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Grammar, context and diachrony: bridging the gap between impossible and self-evident?

"Mancher Forscher, der sich auf der Höhe des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts fühlt, lächelt wohl vornehm über den Streit der mittelalterlichen Nominalisten und Realisten und begreift nicht, wie man hat dazu kommen können, die Abstraktionen des menschlichen Verstandes für realiter existierende Dinge zu erklären. Aber die unbewussten Realisten sind bei uns noch lange nicht ausgestorben, nicht einmal unter den Naturforschern." (Paul 1960 [1920]: 11)

Introduction

A person of my age, I regret to say, will already be forgiven if she starts her talk with reminiscences of youth. My student days in Helsinki in the 1980s were the last years of what Esa Itkonen (1999) called „the myth of the great rupture in Finnish linguistics”. The implicit or explicit message of many lectures we heard seemed to be that the Neogrammarians, traditional dialectologists and historical linguists, were Bad Guys guilty of such heinous crimes as „atomism”, „unscientificness”, „priorising *Lautgeschichte*¹ while neglecting syntax”, „believing in the copious, reliable and well-organised data that speaks for itself instead of getting covered with the cobweb of unnecessary theories and notions” (in the notorious wording of Paavo Ravila [1967: 35] that became something of an anathema) and „conflating synchrony and diachrony”, and that although the Good Guys had brought „linguistic science” to us from America in the 1960s, some Bad Guys were still holding the last fortress of „Fennistics” – the latter was understood as a synonym for anything unscientific and reactionary. This water-glass storm, already extensively analysed by Määttä in his in-depth study of the history of Fennistic morphology (1994), splashed over to student circles as well and clearly strained the personal relations in and between the Departments of Finnish and General Linguistics in Helsinki.

¹ Illustratively enough, this expression seems to lack an exact equivalent in English – *sound history* is hardly used and „historical phonology” is anachronistic, as *phonology* itself represents a much more recent theoretical framework.

Meanwhile, my own spiritual home, the Department of Finno-Ugrian Studies, seemed to be untouched by these controversies. What we saw was neither rupture nor revolution in linguistics but a steady accumulation of new methods and insights. We learnt to operate with Neogrammarian concepts like „sound law” and „analogy” in joyful syncretism with latter-day, Structuralist concepts like „phoneme” or „markedness”, and although the distinction between synchrony and diachrony was self-evident to us (or to our teachers at least), it was fully legitimate (or, in fact, desirable) to use historical explanations when describing present states-of-affairs. Early on, we were informed of the interesting fact that the deep structures of generative phonology were strangely similar to the traditional Neogrammarian proto-language reconstructions, as well as of the obvious conclusion that language is something pan-chronic, a product of diachronic developments as well as a composition of synchronic constraints. In our haven of pluralism, we could motivate the changes in vowel system with system symmetry and things like that, while sneering at a visiting student’s generativist views: he criticised Erkki Itkonen’s ideas of shibilants occasionally labialising the neighbouring vowels in Mari vowel history, because in his bible, *The Sound Pattern of English*, the /sh/ sound did not have the feature [+labial]. We, of course, knew that labial coarticulation of sibilants was something quite normal, as well as the occasional (note!) influence of phonetic factors on phonology.

With these reminiscences, I wanted to illustrate the theoretical background of somebody whose main linguistic interests lie within the traditional historical linguistics, largely – although by far not exclusively – based on the work of the great Neogrammarians. Our point of view was completely different from that of many other linguists, and, as I hope to be able to show in what follows, the keywords here are diachrony and context.

The exclusion of context and diachrony

As anybody dealing with historical linguistics knows, the problem with all autonomous and/or minimalist descriptions of grammar is a general inability to account for the very real fact of language change. Explanation in a self-contained model of grammar must be based on either grammar-internal factors such as economy or symmetry, or underlying factors of a linguistic character such as a specific, genetically conditioned language module in the speaker’s mind. Whether formal or functional, all these are problematic for the notion of language change: If a grammar is what it is because this is the optimal way of structuring this particular grammar and making it function, why should this optimal structure ever change? Or if a grammar is what it is because this is how the genetically constrained universal grammar is realised in this case, why

should it ever be realised in any other way? If changes in grammar are triggered by different input forms, how did these different input forms arise? How do innovations come into being and why are they adopted? These problems and controversies have brought forward a host of linguistic-philosophical studies (a good survey of recent research trends is Hickey (ed.) 2003), but the core of the problem seems to remain, connected as it is with the basic attitudes represented by different linguistic approaches.

