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TO DREAM OR NOT TO DREAM ABOUT ‘CORRECT’ MEANINGS? Insights into the User Experience Survey

Abstract In 2023, the Institute of the Estonian Language, in collaboration with the Center for Applied Anthropology of Estonia, conducted a user experience survey aimed at understanding the habits, needs, and attitudes of users of the language portal *Sõnaveeb* (‘Word Web’) and preparing for the publication of the *Dictionary of Standard Estonian* (DSE) in 2025. This paper addresses prescriptive and descriptive issues in Estonian lexicography, including controversial meanings. It provides an overview of the user experience survey, detailing the methodology of the online survey and the subsequent qualitative analysis of responses. The findings from the survey are presented and discussed, revealing diverse attitudes toward language among users. While some dictionary users only seek information about language, others aim to enrich their language use, and a third group seeks correctness and guidelines from language planning, including ‘correct’ meanings of words. The contemporary linguistic approach is descriptive rather than normative and this has been adopted in the *EKI Combined Dictionary* (available via the language portal *Sõnaveeb*). However, the legal norm of Standard Estonian is still determined (among other sources) by the latest *Dictionary of Standard Estonian* (DSE). The existence of these two separate sources has been causing confusion among dictionary users.

Keywords: user experience survey; Estonian; prescriptive and descriptive lexicography; attitudes

1. Introduction

Since 2019, the Institute of the Estonian Language (EKI) has been developing the language portal *Sõnaveeb* (‘Word Web’, Tavast et al., 2018; Koppel et al., 2019). Increasing amounts of data from various general dictionaries have been integrated into the *EKI Combined Dictionary* (CombiDic), displaying information from previous EKI dictionaries: explanatory (2019), collocation (2019), Standard Estonian (DSE 2018), bilingual, etc. Besides the general language lexical data, over 130 multilingual terminological dictionaries are available via the same portal, altogether comprising nearly 400,000 Estonian headwords. The number of users has risen from 10,000 in January 2020 to its highest in March 2024, reaching 112,000 users (according to Google Analytics). By device category, the mobile is preferred (54%) over the desktop (45%).

The Institute has been commissioned by legislative acts (Language Act, 2011; Regulation 2011) to ensure the availability of information about Standard Estonian, fixing the standards and recommendations of the official and public use of language. The norm of Standard Estonian is determined (among other sources) by the latest *Dictionary of Standard Estonian* (DSE), published twice since 2011 (DSE 2013, DSE 2018). The next

DSE is to be published in 2025. The DSE plays a significant role in Estonian society, especially for copy editors, teachers, and other language professionals. The DSE has enjoyed not only societal prestige but also legal support (in the 1920s-1930s see Tauli, 1943; since the 1990s see the Language Act, 2011).

Since 2020, Estonia has faced a quite heated discussion on whether the approach to language and lexicography should be descriptive or prescriptive (see e.g., Vainik & Paulsen, 2023; Koreinik, 2023; Lindström, Risberg, & Plado, 2023, pp. 32–37). In March 2023, the *Action Plan* was launched by the Ministry of Education for preparing the DSE 2025, then to be published in the language portal *Sõnaveeb*, also serving the need for clarification of relevant language resources and services. As the “dictionary war” advanced rather than retreated, the *Action Plan* was updated in May 2024. The result is that the DSE will continue to be published on paper as previously, together with its static electronic copy on the separate EKI web page. The DSE 2025 will serve as a basis for the literary norm of Standard Estonian from January 1st, 2026.

In 2023, the user experience survey was conducted by EKI, in collaboration with the Center for Applied Anthropology of Estonia (CAAE) to better understand the habits, needs, and attitudes of the users of the language portal *Sõnaveeb*, as well as to prepare the publication of the DSE 2025 (Langemets et al., 2024b). The different attitudes that emerged inductively from the comments to the open-ended questions in the study allow mapping patterns of attitudes towards lexicographic support and give an insight into the attitudes of survey participants. As language codifiers such as the DSE and *Sõnaveeb* are one of the social forces that determine what is standard in a language (Ammon, 2015, p. 57), it is essential to study the attitudes towards them. Attitudes are at the heart of the human experience and play a pervasive role in our daily interactions (e.g., Fazio & Olson, 2003), influencing how we present ourselves and interact with others. Language users’ attitudes and opinions are shaped, among other factors, by personal experience, social context, and media (Garrett, 2010, p. 22).

In this paper, we first touch upon normative and descriptive issues in Estonian lexicography (1.1), including controversial meanings (2.2). In Section 2, we give an overview of the user experience survey, describing the methodology of the online survey (2.1) and the analysis of the answers (2.2). In Section 3 we present the results of the survey, followed by a discussion in Section 4. We will end with a conclusion in Section 5.

