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***Livonian***

ISO 639-3 liv; Glottocode: livv1244

Language family: Uralic > Finno-Ugric > Finnic

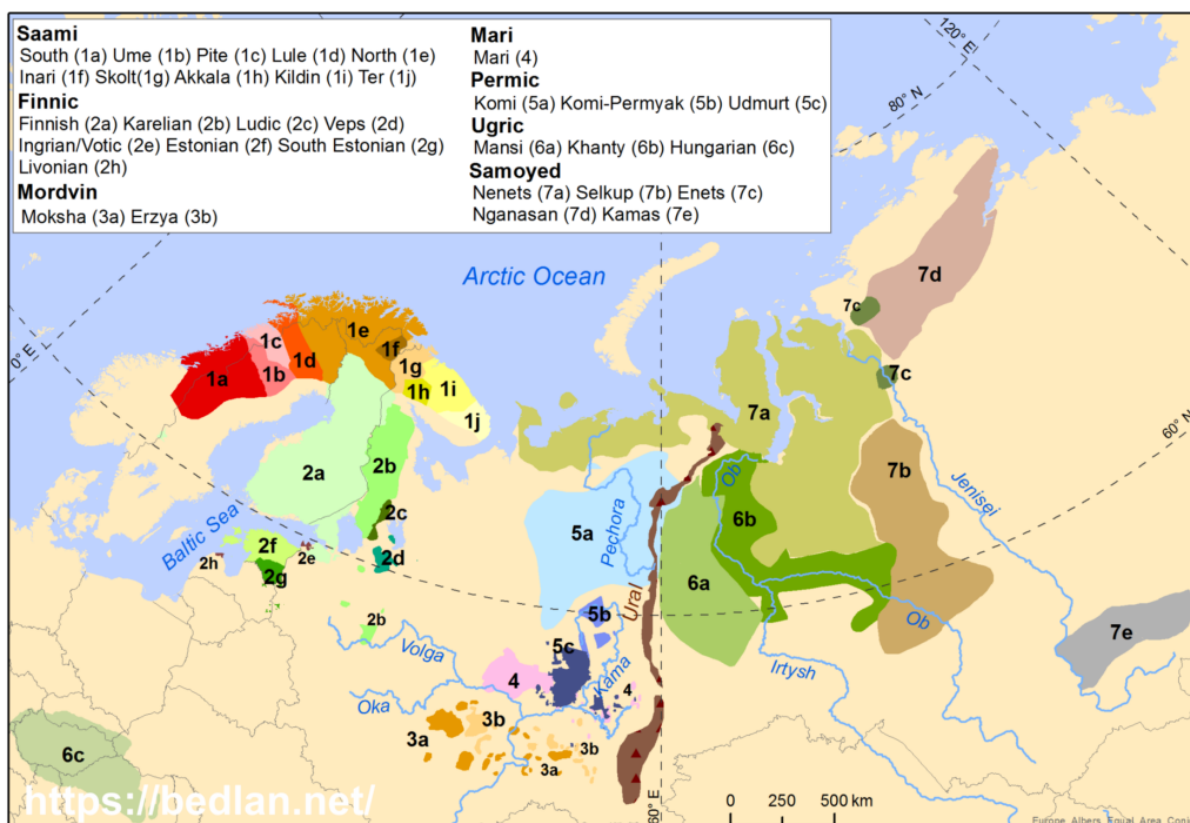
Geographical location: Europe > Latvia

Estimated population: ~250 people identify themselves as Livonians according to the Census 2011 (Census 2011), number of active speakers ~20–30 (Druviete & Kļava 2018)



## Introduction

Livonian is a Finno-Ugric language, which along with the Samoyedic languages forms the Uralic language family. The Uralic language family consists of languages spoken across northeastern Europe and Siberia, reaching south to central Europe where Hungarian is spoken (see Figure 1). Livonian is indigenous to Latvia and belongs to the branch of the Finnic languages (Figure 2).

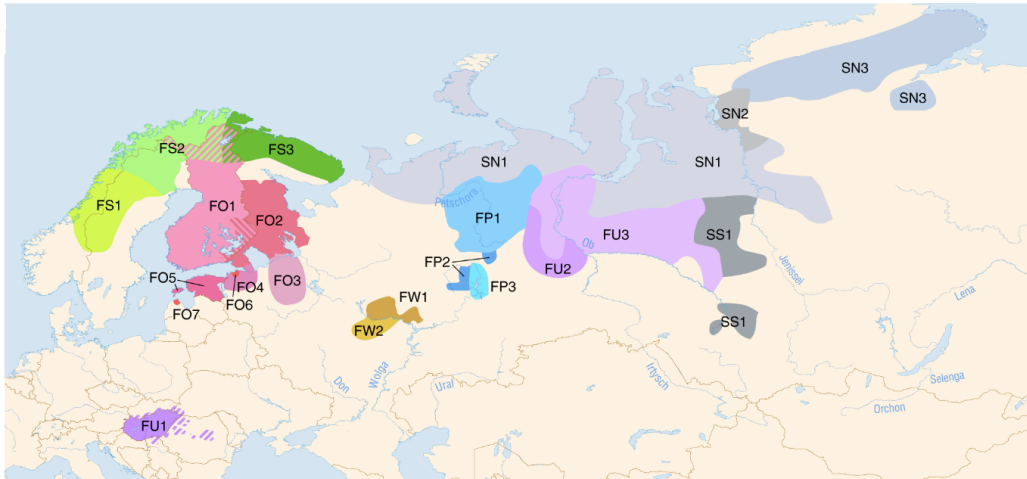


**Figure 1:** Map of Uralic language speaker areas at the beginning of the 20th century (map: T. Rantanen, BEDLAN, <https://bedlan.net/uralic/>).

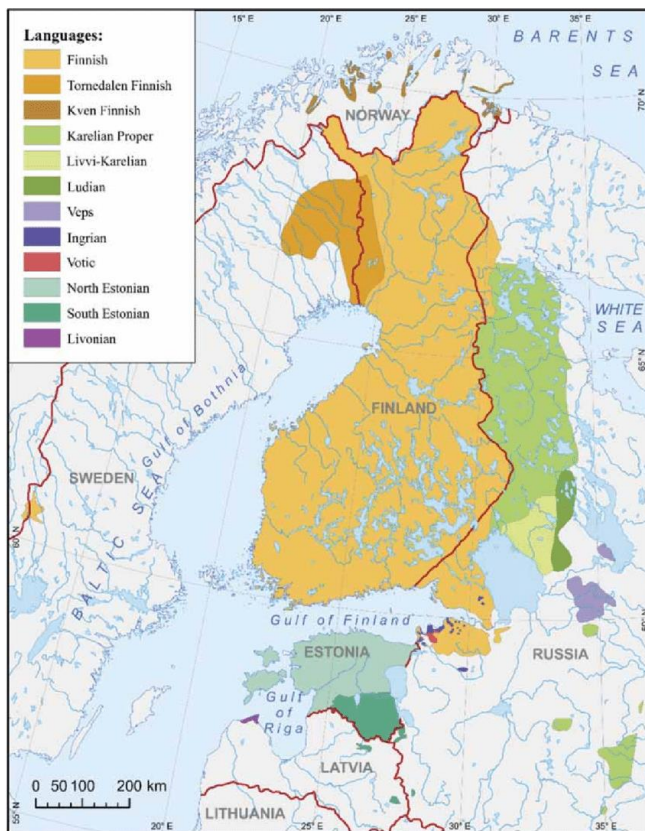
(Another map below, for just in case)

