

Intercultural Language Trends at a Quadriethnic English-medium University in the Baltics

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Abstract

This article examines intercultural communication in the context of student social life at the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga. The undergraduate students at this institution represent all four major ethno-linguistic groups of the Baltics, their native languages being Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian and/or Russian. All of them are also fluent speakers of English, the only study language of the university. Through the analysis of survey and interview data, their trends in language choices and perceptions are established with an eye towards possible future developments in the increasingly English-savvy Baltics. A sociocultural synopsis of the Baltics is provided at the beginning of the article to aid readers not yet acquainted with the region.

Keywords: Baltics, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, intercultural communication, English, Russian, lingua franca

Introduction: The Baltics

In the near future, geographic proximity is likely to remain the most significant unifying factor for the three nations of the Baltics: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The principal ethno-linguistic groups of the region speak mutually unintelligible languages and observe widely divergent traditions. Intermittently, they have been touched by the same cultural currents, but this tends to have a distinctly negative connotation. As Toomas Hendrik Ilves, now the president of Estonia, famously proclaimed during his office as Minister of Foreign Affairs:

What the three Baltic States have in common almost completely derives from shared unhappy experiences imposed upon us from outside: occupations, deportations, annexation, Sovietization, collectivization, Russification. What these countries do not share is a common identity. (1999)

Though the last statement may be somewhat hyperbolic, it is true that since post-Soviet independence and accession to the EU, residents of the Baltic nations, while travelling to Western Europe for work and vacation, have been strikingly uninterested in one another, so that two Lithuanian scholars, Alvydas Butkus and Leonidas Donskis, are worried that "soon [...] in Latvia we will feel as if we are in a more distant place than the United Kingdom or Ireland" (2006: 190). This may already be the case for some young residents of urban centres, coming of age at a time when it is more convenient to take cheap airlines such as Ryanair and EasyJet to London and Berlin than a half-day bus trip to the capital of a neighbouring Baltic country.

Even so, there is no reason to believe that the trend of mutual disregard will carry on indefinitely. As the newness of Western Europe wears off, salaries rise and infrastructure improves, there will be considerably less reason to leave the region. At the same time, the memory of forced union under Soviet rule – that is, the sense of having been united in humiliation more than anything else – is likely to fade, opening the way for mutual curiosity that goes beyond political and economic interests. This leaves the question as to what language choices future generations of Balts will make for intercultural communication.

Baltic[1] Ethno-linguistic Groups

This study will refer to four ethno-linguistic groups: ethnic Estonians, ethnic Latvians, ethnic Lithuanians and Russophones. These are by no means the only ethno-linguistic groups found in the Baltics, but they are by far the most numerous.

Ethnic Estonians, the northernmost Baltic people, speak a Finno-Ugric language closely related to Finnish. Along with certain pre-Soviet historical contacts, this ethno-linguistic tie to Scandinavia has led to the standpoint, contemplated by President Ilves himself (1999), that ethnic Estonians belong more to a Nordic than a Baltic cultural sphere. Yet Latvia has shared many of the same waves of German and Swedish cultural influence as Estonia, while ethnic Latvians are also descended in part from Finnic tribes who adopted the early Latvian vernacular. The last remnants of a local Finnic language, Livonian, are something of a national monument, strictly protected under state law in a way that Russian, for instance, is not.[2] Thus, while the idea of a common Baltic identity remains problematic, the argument for classifying Estonians into a separate cultural sphere, particularly from Latvians, is equally tenuous.

Ethnic Latvians and Lithuanians speak closely related but not mutually intelligible languages belonging to the Baltic branch of the Indo-European language family. While Lithuanian has changed comparatively little over the centuries, Latvian was influenced by local Finnic pronunciation, then by successive waves of Germanic lexis. Meanwhile, both Latvian and Lithuanian have borrowed plenty of words from Slavic languages, but not to the extent that there is mutual intelligibility between these languages and the other major language of the region, Russian.

Russophones are found in all three Baltic countries and form an especially strong contingent in Latvia, where they make up at least a third of the country's population as well as at least a third of the population of its capital city, Riga. They also form the ethno-linguistic majority in Latvia's second largest city, Daugavpils, and are well represented in every other major Latvian city as well as throughout southeastern Latvia, in the Russian and Belarusian borderlands.

Most Russophones are Soviet-era migrants and their descendents from the former Russian, Belarusian and Ukrainian republics, sometimes also from Poland, the Transcaucasus or Central Asia. Many of them have non-Russian ethnic heritage. In Soviet Latvia, for instance, non-Russian minorities tended to adopt Russian as their native language (Muižnieks 2006: 13), the result being that currently 58% of non-Russian minorities in Latvia call Russian their native language, 82% of them speaking mostly Russian at home (Šupule & Zepa 2006: 38). Therefore, regardless of what other background they may have, Baltic Russophones tend to identify with the Russian language and its culture, though by no means with the Russian Federation (see Šupule & Zepa: 2006, 40), where they are often treated with hostility (see for instance Simonian 2004: 79-80).

