

ESTONIAN DIALECTS ACCORDING TO THE POPULATION CENSUS

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Introduction

Dialects are important in Estonian culture in several respects, with various changes in their significance over time. While the development of a unified literary standard reduced dialects to the status of unstructured and less valuable language, the study and mapping of dialects has made them an important bearer of the identity and cultural diversity of various local areas within the country. An important characteristic of dialects is that they go hand in hand with the customs and traditions of specific regions – this is often summarised in the expression ‘intellectual cultural heritage’. It is difficult to collect relevant statistical information on intellectual cultural heritage in order to use it for preservation and development of that heritage (Morrone 2012:). However, the data on dialect speakers, as bearers of living local culture, is statistically measurable and provides an opportunity to communicate the state of Estonian intellectual cultural heritage through statistical indicators.

A relevant factor in case of dialects is also the fact that the speakers of several dialects, such as Setu, Kihnu and others, have started to appreciate their own linguistic specialty, making efforts to preserve and develop it. Adding a question on dialects to the census questionnaire was also largely the result of the initiative from Southern Estonian dialect activists.

In Estonia, dialects have been systematically studied since the middle of the 19th century. However, the first observations concerning Estonian dialects originate from as early as the 16th century. While language in general is understood as the official standardised language with its own writing tradition, dialects are usually defined as sub-languages or small languages without an established written form. Local dialect or traditional speech pattern is an even narrower term, associated mainly with the language spoken by rural residents and not by urban population. Local dialects have not been greatly influenced by the literary standard language and their means of expression are more limited. In Estonia, the term ‘dialect’ is mostly applied to local dialects. Current local dialects generally do not have a literary tradition, with some exceptions, such as Kihnu, Mulgi and Võru dialects that are now also developing a literary language.

Estonia’s dialects can be divided in larger dialect groups. Even though the classification of dialects has been refined in recent times, this article uses the classification of dialects by Arnold Kask from 1956 (Hennoste et al. 2009: 50). According to this classification, Estonian dialects can be divided in three major groups: Northern Estonian, Southern Estonian and Northeastern coastal dialects. Linguists assume that Estonia’s major dialect groups first developed during the period of the Finno-Ugric proto-language, which was spoken at the Baltic Sea 3,000 or 4,000 years ago.

The Northern Estonian dialect group includes four dialects: insular dialect, western dialect, mid-Estonian dialect and eastern dialect. Together, they cover an area from the Estonian islands, over Western, Central and Northern Estonia to the western bank of Lake Peipus. The Southern Estonian group includes three dialects: Mulgi dialect, Tartu dialect and Võru dialect, all spoken in the southern and south-eastern parts of Estonia. The area of the Northeastern coastal dialect, formerly also known as the Northern Estonian coastal dialect, extended on Estonia’s northern coast from Jõelähtme parish to Narva Jõesuu. Dialects are further divided into sub-dialects, which in Estonia means dialects associated with a particular location (usually a parish).

There are also some alternative classifications and catalogues of Estonian dialects. However, as the aim of this article is not to discuss the characteristics, connections and historical development of dialects and sub-dialects but to describe the prevalence of dialects in the context of the 2011 Population Census, it is best regarded as a snapshot of a moment in the history of dialects.

Dialect knowledge in Estonia

In the 2011 Census questionnaire, Estonian residents with Estonian as the native tongue were asked the following question: "Do you/ does he/she speak some local language form, dialect or sub-dialect?" If the answer was affirmative, the respondent was also asked to name the local language form, dialect or sub-dialect they spoke best. The following analysis only includes the persons who stated that they spoke the dialect.

A total of 131,239 persons, or 15.4% of the persons speaking the Estonian language as a mother tongue, claimed to know a dialect. 44% of them were men and 56% were women. In total 3% of the respondents reported speaking Northern Estonian dialects, 11.5% Southern Estonian dialects, 0.1% the Northeastern coastal dialect and over 85% of native Estonian speakers did not speak any dialects. Table 1 ,p. 70 reflects the age distribution of the people speaking dialects.

The Population Census indicates that 101,851 persons knew the Southern Estonian dialects (78% of dialect speakers), 26,986 persons knew the Northern Estonian dialects (21%) and 1,288 knew the Northeastern coastal dialect (1%). In addition, there was a small group of persons that reported the dialect knowledge in the census questionnaire but did not specify the dialect (Table 2, p. 70).

