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## ALEXANDER J. ELLIS ON MODERN ICELANDIC PRONUNCIATION

### Abstract

The paper reviews the description of the pronunciation of Modern Icelandic as contained in Alexander J. Ellis' influential treatise on early English pronunciation. This description, first ever attempted in English, is shown to be remarkably accurate in recording phonetic detail even if the system of transcription devised by its author is, from today's perspective cumbersome and inefficient. The phonetic and phonological regularities contained in the description are reviewed and compared with the views found in contemporary studies of Icelandic. Flaws of the description are seen as basically due to the atomistic and letter-based nature of the approach. Ellis' concern with the relevance of the Modern Icelandic phonetics for Old English and the history of English in general is taken to reflect his conviction about the universality of the mechanisms of phonological change.

The first volume of Alexander J. Ellis's monumental *On early English pronunciation* (1869–1889) contains a brief discussion of the pronunciation of Modern Icelandic, presumably the first such description ever attempted in English. It appeared within Chapter V (*Teutonic and Scandinavian sources of the English language*) alongside a comparable presentation of the pronunciation of Anglo-Saxon, Old Norse and Gothic. To arrive at his description Ellis had worked with an educated native speaker of Icelandic, a writer, editor and translator; the description that emerged was read and commented upon by no less a person than Henry Sweet who himself had worked on Modern Icelandic pronunciation with a different native speaker. Sweet's comments are included in footnotes. The description is illustrated by Luke's *Prodigal Son* parable, where the orthographic version is accompanied by Ellis' transcription and a verbatim translation. The description might justifiably be called contrastive since Ellis frequently evokes not only English but also French, German and continental Scandinavian sounds in an attempt to supply a narrow description. It is also

comparative-theoretical since he invokes phonological changes and stages in the development as attested in other languages and dialects, most frequently English. It is of interest to see how the eminent phonetician, dialectologist and student of the history of English handled the data of a language which had not been studied in Britain before, what he saw – or heard – as the salient phonetic properties of the language and also where he erred, what he overlooked or disregarded, and what appears to have escaped his attention. What should be kept in mind is that the Icelandic Ellis and Sweet describe is that of the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, hence it is possible that it would differ in some details from what we hear today.

Ellis approaches the sounds of Modern Icelandic both as an astute phonetician and a student of the history of English. In the former capacity he makes a serious attempt to record faithfully what he heard from his native informant using an elaborate system of transcription of his own making. As a historian of the English language he is intent on finding parallels and similarities for specific developments in his own language. For Ellis-the historian, Icelandic presents “the strange spectacle of a living medieval tongue, with all its terminations, inflections, and vowel changes, whether of mutation (Umlaut) or progression (Lautverschiebung), practically unchanged, and in daily use” (1869: 537–538). For him, the difference between the Icelandic of the first manuscripts and that in use now is not greater than “that of Chaucer from that of Shakspeare” (1869: 538) and he clearly regards the sounds of contemporary Icelandic (“of the most modern printed books”) as fundamentally archaic and fossilised, hence of great interest to the historian of English. This is made explicit when he says that “many of its sounds are so singular, – living remnants of habits which seem to have been widely diffused in the X<sup>th</sup> century, but which have become lost, and generally misunderstood in modern times” (1869: 538). Unlike other scholars, however, Ellis does not imply that Modern Icelandic pronunciation is identical or even very close to that of Old Norse: in fact, the next section of his book is devoted to the pronunciation of Old Norse where he stresses the differences between the two stages of the language and explicitly distances himself from the views of scholars like Rasmus Rask or Jakob Grimm. Rask in particular “considers that the modern pronunciation is practically the same as the ancient, except in a few instances” (1869: 534), a view Ellis rejects and one which hardly deserves any discussion today, Rask’s historic and historical contributions notwithstanding.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The allegedly archaic nature of Modern Icelandic is a misleading platitude, comparable in nature to the non-existence of a single word for *snow* in Eskimo. It is glibly repeated by language historians who should know better and avoid such sweeping and improbable generalisations. For example, Smith (2007: 22) indulges in the same unreflective prattling when he states that Icelandic “has changed remarkably little since the Middle Ages and adds that present-day Icelanders have little difficulty in making sense of the substantial Icelandic prose saga-literature which survives from the thirteenth century.” For one thing, phonetically (and phonologically) Icelandic has changed quite a lot, probably not less than any other language, an elementary fact recorded even by most succinct descriptions of Icelandic (Thráinsson 1994, Karlsson 2004). While it is true that present-day Icelanders can read Old Icelandic sagas without major problems, it should be kept in mind that the versions they read are normalised or standardised and thus

