

Estonian Language





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ESTONIAN LANGUAGE

Once upon a time, there were very many people around and they could not get along, so Grandfather decided to disperse them around the world and give all of them their own customs, language and name. Each nation had to gather on the Cauldron Hill, to receive their name and tongue. Grandfather set about cooking the tongues, but the water hadn't even started boiling when the first nation arrived. 'Look at you, you have got up early. I like that! You must name yourselves my first nation and my own tongue must be yours, too.' Those diligent people were of course the Estonians. This is how Estonians got their name and tongue.

F. R. Faehlmann *The Cooking of Tongues* 1841

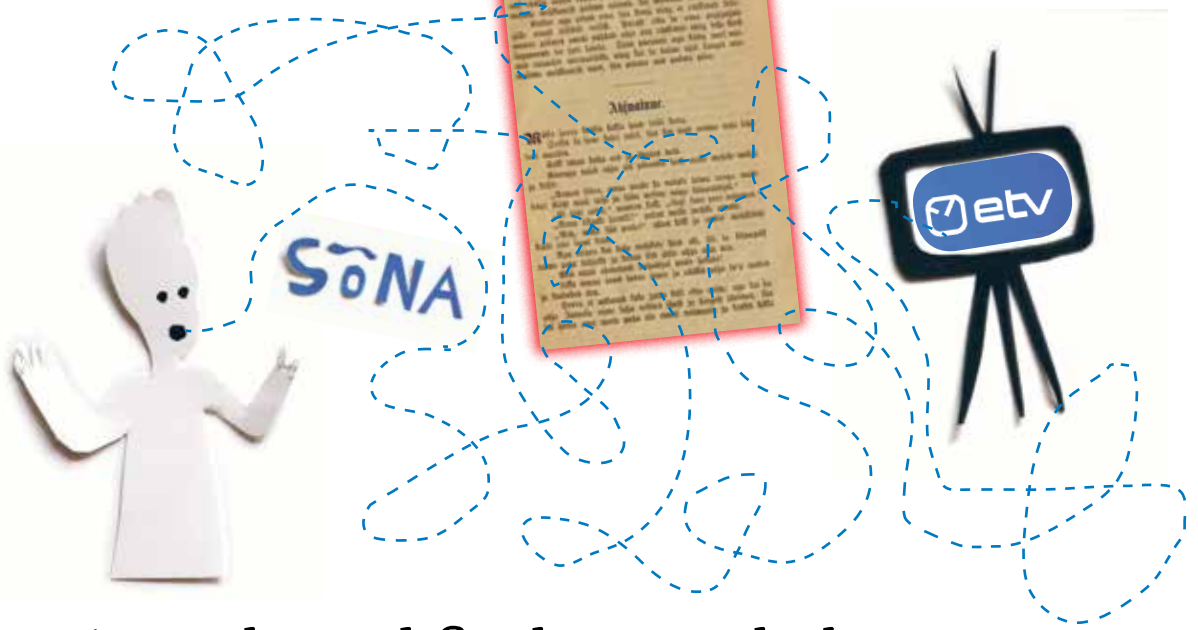
¹ "Keelte keetmine" in the Estonian original

Estonian as a mother tongue is spoken by a little over 1 million people, about 900 000 of them in Estonia. These numbers are approximately 8 times smaller than the population of London, and 3 times smaller than that of Berlin. Estonian is also used daily by about a couple of hundred thousand people who do not speak it as their first language. In addition, Estonian is spoken by over 100 000 expatriates and their offspring in Finland, Sweden, Canada, USA, Australia, Ireland and Great Britain. Despite the relatively small number of Estonians, Estonian is the official language of the Republic of Estonia and one of the official languages of the EU. It is a language used in political and business communication, as well as in science.

To emphasise the importance of the Estonian language as a marker of national identity, in 2007, the constitutional committee of the Parliament of Estonia decided to amend the preamble of the Estonian constitution to guarantee the preservation of the Estonian language (along with the Estonian nation and culture) through the ages. Keeping the Estonian language alive is our modest contribution to cultural diversity in the world.

