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Shifts and stability in schoolscape: Diachronic considerations of southeastern Estonian schools

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ABSTRACT

How do we research the dynamic aspects of the material language environment of schools? In this article, I develop further diachronic analysis as a method to advance qualitative approaches to understand and compare schoolscape across eras. I incorporate findings from a diachronic study of photos and teacher interviews in southeastern Estonian schools in 2001–2003 and 2013–2014 to appreciate and analyze dynamic forces changing schoolscape. I found several forces leading to a marked increase in the use of the regional language in schools: the introduction of mass-produced materials in the language, the need to distinguish schools within choice systems, and the expansion of language instruction to, and related pedagogical opportunities in, the pre-primary level. Enduring norms about the primary role of the official language in schools, on the other hand, worked to maintain schoolscape in Estonian. These collective forces point to the value in investigating schoolscape across time to capture and further understand economic and cultural systems at work.

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1. Introduction

This article focuses on the methodological challenge facing researchers who seek to understand the dynamics—and dynamism—of schoolscape. Schoolscape signifies both a place—those school-based environments where place meets text, whether written (graphic) or oral—and a set of processes, because the text and place, working together, constitute, reproduce, and transform language ideologies (Brown, 2005, 2012). Schoolscape are continually changing in their scope (e.g., within a classroom, school or nationally) and tempo (e.g., accelerated by revolution or government changes). As Shohamy (2015) notes, the Linguistic Landscape (LL) in public space is “vital, energetic, constantly evolving” (p. 168). These shifts may be plainly evident or almost imperceptible, but the environments are transforming. Diachronic analysis enables researchers both to perceive the changes in the deployment of languages in school environments and to understand what animates these shifts.

The dynamism of material school environments poses both methodological and conceptual challenges in time and space. Anthropologist Tobin (2014) suggests that anthropologists must “think simultaneously about space and time, in a sort of ethnographic version of physics’ unified field theory” (p. 6). Time: researchers must identify, consider, and understand not just the present, but also the present in the context of the past and possible trajectories into the future. If for the moment we put aside future

paths and concentrate on understanding the past and present, a diachronic challenge awaits. For LL researchers who engage with “an aggregate of signs at a single point in time” (Pavlenko & Mullen, 2015, p. 114), an engagement with the past helps to address the “impossibility” of interpreting “the functions of individual signs and the reasons behind the choices. . . from a synchronic perspective” (p. 129). Backhaus (2005) proposes two approaches for engaging in diachronic LL research: (1) a successive strategy, in which successive surveys are carried out at different points in time and findings are compared (p. 105); or (2) a single-point-in-time strategy, where the investigation focuses on the “coexistence of older and newer versions of a certain sign” (p. 106). The latter strategy, similar to “apparent-time studies” in linguistics, involves “looking at synchrony and attempting to perceive the seeds of diachrony in it” (McMahon, as cited in Backhaus, 2005, p. 106). By focusing on this “layering”, which “lays bare different linguistic states in the recent history,” researchers engage in a form of “modern urban archaeology” (Backhaus, 2005, p. 107). The ethnographic research discussed in this article employs a qualitative, successive strategy in which the layers and archeology are uncovered in tandem between the researcher and the participants.

The space of public schools provides an intriguing venue to understand the material transformation of language use and its motivations. Public schools are highly regulated (Schmidt, 2013), non-neutral sites with competing demands on space and time. As institutions charged with carrying out large- and

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small-scale, state-making projects of nationalism and internationalism (Thiem, 2009), efforts to include the regional and the local typically involve negotiating for space and enlivening imaginations about the varied purposes of schooling. Attempts to alter school space inevitably encounter, what educational historians Tyack and Cuban (1995) call, “the grammar of schooling”: “. . . [the] unexamined institutional habits and widespread cultural beliefs about what constitutes a ‘real school’” (p. 88). Among these sometimes “unexamined institutional habits” are the material privileging and heightened visibility of certain languages, particularly dominant ones, over others. These habits result in both the intentional—through bans, limitations, etc.—and the unrecognized methods of making languages “invisible” in schools. Despite this invisibility, languages, as Blackwood (2015, p. 39) contends, might be vital both within the school and the community, a dynamic for researchers to explore through careful methods.

The grammar of schooling can cultivate schoolscape stability by allowing for the persistence of a “monolingual habitus” in schools. This environment, cultivated by educational professionals and state officials, can operate despite “hidden” linguistic vitality in the school. Gogolin (2002) describes the monolingual habitus as “the beliefs, basic concepts, common-sense patterns as elements of the practical professional knowledge, or the practical professional behaviour of teachers” (p. 132). These “common-sense patterns” and “unquestioned dispositions toward languages” (Benson, 2014, p. 12) within this monolingual habitus shape teachers’ and administrators’ policy appropriation and practice in deliberate, but sometimes unrecognized, ways. Understanding the ways teachers and directors work as policy actors within the historic and contemporary logic of schools is part of the “systems thinking” (Fullan, 2005, pp. 81–98) that researchers need to understand when investigating change in the schoolscape.

