

## The Sea, Especially the Baltic Sea, from the Point of View of Latvians and Latvian Language

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We have among Latvian linguists a researcher, who have been and still is a devoted explorer of the lexis – both common nouns and proper names – connected to the sea, and especially to the fishing places on the Baltic Sea. Unfortunately she – Benita Laumane – is not very eager to participate in the conferences abroad, and her publications – a couple of monographs and many linguistic papers – are almost all in Latvian, some papers – in Russian and German, but not a single in English. That is why her researches and her name are not to such extent widely known as it would be deserved. I will use in my paper quite many facts and ideas I have found in the researches of Laumane, especially in the monographs *Zeme, jūra, zvejvietas* ('The Land, the Sea, the Fishing Places' – Laumane 1996, 162–168) and *Jūra latviešu valodā un folklorā* ('The Sea in the Latvian Language and Folklore' – Laumane 2013, 13–23), and that is why I would like to start with my special thanks to the Latvian linguist Benita Laumane.

The ancient inhabitants of the Baltic seashore in the region where nowadays is Latvia have been both Baltic tribe of Curonians and Finnic tribe of Livonians; that is why Latvian words and names connected to sea use to be both of Baltic and of Finno-Ugric origin, and sometimes it is quite hard to find the answer to the question is this one word or name a heritage Latvians have got from Baltic or from Finno-Ugric (thus *Finnic* – this term can be used instead of the *Baltic Finnic*) ancestors. As long as the ancestors of Latvians don't have been occupied by foreign powers, they don't even have needed a toponym for the sea, the generic *jūra* 'a sea' was sufficient to name this

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big water suitable for fishing on large scale. And even this basic sea–word have can be seen as a link connecting Baltic and Finnic languages. There is a generic *järvi* ‘a lake’ in Finnish (Finnish is believed to be the most archaic among all Finnic languages), and the similarity between the Latvian *jūra* and Finnish *järvi*, Estonian *järv*, and especially Livonian *jōra* – both phonetic and semantic similarity – have been the reason some linguists have treated these words as akin to one another, and that means as loaned from the one language group to another, from the Finnic languages to the Baltic languages or from the Baltic languages to the Finnic languages. To say the truth the Estonian translator, lexicographer and cultural worker Karl Aben seems to have been the only one treating Latv. *jūra* as a Finno–Ugric loanword (Aben 1957, 201) in his thesis. By contrast Latvian/American linguist Valdis Juris Zeps writes, even a bit ironically: “Aben has apparently succumbed to the perennial temptation to equate Liv *jōra*, Est *järv* etc. with Latv *jūra*. I am not familiar with his arguments.” (Zeps 1962, 116). The Indo–European origin of Latvian and Lithuanian *jūra* was quite convincingly demonstrated by the most known Lithuanian linguist Kazimieras Būga already before almost hundred years, and already Būga have suggested, that Finnish *järvi* is a Baltic loanword (Būga 1922, 235 – 241). Among other etymologically related words Būga mentions Lith. *jáura* ‘swamp; marsh–land’ and Sami *jávrrē* (cf. Northern Sami *jávri*) ‘lake’. It is a pity the etymological analysis made by Būga had not been reflected in the etymological dictionaries of Finnish s. v. *järvi* (SKES I, 132; SSA I, 259), most probably because the monograph of Būga is written in Lithuanian. However, Finnish linguist Olli Nuutinen 1989 published a paper “*Järvi* — balttilainen laina” (“Finnish *järvi* – a Baltic loanword”) (Nuutinen 1989). The paper of Nuutinen is mentioned in SSA, nevertheless the authors of SSA don’t believe in the Baltic origin of Finnic words meaning ‘a lake’, probably because akin words are used in Volga–Finnic languages (e.g., Mari *jer*, Erzya *erke*); still some other Baltic loans, too, are found in Volga–Finnic languages (s. Vaba 1983), and that means a Baltic origin of the Volga–Finnic words meaning ‘a lake’ would not be something impossible.

