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# Loanwords with the prefix *be-* in Modern Icelandic:

## An example of halted borrowing

### 1 Introduction

It is well known that almost no words with the weakly stressed prefix *be-* are to be found in use in Modern Icelandic, that is, words corresponding for example to Danish *betale* vb. ‘pay’, *behov* n. ‘need’.<sup>1</sup> Such words are, however, very widespread in the Mainland Scandinavian languages, Danish, Swedish and Norwegian, and form an important part of their lexicon. Even Faroese has had its share, albeit a considerably more modest one. This word-type became common in the Mainland Scandinavian languages from the fourteenth century on, mainly through borrowing from Middle Low German and High German, and also partly by means of internal productive word formation.

We do not, however, need to search long in the Icelandic texts of earlier centuries before words of this type do appear. Thus, a quick glance at the word lists accessible on the homepage of the University Dictionary in Reykjavík (Orðabók Háskólans, hereafter OH) reveals

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<sup>1</sup> The study presented in this article is a part of a larger project with participants from Iceland, Sweden and Belgium, “Language Change and Linguistic Variation in 19th-Century Icelandic and the Emergence of a National Standard”. A preliminary version of the article was presented as a paper at ICHL21 in Oslo 2013. I wish to thank the peer reviewers for their valuable comments on that as well as the current version.

almost 300 different lexemes excerpted from Icelandic texts from the sixteenth century till the twentieth century. The absence of such words from Modern Icelandic today may, then, seem a little puzzling, but the most probable explanation — an explanation that one would take for granted *a priori* — is that they were “cleaned away” in the language purification of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>2</sup> Words of this kind certainly did find their way into the language and did exist there for some centuries; and then they vanished almost completely. This makes them an interesting example of a halted process of borrowing that was very successful in the neighbouring languages (Danish, Norwegian and Swedish), and apparently well underway in Icelandic, but that in the end still came to naught. Parallels, albeit less comprehensive and systematic, are well known with respect to various other loanwords in Icelandic in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; they disappeared into thin air due to language purification. Various Post-Reformation morphological innovations in Icelandic, which had become general, were also suppressed (Kjartan Ottósson 1987; 1990:70–72), and even a fundamental change in the pronunciation of vowels was reversed in the twentieth century (see e.g. Jahr 1989:105–108).

In this article, I intend to look more closely at this group of words in Icelandic, their history and their fate. The structure of the article is as follows. Chapter 2 begins with a remark about the different, and language specific, appearance of the prefix *be-* in Icelandic as either ‘*be-*’ or ‘*bí-*’. In subsection 2.1, the historical distribution of *be-/bí-* words in Icelandic is discussed, while in subsection 2.2, I proceed to discuss words of this type in Modern Icelandic. Subsection 2.3 deals with attitudes towards loanwords with the suffix; there is a brief discussion on the Scandinavian languages and Faroese, followed by a more thorough one about the Icelandic situation. Chapter 3, building on the previous chapter, discusses such words in a corpus of 1,640 nineteenth-century Icelandic private letters, with some comparison to another corpus of magazines and periodicals from the same century. Finally, the results are briefly discussed in Chapter 4.

<sup>2</sup> The best historical overview of Icelandic language policy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is to be found in Kjartan G. Ottósson (1990). For overviews in English, see e.g. Ari Páll Kristinsson (2012); Kristján Árnason (2003), who has a more general survey of language policy through the centuries, with a short overview of more recent times on pp. 273–275; and Stefán Karlsson (2004), who has a fairly good, but short, overview of purism and language cultivation, esp. on pp. 36–38.

## 2 *be-/bí-*words in Icelandic

Before going further, a comment must be made with respect to the appearance of the prefix in Icelandic.

In Icelandic, the prefix<sup>3</sup> in question, etymologically German *be-*, has two variants, phonologically surfacing as either /be:/ or /bi:/, in writing *be-* and *bí-*, respectively. Unlike Danish and German, where the prefix is weakly stressed, both the Icelandic variants carry the main stress, in accordance with the mandatory rule for stress on first syllable in Icelandic words. There may have been some awareness about the accent pattern in Danish (German) in recent centuries, and the *be-* variant can occasionally, for rhythmic purposes, be assigned weak stress in Icelandic poetry. Examples that seem to confirm this are to be found in various texts, and some of these examples have been excerpted for the citation-slip collection of OH. Examples that show mandatory stress on the first syllable of the *be-* words in question are, though, much more usual. There are also many examples to be found in poetry of other prefixes (even native Icelandic ones) with weak stress used for rhythmic purposes, so weak-stressed examples of *be-* words in Icelandic poetry cannot be used as a reliable evidence of real-language stress patterns.

The variant *bí-* coincides, both with respect to stress and pronunciation, with the etymologically unrelated stressed prefix Danish *bi-*, which is from (Low/High) German *bī-*, *bei-*. This can lead to homonyms in Icelandic, such as Icel. *bileggja*<sub>1</sub> 'besiege' = Dan. *be'lægge* and Icel. *bileggja*<sub>2</sub> 'settle' = Dan. *bilægge*. This complete overlap between the Icelandic variant *bí-* and the Danish/German prefix *bi-* makes it more or less impossible for Icelanders to distinguish between the two (Icel. *bí-* < Dan./Germ. *be-* or *bi-*). The second prefix (Dan./Germ. *bi-*) has also entered Icelandic in loanwords from Danish (some 30 words in total), albeit to a much lesser extent than the first one (Dan./Germ. *be-*). In the present study, only original *be-* words have been included.

Around 12–14% of lexemes with the originally weakly stressed prefix registered in the OH collections are doublets with *be-/bí-*, and usually there is no (evident) difference in meaning between the words in such a doublet. For example, the verbs *bedrifa* and *bídrifa* are re-

<sup>3</sup> It would probably be more appropriate to label this segment, which etymologically speaking is not native to Icelandic, something other than 'prefix' (maybe *pre-formative?*), since it can neither be regarded as an active prefix nor a true productive morpheme in the language, in the usual sense of *morpheme*.

corded, both meaning ‘carry out’. The reasons for the different manifestation of the prefix seem to be partly phonological/orthographic (cf. Veturliði Óskarsson 2003:196 f.), and partly dependent on when the word was imported (cf. *Figure 1*, below). Knowledge of the word accent of Danish (or German) words beginning with *bi-* (Germ. *bī-*), which coincides with the Icelandic accent pattern, **may** also in some instances have played a role and led to a lack of ability to keep *be-* and *bī-* words apart.

In what follows, Icelandic words with either of these variants of the prefix will be labelled ‘*be-/bī-* words’.

