

# THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN (RE)CREATING THE TATAR DIASPORA IDENTITY: THE CASE OF THE ESTONIAN TATARS

MAARJA KLAAS

PhD student

Department of Ethnology

Institute for Cultural Research and Fine Arts

University of Tartu

Ülikooli 18, 50090, Tartu, Estonia

e-mail: maarja.klaas@ut.ee

## ABSTRACT

This paper\* focuses on the meanings assigned to the Tatar language among the Tatar diaspora in Estonia. According to interviews with Estonian Tatars, language is an important aspect of Tatar ethnic identity. This paper will track common discourses about the Tatar language and the way it is connected to Tatar ethnic identity. Issues concerning the Tatar language are used to demonstrate various ways of enacting Tatariness in Estonia. The paper shows that Estonian Tatars worry about the vitality and purity of Tatar, but for some, marginalisation of dialects is also an issue. People categorised with the same identity labels by themselves and others can experience and enact their Tatariness in a variety of different ways.

KEYWORDS: Tatars • identity • diaspora • language • Islam

## INTRODUCTION

The question of the legitimate use and destiny of the Tatar language is emotionally loaded for many Tatars, along with the question of the unity of the Tatars as a nation. This can be seen in a quote by Tatar writer Tufan Mingnullin:

Today as well, Tatars are not united. This is why their opinion is not taken into account. I do not blame the Russians at all for what we are. Only we are to blame. Those who lack self-respect are not respected. A docile slave is beaten more often. (Mingnullin 1996: 55, via Rorlich 1999: 392)

The Tatar political authorities have emphasised the importance of improving the status of the Tatar language as well as of embracing the diaspora to help the maintenance and recreation of Tatar identity and connections with Tatarstan.

I will explore the attitudes of Estonian Tatars towards the Tatar language and the role assigned to language choice and linguistic performance in the maintenance and recreation of ethnic identity. The interviews I conducted gave me personal insights into (among other things) the ways my informants conceptualise Tatar and the meaning of

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language in Tatar identity discourse. Rather than finding out, for example, the extent to which Tatar is used daily among Estonian Tatars, my goal was to understand the “interviewees’ interpretations of their experiences and their understanding of the world” (Rubin and Rubin 1995: 36) through stories that my informants told about their lives. The process of generating meanings is undoubtedly subjective. I will approach the topic by pointing out certain common lines of thought about using Tatar that came up in the interviews, specifically consideration of the viability and purity of Tatar, status struggles between dialects and the possibility of language shift. These discourses will then be connected to anthropological and sociolinguistic writings about the role of Tatar in nation building and identity construction in Tatarstan, and especially about the ways that Tatarstan approaches the diaspora in relation to language issues. I am interested in meanings Estonian Tatars assign to the contexts and ways of speaking Tatar as well as their own linguistic performance. I am also interested in how Tatarstan’s attempts to reach out to the Tatar diaspora have influenced the attitudes of Estonian Tatars to language. Thirdly, I want to investigate the relationship between language and other ethnic identity markers for Estonian Tatars.

The interviews were conducted with members of the Estonian Tatar community in 2009 (12 interviews conducted with 18 interviewees). My study also relies on field notes from some events carried out by the Estonian Islamic Congregation in the same year and two Tatar Sabantuy<sup>1</sup> festivals, in 2008 and 2009, in the small town of Maardu, where an active Tatar community lives and the largest Sabantuys in Estonia are organised. Some of the interviewees had organised or were organising community events at the time of the interview, others participated in events while not being active in their organisation. The ages of interviewees ranged from 19 to 81 and there were 9 men and 9 women. The length of the interviews varied from one to four hours. Most of the interviews were conducted in the interviewees’ homes in Tallinn or Maardu, while some preferred to meet me in cafés, and one in a park in front of his house. In order to protect their anonymity (of which I assured them at the time of the interviews), I use pseudonyms when referring to interviewees. The languages of interview were Estonian and Russian. Four interviews are conducted primarily in Russian and the rest in Estonian.<sup>2</sup> I also rely on background information provided by a three-week field trip to Kazan in 2007.

#### TATARS AS A DIASPORA NATION AND THE TATAR DIASPORA IN ESTONIA

For a long time in Russia all Turkic people were called Tatars. By the early 20th century several Turkish-speaking groups situated in the Volga–Urals region, Crimea and Siberia used the term ‘Tatar’ as self-designation. In the 2010 census in the Russian Federation, over 5.3 million people declared themselves Tatar, about 2 million of whom live in Tatarstan (a little more than half of Tatarstan’s population). Distinctions are made between Crimean Tatars as a more distant group and the Volga Tatars, including Siberian, Astrakhan, Kazan Tatars and Mishars. The Kazan Tatars mainly live in Central Russia, in the areas of Tatarstan and in regions around it (like Udmurtia and Bashkortostan), while the Mishars traditionally live in the Nizniy Novgorod region about 300 kilometres north-west of Kazan, the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan. While the tra-

ditional religion for most Tatar groups has been Sunni Islam, there is also a group of Orthodox Tatars called Kryashens. These distinctions are based on self-identity as well as categorisations by others and are related to both political discourses and linguistic and cultural differences.