For structuralist and generativist frameworks, language change is basically uninteresting. In the often-quoted words of Paul Postal (*Aspects of phonological theory* 1968, cited in Newmeyer 2003: 20), „there is no more reason for languages to change than there is for automobiles to add fins one year and remove them the next, for jackets to have three buttons one year and two the next, etc.". That is, there may well be some reasons but these reasons (i) cannot be described or explained within the model of grammar, (ii) do not even have to be explained, as they are as irrelevant for the functioning of language as fins are for the function of a car, i.e. getting from place A to place B or the number of buttons is for the function of a jacket, i.e. keeping you warm. What a linguist like Paul Postal is interested in, according to this analogy, is the function of language as a vehicle, a means of transportation. To use the traditional conduit metaphor, grammar is a way of packing and unpacking information; the content of the package, the historical reasons for sending the package and the consequences of receiving it fall outside the scope of linguistics.

The only way to deal with language change in many theoretical models of grammar has been to place the locus of change somewhere outside the real object of linguistic study: in the realm of performance, language use or language acquisition. The irreconcilability of language change with minimalist grammar is already shown by the popularity of the so-called „child-based model" of language change. In this model, change is localised in the acquisition of grammar in early childhood, that is: grammar can only change between generations, as the new generation acquires a version slightly different from that of their parents. The child-based model of language change is clearly and patently false, as argued by Croft (2000: 44–53): none of its empirical predictions holds true. Deviations in child language are different from typical attested language changes, they are not transmitted to other speakers (young children do not initiate or introduce innovations in speaker communities) nor do they survive to reach the following generations (peculiarities of child language are lost long before the speakers themselves come to child-bearing age). Yet, the child-based model of language change is still alive and continues to be referred to as the standard theory within the minimalist framework (as in Lightfoot 1999).

The child-based model of language change entails some further problems

that have surfaced in a number of debates, the most relevant of which in our perspective could be the discussion on the gradual vs. abrupt character of language change (in the tradition of Fennistics and Finnish linguistics, an extremely valuable contribution was Terho Itkonen [1970]). The generativist or, indeed, the structural framework practically requires language change to be abrupt; however, as far as there is any evidence, it seems to be evidence to the contrary (cf. Croft *op.cit.* 49–50). An interconnected question concerns the nature of variation, which a minimalist framework can only explain in terms of multiple, parallel grammars. In practice, this would lead to postulating an almost infinite number of grammars for any speaker.

The point I would like to make here is that diachrony and context are excluded from the description of grammar on the same or very similar grounds. From the point of view of autonomous linguistics, both diachrony and extralinguistic factors are outside the defined object of study, the „language machine” in the speaker’s brain, as this language machine has no access to the past or to the future and no direct access to the outside world, except through its own strict mechanisms connected with human cognition. Both context and diachrony, thus, are either uninteresting or secondary, facts that merit discussion only after the main explanandum, the I-language grammar, has been dealt with.

The relationship of context and diachrony

Looking at traditional comparative-historical linguistics, we see the situation in a completely different light. Historical linguistics has numerous contacts with language-external and extralinguistic factors, in all times and on all levels of explanation.

To start from the great Neogrammarians: for them linguistics was a science dealing with (products of) human behaviour, a sub-branch of psychology. It was all in the individual human mind, but no specific language module was defined, the mechanisms of language and language change were of a more general kind, such as association (cf. e.g. Paul 1960 [1920]: 24–26). This contact with extralinguistic phenomena also allowed for a less discrete, more „analogical” and „gradual” view of language change: as nothing stipulated that everything linguistic should be described in terms of discrete categories, the observably gradual character of language change presented no methodological problems.

