

Language and identity in Estonia

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11.09.2025

Outline

- Some basic terms
- Importance of language description
- First sources and early models
- Language planning, modernisation, search of model
- Soviet era challenges. Oppositional identity
- Is Estonian endangered?

Historical timeline

- 13th c – German crusaders' invasion, Danes in the North
- After Livonian war 1558-1583 under the Swedish rule
- 1632 – the Swedish king Gustav Vasa established a university in Tartu
- 1700-1721 – Northern War, incorporation into the Russian Empire
- 1918-1940 – Independent state
- 1940-1941, 1944-1991 – Soviet occupation
- 1941-1944 – Nazi German occupation
- 1991 – Independence restored

Terms

- Identity: a way of self-description based on a wish to belong to a group/to distance oneself from a group
- Individual identity
- Group identity (Estonians, students, TLU scholars etc.; gardeners; also based on gender, age, subculture and so on.)
- Ethnic identity (ethnic Estonians, Russians, Latvians)
- Linguistic identity (Estonian-speakers)
- Civic identity (citizenship)
- Ethnoconfessional identity (Russian Old-Believers)

- Identities are flexible
- Some components are not changeable or difficult to change
- Some components may change their importance (become more or less relevant)
- Language changes in time and in space (non-specialists do not necessarily notice this)

Where does language fit in?

- Not equally important for all identities but most important for Estonian identity
- But what is language? Different linguists will give you different answers
- Language is not what is in a grammar book
- Grammar is an abstraction
- Descriptive (scholarly) vs. prescriptive (for schools, editors, learners etc)

Importance of language description

- Is a grammatical description objective?
- If not, why?
- Is it important who writes it? Let us discuss
- What a choice of alphabet and spelling system may tell you?
- Model in linguistic description (ancient grammars of Greek and Latin; mediaeval grammars of Latin etc)

First texts and descriptions

- 12-13th c. sporadic words and sentences in chronicles (Henrich of Livonia, 1224-1227: *laula laula pappi!* ‘sing, sing, priest!’)
- Reformation 1517, then in 16th c. – longer texts. Kullamaa manuscript (Estonian translation of three Catholic prayers, 1520)
- Reformation enhances translation into vernaculars

- Most of the texts authored by Baltic Germans (Lutheran ministers)
- How well they knew Estonian? It differed
- 1637 – Heinrich Stahl, first grammar of Estonian (in German, *Anführung zu der Esthnischen Sprache*), North Estonian
- German model in spelling, also in language description (vowel length marked with *h*: *mah* instead of *maa* ‘land’ etc.)

- Various attempts to translate Bible (from 16th c on into both North and South Estonian)
- From 17th to 19th c two written varieties (Northren and Southren Estonian)
- Full Bible translation by Anton Thor Helle in 1739
- 1780 - August Wilhelm Hupel, grammatical description of both varieties remained a standard for a long time
- 1803 – position of a lecturer in Estonian at University of Dorpat (Tartu)

- Slow emergence of educated Estonians
- *Maarahvas* – people of the land, most common self-notion
- Talented boys from the countryside, noticed and helped by teachers, priests etc
- Getting to the city > acquiring good German (= becoming German)

Estophiles

- Baltic German intellectuals become interested in Estonian language and culture (Enlightenment, rationalism, interest towards folklore); secularization of genres (practical advice: medicine, gardening, agriculture)
- 1813-1832: the journal “Beiträge zur genauern Kentiss der Estnischen Sprache” (Contribution to the better knowledge of the Estonian language), edited by Johan Heinrich Rosenplänter (1782-1846)
- “Estonian is a sister of Finnish” – ideas that spelling should be modelled on Finnish as a related language (phonetic spelling), also grammar description of Estonian should be modelled on Finnish grammar

Two things happen

- 1) Change of model for linguistic description
- 2) Advent of ethnic Estonians (i.e., they don't leave the community but bring their knowledge back)
 - 1843 – Eduard Ahrens (1803-1863), a new grammar of North Estonian. Finnish spelling as a model (spelling follows pronunciation). Pointed out that the “church language” differs from real language use.
 - The grammar was influenced by Finnish grammar (the idea of “sisterhood” implemented)

- You can say that it is logical because Estonian is related to Finnish

maa 'land': old spelling *mah* (German-like, *h* shows vowel length); cf. Finnish *maa* (long sound = two letters)

- However, related languages may use different principles in orthography and even different alphabets
- It is a statement about identity (relatedness to Finnish, self-identification with Finno-Ugric peoples)

- Proto-elite (university educated young Estonians)
- “Sunday Estonians”: those who already have education and mostly German-speaking environment, including families (German is their home language), but become active in the movement and address public orally or in written form in Estonian.

