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As a subject, as an object

Finno-Ugric Studies and Finno-Ugritude, Women's Studies and womanhood

”I feel that much of the work [in science] is done because one wants to impose an answer on it. They have the answer ready, and they [know what they] want the material to tell them. [Anything else it tells them] they don't really recognize as there, or they think it's a mistake and throw it out... *If you'd only just let the material tell you.*” (Barbara McClintock, interviewed by Keller 1983: 179, quoted in Tuana 1996: 23–24.)

”The structure of language cannot be described as a unitary system, in which everything could be gradually derived from certain main rules. [--] The best grammar is the one in which copious, reliable and well organized data speak for themselves, without being covered by the cobweb of fancy new terms and questionable concepts.” (Ravila 1967: 35, translation J.L.)

Subject and object of research

Together with gender, Women's Studies have introduced the person of the researcher, a social and embodied subject into the theory of research. For some decades already, standpoint epistemologies and diverse “women's approaches” to the philosophy of science have been developed (see, for instance, Keller & Longino 1996). The traditional Western ideal of scientific objectivity, devoid not only of body, boundaries and death but also of responsibility, has been subjected to critical study (Haraway 1996: 254). In general, the question whether the person of the researcher, for instance, her/his gender, has any impact on research, cannot be *a priori* wiped off the table by simply claiming that objective good science stands above matters of this kind, but this question must be empirically solved in any individual case (Giere 1996: 11–12).

The core question can be posed either from the point of view of the researcher (community) or from the point of view of the researcher and her/his object. Speaking about the researcher's standpoint, her/his opportunities of observing and conceiving of the object of research, the decisive question for Women's Studies (and some other critical approaches as well) can be formulated like this: How do you reconcile the multiple standpoints with each other, once it is clear that the traditional standpoint of a White Western middle-class man is neither all-human nor universally valid? Above all: How do you do this without lapsing into an anti-rational *anything goes* nihilism, in which there is no truth at all, just standpoints of different subjects, without drifting into the "valley of the shadow of humanism" (Frye 1990: 177–178)?

On the other hand, speaking about the relationship between researcher and object, the core problem is the detachedness of these two. According to the ideals of science as inherited from the Enlightenment, the knowing subject is detached from the object of knowledge. The object is placed on a metaphoric operation table, where anybody is equally capable of perceiving it, observing it and making the correct conclusions. In the *humaniora*, this approach is naturally problematic, as the research may require the researcher to participate in the social structures under observation or use her/his intuition in order to understand her/his object. But in natural sciences as well, as shown in the last few decades by feminist researchers, the relationship between researcher and object deserves to be reflected upon. These reflections also concern linguistics, the influential schools of which not only adopt their ideals from science but even regard their own research as *linguistic science*, research of formalizable mechanisms placed in the human cognition.

In her classic work on the relationship between gender and science, Evelyn Fox Keller (1988) criticizes the male bias in Western science. The strict detachment of the "objective" researcher subject from her/his object is, according to her, a consequence of the developmental psychology of (the majority of) scientists, growing up or being brought up to be males. This maleness entails (as emphasized by object-relation theoreticians, see e.g. Chodorow 1990) suppression of emotions, safeguarding of the separateness of one's own ego and interpreting independence in terms of control and dominance. In the tradition of Western science, although it is more polyphonous than often stated, the relationship between the researcher and her/his object has often been described as a relationship between an active male and a passive female, and stereotypes of dominant male behaviour have been projected on the role of a researcher. A scientist who identifies himself (?herself) with this kind of maleness is inclined to reducing the object of research into as mechanical models as possible, explaining the processes under study with hierarchic structures,

metaphors of power and violence, rather than models applying diverse origins, collaterality and cooperation. Metaphors, in turn, are not just stylistic means: the language of science reflects and influences the power structures, practices and questions of science (see also Rolin 1989: 133–134; Helasvuo 1992).

As a counter-example of science of another kind, Keller presents the work of the Nobel-prized cytologist and genetician, Barbara McClintock (Keller 1983). Although McClintock never regarded herself as a feminist nor claimed any influence of her gender on her research, Keller thinks that her somewhat non-mainstream views are a consequence of psycho-social femaleness. An intellectually honest female scientist, who cannot place herself in the dichotomy of male subject vs. female object, simply must define the points of departure in her research in another way. McClintock, whose central achievements as a researcher of the interdependence between genes and other parts of the cell threatened to be overshadowed by the so-called “dominant molecule theory” based on the role of DNA, emphasized how important it was to acknowledge the complexity of the object. She spoke about patient observation, attention to all individual objects, intuition, identification with or even love of the object of research. As the quotation in the beginning of this paper shows, she believed that the object of research can speak for itself, if only allowed.

