

# Estonian Language





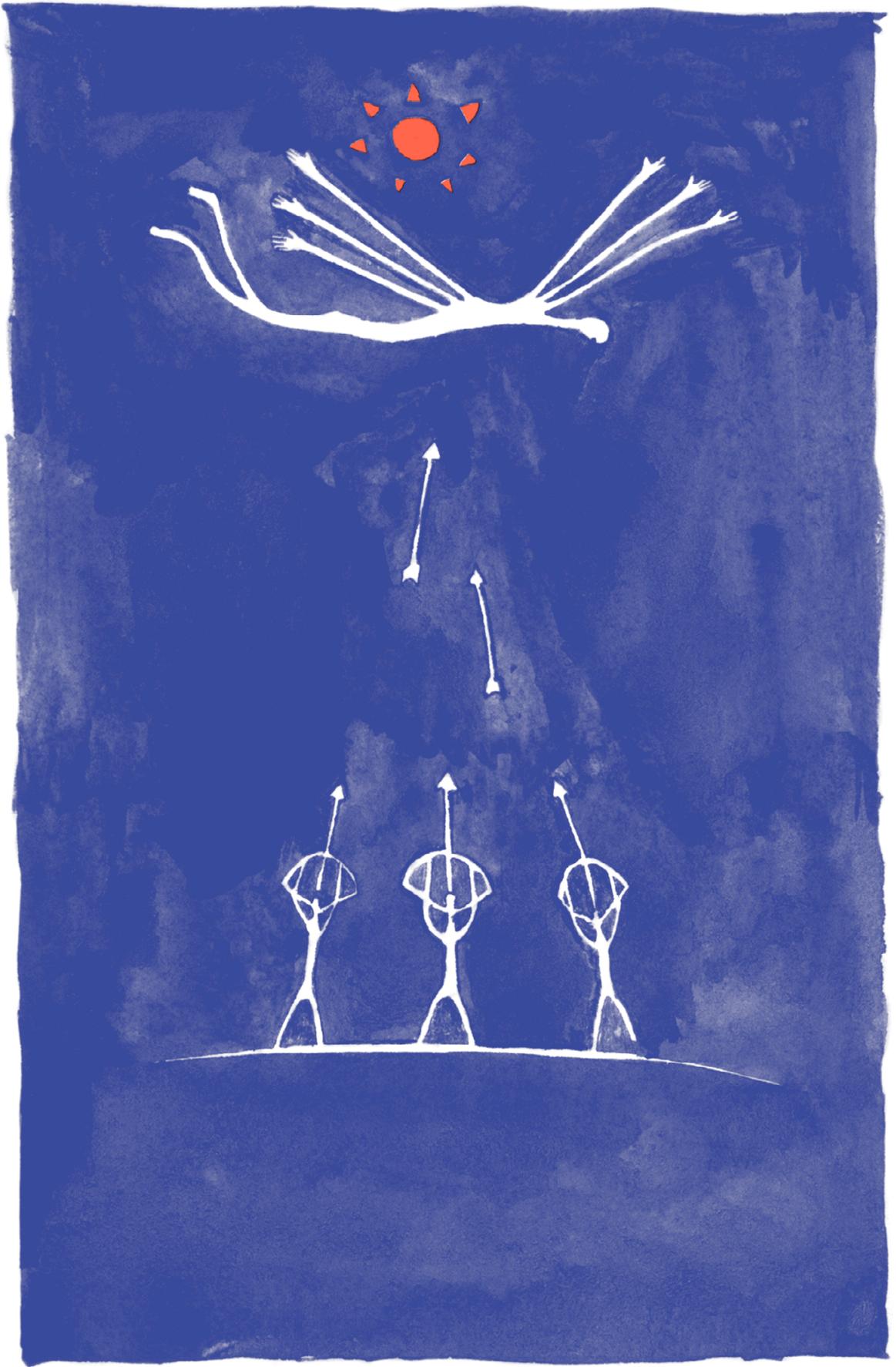
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# Estonian Language

Urmas Sutrop

Estonian is used in the army...  
aviation... theatre



# The Estonian language

The ancestors of the Estonians arrived at the Baltic Sea 11 000 years ago when the mainland glaciers of the last Ice Age had retreated from the area now designated as Estonia. The first settlers who followed the reindeer herds came here from south, from Central Europe. Although the vocabulary and grammar of the language used by people in those days have changed beyond recognition, the mentality of the tundra hunters of thousands of years ago can be still perceived in modern Estonian.

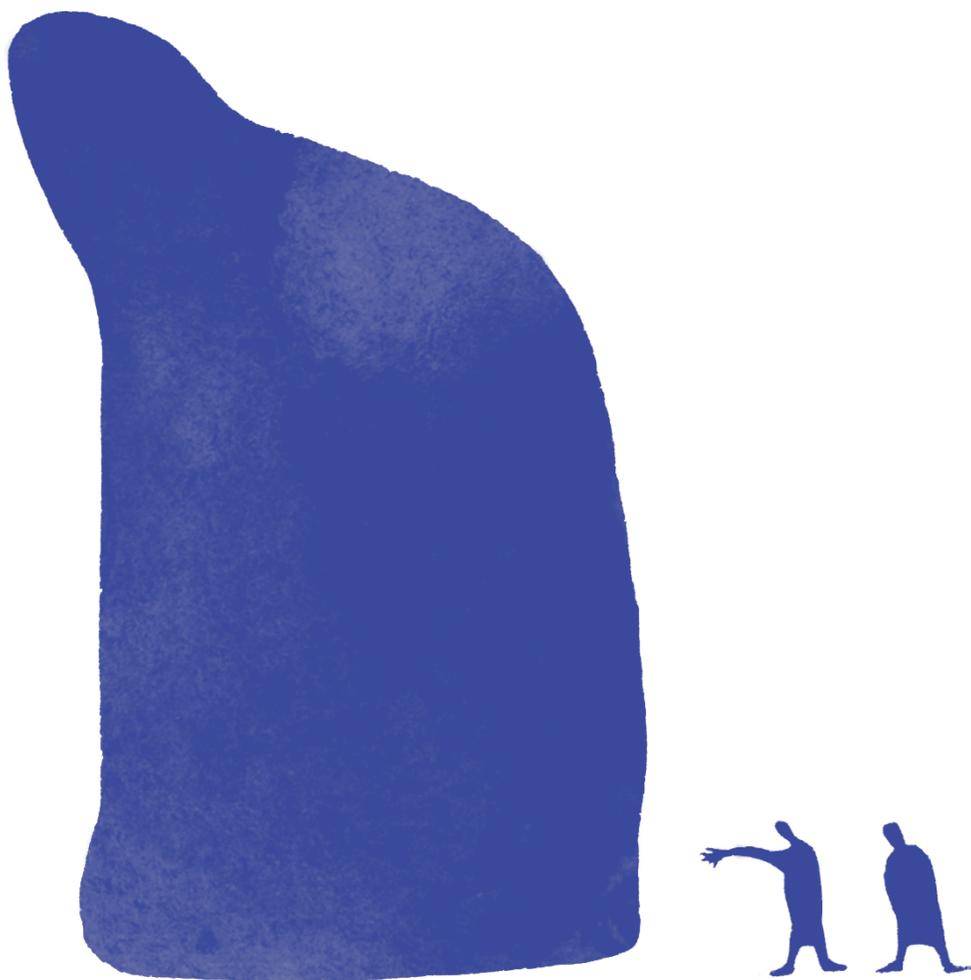
The majority of European languages belong to the Indo-European language group (e.g. Spanish, Polish, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Albanian, Romany, Greek or Welsh). Of the ancient European languages, once so widespread throughout the continent, Basque in the Pyrenees, the Finno-Ugric languages in the North and Central Europe, and Caucasian languages (e.g. Georgian) in the southeastern corner of Europe have managed to survive.

The Estonian language belongs to the Finnic branch of Finno-Ugric group of languages. It is not therefore related to the neighbouring Indo-European languages such as Russian, Latvian and Swedish. Finnish, Hungarian and Estonian are the best known of the Finno-Ugric languages; rather less known are the following smaller languages of the same language group: South Estonian, Votic, Livonian, Ingrian, Veps, Karelian, Ludic, Sami, Erzya, Moksha, Mari, Udmurt, Komi, Mansi and Khanty spoken from Scandinavia to Siberia.

