



Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium

Volume 26 | Issue 1

Article 7

4-7-2000

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Kemppainen, Raija (2000) "Language Policy in Estonia: A Review," *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol26/iss1/7>

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Language Policy in Estonia: A Review

Raija Kemppainen

In Estonia, as well as in most nations, language policies are a part of the larger political and historical context. Estonia is a society that has had to quickly accommodate a dramatic change in its multicultural and multilingual status. During its fifty-year Soviet occupation, Estonia, formerly a rather homogeneous country, became a state with a large Russian-speaking minority. Since regaining independence in 1991, Estonia has been in the process of developing new language policies concerning the minority population. When comparing language policies in different countries, it is important to examine and understand them in the right context—namely from historical and political perspectives. Any analysis of national language policies has to be made in the light of their context, as Wren (1997) puts it:

Attempting to compare nations and their overt and covert language policies firstly requires a sense of both history and context—the political, social, and economic influences on a particular nation's policy decisions. With their vastly different population and land size, history, indigenous peoples, ethnic mix, and immigration and education policies, any such comparison has to be approached cautiously. (24)

The focus of this paper will be on educational language policies in Estonia. However, we cannot discuss language-in-education policies without discussing general government policies—and we cannot discuss general language policies without placing these policies in historical and political contexts.

ESTONIAN LANGUAGE POLICIES FROM AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In principle, it can be said that speakers of all languages have the same rights to use their languages in all situations (Skutnabb-Kangas 1995, 41), but in reality, language rights are a political issue, and different languages have different political rights. The language policies of a country do not dwell in a vacuum. They can reflect centuries-old history and traditions, or they can be a product of more recent events, some dramatic, as in most Eastern European countries. Estonia has had major changes during the twentieth century. Predictably, prevailing language policies have followed political trends.

Estonia, which had been under various foreign rules for over seven hundred years, and had been vulnerable to foreign influences, became independent in 1918. The Second World War interrupted progressive development in Estonia. The country was occupied first by the Soviet Union and then by Nazi Germany, and finally it became annexed to the Soviet Union in 1944. Estonians call all three events "occupations." Annexation to the Soviet Union led to a significant Russian immigration into the country.

Before World War II, the Estonian population consisted of nearly 90% ethnic Estonians. In the most recent census (1989), the proportion of Estonians in the population was only 61.5% (963,300 people). Russians formed 30.5% (47,800 people) of the

population and Russian-speaking Ukrainians and Belarusians together comprised 4.9% (Raun 1997). The percentage of the ethnic Estonian population declined because of large emigrations to the West during the war and deportations to other parts of Russia. The Estonian ethnic population had decreased by one-fifth (200,000 people) by 1946 (Rannut 1991). However, the main change in population ratios is due to Russian immigration to Estonia. Some of this immigration was forced, for example, in the form of the Russian military presence. Most of the immigration, however, was voluntary, caused by higher standards of living in Estonia compared to most Russian republics. The turnover of the immigrants was large as well. Estonians revealed negative attitudes toward Russian immigration—partly as a result of the dramatic changes in the demographics of the country (Raun 1995). Another reason for these negative attitudes was a loss of self-determination under the “Russification policy,” a forced Russian influence in the country.

For the Estonians, making life work in the Soviet occupation meant adapting to a new ideology and learning a new language. During the Soviet era, there was no official language, but the Russian language became largely dominant. Under Russification there was an attempt to replace the Estonian Latin alphabet with the Cyrillic alphabet, an attempt that failed. Many functions in society became Russian because Estonia was under the direct subordination of Moscow. These functions included banking, statistics, militia, transport, and many fields in production (Rannut 1991). This realignment of social and economic functions resulted in a change in the language-use patterns of Estonians. According to the 1989 census, 34.6% of Estonians were fluent in Russian, whereas only 15% of the Russian population could speak Estonian fluently (Raun 1995). The figures are more accurate for the Russian-speaking population

than for the Estonians. In practice, nearly every Estonian who was educated during the Soviet era—especially between the 1960s and 1980s—was competent in Russian. Russians were a numerical minority, but a minority with power in the higher strata of society.

Russian domination also intruded on everyday life. An Estonian approaching a Russian speaker in the Estonian language in a commercial or official setting could get a reply “Speak a human language” (Taagepera 1991, 124). During the Soviet period, the Estonian language was considered a language without a future.

