



## Linguistic Description

The Latvian language belongs to the Baltic group of the Indo-European family of languages. Its closest and only living relative is Lithuanian (Latvian is a non-Slavic and non-Germanic language). Latvian has inherited much from the Indo-European proto-dialects. Like Lithuanian, it has preserved many archaic features in its sound system and grammar.

The Baltic tribes arrived in their present territory in the third millennium B.C. The split between Latvian and Lithuanian proto-dialects took place in the sixth and seventh centuries A.D. The formation of the common Latvian language began during the 10-12th centuries. Today traces of tribal dialects can be found in three main dialects (Central, Tamian and High Latvian) and the more than 500 vernaculars of the Latvian language, which co-exist with the highly standardised form of Latvian.

phonemes while observing the morphemic structure of the word. The so-called phono-morphological principle is still used in Latvian spelling.

Spelling in the first printed books in the second half of the 16th century used Gothic letters and was based on the spelling principles of Middle Low German.

Gothic letters were used up to the beginning of the 20th century except for books that were printed in the eastern part of Latvia. In 1908 the new orthography was instituted, whereby Gothic letters were replaced by Roman ones and clusters of three or four consonants were replaced by one-letter spelling or digraphs, making use of diacritics. In Latvian, vowel length is indicated by a macron; thus, a short vowel is unmarked, but a long vowel has a stroke above it.

Latvian	Lithuanian	Russian	German	English
bārda	barzda	борода ( <i>boroda</i> )	der Bart	beard
cirvis	kirvis	топор ( <i>topor</i> )	das Beil	axe
dārzs	daržas	сад ( <i>sad</i> )	der Garten	garden
dzeltens	geltonas	желтый ( <i>zhyolty</i> )	gelb	yellow
dzintars	gintaras	янтарь ( <i>yantar</i> )	der Bernstein	amber
mugura	nugara	спина ( <i>spina</i> )	der Rücken	back
piens	pienas	молоко ( <i>moloko</i> )	die Milch	milk
slota	šluota	метла ( <i>metla</i> )	der Besen	broom
zirnis	žirnis	горох ( <i>goroh</i> )	die Erbse	pea

Typologically, Latvian is a fissional, inflectional language. Latvian nouns have seven cases, verbs may be inflect for tense, mood, voice and person. There is also a rich system of derivational affixes. The order of clause constituents is relatively free. The majority of speakers distinguish between two tones or intonations in long syllables. Latvian stresses the first syllable of each word and a long vowel may occur in an unstressed syllable.

## Latvian Orthography

The present Latvian alphabet consists of 33 letters:

a	ā	b	c	č	d	e	ē	f
g	ģ	h	i	ī	j	k	ķ	l
ļ	m	n	ņ	o	p	r	s	š
t	u	ū	v	z	ž			

The first written texts in Latvian appeared more than 400 years ago, and since then Latvian spelling has become one of the most perfect Latin script-based spelling systems in the world: Latvian graphemes correspond almost perfectly to the

## Contact with Other Languages

Since the consolidation of the Latvian nation, Latvians have always had direct contact with other languages: with Liv, Estonian, Lithuanian, Belarussian, Russian as neighbouring languages; with Russian, Polish, Swedish and German as languages of cultural exchange and official transactions; and with Latin as the language of religious ceremonies for Catholics. Language contact has been an important factor in the development of Latvian lexicon and grammar. The neighbouring Finno-Ugric languages – Liv and Estonian – as well as Lithuanian and Russian have also influenced the Latvian language. From the Middle Ages to the early 20th century, the German language was the dominant language in education, science and administration; about 3,000 borrowings from German became part of Latvian vocabulary. During the last decades, extensive borrowing from English has taken place. Nevertheless, mainly because of the efforts of Latvian linguists to standardise the language, the impact of other languages is not as great as it could be.

