

RESTORATION OF THE LINGUISTIC TRADITION OF ETHNIC LIVS: ASPECTS OF MOTIVATION

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Abstract

Livs are one of the Baltic Finnish ethnic groups; their historical location is in the north-western part of Kurzeme and Vidzeme Regions in Latvia. According to the 2011 census in Latvia, 250 individuals defined themselves as Livs. This marks a significant rise in their population, compared to 48 individuals in the 1970s. Linguistically, Livs are Finno-Ugrians, thus differing from Latvians who represent the Indo-European speaking family. Ethnological data of the 19th and 20th century provide evidence that Livs have been predominantly bi-lingual, gradually leaving their own language in the second place and therefore natural inheritance of the language diminished as a result, until it was broken, supposedly in 2013.

Nowadays we can observe a strong tendency to restore Liv culture and linguistic tradition. The present-day statistics indicate about 200 speakers of the Liv language. Field research shows that members of the Liv community recognise the increase of prestige and popularity of their language, nevertheless the main language experts today are researchers and those interested in ethnic identity matters. This might serve as evidence that the language tradition is revived rather than naturally inherited within the Liv community.

What is the motivation to restore the language tradition in the 21st century, if the instrumental linguistic function of ethnic minorities has become clearly marginalised and only symbolic aspects have remained topical? This issue will be examined in the paper.

Keywords: *ethnic Livs, Livonian language, linguistic tradition, language restoration.*

The Livonian language has changed its structure and circumstances of existence throughout centuries. At the end of the 20th century it was considered to have died, but now it is viewed as reviving. Ways of Livonian traditional inheritance and transmission that existed before are not valid anymore and everyday practices have been rather replaced by instrumental mechanisms. Livonian is not essentially necessary for the Liv local community; now it has become an object of interest and a symbolic tool to express Liv ethnic identity. There are vast amount of ways of acquiring and using the language, leaving daily communication (instrumental aspect) as the least important, while bringing the symbolic aspects to the forefront.

A 102 year old Livonian lady Fanija Budovska (b. Rozenfeld)¹ is only one example of diversity of the use of the Livonian language (*Līvõ keļ*). She can read and speak Livonian fluently, which she learned during her childhood in Kolka, a small town in North Western Latvia on the Baltic Sea shore, inhabited mostly by ethnic Livs in previous times. Fanija Budovska does not use the Livonian language in her daily life anymore, because, in her opinion, there is simply no one to talk to. Nevertheless she still thinks in the Livonian language, especially if she is not disturbed by anyone and is absorbed by her memories:

“And even now, when I go to sleep at night, I do not think in Latvian, but I think in Livonian. And then so many words come back to my memory, which would not come out during daytime, but when I am in darkness and in my bed, and when I start to think about my children and all the rest, then a plenitude of words come to my mind, to my memory. And if someone speaks Livonian now, I can understand absolutely everything that is said (...)” [Muktupāvela 2016].

Livs have traditionally named themselves *rāndalist* (seaside dwellers) or *kalāmied* (fishermen) [Sīle 2005]. They are one of the Baltic Finnish ethnic groups, historically found in Northern Kurzeme (Western Livs) and North Western Vidzeme (Eastern Livs) of Latvia. Linguistically they belong to the Uralic family together with other Finnic languages, and they have two dialects – Western Livonian (Kurzeme) and Eastern Livonian (Vidzeme).

The Livonian language differs substantially from Latvian – the language of the native people of Latvia, which belongs to the Indo-European language family. The Livonian language is inscribed in the Cultural Canon of Latvia and also into the UNESCO List of Endangered Languages. At present, the community of ethnic Livs is represented by about 200 people, proceeding from the information of the catalogue “Ethnologue: Languages of the World, the 19th edition” [Ethnologue]. There are only 40 fluent speakers (B1 level), and only 20 are ethnic Livs by origin [Latviešu valodas aģentūra 2011]. As the catalogue reports, the last native or L1 speaker Grizelda Kristiņa (born 1910) died in 2013.

¹ Born on May 13, 1914.