Approximately 3000 books (including a few dozen novels) and other publications are issued in Estonian annually. Hundreds of translated books from most European languages, as well as Japanese, Chinese, Arabic etc, are published in Estonian. There are various private Estonian-language TV and radio stations, in addition to the Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR). About a dozen Estonian-language films are released every year. Estonia has been gaining a reputation as e-Estonia, and therefore it makes sense that the Estonian language is also widely used on the Internet. Today, Estonian is the 39th most used language on the Internet, and approximately 0.1% of websites feature content in Estonian.





A good word finds a good place²

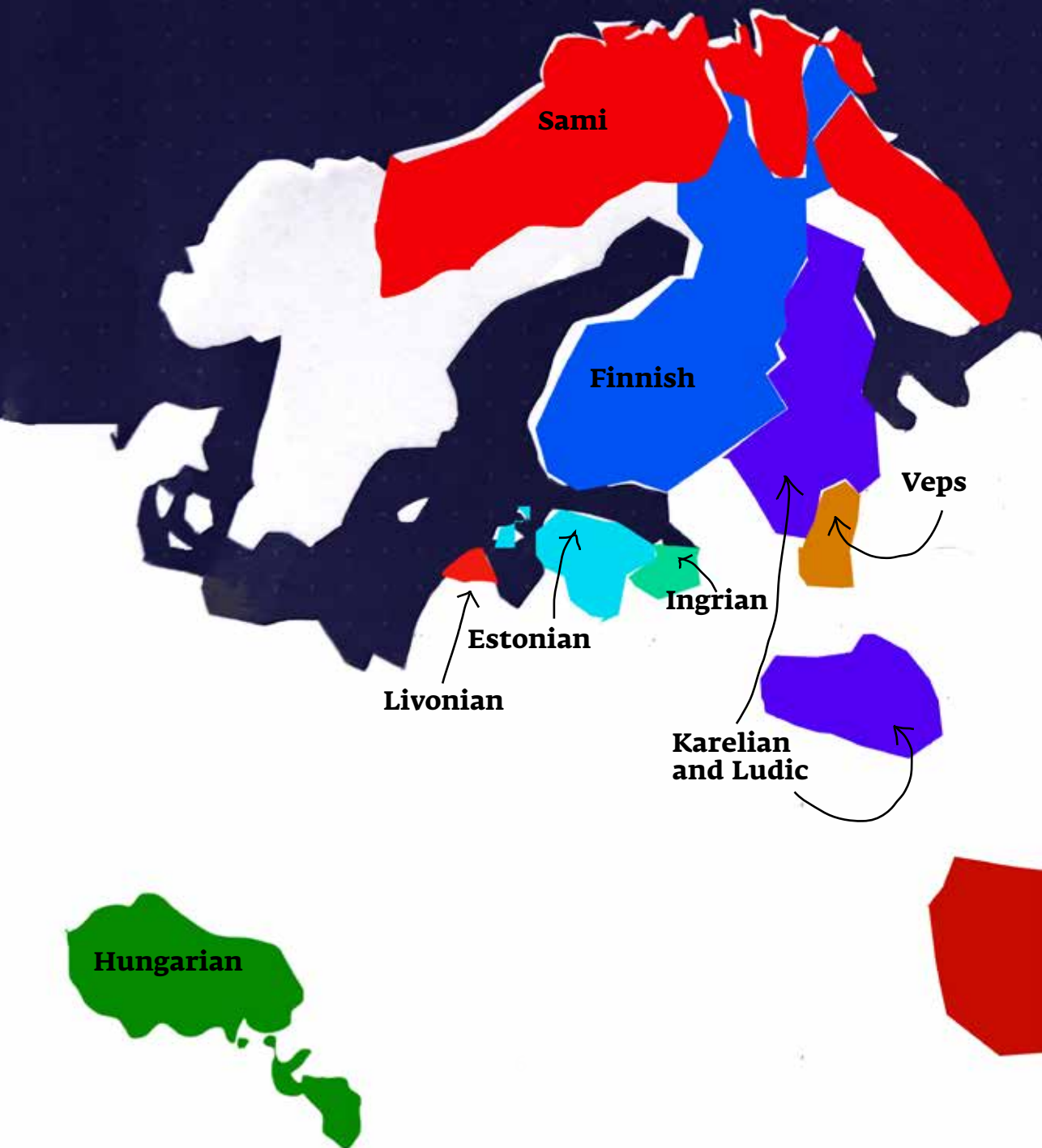
The Family and Development of the Estonian Language

Estonian territory was inhabited approximately 11 000 years ago, when the continental glacier retreated, but speakers of Finno-Ugric language probably arrived about 3500 years ago, mixing with the tribes that were already living here and speaking a language unknown to us. The Finno-Ugric tribes that made it to the Estonian territory spoke in the west Uralic dialect, which in time evolved into the Proto-Baltic-Finnic language.

