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Colloquial Estonian

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for Beginners

Christopher Moseley

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Introduction

Estonian is a member of the Baltic-Finnic group of the Finno-Ugrian family of languages, and is thus one of the few languages in Europe that is not Indo-European. It is closely related to Finnish (and to the almost extinct languages Livonian, Vepsian and Votic) and more distantly related to Hungarian. To the uninitiated reader, then, Estonian will at first seem very baffling, and even quite daunting, with few if any features recognizable to the English speaker. But it is not a particularly complex language to learn once one becomes familiar with a few grammatical rules and its coherent and regular processes of word and sentence formation. It is written in the Roman alphabet, and its spelling system is very consistent and regular.

Up to now there has been no comprehensive and widely available textbook of the Estonian language in English, and this book is an attempt to make up for that absence. It is designed both as a self-tutor and for use in classes. Although all points of pronunciation, grammar and syntax are explained as simply and plainly as possible, it should also satisfy the student of linguistics in that it attempts to be thorough and accurate as well. Audio accompanies this book to help you to get acquainted with the sound of the language and to interact with it. The subject matter covered in the lessons aims to give as broad a reflection as possible of modern Estonian life, whatever one's motives for learning the language may be.

Estonian is the native language of about one million people living in the Republic of Estonia, situated on the southern shore of the Gulf of Finland at the eastern end of the Baltic Sea. It is also spoken by another hundred thousand people of Estonian birth or descent living in Sweden, Germany, the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia and several other countries.

The country has had a turbulent and fascinating history, largely owing to its sensitive strategic position. To its north lies Finland, to the west, Sweden, to the south, Latvia and to the east, Russia. The proximity of all these countries is reflected in varying degrees in the

Estonian language. Another profound cultural and linguistic influence on the language has been exercised by the Baltic-German nobility who lived in what was then Livonia (present-day Estonia and Latvia) from the times of the Teutonic Knights or 'Brethren of the Sword', who brought Christianity to the region in the twelfth century. German cultural influence on the Estonian language is evident not only in the rich vein of vocabulary relating to church and state administration and everyday cultural artefacts, but even in the word order. The next stratum of cultural influence laid down on the language came from Sweden, which administered Livonia for over two hundred years, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Estonia's neighbour Finland was under Swedish rule for a much longer period, and Swedish influence on the Finnish language was consequently much more profound than on Estonian. In the eighteenth century the shift in the balance of power in northern Europe brought Livonia within the Russian Empire, in which it remained until Estonia, like the other Baltic republics of Latvia and Lithuania, became an independent republic in 1918.

Even then, Estonia's independence was not easily held; a bitter civil war lasted until 1920, and the independent state of Estonia lasted only until 1940, when the country, along with its Baltic neighbours, was forcibly absorbed into the Soviet Union as a result of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact which divided north-eastern Europe into spheres of influence between the Nazi and Soviet empires.

It was only during this Soviet period that Russian influence on the Estonian language made itself felt profoundly. The far-reaching changes in Estonian society that the Soviet administration brought with it are of course reflected in the vocabulary of modern Estonian. Now that Estonia is independent again, following the country's declaration of independence in 1990 and the collapse of the USSR in 1991, it remains to be seen how deep-rooted this Russian influence on the language has been.

Present-day Estonia is a country undergoing rapid change. Even during the darkest days of the Soviet era, the Estonians were a westward-looking people, who enjoyed one of the highest material standards of living in the USSR. Cultural links with Finland were maintained as far as possible, and Estonia's unique culture was preserved with fierce pride against almost overwhelming odds. The greatest threat to the integrity of the nation was posed by the influx of immigrants from other Soviet republics, mostly Russia, and the concomitant policy of heavy industrialization which was a conscious part of the Soviet programme of welding together a community of

‘fraternal’ republics. The legacy of this is the large Russian-speaking population which remains in Estonia today. Only time will tell what will become of the ethnic disparities that exist in the young republic.

