

# Finno-Ugric Studies under the pressure of globalization

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## What is globalization?

Globalization is an irritatingly fashionable word, often used when speaking about world economy, sometimes when speaking about politics and culture and very seldom when speaking about science and learning. This, in fact, is one of the main problems pointed out by Norman Fairclough (2007) in his book *Language and Globalization*: in the so-called globalist discourse, the various dimensions of globalization are conflated into one one-dimensional phenomenon of market economy with its own “rules”, regardless of, for instance, who makes these rules and who it is who has to obey them.

A recurring theme in all those innumerable publications which strive at an ambitious and exhaustive description of globalization is the complexity, the versatile and paradoxical character of globalization. Besides, there are many kinds of evaluation about globalization: some regard it as something positive, some as negative, some simply as inevitable. When defining globalization, we are confronted with diverse problems and conflicts (cf. e.g. Murray 2006: 13–17).

The most essential problem with defining globalization is perhaps that globalizing forces are countered by localizing forces, uniting forces by forces promoting fragmentation. In politics and economy, for instance, globalization obviously brings forth new cross-state agency, corporations, organizations and other transnational systems such as the EU. Traditional geopolitical questions are overshadowed by worldwide economic, social and ecological challenges. At the same time, regional cooperation and local decision-making processes gain importance, as for example provinces negotiate with Brussels, passing by the capital of the nation-state, or ethnic conflicts already forgotten arise again and threaten purported unitary state structures. For the global market, international culture industries produce carefully calculated bestsellers, blockbusters and artists who look more and more like living Barbie dolls, but in the Internet, local sub-cultures flourish, and the European language minorities have already for years organized their own alternative “Eurovision song contest” (*Liet-Lavlut*, for the next time in Luleå, Sweden, in October 2008 – in or near the area of two Finno-Ugric minorities).

Central and often-mentioned features of globalization are increasing cross-border mobility – of people, creativity, wares and money – and new structures supporting this mobility. The development of transportation and communication technology plays a key role. As globalization critics will readily state, this creates new inequality, when the rich, those who profit from globalization, use free mobility for their own profit and for the disadvantage of the poor, and a “digital divide” opens between those who use new technology and those excluded from it. All these processes influence the function of peoples, ethnic groups and speaker communities, as well as the functions of the institutions of culture and science. The points of contact between these and Finno-Ugric studies will be the theme of my paper.

## Endangerment, emancipation – and essentialization?

One of the most concrete points where international political and economic developments touch upon Finno-Ugric studies is endangerment of minor languages and peoples, a theme all too well known for all Finno-Ugrists. Together with perhaps even 90% of the languages of the world, most of the Finno-Ugric languages – i.e. all except the three nation-state languages, Finnish, Estonian and Hungarian – are more or less endangered. The object of our research threatens to disappear. The most severely endangered Finno-Ugric languages will probably die in the next few years or decades, together with today's generation of terminal speakers. Even in the greatest Finno-Ugric minorities, the youngest generations will not necessarily be able to grow up to be balanced bilinguals; the national language will be a "second-class" language, offering education, entertainment and high culture only marginally if at all.

This means a double challenge for Finno-Ugric studies. First, those languages which are inevitably dying need "terminal care" and as intensive documentation as possible, those that can be rescued are in need of efficient revitalization, especially supporting the language acquisition of the youngest generations. Secondly, the minority languages living under strong pressure from the majority language are worth investigating in their present state. How does the strong language contact situation affect the language, how do these minority language varieties differ from the "classical" forms documented in the Golden Age of Finno-Ugric fieldwork a hundred years ago, and how could language contact research in general profit from this investigation?

Until the 20th century, the endangerment and assimilation of languages was connected with Modernization and the development of the nation-state. Finno-Ugric minorities were pushed towards assimilation in the Nordic nation-states (including Finland, as concerns the Saami and the often-forgotten small Borderland Karelian minority in Finland), the post-WWI new neighbour countries of Hungary (these assimilatory tendencies, of course, had their own prehistory connected with the nation-state developments in 19th-century Hungary) and, at least at some times, Russia-Soviet Union, a covert nation-state.