## 2.1 Historical distribution of *be-/bī-* words in Icelandic

As stated above, a little fewer than 300 different lexemes with the Danish/German prefix *be-* are listed in the collections of OH, lemmatized as *be-* or *bī-* words. In all, 284 lexemes have been included in the present study. Many of the registered words are derivatives or compounds with the same root or stem (e.g. *\*befal-* as in *befala* vb. and *befaling* f.). Thus, the number of different word stems is quite a bit smaller, no more than around 100. (Here, the term “word stem” is defined somewhat freely as the base stem found in the primary source languages Middle Low German and High German, rarely Dutch.) OH covers Modern and Early Modern Icelandic vocabulary from 1540 on. Almost all Icelandic printed matter until the nineteenth century, and much from the twentieth century, has been excerpted, resulting in about 2.5 million excerpts of nearly 700 thousand lexemes in total. OH’s citations indicate that *be-/bī-* words are predominantly to be found in official texts of different kinds. Judging by how few examples have been excerpted of such interesting lexemes as the *be-/bī-* words (very often only a single occurrence), they seem to have been relatively infrequent.

Some of the words are already to be found in Icelandic deeds and charters from the 15th century, just about the only original text genre of that period. The first examples show up as early as around 1400: the verb *bihaga* ‘please, appeal to’ in a text from around 1400, the adjective *beryktaðr* ‘notorious’, also from c. 1400, and the verb *befala* ‘command’ in a text from 1419 (cf. Veturliði Óskarsson 2003).

*Figure 1* shows the historical distribution of first (oldest) examples of the 284 words in question.

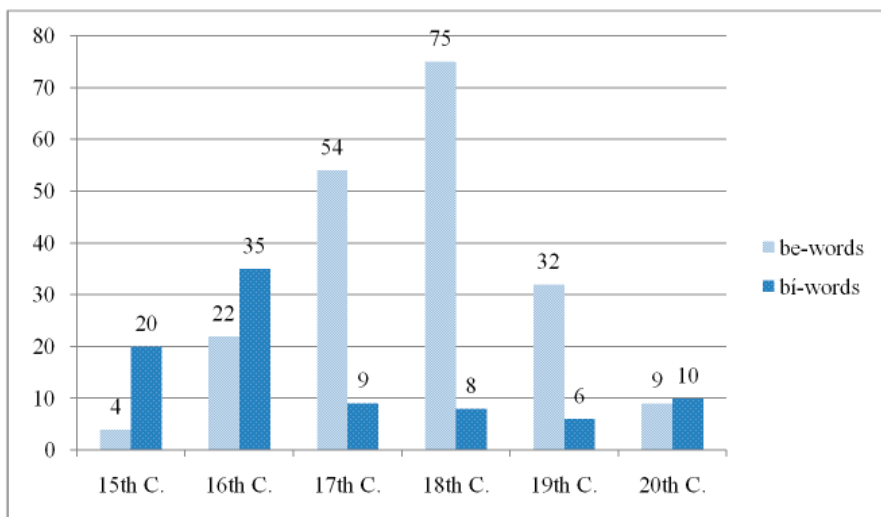


Figure 1. Chronological distribution of the first examples of *be-/bí-*words in Icelandic.

Included are some past participles of verbs, listed in OH as full entries (as adjectives), and some variant forms that would, in an edited historical dictionary, probably be treated under one and the same lemma, such as those words in (1) that appear with both prefix variants, *be-* and *bí-*, and with no (or no apparent) semantic differences:

- (1) *bedrifa* and *bídrifa* vb. 'carry out' (Dan. *bedrive*), *befala* and *bífala* vb. 'order, command' (Dan. *befale*), *befaling* and *bífaling* f. 'command' (Dan. *befaling*), *befatta* and *bífatta* vb. 'deal with; engage in' (Dan. *befatte*), *begera* and *bígera* vb. 'request' (Dan. *begære*), *behaga* and *bíhaga* vb. 'please' (Dan. *behage*), *behalda* and *bíhalda* vb. 'keep' (Dan. *beholde*), *beskuldning* and *beskyldning* f. 'accusation' (Dan. *beskyldning*), *betjentur* and *béptjentur* m. 'officer' (Dan. *betjent*).

Only rarely do such doublets appear simultaneously in the texts for the first time, and what is important is that in Figure 1 we see a steady growth of new words from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, with a culmination in the eighteenth century. We see then a drastic fall in the nineteenth century with slightly fewer than 40 new lexemes, which is significantly fewer new words than in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and less than half the number of new *be-/bí-*words that entered the language in the century before. (Some of the new words in the nineteenth century are compounds or deriva-

tions to word stems that were already in the language.) Written forms with the prefix variant *bí-* (<bi>, <bij>, <by> etc.) seem to be more common in the early centuries, while *be-*forms gradually become most common, probably due to increased knowledge of, and contact with, Danish, especially Danish written texts.

The nineteenth-century words are those in (2) (the translations are approximate):

- (2) *bebrillaður* adj. 'bespectacled', *bebúa* vb. 'inhabit', *bedraga* vb. 'deceive', *bedragari* m. 'fraudster', *bedrift* f. 'achievement', *befinna sig* vb. 'find oneself [offended, etc.]', *begrípa* vb. 'understand', *behagelegur* adj. 'comfortable', *behandla* vb. 'treat', *beklagelegur* adj. 'regrettable', *bekleðning* f. 'clothing', *bekostnaður* m. 'expense', *belasta* vb. 'load (a ship)', *belærður* adj. 'educated', *bemerkning* f. 'remark', *bereiddur* adj. 'prepared', *berömtur* adj. 'famous', *besetning* f. 'ornament (on garments)', *bestemma* vb. 'determine', *bestikkstafla* f. 'chart-room table', *besvara* vb. 'reply', *betalingsfrestur* m. 'deadline for payment', *betalingsheimta* f. 'collection of payment', *betalingsleysi* n. 'nonpayment', *betalingsmáti* m. 'method of payment', *beteinkning* f. 'consideration', *betrekk* n. 'upholstery', *betrekkja* vb. 'upholster', *bevertning* f. 'pub', *bevitna* vb. 'certify', *bevisunarskjal* n. 'letter of evidence', *bepéning* f. 'domestic servants', *bífatta* vb. 'meddle', *bíræðni* f. 'insolence', *bíræfinn* adj. 'impudent, adventurous, foolhardy', *bíræfni* f. 'foolhardiness', *bíræfnislegur* adj. 'foolhardy', *bisperrtur* adj. 'bolt upright'.<sup>4</sup>

Fully reliable examples of new, nineteenth-century words are, however, fewer than what this might suggest. Indeed, as far as we know, eleven out of these 38 words from OH's collections (*bedraga*, *bedrift*, *befinna*, *behagelegur*, *behandla*, *belasta*, *belærður*, *bemerkning*, *berömtur*, *besvara*, *bevitna*) only appear in one book (Þorlákur Ó. Johnson 1879), a satirical novel mocking the Danish-influenced merchants of Reykjavík. Therefore, it is not a particularly reliable source.