1.1 Prescriptive and Descriptive Lexicography

The Estonian Literary Standard, as stated in the law, and to be presented in the DSE is meant to be ‘the system of spelling, grammar and lexical standards and recommendations’ regulating the official use of language (Language Act, 2011). In other texts directed to the public, including the use of Estonian in the media, the best practice of the use of language is to be followed. While the terms *spelling* (orthography) and *grammar* (inflection) seem to be commonly understood as well as subjected to normative purposes, *lexical* is not. Typically, it means just ‘relating to the words’, i.e., it does not imply meanings unavoidably, but, instead word formation, constructions,

or maybe word choice in different contexts. However, during public discussion, the aspect of the normativeness of word meanings has been raised. It should be mentioned also, that in language planning, the theoretical basis for providing recommendations about word meanings has been lacking (Risberg, 2024, p. 98).

Substantial monolingual dictionaries typically list the specific number of meanings in which a word is used, in some cases citing up to 20 senses or more. This has not been the case in the DSE, as historically, since the first DSE in 1918, it has followed the example of the *Duden Rechtschreibwörterbuch* (9th edition in 1915), enacting foremost the rules for orthography and inflection and only some semantic comments (for neologisms and loanwords). In the course of time, more and more hints on meanings have been added to the DSE. Though it never formally addressed the presentation of *all* the meanings, in 1961 the compilation of the explanatory dictionary of Estonian (EKSS) was initiated (the first fascicle was published in 1988). Regarding the DSE, a shift took place in the 1980s, transmitting the DSE 1999 into a *language planning* dictionary offering advice – not rigid rules – on ‘correct’ (or ‘good’) and ‘incorrect’ (‘bad’) use of language. (However, the recommendations were phrased in a way that dictionary users might not have realized they were not mandatory rules.)

Since the establishment of legal regulations in 2011, the DSE has developed into a ‘legal norm of a special kind’ that has little to do with empirical findings in linguistics. Although meanings are not mentioned in the regulations and recent research has proved once again that word meanings cannot be standardized without these prescriptions becoming irrelevant (Risberg, 2024), it is not at all clear among the Estonian community whether (all or some) meanings are part of the legal norm or not. The *Action Plan* (2024) envisages for the DSE 2025 a ‘sameness’ with DSE 2011 and 2013 – the dictionaries lacking many meanings – which leaves us the unsolved problem of whether the meanings are subject or not to the legal norm. The discussion in the community has raised even further questions: does the dictionary violate the *Language Act*, describing actual language use?

Since the 1870s, which is considered the beginning of language planning in Estonia (T. Erelt, 2002), the Estonian language community has been strongly influenced by the Standard Language Ideology (e.g., Milroy, 2001), a belief in the existence of a superior language variant as well as the pursuit of purism, the rejection of undesirable language elements and foreign influences (see Lindström, Risberg, & Plado, 2023). This belief has been strengthened by the existence of two separate dictionaries: one for looking up the norms (normative DSE), the other for searching the actual language data (descriptive EKSS 2009, CombiDic). The history of the explanatory dictionary in Estonia is 70 years shorter than that of the DSE, this might have influenced the understanding of how language works and beliefs about language in the society.

1.2 Controversial Meanings

In line with usage-based linguistics (Diessel, 2017; Díaz-Campos & Balasch, 2023), EKI has moved towards the descriptive approach in language planning, and regarding meanings,

we have applied the principle that meanings of general language are not standardized (Risberg, 2024). The dictionary can provide additional descriptive comments on specific usage cases, such as discriminatory language, but it cannot provide recommendations for avoiding certain common meanings in any communicative situation.

More than 20 years ago Lars Trap-Jensen (2002) expanded on some borderline cases in Denmark. The Danish Dictionary was commissioned to prepare a dictionary that should be “descriptive in the overall aim. It should, however, be normative with respect to information on orthography, and guiding with respect to information on inflection, word formation, collocations, and constructions” (quote from the official mandate). Regarding controversial meanings, they implemented a label ‘this usage is regarded by some/many as incorrect’ (Trap-Jensen, 2002).

In Estonia, we have decided to include the meanings in CombiDic if they meet the standard criteria for description in descriptive lexicography and, if necessary, provide a special note on usage to consider, particularly in official communication. We have used the wording ‘instead of usage X one might consider using Y or Z in official language’. In general, we would prefer to offer substantiated information for the user to be able to choose between different options, instead of generally stigmatizing some words or word forms as ‘incorrect’.

Since 2019 our goal has been to build a “single-window system” to offer all lexical information from one source for the user. We have integrated the DSE 2018 into the CombiDic (via the language portal *Sõnavveeb*), combining descriptive and prescriptive information, hoping to benefit both, the user seeking information on (actual) language as well as the user seeking guidance on ‘good’ language use. The latest developments, connected with juridical matters, have radically changed the scene: the DSE 2025 is to be published separately (both in print and as a corresponding web copy) and preserved unchanging for the next 7-10 years. As for the content, it should follow the type of DSE 2013 and 2018, so there will be only a handful of meanings, including the notes for the controversial issues. *All* the meanings (together with the notes) will be available in CombiDic, to be updated constantly.

