**BOOK REVIEW**

# Eesti keele süntaks (The Syntax of Estonian)
## (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2017, 924 pages)

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**Abstract**

*Eesti keele süntaks*, edited by Mati Erelt and Helle Metslang, contains 23 articles written by scholars at the University of Tartu, collectively describing all areas of Estonian syntax. It is the largest description of Estonian syntax ever compiled. The volume is distinctively modern, relying heavily on recent studies and employing example sentences taken from various Estonian language corpora that were not available to the writers of previous Estonian reference grammars. It draws inspiration from older Estonian grammars as well as the comprehensive Finnish grammar *Iso suomen kielioppi*, but it makes numerous classification choices that differ from those made in its predecessors. The book is intended to aid in all kinds of activity related to the Estonian language, whether language instruction, language planning, or academic research. It is a welcome addition to the library of anyone studying the grammar of Estonian and/or related languages.

**Keywords:** *Estonian, syntax, reference grammar, descriptive*

*Eesti keele süntaks* (The Syntax of Estonian, henceforth EKS), edited by Mati Erelt and Helle Metslang, is a compendium of 23 articles covering all the main areas of syntax, together forming the largest description of Estonian syntax ever compiled. The articles are authored by leading experts in Estonian linguistics at the University of Tartu: Mati Erelt, Helle Metslang, Renate Pajusalu, Tiit Hennoste, Liina Lindström, Ann Veismann, and Helen Plado. The book represents a substantial update and expansion of the previous most comprehensive treatment of Estonian syntax, *Eesti keele grammatika* (Erelt *et al.* 1993); the intervening decades have witnessed new theoretical approaches as well as the rise of expansive text corpora, insights from which are reflected in the new publication. The book is intended to aid in all kinds of activity related to the Estonian language, whether language instruction, language planning, or academic research. It is a valuable resource for both academic professionals and university students.

The book begins with two introductory articles. The first of these, "Eesti keele lauseehituse uurimisest" (On the study of Estonian syntax), presents an overview of previous research and descriptions of Estonian syntax dating back to the 17th century. While the 17th and 18th century saw the publication of some cursory descriptions of syntactic phenomena, true research in the field of Estonian syntax cannot be said to have begun until the 19th century, with the rise of comparative-historical linguistics and the awareness of the position of Estonian as a Finno-Ugric language with particular similarities to Finnish (EKS: 30). The second half of the 19th century saw the publication of the first systematic academic descriptions of Estonian syntax, as well as the first significant treatment of Estonian syntax written in Estonian, that of Hermann (1896). In the first half of the 20th century, descriptions of Estonian began to be made by comparison to Finnish rather than German or Latin, and efforts were made by language reformers (e.g. Johannes Aavik) to de-Germanize the language. The study of Estonian

syntax in the second half of the 20th century was characterized by the influence of structuralist and generative grammar, as well as later by the development of the functional–typological approach and the consideration of semantic roles and pragmatics, among others. The crowning achievement of 20th-century Estonian syntactic research was the publication of *Eesti keele grammatika* II (Erelt *et al.* 1993). The discussion of earlier descriptions of Estonian syntax notes the errors and general disorder characterizing many works, while also acknowledging the aspects in which some authors were ahead of their time.

The second introductory article, "Sissejuhatus süntaksisse" (Introduction to syntax), is an overview of essential terms and concepts in the field of syntax, beginning with notions as broad as those of sentence, phrase, and part of speech. The article also covers semantic and syntactic roles as well as enumerating the primary sentence types found in Estonian (EKS: 86).

The next six articles are devoted to the various syntactic roles: "Öeldis" (Predicates), "Alus" (Subjects), "Sihitis" (Objects), "Öeldistäide" (Predicatives), "Öeldistäitemäärus" (Predicative adverbials), and "Määrus" (Adverbials). The first of these, covering the predicate, is the longest article of the book. It provides an overview of all of the syntactic and semantic categories of the Estonian verb system: tense, mood, voice, negation, aspect, modality, etc. The article is organized primarily on an onomasiological rather than semasiological basis, which is reflected in the detailed treatments of topics such as aspect and modality, wherein differences in meaning are expressed primarily lexically rather than morphosyntactically (as Erelt himself states regarding modality, EKS: 143). However, a semasiological approach is seen as well, for instance, in the description of the usage and meanings of the jussive mood (EKS: 172–176). While the main aim of the article is to describe the present-day language, there are occasional brief digressions into the historical development and/or previous descriptions of various aspects of the Estonian verb system.

The article "Alus" (Subjects) covers the semantic role of the grammatical subject in different sentence types (normal, existential, possessive, experiencer, and result sentences) and describes the phenomenon of differential subject marking (nominative vs. partitive subject), which occurs in a variety of non-canonical sentences.

The next article, "Sihitis" (Objects), describes the different semantic types of direct objects and the different semantic roles that the grammatical direct object can fill. Also, in this article an outline is given of the system of differential object marking in Estonian. This includes both the total vs. partial object alternation, which is largely determined by aspect and therefore plays a central role in the expression thereof, as well as the distribution between nominative and genitive as the case of the total object.

The two short articles "Öeldistäide" and "Öeldistäitemäärus" give overviews of the various forms and functions of predicatives and predicative adverbials respectively. The treatment of predicative adverbials as a distinct syntactic role, rather than treating them as a subtype of the adverb class, represents a divergence from previous descriptions of Estonian syntax.