In traditional historical linguistics, the use of extralinguistic factors in explanation was nothing illegitimate, on the contrary. Classical examples are the motivation of irregular sound change with affectivity, descriptivity or child language. Every Finno-Ugrist knows that taboo words or emotionally charged words – words for something dreaded, something disgusting or something with supernatural connections – may behave differently; it is enough to look up the

words for ‘lizard’ or ‘flea’ in an etymological dictionary like UEW or SKES. Descriptive words, now the great attractor of the recent etymological debate in Finland (cf. Koponen 1998, Koivulehto 2001), are defined – in a somewhat circular manner – as words typically displaying irregular sound developments. And – to return to the reminiscences of my student years – already our first traditional *Lautgeschichte* lectures on the minor Finnic languages, beginning as they did with N1. Consonants, 1.1 Stops, 1.1.1 Word-initial stops, typically explained the irregular voiced stops in words like Vepsian *but’k* ‘tube, pipe, umbelliferous plant’ or *bol* ‘lingonberry’ (cf. Fi. *putki, puola*) by stating that umbelliferous plants and lingonberries are „affective”, as children are particularly interested in them.²

Even ethnocultural factors could sometimes be referred to. True, the classical horror examples of naïve and racist linguistic relativism – jungle peoples speak jungle languages, primitive peoples speak primitive languages – are fortunately almost completely lacking in Uralistic tradition, as the underlying motivation was not to show the differences between „savages” and „us” but, on the contrary, to find the common historical core in all Uralic languages, regardless of how „civilised” the speakers were. Nevertheless, one can sometimes find explanations operating with the mentality of speakers. A de luxe example is Paavo Ravila’s explanation (albeit tentative and acknowledged as insufficient!) for the fortition of intervocalic nasals in North Sámi. In North Sámi, original intervocalic nasals are (in the strong grade) preceded by a homorganic stop in words like *Sápmi* (‘Sámi-land’), *jietna* ‘voice’ or *jiékŋa* ‘ice’ (cf. Fi. *Häme, ääni*, Early Proto Finnic **jäŋe*). According to Ravila, this strengthening of articulation could be connected (although a direct causal connection is explicitly denied) with the „Fjell Lapps” more energetic national mentality and way of living, as opposed to other Sámi peoples with less prestige, less wealth and a less mobile way of living.

„When the velum closes the nasal tract, it is actively operating. [...] We might now feel tempted to compare the psychological qualities of Western and Eastern Lapps. Maybe there is a psychological solution, as no physiological one could be found. As reindeer breeders and men [!] of the fjells, the Western Lapps were noticeably more energetic and active than the Eastern Lapps. We must also note in this respect the positive [!] impact of the close contact with the Scandinavs. The general resoluteness of behaviour is of course reflected in speech activities as well. [...] It is extremely interesting to note in this connection that in certain cities, among the lower classes living in sloth and laziness, a nasal way of speaking is downright fashionable. [...] Resoluteness

² „Marjojen nimet *bol* ja *garbol* samoin kuin kasvinnimi *but’k* ovat kuuluneet lastenkieleen, jossa soinnillinen ääntämys on voinut saada alkunsa [...]”. (Turunen 1976: 14.)

and laziness are, thus, merely general prerequisites, under which certain sound changes are possible, perhaps even frequent, but they do not constitute operative, necessary causes.”³

Actually, the prothetic stop is paralleled by other fortition phenomena such as the preaspiration of stops and the fortition of *j* to *d'* in the strong grade (Korhonen 1981:167), and its development is certainly connected with the history of gradation, which in (North) Sámi is typically realised as fortition of strong-grade consonants.

In addition to psychological and ethnocultural factors, an important part of traditional historical Uralistics that is practically lacking and methodologically problematic in minimalist descriptions of grammar is the role of language contact. Since most Uralic languages are minority languages, the speakers of which have been bilingual to some extent perhaps for centuries already, and since the contacts with well-investigated Indo-European languages (above all, the reflexes of different loanword strata) provide important evidence of diachronic developments in Uralic, language contact has become an explanatory model of overwhelming importance. In historical-comparative Uralistics and in Fennistics in particular, there is a strong tradition of explaining almost anything as contact-induced, while language itself is seen as a very conservative thing that will hardly change at all if left in peace. According to this view, it was contacts with Baltic and Germanic speakers that separated Proto-Finnic from Proto-Sámic, contacts with Russians separated Vepsian and, partly, Karelian from Finnish, and even certain phenomena in Finnish dialects can be explained with the vicinity of Swedish-speaking areas and the presence of bilingual speakers – even if there is no direct Swedish model.⁴ This results in what could be called *la serva padrona* pattern (Laakso 2002b): what is methodologically ancillary – from the point of view of the comparative method – becomes the most interesting and most fruitful part of research. In autonomous grammar tradition, on the other hand, the idealised speaker is a member of a

