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## Karelian Sprachbund?

### Theoretical basis of the study of Russian/Baltic-Finnic contacts

This paper deals with the theoretical basis for studying Russian/Baltic-Finnic language contacts. The subject is approached from the viewpoint of linguistic interference between Karelian and the North Russian dialects, and the main emphasis is on syntactic evidence. The aim of the paper is twofold: (i) to show that the notions of *substratum* and *superstratum*, which have traditionally been used to explain contact-induced changes in these languages, may not be applicable to the description of the relationship between the north Russian dialects and Karelian, and (ii) to suggest that the Russian/Karelian syntactic parallelism could be explained, at least in some cases, in terms of adstratal convergence and universal features of contact languages.

#### 1. Introduction

Since the 19th century there has been considerable interest in the development of a theoretical framework for the study of Russian/Baltic-Finnic language contacts. Discussion about the basis for such a framework was at its height during the first decades of this century, when it took the form of a lively argument over the hypothesis of Proto-Slavic/Proto-Finnic contacts. A theoretical framework was developed, for

the most part, at a phonetic-phonological level. (For details, see e. g. Plöger 1973: 26–33.) Eventually, general agreement was reached that the beginning of the contacts dated from the period between the 6th and 9th century AD, and those who had supported the claim that the oldest contacts had been between Russian and the Baltic-Finnic languages retired victorious from the field of battle. After this the debate gradually died down, and for several decades researchers on Russian/Baltic-Finnic language contacts concentrated on practical problems arising from the etymological study of loan-words.

During the last couple of decades there have been numerous studies of the contacts between Russian and the Baltic-Finnic languages spoken in the ex-USSR. Several new trends have emerged and the time has come for theoretical revision. On the one hand, current themes and orientations (morphological, syntactic and semantic interference, the problems of bilingualism, and sociolinguistic approaches) have provided an opportunity for new methodological and theoretical approaches (for a more detailed discussion, see Sarhimaa 1990 and 1991). On the other hand, modern scholars cannot ignore certain facts. In the first place, the age of perestroika has made it easier for Soviet and foreign scholars to study historical events and sociological and political processes in the USSR, so that there is now much more detailed extralinguistic information available to students of linguistic processes in the so-called national languages than ever before. Secondly, in the late 1980s interest in the theoretical study of language contacts revived all over the world, and after quarter of a century of “weinreichian” paradigms new theoretical foundations are developing within the general theory of contact linguistics (for a detailed discussion of this development, see Filppula 1990a and 1991).

In this paper the theoretical basis for studying Russian/Baltic-Finnic language contacts is approached from the viewpoint

of linguistic interference between Karelian and the North Russian dialects. The discussion will focus on the central notions by which contact-induced changes in these languages have been hitherto explained. The main aim of the paper is to show that some of the crucial linguistic premises traditionally relied on may be over-simple and may not even be supported by real language corpora. Since the paper is based on a study of how Karelian impersonal sentences have developed during some 1500 years of intensive Russian influence, the main emphasis is on syntactic evidence.

## 2. Superstratum/substratum: the traditional explanation

The central concepts that have been used in explaining the nature of the contacts between Russian and the Baltic-Finnic languages, including Karelian, are *substratum* and *superstratum*. The supposed Baltic-Finnic interference in Russian, especially in the northern Russian dialects, is generally characterized as the influence of the Baltic-Finnic substratum, whereas possible Russian interference in the Eastern Baltic-Finnic languages is referred to, at least implicitly, as the influence of a superstratum. However, when this is analyzed with respect to the actual linguistic processes in the real languages that are in contact, and more especially, when the concrete results of the contacts are taken into account, several problems arise.

One of the problems is a terminological one concerned with the definition of the terms 'substratum' and 'superstratum'. The notion 'substratum' is most commonly used to refer to a language which has already died out: a substratum is traditionally defined (i) as a language that has been lost as a consequence of language shift, or (ii) as a set of forms of a lost language which have been

retained in an adopted language, which have become a natural part of that prevailing language so that they are used by all or most of the (monolingual) native speakers (Veenker 1967: 13; Hakulinen & Ojanen 1976: 136; Lehiste 1988: 60; see also Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 37–38). As far as northwestern Russia is concerned, however, language shift has occurred among very few Finno-Ugric tribes (the Merya, the Muroms; cf. e. g. Collinder 1960: 22) and small groups of the ancestors of the Karelians and Vepsians. Given that there have been intensive contacts between Russian and the living eastern Baltic-Finnic languages for approximately 1500 years, it seems odd that the distinctive features of the North Russian dialects should be explained solely on a substratal basis in the traditional sense of the term.

