

Historical Multilingualism of Street Names in Estonia

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Abstract

The earliest recordings of street names in Estonia have been preserved since the 14th century; names in Tallinn were written in Latin and Low German. Later, in the 16th and 17th century, in northern Estonia (Tallinn) names were also used additionally in Swedish and in southern Estonia (Tartu) in Polish. Low German variants changed into High German during the 16th century. Since the second half of the 18th century Russian name variants were added. Estonian-language names were undoubtedly there since the beginning but the first detailed lists date only from 1732.

While the status of languages changed over time, some sort of multilingualism in street names was maintained until the 1930's. Co-existence of names came in different forms: conceptual translations, independent naming, hybrid names and (later) direct transfers of names. The period till 1918 is characterized by mostly descriptive names in Russian, German and Estonian. Particularly in Tallinn there was evidence of independent naming. Since 1918 the names were officially monolingual Estonian but Russian and German names were kept unofficially until the 1930's. During the Soviet period the names continued to be in Estonian but for Russian-language texts these were phonetically transcribed into Cyrillic. The period since 1987 is characterized by the restitution of old names but the linguistic status of the names has remained unchanged.

During its recorded history, Estonia has witnessed many different powers that were in control of the country. This multiplicity is also reflected in the number of languages used by the authorities at different times. At least eight of them can be named. Latin was the *lingua franca* of the early foreign domination in Estonia, being used in documents of the 13th–16th centuries. The actual power was held by landowners from mainly Lower Germany and Plattdeutsch (Low German) came to be used increasingly in documents until it was replaced by High German in the 16th century. German remained the *de facto* language of the local authorities almost till the end of the 19th century when it was first pushed aside by Russian during the era of Russification, and finally by Estonian when the country achieved independence in 1918. Besides Estonian as the language of the majority population, and German as the language of the nobility, all other languages came to be used additionally as languages of the governing powers. Danish was used in Northern Estonia after the first conquest of Estonia in 1219 until 1346, and also on the island of Saaremaa from 1559 to 1645 when Denmark gave it to Sweden. The Livonian War (1558–1583) ruined the old system of small states and the Estonian territory was partitioned between neighbouring countries. Poland was in control of Southern Estonia from 1559 to 1629. Sweden administered first only Northern Estonia (since 1561), but after several wars with Poland, also acquired Southern Estonia. Russians captured and held for longer periods several towns during the war but were forced to withdraw in 1583. Estonia became part of Russia only after the Northern War in 1710. Though first texts in Estonian are found in the 15th century, the language achieved official status only in 1918 when Estonia became independent.

To illustrate this colourful history, here is the list of „governing“ languages in Tartu, the second city in Estonia: 1224 Latin and Low German, 1558 Russian, 1582 Polish, 1600 Swedish, 1603 Polish, 1625 Swedish, 1656 Russian, 1661 Swedish, 1704 Russian, 1918 Estonian, 1940 Russian and Estonian, 1941 German and Estonian, 1944 Russian and Estonian, 1991 Estonian.

In this light, turning to street names of Estonia, one should acknowledge that these names have not been thoroughly researched, although in the case of Tallinn they have been well documented (see e.g., Arbusow 1888, Nottbeck 1884, 1890 and 1892, also Kivi 1972). There is also some research into the history of street names in Tartu (Raid 1999).

The oldest recordings of street names are found in the 14th century, and only from Tallinn. The names were either in Latin or Low German. Although the texts were first mostly in Latin, the street names were also given *vulgariter*, i. e., in German. Examples are 1313 *forum* (modern Raekoja plats ‘town hall square’), 1337 *Zantberg* (Olevimägi ‘Olev’s /personal name/ hill’), 1361 *susterstrate* (Nunne tänav ‘nun street’), *sub monte* (Rataskaevu tänav ‘wheel well street’), 1362 *smedestrade* (Harju tänav), *leymstrate* (Viru tänav), 1365 *Kariestrade* (Suur-Karja tänav ‘big cattle street’), 1371 *parvus mons* (Lühike jalg ‘short leg’), 1374 *schostrate* (Kinga tänav ‘shoe street’), 1389 *kremerstrate* (Kullassepa tänav ‘goldsmith street’), 1396 *lütteke schroderstrate* (Apteegi tänav ‘pharmacy street’).