Livs were mentioned in historical sources for the first time in 1113, whereas archaeological data bear witness to the formation of Liv cultural space in Latvia starting with the 10th century [Zemītis 2013: 95]. This is a good reason to consider Livs not as a minority, but as one of the original ethnic groups having participated in the formation of the Latvian nation. The period of developed Livonian culture was the 11th–12th century, according to archaeologist Guntis Zemītis, whereas the process of assimilation, especially in the territory of Eastern Livs, started already in the 14th century [Zemītis 2013: 131]. Because of wars, famine and epidemics in the 18th century, the number of Eastern Livs diminished rapidly, whereas the Western Livonian area, though significantly reduced, still continued to exist, evidently as a result of a much more favourable geopolitical situation¹ [Zemītis 2013: 131].

The study of the Livonian language started in the middle of the 19th century. During the first field-work expedition financed by the Russian Geographical Society and Academy of Sciences, the linguist Anders Juhon Sjøgren found only 22 persons in Vidzeme who still spoke the Eastern dialect of Livonian, and yet he drew the conclusion that the process of linguistic enculturation had stopped [Blumberga 2013: 28]. The last L1 speaker of Eastern or Vidzeme Livonian – Mr. Gust Bissneek – died in 1868 [Blumberga 2013: 28]. Since then the research of Livonian as a still living culture and language has been carried out mainly in Kurzeme or in the living space of the Western Livs². It should be noted that Livonian has been considered a rapidly disappearing language since the very beginning of its study³ [Blumberga 2013: 32]. The ethnological data of the 19th and 20th century testify to the use of Livonian in a very narrow – family or local community – circle. The interest in Livonian culture and language increased in the interwar period; and it was particularly promoted by Estonian and Finnish linguists and ethnologists. As a response to this interest, the level of Livonian

¹ Statistics show, that at the end of 19th century there were still 2374 persons in Kurzeme who spoke Livonian. But the census, held in 1935, showed, that from 2746 people (inhabitants of villages of Kurzeme seaside) only 892 were Livs and only 214 of them spoke Livonian in their families [Kolkas pagasta pārvalde 2012].

² The seaside of the Baltic sea – approximately 60 km long and 2–5 km wide territory between Ventspils and the Cape of Kolka, which includes 12 Livonian villages: Lūžņa (*Lūž*), Miķeltornis (*Pizā*), Lielirbe (*Īra*), Jaunciems (*Ūžkilā*), Sikrags (*Sīkrōg*), Mazirbe (*Irē*), Košrags (*Koštrōg*), Pitrags (*Pitrōg*), Saunags (*Sānag*), Vaide (*Vaid*), Kolka (*Kūolka*), Melnsils (*Mustānum*) [Kolkas pagasta pārvalde 2012].

³ This community of seamen has never lived such a secluded life which is necessary to maintain customs and beliefs of their ancestors. Their level of education was also very high and comparatively modern [...]. In 1914 the Finnish philologist Emmils Arvi Saarimaa described the reasons for the tendency of assimilation of Livs, pointing out their open-mindedness towards different cultures (including Latvian) and religion (baptism) as the two main aspects that have promoted the assimilation process.

ethnic self-consciousness was raised – social organisations, artistic societies of Livs were formed, Livonian traditional festivities were celebrated, and Livonian, as an option, was taught at school [Blumberga 2006].

The situation changed significantly during the years of Soviet occupation. Though Livs were considered as a “historical ethnic group” [Muktupāvels 2008] and the Livonian language and culture was studied from the linguistic, historical and anthropological perspective, yet the culture bearers themselves experienced hard times because of the assimilation policy practiced by the Soviet authorities. First of all economically: the Baltic sea coast was the westernmost part of the USSR; it was a highly militarised boarder region, and the fishery, having been traditionally the basic economic activity of seaside dwellers, was practically restricted in the area; therefore fishermen were forced to leave their native coastal villages and resettle in other parts of Latvia together with their families. Another aspect is politically ideological: the ethnic and linguistic diversity was considered in the USSR as “an obstacle to progress” in the society, therefore Livonian culture and language were banished – it was not taught at school, nor was it spoken in public space: “It was so in the Soviet period, that they did not speak Livonian. They laughed at those who spoke Livonian at school. They usually spoke it at home, so that the children would not understand, and they did not teach Livonian to their children anymore” [Sadovska 2002]. This affected almost all Liv families: “The story repeats itself and my kin was no exception. In those times parents chose not to teach Livonian to their kids simply because it was forbidden. People were really afraid. My mom was left alone when her parents were deported¹. She was only 15. Those were such times” [Treimane 2016].

