

Recommendations for the meanings of words by Estonian language planning – justified and necessary, or not?

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Abstract. On the example of Estonian language planning, this research paper explores whether it is justified and necessary to give recommendations for the meanings of words. The focus is on the general language. Technical language is out of the scope of this research. First, a brief overview of the history of Estonian language planning and the development of Standard Estonian, as well as the current situation is provided. Then the paper focuses on recent research on the meanings of words in Estonian. The purpose was to revise the recommendations for the meanings of words by Estonian language planning. The research is based on the common approaches in Estonian linguistics today – the usage-based linguistics and corpus linguistics. The paper argues that recommendations by language planning for the meanings of words are not justified nor necessary in the general language, even if some explanations on the choice of words are relevant (e.g., for offensive words).

Keywords: *the meanings of words, recommendations, Estonian language planning, Standard Estonian, usage-based linguistics, corpus linguistics*

Estų kalbos planavimo rekomendacijos dėl žodžių reikšmių – pagrįstos ir būtinos, ar ne?

Santrauka. Remiantis estų kalbos planavimo pavyzdžiu, šiame moksliniame darbe nagrinėjama, ar yra pagrindo ir būtinybė teikti rekomendacijas dėl žodžių reikšmių. Pagrindinis dėmesys skiriamas bendrajai kalbai, nesigilinama į dalykines kalbas ar techninę kalbą. Pirmiausia trumpai apžvelgiama estų kalbos planavimo ir estų bendrinės kalbos raidos istorija bei esama situacija. Toliau dėmesys skiriamas naujausiems estų kalbos žodžių reikšmių tyrimams. Šio darbo tikslas yra peržiūrėti estų kalbos planavimo rekomendacijas dėl žodžių reikšmių. Tyrimas grindžiamas šiuo metu estų kalbotyroje įsitvirtinusiomis teorinėmis priegomis – vartoseną grįsta kalbotyra ir tekstynų lingvistika. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad kalbos planavimo rekomendacijos dėl žodžių reikšmių nėra nei pagrįstos, nei būtinos bendrinėje kalboje, net jei kai kurie paaiškinimai dėl žodžių pasirinkimo gali būti svarbūs (pvz., kai aiškinami įžeidžiantys žodžiai).

Raktiniai žodžiai: *žodžių reikšmės, rekomendacijos, estų kalbos planavimas, bendrinė estų kalba, vartoseną grįsta lingvistika, tekstynų lingvistika*

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1. Introduction

One of the commonly held language myths is that “the meanings of words should not be allowed to vary or change” (see Bauer & Trudgill 1998; Trudgill 1998: 1–8; Aitchison 2018: 126–137). Additionally, there is a belief that mutual understanding can be achieved by having one stable standard language (Davies 2012). Estonia is not an exception in this matter, as these beliefs have been shared not only by the general public but also by language planners over time. They have been influenced by the prevailing Standard Language Ideology and purism in Estonian language planning since the 19th century (see Lindström, Risberg & Plado 2023). Therefore, the enduring belief persists that the meanings of words should be fixed in a (prescriptive) dictionary (e.g., see H. Mäekivi 2022; Tomusk 2023).

In 2020, the discussions about Estonian language planning resurfaced (the previous bigger discussion occurred a decade ago, e.g., see Jürjo et al. 2012). Sometimes, they have become more or less heated (e.g., “Pöördumine...” 2021; Alas 2022; Ehala 2022; Vaino 2023; for an analysis of the discussions, see Vainik & Paulsen 2023; Koreinik 2023). Different questions have been raised in these discussions (e.g., whether the principles of Estonian language planning should be reconsidered and how strict the rules of Standard Estonian should be), but one of the most frequently raised questions concerns the changing meanings of words. Meanings have been particularly in the center of attention in the discussions because there are many research papers and popular science articles published on this topic in Estonia in recent years (see L. Raadik 2020; Risberg & Langemets 2021; Paet & Risberg 2021; Risberg 2022a; Risberg 2022b; radio show *Keelesäuts*¹). The purpose of these papers was to examine why Estonian language planning has provided recommendations for the meanings of words and whether such activity is justified and necessary.² This research has been supporting the larger work, initiated in 2017, of the Institute of the Estonian Language in combining information from various dictionaries (both descriptive and prescriptive) into a single online dictionary (see Langemets et al. 2021).

A noteworthy, heated incident regarding the meanings of a word happened on 14 March 2023 (which is the Mother Tongue Day in Estonia). Namely, for older generations the adjective *liiderlik* means ‘debauched’ (it is an older loanword from German *liederlich*), while for young people, it mostly means ‘leader-like’ (it is a newer loanword from English *leader*, which has an adjective suffix *-lik* at the end). A young PhD student was publicly criticized for several weeks for not knowing the “correct” meaning of this word on a TV interview (e.g., see Vaino 2023). This is not an isolated incident; generalizations on the decline of Estonian language standards have been made before, based solely on a few example words (see Risberg & Langemets 2023).

Hence, linguists may know how language works, its dynamics, and how word meanings change, but it is not always common knowledge among language editors, teachers, the general public – those accustomed to regarding dictionary descriptions, especially in prescriptive dictionaries, as rules (see also Risberg & Langemets 2023; Lindström, Risberg & Plado 2023). Thus, it is important to bring knowledge about the nature of the meanings of words to a wider audience.

This paper provides an overview of the history of Estonian language planning and the development of Standard Estonian, as well as the current situation. It further focuses on the recent research on the

¹ See <https://vikerraadio.err.ee/arhiiv/vikerhommik/keelesauts>.

² The need for a theory of language planning has been seen in Estonia repeatedly over time (e.g., Kull 1969: 645–646; L. Raadik 2020). The last compilation of Estonian language planning was published in 2002 (Erelt 2002), and before that a book about the general theory of language planning was published outside Estonia in 1968 (Tauli 1968). A new book of the contemporary principles of Estonian language planning is currently being written by linguists and scholars from the Institute of the Estonian Language and the University of Tartu.

recommendations for the meanings of words by Estonian language planning. The following research questions are raised:

- What is the reasoning behind the recommendations for the meanings of words by Estonian language planning? Which theory supports such practice?
- Is it justified and necessary to give top-down recommendations for the meanings of words in general language? If yes, which kinds of recommendations?

