

EDITED BY  
SANITA LAZDIŅA AND HEIKO F. MARTEN

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# MULTILINGUALISM IN THE BALTIC STATES

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SOCIETAL DISCOURSES  
AND CONTACT PHENOMENA



# Multilingualism in the Baltic States

Sanita Lazdiņa · Heiko F. Marten  
Editors

# Multilingualism in the Baltic States

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# Multilingualism, Language Contact and Majority–Minority Relations in Contemporary Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania

Sanita Lazdiņa and Heiko F. Marten

## 1 Background to the Volume: Multilingualism in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia Throughout Time

When we were asked a few years ago whether we wished to edit a book on multilingualism in the Baltic states, it did not cross our minds that the book would be published in 2018—a year which is of particularly symbolic meaning for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This year, the three countries are celebrating the 100th anniversaries of their formation:

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Lithuania and Estonia in February 2018, Latvia in November 2018. It gives us additional pleasure to provide an international audience with background information about these countries and to explain the context of the numerous political, cultural and other events which take place all year round not only in Riga, Vilnius and Tallinn and in the different historical, geographic and cultural regions of the Baltic states, but also in Brussels, Berlin, Stockholm and other places in Europe and the world. In this way the Baltic states are enjoying an unusual level of attention this year—just as Finland did in 2017 when it celebrated its 100th anniversary and just as all the other countries whose national movements—more or less successfully—seized the historical momentum of the disruption of the European continent at the end of World War I to establish their own nation states.

In discourses on nationhood and 100-year celebrations, language plays an integral part—both relating to the national languages as important ideological foundations of statehood and to continuing debates on the roles of ethnic and/or linguistic minorities and to other languages in the Baltic states within contemporary globalized language hierarchies. In this context it is important to emphasize that academic writings have shifted their focus from mostly researching and evaluating official language policies to a much broader range of topics. The design of this book has therefore been based on the perception that there is a need for an up-to-date overview of the variety of studies and discourses on multilingualism, minorities, language ideologies and practices in the Baltic states.

Throughout history the land areas constituting contemporary Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia have long traditions of being multilingual. The languages that have played important roles for centuries are, first of all, the so-called ‘titular languages’ (i.e., Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian as the national languages of the three countries). The two standardized national languages of Latvian and Lithuanian belong to the Baltic branch of Indo-European languages, together with a number of other contemporary regional, social and functional varieties. The most prominent is Latgalian, a standardized regional language under the umbrella of Latvian ethnicity; the question as to whether it should be called a language, a dialect or something else continues to be ideologically loaded. Estonian as the third national language is a Finno-Ugric



language; similarly to the situation of Latvian and Latgalian, Estonian is grouped alongside Võro as a related standardized variety as are other regional varieties in South Estonia.

The three titular languages are the only official, or—as they are officially labelled and usually referred to—state languages of the Baltic states today. Historically, however, other languages enjoyed higher status. A dominant language in the area of contemporary Lithuania was Polish; Lithuania and Poland share the history of the so-called early modern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (which, *nota bene*, led to Lithuania celebrating 100 years of restored statehood in contrast to Latvia and Estonia which prior to 1918 did not exist as states in the modern sense; this distinction is not to be confused with the re-establishment of independence of the Baltic states in 1991 which is based on the assumption that the three states throughout the occupations of the twentieth century *de jure* never ceased to exist). Latvia and Estonia as well as Lithuania Minor were for many centuries exposed to (first Low and later mostly High) German as the language of the economic and political elites and as the main language of the town populations. German has left heavy linguistic traces in contemporary Estonian and Latvian, and its historical role can be detected everywhere in historical buildings and names. Languages which served as *linguae francae* for the upper strata of society also included French and Russian; Russian was an important language of administration during Tsarist times as well as a language of the religious minority of the Old Believers, even though the number of Russian speakers in total remained relatively low. Other languages of some significance in different areas of the contemporary Baltic states throughout times include Belarusian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Swedish and Finnish.

The past 100 years of independence of the Baltic states resulted in major changes to languages, both regarding the linguistic composition of the population and the status of important languages. After 1918 the titular languages gained power and prestige, but linguistic minorities first enjoyed widespread cultural liberties. This changed to differing degrees when Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia drifted into authoritarianism. The composition of the population changed most dramatically during the three occupations of the Baltic states by the Soviet Union

(1940–1941), Nazi Germany (1941–1944) and again the Soviet Union (since 1944) which followed the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. Lithuania gained the highly Polish-speaking territory around Vilnius; ethnic Germans were overwhelmingly forced to move away from their long-term areas of residence in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania Minor; Swedes who had settled on the islands of Estonia moved to Sweden. The linguistic varieties and traditions of Jewish life were largely razed to the ground by the Shoah.

