Re-)Negotiating Multilingualism on the Periphery: which languages are valued and which are not in south-eastern Estonia

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The post-communist transition, in the globalised world, has brought about new centres and peripheries. The centre/periphery dynamic has an impact on multilingualism, its discourses and its practices (Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes 2013). Besides the main majority/minority divide involving Estonian- and Russian-speakers, which has received considerable scholarly attention at home and abroad, both in sociolinguistic and ethnopolitical literature (e.g. Ehala & Zabrodskaja 2011; Hogan-Brun et al. 2007; Laitin 2003), there are other minor divisions. Southern Estonian neighbourhoods contain residual spaces (cf. Appadurai 2005) where linguistic uniformity has been weaker than elsewhere in Estonian-speaking areas (Pajusalu et al. 1999). In spite of the language shift to Standard Estonian, which peaked between the 1960s and the 1980s, speakers of South Estonian varieties have not easily given up their vernaculars. On the contrary, at the end of the 1980s, language activists began openly arguing for the emancipation of South Estonian varieties, which they then thought might also protect the area from further peripheralization (Kansui 1999). The resulting regionalism was a reaction to centralism and Estonian linguistic authoritarianism (Raag 2010). However, in regionalism’s drive to standardise language varieties, it created further (linguistic) peripheries in the area. Yet, within the global quest for authenticity, there are new opportunities for peripheries, especially in tourism, services, and food and cultural production. Another, even more large-scale change in the centre/periphery dynamic was post-communist Estonia’s ”return to the Western world” (Lauristin et al. 1997), which also repositioned multilingualism.

The paper examines what empirical outcomes the (re-)negotiation of multilingualism has had so far. The paper draws largely on data gathered within the ELDIA project. It also explores other complexities of the centre/periphery dynamics that do not fit into the apparently desired world of parallel monolingualisms.

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