

Maintenance of South Estonian Varieties: A Focus on Institutions

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Institutions are seen as the societal rules of the game in the broadest sense. Institutions include informal norms and formal laws, which are not necessarily functional, but shape human interaction by both prohibiting and enabling it. In language maintenance, too, institutions can serve as obstacles or can provide support, for example through additional resources. In our article, both the normative and legal aspects of language maintenance are presented and discussed on the basis of the example of South Estonian. Although its varieties – Seto and Võro – are traditionally grouped into one category of sub-language, the speakers’ senses of identity and different cultural practices lead to objections to this exclusively *linguistic* branching. We discuss how, given the similar linguistic resources the Seto and Võro speech communities possess, norms and laws concerning varieties of South Estonian have been maintained and whether they have changed.

Keywords: institutions; language maintenance; South Estonian varieties; spoken and written language; language activism

In the new-institutionalist framework, institutions are seen as the rules of the game (North, 1990); they include both informal norms and formal laws and are ‘constituted in and through recurrent practices’ (Giddens, 1982: 8). Institutions may provide resources for societal continuity and prevent unwanted change from happening or, vice versa, may interrupt stable development and force change. While laws can be changed overnight, it takes time to alter norms. Institutions are not necessarily functional; however, the costs of everyday trial-and-error behaviour are reduced by institutions, and this generally makes institutions resources, in terms of predicting behaviour. Institutional support is vital in the maintenance of any language, but especially of lesser-used and non-standard vernacular languages. In the context of language studies, some authors also use the word “ideology” for either a group’s

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representations (van Dijk, 1998) or ‘the norms about which language is appropriate for different settings and for use with different people’ (Harris Russell, 2001: 140). For example, the ideology of standard language institutionalizes high and low varieties: ‘the standard form becomes the legitimate form, and other forms become, in the popular mind, illegitimate’ (Milroy, 2001: 547). In general, dominant language ideologies have (re)produced social differences by constructing some varieties as worthier than others (Blackledge, 2005; Koreinik, 2011a). The language laws, including the Language Act of Estonia, often follow simplified essentialist representations of language (c.f. Kroskrity, 2000) and the Herderian ideology of distinct languages (c.f. Gal, 2006), and strongly promote the official language (c.f. Dunbar, 2010). In this article, we seek to analyse the role of institutions, namely norms and laws for the maintenance of South Estonian varieties, and to discuss the possibility of institutional change.

Modern standard Estonian was developed on the basis of northern Estonian dialects, incorporating a number of southern linguistic features. Standardization took a while: it started in the sixteenth century with the emergence of two regional codified written varieties, which competed against each other and superimposed high languages for expanding their domains ‘before an all-Estonian standard was eventually engineered’ (Raag, 1999: 34). The reasons for such an “ineffective” standardization are to be found in the society’s limited economic integration, and localized public administration, which lacked public compulsory education, nationalist ideologies, mass (print) media and the welfare state (Anderson, 1991; Kymlicka, 2002; Dunbar, 2010). Yet, between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, despite prescriptive attitudes and forced uniformity, the Estonian literati wrote as they wished without being afraid of stigmatization (Raag, 1999). There were some men of letters, Baltic Germans, whose first (written) language was German but who sometimes preferred an Estonian vernacular in writing because it was ‘the purest Estonian’ (and hence a desirable model for their colleagues) (c.f. Peegel *et al.*, 1994). Simultaneously, there were literati who based their preference for a vernacular on writing for a target group that had full command of a particular variety. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when opposing the German nobility and the clergy, the radicals of the national movement displayed contempt for illiterates, for the use of dialects, for conservatism, and for the old literary Estonian and the Tartu language (*tartu keel*) - the written standard of southern Estonia (Laanekask, 2004). Those

sentiments gradually developed into a kind of linguistic authoritarianism which became apparent after 1905, with the emergence of Modern Standard Estonian (Raag, 2010). While between the two world wars of the twentieth century the experiment of cultural self-government was welcomed and institutionalized by the Law on Cultural Autonomy of Ethnic Minorities (1925), which allowed non-ethnic Estonian citizens of groups over 3,000 to found schools and foster their cultural life in their mother tongue (Müüripeal and Neljas, 1999), all deviations from standard Estonian, for example colloquial language and dialects, were regarded as marginal or incorrect, not as legitimate varieties (Hennoste, 1997). Estonian purism falls into the targeted xenophobic/ethnographic/archaizing category¹ (Thomas, 1991, as referred to in Raag, 1999); while it is conservative and idealizes past (linguistic) practices, it does not support heterogeneity in languaging. While (Standard) Estonian is perceived as a highly planned ethnic language (*ibid.*), it also has a high symbolic value for its users (c.f. Vihalemm, 1999, 2002).