2. User Experience Survey

Different levels of research on dictionary use exist across Europe, ranging from extensive studies in some countries to little or no research in others (Kosem et al., 2018, p. 91; e.g., see Dziemianko, 2014; Lew, 2015a, 2015b; Müller-Spitzer, 2014; Wolfer et al., 2018). The use of dictionaries can be studied in various ways, such as conducting an online survey (Kosem et al., 2019), and using online tracking technologies (Wolfer, Michaelis, & Müller-Spitzer, 2021), among others.

In 2023, the user experience survey was conducted by the Institute (EKI) in collaboration with the Center for Applied Anthropology of Estonia (CAAE) to better understand the habits, needs, and attitudes of the users of the language portal *Sõnavveeb*, as well as to prepare the publication of the DSE 2025. The study consisted

of an online survey prepared by EKI and 16 in-depth interviews (60 minutes each) conducted by CAAE, aiming to get an overview of how the different user groups evaluate their user experience. Our study was focused on the general public – while language professionals were involved, many others also participated (see Section 2.1). Our aim was to involve as many users of the portal as possible to understand how and for what the portal is used and why it is not used, while also allowing participants flexibility in their responses. We used the “what people say”-approach to get to know participants’ stated beliefs they are aware of and willing to report. In this paper,¹ we will analyze the open-ended feedback questions (comments) in the online survey, elaborated and analyzed by the authors. After describing the design and dataset, the analytical approach and coding frame are presented.

The questions in the online survey (see Section 2.1) were not specifically about attitudes, however, they contrasted strongly with the comments. We will also be presenting and analyzing this language dimension in our results as it serves to gain insight into the attitudes and opinions of language users and is an important part of sociolinguistics (Dragojevic et al., 2021; Ebner, 2017, pp. 61–90; Garrett, 2010; Giles & Marlow, 2011, p. 183). The qualitative analysis (Section 2.2) gives insight into the attitudes and linguistic stereotypes of the survey participants.

Linguistic stereotypes have a lot to do with attitudes and these are organized along two major evaluative dimensions: *social status* (e.g., competent, intelligent) and *solidarity* (e.g., warm, friendly, attractive) (Edwards, 1999, p. 102; Dragojevic et al., 2018, p. 30). Attitudes are also shaped by ideologies. Often language users do not realize the influence of Standard Language Ideology but tend to see linguistic standards as a matter of common sense (Garrett, 2010, p. 7). In the Estonian school system, Standard Estonian is often taught as the only correct form of Estonian and is widely considered a central component of the identity of Estonians (Lindström, Risberg, & Plado, 2023, p. 9). The high prestige of standard language in society, including the obligation to use only ‘correct’ language at school, may seriously impact the linguistic security of language users (Vaicekauskienė, 2012, p. 77). Furthermore, when the state institutionalizes overt ideology, it inevitably influences the linguistic identity of speakers. This is particularly true for professional language users who are more exposed to the high prestige of the official language (Vaicekauskienė, 2012, p. 98).

2.1 Online Survey

The online survey (in LimeSurvey) was reachable for about 1.5 months (18.05-30.06.2023). The core survey comprised 21 questions, including 7 about personal data, taking about 10-15 minutes to answer. It was published on EKI’s website, called for in the Estonian Public Broadcasting (“Keeleminutid”, 13. 06. 2023), shared on Facebook, and (as a pop-up) in the language portal *Sõnaveeb*. A total of 3,005 respondents participated in the survey, while 1,382 (45.9%) completed it (Langemets et al., 2024b).²

¹ This paper is partly based on two conference presentations held in Estonia in April 2024 focusing on attitudes.

² Although it was clearly stated in the welcoming text that respondents must be at least 18 years old, the questionnaire had 52 minors to answer. Their responses have been deleted prior to analysis.

The questions spread across seven modules: (1) using the portal *Sõnaveeb* (yes/no, how often, devices, giving feedback); (2) evaluating types of language data; (3) layout of the portal; (4) the medium of the DSE (paper, online); (5) the overall assessment of the portal; (6) personal data (age, gender, formal education, mother tongue(s)); (7) activities when a dictionary consultation is needed.³ Due to the nature of the study, we had to rely on the self-reports of the participants.

The language portal was used (Q1, N=2,151) by 1752 (81.4%), not used by 135 respondents (6.3%), and 264 respondents (12.3%) noted that they heard about it from this questionnaire. The overall satisfaction with the portal (Q3, N=1,333) was high: the majority of respondents were satisfied (1,116 respondents, 83.7%); 153 respondents stayed neutral (11.5%); few were unsatisfied (64 respondents, 4.8%).