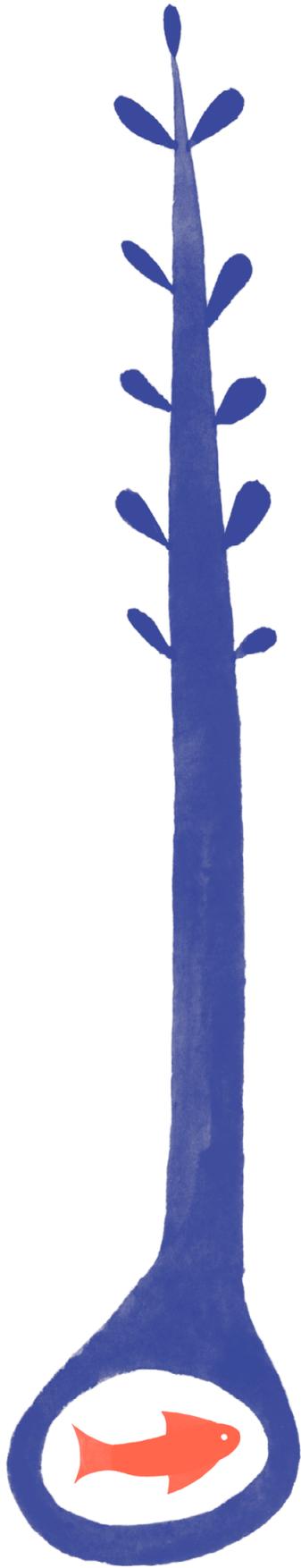
Estonian differs from its closest large related language, Finnish, at least as much as English differs from Frisian. The difference between Estonian and Hungarian is about as significant as between German and Persian.

Along with Icelandic, Estonian is at present one of the smallest languages in the world that fulfils all the functions necessary for an independent state to 'perform' linguistically. Teaching, at both primary school and university level, is in Estonian; it is also the language of modern science (molecular biology, astronomy, computer science, semiotics, etc.). Estonian is used in the army, in the theatre, aviation, journalism — in all walks of life. Estonian is the only official language in Estonia in local government and state institutions. Since 2004 Estonian is an official language of the European Union.

# First attempts to describe the Estonian language...



Kala on puu juures  
'A fish is near the tree'  
Literally: 'A fish is in the  
root of a tree'



As mother tongue, Estonian is spoken by approximately 1 107 000 people in the world. About 887000 of them live in Estonia, and ca 220000 are scattered over Sweden, Canada, USA, Russia, Australia, Finland, Germany and other countries. There are altogether about 1 286 000 speakers of Estonian.

The first attempts to describe the Estonian language scientifically were undertaken in the early 17th century. In 1803, a lectureship of the Estonian language was established at what was then the German-language University of Tartu, founded in 1632. With the spread of the ideas of Enlightenment, the interest of the Baltic German Estophiles in the local language and culture increased. During the 19th century, the first educated Estonians began publishing scholarly research of their mother tongue. The first doctor of the Finno-Ugric languages of Estonian origin was Mihkel Veske who did research into the history of the Estonian language in the 1870s; the Society of Estonian Literati, established in 1871, undertook the task of standardising the common language.

In 1919, a professorship of the Estonian language was established at the University of Tartu where Estonian became the language of study in the same year. At present, research on the Estonian language-related topics is being carried out at the Institute of the Estonian Language in Tallinn, at the University of Tartu, at the Tallinn University and at various research institutions all over the world.

The relations between languages can often be seen from the similarities in numeric systems:

	Hungarian	Finnish	Estonian	Latvian	Russian	English
1	egy	yksi	üks	viens	odin	one
2	kettő	kaksi	kaks	divi	dva	two
3	három	kolme	kolm	trīs	tri	three
4	négy	neljä	neli	četri	četyre	four
5	öt	viisi	viis	pieci	pjat'	five
6	hat	kuusi	kuus	seši	šest'	six
7	hét	seitsemän	seitse	septiņi	sem'	seven
8	nyolc	kahdeksan	kaheksa	astoņi	vosem'	eight
9	kilenc	yhdeksän	üheksa	deviņi	devjat'	nine
10	tíz	kymmenen	kümme	desmit	desjat'	ten

# Language and a lingering mentality

Even the most ordinary everyday Estonian language contains numerous ancient expressions, possibly going back as far as the Ice Age.

The Estonians say *külma käes*, *vihma käes*, *päikese käes*, *tuule käes* 'in the hand of the cold, rain, sun, wind', or *ta sai koerte käest hammustada* 'he was bitten from the hand of dogs', i.e. 'he was bitten by dogs' or *ta sai nõgeste käest kõrvetada* 'he was stung from the hand of nettles'. Quite obviously, nobody any longer thinks that the wind, rain, dogs or nettles actually have hands. But in ancient times the moving, often personified natural phenomena, to say nothing about animals and plants, were believed to have certain powers. These powers, sometimes exerting control over human beings, were symbolised by a hand. Hence the contemporary Estonian *käskima* 'to order', can be translated 'to give orders with one's hand', and *käsilane* means handyman.

In all the above Estonian expressions 'hand' occurs in the singular. This is associated with the integral concept of the world of our ancestors. Everything formed a whole, a totality, also the paired parts of body which were used only in the singular. If one wanted to speak about one hand, one had to say *pool kätt* 'half a hand'. Hence the division of the holistic world into the right and left halves, right and left sides.

Even now, Estonians find their bearings spatially by using parts of the body, mostly without being aware of it themselves. If something is *kõrval* 'beside', 'next to', an Estonian speaker does not even notice that what he is actually saying is that something is 'on his ear' (*kõrv*, *kõrva* meaning 'ear' and suffix *-l* corresponding roughly to the English preposition 'on'). The Estonian postposition *peal* 'on' means literally 'on the head' (*pea* 'head' + *-l*); *juures* (*juur*, *juure* + *-s* which corresponds in modern Estonian to the English 'in' but in earlier times stood for 'near' as well) means that something or somebody is close to the speaker's *juur* 'root', i.e. the place where he touches the ground.

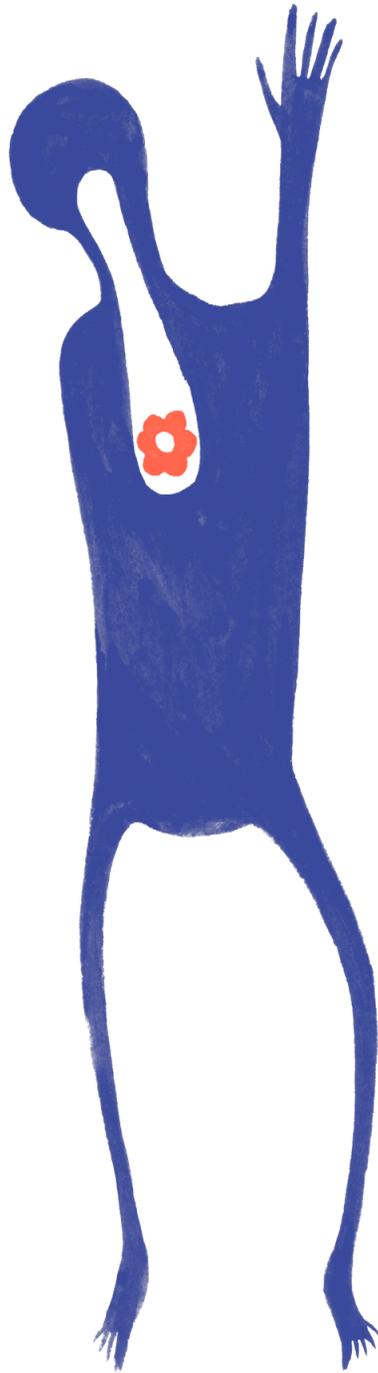




**Ingel on päikese käes**

**'An angel is in the sun'**

**Literally: 'An angel is in the hand  
of the sun'**



Johannes Aavik tried to make the  
literary tongue richer and more  
beautiful

# History

A significant proportion of linguists no longer subscribes to the theory of a language tree, approved only a dozen or so years ago. According to that theory, all Finno-Ugric languages, similar to Indo-European and other language groups, have developed from one proto-language. Consequently, doubt has been cast on a large number of assumptions about when changes occurred in pre-written Estonian, and about the time when the characteristic features became established. Several hypotheses about the development of the Estonian language during the earliest period of development up to the 13th century are now also considered to be of dubious reliability.

It is, however, unanimously agreed that ancient Estonian was influenced by various Germanic, Baltic and ancient Slavonic languages. This is proved by multiple loan words and several shifts in pronunciation (see Vocabulary p. 36).

Probably the oldest recorded instance of an Estonian word dates from the 8th century AD: in his *Cosmographia*, clergyman Aethicus Ister mentioned an island called Taraconta (Tharaconta), denoting probably either the whole of Estonia or its largest island Saaremaa. Describing Estonia as an island is not so strange as it may seem, considering that as late as the 11th century, the North German chronicler Adam of Bremen thought that Estonia and Scandinavia were parts of a large archipelago. Taraconta can be interpreted as *Taara + kond*. Taara was one of the most important gods of ancient Estonians; the affix *kond* in Estonian denotes a fellowship of people, e.g. *perekond* 'family', *sugukond* 'clan', or territorial unit, e.g. *maakond* 'county', *kihelkond* 'parish'. Thus Taraconta could easily refer to Estonians as the worshippers of Taara.