Following Estonia's annexation to the Soviet Union, and within the context of extensive migration from neighbouring, Russian-speaking Soviet republics, the Estonian language was largely seen as the symbol of psychological resistance against Russification/Sovietization. It also constituted the basis of ethnopolitical mobilization during the restoration of an independent Estonian state (Vihalemm, 1999, 2002; Hallik, 2002). Decades later, Estonian is still iconically linked to Estonian-ness (c.f. Koreinik, 2011a), i.e. Estonian is represented as Estonians' 'inherent nature or essence' (Irvine and Gal, 2000: 37). Both purist and symbolic aspects contribute to the ideology of a standard language, and within this context different institutional aspects (norms and laws) of the maintenance of the South Estonian varieties of Võru and Seto are presented and discussed next.

Norms of speaking and writing South Estonian varieties

Despite the emergence of the all-Estonian standard variety, the vitality of South Estonian varieties decreased after only a half century; the language shift to standard (common) Estonian took place in the 1960s-1980s (Org *et al.*, 1994). South Estonian survived best in peripheral south-eastern Estonia (Pajusalu *et al.*, 1999), where mostly bilingual Võru-speakers live, switching between their vernacular and standard (common) Estonian depending on circumstances and interlocutors. Given their strong

Estonian identity, Võru-speakers do not regard themselves as a minority; Brown (2004) has described them as a reluctant minority group who object to “minoritization” by observers. Recent focus group interviews within the European Language Diversity for All (ELDIA) project² seem to demonstrate this fact. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Setos were seen as Estonia’s Other and ‘long lost sons’ (Kalkun, 2011). The Setos, who live on the Estonian–Russian border, have a minority status in Russia but not in Estonia, where they are however increasingly seen as a separate ethnic group. Although both varieties – Seto and Võru – and their speakers are traditionally grouped into the category of sub-language or dialect (*Võru murre*), the speakers’ senses of identity and different cultural practices lead to objections to this mostly linguistic branching. Therefore, below, both varieties will be looked at separately, though in comparison.

Although Estonian vernaculars have historically been less prestigious languages *vis-à-vis* the “power languages” German and Russian, which enabled a speaker to achieve upward social mobility, the enforcement of standard Estonian created a new language hierarchy. Within this new hierarchy, written South Estonian (*tartu keel*) lost its position because of print-capitalism, nation-building and overall societal modernization. Printing for the small south-eastern Estonian market, where Seto and Võru as spoken, was not lucrative (Laanekask, 2004; Ross, 2005). According to the first census in the Baltic provinces in 1881, the counties of Tartu and Võru, where written South Estonian was used, had more than 267,000 residents, the majority of whom were likely to be (South) Estonian speakers (*Rahvaloendused Eestis*). A relatively well-functioning primary education system in South Estonian, with its readers, religious books and calendars which, by the end of the 1800s, taught the whole population to read and write in their vernacular, was not sufficient for emerging intellectuals, for whom the potential of North Estonian seemed more promising. Although an ABC-book in Võru South Estonian was published as late as 1885 – as Jakob Hurt, a leader of national movement, believed that children should learn to read in their mother tongue first (Hurt, 1885) – the replacement of vernacular instruction in south-eastern Estonian schools by common language instruction was demanded (Laanekask, 2004). Thus, South Estonian gradually disappeared from written use: first it was limited to schools and churches and then, at around the turn of the century, it was abandoned in both domains.

