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4. Migration, identity and language change

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Key messages

- The English language is not threatening the maintenance of Estonian. It is important to maintain an emotional bond with the Estonian language and the desire to transmit it to the next generation. Radical solutions (e.g. 'no language other than Estonian' or 'only English for science and business') do not seem reasonable. Rather, flexible solutions appropriate for each context should be sought. Languages die not because of foreign linguistic impact but because their speakers abandon them and are unwilling to transmit them down to the next generation.
- Identity is an emotional bond which often cannot be determined through objective characteristics. While we cannot choose the country we are born in, or our mother tongue, we can choose our attitudes and develop our linguistic repertoire. While the Estonian language is the basis for Estonian identity and one of the main values of the Estonian people, one should find more values that are shared by society as a whole.
- Increasing the number of Estonian classes in schools will not help because only too often there is no incentive or opportunity to use the acquired Estonian language skills. In order to create better conditions for Estonian language learning, its acquisition and integration of others into the Estonian society, the current segregative educational system should be replaced by an integrated one as soon as possible, though children who so wish should have an opportunity to learn their native language and culture (including the Russian language and culture). Immersion is an effective way to overcome the fear of using another language, but is not sufficient, since pupils are of the same ethnic and cultural background and in regions with a small number of Estonian-speakers there are very few opportunities to use the language.

The framework

This Chapter talks about language and its links with various aspects of life, such as language proficiency, identity, opportunities for native language maintenance abroad, language change, segregation and self-identification through language. Language is an integral part of human existence and activity, and therefore the topic of language and its related issues is woven through many articles in this compendium. We can distinguish at least three themes that the authors explore and discuss in connection with the language issue.

Firstly, it is essential to **maintain the Estonian language**. The existence and continuity of the Estonian language and culture is the basis for the existence of the Estonian state: this objective is enshrined in the Constitution and set out in a wide range of legislative acts. Easier migration opportunities and advancing information technology have opened up the world, but also increased the role and presence of English as the language used for international communication (*lingua franca*). Does this pose a threat to the Estonian language or not? Estonians migrate, too – thousands of our compatriots are living in

foreign countries, either temporarily or more or less permanently. Many of them wonder how to maintain links with Estonia and transmit their mother tongue to future generations. Languages, however, tend to change across time and space: today's Estonian is not the same it was 100 years ago (both because each generation introduces their own changes and because other languages to which the Estonian language is exposed are also constantly changing). Even within Estonia, there are regional differences, not to mention the different forms of Estonian spoken abroad. Therefore, we need to explore the notion of language maintenance (Verschik 2012).

The second topic deals with **migration and language**. This concerns both expatriate Estonians and the nationals of other countries migrating to Estonia. Some problems stem from Soviet times: for example the desire to preserve isolation and to live in one's own language environment, to be separated geographically (physical and mental segregation), very few contacts between different language communities, etc. In addition to these issues, we also need to consider new migrants from both poorer regions (including from the territories of the former Soviet Union) and more economically-prosperous European countries: how do we teach them Estonian and prevent the segregation and isolation of different societal groups?

The third key topic is that of **identity**. As the chapter explains, identity is not equal to banal labelling (Estonian, non-Estonian, migrant, etc.); the complexity of identity must be recognised (a seemingly unitary group, such as 'Russian speakers', may include people with such divergent attitudes and linguistic behaviours that the question arises whether they belong to one and the same group) (see Ehala & Zabrodskaia 2014). For example a person may have language skills that are at best average, but may identify exclusively with Estonia and no matter how they describe their ethnic background and native language, it would certainly include the words 'Estonia' or 'Estonian'. Identity can be treated not as a defined, pre-determined notion (ethnic Estonian parents = an Estonian), but as a desire to identify/be identified with a certain group, language, community, etc.

All these topics are related to **multilingualism**. In modern linguistics, multilingualism is not seen as equal knowledge of multiple languages and/or learning to speak all languages at a very young age. The main focus is on effective use and communication, i.e. the ability to accurately express meaning and to achieve the objectives of communication (Cenoz 2013). The majority of the population of Estonia is multilingual. Multilingualism is not a recent phenomenon. Cities have always been multilingual: this was already the case even in the days of the Hanseatic League and other similar bottom-up unions, while in the present we have the example of constant day-to-day interactions at street markets and shops, etc. Multilingualism is not limited to multilingual speakers; we can see it in advertisements, on signs and elsewhere (the so-called material culture of multilingualism, as Aronin [2012] termed it). What do multilingualism and becoming multilingual mean in practical terms? In today's context we refer to the teaching of Estonian and the so-called 'big' languages (English, Russian, German, and others) but is it enough?

