

HOW DOES ONE BECOME A STANDARD LANGUAGE CULTURE?

**REFLECTIONS ON LANGUAGE IN HISTORICAL CONTEXTS.
ESTONIAN LANGUAGE STANDARDIZATIONS 1900-1920
PEETER TINITS
METOCHI, 2015**

CASE FOR LANGUAGE CULTURES

**L. Milroy & J. Milroy 1991; J. Milroy 2001:
'There exist standard language cultures and cultures where
that is not the case.'**

**The difference can be seen mostly in how the conditions and
effects of language use are negotiated, and the preferences
people have.**

See also: language ideologies, language attitudes, language
regard, folk linguistics, etc.

**This variation in „language culture“ has an important impact
on how languages evolve in time.**

STANDARD LANGUAGE CULTURE

Standard language culture (e.g. J. Milroy 2001)

- strong distinction between a standard H-variety and other means of expression
 - often understood as appropriate „in formal contexts“
 - and requiring „attention to speech“
- low tolerance for variation
- strong discourse on mistakes
- elaborate historiographies for H-variety prestige

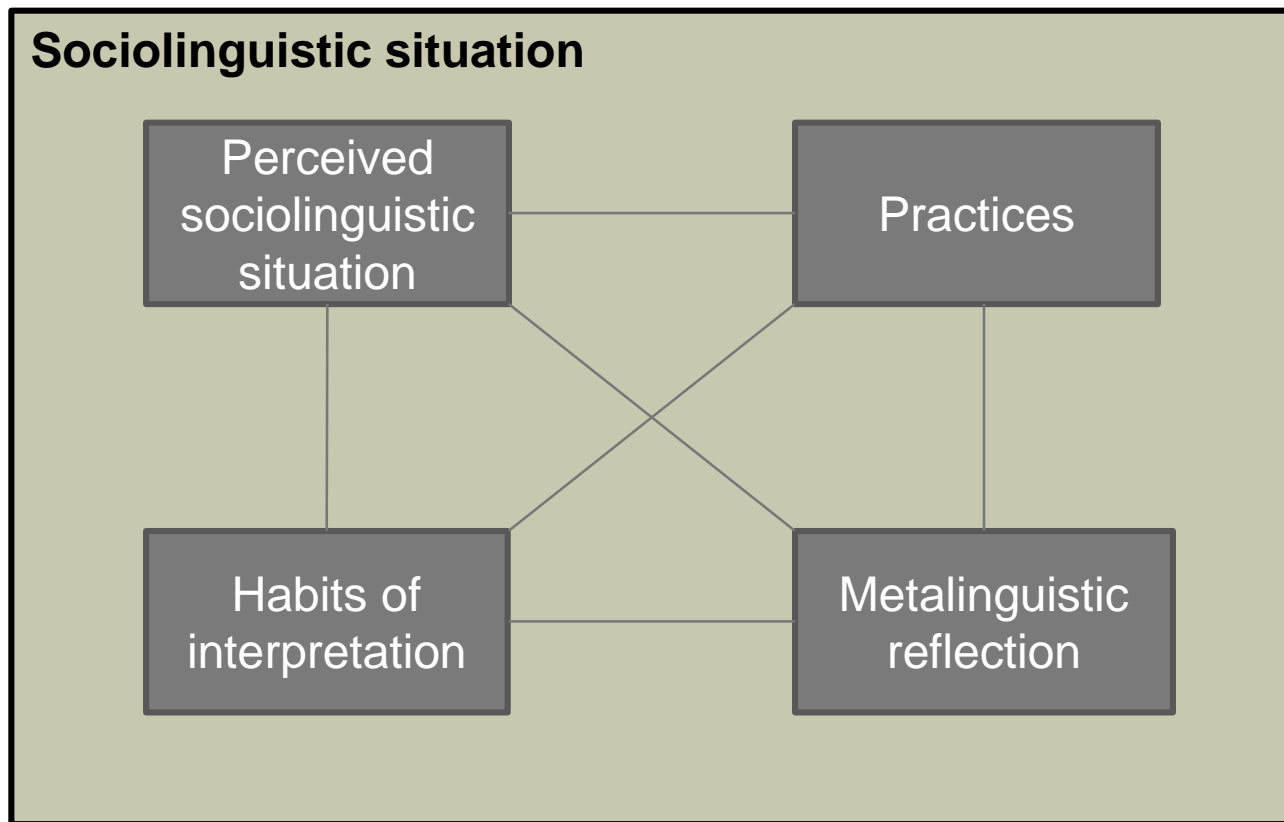
STANDARD LANGUAGE CULTURE

Standard language culture (the concept)

- guides us in terms of the parameters and dimensions on which we could observe interesting cross-linguistic variation.
 - i.e. guides our study.
- allows for notable internal variation
 - i.e. it does not say how much discourse on mistakes is required etc.
- involves components of rather different kinds
 - meaning that they could be understood in terms of a common denominator (e.g. attitudes or habits of interpretation) but could be seen as a complex.

