

**ВЫБОР ЯЗЫКА В ИНТЕРНЕТ-КОММУНИКАЦИИ
МЕЖДУ РУССКИМИ И ЭСТОНЦАМИ
CHOOSING LANGUAGE IN INTERNET CONVERSATION
BETWEEN RUSSIANS AND ESTONIANS***

*Anni Oja (anni.oja@tlu.ee)
Tallinn University*

В статье рассматривается межъязыковая коммуникация на эстонском сетевом портале rate.ee. Рассмотрены диалоговые акты между эстонцами и русскими (комментарии к фотографиям) для того, чтобы определить факторы выбора языка. Большинство этих факторов относится к ситуации: идентичности участников, удобству и цели общения), но некоторые стратегии применяются подсознательно и исходят из неписанных правил вежливости и выбора нейтрального языка с использованием подходящей лексики.

1. Introduction. Online communities as communities of practice: learning through communication

In recent years the Internet has become significant „meeting place“ for all kind of languages, social groups, nations. Being founded in USA with major language English it has succeeded in world-wide technological revolution and given new meaning to the phrase „intercultural communication“. Statistics [1] shows extremely rapid growth of Internet usage in non-English regions, for example in Middle East in period 2000-2007 the growth has been 920.2 %.

Since the very beginning of Internet access virtual communities have existed. The technical base of community has changed through the years (bulletin boards, telnet chatrooms, multi-user dungeons, mailing lists, forums, massive multiplayer online role-playing games, social networking sites etc), but the living force of communities appearing in all kinds of environments shows the growing demand of communication and belonging between Internet users.

Virtual communities generally act as the communities of practice. Communities of practice, concept worked out by Etienne Wenger, are „groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly“ [2]. This may be not intentional, but appear as a coeffect of other communication purposes. In online dating environments these purposes may be quite personal at the first sight – finding suitable partner, promoting yourself, building image of success. Still there is tendency for evolving communities with some collective identity and non-written communication rules. By Wenger [3] the communities of practice have produced a shared repertoire of communal resources – language, routines, sensibilities, artifacts, tools, stories, styles, and so forth. To be competent is to have access to this repertoire and to be able to use it appropriately. So in such environments language use is the competence to be learned and developed. Textual communication is pivotal to understanding virtual communities, for it is the means for participants of those virtual environments to create, affirm, or change shared meaning and culture [4].

2. Material and method. Interculturality in Estonian portal rate.ee

Community of practice to be analysed is the user base of the most popular Estonian communication website rate.ee, which was started in 2002 as a picture rating portal (comparable to Hotornot.com), but nowadays acts as a multifunctional full-featured web environment with options of weblog, gallery, chatroom, gaming corner and news feed. It's interface is only Estonian, so it is mainly used by inhabitants of Estonia who have gained at least some knowledge of Estonian language. Though rate.ee's userbase is Estonian-centered, the community is still multilingual. During the last census in Estonia [5] the native language was Estonian for 921,817 inhabitants of the country, Russian for 406,755 inhabitants, Ukrainian for 12,299 inhabitants, Belorussian for 5,197 inhabitants, Finnish for 4,932 inhabitants and Latvian for 1,389 inhabitants. It is difficult to say exact amount or percentage of Russians in rate.ee as there is no field for nationality, but language skills give us some sense of it. In statistics of rate.ee [6] 77 % of users have declared their Estonian skill as „very good“ and 20 % of users give the same rating to their Russian skill. In general 90 % of users have at least some knowledge of Estonian and 67 % have at least some knowledge of Russian.

* This work is supported by the ETF grant no 6147.

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Author has participated in rate.ee community since its beginning in 2002, since 2006 in role of moderator (power-user with moderating abilities). Moderator has better overview of userbase and communication trends, accepting or rejecting new pictures, helping users with their problems and removing users with incorrect data.

Texts to be analysed are picture comments (public text) from rate.ee. Often the picture viewer does not check the profile of picture owner, so he/she gets the information about ethnicity/language skills in other ways: from language used in picture signature, from comments of other commentators and picture owner's responses, sometimes from username or picture context.