Note on terminology

Firstly, the term *Standard Estonian* (in Estonian, *kirjakeel*) is roughly defined here as an artificially created unifying language variety (mainly based on the North Estonian dialect) currently spoken in Estonia. This variety contrasts with the various dialects that were in use throughout Estonia until the early and mid-20th century. Considerable confusion surrounds the term *kirjakeel*, ‘standard language’. For the sake of simplification, this paper avoids delving into a deeper discussion regarding whether Standard Estonian is the ideal language that the Estonian language planning has strived for, whether it serves as the core of language use in a neutral style, or whether it can be equated with the entirety of the Estonian language, i.e., the actual language usage.

Secondly, the English term *language planning* is used although the Estonian term *keelekorraldus* has a narrower meaning. In the literature on language planning, the more commonly used term is *corpus planning*. Typically, language planning is categorized into two main types: corpus planning and status planning (see Kloss 1969). Corpus planning involves deliberate modifications to the structure or composition of a language, with a specific focus on linguistic aspects (see Baldauf jr 1989; Lane 2015: 266). In Estonia, these activities are mainly carried out by the Institute of Estonian Language (in Estonian, *Eesti Keele Instituut*) and the Language Committee of the Mother Tongue Society (in Estonian, *Emakeele Seltsi keeleteoimkond*). Status planning, on the other hand, is concerned with the position or reputation of a specific language in relation to other languages. In Estonia, these activities are mainly carried out by Ministry of Education and Research (in Estonian, *Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium*) and the Language Board (in Estonian, *Keeleamet*), but also by the Institute of Estonian Language. In contemporary linguistics, including this paper, the term *corpus* is strongly associated with *corpus linguistics*, which involves research based on the analysis of corpus data (e.g., see Stefanowitsch 2020).

2. The history of Estonian language planning and Standard Estonian

The development of Standard Estonian by Baltic-German clerics in the 17th–19th century can be considered the precursor of Estonian national language planning. Estonians themselves started developing the Estonian language in the mid- and late 19th century, particularly from the 1860s and 1870s (see Tuglas 1932). As is characteristic of that time, Standard Estonian came to be highly regarded for its role in uniting the nation and preserving its cultural identity (see Viht & Habicht 2022).

In the early 20th century, most Estonians spoke their local dialect – this caused an even stronger desire in Estonian language planning to fully develop one unifying Standard Estonian (Plado 2022: 1092; Lindström, Risberg & Plado 2023). In 1918 Estonia gained independence. Coincidentally, the first prescriptive dictionary, the *Dictionary of Standard Estonian* (hereinafter DSE; in Estonian, *Eesti keele õigekirjutuse-sõnaraamat*) was published in the fall of the same year. The aim of this dictionary was to standardize the orthography and morphology of Estonian words and fix the literary standard. German *Duden – Rechtschreibung der deutschen Sprache und der Fremdwörter* was an example for the

Estonian dictionary (Paet & Risberg 2021: 968; Ereht 2007b: 5). Nevertheless, at that time, since the standard language was still being developed, language planners tried to standardize every other language area as well, including the meanings of words (see Risberg & Langemets 2023).

In the 1920s–1930s the rules of Standard Estonian were more or less developed and fixed. From 1925 to 1937, three volumes of the *Dictionary of Standard Estonian* (in Estonian, *Eesti õigekeelsuse sõnaraamat*)³ were published. This dictionary contained more information compared to the previous one. Among other things, the new dictionary contained some explanations of meanings. Hence, the first volume of the DSE (1925) greatly influenced the Standard Estonian by fixing many standards in orthography, morphology, as well as semantics (Plado 2022: 1092; Risberg & Langemets 2023).

In the post-Second World War period, there were few linguists and language planners in the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (1940–1991) who had developed Standard Estonian in the Republic of Estonia (1918–1940), as many had fled Estonia during the war. Estonian language planning was particularly strict during this period, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, with little tolerance for parallel forms in orthography and morphology, and a preference for avoiding polysemy. Some scholars argue that by imposing such strict linguistic standards, the DSE 1953, 1960, and even 1976 resisted Soviet totalitarianism (e.g., see Kasik 2022).

Nonetheless, from the late 1970s and particularly from the 1980s, Estonian language planning became more permissive because “the emerging generation of language planners carried an understanding of standard language as a phenomenon in variation and change” (Kasik 2022: 1103). The National Orthology Commission (which was founded as a part of the Academy of Sciences of the Estonian SSR) was responsible for making and changing the rules of Standard Estonian at that time. For example, they made decisions about morphology that led to more parallel forms in Standard Estonian (Ereht 2001a; Ereht 2002: 227–243). In 1980, the Commission pointed out that the meanings of frequently used words cannot and should not be standardized in the general language (Viks 1980: 619) – in contrast to technical language.⁴ However, this point did not reach the general public; hence, it was not a widely accepted and recognized understanding in the society.

In 1991, Estonia regained independence, and in 1995 the Government of the Republic of Estonia adopted a regulation according to which Estonian is the only national language of the Republic of Estonia, and Standard Estonian is, among other resources, fixed in the *Dictionary of Standard Estonian*, which is published by the Institute of the Estonian Language (hereinafter EKI) (RT I 1995, 79, 1349).

3. Current situation

This chapter provides an overview of dictionaries published in the 21st century, as well as the theories and an ideology that underpin the current situation in Estonia – namely, usage-based linguistics, corpus linguistics, and Standard Language Ideology.

³ Since the second DSE, the title was changed from narrower *orthographical* (‘õigekirjutus’) to wider *orthological* (‘õigekeelsus’).

⁴ In this paper, the general language (which is widely used in society) is opposed to the technical language (also *language for special purposes*, i.e., a language which is used mainly within its own narrow fields). Standard Estonian includes vocabulary from both languages to some extent.

3.1. Dictionaries in the 21st century

The dictionaries mentioned here have been published by the Institute of the Estonian Language (EKI), the main compiler of dictionaries in Estonia. The *Dictionary of Standard Estonian*, which serves as the legal basis of standard language in Estonia since 1995 according to the *Language Act*, is exclusively published by EKI.