The role of translations in a small culture

- Speed-up tool (imports modern cultural models, concepts, knowledge about the world)
- Small nations with late modernisation did not have aristocracy speaking their language; no classicism and other major cultural flows > acquisition of styles, concepts, epochs via translation
- Acquisition of such fundamental things, new genres and discourses available through translations
- Non-fiction genres get primary attention

Active phase of language planning

- Corpus planning (dealing with linguistic items proper, i.e., introducing new lexicon, models of derivation etc.)
- Status planning (ultimate task: to create and cultivate modern standard Estonian)
- Both are connected
- Question of models becomes crucial
- Models are (also) about identity
- Distancing from German

- At the end of 19th c rapid urbanization of Estonians, decline of class society
- Spread of Estonian-language press
- Russification in the 1880s: attempted to integrate the Baltic provinces to the Empire, loss of privileged status of German (local majorities were not concerned a serious force)
- Failed because ethnolinguistic identity of Estonians had already sufficiently developed

Northern vs Southern Estonian

- More people understood Northern Estonian
- Written NE had more genres
- Written SE had predominantly religious genres
- NE became the basis of Modern Standard Estonian
(and not because one is objectively better than the other)
- *Noor Eesti* (Young Estonia, 1905) – young literati seek modernization, promote Estonian culture becoming a part of the European culture, Neoromantic, European

Independence

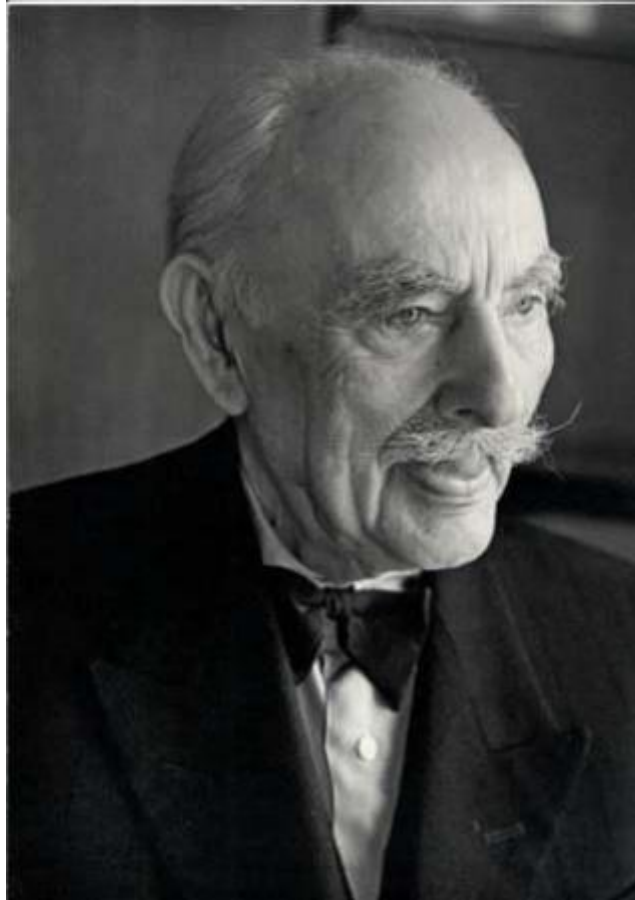
- First period of independence 1918-1940
- Estonian becomes official language
- Minorities are granted cultural autonomy (will be considered in further lectures)
- Estonian becomes a language of science, education, politics, army, media, used in all genres
- Egalitarian language planning: Modern Standard Estonian should be available to everyone
- All learn at least 2 additional languages at school

Johannes Aavik (1880-1973)



- Radical language planning: intervention not only into lexical resources but into structure (new forms, new suffixes)
- New words: *relv* 'weapon', cf. *revolver* or completely constructed *veenma* 'to convince' (about 40 creations ex nihilo)
- Not all innovations became accepted but still quite a few are in use today

Johannes Voldemar Veski (1873-1968)



- Was not as radical as Aavik
- Valued systematic approach and regularity rather than intrusion
- Used sources from dialects for coinage of scholarly terms
- Both Aavik and Veski used Finnish as a source

