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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

(De-)ethnicizing Estonian language acquisition and practice

Christiana[1]

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Abstract

Drawing on over four years of ethnographic data, this article explores how Estonian language acquisition policies and practices tend to be overtly ethnicized. By setting up ethnic/national categorization as a naturalized facet of personhood, Estonian language acquisition initiatives routinely obligate individuals to ethnicize themselves and others, thereby (re)constructing boundaries and prompting dialogue with stereotypes and frameworks of power and inequality. They collaborate with broader political projects of belonging and bordering, constructing the narrative of a homogenous Estonian people, with Estonian language as the cornerstone of this imagined-as-cohesive identity. Through such essentialist categorization and construction of language ownership vis-à-vis primordial criteria, current frameworks are geared towards exclusion and othering, rather than conviviality and care. This article gives attention to de-ethnicization as a strategy to inform both language policy and quotidian community practice aimed at more pluralistic imaginings of who belongs in contemporary Estonia. As such, it contributes to wider critical scholarship dealing with the intersection of language policy, diversity management, and social equality.

Keywords Estonia · Language acquisition · Ethnicity · De-ethnicization · Integration

Eestlased and *eestimaalased*

"You are so quiet," constantly commented the teacher, "You need to talk more!" addressing Ksenia and Anna,[1] two young bachelor's students in an Estonian language course. One session Ksenia spoke up, "But we're *eestimaalased*… we're accustomed to keeping quiet, it's our culture too!" Ksenia and Anna were from Narva, Estonia's third largest city, located on the Russian border, where Russian is predominantly spoken and 86% of the population was recorded as ethnically

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

Christiana
christia@ut.ee

[1] Institute of Cultural Research, University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia

Russian in 2021 population registry data (Narva Linnavalitsus 2021). "You have different blood!" replied the teacher, "You can't use that as an excuse!" This interaction took place in what I perceived as a relaxed and friendly environment, and I had the impression that both Ksenia and the teacher employed their comments casually, with humor and affability, and without the intention of engaging in serious debate over topics such as ethnicity or identity/belonging. So while not confrontational, the interaction's content is telling in regards to the prevalence of evocations of the disparity between normative notions of primordial Estonian ethnic/national identity and more open ideas of civic Estonian-ness. Ksenia's self-employed descriptor, *eestimaalane*, literally translates as "one of the Estonian land." It thereby denotes a connection to the geopolitical configuration or territory of Estonia but without implying ethnic/national belonging. The teacher, in contrast, by mentioning a blood connection, was referring to being *eestlane*, ethnically/nationally Estonian, a positionality accorded primordially by blood/birth and that supposedly gives one the exclusive right to claim Estonian behavioral "traits"—or stereotypes—such as modesty.

Aims

This article explores the underlying assumptions and implications of the tension between these two concepts of "Estonian" by looking at how Estonian language-learning materials and classrooms are often highly ethnicized. That is, they tend to bring *rahvus*—ethnicity/nationality—to the forefront, both in terms of categorizing learners and in constructing Estonian language as belonging unequivocally to the Estonian people, ethnically/nationally-understood. I look at how Estonian language-learning practices and materials often collaborate with broader political projects of belonging and bordering (Yuval-Davis 2011; Yuval-Davis et al. 2019) constructing the narrative of a homogenous Estonian people, with Estonian language as the cornerstone of this imagined-as-cohesive identity. In doing so, they largely rely on concepts and ideologies inherited from Soviet institutionalization of ethnicity/nationality. This involves (re)construction of mutually-exclusive categories, often including juxtaposition of Russians or Russian speakers as "others." To come into line with democratic and pluralist values, Estonian integration policy must be "de-essentialized, de-antagonized and de-territorialized" maintained minority rights academic and practitioner Tove Malloy in 2009 (225). Writing this in 2023, I find her critique still relevant. I claim this from the point of view of a community member informed by transcultural, feminist, and queer thinking (Ahmed 2017; Epstein 2009; Halberstam 2011; Hooks 1984; Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010; Tlostanova et al. 2016; Weed and Schor 1997) geared towards unlearning (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012) defuturing (Fry 2009) thought and behavior patterns in order to move towards more sustainable frameworks of social organization and interaction that prioritize conviviality and care (Avaia and Avaia 2020; Escobar 2018; Kavedžija 2021; Machado de Oliveira 2021). In this article, I add to and overlap with Malloy's "de-s" in exploring specifically the potential of de-ethnicization as related to language policy, ideologies, and rhetoric in Estonia.

Methodology and author positionality

This article's topic matter reflects those patterns that have stood out to me in the course of my quotidian experiences that I believe are worthy of critical scrutiny and discussion. I do not view myself as a "researcher" per se, but foremost as a curious and reflexive individual, interested in engaging meaningfully with what I perceive as topics of importance impacting my community. Academic writing is one—but not the sole or primary—way that I do so. The majority of my life is very far from the world of the academy, and the research's emergence can be thought of in terms of "accidental ethnography" (Castillo and Puri 2016; Martínez 2021), "para-ethnographic practice" (Holmes & Marcus 2008), or "open-plan fieldwork" (Spivak 2003). To a fair extent, I view this as a methodological advantage, as it means that data emerges organically from my everyday life and interactions, rather than from a pre-conceived research agenda, conceptual framework, or institutional ties.

Data with which I engage in this article have emerged through interactions and observations spanning four years (2019–2023) of active involvement in Estonian language acquisition activities—both those designed for "Estonians" and "non-Estonians"—in Tartu, Estonia's second largest city, mostly carried out at the University of Tartu and within *Integratsiooni sihtasutus* (Integration Foundation) frameworks. Daily interactions with diverse individuals give me insight into lived experiences of learning and using Estonian language and of complex negotiations of "integration," problematized in coming sections. The article is partially autoethnographic, in that I scrutinize my own experiences and perceptions. It also brings to the forefront the voices of my field partners with presentation of situational vignettes and viewpoints shared with me in informal conversations. What's more, I bring in data from semi-structured interviews for ongoing preliminary post-doctoral research on "new speakers" (O'Rourke et al. 2015; Smith-Christmas et al. 2018) of Estonian. The creation of this article has been very much a "complex assemblage of spatial repertoires," in that "a range of participants, multimodal resources, and artifacts from different networks and spatial ecologies went into the construction of the text" (Canagarajah 2018, 43). I have involved many of my peers during the writing and editing process, inviting them to read and share their thoughts on my drafts. This reflects my preoccupation with not wanting to merely produce a distanced scholarly representation for the world of academia, but rather, foremost, to contribute to disseminating and legitimizing the points of view of the stakeholders of Estonian language-learning and integration initiatives. Furthermore, this article is based on textual analysis of Estonian language acquisition materials.

As my own gaze determines what stands out as relevant, I comment briefly on my own positionality. Very much a transcultural (Epstein 2009) individual, the product of a transnational (Vertovec 2009) existence, I have never found national or ethnic labels relevant to describing myself. This gives me a view from the margins, definitively outside and in-between any identity model, a nepantlera (Anzaldúa 2015), if you will. On one hand, this allows me to notice and problematize many issues perhaps less-evident to those with more rooted belonging, who live according to normative identification (national/ethnic, gender/sexual, linguistic, etc.) patterns. I am cognizant, though, that my own positionality guides my lens of analysis and creates

potential for a slanted perspective. Being outside standard frameworks and at times experiencing the exclusion that this can entail[2] makes me more apt to take a decidedly critical stance towards dominant models of social organization (or division). It surely means that I am less predisposed to immediately understanding the other side of the coin, the perspectives of those who rely on blood or primordial circumstances for creating meaning in life. I am upfront that I strongly believe that frameworks which deny possibilities of hybrid selves and keep identities tidily categorized and hierarchialized are inherently oppressive and a guiding structural element of the world's abyssal inequalities (Bauman 2011; Holsapple 2022; Santos & Mendes 2020). However, I am just as upfront regarding the implications of my own inevitable situated-ness, which may well hinder my ability to understand what is behind particular attitudes and assumptions. I do not believe, though, that the article's critical approach should be antithetical to opening pathways for dialogue. I hope sharing my findings—highlighting candidly that they were created through me myself as the data generation tool—can stimulate discussion on the potential for creating more equitable and dialogical realities in Estonia and broadly.

