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## LANGUAGE TESTING IN THE CONTEXT OF CITIZENSHIP ON THE EXAMPLE OF ESTONIA

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The focus of the current article is language testing in the context of citizenship in Estonia. Estonian as the single official language of the country (according to the new language legislation laws) and a new political system have caused changes in use of and attitudes toward Estonian among the Russian-speaking population, which is the local «majoritized» minority. New language, citizenship, and education laws have begun to enforce the use of Estonian. As part of a summary of these laws, the article also touches on the challenges currently faced by the country in fulfilling the needs and rights of the local Russian-speakers.

*Key words:* language knowledge assessment, tests, structure of language exam, language policy.

### **The sociolinguistic situation in Estonia**

Estonia, occupied in 1940–1991 by the Soviet Union, is a country with a population of 1.345 million people [1]. Estonia's ethnic composition could not be termed homogenous by contemporary standards. Estonians comprise the bulk of the country's population – 68.6%. Altogether about 430 000 people belong to various ethnic groups other than Estonians: Russians 25.7%, Ukrainians 2.1%, Byelorussians 1.2%, Finns 0.8%, Tatars 0.2%, Latvians 0.17%, Poles 0.16%, Jews 0.15%, Lithuanians 0.15%, Germans 0.14%. More than 145 different nationalities and ethnic groups are represented in Estonia according to the census of 2000.

Most non-Estonians residing in Estonia are second generation immigrants and their families who came to live here after World War II during the period of Soviet occupation – as late as 1945 Estonians formed more than 97% of the population. During the Soviet occupation, the percentage of Russians was constantly on the increase and reached 30.3% according to the last Soviet census of 1989 [2]. The proportion of Estonians was dramatically dropping, and in the northeastern county of Ida-Virumaa they in fact constituted a minority in their own homeland (about 20% in Kohtla-Järve and only 3–4% in Narva; see details in [3: 198–199]). Russian supplanted Estonian in the strategically important functional domains of public administration such as banking, police, railway, the navy, and aviation. Radical changes in national language policy (see [4]) and language use came with the general liberalization of the Soviet Union towards the end of the 1980s; this was accompanied by problems in language legislation. According to the 1989 Soviet census, only 15% of ethnic Russians in Estonia knew Estonian. The change from privileged

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majority to minority for Russians provoked psychological and linguistic difficulties. Nowadays, the Russian-speaking population in a whole does not form a single community; rather, it is a heterogeneous assemblage of people with different interests, political views and sociocultural profile, united only by the fact that they all are Russian-speakers [5: 185].

The Baltic republics immediately seized at the opportunities provided by *perestroika* and opted for a complete breakaway from the Soviet empire. Indeed, the Act of the Supreme Soviet (Parliament) of the Estonian SSR of 16 November 1988, that declared the legislation of Estonia superior to that of the USSR in the territory of Estonia, can be viewed as the first decisive legal action that was to lead to the ultimate breakaway from the USSR within less than three years. The Estonians' striving for the re-establishment of national independence was obvious, and the first Language Law of 1989, despite being declarative rather than legally binding, was of great symbolic value (see [6] on language legislation in Estonia). It sought to restore the linguistic balance and to ensure the possibility of Estonian-language communication anywhere in the territory of Estonia. In 1991, the existence of the Republic of Estonia was restored *de facto*, with Estonian as the sole official language of the state.

After 1991, the language situation in the Baltic countries attracted a large number of researchers interested in language policy, societies in transition and post-communist studies [7]. However, language policy and minority rights issues continue to dominate the research agenda [8: 90 and references therein]. Some Western and Russian authors who write on the topic [9] imply that the language requirements and citizenship legislation in the Baltic countries discriminate against the 'Russian minority' and that human rights are violated. However, as [10] argues, existing European norms and legislation have simply not been designed to deal with this kind of situation. As mentioned, the transition from privileged to ordinary status and the very notion of making an effort to master another language, albeit on the elementary level only, was hard to accept for many. As [11] stress, reorientation in the economy (privatization, etc.) was not linked either to ethnic or linguistic criteria.

A number of laws, legislative acts and strategic documents adopted by the Parliament of Estonia (*Riigikogu* in Estonian) concern the status of Estonian and the other languages used in the Republic: their status, teaching and use within the educational system as well as in society at large. The position of Estonian as the state language is officially stated in Estonia's Constitution (Chapter 1, paragraph 6). After the restoration of independence, the Estonian government introduced a linguistic normalization program to integrate the immigrant population that had moved here during the period of occupation. Immigration was put under control via the Act on Immigration (adopted in 1990) and the Law on Aliens (1993). A major issue in this context has been that Estonian citizenship was based on the principle of *ius sanguinis*: citizenship was not determined by place of birth, but by having an ancestor who was a citizen of Estonia before 16 June 1940. This means that immigrants (including the Soviet period immigrants that constituted almost one third of the population in 1991) had to go through a naturalization process, which also requires a basic knowledge of Estonian at approximately the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages Threshold level (B1), according to the corresponding legal acts (1993, 1995).