In his capacity as a phonetician Ellis tries to describe the sounds of the modern language by relating them to the more familiar ones in English and its dialects, in German, French, the continental Scandinavian languages and even Welsh (his *Welch*). He records Icelandic distinctions in a system of transcription he uses throughout the book both for reconstructed forms of the earlier stages of English and for a variety of other languages (not only Indo-European but also e.g. Dravidian, Semitic, Chinese, Hungarian). The system, described in the *Introduction* (1–16) comprises jointly dozens of letters and letter combinations, additional diacritics and fonts which make it extremely cumbersome and, from today's perspective, exasperatingly complex and unilluminating. While admirable in its objectives, Ellis' system is today little more than a testimony to linguists' attempts to record the highly diversified speech chain by limited means. Luckily, in most cases Ellis' transcription can be directly translated into the familiar IP system, hence his ideas remain transparent and open to discussion. In what follows we shall adopt the contemporary conventions both with reference to orthography and transcription, although it has to be said that no single system of transcription is universally adopted for Icelandic and different scholars adhere to somewhat different traditions.

The description of Icelandic phonetics, although highly condensed, contains most of what can be expected of a practically-oriented presentation. After a brief general description of Icelandic vowels and consonants, Ellis proceeds to discuss the phonetic equivalents of letters, both vowels and consonants. The fact that the description is based on letters of the alphabet rather than sounds is not surprising since the same convention is often found in present-day textbooks (e.g. Einarsson 1945), grammars (Kress 1963, 1982) and partly also in purely phonetic descriptions (Ófeigsson 1924, Gíslason and Þráinsson 1993). Obviously the letter-to-sound bias forces the analyst to repeat certain generalisations or, conversely, is conducive to their non-formulation. A case in point is the question of vocalic length in Modern Icelandic, the first major issue of the phonetics and phonology of the language we will consider.

Length of vowels in Modern Icelandic is predictable from the phonological context. This is the view adopted by practically everybody working in the area of Icelandic phonetics and phonology (e.g.: Ófeigsson 1924, Einarsson 1945, Kress 1963, 1982, Orešnik and Þétursson 1977, Árnason 1980, 2005, Gussmann 2001, 2002, 2006a) and although there are certain outstanding problems (Árnason 1998, Gussmann 2006b), the general pattern was adequately formulated already in Ellis' early account: vowels are short before two consonants or a geminate (1869: 539). In other contexts vowels are long. One point overlooked

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depart significantly from the medieval originals, not just in matters of spelling (Karlsson 2004). Most importantly, however, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries Icelandic went through a period of intensive puristic tendencies which profoundly affected all aspects of the language and often artificially enforced obsolete or archaic forms or patterns which replaced those of the spoken language (Karlsson 2004, Ottósson 1987, 1990). Thus, somewhat paradoxically, the archaic forms found in common use today are not necessarily a continuation of and did not emerge from those in use three centuries ago. This goes to show that one needs a more nuanced approach than a mechanical juxtaposing of mediaeval and modern forms.

in Ellis' formulation is the restriction of the generalisation to the stressed position: stressed vowels are long before at most one consonant, otherwise vowels are short. The situation in the modern language is a direct result of the general Scandinavian process, named by Haugen (1976: 258) "the great quantity shift," which reshaped the structure of the stressed syllable: this syllable must be heavy either through the length of the vowel or the presence of a consonantal coda. Conversely, an unstressed vowel is short no matter how many consonants, if any, it is followed by. Without including this restriction into his formulation of the vowel length, Ellis is forced to repeat the information with every vowel and diphthong, a procedure he does not follow mechanically (or consistently). In any event, in *faðir* [fa:ðir] 'father' we have [a:] in the stressed position and [ɪ] in the unstressed one, whereas in *vika* [vɪ:k<sup>h</sup>a] 'week,' it is [ɪ:] which is stressed and long, while [a] unstressed and short. In *binda* [pɪnta] 'bind' and *andi* [anti] 'spirit' vowels are short in both syllables: the first is followed by two consonants while the second is unstressed.

