

ADULT L1 USERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THEIR PROFICIENCY IN WRITTEN ESTONIAN AS EVIDENCE OF DEEP-ROOTED LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES

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Abstract. The purpose of this article is to investigate how adult L1 users of Estonian describe their written language proficiency and how their responses reflect language ideologies. Data were collected from 668 participants, with an average age of 48 years (89% were women; 71% had completed higher education). The results show traces of deep-rooted standard language ideology as well as nationalist ideology. Some of the attitudes found can also be associated with the concept of linguistic insecurity, according to which the “best language” and the current rules and norms of standardized language have the highest value. It can be said that language stereotypes are based on the high status of the standard language, which may be the influence of standard language ideology, and that the majority of the participants in this survey consider standard Estonian as their mother tongue.

Keywords: *Estonian, language attitudes, linguistic insecurity, language ideologies*

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1. Introduction

This article focuses on the attitudes and ideologies embedded in beliefs about literacy and written language. The motivation for this article comes from the field of sociolinguistics, more precisely from the concept of linguistic insecurity (from now on LI), which is classically associated with spoken language, but since it has provoked the investigation of contemporary attitudes of Estonian L1 users in general, the idea is also a part of the theoretical framework of this article, which is mainly focused on written language. The concept of LI involves the idea of making a conscious effort for being linguistically correct according

to language norms, as well as the feeling that the variety the speaker uses is in some way inferior, ugly, or bad (Labov 1966; Meyerhoff 2006: 292). The two main forces that produce LI are considered to be the stereotyping of other language registers, and education based upon a doctrine of correctness and purity in language that differs from the facts of actual language use (Labov 1966; Baron 1976: 2). Stereotypes are directly associated with attitudes: “language-based stereotypes are organized along two primary evaluative dimensions: status (e.g., competent, intelligent) and solidarity (e.g., warm, friendly)” (Dragojevic et al. 2018: 30). Being insecure in one’s language use may have to do with the high status of a standardized form of language in society over the solidarity between people with similar dialectal (geographical) background, age group, or other registers of language.

Studying language attitudes (Agheyisi & Fishman 1970; Ebner 2017: 61–90; Garrett 2010; Giles & Marlow 2011: 183) is for gaining a better insight into the attitudes and opinions of language users. Attitudes are a central part of the human experience and play the main role in our daily interactions (e.g., Fazio & Olson 2003), influencing how we present ourselves and interact with others.

Attitudes are shaped by different language ideologies and “in the broadest sense, language ideologies reflect people’s beliefs about what language is and how it should be used” (Dragojevic, Giles & Watson 2013: 3). Language attitudes are also shaped by the ideology and process of standardization. Frequently, individuals are unaware of the influence of underlying ideologies and tend to regard language norms as matters of common sense (Garrett 2010: 7). The sources of attitudes are personal experiences and the social environment, as well as the media (Garrett 2010: 22).

The high prestige of standard language in society, including the obligation to use only ‘correct’ language at school, may seriously impact the linguistic security of L1 users (Baron 1976: 2; Vaicekauskienė 2012: 77). The dialects of the Estonian language have been levelled and the Estonian spoken today is relatively homogeneous. Nevertheless, the vocabulary and syntax of written and spoken Estonian are quite different (Hennoste 2000: 55). In Estonian schools the written standard language is often taught as the only correct form of Estonian (Lindström, Risberg & Plado 2023: 9). As it is believed language is an essential part of identity (Vihman & Praakli 2014; Ehala 2017), standard Estonian is also

widely considered to be a central component of the identity of Estonians (Lindström, Risberg & Plado 2023; Valk 2010).

The notion that language extends beyond its standardized form is often overlooked in Estonian society, and this, in turn, can be directly linked to the spread of the standard language ideology (Lindström, Risberg & Plado 2023: 10). The theme of language ideologies embedded in L1 users' attitudes has not yet received much attention in Estonia. In the 1990s, it was discussed that there was a need to help create a linguistic consciousness in which the written language was not the only known and recognized form of the Estonian language (Hennoste 1999: 93); however, representatives of language practitioners/advocates, such as educators and editors, continue to perceive any prospective alterations to standard language as a challenge to the integrity of the Estonian language and, by extension, the nation (Lindström, Risberg & Plado 2023). Jaan Undusk has written about language ideology in Estonian older literary culture (2012), Liina Lindström, Lydia Risberg and Helen Plado have written about ideologies and beliefs associated with Estonian language planning (2023).

This study addresses questions about L1 Estonian speakers' perceptions of writing in Estonian in order to see what traces of language ideologies emerge from their responses. The article points at the potential dangers of language ideologies that influence attitudes and thus cause linguistic insecurity and hypercorrection among L1 users. Using a direct approach, participants were asked whether they find writing in Estonian difficult. They were asked to self-assess their written expression in Estonian. Participants had the opportunity to comment on these questions. The specific research question of this article is how adult L1 users of Estonian describe their written Estonian proficiency and what, if any, language ideologies underlie their attitudes.

2. Theoretical Framework

Since the 1960s, sociolinguists have identified language awareness and the choices of speakers as subject of significant importance (see an overview in Coulmas 2005). Over time, they have pointed out that variation in language can be seen as valuable, but negative ideas regarding variation, or alternatives to the standard language, are still prevalent and

often inflexible. Many people believe that there should be one correct way to say/write something (Davies 2000: 122). Language users' self-confidence is a complex issue that sociolinguists have been examining since the 1960s (see an overview in Dragojevic et al. 2021).

2.1. Language ideologies

The various factors that may influence language users' choices include **standard language ideology**, meaning "a bias toward an abstract, idealized, homogenous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions and which names as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class" (Lippi-Green 2012: 67). One aspect of the standard language ideology is a firm belief in correctness (Milroy 2001: 535). Another aspect is **linguistic purism**, the belief that there is such a thing as pure language. But linguists explain why this is not possible: "The crucial point for our discussion is that there is – strictly speaking – no such thing as linguistic purity: first because we can never determine the *Stunde Null*, the very beginning of a language – when, by definition, it was pure – and, secondly, because a new language is always the result of some degree of language contact; hence, even if we were able to pinpoint the actual birth of a language, it would contain some degree of influence from other languages." (Langer & Nesse 2012: 610). Purism is strongly believed in by people called "grassroots prescriptivists", who come from a variety of backgrounds, and, for example, write to newspaper editors demanding the correct use of language (Lukač 2018). Prescriptive practices of lay people's prescriptive activism have also been called "verbal hygiene" (see Cameron 1995).

Being extremely cautious and tense while using language can lead to a phenomenon of hypercorrection (Labov 1966; Decamp 1972; Baron 1976), which makes speakers avoid less prestigious forms, even where they may be the "correct" forms (Hubers et al. 2020: 571).

The concept of **linguistic insecurity** (LI) involves the idea of making a conscious effort to be linguistically correct according to language norms, as well as the feeling that the variety the speaker uses is in some way inferior, ugly, or bad (Labov 1966; Meyerhoff 2006: 292). The origins of linguistic insecurity associated with the English language go back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the middle class

first began to notice that their use of language was not appropriate for certain situations (Leonard 1962).

The Index of Linguistic Insecurity (ILI) was first introduced in the 1960s by the American sociolinguist William Labov (see Labov 1966; 1977), who was investigating spoken language. Labov surveyed respondents, asking them to identify which of the two pronunciation forms of a word they considered correct and which they used more. He categorized such instances where respondents acknowledged the correctness of a form they did not employ themselves as indicative of linguistic insecurity. He showed that the most prestigious pronunciation of words is considered to be the variants used by the higher classes. In his analysis, on a scale of 0 to 10 Labov categorized a score of 0 as indicating “no insecurity,” scores ranging from 1 to 2 as “mild insecurity,” scores falling between 3 and 7 as “moderate insecurity,” and scores of 8 and above as indicative of “heavy insecurity” (Preston 2013: 305).

Following Labov, Owens, and Baker measured the ILI in Canada (Owens & Baker 1984; see overview in Preston 2013). Social class and gender differences confirmed similar results as Labov's study: the lower middle class and females showed higher levels of linguistic insecurity (Owens & Baker 1984: 337). Labov's research also showed that speaking the ‘best language’ to children is characteristic of the behavior of lower middle-class mothers and primary school teachers (Labov 1966: 141). The ‘best language’ in this context means the language speakers believe to have high prestige, so the up-to-date rules and norms of standardized language.

Dennis Baron formulated the impact of LI and addressed its negative side:

“It is a feeling of guilt that is sometimes conscious, often not, and its effects are sometimes trivial, occasionally distressing. It drives ordinary folk being introduced to English teachers to exclaim, “Oh, you're an English teacher? I guess I better watch my grammar.” [---] At one extreme it produces hypercorrections that may alter the course of the language; at the other, it produces a devastating, though usually temporary, state of silence that inhibits communication between individuals and groups” (Baron 1976: 1–2).

Of course, the question arises as to who these “ordinary folk” are that Baron is referring to.

Labov's investigations into English showed that lower-middle-class speakers were most prone to LI (Labov 1977: 117). According to him, the signs of LI are a conscious effort to be linguistically correct according to norms and they show a negative attitude towards one's language use. Additionally, he claimed that LI leads to linguistic change (Labov 1966). The impact of LI can be characterized by language users opting for normative and highly codified language, often diverging from their idiolect, which may differ from the standardized language.

Lastly, the **nationalist ideology** carries a role in the theoretical framework of this article. Many languages are frequently regarded as emblematic of national identity, as evidenced by prevalent discourse emphasizing the significance of learning the “mother tongue” and the romanticized association of a nation with a singular language. The ideological association of one nation with one language is often traced back to 18th-century German Romanticism and the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder and his contemporaries. (Dragojevic, Giles & Watson 2013: 4). “Herder valorized the power of a pure, uniform German language and literature, stripped of foreign (i.e., French) influences as the single most unifying force of the German people – to be German meant to speak the German language” (Dragojevic, Giles & Watson 2013: 4–5). The ideas of Herder also passed on to Estonian society (Lukas 2016).