## Latvian Language Standardisation

Standardisation of the Latvian language occurred spontaneously in the pre-written language period, i.e., until the 16th century. When the first normative texts appeared in the 17th century, there was more or less purposeful language standardisation.

The authors of the first Latvian books were the Baltic German clergy who applied themselves methodically to the task of creating a written language by writing grammars and dictionaries of Latvian. The first printed text in Latvian appeared in 1525. Among the first books preserved until today are Catholic Catechism (1585), and Evangelic Lutheran Catechism (1586). The first Latvian dictionary was published in 1638, and the first grammar in 1644 by German clergymen G. Manzelius and J.G. Rehehusen.

Thus the Baltic languages (Lithuanian, Latvian and the extinct Old Prussian) became a focus of the research by the international community of professional linguists. Hence, the research of the first important Latvian linguists, Kārlis Milēnbahs (1853-1916) and Jānis Endzelīns, (1873-1961), also became research of interest in an international forum.

Starting in 1918, when independence of a sovereign Latvian state was declared, and continuing until the Soviet occupation in 1940, the Latvian language was formed into a well-developed, multi-functional language with an established system of styles and developed terminology.

During the Soviet period, Latvian linguists because of political reasons, could not affect the shrinking of the sociolinguistic functions of Latvian; therefore, the retention of language quality and even its

<b>Latvian:</b>	Dievs deva zobus, Dievs dos maizes donu
<b>Lithuanian:</b>	Dievas davė dantis, Dievas duos duonos
<b>Sanskrit:</b>	Devas adāt datas, Devas dāsyati dhānās
<b>Russian:</b>	Бог дал зубы, бог даст хлеб
<b>German:</b>	Gott gab die Zähne, Gott wird das Brot geben
<b>Meaning in English:</b>	"God gave teeth, God will give bread"

The middle of the 19th century saw the rise of the National Awakening movement, along with the emergence of interest in their language on the part of Latvians themselves. At the same time, the status of the Baltic languages changed. Until then, Latvian had been regarded by the Baltic German nobility as a "rural language" unfit for expressing lofty thoughts.

perfecting were set as major tasks. The Commission of Terminology of the Latvian Academy of Sciences has been active since 1946. By 1990 it had published 15 terminological dictionaries and more than 50 bulletins in various fields of science and technology. Studies of Latvian were carried out, and a two-volume grammar of the modern Latvian language and an eight-volume dictionary of standard Latvian were compiled. Since 1965, annual handbook on correct Latvian usage and a bulletin for journalists, as well as a lot of monographs, have been published.

Since the renewal of independence, the Latvian Language Institute and departments at the University of Latvia, Liepāja University and Daugavpils University have been conducting research on the Latvian language. The main research areas are lexicography, grammar, dialectology and regional differences,



"Mājas Viesis Menešraksts" December 1899

Today's largest daily newspaper "Diena" ("Day"), September 2001



Samples of Latvian periodicals from the 18th and the 21st century

At the end of the 19th century, Latvians took over the research and standardisation of the Latvian language. By the second half of the 19th century, Latvian had become a highly standardised language, rich in press publications and belles-lettres. As early linguistic studies were developing the typology of the Indo-European group of languages, it gradually became apparent that the Baltic languages provided some of the missing links to explain the relationship among Sanskrit, the classical languages (Greek and Latin) and modern languages of our day.

sociolinguistics and terminology. Latvian is taught and studied in several universities throughout the world. Standardisation and codification of standard Latvian are carried out by the Latvian Language Expert Commission of the State Language Centre.

## Sociolinguistic Situation of Languages and Language Legislation in Latvia after World War II

During the Soviet occupation (1940-1941 and 1945-1991), Latvian functioned in the context of Latvian and Russian societal bilingualism – the language of the governing state and its structures was Russian. Latvian was gradually ousted from several spheres, such as transport, banking, police and industry. Because of massive immigration, the percentage of Latvian language users decreased. In 1989 only 21% of representatives of other nationalities declared Latvian language skills while most Latvians knew Russian.