The selection of language material is made of 1) comments posted by probable Russians to probable Estonians, 2) comments posted by probable Estonians to probable Russians and 3) comments posted by probable Russians to probable Russians, but in Estonian. The determiners of nationality in this context are language skills defined by users themselves (for example „Russian – very good, English – intermediate, Estonian – poor“), names (generally Estonian and Russian names differentiate clearly), school information (Estonian or Russian school), language used to describe him/herself, language used in weblog, language used for commenting others. For analysis were chosen 150 user accounts that fitted restrictions mentioned before.

The comments will be analysed and compared to see the general and special features in different language situations. This helps to define environmental language details that may have been learned from each other in interlingual communication and the ones that are universal or depending more on situation than environment.

Analysis is limited to available information: it is possible that some users play with identity or that their real-life identity is multilingual (for example in bilingual and -national families), the language proficiency is also defined by user, so there exists a chance that it is overrated or underestimated. Anyway, we can only rely on available data, considering the chance that background information may be somewhat invalid or imprecise. Still the information is quite valid as the community regulates itself. Estonia is small country and people know each other quite well, so when somebody defaces his/her data, quite soon somebody notices it and informs the moderators of the site. Being in the role of moderator, the author has received many such complaints and always asked for reason to complain. More common answers have been of type „I would like to be moderator, too“ (to get the virtual honour and power), „I have correct data myself and I want other users to be honest, too“ and „he/she is lying, there is no such person in our class/village/etc, I couldn't stand it“. When moderators get information about fake account or fake data, the account will be closed. It means that the owner of account loses all his/her messages, contacts, virtual reputation, membership of private clubs and social network. He/she can create new account, but it takes time to restore all his/her virtual „life“. There is one more reason to present correct data: people looking for real-life relations want to meet others face-to-face and for that they have to present „real self“ to avoid embarrassing meetings. This topic has been discussed in rate.ee forum and youngsters tell, that they better present their (almost) real presence in rate.ee to get real friends.

3. Analysis

The conditions of choosing one or another language were examined. In most cases, when commentator and the picture's owner were not acquainted, the commentator tried to use the language of preliminary comments.

(1) *ilus oled :) [you are pretty]*

from: male, 21, Russian very good, Estonian: intermediate, English: intermediate

to: female, 16, Russian: very good, Estonian: intermediate, English: intermediate

Previous comments, written by Estonians in Estonian: *kaunitar!!! (k) [beauty!!!]*

täiiega armas [absolutely cute]

If he/she was not familiar with that language, then mainly English was used. While responding to comment, the picture's owner tried to use same language or when he/she was not familiar with that language, he/she used English or responded with emoticon or some very common short neutral and polite word (for example *tnx*, shortened version of combination of Estonian *tänan* (meaning *thanks*) and English *thanks*).

(2) *Ouuuch, My godnesssss....you are soo Pretty!!!!*

response: *no, you are!*

from: female, 16, Russian: very good, Estonian: very good

to: male, 15, language skills undefined, but studying in Estonian school and having Estonian name

Sometimes the disorientation appeared, when comment included more than one language.

(3) *t6 samaja samaja „iludus-. [iludus = beauty]*

response: *Tänan sind;) [Thank you]*

from: male, 16, Russian: very good, Estonian: poor

to: female, 16, language skills undefined, but commenting others only in Russian)

There was also one interesting correction: commentator used firstly Estonian, then probably noted other comments in Russian and after one minute wrote second comment in Russian with generally same meaning.

(4) *oilt on paris seksikas.kuid voiks seal olla rohkem sartsu.* [the picture is kind of sexy, but there might be more electricity]

After one minute: *fotka seks.no tam egoto ne hvataet.tebe nado bolo bo bolse fantazii*

from: male, 18, language skills: Russian:very good, Estonian: very good

to: female, 16, language skills: Russian: very good, Estonian: poor

In some cases the first comment was in non-native language of picture's owner, then response was very neutral (emoticon or just one word) and the next comment was already given in native language. It is possible, that neutral response indicates communication breakdown, gives a signal to change the communication code.

Some users responded only to comments produced in their native language, ignoring foreign-language comments. This silence normally ends the conversation, as the first commentator does not get any encouragement. Neutral answer, on the contrary, still leaves the possibility of following discussion, even when having no actual or positive meaning, whereas no answer is understood as negative, cancelling signal.

