

Determinants of destination-language acquisition among foreign-origin population in Estonia

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INTRODUCTION

Studies analyzing the integration of different immigrant groups address often also the factors determining the destination-language proficiency (e.g. Chiswick, 2001; Stevens, 2006; Gonzalez, 2005). Against the background of various socio-linguistic studies focussed on Estonian language acquisition or actual language behaviour of Non-Estonians in Estonia (for an overview, see Verchik, 2005; Kulu&Tammara, 2005), the contribution of the present study relates to data sources and the fact that the effects of determinants of destination-language acquisition are tested in the context of societal transition.

Immigration and formation of the foreign-origin population in Estonia

The present study addresses the characteristics of foreign-origin population in Estonia. In the European context, immigration to Estonia had several features which shaped the profile of foreign-origin population in the country. First, immigration commenced immediately after the war, i.e. earlier than in most receiving countries of Europe. Secondly, the flow was on a large scale, persisted for four decades and left the country with a population of foreign-origin that accounted for more than a third of the total at the turn of the 1990s (for a detailed discussion, see Katus et al, 2000a and 2002).

Immigration originated mainly from the European part of Russian Federation, which had entered the stage of fertility transition and featured a high migration potential in the immediate post-war decades. These demographic factors were further strengthened by geopolitical change and administratively directed migration flows.

Context of language acquisition

The temporal focus of the present study is on the period 1989-2000, framed by two population censuses. In Estonia, this period includes dynamic and profound changes that have affected virtually all sectors of society. From the viewpoint of foreign-origin population, the core of these changes relate to the restoration of statehood which left them in an independent country with different institutional, economic and cultural context.

Immigrants had typically no previous knowledge of the language of the country and the respective skills had to be developed after arrival. However, during Soviet period learning Estonian was disfavoured by the governing ideological concept. The latter anticipated the fusion of nations and ethnicities into one unified Soviet nation, with Russian language as a central mean for intercultural communication. The concept was implemented in language policies that were aimed at sufficient proficiency of Russian all over the former Soviet Union (Katus et al, 2002:145).

In early 1990s the situation changed. Estonia regained independence and the position of Estonian language was consolidated by its status as an official language of the country. Since then the acquisition of local language by foreign-origin population has been in the centre of both integration policies and everyday discourse of immigration.

AIMS

- to map the change in the proficiency of Estonian language among foreign-origin population in Estonia during the period of societal transition 1989-2000;
- to analyse the variation of Estonian language skills among foreign-origin population by different factors: birth cohort, age groups, first/second generation, gender, educational attainment, ethno-linguistic environment, and ethnic affiliation.

DATA AND METHOD

The preliminary study employs micro-data from 1989 and 2000 population censuses. The two censuses took place in a different statistical context which is reflected in their programme, definitions, classifications, procedures etc. In order to compare language situation in two time points those differences had to be taken into account.

Definition of foreign-origin population

The 1989 census was developed and implemented by *Goskomstat* in Moscow. Reflecting the emerging societal change, the programme of 1989 census was significantly extended compared to earlier Soviet enumerations. Of particular relevance for the present study is the inclusion of the question on country of birth which allows defining foreign-born population in a consistent manner. This group constitutes a first generation of foreign-origin population, and was defined in the same way in both censuses: persons born outside Estonia, with non-Estonian ethnic affiliation.

The possibilities to distinguish second+ foreign-origin population were different. In case of 1989 census second+ generation was defined simply as people born in Estonia after 1945, with non-Estonian ethnic affiliation. The use of ethnic affiliation as a proxy draws on the fact that Estonia lost most of its historical minority populations in the WWII. In 1945 ethnic Estonians formed more than 97% of the total population (Katus et al 2000b:50-52). This scheme does not allow distinguishing the descendants of historical minority population from the second generation of immigrants.

Compared to 1989 census, the programme of 2000 census, that was developed and implemented by Statistical Office of Estonia, included a question on parents' country of birth. This extends the possibilities to make a distinction between native (including historical minority population) and foreign-origin population. Thus, the second+ generation of foreign-origin population was defined as: people born in Estonia after 1945, with neither parent born in Estonia and non-Estonian ethnic affiliation.

Table 1. The population of Estonia broken down into natives and those of foreign-origin.