Twenty-first century Estonia has made amazing strides towards becoming a modern, wired-up, western European nation, all the more so since the country joined the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 2004.

English speakers and Estonians have become a lot more familiar with one another in the decade since this volume was first written, and Estonia is now a popular tourist destination for people from Britain and the USA. The welcome will be even warmer for someone who has made the effort to learn something of the culture and language of this unique nation. Of course, for those who know Russian it is possible to get by in a superficial way, and even communicate with the sizeable Russian-speaking population, but if you really want to get to know Estonia well, the only way is to learn the language. You will find that your Estonian friends and colleagues are eager to help and encourage you, and the experience of learning this beautiful tongue will be well worth the effort. Good luck in your studies!

Acknowledgements

I would like to record my grateful thanks to numerous people who have offered help and encouragement in the writing of this book. In the initial stages my inspiration and guidance came from the late Professor Eduard Vääri of the University of Tartu, whose knowledge of the intricacies both of the Estonian language and of teaching it are second to none. As the book developed I have had invaluable help and numerous suggestions from Tiina Tamman, Alliki Lukk and Merit Ilja, to whom I am sincerely grateful. In preparing this new edition, I have been grateful for the help and encouragement of Lembi Loigu. Any sins of omission or commission that remain after their careful scrutiny are entirely my own.

In writing this volume I have consulted several authoritative dictionaries and textbooks, which I would like to mention here:

Dictionaries

- Rauk, M. (1980) *Inglise–eesti sõnaraamat koolidele*, Tallinn: Valgus.
Saagpakk, P. F. (1981) *Eesti–inglise sõnaraamat*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Veldi, E. (2002) *Eesti–inglise sõnaraamat/Estonian–English Dictionary*, Tallinn: Koolibri.

Textbooks

Erelt, M. (ed.) (2003) *Estonian Language*, Tallinn: Estonian Academy Publishers.

Oser, W. and T. Salasoo (1982) *Estonian for Beginners*, Sydney: Estonian Learning Materials.

Pesti, M. and H. Ahi (2006) *E nagu Eesti*, Tallinn: TEA 2006 (for beginners, in Estonian).

—— *T nagu Tallinn*, Tallinn: TEA 2006 (for more advanced students, in Estonian).

Tuldava, J. (1994) *Estonian Textbook*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University.

The sounds of Estonian

The alphabet (names of the letters in brackets)

a	(aa)	m	(emm)	u	(uu)
b	(bee)	n	(enn)	v	(vee)
[c]	(tsee)	o	(oo)	[w]	(topeltvee/ kaksisvee)
d	(dee)	p	(pee)	õ	(õõ)
e	(ee)	[q]	(kuu)	ä	(ää)
[f]	(eff)	r	(err)	ö	(öö)
g	(gee)	s	(ess)	ü	(üü)
h	(haa)	[š]	(šaa) (sh as in Shah)	[x]	(iks)
i	(ii)	[z]	(zee)	[y]	(igrek)
j	(jott)	[ž]	(žee)		
k	(kaa)	t	(tee)		
l	(ell)				

The letters given in square brackets occur only in words and names of foreign origin.

Pronunciation

You can hear a selection of the following material on the accompanying audio.

Consonants (Audio 1:2)

The consonants **g**, **b**, **d** are pronounced like their English counterparts, but with slightly less voicing. In genuine Estonian words they are not found in the first position.

lugema	to read	pada	pot
sugu	gender, stock, family	pidama	to hold
mägi	hill	ader	plough
viga	mistake	tuba	room
magama	to sleep	habe	beard
põder	elk, moose	lubama	to promise
rida	row, line	hõbe	silver

In the final position in a word **b**, **d** and **g** lose their voicing:

tuleb	comes	sulg	feather, pen
toad	rooms	kuld	gold
poeg	son	kurb	sad

The consonant combination **ng** is always pronounced [ŋg] (as two sounds):

ring circle **mäng** play

The consonants **b**, **d**, **g** and **k**, **p**, **t** form a set which is subject to a phenomenon called ‘consonant gradation’. Depending on a variety of factors which we shall study in the grammar lessons, these sounds occur in different ‘grades’ of length and voicing.