An intriguing aspect of vocalic quantity in Modern Icelandic is the presence of diphthongs differing in length, i.e. the existence of short and long diphthongs. For historians of English this phonetic phenomenon is particularly significant in view of the well-known 'diagraph controversy' relating to the short diphthongs traditionally recognised for Old English (for a summary of the debate, see e.g. Lass 1994: 45–48). Since diphthongs are assumed to be complex, hence long nuclei, various attempts were made to explain away the alleged short diphthongs of Old English and replace them by short vowels. Although the reinterpretations were mostly deemed to be a failure and the diphthongal status of the diagraphs continues to be upheld, there are still occasional dissenting voices (e.g. White 2004) who refuse to "believe in short diphthongs." The staunch believers in the non-existence of short diphthongs will feel sadly let down by Icelandic, and also Faroese, since diphthongs differing in length are abundantly present there. Every phonetic description of the language provides examples galore of both short and long diphthongs. Thus Gíslason and Þráinsson (1993: 133) mention cases such as the following:

	long	short
[ei]	meira [mei:ra] 'more'	seinn [seitn̩] 'late'
[ai]	væla [vai:la] 'whine'	rælni [railni] 'groundlessness'
[ou]	bóla [pou:la] 'bubble'	hóll [hout̩] 'hill'
[au]	mála [mau:la] 'paint'	álka [au̯ka] 'razorbill'

Diphthongs, just like monophthongs, are long before at most a single consonant and are short otherwise. This is carefully recorded by Ellis who notes that "before two consonants or a doubled consonant, the first element is shortened" for example in the case of the diphthong [ai] (1869: 540). What is more, Ellis' otherwise cumbersome transcription is more successful in recording this fact than the IPA-based systems since the latter all place the length mark [ː] after the diphthong as a whole while noting at the same time that it is the first part of the

diphthong which is of longer duration.<sup>2</sup> Ellis, on the other hand, renders long [ai:] and short [ai], as [aai] and [ai] respectively, thus coming closer to the reality that phoneticians embrace in their descriptive statements. In this way, the existence and distribution of long and short diphthongs is just as controversial for Ellis-the-phonetician as the existence and distribution of long and short monophthongs. Admittedly, short diphthongs are very rare in the familiar Indo-European languages hence the Indo-European perspective – or bias – looks at them suspiciously or even denies their existence. But exist they do, even though, as noted by Einarsson (1949: 10), “[t]he mastering of the short diphthongs is undoubtedly one of the most difficult tasks in learning Icelandic.” This is partly because “[w]hen the diphthongs are short, the second element is often obscured or reduced, sometimes lost or merged with the first element in a new sound.” The possibility of monophthongisation is recognised by other descriptions (Gíslason and Þráinsson 1993: 134–135) in informal styles of speech but details are not specified. Einarsson’s characterisations “obscured”, “reduced”, “sometimes lost or merged” are largely impressionistic but acceptable in a language textbook. What seems to be happening is syntagmatic interaction between the (second part of the) diphthong and the following consonant. A detailed phonetic study confirms this conclusion.<sup>3</sup>

The area of vocalic quantity in Modern Icelandic must include some discussion of the nucleus denoted by the letter <é> [je] in the contemporary usage and earlier designated variably by <é> and <je>. Ellis while correctly noting the phonetic equivalence behind the alternative spellings, makes the incomprehensible statement that “as in many cases where j is written, the result is often a diphthong with the stress on the first element” (1869: 542). He contrasts the words *tré* [tʰrje:] ‘tree,’ *mér* [mjɛ:r] ‘to me’ with *fénu* [fje:mʏ] ‘fee, dat. sg. def.,’ *réttur* [rjehtʏr] ‘right,’ *féll* [fjetʏ] ‘(s)he fell’ and supplies them with different transcriptions: [íee] vs. [jee] or, when short, [je]. Not to put too fine a point on it, this is a case where Ellis’ phonetic acumen led him astray: there is absolutely no difference in the phonetic interpretation of the diphthong denoted by <é> and our transcription as [je(:)] above is the one universally accepted by Icelandic and non-Icelandic phoneticians; [je] is a rising diphthong, short or long depending on the context. Its length today is the result of the Scandinavian quantity shift mentioned above while its rising quality remains one of the poorly understood problems in the history of Icelandic phonology. In brief, Icelandic long vowels were diphthongised in the late Middle Ages; in the case of /e:/ this development

