Sustainability of double ethnic identity in majority-minority settings: The case of Estonian and Võro

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The paper analyses the possibility of double (or multiple) ethnic identity for individuals as well as groups on the basis of a study of ethnolinguistic vitality of Võro community conducted in fall 2005 amongst of 9th-graders at the county of Võro. The role of languages in formation of double identities is discussed. The conditions for a stable and sustainable double identity are outlined on the basis of theoretical work on social psychology. The Võro situation is analysed on the basis of this information and it is concluded that Võro-Estonian double identity could be sustainable only if it is located on different dimensions of the scale of collective identities.

Very often language maintenance literature and programs are concerned only with the problems of how to support language, forgetting that language as a token of identity depends crucially on the strength of the particular ethnic identity it manifests. If people do not value their collective identity, no language maintenance program could possibly save this language – it ceases precisely because the speakers want to get rid of their stigmatized group affiliation or just do not see the reason for speaking it. This means that successful collective identity maintenance is a necessary, although not sufficient condition for successful language maintenance.

Such identity maintenance is a difficult task, because in the minority setting, it is hard to construct a positive collective identity for the group. One reason is that the possible rewards for belonging to the minority group will almost surely be overshadowed by the appeal of the majority membership; the other stems from the simple fact that a double ethnic identity is cognitively more complex than a single one and thus more energy is needed to maintain it.

In this paper I'll provide a short overview of the social psychological research on multiple collective identities and try to apply it to the problems of language maintenance. In my analysis, I'll concentrate on the sociolinguistic situation of the Võro language in Estonia. I suggest that the reversal of language shift in Võro could be achieved only if it will be built on a sustainable Võro-Estonian double identity.[1]

Cognitive complexity of identity

There is a variable usage of terminology in the social psychological literature: both the terms *social identity* and *collective identity* are used for the same phenomenon defined often as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel 1978:63). So, some frameworks such as social identity theory (Tajfel 1978) and self-categorisation theory (Turner et al. 1987) use the term *social identity* whereas some other (for example Brewer and Gardner 1996; Sedikides and Brewer 2001; Simon and Klandermans 2001; Ashmore

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et al. 2004) prefer *collective identity*. I agree with Ashmore et al. (2004: 81) that all the aspects of the self are by nature social and the term *social* is already heavily overloaded with various meanings. Thus, I favor the term collective identity, because it is less confusing.

While people belong simultaneously to various groups, they do not have one exclusive collective identity, but rather a whole array of possible collective identities. These multiple identities are organized on various dimensions. Typical dimensions of collective identity are gender, race, ethnicity, age, language, religion, profession etc. Each of these dimensions allows a certain number of distinct categories. For example, gender has two categories (male, female), race has considerably more and ethnicity and language even more. Prototypically, the identity which characterises a person on one particular dimension is exclusive, i.e. one is either male or female, rarely both, black or white; and so on.

Nevertheless, in non-prototypical cases people may belong to groups which are defined on the same dimension. For example, a balanced bilingual person may feel belonging to both of the ethnicities concerned. Such a situation increases the cognitive complexity of one's overall collective identity. Similarly, the cases where an individual belongs to groups which do not share members or share only a few members are also cognitively more complex (Roccas and Brewer 2002). For example, due to historical reasons, there are not many people who are both black and Estonian, consequently this identity combination is cognitively more complex than for example black and American. In this way for any individual, one or another combination of identities on different dimensions can lead to more or less complex overall collective identity.