In recent studies of contact linguistics, the notions of substratum and superstratum are often used to describe the relationship between two (or more) neighbouring languages where both languages have been maintained. The definition of 'substratum' has been extended to cover the socially subordinated language, whereas 'superstratum' is used to refer to the language which is commonly considered to be the prestige code of the society (Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 16, 44). In a contact situation in which one of the languages is subordinated to the other, the direction of influence is predominantly from the prestige language to the subordinated language. Interference from the low-prestige code to the dominant one is very limited, and is most likely restricted to a random selection of words or idioms.

In spite of these revisions it can be argued that the terms substratum and superstratum are not well-suited for describing the relationship between the north Russian dialects and Karelian. In the first place, we do not know enough yet about socio-linguistic conditions in northwestern Russia during the past to support the claim that Karelian has always been in a subordinated

position or that Russian has had generally acknowledged prestige since the very beginning of the contacts. Moreover, it is obvious that Karelian must have retained a strong identity of its own throughout the centuries, since it has remained alive in spite of the intensive contacts between the Karelians and the Russians. Secondly, there is no doubt that the north Russian dialects contain a considerable number of grammatical features of Karelian and Vepsian origin, which testify to bilateral interference. So we can conclude that alternative explanations for Russian/Karelian parallelism should also be looked for.

### 3. Alternative explanations

In the following I suggest two alternative approaches to explaining Russian/Karelian linguistic interference, viz adstratal convergence and universal features in the development of contact languages. The discussion will proceed within a general framework of so-called *necessive sentences*, i.e. impersonal constructions expressing the necessity of performing an action named by an infinitive (for example, Kar. *hyväll'ä načal'nikalla pid'äy kai t'ied'eä* [N-Adess + V-3sg + N-Nom + Inf] lit. 'to a good boss must everything know'; 'a good boss has to know everything').

#### 3.1 Necessive sentences: an indication of Russian/Karelian contacts

Figure 1 (p. 214) illustrates the situation in which the basic types of North Russian and Karelian *necessive sentences* are incorporated into their systemic, linguistic framework, i. e. they are presented

Figure 1. The systems of necessary sentences in Finnish, Karelian, North Russian and Standard Russian

Finnish	Karelian	North Russian	Standard Russian
1. <i>pitää laulaa</i> '[one] must sing' 2. <i>miehen pitää tehdä kaikkea</i> 'a man must do everything'	1. <i>pid'äy pajattoo</i> '[one] must sing' 2. <i>kaikki pid'äy mužikat rootoo</i> 'men must do everything'	1. <i>nado idti</i> '[one] must go' 2. <i>nado pečka topit'</i> '[one] must warm the oven'	1. <i>nado idti</i> '[one] must go' 2. <i>nado pečku topit'</i> '[one] must warm the oven'
3a) <i>*nyt lähtää</i> lit. 'now to go'; '[one] must go' 3b) <i>*lämmittää sauna</i> lit. 'to warm the sauna'; '[one] must warm the sauna'	3a) <i>nygöi l'ähtiä</i> lit. 'now to go'; '[one] must go' 3b) <i>kyl'ly l'ämmit'riä</i> lit. 'to warm the sauna'; '[one] must warm the sauna'	3a) <i>mne idti</i> lit. 'to me to go'; 'I must go' 3b) <i>pečka topit'</i> lit. 'to warm the oven'; '[one] must warm the oven'	3a) <i>mne idti</i> lit. 'to me to go'; 'I must go' 3b) <i>pečku topit'</i> lit. 'to warm the oven'; '[one] must warm the oven'
4. <i>*karjalan kieli pitää ehdottomasti</i> lit. 'the Karelian language must absolutely'; 'the Karelian language must absolutely be preserved (etc.)'	4. <i>karjalan kieli pid'äy obizatel'no</i> lit. 'the Karelian language must absolutely'; 'the Karelian language must absolutely be preserved (etc.)'	4. <i>nado igolka</i> lit. 'must a needle'; '[one] must get (etc.) a needle'	4. <i>*nado igolka</i> lit. 'must a needle'; '[one] must get (etc.) a needle'

here as part of a specific syntactic subsystem. The systems of Standard Russian and Finnish are given for comparison.

When the North Russian subsystem is compared with the subsystem in Karelian, complete correspondence is found. This correspondence becomes even more striking when the North Russian/Karelian parallels are compared to Finnish, on the one hand, and to the Standard Russian system, on the other. The figure shows that only two of the four constructions which are typical of both Karelian and the North Russian dialects have a counterpart in Finnish. Furthermore, one of these constructions does not even exist in Standard Russian. In other words, when examined synchronically, the necessary constructions of Karelian and the North Russian dialects form a union, whereas Finnish and Standard Russian remain partly outside of this alliance.

