

# LautSchriftSprache | ScriptandSound

Edited by  
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LSS 1  
Variation within and among Writing Systems

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Paola Cotticelli-Kurras / Alfredo Rizza (eds.)

## Variation within and among Writing Systems

Concepts and Methods in the Analysis of  
Ancient Written Documents

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# Z in Icelandic. The vicissitudes of a letter over the centuries

Fabrizio D. Raschellà

## Abstract

Considered a ‘superfluous’ letter by Icelandic grammarians since the beginnings of manuscript tradition, the letter *z* has survived in Icelandic writing without a break, albeit with variable denotative functions, until very recent times. After presenting a historical and comparative synopsis of the use of this letter in classical and medieval vernacular orthographies, the present investigation attempts to define the main phases of the history of the Icelandic *z* by highlighting the changes of its denotative value and the underlying grapho-phonemic relations.

## 1. Introductory remarks

*Z* is at present – together with *c*, *q*, and *w* – one the four ‘redundant’ or ‘additional’ letters<sup>1</sup> of the Icelandic alphabet. In other words it is not properly part of that alphabet but occasionally appears in Icelandic texts in words and names of foreign origin that are not adapted to Icelandic spelling.<sup>2</sup> Yet, while the other three letters have not been used for centuries, the disappearance of *z* from Icelandic writing dates back to only a few decades ago.

After a centuries-old existence, though often marked by the absence of any firm rule, this letter was officially abolished from the Icelandic alphabet with an ordinance of the Icelandic Ministry of Education on 4 September 1973. The ordinance reads as follows:<sup>3</sup>

- I. The following rules shall be applied in the teaching of spelling in schools, in textbooks published or funded with public money as well as in official documents:
- II. *Z* is not to be written for an original dental sound (d, ð, t) + s where the dental sound has disappeared in actual pronunciation.

By way of guidance, reference is made to the following items:[...]<sup>4</sup>

This was the epilogue (at least temporarily, even though a reconsideration of the matter appears quite improbable)<sup>5</sup> of a quarrel that began in the 1930s reflecting the indeterminacy and the variability in the use of this letter in Icelandic that dates back to the very beginning of manuscript tradition.

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- 1 In Icelandic, *umframir bókstafir* and *viðbótar(bók)stafir* (or *aukalegir bókstafir*), respectively. See e.g. the entry “stafróf” in Mördur Árnason (2007: 965), Jón G. Þorsteinsson (2007) and Ari P. Kristinsson (2015).
  - 2 Only a few exceptions are admitted for some Icelandic proper names of foreign origin or family names which traditionally contain a *z*, e.g. *Zóphanías*, *Zakarias*; *Zimsen*, *Zoëga*; *Haralz*, *Sigurz*, etc. (cf. *Auglýsing um íslenska stafsetningu* (‘Ordinance on Icelandic orthography’) nr. 132/1974 + 261/1977, 2. k., 3. gr., e.-f., issued by the Icelandic Ministry of Education).
  - 3 Considering that the present paper is also intended for a public of non-specialists, quotations from Icelandic texts are first given in English translation and then reported in their original form in the footnotes.
  - 4 *I. Eftirfarandi reglur skulu gilda um stafsetningarkennslu í skólum, um kennslubækur útgefnar eða styrktar af ríkisfé, svo og um embættisgögn, sem út eru gefin. | II. Ekki skal rita z fyrir upprunalegt tannhljóð (d, ð, t) + s, þar sem tannhljóðið er fallið brott í eðlilegum framburði. | Til leiðbeiningar skal bent á eftirfarandi atriði: | [...] (Auglýsing um afnám Z (‘Ordinance on the abolition of Z’) nr. 272/1973).*
  - 5 On the substantial stability of contemporary writing systems and their reluctance to introduce changes unless justified by rule simplification, and specifically concerning Icelandic orthography, see Stefán Pálsson et al. (2012: 66).

Before proceeding to outline the history of the letter *z* in Icelandic writing, it may be useful to have a look at its Latin background and to briefly consider its status in other medieval vernaculars, especially those belonging to the Germanic area. Of course, due to limitations of space, this will be possible here only in very broad outline.

## 2. The Latin background

*Z* was originally introduced into the archaic Latin alphabet from a Western version of the Greek alphabet used by the Etruscans in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC and was given the same place, i.e. the seventh, as in the Greek alphabet (where, in turn, this letter had been imported from the Phoenician alphabet). In the course of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC it was removed from the Latin alphabet (and replaced by the new letter *G*), but it was then reintroduced in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, after the Roman conquest of Greece, when it was placed at the end of the alphabet, which remained its definitive position, as most Latin-based alphabets still show today.<sup>6</sup>

Historical evidence of the phonetic value of *z* in Greek and Latin is scanty and rather inaccurate. What seems certain is that in ancient and classical Greek the letter *zeta* (*Z*, ζ) represented a compound sound containing the voiced plosive [d] and the sibilant [z] (the latter as an allophone of /s/). Scholarly opinion diverges as to the sequence of the two components, i.e. [dz] – a voiced affricate – or [zd].<sup>7</sup> The sources, starting from the works of the ancient Greek grammarians, are not univocal in this regard. It is, in fact, very likely that both combinations existed as diatopic and/or diachronic variants. In any case, it is generally accepted that the transition to the simple voiced sibilant [z], which has been proper of this consonant in Greek up to the present day, was already under way as early as in the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>8</sup>