At the beginning of a word, **k**, **p** and **t** are pronounced as in English, but without the aspiration or slight puff of air which is usually emitted in English words:

kana	hen	kott	bag
paras	right	pea	head
taga	behind	tere	hello

Within a word, **k**, **p** and **t** are lengthened after a stressed short vowel:

rukis	rye	õpin	I learn
tiku	of a match	lipu	of a flag
lükata	postpone	mõte	thought

After a long vowel or diphthong or a voiced consonant, **k**, **p** and **t** are pronounced even longer, with double length:

sööki	(some) food	aitan	I help
vaipa	(some) carpet	jäätis	ice cream
vaatan	I look		

When written double, **kk**, **pp** and **tt** are longer still, even at the end of a word:

pakkuma	to offer	tükk	piece, item
kokku	together	õppida	to learn
tuppa	into the room	katta	cover
kappi	into the cupboard	võtta	to take

The dental consonants (those in which the teeth are involved in articulation), namely **d**, **t**, **n**, **l** and **s**, occur in two forms: unpalatalized and palatalized. Palatalization originally occurred because of a following **i** or **j**: **ostja** ‘buyer’, **võti** ‘key’; but in the present-day language the **i** which caused the palatalization has in some cases been dropped as the result of sound changes. Palatalization is not shown in written Estonian. In the following examples, we need to know other forms of the word – the type of declension involved – in order to guess whether the final consonant is palatalized or not. This is part of the process of consonant gradation which we will come to later.

palatalized		unpalatalized	
müts (<i>gen. mütsi</i>)	cap	müts (<i>gen. mütsu</i>)	thump
patt (<i>gen. pati</i>)	stalemate	patt (<i>gen. patu</i>)	sin
kott (<i>gen. koti</i>)	bag, sack, clog	kott (<i>gen. kota</i>)	large shoe

l and **s** are clearer than in English, because the point of articulation in Estonian is lower and further forward:

süsi	coal	elan	I live
sisse	in(to)	talle	to him

h is usually pronounced as in English, and in all positions:

hammas	tooth	ahju	stove (<i>gen.</i>)
tsehh	department		

The letter **j** is pronounced like the ‘y’ in English ‘yet’, and it can be doubled:

maja	house	majja	into the house
-------------	-------	--------------	----------------

Generally no difference is heard in pronunciation between **s** and **z**, or **š** and **ž**, the last two of which, found only in foreign words, represent the sounds in ‘ship’ and ‘beige’. None of the sounds is usually voiced.

The sound **r** is fairly strongly trilled, and can occur both short and long:

korral	in case	härra	gentleman, Mr
kord	order, time		

The other letters occurring in native words, namely **m**, **n** and **v**, are pronounced as in English, but when written double they are pronounced with extra length.

mina I **minna** go

f, which occurs only in recent foreign loans, is pronounced as in English:

šeff chief, boss, (*slang*) cool **film** film

q, **w**, **x** and **y** occur only in foreign names and have no designated pronunciation in Estonian.

Vowels (Audio 1:3)

There are nine vowels in Estonian, three of which do not occur in English. All of them may occur either short or long, and are written as such.

a is pronounced short as in ‘agenda’ and long as in ‘father’:

hallo hallo **taas** again
tahtsin I wanted **saame** we get

e is pronounced short as in ‘fell’ and long as in ‘café’:

tere hi, good-day **meeldiv** pleasant
kell clock **need** these, those

i is pronounced short as in ‘filling’ and long as in ‘feeling’:

iga each **viis** five
mida what **kiiresti** quickly

o is pronounced short as in ‘pot’ and long as in ‘port’:

kolm three **oktoober** October
kohvik café **Soome** Finland

u is pronounced short as in ‘put’ and long as in ‘stool’:

kuna when **juuli** July
pulma of a wedding **suu** mouth

õ is a narrow, unrounded back vowel. It is produced with the tongue in the position for ‘u’ as in ‘put’ and the lips in the position for ‘i’ in ‘pit’. The nearest English equivalent is the vowel in ‘bird’, but **õ** is more tense:

õpin	I study	võõras	foreign
kõne	speech	põõsas	bush

ä is identical to the vowel in English ‘cat’:

käsi	hand	hääl	sound, voice, vote
tänan	I thank (you)	äär	edge

ö is a narrow rounded central vowel, like the same letter in German:

öelda	to say	söön	I eat
kööb	kitchen	töö	work

ü is a narrow rounded front vowel, made by rounding the lips and articulating further forward than **ö**:

süda	heart	süüa	eat
püha	sacred, festival	püüda	try

Note that for all the above vowels, the long form has the same quality as the short, and is not a diphthong or a different vowel as in some cases in English.

In addition to pure vowels, there are numerous diphthongs in Estonian, including:

ai	aitäh	thanks	ui	kui	as, when, if
au	au	honour	õu	lõug	chin
ei	ei	not	äe	päev	day
oa	noad	knives	äo	näo	of a face
oi	poiss	boy			

Stress (Audio 1:4)

The main stress in words of Estonian origin is on the **first** syllable, but in words of recent foreign origin it may also fall on subsequent syllables, as underlined below:

all<u>e</u>rgia	allergy	revolut<u>sio</u>on	revolution
Austr<u>a</u>lia	Australia	part<u>e</u>i	(political) party
proble<u>m</u>	problem		

Exceptions among native words are very rare indeed; one such word is **aitäh** ‘thanks’. This word is also an exception to another rule: that all vowels may occur in the first (stressed) syllable of words of Estonian origin, but subsequent syllables may contain only **a**, **e**, **i**, **o** or **u**, and of these, **o** occurs only rarely. This is the result of a process of sound change in Estonian.

Exercise 1

Practise saying these words aloud:

buss	bus	liiv	sand
gaas	gas	vilu	cool, chilly
dollar	dollar	mõni	some
Helsingi	Helsinki	kõrge	high
sangad	handles, frames	üks	one
pipar	pepper	süüdi	guilty
nutan	I weep	süü	guilt
ratas	wheel	küüs	nail, claw
mitu	some	hästi	well
rääkida	to speak	täna	today
kleiti	(some) dress	alles	only, not until
pakk	packet	vabanda	excuse (me)
appi hüüda	to call for help	veel	still, yet
ette	forward	enamik	majority
lipp	flag	midagi	something
vett	(some) water	kiirus	speed
kisa	scream (<i>n</i>)	viimane	last
asi	thing	viiksin	I would take
tulen	I come	hotell	hotel
kallas	shore	oleme	we are
hiir	mouse	konstitutsioon	constitution
hea	good	juuni	June
hind	price	just	just, exactly
hää	voice	mu	my
palju	much	praen	I fry
juba	already	mao	snake's
ju	indeed, after all	teadus	science
järgmine	next	poed	shops
rõõm	joy	veebru	February
veri	blood	lõa	of a tether
nurk	corner	nõel	needle
number	number	sõita	to travel
ema	mother	tõotada	to pledge
homme	tomorrow	kräunuda	to mew, whine

1 Kaks vana sõpra

Two old friends

By the end of this unit you should:

- be familiar with the present tense and infinitives of the verb
- know a little about the importance of consonant grades
- know something about the Estonian noun case system
- be able to greet other people formally and informally
- know about 'definiteness' and 'indefiniteness'

Dialogue 1 (Audio 1:5)

Kaks vana sõpra



Tõnu is a 19-year-old Estonian boy and Piret is a girl of the same age. They have not seen each other since they left school, but one day they meet by chance on the street in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia.

TõNU: Tere, Piret!

PIRET: Tere, Tõnu!

TõNU: Kuidas sa elad?

PIRET: Tänan, hästi.

