
The earliest days of Estonian lexicography

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Keywords: *historical lexicography, 17th century dictionaries, beginnings of Estonian lexicography.*

Abstract

The first Estonian dictionaries were compiled by German pastors in the 17th century, at a time when bilingual lexicography was already rather widely spread in Western Europe. Why were these dictionaries compiled and for whom? What are the main characteristics of these dictionaries? In the article, an overview is given of the aspects relevant to historical lexicography of three authors: Heinrich Stahl and his *Anführung zu der Esthnischen Sprach* (1637), Johannes Gutsclaff's *Observationes grammaticae circa linguam esthonicam* (1648), as well as Heinrich Göseken's *Manuductio ad Linguam Oesthonicam* (1660). These bilingual German-Estonian dictionaries were not independent works, but were published as appendixes of German- and Latin-based grammars for Estonian. Their authors were native speakers of German, outstanding members of the local clergy, and at the same time the first Estonian lexicographers. Regardless of the limited number of entries and several inconsistencies in presenting the information about target language equivalents, in addition to evident mistakes in the choice of certain equivalents, the importance of these works should not be underestimated: not only were these grammars and dictionaries the first such publications in the region, but they also helped to fix the orthographic standards of written Estonian. Even if the fact that current Estonian language has extensive German influences both in vocabulary and syntax is most probably not due to a direct impact of these grammars and dictionaries, these three works were influential in their own time (partially due to the importance of their authors in the local church hierarchy) and had a role in the development of the Estonian language.

1. Introduction

By the time the first dictionaries were published in Estonia, bilingual lexicography had a widely spread tradition in Western Europe. In spite of the rather limited size of these dictionaries, they provide a good illustration of the situation in the lexicographical landscape in these distant times, more than three and a half centuries ago. Being part of a larger context related to the spreading of Christian faith and especially Lutheranism, these works were intended to serve their authors, German pastors, as a better tool in their work as leaders of local parishes.

In the following, the author aims to give an overview of the birth of Estonian lexicography in the 17th century, focussing on the works of Heinrich Stahl, Johannes Gutsclaff and Heinrich Göseken.

2. Historical background

In the beginning of the 17th century, Estonian territory was locally governed by Germans, even as the country was divided between Sweden (Northern Estonia), Poland (Southern Estonia) and Denmark (Saaremaa, the biggest island in Western Estonia). In the second half of the century, Lutheran Sweden gained power over all the Estonian territory. Despite the higher governments that changed over the course of time, the local Germans' culture had a predominant influence in Estonia from the 13th until the 20th century. Linguistically, the country had two main dialects, each with its own writing tradition being developed: Northern Estonian and Southern Estonian. Later, in the end of the 19th century, the former became the basis of standard Estonian.

3. The first Estonian lexicographers: Heinrich Stahl, Johannes Gutslaff and Heinrich Göseken

The first printed Estonian dictionary was compiled by Heinrich Stahl. Born around 1600 in Reval (nowadays Tallinn), he probably had some contacts with native speakers of Estonian, although the inhabitants of the city were almost exclusively German-speaking at that time.¹ Stahl studied first in Tallinn, then in Rostock and in Wittenberg, but had to return to Estonia in 1623. He then occupied several important posts in the local church hierarchy (Lotman 2010).

In 1637, at that time pastor of a country parish at Kadrina, Stahl published a short grammar of Estonian, called *Anführung zu der Esthnischen Sprach*. Out of the 136 pages of the book, 100 pages in the second part of the book form a German-Estonian dictionary with 2130 entries. The entries are short, consisting of the German headword and its Estonian translation equivalent in nominative and elative case (the author himself says the latter is ‘genitive’) for nouns (e.g. **brot leib** / *leibast* ‘(black) bread’), and the first person singular form of indicative mood, imperfect, perfect (past participle in *-nud*) and the infinitive in *ma* (e.g. **Anfechten** *Kiusan* / *kiasasin* / *kiasanut* [sic] / *kiasama* ‘to tease or annoy somebody’). This approach is not consistent: in several articles Stahl gives less information (e.g. only the infinitive in *ma* in **Annehmen** *wastowotma* ‘to receive’). Other inconsistencies include for example partial nesting of headwords, although the entries are supposed to be presented ‘nach Ordnung des Teutschen ABC’, that is ‘following the German alphabetical order’ (Stahl 1637: 34).

Stahl’s knowledge of Estonian language has been severely criticized (cf. Kask 1970); among other examples, we can find in his dictionary strange translations like *Marri* ‘berry’ for *Birn* ‘pear’. Nevertheless, it was precisely his use of language – for example orthography – that was taken over by subsequent authors and used partially until the 19th century.