According to Roccas and Brewer (2002), cognitively complex multiple identities have an inherent inconsistency. Research on cognitive consistency has shown that people seek for ways to reconcile their inconsistent perceptions, beliefs or behaviors (Abelson et al 1968). The same happens also with conflicting collective identities. Roccas and Brewer (2002) outline four possible ways how this could be achieved: by intersection, dominance, compartmentalization or merger (see Figure 1):
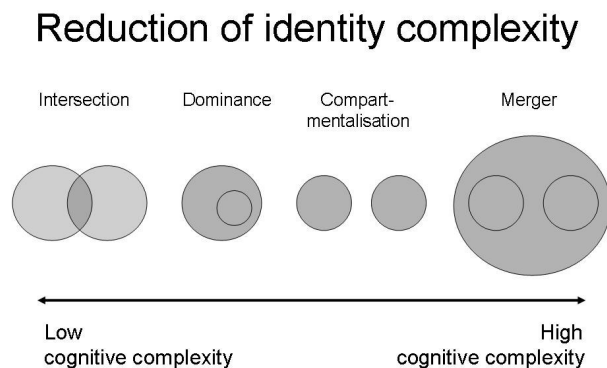

Figure 1. Reduction of identity complexity (based on Roccas and Brewer 2002:90)

The simplest strategy is intersection. In this case a person identifies oneself only with people who share the same combination of identities. For her, the in-group is the intersection of multiple group memberships.

Dominance is cognitively more complex. In this case the person has one of her group memberships as the primary one and all the others are subordinated to this. For example a female lawyer might identify herself as lawyer and all other group memberships (gender, ethnicity, marital status etc) are just an addition.

Next in complexity is the compartmentalization strategy. In this case person keeps her group memberships apart, according to the social situation or context. For example a female lawyer might categorize herself in work situations as a lawyer, but at home as a female. Cognitively the most complex strategy is merger. In this case, a person includes all members of her different group affiliations as her in-group.

The individuals' tendency to reduce cognitive complexity has direct impact on the group processes: in the course of time, it tends to lead either to assimilation or separation of the groups that have a double identity defined on the same dimension. Of course, the maintenance of double identity is also possible, but as this is cognitively more complex, it requires extra effort from the members of the group. This can be best seen in the case of various immigrant groups all across the world. Although some of them can be quite persistent, most immigrant groups are able to maintain their double identity for three generations at the best (see for example Clyne 2003:7-19 for a thorough overview).

While multiple identities on the same dimension tend to be unstable and lead to assimilation or separation in long run, multiple identities that are formed on different dimensions are cognitively simple and therefore more stable. This regularity might be very useful in language maintenance: if a group can build a double identity on different dimensions, this could lead to its higher vitality which in turn would enhance the language maintenance.

Language maintenance situation in Võro

There are some recent studies about the usage of Võro language (or dialect, as some prefer to call it). In 1998, Pajusalu et al. (2000) conducted a large scale survey of the usage of Võro in South-Eastern Estonia. In 2005, I carried out an ethno-linguistic vitality study in the schools of the Võro linguistic area (see Ehala forthcoming and Ehala and Niglas forthcoming for more details). These studies are to some extent complementary as the 1998 survey studied people from 25 to 60 years of age whereas 2005 study concentrated on 14-16 year old students. Provided that the adult people studied in 1998 have not changed their linguistic behaviour much over the last 7 years, we could merge both data sets, obtaining in this manner an apparent time overview of the dynamics of the usage of Võro through three generations: children (14-16 years), parents (32-51 years) and grandparents (52-71 years).

As about the self-assessment of the knowledge of Võro, the situation is quite satisfactory: 52% of the children's generation regards their knowledge of Võro as average or better, only 23% claimed that they do not know Võro at all (Ehala, forthcoming). From amongst the parents' and grandparents' generation, 79% of the respondents considered their knowledge of Võro as average or better (Pajusalu et al 2000: 150). Of course, self-assessment is subjective and impossible to control. As

Romaine (1995:27) pointed out "self-reports are subject to variance in relation to factors such as prestige, ethnicity, and political affiliation, etc."

The situation changes considerably if we look at the language usage data. Only 23 % amongst the children's generation use Võro language at home to some extent and as many as 49% use only Estonian (Ehala, forthcoming). This data is in a good concordance with the data obtained from their parents' generation. According to Pajusalu et al (2000: 157), 48% do not use Võro language talking to their children.