The idea of Tatarstan as the spiritual homeland of all Tatars does meet some resistance. For example, the Astrakhan and Siberian Tatars have presented themselves as ethnic groups distinct from the Volga Tatars. These groups both claim that historical and linguistic peculiarities differentiate them from Volga Tatars to such an extent that they should be considered separate groups (Graney 1998: 155–156). For the 2010 census, the Russian federal statistics service Rosstat provided a list of nationalities to guide residents in completing the census form, which gave almost 30 categories of Tatar. The Tatar elite in Tatarstan saw this as a central government political strategy that tried to downplay the numbers and influence of Tatars in the Russian Federation. They claim that these Tatar subdivisions do not have any ground in the people's self-perception (Sindelar 2010; Goble 2013). Tatarstan's elite makes a conscious effort to keep their relationships with the central government in Moscow harmonious, while simultaneously retaining as much sovereignty as possible. In the 1990s, Tatarstan used the diaspora as legitimation for increasing its influence and decision-making power in the Russia Federation. Relations between the central government and Tatarstan are fraught with power struggles, which are nevertheless carefully hidden. According to Yves-Marie Davenel (2009: 77), in the 2002 census, when only the Tatars of Siberia, Astrakhan and Kryashen were counted separately, there were about 34,000 people out of 5.5 million Tatars in the Russian Federation who chose to identify themselves primarily as members of these groups. Although the number is small, this fact reveals the existence of some divisions among the Tatars. Some members of other minority groups also seek recognition of their distinct ethno-linguistic and religious traits and resist the homogenising attempts of Tatar political authorities in Tatarstan (Graney 1998: 155–156). There is also a widespread diaspora of Tatars with long traditions in the former Soviet Union, especially Central Asia, and in the cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg. The largest communities of Volga Tatars outside of the former Soviet Union live in China, Turkey, Poland and Finland (see *ibid.*: 157 for a detailed table of Volga Tatar diaspora communities).

The first Tatar community in Estonia formed after Estonia and Livonia were annexed to Russia in 1721, when some Tatar navy officers in the Russian army stayed in Tallinn after the Great Northern War (Abiline 2008: 58). The names of Tatari and Uus-Tatari Streets in Tallinn date from this period (*ibid.*: 60). When Russia abolished serfdom in 1861, many former serfs took up trade, and in the 1870s and 1880s Tatar peddlers started to come to Estonia. The number of Tatars living in Tallinn, according to the 1897 census, was 109. However, the military were not accounted for, and it is thought that the actual number of Tatars could have been much higher (*ibid.*: 66). During World War I and the subsequent Estonian War of Independence, 1914–1918 and 1918–1920 respectively, many Tatars left Estonia for Finland, Germany and Tatarstan. Simultaneously, new Tatar immigrants came to Estonia and the immigration process continued during the first Estonian independence period (*ibid.*: 68). In Tallinn and Narva, where the largest communities of Tatars lived, Sunday schools for children were organised. Narva Muslim Congregation (Narva Muhamedi Kogudus) was registered in 1928 and later reregistered as Narva Muslim Religious Society (Narva Muhamedi Usüühing). In

1940, Tallinn Muslim Religious Society was registered. According to the 1934 census there were 170 Muslims living in Estonia, and 166 of them were Tatars. Thus, Muslim organisations in Estonia at the time were mainly Tatar ventures as well. During the Soviet period, religious societies were banned. In 1988 the Tatar Culture Society was registered and the reregistration of the Estonian Muslim Congregation came in 1989. After the collapse of the Soviet Union there was also a considerable amount of emigration (Abiline 2008: 58–74). According to the 2011 census in Estonia, 1945 people listed themselves as Tatars (Rahva ja eluruumide loendus 2011).

Tatars who came to Estonia before the Second World War mainly originated in what is today the Nizhniy Novgorod Oblast, from villages around a larger central village Sergatch. They were mostly Mishar Tatars. Between 1950 and 1980 Estonia experienced extensive immigration from different parts of the Soviet Union. Many Tatar immigrants came and now from different areas of the Soviet Union. They came as workforce to build the Narva Electric Power Station and the Maardu Chemical Combine starting from 1948, and the Olympic Complex in the 1970s (Abiline 2008: 74). Those Tatars who came to build the Maardu Chemical Combine were mainly Mishar Tatars from the village of Andreyevka in the Sergatch area. However, other immigration waves included Tatars from Tatarstan, Bashkiria and other locations as well.

