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# Samspel & variation

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“Mother thinks that an Estonian doesn't say *läind*  
or *õppind*”

## Schoolchildren's attitudes towards a morphological variable in Estonian

By LEELO KEEVALLIK

Age differences is an area of interest for sociolinguists not only because of its usefulness in tracing linguistic change but also because there is yet much to be said about the interplay between language and age. Furthermore, studies in child language aim at answering the basic questions about the nature of language since the acquisition of language is assumed to reveal its actual structure. Besides observing the appearance of certain phonemes, morphemes or syntactic structures in children's speech, one should pay attention to the acquisition of communicative competence: how children come to understand what can be done and achieved with a language if used in a particular way and how and when children acquire the linguistic repertoire that adults have. Logically, new registers appear in connection with the new situations in which the child happens to participate. Thus, if the acquisition of standard norms is studied, the transition from home or nursery to school is of great importance. With certain reservations (earlier reading, watching TV) the transition can be seen as a change of focus from everyday speech to the standard language and consequently to the existence of different registers.

It has been shown convincingly that already six-year-old schoolchildren demonstrate an ability to use certain variables appropriately in different amounts in different styles (Reid 1978) and other clear instances of style-shifting have been observed in their speech (Romaine 1984 p. 100-101). Children of that age, however, cannot be expected to comment on what they are doing and to verbalise their attitudes, they have just been shown to possess the productive competence. The ability to reason verbally develops later, partly as a result of the increasing knowledge of right and wrong. Once the children become aware of the norms, it may result in an even higher degree of informality

(nonstandard forms) among adolescents as a conscious protest against the governing rules and the mainstream of the society, a demonstration of their independence which occurs in so many other ways as well. The relatively larger amount of stigmatized features in adolescent speech than in adult speech is also an established fact (Romaine 1984 p. 104–111), which may be a result of the adolescents' minor experience of situations where more formal language use is necessary (Nordberg 1985 p. 29).

From the moment children become aware of right and wrong in language it must become a subject of relatively conscious reasoning and therefore a subject for building up one's own attitudes. What these attitudes look like and when they appear is the concern of this paper which concentrates on a morphological variable in spoken common Estonian.

### Characterization of the variable

In spoken Estonian there are basically two options for marking the active past participle: *-nud* (which is also the norm of the standard language) and a shorter vowel-less variant (*-nd*). It is to a large extent a historical coincidence that the *-nud* suffix became standardized, as *-nd* has been a more common spoken variant in the major part of the North Estonian dialect area and South Estonia has had another variant (*-nul/-nuq*, where *q* is a laryngeal stop). The standardization of only *-nud* has not been an obvious solution for the speakers of Estonian. There have been periods when *-nd* was considered more elegant; through the history of written Estonian the two morphs have appeared with varying frequency (for a thorough account see Keevallik & Pajusalu in print). From about the 1930's *-nud* has gained the status of correct form, while *-nd* has disappeared from grammars and textbooks as well as from the direct speech of novel characters, retaining its position almost only in poetry.

That the oral usage still seriously deviates from the written usage was shown in a quantitative study of the variable among educated adult speakers of common Estonian (Keevallik 1994). 57 people of varying age and sex were covertly recorded in different situations for about 50 hours in all. The 3,229 occurrences of the active past participle were characterized by 19 phonological, morphological, syntactic, social, and situational factors. With the help of the special computer program Varbrul, the significance of the correlation between the variable and the factors was calculated. It turned out that besides the strength of stress it was the formality of the situation that had the greatest impact on the

choice of variant. In formal situations *-nud* occurred in 93% of the cases, in informal situations it appeared in just 60% of the cases (Keevallik 1994 p. 131). This proves that the *-nud/nd* variability belongs to a certain style only. The speakers can consciously restrain their participle usage and adjust to the requirements of the setting and the audience. They use *-nud* quite exclusively in formal situations, whereas *-nd* seems to be a marker of informality. It is natural that after so many years of regular use of *-nud* in the written texts, the variant has acquired the connotation *appropriate, correct* even in spoken usage. Speakers of Estonian are therefore somewhat aware of the options and also able to comment on their preferences. As part of the abovementioned study, the self-reports of the university teachers of Estonian were shown to be typical over-reportings of the standard form. The teachers believe that they always speak 'correctly', but their actual usage includes nonstandard forms even in relatively formal situations. The attitudes and prejudices of schoolchildren are not likely to be so rigid, even if they may be expected to be aware of the variation. It is sometime during the years of schooling that they are likely to acquire the adult-like usage norms and the respective attitudes.

