

THE COMMODIFICATION OF IDENTITY AMONG ESTONIA'S RUSSIAN-SPEAKING YOUTH

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Language as a commodity

- A command of any language is a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986; 1991), the linguistic forms and tools have a value of their own
- Especially true in the knowledge-based society of the late capitalism – emphasis shifted from physical skills to the domain of communication
- Language itself has become a commodity – a type of goods on the marketplace – especially true for certain varieties
- *„The commodification of language = redefinition of language as a measurable skill, as opposed to a talent or an inalienable characteristic [...] and redefines the relationship between language and identity”*
(Heller 2003: 474; slightly rephrased)
- The commodification of language happens in two ways:
 - As a measurable, technical skill which can be perfected and regulated (exams, linguistic requirements, prioritising speakers of certain sociolects or varieties)
 - Highlighting and favouring certain rare varieties due to their authenticity +exoticness

Authenticity as an added value



Kõikse rõõmsamad lehmad oo meitel

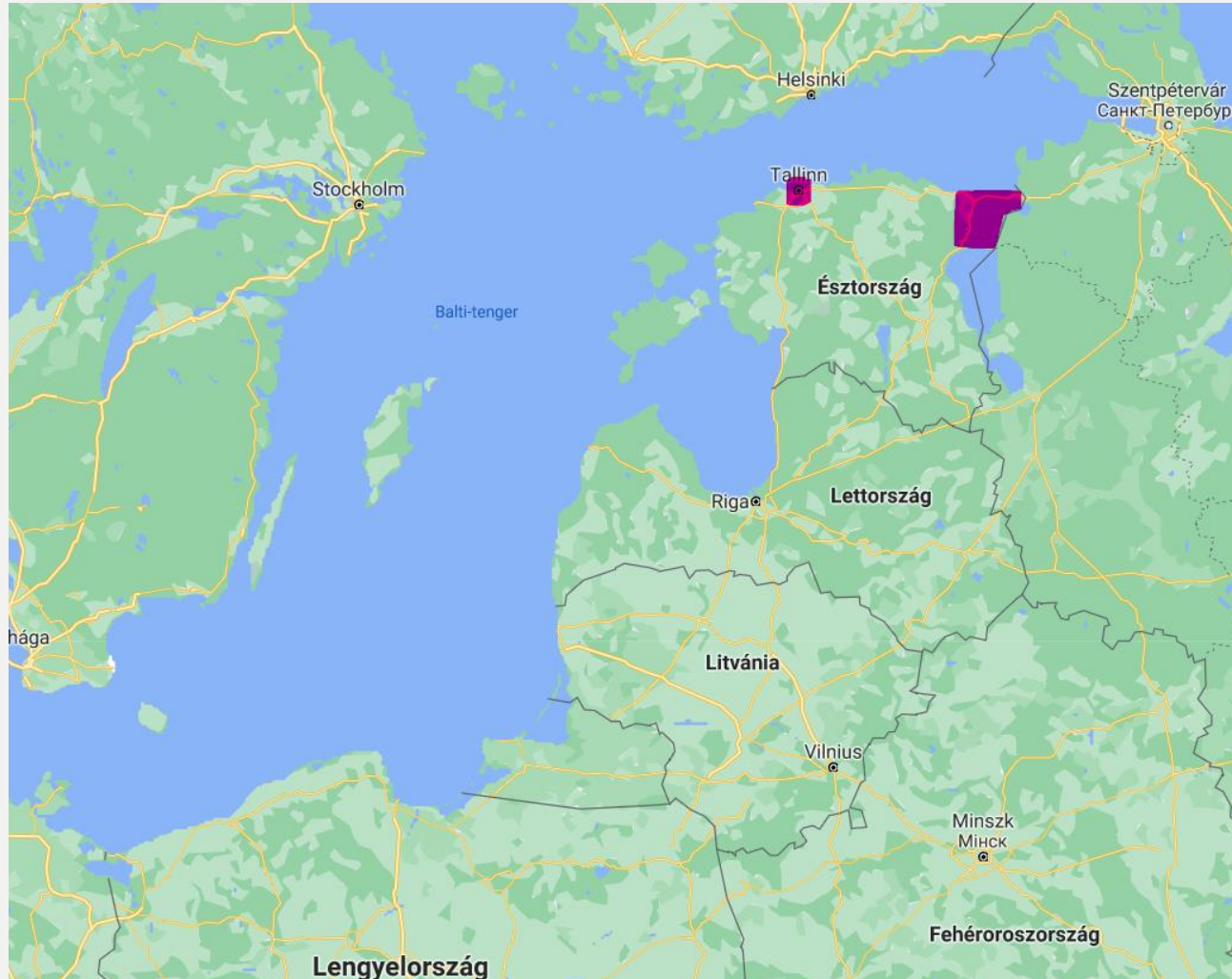
Kõige rõõmsamad lehmad on meil