Tensions surrounding the use of Russian versus the use of ethnic Baltic languages exist in each Baltic state, but especially in Latvia, where the Russophone population still includes a considerable number of so-called "non-citizens" – Soviet-era migrants who have not yet passed the State Latvian language exam and are therefore unable to vote in general elections or work in governmental organisations. Another source of contention has been that, as of 2004, instruction in Russophone-majority state secondary schools must be at least 60% in Latvian. Originally the state was pushing for 100%, but capitulated after widespread protests.[3]

Similar citizenship laws exist, and similar school language laws are now underway, in Estonia (International Herald Tribune 2007), where Russophones likewise make up about a third of the population, including a third of the population of the capital city, Tallinn, and the majority of the third-largest city, Narva. In contrast to the situation in Latvia, however, most other cities and towns in Estonia have few Russophone inhabitants, and Russophones are also largely absent from the Estonian countryside.

In Lithuania, which has the smallest Russophone minority of the three Baltic nations – 9-10% of the total population – the state has been more tolerant of the Russian language. With little to fear regarding Russophone political influence, it has not enacted any specific laws to limit the use of Russian and it automatically granted all Russophones citizenship after the Soviet break-up.

Russian for Intercultural Communication

In Soviet times, Russian prevailed as both an asymmetrically dominant[4] language and a lingua franca (see Muižnieks 2006: 13 and Hogan-Brun 2006: 316). That is, not only were ethnic Balts constrained to speak Russian to Russophone migrants, in most cases, ethnic Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians used

Russian amongst themselves for intercultural communication, sharing no other common language.

A gradual reversal of these trends has been underway since the Soviet break-up. From 1989-2000, the number of speakers of ethnic Baltic languages rose from 67% to 80% in Estonia, from 62% to 82% in Latvia and from 85% to 94% in Lithuania (Hogan-Brun & Meilutė 2004: 68). Nonetheless, surveys suggest that, on average, ethnic Balts still speak better Russian than Baltic Russophones speak ethnic Baltic languages and that Russian still dominates as the language of intercultural communication in the Baltics (Pavlenko 2008: 65-66) – particularly in Latvia. According to Šupule and Zepa, nearly three-fourths of ethnic Latvians have "a more or less free command" of Russian, while less than half of "non-Latvians" (by which they mean Russophones and other non-ethnic Latvian residents of Latvia) have the same command of Latvian. "Fifteen years after the restoration of independence," the authors state, "communication between Latvians and non-Latvians usually takes place in Russian" (2006: 38). According to Priedīte, however, an important reason behind continued Russian asymmetrical dominance is the fact that many ethnic Latvians also prefer it. Even when addressed by Russophones in Latvian, they have a tendency to switch to Russian, thus preserving their own language as "a secret code in a golden cage" (2002).

To what extent these language trends apply to the youngest generation of Latvians and other Balts has not been adequately determined by any study as of yet. However, there is every indication that a major shift could soon be underway. In ethnic Baltic majority schools, Russian is still widely offered (Pavlenko 2008: 66), but only as an optional foreign language. Indeed, as this study will confirm, some ethnic Baltic teens, particularly from Estonia and Lithuania, now speak no Russian whatsoever – something virtually unheard of a decade ago. Meanwhile, as Renal'd Simonian, a Russian scholar of Baltics, notes of the youngest Russophones of the region, "As a rule, they speak not only the language of the titular population but also English" (2004: 85).

English in the Baltics

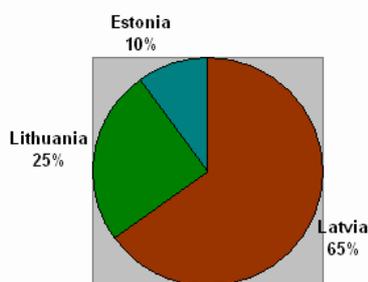
With remarkable rapidity, English has become the most important foreign language in all three Baltic countries. As elsewhere in Europe, it is a symbol of progress, status and worldliness, and the ability to communicate in it is something of a given among educated members of the youngest generation, who also tend to use English rather than Russian as a trans-Baltic lingua franca. In Estonia, where knowledge of secondary local languages is comparatively low, there has even been some speculation that English could become a national lingua franca (see Fonzari: 1999), though the likelihood of this idea for any of the Baltic nations is called into question by, among other things, the findings of this study.

Research Location: The Stockholm School of Economics in Riga

Baltic Russophones converge with all three ethnic Baltic peoples in cities and villages throughout the Baltics, but contexts in which different ethnic Baltic peoples themselves live, work and socialise together are rare, and there is hardly a case where all four ethno-linguistic groups regularly merge.

One of the few examples is the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga (SSER) – as its name suggests, a joint Swedish-Latvian venture located in Latvia's capital. Founded in 1993, it offers an intensive three-year Bachelor of Science in economics and business administration to gifted secondary-school graduates of all three Baltic countries. 120 students are accepted into the programme every fall, so that the total number of students fluctuates at around 400, given that a fair number do not complete their studies within three years. In any given year, about 65% of the students are from Latvia, while around another 25% are from Lithuania and about 10% are from Estonia. These percentages are what the school has striven for, based on both the population sizes of the respective countries and actual interest in the school, which is naturally greatest among Latvians and residents of Riga in particular.

Figure 1: SSER: Student Country of Origin



The students from Lithuania and Estonia have tended to be ethnic Lithuanians and Estonians, whereas the students from Latvia are usually between a third and a half Russophone. There is no official policy or statistic regarding ethno-linguistic background, though a good mixture is considered desirable.

The lecturers at SSER come from all over the Baltics, the rest of Europe and North America. Many of them spend only part of the year in Riga, sometimes no more than a month, and have no knowledge of the local languages. Thus, not only is English the official language of instruction, it is also, by necessity, the lingua franca between students and teachers.

