

# SYMBOLIC CAPITAL AND DIPLOMATIC INTERPRETING IN THE REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA (1918–1940)

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This article aims to expand on our knowledge of interpreting and interpreters in the early years of the Republic of Estonia's creation of symbolic capital (1918–1940). The authors' point of departure is the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's definition of symbolic capital. She has researched the evolution in interpreting in Estonia during three phases (1918–1940, 1944–1991 and 1991 to the present day) and, although the article is limited to diplomatic interpreting and the growth of the newly independent Republic of Estonia's symbolic capital via interpreting in diplomatic intercourse, it represents a new approach in the descriptive history of interpretation in Estonia. During that period, diplomatic interpreting supported the Republic of Estonia's aspirations to be recognised and accepted as an independent state in world politics. The years 1918–1940 were studied by analysing 36 memoirs, newspaper articles covering interpreting from the Estonian Literary Museum's collection, diplomatic correspondence as well as the minutes of the Tartu Peace negotiations with Russia in 1919–1920, which are preserved in the State Archive of Estonia.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The article analyses the development of interpreting in the Republic of Estonia during the early 20th century. The article's theoretical framework is based upon the idea of symbolic capital as defined by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who expanded upon the concept of capital to include its different forms. Namely he spoke not only of economic capital, but also of cultural, social, and symbolic capital (1991/1997). Bourdieu describes symbolic capital as

an ordinary property (physical strength, wealth, warlike valour, etc.) which, perceived by social agents endowed with the categories of perception and appreciation permitting

them to perceive, know and recognise it, becomes symbolically efficient, like a veritable *magical power*: a property which, because it responds to socially constituted “collective expectations” and beliefs, exercises a sort of action from a distance, without physical contact (Bourdieu 1998, 102).

Symbolic capital represents accumulated prestige or honour. Bourdieu describes the relationship of linguistic capital to other forms of capital, helping to define the location of an individual within a social space. As Roland states in *Interpreters as Diplomats*, “language has always been more than a simple communication tool: it has also been a mark of national prestige, and interpreters have brought this prestige to the international arena” (1999, 2). Expanding upon Bourdieu’s approach and applying it not just to individuals but to states, it could be assumed that it is possible for the state “to reap symbolic benefits” by speaking “with distinction and thereby distinguishing itself] from all those who are less well endowed with linguistic capital” (Bourdieu 1991/1997, 21).

According to Bourdieu, symbolic power is invisible. Its roots lie in the mutual conviction that even those who have nothing to gain from the arrangement silently recognise it (ibid., 23). Bourdieu stresses two aspects of this invisible power: the right to speak, on the one hand, and the power and authority arising from the communicative situation, on the other hand. However, “the language of authority never governs without the collaboration of those it governs” (ibid., 113), as “those who speak must ensure that they are entitled to speak in the circumstances, and those who listen must reckon that those who speak are worthy of attention” (ibid., 8).

In this context, the following questions are addressed in the article: can the use of interpreting be interpreted as the enhancement of Estonia’s symbolic capital? Did the use of interpreting help the young state increase it? To understand the evolution of interpreting today, it is essential to know to what extent interpreting was used in the early years of the Republic of Estonia. Neither the history of interpreting nor the explosive growth of international interpreting assignments after the restoration of independence in 1991 has been studied in Estonia.

## 2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This article covers the 22 years of independence following the proclamation of the Republic of Estonia on 14 February 1918. Interpreting was considered a somewhat marginal activity throughout that period, and not only in Estonia, thus it is rarely mentioned in sources. All the material analysed for this article is authentic and was gathered by the author. These sources have not previously been examined from the point of view of interpreting. Although Franz Pöchhacker (2006, 64) states that “basic techniques for data collection might be summarised as watch, ask and record”, he mentions that research into interpreting also makes use of documentary material. Was interpreting actually

used in diplomatic intercourse? Who benefited from that interpretation? What kinds of events were interpreted? Who were the first interpreters committed to enhancing the Republic of Estonia's symbolic capital? Is it possible to identify any interpreters by name after all these years? These were the questions that sparked the researcher's interest. Meticulous work in archives and museums provided answers, which will be discussed in the following sections. As the author gathered material, fragmented information about the more widely spoken foreign languages, about the attitudes toward linguistic skills and the use of interpreters, and about diplomats' recollections of their own experience acting as interpreters, a general outline began to emerge.

