

Language Use and Intercultural Communication in Latvia

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to illustrate how intercultural communication is affected by language use in Latvia and to show that in accordance with theories of D.L.Horowitz and P.R.Brass (Horowitz, 1985; Brass, 1991) the question of language is a question of conflict in Latvia. The empirical base for this report is the survey "Towards a civic society" conducted by the Baltic Data House. In the second analysis of empirical data, author is trying to show the correlation between language proficiency, language use and intercultural communication, and the hypothesis of the report is that the question of language is a question of conflict, because the language hierarchy is changing in Latvia.

Keywords: : language use, conflict, civic society, Latvia, Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

"The common attitude is that people who choose to migrate into an area where the language is foreign to them have no right to special consideration; they should either learn the new language or accept the consequences. The case for this is especially strong when their migration threatens to expand the territory of one language community at the expense of another" (Dyke, 1985: 49).

"The status of the language is a symbol of new-found group dignity" (Horowitz, 1985: 219).

Within intercultural communication the question of language is of the greatest importance in Latvia. Since Latvia regained its independence on August 21, 1991, Latvian language policy has affected mainly the population with native language other than Latvian. As Latvian was declared the state language, Latvian is demanded for acquiring citizenship, it is a criterion of professional standards, it is necessary for obtaining higher education, and finally it is a prerequisite of participation in political and social life. The lack of Latvian knowledge may limit channels of information and communication for certain ethnic groups and even cause an ethnic conflict (Horowitz, 1985; Brass, 1991).

As noted by E.Gellner (Gellner, 1983) – one language is needed for communication in all social areas between different language groups, therefore the question of language is very important within the context of integration in Latvia.

The aim of this report is to illustrate how intercultural communication is affected by language use in Latvia and to show that the question of language is a question of conflict in Latvia. The empirical base for this report is the survey "Towards a civic society" conducted by the Baltic Data House. The survey data were obtained by setting up two samples: citizens (N=1507) and non-citizens (N=1502) which represent the body of citizens and the body of non-citizens in Latvia. The respondents were chosen by applying the method of multi-level random sampling. 301 survey locations were chosen for the survey, where Latvian inhabitants, aged 15 to 75 years, were interviewed. The survey method was face-to-face interviews at the residence of respondents. The survey was conducted from 20 November 1997 through 9 January 1998.

Part of this complex survey was devoted to the problem of language use and the evaluation of international relationships in Latvia, as well as measuring language proficiency.

In the second analysis of these empirical data, author is trying to show the correlation between language proficiency, language use and intercultural communication, and the hypothesis of the report is that the question of language is a question of conflict in Latvia, because the language hierarchy is changing.

The status of Latvian and Russian languages in Soviet period and now

As noted by P.R.Brass (Brass, 1991) Russian was both the lingua franca of the Soviet Union and the "language of success", providing the prospect for entry into privileged positions of power and economic security. D.L.Horowitz has argued that the status of language shows the status of particular language

group. Russian language and ethnic dominance was obvious in the absence of any requirement for Russians living in Latvia to learn the Latvian language. Russian was the language of inter-ethnic communication during the Soviet period, and it was seen as a symbol of Soviet power.

Now Russian is the language of the nearest large neighbour state – Russia -, and after regaining independence there is a demand for the approval of Latvian language, and it means that the language hierarchy is changing in Latvia, and Latvian people need respect. However the proficiency of Latvian is increasing very slowly.

In 1989 only 21% of Russians knew Latvian, at the end of 1997 about 15% said that they can speak fluent Latvian and 25% can discuss in Latvian any issue with some difficulties (Figure 1).

Altogether the results of the study indicate that 40% of Russians are more or less fluent in Latvian, but still Latvians know the Russian language much better than Russians know Latvian (good self-assessment of Russian language proficiency among Latvians - 94%) (Figure 2). Also those with ethnicity other than Latvian or Russian know the Russian language better than Latvian, and here the emergence of Russian speakers during the Soviet period in Latvia is of high importance.