Different age groups (Q16, N=1,291) were covered quite evenly: each 5-year range from 18-19 to 50-54 around 10%, then lowering from 6.3% (55-59) to 0.2% (85+). As for gender groups (Q17, N=1,312), 71.2% were women (934 respondents), 26.7% were men (350), and 2.1% marked “Other” or were not willing to tell (28). The data on education (Q18, N=1,265) showed that the majority of respondents were MAs or MA students (44.6%, 565 respondents), followed by BAs or BA students (24.6%, 311), secondary or vocational education (19.4%, 245), PhDs or PhD students (7.6%, 96), and basic education (3.8%, 48). The mother tongue(s) of the respondents (Q19, N=1,413) were Estonian (73.5%, 1038), Russian (18.7%, 264), English (3.0%, 43), Ukrainian (2.2%, 31), Finnish (1.8%, 26), and German (0.8%, 11). Also, several more languages appeared (e.g., Italian, Armenian, Japanese).

The activities when a dictionary consultation is needed (Q20-21, answers N=5,023) included communication in Estonian (13.8%, 693 answers)⁴, producing Estonian texts (11.1%, 557), translating into Estonian (8.9%, 445), editing Estonian texts (8.7%, 436), searching for terminology (8.5%, 425), compiling (official) documents in Estonian (8.0%, 402), etc. However, not all respondents were language professionals, as might be inferred from here. We broadly categorized individuals into two groups: language professionals and general users (see Langemets et al., 2024a).

2.2 Qualitative Analysis

The respondents left a total of 1,697 additional open-ended feedback comments. For this paper, we analyzed the comments of the questions focusing on searching for information in the portal. We left out the comments connected with the publication of the paper version of the DSE 2025 (because of the updated *Action Plan*, see above Section 1) as well as comments on the layout of the portal. So, we chose four questions (in different modules) with altogether 1,049 comments:

1. Do you use the language portal *Sõnaveeb*? (243 comments, Q1)

³ The detailed description of modules and questions can be found in Langemets et al., 2024b.

⁴ We realize that this option was too vague to draw any conclusions from.

2. Are there any more linguistic issues that should be presented in the language portal *Sõnaveeb*? What information do you miss in the portal? (328 comments, Q6)
3. How satisfied are you in all with the user experience of the language portal *Sõnaveeb*? Share your comments, if you have any. (316 comments, Q3)
4. If you have any feedback about the language portal *Sõnaveeb* that you could not say previously in this questionnaire, please comment here. (162 comments, Q14)

The online tool QCAMap (Mayring & Fenzl, 2022) was used to analyze the answers and comments, enabling qualitative inductive content analysis with the support of a system of categories and rules. The inductive method helped to understand the attitudes of the participants and to explore their interpretations. We coded several topics mentioned in the comments, that can be related to the evaluative dimensions (e.g., more information, norms) as well as the general attitude of the comments (neutral, positive, negative). In the light of attitude research, the comments give a lot of data.

3. Findings from the Comments: Topics and Attitudes

Topics detected in the comments (one person could mention several topics in their comment) were as follows: seeking more information (226), users' habits of preferring other sources than *Sõnaveeb* (189), language norms (184), improvement suggestions for the portal (106), the user experience (79), reliability of the portal (54), rumors about the portal (12), bidding less information (10). Altogether 860, see Figure 1. The rest of the comments (out of 1,069) did not mention any specific topic but just reported about using the portal.⁵

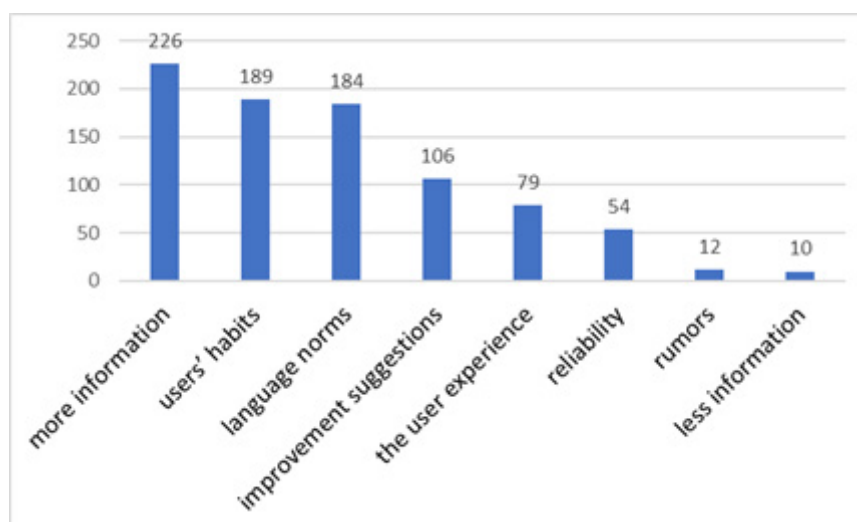


Fig. 1: Topics detected in the comments (altogether 860)

⁵ Numerical data is presented for background information to illustrate aspects that emerged from the qualitative analysis.

