



**Speech**  
**by**  
**Guðni Th. Jóhannesson**  
**President of Iceland**  
**at the Inauguration**  
**of the Vigdís Finnbogadóttir International Centre**  
**for Multilingualism and Intercultural Understanding**

**20 April 2017**

Madam Vigdís,  
Mr Vice-Chancellor,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Languages open up worlds. We are here to celebrate the formal opening today of a new building to house the Vigdís Finnbogadóttir International Centre for Multilingualism and Intercultural Understanding. For some decades now, language teaching and research have been going on at the University of Iceland in an institute named in honour of Vigdís Finnbogadóttir. In her younger days, Vigdís herself earned a good reputation as a teacher of French and also channelled her energies into the theatre, bringing in influences from abroad and weaving them into Iceland's cultural tapestry.

After that, Vigdís moved to Bessastaðir. We do not know with any certainty what languages were spoken by those who first arrived there when the country was still unoccupied. In the early centuries a Nordic language must have been used there, and probably some Celtic languages too. Languages connected their speakers' worlds. And somebody gave the property its name, Bessastaðir ('Bessi's Place'). It may come from the Celtic world, or perhaps Snorri Sturluson decided on the name. He bought this piece of good farmland, and it may be that he decided to name it Bersastaðir ('Bersi's Place') in honour of his father-in-law, Bersi Vermundarson the Wealthy.

Who knows – perhaps Snorri was living at Bersi’s or Bessi’s Place when he read works in Latin and felt inspired to write in Icelandic about the ‘earth’s circle which the human race inhabits’ with its many peoples and languages? Centuries after his day, a school was founded on the site of his manor farm. There it was that Sveinbjörn Egilsson gave us the epics of Homer in Icelandic and compiled his dictionary of the Old Icelandic poetic vocabulary, *Lexicon Poeticum*. Once again, languages opened the way into different worlds.

This thread at Bessastaðir remained unbroken even after the school was moved elsewhere. Grímur Thomsen took up residence there and not only produced original poems, but also translated great literature from other tongues, including works by Sappho and Goethe. Before this time, Grímur had already made his mark in Denmark, writing the first thesis in Danish on the works of Byron and becoming a friend of Hans Christian Andersen. I read an anecdote about Grímur Thomsen on Wikipedia. He was asked by a Belgian aristocrat what language people spoke in Iceland. Grímur told him that they spoke Icelandic, the ancient Nordic tongue in which the poems of the Edda were written. ‘Oh, of course you are talking about the educated elite,’ said the Belgian. ‘But what about the rabble?’ To which Grímur replied: ‘The rabble? They speak Belgian, of course.’

Time passed. Iceland became a republic and Bessastaðir became the residence of the head of state. All our previous presidents have taken a keen interest in the fortunes of the Icelandic language, while at the same time they have had a good command of one or more foreign languages, following the pattern of those who occupied the property in earlier times.

So I am in good company. When I arrived at Bessastaðir in summer last year I had already made my contribution to the ranks of translations: the fact is that when I was young, lacking experience and much education, I translated horror stories by the American writer Stephen King into Icelandic. Not exactly on a par with *Heimskringla*, Homer or Goethe, perhaps; but we should be careful of drawing too great a distinction between high-brow and low-brow culture; let us follow Grímur Thomsen in deflating the idea of the elite versus the rabble.

Dear friends! Institutes have their significance, but the fates of languages are decided outside their walls. Last time I came here, to Háskólabíó, was to hear a concert by the heavy metal group Skálmöld. Its members draw on our ancient heritage about the Nordic gods, giants and other supernatural beings. ‘Vaskir menn á vígamóðri stund / og Valhöll bíður okkar,’ [‘Valiant heroes, slayers all / and Valhalla awaits us’] they sing, or: ‘Hlusti nú hver sem heyrir í mér / hættuleg eru Loka börn’

[‘Listen now all who hear my words / hazardous are Loki’s offspring.’] It might seem that using English would help them gain popularity in the world at large, yet on YouTube you can read comments from their fans saying that even though they don’t understand a word of it, they feel that Icelandic is the ideal language for this ‘Viking metal’.

Yes, languages continue to open the way into other worlds. And they do more than that. They also consolidate the bonds between people in their home countries. I don’t want this to be taken as an empty cliché, but Icelandic is one of the main pillars of the Icelandic nation. This is why it is so important that those who come from abroad to settle here should have a chance to learn Icelandic and be supported to do so. This is why it is so important that we should be able to use Icelandic in the world of information technology, that we should sing, howl and rap in Icelandic and, not least, that we should be able to learn and study other languages here in Iceland.

Dear Vigdís: It was during your presidency that I began my studies abroad, living here and there for various lengths of time. Wherever I went, I took with me one very useful thing: a thick English-Icelandic dictionary with illustrations. In his foreword when it was published in 1984, the author, Sören Sörensson, quoted what you had said that summer at your investiture for your second term as president of Iceland:

All nations have a self-image that is woven from many different threads. One of the most important of these is certainty about where one lives. To go away, even just from one’s house, and be able to find one’s way back. What is this ability based on – the assurance with which an Icelander can find the way back to Iceland from anywhere in the world? It will be quite clear to everyone that what unites us all has been summed up succinctly in the words of the poet that apply to our times no less than the past:

Land, þjóð og tunga, þrenning sönn og ein,  
þér var ég gefinn barn á móðurkné;  
ég lék hjá þér við læk og blóm og stein,  
þú leiddir mig í orðs þíns háu vé.

[Land, people, language; verity triune,  
To you I was entrusted, child at my mother’s knee;

My playmate then, by stream, by flower and stone,  
You led me to your word's deep mystery.]

Dear friends, ladies and gentlemen: May the Vigdís Finnbogadóttir International Centre thrive and develop in its magnificent new premises. May they be open and caressed by fresh currents. Today is the first day of summer: spring is here – or at least it will be shortly. Heinrich Heine wrote a poem about the season. I put his 'Frühling' into Google Translate. What came out included the lines: 'skógurinn og sviðin eru græn / vorið er birt' ['the forest and the sheeps' heads are green / spring is published']. So there is full reason why we will still need a knowledge of foreign languages in the future, not least so as to be able to cultivate our own. Instead, I should like to leave you with the superb rendering by Jónas Hallgrímsson, which will give us something to think about as we go over to the new centre:

Vorið góða, grænt og hlýtt,  
græðir fjör um dalinn,  
allt er nú sem orðið nýtt,  
ærnar, kýr og smalinn.

[Gentle, green, returning spring  
gives the valley life anew.  
Re-created's everything:  
flocks and herds – and shepherd too.]