The changes that had the most enduring influence on the current language situation of the Baltic states, however, occurred as a consequence of inner Soviet migration. Russians, like many persons of other ethnicities, moved to the Baltic states mostly in search of better working conditions and settled there—much as they would have in any other part of the Soviet Union—bringing with them Russian as the major language of the country and the main means of communication between different ethnic groups (see Saarikivi and Toivanen 2015 or Zamyatin 2015 for background information on language policies in the Soviet Union). The result was what has often been labelled ‘asymmetric bilingualism’ in which there were high levels of bilingualism among ethnic Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians. When Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia regained their independence in 1991 the new states saw themselves confronted with high numbers of (often monolingual) speakers of Russian—the proportion of ethnic Latvians, the most extreme case, had drastically declined from 77% in 1935 to 52% in 1989 (Centrālās statistikas pārvaldes datubāzes). Language policies have aimed since then at re-establishing the titular languages as the main languages of Baltic societies and as ‘languages of interethnic communication’—amounting to a reversal of language shift and a normalization of language use with the explicit aim that individuals should be able to lead their entire lives using the national languages. Heavy ideological debates around these issues followed and continue until the present day, in which languages usually more or less explicitly play an important role. Among the most famous societal tensions were the ‘Bronze Soldier Riots’ in Tallinn in 2007 (cf. Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008) and the referendum on Russian as a second state language in Latvia in 2012 (Marten and Lazdiņa 2016; Hanovs 2016; Druviete and Ozolins 2016). Educational policies

regarding languages and general policies of integration continue to be 'hot potatoes' in society, even though knowledge of the titular languages among minorities has steadily increased. A recent example is the 2018 decision by the Saeima, the Latvian parliament, to move further away from the Soviet tradition of the dual-school system comprising Latvian and minority schools by increasing the percentage of schooling in Latvian in minority schools. The future aim is to integrate pupils from all language backgrounds in the same schools, in order to avoid segregation of the population on ethnic or linguistic grounds in future generations and to ensure sufficient knowledge of Latvian among children who speak other languages at home. This will involve mother tongue education as well as classes on literature and culture, and thereby respect the right of acquiring minority languages. Remarkably, societal protests by Russian L1-speakers about the Latvian educational reform have—in contrast to, for instance, the reform of 2004—been limited and largely restricted to small groups of extremists. This indicates that acceptance of Latvian as the main language of society and education has grown but is subject to other languages enjoying support in other ways. This corresponds to findings by Dilāns and Zepa (2015) who show that, despite previous critiques by Russian-speaking communities, educational reforms have succeeded to increase Latvian skills among Russian L1-users considerably in recent years.

Today, almost 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and almost 15 years after accession of the Baltic states to the European Union (which forced the Baltic states to rediscuss some of its language policies, cf. Hogan-Brun 2008), multilingualism and minorities therefore continue to be important topics in societal debates in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The many historical layers that shape language practices, ideologies and policies, are a common denominator characterizing the three countries. In spite of historical and contemporary differences and separate developments, there are still many fundamentally similar issues with regard to languages in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. As the major languages of society, the national languages are today grouped with English, a relative newcomer to the region, and Russian. Both English and Russian function as *linguae francae*—English in globalized communication with the world and

by increasing communities of ex-pats and other recent migrants, at least in the major cities, and as a largely 'neutral' language; Russian both in communication with other countries of the former Soviet Union and as the L1 of the most sizeable linguistic and/or ethnic minorities. Post-Soviet societal transformation, ideologies, language practices and policies in this sense justify in many respects the continuing view of the Baltic states as a single unit, and for political and academic actors in the Baltic states there is also the advantage of being more visible in global circles when Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia are not discussed separately.