There were 609 comments expressing some kind of attitude: positive (207, 34.0%), negative (80, 13.1%), or both positive as well as negative attitudes (17, 2.8%). Half of the comments (305, 50.1%) stayed neutral, without expressing explicitly any attitude while commenting on topics, see Figure 2. This result correlates with the outcome of the Likert scale question (Q3, see above Section 2.1) indicating the high satisfaction (83.7%) of the survey respondents.

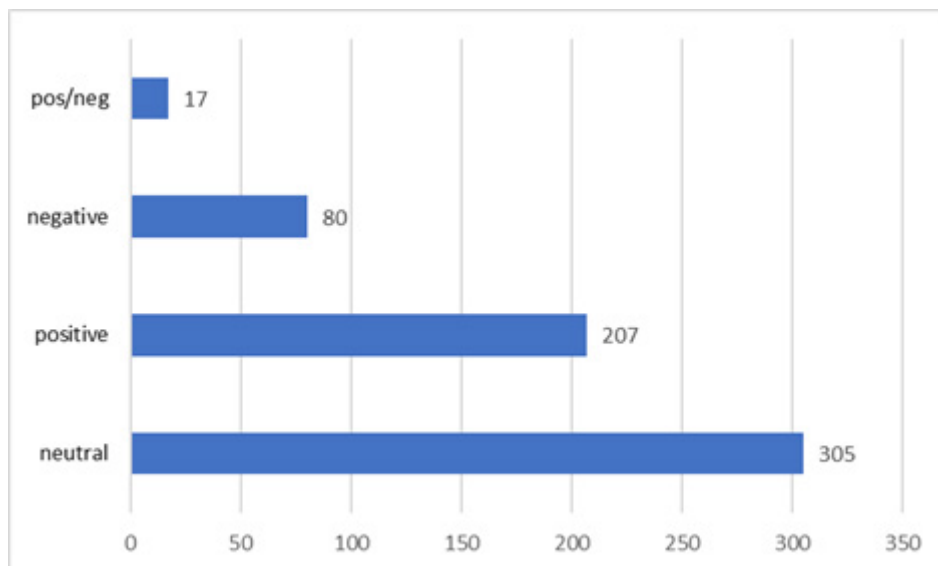


Fig. 2: Attitudes detected in the comments (altogether 609)

In the context of the ongoing discussion in society, we chose to focus on language norms (Section 3.1) and reliability (Section 3.2). There was a notable difference in attitudes: while the negative comments focused on norms (61%) or reliability (37.9%), the positive comments focused more on the content (e.g., meanings, other languages, more information) and much less on norms (23.7%) or reliability (1.9%). We specifically chose to look into what was (across all topics) commented about the content in the CombiDic – meanings (Section 3.3) and other languages (Section 3.4).

3.1 Language Norms

Language norms in Estonian primarily focus on spelling and grammar (inflection), but also on pronunciation if it affects inflection. Since 1980, it has been stated that the meanings of general language words should not be standardized; however, this understanding has not yet been firmly established in society (Risberg, 2024, p. 98). Since 2020, there have also been debates about standardizing meanings.

Since the 1990s, Estonian society has been witnessing ambivalent attitudes: while one segment of society expects commands and prohibitions, “a crusade against bad usage”, others feel that the previously predominant standard language should be regarded as just one of several equally valid sublanguages (M. Erelt, 2007, p. 333). All the norms and recommendations can more than ever be based on actual usage

due to the large corpora (nowadays Estonian National Corpus, see Koppel & Kallas, 2022). The language norms are to be found both in CombiDic (via the language portal *Sõnaveeb*) as well as the DSE, while only the latter is considered the legal source of the norms.

The norms were mentioned in 184 instances (see Figure 1). The positive comments brought up the convenient exposition of the grammar (inflection) information as the correct/appropriate forms are found easily. There's also an intuitive perception of the CombiDic as prescriptive – but it is a well-known fact that any dictionary is easily perceived that way.

The negative comments brought up issues participants were dissatisfied with. The respondents did not like the existence of two sources as they felt the need to double-check the correctness of one (CombiDic) compared to the other (DSE). We have aimed to fix this problem by integrating the lexical data from different dictionaries into one CombiDic in the portal (see above Section 1) but as a consequence of the recent legal decisions the DSE has yet to be presented separately. Participants were also worried about how they would know what is actually correct (if it is not explicitly stated) and what belongs to the literary tradition. They asked if everything had been discussed in the official Language Committee of the Mother Tongue Society. They feared that rules and norms are vanishing, if not strictly commanded by the language planners: “*DSE does not allow everything, but Sõnaveeb does*”, and expressed that it is not clear whether a word belongs to spoken or written language (although the register labels are available). The attitude of this comment is that DSE has a higher status than *Sõnaveeb*. The question of “*Who is the target audience?*” was raised as the CombiDic differs from previous DSEs (since 1999) for incorporating *all* meanings (all language data), instead of focusing only on special controversial cases.

