

A Unique Language

THE OLDEST LIVING INDO-EUROPEAN LANGUAGE FINDS ITS PLACE IN THE MODERN WORLD

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Due to their similar political situations and their historical development in the 20th century, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are often treated as sisters, and referred to as the Baltic States. The name Baltic is even applied to the entire region. But professional linguists have always pointed out that this is not an appropriate designation.

The term Balt was coined in the 19th century by the German linguist Ferdinand Nesselman to name one of the branches of the Indo-European languages spoken on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea. Linguists had already known Indo-European groups such as Germanic, Romance and Slavic. Now they discovered another group of Indo-European languages, the Baltic languages.

Since then, in linguistics, the term has been applied only in reference to the true Baltic languages: the living Lithuanian and Latvian languages, and dead languages such as Curonian, Semigallian, Selonian, Yotvingian and Galindan.

Estonian is quite different: not only is it outside the Baltic group, but it is not even an Indo-European language, for it belongs to the Finno-Ugric group. Thus, when we hear the word Baltic, we should not forget that, for a linguist, and even for a Lithuanian, it may not include Estonian.

Lithuanians make up about 80 per cent of the population of Lithuania. This means that more

than three million people (perhaps three and a half million) consider Lithuanian to be their mother tongue. It is spoken by the autochthon Lithuanian populations in some border areas of Poland and Belarus, and by numerous Lithuanian émigrés in other countries. The largest émigré groups are to be found in the United States.

Relations

People have long been curious to know what makes languages similar, and why people speak different languages in different countries. Linguistic similarity could be evidence of a tribal or national affinity, or even once proved the place closest to God. For instance, during the Renaissance one theory held that Lithuanian was simply a form of debased Latin, and we know that Latin was the most sacred language in the Catholic world.

Genealogical studies of languages took on a scientific approach only in the 19th century. Traditionally, it was based on the history of sounds: that is, it was a history of the spoken language, which people learn in some mysterious way in early childhood without any apparent effort, as if the sounds of the language overwhelmed them like a swollen river.

Latvian is the only living language with sounds and endings similar to those of Lithuanian, but a Latvian and a Lithuanian who do not speak each other's tongue cannot communicate, unlike a Dane who can communicate with a Norwegian, an Italian who can communicate with a Spaniard, or a

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Ukrainian who can communicate with a Russian. A Lithuanian and a Latvian can only recognise a few words in each other's speech, and this is not enough to hold a conversation.

Therefore, we can say that Lithuanian is a language that cannot be understood by a speaker of any other language who has not learnt it. More than that, even users of different Lithuanian dialects (such as Žemaičiai and Aukštaičiai) cannot understand each other unless they communicate in standard Lithuanian, which they have to learn.

Since the 19th century, when the similarity between Lithuanian and Sanskrit was discovered, Lithuanians have taken a particular pride in their mother tongue as the oldest living Indo-European language. To this day, to some Lithuanians their understanding of their nationality is based on their linguistic identity. It is no surprise then that they proudly quote the French linguist Antoine Meillet, who said that anyone who wanted to hear old Indo-European should go and listen to a Lithuanian farmer. The 19th-century maxim "The older the language the better" is still alive in Lithuania.

The history of sounds explains how the Lithuanian word *sūnus* and the German *Sohn*, English *son* and Polish *syn* are not loanwords from one language to another, but have the same origin. The same is true of the Lithuanian *duktė*, German *Tochter*, English *daughter* and Polish *córka*; or the Lithuanian *mėnuo*, English *month* and German *Monat*.

The Indo-European languages: what they have in common and how they are different



Although the languages are different now, their sounds testify to the fact that many centuries ago the situation was quite different.

The history of sounds also addresses loanwords and their passage from one language to another. For example, the German *Rathaus*, Polish *ratusz* and Lithuanian *rotušė* mean the same because the Poles borrowed it from the Germans, and later the Lithuanians borrowed the word from the Poles.

This genealogical history of sounds is like a biological science: tracing DNA sequences is like tracing and reconstructing sound sequences. Thus, we can say that throughout the centuries, the changes in Lithuanian “DNA sequences” have been less numerous than in other languages, and that is the reason why it is considered to be a very old language.