Is the object allowed to speak for itself?

As I first encountered McClintock’s words about “listening to the data”, I spontaneously thought about the other quote presented at the beginning of this paper. In my own student days in the 1980s, the dominant paradigm had changed since Rivila’s times and his famous definition of the ideals of linguistics was often used as an example of outdated late-Neogrammarianism, an untheoretical, unscientific and national-conservative approach, suppression of international *linguistic science*. In its most extreme form, the post-WWII paradigm change from Neogrammarianism to structuralist and generativist schools in Finnish linguistics was formulated as a kind of a linguistic salvation history, recently retold by Öim (2002: 16; cf. Laakso 2003a). This “myth of the Great Rupture in Finnish linguistics” has been subject to harsh criticism by Esa Itkonen (1999), while Määttä (1994) has analyzed the deep-going difference between the theoretical backgrounds that prevented both opponents from really solving their controversy. But does this conflict concern the relationship between researcher and object, and could it tell us something about the subject and the object in the tradition of Finnish or Finno-Ugric studies?

In the formalism and minimalism as present in structuralist and generativist schools of linguistics, it is not difficult to see “male” symbolic domination (*government and binding!*), manifesting itself not only as hierarchies, reductionism and mechanical operations (see also Heinämaa 1989a, Helasvuo 1992) but also as a violently strict exclusion of certain areas. According to Lakoff (2004a), feminist linguistics in the USA in the 1960s and ’70s arose from disappointment in the dominant Chomskyan paradigm which excluded, among other things, all gender approaches. On the other hand, neither can the positivist data-centrism as represented by Ravila and others be regarded as a more pluralist interpretation of the subject-object relationship, of intuitive observation in the spirit of McClintock. Or could it?

The key is in the attributes of “data” as defined by Ravila: it must be not only copious but also reliable and well-organized. The copiousness and reliability is guaranteed by the researcher herself/himself: s/he is qualified to record and transcribe the material in a reliable way, and s/he selects the informants and the material elicited from them, on the basis of her/his knowledge, goals and tacit assumptions. For instance, the classic of Finnish field linguistics, *Muoto-opin keruuopas* (‘Handbook for collecting morphological data’, Terho Itkonen & al. 1969) gives detailed instructions on selecting the informants and warns against trusting the speakers’ own judgment. Goals and tacit assumptions are also formed by ideological factors. For example, in Finnish dialectology, the images of genuineness and purity which determined the object of research were originally connected with the nation-state project and even with political traumata, the disappointment caused by “the People” in the civil war of 1918 (Häkkinen 1993).

“Well-organized data”, in turn, have been organized according to a certain scheme. In Finnish studies, it was especially the disposition of *Lautgeschichte* following the groundbreaking work of E. N. Setälä that was used as a model – and a structure of this kind inevitably includes theoretical preassumptions and value-settings. This scheme, restricting the perspective of the researcher, is a necessary evil. In fact, it implies acknowledging the boundedness and standpoint of the knowing subject. Unfortunately, it may have led certain researchers to manipulate, in the worst case even to forge their data. Luutonen (1985; cf. also Purra & Tainio 1989: 221) critically reflects on the products of the Finno-Ugric field linguistic tradition from a hundred years ago, texts consisting of neat and tidy sentences in the vein of written language, completely devoid of many central features of spoken language. It seems that these field linguists, despite their Positivist ideals of science, not only listened to the data but also to their own preassumptions.

On the basis of criticism like this it seems easy to think that in the research tradition

as represented by Ravila, the data have been forced to wait by the door in reverent posture, only allowed to speak after proving their worth in the eyes of the gentlefolk and only allowed to answer when asked. However, the setting is not that simple. First of all, the Neogrammarian historical linguistics, the hard core of Finno-Ugric and historical Finnish language studies, cannot be simply regarded as an errand-boy of patriarchal Nationalist ideologies. Although classical Finno-Ugric studies did have their connections with the markedly masculine and patriarchal national-romantic project and the – similarly masculine and patriarchal – romantic scientist-genius cult of the 19th century (Laakso 2005: 25–29, 91–100), the positivist background in science can also be read as a humble recognition of human imperfection and the relativity of all knowledge. “No absolute knowledge is possible, because science cannot eliminate the human being” (Ravila 1967: 12). This is not necessarily very far away from the stand-point epistemology of feminist philosophy of science, for instance – as long as the human being, the centre of scientific inquiry, is also relativized.