Although the short-term language policy «visible» goals were reached, the emerging situation at large was still not satisfactory, and needed a further qualitative step in order to normalize the linguistic situation in Estonia, placing a main emphasis on national consolidation through the creation of a common core which included mastery of Estonian as the common language and integrated information space. For this purpose, the

government focused on long-term programs such as educational and integration programs [12]. The new legal framework for modern language policy was created through a new Language Act, adopted in 1995 that expanded on the constitutional norms regarding the use of the Estonian language, minority languages and foreign languages in different fields. After 1991, the proficiency of Russian-speakers in the Estonian language started to improve but less so among the elderly population who were disappointed as a result of the language requirements for citizenship issued in 1995.

### **Citizenship act**

According to the Law of Citizenship (Article 8 of Citizenship Act, which came into force on 01.04.1995) knowledge of the Estonian language is defined as a general knowledge of the Estonian language required for everyday life. The requirements for knowledge of the Estonian language are as follows:

- 1) listening comprehension (official statements and announcements; notices of danger and warning, news, description of events and explanations),
- 2) speech (conversation and narration, use of questions, explanations, assumptions and commands, expressing one's opinions and wishes),
- 3) reading comprehension (public statements and announcements, public notices, news, sample forms, journal articles, messages, catalogues, user's instructions, traffic information, questionnaires, reports, guidelines),
- 4) writing (applications, letters of attorney, explanatory letters, *curriculum vitae*, filling in a questionnaire/ a standard form/ responding to a test).

Knowledge of the Estonian language is assessed by Estonian language examinations. The procedure for the holding of the examinations is established by the Government of the Republic. The National Examination and Qualification Centre has been organizing Estonian language examinations since July 1st 1999. According to the Amendments Act to the Language Act, passed in February 1999, there are three levels of language competence: elementary (Estonian *algtaase*), intermediate (Estonian *kesktaase*) and advanced (Estonian *kõrgtaase*). The state language certificate is required for persons who have graduated from non-Estonian high schools and who wish to work in Estonia or gain Estonian citizenship. For applicants for Estonian citizenship at least the basic (former *algtaase*, from the 1st July 2008 CEFR B1) examination is required. As of 1 June 2007, a person applying for long-term residence permit is required to pass an examination at A2 level in the proficiency in the Estonian language pursuant to the Amendment of the Aliens Act.

People applying for Estonian citizenship by naturalization in addition to a language test are also expected to pass the examination on knowledge of the Constitution and Citizenship Act of the Republic of Estonia.

### **The levels of the Estonian language examinations**

Standard tests have been used as state examinations of Estonian as the second language, since 1999. The first version of the Estonian language proficiency test for applicants for Estonian citizenship was developed by Language Centre of the Estonian National Language Board in 1995.

The certificate of proficiency in Estonian is necessary for working in Estonia. The six state language knowledge categories are pitched at the following levels (see Table 1) which correspond to the [13]. This system has been applied since 1 July 2008. The exams are arranged at levels A2, B1, B2 and C1.

Table 1

## Examinations in the Estonian language

Level		Description	Requirements
1	2	3	4
Proficient user	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarize information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.	Language proficiency at <b>C-level or above</b> is required of public servants, employees, and sole proprietors, whose duties of employment or official duties are the direction of a unit, the planning and coordination of activity, or providing consultation for and the preparation of public addresses, speeches and comments and text of official correspondence.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.	
Independent user	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.	Language proficiency at <b>B-level or above</b> is required of public servants, employees and sole proprietors whose duties of employment or official duties are of a diverse nature and may be related to administration, direction or co-direction of a subunit, or the compiling of documents (with a predetermined content) necessary for the work.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on	

		familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.	
<b>Basic user</b>	<b>A2</b>	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.	Language proficiency at <b>A-level or above</b> is required of public servants, employees and sole proprietors whose duties of employment or official duties are of a specific nature and precisely defined, where the use of language is routine and written work is limited to the compiling of standard documents or filling out forms.
	<b>A1</b>	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him-/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.	

All Estonian language exams consist of a written part and an oral section. Each examination consists of four components: writing, listening, reading and speaking.