There are even less those children who use only Võro or primarily Võro language at home (9%). This is in a vivid contrast with the attitudes expressed by their parents' generation. According to Pajusalu et al (2000:165), as much as 40% of the respondents said that they are "by all means" ready to teach Võro to their children and an additional 36% was prepared to teach it alongside Estonian. More than 76% considered it important to speak Võro to children (Pajusalu 2000:169). Thus, it seems that there is consensus that the language deserves to be saved, however the discrepancy with the actual Võro usage at home is very large.

The picture becomes more drastic if one looks at the increase of these people who do not use Võro at all. While amongst the grandparents' generation there are only 12% of such people and amongst the parents's generation 21% (Pajusalu et al 2000), amongst the children's generation the group of non-users of Võro has risen to 62% (Ehala forthcoming). As the graph in figure 2 shows, this pattern resembles closely to the well known S-curve of language change.
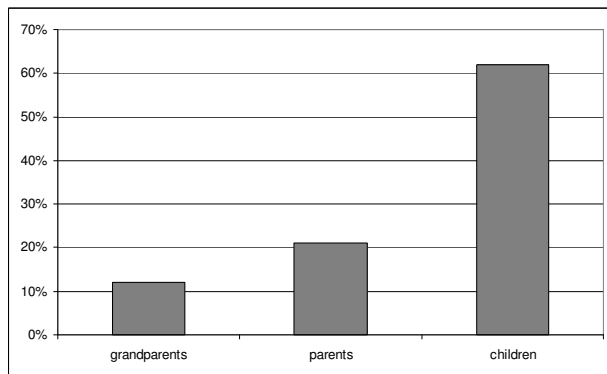

Figure 2. Non-users of Võro amongst current generations.

Based on the abrupt rise of the number of non-users of Võro amongst the youngest generation, one could claim that the language shift started in Võro linguistic area about 20 years ago. Considering that about the half of the parents generation do not use Võro with their children (Pajusalu 2000:27), it is apparent that the intergenerational transmission of Võro has been broken and the language is likely to die within one generation if the shift could not be reversed.

Võro identity in reversing the language shift

Despite active Võro maintenance movement in the last 15 years, the language shift in Võro area has deepened, not stopped. Considering the data presented above, the first priority in language maintenance activities in Võro area is to re-establish the intergenerational transmission of Võro. This could only be done if a sustainable Võro

identity could be established together with a plausible ideology for maintaining such identity.

The 2005 study of ethnolinguistic vitality (Ehala and Niglas forthcoming), investigated amongst the other things also the collective identity of the Võro area youth. The nature of their collective identity was explored by two questions: *How much do you consider yourself Võro?* (a Võro person) and *How much do you consider yourself Estonian?* The results are presented in Table 1:

Scale	How much do you consider yourself Võro?		How much do you consider yourself Estonian?	
	Percent	Cumulatively	Percent	Cumulatively
Totally	3	3	53	53
2	3	6	19	73
3	10	16	10	83
4	14	31	10	92
5	12	43	4	96
6	21	64	2	98
Not at all	36	100	2	100

Table 1. Collective identities of Võro youth.

As the Table 1. shows, for Võro area youth, the Estonian identity is dominant (more than 90% consider themselves totally or at least half Estonians), accompanied by some degree of Võroness (30% considers themselves totally or half Võro. For most of the young people, Estonian and Võro identities are not directly competing: there is only a low negative correlation (r=-0,24) between them. This means that it is generally not so that who feels more strongly as Estonian, feels also less Võro, and *vice versa*. That Võro identity is not opposed, but complementary to the Estonian one, has been told to me in several times by Võro people themselves. In this light, it is interesting that the study of Aune Valk (2000) also revealed that Võro people do not distinct themselves very clearly from the rest of Estonians.