### Method and material

The attitudes of schoolchildren were obtained via a questionnaire. Three age groups were examined: 8–9 (3rd year of schooling), 14–15 (9th year), 17–18 (12th year). These children are the finalists of the three traditional stages of secondary schooling in Estonia.

The schools were chosen from the two educational and scientific centres of Estonia, Tallinn and Tartu, so that the children would speak standard Estonian. (The fact that Tartu belongs to the South Estonian dialect area does not play a significant role in contemporary language usage.) The relations of Tallinn and Tartu can be characterized as a typical opposition between a capital and an educated province town.

The two schools chosen (the Tallinn 7th secondary school and the Miina Härma school in Tartu) have similar positions in the respective towns. It is at least a strong common belief that the children of successful parents attend them. These schools are exceptional because English has been taught there in larger amounts than in ordinary schools, and the teachers as well as the students have always been chosen on competitive terms. The ambitions of these elite schools are high and so are the expectations from the children. A high percentage of them continues at the university.

In order to have access to the schools, I contacted the teachers of Estonian there and was allowed to use their classes. In the introduction to the children I said very briefly that I was interested in the parallel forms in Estonian and would answer their questions after they had answered mine. The questionnaire was actually much longer than the data presented in this study; a substantial part of the questions concerned the choice between the singular and the plural (polite) variant of *you* in different contexts. The few questions about *-nud/-nd* came last, which explains why the informants sometimes referred to the distinction between the two *yous* ("I use *-nud* with the persons I say *teie* (pl. you) to").

It should be mentioned that despite of my attempts to tackle similar schools the general atmosphere turned out to be very different at the two places. It was very relaxed and informal in Tartu, the pupils made comments on the questions all the time and talked freely to the teacher, also about irrelevant things. In the 9th form the teacher was not even present and I had difficulties in making myself heard in the beginning. In Tallinn the schoolchildren were well calmed down by the teacher. There was no talk during the filling in of the questionnaire, and everybody worked on their own. The teacher checked their homework at the same time, which made the atmosphere even more formal. As soon as they completed their questionnaire they had another job to do, whereas in Tartu the children rushed out of the classroom as soon as they were finished. The atmosphere certainly played a role in the fact that the answers from the older groups from Tallinn were generally longer and more analytic. The children from the 3rd forms, however, behaved quite alike in Tallinn and Tartu. They were mostly quiet and concentrated on the answering. It is clear that a written questionnaire is not the best way of obtaining information from children aged 8 or 9, but they were at least not puzzled and seemed to cope well.

The 3rd form had to answer the following 4 questions about the *-nud/-nd* suffixes. 1. Can *õppind* be said instead of *õppinud* 'studied'? 2. What about *läind* instead of *läinud* 'gone'? 3. What do you say yourself? 4. Is there any difference? If yes, what kind of a difference?

The questions for the higher forms were formulated differently. 1. Have you noticed that one can say *läinud* as well as *läind*, *sõnud* as well as *sõönd* 'eaten', *lugenud* as well as *lugend* 'read', *õppinud* as well as *õppind* and so on with all the rest of the verbs? 2. Which forms do you prefer? 3. Is there any difference? If yes, then what kind of a difference? 4. Who uses the shorter forms and who uses the longer ones? 5. Could the shorter forms be used all over?