On several occasions, different individuals expressed opposing views in the comments. For example: “*Considering the increasingly sloppy language use, Sõnaveeb is a strong pillar on which to maintain the quality of the mother tongue. You are doing commendable work!*” While just the opposite: “*The inflection tables work. [...] That's it. Otherwise, I would say that Sõnaveeb contributes to the triumph of zero style and impoverished language.*”

The need to evaluate others is a natural part of human behavior (see Cameron, 1995 on “verbal hygiene”). Some members of society exhibit “grassroots prescriptivism” – they send letters to the media about incorrect language usage (Lukač, 2018; Lukač & Heyd, 2023). In addition to critically evaluating others, some participants also criticize themselves and hesitate to express themselves, fearing ridicule from others. This is evidenced by the fact that users often seek black-and-white answers about what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in language from EKI language counseling (Risberg, 2022, p. 207; Paet, 2023, p. 39, 46). This behavior can be linked to the high status of lexicographical assistance and shows traces of linguistic insecurity of language users since they feel the urge to be utterly correct.

3.2 Reliability

The reliability of the content in dictionaries is found to be important for users (Müller-Spitzer & Koplenig, 2014). The recent discussion in Estonia has somewhat turned this notion upside down when talking about relying on corpora. While Carolin Müller-Spitzer and Alexander Koplenig (2014, p. 168) found in their study that in terms of reliability, participants “considered important that all details represent actual language use and are validated on a corpus,” in Estonia, incorporating actual language usage and the use of corpus data in lexicography have caused misunderstandings and reluctance (e.g., Vider, 2022; Veldre, 2022).

Reliability was mentioned in 54 instances (see Figure 1). Positive comments reported finding it helpful to get the grammar (inflection) and meaning information easily, but a little confused if provided multiple variants: “*Which of the possible variants philologists prefer?*” It is not clear who are philologists – language planners? or copy editors? It was mentioned that more terminological data would increase the credibility of *Sõnaveeb*.

The negative comments mentioned the incompleteness, even randomness of the *Sõnaveeb*, as it is updated daily, while the previous dictionaries (DSE, explanatory, etymology, etc.) are considered well-researched and reliable. It was commented that there are “*rumors circulating that Sõnaveeb is not a recognized source*”.

In addition to the usage examples selected by the lexicographer, we present automatically selected sentences from the corpus (clickable if needed). Although there is a warning that these sentences may contain errors, they have “*given the impression that the word is widely used in standard language*”. This is another example of the influence of SLI. This is also a lesson to learn: the data should be extremely carefully arranged on the page to be better understood.

Otherwise, the negative comments were pretty much the same as mentioned in connection with the norms (see Section 3.1): users do not like to navigate between two websites (DSE and *Sõnaveeb*) and they are unsure which information is ‘correct’ and which is ‘incorrect’. Some of the respondents do not trust *Sõnaveeb* (“*Sõnaveeb is flawed*”) because it is too similar to an explanatory dictionary, while they are seeking (strict) guidelines, and language planning advice, instead. This indicates the high prestige of DSE, and that the status stereotype of language attitudes (e.g., Dragojevic et al., 2018, p. 30) is spread. This indicates that the attitudes toward *Sõnaveeb* can be perceived as reflecting a trust or distrust in authority, as opposed to a sense of solidarity. This is in contrast for example to the case of youth language, where the ‘correctness’ of language is regulated among youth who are not seeking to align themselves with any external authority (Koreinik et al., 2023).

3.3 Meanings

A study conducted in Europe has revealed that the most common queries in dictionaries are for meanings (“What does this word mean?”), as well as for spelling

and grammar (Langemets et al., 2018; Kosem et al., 2019). The same findings emerged from the *Sõnaveeb* survey (Langemets et al., 2024b), where participants were asked to rate the types of information most frequently searched: meanings were chosen the most (92.5%), followed by spelling (92.0%), then grammar (inflection) and synonyms (90.7% each). Satisfaction with language information (ratings of 4-5, meaning “Rather satisfied” and “Completely satisfied”) was as follows: spelling (88.3%), grammar (86.4%), and meanings (84.2%). The poorest satisfaction score, but still over 50%, was earned by equivalents in other languages (51.5%).

The legacy of historical language planning in Estonia has favored the “one word one meaning”-principle, which involves rejecting new senses, coining new words for different senses of polysemous words, etc. (Risberg & Langemets, 2021; Risberg, 2024). For example, the verb *vabandama* was long considered to have only the ‘correct’ meanings of ‘to forgive’ and ‘to justify,’ while the common meaning of ‘to apologize’ was deemed ‘incorrect’, as it was thought to be influenced by Russian (Raadik, 2020). Additionally, the DSE 2018 retained 130 words whose newer meanings were not recommended for use in Standard Estonian due to various language change reasons considered undesirable in language planning, such as the influence of other languages, figurative language use, and metonymy (see Risberg, 2023).

