On parallel teaching of Finnish and Estonian
within Finno-Ugric studies extra muros
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Background

Finnish-Estonian “close contrastive studies” (Fi. lähivertailu, “close comparison”) – i.e. investigating how Finns learn Estonian or vice versa, or the study of Finnish-Estonian bilingualism – already look back to a long tradition. In contrast, relatively little attention has been paid to the situation not unusual at universities and other teaching institutions outside Finland and Estonia: teaching Finnish and Estonian side by side in an environment where the dominant language, the language of instruction and the default native language of the students is neither of these two. I am no expert of language teaching, but in my profession, I have to deal with questions of administration, student recruitment and other academic planning and PR activities. For this reason, I try to keep the following reflections on a general level, hoping that language teaching professionals can be motivated to comment on and investigate the questions I attempt to raise in this paper.

For a starting point for these reflections, I distributed a preliminary query to two e-mail lists, UKANET (serving the communication between teachers of Finnish at foreign universities and the coordinating organs within the Finnish Ministry of Education) and the Estonian EKKAV list (correspondingly, connecting teachers of Estonian language and culture abroad and institutions in Estonia). I asked teachers of Finnish and Estonian to share their opinions on and experiences of the parallel teaching of Finnish and Estonian, possible difficulties (such as problems caused by interference between sister languages) and synergies, and the position of Finnish and Estonian in the curriculum. Only some dozen teachers found the time to answer my questions, but these
few answers – largely confirming my own experiences and previous comments by other colleagues – contain interesting ideas serving as a basis for further discussion.\(^1\).

To explain the background, a few words on the general framework of teaching Finnish and Estonian abroad and on the concept mentioned in the title, “Finno-Ugric studies extra muros” (Fi. ulkomaanfennougristiiikka, German Auslandsfinnougristik). The teaching of Finnish and Estonian at universities can be administratively allocated either on areal basis or on the basis of language relatedness. In the areal solution, Finnish or Estonian is taught as part of the languages (and cultures) of Scandinavia, the Baltic countries or the Baltic Sea region, of Northeastern Europe or even “languages of Central Eurasia”, as in Bloomington, Indiana. If Finnish (Fennistics) constitutes a subject of its own, it may administratively belong to an institute of North-European or Scandinavian languages. In the genetic solution, the teaching of Finnish or Estonian is connected with (historical-comparative) Finno-Ugric studies or simply with Hungarian. In addition, there are universities which do not offer Finnish or Estonian as an independent philological subject, only practically oriented language courses at the university language centre, or in connection with general linguistics, in order to widen the horizon of the students. Many curricula of general linguistics, for instance, include a compulsory course in a non-Indo-European language.

According to the CIMO website (http://finland.cimo.fi/ > Studying Finnish abroad) and the corresponding homepages of the Estonian Ministry of Education (http://www.hm.ee/index.php?046907), there are more than twenty universities around the world offering courses in both Estonian and Finnish on a regular basis. For regrettable but understandable historical-financial-political reasons, there are many universities teaching Finnish but not Estonian. On the other hand, in the last few years the teaching of Estonian has begun in a few universities where Finnish is not taught, at least not regularly; this seems to be the case in Glasgow and Miskolc. Even at universities teaching both languages, there are not necessarily many connections between the teaching of Finnish and Estonian, and the sister languages may be taught at

\(^1\) Colleagues who answered my query: Cornelius Hasselblatt, Paula Jääsalmi-Krüger, Kerdi-Liis Kiirs, Virpi Masonen, Kaarina Mononen together with Larisa Mukovskaya, Sari Päivärinne, Tiina Savolainen, Kirsti Siitonen, Lasse Suominen, Anne Tamminen and Riitta-Liisa Valijärvi. My cordial thanks to all of them, as well as to Annkatrin Kaivapalu and the anonymous referees of the VIRSU 3 publication for good comments and useful source references!
different departments – thus at least in Kiel, where Finnish is taught in connection with Nordic studies, Estonian with General Linguistics.