As a result of a transnational life, I also have "in-between language competencies" and position myself not as multilingual, but more of a speaker of "no-language" (Holsapple 2022), in problematizing how certain communicative acts are validated as "multilingualism," while others are stigmatized as "wrong," "bad," or "lacking"—"non language." These distinctions rely on notions of uniformity, adherence to an institutionally-defined standard learned through privileged access to formal education, and are intertwined with processes of national/ethnic construction and legitimization (Canagarajah 2020; Makoni and Pennycook 2007). While I carry out higher education in Estonian with "native" Estonian speakers, I also attend Estonian courses for "non-Estonians." Participating in both gives insight into how the rigid native vs. non-native dichotomy is far from clear-cut. It also equips me with insight into how language ownership and valorization processes play out.

A relevant concern might relate to what gives me the right to critique and make suggestions about language policy and practice in Estonia. My response relates back to the article's foremost concern with challenging nativistic thinking that only if you identify as ethnically Estonian do you have a say regarding what happens on this particular territory. In the place known as Estonia, I identify—and can be variously identified by others—as very much both outsider and insider. I do not claim any blood or birth privilege that normatively justify ethnic/national belonging. Neither do I partake in marriage, an institution deeply rooted in patriarchal heteronormativity (Brake 2011) that also accords legal privilege. However, I am very engaged in my local community through affective ties, practices of care, volunteering, social activism, and alternative models of kinship. My authorship of this article is anchored in efforts to shake up notions of "native," "roots" (Malkki 1992), and methodological

[2] Not to imply that "being outside" foremost entails exclusion. See, e.g., Bauman and Vecchi 2004, Lorde 1984, Probyn 1996, Tlostanova 2020 for an assortment of aspects related to free choice, transcendence, authenticity, and self-determination.

nationalism (Wimmer & Schiller 2003) that by default takes the nation-state as the frame of reference.

Relevance and contribution

Broadly, this article contributes to critical scholarship dealing with interplays of language issues, integration policy, and social equality (Anthias 2013; de Waal 2020; Heller et al. 2018; Piller 2016). Specifically, it adds to research looking at management of diversity in Estonia, problematizing nationalistic imaginings of identity/belonging (Malloy 2009; Seljamaa 2012, 2013, 2021; Kuutma et al. 2012). The article lends fresh insight to these discussions in that it highlights specifically ethnicization in language learning as a key obstacle to these initiatives achieving their goals. Its arguments contribute to wider critical scholarship problematizing tendencies to devalue diverse individuals' linguistic resources and backgrounds, while strategizing how to counter hegemonic discourses and facilitate empowerment in language education contexts (Bermingham 2021; García et al. 2021; Hélot et al. 2018). In doing so, this article is pertinent to discussions of language (acquisition) pedagogy (Pukspuu 2019) and planning/policy in Estonia (L'nyavskiy-Ekelund and Siiner 2017; Siiner et al. 2017; Soler and Zabrodskaja 2017). A recurring topic in political, academic, and everyday contexts in Estonia surrounds the possibility of Estonian becoming a *köögikeel* (a language of the kitchen) (ERR 2017)), as English gains more hegemony (Phillipson 1992; Wierzbicka 2014), both in popular culture, as well as higher-education and research contexts (Soler 2019; Soler & Rozenvalde 2021). The 2015 "Sustainability of the Estonian Language" (Ehala 2015) in the framework of the *Estonian Human Development Report* predicts that if current trends continue, spaces for Estonian-language use will decrease significantly in coming decades. If Estonian policymakers are to engage with such concerns, more inclusive and participatory models are needed that extend legitimate speakerhood to individuals, regardless of ethnic/national criteria.

Rahvus (ethnicity/nationality) and integration/segregation in Estonia

Since emerging as a nation-state after the Soviet Union's collapse, policies in Estonia have focused on constructing a geopolitical configuration based on the titular ethnic/national majority. This has involved creating "the people"—or the appearance of a people (Balibar 1991)—by building directly on the Soviet Union's system of institutionalization of ethnicity/nationality. Taking as its basis ethnographic knowledge, much of which had its foundation in the Russian Empire's tradition of ethnographic expeditions, Soviet policy and ideology worked to (re)order heterogeneous populations by classifying them according to primordially-accorded *natsional'nost'* (ethnicity/nationality), envisioned as equating with language, culture, and territory (Hirsch 1997, 2005). Although such ideology existed prior to the Soviet regime, its institutionalization in the Soviet era was unprecedented (Brown 2004; Slezkine 1994). *Natsional'nost'* was a ubiquitous marker, noted on

the fifth line of Soviet citizens' passports and played a significant role in access to institutional entitlement (Baiburin 2012; Brubaker 1994), as well as navigation of bureaucracy (Slezkine 1994). Post-Soviet Estonian policy has maintained these core concepts, as outlined defensively in the Constitution that "must guarantee the preservation of the Estonian people, the Estonian language and the Estonian culture through the ages" (Eesti Vabariigi põhiseadus 1992). Critical scholarship (Agarin and Regelmann 2015; Malloy 2009; Seljamaa 2013) has problematized this constitutional hegemony, pointing out that the assumptions guiding Estonian foundational policy, as well as integration policy, are not informed by pluralism. Post-Soviet citizenship policy distinguished between (descendants of) pre-1940 citizens—"rightful" citizens—and (descendants of) those who had moved to Estonia in the Soviet era. For a great number of so-categorized Russian-speakers, many who had been born and/or spent their entire lives in Estonia, this meant exclusion from citizenship without passing language exams and other bureaucratic proceedings. Ethnographic accounts dealing with Russian-speakers obligated to undergo naturalization processes and "prove" that they belonged during the post-Soviet transition period, draw attention to the sentiment of being "second-class citizens in a country that privileges and values ethnic Estonians only'" (Jašina-Schäfer 2021, 2). Tens of thousands of people in Estonia chose—and today continue to choose—to be stateless, as holders of so-called "grey passports" or alien's passports. While this choice is often made because statelessness does not greatly impact the practicalities of everyday life and, therefore, many do not see the point of undergoing bureaucratic proceedings that are often exclusionary and uncompromising, classification as non-citizens does deny rights related, for instance, to travel and voting (Vollmer 2021). Various exteriorizing naming pathways are used to describe people who cannot claim an ethnic/national Estonian identity. As mentioned in the opening vignette, *eestimaalane*, literally "one of the Estonian land" distinguishes from *eestlane*, an unmarked ethnic/national Estonian. *Mitteeestlane*, literally "non-Estonian," is also standard vocabulary utilized in policy and popular contexts alike as a catch-all phrase for ethnic/national others, regardless of whether Estonia is the only home they know, have Estonian citizenship, and/or claim other criteria for Estonian belonging (problematized, for example, in Marianna Kaat's 2017 documentary *14 käänet* ("14 cases")).

