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Teachers as Language-Policy Actors: Contending with the Erasure of Lesser-Used Languages in Schools

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On the basis of an ethnographic study of the Võro-language revitalization in Estonia, this article explores the way teachers function as policy actors in the broader context of the school. As policy actors, the language teachers' appropriation of regional-language policy helps simultaneously to reproduce and challenge existing ideologies in the school environment. I explore the teachers' understandings of their power and freedom to inform their navigation of the circumscribed choices offered in a post-Soviet educational system. [language, anthropology of policy, teachers, Baltic]

Over the last quarter century, attempts to promote lesser-used languages (LUL) through schools have expanded dramatically around the world. Teachers are critical to the success of these school-based language revitalization efforts, and two decades of ethnographic research and linguistic anthropology have greatly advanced our understanding of the many roles they play (Aikman 1999; Hornberger 1988, 2002; King 2004; McCarty 2003; McCarty et al. 2001). Ricento and Hornberger (1996:417) position the classroom practitioner "at the heart of language policy." But what precisely does it mean to be "at the heart of language policy?" Many anthropological researchers have explored teachers' everyday language policy decisions within the context of the classroom (Benson 2004; Skilton-Sylvester 2003; Valdiviezo 2009). This body of research reveals the way teachers use the classroom—often a semiautonomous space—to make room for lesser-used and less powerful languages through code switching (Arthur 2001), the formal adaptation of the curriculum (Yiakoumetti 2007) and impromptu curricular revisions (Brown 2008). Teachers of nondominant languages also play a critical role, however, in the broader context of the school (i.e., the space outside of the classroom), a domain that has not yet received much attention in the anthropological literature.

By exploring the lives, practices and experiences of teachers in Southeastern Estonia within the broader contexts of schooling, this article seeks to enrich our understanding of the complex and multifaceted roles that teachers play in language policy. On the basis of data from an 18-month ethnographic study of the Võro-language revitalization movement during 2001–02 and 2007, I argue that teachers function as central policy actors in the broader context of the school as well as in their immediate classrooms. As policy actors, they simultaneously reproduce and challenge existing language ideologies in the school environment. Incorporating interviews, ethnographic data and policy document analysis, I consider the intersection of regional-language policy and teachers in several schools across southeastern Estonia.

This analysis demonstrates how policies designed to provide schools and teachers freedom to opt into LUL instruction inadvertently position teachers as policy actors with a limited range of choices. Options are constricted both by the policy design and by the context of long-term institutional exclusion of and discrimination against the regional language. As a result of these limitations, even when teachers work to promote a language in school, they can also inadvertently help to maintain its marginal place and perpetuate language imbalance. I explore the teachers' understandings of their power and freedom to inform their navigation of these circumscribed choices. This article argues that the

“limiting” choices contribute to larger feelings of powerlessness as policy actors, while their grappling with the nature of freedom in this context—so important after a half-century of Soviet rule—is a key, but underappreciated dynamic in the prospects of language revitalization movements.

Language policy

The Roles of Teachers and Schools

The role of schools in promoting LULs is itself contentious, a fact that places teachers in a potentially conflictual role. Around the world, government policies are increasingly repurposing schools vis-à-vis LUL, giving them a mandate to promote, develop, and revive these languages instead of using schools as a tool of assimilation that suppresses, excludes, and homogenizes (Watson 2007). By teaching with the LUL as the medium of instruction, or with LUL acquisition as the purpose of instruction, schools help to legitimize the tongue and often introduce it to a student who rarely encounters it in her home environment. A teacher of Võro, a regional language spoken by five percent of ethnic Estonians (i.e., 50,000 to 70,000 people), expressed the situation thus: “The children are drifting further and further away from their ancestors’ language and culture. Many are hearing something about them only in school in the Võro class.”

Researchers and language activists acknowledge the complexity of using schools to advance the education of (and in) LULs. Hornberger points to the ideological tension behind language programs and policies promoting language diversity and maintenance in schools. Hornberger argues that “such [pluralist] policies embody a paradox wherein a traditionally standardizing education is increasingly called on to make room for and promote diversity, a paradox stemming from ideological tensions between assimilationism and pluralism” (2000:173). Despite policy advances, schools remain problematic sites for promoting linguistic pluralism. For example, Sims reports that although goals have nominally shifted toward Native-language education in the United States, the lack of financial commitment for these LULs reflects residual resistance to pluralism. She argues that

in the broader context, K–12 schools and universities are rarely able or willing to put forth the resources necessary to initiate and sustain long-term language learning. Nor do such institutions consider the length of time and types of supportive language learning environments required to effectively produce speakers of a Native language. [Sims 2005:105]

Likewise, McCarty (2003) and Romero-Little (2006) question the commitment and ability of U.S. schools to promote LULs given the widespread, homogenizing school practices of standardized testing and the emphasis on English.

Teachers’ relationships with LULs can be as paradoxical as the use of schools to promote pluralism. The fact that even some committed Võro teachers hesitate to use Võro publicly in the school setting hints at the complexity they face in their roles in language-revitalization efforts. Fishman observes “very few people (including most of their own speakers) care about the impending demise of small languages” (1995:60). Teachers involved in language-revitalization education constitute, however, part of the small group that cares about the vitality of the LUL. Many of the teachers I researched shared a deeply personal attachment to the language, explaining on questionnaires that Võro is “close to their heart” because it represents a tie to their youth and a connection with their forefathers. The teachers’ decisions to teach the language reflected a level of care about regional culture and history. A comment made by Mari (pseudonym), one of the first teachers involved in the education program, captures a sentiment shared by many of her colleagues: “I want to continue to teach Võro in the future because it’s a part of my childhood, a part of my ancestors’ culture, this is what makes the Võro area original.”

Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer (King and Benson 2004:249) argue, however, that with indigenous teachers “there is often disparity between expressed ideals and actual support for indigenous languages,” which stems, in part, from “deeply embedded ideologies concerning the language.” These “embedded ideologies” inform the teacher’s own sense of the viability of the language, of the appropriateness of schools as sites for using regional languages, and of their notions of professionalism. In part, the roots of these conflicting ideologies are found in the teachers’ own personal and professional histories; many teachers, who now have roles as LUL instructors and advocates, were instructed as children in schools where their mother tongue was unwanted and made invisible. Indeed, I regularly heard Võro teachers’ stories of punishment and exclusion during the Soviet era for speaking a LUL in school. Moreover, their own teacher education programs generally taught that these LULs could be detrimental to students’ academic achievement and learning. The relatively recent policy shift in Estonia to use schools to advance LUL instruction has situated many teachers in a tenuous position between personal experiences and professionalism, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, an emerging sense of language pride and positive community identity.

Policy Appropriation

Understanding teachers as language-policy actors requires a recognition of policy as a sociocultural process that transcends official or “legally authorized” designations (Levinson and Holland 1996; Levinson et al. 2009). Policy is a process of human interaction, negotiation, and resistance, what Levinson and colleagues (2009) inclusively call “appropriation.” Appropriation refers to “the ways that creative agents interpret and take in elements of policy, thereby incorporating these discursive resources into their own schemes of interest, motivation, and action” (Levinson et al. 2009:779). This sociocultural approach provides a holistic conception of language policy that considers both the official “authoritative allocation of resources to language” (Fishman 1994:92) and the instances when people, especially teachers, make policy “their own” through appropriation (Levinson et al. 2009).

The Võro teacher in Estonian schools regularly appropriates regional-language policy; she (most teachers are women) determines the face and form of LUL education in her school. Unlike other language-revitalization programs guided by more uniform educational policies (May and Hill 2008), regional-language education in Estonia is decentralized, differing from school to school, although sharing the basic curriculum. Teacher training contributes to some coherence across the region, but the dialect varies from parish to parish, leading each school to teach a slightly different form of Võro. In the current arrangement, the teacher decides if she will take on the responsibility to prepare an extra class, what the appropriate form for the language lessons should be (i.e., elective or hobby), to whom the class will be offered, and whether it is conceivable to continue teaching the class given the economic and social environment within the school and beyond.

The concepts of erasure and reinscription help to illuminate the varied ways that teachers appropriate policy and shape a school’s language environment through everyday policy decisions. Irvine and Gal (2000:38) conceptualize erasure as “the process in which ideology . . . renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible.” In the context of schooling, erasure has historically emerged from an ideology that rejects a place for LULs in schools. The justifications for this rejection include concerns about the economy, sound pedagogy, and national cohesion. Teachers’ appropriate policies of erasure in a range of ways from strict adherence to outright rejection; through these responses, teachers, as language policy actors, simultaneously change and reproduce the language environment of schools.

Reinscribing or reinscription, a concept I develop in this article, denotes efforts to incorporate languages that were previously excluded or ignored in education back into the general sociocultural context of the school. Reinscribing strives to make previously “invisible” languages visible again in school. Reinscribing results from an ideology that advocates for change within the school environment and a belief that the overt presence of the LUL in school, be it in cultural programs, assemblies, or language classes, has important symbolic value. As a form of appropriation, reinscribing efforts may be explicit, as reflected in a formal shift in the primary language of instruction (LOI), or covert, as illustrated in a teacher’s decision to use the language in classroom.

The Study

This article is based on a larger, multisited ethnographic study, which examined the ways that teachers and language activists negotiate the international, national, and local policy terrain to promote regional-language education. Applying a framework called “studying through” (Wedel and Feldman 2005:2), I followed regional-language education policy from its sources—“its discourses, prescriptions and programmes—through to those affected by the policies.” I narrowed the focus in part to the teachers in Võro language programs who are attempting to navigate the larger policy context.

An ethnography at the Oak School constituted the heart of my research. My ethnographic work at the school consisted of weekly observations of the 45 minute, voluntary Võro-language class over the academic years 2001–02 and the first half of 2002–03. Depending on the day, up to ten third graders attended. I spent hundreds of hours participating in and observing the life of the school—in the teachers’ lounge, on class trips, in school assemblies, and in the cafeteria, a separate building to which many students skied in the winter. Observations focused particularly on the circumstances in which students and faculty used different languages, the social and cultural environments linked with languages, and, finally, the way international, national, and local perspectives played a role in school life. Thirty-two formal and informal interviews at the Oak School with the school director, regional-language teacher, and other subject teachers supplemented and checked the observations. The research was conducted primarily in Estonian and, following the lead of the participants, in Võro. I use pseudonyms for the names of all informants and schools included in this article.

To locate the Oak School within its broader contexts, I conducted observations and interviews at more than 20 of the 26 schools offering regional-language classes in south-eastern Estonia. Most often these visits coincided with the teacher interviews. In the spring of 2002, I surveyed and interviewed more than 90 percent of the regional-language teachers. Interviews were arranged as a follow-up to the survey, which was filled out by the teachers in advance. Often my visits to schools extended beyond the formal regional-language class and included semistructured interviews over lunch with students, coffee in teachers’ lounges, tours of the school and grounds, and guest lectures to small school assemblies. I also took the opportunity three times during my fieldwork to interview regional-language teachers as a group while they were assembled for in-service training sessions. I have taken a grounded theory approach to analyzing my data, continuously comparing the data, identifying underlying uniformities in concepts, and on this basis formulating tentative theories (Schwandt 2001:110).