As a result, Livonian, being tended towards assimilation, lost its functionality and prestige even more rapidly; and this was reflected in the ethnic statistics: the biggest demographic downfall of Livs occurred in 1970, when their number shrank from 944 in 1935 to just 48 in 1970 [Blumberga 2006].

After Latvia regained its independence in 1991, the revival of the Livonian language and culture started, it was supported institutionally as the law was adopted granting the status of a special protected original nation to Livs and to their living territory – the Livonian Coast [Augstākā padome 1991: 4. pants]. Simultaneously different non-governmental organisations were formed, and creative artistic groups emerged, aiming their activities at the preservation of Livonian culture and language. The present statistics show 168 persons, who have registered officially as Livs [Libiešu kultūras un valodas portāls 2006]. It should be mentioned that a significant tendency is manifest towards linguistic revitalisation nowadays, as more

¹ A reference to mass deportations to Siberia during Soviet occupation (Crimes against Humanity. Available: <http://lpra.vip.lv/index.htm>).

and more young people get involved in these processes. For example, out of 185 officially registered Livs in 1999, 45 persons were born after 1970 [Blumberga 2013: 190]. The young generation acknowledge their roots, and to where they belong, and they consider it as an essential resource, where to gain strength, as well as the possibility to construct a special identity. The Livonian language is part of cultural heritage, and to preserve and maintain it seems to be important for the young generation: “Of course, I would never say that it is impossible to revive the Livonian language. Of course, the language would not be the way it was years ago. But young people see more justification to study Livonian than the older generation, who still remember that Livonian was spoken in their homes; maybe they do not see the reason anymore why do it. We have just started to collect our heritage; we have a different vision, where this can take us” [Treimane 2016].

Since the interest in the language is increasing, many new opportunities are provided. It is possible to study Livonian at the university, in courses, and summer schools now; it is also possible to get acquainted with its basics in internet portals¹ [Ernštreits 2016]. A Livonian-Estonian-Latvian dictionary was published in 2012, and one of its authors the philologist Valts Ernštreits has said: “From the perspective of Livonian, it is not only the event of the century; it is a unique and historical turning point” [Igaunijas vēstniecība Rīgā 2012]. Several textbooks, teaching materials have been written, conferences and workshops are organised, aiming at improving the language and grammar. One of Livonian cultural activists Gundega Blumberga has said the following: “As to me, Livonian has never been so developed as today. It does not matter, who would be ready to carry it on. It is important to prepare something for your suitcase, and there is always someone, who is interested, and he/she can continue all this. [...] We have modern Livonian literature, because, marvellous as it may seem, people write in Livonian!” [Treimane 2016]

Even more – “a concept of a new research field – Livonian Studies (*livonica*, in Latin, or *livonika*, in Latvian) – that is, a research field devoted to the study of the Livs, their history, culture, and language has emerged nowadays” [Ernštreits 2016].

Thus institutionally Livonian has been supported, and it is a positive precondition for its sustainability. Regardless of the decease of the last L1 level Livonian speaker in 2013 (see Ethnologue.liv), the talks about dying of this language, as the bearers of the language consider themselves, are exaggerated, because of the interest in Livonian and because there are people who regard this language as their native language, inherited in their childhood (at least certain elements), very often from grandparents, not parents because of the above geopolitical situation:

¹ For example, livones.net, *Livõ Kēļ* (Facebook), *Lindloul* (Youtube) etc.

“Children didn’t know the language anymore not because their parents suddenly became Latvians. Parents did not speak Livonian in front of their children for one reason: so that it would be easier for their children to go to (Latvian) schools as there were only Latvian schools. They knew that their children needed to get basic and higher education; or else it would be hard for them to live without the Latvian language. That is why even the most authentic Liv families switched over to Latvian. Many 70, 80-year olds say that kids were even bullied at school because they were Liv. They did not want to be different. Another aspect was that when a Liv married a Latvian, the main language in the family automatically became Latvian” [Treimane 2016].