It should also be pointed out that seven out of the nineteen *be-/bí-*words that first appear in twentieth-century texts are from historical novels: *bífalingsmaður* m. 'officer' (a *be-*variant is attested in 1570), *bedrag* n. 'deception', *bikening* f. 'confession', *bemerkja* vb. 'note', *biskera* vb. 'crop, cut' and *bískorinn* past part. (adj.), and *bepenkilegur* adj. 'criti-

<sup>4</sup> *Bisperrtur* and the verb *bisperrast* (in list (4) below) may not be loanwords; see 2.2 below.

cal'. Two words are from sailor language, *bestikhús* n. and *bestikkskoja* f. 'chart room'; and *bíræður* adj. 'daring, impudent' is probably a combination of two older words, *bíræfinn* and *bíræðinn*. Interestingly enough, the twentieth-century words *beffjötra*, *biglenntur*, *bíhlæjandi*, *bíleggirí*, *bíloka* and *bípræta* (discussed in more detail in 2.2 below) are probably native Icelandic coinages, and OH only has examples of them from spoken language (one example of each) – which indicates a certain productivity in word-formation, and might also indicate a greater frequency of *be-/bí-* than what is otherwise to be concluded from the present data. The only really new loanword with *be-* in the twentieth century seems to be *behollari* (*beholdari*) 'container', first attested in a text correcting some "language defects" (Jón Jónasson 1914).<sup>5</sup>

To put things in a wider context, it can be useful to look at a few Icelandic dictionaries from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, and the *be-/bí-*words included in them, either as full dictionary entries or as used in translations and comments:

In an Icelandic-Latin dictionary from 1683, finished by its author before 1654 (Guðmundur Andrésson 1683/1999), there are four *be-/bí-*words among the dictionary entries (or secondary entries): the verbs *befala*, *betala*, *bíklína* and the adjective *bíræfinn*. Of these, *befala* 'command' is said to be the modern equivalent of older *fela* in this same meaning ("Eg fel / *Commendo* ['I command'], hodie ['today'] Befel / ad befala ['to command'] / *Veteribus* ['old'] fela ..." 1683/1999:45). *Bíræfinn* 'foolhardy' is said to be a vulgar and corrupted form of *bifrænn* ("**Bifrænn** / vulgo & corrupte **byræfin**: *petulans*", p. 19), although in fact *bíræfinn* is from Danish (< Old Danish *beræven*) and *bifrænn* is probably a native Icelandic transformation of that word. The small number of such words in the dictionary may indicate that they were not very common, or at least that the author did not consider that they needed clarification.

In a Latin-Icelandic dictionary from 1738 (Jón Árnason 1738/1994), twenty-two *be-/bí-*words, belonging to ten word-stems, are used in Icelandic explanations of various Latin words (the translations are approximate):

<sup>5</sup> Besides these are the compound words *betrekkspappír* m. 'wallpaper-paper' (1904, 1905) and *begráfelsiskeina* 'fried pastry served at funerals' (example from spoken language, dated to c. 1980; temporary coinage?), but the word stems, *betrekk* n. and *begráfelsi* n., are from the nineteenth and the seventeenth centuries, respectively.

- (3) *befala* vb. ‘command’, *befaling/befalning* f. ‘command’, *befalingsbréf* n. ‘written order’, *befalingsmaður* m. ‘officer’, *begáfa* vb. ‘grant, give’, *begáfaður* adj./past part. ‘provided (with sth)’, *begering* f. ‘request’, *besetinn* adj./past part. ‘bewitched’, *besetning* f. ‘being possessed (by an evil spirit)’, *bestilla* vb. ‘do, work’, *bestilling* ‘work’ (among other meanings), *betala* vb. ‘pay’, *betalaður* adj./past part. ‘paid’, *betalingstími* m. ‘payment time’, *betalingur* m. ‘payment’, *bevара* vb. ‘preserve’, *bevísа* vb. ‘demonstrate’, *bevísаður* adj./past part. ‘proven’, *bevising* f. ‘evidence’, *bíhalda* vb. ‘keep’, and *bíklínast* vb. ‘soil, become dirty’.

These words are used in total about 110–120 times (some more often than others, *betala* for example about 25 times, *betalingur* and *bevísа* about 15 times each, *befala* at least eight times), so they seem to have been a part of the author/translator<sup>6</sup> Bishop Jón Árnason’s (1665–1743) active lexicon.

In Björn Halldórsson’s (1724–1794) Icelandic-Latin-Danish dictionary from 1814 (Björn Halldórsson 1814/1992), probably finished by its author in 1785, only one *be-/bí-*word is found as a dictionary entry, *bíræfínn* (*bifræfínn*, *bifræfr*, *bifrænn*, p. 69 in the 1992 edition). The author’s brother-in-law was Eggert Ólafsson (see further below), “an outstanding figure in the history of Iceland’s fight to preserve and revivify its language, culture, and economy” (*Encyclopædia Britannica*), at whose home Björn stayed for several years in the 1760s. It is very likely that the almost complete absence of *be-/bí-*words in the dictionary reflects this.

In Gunnlaugur Oddsson’s Danish-Icelandic dictionary from 1819 (Gunnlaugur Oddsson 1819/1991), containing “rare, exotic and difficult words occurring in Danish books” (transl. from the Icelandic title), not a single *be-/bí-*word seems to be used in the Icelandic explanations, according to a word-list in the 1991 edition. The dictionary contains, on the other hand, around 100 Danish *be-*words which the author has deemed necessary to explain for Icelandic users.

Lastly, during a cursory perusal of Konráð Gíslason’s large Danish-Icelandic dictionary from the middle of the nineteenth century (Konráð Gíslason 1851), no *be-/bí-*words have been found in the Icelandic translations.

<sup>6</sup> See Guðrún Kvaran (2012:31–34) on the differences between the dictionary and its Danish model.



## 2.2 *be-/bí-*words in Modern Icelandic

Today, words with the prefix-doublet *be-/bí-* are next to unknown to the Icelandic public, and even if Modern Icelandic dictionaries list some twenty words, they are practically unusable, both in daily language and in more formal texts. The main dictionary of Modern Icelandic, *Íslensk orðabók*, 3rd edition from 2002, has the following ones:<sup>7</sup>

- (4) *bekenna/bíkenna* vb. 'suit, follow (in card games)', *bestikk* n. 'chart room', *betrekk* n. 'wallpaper', *betrekkja* vb. 'cover with wallpaper', *bevis* n. 'proof', *bevís* vb. 'prove', *bevising* f. 'proof', *befala/bífala* vb. 'order, command', *bífal(n)ing(ur)* f./m. 'command', *bífalningsmaður* m. 'sheriff', *bíleggja* vb. 'besiege', *bíræfnn* adj. 'daring, impudent', *bíræfni* f. 'foolhardiness', *bísperrast* vb. 'boast of sth', *bísperrtur* adj. 'self-assured, proud', *betala/bítala* vb. 'pay', *betal(n)-ing(ur)/bítal(n)ing(ur)* f./m. 'payment'.

