

Multilinguality and Code Change in Incantations

Abstract: Healers can switch from one language to another in the midst of an incantation or presentation of a healing rite. The type of alteration, or code switching, may take a number of different forms. Words meaningless in the mother tongue (quasi-words and reduplicates) are common in incantations – they act like elements of holy language and make the texts closer to the higher, supernatural sphere, since gods and the supernatural would rather speak a language dissimilar to ours. The incantation corpus includes incantations in foreign languages, usually in that of neighbouring ethnic groups, pointing to reciprocal socio-cultural influences, exchange of linguistic and incantation practices. Article analyzes primarily switches from Estonian to Russian language, incantations used parallelly in both languages and adaptations of Slavic incantations in Estonian.

Keywords: incantations, multilingualism, code switching

Introduction

In the present paper I am going to view the issues of alien language use and code change in incantations. I am going to view primarily switches from Estonian to Russian language, although the same could be observed on the example of other language pairs. Gods and supernatural beings use a language different from that used by humans, and myths contain holy messages and elements of holy language that have no meaning in our everyday language, or which are incomprehensible for us. The use of meaningless words (quasi words and reduplications)

is also common in incantations. They act like elements of holy language and make the texts closer to the higher, supernatural sphere.

Language switching in Estonian folk songs (from Estonian to Russian language) has been thoroughly analysed by Paul Ariste (Ariste 1987). Mixing two languages into a text creates special types of humour. Researchers have pointed out how certain languages are attributed special status, for example languages used to record Holy Scripture gained the status of holy languages (cf. Wheelock 1987; Hymes 1987), with every culture giving higher status to the language of their holy scriptures. Mixing holy words and phrases (quotations from the Bible) into a text changes the connotation of the text: raises its authority, taking the incantation to another level in the eyes of the patient. The language used in incantations and prayers has features of holy language. The name of god and other holy names have been used for healing purposes: Elochim, Adonai, Adam, Abraxas, Abracadabra, as well as fixed phrases from the Bible (e.g., the last words of Jesus), which have power by way of their innate holiness.

Linguist Crystal (1987) postulated that people use the code switching as a socio-linguistic tool when they are unable to express themselves in one language (to compensate the deficiency), or they want to express solidarity with a particular social group, or to exclude others (who do not speak that language) from a conversation, to convey their attitude to the listener, or to create a special effect. Use of language switching in incantations is driven by the same reasons, although all aspects are equally important. For example, creating a special effect is important as this enhances the effect of the ritual.

Incantations in Foreign Languages – Linguistic and Cultural Contacts in Estonia

The incantation corpus of every nation includes incantations in foreign languages, usually in that of neighbouring ethnic groups, pointing to reciprocal socio-cultural influences, exchange of linguistic and incantation practices. We can assume Estonian wise man shared and exchanged professional knowledge with non-

Estonian ones. There are reports from the 17th century of incantations learned from non-Estonians (Mansikka 1945), just as from the latest fieldworks. The same applies to the Siberian Estonian communities (cf. Korb 2010). This is a wider phenomenon known, e.g., in Latvia with incantations in Finnish, a language totally foreign and incomprehensible (Krohn 1929: 15 ff.).

The Estonian Folklore Archives include incantations in Russian, Latvian, German, Finnish languages recorded from Estonians, plus texts in Swedish, Livonian, and Votian languages. Chronicles, witch process protocols and other historical sources include also excerpts of and mention incantations and prayers in Latin (Ariste 1987, Uuspoo 1938a, 1938b, Kõiva 1996, 1999). It is also worth mentioning that from the point of view of ethnic minorities and cultural contacts, Estonia was a monoethnic region up to the middle of the 20th century (in 1939, 80% of inhabitants were Estonians), and that of the languages listed above, only Finnish is closely related to Estonian, all the others are incomprehensible to anyone who has not learned the language.

Before the 20th century, larger Estonian minorities included Swedes on the western coast and islands (who settled there in the 13th century) and Russians (mostly merchants, living in urban centres since the 16th century). In the 17th century, the Estonian shore of Lake Peipus was settled by Russian Old Believers, who despite relations with Lutheran Estonians maintained their own culture and language. The latest publication on Estonian Old Believer folklore (Novikov & Morozova 2008) showed that they have preserved a rich folklore and that contemporary fieldwork has much to add on even a folklore genre as archaic as healing words.