### ***2.1. Memoirs and diaries***

There are very few direct sources about interpreters' work. Memoirs and diaries were therefore a very important source. The author analysed 36 memoirs and diaries of diplomats and officials employed by the Foreign Ministry of Estonia (for example, Jaakson 2011; Kirotar 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Laaman 1998; Pusta 2010 and Tomingas 2010). Most of the texts were written immediately after the pertinent event as a diary or later as memoirs. Those memoirs were mainly written between the 1930s and the 1960s and were published in Western countries following World War II. Former politicians, in particular diplomats, are more active in authoring memoirs, with the amount of focus placed on personal versus more general topics, which varied depending on the author.

For the author of this article 18 books were the more significant sources, as they mentioned interpreting or an interpreter. The rest referred to linguistic proficiency or the use of one or more languages, allowing facts mentioned elsewhere to be confirmed or conclusions about the increase of the state's symbolic capital to be drawn.

### ***2.2. Archives and museums***

Facts and data to confirm or refute the recollections of historic events in memoirs can be found in the archives. The relevant archives in Estonia are the National Archives of Estonia and the Bibliography Department of the Archival Library at the Estonian Literary Museum. They have made parts of their collections available electronically. For the present article, minutes from the Tartu Peace negotiations held between the Republic of Estonia and Russia from 1919 to 1920, as well as documents and correspondence of the Foreign Ministry preserved in the National Archives provided information and were a valuable source for research.

The Analytical Retrospective Bibliography of Estonian Journalism (1821–1944) compiled by the Bibliography Department yielded several rare pieces of additional information. The classified catalogue and its card files permit a search by topic, such as Estonia's relations with foreign countries, while names can be searched for in the personal file index. For this study, the aim was to look through newspapers published

in Estonia from 1918 to 1940 in order to discover whether interpreting or interpreters were mentioned in articles, as well as to establish and confirm when interpretation was first used in Estonia. The electronic search, however, was not as useful as going through the bibliographic file cards, each of which features a brief summary of an article published in Estonian newspapers. The search yielded over 400 articles of possible research value, available in the Digital Estonian Newspapers Database (DEA). Most of the selected articles did not turn out to cover interpreting, and 49 were filtered out for analysis. Only ten of them have to do with diplomatic intercourse.

### 3. INTERPRETING FROM 1918 TO 1940

#### ***3.1. Using interpreting as a bid for symbolic capital***

Modern interpretation – conference interpreting, in particular, as well as its professionalization and the use of not only French but also English as a language of diplomacy – began at the Paris Peace conference in 1919, since neither the US president nor the British prime minister spoke French.

However the issue of what language to use in diplomatic intercourse had become contentious as early as the 18th century, with mainly Latin and later French being used. The issue was more or less settled in 1851 when British Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston “instructed the British representative that in the opinion of Her Majesty’s Government, every Government was entitled to use its own language in official communications” (Satow 2011, 67). Thus Lord Palmerston “established the principle that has ever since been honoured in the diplomatic world – the right of any government to use its own language in foreign relations” (Roland 1999, 56). In his pioneering work, *A Guide to Diplomatic Practice*, published in 1917 and continuously revised and reprinted, Ernest Satow justifies this principle, saying

it is obvious that while a man speaking or writing in his own language is able to say whatever he wishes [...], when employing a foreign tongue, he can only say what he is enabled to express by the knowledge which he happens to possess of that particular language (Satow 2011, 67).