During the twentieth century, the peripheral Võru-speakers' economic–geographic situation and socioeconomic prospects gradually worsened compared to the rest of Estonia. Therefore an ethnic–conservative and nostalgic attitude seems to be rather common among Võru-speakers, especially those who have not out-migrated to urban centres. They are not aware of the structural, market-initiated injustice of regional development which accelerated in the Estonian nation-state. Despite Europe's supposedly celebrated (linguistic) diversity, ethnic–conservative attitudes may make the vernacular especially vulnerable and easy to give up: it is enough to claim that the maintenance of Võru can harm the interests of the Estonian national (state and official) language and Estonians in general. Such an argument, as the authors' observations and decades-long fieldwork experience have shown, is mostly accepted by Võru-speakers without any critical analysis. Empirically, a survey by the Võro Institute in 1998 also indicated that Võru was a less prestigious language, although it may have had hidden prestige among some users (Pajusalu *et al.*, 2000; Eichenbaum and Koreinik, 2008). Social groups that are receptive to (language) prestige – women, young people, educated people and urbanites – reported less frequent language use than other groups (*ibid.*, c.f. Labov 2001). Yet, it is not clear whether language use was under- or over-reported; the estimated number of active and passive users was 50,000 (Koreinik, 2007; c.f. Pajusalu *et al.*, 1999). Ehala and Niglas (2007) concluded that Võru was neither used nor valued in Estonian society; its low prestige was likely linked to its peripheral position compared with the Estonian and global 'prestige centres' (Ehala, 2004).³

Nevertheless, reading and writing in their own vernacular has some legitimacy for Võru-speakers. For example, since 2000 the Võru-language newspaper *Uma Leht* (UL) has been read regularly or occasionally by three quarters of residents in the area (Saar Poll, 2005). Moreover, UL has a number of correspondents and many Võru-speakers take part in its annual writing contest (about 60 authors in 2010). Finally, Võru-speakers have reported their support for the publication of children's books and fiction (Eichenbaum and Koreinik, 2008). The collective memory of Võru-speakers seems to embrace the idea that it was still possible in the nineteenth century to read and write everything that a peasant needed in his everyday life using his own vernacular (*tartu keel*). There seems to be a "correlation" between longing for one's own written word and nostalgia for a simpler societal life of pre-modernity.

Developments were rather different for the Setos, whose identity has been construed via the fluctuations of the Estonian–Russian border (Jääts, 2000; Saar, 2003). At the end of the nineteenth century, the Setos were closer to Russians than to Estonians because of their “Russian” religion; Russian Orthodoxy (Jääts, 2000). The Estonian national (c.f. traditional) culture, modelled after the German culture, remained unfamiliar to the Setos, as they were either illiterate or, to a lesser extent, educated in Russian. Therefore, the Setos were subjected to Estonianization when their habitat, together with Russian villages (as the new 1920 border was a strategic rather than an ethnic one), was incorporated into the interwar Republic of Estonia. The patronizing ideology that the Setos were younger, uneducated brothers of Estonians whose development had to be fostered was also accepted by the Setos, especially when their religious affiliation was left untouched (*ibid.*).

After World War II, a number of the Setos first in-migrated to the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic from Russia and then moved to urban centres. In cities, the Setos gave up their mother tongue and the Soviet atheist propaganda had its impact on their religious practices (Saar, 2003). In their traditional rural habitat, older Setos reported more frequent language use, while younger Setos reported less frequent use (Eichenbaum, 1998; Mäger *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, young people have become unfamiliar with the meaning of many religious practices (for details see Semm and Palang, 2004). Most likely, there are inter-generational but also cross-generational differences in the ethnic identification of the Setos: some perceive themselves as ethnic Setos, some identify with Estonians, and some are in between. In the second half of the twentieth century, Seto activists realized the value of old traditions, beliefs and folklore, and found a common language with other Finno-Ugric ethnoses and ambassadors of traditional cultures all over the world. However, the Seto heritage has now been defined by experts and the institutionalized funding of its cultural practices excludes other versions of local culture (Annist, 2009).

Not having developed a writing system of their own, Seto activists have made several unsuccessful attempts to create one. Nevertheless, given their rich and original heritage, the Setos have more choices for identity-building in the globalizing world than Võru-speakers, whose cultural practices resemble those of Estonian-speakers and whose local identity is largely linguistic. Võru language activists, on the other hand, agreed upon *vahtsõnõ kiräviis* - “the new spelling” for both Võru and Seto varieties in 1995. Yet, linguistically older, geographically distant, otherwise

