

Anneli Sarhima: What shall we do with the drunken sailor? Emancipating Finno-Ugric minorities and their “Russian-contaminated” language varieties

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed the reappraisal of minority cultures and languages all over the world. Numerous minority languages that so far have not had a literary standard are being standardised. Numerous varieties that have been considered as “sub-standard” or “regressed” codes, suitable only for domestic or other private use, are now becoming recognised as varieties with full rights to be used in all domains. Numerous people who have been deprived of the right to speak their mother tongue and practise their own culture are being encouraged to do so.

There are numerous practical as well as fundamental problems involved in the cultural and linguistic emancipation of minorities. In March 2001, many of these problems were dealt with in Paris during the three-day conference *L’émancipation linguistique et culturelle des minorités nordiques*. The present article is a slightly revised version of one of the papers read and discussed there. It introduces briefly some of the results of Sarhima 1999, a case study on bilingual language alternation, contact-induced syntactic change and the evolution of mixed codes in two distinct present-day Karelian speech communities. The article aims at presenting for further discussion an issue which hitherto has been ignored in the public discussion of Finnic minority-language standardisation. The fact is that (the majority of) native speakers of these languages employ in their in-group communication varieties that reflect moderate to heavy interference from the local socially dominant language or languages. Therefore, it is argued, there is a true danger that a standard which is deliberately made maximally “pure” may fail to reach the actual users of the language.

The primary data of Sarhima 1999 was drawn from a corpus of interviews with 54 Karelian-Russian bilinguals, and a Russian-Karelian translation test administered to 31 native speakers of Karelian. I shall be referring to these data as the spontaneous interviews and the test data, respectively. The recordings were made by myself in the period of 1989-1994 in Central Karelia and the Tver area.

At its most general level, Sarhima 1999 was concerned with the linguistic outcomes that the bilingual speakers’ constant alternating between Karelian and Russian has had in the Karelian language. As a concrete starting point, a kind of window which offered a micro-perspective into the contemporary habitus of Karelian, I employed one Russian-modelled construction which is used to express necessity in present-day Karelian. I labelled this construction *the Duty and Obligation Construction*, shorter: the DOC. A prototypical DOC consists of the predicate *dolžen* ‘[is] obliged to’, and two complements: an Experiencer, and an infinitive which may be intransitive or complemented by a Target as in example (1):

- (1) *Hüvä načal’nikka dolžen kaikki tiedeä.*
 Exp-Nom Pred-Nec Targ-Nom Inf
 good leader obliged all to-know.
 ‘A good leader is obliged to know everything’.

In addition to the Experiencer and the infinitive, the pattern often contains other complements and adjuncts such as the Beneficiary (Ben) in (2), and the Locative (Loc) in (3):

- (2) Nina dolžen d'oga päivä lugie gaziettoa boabol.
 Exp-Nom Pred-Nec Adjunct InfTarg-Part Ben-AdAll
 Nina [is] obliged every day to read paper grandmother.
 'Nina has to read the paper to grandmother every day.'
- (3) školašša lapšet dolžen olla eänetti.
 Loc-Iness Exp-Nom Pred-Nec Inf Manner
 At school children [are] obliged to-be quiet.
 'At school children have to be quiet.'

The DOC deviates from the other expressions of necessity in Karelian in two respects. First, instead of the inherited unipersonal necessitative verb *pid'äy* 'must, has to', it contains the Russian-origin predicate *dolžen* 'is obliged to; must; has to'. Second, in the DOC the Experiencer is in the nominative, whereas in the inherited Karelian necessitative constructions it is predominantly in the external local case, the adessive-allative as in (4), or occasionally the dative-genitive as in (5):

- (4) Pidi kaikil kolmel l'ähtie.
 Pred-Nec Exp-AdAll Inf
 Had-to all three to-go;
 'All three had to go'. (408, 698/ Rja: 40.)
- (5) Hänem pit'i huolehtie lapšista.
 Exp-Gen Pred-Nec Inf Targ-Elat
 She had to to-take-care children-from;
 'She had to take care of the children'. (113, 1056/ Fed:34.)

For the case usage, too, a Russian origin can be discerned: the Experiencer is in the nominative, exactly as it is in Russian, compare the Russian example (6a) with the Karelian examples (1)-(3) above. (The discontingent Karelian and Russian transcriptions *dolžen* and *dolzhen* etc. are due to that the transliteration of Cyrillic characters follows the British Standard 2979, whilst the Karelian examples are presented using the rules of orthography adopted in the Olonets Karelian primer *Aberi*, 1990.)