In the 21st century, endangerment has acquired a wider framework. The nation-state is paralleled by transnational political and economic agents, and international killer languages, above all English, get more and more technical and financial support. Instead of a one-language-one-people-ideology, the market value of languages seems to be in the focus. This means that the typically complete asymmetry between minority and majority (the majority has not only more numeric strength and political influence but also more money and more publicity; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson 1996) is realized with full force.

By weakening the role of the nation-state, globalization may encourage the emancipation of minorities. This could be stated of the *meänkieli* (Tornedal Finnish) speakers in Northern Sweden, the revitalizers of Kven in Northern Norway and the Võro-Seto activists in Southeast Estonia – not to speak of the Saami, who have played an important role in the human rights activism of the indigenous peoples across state boundaries. The more power for decision-making there is on local level, the easier it might be to enforce support measures for minorities. Together with the rising standard of living and education, the often-mentioned last minute interest for endangered languages, identities and cultures awakens. When the education system manages to provide every school child with a good knowledge of the standard state language – and perhaps even an international lingua franca such as English –, speaking a minority language is not a sign of backwardness any more but, in the best case, something extra. In connection with internationalization, versatile language knowledges and multilingualism in itself get more prestige. In order to enjoy these good sides of globalization, however, one needs a high standard of living and education. This means that at least a national elite is needed which belongs to the side of those who profit from globalization. This

elite is missing with many (Finno-Ugric) minorities, at least in Russia, which seems to be developing anachronistically towards a centralized national state.

Endangerment of languages poses a challenge to Finno-Ugric studies, and this challenge is neither new nor surprising. Already the classics of Finno-Ugristic fieldwork a hundred years ago prophesied the approaching death of the smallest Uralic languages. A hundred years ago, however, the most important problems of Finno-Ugric studies or linguistics in general were narrower and more simple than now. Other Finno-Ugric languages were not investigated for the sake of practical goals or the needs of the speaker community itself, but Finnish researchers wanted to shed more light on the history of the Finno-Ugric language family and the Finnish language in particular. These tasks and questions are still important – that there is a constant interesting and high-quality discussion on the central questions of Finno-Ugric historical linguistics going on is a fact we cannot emphasize too much – but beside them, Finno-Ugrists should comment on questions of endangered languages, now visible and relevant in a new way. This means also new reflections on the relationship between Finno-Ugric studies and ethnopolitics.

Classical Finno-Ugric studies, although partly departing from National Romantic emancipation tendencies, kept a correct distance to national-political questions, kept out of the fantasies of a “Greater Finland” between the world wars and avoided commenting on the minority policies of the Soviet Union, to enable the maintenance of scientific contacts across the Iron Curtain. Nor did questions of ethnopolitics belong to the Positivist ideals of normal science – neither to historical linguistics inspired by National Romanticism and Neogrammarianism nor to the science-inspired mainstream linguistics of the 20th century. Now, on the other hand, even political criticism of globalization partly stems from arts and humanities, seeking new points of contact with the problems of minorities and indigenous peoples. The Indian-origin apologist of globalization, Jagdish Bhagwati (2004: 18) states that the points of departure are partly the postmodern anti-rationalism and criticism of Western normal science as practiced in Western cultural studies, following Derrida and Foucault, partly the feeling of anxiety that arises from the helplessness of a Western intellectual confronted with the problems of the Third World, minorities and the environment. This anxiety leads to a diffuse discontent with the capitalist system, creates an interest towards the cultures of indigenous peoples (perceived as an alternative) and seeks for applications also in scholarly fora.

In Finno-Ugric studies, this intertwining with the questions of human rights and the environment is tackled at least in Ethnofuturism and some approaches inspired by Native Studies or Postcolonial Studies. Ethnofuturism, a search for a new, future-oriented and holistic way of experiencing “Finno-Ugritude” in culture and art, came into being in Estonia in the last years of the Soviet system and has since then become popular among some Finno-Ugric peoples of Russia as well. In Finland, similar alternative views, trying to substitute the traditional colonialist, patriarchal and technocratic approaches with the perspective of minorities, nature and disadvantaged groups, have been propagated by some critical and “alternative” researchers such as the feminist scholar Kaarina Kailo (see e.g. Heiskanen & Kailo (eds.) 2006).

