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DIVERSE MINORITIES WITH ONE LANGUAGE: THE CASE OF SOUTH ESTONIAN



The paper focuses on comparison of the minorities which speak South Estonian – a Balto-Finnic regional language (language/dialect group) with long tradition of literature and public use in southern Estonia.

ATŠKIRĪGAS MINORITĀTES AR VIENU VALODU (DIENVIDIGAUNU VALODAS SITUĀCIJA)

Rakstā galvenā vērība pievērsta to minoritāšu salīdzinājumam, kuras runā dienvidigaunu valodā – Baltijas somu reģionālajā valodā (valodā/dialektu grupā) ar senu literatūras un publiskā lietojuma tradīciju Dienvidigaunijā.

Dienvidigaunijas autohtonās minoritātes var tikt iedalītas trijās (vai drīzāk četrās) dažādās grupās:

1. Setu ir vistālāk austrumos dzīvojošā un visatšķirīgākā Dienvidigaunijas minoritāte. To var uzskatīt par etnisko, reliģisko un lingvistisko minoritāti. Atšķirībā no citiem dienvidigaunjiem, kas ir luterāņi, setu ir pareizticīgie (Grieķijas Pareizticīgā Baznīca). Setu ir ļoti nopietnas sociālās un politiskās problēmas tāpēc, ka viņu galveno izplatības areālu sadala robeža starp Igauniju un Krieviju. Setu valodu nopietni apdraud igauņu literārā un krievu valoda.

2. Veru ir vislielākā un visnoturīgākā dienvidigaunu daļa. Taču viņus var uzskatīt tikai par lingvistisko (ne etnisko vai reliģisko) minoritāti. Veru dzīvo Dienvidigaunijas centrālajā un austrumu daļā. Veru valoda ir dienvidigaunu visvairāk izplatītais, visvairāk atbalstītais un standartizētais variants. Joprojām to nopietni apdraud igauņu literārā valoda.

3. Mulgi un Tartu izloksnē runājošie dzīvo Dienvidigaunijas rietumu un ziemeļu daļā. Šajās daļās dienvidigaunu valoda ir gandrīz izmirusi. Taču pavisam nesen Mulgi novadā ir uzsākti atsevišķi valodas atdzīvināšanas pasākumi.

Raksts atklāj, kā dažādā etniskā identitāte un valodas lietojuma vēsturiskie apstākļi ir radījuši triju dažādu reģionālo standartu izveidošanu.

1 Introduction

The paper focuses on comparison of the minorities which speak South Estonian – a Balto-Finnic regional language (language/dialect group) with long tradition of literature and public use in southern Estonia.

South Estonian is a Finnic regional language (or language/dialect group) with a long tradition of literature and public use in southern Estonia. The term South Estonian can be used as an

umbrella notion for all South Estonian autochthonous minorities (Iva, Pajusalu 2004: 59). South Estonians can be divided into three or four rather different groups: Setos, Võros, Mulgi and Tartu people (see map 1).

The place and status of the Võro language in Estonia and among Finnic languages, is quite similar to the same aspects of the Latgalian language in Latvia and in the whole Baltic linguistic space.



Map 1: *South Estonian autochthonous minorities Setos, Võros, Mulgi and Tartu people*

1. karte *Dienvidiigaunijas autohtonās minoritātes: setu, veru, Mulgi un Tartu izloksnes*

2 The Setos

The Setos are the easternmost and the most distinctive South Estonian minority. They can be regarded as an ethnic, religious and linguistic minority. Unlike other South Estonians who have traditionally belonged to the Lutheran Protestant Church, Setos are (Greek) Orthodox believers (Eller 1999).

There are about 5.000 Seto speakers (Pajusalu, etc. 2000) but only one or two books per year are published in Seto language. There are neither Seto-language schools nor a kindergarten. There are only some facultative Seto culture and language classes in some schools of the Seto area. Once a month comes out a newspaper “Setomaa”, which discusses Seto political and cultural

problems (see figure 1). About 50% of its texts are in the Seto language, rest of them in Estonian. One can hear very seldom Seto language in TV, but from autumn 2009 one can hear once a week a short news program in Seto from Estonian national radio Vikerraadio. Seto language is seriously endangered by Estonian and Russian.



Figure 1: *Newspaper Setomaa (May 2005)*

1. attēls *Laikraksts „Setomaa” (2005. gada maijs)*

Setos have serious social and political problems because their main living areas are divided by state borders of Estonia and Russia. Before the Second World War all the Seto areas belonged to the Petseri county which was under the jurisdiction of Estonia. Even shortly after the Soviet occupation in 1941 all Seto areas were left under the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic. However, after the Second World War, in 1945 Stalin made a new border between Soviet Estonia and Soviet Russia and the main Seto areas went to Russia. The Seto areas were splitted into three administrative units: Petseri county in Soviet Russia and Võro and Põlva counties in Soviet Estonia.

In 1991 Estonia regained its independence, but only in the borders of Soviet Estonia. The Soviet Estonia’s border which splitted the Seto area became the real state border between Estonia and Russia. This caused collapse of Setos’ traditional life, serious social and economic problems. Normal everyday communication between relatives, parents and children was often impeded. Most Setos moved from Russia to Estonian towns, where the Seto societies were founded.

The Setos very strongly demonstrated against signing and ratification of the border treaty which split Seto area. And they were supported by thousands of Estonians. Nevertheless Estonian government has decided to legitimate the loss of the Seto areas.

