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A GENERAL CHARACTERIZATION OF THE LITHUANIAN LANGUAGE

The Lithuanian language belongs to the Baltic group of the Indo-European family of languages. In addition to Lithuanian, Latvian or Lettish, and Old Prussian (extinct), this group includes the extinct Curonian (or Kurish), Selonian, and Semigallian dialects.

The Baltic languages' relationship to other languages is questioned quite often. Lithuanian and Latvian are sometimes considered to be Slavic, or at least very close to the Slavic languages. This opinion is supported by the old theory of a close relationship between the Baltic and Slavic languages stated by the nineteenth-century philologists and indicated by the term "Balto - Slavic," which is sometimes still used today, e.g. in Webster's Dictionary. This relationship between Baltic and Slavic was associated with a so-called Baltic and Slavic proto - language which supposedly existed after the Indo-European proto-language had split up into dialects. However, the most outstanding specialists on the Baltic languages, K. Buga [1](#) and J. Endzelin [2](#), as well as other philologists, such as A. Meillet [3](#) and A. Senn [4](#), refuted this theory. Philologists now agree that, although the Baltic and Slavic languages have more features in common than do Baltic and Germanic or Baltic and Latin, these common features could have been inherited from Indo-European or could have developed later, when the Balts and the Slavs lived in close proximity. The term "Balto - Slavic" is therefore being used less and less, for there is more reason to speak of the Baltic and Slavic languages separately.

Another popular notion about the close relationship of Lithuanian to Sanskrit has no proven foundation, although it is stated in the *Encyclopedia Americana*, XVII, 1954, that "it belongs to the Indo - European group and is nearest idiom to Sanskrit."[5](#)

Although the Lithuanian language is used in a comparatively small area, it is subdivided into dialects. The two main dialects are Low Lithuanian and High Lithuanian; they differ in their treatment of the proto - Lithuanian *-dja-*, *-tja-*, which became *-de-*, *-te-* in Low Lithuanian and *-džia-*, *-čia-* in High Lithuanian. For example, proto - Lithuanian, *medjai*, *jautjai* (trees, oxen) has become *medei*, *jautei* in Low Lithuanian, but *medžiai*, *jaučiai* in High Lithuanian. Both dialects are further divided into subdialects.[6](#)

The first Lithuanian books appeared in the sixteenth century, but the formation of standard Lithuanian began only in 1883, with the appearance of the newspaper "Aušra." In standard Lithuanian, 32 letters are used to express far more than 32 sounds. There are eleven vowels: five short ones, *a*, *e*, *o*, *u*, *i*, and six long ones, which are expressed by 10 letters: *a*, *ą*, *e*, *ė*, *ę*, *o*, *ū*, *ų*, *y*, *j*. The letters *ą*, *ę*, *j*, *ų* the so - called nasals, express long vowels which developed from the diphthongs *an*, *en*, *in*, *un*; for example, *žąsis* (goose) comes from *žansis*, and *darbų* (of the works) comes from *darbun*. The nasalism is not longer noticeable. Long vowels *a* and *e* appear only in accented syllables, such as *nāmas* (house), *lēdas* (ice). The vowel *o* is always long in Lithuanian except for recent loan words, e.g. *fōnas* (background), *istōrija* (history).

The length of Lithuanian vowels and diphthongs is now being studied experimentally. The results show that any long vowel is from 1-1/2 to 2 times longer than its respective short vowel. Length is not the only difference between long and short

