

# Labile verbs in Estonian

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# What kind of a language is Estonian?

- Genetic stock: < Balto-Finnic < Finno-Permic < Finno-Ugric < **Uralic**.
- Areal stock: **Circum-Baltic**, extensive contacts with Germanic (German, Swedish), Baltic (Latvian) and Slavic (Russian).
- Morphological typology: More **fusional** and **analytic** than Finno-Ugric in general. Relatively high degree of **allomorphy & grammatical syncretism**.
- Morphosyntactic typology: **nominative-accusative** alignment

- Valency alternations: several dedicated markers.
  - Valency increasing markers:
    - causative derivational suffix (e.g. *kasvama* 'grow' → *kasva-**ta**-ma* 'raise, cultivate')
  - Valency decreasing markers:
    - impersonal/passive inflectional morphology (voice)
    - decausative (middle) derivational suffixes: (e.g. *solvama* 'insult' → *solv-**u**-ma* 'take insult')
  - Object- and subject-ellipsis is **more productive** than in English due to the overt agreement on the finite verb and the case-marking of core arguments.

# Criteria for lability

- A verb is **canonically labile** if (Letuchiy 2006: 22, free translation P.K.):
  1. It is employed both transitively and intransitively.
  2. Either the properties of the subject or other semantic properties of the situation differ considerably between the transitive and the intransitive use.
  3. All forms of the verb satisfy conditions 1 and 2.

4. The relationship between the alternative diatheses is not identical to the relationship between full diathesis and diathesis with omitted referent, be it definite or generalized.
5. The alternative uses of the verb cannot be considered as two separate homonymic lexemes, because the situations they denote are too similar.

# Lability in Estonian

- Some preconceptions:
  - Lability is **almost entirely absent** in Uralic languages (Letuchiy 2006: 253).
  - Estonian **is no exception**. Estonian grammatical description is not aware of the range of lability in the verbal system.
    - Some studies mention 5–6 labile verbs.
    - Kasik (2001: 83–84) claims that Estonian does not have any non-derived labile verbs.

- None of these preconceptions survive closer scrutiny.
  - Estonian (although Uralic) has at least **80** labile verbs, of which **50** are P-labile.
  - The majority of these verbs denote **basic** and **frequent actions/states**, such as ‘support/lean on’, ‘reach/stretch’, ‘rush/quicken’, ‘stop/stand still’.
  - Estonian has **more than 30** non-derived labile verbs.
  - In terms of the spread of lability in the verbal system, Estonian comes **closer to Germanic and Romance** than to Finnish and Hungarian.

- Major types of lability in Estonian:

- Patient-preserving (P-lability):

(1) a) *Jüri*            *ehmata-s*            *Mari-t.*  
Jüri.NOM    startle-ACT.PST.3SG    Mari-PART  
'Jüri startled Mari.'

b) *Mari*            *ehmata-s*  
Mari.NOM    startle-ACT.PST.3SG  
'Mari startled.'

- Agent-preserving (A-lability):

(2) a) *Jüri*            *jaluta-s*            *koera.*  
Jüri.NOM    walk-ACT.PST.3SG    dog.PART  
'Jüri walked the dog.'

b) *Jüri*            *jaluta-s*  
Jüri.NOM    walk-ACT.PST.3SG  
'Jüri walked.'



➤ Reflexive lability:

(3) a) *Jüri keera-s luku lahti.*  
Jüri.NOM turn-ACT.PST.3SG lock.GEN open  
'Jüri unlocked (the door).'

b) *Jüri keera-s vasakule*  
Jüri.NOM turn-ACT.PST.3SG left  
'Jüri turned left.'

➤ Reciprocal lability:

(4) a) *Jüri kallista-s Mari-t.*  
Jüri.NOM embrace-ACT.PST.3SG lock-PART  
'Jüri embraced Mari.'

b) *Jüri ja Mari kallista-sid*  
Jüri.NOM and Mari.NOM embrace-ACT.PST.3PL  
'Jüri and Mari embraced.'

- Distribution of lability over verbal lexicon

- Formal classes rich in labile verbs:

- **More than 50%** of Estonian labile verbs are derived.
      - **Almost all** derived labile verbs are formed with the suffix *-ta-*, which descends from at least three suffixes, and is thus synchronically polysemous.
      - This suffix derive:
        1. **Denominal** factitives/causatives;
        2. **Deverbal** causatives;
        3. **Punctual (momentaneous)** verbs.
- } 85% of all derived verbs

NB! The direction of derivation often does not coincide with what is considered by speakers to be **primary and secondary** use of the verb.

- ✓ The transitive use of the verb *vabandama* ‘excuse’ is marginal in contemporary Estonian, compared to its intransitive use ‘apologize’. The transitivity suffix (*vaban(e)-**ta**-ma*) indicates, however, that this verb was originally derived as a dedicated transitive.

➤ Semantic classes rich in labile verbs:

- Verbs of **emotion & sensory perception**; e.g.

*ehmatama*      ‘startle (tr.)/startle (intr.)’

*pahandama*    ‘annoy/become angry’

*rõõmustama*   ‘cause joy/rejoice’

*vihasutama*    ‘anger/get angry’

*kurvastama*    ‘sadden/be sad’

*imestama*      ‘wonder/be amazed’

*külmetama*    ‘freeze/be cold’.

- **Sound symbolic & manner imitation** verbs; e.g.