Another ethnic group, Germans (settled from 13th century, diffused) belonged to the higher and middle class, while Estonians were predominantly lower-class peasants. Votians lived in north-eastern and eastern Estonia.

Most minority groups shared the low social status of Estonians, as did most habitants of cultural contact areas. North-Estonian coastal areas have been much influenced by Finnish dialects and culture from centuries of informal communication. South-Estonians, in turn, have had more contacts and share much with Latvians, with whom they for centuries also shared the administrative unit Livonia (since the 13th century until

practically the 1905 revolution). The whole of Estonian culture was in many respects similar to German or Baltic German culture, there are many shared cultural models; the language has German loans and adoptions. The land border in South-East and North-East Estonia provided contact with Slavic peoples. The influence of the Russian cultural sphere increased with the state-supported spread of Russian Orthodox Church in the 1840s, not to mention the status of Russian language as the official language of the state. During the 20th century, the roles of Estonian and Russian language depended on political circumstances. Since WW2, the largest ethnic minority in Estonia has been and still is Russians.

Although most minorities were small in number, they all had an impact on our incantations. Incantations in a foreign language have spread from the initial points of contact in oral as well as written form.

Preference for Healers of Different Ethnicity, Different Religious Affiliation

There was an underlying common belief that healers from further away, living up north, in Sõrve Peninsula, or people of different nationality, or of a different denomination have stronger powers than others.

We know from documented cases that healers of other nations were sought out as early as in the 17th and 18th century (Westren Doll 1925, Uuspõu 1938a, 1938b, Mansikka 1945), but certainly the custom is older than that and still thrives. Sometimes, people took up a longer trip to healers living outside Estonia, mostly Latvia or Russia. There are well-documented cases of 20th century South-Estonian inhabitants turning to Latvian wise men (Kõiva 1989).

We should here also mention the travelling Gypsies who were a special case as they were feared for their evil eye and their alacrity in putting a curse on those who did not meet their wishes or consent with forecasting or healing. Nevertheless, Gypsies were called to heal animals (ERA II 273, 15 (3) < Tarvastu parish), and were welcome on certain calendar holidays – on St.

Martin's Day, bear dancers with a bear were welcome in the byre (and a fee was paid for the visit).

Estonia was predominantly Lutheran until the Russian empire started a campaign in support of the Russian Orthodox Church in the 1840s. Russian Orthodoxy later remained strong in the western islands, in South-East Estonia and North-East Estonia, where also many of the Russian minority were established. People very quickly came to believe the Russian Orthodox priests and healers of that concession are more powerful. In addition to the belief in their stronger powers, there were also significant differences in incantation texts. Texts recorded from the Estonian Orthodox regions featured characters and motifs clearly differing from those recorded from the rest of Estonia, Lutheran by confession.

The syncretical beliefs in the Russian Orthodox areas are well characterised by the (until recently practiced) custom of asking the priest to bless farm animals. This was part of herding customs which included herding incantations.

On St. George's Day, the horses were taken to the church. When the service was over, a prayer was said for the horses. The horses stood on both sides of the road. The priest said a prayer, then sprinkled blessed water. Those who had two horses took both of them there (RKM II 44, 489 (4) < Setu region (1953).

Incantations in Russian: Original Texts, Translations, Adaptations

Next, let us have a look at Russian incantations in Estonian folk tradition. Incantations in Russian use the Russian language, garbled Russian, translated texts or a mixture of Estonian and Russian languages. Incantation repertoire in Russian has expanded several times, one of the last larger waves dating to the 1920s and 1940s when Estonians remigrated from Russia. There are also earlier reports of incantations learned from non-Estonians (ERM 21, 56 < Võnnu parish) and reports that Estonian mariners returned from Russia with knowledge about healing and incantations that they put to use locally. 19th and 20th century farmhands working outside Estonia also brought

incantations home (Kõiva 1990). The reason why some incantations remained in Russian can be explained by what Crystal (1987) called the inability to express oneself in one language, or situation-based usage.