<sup>2</sup> Explicitly so Ófeigsson (1924: XV) “Naar en Diftong er lang mener de fleste Fonetikere, at det er Diftongens første Del, det er lang, medens sidste Del er altid kort” (With a long diphthong, the majority of phoneticians assume that it is the first part which is long, while the second part is always short).

<sup>3</sup> Consider the following account in Kreß (1937: 52): „Sie [= die Kurzdiphthonge] weisen unter Umständen einen Verlust der zweiten Komponente auf, die dann in gewisser Weise von dem folgenden Konsonanten übernommen wird. i-Diphthonge zeigen diese Verkürzung vor palatalen Konsonanten oder palatalisierbaren, u-Diphthonge entsprechend vor labialisierbaren. (...) Der entstehende Monophthong ist entweder von derselben Qualität wie der Ausgangspunkt der ungekürzten Diphthonge oder von der Qualität des ihm nächstliegenden geschlosseneren, seltener des offeneren Lautes aus derselben Vokalreihe”.

produced initial /e<sup>i</sup>/ and, if continued, would have resulted in a merger with the original diphthong /ei/. Historians of Icelandic appear agreed that the potential merger was checked by the change of /e<sup>i</sup>/ into /ie/, leading to the present-day rising diphthong [je(:)] (Einarsson 1949, Benediktsson 1959, Steblin-Kamenskij 1966), hence *fé* [fje:] ‘fee’ for Old Icelandic [fe:].<sup>4</sup> Today’s spelling of the diphthong as <é> is only the most recent stage in a series of fluctuations: it was also the dominant version used in Ellis’ times, then it changed to <je> before reverting in the 1930’s to the earlier <é>. Ellis adopts the mechanically phonetic stance when he concludes that <é> “might with equal propriety be written ‘je’, for in fact there are numerous other diphthongs of the same class, now written with a prefixed ‘j’, but formerly written with a prefixed ‘i’” (1869: 539). By the “numerous other diphthongs” Ellis means the initial parts of words like *jól* [jou:l] ‘Christmas,’ *já* [jau:] ‘yes,’ *jæja* [jai:ja] ‘well now,’ possibly also *jafn* [japn] ‘even,’ *jurt* [jyrt] ‘grass,’ *jötunn* [jø:t<sup>h</sup>yn] ‘giant,’ *jússa* [jus:a] ‘fat woman.’ Strangely enough, the “numerous other diphthongs” are not mentioned among the six diphthongs Ellis identifies in Icelandic; additionally, of course, some of them would not be diphthongs but triphthongs [jau, jou, jai]. The orthographic distinction between <é> [je(:)] and, say, <já> [jau(:)] suggests that there is a difference between a genuine diphthong and a chance or spurious combination of a semivowel and another vowel, a distinction that Ellis seems to find objectionable. The distinction is real, however, not only historically but also in synchronic morphophonological terms. Thus the rising diphthong [je:] <é> alternates with the falling diphthong [ei:] <ei> in a number of words, e.g.: *lék* [lje:k<sup>h</sup>] ‘I played’ – *leikum* [lei:k<sup>h</sup>ym] ‘we play,’ *steig* [stei:y] ‘I stepped’ = *sté* [stje:] ‘id.’ etc.; nothing comparable can be found for the spurious diphthongs. The specific orthographic convention reflects the morphophonological relatedness in a way not untypical of spelling conventions in other languages.