3.1.1. *Dictionary of Standard Estonian* (1999, 2006, 2013, 2018)

Following the *Dictionary of Standard Estonian 1976*, the next DSE was published in 1999 under the title *Dictionary of Estonian DSE 1999* (in Estonian, *Eesti keele sõnaraamat ÕS 1999*, where the word *Standard* is missing in the title). The content of the DSE 1999 had been expanded by adding example sentences, compound words, and other features. Among other innovations, the meanings of 160 words were explicitly standardized, e.g., they were annotated with the comment ‘does not mean’ (in Estonian, ‘ei tähenda’; in earlier editions of the DSE, the sign ‘→’ was used for this purpose, among others). Some meanings of 9 words were marked as ‘rarely appropriate’ (in Estonian, ‘harva sobiv’) to be used in Standard Estonian. There were other, more indirect prescriptive comments on meanings as well (e.g., in the example sentences),⁵ although, as mentioned above, in 1980 the National Orthology Commission had pointed out that the meanings of frequently used general language words cannot and should not be standardized.

The tradition of standardizing the meanings of words continued in the subsequent DSE editions in 2006, 2013, and 2018, which were basically updated reprints of the DSE 1999. The wording of the prescriptive comments on meanings changed starting from the DSE 2006; they were now marked as ‘not recommended’ (in Estonian, ‘ei soovita tähenduses’). However, at the same time, the wording in the forewords had not changed, so these comments still pointed to inappropriate meanings (in Estonian, ‘sobimatud tähendused’; see DSE 1999: 10; DSE 2018: 12). Again, according to the DSE, these words should not be used in these meanings in Standard Estonian. This indicates that the views of Estonian language planning had not significantly changed, even though instead of strict standardizations, only recommendations were now provided.

The persistent nature of the views is further illustrated by the fact that the Language Committee of the Mother Tongue Society⁶ (founded in 1993), which has the power to make and change the rules of Standard Estonian since 1995 under the *Language Act*, has discussed whether some meanings of words are appropriate for Standard Estonian or not three times: in 2009, 2012 and 2016 (for an overview of all decisions made by the Language Committee, see M. Raadik 2019; Siiman 2023).

3.1.2. *EKI Combined Dictionary* (since 2020)

The history of Estonian descriptive dictionaries is 70 years shorter than that of the DSE. Namely, 26 fascicles of the *Explanatory Dictionary of Standard Estonian* (in Estonian, *Eesti kirjakeele seletussõnaraamat*) were published from 1988 to 2007. In 2009, six volumes of the *Explanatory Dictionary of Estonian* (in Estonian, *Eesti keele seletav sõnaraamat*) were published, which constituted an updated reprint of the previous 26 fascicles (EKSS 2009: 5).

⁵ There have been different kinds of recommendations since the DSE 1999. For example, the word *parem* ‘better’ is used to indicate that other possibilities of expression are better (but there are no explanations why); some words are provided in parentheses to indicate that these words should not be used in Standard Estonian (for all types of prescriptive comments, see DSE 2018: 12).

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

In 2009, a new project by EKI was already in progress. The aim was to create a one-volume descriptive dictionary of the Estonian language. This decision was inspired by examples such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Duden Deutsches Universalwörterbuch* (Langemets et al. 2010). However, in the 2010s, it became evident that the contemporary needs could be better met with an online dictionary due to its capacity for constant updates (Langemets et al. 2018). Thus, since 2017, EKI has been assembling the data from our dictionaries, encompassing all information about Estonian words, into the online database Ekilex (Tavast et al. 2018). The language portal *Sõnaveeb*⁷ (‘Wordweb’; see Langemets et al. 2021) has been publicly displaying the data stored in Ekilex since 2019.

At first, the portal displayed the *Explanatory Dictionary of Estonian 2019*, compiled by examining corpus data (Langemets et al. 2018). Other data layers have been added since 2019, such as collocations, equivalents in other languages, synonyms, and more. In 2019, EKI started working on the prescriptive data of the DSE 2018 by adding a column titled *DSE recommends* to the dictionary. Since 2020, this dictionary of general language⁸, containing both descriptive and prescriptive data, has been titled the *EKI Combined Dictionary* (in Estonian, *EKI ühendsõnastik*). Today, it is the largest dictionary of Estonian (covering about 170,000 Estonian words). As is typical of the online era, the *EKI Combined Dictionary* is being compiled publicly and its content is updated daily.

The process of complementing the descriptive dictionary with prescriptive data has highlighted some major issues: (a) lots of discrepancies between different dictionaries had to be inspected and reworked, and (b) the relevance and timeliness of the recommendations for the meanings of words in DSE had become questionable, since it was noticeable that the content of the DSE had been largely transferred from one publication to another (mostly since DSE 1976 and 1999) without systematically analyzing its compliance to contemporary language. Thus, it was realized that all the DSE’s information added to the *EKI Combined Dictionary* should be revised and updated in accordance with the findings of linguistic research.

It has been theorized that there exists no dictionary that is solely descriptive or solely prescriptive (see Bergenholtz 2010). Generally, the *EKI Combined Dictionary* is a descriptive dictionary; however, the integration of DSE adds prescriptiveness to the dictionary. Therefore, it is important to tell the user clearly which part of the dictionary is descriptive (e.g., meanings, government, and synonyms) and which part can be regarded as prescriptive (in Estonian, orthography and morphology only) (Paet & Risberg 2021: 969). This is necessary because the next DSE is going to be published on the language portal *Sõnaveeb* in 2025.

3.2. Usage-based linguistics and corpus linguistics

Today, in linguistic research in Estonia, the most common approaches are usage-based linguistics and corpus linguistics, which also form the foundation of EKI’s contemporary efforts in compiling the *EKI Combined Dictionary*. One of the purposes of a dictionary is to describe what words mean (Cruse 2015: 17), and for many people dictionaries are the primary source for looking up word meanings. In Estonia, morphology is also often searched for (Langemets et al. 2018: 954). The definitions of words in dictionaries are generalizations (Crystal 2006: 209). Furthermore, a dictionary can only give a concise summary of the usage of words based on current knowledge (Ravin & Leacock 2000). To make the generalizations and to find typical patterns, the data of actual language use needs to be analyzed (Tognini-Bonelli 2001: 160).

