

Reusing pedagogical resources for reclaiming dormant varieties

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Dormant languages are characterised by no active speaking community but a potential for renewed interest in learning (about) the language by heritage speakers. There are several challenges associated with the provision of educational materials, which straddle several areas of language planning: The materials have to allow for meaningful engagement with the language (acquisition), clarify restrictions and opportunities for expanding the language to new domains (status, corpus, domain), and raise the desire to learn more about the language by fostering a positive perception of the language and its speaking community (prestige). This is further compounded by sociolinguistic settings where there is no clearly defined community, or the precise local ethnolinguistic identity has been superseded by a dominant language or variety of the same language. The present paper outlines preliminaries and opportunities for the reclamation of the dormant Kraasna variety of the South Estonian language. This linguistic enclave on the territory of the present-day Russian Federation (Pskov Oblast') declined before WWII, with rememberers of the language still found in the 1960s. While academic interest in this language has spiked in recent years (Balodis & Pajusalu 2021), there has been no language activism or desire to tie the local identity to the dormant language – any academic publications or edition of materials must not preclude the community's opportunity to repurpose them for language reclamation. At the same time, academic discourse and philological work on Kraasna is mostly carried out on the basis of Estonian or South Estonian, following their scholarly traditions, which may be inaccessible or be foreign to the Russian-centered Kraasna community. Nevertheless, any tools and resources that are created for a South Estonian audience (most notably recent advances in NLP for Võro and Seto) may serve as reference point for pedagogical materials for non-standard varieties and learners outside of institutional settings.

This paper discusses opportunities for adapting sources and tools to enrich materials for other South Estonian varieties, in order to make them useful for language reclamation. In addition to the focus on digital tools, an emphasis will be put on the development of literacies and competences for accessing and using these materials, as a necessary skill set for interacting with scholarly publications and language data. While there is no current demand for the reclamation of Kraasna, the neighbouring South Estonian Lutsi enclave in Latvia has shown renewed interest in their dormant local language (Balodis 2019)

References

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