Before concluding the vocalic section it must be pointed out that in his very short survey of Icelandic phonetics Ellis makes observations concerning restrictions in the distribution of vowels. Some of these observations are superfluous as they follow from more general principles: it was indicated above that long vowels can only appear in stressed positions hence there is no need to state that for every vowel individually. The recognition of the general principle might have prevented Ellis from making patently false statements: he claims, for instance, that the vowel [i] is not “found short in closed accented syllables as in Scotch and French” (1869: 545). The obvious question which suggests itself is why this should be so since generally stressed vowel quality appears independent of the phonetic environment. Indeed, examples of [i] in short stressed syllables are quite common, a fact that must have evaded Ellis’ attention: *tíska* [t<sup>h</sup>iska] ‘fashion,’ *bíddu* [pit:y] ‘wait, imper. sg.,’ *hvíld* [k<sup>h</sup>vilt] ‘rest,’ *ríkt* [rixt]

<sup>4</sup> This historical interpretation, although generally accepted in the literature, raises serious doubts to its validity as it requires a specific sound change to take a peep into the future, detect the possible danger of merger and reverse its course. Neither the danger of mergers nor the perils of massive homonymy are particularly strong factors inhibiting phonological change and numerous instance of both can readily be provided, both in Icelandic and elsewhere.

‘rich, neut.’. Ellis himself (1869 : 545, fn. 1), attributing the observation to Henry Sweet, admits that the vowel is found in the word *þing* [θiŋk] ‘parliament’ (and, we might add, in the very common suffix *-ing*, e.g. *gifta* [cifta] ‘marry’ – *gifting* [ciftiŋk] ‘marriage’). Sweet also records another valid observation, namely that the word *þungur* [θuŋɣʏr] ‘heavy’ is pronounced with the stressed vowel [u] rather than [ʏ], as if spelt *þúngur*. Sweet’s observations are spot-on and would need to be extended to the vowels <a, ö, o> in words like *langur* [lauŋkʏr] ‘long, masc.’, *löng* [løŋk] ‘long, fem.’, *kongur* [k<sup>h</sup>ouŋkʏr] ‘king’ (as if spelt *lángur*, *laung*, *kóngur* – the last item is actually spelt *kóngur* according to the present-day norm<sup>5</sup>). Contemporary descriptions of Icelandic (Einarsson 1945, Gíslason and Þráinsson 1993) stress that in the context before a velar nasal and a velar plosive the short (lax) vowels [ɛ, ɪ, a, ʏ, ɔ, ø] are turned into the tense [ei, i, au, u, ou, øy]. The specific consonantal cluster creates a neutralisation position for the lax-tense vowel opposition, a factor that some phonological descriptions attach a great significance to (e.g. Steblin-Kamenskij 1960).

Facts like these underline the need to cast phonetic observations in general terms rather than concentrate on individual units, be they sounds or letters. This remark is not meant to reflect a condescending attitude towards the early phoneticians. Historically, such an approach became the norm only with the emergence of structural linguistics and its concept of the system, hence one can only admire the commitment and acumen that scholars like Alexander Ellis or Henry Sweet brought to bear on their phonetic studies and descriptions. They appear to have intuitively pinpointed most of the theoretical issues that subsequent and theoretically-informed tradition would grapple with. Needless to say, the theoretically-informed approaches are anything but unanimous in their results, as seen in the phonological studies of the past decades (see Gussmann 2003 for a bibliography of Icelandic phonology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century). Some of the issues identified by the early phonetic descriptions remain problematic or ambiguous despite repeated attempts, within different frameworks, to understand them. A few such examples will now be presented within the Icelandic consonantal system.

Let us start with the interdental spirants [θ – ð] as in *þvo* [θvɔ:] ‘wash’ *heiðinn* [hei:ðm] ‘pagan.’ Structural and generative interpretations normally regard these two sounds as allophones of the same phoneme (Haugen 1958), or rule-governed variants with [ð] appearing after vowels and continuants and [θ] elsewhere. Thus, structurally, the interdental fricatives are different from the labiodentals [f, v] which can both appear word-initially before a vowel, e.g.: *fara*

<sup>5</sup> It may be of interest to note that the distinguished 20<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic writer and Nobel Prize winner Halldór Kiljan Laxness introduced some idiosyncratic changes into his own Icelandic spelling system, including the reflection of vocalic tenseness in the position of neutralisation (before *-nk*, *-ng*). Thus Laxness consistently spells *þing*, *þúngur*, *lángur*, *laung*, *gifting* etc. in accordance with pronunciation (the standard forms are *þing*, *þungur*, *langur*, *löng*, *gifting*). These innovations were initially followed by some other writers but the general tradition prevailed and Laxness’ departures are tolerated as an individual affectation. Opinions have been voiced in Iceland that his writings should be published now in conformity with the conventional spelling (Steinsson 2006, Gussmann 2007).