Figure 1. Ability to speak in Latvian

Data Source: Survey by Baltic Data House, Nov. 1997 to Jan. 1998

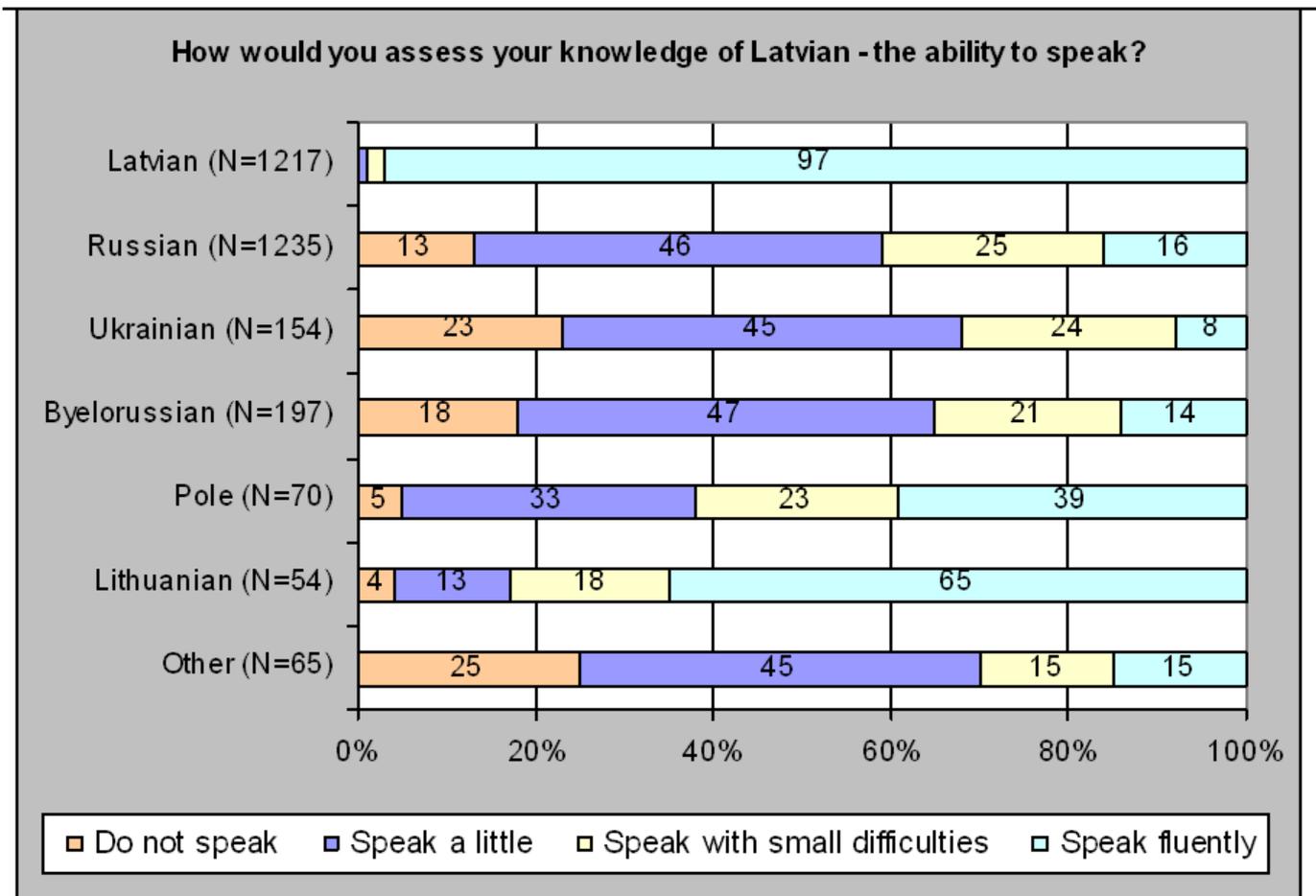


Figure 2. Ability to speak in Russian

Data Source: Survey by Baltic Data House, Nov. 1997 to Jan. 1998



A phenomenon of "Russian-speakers"

It is important to note that there is no congruence between ethnicity and native language among minorities in Latvia. As a result of Soviet migration and language policy a phenomenon of "Russian speakers" has appeared. Because of the huge immigration from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, there have been important changes in the proportion of ethnic groups in Latvia. If we compare the census data in 1935 and in 1990, the number of Eastern Slavs increased more than 4.5 times since 1935 in Latvia (Figure 5), but the language of communication among them was only Russian.

According to the responses to the question "What is your native language?" Latvian is the native language for 96% of Latvians; for the remaining 4% of Latvians, the native language is Russian. The native language of 98% of Russians is Russian, for the remaining 2% it is Latvian. As we see, the native language of Latvian and Russian usually coincides with the nationality (Figure 3). The situation is different with other nationalities. More than half of them regard Russian as their native language, 42% have some other native language. As shown in the Figure 4, 46% of Ukrainians also regard Russian as their native language, similarly 68% of Byelorussians and 58% of Poles. We can conclude from the survey results, that the number of respondents for whom Latvian is the native language is very limited among non-Latvians. Therefore in the following language use analysis the focus is on two groups – people with Latvian as a native language and people with native language other than Latvian.

Figure 3. Native language (N=3008)

Data Source: Survey by Baltic Data House, Nov. 1997 to Jan. 1998.

