Semiotic and linguistic impact of English in Estonian blogs and linguistic landscapes

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Being a small nation, Estonia has always been multilingual: in a recent European survey 52% of Estonian respondents stated that they are able to speak at least two languages in addition to their mother tongue, which is twice as high as European average. The number of speakers proficient in English is the highest in the Baltic countries.

This paper looks into what role English plays in Estonian blogs and linguistic landscapes of Estonian from two points of view: contact-induced language change and symbolic impact of English. Both types of texts, blogs and public signage, belong to written genres. Case-studies have not discussed what happens with language use and alphabet choice when English is used in these two different but still both written genres. So far sociolinguistics and language contact research have been concerned with oral discourse; however, turning to written media provides new valuable data and allows taking further some known contact-linguistic models. We analyze 5 blogs (fashion, beauty, life style, photography) and a number of signs consisting of advertisements in streets, labels in the market places, banks, restaurants and shops (bank/shop windows), and other advertising material collected in Estonia in 2006–2014.

The main language of the blogs is Estonian, yet they exhibit insertional and alternational codeswitching to English. Alternational codeswitches are mostly fixed expressions or references to popular culture rather than quotations or reported speech. Code alternations have a strong emotional component, which makes them in a sense similar to certain discourse particles. It leads to the question whether English is becoming one of the languages of emotion.

Internal and external sociolinguistic factors determine how English is used and its script elements are combined with Estonian/Russian in multilingual signs. Data reveal that English non-target forms and orthography or compromise forms and new creations have been identified.

Keywords: language contacts, Baltic countries, multilingualism.