Danish equivalents to the words in (4) are the following: *bekende*, *bestik*, *betræk*, *betrække*, *bevis*, *bevise*, *bevisning*, *befale*, *befalning*, *befalningsmand*, *belægge*, *beræven* (Old Danish), *bespærret* (so according to Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, but see comment below), *betale*, *betalning*. (It is somewhat suspicious that the word *bíræfnn* is first attested in Icelandic in the nineteenth century; the word is not part of Modern Danish and it is not mentioned in the Danish Historical Dictionary, covering the period 1700–1950, but is to be found in Danish texts from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, according to *Gammeldansk Ordbog* and the Old Danish Dictionary of Otto Kalkar, 1881–1918, vol. 1, p. 162.)

For comparison, only one of these words, *bísperrtur*, is listed in the most recent Icelandic-English dictionary (Sverrir Hólmarsson et al. 2009; the word was not in the first edition in 1989). No other *be-/bí-*words are in the dictionary. The same goes for other printed bilingual Icelandic dictionaries that have been consulted; *bísperrtur*, *bíræfnn* and *bíræfni* are occasionally included but not other *be-/bí-*words. In the web based dictionary *ISLEX*, *betrekk*, *betrekkja*, *bevis*, *bíræfnn*, *bíræfni* and *bísperrtur* are to be found, with translations into Danish,

<sup>7</sup> A few words have been left out here, words that etymologically do not belong to this group, even if they look alike, e.g. *bíleggjari* m. from Dan. *bilægger*, Germ. *bilegger* (stressed prefix, Germ. *bī-*) 'jamb stove, stove fed from another room', and *bígerð* f. (sth is in *bígerð* = sth is 'being planned') which is, according to Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon (1989), some sort of an adaptation of Dan. *gære*, Old Danish *gerd(e)* 'fermentation', cf. *der er noget i gære* 'sth is in the pipeline'.

Swedish and Norwegian, *bevis* marked as “historical”. And just to take an example, the present author, whose mother-tongue is Icelandic, can only use five of the *be-/bí-*words listed in *Íslensk orðabók* 2002, that is, the couple *bíræfinn* and *bíræfni* and the couple *betrekk* and *betrekkja*, the last two, however, sounding somewhat old fashioned in the present author’s ears; and finally *bísperrtur* which may not be a loanword after all, see below.

In the 2002 edition of *Íslensk orðabók*, the *be-/bí-*words are in most cases marked as old or obsolete; and in older twentieth-century Icelandic dictionaries (e.g. Jón Ólafsson 1912–1915; Sigfús Blöndal (ed.) 1920–1924; *Íslensk orðabók* 1983) they are marked with question marks or comments such as “bad language”.



This group of words did not acquire the role of a model for native word formation in Icelandic, as it did in the Mainland Scandinavian Languages. There are, however, a handful of Icelandic words to be found with *be-*, or, more often, *bí-*, that have no recognized foreign models, as was briefly mentioned above. These are the adjectives *bí-bölvaður* ‘damned’ (or better: ‘highly damned’) 18<sup>th</sup> C.,<sup>8</sup> *bíflenntur* ‘wide open’ 18<sup>th</sup> C., *bíglenntur* (*maður*) adj. ‘fop, dandy’ 20<sup>th</sup> C., *bíhlæjandi* adj./pres.part. ‘broadly smiling’ 20<sup>th</sup> C., and *bímóðigur*, *bímóðugur* ‘arrogant’ 17<sup>th</sup> C.; the nouns *beskyn* n. ‘understanding’ 18<sup>th</sup> C. and *bíleggiri* n. ‘laziness’ 20<sup>th</sup> C. (a possible model may, however, be found in Dan. *belægge* ‘put a burden on somebody’); the verbs *befjötra* ‘tie, bind’ 20<sup>th</sup> C. (cf. Kristín Bjarnadóttir 2005:146), *bíloka* vb. 20<sup>th</sup> C. ‘stop, stay for a while’, *bískæla* ‘pull faces’ (and past part. *bískældur* ‘deformed’) 18<sup>th</sup> C., and *bípræta* vb. ‘quibble, protest strongly’ 20<sup>th</sup> C. The noun *bedemi* n. ‘wretch, weakling, scoundrel’ 19<sup>th</sup> C. shares both connotations and formal resemblance with these words, even if it is probably, together with its parallel form *dúdemi* n. 19<sup>th</sup> C., a transformation of the word *ódæmi* (*óðemi*) n. ‘sth exceptional’ (the prefix *ó-* can both have a negating and a strengthening function).

The function and meaning of the prefix in these new words seems always to be strengthening or degrading/negative, and even if the words are few, and registered examples not many, they may very well indicate the beginning of a (subtle) trend — later reversed — to-

<sup>8</sup> Most of these words only occur once in the sources; the dating is of the oldest example.

wards a productive, indigenous word formation with *be-/bí-* as a true prefix. Apart from the aforementioned words, the loanwords *bískitinn* ‘very dirty’ 18<sup>th</sup> C. (cf. Dan. *beskidt*; Middle Low Germ. *beschiten*) and *bínefna* ‘call names’ 20<sup>th</sup> C., *bínafn*, *bínefni* ‘nickname’ (cf. Dan. *binavn*, Germ. *Beiname*) 18<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> C. have clear degrading/negative meanings and may have supported this trend.

With this in mind, I would finally like to draw attention to the adjective *bísperrtur* ‘self-assured’ which in Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon’s (1989) etymological dictionary is held to be a probable loanword from Danish *bespærret* ‘bent back’ (“spenntur aftur”). The Danish Historical Dictionary (*Ordbog over det Danske Sprog*), however, renders the Danish word as ‘closed’ (“lukket”) and the Middle Low German source, *besperen*, also means ‘close’ (“aflukke”), which does not correspond to the meaning of the Icelandic word at all. In Icelandic, there is the verb *sperra* ‘stretch’, *sperra sig* ‘puff oneself up; stick one’s nose in the air; be haughty’ and the corresponding adjective/past part. *sperrtur* ‘snotty; self-assured’, and I find it much more probable that *bísperrtur* (and, consequently, also the verb *bísperrast* ‘boast’) is a native Icelandic coinage where *bí-* is used in the aforementioned strengthening function.

### 2.3 *be-/bí-*words and language policy

Loanwords with the prefix *be-/bí-* have, probably without exception,<sup>9</sup> made their way into Icelandic through Danish, and they have sometimes been portrayed as the ultimate examples of “corrupting Danish influence” on the Icelandic language (see Sigurður Nordal 1926, Guðmundur Finnbogason 1932 and Vilmundur Jónson 1955, cited below).

Opposition to words of this type has by no means only been an Icelandic matter of interest, and to some extent we have clearer information and knowledge about the struggle against them in neighbouring languages. Norwegian language purists’ war on words with the German/Danish affixes *an-*, *be-*, *-heit* and *-else* (sometimes referred to with the acronym “anbeheitelse”-words) is well known; such words have been associated with Norwegian *bokmål* (‘literary language’) and Danish (Akselberg 1999; cf. Haugen 1968:123; Brunstad 2002:13; Brunstad 2003:11). Ever since the nineteenth century, there has also been considerable resistance to *be*-words in Faroese; no fewer than

<sup>9</sup> Cf., though, the discussion above on some possible native Icelandic innovations or neologisms.