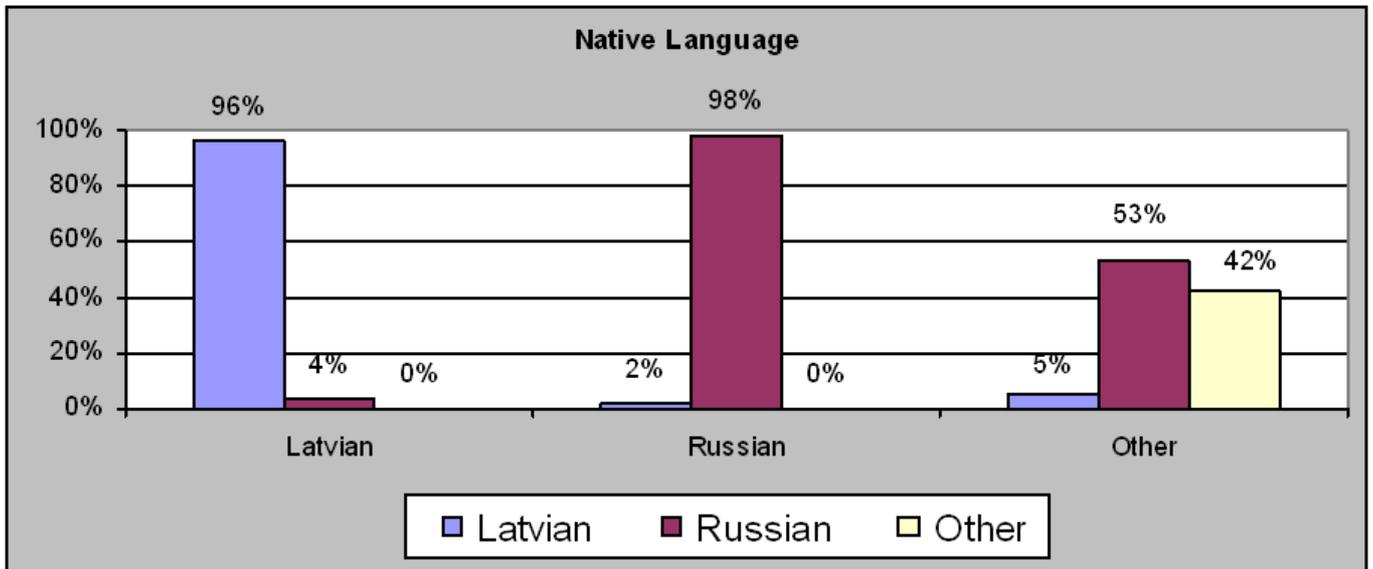
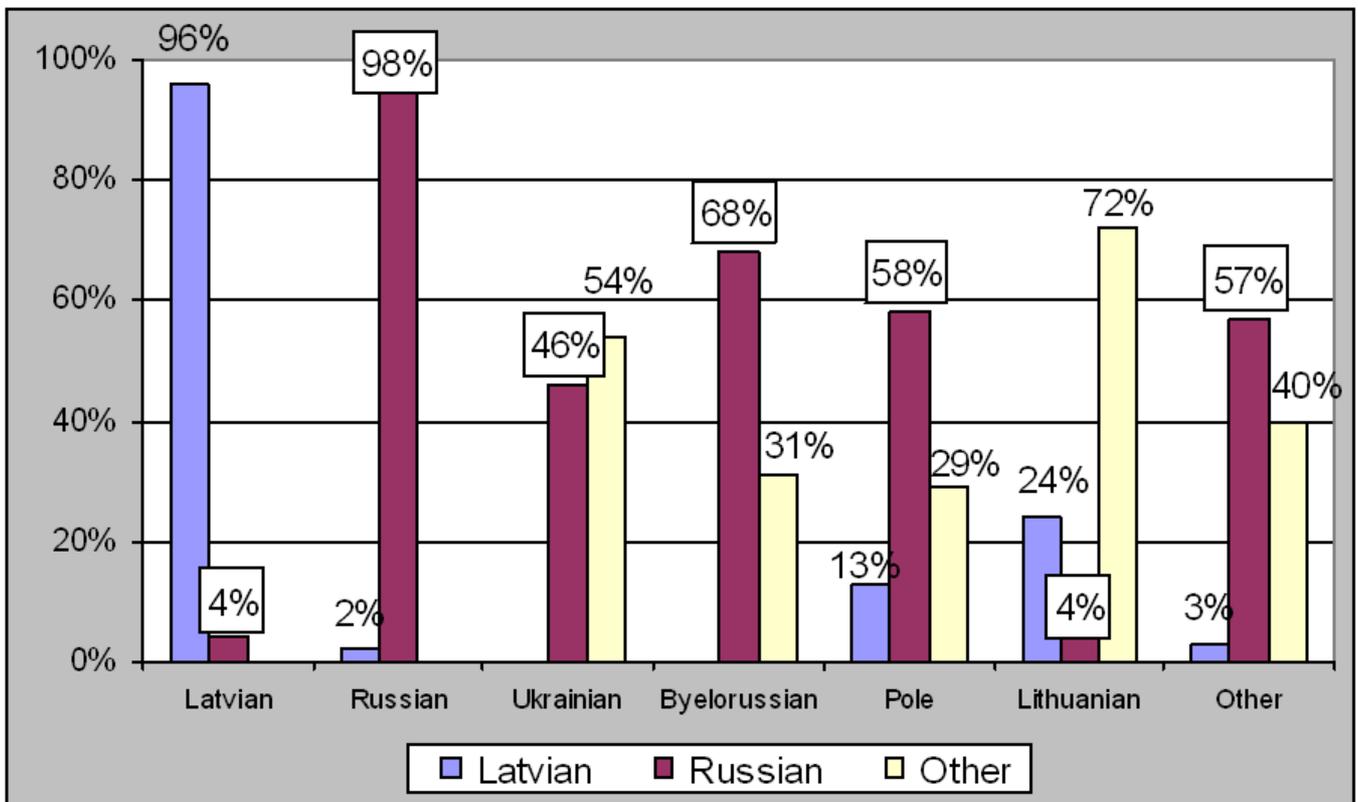
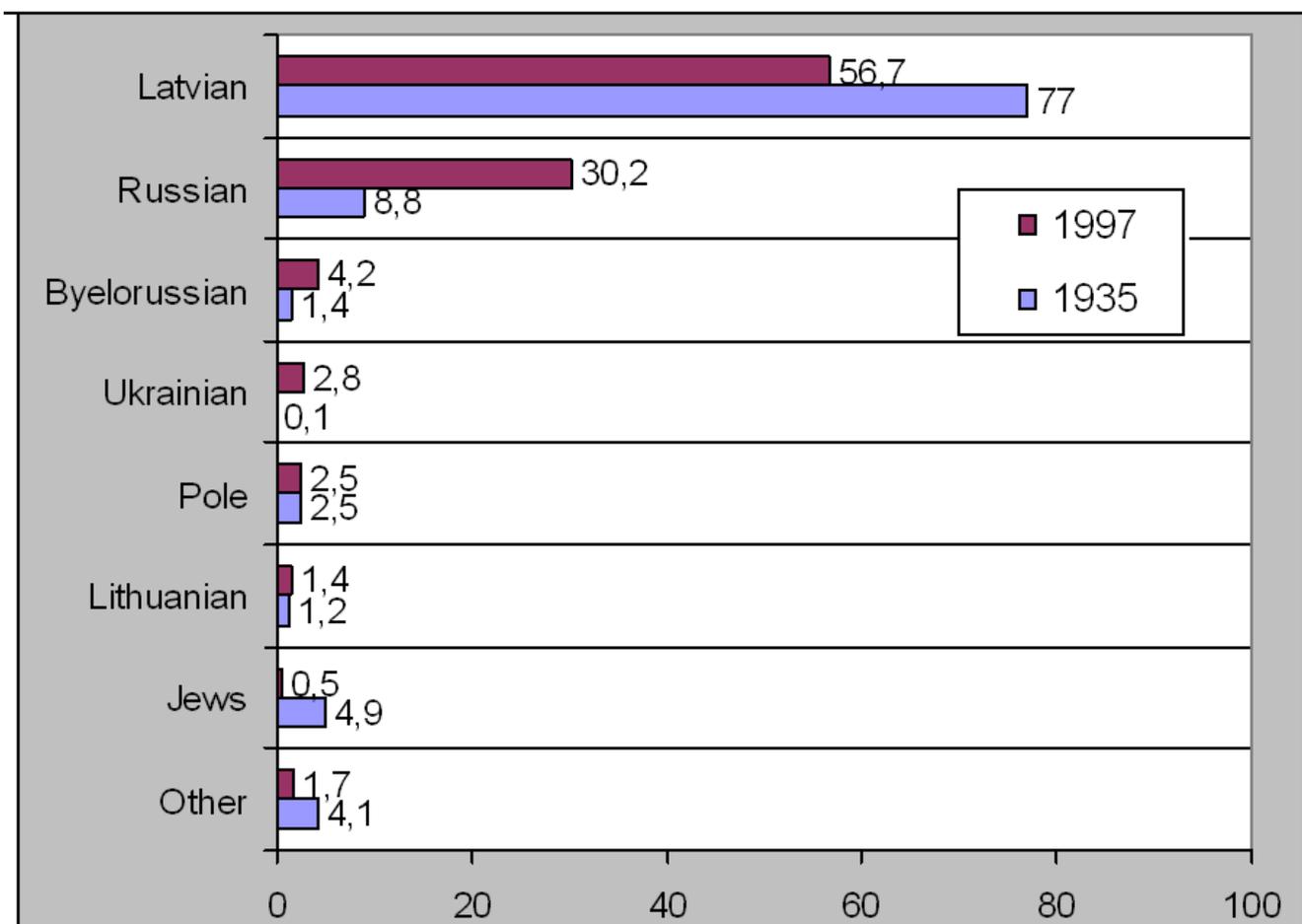


