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Introduction to language planning and maintenance in Estonia

Kokkuvõte

Eesti keel on Eesti identiteedi üks olulisimaid komponente. Seetõttu reguleeritakse keelekõnnumisi mitmes olulises õigusaktis: Eesti Vabariigi põhiseaduses, keeleseaduses, keelevaldkonna arengukavades, strateegiatel jne. Esitan lühiülevaate Eesti keelepoliitika ja keelekorralduse mõnest põhimõttest ja tegevustest. Keelekorraldus tegeleb mh keele mainega, selle hoidmise ja tõstmisega. Usk oma keele (oma emakeele) ilusse on keele kestvuse seisukohalt oluline: seetõttu meenutan ka eri rahvaste seas tuntud legendi keele iludusvõistlustest. Samuti kirjeldan sarnasusi Eesti ja Prantsusmaa keelepoliitikas ja -korralduses. Tutvustan Eesti mõnda keelepoliitika ja keelekorraldusega tegelevat institutsiooni ja asutust. Eesti keelekorraldus sai ühe versiooni kohaselt alguse 19. sajandi lõpul Eesti Kirjameeste Seltsiga. Tänapäeval tegelevad keelepoliitika ja keelekorraldusega Haridus- ja Teadusministerium, Eesti Keelenõukogu, Eesti Keele Instituut ja Emakeele Selts. Selgitan ka eesti keelekorralduse mõnda põhimõtet ja keelekorralduslikke tegevusi Eestis.

Abstract (English)

The Estonian language is one of the most important components of Estonian identity. Linguistic issues are therefore regulated in several important legal acts: in the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, in the Language Act, and in the Language Development Plans, Strategies etc. I will give a brief overview of some of the basic concepts and activities of Estonian language policy and language planning and maintenance. Language planning and maintenance also deals with the prestige (reputation) of the language, both keeping it and raising it. Belief in the beauty of your language (in your own mother tongue) is important for the language's durability: so I will remind you of a legend about a language beauty contest which is well-known in many countries. I will also make a brief comparison between language life in Estonia and France, because it is possible to find a number of common features. I will introduce to you some institutions and bodies dealing with Estonian language policy and language planning which, according to one version, began at the end of the 19th century with the Society of Estonian Literati. Today, language policy and language planning and maintenance are carried out by the Ministry of Education and Research, the Estonian Language Council, the Institute of the Estonian Language and the Mother Tongue Society. I will also explain some of the principles of Estonian language planning and language-related activities in Estonia.

1. Introduction: some facts

Estonian is a Finno-Ugric language with about one million native speakers, including expatriates. In terms of its age it is a relatively old language, having been spoken for perhaps a thousand years.



Fig. 1: Finno-Ugric Language Tree
(www.kraanvelt.com/learning-estonian/)



Fig. 2: The Baltic and Finno-Ugric languages¹



Fig. 3: A page from the Estonian-language Wanradt-Koell Catechism (1535).
[Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven /.../ (Matthew 6, 10)]
(www.murre.ut.ee/vakkur/Gooti/Originaal/Koell.jpg.htm)

¹ https://aminoapps.com/c/languages/page/item/baltic-fenno-ugric-languages/QK0D_DGxTYI3k6aRvNGjk36bxXJ2YNZ1G0a.

It emerged as a literary language in the early 16th century, but as the official national language of the Republic of Estonia, with high status and prestige, it is relatively young – just a century old (see e.g. Mati Ereht 2003).

2. The beginnings of Estonian language planning

The beginnings of Estonian language planning, according to several experts, date back to the early 19th century, when two literary languages were in use in present-day Estonian territory: those were called the Tallinn or North-Estonian literary language and the Tartu or South-Estonian literary language. In 1811 a public debate was launched over spelling systems, while the 1850s and 1860s witnessed a heated struggle between the two literary languages. In 1871/1872 the **Society of Estonian Literati** (*Eesti Kirjameeste Selts*, 1871-1893) was founded. The Society was presided over from 1872 to 1881 by **Jakob Hurt**, who was a linguist, pastor, outstanding folklore collector and spiritual leader. In 1872 the Society of Estonian Literati made several important decisions, including the choice of spelling for their publications. This could well be considered the beginning of Estonian language planning (Tiiu Ereht 2002, 46-47).

