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# Concerning the Treatment of Co-existent Synonyms in Estonian Monolingual and Bilingual Dictionaries

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## Abstract

Estonian is a lesser used language of Europe (with about one million users) that belongs to the Finnic group of Finno-Ugric language. It has a large proportion of international words, which has resulted in extensive co-existent synonymy between native and international words. However, because of linguistic purism Estonian monolingual dictionaries do not treat the members of such synonym pairs on an equal footing. Usually, they give preference to native words, which in practice implies that international words are provided together with their native-language equivalents, but native words are without any reference to international words. Unfortunately, this kind of asymmetrical treatment is not helpful for language users and compilers of bilingual dictionaries; they need to develop synonym competence, which covers both international and native synonyms. Probably the best solution is symmetrical treatment, that is, both synonyms should be provided side by side on a regular basis, which contributes to their better knowledge. It is argued that the quality of bilingual dictionaries could be significantly improved by providing the synonym pairs together on a systematic basis.

**Keywords:** synonyms; monolingual dictionaries; bilingual dictionaries; language planning; English; Estonian

## 1 Introduction

Synonymy can be regarded as “a relation of similarity / identity of meaning between senses associated with two (or more) lexical forms” (Cruse 2002: 486). For practical purposes, it is useful to follow the “synonymy rule of thumb: X is Y and Y is X” (Atkins and Rundell 2008: 135). It is also important to bear in mind that synonymy is a language-specific phenomenon (Gouws 2013: 349).

The purpose of the present study is to examine the lexicographic practice of treating co-existent intralingual synonyms in Estonian monolingual dictionaries from the perspective of its usefulness for lexicographers who compile English-Estonian and Estonian-English bilingual dictionaries. Estonian is a lesser used language of Europe (with about one million users) that belongs to the Finnic group of Finno-Ugric languages. Estonian has a large proportion of international words; therefore, it is not surprising that the size of the latest edition of the dictionary of foreign words (VSL 2012) almost equals the size of the single-volume dictionary of Standard Estonian (ÕS 2013). In many cases synonymy

concerns pairs of synonyms between native (Estonian) and foreign (international) words. However, sometimes both synonyms can be foreign words (e.g. *kabatšokk*, *tsukiini* ‘courgette Br, zucchini Am). Extensive co-existent intralingual synonymy in Estonian is the result of conscious efforts of language planners to increase the proportion of native vocabulary. It is typical of Estonian specialized vocabulary but can be found in general language too. The following examples come from linguistic terminology: *nimetav*, *nominatiiv* ‘nominative (case)’, *omastav*, *genitiiv* ‘genitive case’; *osastav*, *partitiiv* ‘partitive (case)’; *täishäälik*, *vokaal* ‘vowel’; *kaashäälik*, *konsonant* ‘consonant’; *vormiõpetus*, *morfoloogia* ‘morphology’; *lauseõpetus*, *süntaks* ‘syntax’.

Stephen Ullmann discussed similar synonymy in German:

The German linguist, for instance, can choose between *Lautlehre* and *Phonetik*, *Formenlehre* and *Morphologie*, *Bedeutungslehre* and *Semantik* (or *Semasiologie*), and as these synonyms are used in the same contexts, and sometimes even in the title of the same book, one can hardly speak even of stylistic differences between them. (Ullmann 1962: 142)

It could well be that Estonian may have followed the German example. Historically one could explain the development of extensive native-language terminology with national pride and identity building. In the case of Dutch, for example, Roel Vismans claims that “in the early Republic pride in the Dutch language also led to the introduction of many newly coined words for concepts expressed by Latinisms in other languages” (Vismans 1998: 133).

Estonian language planners have regarded the introduction of co-existent synonymy between international and native words as an important method of establishing native-language identity and increasing the proportion of native vocabulary. In 1980 Henn Saari, an Estonian linguist, published a seminal paper where he discussed at length the importance of such word pairs in Estonian terminology (Saari 1980)

Uno Mereste, another Estonian academic whose views have been influential in language planning, explained the need for intralingual synonymy as follows:

There is no such thing as positive polysemy. However, in addition to undesirable synonymy, there is also positive sameness of meaning or synonymy, which one should try to preserve and develop further – it is synonymy between pairs of native and international terms, for example, *nimetav* or *nominative* ‘nominative (case)’, *ainsus* or *singular* ‘the singular’, *tasuvus* or *rentaablus* ‘profitability’, *tehis-* or *sünteesiline aine* ‘synthetic substance’, etc.. (Mereste 2000: 87)

In Estonia, one of the purposes of national word coining competitions is to seek native synonyms for the existing international words. A recent example is the winning entry *taristu* of the 2010 competition, which means the same as *infrastruktuur* ‘infrastructure’. The word was immediately adopted by Estonians and is now widely used.

