

SURVEY OF THE STATE OF THE ESTONIAN LANGUAGE

SUMMARY

The aim of the survey was to evaluate the present situation of Estonian both in and outside of Estonia, with respect to the status and prestige, teaching, research and development, and language infrastructure of Estonian, as well as teaching of other languages within Estonia. In light of this task, an overview of the current state of Estonian and other languages was given; the strengths and weaknesses of the domains of the study in each key area (status and prestige, teaching, research and infrastructure) were clarified; and an analysis was provided of the issues and directions of development over the last 15 years. The primary aim of the survey is to provide a basis for the „Estonian language strategy (2018-2027)“, but it is equally available for all interested parties. The research findings are primarily based on an analysis of data gathered through interviews, which both substantiated existing information and enabled the discovery of new information and new perspectives. Interview-based findings were complemented by the descriptive analysis of secondary data. The research took place between December 2016 and May 2017. All interviews with partners involved in fields of implementation of language policy or the development of language policy, the promoters and opinion leaders of the Development Plan of the Estonian Language 2011-2017, and the Estonian Foreign Languages Strategy 2009-2015 (13 individual and 14 group interviews, with 58 people altogether) were carried out in March 2017.

Language may be considered to be a problem, a right, or a **resource** (Ruiz, 1984). Language and multilingualism are of great significance for a stable society as resources for comprehending the world, the self and others. Estonia has substantial experience in supporting individual multilingualism in both the distant and more recent past, e.g. teaching multiple foreign languages at comprehensive schools and the resulting widespread knowledge of foreign languages. However, alongside supporting knowledge of multiple languages, it is equally important to shape positive attitudes toward multilingualism within the family unit, society and the educational system. Construal of the Estonian language more clearly as a resource, rather than a defensive fortress or national treasure, would benefit native and non-native Estonian speakers alike. It must be admitted that the current dualism (L1, L2) may become too simplistic a divide at schools with a more diverse student population, in terms of migration, educational experience or special needs. Teachers have a crucial role in the shaping and reproduction of language attitudes; teachers who are multilingual, flexible, mobile, and possess diverse skill sets, will be increasingly in demand. Language infrastructure supports language users and learners, and provides support and resources for researchers; the fast pace of language change means continuous development and updating of language collections and corpora. Infrastructure development should focus on user-friendliness and quality. Companies who are engaged in the development, production and distribution of language technology products constitute an important resource which should be supported through an inclusive network of cooperation for all the stakeholders.

Language policy is often seen today as a social process that is **dynamic**, complex and often **de-centralised**, and where the role of the state is inevitably reduced, due to globalisation (see for example Siiner et al., 2017). The de-centralisation (or internationalisation) can best be observed in the case of higher education and research. As language use in higher education has a widespread impact on the lower levels of education, it shapes the linguistic practices and language prestige among the coming generations. Central to language learning is the understanding that society and language are changing at a fast pace, and language development (e.g. work on terminology) has to be continual, while pragmatically limited in scope, flexible and natural. Migration also has a de-centralising effect on language policy – Estonian-speaking communities

abroad are inevitably located in non-Estonian speaking contexts where the language status (and prestige) is dependent on local language policy; the language attitudes and family language policy becomes decisive from the perspective of the sustainability of the language (see Schwartz and Verschik, 2013). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union (and the eastward enlargement of the EU), Estonia has predominantly been considered to be a country of emigration, whereas 'new immigration' also characterises the migration processes. Immigration to Estonia – from the EU and third countries, including migration for seeking international asylum – has shown a growing trend in the last ten years. Particularly in recent years we have seen a predominance of immigration to, rather than emigration from, Estonia. Whilst there are currently relatively few new immigrants, they are generally highly motivated to learn Estonian, and it is crucial to be ready to teach them Estonian: the key lies in the efficacy of language courses, (methodology, preparedness to teach Estonian without a mediator language), flexibility and adaptability to the specific needs of the learners.

Aside from the dynamism, there is also a certain **inertia** among attitudes toward the Estonian language. Predominantly, due to the systemic inertia of educational systems and the substance of education, the language ideology, beliefs and practices of Estonian residents are often paradoxical: the Estonian language should be simultaneously purist and modern, non-native influences should not be tolerated, or they should be allowed to rapidly accommodate to the Estonian language. Here too, a solution may be to focus the orientation toward communication and mutual understanding. Talking in schools and media about language change, language contacts (and the generative potential of languages) and linguistic diversification globally, helps speakers (including students) understand the background of national and personal language policy choices. Understanding language functionality, in addition to its symbolic value, is key to developing pragmatic, tolerant language attitudes.