The stage of development of the Estonian language covered by more thorough written sources started in the 13th century. This was the time when German and Scandinavian crusaders reached Estonia, one of the last pagan countries in Europe. The crusades against the Estonians are described in the early 13th century in the Latin chronicle *Heinrici Chronicon Livoniae*, which already contains words and fragments of sentences in Estonian.

Numerous Estonian proper names and place names date from the 13th century as well: thus the Danish taxation list, *Liber Census Daniae*, compiled between 1219 and 1220, already includes about five hundred place names from Northern Estonia. All but fifty of them have survived until today, and offer ample comparative material, fixed in many documents, to research the language changes.

As a result of the crusades, the predominantly Low German nobility and burghers became established on the territory of Old Livonia, which covered areas of the present day Estonia and Latvia. Although the rulers of Estonia changed several times during the 700 years of foreign occupation — i.e. by Denmark, Poland, Sweden and Russia — the strongest influence on the Estonian language was exerted by Low and High German, and by the local Baltic German dialect that developed from them.

The first continuous Estonian text still extant, the *Kullamaa Manuscript*, dates from 1524–1532. This Catholic text contains two prayers — the Lord’s Prayer and the Hail Mary —, and the Creed. When the Reformation shook Northern Europe, arriving in Estonia in the early 16th century, preaching in the local languages brought about an even more pressing need to translate religious literature into the North and South Estonian.

The first Estonian grammars and dictionaries were compiled in the 17th century. From that time onwards, abundant Estonian-language literature has survived to our day.

During the National Awakening in the mid-19th century, the Estonian language rapidly advanced from being the spoken idiom of the peasants to becoming a cultural language. It began to be used in literature and science, and the first native-language discourses on Estonian were published. In 1884, Karl August Hermann published the first Estonian grammar in the Estonian language; this played a significant role in standardising the language.

At the same time, in the late 19th century, the indigenous Estonian population began calling itself by the name *eesti*, which was probably borrowed from the Swedish or German in the 17th century.

During the first decades of the 20th century, the Estonian intellectuals set themselves the conscious task of turning the Estonian language into a European cultural language. An essential part in that was played by Johannes Aavik who tried to make the literary language richer and more beautiful. He relied on the material provided by the Finnish language and Estonian dialects, but also coined artificial words and forms. Another trend, equally significant from the point of view of innovation and which focused on producing the normative forms and furthering the terminology, was set by Johannes Voldemar Veski. It is worth mentioning that the authorities had thousands of terms in science and in all other fields of life created at that period.

During the 20th century, an important role in shaping the standard language has been played by normative dictionaries. The first normative and regulative dictionary of the Estonian language appeared in 1918.

# A wobbly language family tree of the Finno-Ugric languages

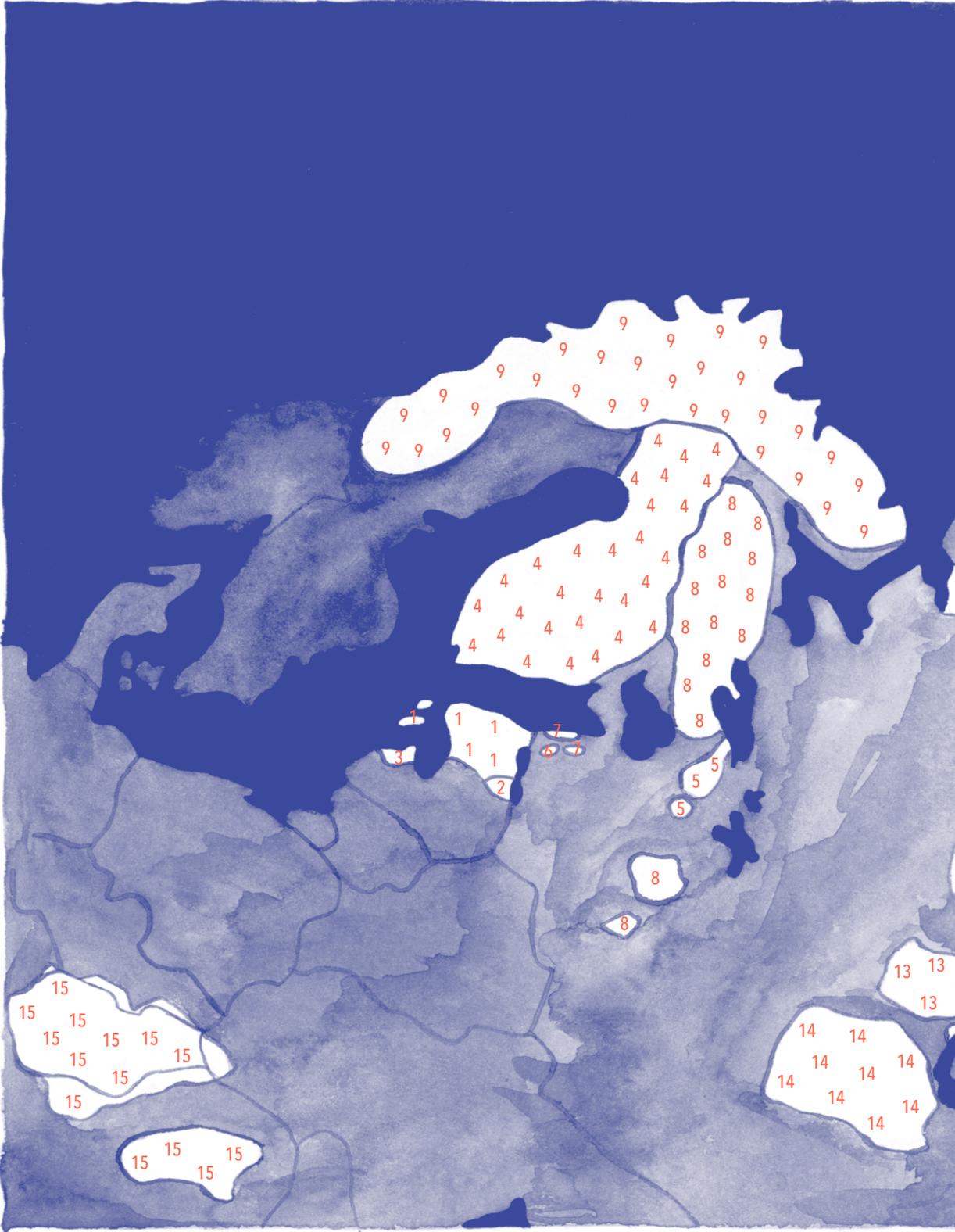
Votic Livonian Estonian Erzya Moksha Mari

Sami Ingrian Veps Karelian Finnish



Udmurt Komi Hungarian Khanty Mansi

# Finno-Ugric and Samoyedic languages



1. Estonian 2. South-Estonian 3. Livonian 4. Finnish 5. Veps 6. Votic 7. Ingrian 8. Karelian and Ludic 9. Sami 10. Komi 11. Permyak-Komi 12. Udmurt 13. Mari 14. Erzya and Moksha 15. Hungarian 16. Khanty 17. Mansi 18. Nenets 19. Enets 20. Nganasan 21. Selkup



During the years of the Soviet occupation — 1944–1991 — standardising the language and closely following the norms became a form of national resistance. This was a way of opposing the Soviet ideology, as symbolised by the Russian language. Language remained one of the most powerful tokens of Estonian identity. Neither the scientific study of Estonian, nor the use of Estonian in most of the spheres of public life including higher education, were prohibited by the Soviet authorities, and this enabled Estonians and their language to survive both Russification and colonisation.

In the 1990s, the attitude towards language norms became more open; different sociolects and linguistic variety were appreciated once again.

# Reconstructions of the Estonian language

The only existing attempt at reconstructing the North Estonian language has been presented by Alo Raun and Andrus Saareste. Nowadays, specialists consider similar reconstruction too dependent on the language-tree, and the Estonian thus restored close to Finnish to an unacceptable extent.

As in the Võro language, the glottal stop in the reconstructions is marked here by a 'q'.

'Once an old honest man had a very ill-tempered wife who scolded (and) swore the entire day from early morning to late evening and beat her poor man...'

## 1. Pre-13th century

Kõrdan oli ühdellä vanhalla auvoisalla mehellä ülin kurja nainõn, ken soimasi, kirosi tervehen pitkän päivän varhaisesta hoomikkosta hiljaisennik õhtagonnik niinkä peksi vaivaista meestänsäq...

## 2. 13th century

Kordan oli ühdelä vanhala auvosala mehelä ülin kurja nainõn, ken sõimas, kiros terveen pitkän päivän, varasõsta hoomikkosta hiljaisenniq õhtooniq niinkä peksi vaivasta meestäsäq...

## 3. 16th century

Korra oli ühel vanal auosal mehel väen kaas kuri naine, ke sõimas, kiros, terven pitkän päivän, varasest hommikost hiliseni õhtoni nink peks vaivast meestäsä...

