

## The mechanisms of spelling standardization for written Estonian 1880–1920

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From the middle ages onward, most European languages transitioned from highly variable spelling systems to rather standardized ones, levelling both dialectally induced and other spelling variants into supralocal and quite stable writing systems. This process took place over a few centuries and has been associated with various demographic, institutional, technological and pragmatic factors (ranging from migration in urbanization, through access to education, to emerging standard language ideologies). Considering, which particular factors were responsible for particular waves of standardization in different languages, would give cross-linguistic insight to the mechanisms that shaped modern languages in these transitions.

In this talk, I will present a case study that combines several custom datasets and a text corpus to study the standardization of a selected spelling features for written Estonian around 1880–1920, keeping in mind the multiple candidate mechanisms responsible. Integrating demographic data, publication records, the spread of education, prescriptive language publications, and individual writer biographies, the study estimates the role of these complementary features in determining the distribution of the spelling variants between print publications and over time.

Considering these features together, we find that population changes in the use of spelling features are highly influenced by prescriptive publications, and that these intended changes were led by younger writers and large cities. The influence of spoken language contacts and the birth dialects of the writers were marginal, indicating a certain independence of the written medium, akin to an emerging standard language ideology. Still, for a few of the trends, also the demographics and education of the population of writers mattered.

The study describes the mechanisms of spelling standardization for a community in transition from an oral to a literate one. There, for an emerging language in turn-of-the-century Europe, intentional intervention played a big role in language standardization, visibly shaping the linguistic outcome. Combining different data sources, and competing and complementary explanations allows us to investigate the mechanisms responsible in particular historical cases. Sufficient detail in single-language case studies also allows us to build up a cross-linguistic understanding of the typical mechanisms influencing spelling practices across different societies and eras.

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