It is not yet known what sources Stahl could have used as the basis of his dictionary’s word-list: it has been shown by Lotman (2010: 40–41) that in his grammar he mainly follows the example of Aelius Donatus and David Cythraeus, whose grammars of Latin were used in school teaching in the 17th century. Grammars where local languages were described from the viewpoint of more widely known languages such as Latin (or in Stahl’s case German) were common in 17th century Europe. As to the dictionary, it is most probable that he did not compile his word-list from scratch: firstly, we can see relatively full paradigms in the treatment of some lexical sets such as relatives or domestic animals, and secondly Stahl (1637: *Author ad Isagogen*) himself mentions that he has written the book in a short time and in addition to his other occupations; in this light, compiling an appropriate collection of entries without using previous lists of words was certainly possible, but not very likely. As shown by Rätsep (1987: 713), Stahl’s grammar and dictionary was the first publication of that kind in the Baltic region – in Finland, Sweden and Latvia similar works appeared later – but it can be supposed that he could have used an appropriate word-list from a comparable source published in Germany. After all, more than a thousand word-lists and dictionaries of German had been published in Germany between the mid-15th and the mid-17th centuries (Considine 2010: 113).

One important question to ask is to what extent this work, although titled *Anführung*, could have been of any real help to Stahl’s colleagues – the local clergy – who supposedly were the main target group of the grammar and the dictionary. One can have serious doubts if a set of 2000 words could be a sound basis for preparing sermons, but on the other hand, it could certainly have been a useful starting point for somebody who had had no previous contact at all with the local language. After all, we do find in the text a large amount of basic everyday vocabulary.

A decade later, in 1648, Johannes Gutsclaff (?–1657) – a pastor of German origin, working in a country parish in Southern Estonia (Urvaste) – published his *Observationes grammaticae circa linguam esthonicam*, a work rather similar to that of Stahl’s. Unlike the latter, Gutsclaff’s grammar was written in Latin, but the dictionary that he included in the end of the book still uses German as source language (the first Estonian-German dictionary was not published until 1732). With its approximately 1700 entries, the *Observationes* is said to be the biggest printed set of words in Southern Estonian dialect from the 17th century, and thus its size is comparable to Stahl’s *Anführung*. Nevertheless, Gutsclaff probably used a different basis for his word-list, as only 25 per cent of entries in the two dictionaries overlap (Lepajõe 1998).

Similarly to Stahl’s *Anführung*, Gutsclaff’s *Observationes* was mainly intended to be used as a basic introduction to the Estonian language by local clergy, although in his case it described the Southern Estonian dialect, and publishing another grammar and dictionary was necessary due to the rather important differences between the Northern Estonian and the Southern Estonian dialects.

Like the entries in Stahl’s dictionary, those in Gutsclaff’s *Observationes* are rather minimalistic, consisting of the German headword and the Estonian translation equivalent in nominative and genitive form for nouns (e.g. **Orth** *Paick/ a* ‘place’) and only the infinitive in *-ma* for verbs. Latin equivalents are used to disambiguate homonyms (e.g. **Otter** *Lutra* Uddras ‘otter’ as opposed to **Otter** *Vipera* Nastick ‘grass snake’). As in *Anführung*, the presentation of grammatical information is inconsistent – in a large number of entries, no genitive form is given (e.g. **Pott** *Padda* ‘saucepan’).

The third author, Heinrich Göseken (1612–1682), published his grammar and dictionary in 1660. Once again, it was a Northern Estonian dictionary, its author being the pastor of Kullamaa parish in Western Estonia. The dictionary contained in his *Manuductio ad Linguam Oesthonicam* differs significantly from the two previous ones in size: whereas both Stahl’s and Gutsclaff’s dictionaries contained around 2000 entries, Göseken has more than 9000 entries. As such, Göseken’s *Manuductio* is the most comprehensive German-Estonian dictionary of the 17th century.

Not only has Göseken a much bigger number of entries, but he also includes several new elements that were not present in the previous works: firstly, he makes an attempt to explicitly show the German etymology of about 400 Estonian words, and secondly he gives a large number of usage examples (e.g. under **Morgen**, Göseken includes amongst other examples *es wird morgen* koitab / taiwas koitab ‘it is dawn’). On the other hand, the presentation of grammatical data is again inconsistent.