## 4. 17th–18th centuries

Korra oli ühel vanal auusal mehel väega kuri naine, kes sõimas ja kiros terve pitka päiva, varasest ommikost ilise õhtoni ning peks vaist meest ...

## 5. 20th century

Kord oli ühel vanal ausal mehel väga kuri naine, kes sõimas ja kirus terve pika päeva, varasest hommikust hilise õhtuni ning peksis oma vaest meest...

# Dialects and layers of the Estonian language

Standard Estonian has mostly been formed from the dialects of two ancestral tribal languages — North Estonian and South Estonian. The differences between those proto-languages are reflected in both the phonetics and grammar.

Mulgi (1), Tartu (2), and Võro-Seto (3) dialects in the South Estonian language area can be clearly distinguished. The North Estonian language area includes the northeast coastal (4), eastern (5), central (6), western dialects (7) and insular dialects (8).

Several registers can be distinguished in standard Estonian; the general Estonian spoken idiom also differs greatly from the written language. In addition to regional variations resulting from dialectal background, the spoken language depends on the education and social status of the speaker. The number and distribution of Estonian sociolects is nevertheless much more modest than in major European languages. The most popular types of slang are actually those used by schoolchildren and in laboratories at various research institutes. Computers and the Internet have introduced a new type of English-based slang.

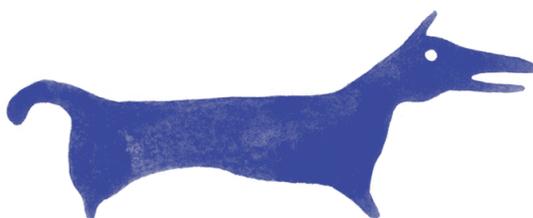
# Estonian dialects



# Estonian dialects

Our nightingale has gone elsewhere this year

Hiiumaa:	Meide ööbik aa seaesta maeale läin
Saaremaa:	Meite ööbik oo siasta mäale läind
Muhumaa:	Meite üöbik uo sieoasta mõjale läin
Läänemaa:	Meite ärjälend oo tänäkond maale läin
Vigala:	Mede künnilind uu tänabö maeale läind
Kihnu:	Mede künniljõnd ond tänävasta maalõ läin
Harju-Risti:	Mete üöbik oo tänabu maeal läin
Kuusalu:	Meie üöbik on tänävu muuale mend
Järvamaa:	Me õitselind on tänävu maale läind
Northern Virumaa:	Meie kirikiut one tänävu mojale lähänd
Vaivara:	Mei sisokaine ono (olo) tänä vuo mojale mennö
Kodavere:	Meie sisask one tänävuade mõjale lähnu
Karksi:	Mee kiriküüt' om täo muial lännü
Southern Tartumaa:	Meie tsisask om tinävu muiale lännü
Võromaa:	Mii sisask um timahavva muialõ lännüq
Setomaa:	Mii sisas'k om timahavva muialõ l'änüq
Standard Estonian:	Meie ööbik on tänävu mujale läinud



# Võro kiil

## (Võro language)

The Võro language is historically a dialect of the South Estonian language. Compared to other South Estonian dialects (Tartu and Mulgi), it has retained its characteristic features and has remained furthest from the standard written Estonian language.

Thanks to the activities of the Võro Institute and summer universities of the Võro language and culture, the Võro language has by now been standardised. The earlier South Estonian literary language, which until the early 20th century strove to form the basis for the standard Estonian literary language, was founded on the Tartu dialect. The Võro language differs from the standard Estonian by its pronunciation, word alteration, syntax and vocabulary.

Some morphological features of the Võro language are considered to be very old. For instance the 3rd person singular of the indicative mood can be either without an ending e.g. *and* 'gives', or, alternatively, with an s-ending e.g. *kirotas* 'writes'; in standard Estonian respectively *annab* and *kirjutab*. Among the Finnic languages, such double verb conjugation can be found only in the Võro, Seto and Karelian languages.

Another significant difference between standard Estonian and the Võro language is vowel harmony. There is a general rule in Finnic languages which determines that a front vowel in the first syllable (i.e. *ä*, *ö* and *ü*) can only be followed by front vowels in the successive syllables, whilst a back vowel (*a*, *o* and *u*) is followed by back vowels. There is no vowel harmony in the majority of North Estonian dialects and standard Estonian, but it exists in the Võro language; compare standard Estonian *küla* and Võro *külä*.

Differences in vocabulary between standard Estonian and the Võro language can be clearly seen in everyday speech:

Estonian	Võro	Meaning
punane	verrev	red
vend	veli	brother
soe	lämmi	warm
õde	sõssar´	sister
uus	vahtsõnõ	new
koer	pini	dog
pesema	mõskma	to wash
hunt	susi	wolf
surema	kuulma	to die
sõstar	hõrak	currant
kask	kõiv	birch
nutma	ikma	to weep
oder	kesv´	barley



Another significant difference can be noted in negations. In Võro the negative particle often follows the verb, whereas in standard Estonian it always precedes the verb:

Estonian	Võro	Meaning
sa ei anna	saq anna eiq	'you (sg.) do not give'
ma ei tule	maq tulõ õiq	'I do not come'

In standard Estonian, the particle *ei* is used in both present and past negation, e.g. *ei kirjuta* 'do(es) not write', *ei kirjutanud* 'did not write'; whereas in the south of the country the same is expressed by different particles, e.g. the present forms *ei kirotä* or *kirotä aiq* and the past forms *es kirotä* or *kirotä es*.

The Inessive case in the Võro language has an *n*-ending or an *h*-ending (almost disappeared from usage), in standard Estonian an *s*-ending.

Estonian	Võro	Meaning
külas	külän	'in the village'
metsas	mõtsah	'in the forest'

The nominative plural in Võro is formed by a glottal stop (marked by the letter *q*), in standard Estonian with the help of the *t*-sound (marked by *d*).

Estonian	Võro	Meaning
külad	küläq	'villages'
metsad	mõtsaq	'forests'

The glottal stop makes the spoken idiom of the South-East distinctively jerky as compared to the more 'even' language of the North Estonia, and especially to the almost 'singing' dialect of the islanders of the Western Estonian Archipelago.

# Estonian Sign Language

An interesting linguistic phenomenon is the Estonian Sign Language, used by hearing-impaired people and the deaf.

Estonian Sign Language (ESL) differs from other sign languages primarily in signs, as opposed to the grammatical structure (e.g. the sign for 'pain' in American and Estonian sign language [1 and 2]). However, many signs in various sign languages also resemble to each other due to their iconicity. This kind of similarity (about 40 per cent of all signs) makes the message to a large extent understandable to deaf people of different nationalities and facilitates the communication between them [6].

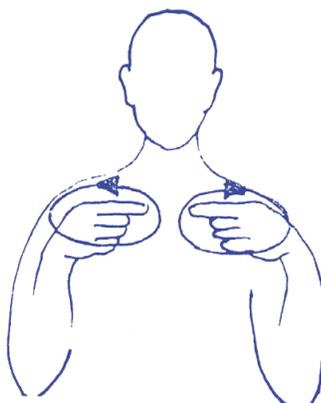
At the same time, ESL (as many other sign languages) is heavily influenced by the local spoken language. For instance, some signs are expressed by images formed with fingers, which represent the equivalent to the first letter of the Estonian word (e.g. the sign for restoran 'restaurant' [3]), or a method used in oral articulation instruction (e.g. the sign for *mahl* 'juice' — refers to the strong current of air that is aspirated during the pronunciation of Estonian 'h' [4]).

In its formative stages, Estonian Sign Language has mostly been influenced by the Russian and Finnish sign languages (e.g. an Estonian sign for 'butterfly' has developed from the Finnish sign for 'bird' [5 and 7]).

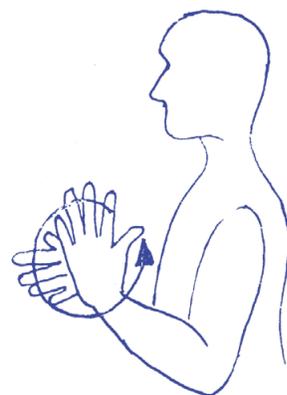
The most original amongst the 'dialects' of Estonian Sign Language is thought to be the Pärnu variety.