Above all: among all areas of linguistic inquiry, historical linguistics is perhaps closest to normal science according to the ideals of Positivism. The laws of historical linguistics “work” and the central findings “hold true” in the same way as the scientific constructions describing gravity, the structure of the solar system or the origin of species. They can be precised and modified but hardly falsified – unless with strictly empirical data. The practice and, perhaps, the theory of both Western science and Finno-Ugric studies have included discrimination of women, but the “hard” research results, such as the relatedness of Finnish, Mari and Hungarian, are just as immune to accusations of phallogentricity as, say, the idea that our Earth is not flat but spherical.

Second: Finnish and partly even Finno-Ugric studies have been greatly influenced by their connection with the nation-state project, research into the national past and the construction of the national identity. True, this national commitment comes together with the patriarchal National-Romantic philosophy and the traditionally male-dominated structures of a nation-state, and it also manifests itself in the “his master’s voice” attitude still perceptible in the public image of Finno-Ugric studies – for instance, as shown in the publicity around Kalevi Wiik’s (2002) debated book (see e.g. Laakso 2003b; Lindstedt 2004), Finno-Ugric studies in Finland can still be presented in the eyes of the great lay public as *the* discipline whose main task is to give the authoritative “final truth” on the origin of the nation. This national ideological background includes symbolic domination and directly patriarchal attitudes, as shown – in addition to the public image of the research into the national past – by the history of Finnish language planning (for the relationship between

linguistic and women's emancipation, see in particular Laitinen & Vartiainen 1988) or the attitude towards the Finno-Ugric "kindred peoples", friendly yet patronizing and condescending (cf. Laakso 2005: 87–88). But the nationalist background also includes identification, not just dominance but also belonging together. For Finnish linguists, the national language and its history was not just metaphoric property but also – metaphorically and concretely – part of themselves.

Ownership and identification

The linguistic inquiry into Finnish and Finno-Ugric languages was largely created to serve the national emancipatory project. For example, M. A. Castrén, the founding father of Finnish Finno-Ugristics, regarded the trail-blazing Samoyed grammars he wrote as merely an intermediate goal – his real aim was to help his nation construct its self-image by showing the Finns their place on the ethnolinguistic map of the world. And although many important Finno-Ugrists during the whole 20th century have been, for example, Western Europeans, Swedes, Norwegians or Russians, *most* of the important Finno-Ugrists of all times have been ethnic "Finno-Ugrians" (Finns, Hungarians, Estonians etc.) and an even greater part of the important Fennists have been ethnic Finns. The situation thus resembles the history of women's and gender studies, also propelled by a political emancipatory project and, until our days, largely pursued by women.

But there are similarities between Finno-Ugric and Women's Studies not only in the socio-political background but – because the point of departure was not merely methodological but (also) political – also in the definition of the subject and object of research. For the founding fathers of Finno-Ugric studies, who worked within the framework of National-Romantic monism, nationality and native language were just as self-evident, clearly and exclusively delimitable concepts as womanhood was for the first feminist generations, and, correspondingly, the essence of the object of research was similarly clear.

Both Finno-Ugristics and Women's Studies depart from a fixed and scientifically definable core: the study of linguistic relatedness by the methods of historical-comparative linguistics vs. the study of gender as a social phenomenon by the methods of social and cultural sciences. Outside these traditional points of departure, the object of research threatens to fall apart. What originally was a sensibly definable question setting – "how is the Finno-Ugric linguistic heritage reflected in language X?", "what is the role of women in the X society?" – is not necessarily a sensible point of departure, as the research is extended to new approaches. In ethnography, folkloristics or other cultural studies, "Finno-Ugrianness" is not a problem-free

concept, probably not even a useful one, and Women's Studies – just like their political driving force, feminism – have to tackle the fact that there need not be one unified “womanhood”, uniting the experience of women in different countries, cultures and classes.

Now, as the administration of academic institution (with the perpetual pressure to economize) and the popularization of research, i.e. motivating research for the great tax-paying public, and also the recruitment of new researchers require a clear profile-building and explicit motivation, both Finno-Ugric studies and Women's Studies face similar problems. Looking for explanatory force and political motivation may lead to essentialism iced with identification (“this is our cause, and only we are entitled and able to understand it”), that is, seeing the essence of the object as something self-evident: women/Finno-Ugrians are as they are, because this is the essence of femaleness/Finno-Ugritude, and the task of research is simply to reach this essence.