Most universities teaching both sister languages are situated in Europe, most of them in Germany, adjacent areas, and Hungary. In these countries, Finnish and Estonian traditionally belong to Finno-Ugric studies; such “classical Finno-Ugric departments” can be found in most universities of Hungary, in Göttingen, Hamburg, Munich, Vienna and Groningen. Thus, there is a good reason to speak about Finno-Ugric studies in connection with the teaching of Finnish and Estonian abroad – even if language relatedness and historical relatedness are not automatically taken into account in language teaching.

Finno-Ugric studies extra muros is a term appropriate to describe Finno-Ugric departments outside Finland, Estonia and Hungary. In the three “Finno-Ugric countries”, Finno-Ugric studies is an “exotic” subject clearly distinct from the “national philology”, mainly concentrating on related languages (in particular, the minor Finno-Ugric languages) and historical-comparative linguistics. “Domestic” Finno-Ugric studies have also lost their original, historical connection with literature studies, ethnography and other cultural studies and are now practically exclusively linguistically oriented. In other countries, in contrast, Finno-Ugric studies include studies in Finnish, Hungarian and/or Estonian language, literature and culture, from political history to architecture, and the role of historical linguistics and minor related languages is necessarily marginal – true, in this respect there are great differences between universities.

Finno-Ugric studies extra muros are thus comparable to any modern European philology and may also (as minor philological subjects in general?) be drifting towards interdisciplinary cultural studies. In this respect, there might not be such a great difference between the genetic/Finno-Ugric and “areal” framework as it might seem judging on the name labels of subjects or institutes. Most probably, practically all teaching of Finnish and Estonian as foreign languages must face the same general questions which will be dealt with in what follows: the heterogeneity of student groups, combining and comparing the languages in curriculum planning, problems and challenges of interference. In particular, the problems of parallel teaching of Finnish and Estonian raise questions about the role of linguistics and metalinguistic knowledge in academic language teaching.
From motivation to problems of motivation

The different administrative solutions reflect different concepts of why a language such as Estonian or Finnish should be studied. The “genetic solution”, i.e. the framework of traditional Finno-Ugric studies, is motivated by theoretical, linguistic interest in language (as well as investigating the national prehistory of Finns, Hungarians or Estonians). Areal solutions, such as Northern European or Baltic Sea region philologies, suit well together with cultural studies or other non-linguistic interests (but also for contrastive or areal-typological linguistics). Most teachers of Finnish/Estonian as a foreign language will have encountered students who have had problems with either of these approaches. The traditional Finno-Ugric approach will not open the doors for the whole cultural area: a deeper understanding of the cultural history of Finland is impossible without the background of the Swedish language and Scandinavian history, and knowing just Estonian will not open the doors to all the Baltic countries. On the other hand, the areal approach may be hampered by the deep differences between the languages: How, for instance, do German-language universities offering curricula in Nordic or Baltic Sea Region studies deal with the fact that for a German-speaking student it will be immensely easier to acquire a working knowledge in Swedish, a related Germanic language, than in Finnish or Estonian?

Students of humanities rarely choose their subjects with a certain professional goal or competence profile in mind. They often come out of curiosity, just to try it out – or they are motivated by a rather diffuse and holistic interest in a certain country or culture (insightful reflections on the perspective of non-Finno-Ugric students of Finno-Ugristics are presented by Hasselblatt 1989 and Patri 1996). Many of those attracted by such a holistic interest in Finland or Estonia already have relations or personal contacts in these countries, sometimes even some kind of a language knowledge. This leads to the well-known problem of heterogeneous groups: students of small exotic languages include both complete beginners – setting the starting level for the whole group – and a broad range of students who know the language to some extent, for instance, half-natives who have learnt it from one of their parents as a spoken vernacular at home.
These speakers are typically confronted with – and even surprised by – problems with the orthography and grammar of the standard language; cf. Siitonen 2005).

In departments teaching Finnish and Estonian side by side, these reasons may bring (half or near) native speakers of Finnish to Estonian groups, or vice versa. Some of the language teachers who answered my questionnaire saw this as a problem for group dynamics: after only a few hours, students with previous knowledge of Finnish are already able to build whole sentences in Estonian and try their wings in simple conversation, while their fellow students starting from scratch are still struggling with the basics of pronunciation and find it difficult to understand morphophonological complexities such as the Finnic consonant gradation. In the worst case, part of the group loses their motivation, while others are misled to overrate their level of language command.

