

Karl PAJUSALU (Tartu)

The reforming of the Southern Finnic language area

This article focuses on recent changes in the southern group of Finnic languages. The present state of these languages, the establishment of written standards, and ways to modernise the languages are observed. The Southern Finnic group comprises Livonian, Votic, and Estonian, including South Estonian. Historically these languages share a number of common features and mutual influences. However, the destiny of these languages has been rather different over the past centuries. Standard Estonian, which evolved on the basis of the North Estonian dialects, became the state language of the Republic of Estonia. The South Estonian or Tartu written language fell into disuse at the end of the 19th century. Present-day Estonia is witnessing the emergence of some new regional standards, especially in South Estonia. The Livonian language became extinct in Old Livonia, that is, in North Latvia, as early as the middle of the 19th century and has by now ceased to exist as an everyday language even in the coastal villages of Courland. Nevertheless, there now exists a written standard for Livonian, and modern ways to use Livonian have been created. Also, the traditional area of Votic on the southern shore of the Gulf of Finland is declining, and the last bilingual Votic-Russian speakers are to be found only in a few villages in the Leningrad *oblast* in Russia. At the same time there are young people with Votic roots who try to use the language of their ancestors in modern situations. At present the historical diversity of the language group under discussion is severely threatened, although some endeavours and also possible methods for protecting and developing these small languages are to be observed nowadays.

1. Concerning the culturally diverse development of the Southern Finnic languages

The southern group of Finnic took shape by the end of the first millennium. Its formation was characterised by the convergence of southern Finnic tribal dialects and divergence from the northern and eastern varieties of Finnic. The Southern Finnic languages share a number of common innovations (see e.g.

Viitso 2000), wherein the change of their morphology into the fusional type may be regarded as central.

When dealing with the history of the southern group of Finnic, one has to bear in mind that originally it was not a uniformly compact continuum of dialects. The divergence of the ancient South Estonian tribal language from the other Finnic varieties has been considered as the earliest development in this regard (see Kallio 2007). The specific features of Livonian are ancient, too (Viitso 1985). At the same time, the divergence of North Estonian and Vote can be regarded as more recent, similar to the convergence of North and South Estonian. It is likely that during the previous millennia the southern area of Finnic may have been a rather diffuse and largely multilingual region that became more compact as a result of migrations during the second half of the first millennium.

In the second millennium the social and cultural contexts for the development of Livonian and Estonian were rather similar. After the crusades of the 13th century both languages remained in the sphere of Low German and later German influence and were peasant languages spoken in Old Livonia. Both Livonia and Estonia witnessed the Reformation in the 16th century, which set the scene for the written use of the languages. However, there was an important difference, insofar as the Estonians were an overwhelming majority nation in their own country whereas the Livonians constituted a minority in north-western Latvia and Courland, surrounded by Latvians. This fatal fact became decisive in the modernisation of these languages. The native language of the Estonian peasants became their school and church language while in the case of the Livonians it was the language of the majority of Latvia, that is, Latvian. The cultural texts that were important for Estonian were translated or written as early as the 16th–18th centuries; in the language of Courland Livonian the same happened as late as the 19th and 20th centuries, although they were never created in Salaca, that is, Northern Latvian Livonian.

Actually, the belatedly created church and school literature in Courland Livonian did not reach general use. The Livonian language remained the spoken language of peasantry until its decline as an everyday language. Only when the language community had begun to decrease dramatically did the number and importance of written Livonian texts increase for Livonians. Nevertheless, even most of the last native speakers of Livonian were unable to read Livonian; Latvian served as their language of education and as a written language.

While the Livonians and Estonians remained in the Lutheran cultural region, the situation for the Votes and the Southern Estonian Setos was different. For the larger part of the second millennium the Votes and Setos were subjects of the Russian state, and they adopted the Orthodox faith. Both have lived as minority nations in the Russian-language cultural field, and for centuries they had

no written word in their native language. While the destinies of the Votes and the Setos have been similar to that of the Livonians in several ways, some important differences can be discerned. The Livonians have enjoyed a longer educational tradition; because it was in the Latvian language, it contributed to their assimilation. Most Votes and Setos remained outside of the educational system and other written culture until the 20th century; for this reason the significance of foreign-language education and the church was not so great as far as their assimilation is concerned. On the one hand, this difference could explain earlier bilingualism and the language switch among Livonians; on the other hand, it points to the more extensive development and use of Standard Livonian in the 20th century. Unfortunately, the provision of an Estonian-language education in the Republic of Estonia since the 1920s served as an additional factor in the linguistic levelling of the Setos. Since then the levelling effect of the closely related Standard Estonian has been extensive.