Recordings from other cities are more recent, e.g., in Pärnu 1543 *Lange oder Karry-str.* (modern Pikk tänav ‘long street’), *Beck-strate* (Põhja tänav ‘northern street’), *Kompenye o des hilligen geistes str.* (Pühavaimu tänav ‘holy ghost street’). In Tartu the 1582 list gives names simultaneously in German, Latin and Polish: *Grosse Gildestraße ~ in platea Companiae maioris ~ ulicza wielkiey gielidy* (modern Gildi tänav ‘guild street’), *Breite(n) Strasse ~ ad plateam latam ~ Ruthenicam ~ ulicza SzYROKA* (Lai tänav ‘broad street’).

As can be seen from the examples and their translations, many street names have preserved their original meaning. The present Estonian-language street names have probably been used alongside other names since the very beginning, but the earliest lists originate only from the 18th century. The 1732 Anton Thor-Helle’s *Kurtzgefaßte Anweisung zur Ehstnischen Sprache* gives as an annex a relatively long list of Tallinn street names. Except for changes in the orthography and the substitution of the generic term for street (*ulits*, modern *tänav*), most of the names are still there: *Lai ulits* (modern Lai tänav ‘broad street’), *pitk ulits* (Pikk tänav ‘long street’), *wenne ulits* (Vene tänav ‘Russian street’), *apteekri ulits* (Apteegi tänav ‘pharmacy street’), *wirro ulits* (Viru tänav, named after a county), *sauna ulits* (Sauna tänav ‘bath street’), *harjo ulits* (Harju tänav, named after a county), *niggola ulits* (Niguliste tänav ‘St. Nicholas street’), *pitkjalg* (Pikk jalg ‘long leg’). Some names are adapted from German: *prooks mäggi* (German *Brockusberg*, modern Olevimägi), *hilligööst ulits* (German *Heiligengeiststraße*, modern translation Pühavaimu tänav ‘holy ghost street’), *prügulits* (German *Brückstraße*, modern Kivisilla tänav ‘stone bridge street’).

More extensive Estonian-language lists are found in newspapers and calendars of the second half of the 19th century, e.g., streets of Tartu in *Eesti Postimees* newspaper of 1865: *Aleksandre-ulits* (Aleksandri tänav ‘Alexander street’), *Erne-ulits* (Herne tänav ‘pea street’), *Kiwwi-ulits* (Kivi tänav ‘stone street’), *Ria-ulits* (Riia tänav ‘Riga street’), *Porri-ulits* (Turu tänav ‘market street’).

Street names were made official in many cities during the 19th century. In Tartu many names were approved in 1814 and 1875, in Tallinn the first official list dates from 1872. From these times on clear patterns emerged concerning the use of names in different languages. At that time it was usual to talk about “three local languages“: Russian as the official or state language, German as the language of the local Baltic autonomy, and finally Estonian, the vernacular. Consequently, names were used in three variations. Their interrelationship could be analyzed in three types: translated names (conceptual renderings), transferred or adapted names (sometimes

hybrids) and independent names. If names consisted of more than one element, combinations of these could also occur.

Translated names or conceptual renderings were the majority of cases. Examples are E. *Kuninga tänav* – G. *Königsstraße* – R. *Королевская улица* ‘king street’ (Tallinn), or E. *Jaani tänav* – G. *Johannisstraße* – R. *Ивановская улица* ‘St. John street’ (Tartu). Some names were ambivalent, and therefore had various translations. German *Weidenstraße* ‘1. pasture street; 2. willow street’ in Tartu was translated into Estonian as *Karja tänav* or *Paju tänav* and into Russian as *Выгонная улица* or *Ивовая улица* (current name is *Paju tänav*). Not so infrequent were also mistranslations. For example, German *Küterstraße* (< Low German *kuter* ‘butcher’) in Tartu was translated into Russian as *Бочарная улица* ‘cooper street’, taking German *Küfer* as the basis. In Tallinn, G. *Töpfergasse* ‘potter street’ was translated as R. *Печная улица* ‘oven str.’ and E. *Ahju tänav* ‘id.’, and finally it gave also G. *Ofenstraße* ‘id.’. Translation of *Spukstraße* ‘ghost street’ into Russian in 1872 was a headache for the city authorities in Tallinn, as the provincial governor did not accept the hybrid *Шпуковская улица*, and the citizens rejected the governor’s suggestion *Нечистая улица* (which also meant ‘dirty street’), so the final translation was *Страшная улица* ‘terrible street’ (Kivi 1972: 19).

