

Dear friends of our mother language,
My ladies and gentlemen.

I wish each and every one of you, both here in this hall and all the people of Estonia, a beautiful Mother Language Day. In saying this, I am confirming that using any language correctly and well, either verbally or in writing, protects and develops this language, and this requires good mastering of the language, learning and professional teaching of the language concerned.

At a time when the official 'broadcast area' of the Estonian language reaches from the territory of the Republic of Estonia to the European Union, passing through Brussels and Strasbourg along the way, we should stop speaking so much about the official status of our mother language.

Everything is fine with it, de jure. Never before has the Estonian language stood so high and so strong.

But why are the language people and others still ringing alarm bells, saying that our formal language skill, which is the foundation of Estonian culture, could be more secure than it is right now?

Maybe this is strictly a linguistic issue? Perhaps the work of linguistic people includes worrying about the language.

Not by far! When the language scientists of Tallinn University conducted a study on the linguistic skills of students a couple of years ago, the conclusions they drew were rather stark:

sixty per cent of first year students master formal Estonian language fluently; functional language skills, however, are good or at least satisfactory in 49 per cent.

We could read the conclusions drawn by Professor Martin Ehala from *Õpetajate Leht* (the Teachers' Gazette) and I quote:

"Functional language skill affects, above all, the success of our studies and then our ability to cope professionally in most specialties. Therefore, we can conclude that by the end of the day this specific competence determines our general ability to cope and succeed in society. As approximately one third of students encounter problems with tasks of this type, this only shows that they have not developed the linguistic prerequisites that are required to study in a university." End of quote.

Dear language friends,

Never before has so much been written in the Estonian language as is written today. I do not simply mean books and other publications in the Estonian language, which are produced for every taste and, regardless of the credit crunch, in quantities that are the largest in the history of Estonia.

Never before have our schools and universities enjoyed as many textbooks and other teaching materials in the Estonian language as they do today.

Here, we can add the written virtual world and all its diversity. Estonians are writing and, consequently, read more than they have ever done before.

What is the problem then?

We have never experienced such a quantity of bad and flawed formal written language, flourishing as a by-product of this apparent largesse and prosperity of formal language. This is the Estonian language that the fans of Alliksaar, Alver and Viiding could never call their own.

But this is the very language that is slammed down computer networks to be stored there forever, by many who do not have any genuine problems with spelling or clear thinking. Because the democracy that rules the Internet seems to stand above linguistic standards and grammatical correctness, they feel that it is acceptable in this environment.

But I do not think that we could – or should – interpret the situation in this way.

As many people, especially young, spend the majority of their time working with texts in front of this very destitute and distorted picture of language, the fear of the boundary between good and proper and poor and erroneous language that first becomes vague and then disappears is not altogether groundless. And soon, the Estonian language will become stratified in the way that many other, much bigger languages have become before. The consequence will be that correct and rich high-class language will only be spoken and written by a few, while the so-called mass language, characterised by limited vocabulary, will proliferate.

Here we should ask, how strong a linguistic stratification can a society take where the language is the strongest pillar supporting common identity?

When facts confirm that linguistic stratification and material stratification happen simultaneously, there must be a limit somewhere that, once exceeded, will start to endanger the cultural sustainability of a society.

If we allow a gap that we observe between Eliza Doolittle and Professor Higgins at the beginning of Pygmalion by Bernard Shaw to emerge in our language, we should also ask:

do we have a Higgins for every Eliza – and where should we take him from – to fill this gap by the beginning of a garden party?

I tend to think that considering the distribution area of the Estonian language and the number of people speaking this language, such a development would have an influence on the Estonian language that would be as bad as the growth of the Gini coefficient, which characterises inequality, on our social sustainability.

My ladies and gentlemen.

I am certain that many will not say that the faulty and poorly written Estonian language staring back at us from everywhere is a reflection of thoughts, above all. That lack of thoughts and platitude is staring at us in the virtual world, but also more and more often on paper.