Language has for quite a long time been conceptualized by language planning as a strictly manipulable system. This has facilitated the understanding that it is possible to normatively fix word meanings in dictionaries (e.g., Aavik, 1936; Veski, 1958; T. Erelt, 2003). Such views could be cultivated in specialized terminology, but not in general language. With the emergence of the cognitive paradigm in linguistics in the 1970s and 1980s, language has increasingly been understood as part of human cognition (see Croft & Cruse, 2005). However, this knowledge has not yet reached all parts of the Estonian public awareness.

Meanings were mentioned in 78 instances (across all topics, see above Section 3). Positive (or neutral) comments favored dynamic updating, including adding new meanings, and a plentiful choice of synonyms. However, regarding polysemous words, some would like to know which meaning is the most common or preferred one. If there is a new or changed meaning (or form), some would expect an explanation and justification for the change. Some want more labels to better understand which registers the meanings belong to. Some reported improving Estonian language skills while searching through all meanings.

Negative comments, once again, revealed the longing for recommendations, and guidance on ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ meanings: “*Not every new meaning is correct.*” As previously described, we register meanings emerging from actual language use in CombiDic, rather than capturing any arbitrary usage instances. However, the Standard Language Ideology comes into play here, leading some members of society to believe that word meanings should not change (see also Trudgill, 1998).

3.4 Other Languages

In the language portal *Sõnaveeb*, the default option is to present all lexical data we have assembled in our database, including all languages, only then to be further filtered. Russian is the best-represented other language in the CombiDic,⁶ as we have imported the voluminous Estonian-Russian (1997–2009, 2nd ed. 2019) dictionary into our database Ekilex (Tavast et al., 2018, Koppel et al., 2019). French and Ukrainian are represented in the range of the basic vocabulary (ca 6,000 words), while English is only random, and German is missing completely (so far, August 2024).

Other languages were mentioned in 101 instances (across all topics, see above Section 3). Attitudes towards other languages are roughly divided into two categories: some would like to see even more equivalents in different languages, while others do not want any other languages to be seen in the Estonian dictionary.

Positive comments approved of the presence of other languages: “*Since Sõnaveeb has started adding foreign language equivalents as well, it should confidently continue in that direction.*” Neutral comments proposed adding more equivalents in more languages, or the opposite, stated that they are not seeking equivalents in other languages. It was also noted that some users might prefer separate websites, meaning they would like to use the Estonian monolingual dictionary separately from other languages.

The lack of English equivalents was mentioned most frequently. Some specified that they would like to see more (official) European languages. German and Finnish were also mentioned more, less so Latvian, Ukrainian, French, and Swedish. Some respondents would like to see even more Russian equivalents.

As for negative comments, respondents feared it to be misleading containing French and English in the CombiDic, as the users could make mistakes in Estonian spelling when accidentally choosing the form of the foreign word. Some of the negative comments were extreme: “*Please remove the blocks of foreign words/definitions, they are unnecessary noise*” or “*Sõnaveeb is a nightmare. Who is it meant for? Russians?*”

The negative attitude towards Russian can be explained with historical reasons, as Estonia had been occupied by Russia for half a century (1940–1991): “*Instead of Russian translations, there could be English ones*” or “*Why does every word have a Russian equivalent?*”

4. Discussion

The rather poetic question in the title of this paper asked if one should dream or not dream about ‘correct’ meanings. Depending on the viewpoint, the answer can be

⁶ There are more than 140 terminological databases in the *Sõnaveeb* that include equivalents mostly in English but also many more languages.

different. Although only a handful of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the language portal *Sõnaveeb* (4.7%, 80 out of 1,697 comments, see Figure 2), the open-ended comments revealed various concerns and attitudes. In general, attitudes were divided based on whether the user was seeking information to enrich their language or seeking language norms and language planning recommendations. Meanings were not an exception: there were users who definitely believe in 'correct' meanings guarded by lexicographers or language planners and others who expected neutral descriptions of all meanings in use, and perhaps expected some labels for registers.

The study reveals that the online survey participants' attitudes towards dictionaries (lexicographical assistance) and the portal *Sõnaveeb* can be placed on the scale of status (Dragojevic et al., 2018, p. 30). Status is linked to the idea that *Sõnaveeb* is for the majority of users reliable and thus carries a high status. Another similar attitude is that it has prescriptive power (norms) and thus has high prestige. Dictionaries are universally seen as a standard that can be referred to as an authority (e.g., Müller-Spitzer, 2014, p. 85), and as language codifiers that have a social force to determine what is standard in a language (Ammon, 2015, p. 57) even more. It is unsurprising that they have a status-based stereotype rather than a solidarity-based one. The latter would mean that participants do not seek authority from above; instead, language use would be regulated among users. A good example is youth language, where solidarity between youth sets the standards for correctness (Koreinik et al., 2023).