This perspective is interesting also because it often explicitly refers to the prehistory, tradition and world view of ancient Finns, Saami and other Finno-Ugrians. This is also a problematic view. However important I consider the perspectives of the environment or Women’s Studies, I am not completely convinced by the way the concepts of “Finno-Ugrianness” or “authentic culture” are used. At least from the point of view of Finno-Ugric linguistics, it seems that the antirationalism and the unquestioning essentialization of Finno-Ugrianness makes these approaches vulnerable even to downright flim-flam and pseudo-science (Laakso 2006). To put it more politely: from the background of the traditional discourse in linguistics or social studies, it is often very difficult to understand the rhetorics of

these alternative minority or ecological perspectives, and there is a constant danger of mutual misunderstanding.

## **Free mobility – whose free mobility?**

Finno-Ugric studies came into being in a time when most speakers of Finno-Ugric languages (even today's nation-state languages) were born and died in their home villages and never went further from there than a few days' walking distance. Finno-Ugric linguistics, including the national philologies of the three Finno-Ugric nation states, was based on traditional dialect geography, where the dimensions were geographic and could be drawn on a map: language varieties were identified with their areas. There could be irredenta areas outside the "motherland" (such as in Transylvania after Trianon, or in North Sweden after 1809), or more recent colonies such as the Csángó Hungarians in Moldavia outside the historical Hungary, the Estonians in Central Russia or Caucasia, or the Kvens in Northern Norway. Urban individual mobility, in contrast, was hardly taken into account in national philologies fifty or a hundred years ago – except as an intermediate stage leading to deplorable assimilation. American Finnish or American Hungarian, for instance, were seen as rootless, dwindling varieties doomed to death. The future of a language was in the soil of its homeland.

After the great emigrant and refugee waves of 19th and 20th century, the time of more individual nomadism has come for the three greatest Finno-Ugric nations: young and educated people who already speak one or more foreign languages are leaving Finland, Estonia and Hungary in order to work or study abroad. If they remain abroad, time will show, whether the traditional three-generation pattern of language shift will apply in their case. Or could it be expected that emigrants in the time of globalization will preserve their contact with the heritage language better now that there are new easy-to-use communication technologies and bi- or multilingualism are generally being regarded as a positive phenomenon? This would mean changes in the linguistic consequences of mobility, and the traditional concepts and models of explanation in the research of multilingualism and language contact should be updated.

Among the so-called minor Finno-Ugric languages, modern mobility has clearly affected the Saami, who might become something like a precedent. In Finland, for instance, more than half of the Saami and an even greater majority of Saami children and youth live outside the Saami area. For the maintenance of their language and culture, they must rely on the one hand on their own "City-Saami" organizations and networks, on the other hand on the support of society, school and the media (which, of course, should be developed further; see especially Lindgren 2000). For the Finno-Ugric minorities in Russia, this support is often lacking. In Russia, moving into urban environment may cause even families to change their internal language of communication into Russian. In the media and in the school system, the position of the heritage language is often very weak.

In addition to internal mobility (and the traditional problem of scattered population), new international mobility of educated young people has begun to affect some Finno-Ugrians of Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. One possible target is Finland, the country of linguistic relatives. The Finnish language has traditionally been used to some extent in Russian Karelia, and since the 1990s there has been more and more instruction of Finnish as a foreign language in other parts of Russia (see e.g. Hännikäinen 1997). The brain drain to Finland is already a traditional problem in Russian Karelia, and it is known that talented young Finno-Ugrians from other parts of Russia as well have come to the West with a scholarship and stayed there. The essential question is now whether this kind of brain drain – sometimes even indirectly triggered by Finno-Ugric institutions and organizations – only

profits the mobile individuals and their target countries. How could we help their communities of origin to profit from this new mobility?

I do not know whether there has been any systematic research on this new mobility of the Finno-Ugrians and its consequences. In Finno-Ugric linguistics, linguistic phenomena such as contact-induced language change or individual language attrition have hardly been investigated in this respect (for understandable reasons). One could ask a polemic question: have the mobile speakers of Finno-Ugric minority languages been forgotten – do Finno-Ugric studies only see either the traditional rural dialects or the standard languages cultivated by a small city intelligentsia? Or does this mobility of speakers exist at all: is it so that the language dies as soon as it has moved outside the traditional speaker communities?

