

An annotated bibliography of an illustrious scholar

When the second-named author of this contribution was working at LMU Munich as the third-named author's assistant, he through her became aware of Parkinson's Law: that work will always expand to fill up any available time you might dream of someday having in your schedule. In an academic context, this primarily pertains to the myriad administrative tasks that continuously pop up and require execution for structures to be upheld, with it being a rather theoretical hope that these activities will create tangible value, or even joy, for anybody.

An example of this principle – or so we thought – is the recent near universal requirement for scholars to document all their academic activities in research information systems, such as the University of Vienna's [u:cris](http://ucris.univie.ac.at) (Current Research Information System) at ucris.univie.ac.at. When we, in the process of editing this volume, found ourselves overwhelmed by the daunting prospect of having to adequately represent the heroine of the day, we suddenly realized: university administration has been forcing her to document her own research activities, and she has been doing so meticulously in a manner commensurate with her Protestant background. Suddenly, we were those abstract hypothetical individuals experiencing tangible value, and even joy! The jubilarian's complete research record can be accessed at finno-ugristik.univie.ac.at/ueber-uns/mitarbeiterinnen/laakso/; rather than plagiarize her work in a volume meant to honour her, we created a word cloud¹ on the basis of her publication titles.

¹ Created using www.wordclouds.com

Department of Finno-Ugrian studies at the University of Szeged when Elena exclaimed: “Girls [the standard address within our circle], there is a possibility to compile a handbook of Uralic languages for Oxford, what do you think about it?” Without a moment of hesitation, an affirmative and even joyful consensus was reached. This was not our first shared enterprise. We had at this point been carrying out shared academic and educational endeavours for years, notably the *Ob-Ugric Database Project* within EURO-BABEL³ and the International Winter Schools of Finno-Ugric Studies: ever since Johanna organized the first one in Vienna in 2013, these have been taking place annually, come hell, high water, or global pandemic. Currently they are being organized as part of the Erasmus+ funded strategic partnership *The (Re-)Making of a Discipline. Digital Transformation and Internationalization in and beyond Uralic Studies (REMODUS)*⁴, headed by ... you guessed it.

Despite these ongoing initiatives, *The Oxford Guide to Uralic Languages* (OGUL⁵) was an unprecedentedly large undertaking. We started developing the concept almost immediately, and while we disagreed on some minor details, we were in full agreement about the basic concept. This was rather impressive given our radically different social, educational, academic, and cultural backgrounds – which is not to mention the difference in temperaments. But we always agreed on the necessity to eliminate borders between Uralic linguistics on the one hand and general, theoretical linguistics on the other, and to strive for a better understanding between different traditions.

At first, it seemed straight-forward enough to set the volume’s content. We did not plan grammar sketches for the individual languages, but rather intended to provide a good number of overviews of different phonological and grammatical characteristics of “our” languages, not only from a classical comparative but also from a typological point of view. We thus hoped to show the distribution, realization, and variation of features across Uralic languages. We also wanted to shine a light on sociolinguistic

³ www.babel.gwi.uni-muenchen.de

⁴ remodus.univie.ac.at

⁵ According to our records this abbreviation only entered usage in correspondences pertaining to the compendium in 2021, showing that it is never too late to make communication more efficient.

and social-historical topics (e.g., literary languages, language endangerment and revitalization, language policies etc.), of course. However, the general editors of the series (*Oxford Guides to the World's Languages*) insisted that grammar sketches cannot be omitted. And so, our second outline included descriptions not only of the usual suspects, but of as many Uralic languages as humanly possible, including ones that rarely receive any attention on an international stage and that had not previously been covered in respectable handbooks (e.g., East Mansi, South Estonian, Kildin Saami). We also saw it as essential that descriptions follow a common structure, thus giving prospective readers the possibility of a systematic comparison. All the authors of contributions were involved in establishing this common structure, as dictated by common wisdom. Already then, the seeds were planted for a volume that, with its three parts (“The making of Uralic languages”, “Language descriptions”, and “General issues and case studies”), would end up spanning almost 1200 pages.

Even with the basic architecture set, the choice of topics for a comprehensive overview of the Uralic languages remained challenging. They had to be relevant also from a typological point of view; it became evident that numerous logical topics either were not covered by earlier works or were mentioned but not sufficiently analysed, were described adequately but only for very few languages, et cetera, et cetera. Lengthy debates in select Central European locations – Johanna’s cosy office in Vienna, the Buda side of the Hungarian capital, the university district of Munich – were needed to flesh out the concept, as was a depletion of strategic green tea and coffee reserves. But the result of these efforts was eventually positively evaluated by anonymous reviewers, and the Oxford publishers accepted the idea of the book.

As we slipped in above, “all the authors”! Each chapter was to be entrusted to the best expert on respective topic. More than forty excellent colleagues were asked to contribute, and the number of those who, for different reasons, could not accept our invitation was very low indeed. What a success! We can neither convey the sense of elation nor reconstruct our victorious exclamations when we received e-mails from colleagues agreeing to contribute. Without a doubt, “great” and “excellent” were among our most frequently used lexemes at the time.