## URALIC LANGUAGES

F Finno-Ugric			S Samoyedic
<b>FO Baltic-Finnic</b> <span style="color: #E91E63;">■</span> FO1 Finnish <span style="color: #C0392B;">■</span> FO2 Karelian <span style="color: #E91E63;">■</span> FO3 Veps <span style="color: #E91E63;">■</span> FO4 Ingrian <span style="color: #C0392B;">■</span> FO5 Estonian <span style="color: #E91E63;">■</span> FO6 Votic <span style="color: #C0392B;">■</span> FO7 Livonian	<b>FS Sami languages</b> <span style="color: #2ECC71;">■</span> FS1 Western Sami <span style="color: #2ECC71;">■</span> FS2 Central Sami <span style="color: #2ECC71;">■</span> FS3 Eastern Sami <b>FU Ugric</b> <span style="color: #9B59B6;">■</span> FU1 Hungarian <span style="color: #9B59B6;">■</span> FU2 Mansi <span style="color: #9B59B6;">■</span> FU3 Khanty	<b>FP Finno-Permic</b> <span style="color: #3498DB;">■</span> FP1 Komi-Zyrian <span style="color: #3498DB;">■</span> FP2 Komi-Permyak <span style="color: #3498DB;">■</span> FP3 Udmurt <b>FW Finno-Volgaic</b> <span style="color: #F1C40F;">■</span> FW1 Mari <span style="color: #F1C40F;">■</span> FW2 Mordvinic	<b>SN Northern Samoyedic</b> <span style="color: #A6C9EC;">■</span> SN1 Nenets <span style="color: #A6C9EC;">■</span> SN2 Enets <span style="color: #A6C9EC;">■</span> SN3 Nganasan <b>SS Southern Samoyedic</b> <span style="color: #7F7F7F;">■</span> SS1 Selkup



Geographical distribution of the Uralic languages (map: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uralic\\_languages](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uralic_languages)).



**Figure 2:** The twelve Finnic languages according to the classification in Glottolog 3.3 (Hammarström, Forkel & Haspelmath 2018) and the Ethnologue (Simons & Fennig 2018). Speaker areas were drawn

by BEDLAN / T. Rantanen and D. Kuznetsov based on (Grünthal & Sarhimaa 2012) and (Tuomi, Hänninen & Suhonen 2004: 14)).

At the end of the prehistoric era, the Livonian language was spoken over a large area in the western part of the Central Baltic region. During the 12th century, the major Livonian settlements were situated in the central part of present-day Latvia on the banks of the important rivers of Daugava and Gauja, and the coast of the Gulf of Riga, north of Daugava up to the Estonian settlements. From the historical point of view, it is possible to differentiate the Livonian dialectal variations of Courland (Latvian *Kurzeme*) and Livonia (Latvian *Vidzeme*). However, Livonian language data have been systematically preserved from only two peripheral regions of the former Livonian language area – from the Salaca River region in northern Latvia and from Livonian villages in northern Courland. (see Figure 3)



**Figure 3.** Livonian areas (map: University of Latvia Livonian Institute).

Over time, Livonian areas gradually became Latvian-speaking. The next records of the Livonian language originate from the 17th century from the northernmost periphery of the historic Livonian settlement area near the river Salaca in northern Latvia and northern Courland. In the 19th century, Livonian had approximately 3000 speakers. After World War I, there were about 1500 Livonians. After World War II, around 800 Livonians were living in the coastal villages. However, after these lands were classified as Soviet border areas, most Livonians were forced to leave the coast to search for jobs. By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, approximately 200–250 people have self-identify as Livonians, most of whom live in Riga, Ventspils, and Kolka.

Livonian is listed in the *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* as a critically endangered language (Moseley 2010). Presently there may be at best 20–30 people in the world who can communicate in Livonian. However, the number of individuals who have learned the basics of Livonian continues to increase. The people who speak Livonian well, include scientists and other interested individuals from research institutions around the world but who are not Livonians themselves; Livonian descendants who did not learn Livonian from their parents but from their grandparents; also, those who learned Livonian from a fluent older speaker (not a family member) and through self-study. Though the Livonian community is

currently undergoing generational change, at this time it is still possible to find Livonian speakers who inherited their language from older generations of speakers.

The circumstances that led Livonian to the status of a minority language, can be summarized as follows:

- 1) A sharp decrease in population due to wars and epidemics, high mortality of children and young people,
- 2) World War I and World War II, deportations, escape elsewhere,
- 3) as a result of the exile, the younger generation of Livonians partially lost their language,
- 4) Livonian was spoken at home, it was hardly used in schools or churches, public events, community institutions,
- 5) lack of reading materials for native speakers,
- 6) general poverty in Livonian villages,
- 7) living under external pressure and mixing with Latvians,
- 8) hostile attitude of local pastors, landlords, and officials towards Livonians, Livonian was used as a spoken language in areas with mixed administration,
- 9) sometimes, parents did not speak Livonian with their children.

Taking into account that the Livonian community has been entirely bilingual at least since the end of the 19th century (Ernštreits 2012: 156) and has now experienced a complete language shift (Blumberga 2013: 194), the native language – as this term is traditionally understood – for the majority of Livonians is Latvian, or for a few of them possibly also some other language. Presently, Livonian is not inherited from generation to generation, it is not learned directly from one's parents and it is not the daily language of interaction.

The special role of Livonian in Latvia is described in the Latvian Official Language Law as well as other significant national documents and normative acts. Over time, Livonian has grown into the modern Latvian culture, language, and nation far deeper and more firmly than any other language, culture, or nation in Latvia. Livonians are a part of the modern Latvian language, Latvian culture, and the culture of Latvia as a whole. It has become especially noticeable in recent years when – along with Latvian society becoming better informed about the Livonians – an increasing number of people have discovered their own Livonian roots.

An important aspect that makes Livonian stand out among the languages used in Latvia (and more broadly in the European Union) is the indigenous status ascribed to the Livonians and the Livonian language in a number of Latvian laws and their sections (first in Law 1991, following Law 1999 and Law 2021). The status of Livonian is singled out as “the Republic of Latvia is home to the Latvian nation, an ancient indigenous people– the Livonians, as well as national and ethnic groups” (Law 1991), “The State shall ensure the maintenance, protection, and development of the Livonian language as the language of the indigenous (autochthonous) population” (Law 1999), and “In the historical lands of Latvia, the Latvian nation was formed based on the culture and language of the Curonian, Latgalian, Selonian, and Semigallian peoples as well as the ancient indigenous people – the Livonians” (Law 2021). These Laws confirm the status of the Livonians as indigenous.

Knowledge about Livonian and proficiency in it is important for understanding the nature of Latvian, as both languages have influenced each other through longstanding contact. Though it has few speakers, Livonian is important for those researching Uralic languages, as it is unique

and contains many ancient features. Likewise, language knowledge is fundamental for the Livonians themselves, as it has been precisely language that has always been at the foundation of their sense of identity. Presently, it is possible to learn Livonian through self-study, in courses, or at camps as well as at some universities.

