

## Icelandic, and Icelandic Accented English

### Overview

Icelandic (*íslenska*) is spoken by less than 350,000 people in the world. About 320,000 Icelandic speakers live in Iceland, with the remainder in Denmark, Canada, and USA, primarily. Of the languages we're studying today, it is most similar to Norwegian as both are considered *West Nordic*, while Swedish, Danish and Finnish are *East Nordic*. The language is extremely similar to Old Norse, and Icelanders can read the ancient Nordic myths and sagas easily.

There are very few differences between regional or social groups in Iceland (though there is a difference between Northern and Southern Icelandic).

### Oral Posture

- Generally, there is little movement of the jaw
- The quality of consonants will probably set the tone for much of the accent, especially /s/ and /th/ consonants seem to set the tone and place for much of the accent
- Because Icelandic uses an apically trilled /r/, it often appears in speech, even when the speaker generally tries not to use it. This leads to a forward feel that is centered in the front edge of the tongue.
- The resonance of the accent is focus forward with a generally bright feel to vowels, except for /u/ which is particularly backed.

### Prosodic Elements

- Icelandic contrasts long and short vowels and diphthongs, as well as geminate consonants that are *pre-aspirated*, with what feels like a devoicing of the vowel before the consonant, or double-stopped with the first instance unreleased and the second released. This creates, on occasion, a feeling of a “dotted rhythm” to the native English speaker, who feels the vowel is a bit long!
- Generally speaking, L1 Icelandic words are stressed on the first syllable, so long, unfamiliar English words with stress elsewhere in the word are occasional mispronounced
- It seems that Icelandic speakers tend to use loudness to accent words/syllables more than length and pitch.
- Sentence contours seem to fit well with typical English patterns.

### Consonants

- /th/ (θ and ð) are native sounds in Icelandic but they are retracted, and essentially non-sibilant (not hissy) /s/ sounds. Icelanders think of them as “soft /t/ and /d/;” occasionally they will substitute [t] or [d] when speaking quickly.

- This retracted [θ] or [ð], in turn, moves the /s/ into a contrastive place of a hyper-sibilant, or whistling /s/, [s̺]. That's a up arrow arrow diacritic for "whistled articulation".
- In Icelandic, initial "th" is always [θ], which is written with the thorn þ; medial and final "th" are written with the eth ð, which is either [ð] or devoiced to [θ] in final settings. So initial [ð] as in "those" are likely to be realized as [θ], while medial [θ] as in "ether, lethal, Ethan" is likely to be realized as [ð].
- Overall, final voiced consonants are frequently devoiced; final p, t, k are usually released in some way, either aspirated or as an ejective.
- /l/ is light initially; final /l/ is usually devoiced rather than "dark" [ɫ]—note that devoiced /l/ is [ɬ], a fricative, rather than an approximant (as voiceless approximants make no turbulence.)
- Icelandic also has the voiceless palatal fricative [ç] that they spell as "hj-" as in *hjá* [çau]. This gets substituted for /j/ and in /tʃ/.
- In Icelandic, there is a contrast between [p<sup>h</sup>] and [p<sup>̄</sup>] (unaspirated).
- Initial /b/ is much like English, [p<sup>̄</sup>] rather than [b], in other instances quite voiced (short VOT).

#### Icelandic Only Consonants:

- Icelandic also has unusual voiceless initial consonants: *hl-, hr-, hn-, hj-*, etc. [ɬ r ŋ ç], (which are unlikely to come up in accents of English).
- Icelandic has palatal stops [c<sup>h</sup> c<sup>̄</sup>] spelled as *kj-*
- *hv-* is unusual: it is realized as [kv] as in "hvað" [kvað] *what*.
- *-fn-* also has an alteration: it is realized as [pn] as in "grafna" [krapna] *to dig*.
- *-ll-* is realized as [t<sup>l</sup>] or [tɬ] as in "bíll" [bitɬ]. This lateral plosion pronunciation appears in "-tle" endings in English, such as *little, metal, mantle* or devoiced "-dle" endings, such as *ladle, yodel, cradle, nodal, modal, model*. Rarely, I have heard Icelanders insert [tɬ] in place of "ll" but I suspect that this would be merely confusing for English audiences, and probably should be avoided.