⁷ See <https://sonaveeb.ee/>.

⁸ In addition to the *EKI Combined Dictionary*, which focuses on general language, there are over 120 terminological dictionaries in the language portal *Sõnaveeb*.

The object of study of usage-based linguistics is actual, natural language use, which is most easily accessible via text corpora. Language is created in usage, and language use constantly modifies language (Bybee 2010; Diessel 2017; Campbell & Barlow 2020). Usage-based linguistics relies on corpus linguistics, which is language research based on corpus data (Stefanowitsch 2020). The advent of searchable corpora from the 1970s and onwards “led to large amounts of data which in turn drew [worldwide] research focus to variation and language as a contextualized phenomenon, a development which also affected language standardization” (Lane 2015: 267–268). In Estonia, the availability of corpus data and therefore systematic access to representativeness of knowledge has improved significantly in the 21st century. The data from different corpora have been used in Estonian *descriptive* lexicography and linguistics for decades (see EKSS 2009: 5; Langemets et al. 2018; however, it needs to be noted that earlier corpora consisted of much less data from fewer types of texts than contemporary corpora). The tradition to systematically analyzing corpus data in Estonian language planning and *prescriptive* lexicography began more or less in the late 2010s. (Although, the Language Committee of the Mother Tongue Society has also analyzed usage data before; see Siiman 2023.)

For Estonian, there are several corpora describing different periods of language, e.g., old written Estonian, DEA newspapers from 1811–2023, TÜKK newspapers and literature 1890–1990, and the Bible translations into Estonian. The largest corpus containing contemporary language is the Estonian National Corpus 2021⁹ (hereinafter ENC; Koppel & Kallas 2022b; accessible via the corpus query tool Sketch Engine, see Kilgarriff et al. 2014).

Language standardization is influenced by corpora because corpora and corpus tools offer better insights into language usage than was previously possible (Frankenberg-Garcia et al. 2021: 206; for examples, see Ross 1997; Stefanowitsch 2020: 18, Hennig 2021: 16). Hence, a usage-based approach is also useful for language planning. It provides the tools and methods needed to systematically observe and analyze language usage. Additionally, it enables an analysis of whether the standardizations created and recommendations issued long ago have been adopted in language use (Risberg & Lindström 2023; Langemets et al. 2021; Risberg 2022a; Crawford & Csomay 2016: 7).

Regarding semantics and standardization, corpus analysis cannot give all the information there is about semantics, but it does provide sufficient insights to assess the timeliness of the DSE’s recommendations for the meanings of words. Corpus data can be analyzed using the concordance search¹⁰ (the keyword is shown in the surrounding context) where many examples of a single word are vertically analyzed at the same time (Crawford & Csomay 2016: 9; Risberg 2022a). The preceding and following sentences can be seen in the corpus; thus, it is possible to understand in which context the sentence under analysis occurs. Hence, concordance search helps linguists and dictionary compilers to find information on the typical usage of words (Frankenberg-Garcia et al. 2021: 207). In general, corpus linguistics helps to reduce subjectivity in research because the conclusions about language drawn from the data are not based solely on the researcher’s introspection but rather on the interpretation of the language use by a larger and more diverse group of people. Furthermore, the sentences are not made up by a researcher, but occurred naturally. As a result, research findings are less biased (Stefanowitsch 2020).

All in all, meanings of words cannot be obtained from the corpus in any other way than by interpreting. Although the interpretation of the meanings of a word is always somewhat subjective, within the surrounding context, one gets an idea of how a word has been used (Risberg 2022a: 195; Stefanow-

⁹ The next edition of the Estonian National Corpus (2023) became available in December 2023.

¹⁰ There are other methods for semantic research of a word, such as examining collocates (see Storjohann & Schnörch 2016).

itsch 2020: 7–8). Moreover, corpus data is interpreted by a linguist or a lexicographer – in general, a language expert. The data is not taken from the corpus into the dictionary in unrevised form. (Paet & Risberg 2021: 970)

Corpus methods empower lexicographers to work in a more systematic and objective manner, encompassing not only their own intuition but also the regular structures observed in the Estonian language community. All these advantages are widely acknowledged in contemporary international lexicography (e.g., see Storjohann 2021; Frankenberg-Garcia et al. 2021). Still, in Estonia, there has been some confusion about the benefits of usage-based linguistics and corpus data for language planning (Veldre 2022; Vider 2022). Therefore, the discussion now turns to the influence of Standard Language Ideology on Estonian language planning and the general public.

3.3. Standard Language Ideology

To a large extent, linguists' understanding of how language functions relies on their theoretical approach (Tognini-Bonelli 2001: 178). However, in addition to theoretical approaches to language, ideologies also play a crucial role, and regrettably, ideological beliefs and opinions often prove resistant to scientific refutation. Furthermore, it is more and more acknowledged that language standardization is inherently ideological (McLelland 2021: 109).

Starting from the 17th and 18th century and particularly in the 19th century, the Standard Language Ideology (hereinafter SLI) emerged as the predominant language ideology across Europe (Milroy 2001; Vogl 2012). In short, the SLI represents the belief that a specific variant of language, the standard language, is considered the most accurate or superior form, while considering all other language variants as incorrect or of lesser validity (Lippi-Green 2012: 67). The ideological nature of beliefs about language may not always be apparent, often being accepted as common sense due to their naturalized state (Milroy & Milroy 2012: 135). A standard language is sometimes perceived as natural in certain contexts without an awareness of the underlying interests that led to its adoption – it was fostered to serve the unity of a nation (cf. Kimura 2022: 38). A similar situation occurred in Estonia in the late 19th and early 20th century.

The SLI has played a big part in Estonia as well, especially in Estonian language planning. In turn, language planners throughout Estonian history have exerted significant influence over others, shaping not only the content of school textbooks but also the understanding of the general public. As a result, the idea that Standard Estonian is the best variety has become widely shared within the language community (see Risberg & Lindström 2023: 307–310; Lindström, Risberg & Plado 2023).

