LATVIAN IN THE EUROPEAN INFORMATION SOCIETY

3.1 GENERAL FACTS

Latvian is the sole state language in the Republic of Latvia and one of the official languages of the European Union. There are about 1.5 million native Latvian speakers worldwide, of which 1.2 million live in Latvia, while the rest are scattered throughout the USA, Russia, Australia, Canada, UK, Germany, Ireland, as well as Lithuania, Estonia, Sweden, Brazil, and other countries. Latvian, though apparently small, is in fact approximately the 150th most spoken language from about 6,900 languages of the world. At least 500,000 non-Latvians speak Latvian besides their own native language. Since regaining independence in 1990, Latvian has had a state language status which extends to all spheres of language use. As a result, more and more minority language speakers in Latvia also now speak Latvian. The 1989 population census data showed that 23% of Latvia’s national minorities spoke the Latvian language. According to the 2000 population census data, the number of Latvian speakers among national minorities increased to 53%.

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Data of the Population and Housing Census 2011 [11] show that more than 170 various nationalities reside in Latvia. However, due to low birth rates during the time period since the last Population and Housing Census in 2000 the absolute number of persons of all largest ethnic groups has diminished, e.g., Latvian speakers decrease by approximately 5,000 people (0.3%) annually. But the share of Latvians — main ethnicity — in the total number of population in the country as a whole has increased from 57.7% in 2000 to 62.1% currently. The share of Russian residents has reduced from 29.6% in 2000 to 26.9% in 2011, share of Belarusians — from 4.1% to 3.3% of Ukrainians — from 2.7% to 2.2% of Poles — from 2.5% to 2.2% and of Lithuanians — from 1.4% to 1.2%.

Latvian is the native language of 95.6% of Latvians. Among national minorities, Latvian is considered as the native language most often by Lithuanians (42.5%), Estonians (39.2%), and Germans (24.6%). In comparison, 39.6% of Latvia’s citizens are native speakers of Russian. For a large number of other national minorities (Jews, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Poles) Russian is their mother tongue and the language of daily communication.

Although often referred to as a new language of a new republic, Latvian, in fact, is one of the oldest European languages with numerous similarities to Sanskrit, the language closest to the original Indo-European language. The Latvian language belongs to the Baltic branch of the Indo-European proto-language family. The Baltic languages are divided into East Baltic and West Baltic languages. There are only two living Baltic languages nowadays: Latvian and Lithuanian, both of which belong to the East Baltic languages.
Latvian is kindred to Lithuanian, speakers of both languages cannot communicate with each other freely. The similarity of both languages is like the one between Spanish and Italian, or between Russian and Polish. In the Latvian language, there are 3 dialects: the Central dialect, Tamian, and the High Latvian dialect and more than 500 vernaculars or sub-dialects. These separate dialects are influenced by standardisation, social and culturally historical factors, and are subordinated to the process of improvement and accommodation to a standard literary language. The standard literary language has been developed on the basis of the Central dialect.

The written form of the Latvian language has existed for about 400 years. The first written monuments of Latvian are writings in Gothic script dating to the 16th century when, under the ideas of the Reformation, the clergy attempted to break the divide between the local peasants and the landlords of Teutonic descent. The first great landmark of Latvian writing is the translation of the Bible (1689). Thus, Latvians obtained a powerful literary document, the language of which was to affect the development of written Latvian (the so-called Old Writing) for centuries. It imposed a standard on the written language and was also important as a recognition of the language. It should be noted that the first scripts in Latvian were made by Baltic Germans and were mostly translations. Baltic Germans defined Latvian grammar, produced dictionaries, collected and recorded folksongs, and in general, controlled and dominated the language scene. Genuine Latvian writing started only in the 19th century when national literature and cultural aspirations emerged and Latvian linguistics came into the hands of native speakers. As a result of centuries of foreign domination, in modern Latvian one can trace numerous lexical and morphological influences – loanwords, calques, and borrowed idioms which have been fully assimilated. In spite of extensive and various contacts with other languages (German, Polish, Swedish, Russian, English), the core structure of Latvian has survived, and the language maintains its stability. Latvian is characterised by a complex grammatical system and a certain linguistic conservatism, yet has been very open to outside influences.

Latvian orthography underwent a gradual reform from Gothic to Latin script (with diacritics) in the beginning of the 20th century. Since World War II, there have been two orthographical traditions (with minor differences): the orthography used by Latvians in Latvia and the orthography used by émigré Latvians abroad. In addition, the Latgalian orthographical tradition exists in the eastern part of Latvia.

3.2 PARTICULARITIES OF THE LATVIAN LANGUAGE

The high linguistic quality and rich means of expression of the Latvian language is one of the prerequisites for the stability and competitiveness of the language. The Latvian language exhibits specific characteristics, including:

- pronunciation that almost fully corresponds to the written form
- many grammatical forms and endings due to inflections
- a large number of derived words and derivational means
- free word-order
- punctuation principles: grammar and intonation

The Latvian language uses the phono-morphological basis of orthography. Latvian orthography almost fully corresponds to the pronunciation (diacritical marks are