Other important keywords are **balance and expediency**. A balance needs to be found between individual and societal multilingualism: which languages should be taught in schools; where and to what extent should other languages be used in public spaces? The balance between Estonian and English needs to be carefully monitored in higher education and research, e.g. curricula in Estonian and English, and in languages used in student theses. The point of balance in the context of teacher training is between a focus on the subject itself and student-based teaching. Expediency is relevant in the context of research published in Estonian, when limitations derive from the level of specialisation and the size of the academic community: decisions must be made regarding which disciplines are self-sufficient enough to justify sustaining them and developing specialised vocabulary in Estonian, and which are not. Strategic decisions are also required in the teaching of foreign languages in general, vocational and higher education, to secure enough proficiency in strategically important languages in the Estonian and global contexts. Much discussion has revolved around the question of whether English should be the first foreign language taught at primary school. It is important to look beyond the context of primary and secondary school and evaluate how students' academic achievement at increasingly internationalised universities would be influenced by prioritising a different foreign language. Balance is also required in foreign philology: whether the curriculum should be reduced to teaching a common language, and how to prepare specialists with language skills for the Estonian labour market during the short programme of study, although first-year students often show poor language skills.

The main area requiring balance is the teaching of Estonian as a second language. Critics have said that the transformation to a completely Estonian medium curriculum has come a quarter of a century too late. An increasing number of voices claim that non-native speakers should start learning Estonian early, either at nursery or primary school level. The results of the survey at hand support this view, though note that more intensive, systematic teaching of Estonian at nursery or lower school levels requires a high level of state support: this includes finding and training suitable teachers, implementing appropriate methodologies, supporting additive multilingualism, and counselling and support for (mainly Russian) non-Estonian-

speaking families, in order to reduce potential fears regarding school or nursery choice. A uniform, Estonian-medium school system will not emerge overnight, but it is important to form an action plan and begin to implement it.

As the present survey was limited by time constraints and the conditions of the tender, it was not possible to address the entire field of language policy – language use in multinational enterprises and international organisations, family language policy, new and old media are examples of topics which were not taken into consideration in the study. Special language needs were briefly considered at the initiative of the authors, although these fall only partially within the remit of the Ministry of Education and Research. Various other domains also lie beyond the reach of one ministry – language use and development impacts all areas of life and require attention from all policymakers. The survey and report inevitably, in part, reflect previous language policy documents in structure and content. The central task, and urgent need for the state, as the most influential designer and implementer of language policy, is to continuously monitor and evaluate national and international language policy. The group conducting the present survey recommends planning more time and resources in the future for researching the language status and various subdomains of language policy.

Recommendations

For purposes of clarity, the recommendations of the study have been divided into four larger groups: (1) general recommendations relating to broader political choices and values; (2) recommendations relating to the status and prestige of Estonian and other languages, and research; (3) recommendations for language teaching; and (4) recommendations for the development of language infrastructure. The majority of recommendations are based on the results from secondary analysis; however, opinions mentioned during the interviews with experts have also been quoted where relevant. Some recommendations may already be employed within the existing policy framework, measures or working practice, but are mentioned here in order to reiterate their continued importance.

General recommendations

- While a significant proportion of language policy concerns **language education**, decisions regarding language policy have great impact far beyond language-related fields. The process of decision making must consider the fact that issues concerning language policy (e.g. insufficient language skills) can ultimately lead to **social issues** (e.g. lack of social integration, school dropout rates, unemployment and labour scarcity, crime, lack of competitiveness in the labour market).
- Language policy in Estonia is inseparably connected to wider societal processes, affecting all areas of life and government institutions. Therefore, language questions necessarily require cooperation across ministries. The survey points to the need for establishing an **inclusive, coordinative, administrative body drawing on input across ministries** for shaping language policy, proposing a vision and possible development scenarios, and monitoring policy. Both the background analysis and interviews demonstrated the need for a broad-based, participatory, unifying system.
- As language policy intersects with all areas of life, both the structure and content of the language strategy are important. The survey found that, although many organisations and individuals increasingly place value on language, most of the experts who were interviewed were not familiar with the existing language development strategy. If a language strategy and its objectives are to be adopted on a wider scale, the **strategy must be easily understood, clever and inspiring**. A compromise must be found between a policy document designed for policymakers and organisations implementing policy and a

visionary document speaking to the wider target group, including enterprises, civil society and ordinary citizens. At the same time, it is necessary to ensure that the objectives and impact of the development plan can be evaluated in a clear and consistent manner. It is important for the strategy not to be perceived as a document belonging to one ministry only, or falling only under the remit of one single ministry.

