

**IN MEMORIAM TIIT-REIN VIITSO**  
**(4 MARCH 1938 — 2 DECEMBER 2022)**



In early December of last year, Professor Emeritus Tiit-Rein Viitso — an esteemed researcher of Finnic languages, an inspiring teacher for many young linguists at the University of Tartu, and the long-standing editor-in-chief of *Linguistica Uralica* — passed away.

Tiit-Rein Viitso's roots were in Virumaa in northern Estonia and he graduated from the University of Tartu in 1961 completing a thesis on Votic. In 1966, he defended his candidate's thesis on Onega Veps. In 1983, he defended his doctoral dissertation in linguistics, which incorporated an innovative approach to compar-

ative Finnic phonology. His focus on the southernmost Finnic language — Livonian — began to take shape in the 1970s and it would become his chief scientific interest aside from his mother tongue. He spent decades doing fieldwork with the last native speakers of Livonian in Courland and wrote a vast array of important studies on the unique features of Livonian phonology and morphology. He also published the extensive Livonian-Estonian-Latvian dictionary (2012) together with Valts Ernštreits, whose doctoral thesis he supervised.

Tiit-Rein Viitso authored approximately 300 scientific studies with the majority on the Finnic languages. In addition to Finnic, Viitso also studied other Uralic languages, for example, Nenets, Khanty, and Sámi. He was interested in the principles used in classifying language families, the relationship between the proto-languages of the Uralic, Indo-European, and other Old World language families, and Nostratic theory. During his lengthy scientific career, he also published on Native American languages, for example, the Penutian languages of California, the classification of the Athabaskan languages, etc. Viitso wrote overviews of considerable depth on various languages and language families for Estonian encyclopaedias; his expertise is evident in the maps he made of the languages of North and South America as well as in his overviews and maps of the indigenous languages of Africa, Asia, and Australia. He also systematically described

the central concepts and schools of linguistics for Estonian encyclopaedias.

Tiit-Rein Viitso's first position was at the University of Tartu Computing Centre where he worked between 1965 and 1973. His favorite work became the creation and application of formal linguistic models to describe the structure of language sounds and forms as precisely as possible, for example, utilising the latest developments of Hjelmslev's 1960s work in glossematics.

Tiit-Rein Viitso was foremost a phonologist — a researcher of sound systems; however, his creation of a comprehensive description of the morphological structure of Estonian is equally remarkable. His 1976 article "Eesti muutkondade süsteemist" (On the inflectional system of Estonian) published in *Keel ja Kirjandus* remains a landmark study. Viitso's contribution to the understanding of the development of Estonian classificatory morphology is significant. He also encouraged and guided the creation of comprehensive morphological descriptions for other Finnic languages.

When Tiit-Rein Viitso became a senior researcher at what was then the Institute of Language and Literature in 1973, it marked the beginning of his major work of preserving and researching the Livonian language. Already that same year, Viitso published his first article on Livonian with many dozen added later (see a bibliography in ESUKA<sup>1</sup>). He studied Livonian from various perspectives — from sounds to vocabulary. His work with Livonian shows most clearly the profound value and worth that a linguist can have for a small nation. In addition to scientific analysis of Livonian, he was involved with the continuing development of the Livonian written language, editing of books in Livonian, teaching Livonian to young generations of Livonians, and even publishing scientific articles in Livonian. He was the head of the International Society of Livonian Friends from 1998 until his death. He was a fixture at Livo-

nian community events, addressing those present in the language of their Livonian ancestors. His book "Liivi keel ja läänemeresoome keelemaastikud" (The Livonian language and Finnic linguistic landscapes; 2008) and the aforementioned Livonian-Estonian-Latvian dictionary are of enduring value. Viitso was one of the best speakers and most thorough researchers of Livonian of all time.

For Viitso, love of languages also meant love of poetry. In the mid 1970s, he reviewed and suggested additions to the manuscript of Jaak Põldmäe's "Eesti värsiõpetus" (Estonian poetics), adding examples of Estonian poetic expressions as well as the longest word in Estonian. Prosody and metrics have been scrutinised in Viitso's research in many ways.