- (6a) Horoshiï nachal'nik dolzhen vsyo znat'.
 Exp-Nom Pred-Nec Targ-Acc Inf
 Good leader obliged everything to-know.
 'A good leader should know everything'.

The Russian equivalent of the DOC is a personal construction: the Experiencer is its grammatical subject, and it is always in the nominative. The predicate is not a necessitative verb but a short adjective. Thus it is not accommodated in any verb conjugation paradigm. It is, however, inflected for gender and number: the form of the predicate depends on the number and grammatical or natural gender of the Experiencer; in cases where grammatical and natural gender do not match, the predicate takes the natural gender of the Experiencer. In example (6a) it is in the masculine form; in (6b) it is in the feminine form *dolzhna*, in (6c) in the neuter form *dolzhno*, and in (6d) in the plural form *dolzhny*.

- (6b) Horoshaya zhená dolzhna vsyo umet'.
Exp-Nom-Fem Pred-Nec-Fem Target-Nom Inf
Good wife obliged everything to-be-able-to-do';
'A good wife is expected to be able to do everything'.
- (6c) Éto dolzhno byt' tak.
Exp-Neut Pred-Nec-Neutr Inf Manner
It obliged to-be so;
'It should be so'.
- (6d) Shkol'niki dolzhny učit'sya.
Exp-Nom-PI Pred-Nec-PI Inf
'Schoolchildren obliged to-study';
'Schoolchildren must study'.

In sum, the Karelian DOC displays clear lexical and syntactic interference from Russian, and the origins of the pattern do not pose any particular problems. Yet, as will be seen shortly, the DOC is an extremely intriguing case of syntactic interference.

2. The sailor in point: Russian-contaminated Karelian

The analyses of the data revealed wide morphosyntactic variation within the DOC. One vivid example of the variation is the multiple forms of the Russian-origin predicate *dolzhen*: as illustrated by examples (7) through (10), all morphological forms that the short adjective *dolžen* can take in Russian were represented in the Karelian data as well: *dolžen* < Rus. 'obliged-Masc', *dolžna* < Rus. 'obliged-Fem', *dolžno* < Rus. 'obliged-Neut' and *dolžny* < Rus. 'obliged-PI'. Note that the forms are not necessarily used as they should be used according to Russian grammar but in example (3), for instance, the neuter form is combined with *Ivan* whose natural gender would require the masculine form *dolzhen* in Russian.

- (7) Andilaš dolžen podar'ie pajjan boatjuškalle.
Bride obliged present shirt father-in-law-to
The bride is expected to present the father-in-law with a shirt.
- (8) šie dólžnaa avuttoa lapšil
Exp-Nom Pred-Nec-Fem Inf Ben-AdAll
You obliged to-help children-with/to
- no ei haukkuo.
Partic V-Neg Inf
but not to-scold;
You are expected to help the children, not to scold [them]. (328, 4A/ AS: 1.)
- (9) livana dólžnoo tappoo pahačču.
Exp-Nom-Masc Pred-Nec-Neut Inf Targ-Nom
Ivan obliged to-kill snake;
Ivan is expected to kill the dragon. (230, 2A/AS: 2.)

- (10) Naroda dólžnii en'ämälruadua.
 Exp-Nom-Coll Pred-Nec-PI Manner Inf
 People obliged more to-work;
 People are obliged to work more. (328, 4A/ AS: 1.)

In an attempt to find out what regulates the choice of the form of the predicate in the DOC used by the Karelian informants, I carried out analyses based on the characteristics of the DOCs in the data, and such classical sociolinguistic variables as the age, the sex, and the domicile of the informants. The results of these analyses were totally inconclusive: the data simply did not yield to any traditional sociolinguistic variable. The analyses of the translation test data did not reveal any correlation between the original Russian test sentence and the form of the predicate either. There also was no consistency in the proportion of DOC translations received by individual test sentences that would have suggested that items of a particular type were more likely to be translated by the DOC.

At this stage I believed that we might be concerned here with a case of extreme free variation, and I assumed that this variation could best be explained as an indication of ongoing contact-induced syntactic change that had not settled into any particularly established form. Finally, however, it occurred to me that I could test for the correlations between the form of the predicate, the frequency of the informant's DOC translations, and the characteristics of each informant's way of speaking Karelian during his/her spontaneous interview. This analysis did indeed yield results that appeared fairly consistent throughout the data, that is, both the instances of the DOC that were gathered from spontaneous interviews and the data elicited by the translation test.

