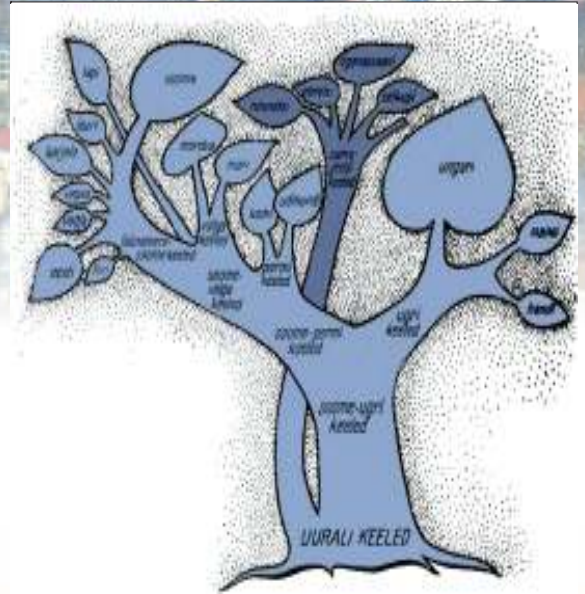


About the history of the Estonian language

As to its origin Estonian is a Finno-Ugric (Uralic) language. According to a simplified family tree theory, the Estonian language evolved over millennia from Proto-Uralic as a result of its successive branching. One part of Proto-Finno-Ugric speakers migrated from the original homeland to the Baltic Sea. They became speakers of Proto-Finnic or Proto-Finnish. Estonian is a Finnic language.

According to the model of the traditional family tree, the Samoyed branch (Nenets, Enets, Selkup, and Nganasan) became separated from Proto-Uralic. The vocabulary that Estonian shares with the Samoyed languages dates back to the period of Common Proto-Uralic in the fourth millennium BC, for example, *ela(ma)* 'to live', *ema* 'mother', *jõgi* 'river', *kaks* 'two', *kala* 'fish', *kalm* 'grave', *keel* 'language', *kuusk* 'spruce', *kõiv* 'birch', *lumi* 'snow', *minia* 'daughter-in-law', *muna* 'egg', *nimi* 'name', *nool* 'arrow', and *puu* 'tree'. Thereafter the trunk of the language tree branched into Finnic-Permian and Ugric (Hungarian, Mansi, and Khanty). The lexicon that Estonian shares with Ugric languages dates back to Common Proto-Finno-Ugric in the third millennium BC, for example, *hing* 'soul, spirit', *ilm* 'weather', *isa* 'father', *jalg* 'foot; leg', *jää* 'ice', *kask* 'birch', *koda* 'house; shell', *käsi* 'hand; arm', *küla* 'village', *leem* 'broth', *lind* 'bird', *maa* 'land', *nõid* 'witch', *veri* 'blood', *öö* 'night', *üks* 'one'. The Permian languages (Komi and Udmurt) became separated from the Finnic-Permian branch. The vocabulary that Estonian shares with the Permian languages dates back to the period of Common Proto-Finnic-Permian at the beginning of the third millennium BC, for example, *amb* 'crossbow', *jaga(ma)* 'to share; to divide', *jaksa(ma)* 'to have strength', *kaas* 'cover', *kudu(ma)* 'to knit', *kotkas* 'eagle', *kõht* 'stomach', *kulm* 'cold', *lõuna* 'south', *meel* 'sense', *mõla* 'paddle', *peni* 'dog', *pähkel* 'nut'. Subsequently, Mordvin and Mari branched off. The lexicon that Estonian shares with those languages dates back to the period of Common Proto-Finnic-Volgaic at the beginning of the third millennium BC, for example, *aher* 'dry (of a cow)', *haab* 'aspens', *juma(l)* 'god', *juur* 'root', *kevad* 'spring', *kümme* 'ten', *lehm* 'cow', *lell* 'paternal uncle', *siga* 'pig', *sääsk* 'mosquito', *töö* 'work', *vaher* 'maple', *vaim* 'spirit', *paat* 'boat'. Finally, the language tree branched into two: Sami and Finnic dialects. The vocabulary shared by Finnish and Sami is at least 3,000 years old, for example, *hull* 'lip', *hõbe* 'soft' > *hõbe* 'silver', *ilves* 'lynx', *ime* 'miracle', *küll* 'enough', *ligi* 'close; about', *mahl* 'juice', *nina* 'nose', *nurk* 'angle', *nälj* 'hunger', *org* 'valley', *põud* 'drought', *põõsas* 'bush', *sammal* 'moss', *selge* 'clear', *usk(uma)* 'belief, to believe', *veli* 'brother', *vihm* 'rain', and *õnn* 'happiness'. Finnic vocabulary existed as early as in the first millennium BC, for example, *aed* 'fence; garden', *aeg* 'time', *eile* 'yesterday', *habe* 'beard', *hobu* 'horse', *julge* 'courageous', *kiri* 'pattern; script', *kõne* 'speech', *laps* 'child', *linn* 'town', *maga(ma)* 'to sleep', *maja* 'house', *mänd* 'pine', *nuga* 'knife', *oja* 'stream', *peenar* 'bed (of plants)', *põder* 'elk', *sõna* 'word', *udu* 'mist', *võlg* 'debt'. Estonian native vocabulary has no equivalents in any genetically related languages, for example, *aas* 'meadow', *hiil(ma)* 'to sneak', *ila* 'droll', *jäärak(k)* 'gully, ravine', *kaan* 'leech', *kesv* 'barley', *lubi* 'lime', *lõhn* 'smell', *mahe* 'mellow', *mutt* 'mole', *mõru* 'bitter', *roie* 'rib', *räni* 'silicon', *salk* 'detachment', *ürp* 'cloak'.