These few questions were expected to reveal the attitudes of the informants

without giving any hints about the results from the previous empirical study or the prejudices concerning the conventional rights and wrongs. The very first questions were oriented towards spoken language, the rest did not prescribe any restriction of the kind. So, younger children sometimes pointed out that the letter *u* has disappeared from the shorter form, and older students sometimes specified their preferences differently in spoken and written usage. Not all of the questions for the older children had a counterpart in the questionnaire of the younger. The latter was mostly designed to show whether they notice the variation altogether, whereas the older children were expected to draw conclusions and analyse the meaning of the variants. The opinions and preferences of the 9th and 12th formers could be revealed in an answer to any of the questions. Some commented on question 2, some argued longer in the answers for question 5, so that his/her evaluations became clear. Question 4 often disclosed prejudices.

All in all 171 students (83 girls, 88 boys) answered the questionnaire. 49 informants were in their 12th year, 63 in their 9th year and 59 in their 3rd year of schooling. 87 pupils answered from Tartu and 84 from Tallinn. The similar overall numbers are the result of the standard size of classes in Estonia. The 9th form of Tartu was exceptionally large and contained 35 children. The 12th form of Tartu was the smallest with its 22 pupils. (See Table 1.)

## Results and discussion

### 8–9 year olds

The main aim concerning the 3rd formers was to find out whether they pay attention to the variation and if so, whether they know about the stylistic restrictions. The serious problem with the 8–9 year olds is that one can never be sure that they actually answer the question posed and the conclusions should therefore be drawn with reservations.

All in all only 8 children of 59 said that it was not possible to say *läind* and *õppind*, which shows that most of them are already aware of the alternatives. The 8 negative responses need not reflect ignorance, but, on the contrary, may reflect an early awareness of correct forms. (The word *can* in the question may have been interpreted as *is one allowed to*.) This is confirmed first by the fact that 5 out of those 8 reveal somewhere in their answers that they know which one of the two forms is correct. For example, the question *What do you say yourself?* gets the answer: "usually correct" (a girl from Tartu). All 8 say that they themselves use *-nud*. This is the most normative group of children who are

conscious of the standard (13.6% of the group). There are however altogether 25 children whose self-reports consist of *-nud* forms (see Table 1). For example, all the 17 boys from Tartu answer *yes* to at least one of the first two questions, thereby stating that in their opinion the two possibilities exist. But then 8 of them believe that they themselves use *-nud* forms, 3 say that they use *-nd* forms, and the rest use both (they have either written down both options or said *it depends, both* or the like), while two have not answered. The tendency is the same in all the groups—even if children know about the existence of two options they tend to report themselves as *-nud* users, which adequately reflects the general value attachments in the speech community. Compared to those 25 who report *-nud* forms, only 10 children report *-nd* forms exclusively. None of those 10 is able to define any difference between the variants, which may indicate a lack of stylistic competence regarding the variable. On the other hand, it may show that the children have actually thought about spoken usage only where the variants seem equal to them.

As to the differences between the two options the answers are varied. 29 children (49.2%) say that there is no difference at all (see Table 2). These children may either be insensitive to linguistic styles yet, or unable to formulate it, but they may also refer to the grammatical meaning which is the same. Additionally two boys from Tartu and two boys and one girl from Tallinn have drawn a hyphen, which could be interpreted as either *don't know* or *no difference*. According to the latter option altogether 34 children (57.6%) could be classified as having answered *no difference*. Only one girl from Tallinn says "don't know" and one boy from Tartu answers inadequately. 7 children (5 of them boys from Tartu) point out the formal difference: "one is shorter than the other" or "*u* is missing in one case".

14 children give insightful accounts, and they represent both schools and both sexes (2 girls and 4 boys from Tallinn, 6 girls and 2 boys from Tartu). The difference is specified by the concepts of right and wrong (e.g. "it's correct to say long"; 3 answers), politeness (e.g. "one is more polite"; 5 answers), decency ("one meaning is more decent"; 1), beauty ("*läinud* is more beautiful"; 1), and the medium ("*läinud* in writing"; 1). It may be that in the latter case the written form equals with 'right' for the child. The standard form receives positive evaluations: "*õppinud* is better. I think that if you put a *u* there then the word is more polite. Otherwise it's mean" (a girl from Tartu). It is noteworthy that none of the children assigns any positive meaning to the shorter form. One girl refers to authority: "mother thinks that an Estonian doesn't say *läind* or *õppind*". Two children think that the age is of crucial importance: "older people