Moreover, the SLI creates an impression that (standard) language is a fixed system, leading to resistance against change and variation within the standard (Milroy & Milroy 2012; Davies 2012: 54). For example, while words are often polysemous, and generally, polysemy does not hinder communication since the context gives clues for interpreting word meanings (Durkin 2009: 225–226; Brinton & Traugott 2005: 6; Ravin & Leacock 2000: 1), in the context of Estonian language planning, polysemy has not always been favored (e.g., see Aavik 1936; Veski 1958, 1967; Keelenõuanne soovitab 1–6¹¹).

Yet, at least among Estonian linguists, it seems to be widely acknowledged that language is constantly changing via usage (e.g., Pilvik et al. 2021; Lindström et al. 2021). Vocabulary and the meanings of words are changing particularly easily and quickly, and native speakers notice these changes the most

¹¹ See <http://keeleabi.eki.ee/> (18.06.2023).

(Durkin 2009; Cruse 2015). Some language changes may cause fear and anxiety; therefore, language change can be perceived as a loss of standards or values and the decline of culture and traditions. For some, language is something that must be preserved as it is (i.e., as they learned the rules at school) (McMahon 1999: 174–175; Burrige & Bergs 2017; Lukač 2018: 9; see also Labov 2001 about the “Golden Age” of language). In addition, according to some, language should be preserved in the (prescriptive) dictionary (e.g., H. Mäekivi 2022; Tomusk 2023).

Thus, with the background of SLI, Standard Estonian is perceived as the most prestigious language variant by many speakers, and it is also considered that speaking Standard Estonian shows that its speakers are educated (as was indicated in the foreword of the DSE 1999 and 2006: “The ability to use standard language is an indicator of education and a prerequisite for success”). This might also be the reason why older generations do not accept the new usages of some words (e.g., the case of *liiderlik*, Tomusk 2023; Vaino 2023). They seem not to realize that “what is modern speech today will be conservative speech tomorrow” (Kristiansen 2021: 676).

Contrary to the belief that mutual understanding can be reached by having one stable standard language fixed in a dictionary, the success of communication in the standard variety stems from its associated status and the likelihood of it being given more attention, rather than its objective superiority in terms of comprehensibility compared to other varieties (Bourdieu 1991: 54–55, via Davies 2012: 62). This raises a question about the current state of Standard Estonian.

Different scholars have theorized about the phases of standard language development, including Ferguson (1968), who identified graphization, codification, and modernization (for alternative perspectives, see Ayres-Bennett 2021). A century ago, stricter codification and standardization of Estonian were useful to establish one unifying language (see Plado 2022; Tinitis 2015). However, today, Standard Estonian is considered stable (Kerge 2012a; *Estonian Language Development Plan 2021–2035*) as it is standardized to a certain degree and enjoys legal recognition under the *Language Act*, ensuring its secure status and positive reputation. Consequently, Standard Estonian does not need to be standardized as vigorously as in the past. The current phase is to keep the standard language up to date, ensuring that its norms and recommendations do not deviate significantly from actual language usage (see also Päll 2019).

It has been stressed that there are very few areas in a language that can be successfully standardized (Kerge 2004: 15; “Keelekorralduse teisenemine”), primarily orthography and morphology in Estonian. In language, not all aspects, including meanings, are consciously established; instead, they are unconscious similar usages among language users that depend on various linguistic input. Language usage and meaning construction are complex processes shaped by multiple factors, such as cultural, social, and individual influences.

However, previously Estonian language planning has attempted to standardize every language area, including the meanings of words (see Risberg & Langemets 2023). Since the 1980s, language planning has been more permissive (Erelt 2002; Risberg & Lindström 2023: 318–321). Still, changing the course from “correct” and “incorrect” language (standardizations) to “good” and “bad” language (recommendations) in the 1980s did not change much in general attitudes, school system or the understanding of the language community (see Lindström, Risberg & Plado 2023).

The DSE’s recommendations have often been interpreted as mandatory standardizations that must be applied in every text. However, according to the *Language Act* (RT I, 14.06.2011, 3), Standard Estonian should be used in formal registers and texts. In practice, Standard Estonian is also used in other

contexts (e.g., in fiction). Therefore, it has proven challenging for DSE users to regard the recommendations in the DSE as merely indicative and not normative when composing their texts (Paet & Risberg 2021: 956).

In 2023, after ongoing discussions in 2022–2023 on the publication of the next DSE, the *Action plan for the preparation of the DSE and EKI handbook 2022-2025*¹² compiled by EKI was signed by the Minister of Education and Research (HM 17.02.2023). According to it, the next DSE (2025) will contain “vocabulary standards and recommendations for standard language”. Nevertheless, the *Action Plan*, drawing on the recent research, does not stipulate giving recommendations for the meanings of words.

4. Research on the recommendations for word meanings

Since 2019, one of the focuses of Estonian language planning has been to research the (previous) standardizations of and recommendations for word meanings to understand (1) whether standardizing or recommending to avoid some meanings has produced the desired results, and (2) if yes, then in what cases it is justified and necessary to provide recommendations (see L. Raadik 2020; Risberg 2021; Risberg & Langemets 2021; Paet & Risberg 2021; Risberg 2022a). The research has focused on contemporary general language. The issues concerning technical language are beyond the scope of this research and are discussed here only when they are related to some specific topics.

The aim was to revise the recommendations for word meanings and supplement, if necessary, the data in the *EKI Combined Dictionary*. A comprehensive study of recommendations for word meanings of words had not been conducted before; some earlier studies had primarily focused on single words (e.g., Plado 2014; Pook 2018).

In the DSE 2018, there are many recommendations that concern word meanings: some are more hidden than others, such as within example sentences or through omitted meanings. However, these prescriptions are very hard to quantify. Consequently, clearly stated recommendations for word meanings were selected for the current analysis.

In the DSE 2018, meanings considered “inappropriate” for Standard Estonian are explicitly flagged with the comment ‘not recommended in the meaning’ (in Estonian, ‘ei soovita tähendus’). A total of 130 such direct recommendations exist, comprising 44 for native Estonian words and 86 for loanwords in Estonian. Although native and loanwords were originally analyzed in separate research papers (see Paet & Risberg 2021 and Risberg 2022a), this paper examines all words together as the findings were very similar, and ultimately, all the words are part of the Estonian language.