- The preservation of the Estonian language through the ages is established as a goal in the preamble of the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia. According to one interpretation, this ties all citizens of Estonia constitutionally to the tasks of maintenance, development and protection of the Estonian language. The findings in the present study demonstrate a desire to shed the defensive stance – a status of preservation and protection from change will not increase the number of Estonian speakers, nor does it increase the value of the language in the eyes of speakers. As such, whilst discussions about the endangerment and need for protection of the Estonian language have been taking place for centuries, it would be more beneficial at this stage to talk about its **strength**.
- Developing and valuing multilingualism has recently grown in importance partly due to increasing geographical mobility. Hence, it is crucial to **support the knowledge of other languages in addition to Estonian, and to place a high value on multilingualism**.

Status, prestige and research

- The Estonian language is under constitutional protection as a national language *de jure*, and its *de facto status* is also stable in almost every geographical region and discipline. The language needs support in towns in Ida-Virumaa, where Russian is the majority language, and among Estonians who have emigrated to other countries. Language use in higher education and research requires separate attention and clearer legislative support in order to ensure that Estonian is maintained as a language of science, despite the pressures from **increasing globalisation** and the concomitant **dominance of the English language**.
- In general, the **prestige of the Estonian language** is very high – this is demonstrated by the overall desire to speak Estonian. It is essential to continue activities that highlight the Estonian language and accentuate its prestige, for instance the nationally broadcast dictation on Mother Tongue Day, the “Clear Message Award”, neologism competitions, and language clips by the Institute of the Estonian Language.
- In addition to the national Mother Tongue Day (14 March), it would be beneficial to promote **International Mother Language Day** (21 February), or to conceptually expand the day of Kristjan Jaak Peterson’s birth to also celebrate other mother tongues spoken in Estonia.
- In addition to teaching several languages in schools (e.g. ‘A’ and ‘B’ foreign languages), it is important to promote and teach **the value of multilingualism** at all levels of education, as well as outside the education system. Multilingual language materials need to be produced and existing language learning facilities need to be better promoted, as well as increasing the provision of support and advice to multilingual families. One crucial aspect of language education is to develop tolerance toward non-native speakers of Estonian and respect for other languages.
- **Language regulation and protection** in an open, democratic society (corpus planning) can be essentially descriptive, consultative and inclusive of the language user – such an approach needs to be continued by the individuals and organisations involved in language regulation (the Institute of the Estonian Language, universities, the Mother Tongue Society).
- Language (especially vocabulary) is changing fast, due to intense contacts with other languages. The well thought-through adaptation of **terminology** is a realistic way of managing language change,

alongside the effort to support professions and disciplines in resisting the tendency to shift to the use of only English. Hence, it is important to continue to invest in terminology work. A breakthrough, however, would require additional resources, coordination and cooperation, in order to further develop discipline-specific terminology, expand the terminology database (ESTERM), and make it relevant, multidisciplinary and user-friendly. Priorities must be established regarding which disciplines to focus on in order to achieve high quality and have an impact on use.

- **Researchers of the Estonian language** need to be prepared to adapt to internationalisation as well as react to **changes in the language** by mediating and explaining these to the wider public. Research topics cannot be prescribed, but there is a clear need for more of a focus on language change, social aspects of language use and language planning, and various aspects of language acquisition. Plans to advance digital humanities particularly support the skills of language researchers in cutting edge practices of new types of data, data analysis and intersectionality.
- In the absence of a societal agreement on changing legislation regarding entrepreneurship, the **language landscape** must be taken as a focus **instead of business names**, and Estonian usage must be encouraged in various ways. Alongside implementation of the Language Law, it is important to continue the positive inclusion and recognition of providers of Estonian names (e.g. the competition „Genuine Estonia – Estonian Names for Estonian Businesses 2017“ and the language landscape at Telliskivi Creative City), and to consider provision of business name consultancy.