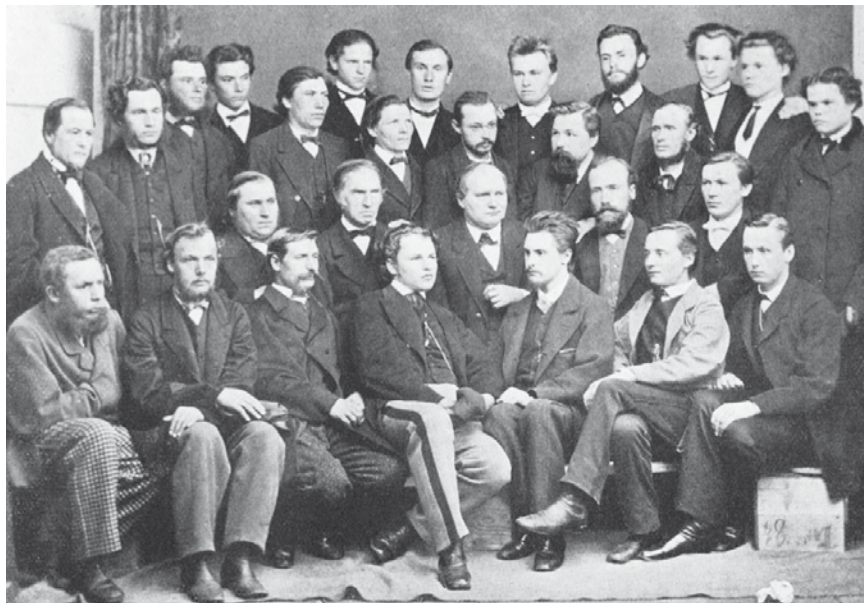


Fig. 4: Founders of the Society of Estonian Literati, Tartu 1870

(http://entsyklopeedia.ee/meedia/eesti_kirjameeste_selts1/eesti_kirjameeste_seltsi_asutajad_1870)



Fig. 5: Dr Jakob Hurt (1839-1907)

([https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=Category:Jakob_Hurt&uselang=et#/media/File:Jakob_Hurt,_TaM_F350_\(F133-8\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=Category:Jakob_Hurt&uselang=et#/media/File:Jakob_Hurt,_TaM_F350_(F133-8).jpg))

3. Language planning and language maintenance

A few words on how we interpret the concept of **language planning**, according to the expert opinion of Tiit Erelt. Language planning is the conscious development of the literary language, its enrichment and modernisation. Language planners keep seeking a linguistic ideal by making recommendations and fixing norms. Their aim is a good literary language that is capable of satisfying the needs of its users in whatever field and of expressing every possible thought and emotion (Tiit Erelt 2002, 15-16).

Language maintenance involves practical activities to improve language use. Language planning and language maintenance are two sides of the same activity.

Language planning falls into three divisions, namely:

- a) general language planning,
- b) special language planning and
- c) name-planning.

As such, language planning is an applied aspect of linguistics. Figuratively speaking, a literary language needs language planning in the same way that a beautiful garden or park needs a gardener for its design and maintenance.

4. The beauty of language

This brings us to beauty. What is the beauty of a language? Is it not – according to Aristotle – “a flush on the cheek of reason”? Surely all participants at our conference consider their own mother tongue very sweet and beautiful. And each of us has every right to do so, because that’s what our languages really are, underlying and framing their speakers’ way of thinking, their wisdom, history, experience, collective memory etc. Every time a language disappears, the world suffers a serious loss. Also, the beauty of a language involves a certain regularity, system and rules, which provide the basis for a literary standard. According to Thomas Stearns Eliot, at least, a culture cannot survive in the modern context without its base language, especially its literary form.

In Europe, at least, Italian has been considered a benchmark of linguistic beauty. Maybe this is due to Italian music, especially opera? Many people know a legend of a beauty contest, perhaps even a world championship of languages having taken place somewhere at some time, with Italian coming first. Estonian – according to Estonians, of course – is said to have come second, presenting the sentence *sõida tasa üle silla* ‘drive softly over the bridge’, reportedly told by a landlord addressing his coachman (Tender 2016 (1996), 113).

The Finns have a similar story of how Finnish came second after Italian at such a beauty contest. But they give more detail, saying that the sentence *Aja hiljaa sillalla* (an exact equivalent of the Estonian sentence) is said to have been presented by the legendary Finnish soprano Aino Ackté at the World Exhibition of 1900 in Paris, where Finland had its own pavilion.



