

Working Papers
in European Language Diversity 8

Kadri Koreinik

The Seto language in Estonia: An Overview of a Language in Context

aldie

europaan keelade
mitmekesisus kõigile

Mainz • Helsinki • Wien

Tartu • Mariehamn • Oulu • Maribor

Working Papers in European Language Diversity is a peer-reviewed online publication series of the research project ELDIA, serving as an outlet for preliminary research findings, individual case studies, background and spin-off research.

Editor-in-Chief

Johanna Laakso (Wien)

Editorial Board

Kari Djerf (Helsinki), *Riho Grünthal* (Helsinki), *Anna Kolláth* (Maribor), *Helle Metslang* (Tartu), *Karl Pajusalu* (Tartu), *Anneli Sarhima* (Mainz), *Sia Spiliopoulou Åkermark* (Mariehamn), *Helena Sulkala* (Oulu), *Reetta Toivanen* (Helsinki)

Publisher

Research consortium ELDIA c/o Prof. Dr. Anneli Sarhima
Northern European and Baltic Languages and Cultures (SNEB)
Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz
Jakob-Welder-Weg 18 (Philosophicum)
D-55099 Mainz, Germany
Contact: eldia-project@uni-mainz.de

© European Language Diversity for All (ELDIA)



ELDIA is an international research project funded by the European Commission. The views expressed in the **Working Papers in European Language Diversity** are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission.

All contents of the **Working Papers in European Language Diversity** are subject to the Austrian copyright law. The contents may be used exclusively for private, non-commercial purposes. Regarding any further uses of the **Working Papers in European Language Diversity**, please **contact the publisher**.

ISSN 2192-2403

During the initial stage of the research project ELDIA (European Language Diversity for All) in 2010, "structured context analyses" of each speaker community at issue were prepared. These context analyses will act as a starting point for further deepened research by linguists, sociologists and lawyers. Thus, they will form the basis of further case-specific reports and the comparative report which will be the main outcome of the whole project. However, as these will be available for interested readers only at the end of the project, we wanted to publish shorter versions summarising our work so far already at this stage, thus providing up-to-date information for both the academic community and stakeholder groups. This paper, based on the context analysis by Kadri Koreinik, gives a brief and up-to-date overview of the status of and research about the Seto language in Estonia.

As all papers appearing in the series Working Papers in European Language Diversity, these context analyses have been subject to an anonymous peer-reviewing process. Whenever the present document is referred to, due reference to the author and the ELDIA project should be made. For more information about the ELDIA project see <http://www.eldia-project.org/>.

Table of Contents

1 INTRODUCTION: SPEAKERS OF SETO IN ESTONIA.....	3
1.1 LEGAL AND POLITICAL POSITION.....	1
1.2 ATTITUDES.....	3
2 SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT	3
3 LANGUAGE	4
3.1 GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE LANGUAGE	4
3.2 LANGUAGE CONTACT AND MULTILINGUALISM	5
3.3 LANGUAGE USE AND MAINTENANCE	6
5 SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	8

1 Introduction: Speakers of Seto in Estonia

The Setos¹ are an autochthonous ethnic group of approximately 5,000 people who mainly live on the border of South-Eastern Estonia and Russia and speak a language variety which has traditionally been classified within the Southern dialects of Estonian. The ethnic identity of the Setos has been shaped and strengthened over the course of multiple border changes (Saar 2003). The first data about the Setos, the orthodox Estonians living in the vicinity of the old Western Russian areas of Pskov and Izborsk as a distinct ethnos date back to the 18th century. In the modern era the population in the Seto habitat has fluctuated due to causalities of war and other hardships. Migration to and from the Estonian territory has played a significant part in the development of the Setos over time. Earlier the Setos were referred to as Pechory or Pskov Estonians (German: die Pleskauer Esten). The ethnonym setu first occurred in written form in 1860, but appeared in a wider use decades later (cf. Hurt 1904). Today the Setos identify themselves as both Setos and Estonians. Half of the older cohort defines themselves as Seto rather than Estonian or something else. In a census from 2005, the majority of adult informants in Seto areas mentioned this name when asked what language or dialect beside Standard Estonian is spoken in their neighbourhood.