I adapted my theories, reconsidered tentative conclusions, and rethought findings as a result of the member checks and public presentations. Member checks, in which I corroborated findings with Võro Institute [VI] researchers, teachers and other informants, constituted the heart of my efforts to make valid and reasonable research conclusions. As part of my fieldwork, I shared my research observations and findings through three formal

meetings with regional-language teachers, two structured discussions with VI researchers and staff, and two presentations at VI-sponsored international conferences. In addition to these formal avenues of sharing my findings and member checking, my more casual conversations and correspondences with people involved in regional-language policy in Estonia and beyond proved to be tremendously useful in drawing appropriate conclusions.

Erasure and Reinscription through State Policy

Most Estonians perceive the Estonian language, a thread of identity and tradition that survived Soviet Russification policies (Hogan-Brun 2007), to be endangered (Siiner 2006:166), whether from the approximately 350,000 Russian-speakers left from the Soviet colonization, the country's peripheral position in a powerful EU, the ambitions of the regional-language movement, or the demands of the global labor market. In postcommunist Estonia, the government uses schools, as governments do around the world, as "a privileged site for the production and distribution of the linguistic resource" (Heller 1999:266). In Estonia, the "linguistic resource" developed in schools is primarily standard Estonian, but also includes other world languages like English, German, Finnish, French and Russian. In an effort to protect and promote the sole official language of Estonia, the state mandates through the Language Law (1995) and the Republic of Estonia Education Act (1992) the teaching of Estonian in all public schools including Russian-medium and private schools from the third grade.

The promotion and protection of the Estonian language has come, however, at the cost of the country's regional languages. From the period leading up to the emergence of Estonian statehood in 1920 through the current post-Soviet period, powerful ideologies and laws protecting standard Estonian have helped to erase regional languages, like Võro, from the formal (i.e., curricular) and informal environment of schools (Brown 2005). In Estonia, the declining use of regional languages in schools began in the 19th century along with the strengthening of efforts to consolidate national identity (Raun 1985). Võro, commonly considered a dialect and lacking any legal status or formal recognition, was informally banned from schools—the most outright expression of erasure—for most of the 20th century. The historical accounts of teachers involved in my research attest to attempts during most of the Soviet occupation (1944–91) to expel the regional language from school through classroom punishment and verbal insults. Võro has survived into the 21st century, but not without significant language loss and shift. Researchers report a sharp decrease in the daily use of Võro across generations (Ehala 2007) with few children speaking Võro as their mother tongue (for exception, see Saar 2002). According to one VI researcher's estimates, only 20 children in 2009 spoke Võro as their L1; the vast majority of the ethnic Estonians in the region where Võro was historically spoken, identify Estonian as their mother tongue. Given these sociolinguistic dynamics, the youngest generation learns Võro, a Finno-Ugric literary language more closely related to Finnish than standard Estonian, as a heritage language, rather than via mother-tongue instruction.

Since independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the Estonian government has shifted its position toward regional languages from condoning the erasure practices typical of the interwar (1918–40) and Soviet periods toward endorsing reinscription. The state government, in a combined response to the organized initiative of Estonian regional-language activists, the awareness of general "European" (i.e., the Council of Europe and the European Union) support for regional and minority languages, and the continued appreciation of the regional languages as a potentially enriching source of Estonian language and identity, has sponsored multiple policies and initiatives supportive of voluntary regional-language education. Two of the primary programs the government has developed to support the instruction in regional languages include the South Estonian

Language and Culture Program (2005–09) and the Development Strategy of the Estonian Language (2004–10). The government also supports the regional-language through the VI, a research and development organization funded primarily by the Ministry of Culture. The VI was established in 1995 as an independent institution to coalesce the work of a grassroots language-revitalization movement that emerged late in the Soviet period. The Institute compiles and publishes textbooks and teaching materials, organizes in-service teacher training seminars and academic conferences, recruits, organizes and subsidizes teachers and hosts extracurricular language competitions and camps for students.

Regional-language instruction has developed in the context of this language shift and enhanced government support. Since 1995, the VI has designed and propagated a voluntary language program for public schools in the region where Võro, also called a South Estonian dialect, has historically been spoken. The network of institutions teaching Võro has expanded over the last decade from six schools in 1997–98 to 23, just under half the schools in the region, in 2009–10. The class is taught weekly either as an after-school, “hobby” class, or as an elective during the school day; five schools offer the regional language course as an elective. Teachers sign a yearly contract to provide language instruction; the hobby class is paid at \$17 a lesson and the elective class is about \$10 a lesson. Approximately 400 children, or about five percent of the total school population, receive some type of Võro instruction, which begins in third or fourth grade with basic primer instruction and can extend into the sixth and seventh grades with “home studies,” a type of regional culture and history class.

Possibilities for Reinscription: Choice

The government has played a central role in positioning Võro teachers as key policy actors by creating a regional-language policy centered on the idea of “choice.” In the context of contemporary Võro instruction, “choice” expresses the ideal of the local ability to act on state-provided opportunities through teacher or parent-directed organization and initiative. The post-Soviet policy developments reflect the government’s emerging recognition that regional-language instruction merits support on a voluntary and interest-driven basis. Currently, the reinscription of Võro into schools remains firmly in the realm of options and available choices; the state curriculum does not include it as a mandatory topic or as a requirement in preservice teacher preparation.