Latin grammarians deal with *z* much more extensively than Greek grammarians do, but are often vague and partly discordant. All of them agree in asserting that *z*, along with *y*, is a Greek letter that was introduced into the Latin alphabet only in order to transcribe and read properly (*scribere et enunciare proprio sono*)<sup>9</sup> Greek words and names; for this reason both *y* and *z* are sometimes called *litterae peregrinae* ('foreign letters'). Most of them also agree in considering *z* a *semivocalis*, i.e. a letter representing a continuant consonant on a par with *l*, *r*, *m*, *n*, *f*, *s* and (partially) *x*. But exceptions are not few, and outstanding grammarians like Verrius Flaccus (1<sup>st</sup> century BC–1<sup>st</sup> century AD) and Audax (6<sup>th</sup> century) assign it to the *mutae*, i.e. plosives. In fact, neither of the two attributions seems fully appropriate, since *z* (like *x*) is always described as a 'double' (*duplex*), i.e. compound, consonant, combining a plosive (*d*) and a continuant (*s*) element, irrespective of their order. Therefore both the spellings *ds* and *sd* were used in broad Latin transcriptions of Greek words and names,<sup>10</sup> although in word-medial position between vowels the notation *ss* was also very frequent.<sup>11</sup> As a 'double conso-

6 Cf. Sampson (1985: 108–110).

7 For a thorough discussion, see Bailey (1968).

8 Sturtevant (1940: 93); Bailey (1968: 178, 181); Allen (1987: 58).

9 Asper, *Ars maior* (CGL, <http://kaali.linguist.jussieu.fr/CGL/text.jsp?id=T06&topic=de%20litteris&ref=5,547,11-548,4>).

10 Some examples are: *dseferus* and *Medsentius* for *zephyrus* and *Mezentius*, respectively (e.g. in Julian of Toledo, 7<sup>th</sup> c.); *sdeferus* and *Mesdentius*, again, for *zephyrus* and *Mezentius* (e.g. in Marius Victorinus [attributed to Palaemon], 4<sup>th</sup> c., and Audax, 6<sup>th</sup> c.). For each of the authors mentioned, see the respective sections "De litteris" in CGL, <http://kaali.linguist.jussieu.fr/CGL/text.jsp?textByTopic=de%20litteris>.

11 E.g. *Messentius*, *malacisso*, *massa*, for *Mezentius*, *malacizo* 'to soften', *maza* 'frumenty', respectively (in Velius Longus, 2<sup>nd</sup> c.; Diomedes, 4<sup>th</sup> c.; Priscian, 6<sup>th</sup> c.; Cassiodorus, 6<sup>th</sup> c.); but also, initially, as *s*: e.g. *Sethus* for *Zethus*

nant', *z* is also considered to be long, although some Latin grammarians distinguish between a short and a long variant of *z*,<sup>12</sup> in word-initial and in intervocalic position respectively, but only for metrical purposes.

The presence of a *voiceless* dental or palatal affricate, i.e. [ts] or [tʃ], as the result of the mutation of the plosives [t] and [k] in certain phonological contexts, was known in spoken Latin from the first centuries of the Christian era, but was not, however, expressed in standard writing.<sup>13</sup> The earliest significant instances of *z*, alone or combined with other letters (for example *tz*, *zz*, *cz*), as a means to express a voiceless affricate in Latin orthography – where it replaced or completed the traditional spelling *c* before front vowels and *t* before unstressed prevocalic *i* – make their appearance at a later date and are often produced by interference with the writing of the nascent Romance vernaculars, especially Italian.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. *Z* in medieval Germanic languages

With the diffusion of literacy and the use of the Latin alphabet in the Western world during the medieval period, the letter *z* also came to be applied in the writing of vernacular languages, as previously mentioned. Among the Germanic vernaculars that made a most intensive use of *z* were Old and Middle High German and the Old Scandinavian languages, in particular Old Icelandic.<sup>15</sup> The sound values assumed by this letter in the two language areas were much the same, and, as we will see below, this fact is probably not entirely accidental.

The grapho-phonemic status of *z* in Old High German was recently reviewed in broad outline by Annina Seiler in a study devoted to the use of the so-called Latin 'superfluous letters' (*litterae superfluae*) in old West Germanic vernaculars<sup>16</sup> and I refer to that work for precise information.

In Old High German, as well as in Middle High German, *z* was used, alone or in combination with other letters, including *z* itself (i.e. as *zz*), to denote the twofold outcome of Proto-Germanic \*/t/ subsequent to the High German consonant shift, thus expressing a double phonetic value: an affricate and a continuant, depending on phonological context.<sup>17</sup> What is of interest for the present discussion is that, in certain contexts, the Old High German *z* denoted

(Priscian). Still another rendering, rarer than those mentioned so far and probably the oldest one, was *d(i)*, as in *diefrus* for *zephyrus* (Audax) and *Medentius* for *Mezentius* (Priscian). All the examples referred to are taken from CGL (cf. the preceding note). For a general discussion on the use and the phonetic values of *z* in Latin, see Sturtevant (1940: 175–176), Allen (1978: 45–46) and, especially for the medieval period, Stotz (1996: 323–327).

12 For instance Velius Longus, Cleodnius (5<sup>th</sup> c.), and Julian of Toledo. For bibliographical references, see the two preceding notes.

13 We have in the 5<sup>th</sup>-century grammarian Papirius or Papirianus the first description of this phenomenon, which is presented as the intrusion of a *z* between a *t* and a following unstressed prevocalic *i* (CGL, <http://kaali.linguist.jussieu.fr/CGL/text.jsp?topic=de%20orthographia&ref=7,216,8-14>). Since in this context only a voiceless element is admissible, it follows that Papiri(an)us also knew a voiceless variant of *z*. See also, in this regard, Stotz (1996: 324–325).