#### Missing English Consonants:

- /w/ doesn't exist, so Icelanders often substitute their "v" for it. However, Icelandic "v" is very soft, often an approximant [v]. The other option is for them to substitute [u] in its place, which also gives a softened feeling to the articulation. Hypercorrection of /v/ to [w] happens on occasion as well.
- Though /g/ exists, there are many allophones, including [k<sup>̄</sup> c<sup>̄</sup> x γ j]

## Vowels

The monophthongs of Icelandic are actually quite close to English realizations. Unlike many other languages, Icelandic has vowels similar FLEECE and KIT, and the contrasts between the two are helpful. Note that orthographically KIT is **i** and FLEECE is **í**. The happy Set is merged with FLEECE, [i], but there are many Icelandic words that end in /-i/, so, for Icelanders in a non-rhotic environment, it is likely that happy could appear with [ɪ].

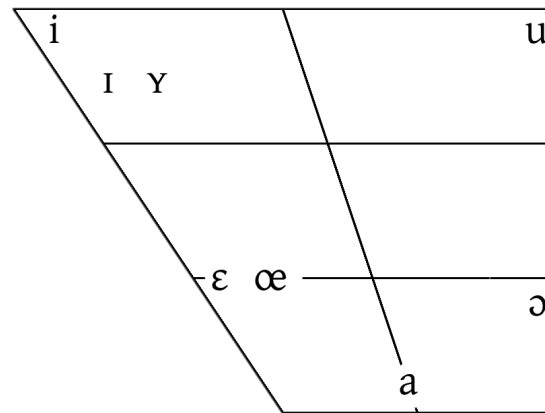


Figure 1: Icelandic Monophthongs

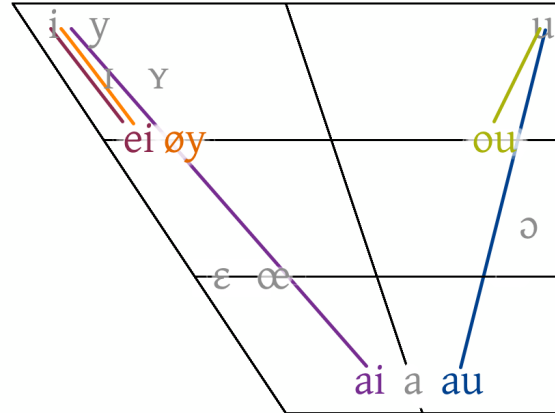
Icelandic features two non-English monophthongs, namely [ɣ] and [œ] (occasionally transcribed [ø] by phoneticians), typically spelled **u** and **ö** respectively. These front rounded vowels make Icelandic sound significantly different from English; the frontness of these two rounded vowels is unusual for native speakers of English, so they are worth exploring, though they're only likely to come up in Icelandic names and possibly in very strong accents where [ɣ] might substitute for the FOOT Lexical Set /ʊ/ and [œ] could substitute for NURSE Lexical Set /ɜ-ɝ-/.

The Hardest Working Vowel Award this year goes, yet again, to [ä] (spelled **a**), which is centralized in most instances, and maps onto *many* of our Lexical Sets—TRAP, BATH, PALM, START, STRUT, and even comma, plus starting two diphthongs PRICE and MOUTH. Short **a**, when followed by double-g, as in *sagga* [sækka], rises to its allophone [æ].

