

Erelt, M. (Ed.) (2003) *Estonian Language*. In Series: *Linguistica Uralica*. Supplementary Series. Volume 1. Tallinn: Estonian Academy Publishers. 413 pp.

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*Estonian Language* by Erelt (Ed) is the most recent description of Estonian available for an international reader. It is a compilation of studies in which leading researchers in Estonia and a scholar from Uppsala, Sweden consider various aspects of the Estonian language. The book consists of six chapters and a preface by the editor and it is structured as follows: The structure of Estonian (Chapter I), rise and development of Estonian (Chapter II), dialects (Chapter III), written language (Chapter IV), colloquial language (Chapter V), and study of Estonian (Chapter VI.). Each of the chapters and the Introduction are summarised below along with discussing some research findings and conclusions drawn.

INTRODUCTION by the Editor, Mati Erelt.

Introduction gives the reader the basic facts about the present day Estonian, such as the speaker count (1.1. million) and possible start date in the 13<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> century by the merger of the North-Estonian and South-Estonian dialects. It is not always easy to determine a starting point for a language and this is what the very approximate estimate reflects.

Estonian belongs to the northern branch of the Finnic languages and is therefore agglutinating. However, it is more fusional and analytic than other languages in the same group. Finally, the Introduction points out the most influential contact languages for Estonian. These are German, Finnish, Russian and currently English.

The Introduction, although not lengthy, sets the Estonian language within the larger context of language typology and language change and prepares the reader well for the subsequent chapters.

Chapter I, STRUCTURE OF ESTONIAN LANGUAGE contains contributions by two scholars, namely Tiit-Rein Viitso (phonology, morphology and word formation), and Mati Erelt (syntax). On the whole, Chapter I is one of the

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most compact and informative overviews of the above aspects of Estonian that I have come across. What I find admirable is the very systematic treatment of topics and clear presentation. For example, in Viitso's contribution, every section starts with a general introduction which is then followed by a thorough examination of the different subtopics.

Chapter I is similar to the existing descriptions of Estonian available in English, e.g. Tauli (1973, 1983). Yet, there exist differences, some of which are outlined below. For example, Viitso offers an interesting approach for classifying words. Namely, he categorises them based on certain morphological properties. According to him, there are four main word classes in Estonian (32):

- 1) words that can be inflected for mood, time and person (verbs)
- 2) words that can be inflected for case, including grammatical case (nominative, genitive and partitive) (nominals)
- 3) words that have no grammatical case forms (some adverb types and adpositions)
- 4) words that have no inflectional forms (some adverb types, adpositions, conjunctions, interjections).

Although Viitso's approach serves as a novel solution when paired with the traditional classification based on semantic and morphosyntactic properties, it remains to be questioned whether it serves the purpose. For example, adverbs and adpositions here come under two separate word classes, 3 and 4, and without further explanation such a division hardly seems to be the most transparent. Viitso states that his list shows the main word classes. However, I would have liked to see a more elaborate classification or references to those since the purpose of the book is to give an overview of the language to academic readers.

What concerns case marking in Estonian, Viitso notes that there are 14 cases, three grammatical ones—nominative, genitive and partitive—and 11 adverbial cases, which fill the same functions as suffixes and prefixes in many other languages (32). In this, Viitso follows the most prevalent approach to the case system in not acknowledging the accusative as one of the grammatical cases (for alternative views see e.g. Ackerman and Moore 1999 who consider Estonian total objects to be marked with the accusative both in the singular and the plural, and Grünthal 2003 who sees only singular total objects as marked with the accusative).

Viitso has also an innovative approach to impersonal sentences in Estonian (64). This is a topic which has received a lot of attention recently.

According to him, only the construction with a partitive NP in complex tenses are in the impersonal voice as illustrated in (1):

- (1) *Hunti oli haavatud.*  
 wolf.PART be.PAST.3 wound.PRTC  
 ‘The wolf was wounded.’

A corresponding construction with a nominative NP he regards to be an instance of predicative complementation. Alternative analyses where sentences containing both nominative and partitive NPs are classified as impersonal voice, are in e.g. Vihman 2001 and Vihman and Hietam 2002. Classifying these constructions as suppressive and not impersonals, can be found in Pihlak 1993. The question of passives and impersonals in Estonian will also be addressed in the following section from the point of view of syntax.

SYNTAX by Mati Ereht.

The second part of Chapter I deals purely with the syntax of Estonian. It starts with an often-addressed topic, word order. Ereht states that the basic word order in both unmarked main and complement clauses is SVX. Nevertheless, word order in Estonian is fairly flexible and various variants are allowed depending on the pragmatics of the sentence (100, 119). In regard to the position of the verb, Ereht states that in non-negated declarative clauses it stands on the second positions (100). These conclusions are also drawn in Ehala (1995).

