

# INTEGRATING LANGUAGE POLICY IN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES: THE INTERNATIONAL DECADE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES FOR LANGUAGE AWARENESS

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## ABSTRACT

The project “Competency-based approach in the curriculum” (*School 2030*) initiates changes in learning approach in order to develop value-based knowledge, skills and attitudes. In the domain “Languages” as well as in the domains “Social and Civil Skills”, “Cultural awareness and self-expression in art” the interrelation between languages and the importance of language and culture in the process of identity formation should be highlighted in all educational programmes. Taking into account the need for new content, the aim of the study is to analyze sources for additional information. Public opinion on language issues is largely developing under the influence of global trends and movements. Therefore current activities in international arena may be used for promoting positive language attitudes. *The International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032)* (IDIL) proclaimed by the UN offers a unique opportunity to provide information not only about endangered indigenous languages, but also about the efforts of communities and international organizations to preserve and develop all languages as an integral part of the world's cultural heritage. The primary focus for IDIL activities in Latvia is the Livonian language, the language of the indigenous (autochthonous) population in Latvia. However, the IDIL can help to implement the goals of language policy in Latvia, not only raising awareness about Livonian but also reminding people of the importance of using and developing the Latvian language as a part of global linguistic diversity. The paper provides conclusions on reflection of global language processes and ideas for implementation of IDIL issues in various educational programmes.

**Keywords:** *indigenous languages, language attitudes, language education, the Latvian language, the Livonian language*

## Introduction

The United Nations General Assembly has proclaimed the period 2022–2032 as the *International Decade of Indigenous Languages* (IDIL). The goal of this initiative is “to draw attention to the urgent need to preserve, revitalize and promote all languages

and to create greater awareness of the importance of linguistic diversity and multilingualism and of their contribution to self-empowerment, sustainable development, good governance, respect for human rights, as well as the importance of cultural diversity and biodiversity, interculturality, intercultural dialogue and peace education in building open, inclusive, democratic and participatory societies” (Global Action Plan, 2022, 9). Undoubtedly, the information about the world’s linguistic diversity and its future prospects can be considered as a valuable and important part of the knowledge pool of every human being. People in the Baltic States also experience interest in indigenous languages, mostly as a part of lesser-known “exotic” cultures and worldviews. From this point of view the IDIL is “everyone’s Decade” (Ibid., 20) because it presents a unique possibility to raise awareness not only about other, mostly endangered, languages, but also about the efforts of communities and international organizations to maintain and to develop all languages as an inseparable part of world’s cultural heritage.

However, there is another added value of this Decade apart from this informative function. The IDIL tasks and elements of campaigns may be overtly or covertly integrated in the language policy guidelines and legislation in most of countries. The present contribution provides some ideas of the importance of the IDIL for our region and the ways the IDIL could help to implement the goals of new approach to education. E.g. there are mentions of Livonian in *Regulations Regarding the State General Secondary Education Standard and Model General Secondary Education Programmes* (see Noteikumi, 2019), but no teaching materials and information sources exist. The research provides basic information for teachers to be used in language classroom.

## Methodology

This paper presents a theoretical and analytical study aimed at improving education content for basic and secondary education, with a focus on global linguistic processes. By raising awareness of language diversity through the education system, this study aims to contribute to the implementation of the *State Language Policy Guidelines (2021–2027)* (Par valsts valodas politikas pamatnostādņēm, 2021). The research questions addressed in this study are derived from actual challenges for language and education policy-makers, namely: 1) How can the idea of IDIL be effectively integrated into the education process? 2) Which aspects of the IDIL should be included in the curriculum to promote positive language attitudes towards global multilingualism, as well as the full-blooded functioning of Latvian as the sole Official State Language? To answer these questions, this study provides an analysis of language attitudes, information on the IDIL, its mission, and terminological issues, and presents ideas on how to integrate different aspects of the IDIL into the curriculum. The study employs qualitative sociolinguistic methods, including analysis of scholarly articles, policy documents, reports from relevant international organizations and direct observations.