Figure 4. Native language (N=3008)



Data Source: Survey by Baltic Data House, Nov. 1997 to Jan. 1998.

Figure 5. Population change in Latvia



Data Source: Census data 1935, 1997

Language use

Generally, the results show that people whose native language is Latvian also use mainly this language both at home as well as elsewhere. While people whose native language is Russian use the Russian language.

Comparatively, among non-Latvians the Latvian language is most often used in state institutions (33%), in the street and in shops (23%), as well as at the workplace (19%), more seldom at home (7%) and communicating with friends (10%).

Speaking about those whose native language is neither Latvian nor Russian but some other language, it should be noted that in this group, as compared with Russians, the Latvian language is spoken somewhat more. However, the Russian language is used predominantly.

Still one must mention that about half of non-Latvians have tried to improve their Latvian knowledge during the last 7 years (56%), and 72% of those whose native language is not Latvian would like to improve their Latvian language knowledge. Summarizing the data about attitudes towards the Latvian language, we can conclude that most of Latvia's inhabitants (over 90%) believe that all Latvian inhabitants must know the state language, which serves as evidence of a dominant positive attitude toward the usage of Latvian. A possible reason of this phenomenon may be the rather extensive communication between Latvians and others in Latvia.

Inter-ethnic relations in Latvia

Despite evidence of two separate language spheres, our study shows that contacts between Latvians and non-Latvians are quite extensive in Latvia.

The frequency of mutual contacts finds its expression not only in working relations and friendships but also when choosing one's spouse. Mixed marriages are quite widespread in Latvia with about 20% of

Russian respondents have a Latvian spouse. Almost every second Russian family (49.6%) has a Latvian relative, and about 68% of Latvians have Russians among their friends and acquaintances.

However the results of the survey show that the language of intercultural communication is still Russian. For example, 95% of all respondents whose native language is something other than Latvian have Latvian colleagues at work. Among these respondents, though, only 7% speak mainly Latvian, 19% of them speak more Latvian than Russian, while 74% speak more Russian than Latvian or only Russian. (Figure 6).

About 90% of respondents with a native language other than Latvian have a Latvian friend, but only 10% use Latvian language in the process of communication. (Figure 7).