## **Science and technology in the global market**

The development of communication and information technologies, an essential part of globalization, makes itself felt in science and to some extent even in Finno-Ugric studies. In the online gazette *Yale Global*, the physicist Ramamurti Shankar (2003) bursts into a frenetic praise of globalization when describing how electronic means of publication helped the scientists of poor countries to get on a par with their colleagues. An Indian researcher, for instance, need not wait for months for his paper to appear, constantly afraid that an American colleague might publish a similar idea first, and how a publication is received does not depend on the quality of its printing and paper. In nature sciences this is possible, because the objects of research are the same all over the world and everybody speaks the same language – Shankar claims that this universal language is mathematics, but we linguists know that the lingua franca in science is English. A paper on physics, however genial, would hardly be distributed worldwide, had it only appeared in Russian, Finnish or Burmese.

In Finno-Ugric studies, the situation is different. For the first, there is no common language, but alongside with English the three greatest Finno-Ugric languages, Russian and even German or the Scandinavian languages are used. Secondly, the volume of research is much smaller, there are private hunting grounds available for all researchers, and the results do not get antiquated as they do in science. Publications which appeared twenty, fifty or a hundred years ago may still be completely usable – and due to cost reasons, partly also to copyright questions, they will remain on paper, outside the digital world. The third problem (cf. also Laakso 2001, 2005) consists of the formerly general technophobia of Finno-Ugrists and, above all, the individualistic tradition avoiding teamwork and networking. This amounts to a vicious circle of poor accessibility of material, poor compatibility (everybody uses whatever means and principles of documentation s/he prefers) and poor networking of researchers.

The problems of globalization in Finno-Ugric studies, of course, are partly due to the fact the Finno-Ugric studies are not a very global discipline. They are practised in a small part of Eurasia and marginally outside it, mostly in North America, but in the new “tiger” countries of vastly expanding economy in Asia they are unknown and irrelevant. As many other disciplines in the humanities, we cannot be exported to China, and complete globalization cannot be a future goal for Finno-Ugric studies. However, we could have reacted to the challenge of internationalization better than what has been done so far.

In addition to the poor networking between researchers – of course, we can ask how fair it is to add the challenge of networking to the growing burden of teaching, research and university administration – there is a special challenge in Finno-Ugric studies: the language barrier and some kind of a digital divide still existing between Russia and the West. The latter might be illustrated by the recent discussion initiated by Mari activists on Internet fora on

adding a few Cyrillic special characters needed for the Mari language(s) to Windows<sup>1</sup>. In fact, as Unicode activists who joined the discussion promptly pointed out, these characters are already included in Unicode and thus in the newer versions of the Windows operating system. The problem cannot thus be solved by Bill Gates – whom the Mari activists addressed in an open letter – but only by updating the hardware and expertise available in Mari El, which, of course, is a far greater challenge.

The most essential challenge to Finno-Ugric studies, however, comes from inside the world of research. The connections between Finno-Ugristics and general linguistics need to be developed. Until now, general linguistic publications have sometimes used examples from Finnish, Estonian and Hungarian (mostly probably in papers written by native speakers of these languages), but according to my own unscientific sampling, references to Guugu Yimidhirr, Lakhota or Mbugu in general linguistic literature are vastly more frequent than references to Veps or Mansi. It is also known that erroneous, misinterpreted or bizarre statements about Finno-Ugric languages abound in general linguistic literature. (Somebody should investigate this systematically, in the same way as the Norwegian Jan Engh (2006) has researched the Norwegian-language examples used in recent general linguistic literature by non-Norwegian-speaking authors. In his data, two thirds of the examples showed minor or major errors. If they do these things in the green wood, what will happen in the dry?) There is obviously something wrong in how information on Finno-Ugric languages is transmitted to outsiders in the linguistic world, and I believe that Finno-Ugric studies are in grave danger of getting marginalized.