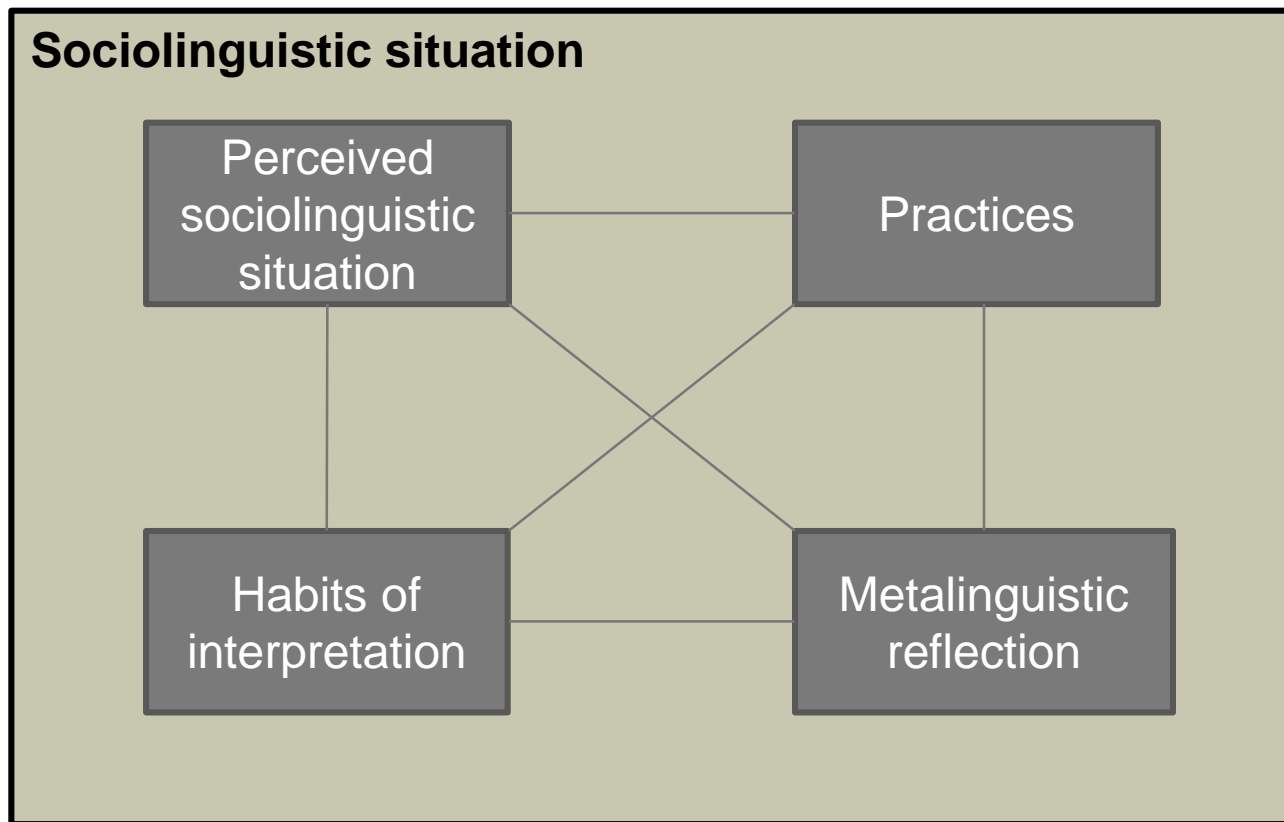
CULTURE (VERY SIMPLY UNDERSTOOD)

Culture = Habits, perceptions, practices, etc.