On the contrary, the older generation did not have these fears, so most of the time grandparents became the source of information for the young, who wanted to learn Livonian: “I started to learn the language from scratch. Nobody spoke Livonian in my family for a long time, only my great grandmother did, and great grandfather, less though” [Treimane 2016].

At the same time Valts Ernštreits points out, that the mass media declaration about the terminated existence of Livonian is not correct, as there are still persons who have learned the language, and there are such, for whom, just like Grizelda, this is their native language: “The statement that Livonian is a dead language, is actually a joke with a long, long history, since the middle of the 19th century. [...] When it is announced, that the last Liv has deceased, and it seems that really no one has survived, it is always that somebody “turns up”. So it was with the story about Grizelda” [Zalāne 2013], as it was declared already in 2009, that the last Liv – Viktors Bertholds (born 1921) – had died.

Moreover, Livonian is studied by such people, who do not necessarily consider themselves as Livs or somehow affiliated to Livs. Sometimes it is promoted by their interest in history or in the specific cultural region and its peculiarities, it might be of interest for Finno-Ugric cultures and peoples, it might be also of interest to discover one’s Livonian roots, etc. As an example, we could mention one of the participants of the Livonian children and youth creative action summer camp “*Mierlinkizt*”¹. She is not of Liv decent, but she is interested in Liv culture because of her love for history matters:

“How did I find out about this summer camp? My godfather was in the same amateur group as the summer camp director. He found out about the summer camp and let me know. I was fascinated by the history and the ancient ethnic groups of Latvia, so he offered me this opportunity. I was interested and so I went.

¹ The Livonian children and youth creative action summer camp “*Mierlinkizt*” has taken place every year in the Mazirbe Village for more than 20 years now. The summer camp provides different activities related to Livs, their culture, language, customs, etc.

[..] Now you can find the Livonian flag with me in different places – I have it on my pencil case, bag... I carry the Livonian flag because it raises questions. It is not like I'm not patriotic; I also wear the ribbon [of Latvian flag] in November¹. But daily I have little connection with anything Livonian, so at least I carry the flag with me" [Treimane 2016].

The teacher of Livonian Zoja Sīle describes her experience with her students – amateur enthusiasts of the Livonian language: “There have been so many different cases. Mostly they think they have Liv ancestors. But there are people completely unrelated to us. Some stay, some leave. I had one guy Raitis. He was such a weirdo, a hipster maybe. He took Ketunen’s Finnish-Livonian-German dictionary and took photos of the pages. That’s how he learned. He needed nothing more. Sometimes he still comes to sing with us. He can say basic things, say hello. Every now and then there are some Russian people, who know, they come from Finno-Ugrians. They usually are very special. There was a woman, who researched the influence of Livs in the European context. She developed some schemes. Sometimes she calls, wants me to translate something. She also thinks that certain things mean something very special in Livonian” [Treimane 2016].

This proves that Livonian cannot be perceived as a dead language, because new enthusiasts emerge again and again.

At present, the process of branding of the Livonian language and culture is taking place, influenced by tourism and globalisation; this process might be viewed in the context of general interest about rare, vanishing and minor cultures and languages. We can see certain efforts in Latvia, especially among young people, to revive different supranational identities, languages and life-styles. Separate subcultures² are emerging, based on Prussian, Yatvingian, Selonian and other “extinct” cultural heritage of the Baltic peoples. Under such conditions of constructed identities, the instrumental function of a language becomes marginal, whereas its symbolic aspects become more and more significant. It also happens because members of the community admit themselves that they want to learn the language, not to lose it, yet it does not and, probably, will not share the qualities of an everyday instrumental language. This opinion is more expressed by the older generation:

“Well, what does it mean “to learn”? Usually, if you want to know, you just ask – do you speak? But what does it mean “to speak”? The same activist of Livonian

¹ It has become a tradition in Latvia to wear a ribbon in the colours of the Latvian flag during the month of November in honour of the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia on the 18th of November, 1918.