Unlike most other European languages, which are Indo-European (e.g. Germanic, Slavonic, Romance and Celtic, but also Greek and Albanian, languages), the Estonian language belongs to the Finno-Ugric, or Uralic, language group. Besides Estonian, the group comprises about thirty languages,

largest of which are Hungarian and Finnish. Although in the past the Uralic languages used to be spoken in large areas of the European part of today's Russia, nowadays only small Uralic language enclaves remain along the central Volga valley, and on both sides of the Ural Mountains. The larger languages are Mari, Erzya, Moksha, Udmurt and Komi. Finnish and Estonian, spoken on opposite shores of the Gulf of Finland, are closely related languages, kind of like Italian and Spanish, or German and Dutch, and northern Estonians are usually able to understand texts in simple Finnish. The languages of Estonia's neighbours – Latvian, Russian and Swedish – are not related to Estonian; however, the Estonian language has borrowed considerably from all of them.

² 'Hea sõna leiab hea paiga' – Estonian proverb



Sami

Finnish

Veps

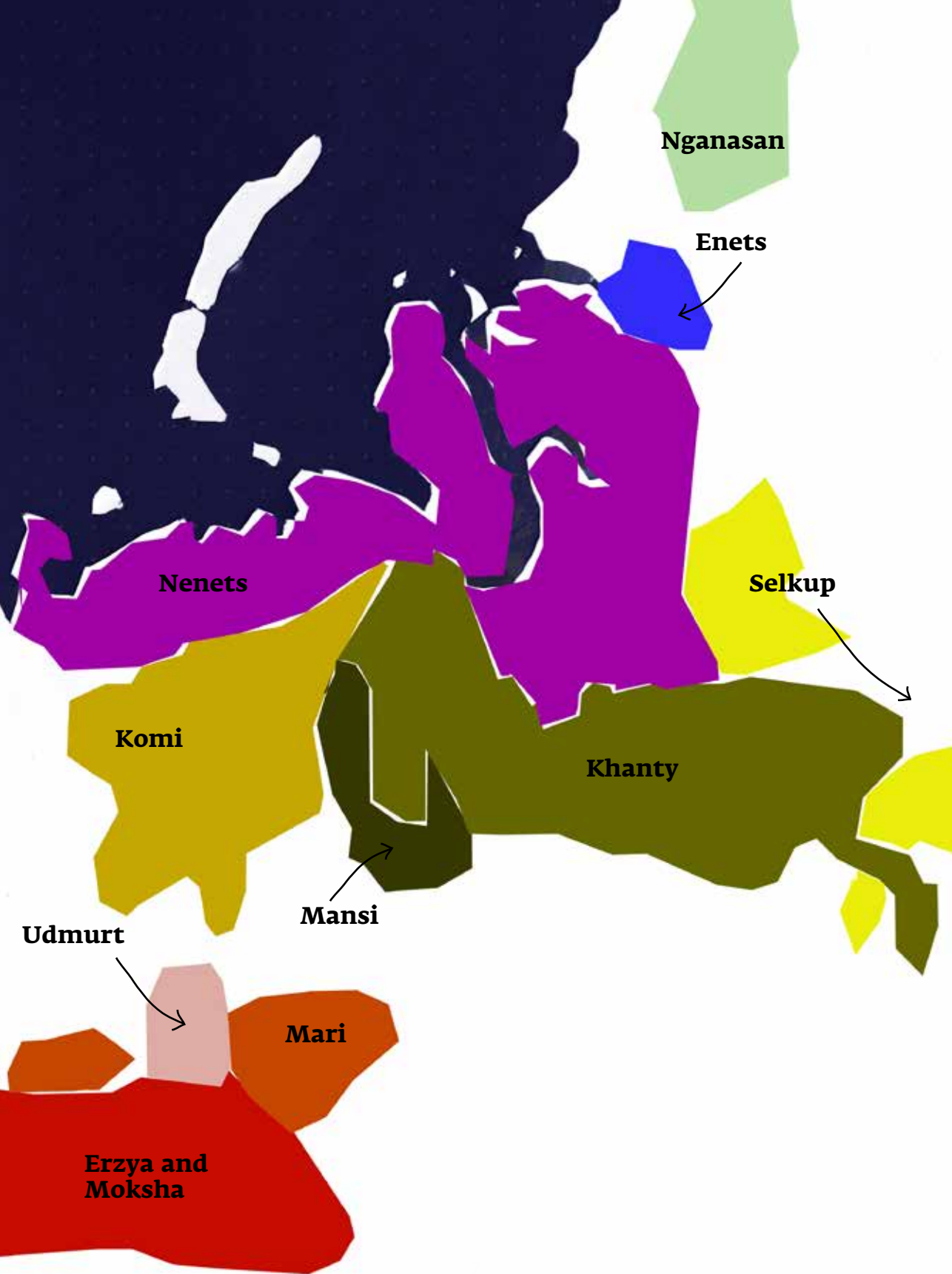
Ingrian

Estonian

Livonian

**Karelian
and Ludic**

Hungarian



Estonians have suffered various wars and famines on the southern shore of the Gulf of Finland; nonetheless, they have survived and built their own state. ‘Words are mightier than any army’³, as the popular Estonian proverb goes.

On the other hand, our close linguistic relations in the south and east – the Livonians and the Votes – are dying out, by being assimilated into Latvian and Russian cultures respectively.

The following table will demonstrate some similarities and differences between the Estonian language and its relatives, and neighbours:

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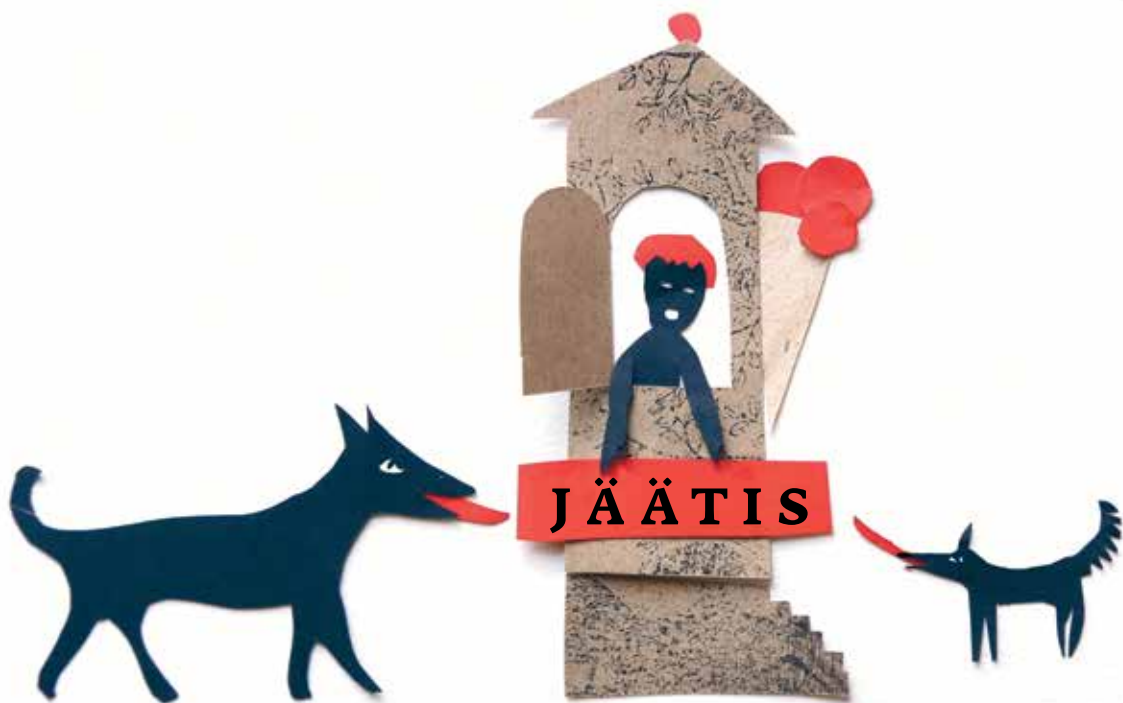
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Estonian	Finnish	Hungarian	Latvian	Russian	Swedish	English
üks	yksi	egy	viens	один	en	one
kaks	kaksi	kettő	divi	два	två	two
viis	viisi	öt	pieci	пять	fem	five
käsi	käsi	kéz	roka	рука	hand	hand
veri	veri	vér	asinis	кровь	blod	blood
vesi	vesi	víz	ūdens	вода	vatten	water