The language of choice permeates the government’s regional-language related policies, which support the creation of “opportunities” and “conditions” conducive to regional-language learning in schools, yet express few mandates. For example, one of the goals of the South Estonian Language and Culture Program is “to create a helpful educational policy system that would assist in the preservation and development of southern Estonian. This system should ensure the necessary activity not only in the levels of early education (kindergartens), and general schools (basic schools and gymnasias), but also support and enable instruction at a high level” (Estonia Ministry of Culture n.d.:13). Likewise, the Development Strategy of the Estonian Language (henceforth “Strategy”), a research-based framework for developing the major areas of Estonian language use from 2004–10, emphasizes options. One of Strategy’s goals is “to create opportunities for the teaching of dialects in general educational schools and other educational establishments and to prepare such teaching materials” (Estonia Ministry of Education and Research 2004:40). The government’s emphasis on opportunities is reflected further in a 2002 letter to the VI, where the Minister of Education and Research states “An emphasis on local distinctiveness should come continuously from the large opportunities given to schools for the internal development of their program of study” (letter, September 13, 2002).

Choice, as constructed by the government in its commitment to Estonian regional languages, is designed to be responsive to on-the-ground initiative of parents. The government's 2002 guarantee of elective mother-tongue education in the official curriculum, which ensures two hours a week be committed to mother-tongue language study if at least ten parents or students choose to appeal to the school director, reflects the emphasis on choice. A Ministry of Education letter to the VI further reflects the government's attempt to be responsive to the choices made by particular school populations: "Our position is that the Võro language can be taught as an elective. We recommend the scheduling of Võro language in the schools of historical Võrumaa and Setumaa if at least 10 students have expressed such a wish" (letter, Ministry of Education to K. Kama, September 13, 2002).

Shaping Reinscription: Ideas of Teacher Power, Choice, and Freedom

One of the core elements of choice in this highly decentralized and voluntary regional-language program is the decision to offer the class as an elective during the school day or as an after-school hobby class. During the course of my research, teachers decided, sometimes in concert with school administrators, colleagues and parents, but often independently, the format and place for the regional-language class in the school. In making the choice of class format, teachers reinscribed the regional language in deliberate ways into the formal school environment. In the following three sections, I consider the ways that the varying understandings of power, choice, and freedom mediate regional-language policy in southeastern Estonian schools. These findings point to teachers as significant policy actors who although cast by others, and even themselves, as powerless, draw on their varied understandings of freedom to reinscribe Võro back into schools.

Power

Despite the centrality of regional-language teachers in school-based Võro education, in the context of their schools and communities, they are depicted, paradoxically, as peripheral policy actors. In the course of my research, a discourse emerged among education officials, researchers, and teachers concerning the lack of power and ability of teachers to make informed choices especially regarding the regional language. In this section, I examine the way the Soviet legacy, contemporary educational trends, and in-school dynamics combine to cast the language teacher as a disempowered, untrained, vulnerable, and questionable policy actor.

The legacy of Soviet policy-making culture, which awarded little formal power to teachers and schools acts as a disempowering force for current regional-language teachers. The potential impact of this era is significant considering the majority of teachers with whom I worked in 2001–02 had been trained and spent most of their professional lives under Soviet rule. Early in my research I heard from a range of educational officials and researchers that teachers lacked the training to take initiative and embrace new choices. A VI researcher alluded to the negative influence of Soviet decision-making culture on contemporary teachers, "Schools were used to someone from above making the decisions and telling schools what to do. People were not important during the Soviet period; plans were. People just had to raise their hands in agreement. Now schools have to make the decisions themselves and they're not used to doing that." A Võro County education official echoed the disempowering legacy of the Soviet on contemporary educators. She explained that the Soviets did not provide opportunities or teach educators and administrators how to make informed choices; this practice has left them ill-prepared in a post-Soviet school life overwhelmed with options.

In this postmodern society, there are now an incredible number of choices. A young person can choose, "Do I go to Võru Central School or somewhere in Northern Estonia?" "Do I go to Tartu University or somewhere else? I don't know, like Washington or Harvard?" Isn't this so? There are really so many choices for students. And, of course, the leaders of schools have to do more choosing as well. . . . These numerous choices dominate school life. But, in Soviet times it was different. There were not all of these choices to be made; by the way, this was not good either.

Although concern circulated about the ability of teachers and schools to make informed choices given the Soviet legacy, other observers noted that schools and teachers made decisions in measured response to contemporary educational priorities and the pressing academic concerns of the school. In short, educators and administrators responded negatively to the opportunity for optional reinscription of the regional language; in this scenario, schools and teachers are painted as reluctant to change the current curriculum to make room for the LUL. An official at the Estonian Curriculum Center highlighted the failure to reinscribe in the face of contemporary educational priorities and demands.

It [Southern Estonian language and culture education] has been possible all the time because the curriculum gives the opportunity to do regional studies. The schools are not into this regional stuff though. They want to study more the subjects that are connected with state exams. Schools are afraid to use the space provided in the national curriculum for an optional regional subject because it will take time away from preparation for the national exams.