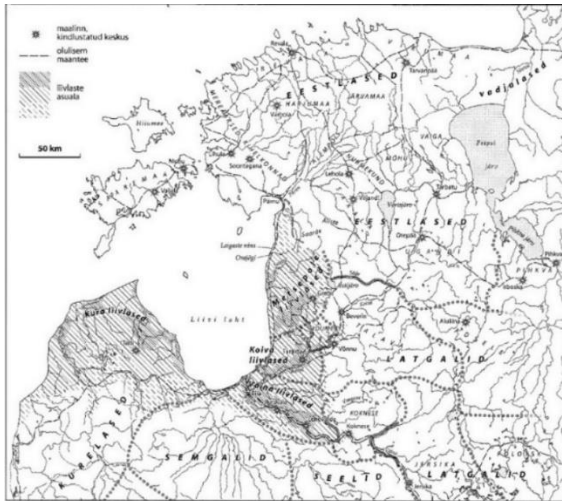
## History

### Ancient history

The ancestors of the Livonians and Latvians, the Finnic and Baltic tribes, arrived the territory of present-day Latvia in the Late Bronze Age. By the 12th century, the Livonian nation had come into existence and later merged with the ancient Baltic nations of Latvia – the Latgalians, Curonians, Semigallians, and Selonians – forming the Latvian nation. The development of the Livonian area can be observed from the 10th century, but more reliable data is from the 12th century when the Livonians occur in historical records. The Livonians are first mentioned in “Повесть временных лет” (Tale of bygone years), written by the monk Nestor of the Pechersk Monastery in Kyiv. In that record, the Livonians are mentioned in the form *либь ~ любь*. Livonian culture flourished in the 11th and 12th centuries.

More detailed information about the Livonians of Vidzeme from the late 12th and early 13th centuries is found in the Livonian Chronicle of Henry where Livonians and their territories are mentioned as of the 1180s. This chronicle records the conquest and conversion to Christianity of the Baltic and Livonian lands by the Germans and Teutonic Knights. It is mainly from this chronicle that we have knowledge of the ancient Livonian tribes, their social organization, customs, religion, and territories. The events of the late 13th century were recorded in the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle where its author says the following about the Livonians: “There by the River Daugava (Dune), which flows here from Russia (*Ruzen*), there lived a godless people, very brave in battle: – the Livonians (*Liwen*) – so they were called.” In the 13th century, other sources also mention the Livonians: contracts, documents, and descriptions of their customary law. At this time the Livonians can be considered an ethnicity with its own identity, as they are treated as a separate group in written sources.

Based on archaeological and written sources, two large regions can be identified in Latvia at the end of the 12th century as having been inhabited by the Livonians: northern Courland (Kurzeme) and Vidzeme, which includes the Lower Daugava, the Lower Gauja, Metsepole, and Idumea (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Regions inhabited by Livonians on the 12th century. \\ – Livonian regions. *Kura liivlased* – Courland (Kurzeme) Livonians, *Väina liivlased* – Daugava Livonians, *Koiva liivlased* – Gauja Livonians, *Metsepole liivlased* – Metsepole Livonians (map: Urmas Sutrop and Raivo Aunap).

Nowadays it is no longer possible to say with certainty what was the source of the name of the Livonian people or what its original form was in Livonian. The Latin *livones* used in the Livonian Chronicle of Henry and the German *Liven* was most likely borrowed from a term already used for the Livonians in Scandinavia and later borrowed from German into other languages including Estonian and Modern Russian. In ancient Russian sources, the Livonians are referred to by name in the 11th century (любъ ~ любъ) and this corresponds to the term *lībieši* used by the Livonians' closest neighbors – the Latvians – which is first attested in the 14th century. The Livonians also referred to themselves as *līb roust* (in Vidzeme) or *rāndalīz* (in Kurzeme). Modern Livonian uses the term *līvlīz*, which was borrowed from Estonian in the 1920s.

#### The Livonians up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century

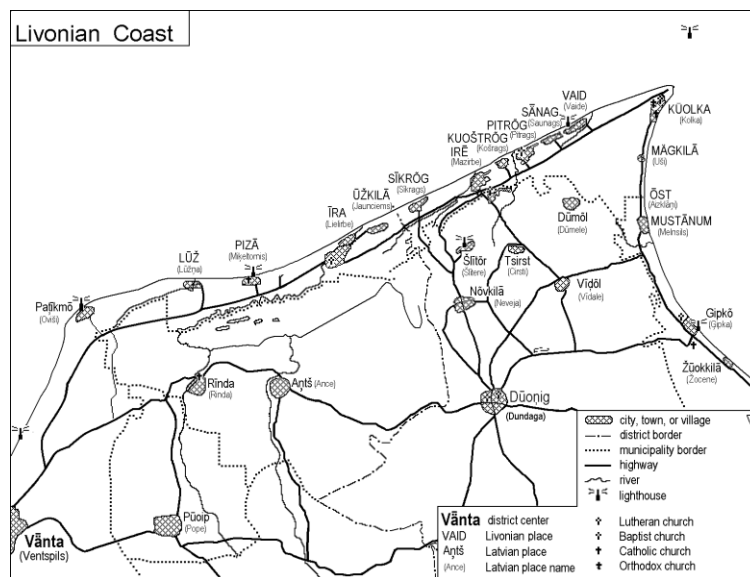
In the early 14th century, the Vidzeme Livonians gradually began to assimilate into the Latgalians and other Baltic tribes of Latvia laying the foundation for the development of the Latvian language and people. It appears that Livonian was spoken in the Daugava and Idumea regions until the 15th-16th centuries, in the Gauja region until the 17th century, but in the Metsepole region up until the mid-19th century.

Less is known about the Courland Livonians. Written records and linguistic evidence show that the Courland Livonians lived mixed with the Curonians, who ruled over most of historic Courland in the 12th-13th centuries. The Courland Livonians are also associated with the Vends, who at some time in the past moved from the Lower Venta to Rīga and were living in Cēsis by the 12th century.

It is known that in the 16th-17th centuries, Livonian was spoken in northern Courland. At that time the Livonians began to adopt Latvian, which had already developed as a language in Vidzeme, and the area they inhabited began to shrink. Over the centuries, the number of Livonians in Courland and Vidzeme decreased, accompanied by a language shift. In Vidzeme, this process came to an end in the 1860s. The last speaker of Vidzeme Livonian died in 1868.

Salaca Livonian is the only form of Livonian spoken on the territory of historical Livonia. In the second half of the 18th and early 19th centuries, the Livonians lived as a homogeneous ethnic group only from Ovīši to Ģipka.

By the early 20th century Livonian was only spoken in the fishing villages in northern Courland, known today as the Livonian Coast (Figure 5). Traditionally, Courland Livonian has been divided into East (spoken in the villages of Ūžkilā (Latvian *Jaunciems*), Sīkrōg (*Sīkrags*), Irē (*Mazirbe*), Kuoštrōg (*Košrags*), Pitrōg (*Pitrags*), Sānag (*Saunags*), Vaid (*Vaide*), Kūolka (*Kolka*), Māgkilā (*Uši*), Ūst (*Aizklāņi*), Mustānum (*Melnšils*) and West Livonian (the villages Paņikmō (Latvian *Oviši*), Lūž (*Lūžņa*), Pizā (*Miķeļtornis*), Īra (*Lielirbe*)) dialects. Livonian spoken in the village of Īra on the banks of the Īra River has also sometimes been considered a central dialect or a transition area between western and eastern Livonian.