English is also the one language that all SSER students are guaranteed to have in common. Aside from receiving high marks on state English exams, students wishing to study at SSER must also demonstrate excellent spoken English. The top applicants are interviewed in person, and those who cannot communicate in English fluently are not accepted into the school.

Research Question and Methodology

The obligation to use English – a phenomenon that will increasingly characterise work and study environments in the EU-integrated Baltics – is of interest in the context of prospective local language trends insofar as what takes place when it is removed. That is, given a group of cosmopolitan young Balts from all four major ethno-linguistic backgrounds of the region, with no personal memory of the Soviet era (and thus, presumably less emotional "baggage" from this problematic time than their parents) and an all-purpose command of English, what language choices are made when English is no longer required, and what patterns emerge from these choices?

To answer this question, an anonymous survey was prepared, revised according to feedback from two student assistants, and administered online over the course of a week in fall 2007. The survey began with a series of questions geared towards obtaining a detailed language profile of each respondent: native languages, parents' native languages, languages spoken at home, and level of proficiency in the four languages of the region. This was followed by a series of questions that endeavoured to determine which languages each respondent most often uses to communicate with SSER friends and acquaintances of each ethno-linguistic background.

These were supplemented with other questions regarding students' perceptions of language use at SSER as well as their relationship to both English and Russian, the languages with the broadest potential for intercultural communication at the school. There was also a section for individual comments. Overall, despite the complexity of the topic, an attempt was made to keep the survey concise, with as many multiple choice questions as possible, since it was felt that this would maximize student willingness to participate.[5]

After considering the survey's principal findings, a more specific list of questions was created and the two student assistants conducted a series of interviews, [6] the purpose of which was to obtain further information about the principal findings as well as more specific information about the dynamics of students' day-to-day language use which could not be obtained effectively through the primarily multiple-choice survey. The interviewees were instructed to recruit students of diverse ethno-linguistic backgrounds and, as far as possible, of both genders equally within these ethno-linguistic backgrounds; otherwise, no criteria were used in the selection of interviewees. Students were interviewed individually and remain anonymous to the author. The interviews took place in the space of six weeks following the survey in a quiet meeting room on the school premises and both student assistants participated in each interview, one engaging the interviewees in a casual conversation based on the question list, the other taking notes.

The student assistants were both female Latvian Russophones in their second year of studies – native speakers of Russian and fluent in both Latvian and English. Their shared capacity to conduct interviews in three relevant languages according to interviewees' wishes (all the while informally gauging abilities and spontaneous preferences in these languages) was extremely valuable, as was their affiliation with the student Russophone community. Of the four ethno-linguistic groups, Russophones are the most likely to feel uncomfortable with language research, which has often been carried out in the Baltics in a generally competent fashion, but sometimes in anything but good spirit. With two Russophones working intently on the research, a clear message was sent that, whatever its nature (to prevent bias, this was not fully revealed until after the survey and interview process), it was not intended to offer further proof that Russophones are failing to "integrate" into ethnic Baltic society.

Survey Respondents and Interviewees

180 survey responses, representing about half of the undergraduate student body, were received and analysed by the author.

Determining respondents' native languages and ethno-linguistic identification – that is, classifying them into one of the four (or, in the case of mixed parentage, two of the four) categories – was by no means straightforward, but almost always possible.

112 residents of Latvia were counted, 65 of whom indicated Latvian as a native language, 43 of whom indicated Russian a native language and – although 17 indicated having one ethnic Latvian parent and one Russophone parent – only 4 of whom reported that they spoke both languages not only fluently but also as native speakers.

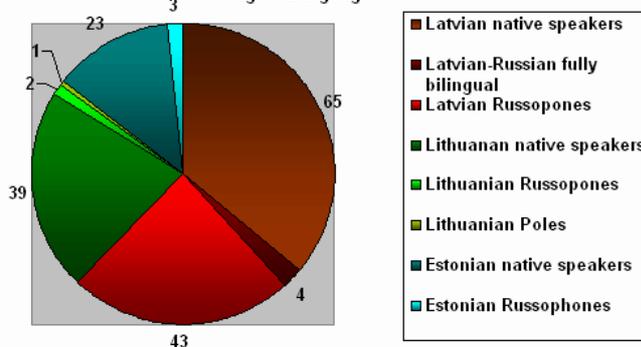
Possibly, there may have been a reluctance to indicate more than one native language, despite an explicit invitation to do so, and there may have also been a reluctance to indicate Russian as a native language. Only 6 of the 17 respondents of mixed parentage indicated Russian as a native language, of whom only 2 indicated that Russian was their only native language. Meanwhile, even 4 clear Russophones – that is, respondents indicating entirely Russophone parentage – identified Latvian as their native language, 2 of the 4 also indicating that Latvian was the language used at home.

Such respondents may have been raised in part by ethnic Latvian stepparents – the survey did not probe this deeply. The student assistants are also familiar with cases of Russophones so intent on their children succeeding in Latvian society that they have raised them in Latvian; by chance, a student brought up in this fashion was later interviewed. However, the indication of Latvian as sole native language – when other possibilities seem equally or more likely – may in some cases have been a statement of solidarity with the Latvian nation.