All the dialects are divided into smaller dialects which in general have named after the local parish.

The initial impression from the Table 2 is that the majority of dialect speakers speak a Southern Estonian dialect. However, it should be remembered that Estonia's literary standard language is based on the Northern Estonian language and, therefore, many people may not even realise that they speak a Northern Estonian dialect, as it is quite similar to their daily literary Estonian. Southern Estonian dialects on the contrary, are clearly different from the language that can be heard in the media, for instance. As a result, it is easier for people to recognise that they speak a local dialect. Furthermore, there was a wider campaign in Southern Estonia to answer the dialect questions during the census and this has influenced the level of representation of Southern Estonian dialects in the census data.

Current geography of dialect groups

Even though many dialect speakers still live in their original regions, they also increasingly tend to relocate to larger urban centres. As remote areas offer fewer employment opportunities, schools, shops and other necessary services, there is a general tendency to move from rural regions to cities. The two largest cities, Tallinn and Tartu, are especially notable in this context, but the trend is also noticeable in smaller cities, such as Pärnu and Viljandi.

A large portion of the speakers of the Southern Estonian dialects still lives in their original area in Southern Estonia, but many have also spread all over Estonia. For them, Tallinn and Pärnu are the main urban centres of attraction outside Southern Estonia (Map 15, p. 156). Even though the speakers of the Southern Estonian dialects are relatively numerous compared with the others, relocation of people to other counties has weakened many Southern Estonian sub-dialects. The Halliste, Hargla, Helme, Kambja, Kanepi, Karksi, Nõo, Puhja, Rannu, Rõuge, Tartu-Maarja and Urvaste sub-dialects are spoken by less than 18 persons each.

The Northern Estonian dialect group is also characterised by the fact that its speakers have spread all over Estonia. However, the number of Northern Estonian dialect speakers is relatively modest in Southern Estonia, with Tartu being the only exception. It is also interesting that, according to the census data, Pärnu has more speakers of the Southern Estonian dialects than the Northern Estonian dialects, despite the city originally belonging to the region of Northern Estonian dialects (Map 16, p. 156). In the Northern Estonian dialect group, only 5–17 persons still speak the Hageri, Jämaja, Kullamaa, Põltsamaa, Rakvere, Simuna, Varbla, Mustjala, Türi, Märjamaa, Pärnu-Jaagupi, Audru, Rapla, Torma or Viljandi sub-dialect. There is also a number of

sub-dialects spoken by fewer than five persons. Consequently, many Northern Estonian sub-dialects are also about to die out.

Many speakers of the Northeastern coastal dialect have remained in Northern and Northeastern Estonia. However, some can also be found in Tartu, Pärnu and many smaller locations all over Estonia. As the total number of the representatives of this dialect group is small, their distribution over Estonia is quite significant in percentage terms. 31% live in Ida-Viru and Lääne-Viru counties, which can be regarded as the original region of this dialect, while 49% live in Harju county and 21% in other counties. The speakers of Northeastern coastal dialect are also considerably older than those who know Northern or Southern Estonian dialects. Three quarters of the coastal dialect speakers are over 50 years of age, which means that younger generations include fewer new speakers of this dialect. Unfortunately, this indicates that the number of speakers of the Northeastern coastal dialect is on a declining curve and the dialect is about to blend into other dialects (Map 17, p. 157). Only 7–16 persons still speak the Haljala, Iisaku or Jõhvi sub-dialects of the Northeastern coastal dialect, which means that these sub-dialects are likely to perish.

On the one hand, population mobility and relocation is a characteristic phenomenon of a free society. On the other hand, it leads to assimilation of many dialects into the literary standard language and the consequent loss of a part of cultural heritage, which is particularly evident in case of many sub-dialects. According to the data from 2011, there were no persons who could speak the Emmaste, Harju-Jaani, Jaani, Kaarma, Karuse, Koeru, Kursi, Kõpu, Käina, Kärla, Martna, Paistu, Pilstvere, Püha, Pühalepa, Reigi, Risti, Valjala or Vastseliina sub-dialect. The Ambla, Anna, Anseküla, Hanila, Järva-Jaani, Järva-Madise, Kadrina, Kanepi, Karja, Keila, Kolga-Jaani, Kose, Lääne-Nigula, Maarja-Magdaleena, Paide, Põide, Viru-Jaagupi, Väike-Maarja, Harju-Madise, Juuru, Lihula, Peetri, Tartu-Maarja, Äksi, Kihelkonna, Kirbla, Laiuse, Nissi, Halliste, Jüri, Mihkli, Palamuse, Puhja, Ridala, Suure-Jaani and Urvaste sub-dialects are still spoken by fewer than five persons each.