CULTURE (VERY SIMPLY UNDERSTOOD)

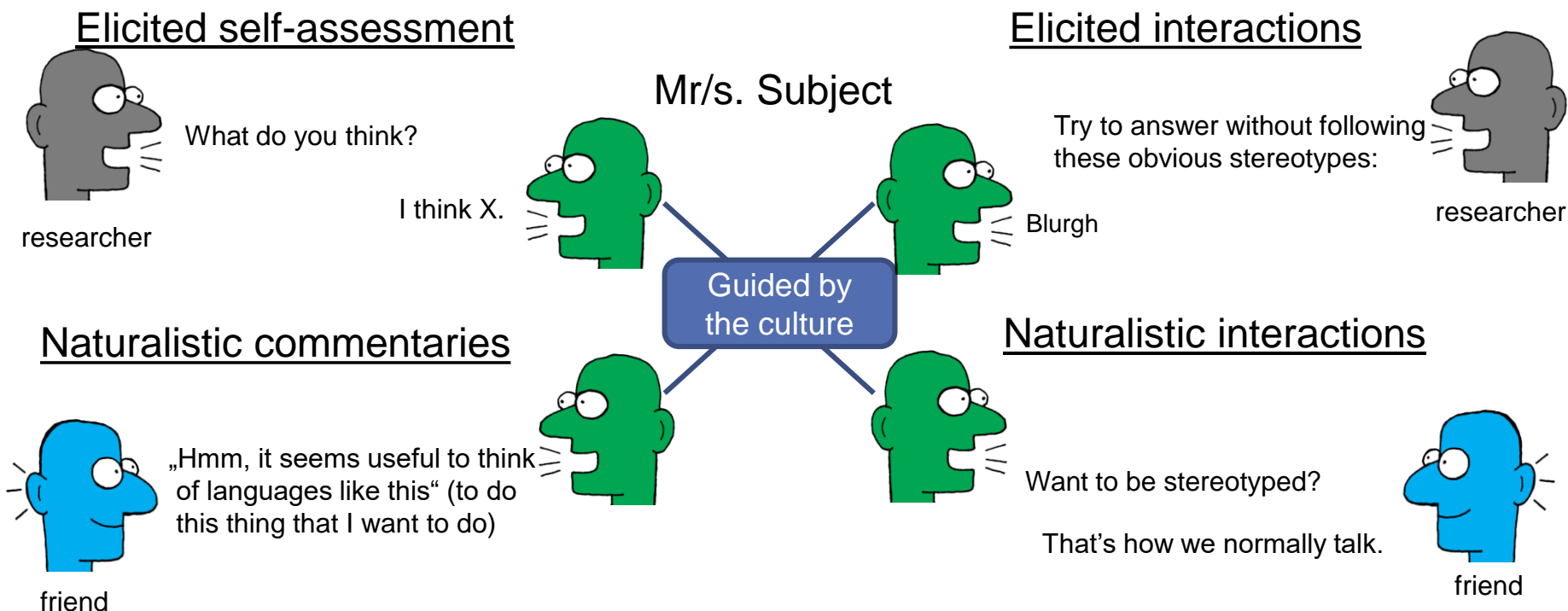
Culture = Habits, perceptions, practices, etc.



FINDING LANGUAGE CULTURES

How to find the language attitudes / ideologies?