³ 'Sõna vägi on suurem kui sõjavägi' – Estonian proverb, similar in meaning to 'The pen is mightier than the sword'



Not even a dog's tongue can erase what is written⁴

History of the Estonian Literary Language

For a long time, Estonians used to be called countryfolk and their language country language. It could be said that for quite a while Estonians did not know they were Estonians. Eventually, the countryfolk, the peasantry, morphed into a nation proper due to the development of the written word, which nurtured the development of national self-awareness.

⁴ 'Mis kirjutatud on, seda ei laku koergi maha' – Estonian proverb

The first words in Estonian were recorded in *The Livonian Chronicle of Henry*, written in Latin in the thirteenth century. But we can truly speak of the emergence of the Estonian literary language in the sixteenth century, in conjunction with the invention of the printing press and the spread of the Reformation. The first partially preserved book in Estonian, the *Wanradt-Koell Catechism*, was printed in Wittenberg in 1535. The first Estonian grammar dates from 1637.

In the seventeenth century, two literary languages developed on the Estonian territory – languages of Tallinn (north) and Tartu (south). To be sure, the northern and southern dialects of Estonian were indeed quite different. Until the creation of a common literary language, the south Estonian language was significantly more prevalent than the north Estonian language. With regards to secular literature, the languages of Tallinn and Tartu were on equal footing. In 1739, the Bible was published in full in north Estonian. The common literary language eventually emerged in the nineteenth century, based on the north Estonian central dialect.

The middle of the nineteenth century saw the propagation of a new, totally different orthography, which became the norm within a couple of decades. And in the nineteenth century, the terms ‘Estonians’ and ‘Estonian language’ came into use thanks to journalism in the Estonian language. Consequently, Estonians could forget about ‘countryfolk’ and ‘country language’, and relish their new denominations.

In 1919, the University of Tartu started using Estonian as the language of instruction, and great efforts were made to develop Estonian into a modern literary language. This meant that the south Estonian language was banished from the so-called cultured oral and written word, and it remained ostracised for a long time. It is rumoured that Võro-speaking children were mocked in schools even in the 1970s.

Estonian language has evolved from dialects. There are 8 dialect groups, and the literary language is mainly based on the central dialect. Other dialects are: north-eastern coastal, the islands, western, eastern, Mulgi, Tartu and Võro (incl. Seto).

Today, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, Võro (with appr. 75 000 speakers) is the only southern dialect used as a home language as well as a re-emerging literary language; Seto is spoken as a home language by over 12 000 speakers. Fluency in Tartu or Mulgi dialects has become rare; however, according to the census of 2011, there are over 9000 speakers of Mulgi and 4000 of Tartu dialect.



öö pikK öö
* öö pikK öö

KRAAKS!



* “Öö pikk! Öö pikk!” This is what the nightingale says in Estonian. ‘Öö pikk’ means ‘night is long’, and the two words together sound like ‘ööbik’, or ‘nightingale’.

But the caw of a crow in Estonian sounds like this: “Kraaks!”

Bird’s voice shapes its song⁵

Estonian Alphabet and Pronunciation

There are 32 letters in the Estonian alphabet. However, the letters C, Q, W, X, and Y are only used in foreign proper names and foreign quoted words (e.g. New York, Quito, CV, WC). The letters Ff, Šš, Zz and Žž are used in words and names of foreign origin.

Letters with umlauts (ä, ö, ü) are also used in Estonian, influenced by the German language. In 1816, O. W. Masing started using the letter Õ, for the mid central vowel. The German W was replaced by V in 1920.

⁵ ‘Nõnda kui linnu hääl on, nõnda ta laulab’ – Estonian proverb

Written Estonian resembles its pronunciation, but not all markers of meaning are reflected in writing. For instance, some consonants (n, t, s, l) may be palatalised, but this is not shown in writing.