When discussing the cultural development of the southern group of Finnic in the Lutheran and Orthodox spheres of influence, one should not entirely ignore the role of Catholic culture. At first the Catholic Church played an important role in the medieval renewal of the Estonian and Livonian vocabulary. Furthermore, its significance has been long-lasting for the South Estonian written language. In fact, the early South Estonian written language was created at the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century in the course of the Catholic Counter-Reformation (see Pajusalu 2006). The southern Estonians inhabiting the Lutsi linguistic enclave in south-eastern Latvia have remained Catholic to this day. The Catholic Church plays an important role in the self-consciousness of the Lutsis; they have explained their migration to the present areas as being related to their effort to retain their old faith (Kallas 1894). However, the Lutsis have been able to enjoy a minimal amount of the native-language written word.

2. Modernisation of Southern Finnic languages and the role of Standard Estonian

The North- and South-Estonian written languages were the only Southern Finnic languages that became languages of education before the beginning of rapid modernisation and urbanisation at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The development of the Estonian nation state brought with it a decline of South Estonian in public use at the beginning of the 20th century. The North Estonian as the Estonian national language developed into a modern civilised language meeting all the needs of Estonian society, and thus became an important example for the development of other Southern Finnic written languages. Stand-

ard Estonian has influenced the establishment of the written standards of other Southern Finnic languages with regard to spelling, principles for establishing the grammatical norms of the written languages, and stylistics. For example, the spelling of all the Southern Finnic languages shows the unrounded mid vowel by means of *õ* following the Estonian example; the morphological principle is followed in the writing of suffixes (i.e. the same formatives are written with the single main form despite morphophonological variation in their realisation), and similar principles of phrasing and text production are applied. The application of the example of Standard Estonian has been related to the activities of Estonian linguists in the development of these languages, the general ease of borrowing linguistic forms because of the closeness of the languages, and the efforts of Estonian society to support the neighbouring small kindred peoples.

While one can notice the central role of Finnish in the whole Finnic area (evident in the Estonian spelling reform in the 19th century, see Laanekask & Ereht 2007), Standard Estonian has attained the same position in Southern Finnic. This influence has made these languages even closer in written form than in spoken form. For example, the Livonian unrounded mid vowel is articulatorily not identical to the Estonian mid vowel *õ* (the Livonian *õ* is high and not mid high), as the use of the same grapheme might suggest. However, the Livonian, Votic and even new South-Estonian spelling and other standards differ from Standard Estonian in principled ways, the reasons for which are discussed below.

3. Present-day Livonian

One can claim that there are almost no speakers of Livonian as a first language now. The beginning of the 21st century witnessed the passing away of the last speakers of Livonian as the language of their childhood home. Although the official statistics of Latvia show that about 200 Livonians live in Latvia (see Krautmane 2001; Ernštreits 2006), in the summer of 2008 Viktor Berthold (b. 1921) was the only speaker of Livonian as a native language in Latvia. He came from the eastern Livonian village of Vaide (Livonian *Vaid*); he lived and worked in Kolka (*Kūolka*). Viktor Berthold died in February 2009.

There are still a few Livonian speakers in Canada and elsewhere that are refugees from the Second World War. At present the Livonians are scattered; most of them live in Riga, the capital of Latvia, and in the other larger urban centres of western Latvia. They spend their summer holidays at their ancestral homes on the Courland Livonian coast. In Latvian towns one can find Livonian societies, choirs; various events are organised although Latvian has now become

the language of communication. *Līvli*, the newspaper of the Livonian Society, and Livonian yearbooks are also mostly in Latvian now (Ernštreits 2005). Nevertheless, one cannot claim that Livonian has become an extinct language.

While the number of speakers of Livonian as the mother tongue has reached a minimum, the number of younger people who know the language has remained stable or even shows a slight increase. When language informants were sought for recording a Livonian prosody project in 2004 and 2005, a number of Livonians belonging to the younger and middle generations proved suitable (see Lehiste et al. 2008). However, they do not any longer speak the dialect of their ancestral village but Standard Livonian, which is based on the eastern Livonian dialect. Unlike the Livonians of the older generation, who were not used to reading Livonian, several younger people showed higher proficiency in written than in spoken Livonian.