**Interference – a problem with many faces**

Ever since my student days, as I heard Professor Gábor Bereczki, a Hungarian Finno-Ugrist with a perfect command of Estonian and an excellent knowledge of Finnish, speak about the physical anthropology of the Eastern Mari who have a “wide eyesight, just like the Votyaks” [misled by cognate false friends, he confused Fi. laaja ‘wide, extensive’ with Est. lai ‘broad’ and Fi. näkö ‘(eye)sight’ with Est. nägu ‘face’], I have admired those non-Finnic colleagues who, despite problems of interference, dare to speak both Finnish and Estonian. There are success stories of this kind in the international Finno-Ugrist circles, but I have also met foreigners who theoretically know both Finnish and Estonian but refrain from the active use of Estonian, because they fear Finnish might interfere. Many teachers of Finnish or Estonian also consider interference a problem for the parallel teaching of these two languages – however, already in my small sample, opinions on the severity of this problem vary greatly.

There are obviously different kinds and qualities of interference problems. Many teachers mentioned the problem of lexical interference, some stated briefly that case endings and numbers (that is: plural forms?) are problematic or that students try to inflect the Estonian negation word as in Finnish, some referred to problems in the pronunciation. (Interestingly, the colleague from St. Petersburg mentioned that Russian-
speaking students consider the l sound difficult: after just having learned the Finnish l, they are confronted with a different l in Estonian. As a Finnish speaker learning Estonian, I have never thought of l being particularly problematic. Is it because of the palatalization of Estonian l in certain positions, or just because of different teaching traditions or different tolerance towards the Russian “hard”, non-palatalized l? Often it is difficult to distinguish possible interference from other errors in, for instance, choice of case form. (No examples were given, but one could expect that there are parallel sources for erroneous choice of case in Estonian, German and Russian, for instance, the use of comitative case or adposition with tytetyväinen ’content (with something/somebody)’ instead of the Finnish illative.)

Considering this, it is strange that research on the problems of parallel teaching of related languages is not quite easy to locate. There is much less research into the parallel teaching of Finnish and Estonian than into the internal relationships of these two languages. True, there are many studies on interference between multiple target languages, including cases in which the target languages are related, and also on interference between related languages. Murphy (2003) lists numerous studies showing that the relatedness of languages plays a greater role for the interference between the languages studied than the extent of confrontation or the fluency acquired. According to Ringbom (1986, 2007), Finns learning Swedish as first foreign language may mix Swedish elements into their learner’s English, while Finland Swedes who have learned Finnish as their first foreign language seldom show Finnish elements in their English. In some of these studies, there are also references to Finnish and Estonian (Jarvis & Odlin (2000) state that also bound morphemes can be transferred between Finnish and Estonian, that is, hybridized word forms are possible), but a more extensive and detailed study on Finnish and Estonian as parallel target languages seems to be missing.

In these studies, a strange terminological problem often surfaces that might reflect a more profound problem in the approach. Applied linguists, reflecting on interference between related languages, often speak about “typological similarity” or “typological affinity”. However, typology is something completely different from language relatedness (as we know, Finnish and Estonian are genetically very closely related but typologically surprisingly far from each other), which means that these linguists run the risk of confusing two basically different phenomena.
True, laymen’s views on similarity and affinity between two languages may be different from those of linguists (see e.g. Kaivapalu 2004) and an average language learner may not see the difference between structural similarity and genetic relatedness – or s/he may see it differently (Murphy [2003] and Ringbom [2007] use the term psychotypology). However, there may be a difference between seeing expressions of two languages as structurally, “typologically” similar (that is: elements with similar functions in the same order) and seeing them as genetically “the same” (cognate). We might assume that typological similarity and “sameness” (cognateness) behave differently.