A popular legend among Estonians claims that once upon a time, at a beauty pageant for languages Estonian was the runner-up after Italian. The sentence that had almost won it for Estonian, was ‘Sõida tasa üle silla⁶’.

⁶ ‘Drive gently over the bridge’

Be that as it may, Estonian language does stand out with its abundance of vowels and lack of sibilants. There are numerous diphthongs in the Estonian language: 28 different diphthongs (e.g. ai, au, ea, ui, äe, üi, õe, öe, õi), 36 including those in words of foreign origin (e.g. üa, üo). In Estonian, a word might consist of only a vowel or a diphthong, such as *öö* (night), *ei* (no), *õu* (yard), *äi* (father-in-law).

In Estonian words stress falls almost always on the first syllable, and only in words of foreign origin may a latter syllable be accented (e.g. *demokraatia* 'democracy', *fikseerima* 'to fix').

By the by, in contrast to many Indo-European languages, there is no grammatical gender in the Estonian language.

Twist a word three times in your mouth before you say it⁷

The Declension and Conjugation of Estonian Words



One of the more prominent characteristics of the Estonian language is the multitude of cases – there are 14 cases in standard Estonian. Nouns decline both in singular and in plural forms; however, the accompanying adjective or pronoun only agrees with the noun in some cases.

⁷ 'Pööra sõna suus enne kolm korda ümber, kui sa ta välja ütled' – Estonian proverb, similar in meaning to 'Think before you speak'



For example:

	ainsus (singular)	mitmus (plural)
Nimetav – Nominative	punane lind (red bird)	punased linnud (red birds)
Omastav - Genitive	punase linnu	punaste lindude
Osastav - Partitive	punast lindu	punaseid linde
Sisseütlev - Illative	punasesse lindu	punastesse lindudesse
Seesütlev - Inessive	punases linnus	punastes lindudes
Seestütlev - Elative	punasest linnust	punastest lindudest
Alaleütlev - Allative	punasele linnule	punastele lindudele
Alalütlev - Adessive	punasel linnul	punastel lindudel
Alaltütlev - Ablative	punaselt linnult	punastelt lindudelt
Saav - Translative	punaseks linnuks	punasteks lindudeks
Rajav - Terminative	punase linnuni	punaste lindudeni
Olev - Essive	punase linnuna	punaste lindudena
Ilmaütlev - Abessive	punase linnuta	punaste lindudeta
Kaasaütlev - Comitative	punase linnuga	punaste lindudega

Another thing that could potentially cause trouble for someone trying to learn Estonian, is the use of two infinitives (ending in *-DA/-TA*, and *-MA*), which are dependent on the main word. There is no precise rule regarding that, so one simply must remember which verb takes which infinitive, for example:

<i>Tahan</i>	<i>võin</i>	<i>tohin</i>	<i>oskan</i>	<i>julgen</i>	<i>on vaja</i>	<i>sõita</i>
(I) want	may	am allowed	am able	dare	have	(to) drive
<i>Lähen</i>	<i>viin</i>	<i>kutsun</i>	<i>hakkan</i>	<i>pean</i>	<i>olen nõus</i>	<i>sõitma</i>
(I (am)) going	taking	inviting	will	must	agree	(to) drive



Leave the last word unspoken⁸

Estonian Sentence Structure

The order of words in a sentence is quite relaxed in Estonian, but the main sequence is usually SVO (subject-verb-object) – that is, the important things should be said at the start of a sentence. But don't worry if you mess up the order of words, there's a great chance you'll be understood anyway!

For example, here are a few ways of saying

'Stars
tähti



were seen
nähti



often
tihti



in the sky':
taevas



Tihti

nähti

taevas

tähti.

Tähti

nähti

tihti

taevas.

Taevas

nähti

tähti

tihti.

Tihti

nähti

tähti

taevas.

Taevas

nähti

tihti

tähti.

Tähti

nähti

taevas

tihti.



The inflected verb is usually the second word in a sentence, although a sentence is comprehensible even if the verb is at the very end:

Taevas

tihti

tähti

nähti.



⁸ 'Viimane sõna jäta ütlemata' – Estonian proverb, somewhat similar in meaning to 'Word spoken is past recalling'

Take a man at his word, a bull by his horn⁹

Estonian Vocabulary



For a small language, Estonian vocabulary is remarkably rich. Due to contacts with different neighbouring languages, lots of words have been borrowed through the ages, and often words with similar meaning from different languages are used concurrently in Estonian.