Sometimes one and the same text was known both in the mother tongue as well as foreign language. An example of this comes from the South-East Estonian Setu region where incantations were sometimes read in Russian. The verse includes a small blunder, logically *nosh horoshi* – ‘good nose’ should be *nogi horoshi* ‘good legs’.

In autumn when the cranes were actively flying about and calling out, then we, children minding the herd, sang that “Cranes went to hopping”:

*“Up-and-down, long legs along ground,
And like this hopping-hopping.”* [indicating up and down with hands]

If we did not sing this they just waved their wings. Usually they started jumping right away, sometimes after a little while. If we shouted very loudly they started to really twirl.

We also used Russian to make them jump:

*“Surov, surov uplyashi! Cranes, cranes, dance!
Tebe nosh horoshi.” You have good nose.*

RKM II 30, 61/2 (85) < Setu region (1949)

Incantations in mixed Estonian and Russian could also be used. In the following example, the first two lines of the verse are in pidgin Russian, the last an addressing formula in Estonian.

My husband’s mother used to read, when a child was crying:

*“Sarooka, varoona Magpie, crow,
ja kassit variila was making porridge
ja meie lapse käsi and our child’s hand
jälle terve!” is healthy again!*

She wetted the index finger with saliva and rubbed it on the child’s palm.

KKI 24, 104 (8) < Jõhvi parish (1957)

North-East Estonia and South-East Estonian Setu region Estonians used to adhere to Slavic calendar customs and used incantations that were unknown in the rest of Estonia. In some

cases the text was translated, in others Estonians used Russian text.

Well, this was another one...

On the night of Epiphany they boil peas and then take them atop a post and say: “Maros, maros, pai garoh!” [explains that ‘pai’ means ‘kushate’ = ‘eat’ in Russian] [garbled Russian “Cold, cold, eat peas”]. That then better peas will grow next year. This is another old custom.

KKI 20, 574 (89) < Iisaku parish (1955)

In linguistic transition areas, texts could also be translated into Estonian. The Estonian phrase *ei sulge, ei sulevart* in the following example translated from Russian *ni pukha, ni pera* (“not a feather, not a rachis”) is, however, not grammatically correct. The common Estonian phrase in this situation is *Tõuse ja lendada!* “Rise and fly!”:

“Ei sulge, ei sulevart”, is wished to someone going hunting. The one leaving says: “I will go hunting for luck, maybe I will get steak.” The one staying home wishes the goer luck: “Ei sulge, ei sulevart!”

KKI 26, 120 (11) < Jõhvi parish (1957).

The next examples show how the foreign language can be distorted so much that it is only with difficulty that we can guess what the original was. The first two lines of the incantation are in a garbled foreign language, nonsensical words, the last three in correct Estonian dialect:

The other words for rose:

“Eeri-peeri, Luuha, luuha.

Täitä tuupõ, Matsi kress!

Üteh paigah viis, tõsõh viis,

„tulitungõl“ keskmäne,

nakas takah juuksma.”

KKI 6, 351 (99) < Setu region (1948)

In one place five times,
in another place five
times,
the rose is the middle
one,
it started to run.

In the following disease warding words, the first three lines are in broken Russian, followed by Estonian. The first line uses also

an archaism *himbi* ('girl'), a rare word from Older Baltic-Finnic language.

*Snat, snat, tsistaja himbi,
tsistaja palota,
sitsid krasnaja tsevitsa,
sitsa krasnaja tola.*

*Musta mõtsa koh
kikka kirre-ei
ja kana kõõruda-ie.
Sinnä vödõtas häti ja viko*

*inemisõ luust,
lihast ja soonist vällä.
Amin.*

Spit three times.

ERA II 10, 441 (5) < Setu region (1927).

Take, take, clean girl,
Clean bog,
a beautiful girl sitting,
Sitting on a red/
beautiful chair,
Go to the black forest
where no cocks crow
or hens cluck.
That is the place where
troubles and disease
are taken out of the
bones muscle and sinew.
Amen.

The following sample text is quite similar to the previous one, but wholly adapted: no words or verses in other languages. The text in Estonian (Setu dialect), with loans from Orthodox incantation tradition – a place where no dogs bark or cocks crow, symbols of nonexistence and impossibility – does not seem so foreign at all.