The happiest cows live here with us

Commodification among minorities – an example from Hungary

- Borbála Pachné Heltai: **Geresdlak** (local multilingual practices are showcased in the media)
- Finnish-speaking population, incoming property-owners
- Local Finnish and German minorities organise an annual culinary festival – commodifying their own minority identity
- Multilingual practices found all across – attracts tourism to Geresdlak

- **Commodification among ethnolinguistic minorities:**
- **The value of their multilingual linguistic repertoire grows immensely in the globalised economy**
- Previously disadvantaged minorities now take advantage of their multilingual repertoires
- What used to be the marker of their otherness now becomes their advantage, for example on the job market



Subject of the study

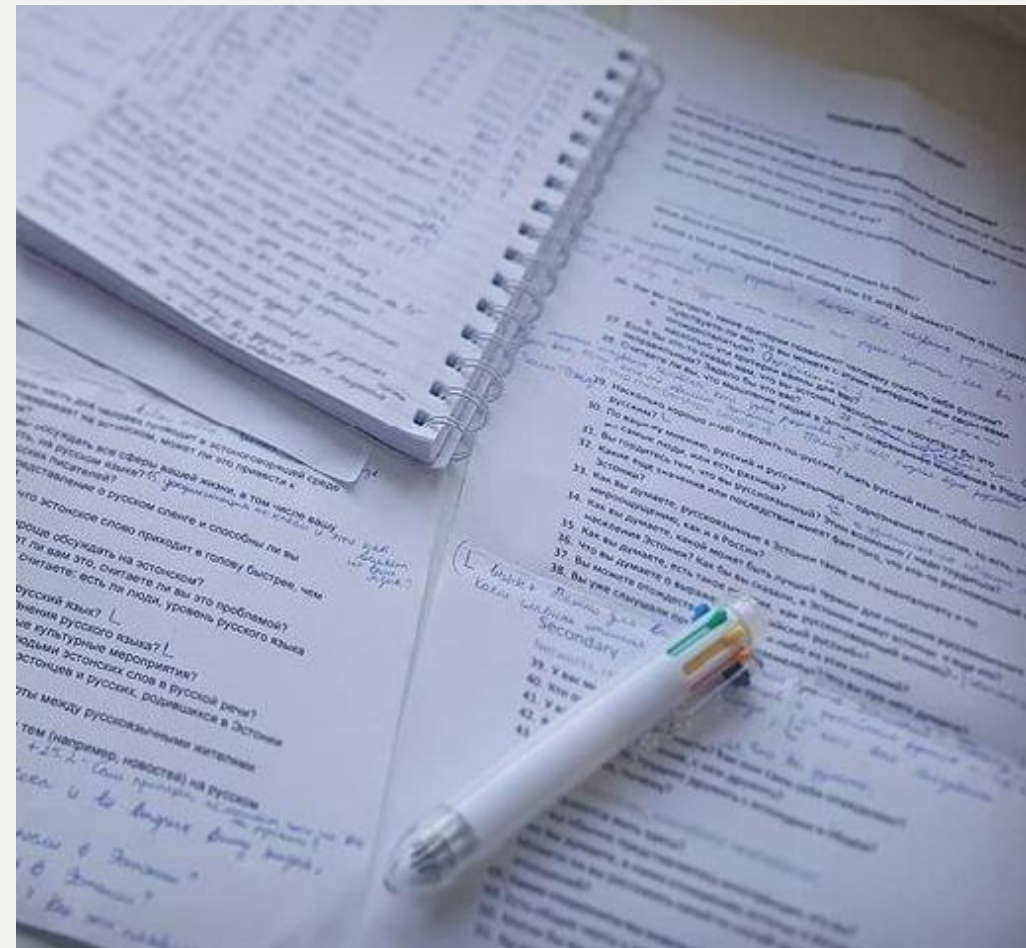
- Russian-speaking people who arrived to Estonia during the Soviet period
- Around 28% Russian-speakers, around half of the capital
- Language law: only official language is Estonian
- Primary and secondary education exists in both languages – tertiary only in Estonian (if free tuition)
- Still, monolingual speakers of Russian exist
- Educated youth is often trilingual (RU, EE, ENG)