The direct source of inspiration for Göseken’s dictionary has been shown (Tafenu 2011) to be Jan Amos Komenský’s widely read textbook of Latin titled *Janua linguarum reserata*, a collection of words grouped thematically into phrases with a parallel translation into vernacular languages. For his dictionary, Göseken not only chose to include words taken from *Janua*, but he also got inspiration for examples: thus, *Janua*’s *Aurum est perfectissimum, quia purissimum & ponderosissimum* has become in Göseken’s dictionary *aurum purissimum est ponderosissimum* se keicke puchtamb kuld on se keicke rasckemb (‘the purest gold is the heaviest’) (cited by Tafenu 2011: 435). He also chose to include exotic words like **Limonien** or **Elephant**, for which he had to invent an Estonian equivalent (respectively *Saxa mah oun* lit. ‘German apple’, i.e. ‘lemon’, and *Elewant* ‘elephant’), those being used in print probably for the first time in his dictionary.

Although Göseken’s published dictionary was already a comprehensive one (compared to the previous ones), references to the existence of a third and yet much more complete dictionary manuscript can be found in the foreword to *Manuductio*, where the author says: ‘I have somewhat restrained this vocabulary and included only a compendium, so

that it would not be too much for the printer and that he could finish his work more rapidly.’ (Göseken 1660:)b(). This larger manuscript may still exist, but if so, its location is yet to be determined.

3.1. *The main characteristics of Anführung, Observationes and Manuductio*

Firstly, the purpose and aim of these works. All three dictionaries were compiled *by* and mainly *for* German-speaking clergy in need of a basic introduction to Estonian language, although Göseken (1660:)b() mentions that his dictionary could be equally useful for students (*Studiosi*), merchants and tradespeople (*Kauff- und Handelsleute*) and craftsmen (*Handwerks Gesellen*). Similarly, the authors’ backgrounds and education are comparable. As mentioned above, all three works were compiled by pastors, not by scholars or linguists: the dictionaries resulting from their work were only of secondary importance to them, the first being the religious education of parish members.

Secondly, the contents of these dictionaries. All three are bilingual German-Estonian translation dictionaries, containing at times several synonyms in the target language without explanations about the semantic differences of the synonymous equivalents. Resulting from the fact that their authors gave a secondary place in their work to the elaboration of the dictionaries (and most probably due to their linguistic capabilities in understanding the target language), we can find several inconsistencies both in presenting the headwords (word order) and in presenting information about the target language equivalents, as shown above.

4. Further research

The preceding overview offering a general insight into the situation in Estonian lexicography in the 17th century, there remain several aspects that have yet to be clarified.

Firstly, the works described above are considered unique in their genre because they are published in print: Stahl’s *Anführung* is the first printed German-Estonian dictionary; Gutsclaff’s *Observationes* is the biggest printed collection of lexical data in 17th century Southern Estonian language and Göseken’s *Manuductio* is the biggest printed Estonian dictionary of the 17th century. Nevertheless, we should consider the possibility of the existence of manuscripts that never got published, but may still exist in public or private archives: Göseken’s reference to his large dictionary manuscript is only one example of such documents.

Secondly, the lexical content of these dictionaries should be analysed in more detail: even if the dictionaries have been analysed both formally (e.g. the composition of the nomenclature by word classes)² and from the aspect of the equivalents’ linguistic properties, a full-scale comparative analysis of the dictionary contents is still to be done, both of the three Estonian dictionaries and with similar publications compiled elsewhere.

Thirdly, Stahl’s and Gutsclaff’s sources of inspiration or the direct models they used are yet to be determined.

5. Conclusion

Estonian lexicography, founded in the 17th century by Heinrich Stahl, Johannes Gutsclaff and Heinrich Göseken, is closely related to German culture. Their dictionaries, being published as appendixes of short German- and Latin-based grammars, were mainly intended to be used by

local clergy – also German-speaking – as a first point of reference in studying the local language. The importance of these works is multiple: not only were these grammars and dictionaries the first such publications in the region, but they also helped to fix orthographic standards of written Estonian. All three have an extremely important place in the history of the Estonian language and provide a precious insight into Estonian vocabulary.

The fact that the current Estonian language shows extensive German influences both in vocabulary and syntax is most probably not due to the direct impact of these grammars and dictionaries, but to the very long presence of German language speakers in this region in general. Written Estonian was developed through the translations of religious texts by the local clergy. It was further homogenized in Bible translations, where more attention was given to the actual vernacular usage. The works described above, influential in their own time, should be seen as part of this much larger process.

Notes

¹ See Pahtma (2000) for more details on important dates in Stahl's life.

² Dictionaries with inverse translation direction (i.e. Estonian-German dictionaries) have been published in the case of Stahl (Kikas 2002) and Göseken (Kingisepp et al. 2010).

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