unfamiliar or stigmatized forms appear strange and Seto-like to many Võru speakers; the standard variety is not firmly established. The new standard seems to be “owned” by the Võru Institute rather than by speakers. How the ownership of the standard written variety (and the language) is interpreted, however, depends on different experiences people may have with standards and written languages in general. Both the Võru and Seto movements have their radicals, who are engaged in identity-building, either supporting the essentialist view of a distinct language (Kansui, 1999) or of a distinct ethnos (Jääts, 2000). In a world where identity has become a matter of cultural choice (Meluzzi, 1996), language activism has not attracted masses of followers. Therefore, while the elite of the Setos and the Estonian intellectuals who have joined them have chosen to maintain their traditions or vernacular, the majority of the Setos, alienated from the tradition, feel excluded. Similarly, the majority of Võru-speakers may feel excluded from decisions made for written Võru and language acquisition. This corresponds to Gal’s (2006: 21) observation that: ‘the language attitudes of language specialists, intellectuals, media workers come to be at odds with the preferences of other minority speakers’. Given this sense of exclusion, it can be concluded that social norms seem to be somewhat ambivalent as regards what concerns the public and, in particular, the written use of South Estonian varieties. Language has different importance for Võru-speakers and the Setos; it occupies a different role in speakers’ and activist speakers’ everyday lives. Nevertheless, while South Estonian varieties have been used in a number of legal areas, e.g. in education and media, as described in the chapter below, activists have made attempts to institutionalize South Estonian varieties as regional languages. These attempts are discussed in the concluding chapter.

Laws and South Estonian varieties

When discussing typologies of language legislation, Dunbar (2002, 2010) describes Estonia, along with the other Baltic states, Catalonia and Quebec, as a strong model of the promotion regime, where there is a right to receive services and to work in the national language. Moreover, there are requirements for public information and enforcement mechanisms, including significant sanctions when the rules are not followed and special control bodies with significant powers. According to his typology, all those promotion regimes have an “official” language of a “nation”,

spoken by a majority of the polity, although vulnerable to a certain degree because of historical reasons (i.e. Russification and Russian-speaking new migrants in the case of Estonia) originating from a neighbouring state or its predecessors. There is general political consensus on language issues among Estonian-speakers, and significant preparedness, e.g. institutionalization, its presence in all levels of the education system and training, and a well-developed text corpus. Obviously, the Estonian promotion regime, with its constitutional provisions, and language, educational and media laws, has an impact on Seto and Võru language maintenance, as it categorizes languages into an official language and foreign languages, but the two South Estonian varieties do not quite fit into the legislative, instituted taxonomies (c.f. Bourdieu, 1991).

The Estonian Constitution is the fundamental law of the country, and defines the one official language of the country as Estonian. The new Language Act (*Keeleseadus*), adopted on February 23, 2011, reinforces its status as the state language, but Article 3(3) also requires the state to support the protection, use and development of regional varieties of Estonian (*eesti keele piirkondlikud erikujud*). Moreover, in the area where a particular variety has historically been spoken, official texts can, in addition to language use conforming with the Literary Standard, also be written in the regional variety (Article 4(1)). Needless to say, the writing conventions of South Estonian varieties do not always correspond to the Literary Standard. These provisions were not included in the previous version of the Language Act. Nevertheless, nothing has prevented public (local) authorities from writing texts in the regional variety, although they can only be regarded as unofficial documents. While the Literary Standard still guides the use of Estonian in public information and provision of services, whenever the use of the Literary Standard is not required explicitly, a regional variety can be used. The Explanatory Note to the draft stated that the term ‘Estonian language’ was to be understood as including both the Literary Standard and regional varieties of the Estonian language (Meiorg, 2011).

Estonian legislation also defines foreign languages as any language other than Estonian, except for Estonian sign language. A language of a national minority is a foreign language which Estonian citizens who belong to a national minority have autochthonously used as their mother tongue in Estonia. Another law in which language plays a significant role is the 1995 Citizenship Act (*Kodakondsuse seadus*), with its requirements for and assessment of knowledge of the Estonian language.