33 such words are to be found in J.C. Svabo's Faroese dictionary from 1770 (in ms., first published 1966), while only seven words are included in the first printed Faroese dictionary from 1891. The use of five of these words is discouraged with better native words being suggested (Simonsen 2002:83; Hansen, Jacobsen & Weyhe 2003:170–171). However, neither in Norwegian nor in Faroese has this antipathy towards *be-/bi-*words resulted in their near elimination in the same way as has happened in Icelandic, even if opposition to them is still present, both in Norwegian and Faroese, albeit less dominantly than earlier. Thus, at least 44 *be-*words are included in the Danish-Faroese dictionary from 1995 (Petersen & Staksberg 1995), which builds on a "liberal descriptive approach and lists many words which are regularly heard in spoken Faroese" (Hansen, Jacobsen & Weyhe 2003:170–171). Simonsen (2002:87) points out, however, that numerous everyday words have still been excluded from the book, and that the monolingual Faroese dictionary from 1998 (Poulsen et al. 1998) contains only 12 *be-*words (Simonsen 2002:88).

Also in Denmark, there has historically been some occasional resistance to German loanwords with *be-*, both in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, albeit mostly insignificant opposition and much more peripheral than in the aforementioned Scandinavian languages, and often only practised by a few language purists without resulting in any widespread dissemination.<sup>10</sup>

In Sweden, Viktor Rydberg (1828–1895), one of the country's most important authors in the nineteenth century, was a dedicated opponent of German loanwords, especially words with German affixes. Thus, in his essay "Tysk eller nordisk svenska" from 1873 (Rydberg 1910), he devotes 18 pages solely to the prefix *be-* (pp. 329–347). And as recently as in the late twentieth century, the Swedish linguist Björn Collinder (1894–1983) published a popular dictionary in which he proposes many replacements for words with the prefix *be-* (Collinder 1975:36–38).

The earliest signs of an Icelandic dislike of words of this type are to be found in the middle of the eighteenth century. This is echoed in judge Sveinn Sölvason's (1722–1782) justification for using a number of loanwords of Danish origin, such as *bevísing*, *betaling* and other

<sup>10</sup> For anti-German linguistic attitudes in Denmark in the 1940s, see Jacobsen (1973:55 ff.); on *be-*words, pp. 72–76 (with endnote 51, p. 196). Cf. also Hansen & Lund (1994:126) for a short comment about opposition to the German prefixes *an-*, *be-*, *er-* and *ge-* in a Danish dictionary from 1875.

“barbarismos in Lingua Patria”, as he calls them, in his book of Icelandic law, *Tyro Juris*, from 1754. In the preface, he defends himself against possible criticism by drawing attention to this fact. Thus, if someone wants to criticize his use of loanwords, then he is willing to respond to that critic, citing the Roman rhetorician Marcus Quintilianus that “to adhere to what is not used anymore is arrogant and a foolish boasting”.<sup>11</sup> By that he refers to “a few men who cling so firmly to their antiquities that they can hardly write a private letter without making one think that their style was that of Ari the Learned or Snorri Sturluson rather than of men who live in the eighteenth century” (Halldór Hermannsson 1919:17, his translation of Sveinn Sölvason’s Icelandic text). These “few men” are without doubt young Icelandic intellectuals, fresh from their education in Copenhagen, not least the aforementioned Eggert Ólafsson (1726–1768), the earliest representative of the Enlightenment in Iceland<sup>12</sup> and also a strong advocate of archaisms and language purism (Halldór Hermannsson 1919:17 ff.; Árni Böðvarsson 1964:195; Kjartan G. Ottósson 1990:34 ff.).

A few years after the publication of Sveinn Sölvason’s book, the Icelandic scholar Jón Ólafsson úr Grunnavík (1707–1779), who lived and worked in Copenhagen from 1726, criticized words with *be-*, as well as many other young loanwords from Danish, in an essay on a poem by his friend Eggert Ólafsson about the Icelandic language and its condition. In the essay, written in 1759, Jón Ólafsson takes the verbs *begjöra* ‘request’, *behaga* ‘please’, and *beskrifa* ‘write down’, among other unrelated words, as examples of corrupted language used by Icelandic law officers (most likely Sveinn Sölvason, among others) – and mocks them by insinuating that they would (in their foolishness, we must assume) use the word-form *begjóra* instead of *be-gera*, that would have been the proper Icelandification of Dan. *begære* (Jón Ólafsson úr Grunnavík 1998:150–151). Dan. *begjøre* (*begøre*) is, in fact, of a completely different origin, probably a native Danish coinage, and means ‘soil, smear with one’s own excrement!’ (cf. *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog* and *Moths Ordbog*).

<sup>11</sup> Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (c. 35–c. 100 A.D.): “Abolita & abrogata retinere, insolentiae cujusdam est, & frivolae in parvis jactantiae” (Sveinn Sölvason 1754:[20]). Sveinn Sölvason’s own words in his preface are best accessible in Árni Böðvarsson (1964:195) and Kjartan G. Ottósson (1990:33), and in Halldór Hermannsson’s rendering of them (1919:16–17).

<sup>12</sup> The influence of the Enlightenment in Iceland is usually said to have begun around or shortly after 1750, coming to fruition around 1770 (Ingi Sigurðsson 1990:293). Sveinn Sölvason was not among the promoters of the Enlightenment in Iceland.

Sveinn Sölvason, praised in an obituary for having been “not snobbish in his writings” (“eingi sundrgjörda madr í ritom sínom”) and sympathetic towards the language used by “sensible men” in his time (Jón Jónsson 1791:20–21),<sup>13</sup> has received many negative comments for his liberal approach, as well as for his style and language in general, beginning with Rasmus Chr. Rask in 1810 (Rask 1888:85, quoted in many works). Halldór Hermannsson (1919:22) even counted Sveinn Sölvason among men that “were willing to sacrifice their mother tongue”. The true fight against loanwords of Danish origin started in Iceland early in the nineteenth century with the romantic-nationalistic inspired struggle for independence, and reached its culmination around the middle of the century. It is a good sign of an established purist view, a century after the publishing of Sveinn Sölvason’s book, that in the introduction to a Latin grammar published in 1868, the authors, when they defend their Icelandic translations of terms and their use of Icelandic neologisms, take Sveinn Sölvason as an example of an author who understood the difficulties of finding and choosing native words when writing about something that has not been written about before in one’s mother tongue; but then they conclude, after printing Sveinn Sölvason’s justification: “Er þetta eigi *insolentia* og *frivola jactantia*?”, i.e. “isn’t this just arrogance and frivolous boasting?” (*Latnesk orðmyndunarfræði* 1868:VI–VII).