Table 1. Suffix variant preferences in different age groups, towns, and sexes.

age	town	sex	preferred suffix variant				total	girls/ boys	% of -nud	% of -nd
			-nud	-nd	variant	both				
8-9	Tallinn	girls	7 46.7%	3 20.2%	5 33.3%	15	28 girls	41.9	17.9	
		boys*	5 35.7%	2 14.3%	6 42.9%	14	31 boys	42.9	16.1	
	total	12 41.4%	5 17.2%	11 37.9%	29					
	Tartu	girls	5 38.5%	2 15.4%	6 46.2%	13				
		boys*	8 47.1%	3 17.6%	4 23.5%	17				
	total	13 43.3%	5 16.7%	10 33.3%	30					
total		25 42.3%	10 16.9%	21 35.6%	59					
14-15	Tallinn	girls	6 42.9%	4 28.6%	4 28.6%	14	30 girls	43.3	33.3	
		boys	6 42.9%	4 28.6%	4 28.6%	14	33 boys	39.4	36.4	
	total	12 42.9%	8 28.6%	8 28.6%	28					
	Tartu	girls	7 43.8%	6 37.5%	3 18.8%	16				
		boys	7 36.8%	8 42.1%	4 21.1%	19				
	total	14 40.0%	14 40.0%	7 20.0%	35					
total		26 41.3%	22 34.9%	15 23.8%	63					
17-18	Tallinn	girls	4 30.8%	4 30.8%	5 38.5%	13	25 girls	40.0	20.0	
		boys	4 28.6%	4 28.6%	6 42.9%	14	24 boys	20.8	25.0	
	total	8 29.6%	8 29.6%	11 40.7%	27					
	Tartu	girls	6 50.0%	1 8.3%	5 41.7%	12				
		boys	1 10.0%	2 20.0%	7 70.0%	10				
	total	7 31.8%	3 13.6%	12 54.5%	22					
total		15 30.6%	11 22.4%	23 46.9%	49					
total		66 38.6%	43 25.1%	59 34.5%	171	83 girls 88 boys	42.2 35.2	24.1 26.1		

\* The total numbers do not match in these cases because two 8-year-old boys from Tartu and one from Tallinn did not answer the question.

say *õppinud* and younger *õppind*"; "one is in the language of schoolchildren, the other in the language of grown-ups". Although I found this answer surprising at first, it later turned out to be the most common answer among older schoolchildren. It appears that the children perceive themselves very much as a social group opposed to adults.

It is evident that at the age of 8 children's language competence includes the two participle forms. The pupils did not get confused about the questions, and more than one third of the children reported that they use both variants. They also seem to accept that the two forms basically mean the same thing. At the same time correct stylistic judgements begin to appear.

## 14–15 year olds

First of all, it can be noticed that in contrast to the youngest group, the older children try to explain the differences between the two forms. This may be due to a growing awareness of correctness and of different styles, but the reason may also be a general belief after several years of studying grammar that every morph must have its individual meaning. An additional favouring factor for the longer explanations of older children is their larger experiences of answering written questionnaires.

In the 9th form there are all in all 10 pupils who say that there is no difference between the two forms, 4 of them are boys from Tartu (see Table 2). 8 informants say that the difference simply lies in omitting a letter (12.7%), the answer that I expected rather to be characteristic to smaller children (they had 11.9%). Grammatical correctness has become an important argument (21 children; 33.3%), reflecting a more secure knowledge. Interestingly enough, 4 boys from Tallinn refer to authorities: “teachers are disturbed by the shorter form”; “the Estonian teacher likes the *läinud* form”. A girl from Tallinn says she uses the longer form while talking to the teachers. These answers already involve some stylistic and situational competence as do the following ones: “on festive occasions I use longer forms”; “I use shorter forms among friends”; “if you talk to an educated person, you wouldn’t say *lugend* and *õppind*”; “the shorter ending may be disturbing on TV or in the government”; “my usage depends on the setting” (situational conditioning; 11 answers); “I use longer forms in polite talk”; “*lugend* is official/more formal”, “*lugend* seems like slang”; “one is rude and awful, the other is decent”; “the *-nud* suffix is more polite”; “in some poems I like the shorter form”; “the decent suffix is used in essays and reports, it is said in speeches and presentations, the shorter ending is used in speech”; “one is slang, one is normal Estonian” (stylistic conditioning; 26 answers). These accounts, which may be considered the most advanced and accurate ones, came quite evenly from the different groups, except for boys from Tartu who obtained a considerably lower number than the others (only 4 persons out of 19; 21.1% as compared to the 62.5% out of Tartu girls, 71.4% out of Tallinn boys, and 64.3% out of Tallinn girls). This may reflect their generally lower interest in the questionnaire (they wanted to go and change clothes for the gym class) but also their lower competence. The occurrence of different types of answers in all groups is shown in Table 2.