The minutes from the preparations for the Tartu peace negotiations with Soviet Russia in September 1919 as well as the negotiations themselves in 1919 and 1920 reveal the significance that the recently proclaimed republic attributed to its state language, Estonian. The minutes state that “the head of the Estonian delegation gave his speech in Estonian and informed the Russian delegation that it would receive the text in Russian” (ERA 957-10-23 l. 10)<sup>1</sup>, and the head of the Russian delegation, Leonid Krassin, reserved a right to comment upon receiving the text. Several paragraphs of the minutes verify that

<sup>1</sup> Translated by the author.

the power of language and interpreting had been used since the early days of the republic to empower Estonian independence, as underlined by the following statement made by temporary head of the Estonian delegation Adu Birk at the preparatory meeting to the peace negotiations with Russia: “Birk: Firstly, allow me to settle a formality: we suggest drawing up the minutes in the languages of our states; i.e. the minutes should be drawn up in two languages” (ERA 957-10-23 l. 12)<sup>2</sup>. The head of the Russian delegation Krassin agrees: “we, indeed, cannot be against that. We recognise the equality of all languages; thus, both speeches and minutes can be given and drawn up in both languages” (ERA 957-10-23 l. 12)<sup>3</sup>. The minutes record Birk as saying to the Russian delegation:

“It is an honour to present our credentials; however, they are in Estonian with an accompanying text in French. We have no text of our credentials in Russian to give you.”  
Reads the text of credentials first in Estonian and then in Russian (ERA 957-10-23 l. 11)<sup>4</sup>.

The use of Estonian from the start of negotiations with Soviet Russia was a clear message aimed at increasing the symbolic power of the young state. Newly-born Estonia’s symbolic capital was hard-won, piece by piece, and mostly in an unfriendly environment. It was not easy for Estonia’s first envoys to operate in Western Europe, as they were often considered “unknown men from an unknown country” (Pusta 2010, 142)<sup>5</sup>.

Can the use of Estonian at the meeting of the Estonian and Russian delegations in 1919 be associated with symbolic capital as defined by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu? Undoubtedly it can, as it is directly and clearly related to the prestige of the state. Russian newspapers perceived the significance of that prestige as early as 1913, describing the problems the Russian governor of Estonia, who did not speak Estonian, had when listening to an Orthodox service in Estonian (*Postimees* 24.02.1937).

Another example of the use of the official language is from the opening of the Tartu Peace Conference with Russia on 5 December 1919. Jaan Poska, head of the Estonian delegation, delivered his speech in Estonian (ERA 957-10-12 l. 1). The secretary of the delegation interpreted it into Russian (Tomingas 2010, 181). Poska, however, was in fact fluent in Russian: he and his wife of Swedish descent spoke Russian at home (Laaman 1998, 184), as it was the only common language they both spoke. Poska thus seems to have made the decision to speak in Estonian to reinforce the state’s symbolic capital. The use of Estonian – the official language of the Republic of Estonia – and the use of interpreting from Estonian into Russian was a significant statement and contributed to symbolic capital in terms of establishing the Estonian-Russian relationship.

The significance of the chosen language of discourse was also singled out in the press release on the Tartu Peace Conference: “Jaan Poska opened the meeting at 10:35, giving

<sup>2</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>3</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>4</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>5</sup> Translated by the author.

his speech in Estonian.” A brief overview of the speech ends with the remark: “Leonid Krassin responded in Russian” (ERA 957-10-12 l. 1)<sup>6</sup>.

In developing Estonia’s diplomatic intercourse, international diplomatic protocol was introduced. In describing the first official visit of the president abroad (to Finland), the linguistic capital was singled out: “both heads of state gave their speeches in their own languages, of course” (Kirotar 2008b, 1836)<sup>7</sup>. In his diary, Elmar Kirotar, diplomat and chief of protocol at the Foreign Ministry, states that in 1938 “for the first time in our history [we drafted] a letter of credence [to Rei, the Estonian ambassador to Moscow], as well as a letter of recall [...] in Estonian – just like the Sov[iet] letters of credence to us were in Russian” (Kirotar 2008a, 226)<sup>8</sup>. This can also be interpreted as symbolic capital arising from the use of the state language, in this case from a written text.

### ***3.2. Diplomatic interpreting***

Having expanded Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital from individuals to states, the significance of diplomatic interpreting in interstate intercourse becomes evident. Pöchhacker (2011, 308) defines diplomatic interpreting as “a special type of institutionalised interaction”, focusing on “high levels of professional skills”. The diplomatic interpreter’s great responsibility is highlighted by Ruth Roland’s metaphor: “Interpreters are linguistic acrobats constantly walking on a tightrope” (1999, 3).