In the case of Estonians and Lithuanians, language identity was easier to determine. 26 Estonians were counted, 23 of whom indicated only Estonian as a native language, 3 of whom indicated only Russian as a native language. 42 Lithuanians were counted, 39 of whom indicated only Lithuanian as a native language, 2 of whom indicated only Russian as a native language, one of whom – the only respondent who did not fit into one or more of the four ethno-linguistic categories dealt with in this study – indicated Polish as a native language.[7]

Meanwhile, a total of 46 students participated in the interviews, many of whom had already completed the survey beforehand: 6 ethnic Estonians, 10 ethnic Lithuanians, 11 ethnic Latvians, one Latvian of mixed parentage, 16 Latvian Russophones and 2 Estonian Russophones. This represents about 10% of the total undergraduate student body. Among all survey respondents and interviewees as well as among the respondents and interviewees of each of the four ethno-linguistic groups, the gender ratio was about even.

Figure 2: Number of Survey Respondents According to Country of Origin / Language



Asymmetrical Dominance: Latvian versus Russian

A key finding of the research was students' overwhelming preference for asymmetrical dominance. In particular, English was not usually indicated as the principal language for intercultural communication among residents of a single nation. With regard to students from Latvia, about two thirds of the ethnic Latvian survey respondents indicated a local language for these purposes, the third indicating English comprising almost entirely first-year students – of 22 ethnic Latvians who indicated English as the principal language with Russophones, 21 were in their first year. This was not corroborated by first-year Latvian Russophones, however; among Latvian Russophone respondents of all years, only one, a third-year student, indicated using English most often with ethnic Latvians.

Here it should be emphasised that, according to self-assessment on the survey, SSER students' English is often better than their secondary local language. That is, a Latvian Russophone student may speak English more fluently than Latvian and an ethnic Latvian student is very likely to speak better English than Russian. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that when students are outside of class, they mostly prefer the asymmetrical dominance of a local language to English as a *lingua franca*. Of particular interest is the fact that ethnic Baltic languages do not always take on this role of asymmetrically dominant language. Among Latvian students in particular, Russian as a national language of intercultural communication is alive and well, however shaky the Russian skills of the ethnic Latvians might be. Though less than half of the latter indicated speaking Russian fluently or even fairly well on the survey – and every single Latvian Russophone indicated speaking Latvian fluently or fairly well (the majority fluently) – ethnic Latvians and Latvian Russophones frequently indicated, both in the survey and the interviews, using Russian as well as Latvian to communicate with one another.

The interviews revealed something about how this works. While almost every Latvian interviewee indicated that a mixture was spoken, mid-conversation code-switching was rarely meant. Some interviewees indicated, for instance, that ethnic Latvians would speak in Latvian while Latvian Russophones might respond in Russian and vice versa. This phenomenon, which Pavlenko terms "cooperative nonaccommodation" in the context of the contemporary Ukraine (2008: 62), has characterised Latvian intercultural communication since the Soviet break-up and is much maligned by older-generation ethnic Latvians, who attribute it to Russophones' inability and/or unwillingness to speak Latvian. In the case of SSER Latvians, however, it would seem that language trends die harder than language profiles. Neither inability nor, as we will see, a complete unwillingness on the part of Russophones to speak Latvian would seem to be the reason for the trend.

Latvian students also frequently indicated that one asymmetrically dominant language would be employed by all parties in a certain conversation, or would regularly be employed among certain groups or pairs of individuals, depending on which language they felt most comfortable with – but also simply on chance. As one ethnic Latvian interviewee said, the dominant language could "be both with equal likelihood". Regarding this same interviewee, the student assistants pointed out that they speak mostly Russian with her, whereas other Latvian Russophones speak only Latvian with her. There was no apparent reason for this. As for the interviews with ethnic Latvians, they also tended to be a mixture of Russian and Latvian – that is, often both languages used in the course of one interview – with Latvian dominating by the end of the interviews in most cases.

The Latvian Russophone interviewees likewise indicated that both languages were being used for intercultural communication but were more adamant than ethnic Latvians about the frequency of Russian for this purpose – a clear reversal from the survey, in which almost all Latvian Russophones indicated using Latvian most frequently with ethnic Latvians.[8] Thus, while all of the Latvian Russophone interviewees likewise confirmed that they spoke Latvian well, most also expressed a desire to speak their own language in SSER social life as often as possible. Typical things they indicated in the interviews were "speaking Russian to everybody unless they don't understand", speaking Russian "in all circumstances", and falling back on Russian "as often as possible". One Latvian Russophone also invoked a well known cliché of older-generation Latvians: "they say that when there is at least one Russian person in a

company, everyone will eventually speak Russian." Another confirmed that "Russians by nature are generally more daring and will probably speak Russian" to ethnic Latvians.

Still another explained that Latvian Russophones use Latvian only if they are not confident in their knowledge of it. In other words, the only reason they would speak Latvian is for practice. In this regard, it is interesting to note the case of a Latvian inter-ethnic couple, the Russophone half of which was interviewed. Both students wanted to improve their facility in their partner's language and therefore agreed on "Latvian" days and "Russian" days, the former being odd days of the month, the latter even.

Estonian Asymmetrical Dominance

The ethnic Estonians interviewed emphasised that all Estonian Russophones at SSER speak fluent Estonian and that only one Estonian Russophone, for unknown reasons, often speaks English with them (though his Estonian is also fluent). This student was also among the Russophones interviewed, and though he did not offer a clear explanation for his unusual language preference, he commented that he only speaks Estonian to ethnic Estonians when he feels "nostalgic" about Estonia. Thus, his choice of English probably has more to do with a sense of allegiance to SSER than with any possible feelings of cultural dislocation as an Estonian Russophone.