Commenting in non-native language tends to be shorter, more neutral and more unoriginal than commenting in native language. Such comments are typically *7p* (seven points), *10p* (ten points), *super*, *wau*, *kena* (pretty), *lahe pilt* (cool picture), *klassnaja*. English words and phrases are very common for both Estonians and Russians: *nice*, *beautiful*, *best*, *sexy*, *sweet*, *cute*, *very cool*, *UR2GOOD*, *nice pic*. Such comments will get no or minimal polite response.

The length and contents of comment are also related to purpose of communication. In social network portals one quite widespread aim is to find partner. In rate.ee this is specially supported in environment as every userpage has a relationship status field and extra field for chosen one. One can set another user as his „chosen one“, and when that user sets him, too, they are displayed on each other's pages. Having accepted „chosen one“ is so important, that even some 7-year-olds have this slot filled.

For example test query of comments of *male users in age 15-22 without girlfriend*, *commenting female users with opposite language proficiency* gave more long comments than *female users in age 15-22 with boyfriend*, *commenting male users with opposite language proficiency*. When communication had a purpose, the motivation was recognisably high: dialogue was long, there were many mini-dialogues between users A and B and they managed to find a way to communicate – writing with mistakes, making copy-paste of other comments, combining languages:

(5) *oled vaga kaunitar(KL)=* [you are very beauty, in correct Estonian it should be *oled väga kaunis*]

from: male, 18, Russian: very good, Estonian: very good

to: female, 18, with Estonian name, studying in Estonian school

Once Estonian language was clearly used in response to give a sign of unwanted communication, to cancel communication in „polite way“:

(6) *ja tebe eshe i sovetov to ne daval :)))) gde ti moj sovet uvidela to?eto rekomendacii bili)) ja ne kazdomu 4loveku sovet daju :)relax,it's not so deep))))))))*

response: *Aitab spämmida siin :D* [incorrect Estonian: Enough of spamming here, in correct Estonian it should be *Aitab siin spämmimisesest*]

from: male, 21, Russian: very good, Estonian: intermediate

to: female, 24, Russian: very good, Estonian: very good, usually writing in Russian

4. Discussion

Background of language-political situation was intentionally ignored here as there are no sufficiently reliable statistical researches about cross-lingual and cross-cultural attitudes in Estonia. Still in analysed material there were no examples of aggressive language attitudes like „speak my language!“ or „I know your language, but I don't want to speak it“. There is a chance that users, who never responded to comments in another language, may „protest“ in this way, but based on their profiles it is more likely that they just did not understand the text and were not able to compose answer. The indicators to assume it are 1) user's language skills, for example Estonian is defined as „poor“, all information is presented in Russian and user always comments others only in Russian, 2) living area and school, in some regions the level of teaching Estonian is still primitive and students are not able to get proper Estonian skills. Interviews show that young Russians in Estonia are generally interested in learning Estonian, but for improving it they need Estonian-speaking environment [7].

Conversation situation affects the language choice a lot:

1. what language is used in other comments?
2. do the commentator know the person he/she comments?

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3. what is the purpose of text? Do the commentators hold long conversation and for example aim to get to know each other, presenting themselves and proposing to meet in real life?

4. is it comfortable to use this language: for commentator, for a person commented? Does the commentator want to create comfortable or uncomfortable situation?

Environmental learning helps users to understand the inside rules of rate.ee language politeness:

1) which vocabulary is accepted as neutral and neutral-positive?

2) what kind of response is suitable as „polite enough“?

3) how to cancel unwanted conversation in polite way, still making the cancellation clear?

In future it is possible to go more deep, creating subcorpus of interlingual communication in rate.ee and including other nations and languages. Estonian-Russian code-switching has been often viewed from the (Estonian) language teacher's point of view (for example studies based on Estonian Interlanguage Corpus [9]). Still some studies view Russian's impact on Estonian language, for example Tene Üprus has measured Russian accent in Estonian spontaneous speech and discovered that Estonians may adapt „Russian accent“ to communicate more efficiently with Russians [8]. Written Internet communication does not give us much information about accent or learning, but at the same time helps to shine light on general language trends in normal spontaneous conversations, providing huge text collection composed by language users themselves.

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