Preparations to establish Estonia’s diplomatic service started in the second half of 1917, several months prior to the proclamation of independence. Politicians realised how important recognition by European states was. A requirement when entering the diplomatic service was fluency in two foreign languages. Russian and German were more widespread; thus, proficiency in Finnish and English was evidently an asset.

Diplomat Pusta recalls visits to the British and French Embassies in Stockholm in 1918:

The performance of an odd language used by Estonia’s first envoys in broken English and French could not have impressed Ambassadors of these large countries very much (Pusta 2000, 102).<sup>9</sup>

The use of English, in particular, was problematic, although “[we] could speak English to some extent, our knowledge of written English was very modest” (Piip 1966, 143)<sup>10</sup>.

The minutes drawn up by Estonian foreign delegations frequently mention that they “[could not] accomplish anything much with the help of interpreters, as current experience shows” (ERA 1621-1-127 l. 10)<sup>11</sup>, and that “it [was] quite impossible to

<sup>6</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>7</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>8</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>9</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>10</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>11</sup> Translated by the author.



explain [their] business with the help of interpreters; no one [had] time for that” (ibid.)<sup>12</sup>. Poska grumbles that even questions were asked at meetings in such a way that only short answers could be provided, and that everybody was always in a hurry (ibid.).

Diplomatic correspondence in preparation of President Čakste of Latvia’s visit to Estonia in 1925 also reflects the importance of symbolic capital. Estonia’s ambassador to Latvia Julius Seljamaa wrote to the Foreign Ministry: “it is recommended that the speech by the President of Estonia be given in Estonian and that by the president of Latvia in Latvian, to be interpreted into French thereafter” (ERA 957-7-88)<sup>13</sup>. At the same time Sir Eric Drummond, Secretary General of the League of Nations, visited Estonia. Instructions for a public ceremony in the Estonia Theatre are as follows: “President of Latvia (interpreted) [...] Sir Eric Drummond’s reply (interpreted), speech by Dr Mõtus (in Estonian and Latvian)” (ibid.)<sup>14</sup>. Neither the language nor interpreting is mentioned for other speakers. Programmes of the ceremony preserved in the archives are in Estonian, French and English. The newspaper *Vaba Maa* (26.02.1937), however, described the interpretation in detail:

Estonians spoke Estonian and if necessary speeches were interpreted into Estonian or French, e.g. the speech by President Čakste in Latvian was interpreted into Estonian. Sir Eric Drummond delivered his in English. Finnish ambassador Dr R. Holst used Estonian [...]. The speakers’ list comes to an end with enthusiastic greetings in Estonian, Latvian and French by Dr Mõttus [...].<sup>15</sup>

The article also specifies that he addressed the president of Latvia in Estonian and Latvian and Sir Drummond in Estonian and English. On a visit to the *Riigikogu*, the Estonian parliament, President Čakste addressed the audience in Latvian, and was interpreted into French (*Päevaleht* 25.02.1937).

When preparing to host his Majesty King Gustav V of Sweden in 1929, Estonia’s ambassador to Stockholm was informed “as previously verbally expressed, the president expects the King to reply in Swedish” (ERA 957-7-129)<sup>16</sup>.

These examples lead to the conclusion that the Republic of Estonia adhered to Lord Palmerston’s principle of diplomatic intercourse expressed in 1851: allow diplomats to deliver speeches in their mother tongue.

### 3.3. Interpreters

In the early years of the Republic of Estonia interpretation as a profession had not yet developed. In the Estonian language, ‘*tõlk*’ and ‘*tõlkija*’ were both used for interpreters and translators until the late 1980s. Recently a clearer distinction has been introduced:

<sup>12</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>13</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>14</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>15</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>16</sup> Translated by the author.

‘*tõlk*’ is becoming the established word for ‘interpreter’ and ‘*tõlkija*’ for ‘translator’. That distinction has not, however, become rooted in daily usage. As both ‘*tõlk*’ and ‘*tõlkija*’ have been used interchangeably, it is not possible to distinguish between the terms when reading memoirs and archival materials.

