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**THE MOST BEAUTIFUL LANGUAGE FOR EVERY NATION  
IS ITS MOTHER TONGUE**

Academician Paul Ariste (1905–1990) is a colourful Estonian figure of the 20th century. On the anniversary of his birth, stories from people who came into contact with him during his lifetime are still appearing. Some of the stories are legends that pass from mouth to mouth. He lived and worked at a time when science played a much greater role in society's consciousness, and the profession of scientist was both prestigious and well paid. By the 1960s, the sciences had been romanticised, but Professor Ariste attracted the attention of the wider public with his research into cognate languages. The people of Tartu recognised Ariste in the street because he was elegant, colourful, curious. Paul Ariste's interest in elegant clothes probably dates back to his poor youth. He was also inspired by his stylish lecturer Andrus Saareste. While the uniform of the other lecturers was a greybaggy shop suit, Ariste went in checked trousers and tailored suits. Ariste's popularity among the general public was certainly helped by the popular Naapurivisa (Neighbour's Visa), a telememory game organised by Estonian Television and Finland's MainosTV in 1966–1970. There were two programmes a year — one in Finland and one in Estonia. Ariste was on the Naapurivisa jury because of his outstanding knowledge of the language and culture. He had an excellent command of both Estonian and Finnish and was well acquainted with the cultural background of both nations. Ariste is also well known and respected in Finland, which is why his participation added scientific weight to the programme. On the Finnish side, the jury was composed of Lauri Posti, an academic who spoke Estonian.

Professor Ariste lived in Tartu at the beginning of the Tähtvere district, his lectures were in the main building, and the Department of Finno-Ugric Languages, which he headed from 1946 to 1977, was next to the university hall. Werner's and the university café were a few steps away, as was the bookshop. So, when moving around in the city centre most of the time, he was always visible. The academician liked to interact with people. He could stop a person in the street and strike up a conversation: "I'm Ariste. What's your name?". On this basis, he would try to establish the person's origin. As an old-generation scientist, he preferred to see men in science. In the Finno-Ugric Department, the teaching staff were men, apart from Associate Professor Paula Palmeos. I joined the department as a teacher in January 1979, quite by chance. The department got an extra post as a Finnish teacher to prepare guides and interpreters for the Moscow Olympics in 1980. Before I became a colleague of Ariste, he had read me "Introduction to General Linguistics" and supervised my thesis "Agricultural Terminology in Votian". We had only one young man in the Finno-Ugric languages branch, Jaan Ōispuu, but he had been in Karelia with Associate Professor Paula Palmeos and

wrote his thesis and later research papers about Karelian language. After defending his thesis, Paul Ariste took me and Jaan to the bookshop on University Street and bought our collection of Kalju Põllu's graphic map "Kodalased".

Ariste's great love was the Votic language, and thanks to his principle of "not a single day without writing", he introduced this dying language everywhere, and many people knew that Votic existed. For me, Votic was the symbol of Finno-Ugric studies and of Paul Ariste. For some reason, when I entered the Faculty of Philology in 1973, it did not occur to me that if I chose Finno-Ugric studies, I would be studying one of the more exotic related languages. I already wrote my first coursework, which was to be on folklore, on Votic epic folklore. As a city girl, I had to write a thesis on agricultural vocabulary because my father was an associate professor at the Estonian Academy of Agricultural Sciences in the department of plant breeding. The curious Ariste knew this. In 1976, Paul Ariste visited Vaipoole for the last time with a large group. For me, it was my first contact with the area and the language, and my annual visits ended in 2019. From that time, I have preserved a photo made by Enn Ernits, where I am sitting next to Ariste on a bench in the farmyard. I later had it printed enlarged on KAPA® line and it is on the wall in the Luutsa Vadja museum. In 1977, Ariste mentioned at a seminar that he was no longer head of the department. At first, we understood that Ariste was leaving the university altogether, but in fact, of course, he stayed on as a professor, and the spring semester of 1983 was his hundredth semester at the University of Tartu.