**Figure 5.** Livonian Coast in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (map: Tiit-Rein Viitso).

The 19th century is noteworthy for being the period when scientific research into the Livonians began. Major collection work of Livonian linguistic data began in the middle of the 19th century with the publication of the first important collection of Livonian – a Livonian-German and German-Livonian dictionary (Sjögren & Wiedemann 1861a, see an example of the page in Figure 6) and a grammar with language examples (Sjögren & Wiedemann 1861b) by Finnish scholar Andreas Johan Sjögren and Estonian scholar Ferdinand Johann Wiedemann, who collected data during their expeditions in 1846, 1852, and 1858 under assignment from the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences.



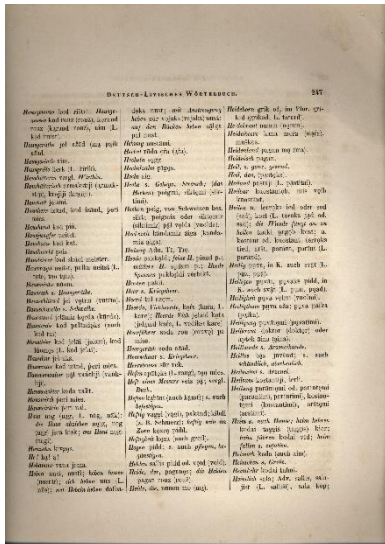
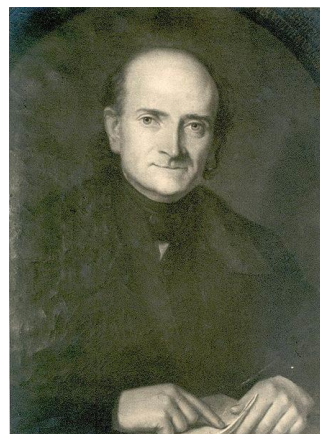


Figure 6. Page from Sjögren & Wiedemann 1861a.



Anders Johan Sjögren (1794–1855) (kansalliskirjasto.fi) and Ferdinand Johann Wiedemann (1805–1887).

The Gospel of Matthew was published in the Eastern and Western dialects of Courland Livonian in London in 1863, the first known work published in Livonian. Both books were published as a single volume in St. Petersburg in 1880 and this became the first Livonian publication to reach the Livonians themselves.

### Between the two Worlds Wars

World War I forced the Livonians into exile and sent them further inland in Latvia and to Estonia and Russia. It also accelerated the decline in their numbers as well as their linguistic assimilation. Of the Livonian-inhabited villages in northern Courland, Irē (Latvian *Mazirbe*) became the most important center of the community and cultural life due to its location and active economy. In Irē there was a church, school, post office, clinic with a doctor and midwife, pharmacy, teahouse, barber shop, photographer's studio, steam mill, sawmill, fish smokehouse, brick kiln, several stores, and the fishing cooperative "Zivs" (Fish). During World War I, the narrow-gauge railway was built and called *piški bōņ* in Livonian ('a little train'). The train came from Vānta (Latvian *Ventspils*) and turned at Irē towards Dūoņig (*Dundaga*) and Stēņđa

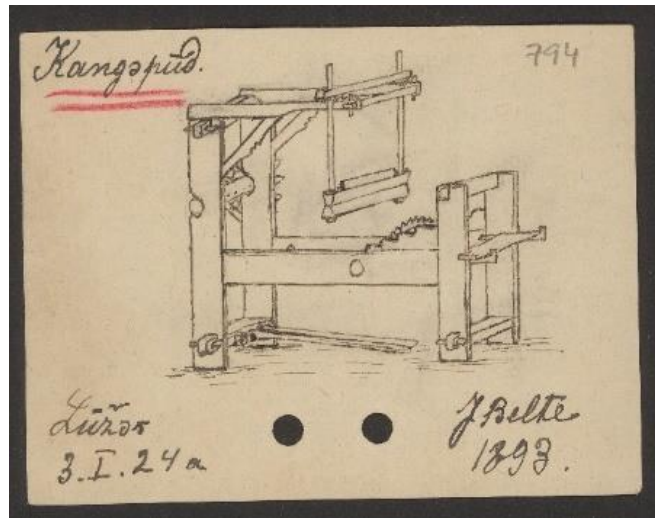
(*Stende*). In the 1920s and 1930s, seven primary schools were operating in the Livonian villages.



Narrow-gauge train in Ventspils open-air museum (photo: *livones.net*).

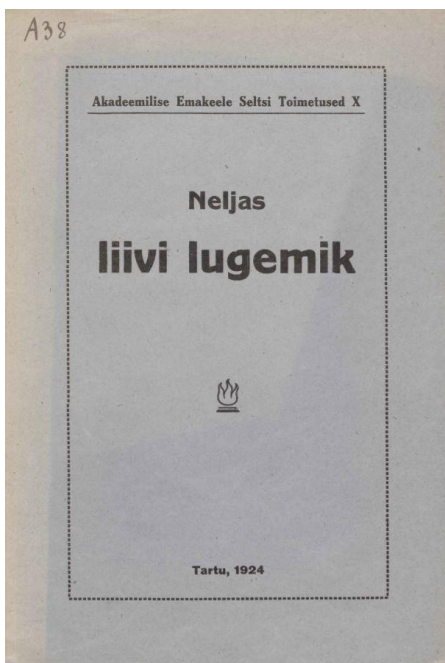
With the end of World War I and the establishment of the Republic of Latvia in 1918, the stage was set for a dramatic improvement in the conditions and use of the Livonian language in its traditional home on the northern coast of Courland. The towns were somewhat isolated from the rest of Courland by a belt of uninhabited forests and swamps, which allowed the Livonian identity of the area to be preserved. However, the situation of the Livonians was not easy in the 1920s: World War I as a result of the exile, the younger generation of Livonians partially lost their language, the Livonian language was not used in schools or churches, there were no native speakers reading material, general poverty prevailed in Livonian villages.

In the early 1920s, a new generation of linguists began arriving on the Livonian Coast. The two most notable researchers were Finnish linguist Lauri Kettunen (1885–1963) and Estonian folklorist Oskar Loo (1900–1961). Livonians were encouraged to take pride in their language and culture. Oskar Loo actively contributed to Livonian community actions. His extensive documentation of Livonian is of great value to researchers. He focused on investigating Livonian folklore and defended his doctoral dissertation in 1926 on Livonian folk religion.



Oskar Loorits writing down the story of a Livonian informant in the village of Lüž in 1920 (photo: Lauri Kettunen, ERM Fk 453:25) and an example of a note from Loorits' folklore materials (LF S 1).

To strengthen the position of Livonian, Estonian activists published five Livonian readers (in 1921, 1922, 1923, 1924, and 1926). The Livonian books published in the 1930s were generally of a religious nature. The first newspaper in Livonian – “Līvli” (The Livonian) – was published in Jelgava in 1931. It was published monthly until August 1939.



The fourth Livonian reader (1924).

The interwar period was productive for Livonian cultural life and had relatively positive conditions for language development. Following Latvia's independence declaration in 1918,

the Livonian community and cultural life also became more organized. The largest and oldest Livonian community organization, the Livonian Union (*Līvõd Īt*) was established on April 2, 1923, in Irē. The following goals were listed in its statutes: to keep the Livonian language alive, to spread knowledge and learning among the Livonians, and to help improve their economic and social life. The Livonian choirs were an important part of cultural life. The first Livonian Union choir was organized in 1922. On June 24, 1924, the first Livonian Song Festival took place.