In the nineteenth century, stylistically ironical or sarcastic use of Danish words or Danish-sounding language was sometimes used to mock people, or the sort of people, who were prone to use Danish words, phrases, word order, etc. Examples of this are to be found as early as 1829 in the annual *Ármann á Alþingi* (1829–1832; see e.g. 1829:8). The first Icelandic novelist, Jón Thoroddsen, lets some of his characters, especially people from Reykjavík, mix their language — often somewhat absurdly — with Danicisms in his novels *Piltur og stúlka* (1850) and *Maður og kona* (posthumous, 1876), for example by using words such as *begrípa* ‘understand’, *bestemt* ‘definite’, *betala* ‘pay’, *behalda* ‘keep’, and *beþenkja* ‘consider’ (1850:90; 1876:274, 327, 329, 390, 391). Also, in a humorous dialogue in the fortnightly newspaper *Þjóðólfur* in April 1850 between the editor and his newspaper,<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The obituary was ordered by judge Sveinn Sölvason’s son (“... at Forlagi sonar Løgmansins”) and cannot be regarded as wholeheartedly objective.

<sup>14</sup> In April 1850 the newspaper was released under the title *Hljóðólfur* and printed in Copenhagen after the authorities had banned the printing of it in Iceland because it was going to publish articles about the national meeting to be held at Þing-

the personified newspaper uses a lot of Danicisms. And likewise, in a satirical novel by Þorlákur Ó. Johnson from 1879, the author lets one of his characters, a merchant in Reykjavík, use words such as *bedraga* 'deceive', *befala* 'command', *befundinn* (*að vera*) 'regarded (to be), reckoned', *belasta* 'load (a ship)', *bestriða* 'pay', and *besvara* 'answer' (1879:5, 11). It is of course hard to trust such examples, as they are used for stylistic and literary purposes. But they indicate at least that the writers looked upon the language in Reykjavík as being mixed with Danish, and that at least some *be*-words were to be found in it.

Criticism of *be*-words has, however, never been a regular or primary subject in Icelandic language purism discourse, as it became in Norway. Thus, the so-called *Fjölnismenn*, a radical group of young Icelandic intellectuals based in Copenhagen before the middle of the nineteenth century, hardly mention *be*-words at all in their periodical *Fjölnir* 1835–1847, in which they harshly criticized the language and style of several contemporary printed publications. Only one example has come to light: the noun *befalling* 'command' in a review from 1839, which is disapproved of with the native words *skipan* and *boð* being suggested instead (*Fjölnir* 5 1839, II:28). And *be-/bí*-words in Icelandic dictionaries are usually not commented upon, other than in some books being marked with question marks or other such markings (cf. above).

However, in the early twentieth century, in two articles from 1926 and 1932, words with this prefix do play an interesting role.

Foreign words have entered [the language] in groups and disappeared again, because the people felt that they did not fit the language. Now hardly anyone says *begrafelsi*, *bevís* and *begeera*, as was common a generation or two ago. People found that the German *be-* was not very appealing when it was used in a stressed syllable.<sup>15</sup> (Sigurður Nordal 1926:4; my translation.)

These are the words of the Icelandic scholar Sigurður Nordal (1886–1974), one of the most influential Icelandic philologists of the twenti-

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vellir, South Iceland, that summer. The editor/guarantor of the newspaper was Rev. Sveinbjörn Hallgrímsson, nephew of Sveinbjörn Egilsson, rector of the Latin school in Reykjavík, who had translated Homer into Icelandic.

<sup>15</sup> "Erlend orð hafa komið hópum saman og týnst niður aftur, af því að landanum þóttu þau fara illa í munn. Nú segir varla nokkur maður *begrafelsi*, *bevís* og *begeera*, sem var algengt mál fyrir 1–2 mannsöldrum. Menn hafa fundið, að *be-ið* þýska var ekki sem fallegast, þegar það var komið í áhersluatkvæði."

eth century, professor from 1918. They are taken from an article, very characteristic of the period and often cited — and reprinted at least four times (cf. Baldur Jónsson (ed.) 2006:264) —, about the Icelandic language, its superiority and uniqueness. The word *begrafelsi* means ‘funeral’, *bevis* means ‘proof’ and *begera* is ‘request’, the same as the corresponding Danish words *begravelse*, *bevis* and *begære*.

Six years later, another professor at the University of Iceland, psychology professor Guðmundur Finnbogason (1873–1944), said substantially the same in a polemical article that was a riposte to an article by another, younger and more liberal scholar, Sigurður Skúla-son (1903–1987), a teacher at the Technical College in Reykjavík, who had criticized the Icelandic neologism policy or *nýyrðastefna* that was gaining firm ground in the country at the time. The latter lists in his article the word *bestik* n. ‘chart room’ (Dan. *bestik* < Dutch *bestek*, Germ. *Besteck*) beside a handful of other loanwords which he considers to have gained full acceptance in Icelandic, *bíll* ‘car’, *bitter* ‘bitter (brandy)’, *kitti* ‘putty’, *kakao* ‘cocoa’, *súkkulaði* ‘chocolate’, *saft* ‘juice’ and *píanó* ‘piano’, and prefers *bestik* to the (admittedly awkward) neologism *teiknigerðar* (f.pl.) ‘graphic utensils’ (Sigurður Skúla-son 1932:2). Professor Guðmundur Finnbogason responds to this article in the same newspaper two days later, dwelling on the word *bestik* in particular and concluding:

Icelandic has always, except in the time of its worst humiliation, spitted out each word that starts with the prefix *be-*, and now no such word is alive in the language except for *besefti*, which has remained alive for special reasons. Those who smack their lips over such words are certainly not fussy about their food.<sup>16</sup> (Guðmundur Finnbogason 1932:2; my translation.)

The only word Guðmundur Finnbogason takes up in his criticism, *besefti*, has however nothing at all to do with words with the prefix *be-*. It is an Icelandification of Danish *besyv* (< *bøs syv*) from Germ. *die böse Sieben* ‘the bad seven’, used in the card game *styrvolt* (the game is mentioned in Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson’s (1772) description of their travels through Iceland in the middle of the eighteenth cen-

<sup>16</sup> “[...] íslenskan hefir alla tíð nema á versta niðurlægingartíma sínum skirpt út úr sér hverju orði sem byrjar á forskeytinu *be-* og nú er ekkert þeirra lifandi í málinu, nema *besefti*, sem mun hafa haldist af sérstökum ástæðum. Þeir, sem smjalsa á slíkum orðum, eru vissulega ekki matvandar.”



tury, Vol. 1, p. 50). It has also another meaning in Icelandic, wholly native, which Guðmundur Finnbogason coyly hints at with the words “special reasons”, namely ‘*membrum virile*’.

More examples of twentieth-century criticism against words of this kind can be found; a well-known one is in a satirical article from 1955 by the chief medical officer for Iceland, Dr. Vilmundur Jónsson (1889–1972), where he, mockingly, recommends the words *begrip* ‘concept’, *beskyn* ‘understanding’ and *bevis* ‘proof’ (Dan. *begreb*, *skøn*, *bevis*) instead of native Icelandic words (Vilmundur Jónsson 1955:6). Interestingly, Icel. *begrip* is nowhere to be found in available sources (cf. OH’s collections, and *timarit.is*), even if the corresponding verb *begrípa* ‘understand’ occurs once in a text from the early nineteenth century (and a few times in novels from the mid- and late nineteenth century, used to mimic Danish slang); and the word *beskyn* has no direct Danish model at all.

