

Estonia's linguistic diversity

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Estonia is a country in the Baltic region of Northern Europe bordered to the north by the Gulf of Finland, to the west by the Baltic Sea, to the south by Latvia and to the east by Lake Peipus and Russia. Across the Baltic Sea lie Sweden and Finland.



- European Environment Agency (EEA)

The official language of Estonia is Estonian since it is spoken by 1,148,895 speakers. Estonian belongs to the Finnic language family and is one of the major modern representatives of the Uralic language family. As a branch of Finnic, Estonian is closely related to Finnish, and they both do not have Indo-European origin, instead, they belong to the Uralic language family which is predominantly in Northern Eurasia. Despite the common origin, Estonian and Finnish only have some overlaps in the vocabulary. Estonian has borrowed nearly one third of its vocabulary from Germanic languages. Modern standard Estonian has evolved on the basis of dialects of Northern Estonia. Since Estonia regained its independence in 1991, the Estonian government has become more supportive of the protection and development of South Estonian.

What is worth mentioning is that people who speak one or more Uralic languages share particular genetic markers and in 2019 a study based on genetics, archaeology and linguistics found out that Uralic speakers arrived in the Baltic region from the East (Siberia) some 2,500 years ago.

Many languages are spoken in Estonia, including Estonian (official), Voro, Russian (is by far the most spoken minority language in the country) which is spoken by almost 155million people, Ukrainian, English by 360million native speakers, Finnish, German by 89million native speakers, Swedish and others. According to the census of 2011, 157 languages were spoken natively in Estonia, mainly due to new immigrants.

There are several dialects of Estonian. South Estonian is considered by some linguists a dialect of Estonian whereas others consider South Estonian an independent Finnic language. The present dialects of the South Estonian language are Mulgi, Tartu, Võro and Seto. (figure1)

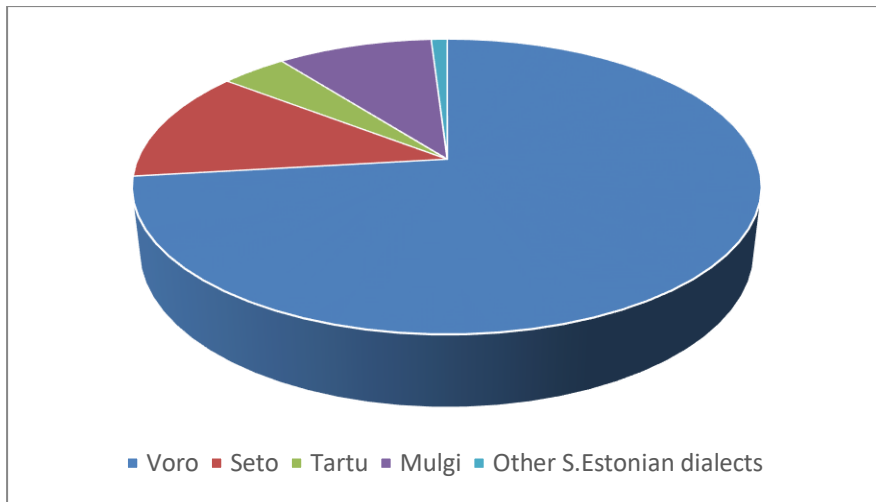


Figure 1: According to the 2011 Estonia Census there were 101,857 speakers of South Estonian: 74,499 speakers of Võro, 12,549 Seto speakers, 9,698 Mulgi speakers, 4,109 Tartu speakers and 1,002 other South Estonian speakers.

Võro nowadays has its own literary standard and is in search of official recognition as an indigenous regional language of Estonia. Speakers can be found mostly in southeastern Estonia. The language is endangered, and according to Kadri Koreinik this is due to the government's lack of legal commitment to protect the language.

Seto is a dialect of South Estonia or a separate language. Today, Seto is used in some of Estonia's most well-known playwrights, poets, and authors.

Mulgi and especially **Tartu** dialects, however, have very few speakers left. The Mulgi language is known primarily as the language of poetry and is spoken mainly in Mulgimaa in southern Estonia whereas Tartu is spoken mainly in Southern Tartu Country. In modern literature, the Tartu language has been used mainly by Mats Traat who is an Estonian poet, prose writer, poet translator, playwright and screenwriter. Today, Tartu is a language with a small and rapidly aging audience.

Language Diversity Index for Estonia

Organization	Rank	LDI
UNESCO (2009)	107	0.473
SIL International (2007)	96	0.476

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