The above mentioned facts are crucial in evaluating and designing the Võro maintenance discourse. For a long time the dominant position of Võro activists has been that while Võros are not an ethnic minority, they indeed are a linguistic minority. Consequently, quite a lot of energy has been spent on rallying for the linguistic rights of Võros – mainly for a legal status to Võro as a regional heritage language in Estonia. Such a status would allegedly raise the prestige of the language and consequently make the people to value their language more. This goal has not been reached, but it has indeed raised some opposition from the mainstream Estonian circles. It is argued that providing Võro language a legal minority status would induce unjustified costs for bilingual governmental services in the area. The main argument for rejecting the legal claim is that Võro is not a separate language, but a dialect; and if a legal status will be given to Võro, it would provide a precedent for other dialects.

Based on the overview of the collective identity complexity and the nature of Võro identity, I would claim that the conception of Võro as a linguistic minority does not in fact support the actual Võro maintenance. The reason for this is that this conception places the Võro maintenance enterprise into the minority discourse, and this discourse is doomed to remain unpopular both amongst the majority of Võro people and of course amongst the so called mainstream Estonians.

The cause for this becomes evident if we look at the collective identity structure of Võro people. As said, Võro people do not oppose themselves to Estonians which means that it is very hard for them to feel as a minority: minority is a group that is distinct from the majority, not a part of this majority. For most of the Võros, their current collective identity is a majority identity with an additional local identity. To feel like a minority they should start to oppose themselves to other Estonians. Currently, I see no reasons why this should happen.

As Võros are not opposed to other Estonians, the ideological positions connected to the minority discourse such as fighting for their rights etc. do not attract them to the Võro maintenance movement – this could be seen as supporting separatism and this is not what they would like to do.

The other thing why the minority discourse is not attractive comes from its general aim to build parallel linguistic structures for the minority language. A rationally thinking person is well aware of the human and financial resources available for their minority group. If these resources are obviously non-sufficient for building and maintaining a sustainable linguistic support system, people will not support such attempts. This is the reason why many native Võro people do not support education in Võro language – it would require extra energy, but could not create better conditions for the personal development for their children.

The arguments, presented above make it appear as if the language maintenance efforts within the minority paradigm are doomed to fail. This would be a too strong statement, as very much depends on the situation and context where a particular linguistic group is situated. But I do indeed claim, that the minority discourse, as it is used often in connection with Võro maintenance efforts, does not work in this particular situation, because the nature of Võro-Estonian double identity does not support it and there are in fact better strategies for Võro language maintenance.

A stable maintenance scenario for Võro

Following the discussion about cognitive complexity of multiple identities, outlined at the first section of this paper, it is obvious that Võro-Estonian double identity either on the ethnic or language dimension is an inherently unstable combination and hard to achieve and even harder to maintain.

On the other hand, there is no extra complexity involved, if Võro-Estonian identity is organized on different dimensions: Estonianness on the ethnic dimension and Võroness on local dimension. I think that I am right if I suppose that this is exactly how most of the Võros identify themselves currently.

This means that the Võro movement would find more support amongst the Võro people if they would drop the argument that Võro is a separate language and Võro people a linguistic minority. Recognising Võro as a dialect would be much more comfortable for Võros as this does not force them to oppose themselves to Estonians.

Recognising Võro as a dialect of Estonian does not mean that Võros should give up using the term *uma kiil* 'our own language' for their variety - it is their language, there is no doubt of that, but it is a part of it, not something distinct from Estonian. So they could be at the same time both Estonians and Võro without a cognitive inconsistency.

This proposal could be criticised on the grounds that despite the fact that Võro-Estonian double identity on separate dimensions would be cognitively simple, degrading Võro to the status of a vernacular – a *patois* – would never provide enough prestige for people to maintain it; if we want to reverse language shift we should provide Võro a higher status, a status of a separate language with all of the rights of a separate language.

