

Challenges of Standardizing a small Baltic Finnic Language (until the end of the 18th century): The case of Estonian

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Estonian is a Baltic Finnic language, which, due to the small size of its speaker base, has developed in socio-linguistically complex conditions. Until the middle of the 19th century, the local elite consisted of representatives of Germanic peoples (Danes, Germans, and later Swedes) who had occupied the region since the 13th century. Written Estonian began to be used primarily by German-speaking clergy, following the demands of the Lutheran Reformation, starting in the 1520s. The first significant surviving texts in Estonian date from the first half of the 17th century. From the pre-Reformation period, isolated Estonian words and phrases have been preserved in Latin or Low German documents. However, based on individual terms (such as *ristima* 'baptize') and church language formulas (e.g., the wording of the 2nd commandment), it can be inferred that the oral standardized Estonian used by the clergy began to develop before the Reformation.

The written Estonian used in the first half of the 17th century clearly shows features of a colonial (or missionary) language. It was used in German-Estonian bilingual books (catechisms, church handbooks) that served as a tool for German-speaking clergy who did not know the local language. From the end of the 17th century, books started to target Estonian-speaking peasants as their audience. Written language began to shift closer to the spoken language.

A decisive milestone in solidifying the status of the Estonian language was the Bible translation (1739). With the Bible translation, a language standard based on the dialects of Northern Estonia was established, which remained in place for a century. In the publications for the inhabitants of Southern Estonia, a language variant based on the local dialects was used, a foundation for which had already been laid earlier with the translation of the New Testament (1686).

In the 18th century, the literacy rate among Estonians was so low that the Bible translation remained difficult to understand for most Estonians. A few Estonians who managed to obtain a university education assimilated into the German elite. The divide between the written language created by the German intelligentsia and the language used by Estonian speakers was somewhat reduced by the movement of the Moravian Brethren. In the 18th century, Estonian began to be used more frequently in written form outside of religious texts. The current research phase raises the question of how well the language preserved in 18th-century manuscripts aligns with the two church language standards or how much it reflects variations influenced by contemporary dialectal features.

The existence of a Bible translation and the expanding written use of Estonian in the 18th century raised the prestige of the language and laid the foundation for the Estonian national awakening in the mid-19th century.