Yes indeed, all of this does play a role. On the other hand, we are facing the inevitability of life, the key words being the accelerated speed of living combined with the development of technology and the explosive increase in the numbers of users of mobile means of communication.

Smart phones have become causes of addiction, in a way, in the world of top managers. Inevitably, things taking place at upper levels reach other levels of society after a certain period of time.

Common sense tells me that a constant readiness for communication and exchange of messages and a constant dispersion of attention amongst the maelstrom of messages does not contribute to deep thoughts. The only cure against this disease is the so-called digital diet or pulling out the plug from all the networks on a regular basis.

Or – to jest – Estonia could consider developing a modern-day tourism service: recreation time outside the network coverage of mobile phone operators.

Only a hundred years ago, composing and writing a letter was considered a literary form of art; people spent long evenings and sometimes even days working on this. Today's speed of written communication is incomparably faster, the purpose being to deliver the message as fast as possible and, therefore, the varnish that was given to the contents will suffer together with its clarity.

I think that there is no need to fight against technological development and the preferences that

people have, when it comes to spending their free time. But we should also think, from now on, about how to cope with the inevitable in the best possible way, while offering our formal language as much protection as possible from impoverishment.

I suggest two ideas for discussion, neither of which can be considered original.

First of all, our educational system could, at different levels, place more emphasis on teaching written expression skills at homework and class and seminar work level. I know from first-hand experience how well one can organise his or her thoughts by writing them down. One can check the logics of a discussion from either paper or a computer screen.

The Rector of the University of Tartu, Alar Karis, last week raised an important issue in the Postimees newspaper, but unfortunately it went unnoticed amongst the melee of teachers and other strikers supporting them. The Rector wrote that the use of ghostwriters has become very common in universities. Students have a certain level of knowledge of the subject in question, but they are unable to express themselves in writing; therefore, they pay for their course and bachelor degree papers to be written by those who have mastered the art of writing.

I think this is a serious problem; people first cheat the university and their prospective employer for a while but, ultimately, they cheat themselves. Sooner or later life will bring out the real face value of a highly educated specialist.

But such a cheating scheme could never be applied if every student would be required to write – consistently and a lot – from the very first year. And at the same time, he/she would learn to write down his or her thoughts.

On the other hand, this would provide professors with an overview of the mental capacities of each and every student. A written paper, bought from someone else, would immediately set apart a student with limited abilities and anyone cheating would be caught.

Of course, this will only be possible once a normal allocation of teachers and learners are restored in our universities. Professors will never learn all the names of their large classes and

course, not to mention handwriting or ways of thinking.

The other idea mostly concerns techniques, the writing technique of the modern world. Many psychologists have proved, empirically, that relative slowness in the mobility of the hand and fingers is the cause behind flawed written language; in other words, the fingers cannot catch up with the words.

We do not have to slow down our thinking but make our hands go faster, instead. Today, different keyboards are used to write 99 per cent of texts. The children of today learn to read and write behind their computers.

The technique used to enter text has a rather beautiful and old-fashioned name in the Estonian language – tippimine (tipping); however, the young people of today are using the word in a completely different context.

'Tippimine' in the true meaning of the word means the skill of blind typing, using all ten fingers, or the skill of writing one's ideas down, correctly and very fast. Unfortunately, I have never heard of this vital skill being taught, systematically, to the children and young people of today.

However, as the children of today learn to read and write at their computers, special software programmes based on the Estonian language could be developed for learning 'tipping' or typing.

Dear language friends,

We do not know exactly how the world will go on developing and in which direction the further life of the Estonian language will evolve. This is not only for us to decide. But there is something that we certainly can do – we should not throw any obstacles into the development path and should not lag behind in the technological changes that will inevitably influence our linguistic environment.

Thank you, dear defenders, watchmen, promoters and keepers of the Estonian language. Our mother tongue lives and develops.

Let us stick together, flow with the time and this will allow us to find the most efficient means for allowing the language of this country sound the richest while living an eternal life in writing. I thank you all and thank you for your attention.