

Ternary oppositions, Estonian three-way quantity contrast, and the Baltic polytonic Sprachbund

Although most linguists believe that everything in language is governed by dichotomy, linguistic ternary oppositions are quite common, e.g. 3 persons, locative cases in triads, oral stops (b, d, g; p, t, k; p^h, t^h, k^h), etc. Moreover, a stop itself may form a ternary quantity/tonal opposition, found, e.g. in Icelandic (V^hC'C, VC:, and V:^hC) and Northern Swedish dialects (V:C, VC, and V^hC).

Frans Plank, in “Das Grammatische Raritätenkabinett”, catalogues under *rarissimum* Estonian, Livonian, and Saami (all Uralic) as dubious cases for a three-way contrast of both vowels and consonants.

In this paper it will be argued that one should take a look on the ternary quantity opposition in two levels. On the one hand, a vowel or consonant (cluster) can occur in ternary oppositions, while on the other hand, such vowels or consonants or clusters with ternary oppositions behave as distinct sounds (phonemes) able to distinguish minimal pairs or minimal sets.

The Estonian language is famous for its three-way quantity oppositions – Q1, Q2, and Q3, or short, long, and overlong, respectively. It is important to note that minimal pairs with binary quantity oppositions are absolutely typical of Estonian. Ternary sets are occasional and very few, e.g.:

Q1	Q2	Q3
<i>koli</i> [koli] ‘junk’	<i>kooli</i> [ko:li] ‘school.GEN’	<i>kooli</i> [ko::li] ‘school.PART/ADI’
<i>löma</i> [löma] ‘squashed’	<i>lööma</i> [lö:ma] ‘scrap’	<i>lööma</i> [lö::ma] ‘to beat’

In Livonian, too, there exist ternary vowel patterns (V, V:, and V::) and ternary and even quaternary consonant clusters (C, CC, C·C, and stød+CC), but they are not distinctive for minimal sets. The same also applies, with some exceptions, to Saami languages (dialects), where there are three contrasting quantities in qualitatively identical consonant centres.

At the same time, one can find a three-way quantity contrast of vowels and corresponding minimal pairs and sets in German dialects (Hamburg and Cologne areas; in Cologne it is called the “rheinische Schärfung”), e.g. the Low German dialect of

Hamburg-Geest: [vit] ‘white’, [vi:t] ‘far, wide’, and [vi::t] ‘willow’. Sonorants (l, r) can also participate in this process, maybe as part of syllable nucleus.

In sum, it seems that the Estonian three-way quantity contrast is unique in that (1) both vowels and most consonants participate in it and (2) this contrast is phonological, serving as a basis for minimal pair discrimination. At the same time, the phenomenon is characteristic of a much larger area encompassing the Baltic polytonic Sprachbund, where the ternary quantity distinction has developed in different forms and ways.