vowels; quality, the stress on speech organs, and other characteristics are also involved. Unstressed vowels and diphthongs tend to be shortened. Not all long vowels are of equal length, just as the length of short vowels may differ from one another. According to length the long vowels are arranged as follows: *ā, ē, é, o, ū, ī*. The maximum length of the first long vowel is 53/100 of a second and that of the last vowel is 36/100 of a second. The short vowels follow this order: *a, e, o, u, i*. The maximum length of the first vowel is 29/100 of a second, of the last — 21/100 of a second. The same vowel or diphthong can be longer or shorter, depending on the following circumstances: (1) the nature of the syllable (somewhat longer in an open syllable than in a closed one), (2) the quality of the preceding consonant, (3) the stress (a stressed vowel is longer than an unstressed one), (4) the proximity or distance from unstressed syllable (vowels are longer if closer to the stressed syllable), (5) the number of syllables in a word (the more syllables, the shorter their vowels), (6) the position of the vowel (always longer at the end), (7) the intonation (longer under a circumflex), (8) the speed (vowels become shorter pronounced with greater speed), (9) the quality of the vowel (lower vowels are longer than the high ones). Sometimes a difference in vowel length signifies a difference in the meaning of a word; for example, *didis* (great) and *dydis* (size).

There are six diphthongs in Lithuanian: *ai, au, ei, ui, ie, uo*. Loan words also contain *eu* and *oi*. According to length, the diphthongs are arranged as follows: *ei* (maximum length 56/100 sec), *ai, uo, oi, au, ui, ie, eu* (30/100 sec).

There are 20 letters for the consonants, although there are 23 consonants: *b, c, č, d, f, g, h, ch, j, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, š, t, v, z, ž, dz, dž*. *C* is pronounced like *ts*, *č* as in 'chip', *š* as in 'ship', *ž* as *s* in 'vision'. All the others are pronounced exactly as they are in Latin. Three consonants, *f, h, and ch*, usually occur only in loan words. All consonants can be pronounced soft or hard (except *j*, which is always soft). Thus, there are 22 hard and 23 soft consonants whose soft quality is expressed in Lithuanian orthography by the letter *i*; for example, *kiáuras* (with holes), *liáutis* (to cease). Both these words have 7 letters, but only 6 sounds, because the *i* does not express a sound. Soft and hard consonants also signify a difference in meaning, e.g. *šuo* (dog) and *šiuo*, the instrumental of its (this); *sauso*, the genitive of *sausas* (dry) and *sausio*, the genitive of *sausis* (January). Thus, standard Lithuanian has 45 consonant phonemes.

A typical characteristic of Lithuanian is that the accent can fall on any syllable in a word; for example, *vaikas* (child), but *vaikai* (children), *mokykla* (school), but *mokyklos* (schools). The accent is accompanied by an intonation, a certain way of pronouncing the accented vowel or diphthong. There are three types of intonations. In the first, the voice is firm at the beginning and drops gradually. This is called the acute intonation (German: *Stosston*) and is expressed by the acute stress, e. g. *vėjas* (wind), *dáiktas* (thing), *sáule* (sun). Or one can begin in a weaker voice, raise it, and then slightly lower it again at the very end. This is the circumflex intonation (German: *Dehnton*) and is expressed by the circumflex stress, e.g. *vaikas* (child), *laũkas* (field). In the third type of intonation, the vowel is pronounced short, with medium voice pressure. Some say that the voice intensifies suddenly and then falls off somewhat slower, resembling a rising-falling intonation. However, since the ear usually hears only a short stress, this intonation is called the short intonation (German: *Kurzton*); e.g., *tàs, tà*, (this), *kitas, kità* (another).

Lately, a different explanation has been offered for the nature of intonations: it is suggested that the difference in the intonation is not caused by the change in the tone, but by changes in the strength and length of the voice in pronouncing the vowel or the diphthong of a syllable.⁸

A difference in intonation can also entail a difference in meaning: *àntis* (duck), and *antis* (bosom), *àukštas* (high) and *aũkštas* (floor). Although the acute and circumflex intonations are Indo - European, most modern languages of this origin do not distinguish between them any more. Serbo - Croatian, Slovenian, and the Baltic languages are the only exceptions. Intonation is, therefore, another of the ancient characteristics inherited by Lithuanian.

Lithuanian has retained many old morphological forms. Of the eight original Indo - European cases, Lithuanian has kept all except the ablative. Instead, a number of locatives were developed in addition to the literary locative; one of them is still found in spoken language and even in various writings. It is the so-called *illative*, the locative of direction, expressing motion inward, e.g. *miškan, miškuosna* (into the wood, into the woods). Lithuanian has preserved the old Indo-European declensions, which are divided according to their stem endings into the *-o(-io-), -a(-ia-), -(i)e-, -i-, -u-*, and the consonant declension.