#### NATIONAL IDENTITY, LANGUAGE, DIASPORA

Identity is a notorious term. Siniša Malešević (2006: 3) argues that identity has become an ideological device used by academics and various political actors alike. Because the concept of identity is often employed as a device of elite power struggles, he cautions social scientists to be prudent in their analysis (*ibid.*: 5). Denis-Constant Martin (1995) asserts that although identity is often used as an explanation in the context of various conflicts, it does not cause human behaviour in itself. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000) are critical of the use of identity as a term in social analysis because of its ambiguity. They point out that identity is used in conflicting ways, taking on strong, essentialist meanings mostly in its non-scientific use, while simultaneously being “routinely characterized as multiple, fragmented and fluid” in social analysis (*ibid.*: 6). The constructivist stance does not seem convincing, they say, because it ends up conceptualising a myriad of affiliations, experiences of community and commonality and self-understandings with one term, which is confusing (*ibid.*: 2). Brubaker and Cooper also find it problematic that the term is often used analytically in a reifying manner, implying that identity is a thing people can have, hiding the essentialism of one’s argumentation behind what Brubaker and Cooper describe as “constructivist gestures” (*ibid.*: 6). Brubaker and Cooper suggest the use of “identification” (*ibid.*: 15), “self-understanding” (*ibid.*: 17) and “groupness” (*ibid.*: 19) in academic writing instead of identity. Of these, “identification” is used frequently, in order to emphasise the process of constantly recreating an individual sense of self and personal agency in associating with different categories or groups of people. Brubaker and Cooper see the benefits of “identification” in that it draws attention to processes, while “identity”, “designating a condition rather than a process, implies too easy a fit between the individual and the social” (*ibid.*: 17). As identity in a non-academic setting is regularly used with the assumption that identi-

ties are essential, unitary and rather stable features of people and groups, the term can easily be misinterpreted to denote the same in academic texts as well. Some academic texts also follow the trend to explain away certain acts simply with the ethnicity, nation or religion of the people involved. There is a small step from seeing group identities as sole reasons for a person's actions, to discriminating against a person for his or her identification with some group or category of people. Some of my informants, who identify with a Muslim, Russian-speaking and/or Tatar-speaking minority, have recounted being subjected to suspicion or hurtful experiences from other parties in Estonia. It is therefore important for me not to perpetuate this kind of essentialism in my argumentation. Nevertheless, this problem can be solved by a more conscious and precise way of handling the term identity.

One often-heard criticism of the use of identity is that instead of explaining why people act in certain ways, it merely veils selfish interests of one form or another, which actually motivate them. Roger D. Abrahams, for example, emphasises that market forces govern cultural identities. Abrahams (2003: 217) points out that ethnic identities are commoditised for the use of tourism and heritage industries. Richard Jenkins, on the other hand, points out that interests and identifications are, in fact, intermeshed. Jenkins underscores that "classifications of self and others [...] can never be utterly disinterested; they are potentially too consequential for that". People's identifications influence what they consider to be in their interest and pursuing certain interests may encourage them to prefer some identities over others. Both interests and identities depend on other factors outside of a person as well, including the identities and interests of other people. (Jenkins 2011: 9) Jenkins suggests that instead of theoretically opposing interests to identities, both should be looked at empirically in local contexts with their local histories. The question Jenkins urges us to ask, is how much ethnicity matters, if it does at all, and in what ways? (Ibid.: 11) Jenkins agrees that in some contexts, ethnic identities do not matter at all, while in others they may be consequential in one way or another.

While national identity is certainly not important for everyone (see, for example, Fenton 2007 about indifference to being English and British), its use value in signifying the differences and categorisations of especially the post-Soviet realities cannot be denied (for a short introduction to how the Soviet system strengthened ethnic identity and its impact on post-Soviet diaspora politics see King 1998: 17–20). Identity is processual and situational, meaning that it happens in daily interaction with others and changes depending on the social context. Stuart Hall (1996: 3) describes identification as a process that "operates across difference". Therefore, identity is always exclusive. It includes defining oneself or others against something, which they are not. The identities are always constructed within a discourse of power and exclusion. Hall continues that identification "entails discursive work, the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries, the production of 'frontier-effects'" (ibid.). The boundaries constantly recreated in discourse are situational and flexible. They are not completely arbitrary, of course, but negotiable to a great degree. This paper will explore the use of language as a symbolic boundary for Estonian Tatars, and show that there are many ways in which language is used – in relation to purity of language and dialects, as well as being or not being able to speak Tatar at all. The various uses of Tatar in boundary maintenance are connected to the fact that identity is also hierarchically organised. Thus, the same person can talk about his or her national identity by referring to a we-group of Mishar Tatars in rela-

tion to, for example, dialect and descent, or Estonian Tatars in relation to location and networks. The discursive approach to identity emphasises that the meaning of identity changes over time and between different members of a community. For example, Rogers Brubaker et al. (2008: 207–238) show that individuals given the same identity labels both by others and by themselves, can practice and experience their identity in very different ways.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen finds that second and third generation immigrants tend to identify more strongly with the values of the majority than their parents did. However, in societies, where ethnicity is important, subsequent generations could instead experience revitalisation movements. (Eriksen 2010 [1993]: 167) In the context of today's Estonia (or the whole of the former Soviet Union, for that matter), it would then be expected that the overall importance of ethnicity in society would make Tatar revitalisation movements more likely to come to life here. Furthermore, the importance of language is emphasised in Estonian laws and national identity discourse, which carry the idea of the Estonian language needing protection in order to survive. The same is true for Tatarstan. In a study of ethnic identification in Tatar schools, Aurora Alvarez Veinguer and Howard Davis (2007) show that language is of central importance in Tatar schools and is treated as essential to being a Tatar. Helen Faller (2011) argues that language is allotted a special place in Tatar national identity discourse. Azode-Ayse Rorlich (1999) uses perceptions of Tatar collective memory in speeches, literature and other texts by Tatar intellectuals to show the interconnectedness of the discourses of language, statehood and religion (Islam) in the Tatar national identity today and considers these three to be the "defining markers of Tatar identity". Thus, the discursive contexts of Estonia and Tatarstan both place great importance on mother tongue in the context of national identity.