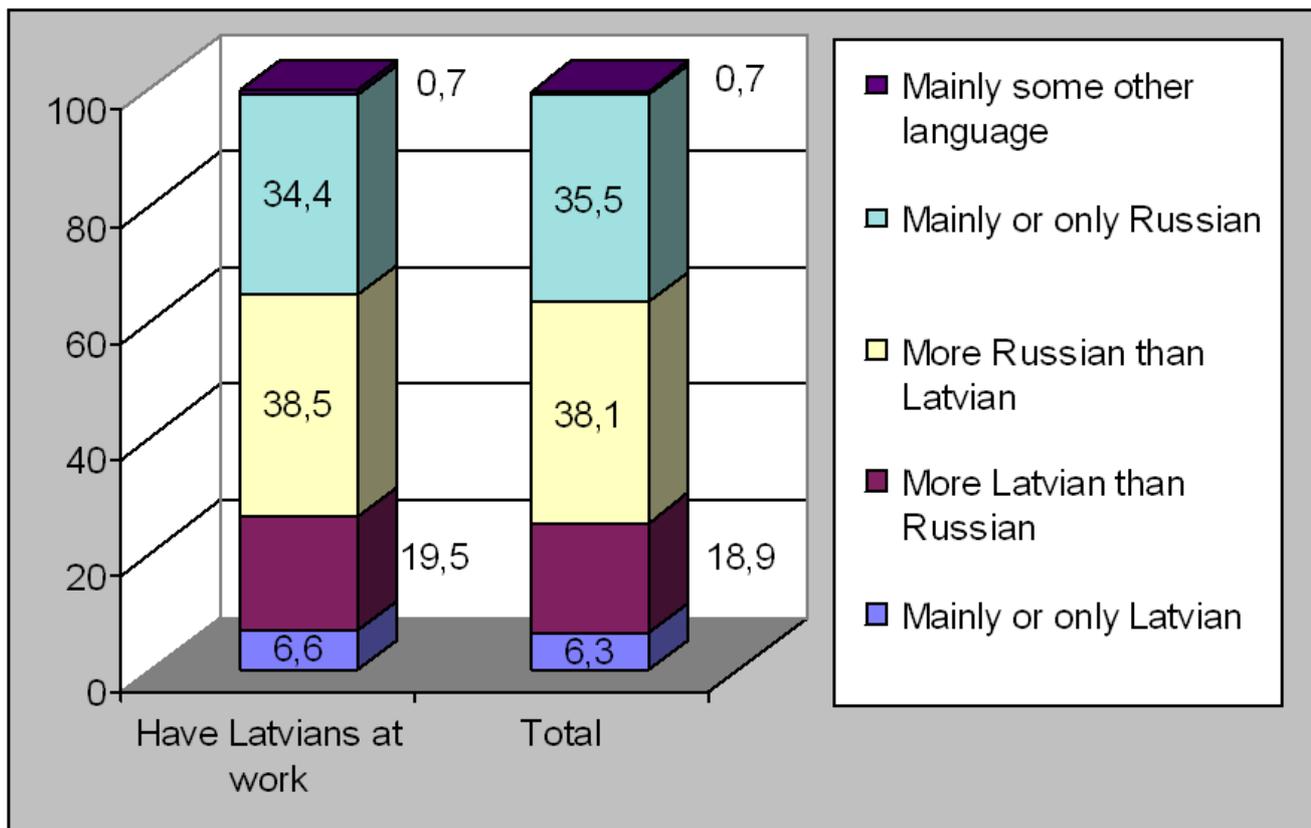
Also among those having a Latvian family member residing with them (27%) just 18% use more Latvian than Russian at home (Figure 8).

So one may conclude that inter-ethnic communication between Latvian and others exists, but the language of inter-ethnic communication is Russian. This pattern creates a conflict situation and presents a psychological offence to Latvians.

Figure 6. Language use at work

Total: Respondents with native language other than Latvian and employed; N=761

Have Latvians at work: N=723 (95%)

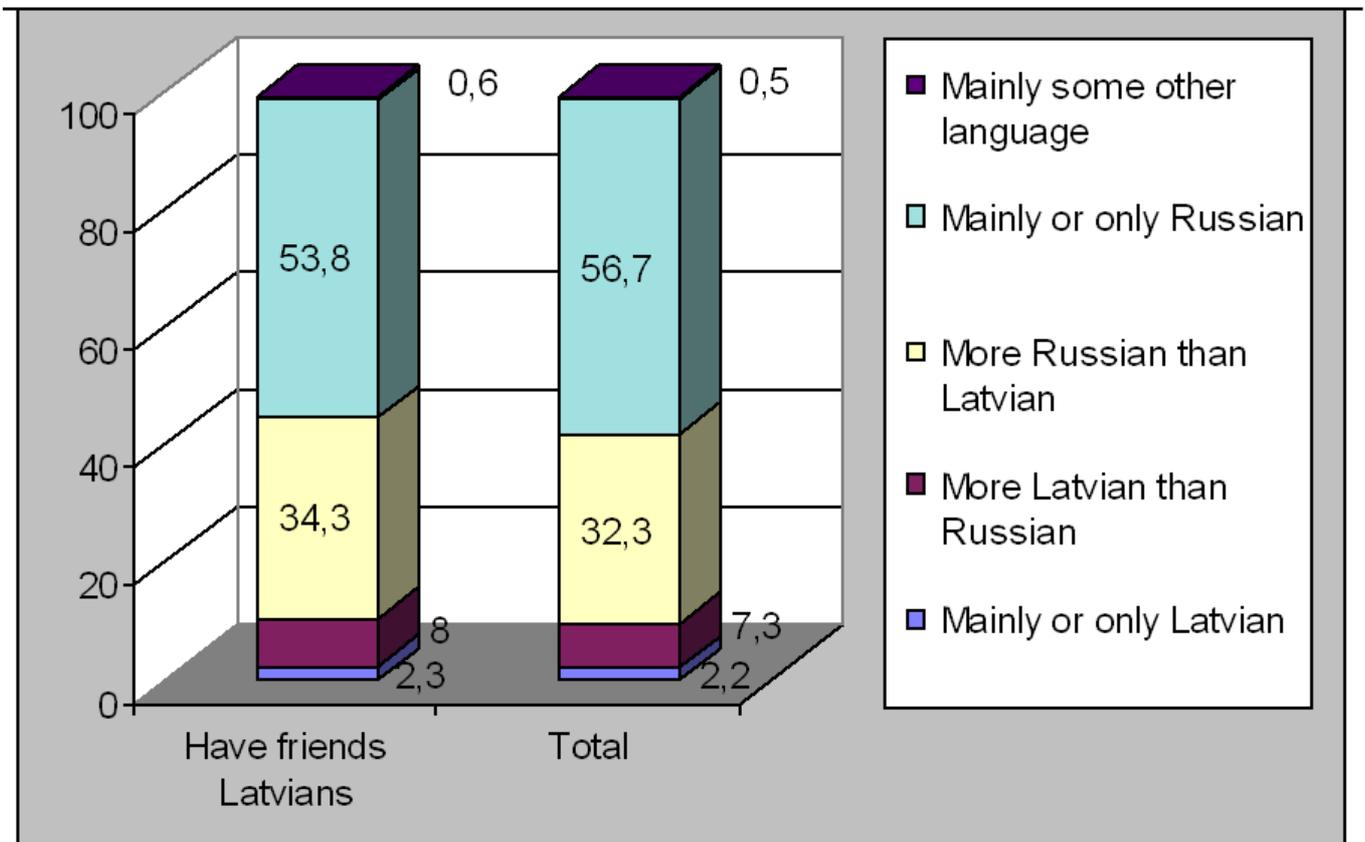


Data Source: Survey by Baltic Data House, Nov. 1997 to Jan. 1998.

