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The state of academic Estonian today

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The development of education in Estonia has been influenced by foreign powers that have ruled over its territory between the 13th–20th centuries. The Republic of Estonia was established in 1918. In 1919, instruction in Estonian was introduced at the University of Tartu and it has remained the language of instruction ever since. A number of new higher education institutions were established in Estonia: Tallinn University of Technology (1918), Estonian Academy of Music (1919), and Tallinn Teacher Training College (1919), the predecessor of today's Tallinn University. After the occupation of Estonia by the Soviet Union (1940–1941, 1944–1991), Estonian became the official language again.

In order to maintain and plan the usage of Estonian language, strategic advancement policies have been elaborated. The Development Strategy of the Estonian Language 2004–2010 was followed by The Development Plan of the Estonian Language 2011–2017, covering all spheres of language use in society. It also aims at “.. granting of continuation and development of Estonian-medium tertiary education in the open educational space of Europe in a way that in all fields of study Estonian-medium higher education will be provided on all study levels.”

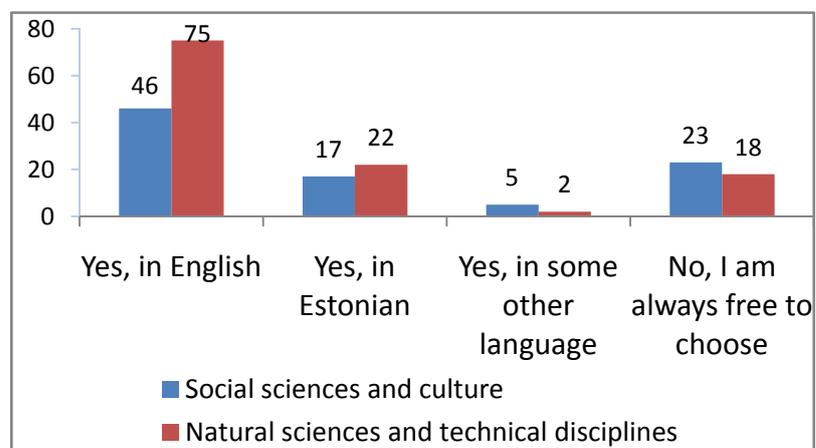
However, there is a remarkable contradiction between the strategies: ““The Estonian Higher Education Strategy 2006–2015” aims to ensure the existence of Estonian-medium education on all educational levels in all fields of study, thus creating a possibility of using foreign languages for the teaching of most specialities within the same field of study. The “Strategy for the Internationalization of Estonian Higher Education 2006–2015” diminishes the role of Estonian-medium education further by removing the requirement of the existence of Estonian-medium education from doctoral education.” (The Development Plan of the Estonian Language 2011–2017)

Among other goals, Estonian Higher Education Strategy for 2006–2015 aims at linking higher education with labour market demands: „In order to improve specialty Estonian-language skills, students will be able to take Estonian language study within the framework of elective subjects.”

Our recent research project in cooperation with sociologists included a study of the attitudes of Estonian PhD students towards using academic languages. The main conclusions are:

- It is considered more valuable to maintain one’s identity and characteristics through using academic Estonian among the PhD students of educational sciences, culture and law
- Estonian PhD students are quite strongly influenced by English while writing academic Estonian
- It is easy for the newcomers to the academic writing to assimilate into mainstream host-culture of English and give up “boring” Estonian writing, supported by
 - the norms and behaviour patterns of others
 - the regulations, research evaluation and standards
 - the organisational space and guidelines/manuals

The question “Have you ever felt you are obliged to publish in certain language?” was answered as shown in the chart below (% by field).



It leads to overlooking the potential incentives to use Estonian and diminishes possibilities of seeking new angles and (eventually) new research results emerging from the variety of language based ways of thinking, though “.. we can only access world scientific knowledge through the existing languages and their structures, which provides a perspective of diversity to the dynamics of world knowledge development.” (Ehlich 2003)

As regards terminology, systematic large scale work on creating Estonian terms in every field of science and research began soon after the independence, in 1920s. Basic terms are well established, but there is of course an everlasting need for new terms along with the rise of new concepts, theories and fields of research – as well as a necessity to unify and standardise. This does not mean that so-called international terms (often stemmed from Latin or Greek) should be replaced by Estonian ones, but many times a parallel term of mother tongue origin is useful for better understanding. This is especially true for communicating new knowledge for general education purposes.

More harmful is the Indo-European impact on grammatical structure of Estonian as a Finno-Ugric language. (Nemvalts 2013)

Any language has specific means of cognition and expression. These could enrich our understanding of the world, but may remain unrecognised during the studies at higher education institutions, if English is regarded as the only medium of academic research. As Hamel (2007) as stated: “Plurilingualism entails a view of intercultural communication where ones own position or academic standpoint recognises that other perspectives and procedures are also part of the possible world knowledge; or, to put it another way, that other valid positions and knowledge bases exist that may be formulated in terms of different languages, discourse structures and cultural model that define research paradigms.”

At Estonian universities, different courses of academic Estonian and terminology have been elaborated with purpose to maintain, train and develop the abilities of the students as starting scientists, future (university) teachers and specialists, so they will be able both to clearly mediate global knowledge to Estonian society and to contribute with their research results to the world knowledge.

Also, there have been developed state programmes for supporting Estonian terminological work and writing university textbooks in Estonians. But, curiously, this kind of work is not considered as a merit while electing people to academic positions. To found the optimal balance between Estonian as a mother tongue and foreign languages in higher education is not an easy task. The quality of higher education depends also on quality of language(s) of instruction.

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