Census	Total population (N)	Native Estonian (%)	National minorities(%)	Foreign-origin 1 st gen. (%)	Foreign-origin 2 nd gen. (%)
1989	1 565 700	61,5	1,1	23,5	13,9
2000-a*	1 370 500	67,9	0,9	16,3	14,9
2000-b**	1 370 500	67,9	2,3	15,8	13,9

* defining of the 1989 census

** defining scheme of the 2000 census

Operationalising the definition of foreign-origin population

The 1989 census collected information on mother tongue and a second language. It was not possible to report a third language and the choice of second language was limited to languages officially spoken in the Soviet Union. In the context of the present study this implies that knowledge of Estonian as a third language is not reported in the 1989 census.

In the 2000 census a different methodology was applied. Beside mother tongue a person was asked about any other languages (s)he spoke. This enabled to report the knowledge of Estonian irrespective whether it was first, second or third+ language of a person.

RESULTS

1. Estonian language proficiency of foreign-origin population in 1989 and 2000

In 1989 the Estonian language proficiency among foreign-origin population was very low. The proportion of people who reported the knowledge of Estonian reached 20% only in few age groups. It is worth noticing that when moving from middle-aged towards younger age groups, the proficiency of Estonian language declines.

By 2000 Estonian language proficiency rose significantly, particularly among middle-age and younger age groups. Unlike in the turn of the 1990s, the young people in the late teens and early twenties featured the best skills which points to the role of educational system in bringing about the change. On the other hand, however, even in these age groups nearly half of foreign-origin population still reported no command of Estonian.

The analysis of the changes from cohort perspective clearly revealed that the younger generations, the greater was the increase in language proficiency. In birth cohorts of the mid-1980s up to 60% reported the knowledge of Estonian in the 2000 census.

2. The comparison of Estonian language proficiency among first and second generation

It can be expected that the proficiency of host country's language reaches higher levels among the second generation, because unlike the first generation they have been born and socialized in a new environment. This assertion was only partly confirmed. The data revealed major differences across age groups/birth cohorts. The advantage of the second generation appeared highest in the middle-aged population born in Estonia to foreign-born parents in the late 1940s. When moving towards younger age groups/birth cohorts, this advantage gradually disappeared.

3. The effect of educational attainment on language proficiency

It can be expected that population with higher educational attainment is also more advanced in language proficiency. Interestingly, in Estonia educational attainment made virtually no difference in terms of language proficiency in 1989. Reported skills of Estonian among the foreign-origin population with primary education even exceeded that among their counterparts with university diploma. Between 1989 and 2000, the pattern has changed and currently the Estonian language proficiency is strongly associated with educational attainment. The change in educational gradient can be regarded as an indication of a shift in the status of Estonian language among foreign-origin population.

4. The effect of local ethno-linguistic environment on language proficiency

Another factor that is expected to strongly influence the acquisition of host country's language relates to the contact with native speakers. If the contacts are frequent and

intensive, they stimulate the acquisition of language whereas a low density of communication inhibits the development of language skills. This assertion was supported when the effect of local ethno-linguistic environment on language proficiency was analysed. In the areas where Estonian language dominates, the corresponding language proficiency appeared systematically higher among foreign-origin population. The pattern was manifested in both censuses.

5. The effect of ethnic affiliation on language proficiency

Although dominated by Russians, foreign-origin population in Estonia is ethnically heterogeneous and comprises more than hundred smaller groups. The data revealed that the knowledge of Estonian language among different ethnic groups varies significantly. The highest Estonian language proficiency is characteristic to Fenno-ugrians (mainly Finns and Ingerians), among the latter four fifths reported the knowledge of Estonian in the 2000 census. Latvians, Lithuanians, Jews and Germans also featured language proficiency above 50%. Among Russians, the largest group, less than 40% reported the skills of Estonian.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper described preliminary findings of the study about the determinants of Estonian language acquisition of foreign-origin population in Estonia. The analysis of micro-data from last national censuses at 1989 and 2000 revealed that the level of Estonian language proficiency has risen significantly during the period of 1989-2000. Most of the discrepancies of the above described results indicate the effects of Soviet Union's language policies that prevented the adaptation into local socio-linguistic environment. Although the new situation has introduced a change, the influence of previous system can still be observed in behaviour patterns of foreign-origin population. This effect will be further tested using more recent survey data from Estonian Family and Fertility Survey (FFS) from 2004/2005 (part of GGP 2001-2008).

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