Teachers were not only positioned by others as powerless to make changes in favor of the regional language and reluctant to challenge the contemporary erasure practices in post-Soviet schools but also often identified themselves as powerless as well. In several schools hosting Võro programs, the very person charged with promoting the regional-language class understands her power to do so is undermined by her role as the regional-language teacher. One teacher explained her situation this way, "We, as subject teachers, have an important role in the schools. But, as Võro-language teachers we don't have any influence over the school director, other teachers, parents. We're on our own." Another explained that "We [the regional-language teachers] cannot solve the problem of how to get the class into the school's curriculum. We don't have that power." From these teachers' perspectives, their powerlessness is rooted not in the Soviet legacy, but, rather, in the limitations of their professional roles as teachers. "Embedded ideologies" of professionalism and the limitations of power heavily inform teachers' appropriation of language policy in South-eastern Estonian schools.

This sense of powerlessness helped to shape the nature of their interaction with colleagues about the place of the regional language in the school. Many teachers were reluctant to act as a language "advocate" (Benson 2004) and declined to engage in a public defense of the program and the language in general. I found a sharp imbalance in the ways in which the shared spaces of the school were used by educators to discuss the regional language. The wider context of the school—in spaces like auditoriums and teachers' lounges—were generally more supportive of the standard language, despite, in some cases, the school's long-term involvement with regional-language education. In the course of my research, I witnessed teachers and administrators utilizing this space as a forum to deliver public criticisms of the LUL and related classes. On one occasion in 2001, I observed the following interaction in a teachers' lounge stemming in response to an article written in the national teachers' newspaper about the activities connected with the Council of Europe-sponsored European Year of Languages Day. On reading in the article that the motto of the yearlong celebration was "Language Opens Doors," one of the Oak School elementary teachers, who also happened to be a non-Võro speaker, delivered a critique to others in the lounge that "the only door Võro was opening was the cellar door." The

regional-language teacher occupying herself with grade-book filing remained silent; I wondered if she had heard her colleague's quip.

To my surprise, during a member-check session later that month, the teacher shared the "cellar door" comment. The other regional-language teachers in the room responded with united praise for the cellar. "Well, what better door to open than the cellar door?" one remarked. Others added: "Think about all the important food we keep in cellars—potatoes, rutabaga, carrots. This is the stuff that keeps us going;" and "What's stored in the cellar sustains us." The contrast between the responses to the cellar-door comment—from resigned silence to enthusiastic confirmation—helps to illustrate the way teacher isolation helps to shape behavior as a language policy actor and advocate. In later discussions about her silence in the teachers' lounge, the regional-language teacher explained how "tiring" it can be to defend repeatedly colleagues' criticisms of the language. The teacher's silence, in the face of endless critique, contributes at a micro level to the contemporary erasure of Võro in public schools.

Choice

Regional-language teachers identified the broader economic and social developments in the school and community as helping to undermine the vitality of Võro-language education. Teachers voiced pervasive resignation in working against these dynamics and communicated that the "choices" provided to them as language-policy actors were, to a degree, false choices; the school and economic environment works against any genuine possibility to introduce the class as an elective or hobby class with a viable future. Teachers identified three problematic aspects of the government's choice model: the willingness of the community to make choices in favor of language instruction, the capability of the school to respond to language interests, and the ability of schools to sustain regional-language programs. The teachers' attention to these elements, which I discuss below, illustrate their attempt to explain their decision-making process as language-policy actors not as rooted in personal and professional inabilities, but, rather, as closely intertwined and shaped by broader dynamics beyond their control.

First, regional-language teachers voiced concerns about the ability of students and parents to make informed decisions about their participation in the regional-language program. Underlying the government's notion of "choice" are assumptions that the school community is able, has the freedom and is willing to make choices. The incorporation of the class into the school day as an optional element assumes that students are responsible enough to make an informed decision about participation. As one rural Võro teacher wondered in reflecting on the low student participation rates in some schools, "Is it that they don't want to [participate] or that they don't understand enough about it? That is the question." The majority of the language teachers and school directors I interviewed perceived the other key actors in this curriculum provision—the parents—as not as involved in or as informed about school life as the "choice" model presumes. Although parents in the region have expressed support for voluntary Võro instruction in schools (Pajusalu et al. 2000:35), they have not been a major force in establishing and maintaining a regional-language program. When I asked a principal what his reaction would be if the parents of his students applied for Võro to be taught in school, he laughed and said,

They would never organize in such a way. The parents here do not bother themselves with school affairs. Look, if it is any sign, attendance at school meetings is awful. The majority of parents attended school meetings during the Soviet times only because they were ridiculed if they did not. Now we are lucky if we get one-third of the parents there.

Second, teachers identified the structure of the school day as an additional force working against the introduction and secure positioning of the regional-language program even

when a willingness exists to host the program. In Estonia, as elsewhere in the Europe, the school day is long and ambitious. The structure and length of the school day creates obstacles for the teacher to find a viable place to formally reinscribe the language class in the schedule and recruit and maintain students in the program. The Võro-language class, be it an elective or hobby format, is usually anchored on the periphery of the school day either after all the mandatory classes or after school. The end-of-the-day position of the class was problematic, as several teachers explained, because the pupils who might otherwise attend class are already “overburdened” and “too tired” for additional learning. Few viable options exist to transfer the class to an earlier position in the day. The school day, as one teacher explained, leaves “little space” for new subjects, which created difficulties in introducing the subject as an elective. A seasoned regional-language teacher reflected that the students “want to learn, but the days are already so full that it is not possible to force it [Võro-language class] into the schedule.” The Võro-language teacher at the Pirm School explained the way the positioning of the class at the end of the school day presents multiple problems.

