Prepositions in Estonian dialects: distribution in the light of language contacts
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In Finno-Ugric languages, an adpositional phrase is built up of a complement noun and a following postposition. Yet the Baltic-Finnic and Sami languages stand out with a mixed system: unlike in other Finno-Ugric languages, both pre- and postpositions are used. (Tauli 1966; Grünthal 2003; Ehala 1995a; Janda et al. 2014; Palmeos 1982)

The development of the prepositional phrase-structure in otherwise postpositional language family is seen as a result of various language-internal changes. The role of language contacts is considered less significant, as despite the strong contacts with e.g. prepositional Russian, other Finno-Ugric languages have remained postpositional. (Grünthal 2005; Ehala 1995a; Ehala 1995b) Furthermore, it has been argued that adpositions are not a likely word class to be borrowed (e.g. Lass 1997: 190). However, Heine and Kuteva (2005:4–46) have pointed out that despite grammatical constructions are rarely borrowed, the pressure of a foreign language may still increase the use of an already existing construction. Janda et al. (2014) have presented how this pattern of pressure is detectable in the North Sami varieties: if an adposition can occur both as a pre- or a postposition, the dialects in contact with prepositional Swedish and Norwegian tend to prefer the prepositional structure over postpositional. There are no corpus-based studies focusing on the influence of language contacts on the use of prepositions in Estonian dialects. However, the study of Ruutma et al. (2016) about the varying word-order of five common adpositions in Estonian dialects showed that there occurs dialectical variation in the preference of the position of adposition. It needs further study, whether the variation could be explained with language contacts.

In this research, I examine the distribution of prepositions in Estonian dialects. A higher occurrence of prepositional phrases in a dialect with strong contacts with Indo-European languages could reflect Indo-European influence on the adpositional system. The data of this study is collected from the Corpus of Estonian Dialects (http://www.murre.ut.ee/home/). In total, the final dataset consists of 13 909 utterances of 164 different adpositions and their nearest context. The results reveal a small but gradual decrease in the usage of prepositions from the northern-eastern areas to the western areas. Similar eastern-western distinction, as opposed to a traditional northern-southern dialect division, has also been detected in studies about verbal constructions (e.g. Uiboae 2013; Lindström et al. 2017) The distributional differences in the use of prepositions between dialects can, to some extent, be explained with the multilingual environment. Yet, in case of some dialects, language contacts fail to explain the higher use of prepositions.

References