

Finno-ugric languages as target languages: Learning, teaching and assessment

This year marks the 20th anniversary of VIRSU, the cooperation network for Finno-Ugric applied linguistics. VIRSU grew from the same ground as our “Close Comparisons” publication series, viz. the Estonian-Finnish cooperations in the research of the teaching and learning of closely related languages. The 27th volume of our series will appear just in time for the anniversary conference of VIRSU, entitled “Language in linguistics, linguistics in language learning”, due to take place in Tallinn on October 5–6, 2017. We are happy to greet the VIRSU conference with our new volume, which comprises eight articles.

In 2007, the scope of VIRSU was extended to comprise all Finno-Ugric languages as target languages. This has been the goal of *Lähivõrdlusi. Lähivertailuja* as well. However, expanding the range of topics across language barriers and borders of research traditions has turned out to be quite challenging. Luckily, this publication includes again one article with a target language other than Finnish or Estonian: Helka Riionheimo and Marjatta Palander in their article deal with the Karelian language as today’s Finns understand it. Karelian is probably the least known of Finland’s old minority languages. It was officially acknowledged in connection with the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages in 2010, but most Finns still have difficulties in understanding the difference between the Karelian language and the Eastern Finnish dialects spoken in so-called Finnish Karelia. This problem is also tackled by Riionheimo and Palander. They conducted a test in which Finnish students listened to the recorded speech of an informant from Ilomantsi

in the easternmost Finland, speaking slightly Finnicized Southern Karelian, and analyze the test answers from a folk-linguistic point of view: what features do Finnish speakers distinguish and how do they interpret them?

Teaching Finnish as a foreign language, especially its history in the light of two old textbooks, is the topic of Marjut Vehkanen's article. The textbooks are *Praktiik Soome keele õpetus* by Johannes Aavik, better known as a language planner and reformer of the Estonian language, from 1902, and *Gyakorlati finn nyelvkönyv* written by Béla Györffy, a Hungarian Fennophile clergyman, from 1939. Both are explicitly entitled "practical coursebooks", but in reality both focus on describing and explaining the grammar of Finnish. Their methods, however, differ from each other, also due to their backgrounds and contexts. Aavik's textbook is constructed around comparisons between Finnish and Estonian, whereas Györffy alongside his grammatical-descriptive approach also experiments with the grammar-translation method and even includes some communication-oriented exercises.

Assessment of language skills has been dealt with, from different perspectives, in many earlier volumes of *Lähivõrdlusi. Lähivertailuja*. This time, we focus on how Ingrian Finns have experienced the language tests organized specifically for them. (Ingria near today's St. Petersburg was home to an old Finnish minority; since the 1990s, thousands of ethnic Ingrian Finns from Russia were allowed to immigrate to Finland as repatriants.) Minna Martikainen has investigated, among other things, what the Ingrian Finns think about the language tests and how Ingrian Finnish students experience the impact of the tests on their studies in Finland. The study is of particular interest now, as the repatriation of Ingrian Finns ended officially in 2016 and the tests are no more organized.

Hanna Jokela's article is also about the learning of Finnish, namely, the expletive subject as used by learners of Finnish. Expletive subjects do not belong to Standard Finnish, but they are often attested in learner Finnish, presumably due to the interference of the learners' native languages. This phenomenon has so far hardly been researched, especially

in connection with non-finite subjects or subject clauses. Jokela's material comes from the ICLFI corpus of learner Finnish.

Similarly to the expletive subjects, article-like determiners *yksi / üks* 'one' and *se / see* 'it / this / that' in Finnish and Estonian have often been considered to indicate foreign interference. Helen Hint, Tiina Nahkola, and Renate Pajusalu investigate the use of these determiners in narratives elicited from adult speakers of Finnish and Estonian and analyze the factors affecting it. In Finnish, the case of the determined NP seems to be of importance, while in Estonian, the syntactic role of the NP explains some aspects of the choice of determiner. In all, however, the development of these article-like determiners to articles in the proper sense of the word has not yet proceeded very far.

Pille Eslon in her article deals with verb constructions in Estonian from a language learner's point of view. Her material comes from the language of literary fiction, and she specifically investigates the trigrams to the right of the verb, with respect to the presence or absence of an adverbial modifier. From the comparison between standard native and learner Estonian, we know that learners of Estonian tend to avoid verb constructions with adverbs or to use them differently from native speakers. However, verb constructions without adverbs can also be challenging for language learners, due to their idiomaticity and diverse collocations.

Tiina Kikerpill investigates what kind of strategies are used by university students, Estonian native speakers and those who use Estonian as a second language, in reading Estonian-language academic texts, what kind of difficulties they encounter and how conscious they are of their own processes of understanding and interpretation. Both native speakers and second-language speakers study the texts in detail and use their encyclopedic knowledge, but the native language seems to play a role in how fast they perform tasks which require the understanding of written text and how they deal with unknown words.

This year also marks the 50th anniversary of the Estonian lecturer's post at the University of Oulu. Heli Laanekask writes about the history of the teaching of Estonian in Oulu, on the basis of archive knowledge

and her own experiences, thus giving an important contribution to the history of academic teaching of Estonian.

We thank all authors for the thematic richness of their contributions and our reviewers for their valuable comments, which the authors have taken into account. Special thanks are due to the Finno-Ugric Cultural Foundation (*Suomalais-ugrilaisen kulttuurirahaston säätiö*) and the programme “Estonian Language and Cultural Memory II” of the Estonian Ministry for Education and Research for their financial support. We are also grateful to the Estonian Association for Applied Linguistics, under whose aegis *Lähivõrdlusi. Lähivertailuja* is published. Our most cordial thanks to all our supporters!

In Tallinn, Vienna, and Turku

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