TõNU: Kas sa oled üliõpilane?

PIRET: Jah, ma olen üliõpilane.

TõNU: Kus sa õpid?

PIRET: Ma õpin Tartu Ülikoolis. Kas sa töötad?

TõNU: Jah, ma töötan Tallinna Kaubamajas.

TõNU: *Hi, Piret!*

PIRET: *Hi, Tõnu!*

TõNU: *How are you?*

PIRET: *Well, thanks.*

TõNU: *Are you a student?*

PIRET: *Yes, I'm a student.*

TõNU: *Where are you studying?*

PIRET: *I'm studying at the University of Tartu. Are you working?*

TõNU: *Yes, I work in the Tallinn department store.*

In the vocabulary lists that appear throughout the book, nouns and adjectives are given in the nominative and genitive cases; the partitive form is also given in the glossary at the end of the book. A dash (–) indicates that the form is identical to the nominative. Verbs are given in the infinitive **-ma** form.

Vocabulary

tere!	hi! good day! hello!	jah	yes
kuidas	how	mina or ma	I
sina or sa	you (<i>sing.</i> , familiar)	olen	am
elama	live	kus	where
kuidas sa elad?	how are you?	õppima	study, learn
tänama	thank	õpid	(you, <i>sing.</i>) study
tänan	thanks	Tartu, –	university town in southern Estonia
hästi	well	ülikool, -i	university
kas	? (opens a yes/no question)	töötama	work
oled	(you, <i>sing.</i>) are	Tallinn, -a	capital of Estonia
õpilane, -lase	student	kaubamaja, –	department store

Language points

The present tense of the verb

The present tense of the Estonian verb has the following endings:

1st person singular 'I'	-n
2nd person singular 'you'	-d
3rd person singular 'he/she/it'	-b
1st person plural 'we'	-me
2nd person plural 'you'	-te
3rd person plural 'they'	-vad

Thus the conjugation of the Estonian verb **õppima** 'study, learn' looks like this (note the short and long forms of the pronouns):

mina (ma) õpin	meie (me) õpime
sina (sa) õpid	teie (te) õpite
tema (ta) õpib	nemad (nad) õpivad

Notice here that Estonian makes no distinction between 'he' and 'she': they are both **tema/ta**.

Consonant gradation

The difference between the **-pp-** of the infinitive **õppima** and the single **-p-** in the present-tense forms is an instance of the phenomenon of *consonant gradation*, which is an integral part of Estonian grammar and applies to all declinable classes of words. There are three *grades* of consonants in Estonian, distinguished by different degrees of length (see the notes in the introductory chapter 'The Sounds of Estonian'). We shall be returning to consonant gradation again later as we meet it in various forms.

The verb olema: 'to be'

The verb 'to be' in Estonian is **olema**, and it is irregular. It conjugates like this:

mina (ma) olen	I am	meie (me) oleme	we are
sina (sa) oled	you are	teie (te) olete	you are
tema (ta) on	he/she is	nemad (nad) on	they are
see on	it is		

Optional pronouns

Notice that pronouns are not always used with present-tense verbs, because the endings alone indicate the person of the verb:

Kuidas elad? *or* **Kuidas sa elad?** How are you? (*lit.*, how do you live?)

Definiteness and indefiniteness

Ma olen õpilane. I am a student.

Notice that in this sentence there is no article corresponding to ‘a’ in English. The sentence could just as well mean ‘I am *the* student’, depending on the context. Estonian has different ways of indicating definiteness (‘the’) and indefiniteness (‘a’) from English, and these ways are built into the case system, which we shall now examine.

Noun cases

Estonian has a system of *noun cases* which largely do the work that prepositions do in English. The *nominative case*, which represents the subject of the sentence, is the basic form given in the glossaries, and it has no particular characteristic ending: **õpilane**, **ülikool**, **kaubamaja**, **Piret** and so on. Thus in the example given above, **Ma olen õpilane**, both **ma** and **õpilane** appear in the nominative case.