The renewed efforts to promote the preservation of knowledge and teaching of Livonian started in 1988, with the re-establishment of the Livonian Society (*Līvõd Īt*). The teaching of the language is of great importance; it is taught both to adults with Livonian roots and children. Since 1992 summer camps for Livonian children have been held annually in the village of Mazirbe (*Ire*) in Courland; the teaching of the language plays a central role there. The Livonian language is substantially supported by the Finnic curriculum of the University of Latvia, which was introduced in the mid-1990s and in the framework of which several courses in the Livonian language and culture are offered (see Krautmane 2001). At present Livonian-language publications include first and foremost language-learning materials and a small amount of fiction, songs, etc. The internet portal *Livones.lv*¹ has become an important Livonian networking environment.

The development of Standard Livonian continues to be a topical subject for Livonian intellectuals. Conferences and seminars dealing with issues of Standard Livonian are held on a regular basis. One of their organisers is Valts Ernštreits, doctoral student at the University of Tartu. Vocabulary development and the codification of some word forms and the related principles of spelling are major issues in the development of Standard Livonian (see Ernštreits 2006, 2007).

The development of Standard Livonian has taken place and is taking place in the sphere of influence of the Latvian language. Livonian is the only Finnic language where vowel length is indicated by means of a length symbol (*aa* = *ā*, *ii* = *ī* etc.); palatalised consonants are also indicated in the same way as in Latvian (e.g. *ḳ ḷ ģ*); the glottalised tone is indicated in standard texts in neither Latvian nor in Livonian, etc. This is understandable considering the fact that the present-

¹ <http://www.livones.lv/>

day Livonians are bilingual speakers of Latvian and Livonian. The Livonian language lives on as one of the two indigenous languages of Latvia, which have developed side by side for centuries.

Nowadays Livonian is a language without a distinct area with which it is associated; it is used in various localities in Latvia. The rebirth of Livonian in the ealier Livonia in north-western Latvia is remarkable (see Pajusalu 2007). In 1999 a Livonian museum was established in the town of Staicele on the bank of the River Salaca, in a former Salaca Livonian area. In Staicele a Livonian Day is celebrated in every summer; the children in this area attend the Livonian children's camp in Courland. Nevertheless, the Livonian language that Salaca Livonians learn and use at present is Standard Livonian, which is based on the eastern dialect of Courland Livonian.

4. Present-day Vote

The Vote language, which is considered to be the closest cognate of Estonian, was once spoken in an extensive area in Ingria as well as in north-eastern and eastern Estonia (Ernits 1996, 2005). However, nowadays only about a dozen people speak it in the Kingissepp district of Leningrad *oblast* of the Russian Federation. This is so despite the official statistics of Russia's 2002 census, which claims that there are 774 speakers of Vote (see Ernits 2006). The last speakers of Vote are residents of two western Vote villages—Jõgõperä (Russian *Krakol'ye*) and Luuditsa (*Luzhitsa*). All of these are bilingual speakers of Vote and Russian belonging to the older generation; in everyday life they use Russian mostly. Their Vote reveals strong Russian influences (Heinsoo 2006). Although the Votes have mostly inhabited areas of mixed Vote and Russian settlement, Vote language contacts with neighbouring closely related languages, such as Ingrian, Ingrian Finnish, and Estonian, has also been significant.

Unlike Livonian, during the 20th century Vote did not develop through a written tradition, although several linguists (e.g. Paul Ariste, Julius Mägiste, Lauri Kettunen) and Dmitriy Tsvetkov, an intellectual of Vote descent (see Ernits 2004), did consider the language. Apart from the less favourable social conditions, this could be explained by a different cultural field wherein the written language was less important than it was in the Lutheran model of culture. For this reason the earlier attitude of the Votes towards their language could be compared to that of the Setos—language is part of the realities of life and a bearer of traditional folk culture, although it has no intrinsic symbolic value in its own right.

Taking the lack of an earlier tradition of a standardised Vote into account, the conscious development of Vote since the mid-1990s is especially noteworthy,

also with regard to the introduction of a spelling system and the written word (an overview of the new Vote movement and the standard language can be found in Ernits 2006). Courses in Vote began in St Petersburg in 1994; it has been taught as an optional subject at the Krakol'ye (Jõgõperä) secondary school; there is also an online course in the Vote language. Mekhmet Muslimov, who resides in St Petersburg, has been instrumental in the elaboration of Standard Vote (see VK 2003, VK 2004 and the website *Vad̄damaa*²).