Usually we have class during the seventh period and the kids are already so tired. Many still have a long walk home from school. When the weather is good, they want to be outside. There is interest in the language, but they just don't have energy for Võro at the end of the day.

The teachers also recognize the academic hierarchy working against regional-language instruction, one that contributes to erasure by positioning the Võro class as a lesser priority below other academic needs. A regional-language teacher in one of the large towns in southern Estonia elaborated, “Maybe there is more flexibility in a smaller school to put Võro into the curriculum, but we have computer classes and many other requests for classes. It would be great if we were able to find time for it, but it's unfeasible.”

Opting to reinscribe the language via an after-school, hobby class also posed problems for the teacher. In addition to students associating the class as a hobby along with the handicrafts and extracurricular clubs, which posed pedagogical frustrations I discuss later in the article, the student's dependence on after-school bus transportation complicated participation. The commuting problem plagues most schools serving a broader community because of consolidation or rural catchment area. In city schools or schools that have been consolidated, the students from outlying communities have to take the bus, instead of walking or biking to school, and are forced to adjust their after-school activities to a transportation schedule that the bus companies determine. Kerli, a regional-language teacher at a city school explained, “Our students find Võro interesting, but all of them pretty much live far away and have to take the bus home.”

Third, almost all of the teachers who participated in my research mentioned that the regional economic dynamics, including school consolidation and retirement, worked against their ability to secure a future for regional-language education. Schools throughout the county, especially those in the less populated, rural areas, faced consolidation and closing because of the declining student population, tight budgets, and general concern about the quality of education in country schools. Since 2000, 11 schools in the region have closed including six schools hosting Võro programs. Language teachers acknowledged that they have little power to bring stability to rural schools, given the contemporary demographic and political trends signaling triple termination—the end of the school, the demise of the regional-language program and, in many cases, the close of their professional careers. Given this bleak scenario, teachers expressed little optimism in the possibility for long-term reinscription of Võro. More than half of the teachers I interviewed insisted that they would continue to teach Võro “if the school remains open.” Another teacher explained, “If the school remains open, then I am happy to keep teaching. If the

school closes, I will no longer be teaching and the children will be elsewhere." Many other teachers were already convinced of the immediate end of the language program. Karl, a county school Võro teacher, reflected, "The future is dark. The school will be closed. There will be no more Võro-language program in this area."

Finally, the impending retirement of Võro-language teachers further signaled the vulnerability of the program. Only five of the 26 schools offering Võro had more than one LUL teacher in 2001–02, and new, younger teachers are hard to recruit. Teachers were aware of the hole that their retirement will leave, but expressed resignation at the effects of their decision. Annika, a veteran teacher with over 25 years of experience, told me "I might teach one more year, but then I will retire. I don't know if there will be another teacher willing to take on the Võro course once I'm gone." The dependence and concomitant vulnerability of regional-language instruction on individual teachers presents a challenge to the government's notion of the ability of the local level to take advantage of choices made by parents and students.

Freedom

Despite understandings of teachers as disempowered policy actors with few options given contemporary social and economic dynamics, language teachers continued to make meaningful choices about the place of Võro instruction in school. These decisions were guided in large part by their varied conceptions of freedom, including understandings of professional freedom and freedom from conflict. Just as choice intertwined with issues of power in decisions about the position of the regional-language class, I found a dialectic between freedom and choice in the teachers' talk about what kind of class they supported. Overall, the teacher understood the enhancement of her individual pedagogical and professional freedom to be dependent on the reduction of choice among students, parents, and principals for any alternative class format. As the examples below illustrate, these critical decisions regarding reinscription strategies were guided primarily by the personal position of the teacher, rather than by any larger commitment to or strategy of the language "movement."

Varied understandings of pedagogical freedom guided many of the teachers' decisions regarding the position of the regional-language class. The freedom of the teacher to choose the hobby format was of primary importance for many teachers in my study. Some teachers were resolutely against transforming the class from hobby to elective format. For these educators, a degree of formality accompanied an elective class. As an elective, the teacher understood that she would have to teach Võro like a "regular" (i.e., mandated) class; and this would require her to organize the class, as Sophia described, "in a totally different way with more of an academic focus." With a hobby class, teachers found more freedom to develop the curriculum. In many cases, the hobby teachers wanted the freedom to engage in a more arts-based approach to language study. Anu captured this sentiment, "I want to continue [teaching] with the way I have been doing it: this means not in formal classes, but free to teach through the children's art, plays, and activities connected with their home culture." The Sidrun School teacher explained that the hobby format of the class freed her and her students from the requirements and, often, dulling routine of elective classes. She stated simply, "That which is optional is good." Two teachers asserted that if the class were ever to become mandatory, they would give up regional language teaching all together.

The notion of pedagogical freedom was also crucial to teachers who were supportive of the elective-class format. For these educators, the most important elements of an elective class were freedom from the distracting and bothersome dynamics associated with teaching a hobby class including irregular attendance, the need to reteach weekly lessons, the repetition of announcements, the string of explanations for absence. In short, the elective

teachers wanted freedom to have her class treated as if it mattered and was akin to a regular subject class. Unlike their hobby-class colleagues, these teachers found it appealing that the elective class, once inserted into the school-day curriculum, became a *de facto* mandatory class. In these elective-class schools, the teachers worked in a more supportive environment where colleagues and the school director tended to recognize the value of reinscribing the regional-language class back into the school. The elective teachers explained that the place of the class in the school day transformed its significance for students and the seriousness with which they approached the subject.