With the assistance of the Finnish Awakening Society (*Herättäjä-yhdistys*), for the first time it was possible for the Livonians also to attend religious services in their own language. Several times a year the Finnish pastor would travel to the Livonian villages thanks to financial support from the Awakening Society, and hold services, baptize children, conduct funerals, and even organize confirmation and Sunday school classes. The first known service in Livonian occurred in the Irē Church in January 1931. Due to its location, Irē became the major Livonian center in the 1920s and 1930s. It also received significant financial assistance from Estonia, Finland, and Hungary for constructing the Livonian National House, which was opened in Irē on August 6, 1939.

#### Soviet period

After World War II, the number of Livonians quickly decreased. The reasons for this included emigration, deportation, fear of advertising one's ethnic affiliation, and the frequent unwillingness of Soviet officials to accept the ethnicity "Livonian" for official purposes.

In the 1940s, the Livonian-inhabited Baltic Sea and Gulf of Rīga coasts were declared the western border zone of the former USSR. Many border guard posts and military units were placed in and around the Livonian villages. Coastal fishing was gradually eliminated in the smaller villages and concentrated in the larger population centers of Kūolka, Roja, and Ventpils. Limits were placed on freedom of movement for inhabitants. This forced working-age people to look for work elsewhere, emptying the villages. Some buildings were sold by the Livonians to summer holidaymakers, some stayed in families, and others collapsed.



Cemetery of boats in Irē (photo: Tuuli Tuisk 2021)

During the Soviet period, the Livonian community and cultural life only became active in the 1970s. This is due to several actions, one of which was the establishment of the Livonian ethnographic ensembles *Līvlist* in Rīga and *Kāndla* in Ventspils. These were established to preserve and develop the Livonian language and musical heritage. Livonian songs were also popularized by the folklore group *Skandinieki*. In the 1970s, several significant events for Livonian cultural life took place, e.g., the placement of a memorial stone honoring Livonian poets at the Pizā (Latvian *Miķeļtornis*) cemetery during the Poetry Days in September 1978 and an exhibit of Livonian ethnographic objects entitled *Rāndali* (Coast dweller).

In August 1978, members of the Livonian and Latvian intelligentsia asked the leadership of the Latvian SSR to recognize the Livonians as a separate ethnicity and work to prevent their assimilation. This request, however, had no official positive results.

#### Livonian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

In the current century, there have been remarkable developments affecting Livonian. Various actions are initiated to promote the Livonian language and culture. For example, the International Year of Livonian Language and Culture in 2011 noticeably invigorated the discussion of Livonian-related questions within Latvia and abroad (see the logo in Figure 7). The discussions involved the status of Livonian in Latvia, the social setting for its use, and the ways in which it is used in everyday life. There are difficulties associated with Livonian language acquisition and language development as well as a description of Livonian language pedagogical materials and other resources, which have been recently developed or are in the process of being developed. However, methods and opportunities for further developing Livonian and improving its current situation are discussed in the context of potential solutions and already existing initiatives.



**Figure 7.** Official logo of the International Year of Livonian Language and Culture (author: Zane Ernštreite).

A relatively new trend can also be observed in that websites and social networks are being used more actively to popularize the Livonians and the Livonian language and share information related to these topics. With respect to intensive Livonian language study, a successful example can be mentioned. Already since 1992, the Livonian children's summer camp *Mierlinkizt* has taken place every summer. Children from around Latvia learn the Livonian language at the camp for several weeks.



Participant of the Livonian children's summer camp *Mierlinkizt* performing in the traditional annual Livonian celebrations in Mazirbe (photo: Uldis Balodis 2018).

Even if it is not possible to learn a great deal about Livonian during such a short time and even if a majority of the camp participants do not come into contact with Livonian in the interim, this camp is the first exposure for a large number of the camp participants to Livonian (which for many of them is their family's heritage language) and potentially can prompt them to further efforts in studying Livonian. Since 1989, Livonian celebrations have been organized on the first Saturday of August on the Livonian beach in Mazirbe in honor of the Livonian Community House. During the celebration, concerts and performances take place, exhibitions are opened, lectures are held, and dancing is held.



Fire on the beach in Mazirbe during the Livonian celebrations (photo: Tuuli Tuisk 2021).

Despite only a handful of speakers, the Livonian community in Latvia is active in preserving and developing the Livonian heritage and language plays a key role in this process. In 2018, the first scientific Livonian center was founded – the Livonian Institute at the University of Latvia. The head of the institute Valts Ernštreits looks positively to the future: „ Motivation is important: there must be no feeling that the Livonian stuff is just the stuff of the past. It is not just a Livonian heritage, it is a living culture! And for it to be a living culture, it must function

as a living culture. We must not focus too much on what has been but constantly look to the future. Otherwise, there is a risk of canning and drying out.“ (Newspaper Sirp 19.06.2020)

In order to motivate the regions historically inhabited by the Livonians to study and highlight their Livonian roots, to discover and display Livonian elements in their region's landscape, events, and everyday life, the University of Latvia Livonian Institute in cooperation with the Latvian National Commission for UNESCO and the Latvian National Centre for Culture has declared 2023 to be the Year of Livonian Heritage (see logos on Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** Official logos of the Livonian Heritage Year in Livonian, Latvian and Estonian (author: Zane Ernštreite).

On the first Sunday after the Spring Equinox, which in 2023 fell on March 26th, Livonian Heritage Day was celebrated for the first time in the regions historically inhabited by the Livonians. On that day regions decorated local places of significance especially those associated with the Livonians with Livonian green-white-blue flags or colors. Likewise, people participated in the Livonian spring bird waking ritual, the roots of which are found in antiquity and which took place in many locations across Latvia. Bird waking is an ancient tradition specifically characteristic of the Livonians. It is associated with the Finnic (Livonian, Estonian, Finnish, Karelian, etc.) mythical view that the world arose from the egg of a water bird. Bird waking, which marks the beginning of the year for the Livonians and the reawakening of all life, is an echo of this ancient myth. The Livonian myth is grounded in the traditional view that migratory birds do not leave in the fall but spend the winter at the bottom or along the shore of the sea, rivers, or lakes, and that in the spring they have to be awoken.



Livonian flags together with Latvian flags on the bridge over Gauja river on March 2023 (photo: Sigulda novada pašvaldība/Municipality of Sigulda county).

## Language features

Unlike Latvian, a part of the Baltic branch of the Indo-European language family, Livonian belongs to the Finnic branch of the Uralic language family. The closest linguistic relatives of Livonian are Estonian, Finnish, and Karelian, more distant ones include Sámi, Hungarian, Mordvin, and other Uralic languages.

Although Livonian is primarily a language spoken in Latvia, Livonian language data have mainly been collected by scholars outside Latvia. The relevance of the Livonian language has long extended beyond borders and special features of this language have drawn attention on several levels. Already at the end of the 19th century, Livonian excited the broader interest of linguists of several countries. For example, it was Vilhelm Thomsen (1842–1927), a prominent Danish linguist of his time, who recognized the Livonian broken tone as being similar to a phenomenon in Danish (Thomsen 1890). The position of Livonian on the border of the Finno-Ugric and Indo-European languages and the emergence of unique language phenomena have made it interesting for researchers of different backgrounds.



Danish linguist Vilhelm Thomsen.