My encounters with Ariste were relatively impersonal. Perhaps the most intimate was the time in the spring of 1978, when I was at his home on Jakobson Street, collecting material from his private catalogue for my thesis. I sat for weeks at his desk in his office, with my plaids on my knees. Ariste felt that the temperature in the study should be 18 degrees and fully accepted that others might not find this temperature acceptable. I still find this position dubious. In the early 1990s, when Estonia had heating problems and our home was kept at 17–18 degrees by oil radiators alone, I would have wanted a pair of felt shoes and quilted jackets to sit at my desk for longer. Only the back of the mechanical typewriter provided warmth. As a colleague, I came into contact with Ariste at faculty meetings. Although I started to go to Vadjamaa with students in 1979, we didn't talk much about it.

I read Pekka Erelt's recollections of how Ariste sent him to the army and wrote to him regularly. To my classmate Mart Kadastik, Ariste brought a Demis Roussos record from Finland. Jüri Viikberg accompanied the professor home from the lecture at his request, and on the way they talked about many things that certainly went beyond the lecture courses. Enn Ernits corresponded with him throughout his life. I have no such personal memories of Ariste.

We all know about the glory days of Ariste, but it was interesting to see how, at the beginning of the 20th century, an Estonian peasant boy became a world-famous scientist. A linguist, not an agronomist, a clergyman, a lawyer. I was interested to read Paul Ariste's "Mälestusi" (Memoirs), which Mart Orav had published in 2008. The very story of how they came to be is typical of Ariste — on Christmas Eve 1978, he was in Tartu hospital waiting to be taken to a Pärnu health resort. Knowing that it would be impossible to do research at the sanatorium, he decided to start writing a memoir. He writes: "Without writing, life would be dull and empty" (2008 : 7). The memories are extremely accurate down to the smallest detail. Particularly the names of people from the time they were children on the estate.

## 1. Ariste's youth and education

The future linguist and Fenno-Ugrian Paul Ariste (until 1927 Paul Berg) was born on 3 February 1905 in the Rääbise manor in the Torma municipality of Tartumaa. His father was a blacksmith, later also a carpenter, a tin-smith and a repairer of

telephone wires; his mother was the daughter of a schoolmaster. Paul started his schooling at Säutsvere School, which was an Estonian Lutheran school. He had been baptised into the Orthodox Church, but the Apostolic Orthodox school in Laiuse was taught in Russian and his parents did not want him to study there. There too, he learned to read and write in Russian in the first grade. We will only be able to talk about education in Estonian after the birth of the Republic of Estonia. How it was possible for Estonians with rural roots to acquire education in a foreign language/languages seems to me a great miracle.

In 1915, the family moved to Tallinn and Paul was not to be placed in an ordinary municipal school. His mother took him to a Russian-language private school, which prepared him for the gymnasium. German and French were also taught there. Paul had already learned to speak German with the children of Rääbise Manor.

The Westholm Gymnasium was partly in Estonian, but the tuition fees were higher, so in 1917 Paul Berg continued his studies at the Russian-language Crown Gymnasium, which later became Estonian-language. In 1925 he graduated from this school, which was then called the Boys Humanitarian School (Poeglaste Humanitaargümnaasium) in Tallinn and later renamed the Gustav Adolf Gymnasium. The gymnasium gave a classical education, there was also a lot of Latin. At the age of 14, Ariste began an interest in Esperanto that lasted throughout his life. Already as a high school student he was included in the editorial team of the Esperanto-Estonian dictionary. During his school years, he wrote his first scientific article. It was an article in Esperanto about Livonians. In his memoirs, Ariste has said that it was his interest in Esperanto that led him to another, more spiritual world. In Pelgulinna district, where he and his family lived in a one-room apartment, there was "a complete milieu of poor sinner's village — there were no spiritual pursuits in those houses". Ariste considered Esperanto as the basis of his spiritual awakening. Ariste learned Yiddish from his classmates. During his secondary school years, he took part in the Esperantist congresses in Helsinki and Nuremberg. In Nuremberg he attended an Esperanto service in a Jewish synagogue!