One essential background factor for this danger is, of course, the increasing dominance of the English language. As pointed out, for instance, by Susanna Shore (2002) in the editorial of the journal *Virittäjä* a few years ago, it is more and more common that Anglophone linguists, or linguists writing in English, approach even European culture languages as if they were unresearched, virgin lands – because the literature on these languages, however rich, is not available in English. For Finno-Ugric studies, where German and Russian are *lingue franche* of essential importance, this is a particularly serious problem. A great part of our important sources and our research tradition has ceased to exist for those innumerable linguists who only read English (and their mother tongue) – and yet comment on questions pertaining to our language family.

## **The erosion of the nation-state – are we losing our partner?**

In connection with globalization, the role of the nation-state is weakened, or at least it changes. The political system becomes a “mixed actor system” entwined with market economy agents and international organizations. In questions of defense and security, the nation-state will not always be able to protect its citizens from transnational or local ethnic terrorism, in jurisdiction, general moral principles and international laws override national legislature. (Held 1999: 50, 72–73.) The need for new “global governance” increases the influence of transnational agency. At the same time, culture and economy are more and more intertwined – we start speaking about culture *export* or the *production* of research and creating formulae and indices allegedly measuring the cost-profit-relations in science and learning.

It is a well-known fact that the invasion of economics in science leads to difficulties for minor and economically less important disciplines: their internal impact is difficult to measure, if they remain outside international citation indices, and their impact in society is hard to prove if they do not produce financial profit measurable in money. Small disciplines,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mari.ee/eng/articles/polit/2008/03/02.html>

lacking business-supported research institutions, can mainly rely on universities, which, in turn, are more and more clearly in the service of education and labour market policies. Hybridizing the education system with market economy arouses resistance in both rich and poor countries, but there seems to be no alternative strategy to be found (Fairclough 2007: 66–69).

These problems are well known to all small disciplines, particularly in the humanities. But there are special challenges meeting the so-called national disciplines (*Nationalwissenschaften*), to which Finno-Ugric studies in Finland belong. They are in danger of losing their partner. Finno-Ugric studies, as other disciplines dealing with national languages and cultures, have constituted something of an ideological support for the nation-state politics in Finland, to some extent in Estonia and Hungary, speaking for such things – the so-called national values – that cannot be measured with money. In this connection, I have already often quoted the decision of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences from 1842 (in Zsirai 1937: 522): The pioneering expeditions of Antal Reguly to the Finno-Ugrians of Russia were to be supported, because Hungary did not have any colonies across the seas or resources to send forth polar expeditions. By investigating the related languages, the international image and self-esteem of Hungarian sciences and learning and the Hungarian people would be built. No cost-profit analyses were presented, as the things at stake were something a civilized European state of some self-esteem simply had to do.

A civilized European state of those times – the first years of classical Finno-Ugric studies – was a unit ruled by a national elite and populated by a “people”, conceived of as a homogeneous collective or an extended family, whose almost biological or racial “family unity” constituted the ideological legitimation of the nation-state. The idealized people spoke one and the same language, and it was not necessarily meant to learn other languages. The educated classes, in contrast, spoke and were expected to speak many languages, in addition to cultivating the national language. For the political decision-makers of those times, language was partly a value in itself, the basis of the nation-state ideology, and also the carrier of cultural values whose importance could not be measured in money.

Seen in this light, the language awareness of today’s decision makers might be developing in an alarming direction. In her recent MA thesis at the Department of Translation Studies of the University of Tampere, Nina Palmgren (2007) has investigated the attitudes of communication professionals in technology towards the use of Finnish or hybridized “Finglish” varieties. According to this small pilot study, the language awareness of the informants, sometimes even educated in linguistics and/or translation studies, seems alarmingly thin: the informants often regard language as merely a means (and Finnish as a useless burden), or even in the best case they produce emotional and unfounded phrases about the “exoticness” of Finnish as a value in itself. And if Finnish in internationalizing circles is seen as a burden or in the best case as an exotic decorative element, what kind of support can we expect from the professionals of politics, economy and technology for the research of related languages or the history of the Finnish language?