Soviet period

(1940-1941, 1944-1991)

- At the point of occupation Estonian was already a fully developed standard language used by the majority
- Estonia was ethnically quite homogenous (88.8 % of population)
- This is very important because there was a sufficient basis for silent resistance

- Sovietization = Russification (at that moment)
- Russification and Sovietization was “served” as modernization (Soviet society considered to be more advanced etc., eradication of illiteracy, Russian as a tool of modernization)
- This could not work (massive literacy, all genres available in Estonian, official language of an independent state > hard to convince that in order to be an educated person you have to know Russian)

Oppositional identity

- Soviet industrialization > promotion of migration from other parts of the USSR
- Central authorities wanted to “dilute” the unloyal local population
- Russian compulsory for all non-Russians but not the other way round
- Asymmetric bilingualism (local majority is more likely to be bilingual than the minority)

- Reaction: polarization, concealing proficiency in Russian, voluntary segregation
- In 1974 census the number of Estonians proficient in Russian decreased (but this is not about objective knowledge)
- In some other Union republics voluntary Russification: non-Russian children go to Russian-medium school (some think they give a better education) but not in the Baltics

- Finnish TV in Tallinn from early 1970: with minimal technical efforts it was possible to watch and to get a passive knowledge of Finnish + news without propaganda and censorship
- Spread of Finnish words among Estonian school children (in slang)
- Relatedness of Finnish and Estonian vs. imposed concept of Russians as “elder brothers” and Soviet „friendship of peoples“ (emphasis on “Westernness”)

Fight against Russification

- 1974 – decision to intensify Russification
- 1980 – minister of education who does not know a word of Estonian > spontaneous schoolchildren demonstration
- 1980 – “The letter of 40” (40 intellectuals write a very cautious letter to Moscow: the current policy undermines self-confidence of the locals) > repressions

- Here you see link between language and identity
- Newcomers who don't learn Estonian perceived as threat
- Central policy encourages constant influx of newcomers > fear of becoming a minority in their own country

- Strict language planning (as in authoritarian and totalitarian states)
- On the other hand, gives some room to fight Russian impact (prevent lexical borrowing)
- It is not that impact of one language is better than of another but it is a question of model: what model do we want to follow?

Restoration of the independence

- Already in late 1980s together with general liberalisation in USSR strives to break away, Language Law of 1989 (no talk of independence; all who communicate with clients should know Estonian)
- 1991 – restoration of the independence, Estonian becomes official language

- No privileged position of Russian anymore
- Does this mean that other languages are prohibited?
- The spirit is: Estonian is obligatory in the public sector but other languages can be present
- No more censorship, publishing becomes easy, internet etc. > liberalisation of language use (whatever some language planners may think)

“Informal language used in media undoubtedly contributes to a broadening of the stylistic range of Estonian media language, in great contrast to the formal, stiff, and monotonous usage of the Soviet period”

Raimo Raag, 1999

Development of Estonian from totalitarianism to polylogy

Tiit Hennoste, 1997 (article title)

What now?

- *Kodueesti* vs. *väliseesti* ('home Estonians' vs. Estonians abroad)
- Negotiation: slightly different criteria applying to *väliseesti* (proficiency in Estonian is not the most important criterion)
- Fear of decline and disappearance of Estonian (whether foreigners/Soviet-time newcomers and their descendants bother to learn Estonian; “bad big languages” like English etc)

Laypeople's view vs. scholarly view

- Laypeople's: borrowing (from English) are flooding the language, it is becoming less pure, it is a contamination (infection) etc other clinical metaphors, so Estonian will lose its uniqueness and die. At the same time: we need to learn other languages.
- Scholarly view: language change is a built-in feature. Languages do not die via borrowing. Intergenerational transmission is crucial for language maintenance

Popular self-description

- “Estonian is so unique” – every language is unique, and this is common among all languages
- “Estonian is so complex, look, we have 14 grammatical cases” – no language is absolutely simple or absolutely complex. Estonian case system is complex but tense system is not, compared to English

- If one speaks a closely related language (Finnish) or a structurally similar language (Turkic languages), the logic of Estonian forms is not complicated
- If one knows several languages, this person knows what to expect
- So no, Estonian is not “the most difficult language in the world”

- The question is thus whether young people transmit Estonian to their children
- Additional problem: how to help Estonians abroad (i.e., not old *väliseesti* but *uusväliseesti* ‘new abroad Estonian’) to maintain Estonian