

**Address by Jón Atli Benediktsson, Rector of the University of
Iceland, at the 48th Annual Meeting of the North East Linguistic
Society. Held at Radisson Blu Hotel Saga, Friday 27 October 2017, 9
a.m.**

Ladies and gentlemen,

A very good morning to you all. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you here on behalf of the University of Iceland, and it is an honour to open the 48th Annual Meeting of the North East Linguistic Society, NELS 2017.

As all of you know, Iceland is a remote and small country. For this reason, the humanities at the University of Iceland bear a special importance for the Icelandic people. Within the School of Humanities at the University of Iceland, this applies particularly to the fields of history and linguistics. Despite its small size, Iceland has its own rich history and language. And outside the University of Iceland, Icelandic history and important language are rarely researched or taught.

Due to the small size of the Icelandic speech community, our language is vulnerable and battles the pressure and influences of more prominent languages, particularly English. Currently, the Icelandic language is also in danger of being the odd one out—so to speak—and, thus, can potentially be overlooked when it comes to the digital revolution. It is, therefore, highly important to focus our attention particularly on language technology, to ensure that

Icelandic remains a living language in the future. The University of Iceland has taken a decisive stance in this regard but we can do much better and need to strengthen our efforts in collaboration with the Icelandic government.

The University of Iceland prides itself in having had outstanding scholars in the field of linguistics ever since the University's establishment in 1911. These scholars—through their research and teaching – have made invaluable contributions to the acquisition, dissemination, and preservation of Icelandic language, culture, and history.

The humanities are a cornerstone of the University of Iceland, and all major research areas relevant to this field are taught here, at all levels of study: undergraduate, masters, and PhD. The humanities are also one of the most powerful research areas of the University, and have achieved striking success on the international level. The University of Iceland was, for example, ranked in 201st to 250th place on the 2017-2018 Times Higher Education World University Rankings for the humanities. We are very proud of this achievement which is achieved in extremely hard international competition.

NELS, the conference of the North East Linguistic Society, operates as the name suggests on the east coast of the United States and eastern Canada. The University of Iceland has long held strong ties with this geographical region, particularly with regard to this academic field. In fact, the majority of linguists that are currently faculty members at

the University of Iceland—many of whom having worked here for decades—have studied at universities in places where NELS operates. It is important to mention one particular name from the past, Hreinn Benediktsson. He received his doctorate at Harvard in 1958 under the supervision of Roman Jakobsson. Benediktsson became Professor at the University of Iceland the same year and was one of the pioneers in establishing modern linguistics.

Benediktsson's student, Höskuldur Þráinsson, went to Harvard during the 1970s and received his doctorate from there in 1979. He became Professor at the University of Iceland in 1981, and has been one of the pillars on which the field of Icelandic linguistics rests. Prof. Þráinsson was the first Icelander to present at a NELS conference in 1976. He was Visiting Professor at Harvard from 1991 to 1995. His work has been very important in introducing Icelandic and various unique characteristics of the language to the field of linguistics on an international level. His contributions are one of the major reasons why Icelandic is often used as an example in publications on linguistics, particularly with regard to syntax. Prof. Þráinsson is one of the invited speakers at this year's NELS conference.

Many Icelandic linguists followed in Prof. Þráinsson's footsteps and all received their doctorates in the eastern parts of the United States and Canada during the 1990s and are now employed at the University of Iceland. And this year, three linguists began their employment at the University of Iceland, all of whom completed

their doctorates in the same geographical area during the past two years. These examples show how closely linked the University of Iceland is with the birthplace—so to speak—of this conference.

The University of Iceland has a special connection with Cornell University, due to the Fiske Icelandic Collection, one of the three largest collections on Icelandic literature and culture outside of Iceland. During the past three decades, the University of Iceland has sent graduate students to Cornell to teach Icelandic. These students often stayed longer than expected, going on to enrol in the university's PhD programme. Some of them later returned to Iceland to teach at the University of Iceland. This is one of the reasons why the number of Icelandic linguists with a PhD degree from Cornell is higher than from any other university.

Linguists from the University of Iceland have also actively collaborated with teachers from universities in the NELS region. Researchers from the University of Pennsylvania and New York University, for example, participated in major projects run by Icelandic linguists.

The previous NELS conferences have always been held at institutions in the eastern parts of the United States and Canada. This is the first time NELS is held outside North America. The University of Iceland is proud to host the conference this time around. It is a great honour for the University, for the field of Icelandic linguistics, and for

Icelandic linguists that such a renowned conference takes place in our country.

Dear guests, I hereby declare the 48th Annual Meeting of the North East Linguistic Society open, and would like to wish you an enjoyable and productive conference over the coming days.

Thank you.