Within Women's Studies, there is already a plethora of critical reflections on these questions. If the Western tradition of science is criticized from an essentialized “women's” standpoint, it is all too easy to drift into Mars and Venus thinking: science hitherto has been men's science, and now we must replace it with a new and better women's science. This kind of thinking not only “joins the choir of enemies” by excluding women or feminists from the standard (i.e. men's) science, it also destroys the critical potential which women's standpoint could offer (Keller 1996: 31) and ends up reconstructing its own ideal subject, that is: the mythical womanhood which it started by deconstructing. The utmost danger is that the theoretical constructions remain, as Chodorow (1990: 124–125) writes about Lacanians, on theoretical-symbolic level and thus immune to empirical counter-arguments. On the other hand, if we acknowledge that instead of one unitary womanhood there is a spectrum of different womanhoods intertwined with many other factors, how can we bring in the standpoint of women, unless as a relativist pluralism of standpoints? How do we move between different points of view without drifting into antirationalism, where instead of empirical truths and universally valid logic only power games and standpoints exist?

Search for essence and Ethnofuturism

This kind of thinking and, in particular, this kind of criticism can be found in Women's Studies. What do they have in common with Finno-Ugric studies? I claim that similar phenomena can also be seen in the so-called Finno-Ugric world, when politically motivated emancipatory projects are covered with essentialized Finno-

Ugritude. By this, I especially mean Ethnofuturism, a movement which came into being as a national project of a small circle of artists in Estonia during the agony of the Soviet rule and which has in the last few years spread and grown to be a serious cultural phenomenon among many Finno-Ugric nations in Russia.

Ethnofuturism relies partly on national traditions, partly on international art, New Age thinking and Postmodernism, which – thanks to its more relativistic concept of truth – allows for a more opportunistic use, interpretation and combination of the elements of the traditional culture. Ethnofuturism has, from its very beginning on, been tightly connected with the emancipation of minor peoples, languages and cultures: it attempts to create a basis for a new, pluralistic, dynamic and peaceful national-cultural identity, something that will not be musealized but looks forward and also functions in the urbanized world of new technology. These goals, of course, can hardly be seen otherwise than in a very positive light. In fact, something of this kind might well be the only chance for minor peoples and cultures to save themselves in the Maelstrom of globalization.

The emancipatory philosophy and rhetorics of Ethnofuturism (as generally of postcolonial studies or “native studies”) bear a ghostly resemblance to feminism. (In fact, it seems that the Ethnofuturist movement has remarkably many active women, starting from one of its founding mothers, the South Estonian writer Kauksi Ülle.) Both criticize the autonomy of the subject, both speak against the subject standpoint of one unified “master” or dominant people, looking from above and from outside, and both speak for the margins, for pluralism, against violence, competition and hierarchies, for collectivity, equality and cooperation.

When reading the texts of Ethnofuturism, however, one has the feeling that the writers have not yet noticed the pitfalls that have been critically analyzed in Women’s Studies already long ago. Since a detailed criticism of Ethnofuturist philosophy would not fit in the framework of this paper, I simply claim that the unquestioning essentialization of a “Finno-Ugric way of thinking” seems to make Ethnofuturism vulnerable to pseudo-science. The difficult but inevitable process of drawing the border between epistemic democracy (truth is a result of a dynamic process in a discourse in which it is possible that none of the participants is absolutely right) and anti-rationalist relativism (there is no truth, just opinions located in social power structures), intensively dealt with in feminist philosophy (see e.g. Haraway 1996) has obviously not yet been undertaken in Ethnofuturism. For this reason, Ethnofuturistic texts do not ask whether the postulated Finno-Ugric way of thinking really exists and what it could be based on. For this reason, they also opportunistically exploit shreds of flim-flam from here and there, from amateur

etymologies to dilettante prehistory. Illustratively enough, the Finnish godfather of Ethnofuturism, Kari Sallamaa, quotes the grandfather of Ethnofuturism, the Estonian poet and philosopher Uku Masing without a shade of doubt – in his writings many decades ago, Masing interpreted prehistory in a way which coincides with later much-debated but scientifically unfounded (see e.g. Laakso 1999; Aikio & Aikio 2002; Lindstedt 2004) fantasies of Finno-Ugrian prehistory:

”Masing doesn't accept the theory, that Finno-Ugrians come from east. He accepts those theories, that the ancient forefathers of the FU-peoples once were lords of whole Europe, but later they had to move northwards following the melting ice, when other, more violent peoples came from West and South. Its ashtonishing to see, that Masing got into those same ideas, which in the recent ten years have been presented by such Finnish scholars as Kalevi Wiik and Pekka Sammallahti.” (Sallamaa 1999.)