Neither Foreign Ministry employees nor diplomats acting as interpreters had received any interpreter training at the time. They were bilinguals who happened to be on hand, i.e. ‘chance interpreters’ (Pöchhacker 2006, 28).

### 3.3.1. Foreign Ministry employees acting as interpreters/translators

The Foreign Ministry was established on 14 November 1918. Of the first three officials, two were English and French interpreters/translators (‘*tõlk*’). The third was the secretary general. Apart from them a janitor, a cleaning lady and a courier were employed. *The Estonian Foreign Service Biographic Lexicon 1918–1991* has 34 people on its staff list whose job description includes the word ‘*tõlk*’ (translator/interpreter).

Twelve people are listed as ‘*tõlk*’, while twenty-two have two-word job descriptions that include ‘*tõlk*’, as well as other words: ‘correspondent’ (12), ‘official’ (6), ‘typist’ (2), ‘secretary’ (1) and ‘assistant’ (1), allowing us to assume that they mostly acted as translators.

### 3.3.2. Estonian diplomats acting as interpreters

In their memoirs, diplomats refer only rarely to foreign languages or interpreting, in particular. For several diplomats, interpreting was a rare experience, whereas three mentioned interpreting or acting as an interpreter more frequently. French, English, Finnish and Estonian were mentioned as target languages (Pusta 2010; Tomingas 2010; Kirotar 2007; Kirotar 2008a; 2008b). Four high-ranking officials are more frequently mentioned as having benefited from interpreting: Jaan Poska, the head of the Estonian delegation to the peace negotiations with Soviet Russia (Laaman 1998, 75; Tomingas 2010, 129, 143, 154, 181, 189), Konstantin Päts, President of the Republic of Estonia (Kirotar 2008a, 1834, 1836), General Johan Laidoner, Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Forces (Kirotar 2008a, 1840–1841; 2008b, 215) and Jaan Tõnisson, head of the foreign delegation and prime minister (Tomingas 2010, 122, 165). They benefitted from interpretation into Russian (Poska), Swedish (Päts), Finnish (Päts) and English (Poska, Laidoner, Tõnisson). All four officials held very high positions and were held in high esteem by the public. They also took part in and chaired historic high-level meetings. Resorting to interpreting carried a diplomatic message and aimed at increasing Estonia’s symbolic capital. President Päts also acted as an interpreter: in 1936 President Svinhufvud of Finland visited Estonia and the President of the Republic of Estonia personally interpreted his meeting with locals at a village community house (*Postimees* 3.08.1936).

Kirotar, who acted as an interpreter for General Laidoner, says he “preferred speaking French but could also communicate in English. However, during these visits he wished



to speak Estonian and to be interpreted into English, simply because he wanted to reflect briefly on what to say next” (Kirotar 2008a, 1841)<sup>17</sup>. The above quote demonstrates the use of diplomatic interpreting to gain time, since Laidoner could speak English. This principle is also frequently applied in modern diplomacy. Kirotar continues: “meeting Churchill, he said a few words in Estonian and I interpreted into English. Thereafter both Churchill and Laidoner switched to French” (Kirotar 2008a, 1841)<sup>18</sup>.

Diplomats did not, however, always enjoy interpreting. In 1930 foreign minister Jaan Lattik attended the League of Nations General Assembly in Geneva. Kirotar recalls that Lattik “did not understand anything because he did not know the language and kept disturbing me following the work of the committees, victimising the unfortunate secretary who had to help the honourable minister” (Kirotar 2007, 2056)<sup>19</sup>. Kirotar and Tomingas mention interpreting quite frequently. Gertrude Bell, who met General Laidoner at the League of Nations’ Mosul Committee in 1925, described his French:

I like Laidoner. He is a large stolid Estonian who speaks no known language but French and that with a total disregard for genders, subjunctives, and all the grosser and finer nuances. This does not discompose him at all. He goes on as calmly as a tank and rolls the French tongue flat (Bell 1925a).

In her letter to her father she writes:

Laidoner says that there are no words in any language to express the plight of the refugees who fled from the Turks. I hope he will find some words in which to tell the Council about it and that they will be so impressive that the Council will overlook his talking *un jeune fille* and *une vieillard* (Bell 1925b).