² See., e.g., activities of the group “Senzeme” (http://senzeme.lv/?page_id=10#comment-1781), activities of the Druviena Tribe – “Druvienas cilts” (<http://www.druviena.lv>), their activities regarding Prussian culture (<http://www.twanksta.org/lv/>).

culture Mrs. Valda Šūvcāne became angry, when she was asked this some 10 to 12 years ago. She said, “Who shall I speak to, to a tree? That’s the way it is: the colloquial function of this language disappeared a long time ago. Well, some specialists, our group, who come together, who can come and talk to each other, or the like. But this is not possible... we can read, translate, write in this language” [Treimane 2016].

Also: “The revival of Livonian has no big sense, as it happens artificially. [...] In reality it is so – the Livonian community as such, where the language could be used, does not exist anymore. Therefore the language does not exist as a communication tool in the society anymore. All native speakers, who have been speaking it in their families, have rested in peace. A small community, some 20 persons in Latvia, who know the Livonian more or less, have learned it. [...] I was also considering learning the language, but I understand that I have not got so much time at my disposal at the end of my days. Shall I pray to God in Livonian? What motivation do I have for studying? Maybe I could use it for the work purpose – sometimes I lack ability to read Livonian texts. But, for example, a normal human, who has nothing to do with it, still learns it; and what next? What to do next? There are practically no books in Livonian. There is nobody to speak to, nothing to read” [Treimane 2016].

And similar thoughts: “But the linguistic (aspect) is all around, and the language is taught optionally. Of course, the young ones are more able to grasp it than us. And I will not be pushed to write on my coffin that I know the language” [Treimane 2016].

This is the reason why the symbolic aspects play a bigger role in the case of Livonian: in accordance with the field research data, the representatives of the community admit themselves that the prestige and popularity of the language has increased in society, the wish to learn the language does not decrease, and there are people who would like to know and master the language.

These language-related activities represent the Livonian community in Latvia and abroad as a clear example of a resistant group who recognises, preserves and popularises its own communal values.

The use of language can be considered as a proof of a certain privilege – the knowledge and understanding of Livonian ensures the feeling of a closed, special community. This is communication, enabled only among some individuals; these are keywords, for instance, greetings, catchwords, etc., which are used only by the members of the community. It is the ability to use elements of language, to understand, decipher, that becomes a symbol of “being a Liv”, and this is frequently equalled to a special status:

“So it is also with Livs – they are different. When I studied, I noticed that Livs were hiding their language from others. They do not like it that other people come into (their society) and learn Livonian” [Treimane 2016].

This promotes a closed feeling of “us”, the language and its elements serve as an identification code and a symbol of belonging (especially to be different from Latvians), even if it does not function as a full-fledged language in everyday life. One of the symbolic aspects is the intention and the possibility to use it as a secret language, “Yes, the Livonian language is very useful as a secret communication tool. For example, there are several persons going by car, and one has a birthday. It is with the help of Livonian that you can discuss when and where to pack the present. If you used Russian or English, it would be clear instantly what is happening. [...] Sometimes my husband and I – we speak Livonian, but our kids eventually crack the code to find out where we have hidden their Christmas presents” [Treimane 2016]. Also: “Why couldn’t Livonian exist in parallel to Latvian? A secret language, not to be understood by Latvians” [Treimane 2016].

It is especially important for children and young people to become the “gate keepers” of this mysterious (Liv) world, which is not accessible to everyone. This is one of the main motivational aspects. This knowledge lets them feel extraordinary, special; it offers them a certain power. The young are optimistic and show genuine willingness to learn the language and use it as often as possible in their daily routines. This is also promoted by many initiatives and active popularisation of Liv culture (as stated above), as well as their positive experiences and examples of good practice.

Conclusions

1. The case study of Livonian has revealed that the language skill promotes the processes of ethnic identity construction and simultaneously creates preconditions for the existence of a subculture, which is based on language and traditional culture, thus ensuring inner networking.
2. The instrumental aspects of language may be marginalised; nevertheless it may still keep its vitality because of its symbolic aspects, besides it is just the institutional support that has a strong impact on this.
3. Aiming at revitalisation and sustainability of disappearing languages, state structures should enforce institutional instruments, especially in the sector of non-governmental organisations and education, as their impact is crucial in the formation of the understanding of the significance and place of a concrete culture in the hierarchy of social values.

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