In brief, what I found was that the test sentence form was systematically maintained by low-frequency DOC translators who during the spontaneous interview predominantly spoke "pure" Karelian without using Russian words and grammatical forms, while the masculine form *dolžen* was the default choice of the high-frequency DOC translators whose interview vernacular in most cases was more or less Russian-influenced in the sense that they used Russian words and grammatical forms in their speech a lot. In other words, the results of the analyses suggested that for those who prefer Traditional Karelian, the DOC is a construction which calls for codeswitching at the predicate; this claim is supported by the finding that the predicate of the DOC appeared consistently in a completely Russian phonological form. However, those test informants whose naturally occurring speech was characterised by constant alternation between Karelian and Russian lexical and grammatical devices, tended to Karelianise the pattern by establishing the masculine form as the predicate of the DOC.

What the analyses of the informants' spontaneous interviews also revealed was that Karelian-Russian bilingualism has given rise to several new codes. I have chosen to call these new codes Neo-Karelian, Russian-Karelian and Karussian. These codes reflect transfer from Russian to varying degrees, and they differ from each other in their patterns of language alternation.

In Neo-Karelian, which is the least Russian-influenced, Karelian and Russian are not mixed at the level of sentence structure, and Russian-origin items carrying Russian system morphemes appear in typical adjunct positions, such as the adverbial of manner 'at his own expense' in example (11):

- (11) *Nu ka tänä vuodena on mužikka ottau ZA SVOĪ SHCHĖT, [...].*
 But this year is husband takes at his expense
 'But this year my husband is [here, he] takes vacation at his own expense'.
 (330, 21/SS: 2a.)

In the second mixed variety, Russian-Karelian, the proportion of Russian-origin items carrying Russian system morphemes is notably higher than in Neo-Karelian, and the two languages are constantly intermingled at the level of sentence structure. Codeswitching from Karelian into Russian is very frequent and may occur between any pair of constituents as in example (12) where the code changes between the subject and the predicate. Yet it is still possible to distinguish the Karelian and the Russian lexical and grammatical items from each other.

- (12) *Mie suvaičen omua kieldä, kui mie MOGU otkazivaiččie [...]*
 I love own language how I can to-refrain
 'I love my own language, how could I refrain [from speaking it]'. (330, AS: 3.)

The third Russian-influenced variety, Karussian, is characterised by repeated usage of amalgamation constructions, that is, utterances where the code does not change from Karelian into Russian abruptly at a certain, clearly identifiable point. In example (13) the speaker glides from unambiguously Karelian items into unambiguously Russian items via words that are shared by the two languages to varying degrees, that is, Russian-origin words that either are known to have already established themselves in Karelian or else appear to be used to the near-exclusion of their Karelian equivalents but still do not display morpho-phonological assimilation to Karelian:

- (13) *Mie ša s'ie ol'e(t) vedúščaja dak dolžná ZNAT' SKOL'KO*
 K-K K-K K-K K-K R-R/K? R-R=K R-R/K? R-R R-R
 I say you are the leader so [you] obliged to know how many
 CHELOVEK, engo lugenu šanou, äij ol'i MOLODYOZHI.
 R-R K-K K-K K-K K-K K-K R-R
 PredN
 persons, [I] did not count [she] says, a host was of young people;

'I say: You are the leader, so you are expected to know how many people [there were at the meeting]. I did not count [them], she says, There were lots of young people [there]'. (211, 14b/AS: r.t. 439-440.)

It is typical of Karussian that it is impossible to derive any stretch of utterance in the gliding area from the lexicon or grammar of either of the languages alone; many of the difficulties demarcating Karelian and Russian in the speech of Karelians are due to long-term phonological convergence between Karelian and the northwest Russian dialects which has made the phoneme inventories very similar; a similar convergence is going on in lexicon and syntax.

Interestingly enough, the analyses also revealed that the Karelian-Russian mixed codes are employed both by speakers who do not show full command over the grammatical and lexical devices of the most traditional forms of Karelian, and by speakers who show that command but nevertheless also make good use of their knowledge of Russian. Given this, the results indicate that the mere use of Russian-

Karelian and/or Karussian is not evidence of linguistic impoverishment or attrition of the speakers' skills in Karelian: in addition to the dominant code (whether Traditional Karelian, Neo-Karelian, Russian-Karelian or Karussian), each interviewee used at least two other codes during the interview as well. Consequently, the coexistence of several parallel codes in speakers' repertoires could be interpreted as an indication of linguistic richness, which the bilingual Karelians are making good use of, even if the richness is in some cases clearly being used to compensate for insufficient language skills in Karelian, Russian, or both.