2.2. Language ideologies in the Estonian context

Where are the roots of standard language ideology? The history of standardization ideologies varies across different countries. Standardization processes can be directed from above, i.e. from the state (Rutten & Vosters 2021), or from below, i.e. from the community (Elspaß 2021). Even destandardization is possible, it means the weakening of the belief in the best language and thus abandoning standard language ideology (Kristiansen 2021). Standardization is not only socio-political, since it has an impact on language use (Milroy 2001: 535; 539). It can mean that even when language norms are seen as having high value in State Language Planning, the language community may use other language varieties, and not the standard language in every situation (Ammon 2015: 57). This applies, for example, to the context of Estonian youth language (e.g. Koreinik et al. 2023) or Southern Estonian

Võro (e.g. Plado, Lindström & Iva 2023). An example of a country with two equal official languages, namely Nynorsk and Bokmål, and also dialectal diversity, is Norway (Røyneland & Jensen 2020).

The history of written Estonian language is relatively new and needs to be introduced. From the 13th to the middle of the 19th century, Estonian and Latvian writing and culture developed under the leadership of those who used German as a language of education. The Baltic societies of the time were multilingual in nature, and languages had a certain social status: German prevailed at the higher levels of oral and written use, while Estonian and Latvian were generally used only at the lower levels of communication (Undusk 2012: 73). In its formative years, Estonian literary culture was shaped by a tradition of translation, with Christianity serving as the primary subject for such endeavors (Undusk 2012: 73). As Jaan Undusk has written: “The era of Bible translation was followed in the second half of the 18th century by the spread of Enlightenment thought in the Baltic countries. It also led to the decline of the ideology of linguistic partnership and a new line in language policy, namely an outright dissatisfaction with the language, complaining about the underdevelopment of the Estonian language, its poverty, crudeness, incompleteness, defectiveness, and everything else that was worth whining about.”¹ (Undusk 2012: 82).

When the first Estonian grammars were written, Estonians belonged to the social underclass, both in the country and in the city (Raag 2008: 23). The caste system in Estonia was not the same as in Western Europe, which meant that dialectal differences between people could persist and even deepen, as peasants were almost exclusively the property of the manor and thus extremely stationary until the abolition of serfdom in Estonia in 1816 and in Livonia in 1819. With freedom from serfdom, the Estonian serf became a citizen of the state (Raag 2008: 32). In the 1820s, the industrial revolution began in Estonia, along with the transition from a caste society to civil society, and the Estonian written language began to be created by members of the wealthier classes who were able to obtain a decent education and who had the inner motivation and courage to start creating a cultural language out of the Estonian language (Raag 2008: 49).

1 Translated by the author.

Two written languages were developed in parallel, one based on North Estonian dialects and the second on the South Estonian dialects (Raag 2008: 28). Estonian intellectuals started to standardize one Estonian written language (based on North Estonian) in the late 19th century, following the example of the prestigious German language (Viht & Habicht 2022: 1044). At the beginning of the 20th century, the time of national awakening, there was a need to standardize the Estonian written language completely (Plado 2022: 1075; Raag 2008).

Estonia is one of the three Baltic countries that gained the status of an independent state in 1918. In the Baltics, the language is interpreted as part of the state apparatus. The status of national language means that it is used in all spheres of life (Vukotić 2019: 16). Estonian is the official language of the Republic of Estonia and it is protected in the constitution and regulated via a Language Act (Language Act). Language planners and linguists say that in the 21st century, the Estonian language is stable, and strict standardization is no longer justified (Hennoste 1999; Päll 2019: 111).

The first volume of the Dictionary of Standard Estonian (DSE, in Estonian: *Õigekeelsussõnaraamat*) was published in 1918, and since then 13 updated volumes have been published. It is of significant importance to both basic and high school students, as it has been the sole permitted material in the Estonian language examinations in the 9th and 12th grades. According to the latest information, DSE will be published on paper, while the electronic version, which will not be modified, will be published on the website of the Institute of Estonian Language. This dictionary will be the basis for the standard Estonian from 1 January 2026 (Action Plan). “Throughout Estonian history, language planners have had a great influence on others, both in education (e.g., via school textbooks and the DSE, which is used as a reference for the correct language) and the opinions of the general public (e.g., for a long time, speaking dialects was disapproved of). Thus, this influence is shared by a wider community and seems to be a common way of thinking about language in Estonian society more generally.” (Lindström, Plado & Risberg 2023: 10).

In recent-years, there have been discussions (e.g. Koreinik 2023; Vainik & Paulsen 2023; Rozentalde & Algvere 2024) in the Estonian society about the new publication of DSE. Even the Estonian Chancellor of Justice wrote a public opinion pointing out the fact, that the Estonian

language is protected by the Constitution: “As long as the Constitution states that Estonian, as the mother tongue of Estonia’s native and majority nationality, is the only state language, the norm of written language must also be preserved: words must have agreed meanings, sentences must have agreed word order, and in schools and universities [people] must make an effort to acquire written language.”² (Madise 2022). This is an excellent example of a deep-rooted standard language ideology, since DSE can be seen as a tool of the standard language ideology. Linguists have pointed out that standardization has an impact on language use (Milroy 2001: 535; 539) and it is common that when a language has a written form, users of the language believe that the language exists mainly in the standardized form (Milroy 2001: 531), which is not the truth, language has numerous varieties.

Ulrich Ammon provides a model based on the German society, which includes four major interacting sources of the social forces that determine what is standard in a language: (a) model speakers and model authors (b) language experts (c) language codifiers, and (d) language norm-authorities. In the first group, Ammon places television and radio news anchors, the second consists of linguists, who have prestige in society, standard language dictionaries are in the third group and the fourth consists of lexicographers, who compile language codifiers such as normative dictionaries (Ammon 2015: 57). Ammon stresses that even if the aim of the dictionary is to create a descriptive work, it often becomes the basis for correct expression or for improving the language of others (2015: 59). These are, in a wider sense, the social forces that determine what is standard in the language. There is a possibility that the language community uses its language varieties and does not use standards in every situation (Ammon 2015: 57) – in Estonia, there are different geographical areas, where other language varieties that are considered dialects of Estonian are used, for example, the Võro language. It is also a research topic of how the standardization of Võro is taking place and what forces are active there (Koreinik, Plado & Iva 2024).

Ammon distinguishes between authorities who directly enforce language norms and those who do not directly control choices of language forms for use. According to Ammon, the language norm authorities in

2 Translated by the author.

a narrow sense prescribe or forbid certain language forms, for example, language teachers at school or language editors (Ammon 2015: 55). A slightly exaggerated description of language editors involves the idea of a ‘language elite’ that enjoys or makes a living by correcting everyone and everything (Baron 1976: 1).

Not only has the discussion about DSE been an issue of linguists, editors, and writers, but it has also extended to the wider Estonian public, offering insights into the broader attitudes and beliefs of the society. There have been discussions about whether the standardization of language in Estonia is too strict. A notable shift has taken place – prescriptivist approaches, which are typically characterized by a “top-down” approach, have now been replaced by a “bottom-up” approach (Lindström, Risberg & Plado 2023: 38). The users of DSE have different goals while using it, among those who seek information about language and enrich their language use, there are people who search guidelines and ‘correct’ meanings of words (Langemets, Risberg & Algvere 2024: 700). However, prescriptive language rules are rarely clear cut, and there are always cases that fall into the gray area. Language principles should align with societal norms, and in a democratic context, they should avoid adopting an authoritarian stance (Päll 2019: 111).

Clear-cut rules of language prove effective for classroom instruction and also capture the attention of language editors, who eagerly incorporate all the suggestions. Studies have found that overly strict standardization from above may reduce L1 users’ self-confidence. That is because correct standardized language is disseminated and taught at schools, where the authority is held by teachers (e.g. Baron 1976: 2; Vaicekauskienė 2012: 77). It is evident that teaching prescriptive grammar rules to high school students appears to elevate their usage of accurate forms in certain constructions, this also brings with it instances of hypercorrection in others (Hubers et al. 2020: 552). Being extremely cautious and tense while using language can lead to a phenomenon of hypercorrection (See Labov 1966; Decamp 1972; Baron 1976).

One area where standard language is more or less in the central place is education. In a survey, Estonian children referred to not liking Estonian language lessons very much, since the exercises are often all alike and boring (Norvik & Pajusalu 2022: 1216). Respondents aged 9–20 would prefer to ask questions and discuss different language-associated themes in the Estonian language classes. The question of

what is the focus in the Estonian language classes has also been a topic in Estonia. Is it the production of language or studying grammar rules? The question of whether the Estonian lessons create the fear of language usage, the so-called “comma fear”, instead of connecting pupils to their language is still under investigation (Käpp 2022).

The idea that the Estonian educational system ought to discard the misguided notion that teaching the Estonian language solely entails mastering the rules of written language has been pointed out already in the 1990s (Hennoste 1999: 93). Jaan Kaplinski has tried to activate open discussion in Estonian society and to show how problematic the teaching of Estonian at school is: “In schools, children are taught the elementary rules of grammar; they are not taught how to use Estonian in a lively, enjoyable and interesting way. [...] All of this means that the current official Estonian language, carefully taught at school and whose officialism in public speech is guarded by vigilant language editors-language sensors, has become detached from living language, stifling people’s ability to express themselves freely and creatively.”³ (Kaplinski 2012: 185–186). For example, in the Scandinavian primary schools there are lessons on the meta and macro level of language, language attitudes, and children discuss how they have experienced language learning (Siiner 2022: 1628), something that Estonian society and language users could benefit from as well.