I agree totally that for reversing language shift, the variety should be loaded with positive connotations and prestige, but I disagree that this could only be achieved by providing it a higher legal status and recognition as a separate language. A good example is Estonian itself. Despite the fact that after the incorporation of Estonian to USSR, the formal status of Estonian was lessened, Estonians did not start shifting to Russian that had a higher status in Soviet Union. Despite of formal criteria, Estonian had a higher prestige for Estonians than Russian had, and consequently no language shift occurred. Thus, for language maintenance, only the high prestige of the variety is needed, but this does not necessarily presuppose a high formal status.

As the collective identity of Võros would be better accommodated with Võro as a dialect rather than as a separate language, various ways should be looked for of how to raise the prestige of Võro as a dialect. The Võro movement needs an appropriate ideology for this. I have a few suggestions here which undeniably need further elaboration and promotion or at least discussion.

According to Smith (1999), there are a few discursive strategies that the elites of various groups use to strengthen their collective identity. One of the most important from these strategies is to provide justification for their group's existence – the *raison d'etre* for this group.

The same goes for Võro people. Võro maintenance should provide a meaningful justification of speaking this variety and claiming oneself Võro – the Võro *raison d'etre*, so to say. Finding and disseminating such a justification is a creative task that the Võro leaders should seriously engage. Here I can only make a suggestion which I believe could be fruitful.

In linguistic and historical terms, Võro variety could be claimed to be the oldest and purest form of Estonian: the closest to this Estonian that was spoken at the ancient golden age when Estonia was free. As the Southern-Estonia was one of the richest and strongest areas of Estonia and played a heroic, part in defending our freedom against the German Order, Võro identity is indeed one of the most central and purest forms of Estonian identity. It is true that during the course of history, the Northern Estonian dialect rose as the prestige variety, but at the expense of accepting massive foreign influences both linguistically and culturally. Võro people at the same time did not exchange their identity for financial gains, but retained their true Estonianness. Thus, recognizing that the Võro variety is the one that has been the most truthful to historic roots of Estonians and Võros are the people who have kept it this way could be a powerful source of prestige. The only thing is that it needs promotion both amongst Võros as well as amongst the mainstream Estonians. Literature, theatre, commercial culture and tourism all could contribute to creation of this image.

At the same time as this historic status of the Võro dialect is being endorsed, parents should be encouraged to raise their children in Võro. There are already first steps done in this direction (see Ojar 2005), but linguists and educationalists and other opinion leaders should do more to disseminate the view that speaking a dialect as the first language does not harm child's later success at the school. Võro and Estonian are similar enough that one can easily learn dialect at home and the standard language later at school.

A special ideology should be created for encouraging females to speak more Võro. At present Võro is clearly a male dominated variety (see Pajusalu et al 2000 and Ehala forthcoming). Even in families that transmit the language to their children, the father is often the one who does it whereas the mother prefers to speak the standard. This tendency is obviously connected to the females' stronger thrive towards the prestige variety, to their desire to provide their offspring better starting position in the life. A conception should be created of how females could meaningfully relate to the Võro variety. One such possibility is to view Võro as a secret language of love: the language of intimacy that one hears only at home from the dearest ones, not on official public channels. For this, one needs not a full command of the language, but could start with a few phrases, lullaby songs or other ritual usages of the language. Ultimately, the maintenance of Võro depends from the position taken by mothers – if they see the usage of Võro meaningful of their children, the language will survive, if not, it will perish.

Conclusion
In this article I proposed that it could better to promote the usage of Võro if we consider it a dialect rather than a minority language. To consider Võro a dialect is a rather unpopular idea at present amongst the Võro activists, since a lot of energy has been invested in promoting the opposite view. I do not know whether my proposal would improve Võro maintenance, but I am quite sure that the current ideology is not going to be successful, either. One is certain, however: if we want to promote Võro language, we need to build a stable and positive Võro-Estonian double identity. And at present, I am sure, it could only be done if the Võro and Estonian parts of the identity are accommodated at separate dimensions of the identity (ethnic and local), not on the same dimension (language) as it is most often depicted at present.

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