Both Setos- and Võru-speakers are mostly Estonian citizens and bilingual by birth; bilingualism is defined as the ability to use one or more languages (dialects) in most communicative situations and to switch freely between languages when needed (Oksaar, 1998: 72). According to the 1993 Act of Cultural Autonomy of National Minorities (*Vähmusrahvuste kultuuriautonomiam seadus*), a ‘national minority’ includes Estonian citizens who live in the Estonian territory, who have a long, firm and lasting relationship with Estonia, who differ from Estonians by their ethnicity, cultural uniqueness, religion or language, and who are driven by the will to maintain their customs, religion or language, which is the foundation of their common identity. While at the beginning of the twentieth century the otherness and autonomy of the Setos was unquestioned, near the end of the century the representative body of Setos, fearing being assimilated by Estonians, proclaimed themselves to be a separate ethnos (Kalkun, 2011). As Cultural Autonomy Bodies of National Minorities can be formed by non-ethnic Estonian citizens of German, Russian, Swedish and Jewish origin, and by groups of over 3,000 persons, the Seto activists seriously discussed this option of the application of cultural autonomy, but the idea was soon dropped. The 1996 Place Names Act (*Kohanimeseadus*) (Article 10) states that the spelling of a place name must follow Estonian orthography although it may reflect the local dialectal sound structure of the name. Estonian dialects, with or without their own orthographies, are considered to be parts of the Estonian language for this purpose (Article 1(4)) (Meiorg, 2011). In 1997 the Place Name Board made recommendations to local governments to reverse the 1970 administrative reform, and many historical place names were eventually restored. At the end of the 2000s, toponyms in Estonian and in Võru are displayed in parallel on the road signs of historical church parishes. Personal names of Võru and Seto origin correspond with the provisions of the 2004 Names Act (*Nimeseadus*), which requires that the spelling of an Estonian personal name should be in accordance with the rules of orthography of Estonian. While, in general, the Language Act secures the political arrangement of languages into ‘standard-and-its-varieties’, the adaptability of legislation and policies is binary: the Language Act provides enough leeway to speech communities to use their languages in parallel with Estonian in the public sector, but when it comes to the status of Võru and Seto the law is inflexible (Meiorg, 2011).

As for educational legislation, the 2010 Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act (*Põhikooli ja gümnaasiumi seadus*) (Article 21) states that Estonian is

the language of instruction in both basic and upper secondary schools. As a matter of fact, according to the law, any language can be the language of instruction: in municipal schools, on the basis of a decision of the local government council, and in state schools, on the basis of a decision of the Minister of Education and Research. The board of trustees of a school must make a corresponding proposal to the local government council or the Minister of Education and Research. Seto and Võru do not form part of the National Curriculum, but they are included in the list of optional subjects or electives chosen by schools. The School Curriculum - designed in accordance with the National Curriculum and partially with in-school agreements based on local needs, parents' and students' wishes, and local resources - creates a legal opportunity to teach non-standard varieties of Estonian; however, this option has been exploited by a few local schools (see also Koreinik, 2007). Pupils and their parents tend to choose skills needed in the globalized world: English classes in particular always seem more desirable than vernacular instruction once a week. Eventually, parents' choices add up to a drop in the number of students and the closing down of small rural schools, steps which make intergenerational language transmission harder. Beginning in the 2011/2 school year, Võru was used as a medium in preschool education in one group in a rural kindergarten, and there is a plan to introduce a couple more in Võru. There is a language immersion group where activist speakers bring their children once a week. The share of (both basic and upper secondary) schools where the Võru language or local (cultural) history, literature and folk music are taught has been stable in recent years (20 schools out of 39 in 2011/2), although the percentage of pupils who study Võru has been small since 1997, i.e. throughout the period it has been possible to study it (Koreinik, 2007). To conclude, while the national curriculum incorporated aspects of identity and culture, and Võru can be taught as an elective subject, Brown (2005) describes the teaching of Võru, as for other local aspects of culture, as being peripheral in the school environment or "schoolscape".

The use of language in the media is also regulated by the Language Act, which covers the translation of foreign language texts of audiovisual works, television and radio programmes and advertisements. In the broadcasting of audiovisual works, a foreign language text must be accompanied by an adequate translation into Estonian. Translation into Estonian is not required for retransmitted or language-learning programmes or for radio programmes targeting a foreign language

audience. Although there is no special provision on the use of Seto and Võru in the media, both are used in short radio news and in television episodes with Estonian subtitles in the Estonian Public Broadcasting, as well as in mono- (Võru language) and bilingual (Seto language) print community media. Adding subtitles to television episodes was initiated by media professionals, as programming had to be in accordance with the law, i.e. the Literary Standard. Those have been funded from the state programme “Southern Estonian language and culture” and its follow-up. Before the turn of the millennium, Võru was used in all journalistic genres (Saar, 2005). With UL being the only entirely Võru language channel, other local newspapers have almost stopped using Võro (*ibid.*). Another example of Võru in print media is the first Võru-language version of the oldest Estonian children’s magazine, *Täheke*, which was published in February 2005 with seven more editions coming out in the following years. The Võru versions of *Täheke* were distributed without charge among first graders and those who study the Võru language in the Võru-speaking area (Koreinik, 2007). Finally, sporadic texts in Võru and Seto have been published in all-Estonian print media and in new media, such as chat rooms, internet forums and the blogosphere.