Before turning to the details of this diachronic study, a note on the terminology I use in this article. I draw on Benson and Kosonen’s (2012) concepts of dominant language (DL) to refer to official/national languages that have privileged legal status within education systems, and non-dominant language (NDL) to those languages not privileged in domains like schools. In diachronic studies, these terms are useful for acknowledging and capturing shifts in the power and prestige of languages. For example, when Estonia was part of the Soviet Union (1940–1991), both Estonian and Võro were NDLs with Russian as a DL. Since Estonia’s independence in 1991, however, Estonian is a DL within the state, and Russian joins Võro as a NDL. The second set of terms I incorporate are (1) $L1/2_{env}$ to capture the exposure to a language primarily through the environment outside of school; and (2) $L2_{sch}$ to convey the primary learning of the language in school (Benson, 2014). These terms clarify, in short-hand, both the historic change in Võro language acquisition for the majority of the current teachers and administrators and their students, and the shifts in the grammar of schooling as Võro $L1_{env}$ teachers work as language-policy actors. Teachers learned Võro as their primary language at home ($L1_{env}$), but not in school given its invisibility; their students, however, perhaps have been exposed to the language in their family ($L2_{env}$), but in all likelihood are most thoroughly and perhaps initially introduced to it in school ($L2_{sch}$).

I open with an overview of the context of the language policy and schools in southeastern Estonia then turn to a discussion of diachronic qualitative methods used in this project. Next I share the primary findings of the diachronic study with attention to evidence of shifts in the schools of southeastern Estonia. I address several questions which arose in this research including: What were the engines of schoolscape transformation? And, what accounted for the unevenness in the shifts within the schools in my study? I conclude with the contributions of this research to our broader understandings of change and directions for further diachronic research. This article aims to contribute to the growing body of

research focusing on the linguistic landscapes of schools (Dressler, 2015; Gorter & Cenoz, 2015; Laihonon & Tódor, 2015; Poveda, 2012; Serra, 2004; Szabó, 2015), LL in rural areas (Moriarty, 2015), synchrony (and diachrony) in LL research (Blommaert, 2013), and the use of ethnographic methods in LL and language policy (Blommaert & Maly, 2014; Johnson, 2013; McCarty, 2011; Shohamy, 2015).

2. Context

In Anyon’s reflections on school reform, she invokes the metaphor of a “screen door” (cited in Berliner, 2006, p. 988); she argues that community values, priorities, culture, and wealth flow into schools as if through a screen door. Isolated education reform concentrating on schools without parallel attention to change in the community, therefore, is akin, claims Anyon, to “cleaning one side of the screen door.” Applying and extending this “screen-door” metaphor for the relationship between languages and schooling, as well as shifts in language policy (and vitality), helps to frame the school and policy context of this research. The region of “Historic Võrumaa,” a socio-historical designation for the southeastern pocket of Estonia bordering Russian and Latvia, has undergone a shift from Võro, a related, but distinct language from Estonian (i.e., it originates from a different Finnic language—South Estonian), to standard Estonian over the twentieth and early twenty-first century. The language, spoken by approximately 75,000 (according to the 2011 census) ethnic Estonians,¹ is “in a diglossic situation, where [it] has been used orally in informal settings and standard Estonian as the literary standard in formal settings. . .” (Koreinik, 2011b, p. 6). As a result of this shift, the children who learn the language today in school, largely learn it as a “familiar foreign” language ($L2/3_{sch}$) that, perhaps, is spoken by their grandparents ($L1_{env}$); this is somewhat akin to heritage-language learning situations in the United States and elsewhere. At least one language expert has reported that that Võro has moved on Fishman’s GIDS from Stage 6—“some intergenerational use”—to Stage 7 “only adults beyond child-bearing age speak the language (Ehala, 2006). To be sure, the shift has been so deep that in the early twentieth century ideological struggles roiled over whether Võro was a “legitimate” language (Koreinik, 2011a, p. 252).

Policies to develop and protect standard Estonian (Siiner, 2006), especially during the first period of independence (1918–1940) when it was the sole official language of Estonia, and during the Soviet period (1940–1991) when Russian played in increasingly dominant role, cultivated a schoolscape in southeastern Estonian schools where the Võro language was largely absent. While some evidence exists (in the form of Johann Hurt’s 1885 Võro-language primer (*Wastne Võro keeli ABD raamat*) that teachers used the regional-language for instruction in the 19th century, standard Estonian has had the preeminent legal position as the primary medium of instruction and dominant language of schooling in Estonia. Although a rich body of both historic and contemporary poetry and prose exists in the Võro language that would periodically make its way into Estonian literature and home-study (kodulugu) classes, the language and the regional presence were largely marginalized in schools even into the twenty-first century (Brown, 2012).

The reindependence of Estonia in 1991 provided an opportunity for the Estonian government, encouraged by an already dedicated group of Võro-language supporters, to introduce policies to

¹ This positive affirmation on the 2011 census of Võro ability captures a range of abilities. As Jääts (2015) notes, “These numbers [the 74,500] include very different levels of language proficiency, starting with real fluency, and ending with unproven declarations. . .” (pp. 257 & 258) For more on the role of the census see Brown and Koreinik (forthcoming).

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