Let us now try to explain the striking parallelism between the Karelian and North Russian systems. Since we know that these languages have been in intensive contact for about 1500 years, it is most probable that the parallelism is somehow due to cross-linguistic interference. In practice, it is not always easy to show the direction of the influence, because most of the changes in North Russian and Karelian necessities occurred in the distant past, so defining the direction and exact nature of the interference requires thorough analyses of the frequency, areal distribution and diachronic development of the constructions.

The arrows in Fig. 1 express the most probable direction of the influence according to my current knowledge. In this paper, however, my intention is not to concentrate on any specific change in either of the languages but to discuss the parallelism on a more general level. Therefore, I shall content myself here with pointing out that the development of these constructions has led to complete structural isomorphism of the Karelian and North Russian necessary systems.

### 3.2 Adstrata, convergence, Karelian Sprachbund

Structural isomorphism is a very common result of the long-standing, peaceful coexistence and intensive, bilateral interference of two (or more) languages. In a contact situation in which both languages are equally influenced by the other, the languages in contact are usually referred to by the term *adstratum* and the linguistic nature of the contact by the concept of *adstratal relationship*.

In *adstratal* conditions the development of the languages is at least to some extent stimulated by multidimensional processes of *convergence*, i.e. although the languages are not typologically similar or genetically related they gradually develop and become almost identical to each other. As a result of the convergence processes, the languages finally form a *Sprachbund*, i.e. an alliance of neighbouring languages sharing a notable number of structural features; a classic example of the results of such a development is the so-called *Balkan Sprachbund* (see e.g. Hock 1986: 494–498).

The notion *Sprachbund* has been mainly used to refer to large linguistic alliances such as the *Balkan Sprachbund* (Bulgarian, Macedonian, the southeastern dialects of Serbocroatian, Albanian, Modern Greek, and Romanian), and the *Baltic Sea Sprachbund*, which includes Swedish, Norwegian, most Danish dialects, some north German dialects, North Kashubian, Lithuanian, Latvian, Livonian, and Estonian (Lehiste 1988: 61–75). It is, however, clear that in addition to these major *Sprachbunds* there are also smaller alliances, a particularly good example of which is that between Karelian and the north Russian dialects, given that a considerable number of random grammatical similarities have been revealed between them. We can call this the *Karelian Sprachbund*, which may also include Ingrian and certain eastern Finnish dialects (including those spoken in Ingria in the ex-USSR, in Kainuu and in Finnish North and South Karelia).



### 3.3 Universal features of contact languages

Let us now look again at Fig. 1 and concentrate on the features that changed during the coexistence of the Karelian Sprachbund languages. Firstly, Fig. 1 shows that the use of the nominative is more varied in North Russian dialects than in Standard Russian (cf. N-Russ. sentences 2, 3 and 4 with their Standard Russian counterparts). It is also more varied in Karelian than in Finnish (cf. Kar. sentence 4, and the Finnish translation). Secondly, in Karelian we can also see a tendency towards an overgeneralized use of the infinitive (cf. Kar. sentences 3a and 3b). This is probably explained by the influence of the corresponding Russian constructions (cf. the N-Russ. and Russ. counterparts). However, since my intention in the following section is to introduce a new point of view into the study of contacts between Russian and the (Eastern) Baltic-Finnic languages, I shall refer to both of the tendencies discussed above as *inflectional simplification*.

Inflectional simplification is highly characteristic of so-called contact languages (see, e.g. Holm 1989; Lindgren 1974; Hirvonen, forthcoming). Identical processes can also be seen in interlanguages and linguistic varieties constantly used as the means of inter-group communication between two communities with different native tongues. This is a situation which is rather common in Karelian villages occupied by Soviet citizens of Karelian, Ukrainian, Belorussian or Mordvin origin using Russian as their lingua franca. Consequently, it is possible that inflectional simplification is one of the universal features of the development of any language under the circumstances of language contact.

It is interesting to note that the idea of universal features of languages in contact opens up new dimensions for the whole field of research on language contacts by offering important connections with general linguistics, since simplification processes and their results have been one of the central preoccupations in

studies of linguistic universals. On the one hand, the latter makes good use of the information obtained from concrete case studies of so-called special codes (aphatic language, child language, contact languages). On the other hand, theoretical generalizations made by the universalists may prove extremely useful for the study of contacts between particular languages; the universalist approach has been successfully applied, for instance, to the investigation of Hiberno-English (for details, see Filppula 1990b).

In my view, the universal features of contact languages may form a particularly valid basis for the investigation of Russian/Baltic-Finnic language contacts. Clearly, the Karelian Sprachbund is only one, very typical case among the wide range of the language contact situations all over the world. Therefore, when trying to understand and explain its development through the ages, one should bear in mind that despite the countless number of languages and linguistic varieties in the world there may be some specific features of the human language capacity that neither know nor admit any national, ideological or cultural boundaries set by human beings.

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