According to the two professors, Sigurður Nordal and Guðmundur Finnbogason, both heavily engaged in language planning, words with this foreign prefix had more or less fallen out of use by around 1930, but they imply that at least some such words were common shortly before that. Their first remark, that such words were out of use, is fairly easy to check, both by looking for them in dictionaries and by comparing present-day Icelandic. The second statement, that the words had been common shortly before they wrote their texts, is maybe more problematic and would need a detailed investigation.

### 3 *be-/bí-*words in nineteenth century Icelandic

There is hardly much need to comment at length on why these words annoyed Icelandic language purists, or why they virtually disappeared from the language. The most plausible explanation is that such obvious loanwords fell prey to the language purification of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is a well-known fact that in the eyes of the Icelandic patriots of the 19th century, and the language purists of the following century, an uncorrupted and “clean” language, without younger loanwords, symbolized the state of the art before foreign kings gained control over Iceland in the thirteenth century and later. The loanwords were seen as the “dirt” that had contaminated the Icelandic language and symbolized the foreign influence that was important to fight against and eventually get rid of.

How exactly such words were eliminated is, on the other hand, a subject that needs further investigation and will not be dealt with here.

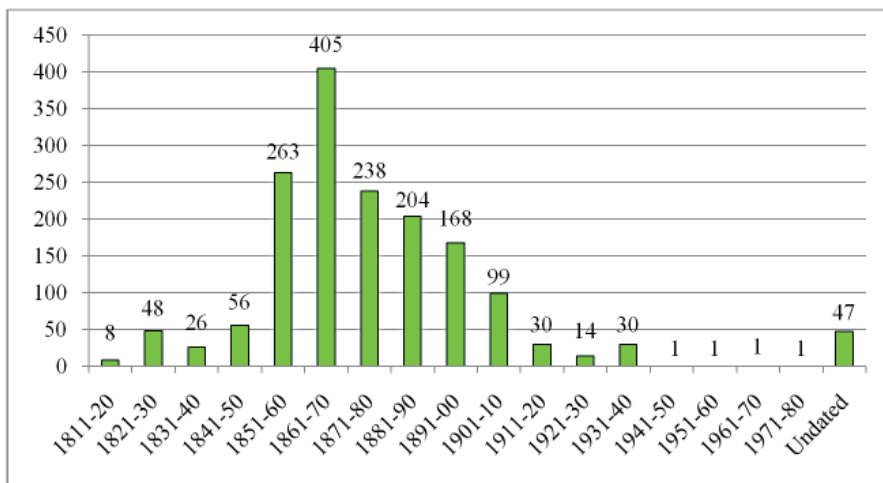
What I find more interesting at present is to get some picture of the usability of the *be-/bí-*words in the Icelandic speech community of the nineteenth century; which words were the ones that were common in that century, shortly before the two professors' statements? Who used them? What kind of language was criticized? Where were the *be-/bí-*words most prominent? — Or: Were they perhaps not at all usual in everyday language?

The fact that OH in Reykjavík lists almost 300 *be-* and *bí-* lexemes does not help much when such questions are asked. Behind these are only a little more than 1,000 excerpted examples, very often only one or two for each word, and this says, of course, nothing at all about the text frequency of such words. But what is interesting, all the same, is that between 30% and 40% of the excerpted examples are from official texts, charters, legal documents, formal letters from officials such as bishops and solicitors etc., and some 10% are from historical novels from the twentieth century. A substantial number of the excerpts are thus from texts that do not reflect the language and language-use of common people, and many of the remaining examples also belong to formal texts or to a higher register, rather than to everyday language.

Of course, lexicographers make use of those texts that are available, and official texts, charters, legal documents etc. constitute a bigger part of both the edited and the unedited Icelandic text material from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century than do everyday texts by common people. Nonetheless, the picture is rather clear: More than half of the examples are either from official texts or from twentieth-century historical novels, and that certainly does not suggest that the *be-/bí-*words were a part of everyday language.

In the project "Language Change and Linguistic Variation in 19th-Century Icelandic and the Emergence of a National Standard", in which the present author is participating, we have in addition to other material access to a fairly large collection of unpublished nineteenth-century private letters from common people (not necessarily people from the lower classes). In all there are 1,640 letters from 348 people (122 women and 226 men), containing somewhere around 916,000 running words (Haraldur Bernharðsson 2013, fact sheet, and private communication). Most of the letters are from c. 1820–1900 (in all 89%); some 11% (177 letters) were from the beginning of the twentieth century, from 1900 up and until 1937. A handful of letters are written later

than that. Half of the letters are written by the women, and half by the men. All the letter writers are born well before 1900 (Haraldur Bernharðsson & Jóhannes Gísli Jónsson 2012:3). The chronological distribution of the letters in the corpus is shown in *Figure 2*.



*Figure 2.* Chronological distribution of the letters in the corpus. (Cf. Haraldur Bernharðsson & Jóhannes Gísli Jónsson 2012:3.)

This corpus is the first and only one of its kind for nineteenth-century Icelandic. Through it the language of common people can be accessed better than has previously been possible. Of course, written language follows its own laws, both those which are in force when a spoken and/or mentally composed text is written down, as well as meta-linguistic rules of style and writing fashion; thus, written language alters and conceals many fundamental elements of spoken language. Private letters from people with little or no formal education, sent to relatives and friends, are, however, undoubtedly less subject to formal customs and norms than the written language of those who are accustomed to writing.

A search for occurrences of *be-* or *bí-* words in these letters reveals a total of 41 examples of eight words, 40 with the variant *be-* and one with the variant *bí-* (“bitalingin” m. acc. ‘the payment’). Moreover, one letter writer has once, in a short and rather formal letter to the dean of the church district, begun writing the verb *bítala* ‘pay’ but deletes it and writes instead the native Icelandic *greiða*, same meaning.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> “Skal jeg [þi] greiða þegar fundum okkar ber samann” ‘I shall pay next time we meet’ (13 June 1866, Vigfús Pétursson, a farmer in East Iceland, born c. 1829).

This may indicate that this person was aware that words of this kind were not acceptable, at least after the middle of the nineteenth century. However, it must be admitted that a single example in a fairly formal letter is not a particularly strong indication of such awareness.

words	ex.	year	writers
<i>befala</i> vb. 'command' (15/16 <sup>th</sup> C.)	3	1857–1868	2
<i>begera</i> vb. 'request' (16 <sup>th</sup> C.)	2	1842	1
<i>behalda</i> vb. 'keep' (15/17 <sup>th</sup> C.)	1	1860	1
<i>bestikk</i> n. 'chart room' (c. 1800)	1	1915	1
<i>bestilla</i> vb. 'engage; order' (17 <sup>th</sup> C.)	13	1821–1868	4
<i>betala</i> vb. 'pay' (15/17 <sup>th</sup> C.)	4	1829–1843	4
<i>betalingur</i> m. 'payment' (16 <sup>th</sup> C.)	10	1852–1864	5
<i>betrekkja</i> vb. 'wallpaper' (1860)	7	1874–1934	4

Table 1. The *be*-words in the letter corpus (the century of the earliest recorded example in Icelandic appears in brackets).