There are fourteen commonly used noun cases in Estonian, and we shall meet them all in the course of the units. For most of the cases it is necessary to add an ending to the stem of the *genitive case*, which indicates possession or belonging, roughly corresponding to ‘of’ in English. The genitive form usually ends in a vowel, and because of its importance in forming other cases, you will find the genitive form given after the nominative form for all nouns listed in the glossaries. For example, the genitive of **ülikool** is **ülikooli**, and knowing this form we can form nearly all the other cases of this noun. In the large number of cases where a noun ends in a consonant, a single vowel is added: **Tallinn** > **Tallinna**, as in the sentence

Ma töotan Tallinna I work in the Tallinn department
Kaubamajas. store.

In cases where the noun ends in a vowel, this will also be the genitive singular form, and so most other case endings will be added directly to this stem: **Tartu** > **Tartu-** for instance.

Ma õpin Tartu Ülikoolis. I study at the University of Tartu.

When we come to study adjectives, we will see that they too can be declined; in most cases they agree in number and case with the noun they qualify. We say

Piret on noor naine. Piret is a young woman.

but

Tõnu on noore naise sõber. Tõnu is the young woman's friend.

How to say 'in'

Look at the first two examples given in the above section and you will see that in both cases the final noun ends in **-s**, added to the genitive stem. This is the characteristic ending of the *inessive case*, which roughly corresponds to 'in' or 'at' in English; it generally refers to a position 'inside' something. So we find:

<i>nom.</i>	ülikool	university
<i>gen.</i>	ülikooli	of the university
<i>iness.</i>	ülikoolis	at the university
<i>nom.</i>	kaubamaja	department store
<i>gen.</i>	kaubamaja	of the department store
<i>iness.</i>	kaubamajas	at the department store.

Exercise 1

Pronounce the following words:

tuba, seda, viga
 hapu, mitu, rukis
 tüüpline, saatus, liikuda
 kimpu, Tartu, hankida
 õppetükk, kütta, hakkan
 padi, nalja, pann
 käsi, kott, sepp
 sul, kuidas, Soomes
 elad, veel, laeval

õnn, sõber, võõras, kõik, lõoke
küla, ülikoolis, sügisel

Exercise 2

Write the correct forms of the verb:

Mina elan Tartus.	Mina töötan kaubamajas.
Sina _____ Tartus.	Sina _____ kaubamajas.
Tema _____ Tallinnas.	Tema _____ majas (= in the house).
Meie _____ Rakveres.	Meie _____ ülikoolis.
Teie _____ Narvas.	Teie _____ koolis (= at the school).
Nemad _____ Eestis	Nemad _____ Tallinnas.
(= in Estonia).	

Exercise 3

Translate into Estonian:

- 1 How is Piret? 2 She is well. 3 Where does she study?
- 4 She studies at Tartu University. 5 Where does Tõnu work?
- 6 Tõnu works at the Tallinn department store.

Reading passage (Audio 1:6)

Piret on noor naine. Ta õpib Tartu Ülikoolis. Tartu on ülikoolilinn, mis asub Lõuna-Eestis. Tõnu on noor mees, Pireti vana sõber, kes elab ja töötab Tallinnas. Tallinn on Eesti pealinn. Pealinnas on kaubamaja, kus Tõnu töötab.

Vocabulary

noor, -e	young	Eesti, –	Estonia
naine, naise	woman	mees, mehe	man
ka	also, too	vana, –	old
linn, -a	town	sõber, sõbra	friend
ülikoolilinn, -a	university town	ja	and
mis	which, what	pea, –	head
asuma	be situated	pealinn, -a	capital city
lõuna, –	south		

Exercise 4

See if you can answer these questions:

- 1 Kes on Piret?
- 2 Kus ta õpib?
- 3 Mis on Tartu?
- 4 Kus see asub?
- 5 Kes on Tõnu?
- 6 Kas Tõnu on Pireti sõber?
- 7 Kus ta elab?
- 8 Kus ta töötab?
- 9 Kas Tallinn on Eesti pealinn?
- 10 Mis on pealinnas?
- 11 Kus Tõnu töötab?