Otherwise, Estonian seems to dominate utterly among Estonians at SSER. Russian was never indicated for Estonian intercultural communication. Indeed, this would seem to be unfeasible; in the survey not a single ethnic Estonian speaker claimed to be fluent in Russian, not even an ethnic Estonian with a Russophone parent, and only 4 claimed to speak Russian fairly well. Nonetheless, 4 was also the number of those who claimed not to speak any Russian at all, and the ethnic Estonian interviewees usually had at least a vague understanding of Russian. This surprised the student assistants, who had been under the impression that their language was fully extinct in the young ethnic Estonian community. All the same, in both the survey and interviews, few Estonian native speakers claimed to actually use any Russian at SSER, while in the interviews, only one ethnic Estonian expressed any interest in studying the language. By chance, an ethnic Estonian with a Russophone father was also interviewed – until that moment, she had not revealed her background to any SSER students. Her Russian was fluent but sounded rusty to the student assistants. Thus, an Estonian Russophone interviewee may have put it aptly when she said, "it seems native Estonians believe knowing English is going to be enough, while other nationalities are trying to improve their Russian".

Lithuanians and the Russian language

This is certainly the case with regard to many SSER ethnic Lithuanians. According to the survey, the ethnic Lithuanians may not feel that they speak Russian better than ethnic Estonians (only 3 claimed to be fluent in Russian, one of whom has a Russophone father, and only 5 claimed to speak it fairly well). The significant difference, however, is that they are more interested in Russian and prepared to use it. Nearly half indicated that they use some Russian at SSER – in most cases not the language they use most often with Russophones, but one they have occasion to use. Survey comments from Latvian Russophone respondents also seemed to confirm this: not only were they using Russian with ethnic Lithuanians, the latter seemed to them to be the greatest non-Russophone enthusiasts of Russian at SSER – despite having less facility with Russian than their Latvian counterparts. One Latvian Russophone commented that practically all ethnic Lithuanians know Russian and that she uses Russian with them more frequently than with ethnic Latvians. Another Latvian Russophone confirmed that Lithuanians are "the most open to learning Russian".

In the interviews, ethnic Lithuanians were also far more likely than either ethnic Estonians or Latvians to indicate an interest in the Russian language. They were also the only non-Russophones to comment extensively on the practical uses of Russian, on the one hand for future business purposes, on the other hand for current social life. One ethnic Lithuanian deemed Russian a "very necessary language", adding that it was nice to have the possibility to improve it at SSER. Another called it "an additional language that can be spoken in all three Baltic countries and other countries of eastern Europe, which might be useful for future work". Still another commented that ethnic Lithuanians who know Russian seem to be able to make friends more quickly from all sorts of backgrounds, adding that this is also true about most Russophones as well.

At the same time, the majority of Latvian Russophones interviewed indicated having at least one ethnic Lithuanian friend with whom they spoke Russian. Both the survey and interviews also revealed – and may have helped to spur on – a peculiar attraction between Latvian Russophones and Russian-speaking ethnic Lithuanians, something not found between any other two ethno-linguistic groups at SSER. Tellingly, exactly one half of the Latvian Russophones interviewed expressed an interest in learning Lithuanian – a seemingly impractical language for them – while only one expressed an interest in learning Estonian (along with Lithuanian). A trend among second-year students was also uncovered in which ethnic Lithuanian and Latvian Russophones spoke their native languages to one another "as a joke", regardless of whether they are able to make themselves understood in this fashion.[9]

Ethnic Baltic Languages across Nations

In contrast, there was little interest in learning Lithuanian among ethnic Latvians, only comments in the interviews that it was useless, or that they could already understand it pretty well on account of its similarity to Latvian. While the latter claim and vice versa may be true in rare cases of ethnic Latvian and Lithuanian students living together for a considerable period of time (the majority of SSER Latvians live with family or friends of the same ethno-linguistic background), it is otherwise likely to be false.[10] Ethnic Lithuanians at SSER also seemed to have little interest in Latvian, despite spending as many as three years in a country where it is increasingly the most important language. In the survey, only one ethnic Lithuanian in her third year indicated having learned Latvian fairly well, while the vast majority of Lithuanians of all years indicated not speaking any Latvian whatsoever. The same was true of ethnic Estonians, and in the interviews both ethnic Estonians and Lithuanians in their second and third years tended to comment (either self-deprecatingly or deprecatingly regarding the Latvian language) that the only thing they had learned to do in Latvia was order food at cafés or ask for products at shops. In the survey, however, two Estonian Russophones (both in their third year) indicated having learned Latvian fairly well. One of them also commented on the peculiar travails of being an Estonian Russophone in Riga – it is virtually the only indication throughout the research that learning Latvian might be advantageous for any SSER students not from Latvia, though the problem was still solved with English:

Being a russophone from Estonia was very hard in the beginning when I arrived in Riga. Riganians were taking me for a local Russian girl who does not speak Latvian. How dare I, speaking other 4 languages, not to speak Latvian - I've heard a lot of nice things about myself those days. I don't know, it should be put in some soft form (newcomers guide?), but those like me should be aware that they just should speak English right away. Forget your clean Russian or imitate an accent (unless you enjoy being called a *stulba krievu cuuka* ["dumb Russian pig"] in the streets), speak English, be a foreigner - they'll lick your toes then.