Contemporary policy and discourse in Estonia continue to reflect the taken-for-granted unit of discrete, cohesive ethnic/national groups. The summary of the "Integrating Estonia 2020 Program" of the Ministry of Culture boasts that thanks to its activities "the state/citizen identity of people of various ethnicities/nationalities has been strengthened" (Kultuuriministeerium 2021a).[3] At the same time, it outlines a

[3] These are my own translations of the Estonian originals: "*tugevnenud on eri rahvustest inimeste riigiidentiteet*" and "*peame rohkem tegema tööd kontaktide loomisega eri rahvustest inimeste vahel*" (Kultuuriministeerium 2021). The Ministry of Culture's English translation of the first assertion reads: "the national identity of people of various nationalities has been strengthened" (Republic of Estonia Ministry of Culture 2021). The notion of "national" is used twice, but to refer to different concepts. *Rahvus* is translated as "nationality," and *riigiidentiteet* is translated as "national identity." My own somewhat cumbersome translation attempts to capture the meaning of the Estonian original that differentiates between the "national" concepts of ethnicity/nationality vs. state/citizen.

key future goal as needing to "increase contact between people of different ethnicities/nationalities." Similarly, the Integration Foundation (2022b) maintains that its strategy includes ensuring that ethnic/national groups are able to preserve their mother tongues and cultures (*et Eestis elavatel rahvusrühmadel oleksid võimalused säilitada oma emakeelt ja kultuuri*). Containers of essentialized peoples, tied to matching language and culture, are discoursed as being definably separate. While they may—and should—come into contact with one another, there is no vision towards transcendence of these Soviet-inherited categories of social organization. Rather, ethnic/national groups or "cultures" are imagined as additive, existing side by side as bounded units. While an umbrella state/citizen identity is mentioned in the "Integrating Estonia 2020" plan, it is understood vis-à-vis dominant Estonian language/culture, belying European nation-state tendency towards assimilationist "integration" policy (Anthias 2013). Ethnic/national difference and particularism are presented as the natural order. This is reinforced by the photo accompanying the Ministry of Culture's announcement, depicting individuals in folk costumes of the ethnicities/nationalities they supposedly "are." "Being" a *rahvus* is linked to the performance of traditional lifeways, suggesting group continuity throughout the ages. This fixation on separateness manifests in contemporary Estonian/Russian segregation in Estonia, often described in terms of "parallel" lives and social worlds, characterized by little cross-ethnic, cross-language awareness or interaction (Astapova 2022; Helemäe and Vetik 2011; Jašina-Schäfer 2021). "Language-based segregation and the resulting inequalities" is highlighted as the primary "major problem" in the Ministry of Culture's Cohesive Estonia Strategy 2030 (KultuuriMinisteerium 2021b, 4).

Indeed, an illustrative example from my own experiences involves a recent conversation with Andra, an Estonian in her 30 s, who I met at a book club. She related that she had studied Russian in school for seven years but did not feel that she had even basic conversation skills. I commented that I have encountered many such people, and it seems this perhaps says something about the educational approach in schools, as failing to provide opportunities to practice language in real-world settings. Andra replied, "Yes, my teacher could have organized an exchange with St. Petersburg, for example!" I recall being taken aback by the suggestion that one would need to go to Russia to speak Russian. Andra's first association with Russian language was Russia, rather than the nearly 25% of her fellow Estonian citizens categorized as ethnically/nationally Russian in 2021 census data (Statistikaamet 2021). In my daily life in Tartu, I communicate in Russian—with "native" Russian speakers, "ethnic Estonians," and other diverse individuals—in a wide range of settings, and I can certainly attest that one does not need to travel to Russia for Russian language immersion. Andra's comment speaks to the segregated social worlds in Estonia, where patterns and preferences related to education, media, residence, consumption, and beyond are largely split, and income disparity is considerable (Kultuuriministeerium 2020). Indeed, if anything, many Estonians perhaps know of the existence of "the Russian-speaking population" abstractly in terms of a "problem" (problematized in the introduction of Siiner et al. 2017) or "challenge" (referred to as such in the title of Lauristin and Heidmets 2002), as often depicted in political, academic, and popular discourse (e.g., Ehin and Berg 2009 characterizes national identities as "incompatible" and "conflicting"), but not as actual human beings with

whom Estonia is a shared home. Change—of a global scale, but in this specific context, within Estonia—is needed from viewing people as problematic to viewing as problematic the hegemonic structures and discourses that position them as such (Holsapple 2022). What change might we see in Estonian society if instead of being named and positioned as *mitteeestlased*—non-Estonians—people involved in language-learning and integration projects were discoursed and seen as partners in the building of a more pluralistic community? Foremost, this would involve extension of membership and ownership, recognizing the potential contribution of people as multi-faceted individuals, rather than as representatives of bounded cultural/national/ethnic containers. It would mean moving beyond the difference-amplifying empty concept of "multiculturalism" or "diversity," as "shorthand for cool, liberal modernity" (Malik 2003), and actually engaging with the complexity and plurality of human positionality.

During a seminar of a tandem language exchange course I took in the spring of 2022, a Soviet-generation Estonian peer, Merike, talked about her positive experience in building a relationship with someone from the same society, but with whom she otherwise would likely never cross paths. She further expressed frustration that Estonia's population with different linguistic and ethnic/national backgrounds normatively is not viewed as an *opportunity* but rather as a problem. Merike asserted that from her point of view, political questions in Estonia get in the way of people taking advantage of language and cultural exchange possibilities like our course. Her critique reflects modern nation-state tendency to see multilingualism as threatening (Blommaert et al. 2012; Santos and Mendes 2020), rather than recognizing its potential for broadening worldviews and augmenting communicative repertoires, among other transformative possibilities. As Jan Blommaert underscored in a documentary (DocWerkers 2021) shortly before his passing in 2021, any attempt to attend to "diversity" can never be unlinked from dimensions of inequality, as "diversity" implies practices or traits ill-fitting within normative imaginings of nation-states as cohesive containers of homogenous populations. This is evident in Estonian policy. For instance, in the Ministry of Culture's 2021 Integration Program Directive (*Kultuuriministri käskkiri: Lõimumisprogramm 2021–2024*), diversity (*mitmekesisus*) is described foremost in terms of its potential as a risk factor for disruption of societal peace and well-being (*ohutegur ühiskondlikule rahule ja heaolule* (5)).

My ethnographic data and textbook analysis show that language-learning materials and spaces widely keep to the overriding tendency in Estonia to conceive of diversity in terms of separate boxes of supposedly homogenous and cohesive groups united by primordial birth/blood criteria. The Integration Foundation's (Integratsiooni Sihtasutus)—originally founded in 1998 as the Integration of Non-Estonians Foundation (Mitte-eestlaste Integratsiooni Sihtasutus (2018)) page on Multicultural Estonia (Multikultuuriline Eesti (Integratsiooni Sihtasutus 2022a)) outlines multiculturalism from the point of view of matching monolithic markers of native language and descent-based ethnicity/nationality. It highlights the role of handicraft knowledge in "keeping cultures alive," thereby demonstrating a decidedly retroactive vision of traditional practices as the "cultural content" (Handler 1988) used for distinguishing ethnic/national groups. Similar approaches are evident, for instance, in the Estonian National Museum's

permanent exhibition *Kohtumised* (Encounters) that, while arguably well-intentioned in its attempt at inclusivity, largely represents named, discrete ethnic/national groups as locked into hierarchialized separate containers (Seljamaa 2021). Discourse and policy stances related to "multiculturalism" in Estonia are largely binary and divisive, rather than reflective of the actual intersectional diversity of lived experiences (Seljamaa 2022). They embody a "Janus faced" approach to integration and diversity (Anthias 2013). While "integration" aims to deal with the supposed social divisions associated with "diversity"—meaning those ill-fitting within normative nation-state imaginaries of cohesive groups, as outlined above—the guiding logic of both concepts is underpinned by essentialized constructions. The result is that difference—at the expense of commonality—is confirmed and emphasized through the very initiatives that purportedly seek to address alleged tensions from said difference.