1.1 Legal and Political Position

The Setos are not recognised as an ethnic minority in Estonia, while in Russia, they have recently been included in the Common List of Indigenous Small-numbered Peoples of Russia (Единый перечень коренных малочисленных народов России). The vernacular language of the Setos has received growing attention as a separate language, but it is not officially recognised as a language in Estonia. The new Language Act (2011) which regulates official and public language use, introduces the term 'regional varieties' which refers to dialects. Therefore, while the Seto language is not directly referred to in the Act, it is addressed through the term 'regional varieties' (for a further analysis see Meiorg 2011). There is no regulation on the use of Seto in the media, though it is used in National Public Service Broadcasting for short news. Similarly, Educational legislation does not address Seto. The Seto language is not part of the National Curriculum. Another law that partly addresses Seto

¹ Instead of Standard Estonian exonym 'setu', 'setud' (the Setu language, Setus), an autoglossonym 'Seto' and endonym 'Setos' are used.

and other Estonian varieties is the Place Name Act, which regulates the spelling of a place name, which may reflect the local dialectal sound structure of the name.

Estonia is not a state party to the Charter on Regional or Minority Languages. In 2004, a law proposal was made to the government by the council of the state programme entitled “Language and Culture of Southern Estonia 2000-2004”, which included representatives of both the Setos and Võru-speakers, to recognise South Estonian varieties as regional languages. The proposal was discussed by parliamentary factions and ministries, but neither consensus was reached nor a decision made. The issue of legal recognition was re-opened in 2009 when the legal drafts of the Language Act were discussed. Yet, again, no compromise that could please both the proponents and opponents of legal recognition was reached. The main argument against the legal recognition can be found in discourses of (language) endangerment (Koreinik 2011). While the Estonian language had become the symbol of psychological resistance and the basis of ethno-political mobilisation for Estonians in the Soviet era (Vihalemm 1999, Hallik 2002), today it is still seen as an iconic representation of Estonianness (Koreinik 2011). Thus, Estonian, instead of its levelling varieties, is often represented as an endangered language in need of protection and legal regulation.²

At the turn of the 19th century, along with Estonian nation-building, the Setos were subjected first to growing (academic) attention, and later, in the Republic of Estonia of the inter-war period, to Estonisation. According to Jääts (2000: 570) the Setos “can be seen as ethnographic raw material that both Estonian and Russian nationalists have attempted to claim”. Since the 1990s, when border issues were discussed in the wider public, the Setos have likely been involved in their demarcation far more actively than ever before. The Setos are politically active: their representatives meet in the Seto Congress every three years; an executive body – the body of elders – is in charge of decisions, although not legally binding, to be taken meantime. The Seto movement has had two broad political aims: the restoration of integrity of the Seto area (Setomaa) in the Republic of Estonia and maintenance and development of the Setos’ culture (Eichenbaum 1998). Individual activists prioritise those two aims differently. The Setos also have political representation in the parliament (Riigikogu), there is a deputies’ association (Setomaa Support Group), which includes eleven

² See also WPELD4 The Võru language in Estonia (Koreinik 2011).

members³. In general, the Setos consider the issue of their language and the maintenance of their traditional cultural practices equally important.

1.2 Attitudes

The survey from 2005 indicates that the prestige of the Seto language is relatively low (Mäger et al. 2006). Some observations suggest that although there might be widespread stereotypes of Setos (and other Southern Estonians) in Estonia, these are not necessarily negative. In any case, the exonym *setu* has been used pejoratively in the interwar period (Jääts 2000) and it is said to be still used this way in contemporary spoken Estonian. These attitudes have not been sufficiently studied. Most likely, the majority media also contributes to the otherness of the Setos.

2 Cultural Context

In prehistorical times, the culture in the northern part of present-day Estonia was shaped by contacts with Scandinavian and coastal Finnish tribes, while Southern Estonian population was culturally more conservative and mainly had inland and southern contacts. South-Estonia is the biggest and the most important of the Estonian cultural peripheries; its rich folklore is described as the most unique.

The South-Estonian-speaking Setos have a number of cultural symbols: decorative silver jewellery, traditional Seto house with its interior and farm yard, a small village chapel, traditional Seto singing and dancing, and traditional (religious) holidays. The Estonian Seto *leelo* polyphonic singing tradition has been accepted into the UNESCO list of Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. The Setos' national costumes indicate their group membership. Nevertheless, there are also a couple of new cultural symbols: a Seto flag and an annual festival, and the Seto Kingdom Day (Semm & Palang 2004). The Seto area is defined by mainly cultural traits: linguistically, it belongs to Southern Estonia, but the Orthodox religion and its traditions connect the Setos to Russians. Today, however, their Orthodox congregations in Estonia belong to the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church, which is a subordinate of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (thus, formally independent

³ In the X Riigikogu and the XI Riigikogu there was another deputies' association called *Petserimaa Support Group*.

of the Orthodox church of Russia) and uses Estonian (instead of the traditional Church Slavic) as the language of liturgy.

