



Summary Article: **ESTONIAN**
From *Dictionary of Languages*

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Estonia

With Finnish, Estonian is one of the twin Balto-Finnic languages divided by the Gulf of Finland. They belong to the wider family of URALIC LANGUAGES.

The Estonians, Eesti, may possibly be the Aestii of the Latin writer Tacitus (1st century AD) and are certainly the Eistneskr of the Norwegian poet Pjóðólfr's Ynglingatal (11th century). The meaning of the word is unknown. Traditionally, Estonians called themselves maa rahvas, 'people of the country'.

Estonia was apparently warlike and independent at the end of the first millennium AD. After Danish raids in the 12th century, the country was conquered by German knights in the 13th. Estonia was subject to German landowners – and generally under Swedish or Russian government – till the late 19th century. Thus, while Finnish was influenced by Swedish, Estonian was for many centuries under strong German influence. Estonian bulges with German loanwords – including many from the Low German of the Baltic trading ports (see box at FINNISH).

There are a few medieval records of the language, such as the Estonian personal names in the *Chronicle* of Henry of Livonia. The first known printed book was the bilingual German-Estonian catechism, by S. Wanradt and J. Koell, which appeared (in far-off Wittenberg) in 1535. No complete copy survives. An Estonian grammar was printed in German, for the use of priests, in 1637.

As a serf population, few Estonians received education before the 19th century. The emergence of Estonian as a literary language can be dated by the publication of a language magazine, *Beiträge zur genauern Kenntniss der ehstnischen Sprache*, 'Studies towards better knowledge of the Estonian language' edited 1813–32 by the clergyman Heinrich Rosenplänter – and by the *Ehstnische Litterarische Gesellschaft*, 'Estonian Literary Society' which was founded in Kuressaare in 1817. A sign of the continuing domination of German, even under Russian rule, is that both these institutions had German names. It was only around 1840 that Estonians themselves began to predominate as authors of works in and about their language.

Estonian literature now flourished, notably with F.R. Kreutzwald's *Kalevipoeg* (1857–61), a literary epic emulating the Finnish *Kalevala*. It is based on Estonian prose legends and on the metres of oral lyric poetry: these resources were needed because Kreutzwald found that unfortunately there were no Estonian oral epics to draw on!

Estonia was independent from 1918 to 1940, and has been independent again since the breakup of the Soviet Union. In this century literary Estonian has been almost rebuilt, many loanwords eliminated, and others replaced by dialect words or Finnish loans. The language is now emerging once more from a period of heavy Russian influence.

Standard Estonian is based on the midland dialect of North Estonian, spoken in Tallinn and its hinterland (see map at FINNISH). It has four (some linguists say three) possible lengths for both vowel and consonant sounds. Length variations often change the meaning completely and are difficult for foreign learners to distinguish. The four lengths are not fully marked in normal spelling, but are specially written in these examples: *sadaa* 'hundred', *saadaa* 'send!', *tahab saaaada* 'want to get'; *kanu* 'of hens', *selle kannu* 'this jug's', *seda kannnu* 'of this jug'. Nouns have 14 cases, and verbs change form to show person, tense, mood and the active/passive opposition.

Examples based on Aimo Turunen, 'The Balto-Finnic languages' in *The Uralic languages: description, history and foreign influences* ed. Denis Sinor (Leiden: Brill, 1988) pp. 58–83

Numerals in Estonian, Finnish and SAMI

	Estonian	Finnish	Sami
1	üks	yksi	åhta
2	kaks	kaksi	guokte
3	kolm	kolme	gålbma
4	neli	neljä	njaellje
5	viis	viisi	vitta
6	kuus	kuusi	gutta
7	seitse	seitsemän	čieža
8	kaheksa	kahdeksan	gávci
9	üheksa	yhdeksän	åvci
10	kümme	kymmenen	lågi

The name of Estonia's capital, *Tallinn*, is a reminder of the country's history of foreign domination. Originally it was *Taani linn*, 'Danes' town'.

South Estonian

'In the 17th to 19th centuries South and North Estonian emerged as distinct languages, and there is some printed literature in South Estonian. The New Testament appeared in South Estonian in 1686, in North Estonian only in 1715. Even nowadays, if south Estonian youngsters return from study with a standard (northern) accent, they may be greeted with the rebuke *Kas ma' su tuuperäst kuuli saadi, et sa' mul sääl joba rääkmä nakkat?* "Do you think I sent you to school for you to start *talking?*"

From Alo Raun, Andres Saareste, *Introduction to Estonian linguistics* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz,

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