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Mechanisms behind standardization of written Estonian 1880–1920

The study of language standardization in historical contexts has a need to tackle multiple explanatory factors (Nevalainen 2015). For example, when contrasting the role of prescription to natural diffusion of forms, it is possible that also lifetime changes in style, register, linguistic ideology or social networks determine the linguistic variants that the author aims to follow (e.g. Deumert & Vandenbussche 2003, Rutten et al. 2014, Säily et al. 2017).

In this talk, I will present the results of a project studying the mechanisms behind spelling standardization around 1880–1920 for written Estonian. During this time, large changes took place in the language community, leading to a growth in the size of the written language community (Raag 2008), new mobility between dialect areas and intense urbanization (Kask 1984), transformations in the style and register ecology (Hennoste 1999), and a gradual growth of a standard language culture (Tinitis 2015). The project combines corpora gathered from digitized text collections and metadata with assembled demographic, biographical, and language prescription data to understand the mechanisms guiding the non-centralized spelling standardization that we observe at the period.

With the combined datasets, I explore the role native dialect and spoken dialect contacts played in standardization, the impact of the prescriptive works written at the time, the ways changes among the population of writers influenced the forms used based on 8 selected linguistic variables. The models built on this data show that language prescription played an important role in determining the variants of the community even with little institutional support, that spoken language contacts proved negligible despite heavy urbanization, and that the dialect backgrounds of new writers entering the community did partially shape the forms used within the community. For a few more prolific writers and publishing houses, intra-individual changes and stability reveal both followers and setters of observed trends in the community.

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