## Sound system and pronunciation

There are 31 letters in the modern Livonian alphabet: **a ä b d đ e f g h i j k l l̥ m n ŋ o ó õ p r ŗ s š t ŧ u v z ž**. The letters **c, q, w, x, y** occur only in foreign names, e.g., *Bach, Wiedemann, Kyrölä*. The long vowel is orthographically marked with a macron above the vowel: *sū* ‘mouth’, *lēņtš* ‘southwest’, *võrõz* ‘stranger’, *sīedõ* ‘to eat, Inf’. The vowel length of the second syllable after a short first syllable is also marked: *jõvā* ‘good’, *katāb* ‘he/she covers’. The long consonant is denoted by writing the consonant either with one or two letters, e.g., *tapāb* ‘he/she kills’, *ka’ggõl* ‘neck’, *võttõ* ‘to take’. The Livonian written language is based on the East Courland dialect (e.g., Viitso 2008).

## Some notes on vowels

- Livonian has eight vowels: i, õ, u, e, ô, o, ä, a. All these vowels can be short and long. In the table, Livonian vowels are presented according to the tongue movement in the mouth:



	Front vowel	Back vowel	
<b>High</b>	i ī	õ ȭ	u ū
<b>Mid-high</b>	e ē	ò ȭ	o ō
<b>Low</b>	ä ā	a ā	ō

- In East Livonian, the distinction between long mid, and low back rounded vowels õ and ȯ (no orthographic distinction!) can be made, e.g., *lõda* ‘table’, *tȯla* ‘winter’. The long mid õ is present in all Livonian dialects, it alternates with the diphthong ou, e.g. *kouv* ‘well’: *kõvõd* ‘wells’. In Central Livonian and West Livonian ā (in Estonian and in Finnish aa) serves as a counterpart to East Livonian ȯ (cf. East Livonian *mȯ* ‘land’ and Estonian *maa* ‘land’).
- Only i, a, u and a reduced vowel õ appear in non-initial syllables, e.g. *võlda* ‘to be’, *kaṭki* ‘broken’ (except some foreign words, e.g., *fotõ* ‘photo’).
- Of long vowels, ā, ē, ī and ū occur in non-initial syllables, e.g., *sidām* ‘heart’, *kuṛē* ‘devil’, *kadīz* ‘disappeared’, *jānū* ‘thirst’.
- The vowel õ is present in all Southern Finnic languages, i.e. Northern Estonian, Southern Estonian, Votic and Livonian. In the Livonian language, a distinction is made between two õ sounds: (1) õ is a high vowel, which is higher than Estonian õ, e.g., *sõnā* ‘word’, (b) ò is a mid-high vowel, which occurs only in stressed syllables following the word-initial consonants p, m, v, e.g., *põis* ‘boy’, *mõizõ* ‘manor’; it is somewhat lower than Estonian õ.
- ö and ü were replaced in the whole Livonian area with e and i.

#### Some notes on consonants

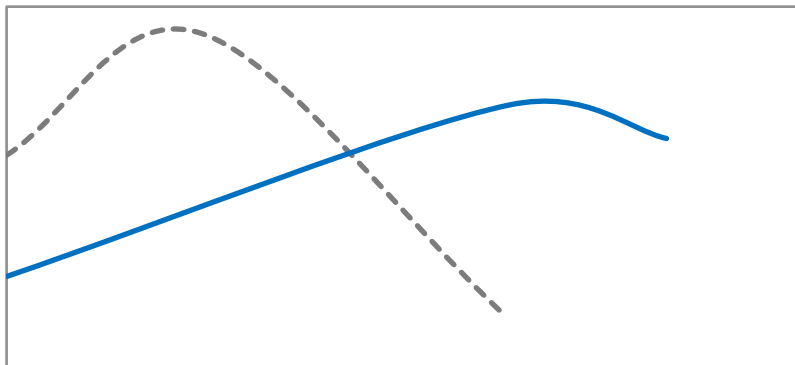
- Livonian voiced consonants are b d ḡ g ɭ ɳ ʀ z ž, e.g., *ažā* ‘thing’, *sadā* ‘hundred’.
- Palatalized consonants: ḡ ɭ ɳ ʀ ʈ, e.g., *paḡā* ‘pillow’, *nõḡla* ‘joke’, *võḡim* ‘key’ (palatalization is marked with a cedilla below the consonant letter).
- A long consonant is written with one letter in a word-final position and in a consonant cluster, e.g., *kik* ‘cock’, *andõ* ‘to give’.
- Fortis consonants are p t ʈ k s š, e.g., *sukā* ‘stocking’, *tappõ* ‘to kill’, *pūošõd* ‘boys’.
- Lenis consonants b d ḡ g z ž are voiced in voiced surroundings, e.g., *tabār* ‘tail’, *vagā* ‘quiet, still’; word-finally and in front of p t ʈ k s š they are generally unvoiced, e.g., *rūož* ‘rose’.
- There are short and long geminates, e.g., *katāb* ‘he/she covers’, *kattõ* ‘to cover’. There is a gemination of voiced plosives and fricatives, e.g., *ka’ddõ* ‘to disappear’, *ki’vvõ* ‘stone, PartSg’, *i’zzõ* ‘father, PartSg’.

Livonian has preserved the main prosodic features characteristic of Finnic languages, such as (a) word-initial stress and (b) the phonological opposition of short and long phoneme duration. Particular characteristics of Livonian are (a) the opposition of the plain tone and broken tone

(i.e., stød), (b) the differentiation of short and long diphthongs and triphthongs, and (c) a wide difference in the structure of stressed and unstressed syllables.

### Tone

The question of tonal oppositions has been a much-debated issue in the research on Livonian prosody. In primary-stressed syllables, two tones occur: the plain (or rising) tone, and the broken tone or stød (see Figure 9), which is rising-falling or predominantly falling and is sometimes accompanied by laryngealization. The broken tone or stød also has equivalents in Salaca Livonian and South Estonian Leivu and Lutsi dialects in Latvia.



**Figure 9.** Examples of the plain tone (solid line) and the broken tone or stød (dashed line).

Words with broken tone or stød are usually marked with an apostrophe in transcriptions and learning materials (e.g., *ki'v* 'stone', *vie'ddō* 'to carry'). In the orthography, the broken tone is left unmarked. There is no common agreement on how to mark broken tone in IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet), but the symbol used for a glottal consonant (ʔ) is sometimes proposed.

### Stress

A simplex word in Livonian usually contains one to five syllables, cf. *sī* 'guilt', *pāvaļikzō* 'sun, IllSg'. The word stem may be followed by an inflectional formative that may consist of a number of syllables. With the exception of a few monosyllabic words that may be unstressed in the sentence, a word has at least one stressed syllable. The primary stress is on the first syllable of a word (also in foreign words). The secondary stress is generally on the third syllable of a word.

### Gradation

Livonian gradation or grade alternation consists of regular alternations of the STRONG GRADE and WEAK GRADE of stressed syllables when the word is inflected.

#### Weak grade

*kalād* 'fish' (NomPl)

#### Strong grade

*ka'llō* 'fish' (PartSg)

<i>kikād</i> ‘cocks’ (NomPl)	<i>kik</i> ‘kukk’ (NomSg)
<i>liepād</i> ‘alders’ (NomPl)	<i>lieppō</i> ‘alder’ (PartSg)
<i>kīraz</i> ‘axe’ (NomSg)	<i>kirrō</i> ‘axe’ (PartSg)
<i>vōtāb</i> ‘takes’	<i>vōttō</i> ‘to take’
<i>siegūb</i> ‘mixes’	<i>sie’ggō</i> ‘to mix’

## Morphology

### Nouns

- Livonian, just as its Finnic relatives, does not distinguish grammatical gender for nouns or pronouns. This means that unlike in many Indo-European languages, no affixes or other particular words (such as articles) are associated with Livonian nouns, which specifically indicate the gender of the referent. Therefore, words like *sōbrā* ‘friend’, *līvli* ‘a Livonian person’, and *leḷli* ‘a Latvian person’ can refer to either a male or female individual. However, there are nouns in Livonian, which inherently distinguish gender just by virtue of the information within the word itself, e.g., *nai* ‘woman; wife’ vs. *mīez* ‘man; husband’, *kēņig* ‘king’ vs. *kēņigemānd* ‘queen’; *kanā* ‘hen’ vs. *kik* ‘rooster’.

