

This book is titled after an Icelandic proverb, “að kenna selnum að synda” (teaching a seal how to swim), and is labelled as an “unusual journey in the Icelandic language”. The main bookshop in my native town has placed it on the shelves of the Linguistics section. Actually, it is far from being a book of linguistics. It is, rather, a collection of charming tales, encounters, personal experiences, and other digressions that depart from rhapsodically selected expressions or rules of the Icelandic language. The author is an Italian who has been living in Iceland for seven years, and for sure, is a brilliant storyteller of his own experience of Icelandizing himself. I would love to meet Leonardo in a pub and listen to his stories.

Of course, for an Italian, the language is a main source of difficulty in “Icelandizing” oneself. Many years ago, when I was doing my first trips to Iceland and looking for academic collaboration, I believed that I needed to learn Icelandic, but I soon realized that this was both hopeless and unnecessary because, first, Icelanders speak so fast, and second, they all are fluent in English. So eventually I gave up. Only once, somewhere in the North, when I needed to catch on time a bus and did not know where the stop was, I asked an old man who only spoke Icelandic. I got from him a useful explanation, and I was so proud that I could pronounce “strætisvagn” clearly enough for him to understand, and in turn, understand his answer. So, I can empathize with Leonardo’s initial difficulties. These are reported in the book’s prologue, properly titled “Formáli” (the book is written in Italian, but each chapter’s title is an Icelandic word).

Each word that is the title of one of the following ten chapters is the starting point of various sorts of mental and narrative wanderings. For instance, the word á attracts the author’s attention because it is so short and has four meanings (at, have, river, and the accusative case of ær, ewe); then the author tells us of his curiosity about a river called somewhere Litlaá (Small River) and somewhere else Stórá (Large River), his encounter with a lady who told him the story of this river, and the arctic terns that live by there. The chapter on fé provides some examples of sheep nomenclature before moving to its main topic, the amazing skills of the Forystufé (herd leader) breed of sheep and the author’s conversations with experts of this wonderful breed. The kaffisopi chapter swings between quotations of Laxness on coffee and tales on the lucky fate of energy drink companies. The killing of the Basks that took place in the 17th century thrills the reader of the sjávargjöf chapter. The word heyrðu evokes free associations with the swimming pool culture, the evacuation of

Grindavík because of an eruption, a conversation with Sigga Björnsdóttir on Icelandic feminism, and a poem by Bubbi Mortens – yes, all this in a single chapter. Indeed, free association is the logic that governs this book. I believe that any psychoanalyst would be truly enthusiastic about the author's fluency and skill in free association.

However, some chapters also offer some linguistic ideas. The chapter ísbíltúr deals with composite words before expanding on the phenomenology of Icelandic ice creams, and also the chapter appelsínugulur concerns composite words and the colour lexicon (as well as the vegetation in Ásbyrgi). The author's conversations with expert linguists such as Jóhannes Bjarni Sygtryggsson and Guðrún Kvaran, and with the famous writer Jón Kalman Stefánsson, are also reported. The linguistic ideas presented in this book are rather simple but could be interesting for the novice reader.

In sum, whom should I advise to read this book? Linguists and scholars with an interdisciplinary interest in language would hardly learn too much from reading it. Instead, Italian laypersons who love Iceland would surely enjoy reading the varied and fascinating tales that, like the tiles of a mosaic, make up the book. I am not sure of what fate awaits this book, but overall, I believe that everything will go well – þetta reddast.