Lith. *šėškas* 'polecat', Fi. *portimo* 'stoat', Eng. *mink*, and other terms for mustelids around the Baltic Sea

Adam Hyllested
University of Copenhagen

Strikingly many terms for mustelids (weasel, stoat/ermine, polecat, ferret, mink, marten, otter, sable, wolverine, badger etc.) in Baltic, Balto-Fennic and Germanic languages have no secure etymologies. It is likely that this situation reflects early language contacts connected to fur trade along the coasts of the Baltic Sea from the Roman Ages onwards.

Lith. *šėškas*, Latv. *sesks* 'polecat, ferret' has been compared to Vedic *káśa-*, *káśīkā*, but the latter is now translated as 'hedgehog' rather than 'mongoose', and the irregular correspondence Lith. *š-* ~ Indo-Iranian and/or Slavic **k-* is at best very rare. Already Kalima (1936) suggested that the Baltic word had been borrowed from Early Proto-Fennic **šäškä* (> Fi. dial. *häähkä*, Olon. *heähku*, Lude *heähkäine* 'mink', Veps *hähk* 'otter'), not the other way round. One might imagine Volgaic as an alternative source, cf. that the Mari cognate *šäškə*, *šaške* 'mink' is known to have been borrowed into neighbouring Turkic languages.

Fi. *portimo*, dial. *porttimo* 'ermine, stoat' and its cognates in Karelian, Lude and Veps have no accepted etymology. Previous proposals are unsatisfying (Koivulehto 1979: Derivative of Fi. *porras*, gen. *portaan* 'step; staircase etc.'; Liukkonen 1999: < Baltic ***sparteiva* 'swift animal'). That *-ti-* fails to yield **-si-* speaks for a Germanic rather than a Baltic origin, and since the distribution is confined to the Northern branch of Balto-Fennic, a somewhat recent origin in NW Germanic is likely. **portti-* would be the expected substitution of Late ME *forette*, MDu. *foret* 'ferret' < OF *fuiret* < Vulg.Lat. **furittus*, lit. 'little polecat', cf. Lat. *fūrō* 'polecat'.

The NW Germanic word *mink* 'European mink, *Mustela lutreola*' is of unkown origin. Since Lat. *mūstēla* and Gk. γαλέη both have the double meaning 'weasel' and 'burbot' (cf. Schaffner 2006), it seems reasonable to connect *mink* with Lith. *ménkė* 'burbot; cod', Sorbian *mjenk* 'burbot'. Since the mink is often designated by its wet habitat (Lith. *audìnė*, cf. Young 2001; Da. *flodilder*, Fi. *vesikko*) the recurrent element **min-* in Baltic river names comes to mind. However, Hung. has *meny-hal* 'burbot' vs. *meny-ét* 'weasel' (with folk-etymological association to *meny* 'daughter-in-law' due to ancient folk beliefs on the weasel as a 'young woman', cf. Witczak 2004) where at least the former is akin to Mari *men* 'burbot'. Volgaic languages were formerly spoken much further to the West, bordering areas inhabited by Baltic tribes.

References
Kalima, Jalo, 1936: *Itämerensuomalaisten kielten balttilaiset lainasanat*. Helsinki.
Koivulehto, Jorma, 1979: "Baltisches und Germanisches im Finnischen: die finn. Stämme auf *-rte-* und die finn. Sequenz *VrtV*". – E.F. Schiefer (ed.): *Explanationes et tractiones Fenno-Ugricae in honorem Hans Fromm*. München: 129-164.
Liukkonen, Kari, 1999. *Baltisches im Finnischen*. Helsinki.
Schaffner, Stefan, 2006: "Lateinisch *mustella*, *mūstēla* 'Wiesel; Quappe' und der Wortbildungstyp vedisch *aśvatará-*". – *International Journal of Diachronic Linguistics and Linguistic Reconstruction* 3: 1-50.
Witczak, Krzysztof Tomasz, 2004: "Old Prussian *moazo* 'mother's sister', *mosuco* 'weasel' and related words". – *Baltistica* 39 (1): 131-139.
Young, Steven, 2001: "East Baltic terms for 'wolverine' and 'mink'". – *Linguistica Baltica* 9: 163-167.