## Results and Discussion

Among sociolinguists and contact linguists there seems to be a consensus that the characteristics of an indigenous language minority are mainly to be seen as a difference in terms of its linguistic and cultural distinctiveness, and the inequality concerning its social status and its position *vis-à-vis* the dominant majority of the state in which it (i.e. the minority) resides (Darguennes, 2013, 104). However, the economic or market value of the language often plays a leading role. “Many beautiful pronouncements about the historical, aesthetic, philosophical and other values of linguistic and cultural diversity for the whole of humankind, about the languages and libraries of humankind and other ‘Unescoese’ statements exemplify social non-market values. Social non-market values have often been labelled and rejected as romantic, non-realistic, elitist, moralist, essentialising and the like” (Olthuis et al., 2013, 161). The idea of IDIL is to promote not only the public presence and a much wider use of indigenous languages, but also the symbolic value of all languages. Public opinion on language issues is largely developing under the influence of historical and geopolitical processes, and is influenced by the global information space. This concerns the *International Decade of Indigenous Languages*, too, as the awareness on global and regional developments may be considered a significant factor in development of language attitudes.

### The concept of language attitudes

Language attitude(s) could be shortly described as a complex of subjective factors that characterize language perceptions, attitude towards different languages (language variants) and measures taken by state or public institutions to regulate the language situation. Language attitudes refer to the feelings, beliefs, and evaluations that people have towards a particular language or dialect. These attitudes can be positive, negative, or neutral, and they can be based on a variety of factors such as the speaker's background, the context in which the language is used, and the speaker's personal experiences with the language. Language attitudes can influence language learning and language use, as well as how speakers perceive and interact with others who speak a different language or dialect (Garret, 2012; Kircher & Zipp, 2022).

Linguistic attitude and language ideology are closely related concepts that reflect speakers' feelings and beliefs about language and identity. These concepts emerged in the latter half of the 20th century as a way to understand the relationship between language and identity, which had previously been largely ignored in language research (Schieffelin et al., 1998). The study of linguistic attitudes is typically associated with social psychology and quantitative sociolinguistics, while language ideology is associated with ethnology, discourse analysis, and qualitative sociolinguistics. Language ideology often emphasizes the role of speakers' political, social, and economic experiences in shaping their beliefs, while linguistic attitudes focus on the attitudes themselves. Changing linguistic attitudes is seen as a key indicator of the success of language policy, particularly when it involves a shift in the language hierarchy established by legislation. However, it

is important to note that data on linguistic attitudes should be interpreted in the context in which it was collected (Liang, 2015).

It should be noted that, in the sense of Latvian linguistic attitudes, it is also important to identify the views and practical behaviour of other nationalities in Latvia – the principle of connected vessels exists here. On the one hand, the attitude of Latvians towards their own language and its use influences the speakers of Latvian language as a second language, on the other hand, the attitude of other inhabitants of Latvia towards the language is reflected in the views and actions of Latvians (see Druviete, 2021). Therefore the information on the *International Decade of Indigenous Languages* could be valuable for all social groups in Latvia.

### **Indigenous languages: terminology, stereotypes, reality**

As concerns the legal or sociolinguistic classification of languages, there are no universal definitions of the terms like *minority languages*, *autochthonous languages*, *indigenous languages*, *aboriginal languages*, *lesser-used languages*, *heritage languages*, etc. Definitions of heritage languages may include the languages of migrant, indigenous, and national minorities. Heritage languages are minority languages learned in a bilingual or multilingual environment, as well as “aboriginal or indigenous languages whose role has been diminished by colonizing languages, and historical minority languages that coexist with other standard languages in diverse territories” (Montrul & Polinski, 2021, 1). As Roberta Medda-Windischer notes, there is a subtle continuum between minority groups and indigenous peoples. “Without entering into details in this controversial issue, it has to be admitted that the debate about the difference between indigenous peoples and minorities is indeed complex. It is not easy to distinguish between a group that calls itself an ‘indigenous people’ and a group or minority that recognizes itself as being native to a given territory and that invokes that characteristic in order to obtain its rights” (Medda-Windischer, 2017, 25).

The programmatic documents of the IDIL do not include clear-cut indications on which languages could be considered indigenous within the understanding of the Decade. The identification of indigenous peoples has been a process of extended policy discussions within the United Nations. The *Global Action Plan* for IDIL facilitates the inclusion of native languages, describing them as the languages currently or historically used and considered integral to their heritage, knowledge systems or identity.

This approach is different from the one used for the purposes of one of the very few internationally binding documents mentioning indigenous peoples – *International Labour Organization’s Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention* (No. 169) (ILO Convention, 1989). This Convention is based on the principle of tripartism, which includes dialogue and cooperation between governments, employers, and workers in the formulation, adoption and supervision of labour standards. As the handbook “Understanding the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention” states, “there is no universal definition of indigenous and tribal peoples, but ILO Convention No. 169 provides a set of subjective and objective criteria which are jointly applied to identify who these peoples are

in a given country” (Understanding, 2013, 2). According to this handbook, the main objective criterion for the difference between indigenous and tribal peoples besides self-identification is the regulation of their status – by their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions in the case of indigenous peoples and regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions in the case of tribal peoples (Ibid.). In most of the present political documents and scholarly publications only the term *indigenous peoples (languages)* has been used.