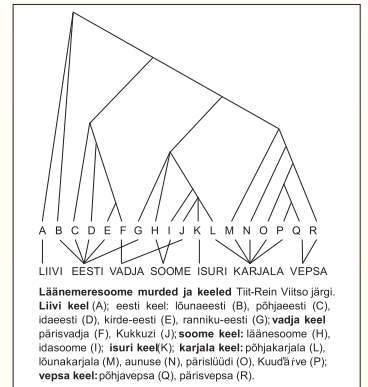
Unfortunately, we cannot determine the origin of the Estonian language by means of the family tree model. We can only get some idea of the divergence and convergence of the Finno-Ugric tribal languages. Proto-Finnic in its turn was divided into Finnic dialects. The regrouping of these dialects and language contacts led to the emergence of contemporary Finnic languages: Livonian, Estonian, Votic, Finnish, Ingrian, Karelian, and Veps.

Nowadays many Finno-Ugric languages are dead or declining. In northern Russia as far as Moscow many Finno-Ugric tribes (e.g. Merya) switched over to Russian, on the banks of the River Volga the Chuvash are former Finno-Ugrians whose present mother tongue is an Altaic language. It is also known that in Siberia several southern Samoyed peoples (e.g. Karagas) switched over to Tuvan, which is also an Altaic language. The speakers of Livonian, which is a close relative of Estonian, also switched to Latvian, which similarly to Russian, is an Indo-European language.

More recent theories have tried to link the family tree model with theories of language contact. In addition to the genetic descent of languages, which is described by the family tree model, language switches and language contacts are important, too. It has been assumed that Finnic tribes, including Estonians, are direct descendants of those settlers who came to the Baltic Sea from the south or the south-west over 10,000 years ago when the ice sheet had receded. Estonian is an ancient language which emerged in the area of Estonia during the period after the Ice Age as the languages of the original settlers and the Finno-Ugric tribes merged. The original settlers of Estonia were the bearers of the Kunda culture (Kunda was a prehistoric settlement on the northern coast of Estonia). The bearers of the Kunda culture contributed a large number of (substrate) words: the fish names *siig* 'whitefish' and *vimb* 'vimba', geographic names *Peipsi* and *Pärnu*, animal name *konn* 'frog', geographic concepts *neem* 'cape' and *saar* 'island', names of body parts and fluids *higi* 'sweat', *liha* 'flesh; meat', *nisk* 'scruff' and *selg* 'back', and such words as *hull* 'crazy', *nüri* 'dull (of a blade)', and *sugu* 'kin; sex'.



