
Bilingualism, language management and linguistic creativity in Russian-Estonian sociolinguistic realities

Anastassia Zabrodskaia¹

¹Tallinn University

anastassia.zabrodskaia@tlu.ee

The migration to the Baltic states was always both popular (in the search for a better quality of life in the Soviet “West”) and encouraged by Soviet authorities. The share of the Russian-speaking population is notable in Estonia: 29%. Estonian is a “medium-sized” national language that shares key domains with English as a global language. Family is a site where languages are managed: language practices constructed by family members are further negotiated with the larger society.

This paper primarily focuses on the language policies that bilingual Russian-Estonian families follow in relation to the maintenance of Russian as a heritage language, in order to identify social variables which either favour or hinder this process. A more concrete task is to search for commonalities and specifics of each family type within broad categories of the mainstream attitudes towards Russian as a heritage language. The aim of the paper is to analyse the sociolinguistic situation of the Russian language in Estonia and to examine the factors which have defined the maintenance of Russian as a heritage language. The paper also investigates translanguaging practices of Russian-Estonian families, including their perceptions of and attitudes towards their multilingual communication. The languages are used creatively to convey or negotiate meaning and identity.

This study is based on an in-depth analysis of a variety of sources, including qualitative sociological materials (semi-structured interviews and participant observations) and quantitative statistical and demographic data on self-reported language behaviour and language ideologies, revealing the “context” of community types. This paper presents results from ethnographic fieldwork studies conducted in different regions of Estonia, and thus offers important conclusions about sociolinguistic variation in heritage language maintenance and loss. It provides evidence of how social milieu and different sociolinguistic backgrounds may affect all processes related to heritage language transmission: management, maintenance, use and proficiency.