Lithuanian has also preserved the inflectional endings, such as the nominative singular: *-as, -is, -ys, -a, -ė, -i, -is, -us, -uo*. The old Indo-European languages — Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin — have similar endings, but not the modern ones; for example, Lithuanian *vilkas*, English *wolf*, Greek *lykos*, Latin *lupus*, Russian *volk*; Lithuanian *ugnis* (fire), Latin *ignis*; Lithuanian *sūnus*, Sanskrit *sūnah*, English *son*, Russian *syn*. Because of these old forms, Lithuanian is as important to com-partive philology as Sanskrit, Greek, or Latin.⁹

In Lithuanian, there are only two genders for nouns — masculine and feminine. In this respect, Lithuanian differs from Slavic, German, and other languages which still have neuter gender nouns. Adjectives and some pronouns have retained a neuter uninflected gender in predicate function only; for example, *šiañdien šálta* (it is cold today), *čia labai gražũ* (it is very beautiful here).

In the nominative singular, Lithuanian adjectives have the same endings as do nouns: *-as, -is, -us* for masculine and *-a, -e, -i* for the feminine; for example, *gėras, gerà* (good), *medinis, mediné* (wooden), *gražũs, graži* (beautiful). Adjectives are used in the indefinite and the definite forms. The definite form consists of a simple adjective and the pronoun *jis, ji* (he,

she), such as *gėras + jis = gerąsis*, *gerà + ji = geróji*. Definite forms are used for certain things which differ from others by some definite characteristic and therefore are frequently used in proper names, such as *Mažoji Lietuva* (Lithuania Minor), *Žaliąsis Kąlnas* (The Green Mountain). Often they have only an emphasizing function. Since emphasizing is subjective, in these cases definite and indefinite adjectives can be used interchangeably : it is possible to say *brangūs draūge* and *brangųsis draūge* (dear friend).¹⁰

The comparative form of an adjective such as *gėras* is constructed by adding the suffixes *-esnis*, *esné* and the superlative form by adding *-ausias*, *ausia*; for example, *gerėsnis*, *gerėsné* (better) and *geriáusias*, *geriáusia* (best).

In Lithuanian, as in other Indo - European languages, numerals are based on the decimal system which is founded on the numerals one to ten; they were inherited from Indo - European. The numerals from one to nine are declined similarly to the adjectives and, except for the numeral three, have both masculine and feminine genders: *viėnas — vienà* (1), *dù — dvi* (2), *trys* (3), *keturi — kėturios* (4), *penki — peńkios* (5), *šeši — šėšios* (6), *septyni — septyńios* (7), *aštuoni — aštuńios* (8), *devyni — devýnios* (9).

The ordinal numbers, which have the masculine and feminine genders in the singular and plural, are also declined like adjectives, e.g., *pirmas*, *pirmà* (first) exactly as *gėras*, *gerà* (good). There are also collective numerals (*dvėjetas*, *trėjetas*) and multiple numerals (*dvejį*, *trejį*), which are only used with plural nouns and only for the numerals from one to nine.¹¹

The Lithuanian pronouns are generally similar to those of other languages. There are two main categories of pronouns — personal pronouns, such as *aš* (I), *tu* (thou), *jis* (he), *ji* (she) and all others which have two genders and are declined like adjectives. Only the interrogative *kas?* (who, what) is the same for masculine and the feminine genders.

The Lithuanian verbs have retained some old Indo - European forms, but also have forms which are uniquely Baltic or Lithuanian. There are four simple tenses: present, *dirbu* (I work), past, *dirbau* (I worked), past frequentative, *dirbdavau* (I used to work), future, *dirbsiu* (I shall work). The past frequentative is a specifically Lithuanian form, not found in any other Indo - European language. As in Latin, verbs are conjugated by changing inflectional endings; therefore, no pronouns are necessary. It is possible to say: *dirbu* and *aš dirbu* (I work), *dirbame* and *mes dirbame* (we work). *Dirbu* in Lithuanian means both 'I work' and 'I am working.'