3. Methods for analysis

To find out how adult L1 users of Estonian describe their language proficiency and what traces of language ideologies emerge from their answers, an online survey was conducted in December 2022. The survey was carried out on 02.12.–29.12.2022, using the University of Tartu LimeSurvey platform. The link to the survey was shared on social media platforms, via university mailing lists, and to private contacts. Informants were recruited with the following invitation (translated here): “Hello! I’m conducting a survey to find out how Estonian speakers express themselves in public and in private. I would like to hear from anyone aged 18 or over who considers Estonian their mother tongue.

3 Translated by the author.

The results of the survey will be presented in groups, but free-text responses may also be cited in research papers based on the survey. The survey will take an average of 15 minutes to complete. Thank you!”

The questions were designed taking into account that the approach used is a direct approach – using a 5-point Likert scale as well as open-ended questions, participants were asked to give their assessments of various statements regarding language attitudes and experiences. The main idea was to collect a range of responses that might answer questions such as: What kind of traces of standard language ideology can be found? Are there ideas of linguistic purism prevalent? Can there be thoughts on the correct language as being the best variant of a language? What kind of problems do participants have with the performance of written Estonian? Are there signs of linguistic insecurity, e.g. that although they use written Estonian a lot, they are not sure whether it is the “correct” version? And what are the differences between participants’ age, gender, and education and their answers?

The blocks of questions were then built up as follows: Help with writing; Public and private text; and Exposure to criticism. The Likert-scale questions were presented before the free-text questions. These questions were followed by a last block containing multiple choice questions on 8 parallel lexical choices in Estonian, for example, ‘väljakutse’ and ‘challenge’ – both are used in Estonia, one is Estonian and one is a new loanword from English. The participants selected the words according to their own feelings, with the objective of identifying the most appropriate option within the given context. Additionally, they could indicate that both options were suitable. This was a minor variation-test designed to provide insight into the linguistic choices made by the participants while acknowledging the theoretical understanding that standard language ideology and language purism are prevalent in Estonian society. There was also an opportunity to comment on the questionnaire and add ideas about the survey. Questions analyzed are from the beginning and the end of the survey, so their position in the questionnaire may influence the answers.

The analysis includes both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative analysis was conducted using R (R Core Team, 2020), and the tidyverse package (Wickham, 2017). The quantitative analysis focused on the responses by gender and the category of working with language. Included are comments from 3% of participants who

did not specify their gender or work with language. ChatGPT (OpenAI) gave answers to the author's questions about the R-coding between September 2023 and March 2024, it was used as a control mechanism with all figures. Qualitative analysis involves an inductive qualitative thematic analysis of comments and reflections written by the participants, done with the online tool QCAMap (Mayring & Fenzl 2022) and using the University of Tartu's Social Analysis Methods and Methodology Learning Base (Kalmus, Masso & Linno 2015) in order to be clear and systematic with the qualitative analysis. The analysis took place in two stages – first, the comments were coded, using inductive category formation from the clear meaning component in the text. In the second stage, subcategories emerging from the comments were categorized at a higher level. The themes mentioned by the participants emerge inductively. DeepL (DeepL translate) was used to translate the comments, which were then edited by the author.

The following sections describe the contents of the survey and the participants.

3.1. Data

The data was collected through an online survey in the University of Tartu LimeSurvey environment, using both questions with 5-point Likert scale responses and space for free-form comments. This article focuses on two questions from the beginning and the end of the survey:

- (1) Assessment and comments: “Do you find writing in Estonian difficult?” on a 5-point Likert scale as follows: 1 – Not at all, 2 – Rarely, 3 – Sometimes, 4 – Most of the time, and 5 – Always.
- (2) Assessment and comments: “I assess my written expression in Estonian as follows: 1 – Unsatisfactory, 2 – Satisfactory, 3 – Good, 4 – Very good, 5 – Excellent.”

There were 443 comments added to the question “Do you find writing in Estonian difficult?”, and 182 comments added to the self-assessment of participants' written expression in Estonian. Many questions will not be discussed due to length restrictions and the focus of the current article, namely to answer the question of how adult L1 users

of Estonian describe their language proficiency and what traces of language ideologies emerge from their answers.

The questionnaire in Estonian with English translation and the answers to the multiple-choice questions with limited social information about the respondents are available in the DataDOI repository at <https://doi.org/10.23673/re-498>. The free-text answers were not included in the repository, as the full set of answers would allow identification of the respondents.

3.2. Participants

Altogether, 1063 respondents participated in the survey, 668 participants, 89% (n=591) were women, with 11% male respondents (n=73), and 0.6% who marked ‘other/do not wish to reveal’ (n=4) completed the survey. Of the participants, 59% (n=395) reported working with language daily and 38% (n=255) did not, with 3% (n=18) choosing not to respond.

The mean age of the respondents is 48 years (range: 18–83). The largest age group of respondents is 50–59. The majority of respondents have higher education – 71% (n = 475). Almost all, 99% (n = 662) said Estonian is their L1. Võro (n = 11), Russian (n = 5), Finnish (n = 3), Seto (n = 1), Swedish (n = 1), and English (n = 1) were mentioned as L1 or a second L1 besides Estonian. Also, 85% (n = 568) have attended only Estonian-based schools. However, many participants added that they had been abroad studying, for example, for one semester.

Multiple choice answers were provided and participants had the opportunity to choose all they found suitable. The most popular answer for job/occupation was “specialist”, 404 participants chose this; secondly 86 entrepreneurs; 75 retired; 73 students; 70 workers; and 65 managers; 30 participants were stay-at-home; 20 chose “something else” and 17 chose the answer “unemployed”.

In addition to the gender imbalance, the sample also represents a greater proportion than average of people who work with the language: more than half of the participants had a daily work-related connection with the written language – around 60% of 668 participants (n=395) reported that their job requires special attention to the use of Estonian language. Many of them specified their occupation titles, including 77 teachers, 34 editors, 24 translators, 10 communication specialists,

11 university lecturers, and 8 linguists. Participants, such as a headmaster of a school, a priest, a business manager, an adviser, an actor, an accountant, and a painter are included in this list of “working with language” since they reported that their work requires special attention to the use of Estonian language. The other group, 273 participants who did not report this, is the comparison group in the quantitative analysis.

4. Results

Since the sample is unbalanced, the sociolinguistic analysis (considering factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, social class, and geographical location) focuses more on the differences between occupations based on self-reports (whether their job requires special attention to the use of Estonian language or not). Results are given according to two groups of responses in the same order as asked: 1) self-assessments and comments on the difficulty of written Estonian to L1 users; 2) self-assessments and comments on participants' proficiency in written Estonian.

4.1. Is writing in Estonian perceived as difficult by L1 users?

This section focuses on the first question of the survey: how Estonian L1 users evaluate the difficulty of written Estonian. The analysis is based on responses to the question “Is writing in Estonian difficult?”, to which participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale, following space for comments. In total, 443 participants provided comments.

4.1.1. Quantitative analysis of the difficulty of writing in Estonian

This section provides an analysis of the first question of the survey. The participants were asked to assess the question “Do you find writing in Estonian difficult?” on a 5-point Likert scale as follows: 1 – Not at all, 2 – Rarely, 3 – Sometimes, 4 – Most of the time, and 5 – Always. As can be seen from Figure 1, the most common self-assessment is 1, i.e. “Not at all”. Most of the participants said they did not find writing difficult, either “Not at all” (46%) or “Rarely” (37%).

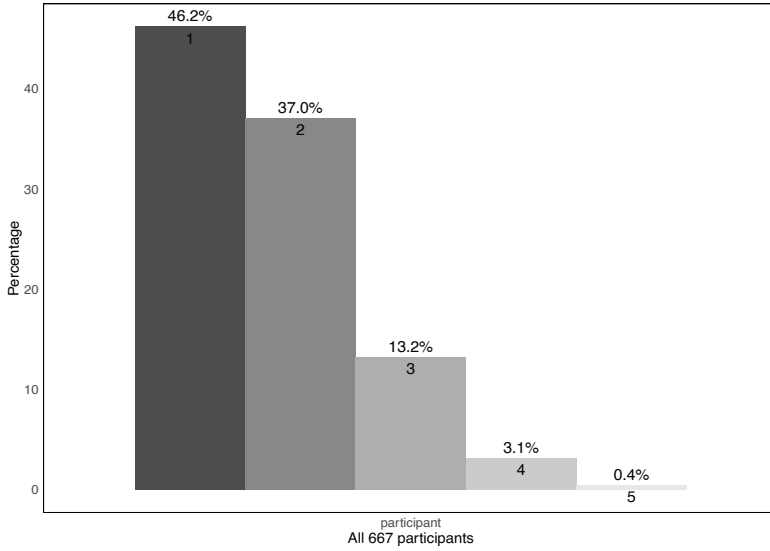


Figure 1. Self-assessment of the question “Do you find writing in Estonian difficult?” of all the participants (N = 667, No response, N = 1).

The general average of all participants is 1.74 (SD=0.83).