The words and examples in question are not particularly numerous; eight words and 41 examples, and only one word, the verb *betrekkja*, is first evidenced in the nineteenth century according to OH. Most of the other words are much older.

Interestingly, seven of the thirteen examples of the verb *bestilla* are from letters of one and the same writer (in fact five in one and the same letter); six of ten examples of *betalingur* are from letters by two writers (thereof one with the variant *bí-*); and four of the seven examples of *betrekkja* are from letters by one writer, in 1886–1887 (two are from letters from 1905 and 1934).

The examples of the verb *befala* are both included in the old letter greeting “*befala e-n Guði*” etc. ‘command sb. to God’.

Admittedly, 916,000 items is not a particularly huge corpus for lexicological investigation. However, these results are interesting in their own right and they support the conclusion that words of this type were not very common, or at least not central, in the vocabulary of common people in nineteenth-century Iceland.

This can be compared to another corpus. The digital library *timarit.is* at the National and University Library of Iceland contains at present almost 4.5 million pages from 810 magazines and periodicals, mostly Icelandic but also a few Faroese and Greenlandic ones. Even if this material cannot be said to be representative of common

language, newspapers and periodical texts can be regarded as being closer to the register of that language than most official texts, laws, religious texts and fiction are. A comparison with this database (the Icelandic part) does not indicate that the *be*-words found in the private letters were frequent in Icelandic periodicals and newspaper texts of the nineteenth century (up to the year 1900) either. In fact, some of the words occur even less frequently in this database than in the letters:

words	until 1900	(20 <sup>th</sup> and 21 <sup>st</sup> C.)
<i>befala</i>	18	(132)
<i>begeira</i>	0	(10)
<i>behalda</i>	5	(8)
<i>bestikk</i>	1	(45)
<i>bestilla</i>	2	(13)
<i>betala</i>	112	(481)
<i>be-/bítalingur</i>	13	(9)
<i>betrekkja</i>	16	(249)

Table 2. *Be*-words in the Icelandic part of the *timarit.is* database.

The number of examples from texts from the twentieth century is written in brackets; apart from examples of the verb *betrekkja*, these are very often from historical texts, reprinted or first printed in the twentieth century, so they do not say much about the actual use of the words in question.

The total collection of OH's nearly 300 *be-/bí*-lexemes has not yet been examined in the same way as was done here. Admittedly, the results of such an investigation might partly turn out to be different, and some of the lexemes might just be very common in newspaper texts of the nineteenth century; but preliminary findings do not suggest that it is very likely.

## 4 Discussion and conclusion

To summarize, words with the prefix *be-* (German weak stressed *be-*, Danish *be-*), surfacing in Icelandic as either *be-* or *bí-*, entered Icelandic successively in the period from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century (and even a few in the early twentieth century), with a culmination in the eighteenth century. The collections of the Icelandic University

Dictionary (OH) list almost 300 different lexemes. The main Icelandic dictionaries of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries do not suggest that such words were common; at least the editors of these dictionaries did not find it necessary to include such words, and they are not used, as far as can be surmised, in Icelandic explanations except in the Latin-Icelandic dictionary from 1738.

Such words did, however, enter the language and were a part of its lexicon for centuries, although they were not used particularly frequently. About 40 of the words registered in OH's collections did not appear in texts until the nineteenth century, which suggests that the borrowing process was still in progress in that century. In 1,640 private letters by common people of the nineteenth century, only eight *be-/bí-*words are, however, to be found, and only one of the 40 "new words" appears in the letters. A quick look at a text corpus with around 4.5 million pages, comprising nineteenth-century magazines and periodicals, does not indicate that these words were frequent in such texts either. A closer examination would be required to see the full picture, but the present study indicates that the often criticized *be-* and *bí-*words were not usual in the vocabulary of common people in nineteenth-century Iceland even though comments and suggestions such as those above, taken from Sigurður Nordal, Guðmundur Finnbogason and Vilmundur Jónsson, might lead us to believe otherwise.

Exactly **how** peripheral the words were in the everyday language of previous centuries is difficult to say, and there is, of course, the **possibility** that they (or some such words) were more widely used (and more usable?) in spoken language than in written texts. Such an assumption would, however, be rather difficult to maintain; why would the words, then, not appear in informal private letters by people who have little or no scholarly training in writing, and in many cases no formal education at all, and probably only a limited knowledge of an emerging purist language attitude? It is most likely that the majority of the *be-*words that entered Icelandic, and are to be found in different texts from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, never acted as a part of the active lexicon of daily language. Comments such as those mentioned above probably target isolated words that because of their immediately perceived foreignness were easily recognizable and easy to criticize. Use of such words in historical novels of the twentieth century to characterize eccentric or odd characters, may also have made modern Icelanders more ready to believe that they were, or had been, more usual than they actually were.

It has been easier to expunge words of this type from Icelandic than e.g. from Norwegian, because in Icelandic they seem mainly to have been a part of the formal language of officials, rather than that of common people, and thus both relatively infrequent and genre specific. Their exclusion from Icelandic may therefore not exactly be a textbook example of active Icelandic language purification, but nonetheless a noteworthy and interesting example of halted borrowing.

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## Keywords

loanwords, Icelandic, prefix, halted borrowing, private letters

## Lykilorð

tökuorð, íslenska, forskeyti, hamlað tökuorðaferli, einkabréf

## Útdráttur

Orð með þýskættaða forskeytinu *be-* bást inn í íslensku frá fimmtánda öld og fram á þá tuttugustu, að mestu úr dönsku. Nálega 300 slík orð er að finna í seðlasöfnum Orðabókar Háskólans. Nær engin þeirra eru þó nothæf í nútímamáli og er brott-hvarf þessara orða athyglisvert dæmi um það sem kalla má hamlað eða stöðvað tökuorðaferli. Á nítjándu öld dró mjög úr straumi orða af þessum toga inn í málið og orð, sem fyrst koma fyrir í tuttugustu aldar textum, eru nær öll úr sögulegum skáld-sögum og sjómannamáli. Fáein orð með þessu forskeyti eru íslenskar nýmyndanir og þótt forskeytið hafi aldrei orðið virkt sem orðmyndunarforskeyti, eða sem fyrirmynd við innlenda orðmyndun, gætu þessi orð bent til að svo hefði getað orðið. Orð af þessum toga voru á sínum tíma gagnrýnd af mállheinsunarmönnum og gefið hefur verið í skyn að þau hafi verið talsvert algeng í máli fyrri alda. Athugun á texta 1.640 einkabréfa frá nítjándu öld bendir þó ekki til þess að slík orð hafi verið algeng í máli alþýðufólks á þeirri öld og lauslegur samanburður við blaðatexta sömu aldar styður þá ályktun.

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