14 Cf. Maraschio (1993: 149–152, *passim*).

15 A fairly regular use of *z* is also found in Old Frisian and, to a lesser extent, in Middle English, though with very different functions in each language (see Bremmer 2009: 49–50 for Old Frisian and Jordan 1974: 35 and 188–189 for Middle English), while it was extremely rare in Old English and Old Low Franconian (the earliest known form of Dutch). Its use was also sporadic in Middle Low German and Middle Dutch, where *s* was mostly used to denote both [s] and [z] (see Lasch 1914: 172 for Middle Low German and Loey 1949: 116 for Middle Dutch).

16 Seiler (2011: esp. 176–178).

17 See Braune (2004: 152–157) and Paul (2007: 169–173) for Old High German and Middle High German notations respectively.



a voiceless dental affricate, [ts], which is precisely the value it seems to have had – originally at least – in Old Icelandic. Another noteworthy aspect is that its other positional variant, presumably a voiceless dental sibilant, [s̥],<sup>18</sup> underwent in the late Middle Ages a change similar to that which seems to have occurred in Icelandic in certain phonetic environments, that is to say the transition to a voiceless alveolar sibilant, [s], and the consequent merger with the phoneme /s/, graphically represented by *s(s)*.

As for the choice of Old German scribes to denote with *z* both phonemes derived from Proto-Germanic \*/t/, it is very likely that it was suggested by certain non-standard uses of this letter in early and high medieval Latin.<sup>19</sup> One might assume that the same thing happened with the Scandinavian, in particular the Icelandic, *z*. This cannot be excluded *a priori*; yet considering that Scandinavians began to apply the Latin alphabet to their vernaculars much later than Germans, it seems more reasonable to think that they availed themselves of an already existing, foreign vernacular model, as they certainly did for other letters and orthographic conventions occurring in early Scandinavian writings.<sup>20</sup> As far as the Icelandic *z* is concerned, that model may actually have been the German one. Such an assumption seems to be corroborated by the fact that close ties existed between Iceland and Germany (especially northern Germany) at the time of Iceland's Christianization. It will suffice to mention that some of the first missionaries in Iceland, in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century, were Germans or people closely connected to the German milieu who had received their assignment from the Archbishopric of Bremen.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the first Icelandic bishops, in the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>22</sup> received their education in Germany and must therefore have been acquainted, to some extent at least, with German vernacular writings and their orthographic conventions. On the other hand, significant parallels between medieval Icelandic and German scribal conventions have been pointed out in previous research on Old Icelandic writing, and the possibility that some orthographic features may have been imported to Iceland from Germany is more than a mere conjecture.<sup>23</sup>

18 Cf. Braune (2004: 167).

19 I refer to what has been observed above (§ 2) with regard to *z* denoting the voiceless affricate [ts] and the occasional use of *ss* for *z* in word-medial position. Seiler (2011: 177–178) points to a passage in Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* as a possible source of inspiration for the use of *z* also for the fricative [s̥] by German scribes.

20 This aspect of Icelandic orthography is often at the centre of discussion in Hreinn Benediktsson's introduction to his volume *Early Icelandic Script* (Hreinn Benediktsson 1965). This is the most extensive and exhaustive treatment of early Icelandic orthography to date, and reference can be made to it for all questions concerning the origins and the development of Icelandic writing until about 1300. A summary of the historical premises of foreign influences on Icelandic writing is found at pp. 35–40.

21 The first mission (981–985) was guided by the Saxon bishop Frederick (Friðrekr in Icelandic sources) with the assistance of the Icelander Þorvaldr Koðránsson, who had been converted to the Christian faith by the bishop himself in Germany. Other early missionaries who were of German provenance or active in the Archbishopric of Bremen were the Saxon priest Thangbrand (Icel. Þangbrandr), the English bishops Bernard 'the book-learned' (Bjarnharðr hinn bókvísi) and Rudolph (Hróðólfr) of Abingdon, and the German bishop Bernard the Saxon (Bjarnharðr hinn saxneski). All these figures are mentioned in Old Icelandic literary sources dealing with the conversion of Iceland, especially in *Íslendingabók* ('The Book of the Icelanders') and *Kristni saga* ('The Book of Christianity'); see Grønlie (2006: in partic. 10 and 26–27 n. 77).

22 Ísleifr Gizurarson (1056–1080) and his son Gizurr Ísleifsson (1082–1118). Accounts of their religious training in Germany and their subsequent relations with the Archbishopric of Bremen are found, for example, in *Kristni saga* and *Hungrvaka* (see Grønlie 2006: 51–52 and Basset 2013: 46–47 and 52–53, respectively).

23 Cf. Hreinn Benediktsson (1965: 31–34).

## 4. Z in Icelandic

### 4.1. The age of manuscript writing (The medieval period)

The letter *z* is found in Icelandic vernacular texts from the very beginning of manuscript tradition. In the earliest period (12<sup>th</sup> to mid-13<sup>th</sup> century) it was used, side-by-side with the corresponding analytic notations, for any combination of dental consonant + /s/, i.e. /ds/, /ts/ and /ps/ (*ðs*). Some examples are: *lanz* for *lands* (gen. sg. of *land* 'land'), *elz* for *elds* (gen. sg. of *eldr* 'fire'), *aliz* for *álits* (gen. of *álit* 'appearance'), *sezcz* for *setsk* (pres. ind. middle voice from *setja* 'to set'), *qvazcz* for *kvaðsk* (pret. ind. middle voice from *kveða* 'to say'), *sízt* for *síðst* 'least' (cf. compar. *síðr* 'less'). Moreover, it frequently occurred in place of *s* after /ll/ and /nn/, as in *allz* for *alls* (gen. sg. masc./nt. of *allr* 'all'), *ellztr* for *ellstr* 'oldest' (cf. compar. *ellri* 'older'), *mannz* for *manns* (gen. sg. of *maðr* 'man'), *finnzc* for *finnsk* (pres. ind. middle voice from *finna* 'to find').<sup>24</sup> According to Hreinn Benediktsson (1965: 75), these notations imply on the one hand the merger of /d/, /t/ and /p/ before /s/ into a plosive consonant identifiable with /t/ and on the other the development of a dental plosive in the clusters /lls/ and /nns/ producing their merger with /lds/ and /nds/ respectively. However, noting that *z* alternates with the spelling *ts* not only where it stands for original /t/ + /s/ but also where it represents original /d/ or /p/ + /s/, Hreinn concludes that the phonemic value of *z* must have been /ts/ in all cases.<sup>25</sup>

But what notion of *z* did medieval Icelanders themselves have?