Most people associate the concept of indigenous peoples (languages) with small communities in remote areas falling under the classification of threatened or (nearly) extinct languages according to the EGIDS measurement tool (see Ethnologue, 2022). According to *Ethnologue*, 3045 languages or 42% out of total 7151 languages in 2022 are endangered. The latest version of the *UNESCO World Atlas of Languages* (2021) documented the legal status of each language: out of 8,324 languages 1,412 languages are recognized by national constitutions, laws and other legal instruments, and around 1500 languages risk losing their speakers in the near future (UNESCO, 2021). Usually, several factors coincide in these cases: an insufficient number of speakers (not always a decisive criterion), a lack of writing tradition, non-usage in the education system. However, the main reason perhaps is the parents’ and grandparents’ inability to or desire not to pass on their language to subsequent generations.

Like the statement that there is no single criterion by which one can describe the current state of a language and also predict its future, there are also no strong criteria for which languages could be nominated as “indigenous”. Contrary to widespread public opinion, the term *indigenous languages* may also be applied to autochthonous European languages. Several sources even mention numbers: informative materials of the *European Centre for Modern Languages* comprise 225 languages (Language Facts, 2022). The identification of indigenous peoples has been a process of extended policy discussions within the United Nations, as the main goal is the protection of global language diversity.

### **Non-disputable indigenous language in Latvia: the Livonian language**

Indigenous languages are recognized by Member States within their legal systems and legislation, which in turn are supported by “comprehensive language-related laws and policy frameworks and are backed by allocated financial, institutional, and human resources, enabling languages to be used fully and functionally in all socio-cultural, economic, environmental, legal, and political domains” (Global Action Plan, 2022, 11). In Latvia, these criteria are applied to the Livonian (the Liv) language.

Livonian belongs to the Finnic branch of the Uralic language family and has been spoken only in the territory of present Latvia. In the 19th century, Livonian still had approximately 3000 speakers, by the mid-20th century around 1500 speakers, but presently there may be at best 30 people in the world who can communicate in Livonian. The number of individuals who have learned the basics of Livonian, however, continues to increase because, as Christopher Moseley states, “not many languages are so well equipped to be revitalized” (Moseley, 2016, 250).

Livonians and the Livonian language has been recognised as the constituent of the Latvian nation and the Republic of Latvia. *The Preamble of the Constitution of Latvia* (adopted in 2014) states that “.. since ancient times, the identity of Latvia in the European cultural space has been shaped by Latvian and Liv traditions, Latvian folk wisdom, the Latvian language, universal human and Christian values”. The *Official Language Law* (adopted in 1999) includes several articles on the Livonian language, e.g. “The State shall ensure the maintenance, protection and development of the Liv language as the language of the indigenous (autochthonous) population» (*Official Language Law*, Art. 4, 1999) or “Names of places, institutions /../ in the Liv coastal territory, and names of events /../ shall also be created and use thereof shall be in the Liv language” (Ibid, Art. 18 (4)).

Although Livonian has been successfully developed and recognized, it is still one of the most endangered languages in the world. The Livonian case “also indicates that the rights of endangered languages with limited representation on the national level – especially those which are small in number and detached from their historical area – become contested despite official recognition at the state level and even internationally” (Kļava & Ernštreits, 2022, 227). This makes the IDIL and its planned activities important in Latvia to ensure the survival and continuation of Livonian. Therefore, it is not surprising that the *University of Latvia Livonian Institute* has become one of the most active promoters of IDIL ideas in the Baltic States. From a sociolinguistic point of view, “the position of Livonian within Latvia should be seen from two perspectives: the preservation, development, and revitalisation of the use of Livonian as well as the mutual influence of Livonian and Latvian. Close historical ties and different societal changes throughout history are also at the foundation of a variety of changes in language, which are layered one on top of the other, thereby obscuring the signs of clear mutual influence between both languages. Thus, in order to completely understand the nature of Latvian, it is necessary to research and understand the nature of Livonian irrespective of the total number of Livonians or the activities of their community” (Druviete & Kļava 2018, 141).

The IDIL undoubtedly will have an impact on the awareness and sustainability of Livonian. Should we use this decade for the implementation of general goals of language policy in Latvia, too?