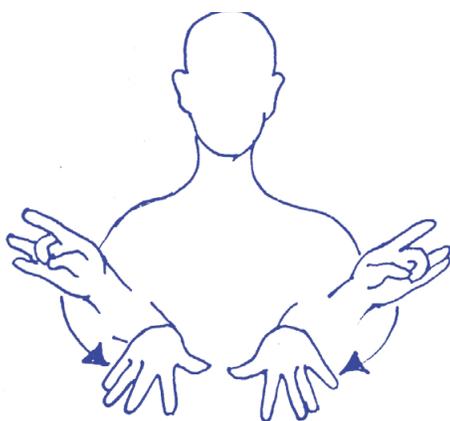
Pain [1]



Pain (American SL) [2]



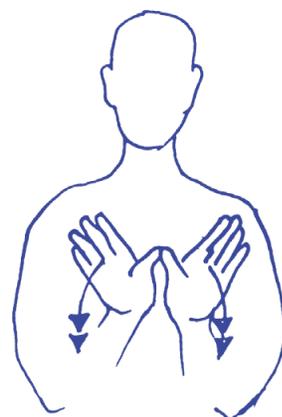
To sign



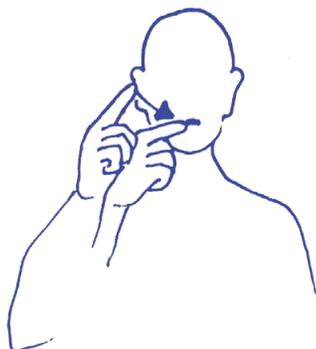
Restaurant [3]



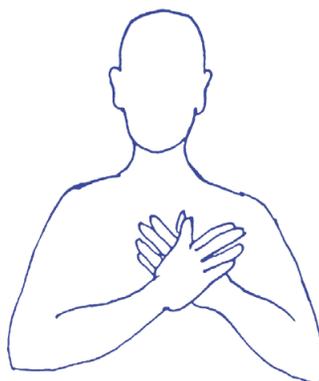
Juice [4]



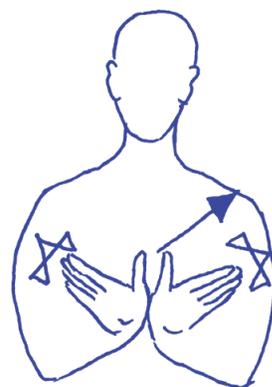
Bird (Finnish SL) [5]



Deaf



To love [6]



Butterfly [7]

# Alphabet, orthography, pronunciation

The Estonian literary language has used the Latin alphabet and its variants throughout its history. The Estonian alphabet consists of 32 letters:

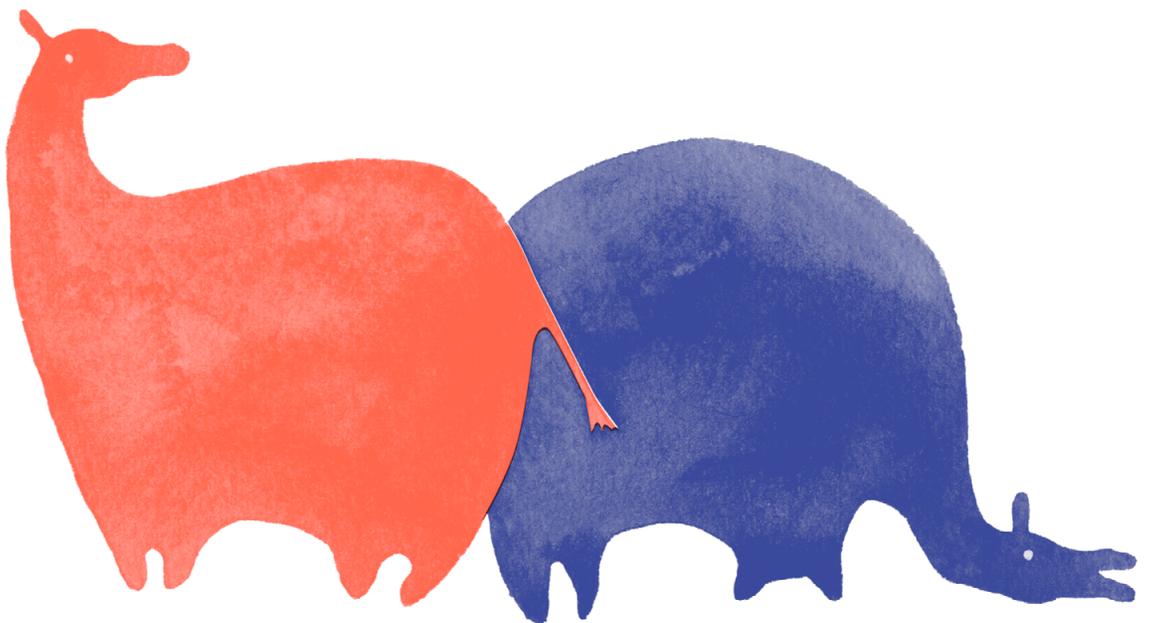
A, B, (C), D, E, (F), G,  
H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O,  
P, (Q), R, S, Š, Z, Ž, T,  
U, V, (W), Õ, Ä, Ö, Ü,  
(X), (Y)

Some letters (*c, f, x, y*) only occur in foreign words and foreign proper names that can also contain other Latin-based letters (e.g. *ø, å, č*). Letters with diacritics (*õ, ä, ö, ü*) denote independent phonemes in the Estonian language. The tilde on the grapheme *õ* does not denote nasalisation as in Portuguese, or palatalisation, as in Spanish; *õ* marks a separate vowel phoneme.

The pronunciation of the Estonian literary language is relatively simple, i.e. its orthography is largely phonetic. At the same time the spelling does not usually distinguish between the 2nd and 3rd quantity (see p. 38), nor is a palatalisation marked.

The Estonian language has also retained some traditionalisms — some written forms are still used, although most speakers pronounce them in a different way. The majority of Estonians drop the initial *h*-sound, e.g. instead of saying *hall hobune* 'grey horse', they say *all obune*.

all obune and hall hobune

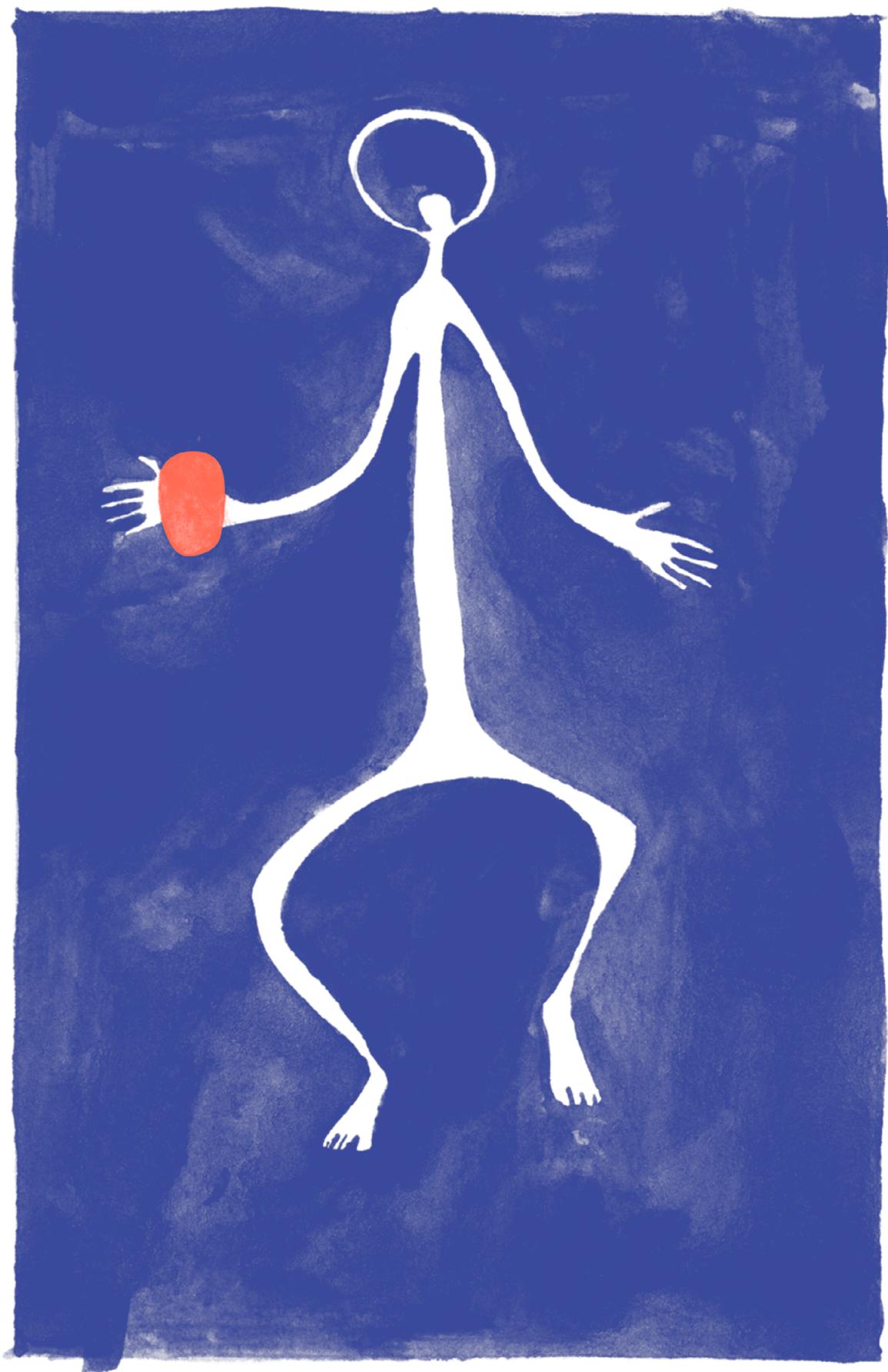


# The history of the Estonian literary language

The first continuous Estonian texts date from the 16th century. The first book containing a text in Estonian was published in 1525, but has not survived. Eleven fragmentary pages were found which originate from the Lutheran catechism published in 1535, written by the German pastor Simon Wanradt and translated by the Estonian cleric Johan Koell. The 17th century already saw the publication of several Estonian language handbooks (in German and Latin), together with German-Estonian dictionaries. The first of the kind appeared in 1637. The author was once again a German pastor — Heinrich Stahl.