The first direct and explicit information about the use and the sound value of *z* in Icelandic comes from the so-called *First Grammatical Treatise*, an anonymous writing on Icelandic orthography and phonology from the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>26</sup> According to its author, *z* is the result of the merger of two Hebrew letters, *daleth* and *sade*, corresponding to the Latin *d* and *s* respectively, and it is a Hebrew letter itself, although also used in the Latin alphabet.<sup>27</sup> This striking statement, which has no counterpart outside of this unique 12<sup>th</sup>-century Icelandic grammatical work, has raised much perplexity among scholars of Old Norse and still remains a puzzle. The author then adds that this letter is not necessary in Icelandic, because it always stands for a combination of *d* and *s*, and that on the few occasions when it is needed he prefers to write *ds*; therefore he rejects it from the Icelandic alphabet.<sup>28</sup> However, it appears that this rule was not followed – at least not consistently – by any Icelandic scribe, and *z* continued to be used, together with other allegedly superfluous letters (like *x*), in Icelandic writing.<sup>29</sup> In spite of all this, we get a first-hand information about the sound value of *z* in 12<sup>th</sup>-century Icelandic from the treatise. On the basis of our knowledge of the phonemic status of dental consonants in medieval Icelandic and allowing for some degree of descriptive approxima-

24 All examples are taken from Hreinn Benediktsson (1965: 74–75).

25 Hreinn Benediktsson (1965: 75). The same result had been achieved much earlier by Hoffory (1885: 79–96) through the careful analysis of scribal praxis in the earliest Icelandic manuscripts.

26 The standard edition of this work, provided with a thorough introduction and commentary as well as with an English translation, is that by Hreinn Benediktsson (1972). Other valuable editions of the treatise exist, which are not mentioned here for the sake of brevity.

27 Ed. Hreinn Benediktsson (1972: 238).

28 *Ibid.*

29 Cf. Kvaran (2000).

tion on the part of the author of the treatise,<sup>30</sup> we can identify such value with the cluster [ts], which is in accordance with Hreinn Benediktsson's inference mentioned above.<sup>31</sup>

Around the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century a distinguished Icelandic poet and Latin scholar, Óláfr Þórðarson, wrote a grammatical and rhetorical treatise, traditionally known as the *Third Grammatical Treatise*,<sup>32</sup> which, in the first part, includes a discussion of the Latin alphabet compared to the Norse runic alphabet. In dealing with *z*, Óláfr states that it is a Greek letter having the sound of two letters, *d* and *s* or *t* and *s*. He further observes that *z* shares its composite character with *x*, and that neither of these letters is found in the original Latin and runic alphabets, but were added later "because it seems quicker to write one letter than two".<sup>33</sup> Óláfr's words very closely echo those of Latin grammarians and provide further evidence of what the sound value of *z* must have been, not only in Latin but also in 13<sup>th</sup>-century Icelandic.

A quite different perspective is that which characterizes the so-called *Second Grammatical Treatise*, another work on Icelandic orthography written in all likelihood in the last decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>34</sup> Here a peculiar descriptive approach is applied to the letters of the Icelandic alphabet: they are classified according to the position – initial, medial, final, variable – they occupy in the syllable. Moreover, each letter is accompanied by its respective name, which is given according to the letter's positional characteristics. The letter *z* is assigned to the group of those letters that can only occur in syllable-final position, together with *ð*, *x*, *c* and several abbreviation marks. Its name is *þet*, a form clearly derived from the Greek-Latin name *zeta*.<sup>35</sup> Unlike the other two treatises, nothing is said here about the sound value of *z*; on the other hand, the author of the *Second Grammatical Treatise* does not consider this letter 'superfluous'. Combined together these two facts are clear proof that *z* had acquired full citizenship in Icelandic writing by the late 13<sup>th</sup> century and that no justification of its use was needed any longer.

In light of these three authoritative views we can now consider, albeit in very broad terms, the development of *z* in Icelandic writing from about the 12<sup>th</sup> century to the early modern period. We will do this by means of a paradigmatic example.

A particularly suitable observation post for the variation and the development of the use of *z* in medieval Icelandic is the inflection of the verbal middle voice.<sup>36</sup> The most common endings of this form in the earliest Icelandic manuscripts were *-mk* for the 1<sup>st</sup> ps. sg. (*ek*

30 The choice of /d/ (*d*) out of three possible Icelandic dentals was probably suggested to the author by his reading of Latin grammatical works, where *d* was the only dental consonant mentioned as a constituent of *z* (see above, § 2).

31 For a thorough discussion of the entire passage on *z*, see Hreinn Benediktsson (1972: 239–240, notes to the critical text, and 97–98, commentary).

32 The standard edition of the treatise is still that by Björn Magnússon Ólsen (1884), although other editions have since appeared; the most recent one is Tarrin Wills's partial edition (Wills 2001), which is limited to the treatise's first part – the only relevant one for the purpose of the present discussion – and which also contains an English translation.

33 *Því [...] at skjótara þykkir at rita einn staf en tvá* (ed. Wills 2001: 88 and 89; cf. ed. Ólsen 1884: 46).

