

Resistance to man-made and contact-induced syntactic change.

Katrin Hiietam
University of Glasgow

The linguistic literature offers plenty of examples of cases where the syntactic composition of a language has changed over time due to contact with the neighbouring or socio-politically dominant languages. The most common elements that make their way to a less prominent or less affluent language or a dialect seem to be lexical units. However, morphological or syntactic patterns (see eg. Veselinova's & Skirgård's 2015 or Manzelli 2015 for descriptions of contact-induced change in negation) are also among the elements that migrate across the language boundaries.

While this seems to be the prevalent tendency, it is possible to find examples where such changes have failed to take place. This paper aims to offer a descriptive account of a case of resistance to both man-made and contact-induced change by presenting data from the North-Eastern Coastal dialects of Estonian which have remained untouched by the attempts of conscious language reshaping and prolonged contact with a politically dominant, the standard variety of the language. The focus of the talk is on the expletive subject-like element – 3SG pronoun, as illustrated in (1) and marked in bold. The example (1 is originally from Tirkkonen (2006, example 86), glosses and translations are ours.

- (1) a. **tä** see suvel õli vähäne einiäkasv
3SG.NOM this.NOM summer.ADE be.PAST.SG. poor hay growth.NOM
'**EXPL** this summer (there) was poor hay growth'

Those dialects represent a considerably older version of Estonian with several archaic features than the remaining, Northern or Southern dialects, as the language changes that occurred between the 13th and 16th century did not affect them. This expletive element can be thought to be an original Finnic feature that is also present in the neighboring language, Finnish, as shown in (2):

- (2) b. Nyt (**se**) taas sataa. FIN
now (**it**) again rains
"Now **it**'s raining again." (from Holmberg & Nikanne 2002, ex. 8)

In addition, Estonia had been under the linguistic dominance of the North-Germanic languages between the 12th and 19th century due to historic reasons (which all do use expletive subject elements). However, in connection with the so called awakening period, starting from the latter half of the 19th century, and strive to return to the original roots of the Estonian language, there occurred the planned "Estonianisation", i.e. move away from the German-type syntactic and lexical features in the first half of the 20th century (cf. Verschik 2005). As a result of this, the Standard Estonian is by now a language with no expletive subject elements in either the standard unified written or spoken language (e.g. Ereht et al. 1993, Ereht and Metslang Eds. 2017). However, that change did not take place in the North-Eastern Coastal dialects, leading us to look through the inventory of factors leading to or preventing linguistic change.

Keywords: Syntactic change, language planning, language contact, Finno-Ugric languages, subject expletives

References

- Ereht, M. and H. Metslang (Eds.) 2017. Eesti keele süntaks. [The Syntax of Estonian]. Eesti keele varamu 3. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus.
Ereht, M. et al. 1993. Eesti keele grammatika. II. Süntaks. Lisa: Kiri. The Grammar of Estonian II. Syntax. Appendix: Orthography.] Tallinn: Eesti Teaduste Akadeemia Keele ja Kirjanduse Instituut.
Holmberg, A. and Nikanne, U. 2002. Expletives, Subjects and Topics in Finnish. In P. Svenonius (ed.), *Subjects, Expletives and the EPP*, 71–105. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
http://www.zacharski.org/papers/ghz/Expletives_subjects_and_topics.pdf. Accessed 04.05.2021

- Manzelli, G. 2015. Mutual influences in negative patterns between Fino-Ugirc and Turkic languages in the Volga-Kama area. In Miestamo, M. et al. (eds) 2015. *Negation in Uralic Languages*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. Pp. 633-652.
- Tirkkonen, M.-E. 2006. Demonstratiiv- ja kolmana isiku pronoomenid ranniku- ja kirdemurdes. [Demonstrative and third person pronouns in coastal and Nort-Eastern dialects.] MA-thesis. Tartu: University of Tartu. <http://dspace.ut.ee/bitstream/handle/10062/744/tirkkonen.pdf> . Accessed 14.05.2021
- Verschik, A (2005) 'The language situation in Estonia', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 36:3, 283 – 316 To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/01629770500000111. Accessed 12.05.2021
URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01629770500000111>.
- Veselinova, L. and H. Skirgård 2015. Special negators in the Uralic languages: Synchrony, diachrony and interaction with standard negation. In Miestamo, M. et al. (eds) 2015. *Negation in Uralic Languages*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. Pp. 547-599.