Between 1925 and 1929 he studied Estonian, Finnic, Uralic, folklore and Germanic at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Tartu.

In the 1920s, many Estonians adopted Estonian surnames. Andrus Saarbek became Saareste, Julius Mälson Mägiste, Peeter Blaubrück Arumaa. Sufiks *-ste* was a popular in surnames, and Paul Berg was struck by the village and bay of Ariste. In 1927 he became Paul Ariste. His parents kept the original surname.

## 2. Paul Ariste and languages

Paul Ariste's linguistic skills have been much talked about. He didn't know how many he knew. I was struck by the diversity of nationalities among the students and teachers at the time — the teachers at the Gymnasium were Estonian, German, Russian, Czech, Sorb and certainly some other nationality. Among the students there were Estonians, Germans, Russians, Latvians, Jews, etc.. In order to get money to study, Ariste taught Estonian to Estonians from China. The students found Chinese easier than Estonian. Ariste seemed to have been socially active from a young age. He was interested in unfamiliar languages with which he had little to do in everyday life. He learnt Yiddish in high school while interacting with Jews, and later wrote a review of the Yiddish-language "Kalevipoeg", published in Kiev in 1922. Ariste was also interested in recording the linguistic materials of the Finnish Jews, and when he was in Helsinki in April 1969, Pertti Virtaranta arranged for him to meet two old people in a retirement home. Academician Virtaranta admired Ariste's fluent Yiddish. In Latin, he corresponded with some of his fellow students, and in a memoir he wrote how he used Latin on a Brussels street in 1936, asking a Catholic clergyman: "Ubi est hortus Botanicus?" and got the answer. At secondary school,

Ariste also studied German and French, and attended Finnish language courses. During his school years he read German, Russian, English and Swedish. He studied related languages all his life, but he said that he gave up Hungarian because it was difficult. Ariste's hobby of Romany is also much talked about. At the end of the 1930s, Ariste studied the language of the Laiuse Roma, and later the Finnish Roma, and wrote several articles about it. Later, towards the end of his life, he said that he sometimes spoke Yiddish and Swedish alone in the street, because there were no speakers left. He did not consider himself a polyglot. In his explanation, a polyglot was someone who gossips in many languages, while he was a linguist, a multilingualist. He himself has said: "I don't learn new languages any more, I start reading the new language immediately. For example, I have never learned Lithuanian or Spanish in my life, but recently I read a thick scientific work in Lithuanian, and I have read fiction in Spanish. At the moment, for example, I am reading Sorbian poetry and fiction. Usually in an hour or so I look at the dictionary once or twice if I really don't understand a sentence. Once I have the key word, I can guess the others."

Ariste knew about thirty languages.

### 3. Folklore or linguistics? Finno-Ugric languages or Germanic studies?

Ariste himself has often said that folklorists think he is a pretty good linguist and linguists think he is a folklorist. In his memoirs, Ariste writes that he has never been a folklorist, although he has published widely on the subject over the years. He himself was sure that it was his participation in the compilation of the Esperanto-Estonian dictionary that finally cemented him as a linguist. But he did not forget folklore when he worked on Yiddish. These materials, which contain customs, beliefs and tales written in Yiddish, are unpublished. He thought that he had done more in the field of Vedic folklore than in the field of the Votic language. When a Livonian choir came to Tallinn to perform in March 1925, Ariste had dinner with the Livonians and Oskar Loorits, and thought afterwards that he had become a Finno-Ugric that evening. Ariste considered Jakob Hurt to be his ideal during his secondary school years, and thought that his writing mania had been inspired by J. M. Eisen, whom he took as his model. Ariste became interested in Roma people as a folklorist in 1930, and in 1938 he published a collection of Roma fairy tales illustrated by Aino Bach.