Proficiency assessment systems for the Estonian language as a second language to be used both at schools/universities and in adult teaching institutions have now been developed and introduced in Estonia. In 2000, the Estonian Government passed a regulation harmonising different language examinations. The new, integrated system for language examinations incorporates three examinations which have been separate (the

language examination for naturalisation and the level and state examinations in the Estonian language to be taken at the end of basic school and the high school), and which all took place according to a different methodology and were the responsibilities of different departments. The regulation is based on a proficiency level examination grounded in contemporary methodology, and assigns the organisation and adoption of the examination to the National Examination and Qualification Centre.

Education and adult proficiency levels are shown in Table 2 below. Thus, persons who have acquired basic, secondary or higher education in the Estonian language are not required to pass the examination.

Table 2

### Estonian language assessment

Educational level	Language knowledge levels	Adult learners
	A 2 (exams were held during 1999–2001)	1st Category of the State Language Competence
Final examination of basic school [Schools with the Russian language as the language of instruction]	B 1 Algtase [basic]	
Final examination of secondary school or vocational institutions [Schools with the Russian language as the language of instruction]	B 2 Kesktase [intermediate]	2nd Category of the State Language Competence
BA diploma [University, Estonian as language of instruction ]	C1 Kxrgtase [advanced]	3rd Category of the State Language Competence

During the period November 1999 – March 2008 48 438 people passed level exams. At most were taken basic level exams, substantial proportion was taken successfully (e. g. 70% in 2003 and 51% in 2007). It seems that intermediate and advanced level language tests are somewhat more difficult to get through – the average percentage of done exams fluctuates between 50–55%.

### Impact of the policy

Estonian legislation does not draw a legal line between people of different nationalities. Nevertheless language boundaries exist. A major part of the Estonian society operates on the basis of the Estonian language, and Estonian underlies central cultural and political infrastructures. Those who do not have command of Estonian cannot be given the rights that presume a person to be politically informed, socially involved, etc., whose rights as a rule are gained by means of language competence. I cannot claim that the system of Estonian language examinations is unfair or discriminate against the Russian-speaking community in Estonia. However, I have experience teaching Estonian to Russian teachers in Narva and reality has shown that it is almost impossible to learn Estonian between the ages of 40–50s (and this is not the only case). Thus, lack of command of Estonian has

become a stumbling-block for generally older generations of Russian-speakers living in Estonia.

What is critically important for the success of language policy promoting Estonian as the sole official language among a targeted Russian-speaking population is that the Estonian language wins the enthusiastic acceptance of local Russian-speakers and also provides certain concrete advantages to those who attempt to learn and use it. If we take a closer look at the situation in Estonia, during the last few decades Estonian has become a language associated with the positive values of high education, professional careers, high posts in government offices and administration etc. Estonian language competence is closely related to professional career potentiality. Professions in the sphere of medicine (doctors etc.), in the cultural and educational sphere, police, law, etc. demand a high level of Estonian language proficiency. Of course such growing attractiveness has been stimulating the spread of Estonian within Russian-speaking parts of Estonia and has led to the use of Estonian in everyday life. As knowledge of Estonian leads to economic advantages and improves employment prospects, young Russian-speakers try to acquire Estonian during school and/or university studies. An important issue relates to the linguistic consequences of pursuing high levels of bilingual competence in education. As a result, younger generations have a better command of the Estonian language than their parents and use their Russian as a strategy to communicate with their parents, but are essentially moving towards the primary use of Estonian as they become socialized into the larger society. At this point, the integration of Estonian language knowledge levels with school final exams and university studies is very good for young people, who do not have now to double pass basically the same tests.

Changes in language attitudes, self-perceptions, and linguistic repertoires have occurred during the last ten years. In addition to this, a popular term Estonian Russians (Estonian *eestivenelased*, Russian *эстонские русские*) has been coined, and some Russian-speakers ascribe themselves to this category [14], which fact signals that there are changes in identity (understood here 'the social positioning of self and other', following [15: 586]). The proficiency in Estonian has significantly increased: in 2000 44.5% of Estonian Russian-speakers claimed to know Estonian, according to Population and Housing Census data. Although the population census does not define proficiency and the data are anonymous and self-reported, this is nevertheless an «act of identity». Among Russian-speakers, bilingualism is on the increase. Answers to the question, «*Is your proficiency in Estonian sufficient for living in Estonia?*» assure this fact (see Table 3).

Table 3

**Evaluations by Estonian Russians of the Adequacy of Their Proficiency in Estonian for Living in Estonia (%)\***

	1995	1996	2002	2005
Sufficient language proficiency (completely + generally)	28	31	44	48
Insufficient language proficiency (completely + generally)	55	57	53	49
Undecided	17	12	3	3
Total	100	100	100	100

\* *Bucholtz M. & Hall K.* Identity and interaction: a sociocultural linguistic approach / M. Bucholtz, K. Hall // *Discourse Studies*. – 2005. – № 7 (4–5). – P. 26–27.