I present one more example to contemplate integration/segregation issues in Estonia further. Summer 2022 I went camping with an acquaintance who is an Estonian language teacher of Integration Foundation programs. She described her perception that many of her students were in her course only because they want to pass the B1-level language exam to receive Estonian permanent residency or citizenship. She recounted that many of them pointed to a dearth of conversational practice in explaining their self-described lack of progress. Opining that they do not actively seek out language practice, she asserted that "*Probleem ei ole keeles, vaid meeles*" (The problem is not language, but rather inclination). I concurred with her to an extent, as, based on my observations, Estonian language acquisition difficulties are undoubtedly connected more to lack of shared spaces of interaction and practice, rather than any sort of grammatical or other linguistic complexity. But I was also interested to discover what sorts of solutions that she as an Integration Foundation teacher envisioned for the "*meel*" (inclination) issue. How do you go about encouraging people to *want* to speak a language? Or, in seeking an environment to practice your emerging language skills, challenge established societal segregation and actively seek out spaces where your out-of-place presence will be constantly questioned (as did Seljamaa (2016))? I have had many similar conversations with Estonians, and I often am left with the impression that the general belief is simply that "they don't want to integrate"—a common trope in integration-related discourse throughout Europe (Anthias 2013)—which is some sort of fixed, un-solvable reality. They *could* find Estonians to talk to and become fluent Estonian speakers if they wanted, but they refuse to do so. In my interactions, I have encountered very little reflection from members of the titular Estonian population on what it must be like to be labeled a "non-Estonian," to constantly be discursively reminded of your non-belonging, "other" status, based on ethnic/national criterion assigned by a genetic lottery, rather than by your choices or behavior. At the same time, on the other side, I am frequently struck by "non-Estonian" individuals' seemingly ready acceptance of this outsider status, as I address more in the coming sections.

I present such vignettes not with the intention of suggesting that these individuals have some moral or logical problem in being able to engage with difference, but rather with an eye to approaching them as entry points to try to home in on underlying circumstances that create such attitudes and assumptions. Namely, I

problematize how a position of privilege, of normativity often hinders reflexivity, as well as empathy. Furthermore, an underlying cause of exclusionary attitudes regarding alterity seems to trace back to the hegemony of the narrative—through media, policy, etc.—that different cultures/people should be viewed as inherently in conflict.

Ethnic/national categorization of learners

In 2019, I participated in an Estonian language course that opened with basic conversational questions. The first "*Mis on sinu nimi?*" (What is your name?) went smoothly, but most got stuck on the second question: "*Mis rahvusest sa oled?*" (What is your ethnicity/nationality?). While several participants unproblematically wrote down "*venelane*" (Russian), many others began to discuss their various complex family histories and transnational biographies debating what connections might give one the right to claim the label *rahvus*. Some argued that *rahvus* or, as the discussions took place in Russian–*natsional'nost'*—is inherited from the father, some contested that you could choose from either your mother or father, others saw it as having more to do with where you grew up, while others advised pointblank, "Write what your documents say you are!" referencing the recording of ethnicity/nationality on birth certificates and other documents in many parts of the former Soviet Union. Observing our difficulties, the teacher helpfully intervened "*Eesti keele tunnis võib alati fantaseerida*!" (In Estonian class you can always fantasize!). We all proceeded to do this, dutifully categorizing ourselves with some ethnic/national label. Our third question, *"Mis on sinu emakeel?"* (What is your native language?) also sparked debate. One student started to write down "Ukrainian" before his wife stopped him, scoffing that she had never in her life heard him speak Ukrainian. "But I wrote 'Ukrainian' as my *rahvus* (ethnicity/nationality), so I have to put it as my *emakeel* (native language) too!" he countered. "*Kuidas on eesti keeles 'surzhik?'*" (How do you say 'surzhyk' in Estonian?), laughed another classmate, teasing her boyfriend for his "mixed" Russian-Ukrainian speech. Yet another classmate with Asian features was challenged when he wrote down "Russian," with others pressing him to write his *real* native language, supposedly one that would correlate with their imaginings of his ethnic/national descendance. My experiences show that for many, if not most, learners, issues of ethnicity/nationality, and its accompanying concept of native language are complex and dynamic, not easily summed up with one sweeping label. However, Estonian language-learning materials often make use of these concepts as basic building blocks for language acquisition and unquestioned aspects of social reality.

Indeed, the textbook (Ilves 2018, 12–15) for this course contains neat tables with correlating boxes of "*maa*" (land/country), "*rahvus*" (ethnicity/nationality), and "*keel*" (language). In all example sentences, they are presented as matching. That is, there is no mixing of these three categories. No examples show "I am from Belarus. My native language is Russian" or "I am from Finland. My native language is Swedish," for instance. Rather, these three monolithic markers are presented as normatively correlating. *Rahvus* holds a prominent position in

conversation activities. In the "*Tutvusta kahte inimest*!" (Introduce two people!) Sect. (48), learners are presented with a list of questions to get to know others and then share with the class information about them. The third question, after name and age, is *rahvus*, coming even before questions such as "Where do you live?" Only the very last question, of twelve, asks "*Mis talle meeldib?*" (What does he/she like?). This presentation is striking, as it suggests that one's *rahvus* is more immediate and relevant, or more basic information, than one's interests, preferences, profession, or hobbies. I argue that this formulation is inherently problematic, as by mimicking the Soviet passport system, it sets up a primordial aspect as basic categorizing information. Worryingly, it opens the door to racial/ethnic/national stereotyping and profiling. Can this ethnic/national categorizing ever be positive? Can it ever not come into conflict with visions of equality, pluralism, and the opportunity for individual self-determination, not based on a blood/genetic lottery? It has implications for individual free will and choice in personhood. What if you do not consider a primordial attribute to be relevant to your experiences of self? How do you opt out of this categorization norm? My teacher's approach mentioned above, in opening the door to *fantaseerima* when answering questions in class is a positive example in granting language learners the agency to engage on their own terms, without necessarily needing to dialogue—or being able to dialogue playfully—with potentially-sensitive topics, foremost among them ethnicity/nationality (Holsapple 2022). Indeed, observing—and having to negotiate—the predominancy of *rahvus* in Estonian language-learning contexts has prompted me to contemplate what exactly this question is meant to achieve? If the goal is getting to know one another, would that not be better realized by learning about others' interests, activities, and choices, rather than contributing to their essentialized categorization? It appears that in many Estonian language learning contexts, the implications of essentializing learners is not given critical thought. Rather, they continue to rely on the inherited Soviet concept of ethnicity/nationality.

Along with the aforementioned examples of categorizing people who have immigrated *to* Estonia, it often opens the door to negative commentary for those *from* Estonia. Many Estonian course participants (in advanced courses, often the majority) are *eestimaalased* like Ksenia of the opening vignette. I have witnessed repeatedly how obligating these students to identify where they are from elicits reactions from other classmates: "How can you be from Estonia, but not speak Estonian? Why are you in the same class with foreigners?" Why, indeed. The answer is complex, related to societal segregation and the intertwined colonial legacies and ethnonationalism framing post-Soviet Estonian policy. I argue that opening this box is not conducive to facilitating a positive atmosphere for language learning. When such individuals are obligated to position themselves, others often make assumptions about them "not wanting" to learn Estonian, asking questions about why their parents sent them to Russian schools, for instance. In my many times witnessing these situations, the outcome is usually uncomfortable. Many adopt apologetic or embarrassed stances, while others can react with hostility as having to justify their supposedly-abnormal positionality.

I constantly observe issues of language ownership and legitimacy play out in the classroom as connected to learners' profiles. Individuals from Taiwan or

Indonesia are usually challenged when they claim English as a native language, and, similarly, participants from Central Asia are often questioned if they assert Russian is theirs. I recall an occasion when a teacher asked a student from Colombia what her "real" native language was when the student identified as a Spanish-speaker. The teacher was insistent in trying to elicit a response regarding a "Colombian" language, explaining to the bemused student that "In Estonia we spoke Russian in Soviet times, but our *real* language is Estonian! What is yours?" These scenarios evidence how populations of historically-colonialized parts of the world are habitually not positioned as "authentic" or "proper" speakers, even if in many cases individuals do not have any exposure to the "traditional" languages associated with their supposed ancestors/origins. Furthermore, they can be painted in a negative light, as both classmates and teachers would often comment on these people's linguistic profiles in terms of "loss" (Block 2008), implying that there is something inherently adverse in not being a bearer of the speech practices nominally linked to one's (primordial) origins. As Deborah Cameron (2008, 280) asks, what about "a right *not* to be defined linguistically and culturally in terms of the ethnic, racial or religious affiliation somebody else considers the most important thing about [you]?" Many—I would argue, most—people's "*rahvus*," "*keel*," and "*maa*" boxes do not match. Furthermore, for many individuals, said boxes—regardless of their (non)correlation—do not have particular resonance for describing their belonging-related realities. While in an era of globalization and superdiversity (Vertovec 2007), this should not be striking, my experiences in Estonian language acquisition contexts show that they are regularly questioned and made the center of attention. Foremost, these issues link back to modern nation-state obsession with uniformity and rejection of ambiguity, ambivalence, and in-between-ness, which I argue calls for contestation (Holsapple 2022).