Semm & Palang (2004) point out that today the younger Setos are not familiar with the Setos' cultural symbols and practices. The same is true for religion and religious symbols: people attend religious festivals yet, their deeper sense often remains obscure to younger ones. Nevertheless, traditionally, religion and religious symbols are believed to mean a lot for the construction of the Seto identity even today when most of the Setos are secularised. Furthermore, according to a survey from 1997 most respondents report the observance of religious (church) practices (Eichenbaum 1998).

3 Language

3.1 General description of the language

Both (Northern) Estonian and Southern Estonian belong to the Finnic subgroup of the Uralic language family. Within Southern Estonian, the dialects of Võru and Seto are generally regarded as most conservative. In addition to South-eastern Estonia, these dialects also were still spoken in linguistic enclaves in Northern Latvia and south of Pskov in Russia until the 20th century.

Võru and Seto differ from Standard (Northern) Estonian in many respects. Perhaps the most conspicuous characteristics are phonological features such as the extensive and consistent vowel harmony, h in all positions, including the (Seto) inessive ending (e.g. hõbõhhõh 'in silver'), and the word-final glottal stop in a number of grammatical forms. The markers of many frequent grammatical forms have completely different shapes (for instance, the past tense or the 3rd person singular marking of verbs), and the vocabulary is noticeably different from standard Estonian.

If the south-eastern Southern Estonian dialects are to be grouped, the question of how Võru and Seto are related always comes first. Although Estonian dialectologists have regarded Seto as a sub-dialect of Võru, many researchers treat it as a distinct Southern Estonian variety (Pajusalu 2007). Both speech communities are aware of their linguistic and cultural differences, and these different identities allow speaking about two essentialised languages.

A Võru-speaker claims to recognise a Seto by a single sentence and vice versa (Pajusalu 2007). The differences between Võru and Seto are first and foremost related to pronunciation and vocabulary. Seto has voiced stops and sibilants, syllable harmony; the pronunciation of l and h resembles Russian. Many frequent words have a different phonetic shape, e.g. Võru hää, Seto hüä 'good', Võru häste, Seto höste 'well', Võru egä, Seto õga 'any'. There are only a few morphological differences, for example, the translative ending is -ss in Võru but -st in Seto. (ibid.) Furthermore, the vocabulary of Seto has many Russian loanwords.

While between the 16th and 20th centuries the Southern Estonian (Tartu) literary standard was used in Southern Estonian churches, courts, print media, schools, and administration, the Seto-speaking area remained under Russian rule and language until 1918 when the independent Estonian state was founded. Even though the Russian alphabet was initially used for the transcription of Seto, currently the Estonian (Latin) alphabet has been used for more than a century. During the 20th century the first issue of the three-volume folklore collection *Setukeste laulud*, a reader, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and several educational texts with different spellings were published. A couple of decades ago, a new standard of Võro-Seto was developed mainly by activist Võru-speakers, compromising between sharp sociolinguistic markers, maintaining specific Southern Estonian features and following the tradition of the old Southern Estonian (Tartu) literary standard. In 2009 a new Seto reader was published with short stories, poems and plays written both by schoolchildren, who were mostly L2-speakers, and experienced native-speaker authors. Today, Seto activists still debate the standard.

3.2 Language contact and multilingualism

The Setos – an ethnos on the border – have been cohabiting side-by-side with Russian and other (Southern) Estonian-speakers for centuries. The importance of a particular vehicular language – Russian or Estonian – has grown alongside the growth of respective contacts. There is no information either on attitudes towards multilingualism or what is considered as multilingualism by the Setos and Estonian speakers. Furthermore, no information is available on whether the command of both Seto and Estonian is considered bilingualism at all. The bulk of the population is likely to be bilingual (Seto-Estonian), the level of multilingualism however, is not known. Adults with elementary, secondary and post-secondary education

have learned at least one foreign language. The learning of English as a foreign language has been increasing all over Estonia, while the command of Russian has decreased (cf. Tender 2010). There is no research on contact induced changes in the Seto language.

3.3 Language use and maintenance

Seto is being used to a different extent in different domains: in alternative community media vs. local county papers, in classroom vs. in extra-curricular activities. The number of passive and active users is likely to be lower than 5000, which is an estimated number of the Setos. As for public domains, Seto is mainly used in arts and literature, and due to targeted state funding in print media and radio as well. The Seto language is available through a number of media channels, and on the world wide web through different websites, while YouTube is also used to share both traditional and newer music, e.g. samples of leelo, the Seto polyphonic singing tradition, and songs by an ethno-pop group Zetod. In the mid-2000s an open-air theatre production, Taarka, enjoyed national Estonian public attention, and it was followed by the first Seto-language film in 2008.

