

## The language shift of Võro and Seto South Estonian in the 20<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>1</sup>

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In traditional Estonian dialectology, South Estonian has been considered one of the two main dialect groups of Estonian (Kask 1984, Pajusalu *et al.* 2018). This hierarchy has been endorsed since the establishment of the Mother Tongue Society in 1920, which marks the beginning of a systematised research on dialects (Pajusalu *et al.* 2018: 38), and the growing need for nationalistic language planning (Lindström *et al.* 2023). However, the linguistic community working on the Finnic languages and specifically on South Estonian, has in the recent decades been treating South Estonian as a language separate from (North) Estonian (Sammallahti 1977, Viitso 1985, Kallio 2014, Prillop *et al.* 2020, etc.).

South Estonian is a cover term for several varieties of which Võro, Seto, Mulgi, and to a lesser extent, Tartu are still spoken today. Despite the numerous attempts of the Võro and Seto communities to change the situation, the Estonian language policy still follows the traditional dialectological hierarchy. This means that the varieties of South Estonian have similar rights to the varieties of North Estonian – they are considered regional varieties (*eesti keele piirkondlik erikuj*) that may be used parallel to the literary standard (Language Act), but this does not offer sufficient legal rights or protection for the preservation of South Estonian. This has been felt as belittling for the members of the language communities and has led both Setos and Võros to declare their languages indigenous to Estonia<sup>2</sup>.

In this presentation we introduce the main results of the survey conducted in 2022 with 660 participants of Võro or Seto origin to illustrate the sociolinguistic situation of the Võro/Seto speakers for the past 60 years. The survey revealed that the language shift from Võro/Seto to Estonian has been actively going on since the 1960ies and one of the recurring issues was the Soviet-era preference and enforcement of Estonian, up to the point where students were forbidden to use Võro/Seto in schools and parents were told that South Estonian will adhere to their children's progress in school<sup>3</sup>. Many parents thus chose to speak Estonian with their children and Võro/Seto was reduced to a “granny-language” heard and acquired from grandparents. Nowadays,

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<sup>2</sup> In 2002 for Setos and 2023 for Võros.

<sup>3</sup> This notion applies to the wider Estonian area and was a general myth of the Soviet era (see Saar 2022; Lindström *et al.* 2023: 23)

few families speak Võro or Seto at home with young children, and Võro and Seto are taught at schools only as a facultative subject (Lindström *et al.* 2024).

Our aim is to illustrate how the approach of considering South Estonian a dialect of Estonian and the resulting language policy have contributed to the decline of prestige and position of South Estonian and are deterring South Estonian from public and domestic use. The efforts of language activists in the last three decades have given Võro and Seto more visibility and higher prestige (Lindström *et al.* 2024: 470), but with no adequate legal status and the lack of governmental support, this has not stopped the ongoing language shift and the language situation has seen no noticeable improvement

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