Previously, the Vote language was mostly recorded by Estonian linguists, who used an adapted Estonian spelling in addition to the scientific Finno-Ugric transcription (such as Ariste 1941 and other Vote texts published by Paul Ariste, the Vote dictionaries VKS 1990–2000, etc.). The spelling formulated by Muslimov is a radical departure from the standards of Estonian. For example, he marks some palatalised consonants with Livonian letters (e.g. *l̄*), which were adopted from Latvian spelling. The grapheme *ḑ*, which denotes the dental spirant in Saami and in a new Kven standard, represents the palatalised dental stop. Muslimov's choices show the establishment of broader links within the Finno-Ugric language area. Unlike the revival of Standard Livonian, the revival of Vote has rather been a so-called ethnofuturistic undertaking. It is language creation that freely selects modern means of expression wherein suitability to the virtual environment is an important criterion. All the Vote letters selected by Muslimov can be found among the widely used main software, and the morphological norms are based first and foremost on the principle of economy. The recorded new common Vote language has a rather transparent dialectal background and is based on the Jõgõperä dialect.

Most of the present promoters and learners of Vote do not come from Vote homes; they have either more distant Vote roots or do not have them at all. The Vote language, Vote songs, as well as the Vote flag and anthem adopted in 2003, have become local symbols for people in the present-day Vote area.

5. Present-day South Estonian

South Estonian could be regarded as the oldest Finnic language (cf. Kallio 2007); nevertheless, to this day it has no official status. The historical Tartu written language was taught and used in the 17th–19th centuries in southern Estonia also outside the Tartu dialect area but efforts to establish a uniform standard South Estonian at the end of the 20th century were unsuccessful. An attempt by Võro language reformers to establish a common Võro-Seto standard language in the 1990s ended in failure. Apparently, this was caused not so much by Võro and

² <http://www.vadjamaa.narod.ru/>

Seto language differences as the identity clash resulting from the different historical experience of the Lutheran Võro people and the Orthodox Setos (see Iva & Pajusalu 2004). In addition to the written Võro and Seto, the Mulgi people, the westernmost southern Estonians, have their own written variety. Thus, at present one could speak of three different South Estonian written languages if this term is defined as the writing tradition of a language variety in its broadest sense (cf. Pajusalu 2006).

The spread and use of the present regional standards of South Estonian are not equal. The Võro language maintains the strongest position. It has the largest number of speakers (about 50,000, see Eichenbaum & Koreinik 2008) and is actively used. The norms of the Võro language have been systematically established since 1995 when the Võro Institute was set up (for an overview see Iva 2007: 19–35). Most journalism and fiction is published in this language, and about thirty schools in Võro County (Võro *Võromaa*) teach it. The majority of Estonians and even southern Estonians perceive the Võro language as a modern synonym for South Estonian. A recent ethno-dialectological study showed that some inhabitants of southern Estonia in Tartu in the south and even in eastern Mulgi, refer to the local language variety as the Võro language (Koreinik & Pajusalu 2007).

An addition to Võro, the Seto and Mulgi written languages have a definable usage area and users, too. Children's books, learning material and periodicals have been published in both languages (see Pajusalu 2006). *Peko Helü*, a Seto-language publication, could be regarded as a central South Estonian cultural magazine at present. The reformers of the new Seto and also Mulgi have cooperated even more closely with local government officials than the Võro language activists, which has contributed to the increased visibility of the language in local life. As for the prospects for Mulgi, it is noteworthy that local teachers of Estonian are actively participating in language activities, for example, through the compilation of a Mulgi dictionary.

The present Võro standard differs from the Seto and Mulgi standards in that its aim is to achieve a broad dialect background; forms of both western and eastern dialects have been selected deliberately (Iva 2007). The language of *Setomaa*, a Seto newspaper, and other Seto publications is mostly based on southern Seto varieties. By contrast, the Seto-language publications of the 1920s and the 1930s were mostly in northern Seto. The Mulgi written language has not been strictly standardised; sometimes the differences between western and eastern are indicated (e.g. in MKM 2004).

In written Võro the proportion of eastern forms similar to Seto, such as the *h*-marked inessive and several historically earlier forms having *h* in non-initial syllables, compare the eastern Võro *küläh* 'in the village', *hõbõhõhe* 'in a silvery

manner' and the western Võro *külän, hõpõlõ*, is on the decrease. One has to admit that the difference between Võro and Seto has not only arisen from the aspirations of the Setos to create their own unique language identity, but also from the perhaps unconscious Võro practice of selecting forms which are as different from Seto as possible (Pajusalu et al. 1999).