The research was grounded in the theoretical framework of usage-based linguistics, and the methodology employed was corpus analysis. In most cases, the analysis was based on the Estonian National Corpus 2019, which comprises approximately 1.5 billion words (Koppel & Kallas 2020). This corpus of Estonian is collected every second year and is accessible via the corpus query tool Sketch Engine. Using concordance search, language data was extracted as a randomized sample of 100–500 sentences (the number of sentences varied depending on the research).

The following section outlines the most noteworthy results of the research on recommendations for word meanings.

¹² See https://portaal.eki.ee/images/EKI_dokumendid/osi%20ja%20eki%20teatmiku%20koostamise%20tegevuskava%202022-2025_16.02.2023.pdf (18.06.2023).

4.1. General observations

In the DSE 2018, the choice of words with meanings considered inappropriate for Standard Estonian seems quite arbitrary and lacks a clear basis or systematic approach (for word lists, see Risberg 2022a and Paet & Risberg 2021). The data shows that there have been recommendations not only for (very) uncommon words (the rarest word is *inditseerima* ‘to indicate; to hint’, which appears 29 times in the ENC 2019), but also for (very) frequent words (the most frequent word is *erinev* ‘special; separate’, which appears 1.3 million times in the ENC 2019). So why do these few words have recommendations for their meanings? The answer, based on the research, is that language planners have come across these words, noticed the new meanings, and did not accept them for one reason or another (see Subsection 4.2).

According to the research, the analyzed data revealed instances where words were used in both recommended and non-recommended meanings. A noteworthy finding was that, while some words could have several possible interpretations within the surrounding context, in most cases, the interpretation of a word was not hampered. In some sentences, it was not fully obvious whether a word was used in its recommended or non-recommended meaning. For example, the DSE sometimes made subtle distinctions in semantic nuances, such as between *erinevus* (which must mean ‘difference’) and *erisus* (which must mean ‘distinctive feature; characteristic’). However, despite the seeming confusion, it was generally still interpretable what the sentence containing the word meant, e.g., *Mehed ja naised ei saa tulenevalt füüsilistest erisustest kontrolli läbida* ‘Men and women cannot undergo the same physical fitness test due to inherent physiological differences’ (Risberg 2022a: 207).

4.2. Reasoning for recommendations

The research identified several intertwined main reasons underlying the recommendations made by Estonian language planning in the DSE. These are outlined in the present section.

The influence of foreign languages, particularly English and Russian, and occasionally Finnish. For example, the adjective *kaasaegne* (a frequently used word) primarily means ‘contemporary’ (equivalent to Russian *современный*) in actual language use. However, according to the DSE 2018, it is recommended to exclusively use *kaasaegne* to mean ‘somebody or something living at the same time as someone else,’ although this usage is infrequent (based on the ENC 2019 research). Additionally, the context allows for the comprehension of sentences containing *kaasaegne*.

However, sometimes the knowledge of foreign languages is helpful when interpreting the meanings of Estonian words, especially if the words are rarely or occasionally used. For example, it helps to have some knowledge of French when interpreting the verb *angažeerima* in the meaning ‘to be busy’, e.g., *Kõik vanaemad on angažeeritud* (‘All grandmothers are busy’). However, words do not occur in isolation; thus, as per the research findings, the broader context mostly helps in interpreting their meaning.

Aspects related to the technical language. For instance, the meaning of a word commonly used in general language is regarded as colloquial because it has a distinct, narrower meaning in technical language. For example, the noun *diisel* was not accepted in the sense of ‘diesel fuel’, although its meaning has expanded metonymically in other languages as well. It has evolved from ‘diesel engine’ to a narrower meaning of ‘diesel fuel’ and further to a broader meaning ‘a vehicle with diesel engine’ (see Paet & Risberg 2021: 975–976).

One of the guiding principles for defining technical language terms in the DSE has been to select only one specific meaning of a word from a foreign language while excluding others (e.g., see Erelt 2007a:

210). However, this principle has also been applied to words frequently used in general language, as discussed in Subsection 4.3. For example, the noun *test* was initially borrowed from English as a term used in psychology, referring to ‘a collection of standard tasks for measuring psychological traits or knowledge and skills.’ However, Estonians started using *test* also in other meanings, consistent with its meanings in English (‘test, experiment’). Based on the research, the surrounding context generally makes it easy to interpret the intended meaning (see Paet & Risberg 2021: 976–977). Here another principle comes into play: namely, it has been considered unnecessary to use loanwords when there are already equivalent terms in Estonian with the same meaning (e.g., see M. Raadik 2008). However, this is not under the scope of this paper.

Disfavoring figurative meanings, which basically refers to the rejection of metonymic and metaphoric meaning change. This approach overlooks the fact that metonymic shifting is a central feature allowing the adoption of new concepts when necessary (see Dirven & Pörings 2003; for issues related to technical language, see Hendrikson 2018; Temmerman 2000). For example, the noun *tööriistakast* should only have the literal meaning of ‘a box for storing and carrying tools’ according to the DSE 2018. However, based on the analyzed data from the ENC 2019, it is mostly used in the non-recommended meaning ‘tools for accomplishing something’ in the actual language use. Nevertheless, the meaning of this word remains easily interpretable in its surrounding context (Risberg 2022a: 202–203).

Also, the expression *päeva lõpuks*, with its newer, figurative meaning ‘in conclusion’ borrowed from English, should only have the literal meaning ‘at the end of the day’ according to the DSE 2018. However, in the surrounding context it is interpretable whether *päeva lõpuks* is used in its figurative or literal meaning according to the research based on the data from the ENC 2019. In addition, this expression was mostly used in the literal meaning, and therefore giving a recommendation to avoid its figurative meaning in the dictionary is not justified (Risberg 2022a: 202–203).

Similar words are intended to have different meanings (i.e., paronyms). For example, nouns *tehnik* ‘technique; technics’ and *tehnoloogia* ‘technology’ were considered paronyms although they are partly used as synonyms in general language (as in English and German, for example). Artificially dividing words into paronyms does not work in (general) language usage (see Risberg & Langemets 2021; Storjohann 2019). A real difference can be made between (loanword) terms like *metroloogia* ‘metrology’ and *meteoroloogia* ‘meteorology’, which actually do represent different disciplines.