Juxtaposed depictions of Estonian and Russian

Interestingly, the example sentences given in the aforementioned course's *rahvus-maa-keel* section all contain negation of Russian language knowledge: *Ma räägin eesti keelt ja inglise keelt ja natuke some keelt. Ma ei räägi vene keelt* (I speak Estonian, English, and a little Finnish. I do not speak Russian.) or *Kas sa räägid vene keelt? Ei, ma ei oska vene keelt, aga ma oskan ukraina keelt* (Do you speak Russian? No, I do not know Russian, but I know Ukrainian.). The constant negation formulation seems noteworthy considering the actual prevalence of Russian in Estonia and the fact that the course itself was taught in Russian. Would not a positive formulation, or at least a mix of both confirming and negating, be the more ready choice? While not possible to draw a definite conclusion on intent or underlying message, this is perhaps indicative of normative attitudes regarding how language repertoires in Estonia *should* be, particularly resistance to acknowledging Russian language as having a legitimate place in the linguistic landscape of the country.

Such attitudes are blatantly articulated in the textbook,[4] *Saame tuttavaks!* (Tomingas 2009), which warns:

> ... the majority of the representatives of the middle-aged and older generations know Russian and speak Russian *when necessary*. However, Estonians do not like it when foreigners address them in Russian, given that Estonians are sensitive to issues of language (Tomingas 2009, 67 – emphasis mine).

Besides once more representing Estonians as a homogenous group, this passage constructs language as a touchy aspect of social reality, depicting Estonians as unwillingly having to accommodate Russian-speakers. Obviously, it is erroneous to portray in such unequivocal and sweeping terms. While I am sure there exist Estonians with the resentful attitude normalized in *Saame tuttavaks!*, representing this perspective as the overriding reality is not only unsound, but also works to legitimize the narrative of ethnic/linguistic boundaries and antagonism. This division is driven home even more explicitly in a passage entitled "The Problematics of Estonia and Russia," stating that "Estonians are extremely sensitive to questions related to associating Estonia with Russia, but even more so with the Soviet Union" (2009, 72). The textbook ends each chapter with "cultural commentary," passages that set out to define "Estonian-ness" by according traits—overwhelmingly positive—to the supposedly-cohesive container of ethnic/national Estonians, and include: "Estonians are sincere and do not manipulate other people" (24), "The Estonian family values homemade food" (80), or "Vodka has been known in Estonia for a long time, but is consumed in moderation. Estonians know how to value good-quality vodka" (112). Comparisons are often made with other imagined-as-cohesive groups. "The imperturbable facial expression of the Estonians can only be compared with that of the Japanese and the Finns" (24), or "When socializing, Estonians maintain more distance than other peoples, with the exception of the Japanese and the Finns" (96).

Saame tuttavaks! contains the most upfront content that I have come across, but such descriptive commentary normalizing the idea of a cohesive Estonian people with definitive traits is common in textbooks. *K nagu Kihnu* (Pesti 2018), for instance, warns that "Estonians do not like tardiness" (71) or asks learners to ponder, "Why is the forest so important for Estonians?" (85). *T nagu Tallinn* (Pesti and Ahi 2006) has a chapter "Eesti ja eestlased" (Estonia and the Estonians (184–192)) discussing the traits of the supposedly-cohesive group of Estonians and how other named nationalities/ethnicities—Italians, French, Scots—perceive them. These textbooks evidence how language learning materials can often mirror and reify wider ideological powerplays and political projects, in this case anachronistic (Blommaert et al. 2012) nation-building narrative bent on defining who/what Estonians are—and are not. These textbooks work to create the "cultural grammar of nationhood" (Löfgren 1989) established sets of components legitimizing existence as an ethnic/

[4] It is important to note that while a common trend, there are exceptions to ethnicization in Estonian language-learning materials. Alternative resources that are not as blatantly *rahvus*-centric include *Tere!* (Mangus and Simmul 2018), *Naljaga…* (Kitsnik and Kingisepp 2021) or web-based Keeleklikk (https://www.keeleklikk.ee).

national group. However, such cultural objectification or "attempts to construct bounded cultural objects" constitute "*a process that paradoxically demonstrates the absence of such objects*" (Handler 1988, 27 – emphasis original). That is, in endeavoring to delineate specifically Estonian culture, the textbooks' assertions establish the futility of linking any practice with a single ethnic/national category (see, e.g., Piller 2022) or of trying to endow a nation or culture with definitive "traits" (Handler 1988,14). This self-defeating attempt at bounding culture is strikingly evident in policy documents. The Cohesive Estonia 2030 Strategy's (Kultuuriministeerium 2021b) exceedingly vague, contradictory, and circular wording repeatedly drives home its priority of strengthening "Estonian identity" but without defining in any concrete way what this actually means. "Estonian people are characterized by Estonian identity" (6) and "The Estonian cultural space is characterized by practices in behavior, relationships, and organization of life based on tradition" (6) the policy document informs us.

Many non-local Estonian speakers express amusement at habitually receiving the compliment along the lines of: "I have Russian neighbors/colleagues/acquaintances/etc. who have lived in Estonia their whole life and do not speak Estonian as well as you!" As an aside, such experiential and observational data contradict once more the "cultural commentary" of *Saame tuttavaks!* asserting that Estonians refrain from giving compliments: "Don't expect compliments from the Estonians! […] The majority of Estonians don't believe that a compliment is sincere, they interpret it as a cunning trick or trap" (2009, 26).[5] Noteworthy with said compliment is that juxtaposition against "Russians" is so frequently used. Struck by how often he hears the same formulation, one classmate commented, "I think they learn this sentence in school, during some kind of etiquette lesson, as the go-to phrase of what to say to foreigners who speak a little Estonian." I certainly do know many Russian-speakers born in Estonia who have not found the apt circumstances—whether related to time, access to opportunity, motivation, etc.—that means they "never" learn Estonian. However, I also know very many who successfully acquire and unproblematically use Estonian in their daily lives, relationships, careers, studies, etc., and I always reflect on why these individuals are not evoked more as positive examples when I hear the template "local Russians who never learn Estonian" commentary. To bring in textbook analysis once more, the same template is used, for instance, in *E nagu Eesti* (Pesti and Ahi 2015) in its "*Maad ja keeled*" (Lands/countries and languages) section: "I am Sergei. I am a Russian, but I was born in Estonia. […] Estonian is quite difficult. Unfortunately, I still do not speak very well (15)." Again, while I do not dispute that many people fit this profile, I cannot help questioning why this particular example is selected for language learners. Its presentation seems

[5] Yet this portrayal is contradicted in another passage "Food Culture," asserting that "the host is very happy when her food is praised" (2009, 80). Noteworthy here also is the characterization of food preparation as women's domain. Consumption of alcohol, on the other hand, is presented as men's activity (2009, 112). Furthermore, the passage "Men and Women" states that "the Estonian woman prefers that the man opens the door for her, lets her go first when entering and exiting, offers her a seat, and helps her put on and take off her coat. Estonian women appreciate gallant men" (130). See Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989) on how gender is often central to constructions of collectivities.

to suggest a ready-made go-to depiction of Russians in Estonia. I personally know several Sergeis from Estonia who communicate in Estonian unproblematically. Why are such profiles not presented as examples in Estonian language textbooks? Importantly, could these individuals, the "Sergeis," ever be presented as unmarked speakers of Estonian or as unmarked citizens of Estonia? That is, could there ever be the formulation along the lines of "I am Sergei, and I am from Estonia, and Estonian is (one of) my native language(s)," without the add-on disclaimer of *rahvus*, of being labeled as Russian—*from* Estonia, but a *mitteeestlane*, non-Estonian? *E nagu Eesti*'s other examples are just as *rahvus*-centric, including: "My name is Kaarel. I am an Estonian. […] My mother and father are also Estonians" (2015, 15). Both the individual's and his parents—of course, matching—*rahvus* are mentioned, evoking ideas of ethnic/national purity and homogeneity. Sergei's and Kaarel's side-by-side profiles not only portray but also work to reify and normalize segregation in Estonia.