Quite a few names were also adaptations. A typically Estonian word for herd or cattle, *kari* (Genitive, *karja*), came to be used as such also in German (*Karristraße*) or Latin street names in several cities in Estonia: Tallinn (1373 Latin *platea kariestrate*), Haapsalu, Pärnu and Narva; translations (*Viehstraße*, *vehstrate*) were seldom. Obviously this reflects the role of Estonians as herdsman in cities. In the Estonian usage, there were also adaptations from German (*Küterstraße* was adapted as *Küütri tänav*) or Russian (*Дачная улица* ‘villas’ street’ in Tallinn became *Datschi uulits*, modern *Johann Köleri tänav*, named after a person).

In several cases personal names or other toponyms were simply transferred into the other language, with slight adaptation: G. *Riesenkampfstraße* – E. *Rüsenkampfi tänav*, R. *Ризенкамфская улица*; G. *Wittenhofsche Straße* – E. *Vittenhofi tänav*, R. *Виттенгофская улица*; G. *Mundtenstraße* – E. *Mundi tänav* (later etymologized as *Mündi tänav* ‘coin street’), R. *Мунтенская улица* (Tallinn).

A phenomenon typical to Tallinn (but occurring also elsewhere) was the use of independent names in each language, i.e., the names were neither etymologically nor phonetically related. With three languages involved, there could be cases when names in two languages were translated, and the third language used a completely different name. So, e.g., German and Russian names could have been translated (G. *Lehmstraße*, R. *Глиняная улица* ‘clay street’) while the Estonian name (*Viru tänav*, named after a county) had a different origin. In other cases Estonian and German names were translated (E. *Pikk tänav*, G. *Langstraße* ‘long street’) while the Russian name was different (*Морская улица* ‘sea street’). (Also, cf. E. *Suur-Karja tänav*, G. *Große Karristraße* ‘great cattle street’, and R. *Большая Михайловская улица* ‘great St. Michael street’.) The third combination was the Estonian-Russian translation, with German as the exception (E. *Jõe tänav*, R. *Речная улица* ‘river street’ – G. *Kanalstraße* ‘canal street’; E. *Mere puiestee*, R. *Морской бульварь* ‘sea boulevard’ – G. *Strandpforten-Promenade* ‘strand gate promenade’). There was one case in which each of the names in three languages were formed independently: E. *Harju tänav* (county name) – G. *Schmiedestraße* ‘smith street’ – R. *Новая улица* ‘new street’.

To add to the confusion, names with the same meaning could refer to different places, depending on the language in which they were used. Thus, Russian *Новая улица* ‘new street’ (*Harju tänav*) was not the same street as German *Neustraße* or Estonian *Uus tänav* ‘new street’. G. *Nikolaistraße* and E. *Niguliste tänav* referred to a different street than R. *Никольская улица* (*Vene tänav*).

Name plates at the time were either monolingual (Russian), bilingual (Russian-German) or trilingual (Russian-German-Estonian), depending on the mood and tactics of the Russian

authorities. The name systems in all three languages were distinct and mostly stable. While in street names translations prevailed, in the case of other toponyms the usual tactic was for Russian to transcribe the German name into Cyrillic while the Estonian toponym was different (G. *Weißenstein*, R. *Вейссеништейнъ*, E. *Paide*). Often the names in German and Russian were corrupted forms from Estonian (E. *Hagudi*, G. *Haggud*, R. *Гагзуть*; E. *Kehtna*, G. *Kechtel*, R. *Кехтель*; E. *Ohekatki*, G. *Odenkat*, R. *Оденкатъ*).

A different pattern started to emerge when Estonia became independent in 1918. At first the old trilingualism continued, with the difference that now the Estonian names became first and the official ones. Translations into other languages continued well into the 1930's. Even many new translations were introduced, for example in the guide *Nõmme juht / Führer durch Nõmme / Справочник-путеводитель по Немме* (1926). Gradually, however, as Estonian became well established as the language of official business and the role of other languages diminished, street names became monolingual. Partly this was also enforced by the state in the 1930's, as part of the Estonianization campaign which targeted mainly family names but also to some extent toponyms.