Changes in the language and identity

- 1999(!): Youngest generation shows new identity patterns – Estonia-oriented self-definition (Vihalemm&Masso 2003: 103)
- Certain sub-groups display only weak links to their heritage which may make the survival of the language and culture uncertain (Zabrodskaja 2015: 234)
- Some educated, middle-class groups gradually shift to the usage of Estonian – it grants them better education and career options (Zabrodskaja 2015: 234)
- This may bring about a shift in identity over sufficient time
- Russian is rarely forgotten – simply its status is shifted into a language of secondary importance
- The Russian language of Estonia is a separate variety than Russia's Russian

Methodology and materials

- 2020 March–November, Tallinn, Tartu, Jõhvi
- 30 interviews, 18-35, snowball method
- ~50 pre-written, freely varied questions
- ~60-70 minutes long interviews
- digitally recorded + transcribed
- thematically coded in Nvivo
- narratives from the speakers' own perspective , interpretation



Results I – Weak Russian identity

- I don't even really understand what it is. To be Russian. But I wasn't even born in Russia, that country... To be honest, I don't know it. [...] If someone tells me that I am Russian, first of all I won't understand what he means because I'm no Russian. (18M, ongoing secondary)
- You are an Estonian citizen, and you have the right to call yourself Estonian. And the situation is that you are uncertain about it, and you ask yourself: Russian? How would I be Russian? Where am I taking that from? I don't even live there, I was there maybe three times, how can I say that I come from Russia? (20F, ongoing tertiary)
- I don't like it if they call me Russian, that is what the Estonians usually call me. Your mother tongue is Russian, you speak Russian, so you are immediately labelled as *venelane*, so they just call you Russian. I find that a bit insulting. (24F, tertiary)

Results I – The low prestige of the Russian language

- I am in no way sorry that I speak Russian and that I speak it well, we had many classes in school. But it was **never like... important to me**. In your workplace you definitely speak Estonian, you only use Russian with your **friends and relatives**. (20F, ongoing tertiary)
- I really wish that our society became unific, and it wasn't separated by nationalities or by languages, and that **everyone's common language would be Estonian**, for everyone, without regards to the fact that some people speak another mother tongue. (19M, ongoing tertiary)

Results III – Commodification of language

- When you are looking for a job, it is an enormous advantage if you speak Russian, Estonian, and English, nowadays it is like the Lord's Prayer. It is not even a question if you know it or not. Everyone thinks that you just have to know three languages. Since here in the country many use these languages so you will be employed more often. And they say that because of this we are more competitive because we left school already speaking three languages. (24F, tertiary)
- Primarily this is a great advantage since I am more competitive, I know Estonian on a high level and English. So, for me to be hired for a good job it will always be a plus that I speak Russian. (19M, ongoing tertiary)
- Yes, my life is different because of Russian. I think it is easier for me to find a job because I can speak both Russian and Estonian without a problem, and I talk to people the way they prefer. (20M, ongoing secondary)

- It is important to read both Russian and Estonian books, because it would be dumb to lose such an advantage, in my opinion. And the same happens if a kid in a Russian family attends an Estonian school, I think it is important to maintain the Russian language and culture, simply because this is another good opportunity, and I think the same applies to every other language and their opportunities, not only Russian and Estonian.
(24F, tertiary)

- Most of the time you do say that you are a Russian speaker since it is an advantage after all, since it happens quite often that the other person also speaks Russian, so you find a common ground, and that is a great advantage for you. It happens often that Russian gives you some sort of an advantage. It is also an advantage with foreigners that also come from a post-Soviet country, so they speak Russian, for someone it might be a second language or the state language, or they just learned it from their parents. It is a very interesting phenomenon if this is exactly what enables you to have an interesting conversation with someone. (30F, tertiary)

Conclusions

- Even those Russian speakers see the language as a valuable commodity who are in no way emotionally attached to it – employability
- Businesses who don't employ people that can talk to the Russian monolingual clients will lose business
- The knowledge of the minority group is important for the market
- They need to use more varieties of Russian (just like in Heller 2003): monolingual Russian with tourists from Russia and other countries; and the local variety – one of the most heavily influenced domains of the Russian Estonian variety is the language of purchases, business, goods, grocery products (see Verschik 2008 on „market discourse”)
- The demand for and the re-assigned value of the Russian language by the employers and businesses can possibly even promote the maintenance of the Russian language and identity (just like in Heller 2003: 483 about the French language and identity in Canada)
- We can conclude that for many speakers, the first language is not a factor in the identity construction per se, but they are aware of its value as a commodity, which then promotes the maintenance of the language

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Thank you for your attention! 😊