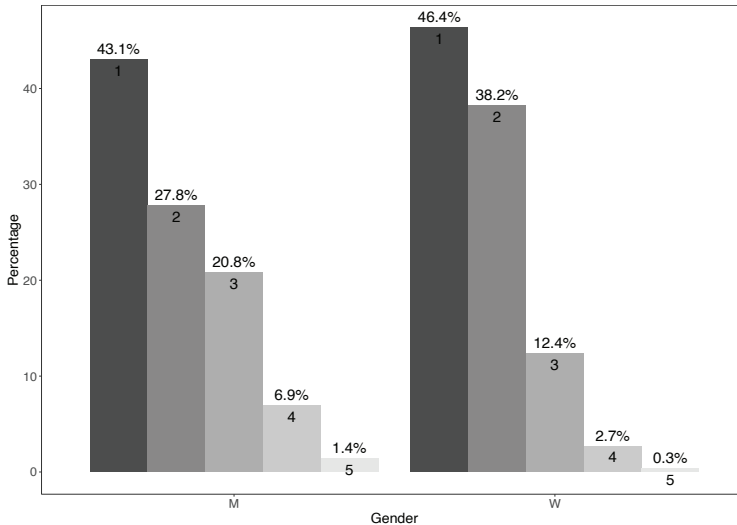


Figure 2. Self-assessment of the question “Do you find writing in Estonian difficult?” by gender (M, N=72, W, N=591).⁴

⁴ In the data were also 4 participants who chose the answer “other/do not wish to reveal”, 3 of them chose “not at all” and 1 “rarely”, these are left out of Figure 4.

When looking at the responses of men and women, the pattern is different. The assessment for Estonian writing difficulty is consistently higher for women than for men (respectively “Not at all difficult” and “Rarely” 84.6% vs 71%). Answer number 4, “Most of the time” and 5, “Always” were more often chosen by men than women (8.3% vs 3%). It can be observed that men tend to perceive writing in Estonian as more complicated than women.

The average score for men and women was 1.74 (SD = 0.83). Men scored an average of 1.95, and women 1.72. According to the Wilcoxon rank sum test ($W = 23530$, $p = 0.11$) there is no significant difference in the mean scores between men and women, suggesting that gender does not affect how participants evaluated the difficulty of written Estonian. However, using the chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 2.678$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.030$) suggests that there is a statistically significant association between the gender and the assessment categories. This association is unlikely to be due to random variation in the data – even if the sample is unbalanced, the differences between the assessments of men and women are significant.

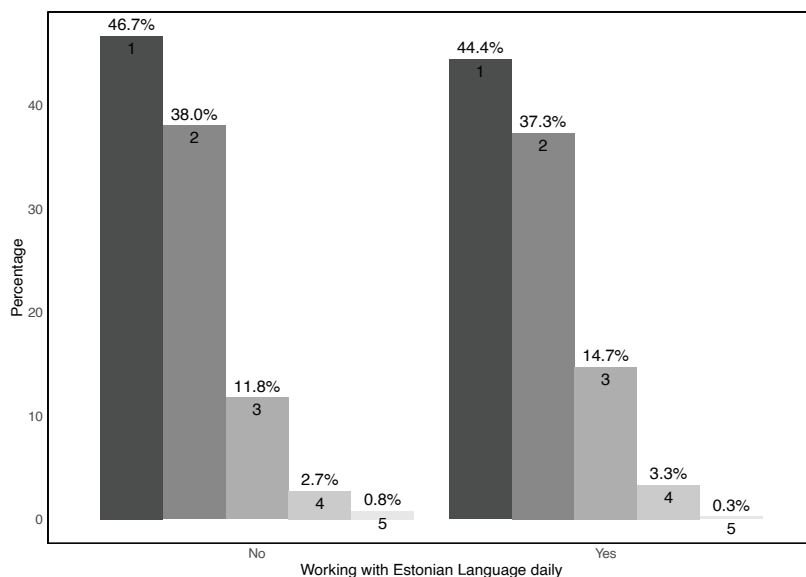


Figure 3. Self-assessment by working with Estonian daily (Works with language: YES, N=394 NO, N=255).

Since there were many participants who claimed that their work required special attention to the use of Estonian, it was important to look at their answers more closely. It can be seen that the pattern for participants who use Estonian professionally at work and those who claim not to do so is not so different. The largest proportion of responses in both groups were “Not at all difficult” and “Rarely” (respectively 84.7% vs 81.7%). Answers “Most of the time” and “Always” were similarly chosen by both groups (3.5% vs 3.6%).

The overall average score across both groups was 1.75 (SD =0.83). The average score for participants who do not work with language daily was 1.72, while for those participants who claimed to do it regularly was 1.77. According to the Wilcoxon rank sum test ($W = 48540, p = 0.431$), there is no significant difference in the assessments between the two groups. Similarly, the chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 0.57, df = 4, p = 0.68$) suggests that there is no significant association between the use of Estonian at work and the assessment categories, as the p -value is much greater than 0.05.

4.1.2. Qualitative analysis of the difficulty of writing in Estonian

In this section is the qualitative data analysis on the comments added to the Likert scale assessment of the optional question “Do you find writing in Estonian difficult?”. It was the first question in the survey after participants added their background information.

There were 443 comments from 396 women, 44 men, and 3 other/do not wish to reveal gender. Another division by nature of participants’ work is as follows: 287 comments from participants who claimed that their job requires special attention to the use of Estonian language; 145 from those participants whose place of work/job does not require special attention to the use of Estonian language; and 11 comments from participants who did not define their relatedness to language at their workplace.

Of those providing comments, 80% had rated the difficulty of writing in Estonian as rarely or not at all. It is notable that comments were added by more than 50% of the participants who assessed their writing skills in Estonian.

The code behind the quotes means: gender, age, education, assessment, and occupation/job status. For example, F61_secondary_1_kindergarten teacher means a 61-year-old woman with secondary education, who assessed writing in Estonian as 1 – “Not at all” difficult and who works as a kindergarten teacher.

Using the QCAMap online tool the first inductive coding themes were:

1. Estonian is the mother tongue
2. Being Estonian
3. Having a good sense/feeling/perception of language
4. Being a keen reader and thus having a lot of experience
5. Working with language on a daily basis
6. The good influence of the school and teachers
7. Recipe for a good text in general
8. Being good at language, but having doubts
9. Having a lack of sense/feeling/perception of language
10. Time from school has passed
11. Rules of grammar have changed a lot
12. Having a dialectal or another language background
13. Dependence on the recipient of the text
14. The difficulties are not directly linked to Estonian
15. COMMON FORM PROBLEMS with the form of Estonian:
 - a. Writing words together or apart (compound word problems)
 - b. Commas
 - c. Orthography / Spelling
 - d. Foreign/difficult words
 - e. Style of a text
16. STRATEGIES to deal with language problems
 - a. Dictionary of Standard Estonian (ÕS)
 - b. Searching for help from the internet / Google
 - c. Ask a friend
 - d. Thinking about how to write
 - e. Being critical

The second part of the qualitative analysis was to group the themes into similar themes. These gave rise to three main themes, which are discussed separately below. Firstly, comments claiming that it is not

difficult for L1 users to write in Estonian, and secondly, that it is difficult to write in Estonian for four groups of reasons: a) language ability – the feeling that one is good at language, but still has doubts or vice versa – having the lack of sense/feeling/perception of language; b) language norms – the time from school has passed and “rules of grammar” have changed a lot; and c) language background. There were also comments about non-language-specific factors – d). The third group of comments is about the common form-related problems of the Estonian language and how to deal with them.

I Written Estonian is not perceived as difficult

Many participants claimed that Estonian is perceived as not difficult since firstly, written Estonian is the mother tongue (see ex. 1). Secondly, just being Estonian and thus being automatically correct in the written standard language (2). This is closely linked to the idea that standard Estonian is under the concept of mother tongue. There were 49 comments about the mother tongue, making up 11% of all comments in this section. Also having a good sense/feeling/perception of language (ex. 3 and 4), being a keen reader and thus having a lot of experience (5), working with language daily (5), also the good influence of the school and teachers were mentioned.

- (1) See on minu emakeel, seda ma valdan vabalt ja oskan ennast grammatiliselt veatult väljendada (F61_secondary_1_kindergarten teacher) *It is my mother tongue, which I am fluent in, and can express myself grammatically fluently*⁵
- (2) Olen sündinud ja kasvanud selles keeles, see on mu veretukse. (F59_higher_1_Estonian language researcher) *I was born and raised in this language, it's my heartbeat.*

Reasons for finding writing in Estonian not difficult have to do with the sense or instinct of language (ex. 3), it is associated with the knowledge of grammar and production of written Estonian.

5 All the comments translated by the author.

- (3) Julgen öelda, et mul on hea õigekiri ja keeletaju – muidugi ma teen ikka vigu ja pean aeg-ajalt õigekeelt kontrollima, aga see ei tähenda, et kirjutamine mulle raske tunduks. (F30_higher_1_information specialist in the library) *I dare say I have good spelling and a good sense of language – of course, I still make mistakes and have to check my spelling from time to time, but that doesn't mean that writing is difficult for me.*

The feeling of language or an instinct is also evoked as something to blame since sometimes it misleads. It might not be a problem to the language user but it is distressing when others notice and do not keep their comments to themselves (ex. 4).

- (4) Enamasti arvan, et kirjutun päris korralikult, aga siis vahepeal tuleb välja, et ikkagi esineb mingeid sõnavorme, mille ma olen valesti ära õppinud või oma keelevaistu järgi kirjutun “valesti”. Siis tullakse kommenteerima ja parandama. Päris häiriv on. (F27_higher_2_communication specialist) *Most of the time, I think I'm writing pretty well, but then it turns out that there are still some word forms that I've learned incorrectly or that I'm writing “wrong” according to my instinct. That's when people come to comment and correct me. It's quite annoying.*

While being Estonian and having a “good sense of language” has more to do with an attitude or even a belief, the next reasons have to do with being actively involved with language and the love for reading books (5).

- (5) Olen lapsepõlvest saadik palju raamatuid lugenud ja seega on korrektne kirjutamine juba sisse harjunud. Kogu tööstaaži olen töötanud valdkonnas, kus tuleb laitmatut eesti keelt osata. (F42_higher_1_translator) *I've read a lot of books since childhood, so the correct spelling is already ingrained. Throughout my working life, I have worked in a field where you need to know the perfect Estonian.*

The influence of teachers and education is mentioned frequently. Negative influence was not mentioned among the comments to the question “Do you find writing in Estonian difficult?”, but was mentioned in the section of critique in the questionnaire.