### **IDIL goals for the maintenance of Latvian**

When Latvian was restored as the sole official State language during the awakening period (1988–1991), the main tasks of language policy makers, mostly professional linguists and sociolinguists, were clearly defined – to overcome the Russification, to ensure the sustainability, linguistic quality and competitiveness of the Latvian language as the state language of the Republic of Latvia, as well as to guarantee to preserve, develop and use the languages of the minorities of Latvia. Since the restoration of independence, the position of Latvian has seriously improved both legally and demographically, although the language situation remains complex and competitive (Kļava, Vītola 2022). Latvian is one of 200–250 languages out of ca.7000 in the world spoken by more than one million of people – by 2.3 million people in 2023, so we cannot define it as a small

language. The competitiveness of the Latvian language is also strengthened by its positions in the state and local government institutions, the armed forces and the education system, including higher education, as well as the growing number and proportion of speakers of Latvian as a second language among minorities. The status of the official language in the European Union is a significant incentive for the sustainability of Latvian terminology. The constitutional status of the Latvian language, the Law on the State Language and its implementing rules have provided the necessary legal framework for the use and freedom of the official language. However, in Latvia's ethnodemographic and geopolitical situation, only statistical data and legislation are not sufficient to understand the language situation, as they do not give a complete picture on language competition with the two languages with much higher economic value (Russian and English). Measurable parameters of the language situation should be analyzed in a broad historical and international context and in close association with language attitudes, or in other words, within the system of values among various societal groups. These values depend not only on traditional narratives, which in Latvia often include stereotypes about Latvian as an endangered and disappearing language, but also on the public awareness of languages and their competition, both in the world and in Latvia. Therefore the education system must provide relevant information about language situation and language policy in Latvia promoting active position for strengthening Latvian among students and teachers.

The importance of IDIL for the maintenance of Latvian could be considered in two ways: 1) directly, applying the concept of indigenous language and its protection to Latvian, 2) indirectly, providing information on global language maintenance and language shift, and applying this knowledge to the language situation in Latvia.

Contrary to widespread opinion, the term *indigenous languages* may be applied to the autochthonous European languages, and discussions on its appropriateness for, e.g., Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian as unique languages in their ethnogenetic territory are also theoretically possible. Nowadays, even mid-sized national languages can be endangered. Well-considered language policy system needs to be developed to maintain them. Language policy in the post-independent Baltic States Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania has attracted considerable political and academic interest. After regaining their independence in 1991 after half a century of Soviet rule and being subjected to Russification, the Baltic States have insisted on making their languages the sole official state languages and have pursued a range of language policy initiatives to ensure this status. In order to evaluate the present language policy, one cannot ignore the political and ethnographic situation of the past. Historical understanding in assessing contemporary language policy is “necessary, even mandatory if one wants to provide a fair judgment of the language situation in countries that have undergone a fundamental return to values and orientations previously denied” (Hogan-Brun et al., 2008, 38).

The awareness of Livonian issues would favour both the revival of Livonian and the maintenance of Latvian in all forms of its existence. As Valts Ernštreits writes, “It is fundamental to take into account the Livonian experience, as the Livonians are a miniature model of the Latvians in terms of society as well as language, the only difference

is found in numbers. The development of the Livonians up to the point where we find ourselves now shows the nature of that process very well. And, furthermore, what happens if one does nothing” (Ernštreits, 2012, 1).

## Conclusions

The implementation of IDIL in education would be essential for providing information and promoting positive language attitudes towards linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as multilingualism. To effectively integrate IDIL into education, this study recommends raising awareness of the benefits of multilingualism, promoting linguistic and cultural diversity, and encouraging language learning and use. Teacher training on IDIL principles and practices is also crucial for successful implementation in the classroom. The implementation of the ideas of the *International Decade of Indigenous Languages* in educational programs can include the following tasks: 1) to provide a comprehensive overview of different languages spoken around the world, highlighting their unique features, origins, and cultural significance, 2) to emphasize the importance of preserving endangered languages and promote efforts to revitalize them, 3) to encourage students to learn about the cultural and linguistic diversity and highlight the benefits of multilingualism, 4) to explain the key principles of language policy in Latvia and to develop awareness of active promotion of Latvian as the sole State language. As the guidelines for “School 2030” in the domain “Languages” suggest, all languages share common big ideas that reflect the most important principles of language acquisition, usage and maintenance. These ideas facilitate the student's comprehension of their learning by demonstrating how their acquired skills and knowledge can be applied beyond the classroom setting.

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