### 4. University and research

Paul Ariste defended his Master's thesis "Eesti-rootsi laensõnad eesti keeles" (Estonian-Swedish loanwords in Estonian) in 1931. In 1939 he completed his doctoral studies with the dissertation "Hiiu murrete häälkud" (Sounds of the Hiiu dialects). From 1931 to 1933, Ariste studied at the University of Helsinki, Uppsala and the University of Hamburg on a scholarship from the University of Tartu. In Helsinki and Hamburg he studied phonetics. There was a shortage of phoneticians in Estonia. Lauri Kettunen had set up a modest phonetics laboratory in Tartu. Andrus Saareste encouraged Ariste to further his education in experimental phonetics. In 1933 he became a teacher of phonetics at the University of Tartu. His doctoral dissertation and the subsequent "Hiiu murrete häälkute kvantiteedist" (On the Quantity of the Hiiu dialects, 1941) form a valuable phonological-phonological monograph. Ariste also later dealt with phonetic issues of Finno-Ugric languages in his studies.

Vocabulary studies, including etymological studies, are only one part of Paul Ariste's extensive research, but alongside the study of the Votic language, they were certainly his favourite subject. His research covered the history of the written language, toponymy and etymology. Paul Ariste became interested in the origins of words as a schoolboy (his first paper on the subject, published in 1924, was on the nature vocabulary of Esperanto), and this interest continued into his old age. According to Huno Rätsep,

Paul Ariste has touched on the origin of more than 2000 words in one context or another. Paul Ariste's interest focused primarily Low German and Swedish loanwords, but he has also dealt with Baltic, Upper German, Russian, Latvian and other loanwords. Paul Ariste has devoted much less attention to the earlier vocabulary. The contribution he has made to the study of Low German and Upper German loans is considerable.

He founded the phonetics of the Estonian language, was one of our first phonologists, studied Estonian dialects, place names and loanwords, Votic, Livonian, Veps and other related languages, and worked on general linguistics and folklore.

Ariste's written work of life is about 8500 pages.

## 5. Pedagogical work and the Tartu School of Finno-Ugric Studies

From 1946 to 1977 he was head of the Department of Finno-Ugric Languages at the University of Tartu and laid the foundations for modern Fennno-Ugric studies in Estonia. In 1954 he was appointed academician. Ariste was an outstanding pedagogue. He made sure that researchers of Finno-Ugric languages were trained in Estonia. Under Paul Ariste's initiative, almost a hundred Finno-Ugric linguists living in the Russian Federation came to the University of Tartu for postgraduate studies and defended their theses for a Bachelor of Science or Doctorate.

Ariste himself supervised 60 doctoral theses and was an opponent in the defence of more than 150 theses. Representatives of Finno-Ugric people who were doing postgraduate or doctoral studies at the University of Tartu certainly felt like they were on another planet in Estonia and Tartu. A foreign language and cultural space and the University of Tartu with its mentality and atmosphere, which was different compared to the national universities they had come from. Probably the most unique was their mentor, Paul Ariste, as they would hardly have been part of such a circle of attention and a family of sorts as they were when they met Ariste. Many of them went on to become professors at home universities and leading researchers in research institutions. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, they had the opportunity to work in Finnish or German universities. In the Finno-Ugric Department at Tartu University, the theses were discussed, and a recurring reproach was that the authors did not use authors other than those published in Russia. In Tartu, their linguistic and scientific world extended beyond Russian.

Paul Ariste has said of his teacher Andrus Saareste that he was "impressive as a human being". This is also what his students think of Paul Ariste.