The Estonian language has been subject to conscious development, so that it could be considered a truly literary, and scientific, language. Some gaps in the vocabulary have been filled by the creation of artificial roots. That

⁹ 'Meest sõnast, härja sarvest' – Estonian proverb, similar in meaning to 'A man is only as good as his word'

tradition originated in the 1930s. It involved studying the natural formation principles of Estonian words – their algorithms, so to speak – to use that as a foundation for the construction of natural-sounding neologisms. Hundreds of new roots were generated, and almost a hundred of them are still used today: e.g. *embama* (to embrace), *evima* (to have), *laip* (corpse), *mõrv* (murder), *roim* (crime, murder), *laup* (forehead), *lünk* (gap), *mee-nutama* (to recollect).

Today many Estonians probably don't even know that many words in their everyday vocabulary were 'made to order'.

It is interesting to note that one of the new words that was proposed as an addition to the Estonian language back then was the verb *laikima* ('to like', transliterated and adapted into Estonian). Back then, the verb was intended to mean *välja nägema* (to look like). This, it has to be said, did not take off, and for most of the twentieth century Estonians were without a single 'like', or *laik*. The twenty-first century, however, brought 'likes' (*laigid*) into everyday use – borrowed from social media, the word now has the same meaning in Estonian as it does in English. Perhaps unsurprisingly, English is the biggest influencer of Estonian vocabulary today.

Although language regulators always try to norm the meanings of words, language often develops its own rules. As an example, here are some derivatives of the root *näge-*: *nägema* (to see), *nägu* (face), *nägija* (one that sees), *nähtmatu* (invisible), *nähtus* (event), *nähtaval* (visible), *näht* (symptom), *nähtavus* (visibility), *nägemus* (vision), *nägemuslik* (visionary), *nägus* (pretty), *nägupidi* (by face), etc.



nägija (one that sees)

nägema (to see)



nägu (face)

nägus (pretty)



nähtus (event)



nägemuslik (visionary)



nägemus (vision))

One word awakens another¹⁰

Same Word, Different Meaning

Many a word in the Estonian language corresponds to a word from another language, whether it be in terms of spelling or pronunciation. However, sometimes their meanings are rather dissimilar. Therefore, in order to prevent (or provoke) any misunderstandings, here's a little pocket dictionary:

korv	basket	Swedish		'sausage'
hallitus	mould	Finnish		'government'
hell	gentle	English		'hell'
sink	ham	English		'sink'
hunt	wolf	English		'hunt'
keel	tongue	English		'keel'
		Dutch		'throat'
arm	love/scar	English, Danish, Swedish, Dutch		'arm' (body part)
laut	barn	German Laut		'loud'
		Indonesian, Malay		'sea'
leib	bread	German Leib		'body'
lehm	cow	German Lehm		'clay'
kabe	draughts	Japanese	かべ	'wall'
osa	part	Japanese	おさ	'leader'

But What do Estonian Animals Say?

Of course, animals like to express their views on the affairs of the world, too. Here's a quick glance at the vocabulary of Estonian animals:

Lehm (cow)	muu	ammuma	(moo, to moo)
Siga (pig)	rõh-rõh	rõhkima	(oink, to oink)
Hobune (horse)	ih-haa	hirnuma	(neigh, to neigh)
Lammas (sheep)	mää	määgima	(baa, to baa)
Koer (dog)	auh-auh	haukuma	(woof, to woof)
Kass (cat)	näu	näuguma	(miaow, to miaow)
Kukk (rooster)	kikerikii	kirema	(cock-a-doodle-doo, to crow)

¹⁰ 'Üks sõna äratab teist' – Estonian proverb, similar in meaning to 'One word leads to another'

And What Does Water Say?

Even though today most Estonians are urbanised, they still have strong connections to nature, and this is exemplified by a rich vocabulary dedicated to descriptions of the sounds of nature. For example, in Estonian you could describe the swish or whoosh of wind or water with one or two of these words: *suhin, vuhin, vihin, kahin, kohin, kōhin, susin, sisin, pahin, tuhin, lahin, mühin, visin, vusin, nahin*, etc.

And these were the sounds Grandfather made when nations kept coming to receive their tongues. Those that were late were given worse tongues and names.