II Reasons why Estonian is perceived to be difficult

One of the blocks of comments was about the difficulty or ease of writing in standard Estonian. Reasons can be divided into four groups: a) language ability – there is the feeling that one is good at language, but still has doubts; having the lack of sense/feeling/perception of language; b) language norms – the time from school has passed and rules of grammar have changed a lot; c) language background; and a theme that differed: d) challenges encountered are not exclusive to the Estonian language.

a) Language ability and possible doubts

Being good at Estonian, but having doubts were pointed out several times (ex. 6–7). The lack of linguistic hearing (7) or sense of language (8) was mentioned. It is important to note that these comments were given already at the beginning of the survey when there was no input from other questions from the survey that followed and thus these were given without big influence from the survey itself.

- (6) Üldiselt on eesti keeles kirjutamine väga kerge ja loomulik, aga kahtlus selle osas, ega ma vigu ei tee, segab veidi. (F20_secondary_2_law student) *In general, writing in Estonian is very easy and natural, but the doubt about making mistakes is a bit distracting.*
- (7) Mõnikord, ent pigem küll harva (kui kahtlen) pean allikatest kontrollima reegleid või õigekirja), kuna olen emakeeles harjunud kirjutama n-ö keelelise kuulmise järgi. Seda ei saa aga vankumatult usaldada. (F37_higher_2_writer and student) *Sometimes, but rather rarely (when in doubt), I have to check the rules or spelling in sources, because I am used to writing by 'linguistic ear' in my mother tongue. This, however, cannot be trusted implicitly.*
- (8) Võõrtähed ja häälikute pikkusi ei taju. Puudub keelevaist kui nii võib öelda. (F37_secondary_1_teacher of non-formal education) *I can't make out foreign letters and vowel lengths. There's no language intuition if you can call it that.*

b) Language norms

One of the findings was the participants' perception that the "grammar rules" of the Estonian language frequently change. This is folklore since the rules of standard Estonian orthography are seldom changed and only by the decision of a language committee⁶. There is a myth that rules have changed, but it is forgotten how exactly (9). Most comments were about the fact that Estonian grammar changes frequently. We will revisit this belief in the discussion.

- (9) On reegleid, mis on ajas muutunud ning pole alati meeles. On ka enda jaoks keerulisi sarnaseid sõnu, mille puhul alati mõtlema pean, millisel juhul neid kasutatakse (nt. järel ja järgi). (F40_higher_4_teacher) *There are rules that have changed over time and are not always remembered. There are also similar words that are difficult for me, and I always have to think about when they are used (e.g. järel and järgi).*

In addition to the changed rules comes an appeal to a lot of time having passed since school (10), and to the language changes being confusing and making writing publicly difficult.

- (10) Kuna õigekirjareegleid sai ülikoolis õpitud väga ammu, siis ei tunne end kindlalt avalikult kommentaare postitades või töökirju kirjutades (F46_higher_4_NA) *Having learned spelling rules at university a long time ago, I don't feel confident posting comments in public or writing work papers*

c) The influence of other language backgrounds

The third group of comments is about the influence of other languages, for example, English (11), but also Võru (12) and the Insular dialect (13).

- (11) Tegelen sellega igapäevaselt, pean töös oluliseks leida anglitsismidele ja võõrsõnadele sobiv eestikeelne vaste. Sotsiaalmeedia suhtlusel kipuvad võõrsõnad siiski sisse lipsama või kohati tuleb meelde vaid ingliskeelne sõna. (F24_higher_2_business development project manager) *I deal with it daily, and I consider it important to find a suitable Estonian equivalent*

6 <https://www.emakeeleselts.ee/keeletoimkond/>

for Anglicisms and foreign words. However, in social media communication, foreign words tend to slip in, or sometimes only the English word comes to mind.

- (12) Võru kiil vahest sekäs.⁷ (F62_secondary_2_NA) *The Võru language sometimes interferes.*
- (13) Ma olen saarlane ja mõningad häälikud tekitavad probleeme ning kontrollin neid sageli sõnaraamatust üle, et kas kirjutasin õigesti. (F33_higher_4 “My job requires correct written language”) *I’m from Saaremaa and some of the pronunciations cause problems, so I often check them in the dictionary to make sure I’ve spelled them right.*

Participants who do not live in Estonia seem to have strict opinions on the correctness and purity of language. There was a comment where a participant explained her occupation with the need to use “pure Estonian” was pointed out, it was from a participant who did a BA, MA, and a Ph.D. abroad and does not live in Estonia at the moment (ex. 14)

- (14) Olen kümneid aastaid elanud väljaspool Eestit, ja perioodidel, kus eesti keeles vähem räägin, ja on vaja kirjutada näiteks ametlikke kirju või õppematerjale, pean rohkem keskenduma (F49_higher_2 “I work with the voice and it is ethical for me to teach only pure Estonian (linguistically, acoustically, with good self-expression and sentence structure), but also to help, if necessary, to teach how to compose texts and sentences.”⁸) *I’ve lived outside Estonia for decades, and during periods when I speak less Estonian, for example when I have to write official letters or study materials, I need to concentrate more*

d) Challenges encountered are not exclusive to the Estonian language

The non-language-specific factors, such as the relationship between difficulty and dependence on the recipient of the text or writing in general, are not specific to Estonian. Dependence on the recipient of the text (15) is one of the issues that can be associated with any language.

7 This answer is in Võru language.

8 My translation of a very long answer to the question of what is the job that requires special attention to Estonian language use.

- (15) Raske on siis, kui ei tunne näiteks sõnumi/kirja saaja tausta ja ei oska seetõttu valida sobivat registrit või tooni; või siis kui peab kirjutama asjadest, mille kohta eesti keele sõnavara on veel korralikult välja arenadamata (nt oma uurimistö). Ka sotsiaalmeedias, aga pigem meediumist tulenevalt – eeldatakse pigem lühikest teksti ning ühise taustsüsteemi puudumisel on vääritimõistmine lihtne tekkima. (F36_higher_2_junior researcher) *It's difficult when you don't know the background of the recipient of the message/letter; for example, and therefore don't know how to choose the right register or tone; or when you have to write about things for which the vocabulary in Estonian is not yet properly developed (e.g. your research). Also in social media, but more because of the medium – a rather short text is expected, and in the absence of a common background system, misunderstandings are easy to arise.*

The unfamiliar addressee, work situation, or level of publicity of the text all have to do with the communicative side of language. Right words can be forgotten while writing an important letter and if the recipient is unknown it is difficult to choose the appropriate register or tone. One longer comment (ex. 16) covers many themes already mentioned, adding one important one – that writing to an unknown recipient is more of a social anxiety problem and less a problem of a certain language.

- (16) See sõltub vist rohkem üldisest vaimuseisust kui konkreetsest juhust/kirjutamisülesandest - vahel on kuidagi tunne, et miski pole õige. [--] Kõhklused tekivad ehk peamiselt siis, kui kirjutat tundmatule vastuvõtjale, st kui tekst on mingil määral avalik (sh sotsiaalmeedias) või kiri võõrale inimesele, või kui aiman, et vastuvõtja keeletaju võib minu omast oluliselt erineda (nt põlvkonnavahe tõttu). [--] see on vähem keeleprobleem ja rohkem sotsiaalse ärevuse probleem, st mitte niivõrd “eesti keeles kirjutamine” kuivõrd eneseväljendus misiganes keeles üleüldse... (F31_higher_3_editor) *I guess it depends more on the general state of mind than on the specific occasion/task – sometimes it feels like something is not right. [--] Perhaps the hesitations mainly occur when I am writing to an unknown recipient, i.e. when the text is to some extent public (including social media) or a letter to a stranger, or when I suspect that the recipient's sense of language may be very different from mine (e.g. because of a generation gap). [--] It's less a language problem and more a social anxiety problem, i.e. not so much “writing in Estonian” as self-expression in any language in general...*

One of the participants who self-assessed themselves on a Likert scale with 5, i.e. “It is always difficult” commented that writing in general is difficult and time-consuming. Although working in a library and having a higher education, one participant who rated herself on a Likert scale with 4, i.e. “In most cases” it is difficult to write in Estonian, wrote a comment about how she has always been weak in linguistic expression. It does not mean only in Estonian. A slightly younger participant, also with higher education, commented that Estonian and other languages have always been difficult for her.

III The common form-related problems users have with Estonian

The qualitative analysis revealed several common form-related issues with Estonian: compound word usage (written as one word or several), commas, orthography and spelling, foreign or difficult words, and text style, these issues mainly concern vocabulary. Often many problems were mentioned in one comment, for example also the change of rules was among other common problems (17).

- (17) kokku-lahku kirjutamine, komad, muutuvad reeglid jne. Muidu probleemideta. (M52_secondary_2_ member of the NGO board) *Writing words together or apart, commas, changing rules, etc. Otherwise no problems.*

Questions of style are also listed here, as it was mentioned in the context of “not writing according to a good style” (18). The question arises as to what constitutes style mistakes, as these can be perceived differently by individuals, but they frequently relate to vocabulary issues.

- (18) Teen palju stiilivigu ning rikkalik keel ja stiiliga mängimine on ajaga kadunud. (F29_higher_3_ communication manager) *I make a lot of style mistakes and expressive language and playing with style has gone with the time.*

Strategies for dealing with language problems were mentioned in the comments: using the Dictionary of Standard Estonian, asking a friend, just thinking about how to write, and searching for help from the internet / Google (see ex. 19). Participants who rated their skills with

the highest score (Likert scale 1, i.e. “Not at all difficult”) rarely wrote about problems, on the other hand, participants who rated themselves as less skillful (Likert scale 2, i.e. “It is rarely difficult” and Likert scale 3, “It is sometimes difficult”) mentioned different form-related problems they have come across while writing in Estonian.