## 6. Ariste and Votic

Ariste's interest in the Votic lasted throughout his life. In 1923, as a schoolboy in Tallinn, he met the Votian Darja Lehti, and as late as the autumn of 1989, he interviewed Nina Lenivenko, a Votian from the village of Jõgõperä in Tartu hospital. In 1932, Ariste was in the phonetics laboratory at the University of Helsinki, and on 14 October 1975 he complained in an interview in Votic to Academician Pertti Virtaranta that the Votian Georgi Kuzmin, who had been invited to the laboratory, was sitting there alone, no one was interested in him, and Ariste started to question him. The materials appeared in print. In 1942, a unique trip to the German-occupied Votian villages was made by the Estonian National Museum, from which the linguists obtained a wealth of material. In 1947, Ariste visited Kukkusi, where he met Matjo Gerassimova, the relative of Darja Lehti, from whom he recorded many songs. From 1956 onwards, Ariste made regular language excursions, and wrote numerous transcriptions and publications. Ariste's handwritten "Vadja etnoloogia" (Votic ethnology) contains 23 volumes and 5369 pages. There are 330 songs, 54 incantations, 7 laments, 204 fairy tales, 274 folktales, 54 legends, 107 jokes, 768 proverbs, 147 sayings, 239 riddles, 3226 units of religion and folklore, and units of historical facts related to

customs. Ariste's field diaries "Vadja päevikud 1942–1980" were edited and published in 2005 by Ergo-Hart Västrik.

44 100 word slips were donated to the Institute of Language and Literature for the necessary vocabulary card index. In 1957, the Finno-Ugric Languages Sector of the Institute was established at the initiative of Paul Ariste, whose main task was to compile a dictionary of the Votic language, and later also to study the Finno-Ugric languages. Ariste could not wait for the dictionary to be completed — the first volume was published a few months after his death.

When I went to Vadjamaa (Votland) with Paul Ariste in 1976, I had already been on field trips with Aino Valmet and Ellen Turu, the lecturers at the Estonian Language Department, so I had some idea of the language collection. I remember how difficult it was at first to distinguish between Votic and Izhorian, because they were mixed villages. The lesson to ask whether a villager *pajatab* (Votian) or *läkkääb* (Izhorian) immediately stuck in my mind. In the 1970s and 1980s we could still hear the local language on the village street. I later learned how to keep a proper diary from Enn Ernits and Jüri Viikberg. In my own excuse, I had no idea that Votic would be my love and my job, both during and after graduation. Paul Ariste would go for a run at 7 o'clock in the morning, then woke up the students but at 9 o'clock the Votic speakers would still be busy with their farm work. Keeping livestock was then the norm. And July, of course, was the wrong time for linguistic field work in general. Now it doesn't matter. The speakers of Votic are a few lonely elderly old people drinking shop milk.

It is in the study of the Votic language that Paul Ariste reveals all his diversity. He studies folklore, language, language contacts in Ingria and ethnogenesis. In his view, the Votians were the part of the North-Estonians who remained on the other side of the Narva River in the first millennium. The Izhorians originated, according to Ariste, from the Southern Karelians. In the study of ethnogenesis, Ariste was the first to collaborate with other disciplines. Together with the archaeologist Harri Moora, he began to pay attention to how to date tribal movements. Moora and Ariste dated the proto-language of the Finnic people to several thousand years earlier, so we are definitely indigenous people who have lived here for at least five thousand years. Ariste's article "Läänemereseome keelte kujunemine ja vanem ajajäärk" (The Formation of the Baltic Sea Languages and the Older Period), published in 1956 published in "Eesti rahva etnilisest ajaloost" (Ethnic History of the Estonian Nation) history was important for linguists and archaeologists alike. The work was awarded the Estonian SSR Science Prize.

## 7. Wikipedia

1946–1977 Head of the Department of Finno-Ugric Languages at the University of Tartu, Professor (1949), Member of the Academy of Sciences of the Estonian SSR (1954), Honoured Scientist of the Estonian SSR (1965), Honorary Member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (1966), Foreign Member of the Finnish Academy of Sciences (1969), Honorary Doctor of the University of Helsinki (1969), Honorary Doctor of the University of Szeged (1971), Honorary Doctor of the University of Tampere (1975), Honorary Doctor of the University of Latvia (1989), Foreign Member of the Academy of Finland (1980).