#### MEANINGS ASSIGNED TO TATAR LANGUAGE AMONG ESTONIAN TATARS

In what follows I will outline some common discourses related to Tatar that my interviewees expressed. The topic of the vitality and purity of the Tatar language came up repeatedly in interviews as they matter to Estonian Tatars and are part of sometimes clashing ways of enacting Tatarness in Estonia. I have connected opinions expressed by informants, with sources of Tatar national identity discourse and Tatarstan's endeavours to help recreate Tatar identity and connections with Tatarstan as the spiritual homeland of the diaspora. I will demonstrate various meanings assigned to Tatar by Estonian Tatars and look at how they relate to writings about Tatar national identity discourse in Tatarstan as well as Tatarstan's work on the direction of the diaspora.

##### *Effects of Tatar Diaspora Politics on Meanings Assigned to Tatar*

Since the end of the Soviet Union the Tatar political authorities in the Republic of Tatarstan have worked to improve the status of the Tatar language and culture. Tatarstan has significantly increased the legislative importance of Tatar in the republic. For example,

the constitution of 1992 defines Tatarstan as a bilingual republic with Russian and Tatar as the two official languages. Several positions (such as the president of Tatarstan) are only attainable to those who know both state languages. The number of Tatar-medium schools has significantly increased and Tatar is part of Russian-medium school curricula as well. Nevertheless, in daily life the two state languages are far from equal. Cities are mainly Russian speaking. Tatar speakers of the republic are bilingual, while Russians and many Tatars do not speak Tatar.

One of the ways Tatarstan tries to improve the status of Tatar language and culture within the republic, as well as its political status in the Russian Federation, is by reaching out to the Tatar diaspora. Tatarstan advocates an image of itself as the spiritual and historical homeland of all Tatars, the prime source of Tatarness and the protector of diasporic Tatars. Although the idea of Tatarstan as a homeland for all Tatars is older, it was not until after the Tatar ASSR was turned into the Republic of Tatarstan in 1990 that Tatarstani officials decided to pay more attention to diaspora issues (Graney 1998: 161). Thus, for example, Tatarstan was depicted as the “cradle of the Tatar people and its culture and language” in the priorities of nationalities policy outlined in November 1996 by the Tatarstan’s Department of Inter-Ethnic Affairs (Graney 2009: 93). In the negotiations with Federal government in the 1990s, Tatarstan used the republic’s perceived obligations to the Tatar diaspora as a justification for its demand for political and economic independence and influence within the Federation, as well as internationally. Tatarstan initiated bilateral contacts and signed agreements of economic, political and cultural co-operation with states where large Tatar communities resided, such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkey (Graney 1998: 161–162).

However, Katherine Graney notes that in the 1990s, Tatarstan emphasised its moral and spiritual commitment to the diaspora, while not actually funding activities that would promote the recreation of Tatar identity in the diaspora (ibid.: 170). In the 2000s, Tatarstan adjusted its legislature to be more active towards the diaspora. In 2002, an amendment to the constitution was adopted, formulating obligations of Tatarstan towards ethnic Tatars living abroad. Article 14 stipulates that Tatarstan provides support for the development of national culture and language and to safeguard characteristics of Tatars living outside the borders of the Republic of Tatarstan (Davenel 2009: 79). In January 2004 an amendment was made to Tatarstan’s law on languages, including increased commitment by Tatarstan to promote the teaching of Tatar in the diaspora (Graney 2009: 93). Estonian Tatars felt mainly spiritual support from Tatarstan. However, the Maardu Sabantuy is often visited by delegations from Tatarstan. A delegation includes folk musicians and representatives of the Ministry of Culture. Tatarstan pays the salary and travel fees of the performers. In 2009, an organiser of Maardu Sabantuy explained that he sees this as a sign of respect and proof of the good work of the organisers in Estonia. In addition, many of my informants emphasised the importance of attending events directed towards the diaspora, to their work in cultural organisations and networking with other Tatars. The measures taken by Tatarstan to teach Tatar abroad have not reached the Estonian diaspora yet.

An important aspect of Tatarstani diaspora politics is the organisation of the World Congress of Tatars and the establishment of the Executive Committee of the World Congress of Tatars. The first World Congress of Tatars was organised in 1992 as an event that specifically tried to consolidate the Tatar diaspora both in the Russian Federation

and abroad. Some of my informants recounted memories of visits to the Congress. Dinara (54)<sup>3</sup> emphasised the aspect of interaction and acquiring contacts with other Tatars around the world through the Congress events in Kazan. For Ilkhan (65), a Tatar community activist, participating in the Congress provided good examples of how to organize Tatar cultural life. The Congress worked for both of them as a source of inspiration and of Tatar networks. The Congress also compiles and sends out newsletters via e-mail to interested Tatars. Several of my informants told me about receiving these e-mails. Thus, the Congress works as a consolidating agent that to some degree brings Tatars abroad into the Tatarstani mediascape.