Language teaching

- With respect to language teaching, several areas continue to be of concern – for example, ensuring a sufficient supply of competent new teachers, the prestige of the teaching profession, sometimes inadequate (professional) supplementary training, the quality of teaching materials and language use in higher education (curricula). A more specific action plan is needed to resolve these concerns.
- Graduates of secondary and vocational school must have **good, diverse skills in Estonian and foreign language(s)**. University graduates need to be articulate and proficient in **professional terminology in Estonian and a foreign language**. These must be **national priorities**, yet reaching these goals will require substantive changes in language teaching and methodology.
- **The teaching of a second language should start as early as possible** (nursery, primary school). At the same time, special attention must be paid to the performance of multilingual children at school, for instance Russian-speaking children entering Estonian kindergarten. Teaching a second (dominant) language in early education must be treated and supported as additive, not subtractive, bilingualism. Secondary school is too late for beginning the most effective, systematic teaching of Estonian.
- It is recommended to work out a new action plan for foreign language teaching, in order to provide guidance and update **teaching of and in foreign languages**. The action plan must take into account broader discussion regarding questions such as which languages should be taught with support by the state, and what objectives are being set for the study of B and C languages. As English has become a basic skill in today's society, it is important to decide when, how much and how to teach it. It is equally important to support the teaching of languages other than English. Russian, for instance, is still an important intermediary language which adds to competitiveness in the labour market and helps to better understand Estonia's neighbouring cultures. Hence, it is essential for Russian to play a role in multilingual Estonia, and for the Russian language to be maintained as a societal resource, to improve community and national cohesion. In a similar vein, it is important to support German language study from the viewpoint of Estonian cultural history (as well as linguistics, law and history more broadly).

Considering today's global outlook, it would be beneficial for Estonia to train more specialists in **Chinese and Arabic**, in addition to **Russian, German, Spanish and other European languages**.

- As a **result of migration**, the language background of students studying in Estonian-medium general education schools is **increasingly diverse** (e.g. returning migrants, forced immigrants). In the context of globalisation, the current classification of Estonian as either a native (L1) or a foreign (L2) language is becoming too narrow. This changing context needs to be taken into account in teacher training and supplementary education. In Estonian-medium schools, **group study formats** may be appropriate for Estonian language learning. Special attention should be paid to new immigrants with whom there is no common language, and who may not have prior language learning experience.
- As the **target groups** of Estonian language teaching are **increasingly diverse (in terms of age, ethnicity and linguistic background)**, new teaching materials are needed which take into account their needs and motivations. This also requires prioritising groups learning Estonian as a foreign language, in order to develop appropriate materials and methodology for particular target groups.
- The strong overt connection of language learning with identity may hinder second language learners from adopting Estonian and developing positive attitudes towards learning Estonian. More **analysis** is needed of which **narratives in language teaching** are exclusionary, and how to replace them with inclusive, unifying narratives.
- A reasonable balance between **teacher training for teaching a subject** and **pedagogical competence** needs to be found within the **educational practices for Estonian language teachers**.
- The **internationalisation of Estonian higher education** is necessary and broadening, but a balance must be found between the use of Estonian and English: strategic documents have remained indicative, and universities have developed teaching in English independently from one another. Open discussion is needed, and a more specific plan must be drafted in order to guarantee Estonian-medium teaching in every discipline (as outlined in the earlier Estonian higher education strategy), and how to resolve differences of opinion: how to decide on the objectives and how to monitor their achievement. The internationalisation of higher education is shaping language choice and language use in earlier educational levels, and the **"Englishisation" of higher education** may lead to attitudes among Russian speaking students that there is no need for the Estonian language.
- Skills in **academic self-expression** in every field of study must be developed at the university level and earlier, including both academic writing and oral skills.
- At present, there is little regulation of language studies outside the formal education system, and no binding quality standards have been developed for institutions and individuals who offer language teaching services. Monitoring needs to be implemented for supplementary education, and **uniform standards of quality assurance need to be developed for the organisation of language teaching**.
- **Diversification of methodology in language teaching** must be supported on an ongoing basis. The use of language immersion methods and the development of integrated language learning, including ongoing teacher training, should be further facilitated, whilst providing information about other supporting methodologies based on examples from other countries. Support must be given to joint events, school twinning, student and teacher exchange and other initiatives.
- Extracurricular Estonian language teaching should also be available in communities with a Russian-speaking majority. **Extracurricular activities** are one context for provision of different linguistic environments and **language immersion**. More opportunities must be developed for language teaching

outside school, and groups offering extracurricular activities with language immersion should be supported, for instance, alongside youth leisure activity schemes.