During the Soviet era, “an extensive Russian-medium schools network was established” (Estonian Ministry of Education 1997, 20). The curricula in Russian schools included some practical Estonian, whereas the Estonian-based school had to teach Russian as a second native language. In the latter part of the 1970s, linguistic Russification intensified. A 1978 government decree emphasized the quality and quantity of Russian teaching in national public schools. Additional decrees a year later aimed at material support for Russian teaching (Rannut 1991). By the early 1980s, Russian was introduced to preschools. Until the mid-1970s, higher education was in Estonian, and theses and dissertations could be submitted in any language. However, in 1975, Moscow instituted a requirement that all theses must be in the Russian language (Raun 1995). Estonians were worried that their people, language, and culture would disappear. Some claim that Russification brought the Estonian language near to extinction (Taagepera 1991)—a perception that seems extreme in the light of how Estonians were able to retain their language. But, keeping in mind the small number of Estonians (less than one million), intensive Russification could have created just such a “worst scenario.”

Despite the strong domination of the Russian language in many societal

functions, including an increase of the Russian language in education, Estonian cultural life and education remained mainly Estonian (M. Hint, personal communication, 23 September 1999). Language itself was an important factor in preserving the Estonian culture. As Bliss (1996) states:

Language simultaneously embodied the expressive and impressive dimension of human activity; moreover, as the written and spoken "mother tongue" remained the principal means of communication between persons, the Estonian language represented the agency and purpose of the Estonian independence social drama. (74)

The democratic developments in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s strengthened the status of the Estonian language. In 1989, Estonia passed a new language law making Estonian the language of the republic. The Soviet-era, one-way bilingualism in Estonia, where the Estonians were required to learn Russian but the Russians were not required to learn Estonian, was reversed with the new law (Hint 1990). After the August 1991 coup in Moscow, Estonia declared its independence.

CHANGES IN THE STATUS OF THE MINORITY POPULATION

The collapse of the Soviet Union changed the status of the ethnic groups in Estonia, as in other former Soviet republics. The language law of 1989 was a law of "limited bilingualism," aimed at equalizing the Estonian and Russian languages and guaranteeing services in either language (Hint 1990). The law required a knowledge of both Estonian and Russian languages in certain occupations. Since then all state employees have needed knowledge of the national language in order to deal with the public in their positions (Ozolins 1994). The 1989 language law was revised in 1995, removing the notion of a two-language

policy and giving Russian the status of a minority language (Ozolins 2000).

Unlike other former Soviet republics, Latvia and Estonia did not grant citizenship automatically to all citizens in the country. Earlier, the Russians had been citizens of the vast Soviet Union, residing in any of its republics or areas. In the newly independent Estonia, hundreds of thousands of Russian speakers found themselves foreigners, without citizenship, and without their earlier language privileges. The Russians in Estonia had to define themselves anew. In 1993, a law was passed that set language requirements for the citizenship (Raun 1995). Citizenship requirements in Estonia include five years (originally two) of residency, declaration of no affiliation with the occupying Soviet forces, and knowledge of the national language (Smith et al. 1998). Predictably, the language issue created bitterness. The test (knowledge of about 2,000 Estonian words) is not perceived as demanding by everyone, but the idea that citizenship applicants are required to be able to speak the national language has been criticized (Vallens 1995). The Estonians felt that de-Sovietization would be complete when all the Russians go back to Russia (Smith et al. 1998).

By 1995, about 70,000 Russians or other non-Estonians had out-migrated (Raun 1997). This out-migration has recently declined. Excluding those who have received Estonian citizenship and over 100,000 Russians who took Russian citizenship, there remain about 330,000 Soviet-era immigrants in Estonia who have no citizenship but who are entitled to permanent residency permits and are classified as "resident aliens" (Smith et al. 1998). This alienation is also expressed in the attitudes of the Russian population. A survey from 1996 reveals that two-thirds of the Russian population in Estonia would prefer the Soviet period (Naulko, cited in Smith et al. 1998). During the period of Russian migration, Estonians were generally resentful. The Russians

themselves had more positive attitudes toward the Estonians than the Estonians had toward the Russians (Anderson et al. 1996). However, it appears that the remaining Russian population is determined to stay in Estonia. A survey by a Moscow-based research group shows that 93% of the Russians in Estonia will stay in the country. Fifty-eight percent indicate their willingness to adapt to the local culture, and 72% identify themselves more with Estonia than with Russia (Brown 1997). These developments have meant that Estonia has had to acknowledge the presence of the Russian minority.

For an emerging nation, two factors are important in "social renewal": language policy and education. Language is the symbol of national identity and is used in such vital domains as "politics, commerce, science, and mass media." The task for education is to rebuild the "consciousness of unity and human dignity that colonialism and imperialism has sought to subvert" (de Beaugrande 1998, 275). Läänemets (1993) from the Estonian Education Center wrote that "the most important factor for the survival of a nation and its cultural heritage is the opportunity for all its people to receive an education in the native language, from preschool to the university" (77).

