

Tiit-Rein Viitso 1938–2022

Tiit-Rein Viitso, the University of Tartu professor of Finnic languages, died on 2 December 2022 at the age of 84. Viitso was one of the most active researchers of Estonian and related languages in the generation after World War II, he systematically documented the Livonian language from its last native speakers, and he was a linguist with a thorough knowledge of multiple varieties of the Finnic languages.

Viitso's interest in the Livonian language, and with it the other Finnic languages, was sparked when he was still a schoolboy. In the spring of 1948, Paul Ariste, who later became a legendary Finno-Ugrist in Soviet-occupied Estonia and a leading figure in the field, paid a visit to Viitso's aunt, who lived in nearby Tartu and worked at the university. As they chatted, it emerged that Ariste was going to visit the Livonians for two weeks, the first visit since the war. Viitso had learned a Livonian phrase from a book that he had borrowed from his school library. He tested the professor's knowledge, and Ariste recognized the source. When Ariste returned from his trip, he invited this schoolboy to his home and made him a present of two Livonian books: a collection of poems by Karl Stalte and the Livonian translation of the New Testament (*Üž Testament*, 1942). Viitso later assumed that the latter one had been owned by Professor Alo Raun, but left behind in Estonia when that scholar fled to the USA during the war. This remarkable acquaintance continued through Viitso's studies and affected his choice of career. It was with Ariste that Viitso, then sixteen years old, got to visit the Veps people in 1954 instead of having to participate in a Spartakiad for all schoolchildren in the Soviet Union.

Due to this interest that had arisen in his school years, young Viitso applied to the University of Tartu to study Estonian and Finno-Ugrian languages and was accepted. Upon graduation, he worked as a junior researcher at the calculating center of the University of Tartu (1965–1973), until he found a firm position for twenty years at the Institute of Estonian Language and Literature in Tallinn (1973–1993), first as a senior researcher and then as a leading researcher. He served as the first visiting professor of Estonian at the University of Helsinki in 1989–1991, and then moved back to the University of Tartu, where from 1993 until his retirement in 2003 he was Professor of Finnic Languages.

Viitso's published output, which began in 1961, spanned nearly sixty years. Within it, the central themes are the history, phonetics, and phonology of the Finnic languages, as well as their inflectional typology, with first Veps and Estonian serving as focuses of research, later expanding to the Finnic languages in general and his long-cherished Livonian. Viitso's bachelor's thesis *Äänisvepsa murde väljendustasandi kirjeldus* (1968) gave a phonological description of North Veps and shows the influence of Western generative linguistics.

Viitso's background in phonetics was strongly reflected in how he viewed a language's development, but morphophonology also gradually came to play a larger role in his work. A deep connection between morphophonological changes and phonetic developments can be seen in his interest in the nature of consonant gradation and quantity alternation in the southern Finnic languages and the history of how the quantity alternation arose in general. He had already examined this in his article "Finnic gradation: types and genesis" (SFU 1981) and he expanded this treatment in later publications.

Viitso was fascinated by the obvious phonological differences between the Finnic languages. The southern Finnic languages had a more complex quantity system, and he felt it important to show three distinctive quantities in the description of Estonian. Through phonology he sought to explain the taxonomy of these closely related languages, which could also be interpreted historically.

In terms of describing the Estonian language, his most interesting and important articles include his explanation of the erosion of Estonian noun morphology "Eesti keele kujunemine flekteerivaks keeleks" (*Keel ja Kirjandus* 1990). Viitso also offered a summary of his views on the history of the Finnic languages and Estonian in particular in the chapters which he contributed to the Routledge volume *The Uralic languages* (1998).

Viitso got the idea of classifying the Finnic languages based on phonetic criteria from an unusual source. After he managed in 1960 to get access to some issues of *Language*, the journal of the Linguistic Society of America, he became interested in the connection between phonemes and the reduced mathematical notation then in use. Viitso gained a wider knowledge of the languages of the northern hemisphere and the literature on Native American languages, and he began to apply a model of development based on three obstruent series. This is where his work on the subgrouping of the

Finnic languages began; this was a matter that other linguists and different generations working with the Finnic languages had tried to solve.