[fa:ra] ‘travel’ – *vara* [va:ra] ‘warn,’ *féll* [fjɛtʰ] ‘(s)he fell’ – *vél* [vɛi:l] ‘machine’; the fact that they contrast in the initial position overrides striking similarities with the interdental, namely the fact that after continuants, including of course vowels, only the voiced spirant can appear: *ævi* [ʰai:vi] ‘life’ (just like *æði* [ʰai:ði] ‘frenzy’), *erfa* [ɛrva] ‘inherit’ (just like *morðingi* [mɔrðɪŋɛɪ] ‘murderer’). These are the structural analyst’s headaches, as is the occasional intervocalic, appearance of the voiceless fricative [θ], e.g.: *íþrótt* [i:θrouht] ‘sport,’ *kaþólskur* [kʰa:θoulskʏr] ‘Catholic,’ (just like *Stefán* [stɛ:faun] ‘Stephen,’ *prófessor* [pʰrou:fɛsɔr] ‘professor’). We need not worry unduly about the structural interpretations at this stage apart from noting that, theoretically, they are not particularly impressive: Haugen (1958 / 1972: 374) suggests that words such as these are compounds phonemically (i.e. *í-þrótt*, *ka-þólskur*), a suggestion which finds morphological support in one case (*þróttur* [θrouht] ‘strength, vigour’) but is completely arbitrary in the other. Ellis was not concerned with phonemic groupings of phonetically similar phones, pattern congruity etc. and came up with a statement that is very much worth pondering also today. He notes, correctly, that [ð] never occurs initially but “is found in place of [d] after vowels and r, f, g” (1869: 541). If we remember that the letter <g> may denote the voiced velar fricative [ɣ], we can generalise the context to the position after a continuant segment. What is arresting is the claim that the interdental fricative *replaces* the voiced dental stop; the question which phonologists should consider is whether indeed the voiced fricative could be regarded as a contextual realisation of the stop. Strictly speaking, there are isolated words where the stop appears after a vowel, e.g. *edik* [ɛ:ɪk] ‘vinegar,’ *edru* [ɛ:tru] ‘sober’ but they are loans and thus not more damaging to the generalisation than the existence of intervocalic voiceless fricatives just mentioned. The sound [θ] <þ> appears in the initial position of function words where Modern English now uses the voiced fricative, e.g. *það* [θa:ð] ‘that,’ *þú* [θu:] ‘thou,’ *þessi* [θɛs:i] ‘this,’ a fact that allows Ellis to draw the conclusion, a *presumption* as he calls it, “that the English use of initial [ð] is modern” (1869: 541). This presumption is now generally recognised to be true.

The interdental fricatives are just one instance of the tendency to detect contemporary Icelandic equivalents to presumed or proposed sounds in Anglo-Saxon or the historical development of English. The different sounds (or zero) that the letter <g> stands for in Modern Icelandic, i.e. [k, c, ɣ, j, w] lead Ellis to establish direct links with Old English and to treat the situation in Icelandic as evidence for the correctness of a proposed phonological development within English: “The changes are extremely interesting because they shew the stages through which the ags. [Anglo-Saxon] ‘g’ passed in older English before it entirely subsided into the present [j i, w u] or totally disappeared. We have, therefore, an actual living example of the intermediate sounds, already suggested by theory, establishing the correctness of the previous hypothesis” (1869: 543). In other words, it is fully legitimate to take the facts of Modern Icelandic in an attempt to determine the sounds of Old English as well as their subsequent development. It is not only Old English and Icelandic, closely related languages,

that can be analysed in this way; the disappearance of the velar written <g> in the Icelandic words like *ljúga* [lju:a] ‘tell a lie’ prompts Ellis to invoke the absence of voiced velars in the Welsh consonant mutations. What clearly transpires from such arguments is the belief in the non-arbitrary nature of phonological change, if not its universality.