Together with the evidently growing attention to grammatical correctness and style the evaluations of the suffixes tend to include a more irrational component: “I think that *-nud* is twice as beautiful”; it is more “expressive”, “flu-

Table 2. Types of differences between the two suffix variants, reported by different age groups, towns, and sexes.

types of differences reported	8-9 years of age				14-15 years of age				17-18 years of age			
	Tallinn		Tartu		Tallinn		Tartu		Tallinn		Tartu	
	girls	boys	girls	boys	girls	boys	girls	boys	girls	boys	girls	boys
1. correctness	0	1	3	0	4	6	4	7	2	6	2	1
2. carelessness	0	0	0	0	2	2	4	4	2	0	2	0
3. speed	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	1	4	2	1
4. spelling	1	1	0	5	0	3	1	4	0	0	0	0
total	1	2	3	5	8	12	9	15	5	10	6	2
5. style	2	3	3	2	6	9	9	2	11	12	10	7
6. interaction	0	0	0	0	4	4	1	2	6	3	0	1
total	2	3	3	2	10	13	10	4	17	15	10	8
7. no difference	10	5	7	7	3	0	3	4	0	1	1	1
* persons #	2	3	3	2	9	10	10	4	13	14	10	7
persons %	13.3	21.4	23.1	11.8	64.3	71.4	62.5	21.1	100	100	83.3	70.0
*classes %	17.2		16.7		67.9		40.0		100		77.3	
*ages %	16.9				52.3				89.8			

\* The number and percentage of persons who referred to stylistic and/or interactive component of variation in each group, in different classes, and in different age groups.

ent", "polite", and "sounds better". *-nd* is "mean", "careless", "rude", "awful", "archaic", "sometimes disturbing", but "more comfortable"; "it would be strange to use it in the laws"; besides, "you wouldn't make a good impression with the shorter forms". *-nud* receives exclusively positive evaluations, and *-nd* almost exclusively negative (except for "comfortable"). The reason for this is most obviously that the children have now learnt what is right. It can also be supposed that they have accumulated enough personal experience to interpret and evaluate the usage differences.

In the self-reports of this group, the level of preference for *-nud* forms has remained the same as it was in the 3rd form (see Table 1). With the exception of two girls from Tartu, the remaining 24 *-nud* users have noticed the other possibility but they still would like to use the correct variant.

With regard to the shorter suffix, the two schools behaved very differently. In Tallinn the number of *-nd* users is about 12 percent smaller than in Tartu. As has repeatedly been pointed out already, the degree of informality seems to be somewhat higher at the school in Tartu.

Regardless of the formulation of the question which demanded a choice between the variants, 15 children say *it depends*. Some explain it along the lines that they prefer *-nud* in written texts and with adults, but *-nd* among friends and

at home. According to this view the choice is never arbitrary but always determined by situation and style.