However, if the meaning of Finnish *järvi* and other related Finnic words is ‘a lake’, why should be their origin connected to the Baltic words meanig ‘a sea’? The answer is, that the meaning ‘a sea’ for Latvian *jūra* (and for the respective Lithuanian noun) is relatively new. The meanings of the above–mentioned akin word Lith. *jáura* (and

*jáuras*) are still connected to the marshy land (LKŽ IV, 315), the Lith. *jūra* have been used to denote some inner waters, what is reflected, e.g., in the Lith. river names *Jūra*, *Jūrė*, *Jūrupis* (Vanagas 1981, 139); the author of the etymological dictionary of Lithuanian hydronyms Aleksandras Vanagas have proposed the idea, that in the even more ancient times the respective word have had the meaning ‘the water’, cf., e.g., Armenian *jur* ‘the water’ (ibid.) or Latin *ūrīna* ‘urin’ (LEW 198). What to the Latvian *jūra*, this word probably had had at first the meaning ‘a locality rich in water; a lake’ as concluded by the author of the etymological dictionary of Latvian Konstantīns Karulis (Karulis 1992 I, 362 – 363; Karulis follows in fact the semantic analysis made by Latvian linguist Jānis Endzelīns already 1928 (see Laumane 2013, 13)). Karulis based his conclusion on the text of ancient Latvian folk-songs, e.g., on the lines as “*ūriņā gara zāle, saldiņš jūras ūdentiņš*” (‘in the sea [grows] a long grass, sweet [or: fresh] is the sea-water’). Another nuance of the ancient meaning of the word *jūra* could have been ‘a floodwater; a floodwater-covered meadow’, cf. “*Šķērsām jūru sienu pļāvu*” (‘across the sea I mowed the hay [= the grass, which will become the hay]’) (Karulis 1992 I, 363). However, another possibility to be taken into account is that of a metaphorical content of the last quoted line and other similar lines. The metaphorical use of the Latv. *jūra* first of all is connected to the meaning ‘big amount’, cf., e.g., *ļaužu jūra* (lit. ‘sea of people’), *darbu jūra* (lit. ‘sea of work (to do)’), *ziedu jūra* (lit. ‘sea of blossoms’) or the mentioned from Laumane *piens kā jūra* ‘milk [so much] as the sea’ Laumane 2013, 17). The same kind of metaphoric use of the word meaning ‘a sea’ is not alien to other languages, too. Still the metaphorical and poetical potencies of the word *jūra* are manifold; *jūra* is sometimes an enemy: “*Jūra, jūra, Gauja, Gauja, Tu ar mani ienaidā: Jūrā slīka trīs bāliņi, Gaujā miežu arājiņš*” (‘Sea, sea, [the river] Gauja, Gauja, You are in enmity to me: In the sea three my brothers drowned, In the Gauja the ploughman of barley [= the husband]’); however, more often the sea is a friend and the feeder: “*Jūriņ, mana māmuliņa, Daudz tu man labu dari: Tu man maizes devējiņa, Tu man' mīļi vzināji*” (‘Sea, my mummy, You do plenty of good to me: You give bread to me, You take me kindly out for a drive’) (the folk-songs from: <http://valoda.ailab.lv/latval/vispareji/tautasdz/jura.htm>).

The first one of the two just quoted folk-songs comes to mind taking notice of one specific name for a part of the sea by Liepāja, where some people have drowned: *Nāves jūra* (lit. ‘The Sea of the Death’; incidentally a fully identical place name is used in Latvian for the widely known salt lake in Israel *Dead Sea*). The generic *jūra* is used to name other parts of the sea and fishing-places on the sea, too, e.g., *Dundagas jūra* (cf., *Dundaga* – a settlement and civil parish), *Salacjūra* (cf., *Salaca* – a river), *Akmeņraga jūra* (cf., *Akmeņrags* – a cape), *Strazdu jūra* (cf., *Strazdi* – a farmstead), *Suitu jūra* (cf., *suiti* – a small Latvian ethnic group, catholic inhabitants of the civil parishes Jūrkalne and Alsunga) (Laumane 1996, 165 – 166).