English as a Lingua Franca

In the case of different ethnic Balts among themselves and ethnic Estonians with students from Latvia and Lithuania in general, English was always cited as being used. In this way, English remains the only true lingua franca at SSER; if in any given social situation one of the speaker's native language is not a viable option, the speakers use English. In the survey, one ethnic Latvian summed up what would turn out to be the basic finding in this regard:

All the communication can be summarized in simple formula: I speak Latvian with Latvian-speakers; I speak English with Lithuanian and Estonian speakers; I speak Latvian or Russian with Russian-speaking originating from Latvia; I speak Russian or English with Russian-speaking originating from countries other than Latvia. This applies in all contexts.

Survey comments also indicated that any time there is a large group of students of various backgrounds communicating all at once, English will also be used. Meanwhile, though Russian might be feasible as a lingua franca for many SSER ethnic Latvians and Lithuanians, it is apparently not used for such purposes. No cases of an ethnic Lithuanian and an ethnic Latvian using Russian together were reported, though, as mentioned earlier, among residents of the Baltics just ten years older, this solution remains commonplace.

Nonetheless, actual enthusiasm for English as a lingua franca is limited; if at all possible, students prefer to speak native languages, whether their own or their partners'. It may even be the case that students who continue to use English when there are other possibilities lose social status. One ethnic Lithuanian

interviewee said she thinks that "everyone tries to use their own native language as often as possible, there are just one or two people who try to use English aggressively with everyone for no particular reason". Interviewees also tended to disparage first-year students, who are known for showing off their English (possibly one reason behind first-year ethnic Latvians' interesting survey claims), but quickly grow out of it. Of course, when it comes to English skills, there is a necessity among students to demonstrate, in the right context, that they have them – as an Estonian Russophone interviewee put it, "smartness is doubted if a person's English is not so good" – but once these skills are established (which presumably occurs in the classroom most of all), it seems that English loses a great deal of its allure.

A positive point regarding English that came up on several occasions was its merits as a medium for politeness. One Latvian Russophone interviewee indicated that she is most likely to speak English at SSER whenever she is discontent, so as not to say something nasty. Another Latvian Russophone interviewee said that English makes her "more peaceful, considerate, and tolerant". Meanwhile, an ethnic Lithuanian interviewee in a relationship with a fellow SSER student of another ethno-linguistic background said that they are more polite when using English and otherwise "shout at each other" in their native languages. An ethnic Estonian interviewee, also in a relationship with an SSER student of another background, confirmed that "you try to be polite all the time" when using English with a partner.

This creates an opposition to Russian, which is regarded by some students as an apt language for rudeness. An ethnic Lithuanian interviewee who otherwise does not speak Russian commented that "there are some absolutely great Russian curse words; a lot of Lithuanians use them". In the SSER student magazine it was also recently joked that curse words are the second most important Russian export after oil (Insider 2006: 11). This, however, points towards nothing more than further continuity with Soviet era generations of ethnic Balts, who often prefer to curse in Russian, claiming that Russian curse words are much more colourful.

Here as earlier, it should be emphasised that – in principle – frequent code-switching is still avoided and even frowned upon, especially when it comes to English. As one Latvian Russophone interviewee said, she "works on not using English words while speaking Russian". Another Latvian Russophone interviewee said "she tries to stick to one language while speaking, it is not nice to 'pollute' any language with foreign phrases". An ethnic Lithuanian interviewee confirmed that too much English "spoils" Lithuanian and that for this reason she tries not to use it so much outside the SSER campus, and still another Latvian Russophone interviewee said that "people tend to mix different languages together, which is not a good thing". Meanwhile, an ethnic Latvian interviewee admitted: "I am guilty of using English phrases and words when speaking my native language [and] this is quite bad."

At the same time, students often complained that their English is getting worse, not only by speaking with other non-native speakers – including their Scandinavian business and economics professors, who, in the opinion of at least two interviewees, are teaching them false English pronunciation and vocabulary – but simply by virtue of its obligatory nature at SSER. As one Estonian Russophone interviewee put it, "It gets tiring sometimes, but we don't really have a choice". She added that "any non-native language gets worse when you've got the pressure of studying in it". And as a Latvian Russophone interviewee confirmed: "Sometimes it is just so nice not to hear any English; then the brain is really relaxing."

Conclusion

In these last findings in particular, there is an intimation of the problematic future of English in the Baltics. While it is set to become a trans-Baltic lingua franca by default, it is also the language that post-Soviet Balts have suddenly been obligated to speak to businesspeople from further abroad as well as tourists, and as tourists themselves. This may rule it out as a comfortable and inspiring language for spontaneous social interaction when Balts are among themselves. In light of this study's findings, it is at least appropriate to doubt that English could ever make inroads as a national lingua franca in any Baltic country, even if fluency in English were to become more universal than fluency in the local languages. But it is also appropriate to wonder whether English will ever truly win out as the sole trans-Baltic lingua franca.

Among SSER students from Latvia and Estonia, we observe that, despite a universally advanced level of English, ethnic Baltic languages remain steadfast as languages for national intercultural communication, utterly dominating in the case of Estonian students and coexisting with Russian in the case of Latvian students. Indeed, Latvian Russophone students eagerly cultivate Russian for intercultural communication and most ethnic Latvians are also happy to accept it for such purposes, in many cases actively speaking it themselves, though their English may be better than their Russian, and the Russophones' Latvian is very likely to be better than the ethnic Latvians' Russian. Most poignantly, we see enthusiasm for Russian among ethnic Lithuanian students, who are under no social pressure to speak the language in their own country – as may increasingly be the case in Estonia and Latvia as well – and perhaps for this very reason are often eager to speak it at SSER.