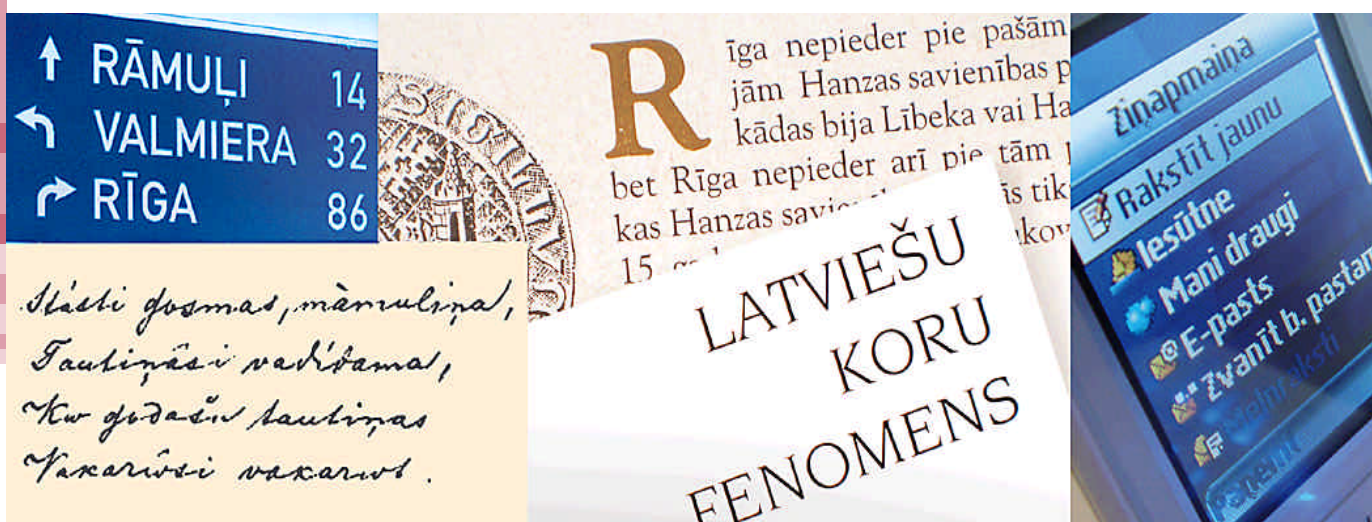
Although the number of speakers and the decrease of sociolinguistic functions of Latvian never reached the critical stage of imminent language shift in Latvia, the preconditions for this had been attained.

In 1988 Latvian regained its status as the state language in Latvia. The 1989 Language Law (amended in 1992) restored the place of Latvian in the national economy and in social life.

A number of minorities in Latvia enjoy bilingual education at government expense. These include Russian, Jewish, Polish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, Belarussian, Estonian and Roma schools where in the initial stages Latvian is taught as a second language so as to encourage the attainment of competence in Latvian and so that each resident of Latvia can become integrated into the life of society and not be hindered by lack of proficiency in Latvian.

The Law on State Language was adopted on December 9, 1999. Several regulatory acts that refer to this Law have been adopted. The State Language Centre of the Ministry of Justice monitors the observance of the Law.

Considering the recent political and demographic processes in the region, Latvia and the other Baltic States are among countries where consistent implementation of reasonable language policy principles is essential for the maintenance of the language. The purposes of the present Law are the preservation, protection and development of the Latvian language, as well as the integration of national minorities into Latvian society of while observing their right to use their native or any other language.



After renewal of independence in 1991, changes have taken place in the language situation of Latvia. The main goal of language policy is integration of all inhabitants in the context of the official state language while protecting and developing the languages of Latvia's minorities. Recognising the problems inherent in society, the Latvian government launched programmes for the teaching of Latvian. In the year 2008 about 93% of Latvia's minorities acknowledged that they possessed some Latvian language skills.

### Examples of Latvian language writing