The onomasiological approach is also clearly visible in the "Määrus" (Adverbials) article, which presents a very detailed classification of Estonian adverbials, organized by function/meaning rather than by form. In many cases the boundaries between adverbial classes are fuzzy at best, especially because these boundaries do not clearly correspond to the distinctions made within the language itself, i.e. the boundaries between different grammatical constructions. However, the authors of the article express a clear awareness

of the limitations of the classification system and the occasional arbitrariness of the boundary lines drawn.

Following articles 3–8, devoted to the various parts of the sentence, articles 9–14 focus on phrases. Each of these articles describes a different type of phrase: "Nimisõnafraas" (Noun phrases), "Omadussõnafraas" (Adjective phrases), "Määrsõnafraas" (Adverb phrases), "Võrdlustarind omadus- ja määrsõnafraasina" (Comparative constructions as adjective and adverb phrases), "Kaassõnafraas" (Adpositional phrases), and "Kvantorifraas" (Quantifier phrases). (There is no article in this section devoted to verb phrases, as finite verb phrases are covered in article 3 "Öeldis" (Predicates) in the previous section, and non-finite verb phrases are covered in article 23, "Sekundaartarindiga laused" (Sentences with secondary constructions)). Each article gives an overview of the functions and structural variants of each phrase type. In many cases, especially when dealing with semantically limited classes, the descriptions go beyond the morphosyntactic level and even include lists of typical lexemes (sometimes exhaustive lists, sometimes merely illustrative) found in individual constructions, thereby describing the function of those lexemes. As in other sections of the book, considerable attention is devoted in these articles to exploring boundary cases, constructions that could be classified in multiple ways and that therefore serve as good illustrations of the salient features of particular categories. A good example of this is the discussion on page 420 of expressions that could arguably be classified as either adpositional phrases, affixal adverbs, or adverbs. The article "Kaassõnafraas" (Adpositional phrases) includes a discussion of how adpositional phrases develop, thereby touching on the differences between adpositions and case-inflected forms of nouns and highlighting words which are currently undergoing grammaticalization and developing into adpositions, e.g. *suhtes* 'relation-INE', with the adpositional meaning 'in relation to, with regard to').

Articles 15 and 16 are devoted to the classification and description of non-constituent elements: article 15 "Üldlaiend, kiil, irdelemendid" (Disjuncts, parentheticals, dislocations) and article 16 "Sidend" (Conjunctions). Articles 17–21 focus on communicative structure: article 17 "Kommunikatiivsed lausetüübid" (Communicative sentence types), article 18 "Lause infostruktuur ja sõnajärg" (Sentence information structure and word order), article 19 "Viiteseosed" (Referential relationships), article 20 "Ellips" (Ellipsis) and article 21 "Rinnastus" (Coordination).

The volume concludes with two lengthy articles covering complex sentences: article 22 "Liitlause" (Complex sentences) and article 23 "Sekundaartarindiga laused" (Sentences with secondary constructions). "Secondary constructions" comprise three categories: 1) non-finite constructions, 2) absolute constructions, and 3) nominalizations (EKS: 756).

Understandably for a volume of this size, there is some duplication across articles. For instance, on page 210, in the "Öeldis" (Predicates) article, reference is made to the fact that negative verb forms require partial objects, a topic covered in greater detail in the article devoted to objects. Another example is the large degree of overlap between the "Adverb" and "Adverb phrase" articles, with the latter containing long lists of adverbs of different types, i.e. adverbs that can serve as the head of the corresponding different types of adverb phrases. Such examples highlight an important principle of the book's structure: each article is intended to be able to function as a standalone reference on its subject. This is of course ultimately unachievable, because of the interrelatedness of different topics within grammar; however, in cases when some aspect of a particular topic is not discussed in depth in the primary article devoted to that topic, appropriate

references are made to the other sections of the book where those subtopics receive attention. For instance, the particularities of object case variation in infinitival constructions are discussed not in the article "Sihitis" (Object), but in the article "Komplekslause" (Complex sentences), and accordingly, within the "Sihitis" (Object) article the reader is pointed to the relevant section in the "Komplekslause" (Complex sentence) article.

The book takes a distinctively construction-centric stance in the description of numerous phenomena. For instance, in discussing sentences such as *Tore, et sa tuled* 'Nice that you're coming', it is noted that these are no longer considered elliptical sentences, but rather examples of a separate, fully developed grammatical construction (EKS: 279).

The book relies heavily on new research and new corpora. A high percentage of the example sentences used in the book are taken from corpora and are marked accordingly. In some cases, corpus data is brought as evidence in order to explicitly contradict claims made in previous descriptions of Estonian grammar, including the 1993 *Eesti keele grammatika* II. This willingness to reconsider and revise previous claims is a clear strength of the book. Occasional reference and comparisons are also made to the comprehensive Finnish grammar *Iso suomen kielioppi* (ISK, Hakulinen *et al.* 2004), which the book clearly takes inspiration from, despite making numerous classification choices that differ from those made in ISK. Another outstanding feature of the book is the lists of literature references provided at the end of each subsection of each article, making it easy for the reader to find relevant sources for individual topics.

*Eesti keele süntaks* is a welcome addition to the library of anyone studying the grammar of Estonian and/or related languages.

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