In light of these historical and current trajectories of languages, multilingualism and groups of speakers, the idea underlying this book is for it to serve as a coherent collection of recent case studies presenting up-to-date work on some of the most prevalent topics of linguistic diversity, societal discourses and interaction between majorities and minorities in the Baltic states. The case studies unite some of the most recent approaches to research in the field and thereby contribute to a methodological understanding of how to conduct research. Approaches, methods and research paradigms include folk linguistics, discourse analysis, labelling theory, narrative analyses and assessment tools, transnationalism applied to analysing media practices, code alternation, research on language beliefs and attitudes, linguistic landscapes, ethnographic observations, language-learning motivation, languages in education and language acquisition. The chapters cover the titular languages, Russian, English, German, Polish and the regional languages of Latgalian and Võro. At the same time, the book also serves as a general introduction to issues of language and society in the Baltic states, not only from the perspectives of some of the most renowned scholars in linguistics and related disciplines in the Baltics, but also including the work of some promising scholars of the next generation. The readers of this book will likely be a mixture of academics and students interested in multilingualism, language discourses, language policy and related fields in Northern and Eastern Europe as well as in contrastive sociolinguistic analyses. Moreover, scholars and students from such fields as history, political science, sociology or anthropology focused on the Baltic states, Northern Europe and the post-Soviet world in addition to practitioners should find the book a useful reference for the provision

of background information. We believe that this diversity of issues of multilingualism in the Baltic states deserves to be on the agenda of an international audience and hope that this book contributes to keeping the Baltic states in the centre of attention in linguistic circles and to encouraging a balanced academic discussion of language issues in the Baltic states.

## 2 Multilingualism in the Baltic States: Research Paradigms and Contexts

Case studies on different aspects of individual languages and communities in the Baltic states have regularly been published in recent decades. Yet, with a few noticeable exceptions, studies about multilingualism in the Baltic states have mostly appeared as individual research papers. Others are parts of collections published for local audiences within Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (i.e., they are barely accessible to a readership without knowledge of the national languages in the Baltics). Journals which publish in English such as the *Journal of Baltic Studies* cover a much broader range of topics and only occasionally focus on issues of multilingualism, sociolinguistics or other language issues (most famously, the comprehensive 2005 Baltic Sociolinguistic Review special issue with detailed historical accounts of each country as well as comments on the contemporary situation; Hogan-Brun 2007a; Verschik 2007; Metuzāle-Kangere and Ozolins 2007; Hogan-Brun et al. 2007). In some respects our book can therefore be described as a continuity of this special issue as well as of the 10-year-old book *Language Politics and Practices in the Baltic States* (Hogan-Brun et al. 2008). Our book should be regarded as an addition to existing high-value titles, but broadens the scope, shifts the focus, provides an overview of current topics and, most significantly, allows for a more current perspective.

The book highlights the important research paradigms of the past two decades which not only have inspired it, but which the book also wishes to complement with additional perspectives. The most important context of international publications has been to look at language-related issues in the Baltic states in light of changes in the linguistic

composition of society after more than 40 years of de facto incorporation in the Soviet Union. The linguistic aspects of societal changes have been investigated from the perspective of post-Soviet or former Eastern Bloc countries and their societal transformation after 1990—for example, the issue dedicated to *Multilingualism in Post-Soviet Countries* by the *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* (see Pavlenko 2008 for an introduction to the issue; see also Pavlenko 2013) or more recently the 2015 Special Issue of *Sociolinguistic Studies* on Post-Soviet Identities (Zabrodskaia and Ehala 2015) and the book entitled *Sociolinguistic Transition in Former Eastern Bloc Countries: Two Decades After the Regime Change* (Sloboda et al. 2016). In contrast, there are books in which sociolinguistic issues in the Baltic states have been researched from the perspective of the current language situation in Europe—for example, *Negotiating Linguistic Identity: Language and Belonging in Europe* (Vihman and Praakli 2013). Addressing language, identity and language policies all over Europe, some of the chapters in that book look at the Baltic states in particular—for example, on language contacts in Estonia (Verschik 2013) or on Russian speakers in all three Baltic countries (Ehala 2013). General overviews on languages in the Baltic states from specific historical points of view are also occasionally provided by individual articles such as Kreslins (2003) or Tarvas (2015) who reconstructs multilingualism among the intellectual elite in Tallinn in the early modern period.

Language policies and underlying ideologies continue to be among the most dominant topics in publications on languages in the Baltic states (e.g., Siiner 2006; Hogan-Brun et al. 2008; Vihalemm and Hogan-Brun 2013a), and they dominate many of the language-related debates in Baltic societies today. Ozolins writes in chapter “[Language Policy, External Political Pressure and Internal Linguistic Change: The Particularity of the Baltic Case](#)” of two largely contradictory discourses which, in spite of all attempts to maintain academic neutrality, often overshadow publications. On the one hand, many scholars from the Baltic states (e.g., Druvieta 1997; Veisbergs 2013) argue that nation-building through a single state language is legitimate; language in this understanding serves as a tool of societal integration of different linguistic groups as in other nation states such as Germany or France