Figure 7. Language used with friends and acquaintances

Total: Respondents with native language other than Latvian; N=1776

Have friends and acquaintances Latvians: N=1594 (90%)

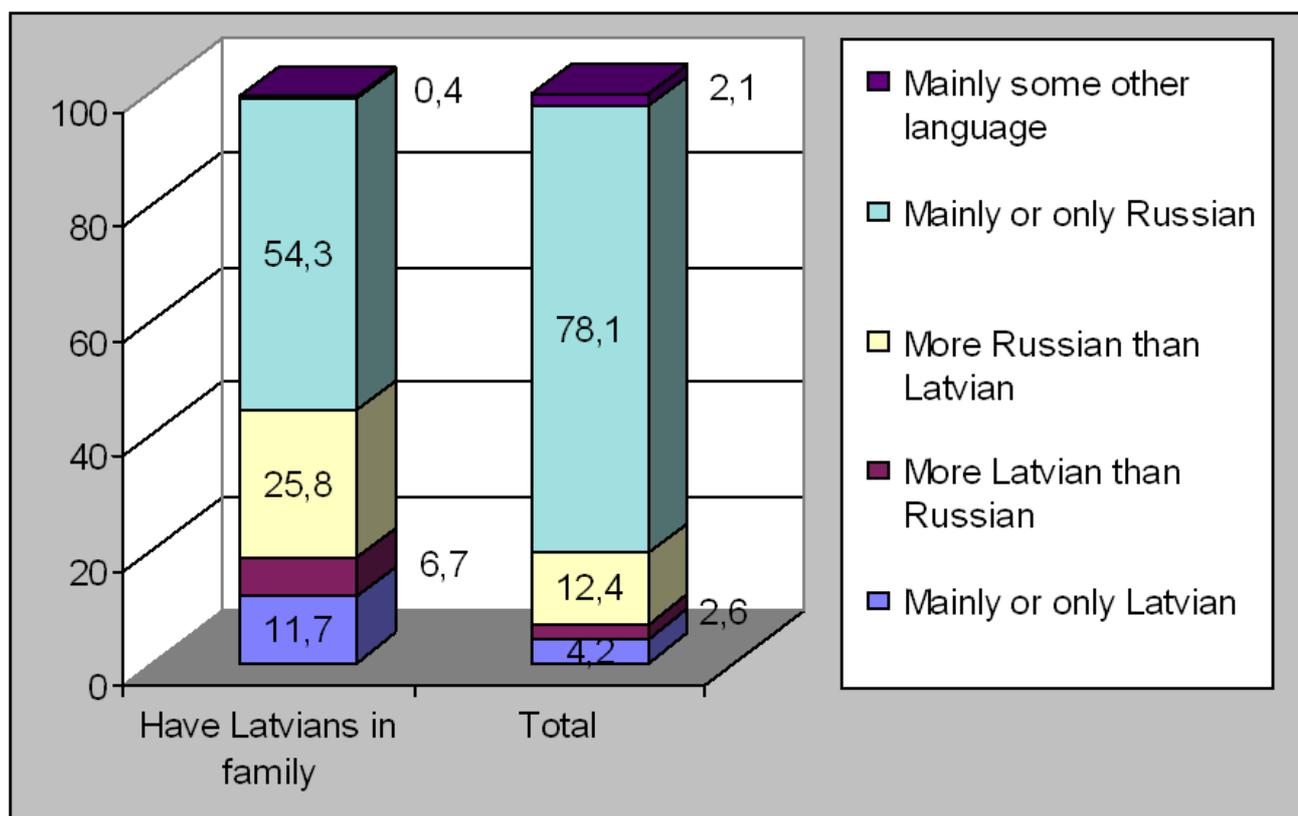


Data Source: Survey by Baltic Data House, Nov. 1997 to Jan. 1998.

Figure 8. Language used in family

Total: Respondents with native language other than Latvian; N=1776

Have Latvians in family (among the people living together): N=477 (27%)



Data Source: Survey by Baltic Data House, Nov. 1997 to Jan. 1998.

The language conflict

At the beginning of this report it was mentioned that the question of language is a question of conflict in Latvia. Regarding this conflict, the psychological factors are of the greatest importance, because on the one hand – Latvian language is a national symbol of Latvians as an ethnic group. On the other hand, for a considerable part of Russians and "Russian speakers" the status reversal from dominant to minority position is unacceptable.

In the Baltic Data House survey data, the language conflict between Latvian speakers and Russian speakers is most obvious if we look at answers to the question: "What is your attitude towards the introduction of Russian as the second state language?".

Figure 9 shows that 81 % of Latvians feel negative about introducing Russian as the second national language. Among those whose native language is not Latvian, only 11% are against such an introduction, and 78% would feel positively about this.

This represents a sharp difference between the two dominant language groups in Latvia.

However the question remains, why it is so important to improve the proficiency of Latvian language among other nationalities in Latvia?

One answer could be that in the case of Latvia the knowledge of Latvian is directly connected with social and political attitudes. For example, people with better knowledge of Latvian feel more connected to Latvia and more proud about belonging to Latvia (53% of all non-citizens feel rather proud or very proud, but among those speaking Latvian fluently 68% feel rather proud or very proud about belonging to Latvia).