Other reasons contributing to language planning recommendations include factors such as overuse of certain words for specific meanings, considerations of syntax and wording, as well as dialectal meanings. In addition, based on the analysis, the historical ideals or values and tastes of Estonian language planning, such as expressiveness and clarity of the standard language, have played a role in shaping these recommendations (e.g., see Aavik 1936; Veski 1958; Tauli 1968; for an overview, see Plado 2022).

Ultimately, based on corpus data analysis and the theoretical framework, it has been determined that none of the reasoning behind recommendations in the DSE 2018 holds true in actual language usage. There were rarely any instances of significant ambiguity in interpreting words and sentences occurring in actual language use. Furthermore, language does not operate by transmitting ideas through words with fixed meanings, resulting in participants sharing the exact same ideas (Harris 2002). Furthermore, the assumption that language functions as a channel for smoothly transmitting thoughts from one person to another is not valid (Reddy 1993). In addition, effective communication (inevitably) requires a certain degree of uncertainty and flexibility, including in word meanings (Weigand 2002: 64; Aitchison 2018: 132). The overall goal of communication among human beings as social beings is

to strive for mutual understanding and successful interaction, as language users desire to comprehend and be understood by others (Trudgill 1998: 5, 8; Weigand 2002: 64; see also Risberg 2022a: 188–189). Therefore, meanings cannot be objectively standardized, and thus, it is neither necessary nor justified for language planning to recommend avoiding some meanings in Standard Estonian – as it is the main language Estonians use daily today.

4.3. The issue of a strict approach to general language

Every DSE has reflected the personal taste and thoughts of its compilers (as was also stated in the DSE 1999 and 2006, page 5). This fact has been acknowledged by Tiiu Ereht (2001b: 173), the editor in chief and compiler of the DSE 1999 and 2006: “Of course a dictionary is somewhat subjective.” Others have noticed the same: “Each dictionary is a creation in which the language itself, the skills and ambitions of the author(s) and the characteristic features of its time live” (Ross 1997: 458).

This is important to acknowledge because the compilers of every DSE were active in terminological committees during the 20th century and in the 21st century (Vare 2001: 570; Ereht 2003: 452). Because of this, the DSE has been inclined towards the supposed definiteness of technical language. Thus, the strict approach towards the (changing) meanings of words is related to specialized lexicographical approaches being applied to general language. Unlike in general language where the meanings of words are formed in actual language use, terminologists try to give specific meanings to terms (Weigand 2002: 74; see also Bergenholtz & Tarp 1995).

Therefore, the suitability of a general language word for Standard Estonian is in many cases assessed based on the characteristics of technical language. Nevertheless, there is no single basis on which to contrast or compare technical and general language – one often involves the other (e.g., the noun *angerjas* ‘eel’ is both a zoological term and a general language word). As a result, labels in dictionaries are largely conditional (Paet & Risberg 2021: 969). In some cases, the DSE does not specify that the recommendation is given for technical language. For instance, the recommendation for the word *hüüpik* lacks a specification about the language of education, while *maguskartul* ‘sweet potato’ has a comment stating that ‘in technical language *bataat* is a more accurate word’ (although it does not specify in which technical language).

In conclusion, every dictionary is compiled by lexicographers, people, but the result differs significantly when research and corpus data are taken into account, as opposed to relying solely on introspection and card catalogs, which, in terms of registers, often leaned towards fiction and journalism in Estonia.

4.4. The need for regular revising

Based on the research, it can be observed that the recommendations in the various reprints of the DSE have either not undergone systematic and regular revisions or, even when contemporary usage of some words is acknowledged, the actual language use is disregarded or not accepted for the standard language (Risberg 2022a: 195–196). The examples of the verb *vabandama* ‘to apologize’ and the verb *kostuma* ‘to be audible’ show that the recommendations (back then standardizations) were provided 50–100 years ago. The usage of these words has changed completely, yet the recommendations remained unchanged until the 2020s (see L. Raadik 2020; Risberg 2021). Meanwhile, the new meanings of some other words have been accepted, and the recommendations have been removed without public attention and explanations by language planning. For instance, the recommendation for the verb *enne-tama* in the DSE 2006 (where ‘to get ahead’ was the recommended meaning, and ‘to prevent’ was initially recommended to be avoided) was deleted in the DSE 2013, and this went unnoticed by the public.

Standard language and standards are often taken for granted to the extent that it is forgotten that “standards are the results of complex and interwoven social, political and historical processes” (Lane 2015: 265; see also Vogl 2012; Hüning et al. 2012; Ebner 2017; Vaicekauskienė & Šepetys 2018). However, it has been theorized that no set of norms should be accepted uncritically and forever when new data about internal norms of language usage are revealed (Cameron 1995: 11). The data in the dictionary must be refined when more usage data becomes available (Stefanowitch 2020: 7).

Contrary to earlier beliefs that Standard Estonian is a fixed (and idealized) construct as depicted in a dictionary, it is now regarded in Estonian language planning as a dynamic, evolving language in active use.¹³ As it changes and develops, it requires continuous observation and analysis using corpus data as a reference, to align it with actual usage. As a result, the language user does not need to rigidly adhere to top-down, artificial rules, leading to a more efficient use of the Estonian language (Päll 2019). While this may be common knowledge among linguists worldwide, it has not always been an explicit principle in Estonian language planning.

5. Discussion

Estonian language planning has been under the influence of the Standard Language Ideology, prevailing in Europe since at least the 18th–19th century (see Lindström, Risberg & Plado 2023). Language planning, in turn, has influenced the perceptions of wider society where a belief exists that changes in the standard language will result in overall decline of Estonian language (e.g., M. Mäekivi 2022; Vaino 2023; see also McMahon 1999; BurrIDGE & Bergs 2017; Lukač 2018). In the 21st century, Standard Estonian has been acknowledged as stable (*Estonian Language Development Plan 2021–2035*). Given that language standardization is inherently ideological (McLelland 2021: 109), “it is mainly a matter of ideological perspective whether the ‘deviations’ in usage (i.e., the linguistic production which exists and develops within the tensions of exo/endo-normativity) is conceived of as ‘falling standards’ or ‘emerging standards’” (Kristiansen 2021: 670). Thus, when researched, the emerging meanings of words should be considered as emerging internal standards of language usage and thus a component of Standard Estonian, rather than deviations from a top-down standard.