The history of the Finnic languages was a long-standing focus of Viitso's research. He examined the land occupancy and earliest contacts of the Finnic peoples (1983), the oldest Finnic loanwords (1982), reflections of the ancient Amber Road in modern languages (1994). He wrote the most detailed description to date of the historical development of Estonian grounding his description in a broader Finnic perspective (2003, expanded in 2007). He was also a co-author of an in-depth monographic study on the history of Estonian ("Eesti keele ajalugu", 2020). In the 21st century, his major endeavours included participation in the Finnic dialect atlas project and the Finno-Ugric prosody project. On the centenary of Paul Ariste's birth in 2005, the Estonian Academy of Sciences awarded him the first Paul Ariste Medal for his accomplishments in Finno-Ugric language research.

Tiit-Rein Viitso spoke passionately on developments in Estonian society, emphasising the importance of protecting and developing Estonian language and culture. In 1989 and again between 1993 and 1997, he was the head of the Estonian Mother Tongue Society, which brings together language researchers and others interested in Estonian. Viitso also played an important role in ensuring the continuity of Estonian scientific research as a member of the Learned Estonian Society from its reestablishment in 1988 and as

<sup>1</sup> T. T u i s k, K. P a j u s a l u, A Journey of Discovery through the Livonian World: The Scholarly Work of Tiit-Rein Viitso. — ESUKA 2018 9–2, pp. 31–34.

its head between 1990 and 1993. He also fully dedicated himself to his work as head of the *Linguistica Uralica* editorial board from 1997 to 2006 and as its editor-in-chief from 2007 to 2016.

Tiit-Rein Viitso's contributions as a teacher and supervisor of young researchers also must be emphasised. From the 1970s, he taught courses on phonology and Finnic languages at the University of Tartu; from 1989 to 1991 he was a visiting professor at the University of Helsinki; in 1991, he was invited to become an extraordinary professor at the University of Tartu; and in 1993, he was elected a full professor of Finnic languages. He worked in this position until his retirement in 2003 and, in the years that followed, participated in a number of research projects as an emeritus professor and senior researcher. As a professor, Viitso trained a new generation of Livonian and Votic language researchers.

Following his retirement in 2003, Tiit-Rein Viitso continued to work at the University of Tartu as an extraordinary senior researcher from 2003 to 2015. In addition to his active research, he taught special courses and supervised doctoral students as an emeritus professor. Even at an advanced age, Viitso studied the history of the Finno-Ugric languages, Finnic language vocabulary, Estonian morphology, and — most insightfully and adeptly — Livonian vocabulary and grammar. In his final Livonian language research, he came to several new conclusions regarding its historical development and structural peculiarities. He noted that Livonian shares common innovations with most other Finnic languages and that, therefore, during a certain historical period Livonian was at the centre of the Finnic language continuum rather than developing on its periphery. In his phonological analysis of Livonian prosody, Viitso

identified a three-way quantity alternation comparable to that of Estonian also in words with a long first-syllable vowel and not only as a result of the opposition of short and long geminates as was previously thought. The presence of *stød* or broken tone in the ternary alternation makes the Livonian prosodic system even more complex than that of Estonian. This is supported by the experimental phonetic data presented in "Livonian Prosody"<sup>2</sup> published as part of the Finno-Ugric prosody project.

Tiit-Rein Viitso left an enduring mark on Estonian and — more broadly — Finno-Ugric linguistics both as a talented, versatile researcher and as a teacher for new generations of linguists. His work was recognised with the Republic of Estonia Order of the White Star (5th Class), the University of Tartu Grand Medal, and, in 2011, the F. J. Wiedemann Language Award. In recognition of his work with Livonian, in 2006, he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Latvia and, in 2012, was awarded the Republic of Latvia Cross of Recognition (4th Class). Viitso was a warm-hearted, always cheerful teacher and colleague with a wonderful sense of humour. His life's work will be carried on by his students in Estonia, Latvia, and beyond.

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<sup>2</sup>I. Lehiste, P. Teras, V. Ernštreits, P. Lippus, K. Pajusalu, T. Tuisk, T.-R. Viitso, *Livonian Prosody*, Helsinki 2008 (MSFOu 255).