Though Russian skills have faded significantly in the Baltics and Russian for intercultural communication is likewise on the wane, this seems to be a measured process – slower, perhaps, than the process of making peace with Russian's unpleasant historical associations. Young ethnic Balts are already re-evaluating it as a language which, usefully, happens to linger around their neighbourhood, offering an acceptable solution for intercultural communication not only nationally but between members of different Baltic countries. The question, by no means answerable at this point, is whether Russian will ever be promoted, by popular choice, to the role older-generation Balts granted it involuntarily: lingua franca. This may depend on developments in Russia, and just how voluntary any future use of Russian seems likely to be.

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NOTER

1 For the sake of socio-political accuracy, the word *Baltic* will have a primarily geographic connotation in this study. All four ethno-linguistic groups will be referred to as *Balts / Baltic* by virtue of their presence in the Baltics. Nonetheless, since it will often be necessary to differentiate between Russophones on the one hand and the region's autochthonic ethno-linguistic groups on the other hand, the terms *ethnic Balts / Baltic* will be used to refer to the latter. Similarly, the terms *Estonians, Latvians* and *Lithuanians* will refer to all residents of the respective countries while the qualification *ethnic* will be used to differentiate the autochthonic ethno-linguistic groups.

2 For an English translation of the currently valid State Language Law of 1999, see Official Language Law, 2000.

3 See Hogan-Brun, 2006, for a full analysis of these events.

4 Ammon first used this term – *asymmetrical dominant* – to distinguish intercultural communication in which one of the parties uses a native language from a lingua franca, in which parties use a mutually non-native language. (1991)

5 See Appendix 1 for the survey questions.

6 See Appendix 2 for the interview questions.

7 This respondent is likely to be a member of the Polish-speaking minority in and around the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius.

8 Part of the issue here may be conflicting sentiments in the Latvian Russophones: on the one hand, pride in being able to speak Latvian to ethnic Latvians better than ethnic Latvians can speak Russian to them (and thus transcending the stereotypes of their parents' generation); on the other hand, respect for their native language and a desire to preserve its international character.

9 There is not enough information to establish any trends regarding national intercultural communication among Lithuanian students. No Lithuanian Russophones related any concrete experiences in the survey and none were available for interview. According to one ethnic Lithuanian interviewee, however, Lithuanian Russophones tend to speak such good Lithuanian that "sometimes even Lithuanians can't distinguish those for who Russian is the native language". Another Lithuanian interviewee, who identifies primarily with the Russian language (his father is a Russophone), though Lithuanian is the language he speaks most fluently, also seemed to confirm this situation, indicating his frustration at how not only Latvian and Estonian Russophones but even Lithuanians he suspects of having Russophone heritage never speak Russian to him. As larger groups with an enduring sense of identity that goes as far as taste in clothes and overall comportment, Latvian and Estonian Russophones often report being able to "sell" if their countrypeople have Russophone heritage before they have even spoken. This would seem to be trickier in the case of Lithuanian Russophones.

10 As a step towards bringing Lithuania and Latvia closer, Birkin and Donkisi make the recommendation that the two countries broadcast each other's "television stations with subtitles, then "just a decade would be sufficient for some real changes in the two countries" mutual understanding to occur. Soon, a time would come in which young people could talk to each other in their native languages and understand each other perfectly" (2006: 189).

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Appendix 1: Survey Questions

1. Firstly, please indicate your gender:
2. Year of study:
3. Nationality:
4. Country of origin:
5. Native language(s):
6. Mother's native language(s):
7. Father's native language(s):
8. Language(s) used at home:
9. Main language(s) of secondary school attended:
10. I speak Russian...
 - fluently
 - fairly well
 - not so well
 - not at all
11. I speak Latvian...
 - fluently
 - fairly well
 - not so well
 - not at all
12. I speak Lithuanian...
 - fluently
 - fairly well
 - not so well
 - not at all
13. I speak Estonian
 - fluently
 - fairly well
 - not so well
 - not at all
14. Please check all the boxes that apply (or none, if none apply):
 - I often read in English outside the framework of my studies.
 - I often watch movies and/or TV shows in English (not dubbed into other languages).
15. Please check all the boxes that apply (or none, if none apply):
 - I often read in Russian.
 - I often watch movies and/or TV shows in Russian (not dubbed into other languages).
16. I communicate with other SSE Riga students who have a different ethno-linguistic background from my own...
 - all the time
 - sometimes
 - rarely
17. When I communicate with other SSE Riga students who have a different ethno-linguistic background from my own, I use...
 - only English
 - only Russian
 - English more frequently than Russian
 - Russian more frequently than English
 - English and Russian more or less equally
18. When speaking to SSE Riga students of Russophone ethno-linguistic background, I most often use...
 - English
 - Russian
 - Latvian
 - Lithuanian
 - Estonian
19. When speaking to SSE Riga students of Lithuanian ethno-linguistic background, I most often use...
 - English
 - Russian
 - Lithuanian
20. When speaking to SSE Riga students of Latvian ethno-linguistic background, I most often use...
 - English
 - Russian
 - Latvian
21. When speaking to SSE Riga students of Estonian ethno-linguistic background, I most often use...
 - English
 - Russian
 - Estonian
22. As far as I can tell, SSE Riga students use English to communicate with each other...
 - all the time