When in 1940 the independence of Estonia was brought to an end, neither the Soviet authorities nor those of Nazi Germany succeeded in replacing the Estonian-language street names which had become rooted. Although e.g., a German-language guide of Tallinn in 1942 (*Ein Führer für deutsche Soldaten durch Reval mit Stadtplan*) did try to translate the new street names (like *Laeva tänav – Schiffstraße* 'ship street', *Hariduse tänav – Bildungstraße* 'education street'), it also left some names unchanged, translating only the generic (*Ao tänav* 'dawn street' – *Aosträße*). In practice the latter method prevailed, e.g. *Harju tänav – Harju-Straße* (not the traditional *Schmiedestraße*), *Pikk tänav – Pikk-Straße* (not *Langstraße*), etc.

The same was true in Soviet times. For the Soviet Union, names were an important element of ideology, and names in local language suited well, forming a nice façade. The usual practice was to render the main, attributive part of the name phonetically into Cyrillic, according to a transcription system. The generic term was translated into Russian. Some examples: *Raua tänav* 'iron street' > *улица Рауа*, *Mere puiestee* 'sea boulevard' > *бульвар Мере*, *Väike-Karja tänav* 'small cattle street' > *улица Вяйке-Карья*.

Exceptions from these rules were made for commemorative names where an adaptation to an appropriate case or even a translation was possible: *Jaan Tombi tänav* (the person's name was Jaan Tomp) > *улица Яана Томпа* (here we see the Russian genitive of the same name), *21. Juuni tänav* 'street of the 21st of June' > *улица 21 июня* (pure translation). Road names were adapted using Russian suffixes: *Narva maantee* > *Нарвское шоссе*, *Tartu maantee* > *Тартуское шоссе*.

Despite official rules, some names in actual Russian use were either hybrid forms or translations. This was the case when words in both languages were sufficiently similar, e.g., *Vaksali tänav* 'vauxhall street' > *улица Вакзали* (cf. R. *вокзал*; officially should be *улица Ваксали*). Also, when Russian names or lexemes were involved, it was tempting to use the Russian name model, e.g., *Velikije Luki tänav* (named after a city in Russia) > *Великолукская улица* (officially *улица Великие Луки*).

Well-known sites tend to have translations in many languages, so also in Russian at the time: *Raekoja plats* 'town hall square' > *Ратушная площадь* (officially *площадь Раэкоя*), *Võidu väljak* 'victory square' > *площадь Победы* (officially *площадь Выйду*; now the earlier name *Vabaduse väljak* 'liberty square' has been restored, this is occasionally translated into Russian as *площадь Свободы*). An interesting example of a truly bilingual name is E. *Toompea* 'cathedral hill' – R. *Вышгород* 'upper city' (though the transcription *Тоомпеа* is also frequently used).

When observing this sort of relationship between names in different languages, one should conclude that the names in Estonia were still monolingual, although some mild features of bilingualism (actually also biscriptualism) were present.

With the restoration of independence (1991) the type of relationship has not changed, although Estonian names are once again the only official ones. There are some trends in Russian newspapers to use Estonian street names without any adaptation (leaving also the generic term as it is in Estonian), especially in giving formal addresses. In colloquial speech such a method was not unfamiliar even in Soviet times (e.g., *Narva maantee* ‘Narva road’ was often used in Russian as *Нарва маантее*, i.e., without translating the generic) but only recently it has come to be used in more formal contexts.

To summarize: being often transparent, street names are more easily adapted into other languages, yet their actual rendering varies from direct transfer (i.e., names are unchanged in the context of another language, e.g., English *Wall Street*, Finnish *Aleksanterinkatu*, Latvian *Brīvības iela* in Estonian texts) to total conceptual rendering (translation).

When we speak of “multilingual names” it should be pointed out that this expression might have different grades. Total multilingualism would mean that names are translated, adapted or independently formed in each of the (official) languages. Mild multilingualism refers to cases in which only some elements, like generic terms, are rendered into other languages, or names are grammatically adapted (case endings, etc.).

Elements of mild multilingualism are found in most countries in literature for tourists (e.g., Tallinn’s *Raekoja plats* is usually translated in guides as *Town Hall Square*, *Rathausplatz*, or *Ратушная площадь*, Finnish *Raatihuoneentori* etc.).

Abbreviations

E: Estonian

G: German

R: Russian

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