- (19) Soovides korrekselt kirjutada pean mõnikord guugeldama, sest õigekiri on oluline (M50_higher_2_board member) *If I wish to write correctly I sometimes have to google, because orthography is important*

It is not uncommon that participants are highly critical and conservative regarding the “poor” and “too innovative” use of language. Examples 20 and 21 illustrate this kind of grassroots prescriptivism.

- (20) Pigem häirib mind väga halb keelekasutus nii kirjalikult kui suuliselt. Pole võimalik leida vist ainsatki õigekirja reeglit, mida ei rikutaks. (F61_higher_1_NA) *I am rather bothered by the very poor use of language, both written and oral. I can't think of a single spelling rule that is not broken.*

- (21) lihtsalt see keeleeuendus ei sobi mõistete järgi varasema keele- ja kõnepruugiga (M60_higher_3_NA) *It's just that this linguistic innovation is not conceptually compatible with the language and jargon of the past*

In addition, there were comments with suggestions on how to write a good text in general: composing a clear text demands time, precision, and complete concentration. This is particularly relevant in public writing, whereas such care is unnecessary when communicating with family members (22).

- (22) Perele kirjutatan ilma mõttlemiseta, muidu pean ikka mõttelema kuidas õieti öelda ja kirjutada. (F60_secondary_4_NA) *I write to my family without any fuss, otherwise, I have to think about how to say and write it correctly.*

The vast majority of participants did not find writing in Estonian difficult, while some participants expressed hesitations and problems. The perception of quickly changing rules of grammar expressed by the participants will be revisited in the discussion. The findings of Estonian being perceived as not difficult since written Estonian *is* the mother tongue and just being Estonian means being automatically correct in the written standard language are findings of ideological influences –

namely the national ideology, where the idea that standard language is under the concept of mother tongue is common. There were 49 comments about the mother tongue, making up 11% of all comments regarding this question.

4.2. Self-assessments on Written Estonian

This section focuses on the question of how Estonian L1 users evaluate their writing skills in Estonian. 660 respondents rated the claims analyzed below on a Likert scale. Comments were added by 182 participants.

4.2.1. Quantitative analysis of self-assessments on written Estonian

The self-assessment was rated on a Likert scale in reaction to the claim “I assess my written expression in Estonian as follows: 1 – Unsatisfactory, 2 – Satisfactory, 3 – Good, 4 – Very good, 5 – Excellent.” As can be seen from Figure 4, over half of respondents gave ratings of 4 or 5: 4, i.e. “Very good” was more dominantly answered by women (55%) than men (48%). The grade 5, i.e. “Excellent” was also more frequently responded to by women as opposed to men (22% vs 15%).

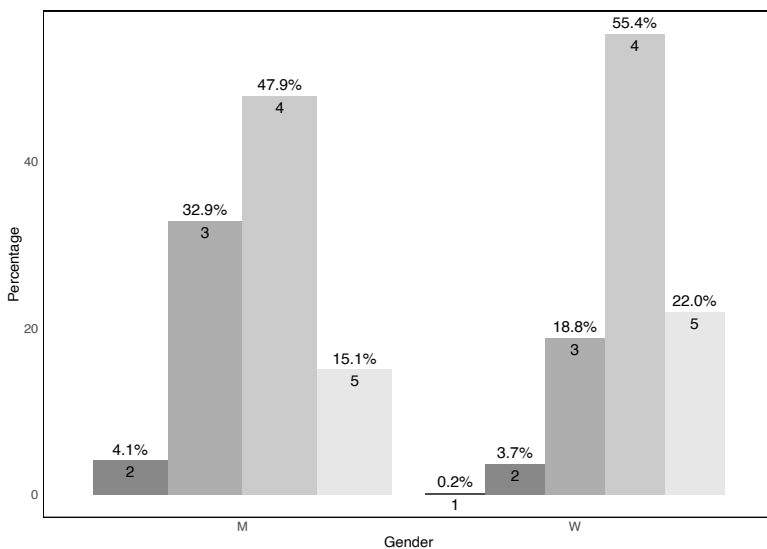


Figure 4. Self-assessments to the written expression in Estonian by gender (M, N=75, W, N=585, No response, N=4).

The general mean is 3.92 (SD 0.75). According to the Wilcoxon rank sum test with continuity correction ($W = 24745$, $p = 0.017$), there is a statistically significant difference in assessments between genders, but the results of the chi-square test, ($\chi^2 = 2.032$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.087$) suggests that there is not enough evidence to claim that there is a statistically significant association between gender and assessment categories. It might be because the sample is unbalanced or that some other marker is more important than gender.

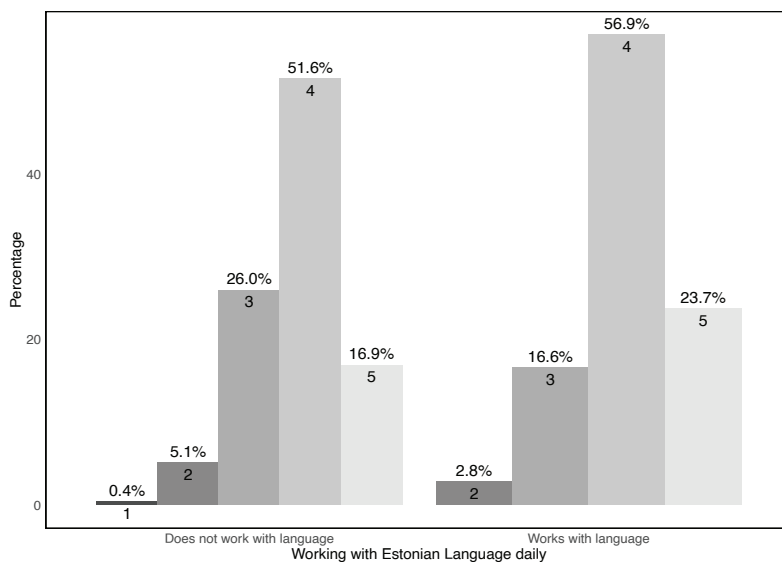


Figure 5. Self-assessment by working with Estonian daily (Works with language: YES, N=392 NO, N=254, No response, N=19).

Figure 5 shows that those who work with Estonian daily assess their written expression highly. The general mean is 3.92 (SD = 0.75). For those who do not work with language daily, the mean is 3.79 and for those who do work with language daily, it is 4.01. Participants who work with Estonian daily chose either “Very good” (56.9%) or “Excellent” (23.7%) more frequently than those not working with language (51.4% and 16.9% respectively).

According to the Wilcoxon rank sum test with continuity correction, the two groups have a statistically significant difference in assessments ($W = 42362$, $p < 0.001$). Using the chi-square test, the results ($\chi^2 = 3.659$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.01$) suggest that there is a statistically significant association between the two groups – working with language daily or not.

In summary, women rated their Estonian writing skills more highly than men, and participants who worked with language daily rated it more highly than those who did not.

4.2.2. Qualitative analysis of self-assessments on written Estonian

Next, I give an overview of the qualitative analysis done with QCAMap on the comments added to the self-assessment to the claim “I assess my written expression in Estonian as follows”, that was the last assessment of the survey, before the word-test and ending comments.

Using the QCAMap online tool the first inductive coding themes were:

1. Confident
2. All is well / Daily work
3. This is my mother tongue / I am Estonian
4. With enough time everything is OK
5. Very good is excellent with rare mistakes
6. Can always do better
7. Self-criticism essential
8. Self-assessment 3 / Errors pointed out
9. Not confident
10. When younger, the rating would be higher
11. Content / Form / Reader / Meaning
12. Public/official and private texts differ
13. Influence of other languages
14. Rules have changed

The next level of qualitative analysis of the 182 comments gave rise to two themes: a) being secure and knowing it; b) being not so secure and knowing it; and c) the reasons for being insecure also emerge.

Comments were added by 28 men, 153 women, and 1 other/do not wish to reveal gender participants. The code behind the quotes means gender, age, education, assessment, and occupation/job status. For example, F31_higher_5_editor means a 31-year-old woman with higher education (all levels included), who self-assessed her written expression in Estonian with 5 – “Excellent” and is working as an editor.

a) Being secure in written Estonian and aware of it

Comments were provided by thirty-five participants who rated themselves as a 5, i.e. “Excellent” at writing in Estonian, 31 women and 4 men. Another 100 participants rated themselves as a 4, “Very good” at writing in Estonian. Altogether 88 women, 11 men, and 1 other/do not wish to reveal gender also provided comments.

Participants explained why they felt secure in their L1 writing. Someone wrote that she “just is” confident and she is sure about their language and does not care about “stupid rules” (see ex. 23). When Estonian is used as an important tool at work, it was pointed out to be normal to be certain of it (ex. 24). It was pointed out that it is easy to be secure in Estonian while there is enough time to complete linguistic tasks (25). Many participants mentioned in slightly different contexts that they can write errorlessly since Estonian is their mother tongue (ex. 25–26). Two participants mentioned the Mother Tongue Day Dictation⁹ as an evaluator of one’s knowledge of Estonian. A common comment was a good sense or intuition of language (ex. 27).