Fig. 6: Finnish soprano Aino Ackté (1876-1944) at Paris Opera in 1900

(https://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aino_Ackt%C3%A9#/media/File:Aino_Acte_Pariisin_Oopperassa_1900_Taiteilijatar_Alcestena.jpg)

Probably there are more people among the honourable audience who have heard the story, but in a version in which the runner-up to Italian, if not the winner, was their own mother tongue.

In the recent past, various language competitions have been organised in different countries, some of them looking for the most beautiful sentence or word in the native language. One such competition was held in Estonia in 2008 on the initiative of the then minister of education and research Mr Tõnis Lukas (Tender 2016 [2008], 92-94).

It goes without saying that the aim of such events is not to belittle any other language, but to raise the prestige of the native language in order to prevent the loss or extinction of a small or less widely used language² under the pressure of big languages in this globalising world of ours.

5. Legislation dealing with the organisation, care, protection and development of the Estonian language

The Estonian language is one of the most important components of Estonian identity. The Preamble of the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia emphasises that it is the state's obligation "to guarantee the preservation of the Estonian people, the Estonian language and the Estonian culture "through the ages"

We also have a **Language Act** whose purpose is "to develop, preserve and protect the Estonian language and ensure the use of the Estonian language as the main language for communication in all spheres of public life".

Article 4 of the Language Act defines, inter alia, the concepts of the official and public use of language and the Estonian Literary standard:

(1) Official use of language is the use of language by governmental authorities and state agencies administered by governmental authorities (hereinafter state agency) and of local government authorities and agencies thereof, the use of language in the documents, web pages, signs, signposts and notices of notaries, bailiffs and sworn translators and the employees of their bureaus or other agencies, bodies or persons authorised to perform public administration tasks. Official use of language shall be in compliance with the Estonian Literary Standard (hereinafter Literary Standard). In the area of use of a regional variety the text of equal meaning in the respective dialect may be added to the text that is in compliance with the Literary Standard.

(2) The Literary Standard means the system of spelling, grammar and lexical standards and recommendations. The procedure for application of Literary Standard in written language shall be established by the regulation of the Government of the Republic.

² **LUL – lesser-used language**, this term does not include official EU member state languages, **LWUL – less widely used language**, this term includes LULs and official EU member state languages (Tender/Vihalemm 2009, 41).

(3) In other texts directed to the public that do not apply the requirement for official use of language, including the use of the Estonian language in the media, the good practice of the use of language is followed.

Language Strategies: The measures necessary for the preservation and development of the Estonian language are defined in the **Development Strategy of the Estonian Language (2004-2010)**, in the **Estonian Language Development Plan (2011-2017)** and in the forthcoming strategy for 2018-2027, which are official documents.

6. Language Institutions and organisations

Considering the paramount importance of our Estonian mother tongue we have more than one national institution dealing with language policy and language planning.



HARIDUS- JA
TEADUSMINISTEERIUM

More precisely, language policy and linguistic education policy is the domain of the **Ministry of Education and Research** (*Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium*), especially its **Department of Language Policy**.

The Estonian Language Council (*Eesti Keelenõukogu*) consults the Government of Estonia on the development and implementation of the language policy.



Issues of language planning are discussed by the language board of the (NPO) **Mother Tongue Society** (*Emakeele Selts*).



Eesti Keele Instituut

The central institution for language planning is the **Institute of the Estonian Language** (*Eesti Keele Instituut*).

The Institute of the Estonian Language is a national Research and Development institution whose goal is to contribute to the long-term survival of the Estonian language.

- The task of the Institute is to guarantee the norms of the Estonian standard language, which pursuant to law are established by the most recent version of

the Dictionary of Standard Estonian (Rules for the application of the norms of the Estonian standard language).

- The Institute has the status of the Office of Onomastic Expertise, whose function is to give expert opinions regarding names and to organise targeted research on place names.

The Institute performs a number of public functions:

- compilation and upgrading of dictionaries and databases essential for the country and national culture (dictionaries of contemporary Estonian, dictionaries of Estonian dialects and cognate languages, bilingual dictionaries);
- free public language advice (including advice on names and terminology);
- language care and language planning;
- coordination of nationwide terminological work, services for people with special needs (speech technology, dictionaries of sign language), e-services for language learners (learners' dictionaries for different levels of language proficiency), and the collection and development of language archives;
- coordination of terminology work;
- archives of Estonian dialects and of Finno-Ugric languages;
- development of speech synthesis for Estonian;
- online services for language learners (learners' dictionaries);
- services for people with special needs: speech technology, dictionaries of sign language.

The electronic resources and applications of the Institute are available to the public free of charge.