In the former case, interference would be mainly structural, concerning, for instance, word order or choice of case, and whole elements would only be transferred inadvertently, as “slips of the tongue”. (Sometimes slips of the tongue are followed by an explicit self-correction, as in the following utterance produced by a Dutch-speaking student of French with English as the first foreign language, quoted by Murphy [op.cit. 1] from Dewaele [1998]: *Ils veulent gagner more, euh, plus.*) In the latter case, the student produces, for instance, a Finnicized verb form *työttää*2 ‘to work’, based on Estonian *tööta*-, and only reluctantly refrains from using it – since Finnish has derivatives such as *vyöttää* ‘to girt’ from *vyö* ‘belt, girdle’, why could not there be a *työttää* from *työ* ‘work’? For this language learner, the border between L2 and L3 is not water-tight, or L3 is conceived of as a variety of L2. Testing this hypothesis will need further empirical research – but in any case, I plead for a critical analysis of the concept of “typological affinity”.

**Problem or resource?**

When composing my questionnaire to the e-mail lists of Finnish and Estonian teachers abroad, I may have too obviously directed the informants to see the similarity between the two sister languages as a problem. Many of those who answered claimed that knowing the other sister language is an asset. Probably the pros and cons are to be found on the level of attitudes. Students with previous knowledge of a related language,

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2 The verb *työttää* has been recorded from Finnish-Estonian bilingual children (Grünthal 2005) and Ingrian Finns (Opas &al. 1997: http://nora.hd.uib.no/Ingrisk/anna1.html, 9.1.2007).
overestimating their level of language command, may have a negative impact on the group dynamics in the teaching situation, but they also display a positive openness towards the strange features of the target language. The teacher does not have to spend his/her time persuading these students to accept the fact that the structure of the Finnic languages differs in many respects from the great European languages they have studied before.

Considering this, it seems strange that there seem to be no attempts to systematically utilize the relatedness of Finnish and Estonian in the parallel teaching of these languages. Only Ms Tiina Savolainen, Lecturer of Finnish at the University of Göttingen, told me she was planning, together with her Estonian colleague, a practically oriented course on “Finnish and Estonian in comparison”. Yet in other parts of Europe, there are many projects with a similar point of departure, possibly offering useful ideas.

The project EuRom4, presented by Castagne (1998, 1999), was initiated by four universities. The aim was to give students who know one Romance language (French, Italian, Spanish or Portuguese) a passive knowledge of three other languages. The basics of this method are “transparent zones”, “empty words”, “global understanding”, combining listening with reading, and teaching grammar “on demand”. By “transparent zones” those parts of sentences are meant in which shared vocabulary and similar word order facilitate understanding. “Empty words” (such as the French machin, or English thingummyjig, or German Dings) can be used by language learners as placeholder translation equivalents for those words that are not immediately understandable. Doing this, the students can read a text like a “good reader”, concentrating on as large text units as possible and “understanding globally”. Supporting texts by audio versions read by native speakers makes it easier to identify syntactic and textual structures. Grammar in the strict sense is only offered “on demand”, following the needs of the learners.

IGLO (Intercomprehension in Germanic Languages Online, http://tea.fernuni-hagen.de/Iglo/Install/kurs/Ressourcen/start.htm) is an EU financed project initiated in the years 2000–2002. One of the prospective aims of this project is to research intercomprehension between closely related languages (such as the Scandinavian languages) in order to develop methods utilizing language relatedness even between somewhat more distantly related languages. The IGLO website offers texts, exercises

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3 Later, I heard from Tiina Savolainen that the planned course, regrettably, had to be cancelled.
and grammar sketches, plus a short general survey on Germanic languages. IGLO, like EuRom4, is also connected to the EuroCom project bundle (http://www.eurocomresearch.net/) with its own Internet portals for the research of the intercomprehension between Germanic, Romance (see e.g. Klein 2006) and Slavic languages. The website includes, for instance, course material teaching German-speaking language learners with a knowledge of one Romance language to understand other Romance languages.