- (23) Mu enda arust mina olenki eesti keele etalon :D st kui minu jaoks on miski arusaamatu (nt “järel” ja “järest” vahe või sõna “ämblik” käänamine – vähemalt nii nagu see vanasti oli – või mingi muu üks asi), siis mulle tundub, et sellest polegi vaja aru saada, sest see ongi loll reegel. :D noh, seda ma mõtlen natuke naljaga, aga natuke ka mitte... (F31_higher_5_editor) *I think I’m the epitome of the Estonian language :D i.e. if something is incomprehensible to me (e.g. the difference between “järel” and “järest” or the cases of the word “ämblik” – at least the way it used to be – or some other random thing), then I don’t think I need to understand it, because it’s a stupid rule. :D Well, I mean that as a bit of a joke, but a bit not...*

9 A text broadcasted on the 14th of March on public radio, where listeners aim to transcribe it as accurately as possible. “Originally intended as a one-off project, the event will take place for the 17th time in 2024, and the Vikerraadio e-celebration has become a tradition and one of the most awaited events of Mother Language Day.” Source: <https://etteytlus.err.ee/>

- (24) Kuna kogu mu töö seisneb kirjaliku teksti suurepärases väljendamises, siis ei saa ma endale midagi vähemat lubada. (F42_higher_5_translator) *Since all my work consists of excellent expression of written text, I can afford nothing less.*
- (25) Kui saan piisavalt aega oma kirjatöö üle kontrollimiseks, siis on minu kirjalik eneseväljendus väga hea, kuid tihti kulub mul teistest inimestest enam aega nt e-kirja kirjutamiseks. (F31_higher_4_speech therapist) *When I have enough time to check my writing, my written expression is very good, but it often takes me longer than other people, e.g. to write an e-mail.*
- (26) Mida see inimene siis veel hästi peaks oskama, kui mitte oma emakeelt? (F62_secondary_4_NA) *What else would this person need to know well if not their mother tongue?*
- (27) Rikkalik sõnavara, oskan pöörata ja käänata, hea keelevaist, emakeel. (F46_higher_5_estonian teacher) *Rich vocabulary, can inflect verbs and nouns, good sense of language, it is the mother tongue.*

b) Being insecure in written Estonian and aware of it

Of 665 participants 136 rated themselves with 3, i.e. “Good” at writing in Estonian, and 34 of them commented, 23 women and 11 men; 24 participants rated themselves with 2, “Satisfactory” at writing in Estonian, and 9 explained why, 7 women and 2 men.

No single explanation emerged for why Estonian is perceived as difficult; instead, diverse reasons were provided. Problems that were listed contained themes such as spelling, sentence structure errors, old-fashioned language, the influence of other languages, the content, and the receiver of the text. Comments about the high level of Estonian and not being able to reach it were quite frequent (ex. 29–30).

- (28) Suurepärane, kuid mitte ideaalne. (F47_higher_5_academic) *Excellent, but not ideal.*
- (29) Perfektsest jääb alati midagi puudu. (F35_higher_4_auditor) *There is always something missing from perfection.*

- (30) Imelik on endale suurepäraselt hinnet panna. Kindlasti võiks vahel veel parem olla. (M52_higher_5_linguist) *It is strange to give yourself an excellent grade. Surely it could be better sometimes.*

The claim “there is always room for improvement” can not be analyzed as being insecure in written Estonian, but the claim has a certain amount of doubt in it, can not be said if it is more about style or correctness (ex. 31–33). This was said only by participants who self-assessed themselves either with 3 or 4

- (31) Kirjaliku väljenduse ulatuses on alati ruumi arenemiseks, isegi emakeeles. (F41_higher_4_NA) *There is always room for improvement in written performance, also in your mother tongue.*
- (32) Pole paha, aga saab paremini. Keelereeglid on nii palju muutunud võrreldes ajaga, mil ma neid koolis õppisin (90ndatel), et ma enam ei üritagi sabas püsida. Kirjutan nii, nagu õige tundub ja küll toimetaja parandab, siis saan jälle targemaks. (M36_higher_3_writer) *Not bad, but it can be better. The language rules have changed so much from when I learned them at school (in the 90s) that I don't try to keep up anymore. I write as it feels right and, although the editor will correct it, I'll get smarter again.*

One participant, who self-assessed herself with 4, mentioned that if they had self-assessed with the highest ratings, they would have become a writer (ex. 33). On the other hand, a writer self-assessed himself with 3 – *good* and commented that something should stick when one has already written a couple of books (34).

- (33) kui hindaksin suurepäraseks, siis ilmselt oleksin kirjanikuks hakanud ????. (F53_higher_4_NA) *If I were to rate it as excellent, I would probably have become a writer ????*
- (34) Kui sa oled juba paar raamatut kirjutanud ja seda kõikide võimaluste abil üle kontrollinud või kontrollida lasknud, siis peaks midagi ju külge jääma..... (M58_secondary_3_NA) *If you've already written a couple of books and checked it or had it checked by all means possible, then something should also stick.....*

Comments about self-doubt, feelings of insecurity, and the need to re-learn Estonian are examples of linguistic insecurity and the linguistic awareness that participants have (ex. 35–37).

- (35) Suurepärane oleks siis, kui endas üldse ei kahtleks. (F58_higher_4_NA) *It would be excellent if I didn't doubt myself at all.*
- (36) Tunnen ennast endiselt õigekirjas ebakindlalt. (F45_higher_4_localisation manager) *I still feel insecure about orthography.*
- (37) Sooviksin uuesti õppida õigekeelsust lisaks eki.ee lehekülje harjutustele, kui kahjuks seni märgatud kursused/koolitused on olnud liiga kallid. (F47_secondary_2_NA) *I would like to re-learn correct language, in addition to the exercises on the eki.ee site, as unfortunately the courses/training I have noticed so far have been too expensive.*

c) The reasons for being insecure in written Estonian

Reasons for being insecure with written Estonian were given by participants from all genders and all Likert scale self-assessments besides 5 – “Excellent”.

The reasons can be divided as follows: being more secure when younger (38), the influence of other languages (39), the form or content of the text, the importance of the receiver, and the meaning the text carries (40). The idea that language rules have changed over time was mentioned (41), the theme that was brought up also in other comments, an important idea that we will revisit in the discussion section.

- (38) Nooremana oleksin hinnanud suurepäraseks, aga need targutajad on enesekindlust maha tõmmanud. Nüüd pigem hindan väga heaks, sest ikkagi usun, et mu kirjaoskus on parem kui keskmisel eestlasel. (F27_higher_4_communication specialist) *When I was younger, I would have rated it as excellent, but these wiseacres have knocked my confidence. Now I would rather rate it very good because I still believe that my literacy is better than the average Estonian's.*
- (39) Viimastel aastatel on minu eesti keele kirjalik väljendusoskus natuke nõrgemaks muutunud, kuna igapäevaelus on inglise keel peamine (tööl ja kodus). Tunnen ise rohkem ebakindlust. (F27_higher_4_NA) *In recent years, my written Estonian has become a bit weaker, as English is the main language in my everyday life (at work and home). I feel more insecure myself.*

- (40) Olen kogu elu olnud see, kellelt tuttavad keelenõu küsivad. Seitsmekümnendatel masinakirjabüroos töötades tegelesin pidevalt kirjade õigekirjaga, et asutuse pärast liigselt häbenema ei peaks. (F67_secondary_4_assistant) *All my life I have been the person people I know ask for language advice. When I worked in a typing pool in the seventies, I was constantly spelling letters so that I wouldn't be too ashamed of the institution.*
- (41) Võrreldes praeguste noortega, on mu keekekasutus päris hea, kuid enda jaoks ma tean, et seal on palju vigu, sest keelereegleid enam ei mäleta ja osad reeglid on ka ajajooksul muutunud. (F49_higher_2_“I'm a kindergarten teacher, so my language skills are important”) *Compared to young people nowadays, my use of the language is pretty good, but, I know there are a lot of mistakes because I can't remember the rules of the language and some of the rules have changed over time.*

Also being aware of one's mistakes, but the message is more important than spelling mistakes is the only example from this part of the analysis, where this thought is expressed (42).

- (42) Tean, et teen vigu, aga pean sõnumit korrektsusest olulisemaks. (F45_higher_3_NA) *I know I make mistakes, but I think the message is more important than correctness.*

In Chapter 4.2 the conclusion for the results is, that quantitatively there are differences in the self-assessments between participants who claimed that their job requires special attention to the use of Estonian language and those who did not. The first group (7%) is more “Excellent” in their written performance and almost 5% more “Very Good”.

Looking at the qualitative analysis, it is notable that there were all kinds of comments – being secure in written Estonian and being not secure were both mentioned, and different reasons were presented. The findings of ideologies are also present – mother tongue and writing skills are on an equal level, therefore signs of national ideology are noticeable.

The common ideas that writing in Estonian could always be better and it is not excellent nor ideal, are signs of insecurity, but it can not fully be connected to the standard language ideology directly, but more with traces of modesty.

5. Discussion

This study sought answers to the questions regarding how writing in Estonian is perceived by adult L1 users and what traces of language ideologies emerge from their comments. The primary focus was on mapping attitudes toward standard Estonian since it is widely considered a central component of the identity of Estonians (Lindström, Risberg & Plado 2023; Valk 2010). On the other hand, it has been pointed out in many works by linguists and writers, that the belief of the standard language being the only right variant of a language, can harm the confidence of the language user in using the language with its different variants and styles, as a living and vital language (Hennoste 1999; Vaicekauskienė 2012; Kaplinski 2020). The survey carried out for answering the questions might have been done differently, since although the study involved 668 participants, who were predominantly women (89%) and highly educated individuals (71%), the findings revealed distinct gender differences in self-assessment and perceptions of writing in Estonian. The fact that participants were mostly women and mostly with higher education, has not given the full picture of adult Estonian L1 users attitudes. On the other hand, this imbalance is very common in such surveys. Many investigations have shown that more educated people are more likely to participate in surveys than less educated and that women are more likely to participate than men (overview by Smith 2008: 3).