F. R. Faehlmann
The Cooking of Tongues 1841



Doesn't burn in fire, drown in water, rot in earth?¹¹

Names of Estonians

In the ancient past, Estonians had their own names, but the arrival of Christianity brought along Christian names, which were adapted to make them more palatable to Estonians. Men's

names Andres, Margus, Jüri, Peeter, Jaan, Tõnu, Siim, Toomas, and women's names Kadri, Katrin, Anne, Anu, Maret, Piret, Tiina – are adaptations of names of Christian saints. At the same time, Estonians also use both old and new Estonian names, and they

¹¹ 'Tules ei põle, vees ei upu, mullas ei mädane?' – Estonian riddle. The answer is 'name' (*nimi*)

often mean something; e.g. men: Aare (treasure), Kalju (rock), Koit (dawn), Agu (daybreak), Ott (bear); and women: Aita (help), Laine (wave), Leelo (song), Virve (wavelet), Kaja (echo), Luule (poetry). Nowadays people like to use names from the Bible, but also names of Scandinavian and Anglo-American origin.

It is often difficult to ascertain a person's gender by their name, since Estonians' names are gender-neutral.

Estonians received their surnames from the Baltic German landowners in the first half of the nineteenth century, and

among those were many German names, sometimes also a few rude Estonian names. In the 1930s, as part of a national campaign, over 200 000 Estonians took a new, Estonian surname. Many Estonian surnames have a certain meaning. There are lots of trees and animals, but many other natural phenomena are also represented: *Tamm* (oak), *Saar* (ash), *Kask* (birch), *Kuusik* (fir), *Pärn* (linden), *Vaher* (maple), *Kaasik* (birch grove), *Mägi* (mountain), *Kivi* (stone), *Oja* (brook), *Meri* (sea), *Ilves* (lynx), *Karu* (bear), *Põder* (moose), *Luik* (swan), *Teder* (grouse), *Kukk* (rooster), *Kull* (hawk), *Hirv* (deer) and *Rebane* (fox).



Estonian language is a many-splendoured thing

Estonian language has helped Estonians achieve quite a lot; the power of our language has aided us in overcoming some rather tough times. Estonian poet Contra (Margus Kõnnula) has said that the Estonian tongue is like the woodpecker's tongue, which is much longer than imagined, and which is shaped like a harpoon to assist with providing the user with sustenance.

To encourage anyone interested in learning Estonian, the Estonian linguist Tõnu Tender has said, 'Languages of the world may be compared to mountains with varying profiles. For example, the English language (or its simplified version, to be exact) is at first (up to the intermediate level) relatively easy, but to reach the apex of proficiency in English (or any other language) takes a lot of toil and trouble. Therefore, I do not agree with those that consider the Estonian language devilishly difficult. There are countless examples of foreigners who have fairly quickly become quite fluent in Estonian'.

The Grandfather of the folk tale has done his job – all the nations of the world have gotten their tongues. We, humans, now have the duty to keep them alive, share them, and continue to learn to understand each other and the world through those languages. And we, Estonians, would be exceedingly happy to share our little language with you!







„Tere hommikust!”
Good morning!



Good day!

„Tere päevast!”



Hello/Hi!

„Tere!”



Good evening!
„Tere õhtust!”



„Head aega!”	Goodbye!
„Nägemist!”	See you!
„Head õhtut!”	Good evening!
„Head ööd!”	Good night!



„Palju õnne!”
Congratulations!

„Tänan!”
Thank you!!



„Palun!” Here you are! / Please

„Aitäh!” Thank you!

„Head isu!” Bon appétit!





“I have“:

“I have... a daughter, a son, a wife, a husband,
a cat, a dog, a grandmother, a grandfather.”

„Minul on“:

„Mul on ... tütar, poeg, naine, mees,
kass, koer, vanaema, vanaisa.”



tütar



poeg



naine



mees



kass



koer



vanaema



vanaisa

Did you know that the Estonian language...

- uses a lot of vowels, and they can be short, long, or extra long
- is only spoken as a mother tongue by 1 million people (with 1.3 million speakers overall)
- boasts an abundant scientific terminology
- is a medium of original and translated literature
- does not have grammatical genders
- has a lot of cases, but lacks the accusative, and the dative case
- is in the top 40 of the most used languages on the Internet