Until the mid-18th century, two language versions competed to achieve the status of standard Estonian: the Northern (Tallinn) and the Southern (Tartu) languages. The New Testament was published in the Tartu dialect of South Estonian in 1686. In 1739, the first complete Estonian-language Bible was published. Since this task was completed in the Northern language, this version of Estonian gained a dominant position. Another reason for the decline of the South Estonian language was the burning down of Tartu, the centre of Southern Estonia, and the deportation of people to Russia, in 1708, during the course of the Northern War waged between the Russians and Swedes. By the end of the 19th century, the South Estonian language as a literary language had practically become extinct. The final decade of the 20th century saw a revival of the South Estonian literary language, this time based on the Võro dialect.

Until the end of the 17th century, the written Estonian language was greatly influenced by German. German loans were often used unaltered in vocabulary, structure and phraseology, mainly in religious texts written by German clergymen in an Estonian that was very different to what was actually spoken. The spelling was inconsistent and included elements of Latin, Low German and High German spelling. During the Counter-Reformation in the early 17th century, Polish-based spelling was also used in South Estonia.



A broken and contrite heart,  
O God, you will not despise.

# One example: Commentary:

Psalm 51:17b (by English numeration):  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you  
will not despise

## I (1638)

öhe ahastut nink katkipextut süddame  
saht sinna Jummal mitte errapölgkma

## II (1739)

üht röhhutud ja russuks pekstud süddant  
ei laida sa mitte, Jummal

## III (1997)

murtud ja purukslöödud südant ei põlga  
Jumal

## Spelling:

I – the occurrence of foreign letters *kat-*  
*kipextut*; compare II, III *pekstud*, *puruks*

I, II – the vowel phoneme *õ* is marked by  
*ö* – *errapölgkma*, *röhhutud*, compare III  
*põlga*

I, II – the short vowel is marked by the  
doubling of the succeeding consonant  
*süddame*, *süddant*; compare III *südant*

## Grammar:

I, II – the occurrence of the indefinite ar-  
ticle *öhe (...)* *süddame*, *üht (...)* *süddant*;  
compare III *südant*

I – the German future form *saht (...)* (*mitte*)  
*errapölgkma*; compare II, III (*ei*) *laida*, (*ei*)  
*põlga*

I – German-style negation using the yes-  
form and privative particle *saht (...)* *mitte*  
*errapölgkma*; II – double negative using  
the privative form *ei laida (...)* *mitte*; com-  
pare III – *ei põlga*

I – the wrong object form (genitive pro  
partitive) *öhe (...)* *süddame*; compare II,  
III – *üht (...)* *süddant*, *südant*.

Johan Hornung and Bengt Gottfried Forselius were mainly responsible for making a start at reforming the Estonian literary language in the late 17th century. Some German constructions were abandoned, and a strict spelling system was adopted which still relied on German orthography.

A new wave of reforms occurred during the first half of the 19th century, in an attempt to popularise the Estonian literary language. In 1818, Otto Wilhelm Masing introduced a separate grapheme *õ* to denote an intermediate vowel phoneme between *ö* and *o*. In mid-century, Eduard Ahrens worked out a new Finnish-style orthography that became widespread during the final decades of the century, and is still used today.

# Sound

The Estonian language is rich in vowels: the vowel-consonant rate in Estonian is 45:55; the 26 Estonian phonemes include 9 vowels: *u, o, a, õ, ü, ö, ä, e, i* (the inhabitants of the western part of the largest island Saaremaa use only eight vowels, though, replacing *õ* with *ö*. Võro-speakers of the southeast have ten, since they use two distinct *õ*-s.) As many as 36 diphthongs can be formed from vowels that offer interesting combinations (e.g. the compound word *kõueööaimdus* 'anticipation of the thundery night'). Vowels on their own can also carry a meaning: *öö* 'night', *õu* 'backyard', *ei* 'no'. Some Estonian compounds may even have quadruplicate vowels, for example: *Kuuuurijate töööö jäääarel*, 'A moon researchers' work-night at the edge of the ice'.

The Estonian language does not like consonant clusters, especially the initial ones. These became established in Estonian mainly through loan words, i.e. *tross* 'cable', *kross* German 'Groschen', etc. The later word-interior vowel disappearance — syncope — resulted in numerous consonant clusters, even in native Estonian words. Consonant clusters mostly consist of two consonants, but in the word *vintsklema* 'to writhe', for instance, there are five consonants in a row.

A few exceptions excluded, the main stress in Estonian words falls on the first syllable, the frequent secondary stress on odd, non-final syllables.

# Vocabulary

Standard Estonian vocabulary is quite rich, as it includes words from both the Northern and Southern dialect areas. The vocabulary is further increased by the frequent word derivations by means of various affixes.

Derivations of the verb *nägema* 'to see', for instance, are: *nägu* 'face', *nägematu* 'unseen, invisible', *nägemine* 'eyesight', *nägemus* 'vision', *nägemuslik* 'visionary', *nägevus* 'sight', *nägija* 'seer', *nägupidi* '(known) by face', *nägu*s 'handsome', *nähe* 'symptom, indication', *nähtamatu* 'invisible', *nähtav* 'visible', *nähtaval* 'in sight', 'in view', *nähtavalt* 'obviously', 'clearly', *nähtavasti* 'apparently', *nähtavus* 'visibility', *nähtus* 'phenomenon', *nähtu* 'something or someone that has been seen', *nähtuma* 'appear', 'to become clear', etc.

Estonian vocabulary consists of native words plus loan words. Since the Estonian language offers many possibilities of derivation, it would be more correct to speak of native stems and loan stems. Estonian stems are those which the language has in common with other Finno-Ugric languages or are typical for Estonian alone. In the opinion of language scholars, the ratio of Estonian own and the loan stems in Estonian is about 50:50. If one disregards the international words with Greek and Latin stems, the share of words with Estonian stems even reaches two thirds.



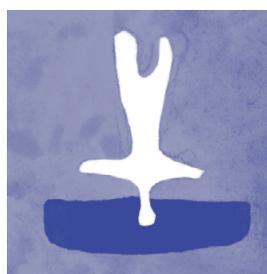
*nägu* 'face'



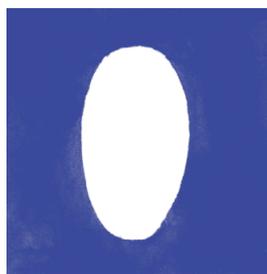
*nähtav* 'visible'



*nägu*s 'handsome'



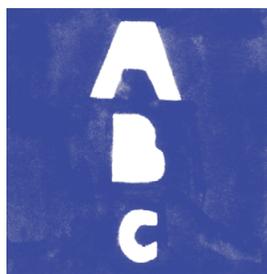
*nägupidi* 'by face'



*näotu* 'unseemly'



*nähtamatu* 'invisible'



*nägemine* 'eyesight'



*nägemus* 'vision'

# The origin of loan words in Estonian (by Huno Rätsep)



(High) German loans 486–520 stems (mid-16th century onwards)



Russian loans 315–362 stems (14th century onwards)



Swedish loans 105–148 stems (late 13th century onwards)



Low German loans 771–850 stems (13th century onwards)



(Early) Germanic loans 269–397 stems (up until the 13th century)



(Early) Baltic loans 94–156 stems (2nd millennium BC onwards)

Estonian has also, throughout its history, been lexically influenced by, for example, French and more recently by the English language. The words are often adapted to the extent that their origin can no longer be deduced:

Low German:	High German:
schöle → kool 'school' dīk → tiik 'pond' schüren → küürima 'scour'	schleifen → lihvima 'to polish' Schinken → sink 'ham' Zichorie → sigur 'chicory'
Slavic / Russian:	Swedish:
gramota → raamat 'book' okno → aken 'window' kapusta → kapsas 'cabbage'	ost → juust 'cheese' flicka → plika 'lass[ie]' tomte → tont 'ghost'

# Characteristic features of the Estonian language

The Estonian language is characterised by the following:

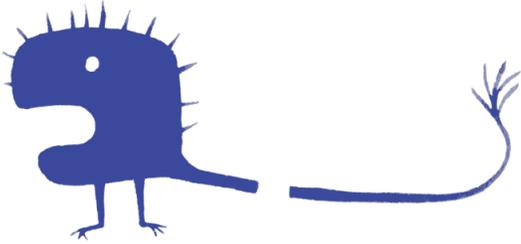
- \* a large number of cases — 14 productive cases;
- \* no grammatical gender either of nouns or personal pronouns. As the pronoun *tema* can refer to both man and woman (occasionally even to a thing), an Estonian speaker does not face certain problems of political correctness as do those who speak Indo-European languages;
- \* no articles (either definite or indefinite);
- \* differentiation between three quantities both in vowels and consonants.