The present study found that female participants and those who reported that their job required special attention to the use of Estonian language felt more confident in their written Estonian performance. The study revealed that women generally rated their written Estonian proficiency higher than men, with more women choosing “Very good” and “Excellent” ratings. Women also found writing in Estonian less difficult overall, with higher percentages indicating it was “Not at all difficult” or “Rarely difficult.” Men, on the other hand, more frequently reported finding writing “Sometimes difficult”, “Most of the time difficult”, or “Always difficult”.

5.1. When the job requires special attention to the use of the Estonian language

The results gave insight into the rootedness of standard language ideology in the minds of participants who reported that their job requires special attention to the use of Estonian language and those who did not. Around 60% of the 668 participants (n=395) reported that their job requires special attention to the use of the Estonian language. The survey attracted more participants who use written language often in their job, one reason for it might have been because of how the information about the survey was presented to the informants – if you are sure in your written language skills, you also want to share it. A better method might be conducting in-depth interviews with participants with different backgrounds.

When overt ideology is institutionalized by the state, it can influence the linguistic identity of speakers – this is especially true for those speakers who are professional language users and therefore more exposed to official language control (Vaicekauskienė 2012: 98). It was evident that when a position necessitated a high level of proficiency in Estonian, the individuals undertaking the task exhibited heightened self-awareness and caution in their self-assessment of written performance in Estonian. Whether this is because of the standardized language is a matter to study further on.

When looking at the first two claims and the self-assessments of these, the grade 4, i.e. “Very good” is the most frequent for both of those working and not working with language. It is higher for those who do (56.3%) compared to those who do not (51.4%). The grade 5, i.e. “Excellent” was also more frequent for those whose work is language-related, (23.7%) as well as for those who reportedly don't work with language-related topics (16.9%). The conclusion for the quantitative results of the first question was, that there are differences in the self-assessments between participants whose job does and does not require special attention to the use of Estonian language. The first group is 7% more “Excellent” in their written performance and almost 5% more “Very Good”. Participants who indicated that their job required a special attention on the use of Estonian estimated their language skills to be higher – an expected result.

5.2. Traces of language ideologies

The qualitative analysis of the comments added to the first question gave rise to two main themes: firstly, comments claiming that it is not difficult for L1 users to write in Estonian, and secondly, that it is difficult to write in Estonian. The latter was justified by different reasons, such as language ability – there is the feeling that one is good at language, but still has doubts or vice versa – having the lack of sense/feeling/perception of language; language norms – the time from school has passed and rules of grammar have changed a lot; language background.

There were also comments about non-language-specific factors. The third group of comments is about the common form-related problems of the Estonian language, the main concerns participants named had to do with vocabulary. Participants who rated their skills with the highest score rarely wrote about problems, on the other hand, participants who rated themselves as less skillful mentioned different form-related problems they have come across while writing in Estonian. The perception that since the time from school has passed, the rules of grammar have changed a lot or are changing all the time. This finding is a sign of a lack of linguistic knowledge about Estonian since it has to be emphasized that in fact the rules of standard Estonian orthography are seldom changed¹⁰ and with the decision of a language committee,¹¹ and the new decisions do not overrule previously existing rules because linguistic arrangements have tended to increase the number of parallel variants over time, the old norm always persists. However, it is not common knowledge within the Estonian language community. What is perceived as grammar is often something else than grammar really is – the fear of not knowing the correct standard language hides behind this notion. This is a sign of linguistic insecurity, where people feel that the variant of language they use is inferior or bad (Meyerhoff 2006: 292), and behind the belief, that the correct language was taught in school is the standard language ideology.

The qualitative analysis of the comments given in response to the second question gave rise to three themes: being confident and knowing it, being not so confident and knowing it, and the reasons for being

¹⁰ <https://eki.ee/teatmik/>

¹¹ <https://www.emakeeleselts.ee/keeletoimkond/>

insecure. Looking at the qualitative analysis, it is notable that there were all kinds of comments – being confident in written Estonian and being insecure were both mentioned, and different reasons were presented, some overlapping with the first discussed question in this paper.

A list of reasons why writing in Estonian is perceived as not difficult consists of the idea that Estonian is the mother tongue or just being Estonian and thus being automatically correct in the written standard language. This idea is closely linked to the national ideology that puts standard Estonian under the concept of mother tongue. There were 49 comments about the mother tongue, making up 11% of all comments in this section. Two participants, who rated themselves quite highly, 4, mentioned the Mother Tongue Day Dictation as an evaluator of one's knowledge of Estonian, so this is considered the thing by which their mother tongue skills are measured.

On the other hand, the reasons why writing in Estonian was perceived to be difficult consist of the feeling that one is proficient in the language, but still has doubts or has a lack of sense/feeling/perception of the language.

Of course, the linguistic background was also mentioned and the languages mentioned were English, but also Võru and the Insular dialect. Some participants who do not live in Estonia seem to have strict opinions on the correctness and purity of language. There was a comment where the importance of “pure Estonian” was pointed out, it was from a participant who received his higher education abroad and does not live in Estonia. This can be viewed as the influence of both – the standard language ideology and national ideology.

According to the sample of respondents, which was composed primarily of women with higher education, the standard language is often viewed as the mother tongue. So it can be said that the language stereotypes based on status (Dragojevic et al. 2018: 30) are the ones driving the attitudes of the participants of the survey that was used to collect data for this article. These attitudes can be linked to linguistic insecurity, where the “best language” and up-to-date rules and norms of standardized language have the highest prestige and are believed to be the most important part of language usage.

The national ideology is also visible and comprehensible. The Estonian language was pointed out as a reason why the Estonian written language is not difficult at all. It was said to be one of the characteristics

of being Estonian. The idea that language and identity are closely linked is consistent with the earlier findings (Valk 2010; Vihman & Praakli 2014; Ehala 2017; Lindström, Risberg & Plado 2023). There is a tension between the concept that the standard language is the only correct form of language and the concept of linguistic insecurity and hyper-correction since the first will influence the confidence of the language user (Labov 1966; Baron 1976: 2; Vaicekauskienė 2012: 77). The public discussion about the new publication of the Dictionary of Standard Estonian (overview e.g. Vainik & Paulsen 2023) is also a very good example of the great importance of the standard language ideology in Estonian society. The general question is: how to raise linguistic awareness in Estonia and among L1 users of Estonian?

The material not analyzed in this article will be used for other articles, which will focus on the differences between attitudes towards private and public written language, the use of different methods by the participants when seeking help in writing in Estonian, their attitudes towards possible mistakes in their own and others' texts, and also criticism they have received for their use of written Estonian throughout their lives, including their school years.

Since the school setting is one where correct standardized language is disseminated and taught, and where the authority is held by teachers (Baron 1976: 2; Vaicekauskienė 2012: 77), the next survey will focus on teachers' attitudes and ideologies.

6. Conclusions

The attitudes of the participants can be linked to linguistic insecurity, where the “best language” and the up-to-date rules and norms of standardized language have the highest prestige and are considered to be the most important part of language use, these attitudes are the result of the standard language ideology. The participants were mostly women and with higher education, so the results of the survey give an overview of only a segment of the population. Many of the explanations given were that Estonians know Estonian, since it is their mother tongue, and that by simply being Estonian the language usage is good. These attitudes can be the results of national ideology, where language and nation are viewed as being in cause-effect relation. Women and those whose job

requires special attention to the use of the Estonian language felt more confident in their written Estonian performance. On the other hand, there were participants who had self-doubt, and who connected this to having attended school a long time ago and to their understanding that “Estonian grammar rules” are constantly changing. The latter is a myth, the rules of standard Estonian orthography are seldom changed and with the decision of a language committee, all the decisions about it made so far are still valid. The language attitudes expressed by the respondents of the survey can be traced back to the high status of the standard language, so the ideology of the standard language and that Estonian L1 users consider standard Estonian as the mother tongue can be linked with national ideology.

The findings point to the potential dangers of language ideologies influencing attitudes and thus causing linguistic insecurity among L1 users. As various studies have shown, overly strict standardization – or, in the case of Estonian, a belief in strict standardization – may reduce L1 users' self-confidence and L1 users may become detached from a living language that has natural variation and multiple variants, all of which are equally valuable. It would be necessary to increase linguistic awareness in Estonian society. It is also essential to learn from the experience of other countries.

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Kokkuvõte. Kristel Algvere: Täiskasvanud L1 kasutajate hoiakud oma kirjaliku eesti keele oskuse suhtes kui tõend sügavalt juurdunud keeleideoloogiatest. Käesolev artikkel keskendub hoiakutele ja ideoloogiatele, mis peituvad uskumustes kirjaoskuse ja kirjakeele kohta. Artiklis otsitakse vastust küsimusele: kuidas kirjeldavad täiskasvanud eesti keele L1-kasutajad oma keeleoskust ja millised keeleideoloogiate jäljed ilmnevad nende vabatekstilistest kommentaaridest? Andmeid koguti 668 osalejalt, kelle keskmine vanus oli 48 aastat, kellest 89% olid naised ja 71% kõrgharidusega. Tulemused näitavad nii sügavalt juurdunud standardkeele ideoloogia kui ka rahvusliku ideoloogia jälgi. Leitud hoiakuid võib seostada ka keelelise ebakindluse kontseptsiooniga, kus „parim keel“ ning kehtivad standardkeele reeglid ja normid on kõige suurema väärtusega. Võib öelda, et hoiakud põhinevad standardkeele kõrgel staatusel, mis on seotud standardkeele ideoloogiaga ja et suur osa selles uuringus osalenutest peab eesti keele standardkeelt oma emakeeleks, on seotud rahvusliku ideoloogiaga.

Märksõnad: eesti keel, keelelised hoiakud, keeleline ebakindlus, keeleideoloogiad