We can also talk about how symbolic capital grows when the state language and interpreting are used when reading aloud a translated text. Until the end of WWI European military censors would not permit letters and telegrams to be sent in Estonian, as it was “an unknown language” (Medijainen 1997, 17). Thus, the French postal authorities detained a telegram sent in Estonian to London as it was “neither in English nor in French” (ERA 1619-1-3 l. 127)<sup>20</sup>, and the Estonian foreign minister said to apply for a permission to send telegrams if possible in Estonian (ERA 1619-1-3 l. 128). Correspondence in foreign languages leads to the need for sight translation (sight-to-text), if we apply modern interpreting research terminology. Meeting minutes frequently state that a document in a foreign language was read aloud in Estonian (ERA 1619-1-3 l. 120; ERA 1619-1-3 l. 25).

17 Translated by the author.

18 Translated by the author.

19 Translated by the author.

20 Translated by the author.

Estonian diplomats had also seen how interpreters for the League of Nations, representing the newly developed profession of conference interpretation, worked:

I most admired [League of Nations] interpreters. There was a middle-aged lady who sat without taking any notes as if dozing throughout the two-hour improvised speech by Briand, then stood up and spoke for two hours in detail about what Briand had said in French (Mamers 1957, 107)<sup>21</sup>.

The admiring diplomat is to be believed as he was fluent in five languages.

#### 4. SOME FINAL REMARKS

Interpreting in Estonia in its modern form emerged alongside the Republic of Estonia. Inconspicuously but persistently, leaders of the country and diplomats, in particular, as well as interpreters and interpreting, contributed to the Republic of Estonia's symbolic capital. From a diachronic point of view, diplomacy and interpreting were inseparable.

Although factual data on both diplomatic interpretation and interpretation in general is scarce, sources such as memoirs, archive documents and museum findings, allow us to confirm that Estonian diplomats and statesmen took for granted the principle of using the state language if needed in the interwar Republic of Estonia (1918–1940). An excellent example of the young Republic of Estonia's symbolic capital and the symbolic power arising thereof is the speech in Estonian delivered by Jaan Poska at the opening of the peace negotiations with Soviet Russia in 1919. Another of the most brilliant examples of the symbolic capital of language is from the opening of Estonia Theatre in 1913.

From 1918 to 1940 there were interpreting diplomats but no diplomatic interpreters in Estonia. We must acknowledge Pierre Bourdieu, whose universal concept of symbolic capital allows us to discover and describe new links between interpreting and the fortification of the newly independent Republic of Estonia's statehood.

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21 Translated by the author.

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## Archives

ERA = National Archives of Estonia

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## SIMBOLINIS KAPITALAS IR DIPLOMATINIS VERTIMAS ŽODŽIU ESTIJOS RESPUBLIKOJE (1918–1940)

KARIN SIBUL

Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariamas vertėjų žodžiu vaidmuo kuriant simbolinį kapitalą Estijos Respublikos gyvavimo pradžioje (1918–1940). Autorė remiasi prancūzų sociologo Pierre Bourdieu'o simbolinio kapitalo apibrėžtimi ir interpretacija, taip praturtindama vertimo žodžiu aprašomąją istoriografiją nauju požiūriu į istorinę vertimo žodžiu raidą ir jo, kaip vieno iš sudedamųjų simbolinio kapitalo kūrimo elementų, svarbą. Straipsnyje tiriamas vertimas žodžiu diplomatinėje aplinkoje Estijos Respublikai siekiant tarptautinio nepriklausomos visavertės valstybės statuso pripažinimo pasaulio politikoje. Šiame darbe daug nuveikė ir Estijos vertėjai žodžiu. Jų indėlis į simbolinio kapitalo kūrimą 1918–1940 m. aptariamas remiantis 36 prisiminimų knygomis, Estijos literatūros muziejaus kolekcijos laikraščių straipsniais, kuriuose minimas vertimas žodžiu, diplomatinio susirašėjimo medžiaga ir 1919–1920 m. Tartu Taikos derybų su Rusija protokolais, saugomais Valstybiniame Estijos archyve.