In the light of my data at least four explanations can be offered why present-day Karelians speak as they do. First, sometimes the mixing of Russian lexical and grammatical devices in one's basically Karelian speech is due to difficulties a bilingual speaker comes across when he/she tries to find the suitable expression in Karelian. Second, sometimes the motivation for Karelian-Russian bilinguals to transfer a Russian-modeled morpho-syntactic pattern into Karelian is the need for a syntactic device for distinguishing between certain pragmatic functions. The third explanation is language-sociological and psychological. Karelian had to face the major socio-historical watersheds of the 20th century without any help by deliberate measures that would have facilitated language construction on a "pure" Karelian basis. Under the circumstances that prevailed until the recent years, alongside making good use of their knowledge of Russian by switching into it when needed, the sole real option for the Karelians would have been to shift to monolingual Russian. Therefore, it can be argued that the Karelian language has found its means of survival in frequent switching into Russian. It can also be maintained that the Karelians speak as they do, because they still want to speak Karelian.

The fourth explanation derives indirectly from the third one but is, paradoxically, contradictory to the third. Given that the Karelians seem to feel fairly strongly about using their own language, one might assume that the Karelian language is a particularly central identity marker for contemporary Karelians. Interestingly enough, this is not necessarily true. The manners of combining Karelian and Russian lexical and grammatical devices appeared to greatly resemble data from such contact situations in which both the minority language and the majority language are indexical of the same group identity; this is the situation, for example, among the Pennsylvania Dutch sectarians. Thus, the fourth possible explanation as to why present-day Karelians use the Karelian-Russian mixed codes is that they do not, as a rule, attach particularly strong emotions to any of the languages at their disposal but find both Karelian and Russian as "a language of their own".

None of these four explanations is the one right answer to the question why present-day Karelians speak as they do, and each of them still requires further investigation. However, it is evident that the wide range of codes which display interference from Russian makes present-day Karelian a vernacular that has much in common with transitional belt dialects which have absorbed features from several varieties. It seems to me that sometimes the division of labour between the codes clearly depends on the topic. Yet the choice of code is not straightforwardly defined by the domain but rather, we are dealing with extremely refined characteristics of linguistic behaviour, calling for extensive further investigation as well.

4. Discussion

I shall now proceed to the discussion part of my current presentation, and return to the social status of the Russian-influenced ways of speaking Karelian in the Karelian communities I investigated. The generally applied criterion for defining an independent language variety is the existence of a set of fixed norms which are

consistent and stable throughout the entire speech community or for a given group of speakers. Given that the analyses that I carried out revealed clear correlations between certain linguistic variables (including, as we just saw, the form of the predicate) and the informant's manner of switching between Karelian and Russian items, there are grounds for claiming that these manners actually constitute codes comparable to, say, geographical and social dialects or professional jargons.

Until recently, it has been customary to equate the term 'code' with linguistic variety, especially with such major varieties as languages and dialects. However, in the late 1990s several researchers such as Celso Alvarez-Cáccomo (1998) have demanded that speakers be respected as the highest authorities in determining what counts as a code in their speech community. In my view, such an approach has apparent merits. First, it would give the codeswitching mode (which itself often constitutes the "language of interaction") an officially recognised status, and thus in many cases encourage the use of the weaker language in in-group communication. And this then could, in turn, facilitate passing a threatened minority language to the next generation. Second, if the speakers themselves recognise the codeswitched mode as a variety distinct from other varieties (as do the Karelians, for example), then it should be recognised as a code by the analyst as well; such recognition would give the native speakers' intuition and way of communicating the respect they deserve.

The strongest argument against defining codeswitched modes as codes of their own is the difficulty of finding methodologically sound criteria for identifying these 'codes' and distinguishing them from other codes. And what are these criteria to be based on, if not on sets of definite norms shared by all speakers using the same code? There is no single and simple answer to this question. Of course speakers who share the same code must share common rules. Yet even established and recognised codes involve at least some variation. And of course in truly bilingual mixed codes like Russian-Karelian, there will be more variation than in a monolingual code: there are simply more possibilities for the bilingual speaker to choose from. Consequently, in my view, there must be markers that are powerful enough to distinguish one code from another; the question is what these markers should look like in mixed codes. Should there be whole sets of linguistic structures that must be learnt in order to command a bilingual mixed code? Such fixed grammatical structures are assumed in studies of monolingual codes and of mixed languages in the sense in which the term is used in pidgin and creole studies (what Auer 1998 calls fused lects). Or are mixed codes like Russian-Karelian produced by more general meta-commands such as "you can alternate between the lexical and grammatical devices of the two source codes as often and as you want and whenever you want, subject to the following constraints"? The analysis of the interviews with the test subjects suggests that the distinctive markers of bilingual mixed codes need not be fixed structures, and the rules according to which items from the source languages are used in codeswitched speech need not be of the type "in order to express x, use pattern y" but may consist of constraints such as "avoid using the grammar of language B in syntactically central constituents". Essentially the same idea has been expressed by Auer (1998a, 1998b).