³ „Kun kitapurje sulkee nenävälän, se on aktiivisesti toiminnassa. [...] Voisimme tuntea nyt houkutusta verrata länsi- ja itälappalaisia psyykkisiltä ominaisuuksilta toisiinsa. Ehkäpä psyykkiset seikat antavat ratkaisun, kun fyysiset eivät sitä voineet. Poronhoitajina ja tunturien miehinä [!] länsilappalaiset olivat tuntuvasti tarmokkaampia ja aktiivisempia kuin itälappalaiset. Huomattava on myös tässä suhteessa edullisesti vaikuttanut läheinen kosketus skandinaaveihin. Käytöksen yleinen tarmokkuus kuvastuu tietysti myös puhetoiminnassa. [...] On perin mielenkiintoista tässä yhteydessä todeta, että eräissä suurkaupungeissa sellaisten alempien yhteiskuntaluokkien keskuudessa, jotka elävät velttoudessa ja laiskuudessa, honottaminen on suorastaan muotiasia. [...] Tarmokkuus ja laiskuus ovat siis vain yleisiä edellytyksiä, joiden vallitessa eräänlaiset äänne muutokset ovat mahdollisia, kenties yleisiäkin, mutta liikkeelle panevia, vaikuttavia syitä ne eivät ole.” (Ravila 1946: 33–34; reprinted in the 2nd edition 1961.)

⁴ Leskinen (1988: 406–407) explains the strange retention of *t* instead of the expected *s* before *i* in Southern Ostrobothnian past tense forms with the indirect influence of Swedish.

homogeneous monolingual speaker community, monolingualism is the normal case (in early childhood, the parameters are set according to the rules of one certain language) and bilingualism, if considered at all, becomes an anomaly, something abnormal – and, thus, basically uninteresting.

The last connection between traditional historical linguistics and context is a philosophical one and concerns the motives of research as a whole. The dominant tradition in 20th-century linguistics presented itself as „linguistic science”: linguistics was about language, as a system in its own right, for the sake of pure knowledge about language only, without any goals connected directly with history, culture, ethnicity or society. In subdisciplines such as Uralistics or Fennistics, this tradition clashed with an older one that saw research into these languages as a means of finding out things about the national past, constructing and maintaining the national identity. We could, once again, refer to M. A. Castrén’s famous words: for him writing Samoyed grammars was not the ultimate goal but just the necessary way of proving that the Finns were not an isolated exotic group but related with a considerable part of mankind. Or we could quote the words of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences,⁵ where supporting Uralistic research is seen as compensation for the lack of overseas colonies and polar expeditions, for the greater glory of the motherland.

This „nationalist” motivation of research could seem hopelessly outdated in the decades after World War II, but now the situation is different: the autonomous ideals of science (linguistics) are challenged by new approaches stressing the role of ethnocultural or gender identity, ecology etc. and questioning the traditional ideas of objectivity in science. Questioning the objectivity of Western science does not mean that we have to reject the laws of physics as misogynous and phallocratic constructions or substitute school medicine with shamanistic healing. It does not mean that we should adopt a naïve linguistic relativism and accept wholesale the poetically impressive ideas of a „Uralic way of thinking” as expressed by the founding fathers of Ethnofuturism (cf. e.g. the idea that the ‘weakly developed subject’ in Uralic languages embodies a more ‘postmodern’ view of subjecthood or that Uralic-speaking philosophers would never have distinguished existence from being; Sallamaa 1999, 2001). It means simply acknowledging that all perspectives are partial and restricted and that science is never completely independent of its social and cultural backgrounds.

