

**INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH  
AND THE INTERNET**  
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## **International English and the Internet**

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I give a lot of speeches and presentations, but nearly all of them are directed to some commercial purpose. It is a joy to be here today talking an audience who has no intention to give me money. I would like to talk to you openly and honestly about what I do and what the problems are for me here in Iceland regarding the English language and the internet. My goal is to just tell it like it is.

While I have an obvious connection to the business world, I like to think of myself as an applied linguist. It is a lovely nerdy-sounding title that provides some shades of dignity that comes from many years of study and research done long ago. But if I am really honest about what I do for a living, it comes down to using images and language, especially the English language, to get people in other countries to send their money to certain friends of mine here in Iceland. Getting people you never meet to send their money to Iceland is no small trick, let me tell you. What it requires is a use of language that motivates people I do not know to think in ways they would not normally think and do things they would not normally do. In English-speaking countries this is called marketing. Here in Iceland, when people are speaking English to me, it is called by a slightly longer one-word name of marketingbullshit. I will explore the reasons for this variation between Standard English and Iceland English later.

There is overwhelming statistical evidence that shows internet has four primary functions:

- 1) serves as a medium of communication through e-mail, instant messaging, and video relay
  - 2) provides information in a variety of forms
  - 3) sells products and services
- and, lastly, 4) it facilitates the potentials for sex, typically without the bother of a partner.

These functions are the reasons people get on the internet. Business on the internet is about each of these functions or some combination of them. For instance, there are people who have managed to combine all these functions (especially good old number four) with great commercial success. As for myself, I just focus on numbers one and three: business communications and the international sales of products and services.

In the global markets, the internet is the medium for branding, sales, marketing, customer service, and product information. The first thing I do to check out a company is go to their website. It is

an automatic thing for me. Here in Iceland, websites do not have that First Encounter role, but internationally a company website is the face of the corporation and where competition begins. Icelanders are used to doing business with people they know, and most likely are related to. In this small but vibrant market, the internet has a very different function than in foreign markets. The sales process is different. And the importance of establishing trust and confidence is different.

There are two aspects of language use on the internet. The first is getting your message found. This is called search engine optimisation or SEO. What this means is that a website is made in a way where the content and structure put it at the highest position in the search results from Google or another search engine. SEO should not be done by engineers or other nerds. SEO is about language, culture, thinking like a foreigner, and matching all that to a fast-changing set of technical environment variables. It is not a mechanical process. It is an art. There are a very few companies in Iceland, like Prima Locus in Hafnarfjörður, who can do this well. When a potential foreign customer inputs words to a search engine thousands, if not tens of thousands or even millions, of websites and references come up. Not having a good SEO strategy will result in a lot of investment in a website being for nothing. If your website is not on the first page of a potential customer's query, your investment in on-line marketing is badly compromised, of not worthless. I cannot stress enough the importance of a good SEO policy reflected in all on-line communications. If you cannot be found on the internet, you might as well not be there.

The second is about website content and communications. I assume that this audience, as Icelanders, are most interested in how to avoid problems in communications using English. In my experience, language problems come from two sources that have nothing to do with grammar, syntax, or vocabulary. These are:

- ♣ Attitude regarding language and especially language usage
- ♣ And cultural differences that prevent us from thinking like our customers

I have lived here for two years and let me tell you, Iceland is a major cultural shock for me. I have learned a lot while living here about how much of what I thought necessary for effective business and personal relationships was simply extra baggage that I did not need to carry. I have had to adjust to a completely new standard of what common sense is supposed to be about. I like Icelandic attitudes about life and relating to each other, but the attitudes within the Icelandic culture, especially about business, can be very hard to transfer into a foreign language without a serious rethinking.

Icelanders have a lot to be proud of. The Icelandic society and economy works well. Icelanders have a level of technical integration between citizens, business, and government that, as far as I am concerned, is next to utopia. When I tell people I know about Iceland, they are interested and want to know more. And that, believe it or not, is a competitive advantage for Iceland.

However, when it comes to business on the internet, Icelanders have an attitude common to many countries that are either islands or linguistically isolated --- including the US and Japan. Such societies often consider their ideas to be transferable into another language without adjustment for cultural differences. Translations are done nearly word for word and that is a huge commercial mistake. Images and design are used in a way that is often confusing. There is a phrase in English that goes, "The devil is in the details" and that applies better nowhere than in translations and on-line communications.

The internet is overwhelmingly competitive. Thanks to several generations having spent endless hours watching television and playing instant-gratification computer games, the average internet user has the attention span and patience of a three-week old puppy. Research conducted by the search engine Lycos back in 1999 when it was the Number One in the world, showed that the average length of time someone was at a website was all of six seconds. If a customer did not get what they wanted within three mouse-clicks, they moved on. I have to assume that attention spans and patience have not improved for the better since 1999.

The language used on websites must reflect the reality of the visitors' interest and keep them motivated to get to a purchase decision. Language that does not motivate or reflect the user's interest is wholly destructive to the point of the website.

Let me give you an example. Many companies here describe their product or service offering in the following manner: "Our company can provide a variety of specialised products of good quality." While this might sound lovely to Icelanders, this is marketing death internationally. What the international customer is looking for is a statement of certainty and an attitude of confidence. "Our company can provide..." should be the bolder "Our company provides...!" And "...products of good quality" should be "products of excellent quality." Good is a mild to mediocre statement that, in English, means a C or B grade. It is little words like "can" and "good" that make the difference between sales success and customer confidence and that dreaded click of a mouse to go to another website. Also, there are many times when incorrect or non-standard English is not only acceptable, but preferable in a sales environment. The effective use of language in business is not about what goes on in the dictionary, but about harmonising with the expectations in the

customer's mind. Formal or grammatically perfect English can be a problem and a real turn-off for millions of potential customers.

Translations are always a problem. There are ways to manage translations and translators that produce the best result, but that goes way beyond what this presentation is about. What I can say is that translations should always be checked by someone who is in the same business in an English-speaking place and is competent to judge marketing or technical writing. The best translations come from ignoring the original text and just giving the translator bulleted points to be made into running text. This method creates natural sounding English that weaves together ideas in a way designed to sell or inform effectively.

When it comes to buying off the internet, I would not do business with someone I expect to have communications problems with. It is not worth the bother, regardless of price or other factors. I want to do business with people who are like me and who understand me. I assume this goes for nearly everyone. It only takes a few incidents like a credit card charge made to a hotel in Thailand that cannot be undone or a 24/7 service desk in Ireland that closes at five o'clock to keep your future international business focused on people you can trust. Language either creates trust or destroys it with staggeringly swift ease. That is why the cultural factors win over linguistic factors every time in successful on-line business communications.

In conclusion, I could (and most likely should) write a book about the Big Picture of international business on the internet and language and culture. (I may get money out of this audience yet if you buy it!) But the most important advice I can give you is to know how different your Icelandic culture's attitudes are from other culture's attitudes with regard to marketing, informing, and language in general. What you do with that knowledge is up to you, but without it the internet world will simply pass you by.