Despite the shift from authoritarian to democratic society and language planning in Estonia (since 1991), some still cling to the notion of adhering to top-down standards (which from time to time contradict actual language use). It seems that it has always been this way, as 23 years ago, the former leading language planner Tiiu Erelt (2000: 7) remarked: “Unfortunately, democracy entails making choices and demands independent thinking. In Estonian society, there are still many individuals who struggle with this, particularly in language matters, and who would prefer the previous [Soviet period] form of commands and prohibitions.”

However, the views of language planning were not purely black and white. In the 1990s, Estonian linguists debated the status of the standard language and the changes occurring in the Estonian language. It was acknowledged that during the Soviet era of totalitarianism, the standard language held exclusive legitimacy, and any deviation from it was regarded as a mistake or an indication of “bad” language. Hence, language planning aimed at imposing strict norms. However, in the new open and democratic society, the central role of the standard language began to diminish, and the use of other sub-languages

¹³ While this has been acknowledged before as well (see Erelt 2002; Kerge 2004; Kasik 2022), it does not appear to have been followed by Estonian language planning until recently, at least not in terms of recommendations for word meanings.

and registers expanded. Yet, the perspective of linguists – questioning the primacy of the standard language – was considered unacceptable by language planners. They argued that languages lacking a strong foundation, such as the standard language, tend to disappear (e.g., Erelt 2002: 260). This underscores the continued presence of the Standard Language Ideology.

Therefore, even though Estonian language planning transitioned toward providing recommendations rather than rigid rules since the 1980s (Erelt 2002; Kerge 2012b), the views changed only moderately: the dichotomy of “correct” and “incorrect” language was replaced with distinctions of “good” and “bad”, “better” and “worse”, “appropriate” and “inappropriate” language (e.g., see Erelt 1999: 820). Although recommendations which should not be interpreted as mandatory were given, the recommendations in the DSEs (1999–2018) have been quite strong – words and meanings were considered inappropriate and unacceptable for Standard Estonian. It has been quite difficult not to interpret these recommendations as standardizations (Paet & Risberg 2021: 956).

Concerning the meanings of words, in 1980, the National Orthology Commission pointed out that it is not possible nor necessary to standardize the meanings of frequently used words in general language (Viks 1980: 619). To some extent, it brought about a change in the tradition of standardizing the meanings of words, but it was not a clear or binding decision that would have been widely recognized in the society. This has led to a constant confusion in the language community regarding whether the DSE standardizes word meanings, or offers recommendations for avoiding some meanings, or merely provides explanations (Risberg & Langemets 2023; for comments on textbooks, see Risberg & Langemets 2021: 904, 919). In addition, the language community attributes unwanted changes to various reasons, such as the belief that young people are not learning the language correctly (partly due to decreased reading habits) and general sense of ignorance among people (e.g., Vaino 2023; Tomusk 2023; the same reasoning is found in other countries as well, as can be seen in Milroy 1998: 58–65; Lukač 2018: 7; Severin 2017).

It could be considered that Estonian language planning has tried to have control over changing language by standardizing every language area (including word meanings) rather than systematically analyzing the language to understand its dynamics. However, some linguistic research has been taken into account in standardizations and recommendations (e.g., see Erelt 2001a; Siiman 2023), since one of the principles in Estonian language planning (from the 1980s) has been that standardizations and recommendations must be based on research. The opportunities for research and quality of data have differed, but the study of variation and actual language use has become easier in recent decades, when large language corpora became available (see Koppel & Kallas 2022a; Risberg & Lindström 2023).

All in all, (corpus) analysis has helped reveal that the rationales behind the recommendations for word meanings in the DSE 2018 do not align with the dynamics of actual language usage. Analysis of actual language usage revealed no significant instances of ambiguity in interpreting words and sentences. This suggests that the recommendations for avoiding certain word meanings in Standard Estonian are unnecessary and unjustified (Risberg 2022a: 207–208). In general language, the understanding of meanings occurs via “negotiation” (Trudgill 1998). The primary consideration in word selection is the intended message and the target audience; word choice depends on how the message might be perceived by the listener (see also Reddy 1993; Harris 2002). Moreover, speakers have a reason for using a word in the meaning that might be considered inappropriate by language planning. The existence of this reason does not depend on language planners’ knowledge about it. If the inappropriate meaning was inherently inappropriate, especially if the speaker thinks it would be ambiguous or incomprehensible to the listener, they would generally not use it; instead, they would opt for a more suitable word.

In addition to the research described here, Estonian language planning has acknowledged that only some general explanations can be given about word choices, e.g., some words can be perceived as offensive by some groups (see “Solvavast keelekasutusest”). In the *EKI Combined Dictionary* there is a column titled *DSE explains* where such explanations are provided for some words, allowing language users to make appropriate choices themselves (Langemets et al. 2022). Due to the unique nature of each situation and text, universal advice for word usage cannot exist. This does not mean that there are no prescriptive standards in Standard Estonian: orthography and morphology are still standardized, and the *EKI Combined Dictionary* describes those accordingly. Meanings, in contrast, are described according to the internal norms of actual language usage.

6. Summary

This research paper examined the practice of Estonian language planning, particularly the recommendations to avoid certain meanings of words in Standard Estonian. It provided an overview of the history of language planning and the current situation in Estonia. The research conducted to reassess these recommendations (see L. Raadik 2020; Risberg & Langemets 2021; Paet & Risberg 2021; Risberg 2022a; Paet 2022; Risberg & Langemets 2023, Risberg & Lindström 2023) has confirmed that there is no valid justification or necessity for providing recommendations in a dictionary for word meanings in general language. Nonetheless, alongside this research, it has been acknowledged that some explanations for word choices are relevant (e.g., for offensive words). However, there is no need for the recommendations on word meanings in Standard Estonian, as meanings emerge from actual language use, its dynamics – word meanings in general language do not originate from dictionaries (a dictionary documents meanings rather than defines or creates them). Vocabulary, being a rapidly changing facet of language, requires continuous research to ensure that dictionary data remains up to date.

List of abbreviations

DSE = Dictionary of Standard Estonian
EKI = Institute of the Estonian Language
ENC = Estonian National Corpus
SLI = Standard Language Ideology

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