⁵ „Nekünk nincsenek tengereink, ’s tengeren tuli gyarmataink, mellyekre tudományos expeditiókat küldhessünk, ’s az egyetemes tudományosság körét tágíthassuk; nincs sem északi, sem déli földszarkunk, melly körül felfedezőinket utaztassuk, hogy bámulásra és tiszteletre bírjuk a népeket irántunk. Eredetünk s nyelvrokonaink azon sarok, melly körül tehetünk és csak mi tehetünk felfedezéseket, ’s ha mindent nem akarunk idegenektől várni – s várni siker nélkül – tennünk kell is.” (1842; Zsirai 1937: 522)

Feminist critics of science (see e.g. Keller & Longino [eds.] 1996) have pointed out that an androcentric bias may lead to prioritising descriptions and models that are based on rules, dominance and hierarchies, neglecting the role of holistic, intersystemic dependences and overemphasizing objectifiability, i.e. the detachment of the observer from the object observed. The aim of this critique is to show that autonomous science – including autonomous linguistics – is never really autonomous: it has its ideological background as well and cannot be automatically considered more true than other linguistic approaches. This means that the connection between Uralic language studies and cultural, ideological or even political goals is not as self-evidently outdated as it may have seemed in the decades after World War II. Rather, new and solidly founded research in this area is urgently needed.

The exclusion of context in synchronic and diachronic linguistics

So far, it may seem that I have, in effect, presented traditional historical Uralistics as a Good Guy (as far as context-relatedness is concerned), the brave old sheriff confronted with the sly young desperado representing the autonomous or minimalist paradigms of linguistics. However, it is not so simple – traditional historical linguistics is in many ways a forerunner of autonomous linguistics.

The point of departure of the comparative method is actually autonomous par excellence. What really makes comparative reconstruction possible is the closedness of the systems analysed and postulated: the units of the system need not be discrete or describable in terms of binary oppositions, but their potential number must be finite or relatively small for the comparison to be effective. The smaller and the more closed (contextless) the systems, the easier it is to trace their changes. Consequently, the greatest achievements of the comparative method are to be found in historical phonology (together with etymology, which provides *Lautgeschichte* with appropriately labelled material and emerges itself as a kind of byproduct), not in syntax or semantics.

In the same way as the obsession for linear order and hierarchies that was characteristic for classical generativism led to a general prioritisation of syntax, the methodological predilection for small closed systems in comparative-historical linguistics accounts for the prioritisation of the subsystem where the method is most efficient, i.e. sound history, *Lautgeschichte*. Both theoretical approaches thus run the risk of confusing truth with method and digging gold in their own backyard rather than in Lapland or Alaska – although the practitioners of *Lautgeschichte* were luckier in having, through etymology, what Rapola

(1966: 5) later called „access to an all-embracing view on the life of language”.⁶

A few minutes ago, I credited traditional historical linguistics with paying due attention to language contacts and multilingualism. Unfortunately, this is not the whole truth. The truth is that from the methodological point of view, the role of language contacts in historical linguistics has always been an ancillary one: language contacts are used as the last resort when all else – in the internal language history – fails. Everything is, by default, inherited unless proven as contact-induced, and even more: if there is a somewhat feasible internal explanation, linguists very seldom try to find an external one. Multiple causation (cf. Laakso 2002a) fares even worse: it is taken into account only in a deadlock between competing internal and external explanations.

In etymology, this amounts to the well-known principle that a native etymology should be preferred to a loanword one, other things being equal. Now other things very seldom are equal. The recent debate in Finnish etymological research, to which I already referred, has shown that loanword etymologies can also be preferred for seemingly technical reasons; the most recent work of Jorma Koivulehto in particular (Koivulehto 1999) includes many examples of etymologies that seem – as one critic has put it (Helimski 1990: 30) – „exquisite and inventive rather than true”. What critics like this are aiming at is probably the gut feeling that the mechanisms of IE and Uralic historical phonology and the possibilities of sound substitutions are being over-exploited, while the psycho- and sociolinguistic motivation – why was this word, and this word in particular, borrowed, and why was its meaning changed? – has not received due attention. What we see, thus, is neglect of context again, reductionism in the guise of – methodologically flawless and sophisticated – traditional historical linguistics?