At this point in time, as all contributors to the project can confirm, Johanna's activities as "the correspondent" began. Here she could really show the synergy between her formidable mind and superhuman typing speed: the moment we came to a decision – and sometimes even before that! – she had already clearly and concisely condensed everything we wanted to say and was ready to send it to the intended recipient, be it the contributors or the "Oxford ladies" (as we ended up calling the kind, competent, helpful publishing specialists at Oxford). What a relief it was for Elena and Marianne that Johanna shouldered this responsibility!

A lot could be said about the lengthy, time- and energy-consuming editorial rounds when we got to see first (or second, or third) drafts of the chapters. Often, we would sit down together virtually (using Google Drive and Zoom!) two or three times a week, investing countless hours into discussing exact definitions, debating if provided examples were appropriate, etc. Perhaps it is not surprising that we, when looking back now, consider the years of editorial work on OGUL as one of the most exhilarating phases of our lives. We would argue, we would shout, we would laugh, we would spend hours on end debating until we were completely exhausted – we were living our best academic lives! The experience was not just joyful, but also educational. We learned an immense amount about the structure of the Uralic languages, about smaller and larger details we had not been aware of in our already not insignificantly long scientific careers. We also truly learned to appreciate the expertise and helpfulness of our contributors: it was never an exaggeration when we instinctively, and frequently, declared a contributor to be a genius, a darling, or both.

Recency bias might be a factor in this, but we feel confident in saying that the most nerve-racking phase of the project was the proof-reading and index compilation. It was in this phase of the project that we designated Johanna as "The Hawkeye". It was unbelievable with what speed (!) and reliability she would notice every little mistake, every little kink in language usage, every little suboptimal formulation. The Hawkeye effect was the most self-evident when we had to edit the bibliography.⁶

⁶ It is also why Jeremy, who is standing in for Johanna when compiling this chapter, is looking at the upcoming presentation of this *Festschrift* with trepidation: the moment we have presented the book, a countdown will start

This is not to mention her incomparable talent when it comes to editing, her tenacity for finding better definitions when the ones at our disposal were not doing the trick, her ability to condense excessively wordy prose into something that is immediately comprehensible while being half as long, etc. Here again her ability to committing not just her own thoughts, but also other people's thoughts, to (virtual) paper in a quick and efficient manner was worth its weight in gold, much as it was when she acted as "the correspondent".

Long before the project was complete, we decided that we would one day want to publish the story of how this volume came to be⁷. The editorial process highlighted numerous aspects of our discipline in an impressive manner that would otherwise have been less apparent. For example, some crucial points of traditional terminologies or subfields we thought to be well-researched and well-described turned out to be problematic when approached systematically from the viewpoint of theoretical linguistics. At times it seemed our knowledge was somewhat incomplete (to mention but one example: phonology). Perhaps it was – and is – the terminology that excited all of us, but most of all Johanna. She demonstrated this in her talk "*What shall I call you?*"⁸ – *The systems and names of the various non-finites in Hungarian, Finnish, and Estonian* at the University of Szeged when she was inaugurated as an honorary doctor in November 2021. We are sure the topic will continue to excite us.

With the compendium having only recently been completed, it is still difficult to think about, much less talk about, life after this project. Working together, be it in person or virtually, has become an important part of our lives. It is a well-known psychological phenomenon that when someone finishes a monumental task, a feeling of emptiness takes hold. In our case, however, the feeling of emptiness and the lack of conversations and togetherness was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a

⁷ Bakró-Nagy, Marianne, Johanna Laakso & Elena Skribnik. 2020. "As we say it in Finno-Ugric". Some thoughts on making Uralic language studies more accessible to outsiders. In Janne Saarikivi, Susanna Virtanen, Sampsa Holopainen (eds.), *Ёмас сымың нэ́кве вёртур этност самың патум. Scripta miscellanea in honorem Ulla-Maija Forsberg*, 27–41. Suomalais-Ugrilaisen Seuran Toimituksia 275. Helsinki: Suomalais-Ugrilainen Seura.

⁸ "What shall I call you?" ("Minek nevezzelek?") is the title of one of the most well-known poems by the famous 19th-century Hungarian poet Sándor Petőfi.

different world we woke up to after completing the compendium. It is a world in which rushing to Vienna – the midway point of our group, an eternal Checkpoint Charlie – and to spend at least a little time together, not only working, but also visiting exhibitions, listening to concerts, or just sitting together in the University of Vienna’s campus and eating a lovely Viennese lunch. It is no wonder that, from time to time, a short e-mail from any one of us drops into the other two’s inboxes: “Girls, I miss you! When?” And then we again sit in front of our screens and exchange ideas, conceive new projects, and try to change our tiny little world. May J(EM) be blessed with a long life and new challenges!