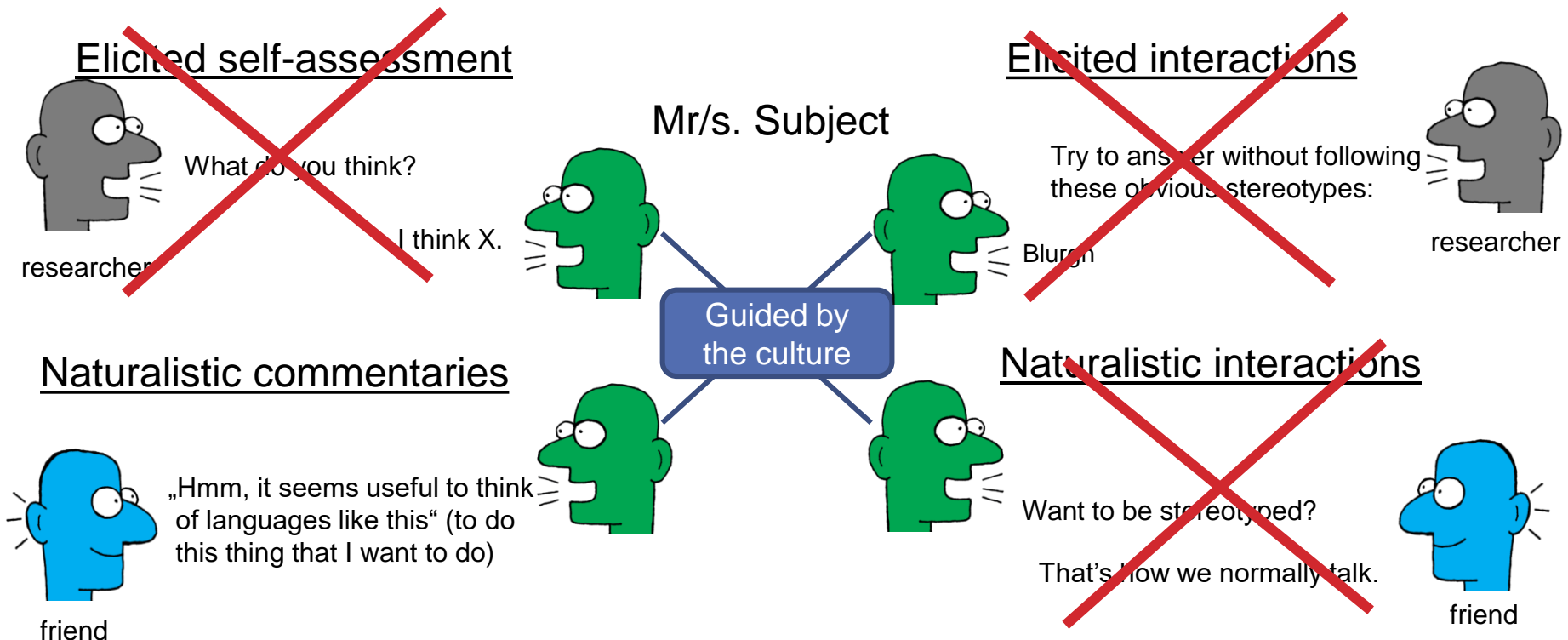
- No direct access, but various clues around



FINDING HISTORICAL LANGUAGE CULTURES

What about historical data?

- Most methods are not available, or data not preserved.



METALINGUISTIC REFLECTION. TURNING TO THE DATA

Metalinguistic commentaries show people of the time making sense of their sociolinguistic reality for their current purposes.

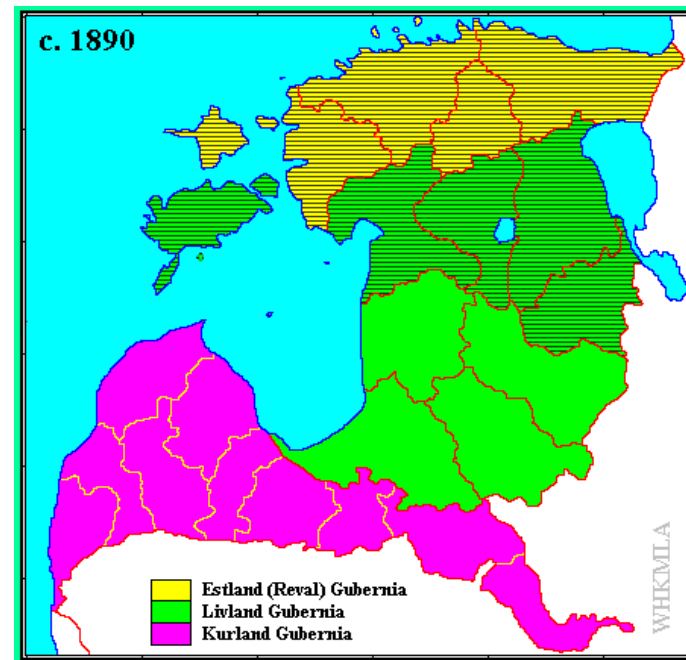
We can use the concept of standard language culture to guide our research, and see whether involvement with the standard language culture is visible in people's reflections.

Particularly, we can look at the Estonian language community around 1900-1920, where some involvement with the standard language culture is expected.

ESTONIAN CONTEXT

Estonian language community

- Special part of the Russian Empire run by Germans
- Purely peasant community until the 1850s (reforms of 1802, 1804, 1809, 1816/1819, 1849/1856 changed this)
- Quickly urbanizing and modernizing
- Romanticist „national awakening“ movement in the 1860s – 1885
- 1885 – 1914 policies of Russianization break the existing language ecology by discouraging both Estonian and German use.