In 1965, Ariste founded the journal *Советское финно-угроведение* (current *Linguistica Uralica*), of which he was editor-in-chief until his death. Paul Ariste was one of the initiators of the international Fenno-Ugric congresses in 1960 and president of the III International Fenno-Ugric Congress in Tallinn (1970); chairman of the Soviet Fenno-Ugric Committee since 1971, chairman of the International Fenno-Ugric Committee since 1980.

Most important works: "Eesti-rootsi laensõnad eesti keeles" (1933; Estonian-Swedish loanwords in the Estonian language), "Hiiu murrete häälikud" (1939), "Rootsi-eesti sõnaraamat" (1939; Swedish-Estonian dictionary, with P. Wieselgren and G. Suits), "Eesti keele foneetika" (1953, 1981–1982; Estonian Phonetics), "Vadja keele grammatika"

(1948; Votic grammar, in English 1968), "Vadja rahvakalender" (1969; Votiac folk calendar), "Ferdinand Johann Wiedemann" (1973), "Vadjalane kätkist kalmuni" (1974; Votian from the cradle to the grave), "Vadja muistendeid" (1977; Votic folktales), "Vadja mõistatusi" (1979; Votic riddles), etc.

In total, Paul Ariste wrote over 1300 scientific articles.

## 8. Finally

According to his memoirs, Ariste was a full-fledged ascetic from 1922. As he was 17 at the time, it is unlikely that he had been drinking before. The first time he drained a glass of champagne was when a close acquaintance turned 90. This happened also on the anniversaries of poet Anna Haava and linguist Johannes Voldemar Veski. He was very sporty, did gymnastics and ran. But the sun also had its flaws — he couldn't swim, dance, ride a bike, drive a car and was afraid of the dark.

Paul Ariste's writing style was pleasant and sometimes humorous. His use of language had a "Finnic element". For example, he used the verb *leema* in the future tense, as in Votic, e.g. *homme leeb hea ilm* 'tomorrow it will be fine', words like *aniharva pro haruharva* 'very rarely', *rääkima soome keeli* 'to speak in Finnish'.

On the 100th anniversary of Paul Ariste's birth, the Estonian Academy of Sciences began to award the Paul Ariste Medal to outstanding humanities and social scientists. The first medal was awarded to Tiit-Rein Viitso in 2005, followed by Huno Rätsep in 2010, Arvo Krikmann in 2014 and Jaak Kangilaski in 2020.

On 23 March 2016, auditorium 438 of the Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics of the University of Tartu was named after Paul Ariste. On the wall of the auditorium there is a barrel-painting of Paul Ariste made by Aulin Rimm and donated to the Institute by the Forselius Society. At the opening ceremony, I presented the world's first Votic reading book "Vad'a sõnakopittöja" (2015). Its first target group, with whom the textbook had been created in collaboration, were the last speakers of the Votic language. While Ariste was running a race to see which would die first, the Votic language or him, I managed to hear the Votic language for several decades after his death. I was a teacher for ten years in Votland — I organised summer courses for the last speakers of Votic and later for their grandchildren.

Ariste belonged to the generation of scientists who spoke about the extinction of the language, but I believe that the teacher has the right to intervene in the process of extinction and to help prolong the life of the language. According to Jüri Viikberg, Votland has been an "open-air auditorium" and the sustained interest of scientists in the language has helped to postpone the language's final demise.

After the publication of Ariste's memoirs in 2008, Juhani Salokannel wondered in the Tuglas Society's journal why the memoirs were published several decades after Ariste's death. But Ariste himself thought that only a fifth of his Votic material had been published. This is difficult to research. But surely there are unpublished treasures among Ariste's legacy at the Literary Museum. For his creative activity and curiosity were extraordinary.

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