34 For this dating, which puts the composition of the treatise some decades later than usually assumed – and therefore leads us to consider it, from a strictly chronological point of view, the *third* of the four grammatical treatises handed down to us from medieval Iceland – see Raschellà (1982: 126–132).

35 On the reasons that may have led the author of the treatise to substitute the initial *z* with *þ*, see Raschellà (1982: 103).

36 The Icelandic middle voice (Icel. *miðmynd*), sometimes also called medio-passive, basically expresses three different action types: reflexive, reciprocal, and passive. For example, the middle voice of the verb *kalla* 'to call', Old Icel. *kallask*, can, according to the context, have the meaning 'to call oneself', 'to call each other' or 'to be called'. In what follows I will resort to forms from this verb to exemplify the changes that occurred in middle voice endings in medieval Icelandic. As regards scholarly research on this subject, the most comprehensive

*køllumk*) and *-sk* for all other persons<sup>37</sup> (e.g. *hann kallask*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ps. sg. masc.), originating, respectively, from the objective and reflexive pronominal forms *mik* ‘me’ and *sik* ‘oneself’ in enclitic position. At a very early date (ca 1200) a levelling process took place which resulted in the transformation of the two endings in, respectively, *-mzk* (by extension of the ending of the 1<sup>st</sup> ps. pl. to the 1<sup>st</sup> ps. sg.) and *-zk* (originally exclusive to those forms whose stem ended in a dental consonant or /ll/ or /nn/ and now extended to all forms).<sup>38</sup> Around 1300, the 1<sup>st</sup> ps. sg. was superseded by the common form of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> ps. sg. (*þú, hann kallazk*), which brought about the complete unification of middle voice endings under a single form, *-zk*. The next step was the loss of the final *-k* (i.e. *kallazk* > *kallaz*); some instances of the disappearance of this letter had already emerged in the 13<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>39</sup> but from 1300 onwards the phenomenon assumed a general character. In this way, *-z* became the only middle voice marker, completely detached from any evident etymological reference. However, a further development soon made its entry: from about the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, the new spellings *-zt*, *-zst* and *-st* were added to or substituted the simple *-z* (*kallazt, kallazst, kallast*), yet without superseding it completely.<sup>40</sup> From that time the various spellings of the middle voice ending would mingle with each other without any apparent rule and coexist in Icelandic until early modern times, although the notation *-st* – reflecting, as we will see shortly, the new, actual pronunciation – became more and more widespread from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards.<sup>41</sup>

As can be seen, the overall picture of middle voice endings was, from a strictly notational perspective, rather fluid during the entire period. As far as sound value is concerned, the chronological boundary-line was represented by the inversion of the affricate cluster [ts] into the sequence [st] (an apparent case of metathesis<sup>42</sup>), which was part of a more general transformation of this cluster in all phonological environments: the other main changes were [s] in word-medial position before consonants (e.g. *veizla* [veitsla] > [veisla] ‘aid; reception’) and [ss] between vowels (e.g. *bleza* [bletsa] > [blessa] ‘to bless’).<sup>43</sup> The problem is that these changes were not always nor consistently displayed in writing. So the question arises: until when did *z* represent the affricate and when did it start to assume different values? There is obviously no definite answer to this question: the instability and variability of spelling are so strong as to prevent us from accurately determining when the single changes took place. Although sporadic instances of *s(s)* in place of normal *z* are already found in the earliest written sources, scholars are generally inclined to date the transition from affricate to simple

and accurate investigation of the Icelandic middle voice to date is that by Kjartan G. Ottósson (1992), which provides, among others things, a detailed historical survey of this grammatical form.

- 37 For practical reasons, I include the ending of the 1<sup>st</sup> ps. pl. *-m(s)k* in the superordinate category of *sk*-endings.  
 38 The reason for the extension of *-zk* to all previous *-sk* endings is, in all likelihood, due to the high frequency and predominance of the former type over the latter.  
 39 Hoffory (1885: esp. 96); Noreen (1923: 370); Björn K. Þórólfsson (1925: 67, 69).  
 40 Noreen (1923: 371); Björn K. Þórólfsson (1925: 67); Stefán Karlsson (2004: 31).  
 41 Cf. Kjartan G. Ottósson (1992: 124–125).  
 42 Other explanations of this change have been proposed which are not of immediate relevance for the present discussion; see Kjartan G. Ottósson (1992: 7–10). In the same section of Kjartan’s book (pp. 5–11) the various hypotheses proposed so far for the transition of the middle voice ending from original *-sk* to *-st* are presented and briefly discussed. See also n. 46 below.  
 43 The disappearance of [ts] through the various processes mentioned – i.e. (1) inversion to [st] in middle voice endings; (2) reduction to [s] (loss of the dental element) word-medially before consonants; (3) transformation into [ss] (backward assimilation) between vowels – can be structurally explained by the relatively low frequency and the limited functional load of this cluster, in fact the only affricate in the Old Icelandic (sub-phonemic) consonant system. Incidentally, it is interesting to observe that sporadic occurrences of *z* for [st] (as a product of metathesis from [ts]) are also found in medieval Latin writing; see Stotz (1996: 326) for references.

sibilant in the 13<sup>th</sup> century;<sup>44</sup> on the other hand, manuscript evidence seems to indicate that the change was not fully accomplished before the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>45</sup> However, we can reasonably assume that the value of *z* was [ts] in all phonological contexts until it came to be associated or interchanged with *s*, i.e. until about 1300. As far as the middle voice ending is concerned, the process of change from [ts] to [st] may well have started in the time when the ending was generally denoted by *z* alone, i.e. from about 1300.<sup>46</sup> It should be further mentioned that the new value [st] soon came to be associated with *z* in all of its occurrences in unstressed word-final position. As a consequence, the use of this letter was analogically extended to other cases of [st] in unstressed final syllables, as in the superlative suffix *-(a)st*, which was frequently spelled *-(a)z* (e.g. *optaz* for *optast* ‘oftenest, most of the time’, *lengz* for *lengst* ‘longest’, etc.).<sup>47</sup> When, around 1350, a pleonastic *t* – or even a hyper-pleonastic *st* – was added to word-final *z*, this letter lost, in this specific context, any distinctive value of its own and became virtually equivalent to *s*; and, actually, *-st* is the spelling which would progressively gain ground and become the definitive form of the Icelandic middle voice ending. As for the other relevant phonological changes referred to above, it may be assumed that they gradually developed in the course of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.