Another influential event organised by the World Congress of Tatars is the All-World Tatar Youth Forum. This is an annual youth conference held in Kazan at which participants from the diaspora are invited and matters concerning Tatar language, cultural and social issues are discussed in lectures and workshops, in addition to which there are a lot of socialising, trips to heritage sites and cultural events. One of the important goals of the forum is community building, or, to put it bluntly, introducing “young Tatars to each other so that they might marry and produce Tatar children” (Faller 2011: 301). The organisers of the Forum invite a certain number of participants from each host state and the final decision of which people go to the Forum is made in the local Tatar cultural associations. Two of my interviewees had participated in the Forum. They mentioned the Forum as a community-building occasion, where they had gained many contacts with Tatars in, for example, Latvia, Lithuania or Moscow. Attending the Forum had created new social networks for them, which involved both digital (e-mails) and real-life contacts, such as inviting and visiting Tatar friends and attending Sabantuy festivals organised by friends in neighbouring countries.

Events organised by the World Congress of Tatars help disseminate Tatarstani ideas of the correct way of enacting one’s Tatariness, including the importance assigned to speaking Tatar. Networks developed through these events further help to maintain Tatar identities in the diaspora.

### *The Vitality of Tatar*

The idea of Tatar being threatened and needing revitalisation is commonplace in Estonia as well as in Tatarstan. In 1989, 95 per cent of urban ethnic Tatar residents in Tatarstan<sup>4</sup> claimed that Tatar was their native language. 36 per cent of them used Tatar daily with their spouses, 25 per cent used it daily with friends, 21 per cent with colleagues. Most urban Tatars used a mix of Tatar and Russian or only Russian in these situations (Graney 2009: 93–94). Thus, although a large part of urban Tatars claimed Tatar to be their native tongue, a minority of them actually used it as a domestic language. Is the situation similar in Estonia? According to the census of 2011, 1993 people in Estonia claimed that their nationality was Tatar. There were 806 people who said that Tatar was their mother tongue. Thus, it seems that about 40 per cent of Estonian Tatars consider Tatar to be their mother tongue. Most of my interviewees expressed concern about Estonian Tatars as well as Tatars in general forgetting Tatar. Rakhima (38) found that Tatars struggle to maintain their ethnic identity in the diaspora:

We don't have an integration problem. The problem is the other way around, we assimilate too much. We forget our roots [...]. What happens is exactly that the mother tongue is forgotten.

Ali (38) thinks that attending Russian-medium schools promoted assimilation during the Soviet period:

During the Soviet period those who studied in Estonian schools, they know Tatar language well. But those who studied in Russian schools, they had a stronger influence. During the Soviet time, Russian language was, there was so much of it. But even though when we went to Tatarstan during the Soviet period, people were surprised that we spoke Tatar. There were people there who were ashamed to speak their mother tongue.

Thus, Ali sees the strong influence of Russian during the Soviet period to be a factor that promoted assimilation. Specifically, he claims that during the Soviet period Russian-language schools were institutions that furthered Tatar assimilation.

A study conducted by Mart and Ülle Rannut at the Integration Research Institute about the domestic languages of 8–12-year-old schoolchildren in Tallinn shows that Ali's remark about the Russianising effects of the Russian-medium schools holds true today as well (Rannut and Rannut 2010: 16). Roughly half (46.2 per cent) of the children, who identified as Tatars, claimed Tatar to be one of their home languages. However, there were surprisingly few children who chose to identify themselves as Tatars – only 13. The authors suggest that the Russian-language school environment discourages children from identifying as Tatars, because for various reasons the reputation of Tatars and Muslims is low among Russian-speakers (*ibid.*: 60, 62). On one hand, attending a Russian-language school can influence children's choice of national identity in general, while on the other hand, the fact that the study was conducted in the school environment can also have an effect. It is possible that had the environment of the study been the home instead of the school, more children would have chosen to identify as Tatars. It is also possible that Tatar families, where maintaining a Tatar identity is considered important, tend to choose Estonian-language schools for some reason. Rannut and Rannut find that according to census results there should actually be more Tatar children in this age group, but they chose not to identify as Tatars in the study (*ibid.*: 60). However, this does not change the remarkably low number of Tatar speakers among the children.

All of my interviewees claimed to use Tatar as one, or the only, home language. Nevertheless, even if Tatar is the only language used at home, a person's subjective evaluation of their Tatar language skills might not be very high. Several informants say that they use a mixture of Russian and Tatar or Estonian and Tatar as their domestic language because their vocabulary in Tatar is very limited. Razia (75) explains the mixing of Tatar and Estonian as follows:

I have to say with regret that our language is a home language. Well, a disappearing language. We don't have many things. If we want to talk about art or science or whatever, then we don't have those words.

Khaidar (31) says that although he speaks Tatar at home, interaction with friends, who are Tatars from Tatarstan, usually switches to Russian. One of the reasons is his pronunciation, which is different from that spoken in Tatarstan:

To some extent, I speak Tatar. They understand, but let's say, even if I speak Tatar, their pronunciation is a bit different. Our pronunciation already oscillates between the two languages [Russian and Tatar].

Lack of proficiency in written Tatar is the reason why his e-mail correspondence with Tatar friends from abroad is mainly in Russian:

Interaction usually switches to Russian. As much as I was taught here, I can't write in Tatar. I have asked them to write to me in Tatar, but I am not capable of answering in Tatar.