As far as art and emotions are concerned, using the term “Finno-Ugric” for unscientific flim-flam, loose speculations or express naturalization of international New Age phenomena is harmless. After all, it is more important that minor (and major) peoples find the will and the strength to maintain their cultures, languages and identities in at least some kind of a form, in a form which they themselves consider appropriate. But if Ethnofuturism wants to be, as Sallamaa (op.cit.) claims, not only an artistic-aesthetic “school” but an ontologically-epistemically-ethically well-founded philosophy and a concrete programme to save the Finno-Ugric cultures, a naïve essentialization of “Finno-Ugritude” is not enough. We need knowledge about things Finno-Ugrian, and this is where Finno-Ugrian studies should come in.

Ethnofuturism, of course, is something different from Finno-Ugristics, and the task of Finno-Ugristics is not to monopolize the interests towards the roots of national identity nor act as a museological “tradition police”. This, in fact, is connected with the patriarchal legacy in the rhetoric traditions and image of Finno-Ugristics and deserves a further critical analysis. However, the relationship of Ethnofuturism or Women’s Studies to essentialism gives Finno-Ugrists a good lesson of the proper attitude towards the essence of the object of research. This kind of reflections on the points of departure and the legitimation of one’s own studies are more and more urgently needed also in the traditional disciplines of research, such as Finno-Ugristics.

In place of a conclusion

In linguistics, there are traditionally two or three approaches for feminist or gender studies. Gender linguists have either examined the forms of sexism and male dominance as reflected (also in subtle and hard-to-detect ways) in the structure of language, or the possible gendered ways of language use, gendered cultures of speech, “women’s (or men’s) language” (Laitinen 1989: 244). By and large, the latter approach has begun to appear more and more problematic, and the attention seems to be shifting to the functions of language and discourse in the construction of different, also fuzzy, overlapping and changing identities and roles. The third traditional line of feminist critique in linguistics is the analysis of gender bias in descriptions of language, such as grammars or dictionaries (e.g. Siirinen 1988; Ross 1996; Macauley & Brice 1997; Leskinen 1998; Mantila 1998). This meta-scientific line is connected with women’s perspective to the history of research, which in Finnish studies has been dealt with by, for instance, Laitinen & Vartiainen (1988), Nuolijärvi (1988) and Kosonen (1988).

The hard core of Finno-Ugristics (and traditional historical Finnish linguistics), the historical-comparative linguistics, seems to remain at least partly outside these question settings: its methods seem to require another concept of truth and another selection of data. The questions arising from a feminist point of view are here similar to those in nature sciences: instead of the substance of the object, the attention is focused on the questions investigated, on the selection of questions and the definitions of the object. This meta-scientific point of view is also connected with the history and sociology of research, for instance, with a gender-sensitive analysis of the political and ideological meanings given to “Finno-Ugritude” (Laakso 2005: 91–100).

Rather than talking about womanhood or Finno-Ugrianness in themselves, it might be reasonable to examine the relationship between Finno-Ugristics and Women’s Studies. These areas of research share surprisingly many problems, connected with the relationship between research and its object or, finally, with the identity of the researcher. Finno-Ugristics has – perhaps partly because of its patriarchal legacy – lacked a critical self-reflection and a conscious critique of the researcher’s own goals, that is, a standpoint view, according to which the researcher acknowledges her/his own points of departure and the partial character of her/his perspective, assumes responsibility for her/his choice of approach and motivates it. In traditional historical linguistics, this problem could be passed by in silence, but it will surface again, when the research into endangered and minority languages challenges Finno-Ugristics to reflect on its points of departure and (without forgetting the historical tradition) expand outside its comparative-historical hard core. How does a Finno-Ugrist motivate her/his choice of problems to be investigated, how does s/he describe

her/his relationship with her/his object, how does s/he pay attention to ethical questions, how does her/his research contribute to the revitalization and emancipation of endangered languages – and how will s/he retain empirical adequacy and a fruitful connection with the research tradition? For these reflections, Women's Studies might give new tools.

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