A further question that has not been sufficiently investigated yet concerns the ideological background of historical Uralistics. Alongside the important role of Indo-European contacts in the history of most Uralic languages, alongside the strong tradition of contact-induced explanations implying multilingualism, there was always the ideological heritage of romantic Nationalism. There are many examples of how in multinational states like 19th-century Hungary practical everyday multilingualism and the very pragmatic attitude towards it were substituted with a nationalist mother-tongue mystique: a person who was not born and bred in a Hungarian-speaking family, who did not acquire Hungarian

⁶ „Mitä äännehistorian asemasta kielentutkimuksessa nykyisin ajateltaneenkin, se oli silloin [1921] vallinneen käsityksen ja on edelleenkin henkilökohtaisen vakaumukseni mukaan kielitieteen kannattava runko, josta oli noustava yhä useammalle taholle levittäytyvään oksistoon. Ilman äännehistoriaa ei etymologiaa, ilman etymologiaa ei semantiikkaa, ilman semantiikkaa ei ovea kielen elämän kokonaishahmotukseen.”

as his first language with his mother's milk, would never be able to understand Hungarian poetry, the soul of the Hungarian nation, would never be a real Hungarian. As the nation-state ideology arose, monolingualism came to be perceived as the normal, maybe even desirable state. Bilingualism became an anomaly – which it continued to be in 20th-century linguistic tradition, although (at least seemingly) without the old ideological foundation.

If the 20th-century „scientific” naturalization of the monolingual language faculty (I-grammar) is a late natural child of 19th-century ideological biologization of language and ethnicity, did historical Uralistics (chronologically between these two) really escape this trap? At least the popularised version of comparative-historical Uralistics, that is, the popular myth of the common primeval home at the bend of the Volga, from where our ancestors travelled to the promised lands of Finland, Hungary etc., seems to operate with monolithic, homogeneous ethnic groups that exist in a vacuum, do not mix with other peoples and finally arrive in an uninhabited land. Of course, this storybook version is an extremely coarse simplification of our linguistic prehistory, as already 19th-century linguists certainly knew – but has it had any influence on Uralistic research? Has this simplified nationalist picture contributed to a neglect of prehistoric language contacts, or have the comparative Uralicists just prudently refrained from jumping to conclusions, as it really is the case that very many details of the language map of prehistoric East Europe remain unknown? The vaguely formulated substrate hypotheses as in the works of the so-called root-finders have provoked László Honti (1998: 185, fn. 4) to remark rather sharply that operating with unknown substrate languages means simply confessing that there is no linguistically founded solution for a problem. His criticism is justified beyond doubt; however, the possibility of finding new traces of prehistoric language contacts with methodologically more solid research cannot be excluded.

The final point where traditional comparative-historical linguistics and latter-day autonomous linguistics meet – where the old sheriff is actually revealed as the father or at least the stepfather of the young desperado – concerns the role of variation. As already mentioned, minimalist grammar traditions must explain the reality of variation with multiple grammars for all speakers, while the actual object of their study is a homogeneous idealisation. In historical linguistics, the reconstructed proto-languages are similar idealisations: the method can only bring present-day variation back to invariant proto-forms, never vice versa, and the longer the distance in time, the more details are lost simply because time consumes information. And similarly to generativists, Finno-Ugrists have made themselves guilty of the classical fallacy of confusing their methodologically conditioned idealisation with reality.

The idea of a pure, original, genuine dialect or language variety really

existing somewhere has been remarkably hard to part with in the history of Finno-Ugristics and Fennistics. Despite their Positivist ideals, our predecessors worked hard to force their data into the mold of their theories and expectations. Language samples were „edited” and purged of dubious constructions, hesitations and corrections, occasional loanwords or code-switches and obvious mistakes etc. (cf. e.g. Luutonen 1985, Sarhimaa 2000: 201–202). Informants were chosen so as to represent as archaic and „pure” a language or dialect as possible. Dialectologists were encouraged to find out facts about the genuine traditional dialect, to trust their own judgment more than the opinions of the speakers themselves (i.e. to construct an idealisation) and tacitly assume that the genuine traditional dialect in a unitary form really exists or has existed (i.e. to project this idealisation on the linguistic reality) – this led to a neglect of variation in many decades of dialectological fieldwork in Finland (Nuolijärvi 1988).

For linguists working with Finno-Ugric languages, a further factor that contributed to the exclusion of variation was the lack or scarcity of social stratification and sociolinguistically conditioned variation. As the most important isoglosses and dialect boundaries – in Finland at least – coincided with the boundaries of the age-old administrative units, the traditional parishes, it was all too easy for Finnish dialectologists to dispose of variation by localizing it (Juusela 1998: 56): actually, instead of variation they saw differences between different parish dialects, i.e. between geographically differently located, distinct grammars. The dialect map turned to a chessboard or a map of virtual warfare, where words, phonological or morphological features – in essence: different grammars – conquered new territories, retreated or defended their positions. Language thus acquired a geographically situated existence on its own. It was reified, detached from its speakers, and it became a mysterious force with its own life and logic.

