

Pragmatic change in the bilingual Estonian community in Sweden

Swedish Estonian is a language variety that developed in an immigrant setting where communication with the original language community was effectively hindered by the "iron curtain". On the whole, World War II refugees from Estonia adapted very well to the Swedish society with high levels of employment soon after the war and good knowledge of the Swedish language. At the same time, the first refugee generation retained the hope of returning to Estonia and valued the language. The second generation displays much less ethnic sentiment and lower frequencies of Estonian use already in the 1980s. The focus of the current study is on the second generation of refugees. Their mundane interaction has been video-recorded in different parts of the country (Uppsala, Göteborg, Lund) during various club meetings and celebrations, resulting in 36 hours of face-to-face data. This enables analysis of verbal as well as embodied behavior of this group.

In every language community there are socio-cultural rules of behavior which regulate language use and may also vary with the choice of language (Oksaar 1992). At the same time, these rules of behavior may not be strictly kept apart by the interactants in multilingual communities. Pragmatic interference is often not as salient for the speakers as loanwords or mistakes in grammar, which can be fought more consciously. Very few pragmatic breaches receive overt comments and corrections in the recordings, witnessing of their subtle nature. With borrowed behavioral patterns speakers may still correctly use the words and grammar of their mother tongue.

Prior comparative studies on Estonian and Swedish communicative styles have been based on family dinnertime conversations. They have on the one hand suggested that Swedish Estonians behave more like Swedes than Estonians in Estonia (De Geer et al. 2002) and on the other shown the similarity of Estonian behavior regardless of the country of residence (Tulviste et al. 2002). The current study looks systematically at the Swedish interference on the pragmatics of present-day Swedish Estonian, including greetings and closure routines, features of politeness, the formatting of speech acts and speaker turns. Qualitative analysis reveals change in all areas: formats for routine social actions, such as leave-taking and thanking, may be direct translations from Swedish and include culture-specific transactions; frequent social actions such as requests and assessments are formulated according to the Swedish models, using imperfect and polar questions, respectively; subsequent turns display 'do' verb-replacements according to the Germanic pattern, and very strong interference in particle formats and placement.

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