Ellis’ concern with the relevance of the facts of Modern Icelandic – “the strange spectacle of a living medieval tongue” – for the history of English is nowhere seen more clearly than in his discussion of the Icelandic voiceless sonorants. Structural phonologists will readily supply minimal pairs testifying to the contrastive status of such consonants when compared with their voiced congeners.<sup>6</sup> Consider some examples of voiced and voiceless sonorants in word-final and medial position:

njóta [njou:t <sup>h</sup> a] ‘enjoy’	hnjóta [ɲjou:t <sup>h</sup> a] ‘stumble’
henda [henta] ‘throw’	henta [hɛnta] ‘suit, vb.’
ljóð [ljou:ð] ‘poem’	hljóð [ɮjou:ð] ‘sound’
mildi [mɪltɪ] ‘mildness’	milti [mɪɮtɪ] ‘spleen’
ríð [ri:ð] ‘(I) ride’	hríð [ɮri:ð] ‘blizzard’
mörg [mørk] ‘numerous, fem.’	mörk [mørk] ‘forest’
jól [jou:l] ‘Christmas’	hjól [ɮjou:l] ‘wheel’
banga [paŋka] ‘hammer, vb.’	banka [paɲka] ‘knock’
kemba [c <sup>h</sup> empa] ‘comb, vb.’	kempa [c <sup>h</sup> ɛmpa] ‘hero’

Needless to say, Ellis is not interested in contrastive pairs but in the very existence of the voiceless sounds. These he brings to bear on his earlier discussion of Old English phonetics (1869: 513), where he posited voiceless sonorants corresponding to the orthographic combination of <h> with a following consonant. His description of the Icelandic sounds is both meticulous and accurate; he stresses, for example, that [ɮ] is a pure voiceless lateral and thus markedly different from the Welsh lateral fricative [ɮ], hence the Welsh *lladd* [ɮa:ð] ‘kill’ and the Icelandic *hlað* [ɮa:ð] ‘farmyard’ “are perfectly distinct in sound” (1869: 544). He also records further details such as the appearance of the voiceless lateral word-finally in the orthographic sequence <ll>, e.g. *áll* [autɮ] ‘eel,’ and before a following <t> in *allt* [aɮt] ‘every, neut.’. Similarly, he notes the occurrence of the voiceless dental nasal word-finally after a voiceless consonant, e.g.: *steinn* [steitɲ] ‘stone,’ *vatn* [vahtɲ] ‘water.’ The existence of voiceless [ɮ] brings Ellis to consider the possible mechanism of a well-known phonological change in the history of Icelandic, now generally known as *u*-epenthesis, whereby the Old Icelandic post-consonantal and word-final [r], e.g. *hestr* [hestr] ‘horse’ appears

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the historical origin of the voiceless sonorants in Icelandic, see Steblin-Kamenskij (1966: 108–114).

today as [yr] *hestur* [ˈhestyr]. Ellis speculates, plausibly enough, about the possible syllabic nature of the final post-consonantal voiceless [r̥] in Old Norse and, less cogently, about its possible shift to its non-syllabic voiced congener in the present-day language.<sup>7</sup> Although parts of the envisaged process seem far-fetched, the author's concern with general mechanisms of phonological change compel respect and invite a search for a better interpretation of the specific historical innovation. Similarly, Ellis connects the phonetic similarity between [r̥] and [s] with rhotacism in Germanic and Latin. Finally, it must be pointed out that Ellis is understandably disturbed by the voiceless bilabial semivowel [w̥] found in some varieties (dialects) of Modern Icelandic. The problem is that Icelandic does not recognise the voiced semivowel [w] whose place is taken by the voiced fricative [v],<sup>8</sup> hence [w̥] "[a]t the present day (...) is an anomaly, which could hardly have been original" (1869: 549). The "anomaly," Ellis would have been pleased to hear, has been largely removed during the century following his research, as the dominant pronunciation of the orthographic <hv> today is [k<sup>h</sup>v], e.g.: *hvetja* [k<sup>h</sup>vɛ:tʰja] 'encourage, whet,' *hvítur* [k<sup>h</sup>vi:tʰyr] 'white,' *hvarf* [k<sup>h</sup>varv] 'disappearance.' It is an open question, however, whether and in what sense the weak Icelandic [v] can legitimately be called an "anomaly."<sup>9</sup>