The language awareness and language knowledge of the decision-makers is, thus, in danger of erosion, and, as stated above, disciplines using other languages than English are threatened by marginalization. At the same time, Finno-Ugric studies are losing the support of the nation-state. From the latter half of the 20th century on, historical linguistics or the study of language relatedness has ceased to be the central or leading part of linguistic inquiry, which means that Finno-Ugric studies cannot market themselves as the cutting edge of international linguistic studies any more. On the other hand, the building of national identity does not rely on the research of national prehistory the way it did: researching the present and securing the future of the Finnish language is more important than national root-seeking. The priorities have changed. Are we still crying over spilt milk?

Perhaps the clearest sign of changed priorities can be seen in one important background institution of Finno-Ugric studies, the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland (*Kotus*). The tasks of Kotus as defined by law include not only the research of languages spoken in Finland but also Finno-Ugric studies in general. Kotus has also been assigned the administration of dictionary projects (i.a. Mordvin, Mansi, Mari, Karelian, etymological dictionary of Finnish) stemming from the golden era of Finno-Ugristic fieldwork, and it maintains one of the best Finno-Ugristic libraries in the world. Now that the dictionary projects are being finished, one after another, and the new version of the Finnish etymological dictionary has appeared, what remains is *Álgu*, the etymological database project of Saami, and the – in itself very valuable – work of editing existing material to a form more accessible for today's researchers. A sharper linguistic profile in Finno-Ugric studies or recruitment of new employees for Finno-Ugristics seems to be lacking, to my knowledge (I do hope I am wrong).

## **New positive developments?**

So far, I have been repeating the usual message of minor disciplines ridden by the structural change in academia: Hi State, send more money! The problems of Finno-Ugric studies are neither new nor unique. Almost ten years ago, Riho Grünthal and I reflected upon the perspectives of Finno-Ugric studies (Grünthal & Laakso 2001), and when writing this paper, I was confronted with a similar feeling of “something should be done”. There seems to have been no general discussion on the future perspectives of Finno-Ugric studies, as suggested in our 2001 paper... At the same time, the problems mentioned here are well known to many of us. One could almost state that wherever two or three Finno-Ugrists meet, these questions arise.

The fact that the problems are neither unique nor new could mean that there are already solutions available. One essential factor was mentioned already in the beginning of this paper: the inner complexity of the globalization phenomenon. The so-called globalist discourse, presenting globalization as a unitary, inevitable nature phenomenon rolling forth like a tsunami, conceals numerous cross-currents, new nests of diversity, new connections. Globalization destroys old traditions but may offer new opportunities. Traditional institutions may become powerless, but this does not mean that their goals or the involved factors would be powerless or futile.

The research of Finno-Ugric languages and cultures may find new contact surfaces. Signs of change are already in the air. In the core area of traditional Finno-Ugric studies, historical linguistics, there is – as already mentioned – an interesting and ambitious discussion going on, and the sharp (although narrow) cutting edge of this discussion still finds its way to international linguistic fora. Researchers of minority languages and endangerment are building connections towards non-Finno-Ugric minority researchers, and in cultural studies there are interesting areal perspectives available, such as the Volga region or Siberia. In clearly linguistic studies, language typology could be the area where Finno-Ugric and general linguistic studies can profit from and support each other.

These contact points are nothing new in themselves: cultural studies, problems of minority languages or reflections on the general laws of human language have been present in Finno-Ugric studies as long as there have been serious Finno-Ugric studies. The essential difference is that in traditional Finno-Ugric studies, this research took place within the Finno-Ugric framework, its institutions and posts: there were Finno-Ugric language studies (at a time when there was no general linguistics yet), Finno-Ugric ethnography or Finnish and comparative folkloristics. Now, there are various different, international institutions, the cooperation of which poses the greatest challenges.

The changes brought forth by globalization mean, in essence, that the Finno-Ugristic institutions cannot be taken for granted any more. Our research will not disappear, its objects and its problems will not cease to be important. But our institutions, our university posts, our scholarly societies, our publication series and congresses will have to be legitimated – that means: “sold” – , built and networked over and over again. Again, we will have to reflect upon Finno-Ugric studies, explain what they mean and what they are needed for. We can only hope that beside all this we will have time and strength to do Finno-Ugristics proper.

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