A healer read those words nine times on the painful spot. The healer put a stick on the hurting place and pressed a knife criss-cross into it and read pain-words. If the afflicted sent somebody else to the healer instead, then the healer made a cross onto butter and instructed to salve the hurting place with this. Shoes could not be taken off on the way home.

*Halu, haigõ, mingu
mõro mõtsa pääle,
kirivähe kivvi,
verevahe merde,
koh kikas õi kiri,
koh pini õi haugu.
Sääl om illos tütrik,
valus tütrik, toolõ mingu.*

Halu, haigõ, tuu kand

Pains and diseases, go
into dark forest
into piebald stone
into red sea
where no cock crows
where no dog barks.
There is a beautiful girl
White girl, to her
should they go.
pains, diseases, this

| | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>halu haigist,</i> | tree-stump |
| <i>Maarja luust, Maarja lihast</i> | pains of disease |
| | out of Mary's bone, |
| | Mary's body |
| <i>kuioma ja kaoma</i> | dry and disappear |
| <i>kui vanakuu taivahe.</i> | like the old moon from |
| | the sky. |
| <i>Timä noorest ja tervest,</i> | [Make] her young and |
| | healthy, |
| <i>halu haigõlt kaoma.</i> | pains away from the |
| | diseased. |
| <i>Arsti käsi, Jumala abi.</i> | Healer's hand, God's |
| | help. |
| S 93370 (19) < Setu region | |

Conclusion

The samples given here concerned Estonian-Russian incantation relations and the code switching taking place therein. A similar line of examples can be provided about German influence in Estonian incantations – in most cases, these are internationally spread incantations like “Three roses”, Merseburg words, etc. Just as we saw in examples of Russian incantations, there are incantations in German, half-translations from German, as well as adapted texts. In archived healer's notes we sometimes see side by side an incantation in Estonian and the same incantation as it first spread in a clumsy translation with German phrases.

It is well known how in the Middle Ages and in Early Modern Times healers used prayer texts in Latin for healing purposes (Kõiva 1985), and garbled Latin can be found also in more recent incantation texts and letter formulae. We find excerpts of Latin in healing words even in 19th and 20th century incantation manuscripts. For example, against ganglionic cyst (‘dead man's bone’ in colloquial Estonian):

When the moon is waning, after sundown, call a dead person by name three times and stroke the cyst clockwise and press it while saying:

“Oh Jehova, father of god, send this dead one, [name], in the name of the holy spirit to take its dead-man’s-bone away. Come and take your dead-man’s-bone.”

And stroke by hand and press the cyst:

“[name] come and take your dead-man’s-bone, [name] come and take your dead-man’s-bone. Rein, Christ, Peter, Naman, Naman, [garbled Latin In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti], Jesus, Mary, Jesus, in the name of god the father, god the son and god the holy spirit. Amen.”

RKM II 22, 528/9 (8) < Jõhvi parish (1949/50)

Depending on how similar the backgrounds of the patient and incantation performer are, the messages and symbols of a text can be interpreted differently. It is obvious that switching depends on the person being addressed and it also depends on the location.

Analyses of incantations used in the mixed-ethnicity Estonian and Russian areas showed that recent loans (mid-19th century onwards) are used in Russian (e.g., the cold showed incantation example). The distorted Russian language indicates low Russian language skills among Estonians, rote memoration and according errors. However, in South-East Estonia, where the ethnicities have co-existed for a long time, we also see texts that have been translated and adapted to Estonian.

People attribute different social values to different codes and languages. Since a different social value is associated with each code, the speaker considers use of one code more appropriate than the other. Language switching induced by various triggers and code change helps change the social meaning of communication during the ritual, to express one’s wishes and emotions in a more precise manner.

There are specific requirements for the time and space of performing a ritual, making demands also about the mystic and uncommon nature of the language used. Healers can change from one language to another in the midst of the incantation or presentation of a healing rite. The type of alteration, or code switching, may take a number of different forms, including alteration of sentences, phrases or words. In the case of incantations, the performer and listener are users of different languages: the text of the healer addresses disease demons and helpful elements or gods using the possibilities offered by the holy language, the

patient understands only a part of that, his linguistic paradigm is mundane and only familiar allusions allow him to follow the general outlines of the incantation content.

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