

Loanwords and native synonyms in Old and Middle Icelandic: preliminary results

Current Icelandic language policy urges users to resort to the inner potential of their mother tongue instead of borrowing lexemes. This often leads to the formation of word pairs consisting of a loanword and native equivalent. The outcome of such coexistence in Modern Icelandic is known and widely researched. Older stages of Icelandic were however not free from this phenomenon, which can thus be regarded as having roots which largely antedate Icelandic purism (end of the 16th c.- beginning of the 17th c.).

How did loanwords and native words interact in the Old and Middle Icelandic period (up till 1550)? My doctoral project analyzes synonyms (and near-synonyms to a limited extent) which form word pairs (loanword(s) - native word(s), e.g. *dýfliza*, *prísund* - *myrkvastofa* 'prison'; *kápa* - *feldr* 'cape, mantel'; *angist* - *ótti* 'fear'; *kanúki* - *kórsbróðir* 'canon (clergyman)'; *partr* - *hlutr* 'part'; *dividera*, *partera* - *skipta* 'to divide'). This general research question entails more specific research items: investigating the semantic typology of the elicited word pairs, exploring the strategies lying behind the enrichment of the native lexicon, determining the provenance of loanwords and thus the cultural influences which the Icelandic society has undergone. Not least, the project takes also into consideration the manuscript tradition of each researched text and examines textual variation with reference to the phenomenon under research. The methodology used throughout the project is threefold, as it is rooted in philology, loanword studies and etymology.

In this paper, I will present a preliminary version of the project's main findings. Special attention will be on the strategies which lay behind the phenomenon, i.e. the relationship existing between loanwords and their native synonyms from a lexico-historical point of view. A conjecture is made on the relationship holding between typology of loans (prestige vs. necessity) and relative native synonym.