#### 4.2. The modern period (16<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> century)

The introduction of printing, which in Iceland took place around 1530, did not produce substantial changes in orthography: in the earliest stages of printing many of the same orthographic conventions were used in books as in manuscripts, and the overall orthographic system remained largely unchanged for the next two centuries.<sup>48</sup> This of course also applied to the letter *z*.

An extensive use of *z* is made in Oddur Gottskálksson’s translation of the New Testament, the first Icelandic printed book (1540). There the *z* often occurs pleonastically in place of *s* after dental consonants (e.g. *vondzka* for *vondska* ‘wickedness’, *brotz* for *brots*, gen. of *brot* ‘transgression’, etc.).<sup>49</sup> In other positions it replaces or alternates with *s* before consonants, especially before *t* in unstressed syllables (the typical case being the superlative suffix, as mentioned above).<sup>50</sup> In verbal middle endings it seldom occurs alone, but is found in a variety of combinations with *s*, *t*, and *d*, as the following examples show: *kastazt* (*-zt*, which is the

44 See e.g. Noreen (1923: 198, 223) and Hreinn Benediktsson (1965: 75–76).

45 Cf. Stefán Karlsson (2004: 19) and Kvaran (2000).

46 Quite a different scenario is that outlined by Kjartan G. Ottósson (1992: in part 125–137), who argues in favour of the thesis, originally suggested by Rask (1993 [1818]: 257) and incidentally reposed by Bandle (1956: 177), of a direct change from *-sk* to *-st* mainly on the basis of an assimilation process.

47 Hreinn Benediktsson (1965: 76); Stefán Karlsson (2004: 45); Kvaran (2000).

48 Cf. e.g. Jón Aðalsteinn Jónsson (1959: 71–74), with examples from the Icelandic translation of the New Testament by Oddur Gottskálksson (see below). I take this opportunity to state that much of the information contained in the present section and in the next is based on the essay by Jón Aðalsteinn Jónsson (henceforth abbreviated as JAJ 1959), still the standard work on the history of modern Icelandic orthography (until ca. 1950) after half a century since its publication; it will be explicitly referred to in the main points of discussion. Another useful, though much more succinct, historical survey of Icelandic orthography, covering roughly the period 1820–1920, was written by Jóhannes L. L. Jóhannsson (1922). The most recent investigation of modern Icelandic orthography, to my knowledge, is Guðmundur A. Aðalsteinsson’s BA thesis (2008), which also includes a sketch of the scholarly debate on Icelandic spelling rules in the last three centuries (pp. 5–11).

49 Jón Helgason (1929: 47), with further examples.

50 E.g. *riettazt* for *réttast* (superl. nt. sg. of *réttr* ‘right’); *vitzku* (*tz!*) beside *visku*–gen. of *vizka* ‘wisdom’ (Jón Helgason 1929: 48).

most frequent notation), *villtz* (-tz), *synizst* (-zst), *birstz* (-stz), *kalladz* (-dz);<sup>51</sup> or it is replaced by *s* altogether, as in *borist* and *giorst*<sup>52</sup>. Finally, it is found, alone or preceded by *t*, between vowels, for example in forms of the verb *bleza* ‘to bless’: *blezit*, *blezadr*; *bletza*, *bletzu*[m] etc.<sup>53</sup> Except for the last-mentioned context, all of the above instances clearly show that the underlying sound value of *z* was [s] in all environments. A doubt remains for the intervocalic position, where *z* never alternates or combines with *s*; on the contrary, it is often ‘reinforced’ by the addition of a preceding *t*, which leads one to believe that the affricate pronunciation [ts] was – at least in some variety of Icelandic – still alive in this position in Oddur’s time, or in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>54</sup>

The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries did not produce any notable change in the use of *z*. It can only be presumed that in this lapse of time the last survival, if any, of the affricate [ts] also disappeared and that, consequently, the only sound value expressed by *z* was the fricative [s(s)] – geminate between vowels and simple in all other positions. This is, among other things, what we infer from the fact that those who elaborated orthographic rules during this period, as the philologist Jón Ólafsson frá Grunnavík (1705–1779) and the poet and lawyer Eggert Ólafsson (1726–1768), maintained *z* in observance of tradition (for example in middle voice endings), but regarded it as redundant or unnecessary for practical purposes.<sup>55</sup>

The first attempt to totally eliminate *z* from Icelandic writing was made in 1836 by the Icelandic linguist Konráð Gíslason, who, in an article published in the journal *Fjölnir*, put forward a revolutionary orthographic system for Icelandic, entirely based on actual pronunciation. Konráð’s source of inspiration was an essay written some years earlier by a priest by the name of Árni Helgason. According to the author, such letters as *c*, *q*, *x* and *z* had to be removed from the Icelandic alphabet insofar as they represented sounds that could be expressed by more common letters or letter combinations. As for the *z* in particular, it should be replaced by either *s* or *ds* or *ts* according to context and pronunciation in each case.<sup>56</sup> The spelling system proposed by Konráð found many opponents and actually never spread outside the limited circle of *Fjölnir*’s readers and supporters. In the end, he had to surrender to the overwhelming majority of his opponents and accept, some years later, to reintroduce traditional orthography in his journal, though in a somewhat revised and normalized form.<sup>57</sup>

In 1859 Halldór Kr. Friðriksson, an Icelandic teacher and headmaster at Reykjavík Grammar School, published a handbook of Icelandic orthography in which, endorsing Konráð Gíslason’s revised rules, he supported many of the traditional spelling rules.<sup>58</sup> The handbook soon became very popular and the orthographic pattern it presented was commonly known

51 Jón Helgason (1929: 48–49). The respective normalized forms would be *kastazt*, *villzt*, *synizt*, *birzt*, *kallazt*. These are all neuter middle past participle (or ‘supine’) forms, corresponding to the active infinitives *kasta* ‘to throw’, *villa* ‘to bewilder’, *sýna* ‘to show’, *birta* ‘to reveal’, and *kalla* ‘to call’, respectively.