I draw on Elo-Hanna Seljamaa's apt phrasing (2021) "inclusion without invitation" to describe this situation. Sure, courses and textbooks are created in Russian to *include* Russian-speakers in Estonian language learning initiatives, but their presentation of language as primordially linked to *rahvus* does not suggest an *invitation* to become legitimate, unmarked speakers of Estonian. Sergei's stereotypical profile—a Russian-speaker from Estonia—is *included* in the textbook in depicting the country's population but certainly not in a way that implies an *invitation* for social participation. These sorts of normative presentations that bring *rahvus* to the forefront and legitimize stereotypical imaginings is an issue that I argue needs to be problematized and addressed in language acquisition and integration policy in Estonia. What might be the implications of offering learners—and thereby working to normalize—more diverse profiles of individuals, in place of the template depictions of stereotypical "Russians who don't speak Estonian" and anachronistic imaginings of "ethnically-pure Estonians?".

What's more, I know many non-Russian-speaking foreigners who have lived in Estonia long-term, decades in some cases, but openly have no interest in learning Estonian language. When I inquire about this, they are often very candid that they see no point in learning Estonian, as everyone speaks English (see Soler Carbonell and Jürna 2017 on transnational academics' language patterns at the University of Tartu). Sometimes my question is met with genuine puzzlement or even amusement in terms of what could possibly be the point of investing time and effort on a language with apparently so little (practical) value. They also frequently opine that Estonian is too difficult, evidencing the disservice done for language-learning initiatives with branding Estonian as "the hardest language" (Astapova 2022). I find it striking that while the supposed refusal of Russians to learn Estonian and accommodation of Russian-speakers is ubiquitously problematized, I rarely come across negative depictions of English language or accommodation of English speakers. This does not seem intuitive from the "defense of small-language" point of view (evoked, for instance, in the Estonian Constitution or Estonian Language Institution, as discussed in other parts of this article), considering the impressive global hegemony of English (Phillipson 1992; Wierzbicka 2014).

Besides being the dominant language in many higher-education and research contexts, numerous startups make English their official office language. One

acquaintance (incidentally, of the "Russian-speaking" population) who works in a tech startup in Tartu reported that she was reprimanded by her boss for writing in Estonian in the group chat, being told that a "neutral" language should be used for office communication. At my acrobatics studio, a recent *viktoriin* (trivia quiz) contained questions—in Estonian, for Estonians—along the lines of "What is the Estonian word for…?" I frequently observe—in university classes, gym trainings, ordering in cafes—Estonians pause when speaking in order to search for a certain word in Estonian—to use in place of the readily-graspable English word—and often being unable to come up with it. Participating in *talgud* (communal work) summer 2023, our program leader, who is a biologist and healthcare activist, discussed at length the challenge of having herself to create new vocabulary in Estonian, translated from English, in order to communicate up-to-date ideas in medical and academic contexts. Such observations speak to the dominance of English. Quantitative data (Wächter and Maiworm 2014, 48), for instance, show that English as a language of instruction in Estonian higher education 2007–2014 increased by 516%, and 2017 data (Klaas-Lang & Metslang 2018) confirm that over 90% of PhD dissertations are written in English. However, this English-language hegemony is typically glossed over as "internationalization" (Soler & Rozenvalde 2021). Indeed, English is generally an accepted, even privileged part of the legitimate linguistic landscape in Estonia, whereas notions of "Russian-speaking" or accommodation of Russian-speakers frequently evokes critical commentary. Stateless youth in Estonia problematize these attitudes as well (Vollmer 2021, 189), pointing out that while Estonians are often warm and welcoming to those from other countries—which involves communicating in English—being a local Russian-speaker can evoke hostility. I problematize these positionality-related issues further in the next section.

Speakerhood and positionality

I often encounter narratives from participants of Estonian language-learning initiatives about not being seen as legitimate speakers of Estonian, usually expressed as connected to not being ethnically/nationally Estonian. One Estonian learner, originally from South America, but who recently obtained Estonian citizenship, shared that at times he feels patronized when speaking Estonian. He links this behavior specifically with ethnicity/nationality. Despite advanced proficiency in Estonian, on occasion he perceives Estonians as "not taking him seriously" when he talks because they position him, foremost, through the lens of ethnicity/nationality. He reports this as at times demotivating further Estonian study, as he does not feel that he can ever achieve legitimate speakerhood. In large part, he sees his experiences as being connected to his physical appearance, as he perceives others as being surprised or reticent to accept that someone with darker features is an Estonian speaker. Similar experiences are put in the spotlight by an interviewee in Terje Toomistu's 2022 documentary *Põlvkond piiri taga* ("A Generation Abroad"), exploring narratives of diverse young people who for various reasons have chosen to leave Estonia. One interviewee, also with darker features, shares, how growing up in Estonia, she was constantly asked about her skin color, hair color, and eye color. She points

out that other Estonians do not have to respond to the question "Why is your skin white?" Sharing an episode in which she was addressed in English by a fellow Estonian while participating in a *laulupidu* (song festival), she highlights that in her life in Estonia she felt obligated to constantly have to justify that "*Eestlane ka võib olla selline nagu mina, näha välja selline nagu mina*" (an Estonian can also be someone like me, can look like me). These individuals' narratives show how in quotidian contexts in Estonia the aforementioned monolithic categories of ethnicity/nationality, language, and nation/country are habitually linked, with ethnicity/nationality normatively implying particular physical/racial characteristics.

Discussing what she perceives as exclusionary attitudes, despite her advanced Estonian language skills, another classmate, Nina, commented recently, "Sometimes I feel that Estonians don't actually want us to learn Estonian." Her feelings seem to point to—perhaps in some cases unconscious—fixation on maintaining separate Russian/Estonian worlds, belying an underlying ideology of ethnic/national purity and discreteness. Again, it seems that Nina's perceptions evidence the aforementioned "inclusion without invitation" (Seljamaa 2021). While Nina is included in Estonian language courses, she does not feel that she is actually invited to be able to claim ownership as an Estonian speaker. This exclusion suggests an underlying fear of framing language ideologies in terms of exploring and possibly opening the definition of who or "what" Estonian could or should entail. Rogers Brubaker (1992) describes this exclusionary mindset in terms of "hypernationalist rhetoric of 'cultural extinction'" (286), framing post-Soviet Estonian policy and practice. Nina's and other classmates' narratives frequently express discouragement, frustration, and disincentive in terms of ever being able to achieve legitimate speakerhood. Their sentiments are highly reminiscent of interview data from stateless individuals in Estonia, who often give up on—or simply opt not to undergo—naturalization in the face of perceived insurmountable and/or unjust bureaucratic, emotional, and financial obstacles (Vollmer 2021).