The author has a very strict approach to subjects and in unmarked affirmative clauses considers them to be solely nominative NPs that agree with the verb (94–95). According to Ereht, partitive subjects can occur in a notionally negative or hesitant inverted clause, as in (2) and (3) respectively (96)

- (2) *Laul pole raamatut.*  
 table.ADE NEG book.PART  
 ‘There is no book on the table.’
- (3) *Kas on mõtet seda teha?*  
 Q be.3 sense.PART this.PART do.INF  
 ‘Is there any point in doing that?’

On the other hand, Erelt takes a much broader view on objects. In addition to total (nominative) and partial (partitive) objects, he states there exists a class of oblique objects which typically open an inverted clause. Oblique objects can be nominals expressing location, time, possessor or experiencer (94). A possible weakness in defining subjects based on morpho-syntactic properties and objects according to semantic ones is that we could potentially be categorising the same NP as a subject and object since we are looking at different properties. This in its turn could lead to an incorrect picture of grammatical relations in Estonian. Also, with Erelt's classification in mind, it remains unclear where the author would like to draw the borderline between adverbials and objects.

Another issue that I would like to discuss is Erelt's treatment of the Estonian passive. According to him, there is no Indo-European type proper passive, i.e. subjective action passive in Estonian (102). He states that Estonian has a special morphological form expressing impersonal passive. This construction has no subject, but only an object, which has some characteristics of a subject: 1) it is in the nominative, 2) it opens the clause, and 3) in the past compound tenses the verb occasionally agrees with it in number, as shown in (4):

- (4) *Raamatud olid loetud läbi.*  
 book.PL.NOM be.PAST.3.PL read.PRTC through  
 'The books were read through.'

In addition to impersonal passive, Erelt states there is 1) the resultative or stative passive in Estonian, which does contain a subject, as in (5)(103):

- (5) *Uksed olid avatud.*  
 door.PL.NOM be.PAST.3.PL open.PRTC  
 'The doors were opened/open.'

and 2) in spoken language one can come across double impersonalisation, as in (6) (103–104):

- (6) *Uksi ei oldud suletud.*  
 door.PL.PART NEG be.IMPS close.PRTC  
 ‘One had not closed the doors.’

If I have understood it correctly, Viitso, the author of the previous section would suggest examples in (4) and (5) should be classified as an instance of predicative complementation and not passive (cf. p. 64). On the other hand, Erelt’s view of the Estonian passive is contradicted by e.g. Vihman (2001, 2004) who considers Estonian to have both the personal (periphrastic throughout the paradigm) and impersonal passive (morphological in simple tenses) constructions. These contradictory claims indicate that passivisation in Estonian is an area that needs further studies to be conducted.

Erelt also addresses the issue of headedness in nominal phrases. For example in numeral phrases he considers the numeral to be the modifier and the noun the head, (112). According to Erelt, the reason why most of the Estonian grammars treat the noun and not the quantifier as the head lies in the fact that in the nominative, numerals starting with two require the partitive head noun and only show agreement in oblique cases (113). This view has been challenged by Payne and Hiietam (2004), who see the numeral as the head based on its syntactic distribution.

Erelt’s contribution contains a lot of examples to illustrate the arguments, however, no glosses are provided, and therefore some morphological details may remain opaque for a reader who is not familiar with the language already.

On the whole, Chapter I is an excellent source of information, yet, there are no references in the body of the text and one is therefore often left to wonder what has been the authors original contribution and what has been referred to other works.

## Chapter II: THE RISE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ESTONIAN LANGUAGE. Tiit-Rein Viitso.

This chapter follows the development of morpho-syntax and phonology of Estonian and maps it onto the larger context of Finnic. According to Viitso, in the Finnic branch there are two state languages—Finnish and Estonian—and the rest can be called dialect continuum due to the fact that they are difficult to distinguish (131). Viitso discusses the existing classifications of Finnic (132ff.) and points out differences and similarities between different dialects in Finnic. Following that, the author moves on to the different

dialects of Estonian. Thereafter the author accounts for the development of phonology, morphology and syntax.

#### Chapter III. ESTONIAN DIALECTS. K. Pajusalu

Chapter III concentrates on the present day dialects of Estonian. As Viitso noted in the preceding chapter, it can often be difficult to distinguish between different Finnic languages, Pajusalu's chapter states that even different dialects are hard to set apart (231).

Contrary to what one might expect, considering the formation of the literary language through the merger of two most prominent dialects, Pajusalu claims that contemporary Estonian is distinct from all the historical Estonian dialects, including those spoken by people who were born in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (233). This is true for both vocabulary and grammatical norms.

Such a phenomenon can be explained by the fact that the present day Standard Estonian is a "a compromise between various dialects, conscious language reform, and recent influences of foreign languages and cannot be traced back to any historical dialect" (233).