These facts raise the question of how the learning of Estonian impacts on the linguistic identity of Russian-speakers and whether the increased use of Estonian may perhaps have bound an Estonian and a Russian-speaking part of the local population together. Of course, there are Russian-speakers who have successfully «integrated» into Estonian society (they work and/or live in predominantly Estonian places, have finished schools and/or universities with Estonian as a language of instruction, have Estonian friends, read Estonian mass media etc.). One third is integrated firmly into Estonian society, according to [17]. But still, there are two polarized population settings in Estonia (this is also demonstrated by language proficiency scales in Table 3): the Russian-speaking North-East remains a country inside the country. Different customs, cultural preferences, behaviour patterns still remain: Estonians and Russian-speakers celebrate different events, anniversaries, memorable days, attend different cultural events etc. Towns such as Narva with a large amount of Russians need good Estonian language teachers (Estonians are not very enthusiastic about moving to Narva), and this lack of teachers with necessary Estonian language knowledge does not allow schools to give subjects in Estonian etc. As for media, I would like to mention the fact that most Russian-speakers in Estonia still live within the cultural environment of the Russian Federation (RF). They mostly watch RF television, listen to RF radio (or local Russian channels), and frequently read RF newspapers (or local Russian newspapers). There is still no Russian-speaking TV channel in Estonia despite numerous promises of the Estonian government after the incident with the Bronze soldier in Tallinn.

Finally, Estonia can be mentioned as an example of a country with a democratic language policy because all the language laws and citizenship application procedures are in accordant with EU norms and directives. The only disadvantaged part of the population in regards to these language examinations remains older Russian-speakers who have finished Soviet schools (even in Estonia, in Russian schools Estonian was not taught during Soviet period), Soviet or Russian universities, live in the predominantly Russian-speaking North East. They can be named «lost generations» as they have no opportunity to be ever «integrated» into Estonian society: to acquire Estonian and receive Estonian citizenship. Even in the cases that they pass successfully the exam and get citizenship, they still remain outside the Estonian society because close family relations with Russia remain and feed ethnic and cultural identity of Russian-speakers.

### Conclusion

The Constitution provides the basis for the language policy in Estonia. It combines Estonian legal tradition from the first period of independence with developments on the international level. Language issues are regulated by several articles of the Constitution. Estonia insists that its sizable Russian-speaking minority first must pass an Estonian language and citizenship test before being entitled to Estonian nationality. The final exams in Estonian at non-Estonian basic and secondary schools are harmonized with the naturalization test and the Estonian language proficiency level exams. **In order to apply for Estonian citizenship an alien has to pass an examination in knowledge of the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia and the Citizenship Act, as well as an examination in Estonian.** If an alien has acquired the basic, secondary or higher education in Estonian he is exempted from the Estonian language exam.

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## **ТЕСТУВАННЯ МОВИ В КОНТЕКСТІ НАБУТТЯ ГРОМАДЯНСТВА НА ПРИКЛАДІ ЕСТОНІЇ**

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У статті на прикладі Естонії розглянуто роль тестування мови у зв'язку з отриманням громадянства. Відповідно до мовного законодавства естонська мова стала єдиною офіційною мовою країни. Нова політична система спричинила зміни у використанні та ставленні до естонської мови серед російськомовного населення, що становить «збільшену» меншину. У нових законах про мову, громадянство та освіту закладено вжиток естонської. Разом із коротким викладом цих законів, у статті порушено питання викликів, перед якими опинилася Естонія, розв'язуючи проблему виконання мовних прав та потреб російськомовного населення.

*Ключові слова:* оцінювання знання мови, тести, структура мовного іспиту, мовна політика.

## **ТЕСТИРОВАНИЕ ЯЗЫКА В КОНТЕКСТЕ ПОЛУЧЕНИЯ ГРАЖДАНСТВА НА ПРИМЕРЕ ЭСТОНИИ**

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В статье на примере Эстонии рассмотрена роль тестирования языка в связи с получением гражданства. В соответствии с языковым законодательством эстонский язык стал единственным официальным языком государства. Новая политическая система привела к изменениям в использовании и отношении к эстонскому языку среди русскоязычного населения, составляющего «увеличенное» меньшинство. В новых законах о языке, гражданстве и образовании заложено использование эстонского. Вместе с кратким изложением этих законов, статья поднимает вопрос вызовов/требований, перед которыми оказалась Эстония в процессе решения проблемы соблюдения языковых прав и потребностей русскоязычного населения.

*Ключевые слова:* оценивание знания языка, тесты, структура языкового экзамена, языковая политика.

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