Bridging the gap?

The key question here is the role of diachrony: we could say that the realism of a linguistic theory or description is shown or measured by its ability to deal with the omnipresent fact of language change. Grammars without the diachronic dimension can be contextless, because nothing forces the grammarians to resort to extralinguistic explanations; grammars without context are timeless, because they could not deal with language change even if they wanted to. Historical linguistic traditions, of which comparative Uralistics belongs to the oldest and most accomplished ones, have a more realistic contact with extralinguistic factors; yet they, as well, have fallen into the trap of autonomism. As shown above, this is due to both methodological and historical, maybe even ideological

factors.

To return to the title of this paper: in autonomous grammar, change is impossible. However, comparative-historical linguistics does not necessarily fare any better. As I hope to have shown, the role of context in historical linguistics is an ancillary one. Paradoxically enough, the reason may be that traditional historical linguistics was not really interested in change itself. In comparative-historical linguistics, the point of departure was the relatedness, the systematic difference between languages, and the developments that led to this were actually a *fait accompli*, something that could be taken for granted.

This brings us to the gap between impossible and self-evident. On its one side, we have either a self-contented neglect of the reality of language change (language change is no more important than whether your jacket has two or three buttons), or piles of philosophically highly sophisticated research into the seemingly hopeless problem of how a system that is perfect and optimal in itself (or, at least, not worse than the other possible or the neighbouring ones) could or should ever change. In this framework, the questions of language change have been approached, if at all, as if they were the main explanandum in an otherwise uncontroversial construction. These studies usually do not extend to the next question – why is it that so many things do not change, or why do some parts and subsystems of language (and which parts?) change less than the other ones?

On the other side, where traditional Uralistics stands, we have language change itself as the explanans, not as explanandum, and, consequently, a ruthlessly opportunistic attitude towards linguistic explanation. We do not have to know why something has happened, only how it happened, and in explaining how it happened, we may use autonomous descriptions of intrasystemic changes as well as the context, that is: descriptions of intersystemic (language contact) or socio-psychological processes. This approach runs the risk of neglecting central theoretical questions – those of predicting change or embedding change into the theory of grammar – or dealing with them in a way that makes communication and creative exchange with synchronic theories of language difficult or impossible.

The two camps on both sides of the gap, however, share the fundamental belief in „language”, the idealised and reified object of study, a „thing” that exists at a certain time, at a certain location. And yet, as Croft (2000: 1–6) has painstakingly argued (and as already Hermann Paul emphasized), theories of language change should not reify language, as the idealised language system does not really exist: it is not a historical thing, not a spatiotemporally bounded entity. What exists, in space and time, are just the individual grammars in speakers' minds and the convention-based networks of communication between the speakers. The question remains (and will remain): can we present any generalisations on language without reifying it, without detaching it from its

context?

Conclusion: language, linguistics, and reality – and Uralistics

Regardless of whether we try to detach grammar as our idealised object of study or to „reconnect language” (cf. e.g. Simon-Vandenberg & al. 1997) as many kinds of sociolinguistic, cognitivist, ethno-neorelativist, ecolinguistic, feminist etc. approaches are attempting, we will have to define the relationship of grammar and context, i.e. language and reality – and this is what neither the autonomous paradigms like generativism nor traditional historical-comparative linguistics have done properly. These two represent different mixtures of two attitudes, both of which are extremely problematic. According to the first, language is an autonomous system with only an arbitrary, secondary relationship with reality. The problems of this approach are manifold: not only the incapability to deal with language change, but also numerous internal conflicts (the purported prioritisation of spoken language vs. the actual prioritisation of constructed written-language sentences; the ideals of objectivity and the practical dominance of introspection, etc.). The second approach regards language as directly produced by the extralinguistic reality; this may be understood as naïve relativism (language as the product of its speakers’ national mentality and culture) or naïve mentalism (language as the product of universal cognitive mechanisms).

