

Community with a non-trivial distribution of languages: Setos of the Pechory region^{*}

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Seto people are a small ethnic group, speaking a Baltic-Finic idiom close related to Estonian. They are indigenous population of Pskov area in Russia and south-east of Estonia. This territory is called Setomaa, (lit. Seto land).

Unlike Estonians, Seto people are orthodox Christians since 15-th century. The language of the church has been Russian, which most of them did not know, therefore, along with Christianity they have remained pagan customs.

Before 1920 Estonia was a part of Russian Empire, so Setomaa also was a part of the Russian Empire. In 1920 Estonia got independence and Setomaa became a part of Estonia. In 1944 the demarcation of the administrative border between the Estonian SSR and the RSFSR took place and Pechory district has been joint Pskov region. From this moment one part of Seto people live Estonia and another one live Russia. Till 1991 it did not create problems, but since 1991 Seto people are separated with the state border.

The Estonian Constitution of 1920 has guaranteed the right to receive education on the mother tongue for minority peoples. But it was not relevant to Setos. First of all, Seto idiom was unwritten, that is why the education on Seto was impossible. In addition Seto people were considered as Estonians, for this reason they were taught on the standard Estonian that is based on the north Estonian dialects which are quite different from Seto. Seto children have badly understood standard Estonian [Chalvin 2011: 128-129].

In 1921 there was an idea to create the Seto writing, but it did not realize. However, in 1928 the gospel in Seto has been published, and later it was reprinted, although the Seto idiom was still not taught and was not officially written.

Despite the fact that formally in Soviet times Pechory region was the territory of the RSFSR, there were schools with the Estonian language of education, where Seto children studied. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the Pechory district up to 2005 there were some schools with Estonian language of education. In the 1990s, children living in border villages were allowed to cross the border daily and attend Estonian schools. Since 2005, all school education is only in Russian. From that moment on, the transfer of language to children stopped abruptly. The generation that studied in Russian does not speak Seto. It is interesting that learning in Estonian was a factor of preservation of Seto as a language of home communication. For those who have studied in Estonian, the functional distribution of languages is as follows: Seto-Estonian diglossia and at the same time Seto-Russian bilingualism. Seto is used in informal areas as the language of home communication, when talking with friends, family. Estonian is used for written communication; if it is necessary to write a letter to a Seto speaker, then it has to be written in Estonian. At the same time, Setos never communicate in Estonian with each other at home, since these languages are functionally clearly distributed in their minds. Russian language can be used in all areas when communicating with people who do not speak either Seto or Estonian. Informants actively attending the Church were asked whether they read the gospel on Seto. They noted that the language of the gospel is good for them and native and understandable, but reading on Seto is unnatural, and therefore they read the gospel in Church Slavonic. Since they are Orthodox, it is also unnatural for them to read the gospel in Estonian.

It seems that it is diglossia distribution of Estonian and Seto languages was a factor of Seto preservation. This is indirectly confirmed by the situation in the Estonian part of Setomaa,

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where, judging from [Chalvin 2015], Seto-Estonian diglossia has changed to bilingualism. As a result, Estonian began to oust Seto in all areas, including home communication, which leads to the disappearance of Seto.

It would be interesting to find typological parallels of the influence of diglossia on the preservation of the language.

References

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