Failure to specify a sub-dialect in the census questionnaire does not necessarily mean that the sub-dialect has completely perished. In many cases, people do not realise that their language is actually a dialect or a sub-dialect, because there is not enough available information on their local dialect to facilitate drawing a connection with their place of residence and local identity. In the 2011 Census, many people did not answer the question about their knowledge of sub-dialects, even though it is likely that they spoke one. For instance, nobody mentioned the sub-dialects of the Hiiumaa dialect group (Emmaste, Reigi, Pühalepa and Käina sub-dialects). Considering that some people in Hiiumaa stated that they spoke the insular dialect, it is likely that they simply mistook their local sub-dialect for the insular dialect. Even though in speech people often distinguish the local people from those living on the other side of the island, not to mention inhabitants of other islands, they may not be familiar with the official name of the respective dialect.

Consequently, the issue of asking residents themselves about their dialect knowledge leads, in fact, to the question whether people actually are as aware of their local dialects as dialect researchers. In many cases it seems that they are not. They tend to be aware of the dialects that are present in the public discourse, while they consider other dialects simply as Estonian language and probably overlooked this part of the census questionnaire.

Larger dialects in Estonia

In case of both the Northern and Southern Estonian dialect groups, we can clearly identify one larger dialect. In Southern Estonia, this is the Võru dialect (combined with the Setu dialect), which is used by 87,000 persons, or 85.5% of all speakers of Southern Estonian dialects. In Northern Estonia, insular dialect is the most prevalent dialect, with 24,500 speakers, or 91% of all speakers of Northern Estonian dialects (Figure 1, p. 72, Figure 2, p. 72).

A distinguished dialect knowledge and the associated local identity is clearly noticeable in case of the residents of the islands and the Võru region, and it is preserved even after relocation to other

counties. As a consequence, people are aware of their dialect even if they live in Harju county, for instance, where the insular and Võru dialects can be clearly distinguished but are no longer in their natural environment where they could develop and, instead, they tend to blend into the literary language and other dialects.

A notable trait in case of the insular dialects is that a large portion of the speakers lives in Harju county. The speakers of the insular dialects have often moved away from the islands in the past decades and this is illustrated by the large share of the speakers of the insular dialects in the mainland counties, especially Harju county. We can assume that this is the first generation of people who have relocated from the islands to the mainland. Their children are likely to adopt the language forms of their new county of residence. (Figure 3, p. 73).

Many speakers of the Võru dialect have also moved away from their original counties. Again, a large portion of the users of the Võru dialect have relocated to Harju county and Tallinn. However, unlike the speakers of the insular dialects, the majority of Võru dialect speakers have remained in the counties closer to their original home. The example of the Võru dialect, therefore, seems to indicate that the Southern Estonian dialects are associated with a stronger sense of local identity and the speakers constitute a more homogeneous group. They tend to live in the same region as their ancestors and develop their traditions and, as a consequence, there are fewer signs of their culture fading than in case of the insular dialects (Figure 4, p. 73).

Considering the large number of people who have relocated to other counties, we could assume that this has had some influence on the dialects of the destination regions. However, as they constitute a clear minority (for instance, the speakers of the Võru (incl. Setu) dialect account for only 3% and the speakers of the insular dialect only 1.4% of the residents of Harju county), it is likely that this influence is virtually undetectable. The knowledge of a dialect remains a sign of heredity in the new location but new generations will adopt the dialects of the new place of residence, unless they return to the original home region of their ancestors.