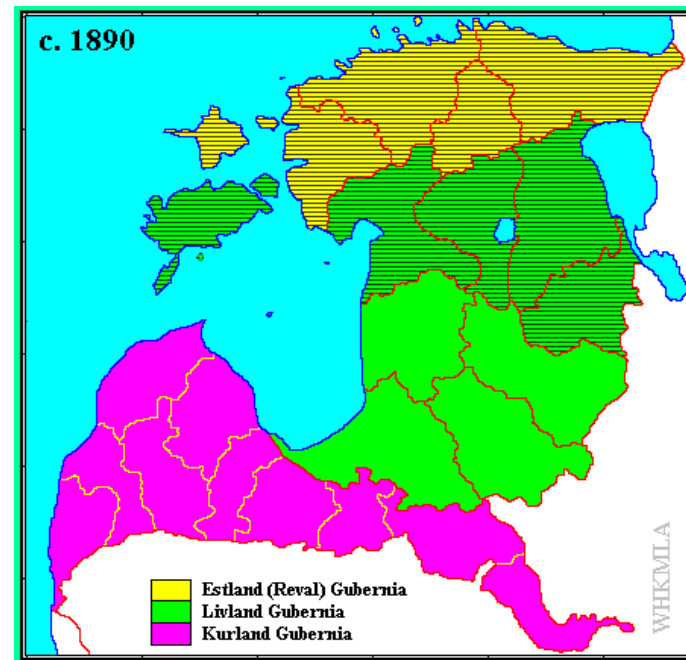


Estonian language community was based in the striped area in two governates of the Russian empire

ESTONIAN CONTEXT

Language issues

- Until the 1860s written Estonian mostly was done for the Germans
- Written Estonian-to-Estonian communication emerging since then, professional writers by ~1900.
- A quick rise in literacy in the 19th century
 - ~1823 -> 1897
 - 40% -> 95% reading
 - <5% -> 77% writing
- Scholarly intuitions: ~1850-1930 transitioned from a fairly „liberal“ language culture to a very strict standard language culture.



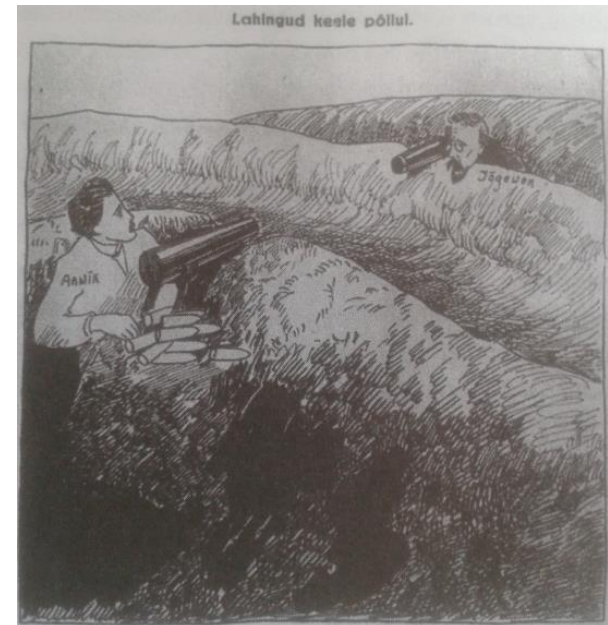
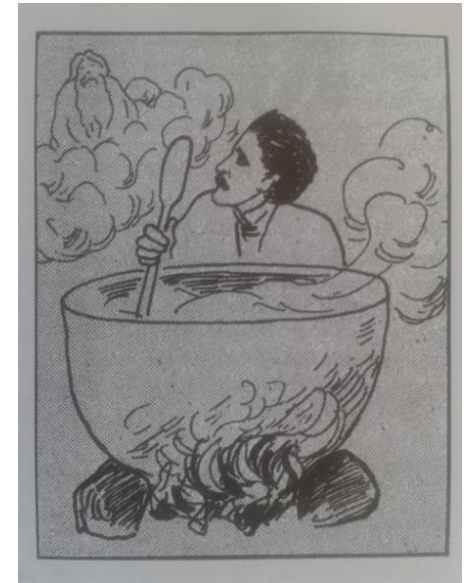
Estonian language community was based in the striped area in two governates of the Russian empire

ESTONIAN CONTEXT

Discourse on language

- Language questions were very prominent in the public discourse.
- Took place in the newspapers, specialized journals, dictionaries, committee meetings and conferences.
- Some notable years high activation 1872, 1876, 1886, 1902, 1908-1911, 1912-1918.
- These discussions had no official policy-making capacities at the time

‘Cooking the new language broth as old fellow up there hadn’t been much of a cook.’ (1913)



‘Combat between linguistic journals and common sense’ (newspaper, 1914)

OPERATIONALIZING STANDARD LANGUAGE CULTURE

Can we find the contemporary metalinguistic reflection become involved with the parameters of standard language culture?