Discourse on the inseparable linkage of ethnicity/nationality with language is often framed in terms of countering threat of assimilation or mixing with other groups. The Estonian Language Institution's informational booklet on Estonian language (Soosaar and Sutrop 2019, 3–6), for example, in linking Estonian to other Finno-Ugric languages, points to assimilation—primarily in Russia—as the reason for their unfortunate declining number of speakers. They are juxtaposed against Estonian, which has managed to survive throughout the ages, despite numerous hardships: "*Sõna vägi on suurem kui sõjavägi*" ("The power of the word is greater than an army" (2019, 6)). While the booklet points out that dialects and smaller languages in Estonia, such as Võru and Seto, have shrinking numbers of speakers, it does not ponder the role that institutionalization of standard Estonian has played in this language shift. That is, it is selective in presenting the value of preserving group discreteness. Estonian language must be preserved at all costs against threatening forces, foremost among them assimilation of its speakers, but privileged standard Estonian's own impact on smaller languages or language varieties is not problematized.

Many of my interviewees work in settings where only Estonian is spoken. I habitually inquire about them, saying I think it would be helpful to have a place to use

Estonian outside the classroom. At times, my questions are met with negativity. I recall one individual warning me, "It doesn't matter how many C1 certificates you have, you're not one of them." Another peer, Natalia, told me, "It doesn't matter that I speak Estonian. They see me as different. For them, I will never be Estonian." I frequently hear such commentary reflecting amplification of ethnicity (Seljamaa 2016) in terms of Estonian vs. Russian insuperable difference. However, these same people often also express negative opinions regarding "Russian-ness" or Russians in Estonia. One time, Natalia, who is a cosmetologist in-training, invited me for a facial cleaning at the salon where she was interning. During this very physically-close shared afternoon, she opined at length—in Estonian—on what she sees as many local Russians' overbearing mentality, as well as delinquency among Russian youth. When I asked about where she planned to work after her internship, she readily asserted that she had selected an *eestikeelne* (Estonian-speaking) salon with an *eesti kollektiiv* (Estonian workplace team). I share this interaction to draw attention to how attitudes are not always articulated along the black-and-white "us vs. them" dichotomy. While Estonian society is usually generalized as being composed of two internally-cohesive, juxtaposed groups, Natalia does not readily place herself in or express affinity with either. She is critical of many aspects of what she perceives as "Russian" culture or mindset and actively distances herself by consciously choosing a workplace with Estonians and Estonian language. At the same time, she does not see herself as being treated as part of the group in her interactions with Estonians, who she feels position her in an inescapable "Russian" categorization. Her advanced Estonian language proficiency and continued involvement in Estonian language courses evidence that she is invested in overcoming the supposedly-critical barrier of language in order to integrate and participate in Estonian society. However, she feels that there is no real invitation to transcend primordial frameworks of positionality and the normative lumping-together of people into *eestlased* and *mitteeestlased*—Estonian and non-Estonian—categories.

In this vein, worth problematizing is the extent to which individuals themselves contribute to reifying these boundaries through their own belief in and adherence to them. At times, I have the impression that many interviewees see themselves as locked into their ethnic/national categories as rigid and unchangeable realities. That is, their narratives evidence a mutual process of "being seen" and "seeing of self" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), in that how others position them and how they position themselves are mutually-constitutive cycles. I argue that the prevalence of *rahvus* in Estonian language learning contexts serves as a bordering (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019) tool that normalizes these boundaries and segregation. It is certainly not straightforward to transcend systems of categorization when they are presented in language-learning contexts as naturalized facets of who you are. They encourage people to ethnicize themselves, thereby creating boundaries and prompting dialogue with stereotypes and frameworks of power and inequality. When individuals are constantly reminded of their ethnic/national backgrounds, and therefore "what" they should be, these imaginings often become an immutable template for how they view and/or discourse themselves. Saliently, it also sets individuals up as different from the titular Estonian people, who, if filling in the table from the textbook of my adaptation course, rightfully correspond to the "*keel*" (language) and "*maa*" (land/country) boxes of the Estonian language and the Estonian territory.

De-ethnicizing Estonian language: challenging *rahvus*-centric attitudes

While challenging these frameworks is not straightforward, I present a counter example to highlight individual agency in navigating *rahvus*-normative discourse. Another interviewee, who happens to be a refugee, opts to identify as a *tartlane* (someone of Tartu). She exercises agency in creating her own narrative about her positionality, rather than relying on her legal status or country of origin to be the salient defining elements when she describes who she is. While she acknowledges that in some cases locals certainly view her as an outsider, she overwrites their perceptions of who she is—or should be—with her own assertion of belonging. In effect, she has *de-ethnicized* her positionality, thereby challenging the dominant patterns of identification frequently normalized in Estonian language-learning and integration settings.

June 24, 2022, as a *Jaanipäev* greeting, an *eesti keele kohvik* (Estonian language cafe) leader wrote to our group, expressing her gratification at being able to form friendships and interact with diverse people who, for whatever reasons, have *chosen* to make their homes in Estonia. She asserted: "*See on üks põnev ja rikas Eesti, see Uus Eesti, mida teie siin loote"* (it is an engaging and vibrant Estonia, this New Estonia that you create here). Throughout our nine months of twice-weekly *kohvik* meetings in 2021, the idea of an "*Uus Eesti*" (New Estonia) had been a recurring point of conversation and reference. It emerged first in a creative classroom assignment targeted at practicing self-expression, in which participants were tasked with brainstorming societal designs. The idea of an "*Uus Eesti*" was evoked usually with humor, but also with sincere aspirations to contribute to creating a more open and diverse Estonia. The instructor often commented on her fascination with how participants had all *chosen* Estonia as home rather than simply being born into having Estonia as a homeland. She was very open about the personal transformation she has undergone interacting with the group, beginning to question normative notions of what it means to be Estonian. What's more, before our *kohvik*, she, an individual in her 30 s, had never had a Russian (-speaking) friend, telling in regards to societal segregation in Estonia and the importance of informal, grassroots contact and collaboration for countering this segregation (Astapova 2022).

Another example countering *rahvus*-centric environments involves a course at a language school, where never in two years of interactions, the teacher asked where individuals are from or "what" we are ethnically/nationally/racially. Rather, she created a positive, open group atmosphere and close relationships personally by inquiring about the aspects of lives over which we have control: interests, preferences, choices, etc. While many freely share aspects of their lives related to their origins over the course of our meetings, there are no formal obligations or expectations to categorize ourselves and others. The difference in classroom atmosphere is noticeable when the box of power-laden ethnic, national, racial, and legal status identifiers is not pried open. At the final meeting, one participant commented, "I went to Estonian courses in the university during ten years, but never felt so comfortable or learned as much as I did here!" Of course, there are additional factors that contributed to the positive group atmosphere, and I do not mean to imply that this was

merely the magic result of one sole approach. However, if I compare experiences from many years of involvement in different Estonian language acquisition environments—both my own personal perceptions, as well as continuous, numerous conversations with different participants—removing *rahvus* from the picture allows for a decidedly more open, equitable setting. Traditional ethnolinguistic boundaries in the contemporary, globalized world are not appropriate for engaging with social complexity (not to imply that they ever have been (Goodenough 1976)). When individuals are constantly linked to an ethnic/national grouping, they are denied personal idiosyncrasies and the agency to negotiate positionality on their own terms. Typically, they are expected to "be" a certain way in line with stereotypical imaginings of the groups to which they are assumed to belong. If their ways of being, choices, or preferences clash with said stereotypes, then they are viewed as anomalous, obligated to justify *why* they are who they are (see Smith-Khan 2017 on these often life-death negotiations of positionality in contexts of migrants and refugees). Ethnic/national background is normatively seen as a key deciding element determining one's mentality and behavior. However, we need to move beyond such rhetoric of sameness (Lugones 2003) in our positionality frameworks and focus on what we have—or aspire to have—in common across differences. The "we" of the prior sentence refers to those involved in Estonian language acquisition and integration initiatives in the context of this article, but it can also be a broad "we" as human beings generally relating to others more equitably.