The issue of development or fading of dialects is associated with several factors, such as the number of speakers of a dialect, especially in its original region. Even though the Setu dialect (a sub-dialect of the Southern Estonian Võru dialect) is on the endangered language list,^a it still has a considerable number of speakers and activists trying to preserve and promote the dialect, especially compared with the Northeastern coastal dialect, for instance, or many other smaller Estonian dialects and sub-dialects. Consequently, there is no need to worry about the Setu or the Setu culture dying out. However, even here there are some warning signs, as many speakers of the Setu dialect have moved to other regions of Estonia. (Map 18, p. 157).

Gender, age and educational distribution of dialect speakers

The age distribution of dialect speakers is one of the main factors for dialects persisting or perishing. In a somewhat simplified manner, it also indicates whether there will be a new generation of younger dialect speakers. The age of the persons who know a dialect indicates that, by age groups covering 10 years each, the largest group of speakers is in their forties in case of Northern Estonian dialects, in their fifties in case of Southern Estonian dialects, and even in their seventies in case of the Northeastern coastal dialect. While the speakers of Northern and Southern Estonian dialects are fairly evenly distributed between ages 20 and 70, the speakers of the Northeastern coastal dialect are clearly at a more advanced age, indicating a lower number in younger generations (Figure 5, p. 74).

The group of the speakers of the Northeastern coastal dialect also includes a rather small number of women in reproductive age, reducing the possibility of addition of children who would learn this dialect from their parents as their native tongue. The share of women between 20 and 40 years of age is 21% for the Southern Estonian dialects, 25% for the Northern Estonian dialects, and only 8% for the Northeastern coastal dialect. Consequently, the share of the

speakers of the Northeastern coastal dialect is likely to decrease at a faster rate than the share of those who speak a Northern or Southern Estonian dialect.

The initial studies of dialect geography focused primarily on women, as women were more settled in one place than men at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. There was also a preference for persons who were born and schooled before the establishment of the Republic of Estonia and, if possible, who had not been strongly influenced by the Estonian school education and literary language. Women are no longer the preferred group in current dialect studies but, as a statistical curiosity, women are still more likely than men to know a dialect. On average, 57.4% of dialect speakers are women and 42.6% are men. As the general ratio of men to women in Estonia is 54% of women to 46% of men, we can see that dialects are still more prevalent among women by a couple of percentage points (Figure 6, p. 75).

A comparison of ages and education levels of dialect speakers indicates that older dialect speakers tend to have a lower level education, while younger age groups include more dialect speakers with higher education. Consequently, while speaking a dialect was correlated with a lack of education a couple of decades ago, this trend has now reversed. Highly educated persons tend to be more knowledgeable about dialects (Figure 7, p. 75).

Similarly, the general division of dialect speakers, without differentiation between age groups, indicates that the share of dialect speakers with higher education exceeds the share of dialect speakers with lower levels of education. Even though this is somewhat influenced by the total number of people with a particular level of education (for instance, the second group as a whole has considerably fewer people), it again confirms that people with higher education are more likely to acknowledge and probably also appreciate their dialect knowledge. This could also have been the reason why they were more likely to specify their dialect knowledge in the census questionnaire.

Summary

The census data indicate that the original dialect regions have been diffused in recent decades. In particular, people have moved from their original home regions to larger centres, especially Tallinn and Tartu. Such mobility has only increased in the last decade and it will, to some extent, reduce the number of people who can speak a dialect, as they are no longer surrounded by the environment where a dialect can be spoken and heard on a daily basis. At the same time, speakers of different dialects have mingled and influenced each other, which can be regarded as a natural process in the development of dialects.

However, in case of many local dialects, particularly in Northern Estonia, there are only very few speakers left and they are mostly older people. It is, therefore, very likely that many smaller dialects and sub-dialects will disappear in the near future, despite the high value attached to small cultures in Estonia. The loss of a language is, unfortunately, an irreversible process (UNESCO 2012: 6). If languages with a literary tradition are at least preserved in written sources, any dialects or sub-dialects without a written heritage will be remembered only by name and the descriptions of dialect researchers. However, any traditions and customs associated with the sub-dialect will be lost. It is a reason for concern, as this is a part of our (still living) intellectual cultural heritage.

Some larger and smaller viable dialects will certainly be preserved and will continue to develop. Preservation is almost guaranteed for the dialects that have found active support in the form of alphabet books or any other initiatives to promote the use of the dialect.