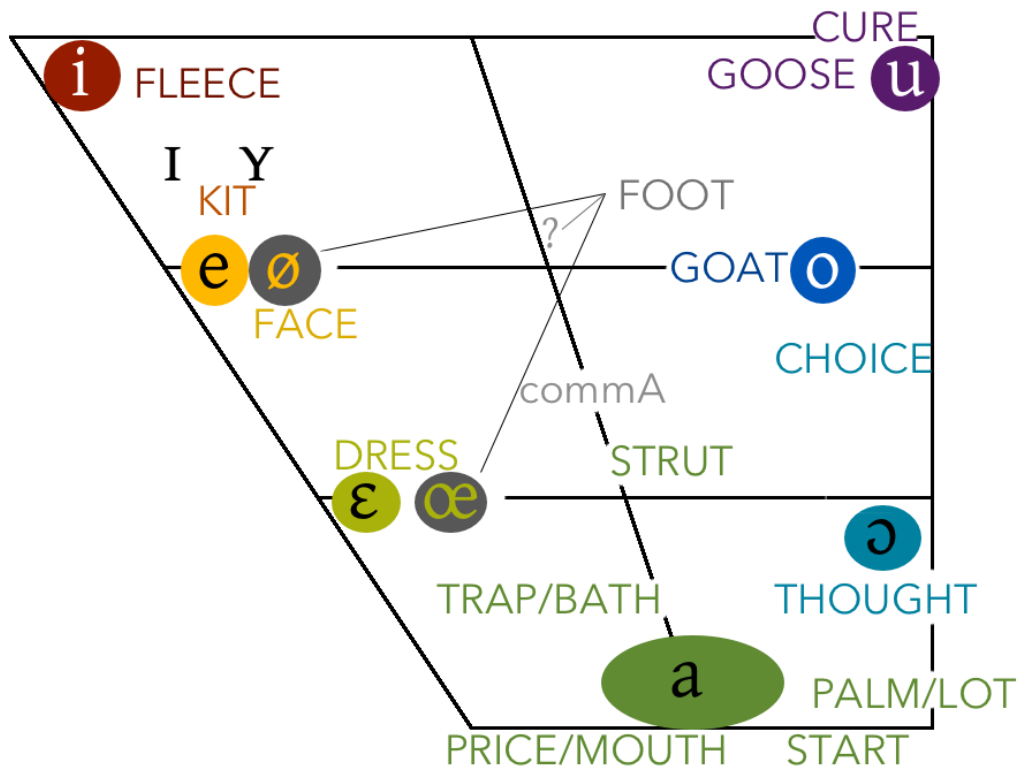
The vowel of our GOOSE set, /u/, is spelled **ú** and is much further back in Icelandic than in contemporary North American and British Englishes, similar to an Italian “u”, [u].

The short value of the sound spelled as **o** by Icelanders is realized as a quite open [ɔ], which works well as the vowel of THOUGHT (and frequently LOT), and as the first element of choice [ɔi]—with a more close offglide than might be expected in many Englishes. The long value of the diphthong spelled as **ó** is, by contrast, more close, and offglides to a value similar to GOOSE, [ou]. This maps nicely onto our GOAT Lexical Set.

Continuing with Icelandic Diphthongs, there are close equivalents to FACE, PRICE, and MOUTH, with [eɪ], [aɪ], and [aʊ] respectively—spellings here are **ei**, **æ**, and **á**. All diphthongs offglide to more close, and therefore more intense, realizations than traditional “standard” accents, with use of either [i] or [u].



There is one final diphthong that is entirely non-English: [œɻ], which is spelled **au** in Icelandic. If you round your lips forward fully while saying [eɪ], you should come out saying [œɻ].



### Diphthong & Vowel Length

There are two lengths for diphthongs, and three for vowels in Icelandic. These are all identified by consistent spelling conventions, so it is reasonable to assume that those Icelanders speaking English with a strong Icelandic accent would apply the same phonological rules to English when they encounter similar spellings in English. Long diphthongs are followed by a single consonant: *heit* or *sára*, while a “short” diphthong is followed by a double consonant: *heitt* or *sárra*. Long diphthongs sound exactly as you might imagine them to with a lengthened diphthong: *heit* [heɪ:t] or *sára* [saʊ:ra], while so-called short diphthongs feature post-aspiration

(essentially[h]) before a double plosive *heitt* [heɪ̯ht], or a lengthened fricative or trill after the short vowel, as in *lauss* [lœys:] or *sárra* [saʊ̯r:a].

Monophthongs have three lengths, too: long before a single consonant, half-long with post-aspiration before a doubled voiceless consonant, and short—with geminate release before a doubled “voiced” consonant, as in *kopar*, *koppar*, *kobbar*: [ko:par, kɔ̯hpar, kɔ̯p̥par].