

Language Policy in Estonia



Estonian-language texts in the Kullamaa Socage Register. The manuscript reposes at the Tallinn City Archive. It was published, for example, in *Esimesed eesti raamatud* 'The first books in Estonian' by Voldemar Miller. Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1976.

As is known, the first written record of Estonian dates from the 1230s when the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia recorded the first Estonian-language names, words, and sentences. However, it did not result in the emergence of the standard language at that time because the first longer texts in Estonian were created as late as in the 1520s: Lord's Prayer, *Ave Maria*, and the creed that can be found at the end of the Kullamaa Socage Register. The first Estonian-language printed books were published at around the same time; they were also religious texts. The 16th century witnessed the emergence of two standard languages – the Tallinn language and the Tartu language. Both were used side by side in different parts of Estonia for almost four centuries.

Between the Middle Ages and the 19th century there was a clear link both in Estonia and Latvia between the languages and one's estate. The clergy, nobility, and burghers used mostly Middle Low German and starting with the 17th century High German; sometimes other languages, such as Latin and Early Modern Swedish, were used in the function of the administrative language. On the other hand, the peasantry used Estonian (in Latvia Latvian and/or Livonian). Social rise from peasantry to a higher class was as a rule accompanied by an unavoidable switch of language, linguistic Germanization.

The period of Swedish power in the 17th century saw the beginning of consistent spread of literacy among Estonians. From the Estonian perspective it meant a gradual switchover from oral to written culture. This is the context where the first secular poem written by an Estonian was born – a 32-stanza lament in the language of Tartu by Käsü Hans, a parish clerk and school teacher of Puhja – *Oh! ma waene Tardo Liin* 'Oh, my poor Tartu', dedicated to the city of Tartu and describing the sufferings caused by the Russian troops during the Great Northern War. The same century saw the publication of Estonian-language calendars, several secular books, the first Estonian-language magazine, and semi-secular translated adaptations of stories. In addition to everyday communication, the Estonian language was still mostly used in religious ceremonies and peasant schools.

By the 19th century literacy had become widespread by European standards which served as a precondition that Estonians could conceive of themselves as a nationality – the Estonian national sentiments were largely instigated by means of Estonian-language journalism.

Literacy also served as a precondition to the situation where the Estonian intelligentsia, which had started to emerge in the 19th century, could start to reform their language and to demand more rights to its, that is, more usage spheres. Because the first widely read newspapers were in the language of Tallinn, they made those Estonians who lived in the area of the language of Tartu become accustomed to reading in the language of Tallinn.

Language work gained momentum during the first two decades of the 20th century: specialized language was developed, during the four language conferences held between 1908-1911 mostly spelling and morphology issues were discussed, in 1912 Johannes Aavik initiated language innovations and in 1918 the first normative Estonian language dictionary appeared. Different from other language innovators J. Aavik was not limited to reforming only vocabulary (or its spelling) but deliberately reformed the grammatical constructions of the language.

With the declaration of independence in 1918 Estonian became the state language. The use of normative language extended to managing state affairs, to all levels of court and schools, also to higher education, science, radio, cinema, recording and entertainment. The main role in the development of Estonian specialized language was played by Voldemar Veski. In the schools of the ethnic minorities Estonian was taught as a compulsory state language besides their mother tongue. In the state court German and Russian minorities used their mother tongue along with Estonian.

The occupation of Estonia by the Soviet Union during World War II dismissed the use of Estonian as a state language. The rights of the Estonian language were limited in various spheres of public life, in some areas Estonian was even banished. Estonian was used in schools and in higher education. The schools of the ethnic minorities were closed except for Russian language schools. The main language that influenced Estonian was Russian.

The regained independence in 1991 provided an opportunity to implement on a larger scale the 1989 Language Act, which proclaimed Estonian as the state language. The use of Estonian was reinstated in many previously Russian-language domains. In 1995 a new language act was adopted, which regulated the use of the state language, including the Estonian sign language, the Estonian dialects, and foreign languages. In 2001 the Estonian Language Board was set up; it worked out the "Development Strategy of the Estonian Language 2004–2010". The "Development Strategy of the Estonian Language 2011–2017" and a new language act are in preparation. The preservation of the usage domains of Estonian (business, banking, education, science, etc.) is an important issue in language policy.

Literacy in some European countries and Estonia at the end of the 19th century

State	Literate people (%-ides)	State	Literate people (%-ides)
Sweden	99,1	Belgium	75,0
Germany	96,5	Austria	59,2
Switzerland	95,4	Italy	48,0
Estonia	93,3	Hungary	45,1
Netherlands	87,7	Russia	21,6
France	83,9		



Johannes Aavik.



Front page of the first issue of J.V. Jannsen's *Perno Postimees* 'The Pärnu Postman'.



Johannes Voldemar Veski.



The parish officials of Aakre, 1930.



Session of the Estonian Parliament.

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