Yet, Pajusalu sees the Northern Estonian dialects to share more features with the Standard Language than the southern ones (233). Pajusalu even goes so far as to consider one of the southern dialects, Võru dialect, as a separate language (234). This, however, is open to discussion.

#### Chapter IV. WRITTEN ESTONIAN. By Heli Laanekask and Tiiu Erelt.

The chapter by Laanekask and Erelt is a historical overview of the development of the written Estonian. Overall, I found the chapter similar to Chapter II which described the development of the Estonian language in general.

The authors have divided the development of the written Estonian into ten periods. These are as follows: 1) the origin of two literary traditions; 2) the beginning of conscious standardisation; 3) emergence of the old spelling system; 4) working towards a common written language, attempts to reform spelling; 5) success of the new spelling system, written Estonian gains some prestige; 6) formation of the nation state, increased authority of the norm; 7) Estonian becomes a state language; 8) preservation of Estonian in the Soviet times; 9) further development of Estonian in the Soviet era, renewed language planning; and 10) Estonian a state language again, special languages become endangered.

Chapter IV informs the reader of the fact that there has been a lot of conscious language planning in the formation of the present day Estonian (326). Laanekask and Ereht list several changes in the language and evaluate how these innovations have been preserved in the present day Estonian.

The authors do not only look at the language strictly, but also tie in different developments of the political climate at the time. For example, they state that during the Soviet time, Standard Estonian was the "foundation of the Estonian identity" and the literary language was a "means of consolidating the nationality" (329).

In connection with political changes in 1980–1990s also the Estonian language changed and this can be considered to be due to both language internal and external factors (330–331). Changes occurred at various levels, including morpho-syntax of the language. For example Laanekask and Ereht report the following syntactic changes: 1) the headedness of a nominal phrase: the quantifier that previously was a head has now become a modifier. This is reflected in number agreement, as illustrated in (7b):

- (7) a) *osa*                    *inimesi*                    (b) *osad*                    *inimesed*  
       part.NOM    people.PL.PART            part.PL.NOM    people.PL.NOM  
       ‘some people’

2) negation, 3) increased use of verb particles to express perfectivity; and 4) *saama* ‘to get’—future. As Estonian has no morphological future, this construction is a popular innovation.

Also, the sources for borrowings have changed. While Russian was formerly the most dominant language for borrowings, it has now been replaced by English and Finnish. All these changes have induced linguistic diversity that was almost non-existent during the Soviet rule.

#### Chapter V. COLLOQUIAL ESTONIAN. By Leelo Keevallik

The study of the colloquial language has been ignored until recently and is therefore a new phenomenon. Chapter V constitutes an introduction and a brief overview of this variety of the language. Keevallik concentrates on the core of the present day spoken language and uses as much natural language data as possible. She notes that in much, colloquial language is close to the written Estonian, yet, many standard forms do not exist in it (361). Since the study of spoken Estonian is a new phenomenon, research into it relies on a relatively small database. The spoken language corpuses

that are available are: 1) Tartu corpus which is compiled of student recordings of spoken language, and 2) a data set collected by the author herself (344).

Keevallik analyses both the phonetics, morphology, syntax and communication patterns of spoken Estonian. In regard to the prosody of the spoken language her conclusions are based on the data collected from three informants (359) and I was wondering whether it would be worth conducting a follow-on study to either compare or evaluate her findings.

The chapter by Keevallik is definitely a good starting point for a study of the spoken variety of Estonian and it gives an interested researcher many potential topics to work on, such as e. g.. conversation strategies (cf.p.370 ff).

#### Chapter VII. STUDY OF ESTONIAN. By Mati Ereht.

The final chapter, *Study of Estonian*, summarises research into Estonian diachronically, starting from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and finishing with the present day Estophiles. The main contribution of influential researchers is summarised according to different eras, e.g. the national awakening, pre- and post World War II era. This chapter, although the shortest one in this volume, contains the most references grouped diachronically according to research topics. The areas that have interested Estonian linguists through times include phonetics, morphosyntax, dialectology, but also language planning. In the field language planning, *Introduction to a Theory of Language Planning* (1968) by an Estonian linguist, Valter Tauli, has been acknowledged at the international level.

Overall, *Estonian Language* is a lot more than just a description of the language. It is rather an overview of the socio-historical factors surrounding the present day Standard Estonian and its development throughout the history. Also, it provides a unique source of references for an interested researcher.

Since there are very few general overviews of Estonian available in English, this work certainly is a valuable addition to the bulk of typological literature on Finnic accessible for an international audience. It is mainly intended for an academic audience and it makes an excellent textbook for students of Finnic or any other reader interested in typology, language change and language planning.



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