The cultural and social history of language is different. It is more concerned, for example, with why the languages of the German and Polish neighbours have the letter “w”, while Lithuanian and Latvian do not. Or why the letter “y” comes at the end of the German and Polish alphabets, while in the Lithuanian alphabet it is in the first half, alongside the letters “i” and “j”; or why the Italian equivalent of the Latin *littera* is *lettera*, the English is *letter* and the Polish *litera*; but the Germans use the word

Buschstabe, the Latvians *burts*, and the Lithuanians *raidė*. We can call this kind of linguistic history the history of letters (in contrast to the history of sounds) or the history of the written language. Writing has always been difficult to learn or teach, it required schools, scriptoria, and grammars. It has never come naturally to a person.

In this respect, the sounds may seem to have a more privileged status compared to the letters. But the letters are always more prestigious. They give a certain power and exclusiveness to a person, while the sounds are given to everybody naturally and in equal measure.

The social history of the Lithuanian language can be considered in the context of its relations and contacts with other languages. For a number of centuries, contacts were especially close with two living languages, German and Polish (in addition to Latin and the East Slavic written languages).

Lithuanian has come into contact also with Yiddish, Russian and other languages, but these contacts have left fewer traces.

Lithuanian culture in East Prussia was strongly influenced by German culture. From the 16th century until the middle of the 20th century, East Prussia produced a large number of Lithuanian books. These included translations of the Bible, psalm books,

grammars, dictionaries and primers, including the first Lithuanian translation of the Bible (by Jonas Bretkūnas between 1590 and 1602) and the first Lithuanian grammar (by Danielius Kleinas in 1653).

In all of these activities, Lithuanian was in close contact with German. The first Lithuanian manuscript of the Bible was mostly a translation of Luther’s translation. The second Lithuanian grammar was written and published in German (in 1654). A large number of psalms in the 16th century were translated from the German; and all or almost all of the bilingual dictionaries (there were no monolingual Lithuanian dictionaries) known since the 17th century were either German-Lithuanian or Lithuanian-German.

Alphabet

At the time that Lithuania formed a federation with Poland (1569 to 1795) and when it was occupied by the Russian Empire (1795 to 1914), the Lithuanian language in Lithuania proper was under the influence of the Polish language. In the Middle Ages, Lithuanian dukes and the gentry spoke Lithuanian; but during the Renaissance they switched to Polish. Gradually, Polish became the language of culture.

It is for this reason that nowadays Lithuanians sometimes take

more pride in their older dukes, who spoke Lithuanian, and cannot fully accept the later ones who could not. The dominance of the Polish language meant the introduction and use of Polish letters: the digraphs *sz* and *cz* for *ś* and *ć* respectively in modern Lithuanian, and the letters *ń*, *ł*, *ź*, *ż* and *ś*.

At the end of the 19th century, however, neither of the two written traditions (Prussian or Polish) would form the foundations of modern Standard Lithuanian. The national movement wanted to standardise the language in such a way that it would be different from other languages in the area. The Lithuanians rejected the Polish letter *ł*, refused to accept the German and Polish *w*, and replaced *cz* and *sz* with the Czech *č* and *š*.

In the end, Standard Lithuanian became established in Lithuania, while in East Prussia the language has disappeared, together with German, to give way to Russian in the newly emerged Kaliningrad region. Still, some elements of the writing from East Prussia were

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transferred into Standard Lithuanian, such as the letter *é*, the use of the letters *i* and *γ*, and the majority of the case endings.

It is interesting that these letters became an integral part of the spelling at the same time as the Lithuanian (or Latin) letters were prohibited by the Russian authorities. The late development of Standard Lithuanian has been responsible for some of its modern features. For instance, *a*, *e*, *í*, *u*, *é*, *č*, *š*, *ž*, *ū* are relatively new additions to the Latin alphabet.

Modern though they are, all these additions to the Latin alphabet are a nuisance to foreigners. These diacritical marks, or accents, to them are like background noise in a recording of music, or a spot of fat on a clean tablecloth: an unavoidable nuisance, to be ignored in order to avoid irritation. Foreigners have to study long and hard to understand why in Lithuanian dictionaries the word *cinikas* (a cynic) comes before *čekistas* (a Chekist).