For example, at the Oak School, where the regional-language class was incorporated into the 2002–03 school schedule as an elective, the Võro teacher praised the “freedom” of that format. In large part, the elective status provided fewer opportunities for students to treat the class lightly. My field notes from the last day of regional-language class during the 2001–02 school year, when it was a hobby class, and the greeting on the first day of class during the 2002–03 school year, when it became an elective, illustrate the way the Oak School teacher communicated to the students how the new class format would take on different significance for them and their future language study.

Student: What happens next year with our [Võro] class?

Teacher: Next year we will have Võro as an official class like Russian, English. It won't be your choice if you come or not. Everyone will have to come. [Fieldnotes, May 2002]

Teacher: This year we have a new workbook, a new competition, and a new school. Last year this class was a hobby-class. Now we have a fourth grade classroom and will study Võro regularly. Everyone will be in class; everyone will have their books. In two years, when you are in sixth grade we will start studying Võro with the local history and culture textbook. [Fieldnotes, September 2002]

This vignette captures the conversational strategies used by the teacher to develop an association between the class type and student expectations. She equates the regional-language class with the other foreign-language classes and refers to it as an “official” class to establish new class norms regarding attendance and materials. The position of the class within the school day also allows the teacher to speak about the future in a more decisive way. She projects the regional-language studies into the future introducing a program of regional-language study that extends through sixth grade.

I observed a similar representation of time and place with other teachers who hoped that the elective format would influence the students' relationship to the class. The Maasika School Võro-language teacher explained that she managed to have the regional-language class positioned in the middle of the school day. With a smile she shared the logic behind the reordering of the school day with the Võro class buttressed on both sides by mandatory classes: “The students do not have any choice, but to attend the class. Where else would they go? It's the middle of the school day.” In this case and the one above, the teachers acted purposefully to reinscribe the regional-language class in an overt way that would promote participation and influence the perception of its academic intent.

The second understanding of freedom, which surfaced in interviews and discussions with teachers, was freedom from conflict; a position that typically led to teacher support for the hobby-class format. In effect, the hobby position allowed the teacher to offer the class directly to the students, effectively bypassing a series of authoritative approvals. These teachers recognized genuine value in having the class be “invisible”; with the hobby format it was possible to tack a Võro-language class onto the end of the school day without a great deal of attention from potentially unsupportive teachers, principals or parents. This kind of “quiet” teaching of the regional language, an approach centered on the minimal sharing of information about the class, was a reinscription strategy used in several Võrumaa schools.

This strategy called for Võro-language teachers to share only as much information as they needed to keep the program alive and avoid confrontation. A teacher at a city school explained that “The school principal doesn’t know much about this class. He knows that there is some after school class, but that’s about it. That’s all he should know.” This approach to reinscription—to keep the class quiet and invisible—was facilitated by the payment structure for the teachers. Until 2006, and during the time I conducted most of this research, the teacher’s contract for regional-language instruction was signed either between the teacher and the VI or among the teacher, the local borough, and the VI, allowing for the possibility, as the VI Education Coordinator put it, for the class to be more or less “invisible” to directors of schools where the regional-language teaching took place. After 2006, the contract system changed calling for three parties—the school, the VI, and the borough head—to sign the teacher’s contracts thus bringing more visibility to the class.

The hobby status of the class also provided “freedom” from potential conflict with parents. One language teacher’s encounter with parents captures the perceived additional freedoms at the margins of the school day.

I made a mistake in the beginning. I sent home a letter and let the students’ parents decide [whether they wanted their children to learn Võro]. That was an immediate hang-up. I mean the kids all want to learn it, but the children’s parents don’t. Well, this is the attitude. Then I realized that I had made a mistake. I shouldn’t have written the letter at all. The children’s parents could hear afterwards that there is the hobby course. Students choose their own hobby classes, they are free to do that; the parents don’t have to agree to it. I tried to be too democratic when I began to ask.

This vignette illustrates the teacher’s understanding that a hobby class will not only help to preserve student choice but also will protect the teacher from parental dissent. She discovers the need to set limits to her democratic impulses to communicate with parents to keep the language class alive in the school.

Erasure and Reinscription in Teachers’ Everyday Language Policy Appropriation

The ethnographic research discussed in this article helps to address the question posed in the introduction: what does it mean for teachers to be “at the heart of language policy?” (Ricento and Hornberger 1996:417) In the “contested” linguistic space (Pavlenko 2008:275) of post-Soviet Estonia, I found that many teachers played a complex role as language-policy actors: although teachers constituted the common foundation of the school-based regional language movement, their varying understandings of power, choice and freedom led to a wide range of reinscription and erasure strategies. The erasure practices of the Soviet era—informal bans, student punishment, ridicule—have ended, but the reinscription practices typical of the current period of independence have led to a limited reintroduction of the language in schools. In this discussion, I consider the role of the state’s choice program of voluntary language reinscription, the sociocultural context of the broader school environment, and the concept of protective erasure in shaping the expressions of everyday language-policy appropriation by teachers.

This article highlights the problematic role of government-supported choice programs in language-revival education. Regional-language policy in Estonia both opens and restricts—or as Johnson (2010:76) characterizes it—creates and closes, educational opportunities and spaces for language learning. Government policies, guided by the ethos of choice, support voluntary reinscription, the broadly conceived approach allowing both for optional language learning formats (i.e., hobby or elective class) and for teachers to tailor language education based on their own sense of appropriate pedagogy and the needs of a school. These state-backed programs, in some sites, limit reinscription possibilities and

effectively support new forms of LUL erasure in Estonian schools. The state's choice approach reinforces the notion that subjects constructed as choices (or optional) are intrinsically less important than those subjects that are deemed mandatory. Furthermore, the urgency of the compulsory presses on the space for the optional, relegating language education to the margins of the school day or forcing students to choose classes within an academic hierarchy.