The same language-school teacher mentioned above ended a spring 2022 course asserting that for her, the course participants are all "*minu inimesed*" (my people), referencing the popular song by Estonian rapper Chalice: "*Kui süda on suur, siis on vahemaad väiksed, head sõbrad…*" ("If one's heart is big, then differences are small, good friends…"). The song has been used in national celebrations, such as *Eesti Vabariigi aastapäev* reception in 2006, and its title of *Minu inimesed* seems to often be interpreted as referring specifically to *eestlased*, Estonians in the ethnic/national sense (evidenced, for instance, by nationalistic and patriotic comments on a YouTube page where it is featured (Jalgratastool 2010)). The song is in Estonian, but it never mentions explicitly *Eesti* or *eestlased*. Our teacher countered these *rahvus*-normative interpretations with her application of *minu inimesed* to describe the group of diverse individuals united by interest in communicating in Estonian. This is the very crux of de-ethnicizing language learning: being included—and, therefore, more feasibly including oneself—in narratives and practices of group-ness, despite lacking some common ethnic/national background. These sorts of inclusive attitudes not fixated on *rahvus* are keys for individual empowerment as speakers of Estonian. They allow learners to transcend normative ethnicized boundaries of who has the right to be an Estonian-speaker.

A friend and colleague recently authored an opinion article (Timár 2023) in Estonia's leading news portal contrasting treatment of non-native speakers of Estonian and Finnish in Estonia and Finland, respectively. Drawing on her vast experience as learner and teacher of both languages, she maintains that Estonian locals are generally more open to non-native language practice than their Finnish counterparts. When we chatted about her piece, she added that her position, while certainly reflective of actual lived experience, at the same time was also consciously intended to

exert positive influence on local Estonians. By discoursing them as open to speaking Estonian with non-Estonians, tolerant of non-nativeness, and generally helpful and patient with those seeking to integrate, her hope is that this will work to (re)create and strengthen such a reality. Her ideas draw attention to the power of discourse and the potential for creating self-fulfilling prophecy circumstances. I do not want to suggest that the depictions of the textbooks and policy problematized in this article simply have no basis in reality or are politically-induced fantasies, but I do contest their presentation as uncritically representative, and I draw attention to the danger of them (re)producing what they describe. A key goal of this article involves unlearning stereotypes that we have about ourselves and others, specifically those formulated in essentialist ethnic/national terms.

Closing note on political context of 2022–2023

Before wrapping up, I comment briefly on the political context of 2022–2023. I certainly acknowledge the atrocity of ongoing warfare and that an understandable reaction in times of crisis is (deeper) degeneration into "us-them" thinking of zero-sum political powerplays. However, I argue that this approach—both on the scale of individuals and policy—is not conducive to working towards alleviating the suffering caused by current heinous political conflict and violence. In her *Hospicing Modernity* (2021), Vanessa Machado de Oliveira highlights how modernity has severely limited the ways we can see, feel, relate, desire, heal, and imagine, urging us to contemplate how we are all complicit in the harmful patterns that structure the current world disorder. In the context of this article, this means working to refrain from seeing individuals as specimens of nation-states or ethnic groups. It means being more consciously critical of the disservice done and the harm inherent in relying on an ethnic/national label as the a priori lens through which we view other human beings. It means recognizing that discoursing others as problematic has very real potential to impact worldviews and behavior, thereby (re)producing that which is being described. I understand the ease of the inclination to prefer to view those who speak a language—Russian, in this case—associated with an oppressive state as inherently threatening or inherently in conflict with Estonian interests. Adherence to such "good/bad," "us/them" dichotomies makes the world seem more understandable and manageable, offering clear-cut ways of deciding how we should treat and justify our treatment of others. But I hold that the appropriate response to the current abhorrent political context is not to insist on seeing others as different vis-à-vis a priori categorizing but rather to consciously work towards recognizing our shared interests and cultivate practices of conviviality.

I am very aware that this may read as naïve or utopian, but I counter that radically-different thinking is both possible and necessary in beginning to enact change. I also recognize the importance of highlighting the salience of the post-Soviet legacies that inform many locals' worldviews. Epp Annus opens her *Soviet Postcolonial Studies* (2018) recounting a childhood memory of a carefree walk by the sea in her native Tallinn in the 1970s being interrupted by a soldier gruffly asserting—in Russian—that the children were not allowed to be there. Annus (2018) evokes this

recollection as an example of the types of lived experiences that inform the strategic essentialism and nationalism of post-Soviet Estonian policy. In this article, I attempt to get through that, in order to effectively deal with issues of social (in)equality, (non)access, and (non)participation, contemporary Estonian policy cannot simply recreate the entire "children being ordered off the beach" situation, just with the roles reversed. Rather, a new game, new terms of engagement are needed in formulating policy related to diversity management. While I recognize the complexity of colonial legacies that make development of such policy seem unimaginable to many people, I stress that "[…] the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde 1984). This article calls for a fundamental shift in how we position ourselves and others, involving critical reflection on the frameworks that we draw upon to narrate and enact our existences. Beginning to think outside the templates of "national/ethnic" as relates to both quotidian practice and institutional policy offers potential for transcendence of current exclusionist tendencies.

Conclusions

"What should be done so that the Estonian people endures?" (*Mida tuleks teha, et eesti rahvas püsiks?*) reads a vocabulary-matching question in the latest Estonian language-learning worksheet I encountered. My only way to dialogue with this question is to argue that a way forward should entail creating more pluralistic discourse on what "Estonian" means, of which a salient aspect would involve de-ethnicizing Estonian language-learning materials and spaces, as well as integration policy and discourse. My research suggests that language-learning is more equitable and more effective when individuals are allowed to identify on their own terms, without having to put themselves in a *rahvus* box. This entails de-normalizing the tendency to make assumptions about others based on their ethnic/national background, physical appearance, or country of origin. When individuals feel that there exists the possibility to have ownership of language, to be seen and to also see themselves as valid speakers, then there exists potential for addressing the discussed "*meel*" (inclination) question of wanting to engage in linguistic practices.

In closing, I am upfront that this article is quite personal. I in no way identify as Estonian, but I do feel that Tartu, Estonia, is my home. This is a positionality that many people share and I do not believe that these two statements should be discoursed as conflicting. As discussed throughout the article, I observe every day how ethnicization—frankly, often ethnophilia, to borrow Yuri Slezkine's (1994) description of Soviet construction of ethnic particularism—works to keep people locked into patterns of essentializing categorization, both of self and others, that have very real implications for societal participation and individual empowerment. At the same time, I also have vibrant interactions every day that transcend the essentializing and nationalistic assumptions normalized in much Estonian language-learning materials and integration programs, as people negotiate and challenge supposedly-rigid frameworks. My goal with this article has been to stimulate thought on how the

latter could be translated into policy and how empowerment in Estonian language-learning contexts could be made the norm. While language could—and should—be a means of connecting and creating shared meaning, hegemonic concepts of language frequently work to impede communication. This article has strategized how to move beyond such exclusive models of language in the Estonian case. Perhaps to one versed in popular political or mediatic discourse, my goals might seem contradictory. On one hand, I am concerned with encouraging future space for Estonian language (with "language" broadly-understood (Canagarajah 2020; Makoni and Pennycook 2007)), in the context of an ever-more-globalizing world, with globalizing inevitably indicating more-English-dominated (Wierzbicka 2014) and homogeneous (Kaplinski 2003). On the other hand, I engage with de-constructing the very concept of Estonian language itself, as normatively highly ethnicized. My approach in combining these aims goes against the guiding ethnonationalism inherent to Estonia's legal foundations and integration policy. In contrast with its logic, I maintain that in a democratic society, access to language, culture, and identity frameworks should be open to everyone: you should be able to choose who you want to be, and you should not be denied the privilege of complex social positionalities (Epstein 2009). Challenging dominant ethnically-framed naming pathways and their accompanying ideologies of separateness could have significant relevance for addressing language and integration policy concerns in contemporary Estonia.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares no competing interests.

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