Blogging and Popular Science

As none of the authors of this chapter are deeply embedded into the Finnophone digital spheres the jubilarian calls her home, we are not the best people to comment on the exploits of her exceedingly verbose alter ego, Sentrooppa-Santra (sentrooppasantra.wordpress.com), who has for almost exactly 10 years (these lines were typed on 21 December 2021 and her first blog post was published on 23 December 2011), among other things, been keeping her Finnish-speaking audience apprised of political happenings in central Europe, ranging from mundane every-day annoyances to farcical absurdities that must be experienced to be believed. Suffice to say, if one encounters speakers of Finnish with a profound understanding of the (especially, but not exclusively, Hungarian and Austrian) insanity du jour, it is thanks to her noble efforts that they have this insight. Figure 3 below, a word cloud extracted from her blog in December 2021, gives a more specific account of the spectres that have been haunting her over the last decade, or rather, the spectres that she has been haunting.



Figure 3. Word cloud of the jubilarian's "political" blog

Furthermore, Johanna has been operating a second Finnish-language blog, *Kieliö* (kielioblog.wordpress.com), in which she has been contributing to the linguistic education of a Finnish-reading audience since 2016. Figure 4 below illustrates its contents by means of word cloud. Given her outspoken frustration with stereotypes about languages, language, and especially the Finnish language, both external and internal ("Finns don't see gender because Mikael Agricola invented a gender-neutral pronoun", "Finnish is impossible to learn because it has so many cases"), it makes sense that she would throw herself at this task while delivering further empirical evidence for Parkinson's Law.



Figure 4. Word cloud of the jubilarian’s linguistic blog

Fortunately, a non-Finnish-reading audience (or an audience that can read Finnish in a pinch but usually does not) has the occasional opportunity to keep up with her activities in the realm of popular science, political commentary, and the intersection between the two. Every so often, she will publish articles and translations in what she, to the confusion of her readers, calls “International Bad English” (leaving even native speakers of English looking for mistakes or even stylistic shortcomings in a panicked frenzy), pertaining especially to bad arguments that are raised so frequently, it can be useful to always have a detailed dissection at your disposal. Three of her classics come to mind here. We have all encountered occasions when these articles gave just the arguments we needed; we have assigned these articles as mandatory reading to bachelor students in their first years of studies to inoculate them against the nonsense they are likely to encounter if they seek a future in our discipline:

- “The Land of Wonderbugs”, for when you find yourself shocked to discover that your entire course of studies and intended academic career is perceived as offensive by many Hungarians (homepage.univie.ac.at/johanna.laakso/?page_id=74)
- “Linguistic Shadow-boxing”, for when you are told that there is actually an ongoing scientific debate as regards the genealogy of Hungarian (homepage.univie.ac.at/johanna.laakso/?page_id=94)
- “The Finnish Inclusive Pronoun Hoax”, for when somebody tells you that the allegedly esoteric absence of a gender-marked third person singular in Finnish is an egalitarian accomplishment ready for export (kielioblog.wordpress.com/the-finnish-inclusive-pronoun-hoax)

It is up to us as her friends, admirers, and readers to make other gems of her Finnish-language science popularization efforts accessible to a wider audience.

Dictionaries

Two of the jubilarian’s earliest publications (at least among those that the Internet remembers, survivorship bias could be in effect here) might surprise scholars only familiar with her later work:

- Elomaa, Jarmo & Johanna Laakso (eds.), 1986. *Lyydiläismurteiden käänteissanasto*. [*Reverse dictionary of Ludic varieties*.] Lexica Societatis Fenno-Ugricae 2: 9. Helsinki: Suomalais-Ugrilainen Seura. 150 pages.
- Laakso, Johanna (ed.), 1988. Rückläufiges Wörterbuch des Livischen: Anhand des Livischen Wörterbuches von Lauri Kettunen. [*Reverse dictionary of Livonian: On the basis of Lauri Kettunen’s Livonian Dictionary*.] Lexica Societatis Fenno-Ugricae 2: 5. Helsinki: Suomalais-Ugrilainen Seura. 180 pages.

The authors of this chapter postulate that a distinction can be made between *white-collar linguistics* and *blue-collar linguistics*: while white-collar linguistics concern themselves with broadening our understanding of human language and by extension, the human condition, blue-collar linguistics is the time-consuming and strenuous shovelling and stacking of data with the aim of making (a) language more graspable to scholarly and speaker communities. Academic funding is heavily biased towards

white-collar linguistics, but the one cannot exist without the other: blue-collar linguistics create infrastructures that give us the possibility to gain insight into human language not just built on a small set of languages to which we have direct access. Should early-career scholars tasked with strenuous and repetitive blue-collar-linguistic assignments find themselves frustrated and concerned with their future academic prospects, when oftentimes it seems that such tasks “do not really count”, it can serve as an inspiration to them that even Johanna Laakso started her career poring over word lists and arranging them into reverse-sorted lists – and she did this with the technological means of the 1980s, rather than the technological means of today. She has been a working-class heroine all along.



Figure 5. Rosie the riveter, or Johanna the editor?