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Restructuring the connections: Scientific networks of the University of Tartu shattered by language shifts

THE UNIVERSITY OF TARTU (Dorpat / Yuryev) was shocked by two major changes in the language use in the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The first case was in 1893 when the university was switched from German to Russian by the Tsarist authorities running a Russification campaign. The second took place in 1919, when Estonian language was declared by the emerging Estonian state to be the official and only means of communication at the university.

Thus the old university of Tartu, serving until the end of the 19th century as a model of academic intercultural connections — a German style and language institution in the Russian state participating in numerous international scientific networks — had to adjust itself to the gradually diminishing language realms.

Although with exceptions — i.e. there were cases when the old language-use remained — it has to be admitted that the scientific level, when the fundamental sciences are fore, suffered. On the other hand the cases under study did possess a positive influence on scientific fields and studies concentrating on the local matters. The emergence of the so called “national sciences” of Estonia can be thus accepted as one of the results of the — by their essence limiting — language shifts.

The developments in the academic realm under discussion were paralleled with the gradual emergence of modern Estonian nation. The latter process was relatively biologised — the national thinkers seemed to justify the emancipation of a “nation with no history” by relying on the possibilities seemingly granted by the “natural history” (the latter supposedly never condemning a small organism into decay). The scientific ideas imported into the national political thinking were depending on the language dominating the local centre of education and science (Tartu), especially before the pre-independence era.

(Resultingly the acceptance of Darwinism in Estonia thus has influences from both German and Russian ways of seeing and developing the evolutionary theory this in turn directing the political picture of the new state.)

The academic community at the University of Tartu survived the linguistic turns by adapting to the more broader international scientific community. Finnish connections fostered the “national sciences”. Fundamental scholarship was gradually entering English language realm with the Rockefeller Foundation as a strong support.

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