It was phonological details that served as the basis for his inductive conclusions, e.g. in his articles “The History of Finnic *õ* in the first syllable” (*SFU* 1978), “Kriterien zur Klassifizierung der Dialekte der ostseefinnischen Sprachen” (*Dialectologia Uralica* 1985), and in the latter’s sister publication “Läänemeresoome murdeliigenduse põhihood” (*Keel ja Kirjandus* 1985). He presented an even more elaborated matrix map at the *Congressus Internationalis Fenno-Ugristarum* in Tartu in 2000 in his article “Finnic affinity” (*CIFU* 2000), and finally a synthesis with broader context in his collection *Liivi keel ja läänemeresoome keelemaastikud* (2008), which was published in his mature years as a researcher and can be seen as encapsulating Viitso’s whole career.

Estonia’s regaining of its independence dramatically changed the environment for research. International networks arose and began to significantly affect projects and funding. Estonia had a strong tradition of research into phonetics, and the University of Tartu launched new projects to study the prosody of the Finno-Ugrian languages (Erzya, Meadow Mari, Livonian, Inari Saami, 2001–2007) under Ilse Lehiste, who had escaped during World War II and became a respected phonetician in the USA. Viitso, too, took part in these projects as a specialist of several languages.

However, the most important theme of the second half of Viitso’s career were the insights gathered from the Livonian language and the practical skills he had acquired from native informants. Viitso made his first visit to the Livonian coast already in 1961. More focused efforts on Livonian began in connection with the third *Congressus Internationalis Fenno-Ugristarum* held in Tallinn in 1970, and the summer of 1972 saw the beginning of regular fieldwork and summer trips to the Livonian coast. Livonian became Viitso’s main research focus for four decades, and his classification of the inflectional typology of Livonian nouns and verbs offers a comprehensive insight into Livonian’s intricate morphophonological variation at the synchronic level. Unlike in the northern Finnic languages, where a morphological form can generally be predicted from its category, Livonian represents the other extreme. Lexical inflection is divided into numerous types, where the distinctive morphological changes that occur in a word demand a lexical perspective and a morphological taxonomy based on lexical types.

Although the number of Livonian speakers continued to decline, with fewer than ten left by the 1990s, researchers' interest in Livonian gained a new impetus and took various forms. Scholarly articles and collections were followed by dictionaries, and finally in 2012 the trilingual *Livõkiel-Ēstkiel-Leŕkiel sōnārōntōz* (Livonian-Estonian-Latvian dictionary) jointly compiled by Viitso and Valts Ernštreits. As a preliminary work, Ernštreits had produced a more narrowly focused Livonian–Latvian–Livonian dictionary (1999), to which Viitso contributed appendices and a preliminary version of his Livonian declension and conjugation types. Viitso worked for twenty years on the inflectional typology of Livonian and ultimately came up with an overall picture of the different inflectional types. Guided by his long-honed expertise in morphophonology, he first presented a classification of 127 noun and 48 verb inflectional types in *Liivi keel ja lääneresoo keelemaastikud* (2008), which brought together his numerous research focuses, but in the 2012 dictionary this was further developed so that the table in the Appendix contains 242 noun and 61 verb inflectional types. For his inflectional typology, the central criteria were paradigmatic differences shown in various word types, the geometry of syncretism, and especially the stem allomorphy caused by morphophonological variation.

A long-term collaborative effort with Finns and colleagues in the Republic of Karelia produced the three-part Finnic language atlas, for which he was the editor responsible for the second part (2007). The atlas was published in three volumes (*Atlas linguarum fennicarum* 1–3, 2004–2010) and Viitso prepared a total of over fifty maps with commentary and etymological summaries.

Although Viitso had already retired from his university duties in 2003, he continued to serve as a senior research until 2015. His long years of experience as a phonetician and expert on Livonian and the development of the Finnic languages benefited the entire scholarly community.

Riho Grünthal

Sources

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