For some members of the Estonian Tatar community it is vitally important that when Tatars meet, especially on formal national occasions, only Tatar should be used. "They were talking to each other in Russian all the time! As if at a party meeting!", one interviewee explains with fervour, making an allusion to communist party meetings during the Soviet period, continuing:

If all Estonians came together and spoke in Turkish. It is almost the same. [...] It is a question of principles. Gatherings, all events must be purely in Tatar. Otherwise the language will not survive.

During the greeting speeches at the beginning of the Maardu Sabantuy festival in 2008, one speaker started his speech in Russian. He was immediately reprimanded by voices from the audience, who demanded that Tatar should be spoken on this occasion. The speaker excused himself by saying that he was speaking Russian for the non-Tatar residents of Maardu, who were present as well. Tolerance and consideration of cultural others are valued to a great extent among Tatars and these values are generally considered a great asset that helps Tatars to live in peace with their neighbours everywhere. Nevertheless, the general opinion seems to be that it is essential for the viability of Tatar language that the family circle and Tatar community events are Tatar-medium only.

### *Purity of Language*

Another issue that frequently came up in interviews is that of the purity of Tatar. Suzanne Wertheim (2002) gives a thorough overview of the quest for the purification of Tatar in Kazan. Wertheim explains two common aspects of what Tatars in Kazan mean by the 'impure' Tatar language. First is the misspelling or mispronunciation of Tatar words. Wertheim gives a longish list of occasions on which grammatically incorrect or poorly translated Tatar is seen in Kazan. It is common for street signs, shops, museums, etc., to be spelled incorrectly in Tatar, for elementary level Tatar teachers to make grammatical errors, for university lecturers and professors to not master the formal language or education vocabulary in Tatar (Wertheim 2002: 13). Another aspect of Tatar considered an impurity is code-switching and code-mixing with Russian, meaning the insertion of Russian phrases or sentences and isolated words or idiomatic expressions in Tatar-language conversations (ibid.: 20–21). This linguistic phenomenon is common and normal in bilingual speech communities, but viewed negatively both by Tatars and local Russians, who tend to have little respect for Tatar language. Wertheim reports

code-switching and code-mixing to be very frequent and partly unconscious among ethnic Tatar Kazanites. Especially on formal occasions in the public sphere, but sometimes in private conversations as well, people switch to what Wertheim calls Tatar on-stage style, and do their best to de-Russify their speech (ibid.: 21).

The issue of the purity of spoken Tatar was important for Tatars in Estonia as well. Mixing Tatar and Russian or Estonian in speech is common and is generally regarded as an impurity of language. During casual Tatar conversations (such as when telephone calls interrupted interviews or when Tatar family member spoke to each other in my presence) I often spotted Russian words or phrases. The issue of the impurity of one's own, or someone else's, Tatar was sometimes discussed or mentioned in interviews. I have already mentioned people's complaints about limited vocabulary or pronunciation being influenced by Russian.

Conversely, being able to speak pure Tatar is a source of pride for many. Dinara recounts a story of her visit to Kazan:

When I went [to Kazan] with my daughter, everyone was wondering how a girl coming from Estonia can speak so well. During the millennium jubilee I gave an interview on the street and they were surprised. We in Kazan don't even speak as pure Tatar as your children do. I received numerous compliments about this.

For Dinara, maintenance of Tatar language skills is very important and she is genuinely proud of having brought up her children so that they speak Tatar well. She says that her children correct her speech, when she uses 'impure' Tatar:

Sometimes I come from work and Russian words slip into my speech. They always correct me: "Mum, you are not speaking correctly." I speak Russian for the whole day. Of course I sometimes mix things up when I speak quickly. They both always correct me.

Speaking Tatar on public occasions becomes a test of one's Tatariness, which can demand a considerable amount of concentration and self-control. Speakers are also assessed by people in the audience and poor performance on the purity scale is frowned upon.

### *Marginalisation of the Mishar Dialect*

One aspect of the perceived impurity of language that seemed significant in Estonia, while not so in Tatarstan, was speaking the Mishar dialect. For example, Khaidar (31) states that

living here, I don't know Tatar so well, so thoroughly. There [in Kazan] they speak the pure Tatar language. Literary Tatar. I understand their speech generally, but, let's say, most words, I just, I sense what they could mean, but I don't comprehend fully.

Wertheim (2002: 16) mentions that "ordinarily the Mishar dialect is considered extremely low-prestige and somehow lacking the richness of the Middle Volga/Kazan Tatar dialect". For many Estonian Tatars, there really does not seem to be any discord of this sort at all. As a Kazan Tatar woman explains: "Of course there are differences. We are

all Tatars. Nobody says that some are Tatars, some are Mishars. They themselves don't want to emphasise that they are Mishars." This seems to be the view of many Tatars in Estonia.