The above pattern is also present in the response to the question about Russian language as a second national language. The negative attitude towards the introduction of Russian as the second national language is more pronounced among those who speak Latvian fluently (26%) (Figure 10).

Answers also vary across language proficiency groups in response to the question about existing inter-ethnic relations between Latvians and others. Those who speak Latvian fluently evaluate them better than

others (Figure 11).

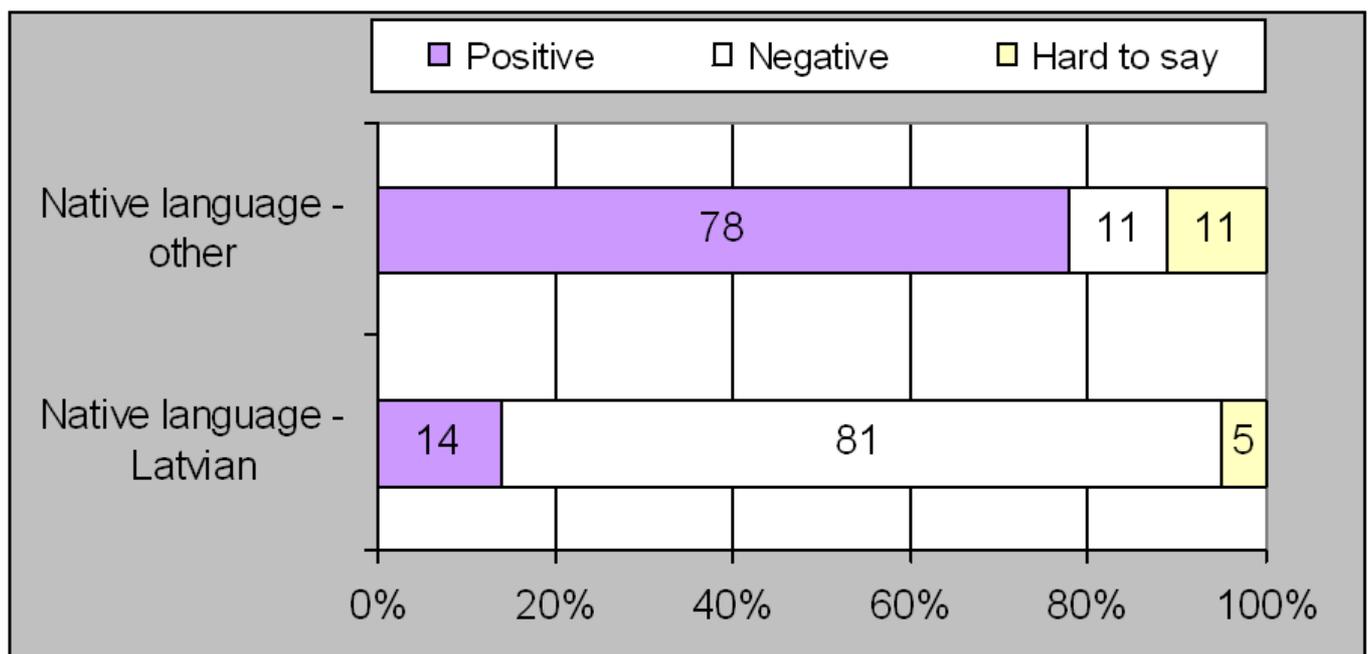
Altogether these data show that political attitudes differ according to Latvian language knowledge, namely those who know Latvian feel more integrated and connected to Latvia.

Figure 9. Russian language as a second national language

What is your attitude towards the implementation of Russian as the second national language?

Respondents with native language other than Latvian; N=1776

Respondents Latvian as a native language; N=1221.

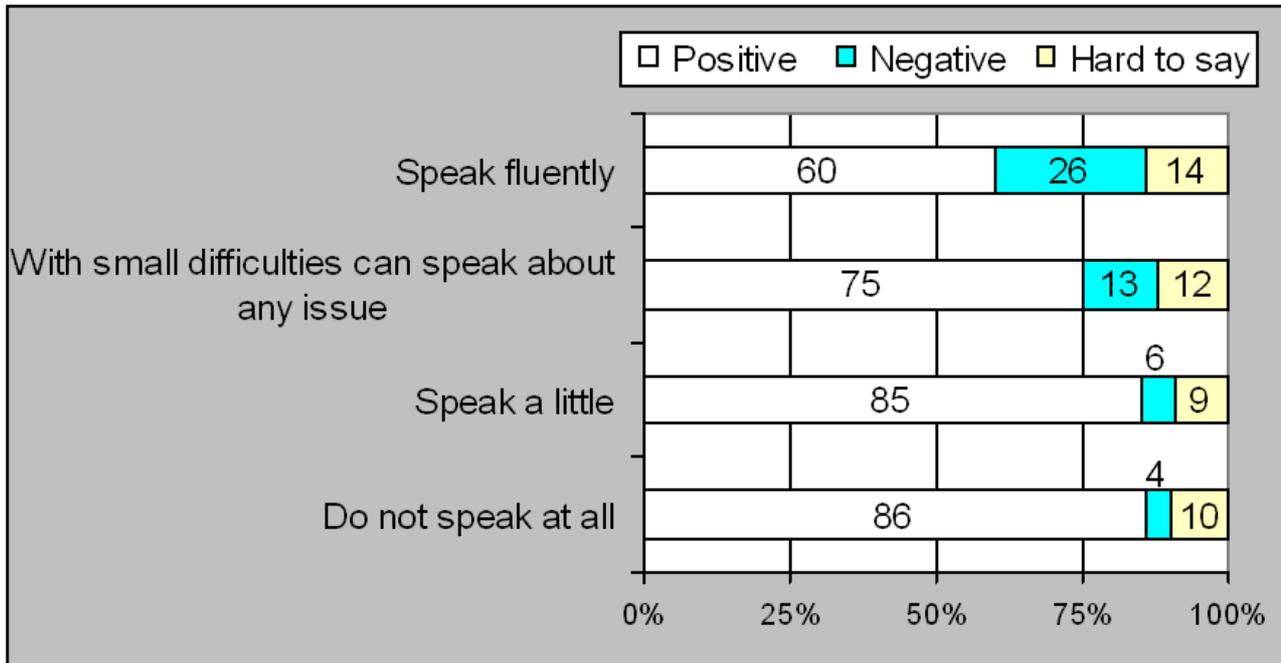


Data Source: Survey by Baltic Data House, Nov. 1997 to Jan. 1998.