7. Brief comparison between language life in France and Estonia

Next, if I may, a brief comparison between France and Estonia. I wonder if everyone who remembers Cardinal Richelieu and his political activities in 17th-century France will automatically think of his tremendous role in French language life. Notably, he was the man who founded the *Académie française* in order to stabilise and control the language (corpus planning), to spread it throughout the realm (status planning), and to enhance its prestige in Europe (prestige planning) (Coulmas 2016, 83).

France and Estonia are quite different EU member states. But it is possible to find a number of common features in the official policy-making attitudes and in the status of the language in both countries – for example, a conservative attitude to the national language as a language of culture, which should be protected from the harmful effects of other languages and users. In both countries, the language

policy (status planning) is mainly focused on the protection and development of the state language. In Estonia as well as in France, there are a series of institutions and organisations, as well as a number of laws dealing with the organisation, care, protection and development of the state language.

In one particular case, France has been a direct model for Estonian legislation. On 8 February 2007 the Estonian Parliament (*Riigikogu*) adopted the Language Act, which refers directly to the French Language Act (Estonian Language Act, § 2 (3) Article 2, paragraph 3: “The measures to support foreign languages shall not damage Estonian” (Siiner/Tender/Vihalemm 2008, 206-208).

A language can be standardised, roughly speaking, in two different ways:

- 1) The first is the **strict way**, using *dos* and *don'ts*. Such an attitude is perhaps reminiscent of primary school. It goes with a peremptory (or imperative) tone and a frequent rebuking of mistakes. As a result, one will remember what to avoid rather than how to improve one's style of expression.
- 2) The other is **guidance** by describing the facts of the literary language and recommending certain developments, and, only if absolutely necessary, pointing out some undesirable tendencies, while letting positive information about the wealth of linguistic options dominate (Tiiu Erelt 2002, 43-44).

It is typical that a country with a young literary language will start by unifying and stabilising their language in the strict way, gradually embracing guidance at a later stage. True, language planners may sometimes move from *dos* and *don'ts* to positive guidance rather quickly – but never a language community, whose understanding of and getting used to new ways will take at least two generations.

Strict standardisation by prescribing single solutions seems, after all, clearer for many users. The guidance method often involves the presence of several options, which need not be equal, while the choice is left up to the user. Estonian language planners have been practising guidance for a score of years. Unfortunately this does not apply to many users, including many Estonian teachers, as well as teachers of Estonian as a second language...

A couple of years ago, two Estonian theatres, one Estonian-medium, the other Russian-medium, embarked on a joint project. The premiere of the play “At second sight” (*Teisest silmapilgust*), written and directed by Paavo Piik and Mari-Liis Lill, took place on April 27, 2016. The play addresses some sensitive issues about integration in a humorous tone. In one of the sketches we hear: Every time someone makes a mistake in their Estonian, a swallow will die.

This sentence is a tragicomic expression of a typical obstacle in learning and teaching Estonian as a second or foreign language: If mistakes are forbidden, one can never learn the language. Note that the chimney swallow is the Estonian national bird, while the Estonian language is the main component of the Estonian identity.

Of course, balance is a tricky thing to achieve – for example, between the freedom for making mistakes in language learning on the one hand, and the encouragement of a clear and correct use of standard language in public communication on the other.

8. Language prestige

Another focus of language planning is the prestige of the language, which should be maintained and raised, if at all possible.

Recently a competition called “Genuine Estonia – a proper Estonian name for an Estonian company 2017” was announced by the Mother Tongue Society in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Research. The first such competition was held last year, on the joint initiative of the Estonian Language Council and the Mother Tongue Society. The aim of the competition is to draw business and public attention to the ongoing foreign dominance of our public space and to raise the prestige of Estonian names of businesses and companies.



Fig. 7: Some examples from linguistic clips (<http://portaal.eki.ee/videod.html>)

The Institute of the Estonian Language has contributed to people's awareness of different aspects of the Estonian language such as place names, word etymologies, loanwords and good language use with the help of Estonian National Television.

Linguistic TV clips (*Keelekillud*) of about 60 seconds each have been shown in prime time; for example, in the summer of 2016 the clips were combined with the broadcast of the European Football Championship. In 2016 twenty such clips were prepared and shown by the first channel of Estonian television; this year (2017) 11 new linguistic clips have been presented to the Estonian TV audience.

As far as the future is concerned, we are currently planning a number of events to celebrate the centenaries of the Republic of Estonia next year (in 2018) and of Estonian as an official national language in 2019.

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