The 2nd and 3rd quantities are not distinguished in spelling; in that case the meaning and pronunciation of the word becomes clear from the contents.

This sort of 3-quantity system was regarded as uniquely Estonian for a long time. Now the scholars have also discovered similar phenomena in a few North German dialects. It is assumed that the 3-quantity system in Estonian and in the German dialects developed simultaneously. The two languages did, after all, belong for centuries in the same cultural space marked out by the Hanseatic League.

Vowel in 1st quantity	V	koli	'trash'
Vowel in 2nd quantity	V:	kooli	'genitive of kool 'school'
Vowel in 3rd quantity	V::	kooli	'partitive of kool 'school'
Consonant in 1st quantity	C	koli	'trash'
Consonant in 2nd quantity	C:	kolli	'genitive of koll 'bogey'
Consonant in 3rd quantity	C::	kolli	'partitive of koll 'bogey'

# Three-quantity system is a bogey for everybody who will learn Estonian



koll 'bogey'

kolli saba 'bogey's tail'



kardab kolli 'is afraid of bogey'

## Morphology and word formation

The principal way of forming words in Estonian is by adding derivative affixes to the stem. Estonian has about one hundred derivative affixes, almost all of them (there are two exceptions: *eba-*, and *mitte-*, 'un-', 'non-', 'in-') are suffixes.

The notion of Estonian as an agglutinative language as far as morphology is concerned, is rather popular. The agglutinative type of language is characterised by the fact that the morphemes bearing grammatical information are joined to word stems, and every such morpheme has only one meaning. In reality, Estonian is rapidly moving away from agglutination and closer to inflection where each morpheme has several grammatical meanings. Estonian differs from its closest neighbour — Finnish (which is agglutinative) — by numerous features. Some scholars have even claimed that Latvian, an Indo-European language and thus unrelated to Estonian, is in fact closer typologically than closely related Finnish.

## The typical Estonian sentence

Täppidega lipsud sobivad esinduslikele teatrijuhtidelegi.  
(Spotted ties suit even representative theatre directors.)

täppi-de-ga → 'spot,speckle'-plural-comitative (=with)

lipsu-d → 'necktie'-plural

sobi-vad → 'suitable'-3rd person-plural (-vad <-va-d-active-present participle-plural)

esinduslike-le → 'representative'-allative (=to)

↓

esindus-lik → 'representative' (-lik being a morpheme borrowed from German, cf. Modern German -lich)

↓

esindus → 'representation'

↓

esi → 'fore'

teatri+juhti-de-le-gi → theatre-genitive+leader [i.e. director]-plural-allative(=to)-em-  
phasis particle (=also, too)

# Cases

Estonian is a language with many cases, employing 14 productive ones. By comparison: Russian has six, German four and English only two cases. The meaning conveyed by case endings in Estonian is expressed by prepositions in English and many other languages.

Despite the large number of cases, the Estonian language lacks the ordinary object case, the accusative, which is common among the Indo-European languages. The direct object in Estonian is expressed by the nominative, genitive or partitive, in the singular, and by only the nominative or the partitive in the plural. Using the genitive object in the singular and the nominative object in the plural, marks the totality and finiteness of the action directed at that object. The usage of the partitive case expresses the partiality or unfinished nature of the action.

# Estonian Cases

## Case

## Meaning

### Grammatical cases

1. Nominative	ilus tüdruk	(a) pretty girl
2. Genitive	ilusa tüdruku	of a pretty girl; a pretty girl (as a total object)
3. Partitive	ilusa-t tüdruku-t	a pretty girl (as a partial object)

### Semantic cases

#### Interior local cases

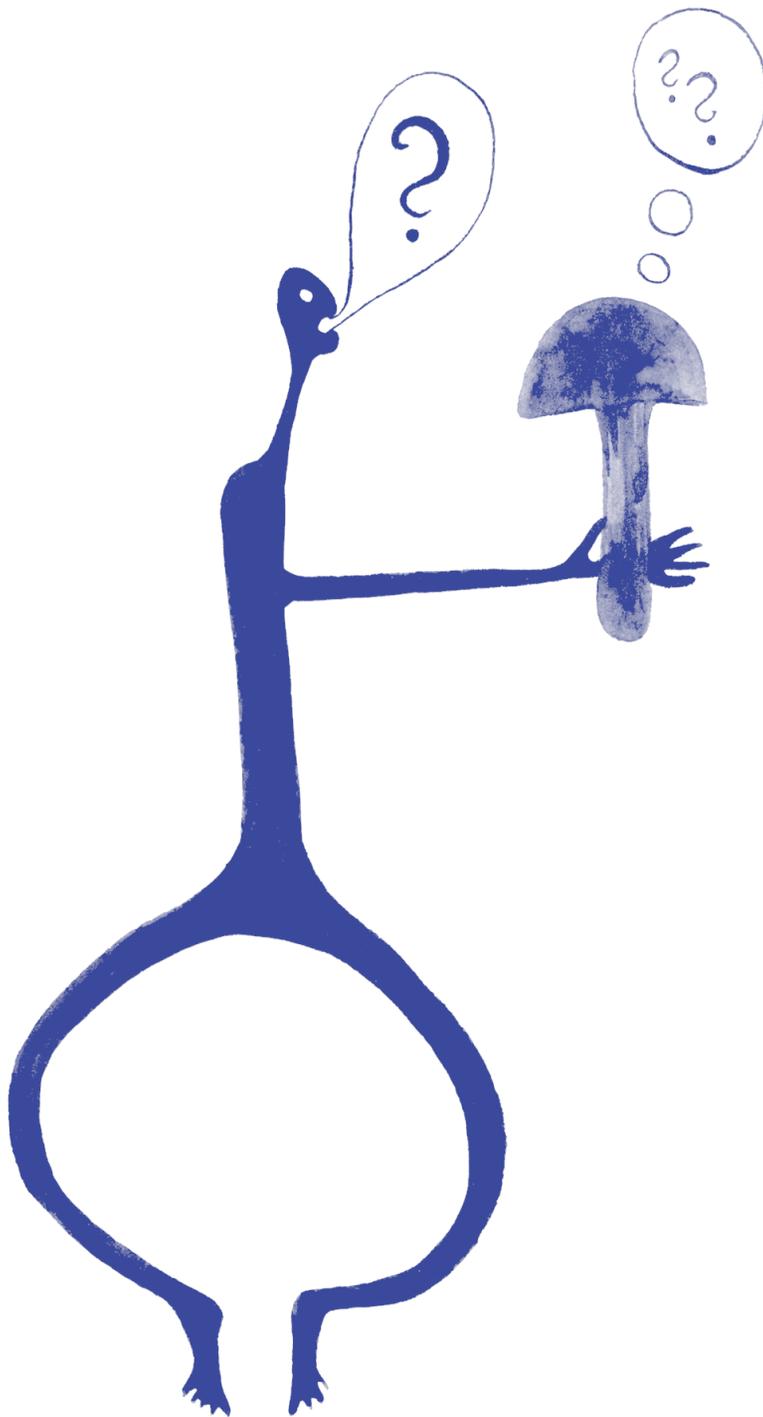
4. Illative	ilusa-sse põranda-sse	into a nice floor
5. Inessive	ilusa-s põranda-s	in a nice floor
6. Elative	ilusa-st põranda-st	from a nice floor

#### Exterior local cases

7. Allative	ilusa-le põranda-le	onto a nice floor
8. Adessive	ilusa-l põranda-l	on a nice floor
9. Ablative	ilusa-lt põranda-lt	from on a nice floor

#### Other cases

10. Translative	ilusa-ks tüdruku-ks	[to turn] (in)to a pretty girl
11. Terminative	ilusa tüdruku-ni	up to a pretty girl
12. Essive	ilusa tüdruku-na	as a pretty girl
13. Abessive	ilusa tüdruku-ta	without a pretty girl
14. Comitative	ilusa tüdruku-ga	with a pretty girl



Peeter ei mõistnud seent  
Peter did not understand  
the mushroom

Thus the sentence:

Peeter	kirjutas	luuletust (partitive and partial object)
Peter	wrote	(a) poem

means that Peeter was writing a poem, but it is not known whether he finished it.