Figure 10. Russian language as a second national language

What is your attitude towards implementation of Russian as the second national language?

Respondents with native language other than Latvian; N=1776

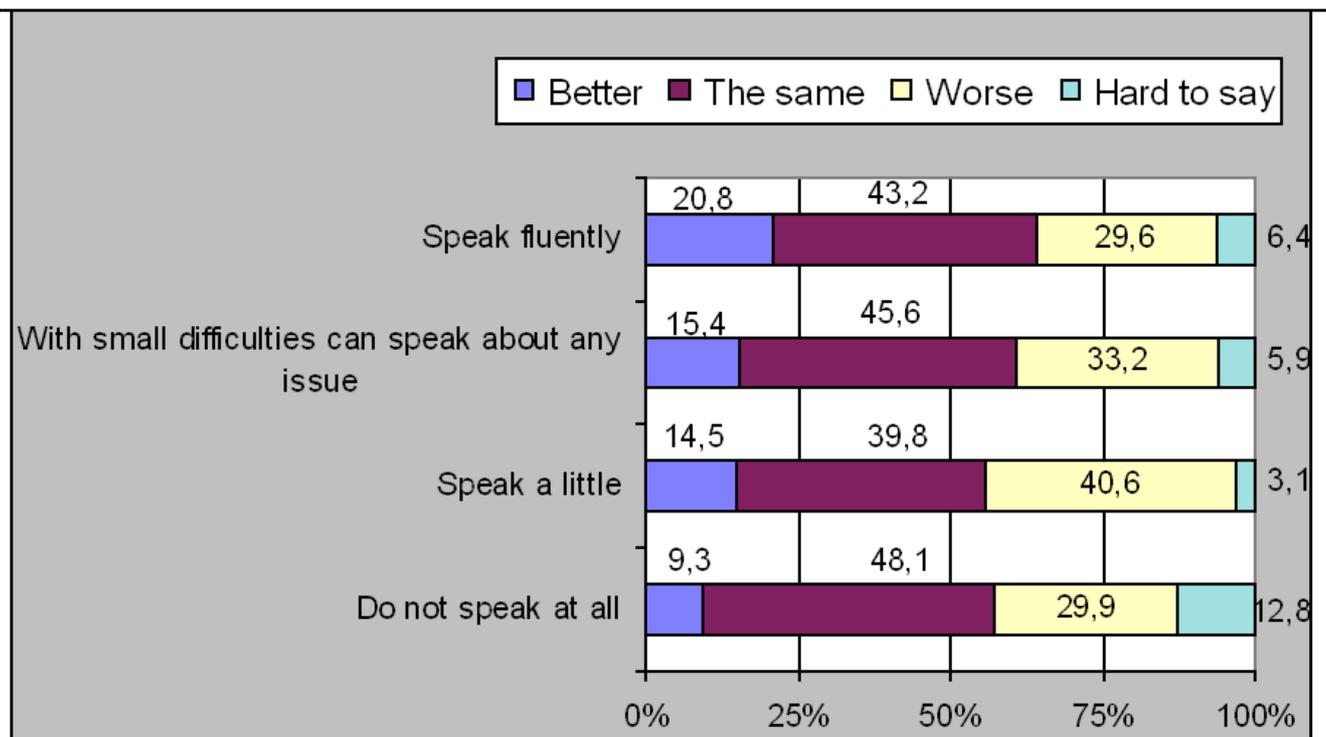


Data Source: Survey by Baltic Data House, Nov. 1997 to Jan. 1998.

Figure 11. Evaluation of the existing inter-ethnic relations

How would you assess the existing inter-ethnic relations between Latvians and other people as compared with those existing before Latvia regained its independence? Are they much better, better, the same, worse or much worse?

Respondents with native language other than Latvian; N=1776



Data Source: Survey by Baltic Data House, Nov. 1997 to Jan. 1998.

Conclusions

Generally, we can conclude that language use is a very important factor influencing inter-ethnic communication in Latvia. We can say also that language use at present is not satisfactory in Latvia. For the majority of non-Latvians, their knowledge of Latvian is insufficient, and this is one of the main reasons splitting the community in Latvia: because for Latvians, the Latvian language is a kind of national symbol, the core of ethnicity. Therefore, they expect the people of other nationalities to respect the Latvian State and to learn the Latvian language.

However a number of those whose native language is not Latvian hope to gain special status for the Russian language, and therefore exhibit a resistance to learning Latvian.

Altogether, the findings of our research support the hypothesis that there is a language conflict in Latvia and the psychological factors are of great importance.

The positive aspect regarding the proficiency of Latvian language is that most respondents believe that Latvia's inhabitants must know the Latvian language, and more than two thirds of those with native language other than Latvian would like to improve their Latvian. Thus we can say that the general attitude to Latvian language is positive. This is supported by the trend towards growing proficiency in Latvian among non-Latvians; and as this is a constant process, it may improve inter-ethnic relationships and promote the process of integration and communication among inhabitants of Latvia.

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