Interesting correlations can be discovered from a comparison of the answers to questions 2 and 5—concerning preferred variants and whether it would be possible to use the shorter suffix all over. 46 informants from the 9th form answered *no* to the latter question, 11 were indifferent or did not know (6 boys from Tartu), and only 6 answered *yes* (none of the girls from Tallinn). This means that even many of those who prefer the shorter suffix are of the opinion that in some contexts it would not be appropriate, the prejudices have established themselves. The explanations outline a frightful result of a possible switch to the general usage of *-nd*: “the language would become ugly”, “the original Estonian forms would perish”, “the speech would become incomprehensible”, “the grammar would become weird”, “the language would start changing with amazing speed”, “the Estonian written language would disappear”. The differentiation between the written standard and spoken language seems not to be very clear yet. It is actually a common belief at least in Estonia that the grammatical rules learnt at school should be followed in writing as well as in speaking. It is therefore rather surprising that regardless of the prevailing extremely normative approach to language, the children demonstrate so sensible views concerning the oral use of the nonstandard suffixes. One of the reasons for this may be that the schoolchildren consciously oppose the adults almost as if they would be speaking two different languages (this was already briefly mentioned in the analysis of the 3rd form). The relatively high preference level for the stigmatized *-nd* suffixes may be a conscious means for making this distinction clear. Question 4 amazingly often triggered references to age. Young people (children, schoolchildren) have been mentioned 36 times as the typical users of shorter forms, and older people (grown-ups, teachers) have been mentioned 29 times as the typical users of longer forms. Other parameters are rare: educatedness (5 times), occupation (1), social class (1), place of living (2). *-nd* is said to be used by “normal” and “free people” and by “poets”, *-nud* by “intelligent”, “more clever”, “polite”, and “decent people” and “philologists, especially teachers of Estonian” (all parameters named just once). Thus the dominant criterion for dividing the society into groups was the age.

The group of 14–15 year olds may be characterized as solidly aware of the norm but quite eager to rebel.

### 17–18 year olds

Among the 12th formers there are 15 who prefer the standard ending (30.6%). The percentage has fallen by more than 10% compared to the 41.3% in the 9th form. The decrease has taken place in both towns and both among boys and girls except for the Tartu girls. This change can be explained by the considerably larger amount of informants from the 12th form who connect the two suffixes with different styles and situation types. It was thus common for them to answer e.g. "*-nd* in writing, *-nud* in speech"; "*-nd* when talking to friends, *-nud* when communicating with strangers and grown-ups"; "depends on to whom the text is addressed". The amount of those who do not make a choice is therefore much larger than in the 9th form—24 informants (49.0%) as opposed to 23.8% of the intermediate group. This illustrates first of all the mature stylistic competence of the school graduates, but also their ability to reason on the metalinguistic level.

This rise in competence can also be illustrated quantitatively. The answers have been classified into seven groups according to their content (see Table 2). "Correctness" involves answers that refer to the grammatical correctness, "carelessness" is a group of answers that could well belong together with correctness as some children just say that *-nd* is a more careless variant and reflects the users negligence; "spelling" means that the informant has paid attention to the disappearance of the letter *u* in the written form; "speed" shows that the informant has considered it important that the *-nd* form enables people to speak more quickly (e.g. "I use both depending on how quickly I have to talk"; "I prefer *-nd* when in a hurry"). These four types of answers can be grouped together as they pay attention to the formal side of variation as opposed to the answers that involve stylistic specification (most often the distinctions spoken vs. written language and formal vs. informal speech style) or interactive information, in one word communicative competence. "Interaction" contains references to other participants in a speech event, e.g.: "The schoolchildren use the shorter variant in oral speech, and the longer one in essays and when talking to older people. But when an older person tries to get along with a younger one and wants to show how cool he is, then he uses the shorter form." (A 12th form girl from Tallinn.) "Style" contains answers about the different stylistic values of the variants. References to style and speech situation are to be considered most mature. The rise of competence becomes clear from the comparison of the three age groups (Table 2). Among the 3rd formers only 10 give answers of the kind (16.9%), among the 9th formers only 33 (52.3%), while among the 12th formers the number is 44 (89.8%). The drastic rise takes place in all groups, and the

12th form in Tallinn reaches the level of 100% of answers pertaining to style or interaction. This class also gives most references to situation. It may be that their teacher has brought the problem into their attention. At the same time the number of references to the relatively unimportant formal side diminishes from 9th form to the 12th form.