- Livonian is typical of other Finnic languages in that it has a large number of noun cases. The dictionary by Viitso & Ernštreits (2012) gives as many as 17 noun cases for Livonian. The standard inventory of nominal cases contains 8 productive (highlighted in light blue in the table) and 4–5 unproductive cases (highlighted in light green in the table). Nouns inflect for case and number.

Livonian case endings		
Case	Singular	Plural
Nominative	–	-ōd -d -t
Genitive	–	-ōd -d -t
Partitive	-dā -tā -da -ta -ṭa -dō -tō, -t -ō -i	-di -ḡi -ti -ṭi -i
Dative	-ōn -n	-ddōn -dōn -ōdōn -tōn
Instrumental	-kōks -ōks -ks	-dōks -dkōks -tkōks, -tōks
Illative	-zō -ō(z)	-ži -īž -iž -ž -īz -iz
Inessive	-s(ō) -ōs(ō) -š(ō)	-īs -is -ši
Elative	-st(ō) -ōst(ō) -št(ō)	-īst -ist -šti
Allative	-l(ō) -ōl	
Adessive	-l(ō) -ōl	
Ablative	-ld(ō(st)) -ōld	
Instructive	–	-īṇ -iṇ

- The **nominative** and the **genitive** singular and plural forms are mostly homonymic, e.g., *kalā* : *kalā* ‘fish’, *kalād* : *kalād* ‘fishes’, *lēba* : *lēba* ‘bread’, *lēbad* : *lēbad* ‘breads’. There are exceptions in several instances, e.g., *nai* : *naiz* ‘woman’, *kuolmōz* : *kuolmōnd* ‘third’, *lāpš* : *laps* ‘child’, *kēļ* : *kēļ* ‘language’, *tām* : *tam* ‘oak’.

- Differently from Estonian which uses exterior cases to express recipient, possessor, etc., Livonian uses the **dative** case (cf. Mordvin and Baltic languages), e.g., *Mi’nnōn vō’ļ i’bbi* ‘I had a horse’, *Jōņ tōitiz Pētōrōn ī’d lambō* ‘Jōņ promised Pētōr one sheep’. However, the elative occurs as well, e.g., *Ta vōtšūb mi’nstō a’bbō* ‘He/she is looking for help from me’. The dative also marks the experiencer, e.g., *Tā’mmōn um kīlma* ‘He/she is cold’.

- Possessive genitive and dative are both used to express whom sth belongs to or part of which sth is, e.g., *Se um mi’n pūoga* ‘This is **my** son.’, *Se mō um mā’dđōn* ‘This land is **ours**.’

- In addition to expressing the atelicity of a subject or an object, the **partitive** case expresses a separate part of a whole or an entity in certain phrases, e.g., in *kabāl leibō* ‘piece of bread’ where *leib-ō* is the partitive of *lēba* ‘bread’.

- Instead of the translative and the comitative cases present in other Finnic languages, in Livonian there is the **instrumental** case (like in Baltic languages), e.g., *kēļkōks* ‘with a tongue’. The translative and comitative functions can be separated only rarely, cf. *pi’ņ/kōks* ‘with a dog’ and *pi’ņņ/ōks* ‘(turn) into a dog’ – *Se kutški kazāb sūr pi’ņņōks* ‘This puppy will turn into a big dog’ and *Ma lā’b pi’ņkōks kenžlōm* ‘I’m going for a walk with the dog’.

- The cases called **allative**, **adessive** and **ablative** are used with certain place names (e.g., Livonian villages Irē, Sīkrōg, Kuostrōg, etc. > *Irēl* ‘in or to Irē’, *Sīkrōgōld* ‘from Sīkrōg’, *Kuostrōgōl* ‘in or to Kuostrōg’), they appear in certain phrases, adverbials, e.g., *lovāl* ‘in bed’, *a’bbōl* ‘(go for) help’, *sīel āigal* ‘at that time’.

- The **instructive** case denotes the way an action is carried out, e.g., *jālgīņ* ‘on foot’, but most often it refers to measures and other units that say how something moves, is measured, etc. (*sumāriņ* ‘piece by piece’, *stūndiņ* ‘for hours’).

- There are some lexicalized instances of the **essive**, for instance, some adverbials expressing a) time, e.g. *ō’dōn* ‘in the evening’, *brēđōn* ‘on Friday’, *tu’lbiz āigastōn* ‘next year’, b) place, e.g. *kuo’nnō* ‘at home’, c) and state, e.g. *opātijizōn* ‘as a teacher’, contain traces of the essive.

Due to the large variation in case endings and also variation within particular cases, Livonian nouns are grouped into several hundred declension types. Each type describes the exact way nouns in that group are declined for all cases and each group is assigned a unique numerical index, which appears in dictionaries alongside each noun. The most comprehensive and extensive description of Livonian declension types can be found in Viitso & Ernštreits 2012 and the dictionary’s online versions.

#### *Pronouns, question words, adpositions*

Livonian pronouns:

<b>Singular</b>	<b>Plural</b>
<i>minā, ma</i> ‘I’	<i>mēg (meg)</i> ‘we’

*sinā, sa* ‘you’  
*tāmā, ta* ‘he/she’

*tēg (teg)* ‘you’  
*nāmād, ne* ‘they’

No gender distinction exists for third-person pronouns in Livonian. Therefore, the singular forms (*tāmā, ta*) are equivalent to ‘she’ or ‘he’. Similarly, the plural form (*ne*) is equally applicable to groups of third-person referents regardless of gender. Livonian personal pronouns are declined according to the case.

Question words are also declined according to the case. In Livonian, as in other Finnic languages, there are two series of question words differentiated by animacy. Question words derived from *kis* are used for living beings and those derived from *mis* are used for inanimate objects. This is roughly the same as the distinction in English between *who* and *what*.

There are both postpositions and prepositions in Livonian. Many locative postpositions have three forms corresponding to the three-way distinction (towards/in/from) present in the locative noun cases. For example, *alā* ‘downward’, *allō* ‘under’, *aldōst* ‘from underneath’. Postpositions such as these can also function as adverbs lending a perfective meaning to the verbs they occur with and also coloring their meaning. (e.g., *kēratō* ‘to write’ vs. *alā kēratō* ‘to sign’) Some examples of postpositions include *allō* ‘under’ (*tam allō* ‘under the oak tree’), *jūs* ‘by at’ (*sōbrā jūs* ‘by/at the friend’), *pāl* ‘on’ (*vie’d pāl* ‘on the water’), *sizāl* ‘inside’ (*kougōl sizāl* ‘inside the bread mixing bowl’), *sōņō* ‘until, up to’ (*jo’ug sōņō* ‘up to the river’). Examples of prepositions are for example *i’l* ‘about’ (*i’l sīe* ‘about it’) and *pi’ds* ‘along’ (*pi’ds riekkō* ‘along the road’). All of the postpositions and prepositions in these examples take nouns in the genitive case. However, there are other adpositions, which take nouns in other cases (for example in partitive or instrumental).