However, some Mishar Tatars in Estonia like to make it clear that they are Mishars. Said (61), one of my first informants, stated at the very beginning of our interview: "Actually, let's say, me, my wife and practically all Tatars in Finland, we originate from one or two villages in Gorki (today Nizhniy Novgorod) oblast [...]." And specifies: "We are not the ones from Kazan. We are called Mishars. But, well, there are those from Kazan as well in Estonia." As this was almost the first thing he said after the voice recorder was switched on, and he continued to make remarks on this topic later on as well, I assume that the distinction between Mishars and Kazan Tatars was significant for him. Several Mishar Tatars whom I interviewed were certain to emphasise their Mishar origin. References to differences between Mishar language and Tatar literary language are usually made in a matter-of-fact way and do not necessarily involve strong antagonism: "For example, those Kazan Tatars, their, maybe their pronunciation or of course the language is different as well. When they start to talk then I don't even understand them right away," said Razia.

From the Kazan Tatars' point of view, there is a clear reason why the Kazan version of Tatar should be studied by other Tatars as well. As I was explained: "The literary language is in Kazan. There is not one book in the Mishar language." Dinara is an active proponent of the Tatar language and national movement and quite a confident Tatar speaker. She praises the local Mishar Tatars for maintaining their Tatar language skills, yet she is positive about the importance of knowing normative literary Tatar.

Another reason that Dinara gives for the central importance of Kazan Tatar heritage to all Tatars is that Kazan Tatars are thought to be the descendants of a "compact Tatar culture since the ancient Bulgars". Volga Bulgaria was a state surrounding the confluence of the Volga and Kama rivers between the 7th and 13th centuries which is an important part of modern Tatar collective memory as proof of their long cultural and political history as a nation with a state. Conquest of the Bulgar Khanate by the Mongols in 1236 signifies the first loss of Tatar statehood in Tatar collective memory (see Rorlich 1999).

If Kazan Tatars perceive themselves as originating from the hub of Tatariness, then Mishar Tatars like to stress their several generations of history in Estonia. Coming here first is perceived as a justification that legitimates their way of enacting Tatariness. Said is definitely not content with the marginalisation of Mishar ways: "That cultural society [...], it consists of purely Kazan Tatars. They don't accept our culture and our things here [...]. It is not possible to co-operate with them." However, by looking at the family history of our language used by members of different cultural societies, no clear divide between Kazan and Mishar Tatars can be detected. Some of my informants, who have been active in the cultural society that Said talks about, originate from the Mishar Tatars of the Sergatch area villages and speak Mishar dialect. This is another example of the fact that identification depends on the drawing of boundaries and not so much on the "cultural stuff" (Barth 1998 [1969]).

Mishars in Estonia often emphasise their connections to Finnish Tatars. Finnish Tatars are a small minority of about 1000 people. They have maintained their identity and language since the 1870–1920 period, when their ancestors moved to Finland, while

simultaneously being well integrated into Finnish society and doing well socioeconomically. When explaining his relationship to some Finnish Tatars, Said states: "I can say that we are boys from one village (*ühe külla poisid*)." This comment is about perceived common origin, not the actual experience of growing up together that it invokes. The identification with Finnish Tatars tells about the high prestige that they enjoy among Tatars in Estonia. So while Kazan Tatars have the discursive power of the literary language and Bulghar ancestors on their side, Mishars boast to have deep roots in Estonia and wealthy kinsmen in Finland.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND OTHER IDENTITY MARKERS FOR ESTONIAN TATARS

I have now covered several meanings and attitudes that my interviewees assigned to Tatar language and linguistic performance. Although most Tatars I interviewed made statements about the importance of the mother tongue to their ethnic identity, other aspects of Tatar identity mentioned as important included religion (Islam), Tatar food, self-perception, interaction with other Tatars or a patriarchal upbringing. Although all of my interviewees spoke Tatar to some degree, this does not hold true for all Tatar activists in Estonia.

Emphasising the importance of Islam in the maintenance of Tatar identity is quite common. Many Estonian Tatars see Islam as a central feature of their identity. The 2011 census results show that 30.3 per cent of Tatars in Estonia identify themselves as Muslim. It thus seems that Islam is currently less prevalent among Tatars in Estonia than is the Tatar language as mother tongue.

The attitudes of my interviewees concerning the relationship of Islam to Tatar national identity are various. Some people consider Islam to be essential for the Tatar national identity. Today Islam is often the unifying factor that connects Tatars with different backgrounds, coming from various locations and speaking different dialects or not speaking Tatar at all. For Ali and Rakhima, Islam is an essential part of Tatar identity because it differentiates Tatars very clearly from Russians and therefore prevents Russification. They also attribute a special role to Islam as the holder of traditional Tatar values, such as chastity and abstinence from alcohol. Excessive alcohol drinking is considered a particular vice that is very un-Tatar, and in Estonia it is associated with the Estonian or Russian influence.

Yet some Estonian Tatars do not see Islam as an aspect of their national identity. Khaidar (31) states that "the fact that I am a Tatar and the religion I profess have no connection. Most Tatars are Muslims, but there are Christians as well. It cannot be connected." Thus, for him both Islam and nationality are important parts of his identity, although he does not want to see one as an expression of the other. Ilkhan (65), on the other hand, finds that "Islam is a religion that came here quite recently. I have never been interested in this question."