As for less regulated domains of written and spoken language, in addition to the boost to Võru language literature, which is characterized as an example of small literature in the spirit of Kafka (Sallamaa, 2009), dramaturgy and performing arts were popular in the 1990s. Theatre in the Võru language was started by professionals (the drama school of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, and the Vanemuine Theatre in Tartu), moved to the sphere of a small chamber-like experimental theatre (the Võru Theatre Atelier) and reached a repertoire which engaged an unpretentious, but broad, audience. It has been one of the most advanced performing arts in which the use of Võru has been most explicit. Although some performers and genres of music (e.g. singer’s song and choir music) have enjoyed the audience’s attention, the existence and development of theatre in a “minoritized” variety, with its dramaturgical roots, fiction and poetry demonstrate that the written word has maintained its importance for Võru-speakers in less regulated/standardized domains.

Although texts in Seto are available in a number of print media (*Setomaa* and *Peko helü* ‘Peko’s voice’) and there are a number of text producers, the Setos have remained outsiders in the Estonian written culture. At the same time, the Setos’

polyphonic singing tradition *leelo* is also very much alive and popular within an all-Estonian context, being constantly reinterpreted, for example by the ethno-pop group ‘Zetod’. As for the theatre, new forms have developed in music, which interpret sounds and epics of folk songs (e.g. Veljo Tormis). This is produced by local youth, who have grown into the Seto culture. While Võru-speakers have maintained their tradition of writing, the Setos have so far preserved their predominantly oral culture, with its material and mental elements.

Discussion: the future of South Estonian varieties

Despite the general political consensus on the arrangement of Estonian into the standard form and its varieties, there have been a couple of legal proposals on the recognition of South Estonian varieties as distinct languages. In general, those proposals may indicate some institutional and legal change.

In 2004, the council of the state programme “Language and Culture of Southern Estonia 2000-2004” proposed amendments to the Language Act to recognize Southern Estonian varieties, including Võru and Seto, as regional languages, in order to expand the domains of South Estonian, to improve its prestige and to remove legal gaps. A number of parliamentary factions, ministries and other relevant bodies discussed the proposal, but no consensus was reached. The issue was reopened in 2009, when drafts of the Language Act were discussed, but again no decision acceptable to both the proponents and opponents of legal recognition was reached. For example, the proposals included replacing “regional varieties of Estonian” with “Estonian regional languages”. The proposal also included provisions for the use of varieties in the media, in public signage and by public officials. The new Language Act enacted in 2011, with its Explanatory Notes, addresses Seto and Võru as regional varieties, i.e. as dialects or, in other words, as dialectal languages (*murdekeeled*). This obviously does not satisfy the proponents of legal recognition. The (de)legitimation of South Estonian varieties, a rather marginal topic in the public discourse, has been voiced by language activists (Koreinik, 2011b). Legal recognition is argued against with references to costs (rationalization) (c.f. Ehala and Niglas, 2007), the past (historicization and path dependency) and the future (threats and discourses of language endangerment) (Koreinik, 2011b). In public discourse Estonian is often represented as an endangered language due to Russification or

Anglification. The following extracts from all-Estonian newspapers translated into English exemplify the discourse of language endangerment rather well:

The director of the Institute of the Estonian Language sees in this regulation serious dangers, because if the Võru language is granted regional language status, then this should be granted, according to him, to Russian as well (Mattheus, 2004).⁴

The number of languages in the world which manage to function on a high level is under 75. The Estonian language belongs to those, but remains, by the number of supportive users, the second to last (surpassing only Icelandic). We are under growing pressure to drop out of this premier league. The scattering of human and financial resources is wicked. The creation of an artificial rival inside or next to Estonian is a dangerous frivolity. If, in the eighteenth century, the generation of two standards, which split the body of the nation, had not been given up, I am afraid we would not now have the nation-state of Estonia (Soosaar, 2005).⁵