None of the ancient perfect tenses have been retained in Lithuanian; instead, there are new, compound perfect tenses. The present perfect tense consists of the auxiliary *būti* (to be) in the present tense with the past participle of the verb, which has to agree in gender and in number with the subject; for example, *àš esù skaĩtes* (I have read), *mės esame skaĩtes* (we have read), *ji yrà skaĩčiusi* (she has read), and *jõs yrà skaĩčiusios* (they have read). The past participle is also used to construct the past perfect tense, e.g. *àš buvau skaĩtes* (I had read), the frequentative past tense, e.g. *as bfidavau skaĩtes* (I used to have read), and the future perfect tense, e.g. *àš būsiu skaitęs* (I shall have read).

Lithuanian also has progressive past and future tenses, consisting of *būti* (to be) and the present participle with the prefix *be-*, e.g. *buvau bedirbąs* (I was working) and *būsiu bedirbąs* (I shall be working).

The passive voice is expressed by a verb phrase consisting of *būti* and the passive voice present participle or the past participle with the suffixes *-mas*, *-tas*. For example *nāmas yra stātomas* (the house is being built) and *nāmas yra pastatýtas* (the house is built).

The aspects of the Lithuanian verbs, that is the span and completeness of the action, are generally indicated by the structure of the verbs. Simple verbs are usually imperfective, i.e., they show an action in progress. Verbs containing prefixes are generally perfective, i.e., they show a completed action. However there are exceptions: about 100 simple verbs are neutral, e.g., *baigti* (to finish), *duoti* (to give), *imti* (to take), *gimti* (to be born), *mirti* (to die), or perfective, e.g., *dingti* (to disappear), *gauti* (to receive), *rasti* (to find), *tapti* (to become). Verbs whose prefixes change their stem-meaning or which are rarely used without prefixes are either neutral with regard to aspects of imperfective; for example, *patarti* (to advise), *patikti* (to please), *pažinti* (to recognize), *atrodyti* (to have the appearance, to seem), *išmanyti* (to know) *pavydėti* (to envy). The perfective verb sometimes has an imperfective equivalent consisting of the iterative form of the perfective verb with the suffix *-inėti*; for example, *atsakyti* (to answer), *atsiprašyti* (to apologize), *įrodyti* (to prove) are perfective verbs, but *atsakinėti* (to keep answering), *atsiprašinėti* (to keep apologizing), *įrodinėti* (to keep proving) are imperfective ones. The progressive form can also be used as an imperfective equivalent of a perfective verb; for example, *atėjo* (he came), but *buvo beateinąs* (he was coming).¹²

Lithuanian has five moods: the indicative, the subjunctive, the imperative, the permissive, and the narrative, which is used in indirect discourse. The narrative mood is characteristic of Lithuanian and Latvian; it is constructed using the active participles in place of the verbal forms used in the other moods. Such participles are used in tales, or generally when somebody else's narrative is retold. For example, a fairy tale often starts thus: *Kartą gyvenęs karalius. Jis turėjęs dvylika sūnų ir vieną dukterį*. (It is said that there once lived a king. He is said to have had twelve sons and one daughter.) Similarly, the passive participles in their neuter forms can be used to replace the indicative mood if one talks about unexpected events which became known at the very moment the conversation takes place; e.g., *'pasirodo, jo esama visai sukalbamo žmogaus'*, *'čia vakar būta lietaus'* ('it appears that he is quite an agreeable fellow,' 'it appears that there was rain here yesterday').

The great variety and number of participles and their frequent use are a characteristic of Lithuanian. There are the active participles of the four tenses; for example, the infinitive *dirbti* (to work) has the present participle *dirbęs* (working), the past participle *dirbęs* (worked), the past frequentative participle *dirbdavęs* (used to work), and the future participle *dirbsiąs* (will be working). There are also the passive voice present participles and the passive voice past participles: *dirbamas* (being worked) and *dirbtas* (been worked), and the *participium necessitates*, *dirbtinas* (should be worked). All participles have the feminine and masculine genders in both singular and plural. In addition, there are two undeclinable special adverbial active participles, comparable to the English nominative absolute, with suffix *-damas* (*dirbdamas*, while he is or was working or while working) and gerunds with the suffix *-nt* (*dirbant*, while working).