The share of 12th formers who would not support the general usage of *-nd* is about the same as for the 9th formers (37 informants; 75.5% compared to the 73.0% in the 9th form). The school-leavers gave somewhat more reasonable explanations for their decisions than the 9th form: "there should be some difference between the official language and the language spoken at home"; "the correct forms should at least be preserved in the written language"; "the main thing is to be understood"; "it is difficult to change the tradition". Here the difference between styles is already much more clear, and the students are concerned with the role of the tradition rather than with the conventional right and wrong. 11 of them are even ready to change the convention, i.e. they answered *yes* to question 5.

Finally, also the 12th formers tended to opt for age if they were asked about the speech patterns of the society (question 5). Youth was mentioned 22 times as the typical users of *-nd*, older people were mentioned 10 times as the typical users of *-nud*. Dialectal background and place of origin was mentioned 4 times, poorer family once, lack of education 4, and laziness 2 times as the reason for using shorter forms. "Practical people"; "those not heavily influenced by the Estonian lessons", and "not well-bred people" use *-nd*, whereas *-nud* is used by "language fans"; "those who are forced to speak pure Estonian"; "those who want to seem educated"; "those who want to make an impression of a wise person", and "people who consider themselves proper". Compared to the children who are three years younger the evaluations have become multidimensional, prejudices are connected with both variants, and either of the variants can be perceived as positive in some sense (*-nd* is more comfortable, homely). Besides, the attitudes towards the generally accepted *-nud* suffix have become obviously ironic, which can be interpreted as a sign of deliberate opposition with the mainstream.

### Summary and conclusion

A strict comparison of all the age groups is hindered by the fact that the questions put to the 3rd form children were somewhat different from those put to

the older groups. Still, vague conclusions may be drawn on the general dynamics of the acquisition of attitudes and communicative competence. The questionnaire revealed that the *-nud/-nd* variation in Estonian is subject to evaluation from at least the age of 8. The school graduates demonstrate maturity in defining the stylistic and interactive constraints on variation, whereas just the two concepts *polite/impolite* tend to replace this complex phenomenon for smaller children. The attitudes grow stronger through the years at school and are likely to cause a conscious revolt sometimes during the mid-teens, when the borderline between right and wrong has become clear but the officially prohibited variant seems to be more attractive. It should therefore be assumed that it is not only a lack of experience of formal situations that causes the more frequent occurrence of stigmatized forms among schoolchildren, but that there are also strong attitudinal forces behind the usage. The standard form receives ironical rather than positive evaluations from the 12th form. (Of course, nothing can be said about the actual usage of the suffixes on the basis of this study.)

The two schools behave quite similarly regardless of the differing atmosphere. The percentages of standard suffixes are similar in the two towns (Table 1), the nonstandard suffix is relatively more favoured by the 9th form in Tartu and by the 12th form in Tallinn. In Tallinn the amount of stylistically and interactionally adequate answers was often higher (Table 2).

Girls answered generally longer than boys and pointed out stylistic and interactional constraints more often (Table 2). This result coincides with the common belief that females are more sensitive to these connotations, but one should also bear in mind that girls are relatively more mature at that age. As to the variant preferences, the gap between the two sexes grows with age (Table 1). In the 3rd form the boys and girls answer very much alike, the difference of 1% is clearly insignificant. In the 9th form the *-nud* percentage is 4% larger for girls, while the share of *-nd* is 3% larger for boys. This result in itself is hardly even a tendency, but the answers of the 12th form confirm the growing gap: 20% more girls prefer the standard form as compared to the boys, and 5% more boys than girls prefer the nonstandard ending. It may be speculated that the variant preference is one of the markers of the social roles that the children are about to acquire. The empirical study of mainly the adult speakers of Estonian has also showed that women's usage is significantly more close to the standard (Keevallik 1994 p. 126).

The study indicates that even if the communicative competence concerning this type of morphological variation develops and advances during the years of schooling, it has clearly appeared already at the 3rd year and could probably be

traced back to even younger age. If the patterns of suffix usage are intimately connected to certain situations from the very beginning, it would not be necessary to regard the acquisition of communicative competence as a separate stage. The development of communicative competence is likely to be an essential part of language acquisition which advances in close connection to linguistic competence.

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