 2018). However, in spite of spatial and social limitations of art to reach a broader audience and have a substantial effect on policy makers, it still has empowering capacity and facilitate intercultural encounters and communication.

With the intensive migration to Iceland in recent years and rapidly growing migrant population, the Reykjavik City Library intends to establish a democratic platform that connects diverse groups of citizens. The event discussed in this article is an example of an activity implemented by the Library in accordance with its current policy to co-create social space with users on their own terms (Reykjavík City Library's Policy 2021–2024, n.d, p. 3). While indisputably the Library – a state run institution – was the host of the event, the approach and method were negotiated earlier between Dögg and Ewa, who represented the independent multilingual literary collective Ós Pressan. They posed questions (introduced at the very beginning of the article) to engage artists and the audience, but did not impose, predict, or project the responses. Each artist had freedom to decide the format and content of their performances, which in a sense, entrusted them with the power as hosts. Therefore, we suggest that the event emerged as a form of enacting hospitality, as conceptualised by Lou Harvey (2018), creating conditions for encounter and dialogue across ethnic and linguistic differences.

Conclusion

The article discussed how an art-based participatory event – which focused on the emotions and intimate engagement with language acquisition by adult migrants – can serve as a tool to open inclusive public space for intercultural dialogue. While learning the host country's language can clearly contribute to migrants' inclusion, we wish to recognise and acknowledge that there are multiple ways to participate in society, especially in the context of increasing ethnic and linguistic diversity. Many contemporary migrants pursue transnational lives stretched between different localities, continuing their social embeddedness in communities from where they originate. Taken together, these factors challenge the assumed indispensability of host country languages for the mobile subject. Moreover, immigrants' integration, including linguistic acquisition cannot be discussed apart from the larger social context and inherent inequalities produced by the current economic relations and transnational labour market, where language ideologies tend to be employed as one of the controlling mechanisms.

Notes

1. By 'foreign-born,' we mean persons that were born outside Iceland and without any Icelandic background, although we are aware that referring to individuals/artists as 'foreign' may be polarizing and reproduce social boundaries.
2. The term 'foreign' implies something alien, strange and not belonging, hence it can be both normative and arbitrary. When talking about 'foreign influences' on the Icelandic language, we mean these linguistic

practices that are typically recognized as non-standard Icelandic. The same applies to the expression 'foreign accent,' used later in this article.
3. Our emphasis is in bold.
4. See: https://borgarbokasafn.is/en/get-know-our-participatory-projects
5. We refer to the texts as they were performed and shared with us by the artists after the event. None of them were published so far, except: the shorter version of Elena Ilkova essay was published recently in Ós Pressan Journal, 5/2021; poems presented by Ewa Marcinek translated into Icelandic were included in Tímarit Máls og Menningar, 3/2016 and will come out in English in Ós Pressan Journal, 6/2022.

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