On the one hand, there is good reason to regard the co-existent intralingual synonymy in Estonian as a luxury because it contradicts the principle economy in language. D. Alan Cruse has claimed that

“there is very little semiotic motivation for such a state of affairs: the only possible utility for absolute synonyms is aesthetic, to avoid repetition of forms (2002: 488).

## 2 Treatment of Intralingual Synonyms in Monolingual Dictionaries

In order to understand the treatment of intralingual synonyms in Estonian bilingual dictionaries, one has to examine the practice of presenting intralingual synonyms in monolingual dictionaries. It appears that intralingual synonyms do not receive equal treatment in monolingual dictionaries. They tend to prefer native-language synonyms and provide the native-language synonym in the entry for the international word but not the other way round (see the treatment of the synonyms *regionaalne*, *piirkondlik* ‘regional’ below; EKSS stands for *Eesti keele seletav sõnaraamat* ‘Explanatory Dictionary of Estonian’).

- (1) **regionaalne** adj mingit regiooni hõlmav, selles esinev v sellele iseloomulik, piirkondlik (EKSS)
- (2) **piirkondlik** adj piirkonda hõlmav, selles toimuv v sellele iseloomulik, piirkonna- (EKSS)

This practice of asymmetrical treatment is intended to discourage the use of international words. It is difficult to say whether it serves its purpose, but one could likewise regard it as not user-friendly. Ordinary dictionary users, as well as compilers of bilingual dictionaries, need to develop competence with regard to the knowledge of both synonyms. In some cases, a prescriptive monolingual dictionary, such as *ÕS 2013 (Õigekeelsussõnaraamat 2013* ‘Dictionary of Correct Usage 2013’), may even indicate that the use of a foreign synonym is undesirable. Such is the case with *multikultuurne* and *mitmekultuuriline* ‘multicultural’.

- (3) [**multikultuurne**] → mitmekultuuriline (ÕS 2013)
- (4) **mitmekultuuriline**. Kanada on mitmekultuuriline maa (ÕS 2013)

This dictionary uses brackets for undesirable lexemes; in this case language planners regard the use of the combining form *multi-* undesirable and recommend its native equivalent *mitme-* ‘several’ instead. On the other hand, the following example shows that there can be inconsistencies even in dictionaries published by the same institutions. The new edition of the dictionary of foreign words VSL (*Võõrsõnade leksikon* ‘Dictionary of Foreign Words’) lists two forms of the ‘undesirable’ item, fails to provide the native synonym (*mitmekultuuriline*) recommended by the dictionary of correct usage, and suggests a different synonym (*paljukultuuriline*).

- (5) **multikultuurne**, **multikultuuriline** mitut kultuuri sisaldav, paljukultuuriline (VSL)

The next example shows that a dictionary user needs to develop a critical attitude towards the data provided in monolingual dictionaries and should not take everything at face value. The example concerns the notion of *kabatšokk*, *tsukiini* ‘courgette Br, zucchini Am’. A similar example of *aubergine* Br, *eggplant* Am and its Polish equivalents was discussed by Adamska-Sałaciak (2013: 338–339). Such lexical differences between British and American English are regarded as cross-varietal synonyms. The present co-existence of *kabatšokk* and *tsukiini* in Estonian can be explained by the fact that before 1991 the vegetable was known in Estonia by its Russian name (which ultimately has a Tatar origin). In recent years, however, *tsukiini* has been adopted as well, and at present both terms are used. It remains to be seen whether the younger generation will continue to use *kabatšokk*, or it will gradually be replaced by *tsukiini*.

However, the analysis of the treatment of *kabatšokk* and *tsukiini* in dictionaries revealed several problems.

- (6) **kabatšokk** s AIAND kõrvitsa pikerguste viljadega teisend, suvikõrvits, tsukiini (EKSS)
- (7) **tsukiini** s kabatšokk, suvikõrvits (EKSS)
- (8) **suvikõrvits** suvel v varasügisel kasutatavate kõrvitsate üldnimetus. *Kabatšokk, taldrikkõrvits ja spagetikõrvits on suvikõrvitsad* || kabatšokk, tsukiini. *Täidetud suvikõrvitsad* (EKSS)

The problem with the treatment of *kabatšokk*, *tsukiini*, and *suvikõrvits* ‘lit. summer pumpkin’ in EKSS is that *suvikõrvits* is a broader term and should be regarded as a superordinate of the first two terms. However, it is now time to turn to examine how the data provided in monolingual dictionaries tends to influence the treatment of co-existent synonyms in bilingual dictionaries.

The treatment of the synonyms *kabatšokk* and *tsukiini* in the dictionary of foreign words showed remarkable differences.