- sometimes
 - rarely
23. As far as I can tell, SSE Riga students use Russian to communicate with each other
- all the time
 - sometimes
 - rarely
24. In my opinion, the following language(s) is (are) the language(s) of SSE Riga social life (please check all the boxes that apply):
- English
 - Russian
 - Latvian
 - Lithuanian
 - Estonian
25. At SSE Riga, I find that English is most frequently used by...
- male students
 - females students
 - neither male nor female students. Both genders use English with more or less the same frequency
26. At SSE Riga, I find that Russian is most frequently used by...
- male students
 - females students
 - neither male nor female students. Both genders use English with more or less the same frequency
27. At SSE Riga, I find that the following ethno-linguistic group uses English most frequently:
- Estonians
 - Latvians
 - Lithuanians
 - Russophones
28. At SSE Riga, I find the following ethno-linguistic group uses English second most frequently:
- Estonians
 - Latvians
 - Lithuanians
 - Russophones
29. At SSE Riga, I find that the following ethno-linguistic group uses English least frequently:
- Estonians
 - Latvians
 - Lithuanians
 - Russophones
30. At SSE Riga, I find that the following non-Russophone ethno-linguistic group uses Russian most frequently:
- Estonians
 - Latvians
 - Lithuanians
31. At SSE Riga, I find that the following non-Russophone ethno-linguistic group uses Russian least frequently:
- Estonians
 - Latvians
 - Lithuanians
32. Please indicate contexts in which English is used among SSE Riga very frequently (please check all the boxes that apply, or none, if none apply):
- talking with other students about coursework
 - talking with other students in the cafeteria or courtyard (not about coursework)
 - extracurricular activities (debate, drama, chess, sports, etc.)
 - SSE Riga dances
 - private parties held by SSE Riga students
33. At SSE Riga, I feel most comfortable using English with... (please answer however you like)
34. When I'm in the Riga area, I live...
- alone.
 - with my family.
 - with other people – not my family and not other SSE Riga students.
 - with other SSE Riga students of the same ethno-linguistic background as myself.
 - with other SSE Riga students, at least one of whom has a different ethno-linguistic background from myself.
35. If you checked the last circle, please indicate the language(s) you speak with your housemate(s) of a different ethno-linguistic background (if more than one language, please list in order of frequency):
36. At SSE Riga, I have (please check all the boxes that apply, or none, if none apply)...
- a boyfriend or girlfriend
 - a boyfriend or girlfriend of a different ethno-linguistic background from my own.
37. If you checked the last box, please indicate the ethno-linguistic background of your boyfriend or girlfriend:
38. If you checked the last box, please indicate the language(s) you speak with your boyfriend or girlfriend (if more than one language, please list in order of frequency):
39. If you have friends at SSE Riga of different ethno-linguistic backgrounds from your own, please indicate the language(s) you use with them (if more than one language, please list in order of frequency):
40. Any other comments regarding the use of English or other languages at SSE Riga would be most welcome!

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

[The following was noted in the case of each interviewee:]

- i. Gender
- ii. Year of study
- iii. Did the interviewee take the language trends survey?
- iv. Country of origin
- v. Native language(s)
- vi. Mother's native language(s)
- vii. Father's native language(s)
- viii. Language(s) used at home
- ix. All the languages the interviewee speaks and how well they speak these languages
- x. The language used for the interview (English, Russian or Latvian) and any language switches that may have occurred during the interview

[Then the interviewers initiated an informal discussion based on the following questions:]

1. What language(s) do you most identify with?
2. What language(s) do you feel most comfortable speaking?
3. What other Baltic-region language(s) (if any) do you wish to learn?

4. What language(s) do you read in and what language(s) do you watch TV and movies in?
5. To what extent, with whom, and in what circumstances do you speak your native language(s) at SSER?
6. How willingly and in what circumstances do you revert to your native language(s) at SSER?
7. How do you perceive other students in this regard? How quickly and in what circumstances do they use or revert to their native languages at SSER?
8. In what contexts are you most likely to speak English at SSER?
9. What is it like to use English with other non-native speakers so frequently?
10. [For students in English-language relationships with other SSE Riga students of a different ethno-linguistic background:] Describe the experience. Do you find your English changes when you are with your partner? If so, how?
11. Do students always understand each other when they speak English? Are there typical problems that arise? Are there typical situations where students fail to understand each other in English?
12. Do the four ethno-linguistic groups have particular ways of using English?
13. How would you describe SSER English, its grammar and/or vocabulary? Are you aware of any specific SSER usage or vocabulary? What Russian, Estonian, Latvian or Lithuanian terms have made their way into SSER English?
14. To what extent and in what ways has your English improved or gotten worse at SSER?
15. [For Russophones:] How much (if at all) do you speak Russian with non-Russophones? If you do speak Russian with non-Russophones, describe how this works / feels and with what sort of non-Russophones you are able to speak Russian with.
16. [For non-Russophones who speak Russian:] To what extent (if at all) and in what circumstances do you speak Russian at SSER? Do you ever speak Russian with other non-Russophones?
17. [For natives of Lithuania and Estonia:] Have you learned any Latvian? Why / why not? If you speak some Latvian, to what extent are you able to use it at SSER and what is it like to do so?

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