The Seto people have stressed their political and cultural self-existence. Their identity is based mostly on their old cultural traditions and religion and less on the language. Very small part of Seto activists have taken part of the creation of a new regional standard for the Võro and Seto language.

The Seto areas are divided between two countries and three counties. However, Setos have their own representative body Seto Congress. Once a year they declare that the Seto area is an independent Seto Kingdom — for one day only. Of course this is not a real independent state. As a matter of fact it is a big ceremonial festival for Seto people and for their friends. However, it is clear that many Setos have ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity different from Estonians.

3 The Võros

The Võros are the biggest and strongest part of South Estonians. However, they may be regarded only as a linguistic, not ethnic or religious minority. Võros live in the central and southern parts of the South Estonian area. There are about 70.000 Võro speakers, but probably only half of them speak the Võro language every day (Pajusalu, etc. 2000).

Võro is not yet officially recognized as a regional language of Estonia by Estonian authorities but there is quite active discussion over that in Estonian society. From 2009 Võro is recognised by International Standard Organization (ISO) as an individual language marked by ISO 639-3 language code *vro*. Võro and Seto languages are also recognized as independent regional languages by Estonian Bureau for Lesser Used Languages (EstBLUL) and as endangered languages by UNESCO. Võro is still spoken also in the Latvian territory bordering with Võro linguistic area in Estonia, mainly in Veclaicene commune. That is the reason why Võro belongs also to the Latvian Bureau for Lesser Used Languages (LatBLUL).

There are neither schools nor kindergarten with Võro as a teaching medium. 26 schools have Võro language as a facultative subject. Only in some schools Võro is taught as a subject included to curriculum. There are rather good Võro teaching materials for children (see figure 2). Võro is taught also in Tartu University (beginners' and advanced course) (Koreinik 2007).

From autumn 2009 there is working a small Võro language playgroup called „Keelepesä” (Language nest) for preschool children in the building of Võro Institute. There is used the

language nest method which means that during the whole day only Võro language is used with children. This playgroup with ten children and two teachers is a private initiative of interested parents and works one whole day a week. There are plans to develop the playgroup to a real language nest which would work five days a week as a small Võro-language kindergarten.



Figure 2: *Võro teaching materials for children:*

ABC-book (Jüvä, etc 1998), reader (VL 1995), song book (TVL 1999) and local history book (Reimann 2004)

2. attēls *Mācību materiāli bērniem veru valodā: ābece (Iva u. c. 1998), lasāmgrāmata (VL 1995), dziesmu grāmata (TVL 1999) un reģiona vēstures grāmata (Reimans 2004)*

A newspaper 100% in Võro “Uma Leht” (see figure 3) is published fortnightly in 10.000 copies and has about 32.000 readers. One can hear fortnightly also a short news program in Võro from Estonian national radio Vikerraadio. About five books are published per year in the Võro language. There are also some computer programs (Opera, Avant Browser, Total Commander) and international web-sites (Eurominority) translated to Võro by activists, without the state support. From 2005 free online encyclopedia Wikipedia (fiu-vro.wikipedia.org) was started in Võro and has reached to 4000 articles to the end of year 2009.

4 The Mulgi and Tartu people

The Mulgi and Tartu people live in the western and northern parts of southern Estonia. In these areas the South Estonian language is almost extinct mainly because of very hard Soviet repressions after Second World War. Then most of the local population of Mulgi area was deported to Siberia. However, right now there is some evidence of language revitalization in Mulgi region. The text book for children was published in Mulgi and some attempts of teaching Mulgi language and culture were made in a little village school. A newspaper in Mulgi (“Üitsainus Mulgimaa”) comes out irregularly and one can hear fortnightly a short news program in Mulgi from Estonian national radio Vikerraadio.

In Tartu area there is no activity of language revitalization.

5 State support and recognition

The Estonian state supports financially all South Estonian autochthonous minorities from year 2000 through State Program for South Estonian Language and Culture (About 160.000 € per year). Big part of the state support goes to the Center for South Estonian Studies (University of Tartu). However, the main support goes to the Võro language and culture: Võro Institute, newspaper “Uma Leht”, but other minorities are supported as well. In addition a special State program was founded for the Setos. However, despite of active discussion in Estonian society about status of the regional languages Estonia has not recognized the South Estonian language(s) as autochthonous regional language(s). The official point of view is still that local languages are dialects of Estonian language. The state supports these languages to a small extent without a serious strategy for protection and revitalization.

6 Conclusion

It may be said as conclusion that despite the fact that all South Estonian languages have the some roots and are linguistically very close, the very different ethnic identity and historical conditions of the language use have caused the making of three different regional standards: Võro, Seto and Mulgi. The fourth South Estonian standard – old South Estonian literary language based mainly on South Tartu and North Võro, has fallen into disuse.

Nowadays the Võro language is the most developed and standardized form of South Estonian while Seto and Mulgi people are doing just their first attempts to develop their languages.

The term South Estonian can be used as an umbrella notion for all South Estonian languages (like the term Saami covers all the Saami languages). However, South Estonian people don't identify themselves as South Estonians. They feel themselves being the Võros, Setos and Mulgis

with the Võro, Seto and Mulgi language. On the level of State identity they all are Estonians but on the level of linguistic identity they are three different groups that can be observed as autochthonic (or indigeneous) regional linguistic minorities. Only the Setos can be regarded also as an ethnic and religious minority.

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