52 For, respectively, *borizt* and *gjörzt*, i.e. the middle supines of *bera* ‘to bear’ and *gjöra* ‘to make’ (Jón Helgason 1929: 48).

53 Jón Helgason (1929: 48).

54 Cf. Jón Helgason (1929: 48): *Vera má, að z milli sjerhljóða sje = ts* (‘It may be that *z* between vowels equals *ts*’). Valuable evidence of the use and the presumable phonetic values of *z* in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Icelandic is also provided by the so-called *Guðbrandsbiblíja* (‘Gudbrand’s Bible’), the first complete Icelandic translation of the Bible, made by bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson in 1584 (see Bandle 1956: 173–179).

55 Cf. JAJ (1959: 75–76).

56 JAJ (1959: 79–80).

57 JAJ (1959: 84).

58 JAJ (1959: 85); Kvaran (2000); Emília D. Sveinbjörnsdóttir (2014).

as ‘the school spelling’ (*skólastafsetningin*). As for the rules concerning *z*, they were based on etymological principles and were not too distant from those that were in use until 1973.<sup>59</sup>

The following decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were characterized by a series of contrasting positions among scholars as to which principles would be more adequate for modern Icelandic orthography and were, in fact, a period of particular instability in spelling practice. Two of the most prominent Icelandic philologists of the time, Björn Magnússon Ólsen and Finnur Jónsson, took part in the dispute, among other things making a stand in favour of the abolition of *z*,<sup>60</sup> while one of the firmest supporters of its preservation was the above-mentioned Icelandic teacher Halldór Kr. Friðriksson.<sup>61</sup> The basic criticism raised against the preservation of *z* was that this letter, due to the difficulty of its application, was an obstacle to mass literacy,<sup>62</sup> and that the effort made to teach and learn where it should be written was not worthy of the benefit one derived from it.<sup>63</sup> An intermediate position was assumed by the Icelandic Society of Journalists (*Blaðamannafélagið*). According to the Society’s style sheet from 1898, the letter *z* should be retained only “in those words and forms where it appears to be a convenient indication of the word’s origin (e.g. *bezt*, *veizla*; *leizt*, *lizt*)”<sup>64</sup>, otherwise it should be regarded as a useless letter, particularly in middle voice endings like *alízt*, *segízt* etc., which should be written *alíst*, *segíst* etc.<sup>65</sup> The weak foundation and the basic incongruity of such a compromise solution inevitably met with criticism from both the supporters of phonetic spelling and those of etymological spelling.<sup>66</sup>

#### 4.3. The 20<sup>th</sup> century (and beyond)

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the need for a uniform and well-defined Icelandic orthography became increasingly strong, and the time was ripe for a general orthographic reform and stabilization. In 1912, the Akureyri and Reykjavík student associations each submitted to the Icelandic Directorate for Education a petition to regulate, by law, Icelandic orthography by issuing a set of rules valid for the entire country and mandatory in official documents, schoolbooks, and all books printed with public money. Such a spelling system ought to be well-balanced between traditional and phonetic spelling, and as easy as possible to be taught. At the same time they solicited the publication of a spelling dictionary based on those same statutory rules.<sup>67</sup>

It took some years before the requests made by the student associations were taken into serious consideration by the Icelandic government and finally actualized. This happened in

59 *Ibid.*

60 JAJ (1959: 89–92).

61 JAJ (1959: 92–94).

62 For the same reason, Björn Magnússon Ólsen and Finnur Jónsson also supported the substitution of *y* and *y* with *i* and *í* respectively: their point was that, due to their identical pronunciation, these letters caused, together with *z*, the most common spelling errors in the writing of young students and less educated people (JAJ 1959: 89–92 and, with further reference to Ólsen’s criticism, 102).

63 This is, in a nutshell, the concept expressed by Finnur Jónsson in a booklet on Icelandic orthography published in 1909, in which he reaffirmed, in a slightly softened version, the views he had maintained two decades before (cf. JAJ 1959: 105).

64 [...] *i þeim orðum og orðmyndum, er hún þykir vera hentug visbending um uppruna orðsins (t.d. bezt, veizla: leizt, lizt) [...]* (JAJ 1959: 96, quoting from a report by Einar Benediktsson in the newspaper *Dagskrá* of 18 June 1898).

65 *Ibid.*

66 The entire, complex debate is accurately summarized in JAJ (1959: 94–105).

67 Both petitions were published in issue no. 6 (1912) of the school magazine *Skólabláðið* (cf. JAJ 107–108).

1918: on 27 March of that year, for the first time in Iceland's history, a government ordinance was issued in which Icelandic orthography was regulated on the basis of the principles established by a committee of experts.<sup>68</sup> The document basically acknowledged and conferred legal validity on the spelling rules set by the Icelandic Society of Journalists in 1898 with only a few changes. According to these rules, *s* had to be used in place of *z* "in all positions where the *s*-sound is heard"<sup>69</sup>, which is tantamount to saying everywhere. With this, the letter *z* was, in fact, excluded from the Icelandic alphabet. However, this official intervention was not sufficient to settle the question, and the orthographic dispute went on as before.

