References

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To the best of my knowledge, this is the first English language book specifically dedicated to language contacts in one of the post-Soviet Baltic countries. Anna Verschik offers a comprehensive overview of Russian–Estonian language contacts in present-day Estonia and of contact-induced language changes in Estonia’s Russian. Her book is comprised of six chapters along with lists of abbreviations and transliteration of Russian, an introduction, notes, a bibliography, and an index.

What makes Verschik’s research of Russian–Estonian language contacts particularly interesting is the context in which they have been occurring, namely the turbulent transition from Soviet to post-Soviet independent Estonia. The Russian–Estonian contacts have a long history, which Verschik outlines in Chapter 2. Rapid changes in the Russian–Estonian sociolinguistic situation happened in 1989–1991 when Estonia became independent. Since that time more and more Russian speakers have begun to study Estonian, which in turn gave rise to phenomena discussed in this book.

In Chapter 3, the author thoroughly reviews pertinent literature, examines relevant theoretical questions in contemporary contact linguistics, and provides theoretical background for her study, drawing on Johanson’s (1993) code-copying model principles. She also offers a modified code-copying model based on her own data.

In Chapter 4, Verschik presents an analysis of code-copying in Estonian compound nouns of the type N NOM+N NOM and N GEN+N NOM, in Estonian analytic verbs, and in discourse-pragmatic words (DPWs). She argues that copying of the first two illustrates the salience and attractiveness of the analytic constructions for the local Russian speakers. Verschik also highlights ways in which Estonian DPWs in Russian are different from other contact situations where speakers of contracting languages are bilinguals or where copied DPWs, along with other borrowed items are used in the in-group communication. In the future, it might be interesting to study whether the attractiveness of DPWs is dependent on purely structural characteristics or whether it has sociolinguistic and cognitive dimensions as well.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to instances of code-copying which are turning into distinct patterns of bilingual communication. The first strategy appears in Russian–Estonian
contact and constitutes a compromise strategy where Estonian functions to express politeness and solidarity toward an interlocutor with the Estonian mother tongue (see also Verschik 2005). The other approach appears in Russian-to-Russian communication among Russian–Estonian bilinguals. Subsection 5.1 provides numerous samples of jocular relexification, i.e. where Estonian stems are inserted into the Russian grammatical frame deliberately for humorous purposes. The author also touches upon the topic of code-copying of graphic properties in written texts.

The book ends with Conclusions (Chapter 6). Here, Verschik discusses the strong points of Johanson’s model, i.e. the incorporation of sociolinguistic factors and the distinction between sociolinguistic dominance and dominance in language proficiency.

Regardless of its small territory and number of people, Estonia offers a lot of challenges for a scholar who does research on bilingualism. These include an internal diversity within the Russian-language community (indigenous group vs. Soviet-era newcomers and their descendants), regional variation in language environments, inter-generational differences in language knowledge, etc. To reflect this diversity, the bilingual data the author analyzes come from several sources, an approach that has its pros and cons. On the one hand, it allows the reader to get familiar with common language patterns used by bilingual speakers during TV broadcasts, in a university with Estonian as a language of instruction or in spontaneous speech produced by ordinary people while shopping. This new linguistic knowledge will undoubtedly enrich contact linguists’ understanding of language contact mechanisms and particularly of contact-induced changes that occur so massively in Estonia’s Russian. On the other hand, a critical contact linguist might ask if such a broad variety of data allow the author to draw reliable conclusions and to suggest any model that could subsume all existing phenomena in any type of bilingual speech.

Nevertheless, the author’s observations of a contemporary and very dynamic language situation are important because of the uniqueness of the contact situation studied. What is more, Verschik does not tend to provide any universal model or constraint and that is why multifaceted data add richness to her grammatical analyses of code-copying phenomena. I would also mention that the book is well-organized and the data are clearly laid out. Throughout, terminology specific to studies on code-copying is explained where used, which makes the book very accessible for graduate students.

References


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