- (9) **kabatšokk** s BOT suvikõrvits, melonkõrvits, puhmikkõrvits, hariliku kõrvitsa piklike viljadega teisend (VSL)
- (10) **tsukiini** s BOT kabatšokk, hariliku kõrvitsa teisend (*Cucurbita pepo*) (VSL)

While the entry *tsukiini* claims that *tsukiini* is *kabatšokk*, the same is not true of the entry *kabatšokk*, which provided a number of other intralingual equivalents. It seems that different lexicographers were responsible for contributing material to different letters and no systematic harmonization was carried out.

### 3 Treatment of intralingual Synonyms in Bilingual Dictionaries

Analysis of the material of the Estonian bilingual dictionaries shows that more accuracy and systematicity is needed in the treatment of co-existent intralingual synonyms. At first the coverage of *courgette* and *zucchini* will be examined in three dictionaries. The English-Estonian Dictionary by Johannes Silvet (Silvet 4) is the best-known dictionary of this category; its first edition was published in the

late 1930s; at present its fourth enlarged edition of 2002 is widely used. The Estonian-English Dictionary by the TEA publishers (TEA 2005) is a recent Estonian-English dictionary. The Contemporary Estonian-English Dictionary by Andres Aule (see Aule 2003) is a large-scale Estonian-English dictionary; so far two volumes have been published (the letters A–J and K). So far the Estonian-English dictionary by Paul Saagpakk is the largest as to its coverage; unfortunately, it includes a considerable amount of outdated material while many more recent words are absent.

(11) **courgette** (no entry in Silvet 4)

(12) **zucchini** *s bot* kabatšokk, suvikõrvits, tsukiini (Silvet 4)

(13) **tsukiini** (no entry in TEA 2005)

(14) **kabatšokk** zucchini <pl zucchini, zucchinis>, (it), squash <pl squash, squashes>, (vegetable) marrow (TEA 2005)

(15) **kabatšokk** [melonkõrvits] vegetable marrow, marrow (*üldk*) (Aule)

(16) **kabatšokk** (no entry in Saagpakk)

(17) **tsukiini** (no entry in Saagpakk)

The presented examples reveal a considerable degree of inconsistency in the treatment of co-existent synonyms; nor are the suggested translation equivalents always accurate. In fact, the analysis shows that a bilingual lexicographer needs to critically study the material provided in monolingual dictionaries. However, in addition, primary corpus data is badly needed during the preparation of bilingual dictionaries.

Another area of intralingual synonymy concerns the situation where the international word belongs to a specific domain and the native synonym can be regarded as belonging to general language. In such cases the synonym that belongs to a specific domain should be labelled accordingly (e.g. *kardioloog med* ‘cardiologist’ and *südamearst* ‘heart doctor’).

(18) **kardioloog med** kardioloogia eriteadlane, südamearst (VSL)

However, analysis of a number of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries showed surprisingly that VSL was the only dictionary that provided the native synonym *südamearst*, which, in fact, is an everyday word in Estonian. It was also surprising that none of the other monolingual dictionaries (EKSS and ÕS 2013) listed the entry *südamearst*. Nor could it be found in the studied bilingual dictionaries. This finding suggests once again that a bilingual lexicographer should not rely too much on the existing monolingual dictionaries and has to use primary data as well.

What could be a solution to this problem? The answer is consistent symmetrical treatment of co-existent synonyms. Are there any Estonian dictionaries that treat the co-existent native and foreign synonyms on an equal footing? One such dictionary is the Estonian-English Dictionary of Linguistics by Erelt et al. (2012) (*Eesti-inglise keeleteaduse sõnastik*, EIKS). In this dictionary, synonyms are provided after the sense, separated by a comma. The treatment is consistent in that the same

information is provided in two places. This approach is also helpful for students who can see co-existent native and international terms side by side, which contributes to their synonym competence.

(19) **kaasa võnkuma, resoneerima** resonate (EIKS)

(20) **resoneerima, kaasa võnkuma** resonate (EIKS)

(21) **parasiitsõna, nugisõna** parasitic word, overused word (EIKS)

(22) **nugisõna, parasiitsõna** parasitic word, overused word (EIKS)

## 4 Conclusion

The study of co-existent intralingual synonyms in Estonian showed that monolingual dictionaries tend to promote native synonyms and do not cross-reference international words. While the rationale of the language planners is understandable, the disadvantage of this approach is asymmetry in the treatment of native and international synonyms. However, language users, as well as compilers of bilingual dictionaries, need to be familiar with the entire repertoire of such synonyms. For this reason, the symmetrical approach where the co-existent synonyms are provided side by side on an equal footing is fully justified. It is argued that the quality of bilingual dictionaries could be significantly improved by providing synonym pairs together on a systematic basis.

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