*lirtsatama*      ‘cause to squelch (once)/squelch (once)’

*mürtsutama*      ‘bang (tr.)/bang (intr.)’

*prantsatama*      ‘crash (tr.)/crash (intr.)’

*säbrutama*      ‘frizz/be frizzy’

*popsima*      ‘puff (a cigar)/puff (intr.)’

*krussima*      ‘curl/be curled’

*pritsima*      ‘spurt (tr.)/spurt (intr.)’

- The development of labiality in Estonian

- Major condition for raise and spread of labiality:

The decreased productivity and regularity of causative/decausative derivation (with the suffixes *-ta-* and *-u-* respectively) leaves **gaps in the lexicon** that are most efficiently filled by means of labiality.

- ✓ In the **19<sup>th</sup> century**, due to the low productivity of decausative suffix *-u-*, Estonian had more labile verbs than now. The **vacuum** left by the lack of productive decausative derivation **was compensated by lability**.
- ✓ In the **beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century**, language reformers tried to revive the decausative suffix. New coinages came to fill up several lexical gaps, which in turn **reduced the need for lability** in the language.
- ✓ However, the suffix *-u-* never achieved full productivity and the need for labile verbs **never disappeared**.

➤ Co-factors for raise and spread of lability:

- ✓ Affix syncretism: most labile verbs are coinages of *-ta*, which diachronically is a **merger** of three different suffixes. This may lead to **reanalysis** of derived causatives to intransitives.
- ✓ Lexicalization and opacity: Verbs originally derived with the suffix *-ta* are lexicalized, i.e. their **internal structure is no longer transparent**. This permits reanalysis of their valency patterns.



✓ German influence: The **lability match** between Estonian and German is striking; e.g.:

(5) a) *Mees seisatas masina./Der Mann hielt die Maschine an.*

‘The man stopped the machine.’

b) *Mees seisatas./Der Mann hielt an.*

‘The man stopped.’

(6) a) *Ta kaalus kaks kilot mannat./Er wog zwei Kilo Gries.*

‘S/he weighed two kilograms semolina.’

b) *Kott mannat kaalub 2 kilot./Ein Sack Griess wiegt 2 Kilo.*

‘A bag with semolina weighs two kilograms.’

- Other verbs with **matching lability** are

<i>praadima</i> – <i>braten</i>	‘roast/be roasted’
<i>ehmatama</i> – <i>erschrecken</i>	‘startle (tr.)/startle (intr.)’
<i>mängima</i> – <i>spielen</i>	‘perform, play/play (intr.)’
<i>tüürima</i> – <i>steuern</i>	‘steer (tr.)/steer (intr.)’
<i>ulatama</i> – <i>reichen</i>	‘reach (tr.)/reach (intr.)’
<i>laadima</i> – <i>laden</i>	‘charge (up)/be charged’
<i>moorima</i> – <i>schmoren</i>	‘stew/be stewed’
<i>kleepima</i> – <i>kleben</i>	‘stick (tr.)/stick (intr.)’
<i>määrima</i> – <i>schmieren</i>	‘lubricate/smear’
<i>sõitma</i> – <i>fahren</i>	‘drive (tr.)/drive (intr.)’

NB! The majority of these verbs are **German loanwords**, which provides additional support for the claim that lability was borrowed.

# Estonian lability in a nutshell

- Prominence of lability: Estonian is **relatively rich** in labile verbs; cf. Letuchiy's typological scale based on the number of labile verbs.

(Letuchiy 2006: 228–229)

ENGLISH > GERMAN, AVAR > SCANDINAVIAN, FRENCH >  
BULGARIAN, RUSSIAN > SERBIAN, ROMANIAN, LEZGIAN > POLISH,  
TURKIC > CZECH, HUNGARIAN (FINNISH).

Unlike its Finno-Ugric relatives, Estonian would be placed above the middle point of the scale, probably together **with Scandinavian and French**.

- Sources of lability: Most of Estonian labile verbs are derived verbs, and most derived verbs are originally (deverbal or denominal) causatives. The type of lability attested in Estonian can be characterized as **causative lability**.
- Structural motivation: The spread of lability in Estonian **compensates** for the relatively low productivity, regularity and usage frequency of morphological causatives/decausatives. A **phonetic merger** of different derivational affixes and lexicalization triggered the reanalysis of verb valency.

- Language contact: Labiality **is** borrowed across languages. A language rich in labial verbs (German) **borrowed its labial syntax** to a language, which on genetic grounds can be assumed to have been poor in labial verbs (Estonian).

## Further topic(s)

- A verb shows valency alternation, but with **different kinds of participants**; e.g.:

(7) a) *Tseremoonia/\*Jüri viivita-s meie ärasõitu.*  
ceremony/Jüri delay-PST3SG our departure.PART  
'The ceremony/Jüri delayed our departure.'

b) *Jüri/\*tseremoonia viivita-s.*  
Jüri/ceremony delay-PST3SG  
'Jüri/\*the ceremony delayed.'

The transitive alternant of the verb *viivitama* blocks actors which are **high** in agentivity, whereas the intransitive alternant blocks participants which are **low** in agentivity.

NB! Does this reflect the degree of **grammaticalization** of the labile syntactic pattern?

If the answer is positive, then:

*kaaluma* 'weigh' = highly grammaticalized lability

*viivitama* 'delay' = weakly grammaticalized lability