## Verbs

Finite forms inflect for person, tense, mood, polarity, and number. Livonian has two tenses,

- present (e.g., *Izā **lugūb** rōntōzt* ‘Father **is** reading a book’)
- past (e.g., *Izā **lugīz** rōntōzt* ‘Father **was** reading a book’),

and five moods,

- indicative,
- conditional (e.g., ***Vōlks** ni mi’nnōn rōz vōita, ma **tīeks** vōīdagstleibō, bet leibō ä’b ūo.* ‘If I had some butter, I would make a sandwich, but there is no bread.’),
- imperative (e.g., ***Rōkānd** vizāstiz ja lougō!* ‘Speak loudly and slowly!’),
- quotative (e.g., *Tā’mmōn **vō’lli** ūž ja interesant rōntōz, kīenda ta **tō’ji** mi’nnōn nā’gļō.* ‘S/he is said to have a new and an interesting book that s/he apparently wants to show me.’),
- jussive (e.g., ***La’z vōtāg** sīe ibīz ja pangō rattōd je’ddō* ‘Let him/her take the horse and put it in front of the horsecart.’).

As in the other Finnic languages, verbs in Livonian are negated using a special negative verb used in conjunction with a root form of the lexical verb (in the present and past tense):

- affirmative (e.g., *Ma opūb līvõ kīeldõ*. ‘I learn Livonian’, *Ta tulks tãnõ*. ‘S/he would come here’),
- negative (e.g., *Ma ä'b op līvõ kīeldõ*. ‘I don’t learn Livonian’, *Ma i'z op līvõ kīeldõ*. ‘I didn’t learn Livonian’, *Ta ä'b tulks tãnõ*. ‘S/he would not come here’).

To express future time, Livonian generally uses a verb in the present tense, e.g. *Mūpõ ma tulāb o'bbõ kuodāj* ‘Tomorrow I will come home late’. The future interpretation becomes clear from the broader context, in this case from the future adverbial *mūpõ* ‘tomorrow’. In addition, *līdõ* ‘will be’ as a future auxiliary is used, e.g. *Pūogast līb kalāmīez* ‘The son will become a fisherman’.

### Current circumstances and future challenges and opportunities

As a highly endangered Finno-Ugric language, Livonian has already started down the path toward entering the digital space. A number of digital resources have been created and gradually provided to the public. Some technologies and tools like keyboard drivers (e.g., <https://rootroo.com/en/livonian-keyboard/> by the Finnish company RootRoo (Hämäläinen & Alnajjar 2021)) and spellchecking software are already being used. An experiment for creating an NLP-based machine translation technology for Livonian has been carried through. This experiment was performed by the University of Tartu Institute of Computer Science Chair of Natural Language Processing (see Rikters et al. 2022).

Compared to many critically endangered languages, as a result of almost two centuries of collecting language data, Livonian is documented relatively well, especially considering its small number of speakers. This has created some preconditions for bringing Livonian into the digital space – both in terms of accessibility of the language data for better research and ensuring the overall sustainability of Livonian by improving access to language sources for the Livonian community.

There are several potential users for the resources and technologies developed for Livonian. The two main groups are (1) specialists interested in researching the Livonian language, intangible cultural heritage, and the Livonian community, and (2) speakers and those who want to study the Livonian language and culture. The needs of both groups are somewhat different; however, the two main types of technologies required by users can be identified. Users need technologies that make further expansion and processing of language resources more efficient as well as support language use and acquisition by including technologies for accessing content by those not proficient in Livonian (a majority of users).

The development of various machine translation technologies has proven efficient in languages with more speakers and greater linguistic data. The development of machine translation technologies for translating Livonian texts into other languages would be beneficial for ensuring the sustainability of the language and expanding possibilities of research into Livonian heritage.

In addition to written documentation, Livonian has also been recorded in audio and video formats. The first audio recordings of Livonian were made already in the 1920s by Oskar Loorits as part of his documentation of Livonian folklore (these phonograph recordings can be

found in the Estonian Literary Museum). The most important collections, however, were made during the post-war period and are found primarily in research institutions in Estonia (Institute of the Estonian Language, University of Tartu).

The complex situation still exists in the matter of Livonian language acquisition. Livonian is in an unusual situation. The geographic area of people interested in it is limited and scattered, not only within Latvia but also beyond its borders. This means that it is difficult to form language learning groups of suitable size, whose participants also have knowledge of Livonian at a similar level. For this reason, the level of Livonian language classes, even if it is possible to organize them despite the difficulties involved with logistics and financial support, will always settle at the lowest proficiency level within the group, which typically means studying language basics. As individuals who already acquire knowledge of Livonian usually become involved in such groups, this type of language activity can offer them nothing besides repeating language basics and socializing with other class participants. Therefore, the result of such language acquisition activities is largely symbolic. The second problem is the lack of Livonian language teachers. The number of Livonian language teachers is very small, especially when organizing classes focusing on more advanced language study. In addition, teachers and potential language course participants are not infrequently located in different places, so it is necessary to transport teachers for such courses from other locations.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Livonian summer universities have become an essential part of the tradition of Livonian lectures and seminars, language learning, and student field studies. The first International Livonian Summer University took place on August 2013 in the eastern Courland village of Kuoštrõg (Latvian *Košrags*). The second Livonian Summer University was held on August 2017 in the western Courland Livonian of Pizā (*Miķeltornis*). The third university took place in 2021 in Kuoštrõg and Irē (*Mazirbe*). Students and researchers from different countries have participated in these events and knowledge of the Livonian language and culture has been shared with them in a number of different languages. The charm and uniqueness of the Livonian summer universities lie largely in the fact that they take place in the historical Livonian settlements and environment. Along with this, the involvement and participation of Livonian speakers and people with Livonian roots are not less important. These summer universities are not just something that is introduced and organized by different institutions, but they also involve people with Livonian heritage.



Participants of the third Livonian summer university in 2021 in Kuoštrõg (photo: Miina Norvik 2021).



The Livonian coast (photo: Tuuli Tuisk 2021)

## B. Questions for further study

(hint: use the websites and dictionaries listed below)

For undergraduates

1. What do the colors of the Livonian flag symbolize?
2. Which traces of the Latvian language can be found in the Livonian language?
3. Describe what characterizes the Livonian Coast landscape.
4. Who was *Vāldapā* and why did he get such a nickname from Livonians?
5. In Livonian legends and folk beliefs there are many important and interesting beings. Who are for example *mierjemā*, *kīlmakānga* and *kuṛē*?

For graduates

1. How has the Latvian language influenced Livonian and vice versa?



2. Present some similarities and differences between the Courland Livonian language and the Salaca Livonian language.
3. Who is the only poet who writes in Salaca Livonian nowadays?
4. What do you think solutions would be efficient concerning the complex situation of Livonian language acquisition and teaching?
5. What do you think should be more prioritized nowadays – creating and developing digital tools for Livonian or teaching the Livonian language? Or both? Why?
6. Who is the Livonian leader to whom this monument is dedicated to and why? Where is this monument located?



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\*The current materials are based on the websites [www.livones.net](http://www.livones.net) and [www.virtuallivonia.info](http://www.virtuallivonia.info) (by Uldis Balodis), as well as the articles in the Special Issues of Livonian Studies (*Eesti ja soome-ugri keeleteaduse ajakiri, Journal of Estonian and Finno-Ugric Linguistics*) and previous Livonian courses held by Miina Norvik and Tuuli Tuisk.

D. Other