As you can see we have a lot of seas there in Latvia; however, do we have *Baltijas jūra* (‘Baltic Sea’), too? The parts of, what is now the Baltic Sea, ancient Latvians at first needed to differ one from another were the wide sea and the gulf (nowadays Gulf of Riga); they used the toponyms *Dižā jūra* or *Lielā jūra* (‘Big Sea’) for the wide sea and *Mazā jūra* (‘Small Sea’) for the gulf. These names still are used in the seashore Latvian dialects. However, there was not and mostly, in the everyday speech, still is not a need to differ Baltic Sea from other seas, because other seas don’t have any importance for Latvians in their everyday life. Of course, there are international contexts including the mentioning of *Baltijas jūra*, and there are members of very mobile social groups (sailors, tourists, and other), who use to speak about *Baltijas jūra* as one of many different seas, however, a typical Latvian will mention only *jūra*, when speaking about the Baltic Sea in some everyday context. Of course, that is nothing special, the analogical way of speaking about the nearest sea we will probably notice in all languages and countries bordering on one single sea. As a result the respective proper name in Latvian, *Baltijas jūra*, is not a name of the local origin, it is most probably as a name loaned from Russian in 19th century, although one of the hypothesis about the origin of this name connects it to the adjectives Lith. *baltas*, *Latv. balts* ‘white’ as well as to the Lithuanian common noun of the same root *bala* ‘a swamp’. Sometimes, especially in poetry, Latvians use to say *Baltā jūra* (lit. ‘The White Sea’) for *Baltijas jūra*, although we know the real *Baltā jūra* is located on the northwest coast of Russia.

Another generic – mare – was used in Baltic languages to name almost closed gulfs, and Finnish *meri* ‘sea’ is probably a loanword based on this Baltic *mare* (SSA II, 160);

in its turn the Latv. *mare* ‘a (almost closed) gulf’ (-*māre* in the place name *Tosmāre*), Lith. *mārė* ‘a sea; a gulf’ are words akin to Latin *mare*, German *Meer*, Russian *море* a.s.o. (Karulis 1992 I, 557).

What to the sea names and politics Latvian situation from the point of view of toponymical conflicts nowadays is rather to some extent paradoxical. Latvia has political problems connected to the Baltic Sea, which do not have toponymical consequences, and we have some toponymical disagreements, however these disagreements do not have political consequences. What to the real, pragmatic conflicts, one of the biggest problems is created by *Būtingē* oil terminal in the Lithuanian part of the Baltic. This terminal is located only few kilometers from the Lithuanian sea-border to Latvia (incidentally this region have belonged to Latvia or, more precisely, to the then Courland governorate before WWI). The terminal is controversial because of a fear of oil spills dangerous both for the Lithuanian as well as for the Latvian ecology. The biggest oil spill took place here two years after the construction of the terminal was completed, in November 2001, when 60 tons of oil flowed into Baltic Sea and spoiled the Latvian seashore in southern Courland. Fortunately in the last years there don't have been big oil spills, and probably that is, why we have to some extent forgot the danger, and why the *Būtingē* oil terminal is not more one of the hottest items among the political news.

The most illustrious toponymical disagreement connected to the Baltic Sea we have probably between Latvians and Estonians. That is not a disagreement about the name of the sea itself: for Latvians it is *Baltijas jūra*, for Estonians *Läänemeri* ‘West Sea’, and, e.g. for Finns *Itämeri* ‘East Sea’, however, we don't have had big difficulties to understand what is what. A bit more of confusion is connected to the name of Gulf of Riga: Latvian *Rīgas jūras līcis*, Estonian *Liivi laht* (lit. ‘Gulf of Livonia’). As for most of Latvians Gulf of Riga seems to be something like an inner water, they don't ever suspect, that a quite big northern part of the gulf, what is from the point of view of geographers the same Gulf of Riga, stretches along the seashore of south Estonia and naturally belongs to Estonia. Thus the existence of a specific Estonian name *Liivi laht* for this gulf is not such a surprising naming habit as it seems to some relatively ignorant Latvian, and this naming difference between Latvians and Estonians, just as some

specific Latvian names for Estonian islands (e.g., Est. *Ruhnu*, Latv. *Roņu sala*; Est. *Kihnu*, Latv. former *Ķīļu sala* (however nowadays Latvians mostly use the Estonian name for this island)), don't give a reason for real conflicts between Latvians and Estonians.

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