CURRENT EDUCATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICIES

The current language policies in Estonia have their roots in the past, in the legacy of the Soviet era and in the legislation of the early phase of the independence process. The struggle over the education of the Russian minority is characterized by political uncertainty (Brown 1997). Rüütel (1994), the former president of Estonia, has said that Estonians have "a continuous feeling of danger" (23). Many Estonians still believe that Russia will invade Estonia and that the loyalty of the Russian-speaking population could be questioned (Brown 1997). For Estonia, as for the other Baltic

states, language policies are intended to create a loyal bilingual minority within the cultural autonomy and integrate them into society (Druvieta 1997). For many in Estonia, language policies are a way of securing national survival for a population once threatened with becoming a minority in its own land (Ozolins 1994).

In 1989, the same year the language law was passed, a center for coordinating the teaching of the Estonian language to Russian children was founded (Rannut 1991). The Law of Cultural Autonomy was passed in 1993, which gives minority groups the right to establish and support educational institutions (Brown 1997; Geistlinger 1997). The law makes it possible to organize mother-tongue education. Minority schools or minority classes in Estonian schools are regulated by the Private Schools Law of 1993 and the University Law of 1995 (Geistlinger 1997).

In 1993, Estonia passed the Law on Basic and Upper-Secondary Schools, requiring the medium of instruction at the secondary level (grades 10–12) in state and municipal schools to be shifted from Russian to Estonian by the year 2000. The law for unifying the curricula in Russian and Estonian basic and middle schools was passed in 1996. This unification concerns only curricula, not linguistic issues. Regarding the Law on Basic and Upper-Secondary Schools of 1993, it was realized that the timetable for the shift from Russian to Estonian at the secondary level was unrealistic. An amendment to the law was passed in 1997 adjourning the transmission from Russian to Estonian until 2007.

This law was debated in Estonia, and there were differing opinions about the needed timetable, varying from 2000 to 2007. Those who supported the date of 2007 argued that students will have the necessary language skills to go on in Estonian secondary school by 2007 (Brown 1997). A bill to amend the Law on Basic and Upper-Secondary Schools is being considered by the Estonian Parliament.

According to the bill, the syllabus and instruction in non-Estonian schools must, by 2007, guarantee such proficiency in Estonian that permits students to continue education in Estonian after the basic school (Estonian education bill 2000).

The language shift at secondary level instruction is a highly political issue, and the Russian party has its own view of the law. The leader of the party has said that by 2007, Estonia will have two state languages, Estonian and Russian, and that he believes that the passed law will not be enacted (Brown 1997). Russian politicians claim that the aim of the act is to close Russian-speaking secondary schools by 2007. However, in accordance with the agreement on protection for national minorities, minorities must be given a chance to preserve and practice their culture and to maintain the knowledge of their minority language. Also in accordance with international practices, a school that functions in the official language has to offer 60% of the instruction in the official language, which, in Estonia's case allows 40% of its instruction in another language than Estonian. Even after the language shift in Estonian secondary education, the non-Estonian students will be permitted to learn their native language and ethnic culture (Estonian education bill 2000).

The Law on Basic and Upper-Secondary Schools, including the language shift, has prompted two kinds of reactions among the Russian-speaking population. First, at the political level, political leaders of the Russian fraction in the parliament have worked to abolish the law. They see the language policies as a part of the larger minority program that violates the rights of the Russian-speaking minority. The second kind of reaction comes from informal groups representing parents and teachers. They are interested in educational opportunities for their Russian-speaking children. Because higher education is mostly conducted in Estonian, parents want to secure the future for their children in edu-

cation and in the labor market by having them learn Estonian (Brown 1997).

These informal groups have targeted Russian school administrators and teachers. With active involvement that is not tied to any high-level organization or to the government, the parents have been demanding changes in Russian schools. For example, some Russian schools in Tartu have requested that the Estonian language be introduced in the first grade instead of the third. This wish became a reality, according to a new law that will be enacted in the 2000–2001 school year. From then on, the Estonian language will be taught in all Russian schools starting with the first grade (M. Hint, personal communication, 18 October 1999). Other Russian-speaking parents have gone further and tried to enroll their young children in Estonian or bilingual schools (Brown 1997). "Many Russian parents prefer Estonian language schools for their children" (M. Hint, personal communication, 23 September 1999). Besides parental efforts, Estonian and Russian educators have found new ways to reinforce Estonian language and cultural programs in Russian schools (Brown 1997). Also, there is some evidence that general language attitudes among the Russian speakers are changing.