The Turath Islamic Cultural Centre and Mosque in Tallinn is Tatar dominated. The mufti and his wife are both Tatars. The focus of the centre is on religion and because of the multinational *umma*, who attends prayers, classes and festivities there, Russian is the main working language of the centre. However, the activities of the Islamic Cultural

Centre give members the occasion to express their Tatar identity as well. At services during religious festivals the mufti delivered his speeches in Arabic, Tatar, Russian and Estonian. The centre has, for example, organised Tatar classes for children in addition to classes that are more essentially Muslim, such as Arabic or religious guidance. The centre is also a space that allows Tatars to interact with each other and speak Tatar, to practice their religion or eat Tatar national food together on religious festivals. To conclude, the activity of the Islamic Cultural Centre supports Tatar identity and the use of Tatar for Tatar participants as well.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I analysed different, sometimes conflicting, ways of enacting Tatariness through language use in Estonia. The paper showed that Tatar identity in Estonia is not uniform. Although Tatar political authorities in Tatarstan have worked to connect the Tatar diaspora to its historical and spiritual homeland, low status given to minority groups in this process is not unanimously accepted. Nevertheless, Tatarstan's attempts to reach out to the Tatar diaspora are felt by Estonian Tatars. The interviewees found inspiration in events organised for the diaspora, such as World Forum of Tatar Youth or the World Congress of Tatars in Kazan. These events have also given them networks of Tatar acquaintances in Russia and Europe and new possibilities to use Tatar. The language is given a central position in Tatarstani national identity discourse and issues pertaining to the improvement of Tatar language skills in the diaspora are discussed at these events. For those of my informants who are actively engaged in events organised by the Congress, their connection to Tatarstan is now more formal – instead of or aside from visiting relatives, they also go to official conferences. Signs of recognition from Tatarstan, such as sending delegations to local Tatar events, are also important for many Tatars in Estonia, as they show that their work here is appreciated. However, the number of Tatar speakers in Estonia is low and especially low among children. Thus, it can be concluded that measures taken by Tatarstan in relation to the diaspora have supported and inspired those activists who are involved in community events. The language skills exhibited at the Tatar events have improved over the course of the post-Soviet years. However, this has not changed the fact that majority of Tatars in Estonia do not speak Tatar as their mother tongue.

The viability of Tatar is a concern for Tatars in Estonia. Those who speak Tatar emphasise the importance of speaking Tatar in the family circle, to their children and at Tatar community events. Several informants were in some ways insecure about their Tatar language skills, claiming that their vocabulary was small and pronunciation somehow 'Russianised'; or they regretted the lack of Tatar written skills. For some activists, the knowledge and use of Tatar is crucial to being a Tatar. They expect all community events to be held in Tatar for fear that the language will disappear if Russian is the norm at community events. However, there are other Tatar enthusiasts in Estonia who do not necessarily speak Tatar and claim some other identity markers to be more important for their Tatar identity. Considering the results of the study conducted by Mart and Ülle Rannut at the Integration Research Institute, there is reason to question the viability of Tatar language in the Estonian Tatar community. The remarkably low number of Tatar

speaking school children in Tallinn is evidence of an extensive language shift in the younger generation of Estonian Tatars. The accompanying low rate of identification as Tatar among children could be an indicator of the importance of mother tongue for Tatar ethnic identity in Estonia.

Purity of language is something discussed by many informants. Purity is connected to the Russianisation of Tatar language and to some extent dialect. Again, some community members were keen to track the purity of public performances of Tatar. Here the status of Mishar is lower than that of Kazan Tatar, while being able to de-Russify one's speech (whatever the dialect) is valued most. For many people, speaking Tatar is the key element to being Tatar.

Islam is another important identity marker for Estonian Tatars. For Tatar members the Tallinn Islamic Cultural Centre supports, rather than contradicts, their ethno-linguistic identity. Further research might explore attitudes towards Islam and the Tatar language in the context of the transnational Tatar diaspora networks in which many Estonian Tatars are engaged. Tatars in the diaspora come from various backgrounds and knowledge of Tatar language is limited for many. It would be interesting to see in what ways Islam unites Tatars transnationally as an aspect of ethnic identity.

## NOTES

1 Sabantuy is a popular Tatar festival usually held in May or June. While originally being a village feast in the agricultural calendar, it is today celebrated as a Tatar national festival in Tatarstan as well as in the diaspora.

2 Because I mainly found interviewees either with the snowball method or by introducing myself to someone at a Tatar event, I had an idea of whether this person would be more comfortable in Russian or Estonian. I tried to use Russian if I felt that this would be easier for my interviewee. However, all interviewees inserted some phrases or words in Estonian, and some interviews quickly switched to Estonian when the interviewee sensed that my knowledge of Russian was below their knowledge of Estonian.

3 I refer to my interview partners with a pseudonym followed by their age in parentheses. Unless stated otherwise, the interviews took place in 2009.

4 There is a sharp difference in Tatar language use between urban and rural Tatars in Tatarstan; this is affirmed by attitudes as well. I have heard numerous times both in Tatarstan and in Estonia that real Tatar culture is in the villages. Estonian Tatars are here compared to urban Tatars in Tatarstan because both experience multilingual living environments and pressure to Russify, as well as because Estonian Tatars are also mainly urban dwellers.

## SOURCES

The author's interviews conducted with members of the Estonian Tatar community in 2009.

The author's field notes taken when attending community events in the Estonian Islamic Congregation in 2009 and two Tatar Sabantuy festivals in 2008 and 2009, in Maardu, Estonia.

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