2 Telefon

The telephone

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- recognize and use two more noun cases
- ask 'where' and 'when'
- make suggestions and give commands
- use the word for 'not' with verbs
- use some more greetings
- form questions
- have a simple telephone conversation
- describe what you do in your daily activities

Dialogue 1 (Audio 1:7)

Tõnu helistab Piretile

Piret's mother answers the telephone when Tõnu rings up Piret's home.

EMA: Hallo!

TõNU: Tervist. Siin räägib Tõnu Tamm. Vabandage, palun, kas see on Pireti korter?

EMA: On küll.

TõNU: Kas Piret on kodus?

EMA: Ei ole.

TõNU: Ega te ei tea, kus ta on?

EMA: Ta on linnas.

TõNU: Millal ta tuleb?

EMA: Ta tuleb varsti. Helistage natukene hiljem!

TõNU: Aitäh. Head aega!

EMA: Head aega!

MOTHER: *Hello!*
 TÕNU: *Hello. This is Tõnu Tamm speaking. Excuse me, please, is that Piret's flat?*
 MOTHER: *It is.*
 TÕNU: *Is Piret at home?*
 MOTHER: *No, she isn't.*
 TÕNU: *And you don't know where she is?*
 MOTHER: *She's in town.*
 TÕNU: *When is she coming (back)?*
 MOTHER: *She's coming soon. Ring a little later!*
 TÕNU: *Thanks. Goodbye!*
 MOTHER: *Goodbye!*

Vocabulary

telefon, –	telephone	ei	not, no
ei ole	(he/she/it) isn't	korter, -i	flat, apartment
ema, –	mother	ega	nor, and not
hallo	hello (used only when answering telephone)	teada	know
		millal	when
tervist	greetings, hi	tulema, tulen	come
siin	here	varsti	soon
rääkima, räägin	speak	helistama	ring
vabandage	excuse (me) (polite form)	natuke(ne)	a little
		hiljem	later
paluma	request, ask	aitäh	thanks (less formal than tänan)
palun	please	hea	good
kodu, –	home	aeg, aja	time
seal	there	head aega	goodbye

Language points

Greeting people in Estonian (Audio 1:8)

There are several ways of saying 'hello' and 'goodbye' in Estonian, depending on the situation, the time of day, how well the speakers know each other, and of course whether the conversation is face to face or on the telephone. When picking up the telephone, for instance, Estonians might say **Hallo** – but they would not expect the

same greeting in response as an English speaker might give, and they would not use **Hallo** in face-to-face conversation. Instead we might find one of several greetings, depending on the circumstances. The most common greeting in all circumstances is:

Tere! or Tervist! hello, hi (at any time of day)

Other common greetings are:

Tere päevast!	good day (daytime)
Tere hommikust!	good morning
Tere õhtust!	good evening

And to say goodbye, we might choose between these greetings:

Head aega!	good-bye
Head ööd!	good night
Nägemiseni!	see you later

Polite and familiar forms

In Estonian, unless you know a person well, it is usual to use the polite form of ‘you’ **Teie** (short form **Te**). To good friends, children and family members it is usual to use the intimate, familiar form **sina** (short form **sa**). You will learn this etiquette with practice, but if in doubt among Estonians, it is safest to use **Te(ie)** – and note that it is written with a capital T.

More about consonant changes

As we saw in the pronunciation section of the introductory chapter, in Estonian both vowels and consonants can have varying degrees of length. As Estonian is written very much as it is spoken, the length is usually reflected in the spelling: **sada** ‘hundred’, but **saada** ‘get’; **sina** ‘you’, but **sinna** ‘there’.

As far as consonants are concerned, this phenomenon is called *consonant gradation*. In Lesson 1 we met the verb **õppima** ‘study’, which has the present tense forms:

õpin	õpime
õpid	õpite
õpib	õpivad