And there are even more possible approaches. The third view, with lots of media coverage and strong traditions in many neighbouring disciplines but fewer contacts with the tradition of Uralistics (if we do not take the recently arisen Ethnofuturism into account), could be called the Postmodern one. In this view, what we call „reality” is only a linguistic construction, a „narrative”, and what we call „language” is actually the force creating socio-psychological structures of power and dominance („language speaks us”). The problem with this view is that it is more interested in describing what is done with language or analysing the purported „linguistically” based structures of culture and society than in finding out facts about and inside language itself, the kinds of facts that we as linguists and Uralists are interested in, i.e. „grammar”. What thinkers like Lacan or Kristeva call „language” seems to be a psychoanalytic symbol for something else, not the creator of sociopsychological constructions but itself a sociopsychological construction, thus defined in a somewhat circular manner.

What I am pleading for, finally, is a kind of realism with resignation. Language is internally structured and obeys its own laws, independently of (such) extralinguistic forces (as we can discern) – to a certain extent. Autonomous linguistics works, to a certain extent and within its own boundaries, just like Newtonian mechanics, and abandoning it would

simultaneously mean abandoning, for example, the truly great achievements of comparative-historical linguistics (Uralistics included) and falling into the „anything goes” trap of antirationalist relativism. The extralinguistic reality works as well, independently of whether and how our language constructs the reality we are living in. Reducing it, or our ideas about it, to „linguistic” constructions may be an interesting philosophical effort but it does not help those who want to increase their knowledge about language and the world or to make our language and our world better for us and for others who share this world with us. Above all, the only way language exists and can exist is anchored to the extralinguistic reality, to the minds and bodies of concrete speakers or to the networks of communication between them.

Seeing our reality as our own linguistic construction is, actually, highly vulnerable to the kind of criticism that has been voiced by feminist critics of science or, for example, ecolinguists (see, in particular, Mühlhäusler 2003, whose criticism of autonomous linguistics has given very valuable impulses for this paper). The same criticism concerns all approaches that reify their object and take their own objectivity for granted. What remains is balancing between the laws of grammar and the laws of reality, taking into account both of these and simultaneously their complex interdependences as well as the inevitable restrictedness of our own perspective – no linguist possesses a God’s-eye-view on language.

One of the disconcerting corollaries could actually be a word of comfort for any Uralist. There are, perhaps, less universal principles of grammar than many of us would like to admit, and much more language-specific ones for us to discover. This, in turn, means that the programme suggested by R. M. W. Dixon in his linguistic pamphlet (1997) – linguists, get off your ivory towers and go describe the endangered languages as long as they are there! – is not merely political (knowledge is power, research serves the emancipation of a marginalised language variety) but „science-internally” motivated as well.

As the numerous ways by which context interacts with grammar will be amply dealt with during our conference, I will not dwell upon the questions of „reconnecting language” in general. Instead, I will proceed to my final point. Just like the defenders of „connectionist” paradigms have argued against reductionism, the over-simplifying of language (grammar) that leaves too many essential aspects out, I would like to argue against meta-level reductionism, in this case, against an over-simplified presentation of traditional historical-comparative Finno-Ugristics. Research traditions are more complex, polyphonic and controversial (again) than many of us would like to admit, and the history of Finno-Ugric language studies shows us both reductionism and connectionism in many guises. To return to where I started: Uralistics, as an „exotic” and „useless” field of study, now detached from the most obvious political and

ideological interests and facing an amazing diversity of questions and possible approaches, can really function as a haven of pluralism, a meta-level diversity. Let us realise the potential of Uralistics!

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Summary

With respect to grammar and context, the relationship between autonomous-synchronic and diachronic linguistics is very complex and even paradoxical. Structuralist and generativist linguistics, prioritising synchrony for methodological or theoretical reasons, also minimised the role of context in favour of the autonomy of grammar, while in historical linguistics, external factors such as language contacts or even extralinguistic aspects of culture (the Wörter und Sachen tradition and etymology, for instance) have always been acknowledged and practically played a highly significant role. On the other hand, the hard core of historical linguistics, the comparative method, actually represents a strictly autonomous approach to the language system (including language change and relatedness), while functional or biologicistic explanations are used in many models of synchronic grammar. In this paper, the repercussions of this paradox in the tradition of Finno-Ugric linguistics are examined, also in order to outline the challenge of context-related approaches to Finno-Ugristics.