The articles in this chapter discuss one or more of the following topics: the preservation of and changes in the language; migration and language learning/transfer; identity as the

desire for self-definition/ not to self-define; multilingualism and its manifestations. All topics are intertwined and impossible to address individually – it is only possible to highlight certain issues.

Summary of articles

Language is not just a means of communication or a set of words and grammar rules. It can also be understood as a symbol of a person or a group. It can be said that the use of linguistic resources is often prompted by what we are doing, but also by who we are or think we are and which role we are playing. Language may change, yet still persist as a symbol.

The sub-chapters by Anastassia Zabrodskaia, Helin Kask and Kristiina Praakli indicate that languages are not static, as there are no 'pure' languages. A rule is a current agreement, which may, for one reason or another, become obsolete (e.g. actual language use and/or the perception of speakers has changed). One might even say that change is built into language. It cannot be prevented and occurs for both internal (structural, etc.) and external reasons (political situation, status and reputation of languages, number of speakers, prevailing language ideologies and rivalry between them, personal attitudes, factors related to communication situations, linguistic contacts, etc.).

The Estonian language is not an exception. Historically, Estonian has been influenced by a number of other languages. The majority of Estonian speakers are multilingual. While in the past the knowledge of German and Russian and in North Estonia also Finnish was common, today most young people can speak English to a greater or lesser degree (and, of course, other languages). Moreover, a considerable number of Estonians are living abroad, either temporarily or permanently. Their language usage is influenced by local languages. Estonian, in its turn, influences other languages, such as the Russian spoken by local Russians or the minority languages with a small number of speakers.

No language, however, is known to have borrowed from another language to a point of extinction. **Language maintenance means transmission of the language to future generations, not the preservation of words and construction in an unchanged form.** Each language contains words and structures that are actually borrowed, unbeknownst to contemporary users, who consider them indigenous. There are different **factors that can put a language in danger of becoming extinct:**

- reluctance to associate oneself with a certain group (the group is considered unattractive, uninteresting, useless, etc.);
- a negative attitude towards the speakers of a certain language, which results in a desire to distance oneself from the group;
- limited opportunities to use one's native language in an alien environment (a narrow social circle, lack of time, lack of ability and willingness to do something about it, etc.);
- extreme and tragic situations that threaten the physical existence of the speakers of

certain languages (mass deportations, genocide).

These reasons are not linguistic. Thus, loans from English to Estonian (or from Estonian to Russian) as such are not a sign of danger. There are inevitable divergences between the variety of Russian spoken in Estonia and that spoken in Russia or elsewhere (e.g. Latvia, Ukraine, Israel, the U.S.). The reason for borrowing is not the lack of equivalents or the fact that speakers are shifting from their first language, but a different reality: in the local variety of Russian, an Estonian word refers to a specific term used in a specific context, so that everybody knows what is being talked about.

Neither does proficiency in other languages mean that one's native language is in danger. It should be taken into account that the Estonian-speakers (regardless of their ethnic background) who consider Estonian their first and/or main language of communication want to speak to their descendants in Estonian. This implies that there is the desire to belong, i.e. an identity.

Since a small nation is **inevitably multilingual**, all kinds of translations also play an important role in its cultural history. Translation means not only the creation of new texts, but also the importation of new patterns, expressions, realities and terms. Multilingualism has become particularly topical now, when increased migration flows, more open societies, and rapid exchange of information thanks to information technology developments have raised the visibility of multilingualism as such. Anastassia Zabrodskaia and Helin Kask argue that, in reality, Estonia is country with a functional-multilingualism: in certain domains of life, several languages are used and users switch effortlessly from one to another. Multilingualism is all around us: on the internet and in everyday interaction. Languages are used in parallel or interchangeably, except in formal situations that require strict monolingualism. This should not be construed as a conflict with the policy of a single official language. In Estonia, a single official language has a symbolic importance, which does not mean that the use of other languages should be banned.

Multilingualism and migration inevitably increase the complexity of the situation, as argued by Martin Ehala and Aune Valk. One and the same label may have different meanings at different times and for different social groups. Aune Valk writes about the changing of the Estonian identity in time and space (differences between generations and between Estonians in Estonia and Estonian expatriates). The role of the Estonian language in Estonian identity is, however, more important than that of territory or statehood. Both the use of language and **identities are becoming increasingly complex**. More often than not, one keyword is no longer sufficient and a more detailed (self-)description is needed. Therefore, the notions and descriptions need to be refined and specified, although this may appear to be too much trouble and cognitively complicated. Identity should rather be depicted as a continuum with more clear statuses (Estonian, Russian, Estonian expat) at each end and a number of more complex ones (Estonian-Russian, bilingual Estonian) in between.

If identity is to be seen as a desire to belong, it is important to look at what is common to all members of society, i.e. which values are shared by all. A person can belong to several