- Extent of variation
- Register differentiation
 - Elevation of a central register
 - Attention to language use
 - Formal/informal
- Discourse on mistakes
- Historical perspectives on language

PRESENCE OF VARIATION

The presence of too much variation explicitly stated as problem

Particularly teachers, translators

- „There are a legion of expressions, and we don't know what to teach“ (Kurrik 1873)

Conscious efforts for decreasing variation.

But: Dialectal variation as a source of richness

- „X dialect has these very nice features“ (many authors)

And: Too much variation was also seen as material to build a nicer language

- „Strike the iron while it's hot!“ (Aavik 1914)
- „If our language were complete, we would not have the variants to choose from“ (Aavik 1912)

DIFFERENTIATION OF REGISTERS

„Written language“ as autonomously different (in all mature written cultures).

- „[Written language] has completely different tasks and demands to fulfil than a peasant dialect“ (Aavik 1913)

„Written language“ as something not native to anyone (in all mature written cultures).

- „We must do away with the idea that any bloke should understand written Estonian“ (Aavik 1914)

Differentiation of registers

- „Mature cultures go to theatre to listen to ‘educated language’, why do we have to settle to this mixture“ (Veski 1913)

Lazy newspaper language.

- „[people write] however they please and how it happens, falling into all sorts of false analogies, rude and simple linguistic errors and grammatical foolishness“ (Aavik 1914)

DISCOURSE OF MISTAKES

Language reviews of original publications and translations

- „our books, even from the best authors, are still full of all sorts of mistakes, faults, lazyness [...] which can't be considered correct according to the current written language standards“ (Aavik 1913)

A particular interesting example, a review on Kalevipoeg (written in the 1840s-1850s) at 1914.

- „the epic is exploding from linguistic mistakes due to poor attitudes of the authors and also many mistakes in the folk songs.“ (Aavik 1914)

Same complaints were addressed to normal writers.

- „our books, even from the best authors, are still full of all sorts of mistakes, faults, lazyness [...] which can't be considered correct according to the current written language standards“ (Aavik 1913)

REWRITING HISTORIOGRAPHY

The legitimacy of previous generations as role models for written norms were contested.

Generation writing in 1850s-1860s – Peasant writing

- „It was a time when despite an emerging national movement, language was in a confused and insecure state and language correctness was little cared about!“ (Aavik 1913)

Generation writing in 1870s-1880s – language of educated bilinguals

- „All of these Jannsens and Jakobsons, Kreutzwalds and Koidulas were mostly language ruiners, their native language instincts seem to have been quite fuzzy“ (Grünthal 1912)
- „From then Estonian style is nothing but German style with Estonian words, except more crude and peasantlike“ (Aavik 1914)

Generation writing in 1890s-1900s – lost victims of Russianization & some cosmopolitan translators.

- But generally „Noone can write 'correctly' as there is no 'correct language' to speak of“ (Aavik 1914)

Bright future in 1920-1930+ (in few decades).

SOME UNDERLYING REASONS

Explicitly building a cultural language

- „Languages of young nations (like ours) explicitly need help from language engineers to go through few decades, what other nations had centuries time for.“ (Aavik 1912)

Participating in the competition between the cultures

- „We need to get and learn a language so rich and pretty that we would not be ashamed, but proud next to large cultural nations.“ (Aavik 1918)

Justifications both from assimilation and „Sapir-Whorfian“ determinism

- „Faust could not have been written in Hotentot or Bushman language.“ (Aavik 1914)
- „An educated and beautiful native language will be considered as more dear and people will be less willing to let go of it in exchange of another“ (Aavik 1918).

SUMMING UP

The problems of Estonian community at the time

- Perceived excess of variation
- Lack of respect for written language
- Transnational prestige and expressive capacities

Language situation seems to reflect an explicit desire to become a standard language culture

SUMMING UP

These reflections show how the Estonian language community made sense of their opportunities in the context of their time.

The finds are guided by an idea of ‘standard language culture’ as an target to look for in historical discourse.

Studies like this can show presence or absence standard language culture, or variations on the theme, such as ones in the processes of becoming a ‘standard language culture’.