- Teachers in after-school clubs and recreational activities may spend more time with children and youth over the years than school teachers (e.g. camps which last several days). Extracurricular teachers and youth workers can also influence their language use and awareness, and employ informal means of increasing their interest in languages. It is essential to support the language studies of **teachers outside the school system, sports trainers, youth workers**, etc., to further improve young people's language use through extracurricular and recreational activities.
- Individual motivation to safeguard the Estonian language and culture plays a pivotal role for Estonians who have emigrated abroad. Therefore, it is crucial for the **Estonian state** to send a **positive, supportive message to Estonians living abroad**.
- Requirements set by the Estonian state do not extend to Estonian language courses abroad, and often, study courses are taught by Estonian speakers or community members who lack the appropriate linguistic or pedagogical training. The **qualifications of Estonian language teachers abroad** must be improved, primarily through making supplementary training available.
- **Counselling** must be made available for **parents of multilingual children**. This includes a number of target groups: native Russian-speakers in Estonia, who require advice early, at the stage where they are selecting an educational establishment for their child; native Estonian-speaking parents living outside Estonia, who wish to develop their children's Estonian language skills, and new immigrants and families, where the parents may speak several languages (or dialects).
- The availability and accessibility of supporting specialists – primarily speech therapists or special education teachers – is inconsistent across the education system and is dependent on the capacities of the local authority. Schools' resources and needs for supporting specialists must be established and **the availability of relevant specialists** must be ensured, including local authorities with lesser capacities.
- Speech and language therapists, class teachers and other evaluators of linguistic development require instruction and well thought-through approaches to better **assess typical and atypical development among bilingual children**, including assessment of school tests, and supplementary training in approaches better suited for multilingual learning environments.
- The sustainability of a dialect depends in large part on intergenerational language use: the (grand)parents' decision as to what dialect is to be spoken in the home environment. For children, it is important for a language environment outside the home to support speaking in the dialect as the norm. Support for **use of dialects in general education** is recommended.
- Translation services for sign language are not sufficiently available, mainly due to the shortage of sign language translators. The sign language programme at the University of Tartu is currently not matriculating students, and the future of this programme is unclear. In order to improve the availability of the service, it is crucial to **maintain training of sign language interpreters**.

Infrastructure

- In the case of state monitoring of the Language Law, it is important to improve the **image and prestige of the Language Inspectorate**, as this institution continues to be viewed as a punitive authority – not only amongst speakers of other languages but also among entrepreneurs. Over time, its activities have

become more supportive and advisory, but the Language Inspectorate has been expected to fill both supervisory (monitoring) and directive (guiding) roles. For instance, the fulfilment of language proficiency requirements has been relegated to surveillance, rather than resolving issues at the source, improving effectiveness, quality and accessibility of language courses.

- Above all, language infrastructure needs to be **user-friendly**. It needs to be assembled into a simple (web)environment with a multilingual user interface where necessary.
- Language infrastructure is distributed across the responsibilities of several organisations. The Centre of Estonian Language Resources is responsible for developing resources, collections and technology, but an organisation should be established to **coordinate most aspects of language infrastructure**, in order to develop infrastructure, prioritise actions, and avoid the duplication of organisations and their activities.
- Many digital language collections are widely available for user access. At the same time, it is not possible to **develop the language collections** or to digitise old collections in a systematic and consistent manner. Taking into account language changes and the users' needs, priorities must be established regarding which language collections need to be developed, and which existing collections should be digitised.
- Legislation regulating teaching resources (e.g. textbooks) does not guarantee their sufficient quality standards. Common principles need to be established for **development and quality assurance of teaching resources**.
- **The national language technology programme** enables the development of longer-term, more resilient infrastructure, and a similar programme should be implemented in the next development programme as well. As technological tools are of key importance, but are also expensive, and increasingly so, it is important to increase the proportion of additional resources allocated (e.g. by a certain percentage each year).
- Only a handful of small enterprises are involved with language technology products in Estonia. Cooperation between the state, research institutions and enterprise must be increased. A minimal level of **consistent cooperation** needs to be achieved (including financing where necessary) for the market introduction of new prototypes (e.g. through the Enterprise Development Programme).