Whereas:

Peeter	kirjutas	luuletuse (genitive and total object)
Peter	wrote [i.e. completed writing]	(a) poem

denotes a finished action, with the poem ending up completed.

In a negative sentence, however, the Estonian language allows only the partitive (partial object):

Peeter	ei mõistnud	seent (partial object)
Peter	did not understand	a mushroom

The nominative object in Estonian is used for example in imperative mood:

Peeter,	ehita	laev (total object)!
Peter,	build	(a) ship! cf.
Peeter,	ehita	laeva (partial object)!
Peter,	build	(a) ship!*
* i.e. Peter, get on with (the) ship-building!		

lammas 'sheep'  
lamba 'of the sheep'



Whereas in semantic cases, each case is marked by a certain ending, it is quite usual in grammatical cases that the nominative and genitive case, sometimes also the partitive case, has no case ending. On occasions, all three cases are the same in the singular, and can be distinguished only in the plural.

	Singular	Plural
Nominative	maja	maja-d
Genitive	maja	maja-de
Partitive	maja	maja-sid
maja ('house')		

The case endings are the same in singular and plural, the plural is distinguished by suffixes:

<b>Allative Singular</b> ilusa-le tüdruku-le 'to a pretty girl'
<b>Allative Plural</b> ilusa-te-le tüdruku-te-le 'to pretty girls'

Declension does not depend on word class — nouns and adjectives are declined in the same way. At the same time, the adjective always agrees with the primary word in number. It agrees with the primary word in ten productive cases out of 14.

Due to the phonemic alternation (gradation), the word's stem is sometimes unrecognisable vis-à-vis the nominative case as given in dictionaries, e. g.:

Nominative		Genitive (stem)	
uba	'bean'	oa	'of the bean'
pidu	'party'	peo	'of the party'
lammas	'sheep'	lamba	'of the sheep'
mees	'man'	mehe	'of the man'
naine	'woman'	naise	'of the woman'

# Verb

In Estonian, the present, past simple, present perfect and past perfect are distinguished. In the spoken language and in the press, the analytical *saama*-future also occurs. This is formed on the model of German *werden*-future: the inflected verb *saama* 'to get', 'to become' + the supine of any other verb, e.g. *olema* 'to be' → *saab olema* 'will be', *tulema* 'to come' → *saab tulema* 'will come', etc.

Verbs are conjugated in the active and passive voice, and indicative, imperative, conditional and indirect mood, in the affirmative and negative form.

Since the verb inflections clearly express the person, the personal pronouns do not generally need to be used, except in the third person of the verb *olema* 'to be'.

In Estonian-language dictionaries, the verbs are presented after a form of the infinitive, the supine. In the case of the verb '(to) love', for instance, the supine is *armasta-ma*, and infinitive *armasta-da*.

The supine was originally the verbal noun in the illative; its nominal character is preserved to date. It is possible to compound some other case forms from the supine, e.g., inessive *armastama-s* 'in the act of loving', elative *armastama-st* 'from the act of loving', and abessive *armastama-ta* 'without loving'. The supine which always ends in *-ma* is used, for instance, in connection with the verbs *pida-ma* 'must', *hakkama* 'begin', and *minema* 'go', e.g. *ma pean minema* 'I must go'.

The infinitive has a somewhat partitive character and is used in other instances, for example, with the verbs *tahtma* 'want' and *võima* 'can', e.g. *ma tahan teada* 'I want to know'. The regular infinitive endings are *-da* and *-ta*.

Person	Singular		Plural		
(ma)	armasta-n	'I love'	(me)	armasta-me	'we love'
(sa)	armasta-d	'you love (sg.)'	(te)	armasta-te	'you love (pl.)'
(ta)	armasta-b	'he, she, it loves'	(nad)	armasta-va-d	'they love'

# Syntax

As opposed to most Indo-European languages, and similar to other Finno-Ugric languages, Estonian uses relatively many postpositions. For instance, instead of *all laua* 'under the table', an Estonian says *laua all* 'the table under'. However, there is a growing tendency to substitute prepositions for postpositions in modern Estonian, e.g. the expression *teed mööda* 'the way along' is more and more replaced by *mööda teed* 'along the way'. Estonian is also characterised by a relatively free word order. A sentence can be fairly easily rearranged without it becoming ungrammatical. In many other languages, such as English, this would be almost impossible.

The reason for this difference is that in Estonian, grammatical relations between words are signalled by case endings, but in English, which has no such endings, by the relative position of words. If grammatical relations are signalled by suffixes, the position of words in the sentence is not important, but if there are no case endings available, the only means of indicating these relations is word order. As in most European languages, a typical affirmative Estonian sentence has the following structure SVO: subject – verb – object:

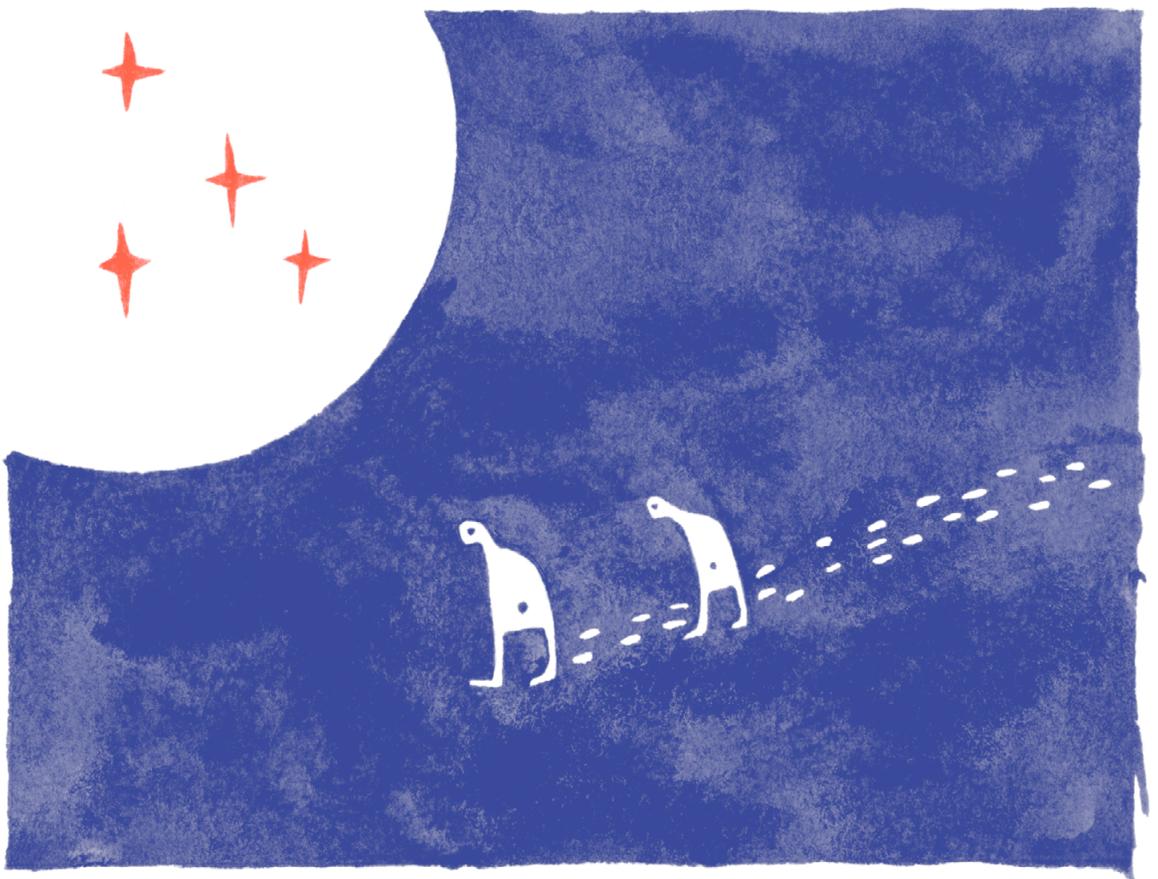
Mari Mary	armastas loved	Peetrit Peter
nominative		partitive
subject	verb	object

But in many cases, especially in poetic registers, word order can be quite different:

Tihti	taevas	tähti	nähti
Often	in-the-sky	stars	were-seen
'Stars were often seen in the sky'			

This four-word sentence can be modified in 24 different ways, and the meaning is still understandable:

Tihti taevas tähti nähti  
Tihti taevas nähti tähti  
Tihti tähti taevas nähti  
Tihti tähti nähti taevas  
Tihti nähti taevas tähti  
Tihti nähti tähti taevas  
etc., etc.







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