Another problem is that with the advent of the Internet the old Latin alphabet, which has been pre-

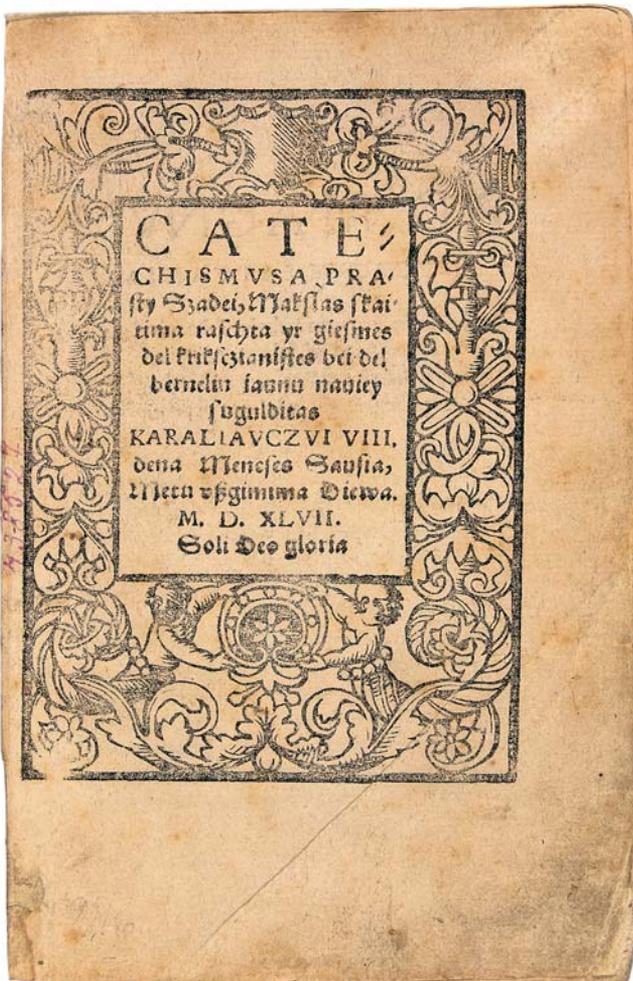
served and used in almost its original form by the English language, is seen as the most modern alphabet. The Internet is not always friendly to the German *ü*, the Latvian *ģ*, the Polish *ł* or the already mentioned Lithuanian graphemes, which look odd to the English-speaking world. It is true that, in the last few years, the developers of universal fonts, Internet browsers and e-mail programs have made great efforts to show more respect to these letters, to make them convenient to use and safe against discrimination.

Difficult to learn

Lithuanians are always pleasantly surprised and glad to meet a foreigner who has learnt some of their language and is familiar with their special letters. It is gratifying to hear a foreigner speaking Lithuanian, because it is not a skill commonly found beyond the country's borders, and Lithuanian has never been widely taught as a foreign language.

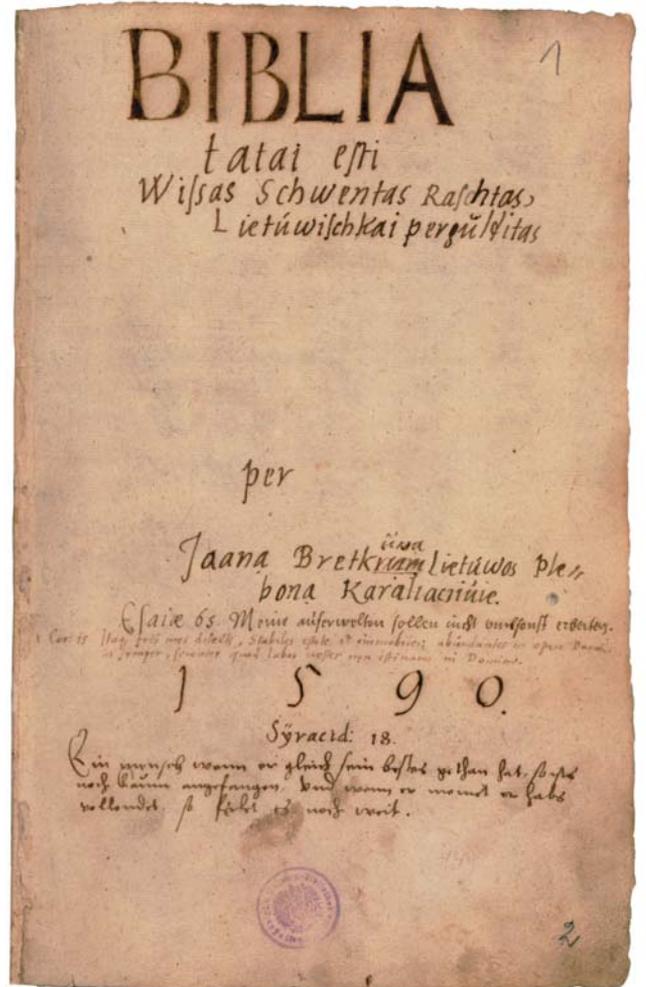
To a person who is familiar with old Indo-European languages such as Latin or Ancient Greek, Lithuanian grammar will come more easily than to a person who can speak modern English, Spanish, Italian, French or German. Due to the old features of Lithuanian grammar, most foreign students find it a very difficult language to learn. It is frustrating to have to learn five declensions, each with seven cases, both in the singular and the plural. The very concept of an ending is difficult to grasp if a person speaks only English. Some learners are frustrated by the mobile stress in different forms of the same word, which sometimes outwits even native speakers.