The participles can be used in four ways: (1) attributive, as in English, e.g., *bėgantis vanduo* (running water), *mylimas draugas* (beloved friend), (2) to construct the compound verbal forms — present, perfect, past perfect, etc. — e.g., *esu dirbęs* (I have worked), *esu baramas* (I am being scolded), (3) to replace the verb in the narrative, and (4) as basic words in participial phrases, also known as abridged clauses, e.g., *eidamas namo, sutikau draugą* (going home I met a friend), *baigęs darbą, nuejau gulti* (having finished my work I went to bed), *tiksliai kalbant* (strictly speaking).

The widespread use of participial forms indicates the antiquity of Lithuanian, for in the opinion of some philologists¹³, the Indo - European proto-language developed first its nominal and then its verbal forms. The verbal forms developed from the nominal ones with verbal characteristics, e.g. the *nomina actionis* (gerund), *skaitymas* (reading), *rašymas* (writing), etc. Participles are also nominal forms with verbal meanings.

In syntax, Lithuanian differs from other languages through various characteristics. For example, it has definite and indefinite adjectives; it uses often the *genetivus possessivus* (genitive possessive) where an adjective is used in other languages, e.g. *lietuvių kalba* (the language of the Lithuanians), English — *the Lithuanian language*, French — *la langue lituanien*, German — *die litauische Sprache*. As in Slavic languages, negative verbs call for the genitive case in the noun that follows; for example, *turiu knygą* (I have a book), but *neturiu knygų* (I do not have a book). Since Lithuanian has many cases, it uses them where other languages use prepositional phrases, e.g. *mano tėvo pirktas namas* ('my father's bought house' to mean 'a house bought by my father'). However, today prepositions are being used more frequently. One can now say *mušti lazda* (instrumental) and *mušti su lazda* (to beat with stick) or *mirti badu* and *mirti iš bado* (to die of hunger). In the use of verbs Lithuanian is characterized by the widespread use of infinite forms. Word order is generally free.

The vocabulary of literary Lithuanian is generally pure, for there are relatively few loan words. The oldest loan words came from the neighboring Slavs or Germans. Words of Germanic origin are *alus* (beer), *gatvė* (street), *midus* (mead), *kunigas* (priest), *pinigas* (money). Some Germanic words via Slavs, e.g. *asilas* (donkey), *katilas* (kettle), *stiklas* (glass). Slavic words in literary Lithuanian are *Kalėdos* (Christmas), *Velykos* (Easter), *bažnyčia* (church), *kryžius* (cross), *karalius* (king), *knyga* (book), *miestas* (city), *seimas* (national assembly), *dvaras* (estate), etc.¹⁴ Many more words used in the literary language are international, i.e., they come predominantly from Latin or Greek.

The process of borrowing or creating new words is still continuing. Examples of new loan words are *radaras* (radar), *nailonas* (nylon), *televizija* (television). Others are new forms of Lithuanian words, e.g. *karyba* (warfare), *pakanta* (tolerance), *pagava* (perception), *samprata* (concept), *garsmuo* (phoneme), *prasmuo* (symbol). Many new words have been formed in Russian-occupied Lithuania, where the Communist order has also introduced a Communist terminology consisting mostly of translations from Russian, e.g., *komsorgas* (Communist youth organizer), *partorgas* (party organizer), *pravaiksta* (absentee from work), *sienlaikrastis* (newspaper displayed on the wall).¹⁵

Generally, there are two types of newly created words - derivatives or compound words and old words with a broadened or narrowed meaning. Derivatives are made with the help of prefixes and suffixes, of which Lithuanian has several hundred. For example, diminutives and words of endearment are characteristic for Lithuanian. There are seven suffixes to construct diminutives, and more than one of these suffixes can be added to a word at once. One diminutive of *brolis* (brother) is *broliužėlis* (dear little brother); one diminutive of girl is *mergeliužė* (dear little girl) ; one diminutive of *ąžuolas* (oak) is *ąžuoliužytėlis* (little oak). The frequency of diminutives, especially in folk songs, imparts a special harmony to Lithuanian.