The analysis of the South Estonian (de)legitimation discourse has demonstrated that recognition of South Estonian varieties is often represented as undermining Estonian *vis-à-vis* Russian. It seems safer, then, to position Southern Estonian varieties into the cultural enrichment framework and discursively represent them as functional parts of monolithic Estonian (Koreinik, 2011b, 2011c). Although approximately half of the 18-64 year-old residents in the area have claimed a need for a law which would protect Võru (Eichenbaum and Koreinik, 2008), it is not clear whether the vernacular should be protected as a heritage language or otherwise. For example, many seem to believe in “diglossic” norms when it comes to protection. Yet, the justification of diglossia (or its interpretation) can further contribute to the ideological marginalization of language and to the legitimacy of the canonical form (see Milroy, 2001).

Different directions of new-institutionalisms explain institutions differently: the “newest” new-institutionalism, discursive institutionalism (DI), defines institutions as both structures and constructs, subjective and real, and as such represents a dynamic account of institutional change and continuity (Schmidt, 2008). The other three new-institutionalisms regard institutions as rather stable historical regularities, incentive structures or cultural norms (*ibid.*). The discourse of the (de)legitimation of South Estonian varieties demonstrates how different actors, the proponents and the opponents of the legitimation of South Estonian, have argued for or against institutional change (Koreinik, 2011a). Nevertheless, this discourse also embraces arguments about what other new-institutionalisms have to offer in terms of

explaining institutional continuity: path dependency, rational choice and cultural norms. Those also seem to be key arguments in discursive practices when the opponents of South Estonian legitimation happen to explain why institutions, and especially laws, should endure as they are.

While standard Estonian is secured by institutional continuity, is some institutional change possible and desirable for South Estonian varieties? Dunbar (2010) concludes that the law can have an impact on reducing or eliminating conflict, but it hardly addresses protection and promotion of regional and minority languages. While the law can have an impact on language users, in general it is not enough for the successful accommodation of language diversity. To conclude, institutional change in formal laws, such as the Language Act, will only be effective when speakers find it unavoidable and welcome it. So far only language activists have demonstrated their interest in institutional change. It seems to be a universal phenomenon, by which the interests of language activists and speakers with regard to language maintenance differ a great deal (Gal, 2006; see also Saarikivi and Marten, in this volume). Meanwhile, in spite of laws being devoid of provisions on Võru and Seto, and of speakers not claiming their language rights, the South Estonian varieties keep, to a limited extent, functioning as oral and written languages.

Notes

- 1 Xenophobic purism refers to conservative attitudes towards loan words and calquing. Archaizing purism is about revitalizing the tongue of the Golden Age. Ethnographic purism idealizes rural life, folklore and dialects. Among other categories, elitist and patriotic purisms are mentioned. See also Dorian (1994).
- 2 For more details, see <http://www.eldia-project.org>.
- 3 Prestige centres are cultural-geographical centres which have legitimate and symbolic power for different speakers. The ethnolinguistic vitality of minority languages (most languages have a minor position compared to “power languages” in a globalising world) depends on what language (minority or majority language) is the main vehicle of communication in their prestige centre (c.f. Ehala 2004).
- 4 *Keele ja Kirjanduse Instituudi direktor näeb sellisel regulatsioonil tõsiseid ohte, sest kui anda võru keelele regionaalkeele staatus, tuleks see tema hinnangul anda ka vene keelele* (Mattheus, 2004). Translated from Estonian by Kadri Koreinik.
- 5 *Maailmas on keeli, mis suudavad kõrgtasemel toimida, alla kolmveerandsaja. Eesti keel kuulub nende hulka, kuid jääb toetavate kasutajate hulgalt islandi keele järel tagantpoolt teiseks. Me oleme kasvava pinge all esiliigast välja pudeneda. Inim- ja finantsressursi killustamine on kurjast. Kunstliku rivaali tekitamine eesti keele sisse või kõrvale on ohtlik kergemeelsus. Kui XVIII sajandil ei oleks loobunud rahvuskeha lõhestava kahe kirjakeele tekitamisest, ei oleks meil, ma*

kardan, praegu eestlaste rahvusriiki (Soosaar, 2005). Translated from Estonian by Kadri Koreinik.

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