The normative and descriptive approaches have always collided in lexicography⁷ where in the case of contemporary Estonian, the language norms are provided for spelling (orthography) and grammar (inflection), but not for meanings (in general language). The same has been stated for Danish: "The usual way for lexicographers to deal with meanings is to include them (descriptively) in the dictionary but supply them (normatively) with a label that indicates the nature of the restriction on their usage." (Trap-Jensen, 2002) So, labels can function a bit like normative advice, but of course, only to some extent. Labels should be perceived as tendencies, not the universal norm across language, as each language situation depends on the context.

The Finnish linguist Pirkko Nuolijärvi (2023) has argued regarding the Estonian DSE that "If the dictionary is titled *Õigekeelsussõnaraamat* [= DSE, literally 'Correct Language Dictionary'], then the user of the dictionary easily interprets all recommendations as norms: this word form or meaning is correct." The title might have 'worked' in the period of codifying the standard language (i.e., in the 1920s for modernizing Estonian), but since the language has stabilized at least since the 1980s, it seems anachronistic (see also Risberg 2024; Kerge 2012). The latest developments in Estonia have regrettably proved the opposite (see "Press release, 28.03.2024"): we should still separately publish the normative DSE (validated by the law), while the option would have been to proceed with one source, the descriptive *Dictionary of Estonian*, which would have had some usage notes by the DSE in a separate column.

⁷ As well as within society more broadly – some members do long for normative guidelines for the entire language.

From the CAAE interviews, it became clear that language professionals understand language more flexibly than general users, who strive to be correct in both formal and informal writing (Langemets et al., 2024a). But even L1 language professionals seek greater assurance from the DSE regarding the appropriateness of a word or its meaning for Standard Estonian. This attitude has been fostered by the long tradition of two types of general dictionaries of Estonian: the normative DSEs (since 1918) and descriptive explanatory dictionaries (since 1988). The common perception of language in Estonia has long been influenced by Standard Language Ideology, which holds the belief that one language variant (in our case Standard Estonian) is superior to others, and purism, i.e., the avoidance of undesirable language elements and foreign influences (Lindström, Risberg, & Plado, 2023; Paet, 2023).

In the online survey, it was notable that the few (80) negative comments focused on norms and reliability, while respondents with a positive (207) or a neutral (305) attitude commented much more on many other topics (e.g., other languages, meanings, layout). It might be connected with the belief in the ‘correct’ language, or be the simplest way to criticize the dictionary one does not favor. In Estonia, relying on corpora has caused mistrust in the public as well, although the corpora have been used since the 1990s, but not for compiling the normative DSE. These kinds of negative comments have been widely reflected in the media during the public discussion in recent years. A behavioral scientist has argued that conflicting contents are usually produced by a minority: “About one-fifth or less produce four-fifths or more of such content, including competitive content (Uusberg, 2024).”

Descriptive approach is considered a cornerstone of scientific linguistic research, emphasizing the importance of factual accuracy. In contrast, prescriptivism lacks a scientific nature – the firm stances taken by prescriptivists do not necessarily reflect actual language usage and thus fall short of scientific standards. (Ayres-Bennett, 2021, p. 44) Consequently, a primary goal of Estonian modern language planning, based on the results of research conducted within the framework of usage-based linguistics, is to harmonize language norms and recommendations with the inherent norms of actual language usage, minimizing potential conflicts. When standards closely reflect the natural patterns of language, users are less reliant on rote memorization, resulting in more efficient language use (Risberg, 2024, p. 100; Päll, 2019). The descriptive approach has already been applied for compiling and editing the CombiDic, and partly, to the extent possible in a language planning dictionary, it will also be used for the DSE 2025.

5. Conclusion

In 2023, the Institute of the Estonian Language conducted a user experience survey to better understand the users of the language portal *Sõnaveeb* and their needs and concerns. Since 2019, the portal has been developed with the goal of consolidating all lexical data into one place, integrating general dictionaries into the *EKI Combined Dictionary* (CombiDic). Although the survey did not specifically ask about users’ attitudes, these were evident in the open-ended comments. We found that the portal

users fell into three groups based on their opinions and attitudes about language: (a) users seeking to find increasing amounts of information, who left positive comments; (b) users looking to enrich their language, who left both positive and neutral comments; and (c) users primarily seeking correctness and guidelines, who left negative comments.

The range of normative aspects of language – spelling and grammar (inflection), and pronunciation if it affects inflection – should be more clearly explained in Estonian society, as this understanding has not yet been firmly established. Regarding meanings, recent research (Risberg, 2024; Paet, 2023) has once again proven that one should not dream of 'correct' meanings but trust the meanings described in the dictionary.

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