Ozolins (1994) states that resistance to the citizenship laws (including language requirements) among the Estonian Russian population has diminished. One explanation for the low resistance is the nature of the Russian population: many members of the Russian population can be called economic immigrants whose political mobilization is low (Smith 1998; Ozolins 2000). Even though there are contradictory research results on the Russian speakers' attitudes about learning Estonian (see Titma, Tuma, and Silver 1998), most research show that the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia perceive the knowledge of the Estonian language to be necessary for them. Laitin's study (1996) shows that 58.2% of

Russian respondents agree that all permanent residents should be fluent in Estonian. Nearly 96% agree that Estonian should be a required school subject. However, only 7.9% agree that assimilation brings the best future for the Russians in Estonia.

According to contemporary language policies, Russians still are able to maintain their Russian language but are required to learn Estonian as well. This approach is reminiscent of partial additive bilingualism. Additive bilingualism makes use of the resources of a child's mother-tongue; its goal is to help people function in both language communities (Handscombe 1997). Additive bilingualism appears to be a realistic approach for the Russian-speaking students in Estonia because they will be able to use mother-tongue resources in early grades and end up learning Estonian, which will then allow them to function in Estonian society.

Monolingual Russian speakers function within an insecure social situation. Unemployment has touched Russian speakers more than Estonians (M. Hint, personal communication, 23 September 1999). According to Titma, Tuma, and Silver's (1998) study, Russian speakers are economically disadvantaged in Estonia. These researchers refer to differences in occupations and they report the differences to be due to language ability, because many jobs demand a high proficiency in Estonian. The demands of higher education and labor-market access suggest that education in the national language should start early. Policies have to be balanced with many requirements; additionally, there are inconsistencies in the policy goals. Guaranteeing competency in the titular language is important; on the other hand, another language should be considered as a resource.

Estonian business life is oriented to the European Union (EU): over 50% of Estonian foreign trade is with European Union countries (Bungs 1998). English

and Finnish have become languages of business life in Estonia. English has largely replaced Russian in Estonian-based schools. The Russian language is not a mandatory subject but an optional language, along with other foreign languages (M. Hint, personal communication, 18 October 1999). However, Russia remains the second largest single business partner (Bungs 1998). Maintaining proficiency in Russian, therefore, would be an additional resource for Estonia.

A few trends in adapting the language requirements seem to be evident in Estonia. As indicated earlier, there is some evidence that Russian speakers in Estonia perceive proficiency in the Estonian language to be important for them. Also, it appears that overall language attitudes of the older and younger Russian-speaking generations differ. The younger generation appears more willing to learn Estonian than the older generation, which is accustomed to managing in Estonian society in Russian (Laitin 1996; Smith 1998).

Another interesting phenomenon is Russian parents' interest in securing their children's knowledge of the Estonian language—for example, by enrolling their children in Estonian schools (Brown 1997; Druvieta 1997). In addition, European integration and Estonia's aspirations toward the European Union affect people's language preferences. Laitin (1997) foresees that the English language will become significant both among Estonian and Russian speakers in Estonia.

In the future, the language repertoire of the Estonians might include Estonian and English; the language repertoire of the Russians might include Russian, Estonian, and English. However, very few Russian speakers appear to be willing to be assimilated into Estonian society. Russian-speaking politicians in Estonia want to make sure that Estonian—as well as English—are not replacing the Russian language. All in all, the linguistic situation is under constant

development in Estonia. As Ozolins (2000) puts it: "An essential aspect of the debate on language policy in the Baltic is that the linguistic situation there is dynamic and gradually changing" (43).

CONCLUSION

The examination of language policies in Estonia has to be put in both political and economic contexts. The linguistic trends that appear prevalent at the moment in Estonia—for example, the requirement of fluency in Estonian for all state employees who have contact with the general public—may be perceived as an expression of a post-colonial and nation-building phase in which the country is trying to secure the status of the titular language. The educational legislation concerning the language of instruction likewise emphasizes the status of the Estonian language. For example, the schools at the secondary level are transferring from a parallel two-language system to an all-Estonian system.

Educational opportunities and the demands of the labor market are strong motivators for language learning among the Russian speakers, and many Russian parents are supportive of their children learning Estonian. Even though there are political forces among the Russian speakers in Estonia that oppose both general and educational language laws, there are signs that the Russians are becoming more accepting of the language requirements. Russians are perceived as economic immigrants rather than as a politically active group. This nature of immigration may explain the interest of Russian speakers in the Estonian language. In addition, European integration increases interest in the English language among Estonian and Russian speakers. These international forces, along with domestic political and economic forces, make the language policy situation especially dynamic in Estonia.

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