All these European projects seem to be aimed at relatively well-educated adults who already have some experience in language learning, and the goal is a passive understanding of the target language. The target group, thus, is similar to academic studies of philology, but the practical goals are different. Academic philological studies typically include linguistics, literature and cultural studies and also aim at an active command of the target language. Despite these differences, it is astonishing that this kind of an approach is completely absent in the teaching of Finnish and Estonian abroad. Risking a mild exaggeration, we might state that Finnish outside Finland is taught as if the Estonian language would not even exist, and vice versa.

**Why not, and what to do?**

The above exaggeration, of course, does not hold true completely. Certainly, background information on the related languages and prehistory of Finnish and Estonian is presented in some form in the courses, and most of those teachers who answered my questionnaire assured me that they certainly refer to related languages whenever it is needed to explain a phenomenon. When giving a theoretical course on Estonian grammar at the University of Vienna, I have also experienced what Estonian linguists saw already in the 19th century: in explaining Estonian morphophonology, Finnish is an invaluable help – although it must be admitted that Finnocentrism has been some kind of a nuisance for the research of all other Finnic languages.

However, there is a lot of room for improvements. Many comments by Finnish teachers showed that a typical teacher of Finnish (abroad) hardly knows Estonian – in the best case, s/he can direct the students with their questions to the lecturer of Estonian. Textbooks rarely include information on other Finno-Ugric languages, and all lecturers
did not consider it necessary, either. Actually, Finnish textbooks are almost always meant for a greater audience, not only for academic philologist learners. This seems to be the case at least in the German-speaking countries: the German-language textbooks of Finnish emphasize vocabulary and communication, but the passages on grammar and linguistic background information are far too scanty for academic purposes.

Another relevant factor is the previously mentioned difference in goals. The teaching of Finnish or Estonian as a foreign language aims at an active command of the modern language and a knowledge of the country and its culture. The historical-comparative approach which would build the most natural bridge between the sister languages (as applied by Lauri Kettunen in his classic textbook of “Differences between Estonian and Finnish” 1926) is not the self-evident point of departure any more, not even for linguistically oriented students – not to speak about those numerous students who are more interested in culture and literature than in linguistics. In the curricula, already challenged by the requirements of practical language teaching, there is hardly any place for systematic, historically based presentation of the differences between Finnish and Estonian (historical linguistics it is, even if camouflaged as synchronic rules). On the other hand, if academic, philological study of a language is considered to require a conscious linguistic analysis of language, then a method of the EuroCom type, based on intuition, emphasizing vocabulary and minimizing the teaching of grammar is probably not the best option.

Finally, the question is connected with cultural and academic policy. Language teaching by way of “bridging the gap” between Finnish and Estonian would easily lead to the priorization of one of the sister languages. Most probably, the prioritized language would be Finnish, which, being phonologically more archaic and morphophonologically more simple, would be a better point of departure. (Or would it? This is also a question deserving further discussion.) This would strengthen the position of Finnish as the “big brother” and contribute to an already existing skewedness in culture-political relations. A model of two sister languages taught side by side might be difficult to fit in the existing curricula, at least outside the traditional comparative Finno-Ugric studies. In fact, it might also be problematic for many departments of Finno-Ugric studies extra muros: Is it right that students with Finnish as “major language” can choose between Estonian or Hungarian as a “second Finno-Ugric language” with similar requirements? Or – this question was posed by Paula Jääsalmi-Krüger – if the curriculum requires
students of Fennistics to study Estonian as minor language, should not students of Hungarian take a compulsory course in Mansi or Khanty?

It is thus not quite simple to build a “bridge over the Gulf of Finland” in the teaching of Finnish and Estonian abroad. However, there are a lot of unused opportunities here. One wonders whether all students of Finnish or Estonian in other countries know that once they have overcome some central difficulties of Finnic grammar, such as the consonant gradation or the complicated system of object case assignment, they might easily go on and discover a completely new language and cultural area on the other side of the Gulf of Finland...

Let me conclude with a provocative question: Have we neglected the possibility of building a project of the EuroCom type, simply because of the ignorance of the Finns who do not know enough about the Estonian language, or because of the arrogance of the Estonians who think they already know more than enough about Finnish?

References