Teachers responded differently to the state-backed choice paradigm. I found some LUL teachers unwittingly helped to reproduce ideologies of the regional language as "the lesser important subject" by limiting discussions about the language class with key stakeholders (i.e., parents and administrators) and maintaining the vulnerable after-school position of LUL learning. Although teachers grounded these decisions on pragmatic and pedagogical grounds, they nevertheless helped to position the regional-language class as invisible in some sites. Other language teacher participants, however, challenged this ideology by positioning and presenting the elective LUL language class as a "regular" (i.e., nonelective) subject. These teachers strove to cultivate positive perceptions of the LUL in school through the deliberate scheduling of the elective class between mandatory subjects and by explicitly referring to the class as mandatory with students. Across my research sites, teachers felt that the genuine "choice" to reinscribe freely and to participate in regional-language education was limited; they identified key demographic, economic, and school-based obstacles to the robust and long-term development of the language program.

These findings further the understanding, developed in recent research (Johnson 2010; Varghese 2008), of teachers as "active agents" in language-policy appropriation. In the decentralized regional language-policy framework of Estonia, teachers negotiate a place and space for language instruction within an often ideologically charged sociocultural context. Similar to other heritage-language programs around the world, Estonian regional-language teachers work within a context of "complicated, potentially conflicting language ideologies within the community" (King 2004:342). My research illustrates the particular challenges of operating as a language actor in the broader spaces of school. Outside of the semiautonomous confines of the classroom, other spaces in the school—the teachers' lounge, the hallways, the auditorium—involve a public questioning and accounting of one's activities and their values. In essence, policy decisions must be justified and defended. The broader contexts of schools open opportunities for school staff to perpetuate ideologies of diminished language value. Suina also found a similar dynamic in his research on Pueblo native-language teachers, where select teachers advanced the notion that "Native language teaching is a lesser goal" (2004:298). Within these broad school spaces, language critiques and questions are raised, often in heated terms. The cellar episode in the teachers' lounge reflects the charged ideological terrain of shared teacher space. Teachers who embrace the choice to participate in the language revival may be subject to public rebuke from their fellow teachers, and may silence themselves particularly in schools with only one regional-language teacher. Even an ostensibly private decision for one's own classroom, permitted under the auspices of choice, becomes public when the students discuss what is done, and when colleagues directly challenge teachers about positions on language-related matters.

Within this complex ideological environment, teachers appropriated language policy through various strategies of reinscription including protective erasure. Teachers involved in my research found the professional and pedagogical freedoms of the voluntary reinscription approach to be central for their continued participation in the educational program. Voluntary reinscription opened up a range of possibilities for teachers to challenge past exclusionary language ideologies through (1) the introduction of a language-education class, either in hobby or elective format, and (2) the flexibility to craft creative solutions to resistant students or colleagues as seen in the deliberate positioning of the

class either after school or in the middle of the day. Of particular note in this research was the noticeable strategy of “protective erasure,” or covert reinscription—at work in schools. Whereas standard erasure strategies aim to exclude a language from the school environment through formal bans, official reprimands, and expressions of contempt for the language, protective erasure strives to preserve a place for an LUL in schools, but on limited terms; in restricting the LUL’s presence in school through scheduling, student participation or teacher discourse, possibilities for continued instruction can be preserved. Strategies undergirded by protective erasure attempt to shelter the language, and many times, more importantly, the teacher, from potentially nonsupportive individuals. I found that this protective ideology shaped the following categories of teacher appropriation of policy: offering instruction afterschool; opting for silence in the face of public language criticism; and limiting communication with potentially unsupportive parents. These strategies maintain the invisibility of LULs in new ways that are distinct from past erasure policies. Teachers’ approaches to protective erasure keep LULs in the margins of school life—both literally and ideologically—through attempts to avoid confrontations with contrary administrators, colleagues and parents.

Finally, this research has implications for policy planning and teacher support. The Estonian government’s support for policies of voluntary reinscription positions often-reluctant, regional-language teachers as the primary advocates for school-based LUL instruction, and it does so without any support on how to cope with community, colleague or administrator opposition. Although some teachers readily embrace this role and work to promote a new space for the language in the school, others seek a less political engagement with language teaching and avoid the role of the language educator-activist. Given this dynamic, LUL instruction remains vulnerable and dependent on an individual teacher’s commitments and professional and personal relationships within the school. To secure the long-term role and future of the regional-language in school, networks of support need to be provided for current teachers who work to challenge the existing language ideologies in schools. Likewise, if policy actors other than teachers, including the VI, language NGOs, and the state, shoulder some of the hard work and burden to expose reluctant school administrators or colleagues to the value of LUL instruction in school, then this could bolster reinscription efforts. Finally, a preservice and in-service LUL teacher-mentoring program could help to work against an unwitting slide back to erasure practices by ensuring a flow of new language teachers into schools and exposing active teachers to a range of reinscription practices for adaptation or borrowing. Hornberger’s observation that “language and literacy practices . . . may be sites of negotiation and transformation of [social and power] . . . hierarchies” (1998:453) resonates with this Estonian case. Renewed support, both professional and ideological, for LUL teachers can enhance their ability to navigate their roles as policy actors and assist in their efforts to transform the school environment through language reinscription.

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