No information is available on regular educational activities in pre-school. The Seto language is taught as a subject to some extent in the schools of Meremäe, Misso, Mikitamäe and Väraska. There are also a number of extra-curricular activities. Different printed titles and audiotapes are used for teaching Seto. In collaboration with the University of Tartu, and the Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics, the Võro Institute has published a series of multilingual research papers, which also feature research on Southern Estonian, including the Seto language and culture. Another publication series, which disseminates research papers on Southern Estonian, is the Annual Report of the Centre of Southern Estonian Language and Culture at the University of Tartu. It includes articles in Võro and Seto, mostly about linguistics, literature and folklore. The collection on history, titled *Setomaa 2*, has summaries of articles in English, as well as Russian and Seto. In 2010 the Seto Institute was founded.

The interruption in intergenerational language transmission, the levelled language use of younger generations, large individual in-group differences, and signs of interference and limited register of Southern Estonian-speakers demonstrate a rapid language shift to Estonian (Pajusalu et al. 1999). Today Seto is reported to be spoken by middle-aged and

elderly residents in South-eastern Estonian village neighbourhoods. Most likely a language shift took place in the Soviet era, between the 1960-1980s. During this time the Seto language became mixed with Estonian, but its importance as an ethnic marker increased. Instead of being triggered by immigration, a language shift was caused by socio-economic changes, the standardisation of Estonian and other (language) political decisions. There are a few explicit attempts to maintain the Seto language by schooling and otherwise supporting its use. There are some actors (journalists, activists and teachers) who are engaged with both the revitalisation of heritage culture and language. Most local municipality and non-governmental organisations involved with the maintenance of heritage culture also support the language use to some extent. In general, there are a growing number of opportunities to use the language in public and language policy in practice supports the limited use of Seto.

Although the Setos have been one of the main targets of ethnographic, ethnologic and anthropologic research, there is a need for (micro) sociolinguistic research on language contact.

4 Select Bibliography

- EICHENBAUM, KÜLLI. (ed.) (1998). *Ku kavvas Setomaalõ seto rahvast jakkus. Ajaloolise Setomaa põllisasustuse säilimise võimalused. Publications of Võro Institute 2.* (includes an English summary).
- HALLIK, KLARA. (2002). Nationalising Policies and Integration Challenges. In Marju Lauristin & Mati Heidmets (eds.). *The Challenge of the Russian Minority: Emerging Multicultural Democracy in Estonia.* Tartu, Tartu University Press, 65–88.
- HURT, JAKOB. (1904). *Über die Pleskauer Esten oder die sogenannten Setukesen.* Finnische Literatur-Gesellschaft. Helsingfors.
- JÄÄTS, INDREK. (2000). Ethnic identity of the Setus and the Estonian–Russian border dispute. *Nationalities papers* Vol 28, No. 4, 651-670.
- KOREINIK, KADRI. (2011). *Language ideologies in the contemporary Estonian public discourse: With a focus on South Estonian.* Dissertationes Sociologicae Universitatis Tartuensis 4. Tartu: University of Tartu Press.
- MEIORG, MARIANNE. (2011). *Legal and Institutional Framework Analysis: Seto and Võro languages.* ELDIA Working Papers. Åland Islands: The Åland Islands Peace Institute.
- PAJUSALU, KARL. (2007). Estonian Dialects. In Mati Ereht (ed.). *Estonian Language.* 2nd ed. Tallinn: Estonian Academy Publishers, 231-272.
- PAJUSALU, KARL, VELSKER, EVA & ORG, ERVIN. (1999). On recent changes in Southern Estonian: dynamics in the formation of the inessive. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 1999, Vol. 139, 87-103.
- SAAR, EVAR. (2003). Setos – Eine südestnische Sprache und Kultur an der Estinisch-Russischen Grenze. In Wolfgang Brücher (ed.). *Grenzverschiebungen. Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zu einem zeitlosen Phänomen.* Internationales Symposium des interdisziplinären Forschungsschwerpunktes „Grenzregionen und Interferenzräume“ der Philosophischen Fakultäten der Universität des Saarlandes in Saarbrücken und Forbach 10.-12. Mai 2001. Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 103-118.
- SEMM, KADRI & PALANG, HANNES (2004). Life-ways in the Setu Cultural Landscape. *Pro Ethnologia* 18, 49 - 67.
- TENDER, TÕNU. (2010). *Mitmekeelsus Eestis Euroopa Liidu mitmekeelsuse ideaali taustal.* Dissertationes de Mediis et Communicationibus Universitatis Tartuensis 9. Tartu: University of Tartu Press.
- VIHALEMM, TRIIN. (1999). Estonian language competence, performance, and beliefs on acquisition among the Russian-speaking inhabitants of Estonia, 1989-1997. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 139, 69-85.