The Võro language and its young reformers have played a special role in breathing new life into South Estonian, as well as Southern Finnic and even eastern related languages. They initiated the Ethno-futuristic movement which inspired the first attempts to revive the South Estonian language at the end of the 1980s, attempting to make the new Võro standard as different as possible from Standard Estonian. However, twenty years later one has to admit that development has taken place in the direction of convergence with Standard Estonian; by now this process may have gone even too far from a linguistically reasonable perspective. For example, the newspaper *Uma Leht* and several other Võro-language publications no longer denote the laryngeal stop. The latter has great significance in the Võro language structure, for example, in distinguishing between the singular and plural nominative, such as *kala* 'fish' and *kalaq* 'fishes'. The problem lies in the letter *q*, which was intended to represent the laryngeal stop; many Võro people perceived it as a foreign letter unsuited to Estonian (Iva 2007). They thought it important that Võro norms should fit in with the principles of the Estonian language.

The written Võro of recent years is characterised by the increased impact of north-western Võro dialects and the spelling has become more Estonian-like. These tendencies may have definite cultural causes. Nowadays, most Võro people are bilingual speakers of Võro and Estonian. Similarly to present-day Livonians, who think that Latvian and Livonian should reveal the highest degree of harmony, many Võro people also think that the Võro and the Estonian languages should be as similar as possible. The same tendency to seek harmony with Standard Estonian is also valid for the Mulgi people, and one can see it in the Seto language reform, too.

6. Restrictions on linguistic emancipation in multilingual societies

In Estonia the modernisation of regional varieties is not confined to South Estonia. The native written word has been created and children are taught the local dialect also on the island of Kihnu, which has its own original culture; several collections of writings have been published in the East-Estonian variety of Kodavere, etc. It seems that the traditional difference between a language and

a dialect is no longer valid; rather, the modernisation of local language practices and accordingly a problem concerning the relationship between the national language and the regional standard is confronted. Sociolinguistic studies show that among the Estonian people of Võro, Mulgi, and Saaremaa the use of the local language expresses their relatedness to the region; it is a marker indicating the values of one's home, and roots (Eichenbaum & Koreinik 2008). Although in a somewhat different way, a similar development of multiple identities and the adaptation of the linguistic competence to a new identity model are valid for Livonians and Votes as well. One can still come across some older Võro people in southern Estonia who do not know Standard Estonian, yet there are no monolingual Livonians or Votes left. Nowadays, Latvian is the national language of the Livonians, and Russian is the national language of the Votes. However, this does not lessen the value of one's language as the carrier of one's local and individual identity, and as the supporter of essential social networks. On the other hand, multiple identities impose restrictions on the ways the languages can be reformed; it is inevitable that the principles governing the predominant language in one's everyday life are observed.

In addition to the national languages, reformers of the Southern Finnic languages know and practise usually other related languages. The majority of younger people actively concerned with the Livonian language and also teachers of this language have studied in Estonia and have a good command of Estonian; they know some Finnish, too. Several South Estonian language campaigners studied in Finland, and the example of Finnish is evident in several South Estonian neologisms, for example, *keeletiieq*, compare Finnish *kielitiede* 'linguistics' (in Standard Estonian *keeleteadus*).

Like social and international mobility, which increased immensely at the beginning of the 21st century, linguistic mobility has also increased. From the perspective of the conscious development of languages, this means the possibility, will, and ability to increasingly follow the example of other languages and even networking, in the case of closely related languages. The new written languages reveal principled diversity and a higher degree of openness to change. In the case of new standard varieties it is impossible to establish the same unique and static norms as those in the traditional national languages. This is valid for all the previously discussed new written languages—the fact that their written texts reveal a high degree of variation is a sign that the norms have not become established as yet. It could well show that these written languages belong to a fundamentally different type in comparison with the so-called old standard languages. At the same time all of the previously discussed languages are taught languages that will be actively and by means of various modern methods passed on to the coming generations who will not speak these languages as native speakers anymore.

7. In conclusion: perspectives for the minor Southern Finnic languages

A language sociologist with a pessimistic attitude could sum up the present state of the Southern Finnic language group by claiming that only Estonian has made it into the new millennium. The other languages have lost their historical area and use as a first language. Contrary to such a viewpoint one could argue that it was possible to modernise all the Southern Finnic languages; nowadays, all these languages are used in the internet, and they are taught to young generations; the required standards and learning materials have been created for this purpose. Today more Southern Finnic languages are practised in modern environments than the number of those languages that were a century ago. At any rate it should be pointed out that this is a very critical period in the development of the new written languages. Whether there will be other people interested in these languages apart from linguists after a few decades depends on how the societies in which these languages are used value them and how the descendants of Livonians, Votes, and southern Estonians, who still share the experience of the living language of their grandparents, value them. It is necessary to further enliven the teaching of these languages to children and to find even more efficient and attractive methods for doing so, for example, in the form of language nests and interactive online courses for children, etc. During the next dozen years it will still be possible to carry this into effect; after that it will be much more difficult.

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