

Indigenous language without an area: inheritance-based language policies for the revitalization

Valts Ernštreits & Gunta Kļava
(University of Latvia Livonian Institute)

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The assumption that languages function within territorial borders, where they are inherited within the family and used locally in everyday life, is challenged by many critically endangered languages. Due to urbanization and overexposure to majorities, speakers of such languages are settling away from the core traditional areas, and communities are becoming scattered, gradually losing connection with any particular area or speaker community at all. Language transmission for them is changing, as should language policies.

A remarkable illustration of the position of such an extremely endangered indigenous language in the modern world is Livonian, the indigenous language of Latvia. Although surviving over the centuries in uninterrupted tradition until today, Livonian language transmission within families stopped almost entirely after the community was forced to abandon their historical area. Nowadays, the Livonian community and Livonian language speakers are a dispersed, superdiverse, and critically small group. Nevertheless, language continues to be transmitted through an unbroken oral tradition, albeit through alternative channels instead of intergenerational language use within the family.

In order to identify those channels, we implemented our own methodology, which relies on L. Milroy's social network theory, to conduct a test mapping of Livonian language transmission and contact points. Mapping indicated that currently, alongside non-sequential (e.g., grandparent-to-grandchild) intergenerational transmission within a family, there are a variety of actors and factors outside families that serve as language transmission channels. Recently, the cultural process and various subcommunities and events for practicing Livonian intangible heritage play an essential part in the language transmission. It also happens over great distances via shared platforms or activities focused on language practice, as well as through virtual interactions with language speakers.

In the talk, we will analyse the specific case of Livonian language acquisition approaches, taking into account the characteristics and needs of individual language learners and language bearers, as well as how they correlate with and change the language policy. Discussions around the introduction of the Livonian language acquisition showed that in order for re-acquaintance with the Livonian to be successful, key efforts should be shifted from the development of traditional education programmes to bolstering the language transmission process and supporting the development of the Livonian language ecosystem, such as using the Livonian in the digital space, empowering identity, and the creative process with tools and programmes tailored to fit the language transmission mechanisms and actual needs.

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