While above we critically assessed Ellis' reluctance to form phonetic or phonological generalisations, it has to be admitted that this attitude is not invariably detrimental: in the case at hand, any generalisation concerning the appearance of devoiced (voiceless) sonorants would run afoul of facts since the different sonorants are not devoiced in the same ways, a fact which suggests that sonorant devoicing is a sound change in progress. Also there are dialectal differences which reinforce this conclusion (see Thráinsson 1980). Ellis' methodology, which no doubt would be considered grossly outdated today, while preventing him from capturing certain regularities also saved him, on occasion, from the perils of sweeping and hasty generalisations. One of the major advantages of a systemic approach to language facts is that it encourages the search for additional data which would allow the investigator to make a regularity more meaningful. We would like to finish by considering possibly the gravest case where Ellis methodology fails since he overlooks facts that could be brought to light if additional questions were to be asked.

<sup>7</sup> In point of fact, the [r] which appears word-finally after a vowel is not fully voiced in the modern language, either. As consistently noted by phoneticians (e.g. Einarsson 1945, Kreß 1937: 122–123) [r] in such positions is half- or partially voiced. Other sonorants also undergo partial devoicing word-finally.

<sup>8</sup> Thráinsson (1994: 147) claims that voiced fricatives are in general very 'weak' and hence possibly better classified as approximants. The class of voiced fricatives in the language comprises [v, ð, j, ɣ].

<sup>9</sup> As is generally known, the PIE \*[w] underwent a change to the fricative [v] in the absolute majority of the languages of the family, with English being the major, if isolated exception. In some languages the fricative [v] continues to display some phonetic and phonological properties of its ancestral semivocalic predecessor. In some languages it is often described as a weak consonant, it tends to alternate with glides, it patterns phonologically with sonorants (in Slavic, for instance, it appears in branching onsets, e.g. *dwa* [dva] 'two' in Polish) etc. For a survey of the phonetic and phonological properties of the Russian labio-dental fricative, see Andersen (1969).

Icelandic is one very few European languages that displays a process known as preaspiration. In brief, the process consists in the introduction of the glottal [h] before certain consonants and consonantal clusters. The phenomenon has been analysed within the context of Icelandic by a number of investigators, among others by Árnason (1977, 1986), Thráinsson (1978), Gussmann (1999, 2000), Ringen (1999) and in a broader typological context by Liberman (1982) and Helgason (2002). Ellis, of course without referring to it as preaspiration, notes (1869: 540) that “before doubled ‘t,’ the guttural is decidedly touched” and exemplifies it by words like *átti* ‘I had,’ *dóttir* ‘daughter’ which in today’s transcription appear as [auhtɪ] and [tʰouhtɪr], respectively. The question that a phonologist might want to ask is what is so peculiar about the geminate dental plosive that it gets realised in this way and whether it is only this plosive that displays such behaviour. In fact, every contemporary description will point out that any domain-internal sequence of aspirated plosives is pronounced as a glottal fricative followed by a single plosive; thus it is not only the orthographic sequence <tt> where *the guttural is decidedly touched* but also <pp> and <kk>, e.g.: *uppi* [ʏpɪ] ‘up,’ *krappur* [kʰrahpyr] ‘narrow,’ *bekkur* [pɛhkʏr] ‘bench,’ *þakka* [θahka] ‘thank.’ The context thus primarily involves aspirated (voiceless) geminates. Additionally, the glottal appears before a cluster of a voiceless plosive and a sonorant stop, e.g.: *skepna* [sçɛhpna] ‘creature,’ *lapm* [lahpm] ‘buddy,’ *famaður* [fahtnaðʏr] ‘suit, n.,’ *rytmi* [rɪhtmɪ] ‘rhythm,’ *ekla* [ɛhkla] ‘shortage.’ It is perhaps not surprising that even such a keen observer of phonetic detail as Ellis turns out to be may have overlooked these facts in a brief study of the phonetics of the language. Undoubtedly a search for a general pattern would have assisted the investigator in discovering the relevant data.

On balance, Ellis’ short survey of the phonetics of Modern Icelandic is remarkably accurate with few of his observations in need of correction. The significance of the account is further increased by its pioneering nature and by the author’s conscious attempt to relate the facts of Icelandic to those of other European languages and to earlier stages in the history of English. The brief account of Icelandic was ultimately intended as an appendix to a detailed study of the development of English sounds. It turned out to be a significant piece of research in its own rights.

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