Among other languages one can point out the layer of early Indo-European and Indo-Aryan loans in the development of Estonian dating back to 3,000–1,000 BC, for example, *arva(ma)* 'to think', *iva* 'grain', *keder* 'spinning wheel; potter's wheel', *marras* 'dead', *mesi* 'honey', *ora* 'spike', *osa* 'part', *puhas* 'clean', *põrsas* 'piglet', *sada* 'hundred', *sarv* 'horn', *sool* 'salt', *udar* 'udder', *varss* 'foal', *vasar* 'hammer', and *viha* 'anger'. Baltic loans from the end of the second millennium BC constitute the next layer of loans, for example, *angerjas* 'eel', *hammas* 'tooth', *hani* 'goose', *hein* 'hay', *hernes* 'pea', *hõim* 'tribe', *kael* 'neck', *kirves* 'axe', *kurt* 'deaf', *kõrs* 'straw', *laisk* 'lazy', *metes* 'forest', *mõrjsa* 'porridge', *puder* 'porridge', *põrgu* 'hell', *riikas* 'rich', *sadul* 'saddle', *varas* 'thief'. Old Russian or western Slavic languages contributed to Estonian before the 13th–14th centuries such words as *aken* 'window', *ike* 'yoke', *koonal* 'bunch of flax on a distaff', *liud* 'platter', *lusikas* 'spoon', *nädal* 'week', *pagan* 'heathen, pagan', *papp* 'priest', *raamat* 'book', *ravi(ma)* 'treat; cure', *rist* 'cross', *saabas* 'boot', *saan* 'horse-drawn sleigh', *sahk* 'plough', *sirp* 'sickle', *turg* 'market', *vaagen* 'platter', *vaba* 'free', *võlu* 'magician', *värav* 'gate'. From the 8th century onwards Estonian adopted Latvian loans, for example, *kanep* 'hemp', *kauss* 'bowl', *kukkel* 'bun', *kõuts* 'tomcat', *magun* 'poppy', *pastel* 'peasant sandal', *sõkal* 'chaff'. Starting with the 13th century Estonian was influenced by Low German, which served as the official language in Estonia and Livonia, for example, *amet* 'office; occupation', *arst* 'doctor', *haamer* 'hammer', *hunt* 'wolf', *höövel* 'plane', *ingel* 'angel', *karske* 'chaste; abstinent', *kelm* 'rogue', *kokk* 'cook', *kool* 'school', *kuub* 'jacket', *lahing* 'battle', *müür* 'wall', *naaber* 'neighbour', *neer* 'kidney', *orel* 'organ', *paar* 'pair; couple', *pann* 'pan', *pull* 'bull', *püss* 'gun', *ruum* 'room', *saag* 'saw', *tool* 'chair', *vorst* 'sausage', *õli* 'oil', *ääs* 'forge', *üür* 'rent'. Swedish loans enter Estonian starting with the 13th century; the so-called State Swedish loans were adopted in the 16th and 17th centuries when Swedish served as the official language of Estonia, for example, *hiiva(ma)* 'to heave', *il* 'gale, gust', *kratt* 'thief', *kriim* 'scratch', *kroonu* 'army', *kuunar* 'schooner', *moor* 'old woman', *pagar* 'baker', *riik* 'state', *räim* 'Baltic herring', *tont* 'ghost', *tutt* 'tuft, wisp', *tünder* 'barrel', *vaar* 'old man', *vård* 'bastard'. Starting with the 14th century until the present time Estonian has adopted many Russian loans, for example, *kapsas* 'cabbage', *kirka* 'pickaxe', *komsomol* 'Young Communist League', *kolhoos* 'collective farm', *kosmonaut* 'spaceship', *astronaut*, *kopikas* 'kopeck', *morss* 'juice drink', *porgand* 'carrot', *präänik* 'spice cookie', *puravik* 'boletus', *rubla* 'rouble', *tatar* 'buckwheat', and *tõlki(ma)* 'to translate'. Between the 16th century and the first half of the 20th century Estonian was influenced by High German, for example, *aabits* 'ABC book, primer', *ahv* 'ape; monkey', *kamm* 'comb', *kett* 'chain', *kirss* 'cherry', *kits* 'goat', *kleit* 'dress', *laadung* 'load'. Since the end of the 19th century Estonian has been influenced also by Finnish, a closely related language, for example, *aare* 'treasure', *harras* 'awesome', *jenka* 'a Finnish folk dance', *julm* 'cruel', *jäik* 'rigid', *keigar* 'dandy', *sünge* 'gloomy', *tehas* 'factory, plant', *turske* 'burly, stocky', *uljas* 'bold, brave'. The impact of English became increasingly important during the second half of the 20th century and in the 21st century. To a lesser extent one can find in Estonian loans from French, Romany, Hebrew, and more distant genetically related and non-related languages.



In the 13th century a large number of tribal languages and their dialects were spoken on the territory of Estonia. It is doubtful whether Estonian had any common self-designation. The Finnic tribal languages constituted a dialect continuum which had a single clear-cut dialect boundary. This boundary ran between the South-Estonian and North-Estonian language varieties, which had been caused by the ancient River Emajõgi that flowed from Lake Peipsi to Pärnu Bay after the Ice Age. The wide primeval river valleys, lakes, and the surrounding swamps and bogs had been impassable for people for millennia. Nevertheless, Henry of Livonia regarded in the 13th century both the southern and northern Estonian prehistoric counties, as well as the islands, as a single territory and called the entire country as *Estonia* and all the tribes as Estonians – *Estones*. The Estonians started to regard themselves as Estonians and their language as Estonian as late as in the middle of the 19th century.

The poster was prepared by the Mother Tongue Society; Estonian Literary Museum, Ministry of Education and Research. Text by Urmas Sutrop. Designed by Margus Nõmm; Multimedia Centre of the University of Tartu 2008.

Additional reading:

Tiit-Rein Viitso 2008. *Läänemeresoome murdeliigenduse põhijooned. Liivi keel ja läänemeresoome keelemaastikud*, 'Main characteristics of dialect classification of Finnic languages. Livonian language and the Finnic language background', 63-69. Tallinn: Eesti Keele Sihtasutus.
Huno Rätsep 2002. *Eesti kirjakeele tüvevara päritolu. Sõnaloo raamat* 'The origin of standard Estonian root vocabulary. The book of word history', 59-77. Tartu: Ilmamaa.
Urmas Sutrop 2008. *Kust algab eesti keel? Emakeelne Eesti, emakeelne Euroopa* 'Where does Estonia begin? Mother tongue Estonia, mother tongue Europe', 81-94. Tallinn: Eesti Keele Sihtasutus.
Urmas Sutrop 2004. 'Estonian language'. Tallinn: Estonian Institute.