On the other hand, the late development of Standard Lithuanian offers certain advantages to learners of it. Even native speakers believe that the pronunciation is almost entirely consistent with the spelling: that is, that the words are pronounced exactly as they are spelt. One letter usually corresponds to one sound. In this respect, Lithuanian is more modern than French or English, where the same letters do not always represent the same sound.



The first Lithuanian book, by Martynas Mažvydas, was published in Königsberg in 1547

Right: The first Lithuanian translation of the Lutheran Bible was made by Jonas Bretkūnas at the end of the 16th century



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COURTESY OF THE GEHEIMES STAATSBIBLIOTHEK PREUSSISCHER KULTURERBISITZ IN BERLIN, GERMANY

The last English writer to enjoy a close correlation between letters and sounds was Geoffrey Chaucer in the 14th century. William Shakespeare was deprived of this advantage, for in his time English spelling was already losing its phonetic nature. That is why it is easier for a German, an Italian or a Pole to learn to read (or pronounce) Lithuanian than to read English, because it is easier to pronounce a Lithuanian word by reading its letters. It is also easier to find a Lithuanian word in a dictionary when you hear it pronounced than it is to find an English one. So, we might say that, although Lithuanian grammar is complicated, to read it is easy.

Due to the structural peculiarities of their language, Lithuanians themselves experience various difficulties in learning other ones. For example, they find it difficult to master the use of articles in English, German, Italian and French, because in Lithuanian (as in many other languages, such as Latin, Latvian, Russian or Polish) there are none. The concept is rendered

by other means, such as definite or indefinite adjectives: *the White House is Baltieji Rūmai*. The word order in a Lithuanian sentence is quite free, and is a convenient means to express a variety of nuances. Therefore, when learning English or German, Lithuanians are inclined to “improve” the syntactic constructions of these languages by “liberating” the word order.

Everybody knows that Lithuanian has a variety of colourful swearwords: for example *rupūžė!* (toad), *rupūs miltai!* (coarse flour), *kad tave sutraukty!* (I wish you were contracted). But when a Lithuanian is truly angry, a foreigner may be surprised to hear Russian or English swearwords escaping his lips. In the speech of town dwellers, probably the most popular Lithuanian swearword is *velnias!* (devil), but in a Catholic country the reasons for its being a swearword should be evident.

Official language

The Lithuanian Constitution stipulates that “the Lithuanian lan-

guage is the official language of the Republic of Lithuania.” This means that it must be used in all areas of public life.

The country has a National Commission for the Lithuanian Language, responsible for monitoring and correcting the use of it. It even has the right to impose fines for certain mistakes in public announcements. On the other hand, efforts are still being made to preserve the languages of minorities, such as Russian, Polish and Belarusian.

What do Lithuanians think is the future of their language? Some believe that the area of use of the language has expanded and they are happy about this. They are also aware of the dangers posed to the survival of the language by the country’s integration into Europe.

On the other hand, the number of Lithuanians learning foreign languages is constantly increasing, because everybody understands that Lithuanian alone is not sufficient for effective communication in the world.