In 1924, Icelandic teachers held a general meeting where a committee of three experts was appointed with the task of elaborating new proposals for a common Icelandic orthography. The rules set by the teacher convention, which were supported by eminent scholars including the linguist Alexander Jóhannesson and the literary historian Sigurður Nordal, comprised the restoration of *z* in all cases where it had been customarily used before its removal in 1918. The proposal met with wide public approval, and in 1929 a new ordinance on orthographic rules was issued by the Icelandic authorities which basically acknowledged and officialized the rules worked out by the teacher convention five years earlier;<sup>70</sup> at the same time, it established that the government should provide for the publication of a normative spelling dictionary based on such rules.

But, as is to be expected, disagreement and controversies did not cease even after the 1929 ordinance. The decades between 1930 and 1960 were a period of relative calm: although some debate also developed in those years,<sup>71</sup> it had no practical consequences and the spelling rules fixed by law in 1929 remained in force throughout this period and beyond.

During the 1960s – a period in which great attention was devoted in Iceland to matters concerning mass education – there was a widespread opinion that the current Icelandic orthography was too complex to be equally accessible to everybody and that it therefore could be a discriminating social factor. This applied particularly to the letter *z*, which was sometimes called 'the scholars' letter' (*stafur menntamanna*). Therefore, many thought that a simplification was urgently needed.<sup>72</sup>

In May 1973, the Icelandic Ministry of Education appointed a scientific committee, chaired by the linguist Halldór Halldórsson, with the task of reconsidering the current orthographic rules. The principal result of the committee's work was the proposal to abolish the letter *z*. The ministry ratified the committee's proposal and on 4 September of the same year the 'Ordinance on the abolition of *z*' mentioned at the beginning of this paper<sup>73</sup> was published in Iceland's Official Gazette. The ordinance was then reissued with some minor revisions in a new ordinance on orthography in 1974.<sup>74</sup>

68 *Auglýsing um eina og sömu stafsetningu í skólum og á skólabókum* ('Ordinance on one and the same orthography in schools and for schoolbooks'), nr. 15/1918. Cf. JAJ (1959: 110–111).

69 *alstaðar, þar sem s-hljóð heyrir í framburði* (*Ibid.*; JAJ 1959: 111).

70 The ordinance appeared in *Lögbirtingablaðið* ('Iceland's Official Gazette') of 28 February 1929. With regard to *z*, it provided that this letter "should be written for original *ds*, *ðs* and *ts*, in both stem and endings, where the dental (*d*, *ð* or *t*) has disappeared in plain pronunciation, e.g. [...]" (*Rita skal z fyrir upprunalegt ds, ðs, ts, bæði í stofni og endingum, þar sem tannstafurinn (d, ð eða t) er fallinn burt í skýrum framburði, t. d. [...]*); cf. JAJ (1959: 116) and Emilía D. Sveinbjömsdóttir (2014).

71 Cf. JAJ (1959: 117–119).

72 Cf. Guðmundur A. Aðalsteinsson (2008: 10).

73 Cf. n. 4 above.

74 *Auglýsing um íslenska stafsetningu nr. 132/1974* (cf. n. 2 above).



This action by the Icelandic government caused numerous and sometimes harsh reactions from Icelanders of all classes, but especially from the academic and political milieus. The debate found great resonance in the Icelandic media, notably in the press, in the years immediately following the enactment of the ordinance: opinions and comments of scholars, writers, journalists, and politicians were frequently recorded in newspapers and magazines of the time.<sup>75</sup>

In 1976, a conference was organized by the Ministry of Education to discuss proposals which had been put forward for the revision of the 1973 and 1974 regulations since their enactment. At the centre of discussion also this time were the contrasting views on the letter *z*: some of the participants longed for its rehabilitation in common use, others were firmly determined to leave the new orthographic rules unchanged and, possibly, to introduce further simplifications. The majority was on the side of the latter party and the conference ended with no modification of the existing rules.<sup>76</sup>

Although controversies among supporters and opponents of *z* have not completely calmed down since then<sup>77</sup> and nothing can be taken for granted, the possibility for *z* to be reintroduced into Icelandic writing has progressively faded with time, and, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper,<sup>78</sup> it seems highly improbable that present and future generations of Icelanders will ever go back to using this letter, which for centuries has been cause for pride and trouble in Icelandic writing.

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75 It is impossible to mention here even the most prominent personalities who took active part in the debate through the media. Therefore I limit myself to mentioning, as a particularly significant example, a collective interview that appeared in the newspaper *Þjóðviljinn* on 17 June (Iceland's national day) 1975 with the title *Íslensk tunga í samtíðinni* ('The Icelandic language today'), in which people of diverse social classes and professions (though mainly intellectuals variously concerned with language, as linguists and writers) commented on the current state of the Icelandic language, both spoken and written (AA.VV. 1975). As can be easily imagined, one of the recurrent topics was the recently introduced regulation on orthography and particularly the abolition of the letter *z*. However, it should be noted that one has the impression that opinions for and against the abolition of *z* are not evenly represented in this interview, where almost all of the respondents express a favourable opinion.

76 Guðmundur A. Aðalsteinsson (2008: 10–11).

77 Some people, especially among the elderly, still use *z* in writing both private and public documents, and it sometimes happens to come across newspaper articles, books and other printed materials in which *z* is at home as before 1973.

78 Note 5 above.

- Auglýsing um íslenska stafsetningu nr. 132/1974 + 261/1977*, [processed by Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson], <https://notendur.hi.is/~eirikur/stafsreg.htm> [date of access: 02.09.2013].
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