Lithuanian is considered an old language because it has preserved old features otherwise found only in the ancient extinct languages, such as Greek, Latin, Gothic, and Sanskrit but which have disappeared in other modern Indo - European languages. Such features are the comparatively good preservation of Indo - European vowels and consonants, the variable stress (not restricted to the certain syllable in all the words), the differentiation between intonations, the wealth of inflection, the preservation of old endings, the use of dual number (in addition to the singular and the plural) in spoken Lithuanian, and the wide use of participial forms. On the other hand, there are also modern forms, or trends toward modernization, such as the new preterite forms, the identical conjugational endings for the third person singular and plural, the disappearance of the neuter nouns which are still known in German and Slavic, the disappearance of the dual number from the literary language, the increasing use of prepositional phrases instead of cases, and the shortening of certain declensional endings, e.g., in literary Lithuanian it is possible to say *su stipriomis rankomis* and *su stipriom rankom* (with strong hands), *žalioje pievoje* and *žalioj pievoj* (in the green meadow).

NOTES

1. K. Buga, "Šis-tas is lietuvių ir indoeuropiečių senovės", *Tauta ir Žodis*, Kaunas, 1924, vol. II, p. 106
2. J. Endzelin, *Slaviano-baltijskije etudy*, Charkov, 1911.
3. A. Meillet, *Les dialectes indoeuropéens*, Paris, 1908.
4. A. Senn, "On the Degree of Kinship Between Slavic and Baltic", *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 1941, vol. XX, pp. 251-265; cf. also W. K. Matthews, "The Affinities and Structure of Lithuanian", *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 1956, vol. 35, no. 84, pp. 40-73; V. Mažiulis, "Pastabos baltų ir slavų kalbų seniausių santykių klausimu", *Lietuvių Kalbotyros Klausimai: II*, Vilnius, 1959, 5-6.
5. Cf. Antanas Klimas, "Lithuanian and Indo-European", *Lituanus*, 1957, vol. 4, no. 4, pp. 14-16.
6. Alfred Senn, *Lithuanian Dialectology*, Menasha, Wis., 1945 (Supplement to the *American Slavic and East European Review*, no. 1).
7. V. Vaitkevičiūtė, "Lietuvių kalbos balsių ir dvibalsių ilgumas, arba kiekybe", *Lietuvių Kalbotyros Klausimai III*, Vilnius, 1960. pp. 207-217.
8. A. Laigonaite, "Dėl lietuvių kalbos kirčio ir priegaidės supratimo", *Kalbotyra: I*, Vilnius, 1958.
9. Cf. Pranas Skardžius, *Lietuvių kalba, jos susidarymas ir raida*, Tuebingen, 1947.
10. A. Valeckienė, "Dabartinės lietuvių kalbos įvardžiutinių būdvardžių vartojimas", *Literatura ir Kalba: II*, Vilnius, 1957.
11. Ernst Fraenkel, *Die baltischen Sprachen*. Heidelberg, 1950, p. 55.
12. L. Dambriūnas, *Lietuvių kalbos veiksmažodžių aspektai* (Verbal aspects in Lithuanian), Boston, 1960.
13. Cf. Hermann Hirt, *Indogermanische Grammatik*, Teil IV, pp. 84-87.
14. P. Jonikas, *Lietuvių kalbos istorija* (History of the Lithuanian Language), Chicago, 1952, pp. 147-154.
15. Cf. A. Lyberis and K. Ulvydas, "Lietuvių literatūrinės kalbos leksikos praturtėjimas tarybinės santvarkos metais", *Literatura ir Kalba: III*, Vilnius, 1958.