Now, if we accept the speakers as the highest authorities in matters concerning what constitutes a code for communication in their speech community, the approach to mixed codes such as the varieties of Karelian that I have just described will change drastically. In an attempt to illustrate some of the indications that the new approach has, I shall draw a few parallels between Karelian countryside scenery and Karelian language.

The most idyllic Karelian scenery with deep blue lakes, peaceful hills and chasounas, tiny wooden houses of worship, can be seen to equal with the thoroughly cherished idea of the Karelian language as something pure, exotic, and original, as the language of laments and numerous other ancient forms of Finnic oral tradition. Yet, we all know now that very often, the reality is something else: the Karelians do not speak as we expect them to but many of them mix a fair amount of Russian into their Karelian. In the vein of the electric line posts that in Karelia hardly ever stand in a disciplined row but rather lean in every which direction, language mixing is contaminating the Karelian scenery.

In the gloomiest visions the contaminated Karelian language is crossing the last border. As with late-autumn mists, the freezing breath of mighty Russia hovers in the air, and the white frost of the Russian language covers the Karelian soil step by step. Furthermore, like the great stinging nettles growing in the yards of huts inhabited by those *boabos* and *d'iedos* who still remain in the villages, yet new structural Russisms spread throughout the Karelian language due to wide language-alternation by bilingual Karelians.

At least in one of the recent studies concerned with Russian interference in present-day Karelian, in Pyöli 1996, it is suggested that the only way to rescue what still remains to be rescued is literarily radical language corpus-planning: the Russian nettles have to be uprooted once and for all. As far as I can see, radical uprooting of everything that derives from Russian is a very undesirable solution which can, at its worst, lead to the acceleration of language-shift among Karelians.

In my view, present-day bilingual forms of Karelian can also be approached from a completely different viewpoint. Let us just think about a nettle: as urban dwellers we may well conceive the nettle as being a highly unwelcome noxious weed; in Karelian villages, however, it is an important source of iron, especially in the winter time, and that is why many people let it grow to be dried for use. Like the nettle, quite a few of the means of expressing oneself that get transferred from Russian into Karelian via language-alternation, bring along a useful shade of meaning that the speaker at least momentarily needs for expressing his thoughts precisely; a vivid example of this is the DOC which makes it possible to make a syntactic distinction between expressions of deontic modality, and other forms of necessitative modality. In the case of the DOC, the other option for formal-semantic preciseness would be the use of monolingual Russian.

Just as in any other corner of Europe, the traditional means of livelihood have been modernised in Karelia: the fishermen travel by speedy motor boats to the remotest places suited for netting, and even goats in Karelia have abandoned their wooden troughs and eat with pleasure from iron and plastic buckets. Furthermore, in every village there are old buildings which were raised with extra floors long ago, and new buildings have always been built among the older ones. Some 100 years ago old houses were new; when another 100 years have passed nobody will recall that a now brand-new yellow building among the old, grey houses once was new. Similarly, foreign linguistic features that are to stay will ultimately be distinguished from indigenous ones only by the means of historical linguistics.

New is not always beautiful - neither in landscape nor in language. Things representing modern technologies are often ugly, and they capture our eyes especially easily in an otherwise traditional landscape. Yet we must admit that most new machinery and everyday facilities are functional and economical. Similarly, the use of Russian lexical and grammatical resources can well be approached from the viewpoint of functionality and best possible use of all the resources that Karelians have at their disposal.

The factor that has so far received too little attention in the study of Karelian and the other minor Finnic languages is, in fact, the factor that is the most crucial one in regard to the future of any language, namely the actual speakers, their needs, their resources, and their linguistic and human rights. Looking at photos taken in Karelia today, we first notice either the old Karelian courtyards, or the new, ugly, metallic sheds or powerful motor boats; similarly, as linguists we tend to see only what we want to find: either we pay our entire attention to what is left from the so-called pure forms of Karelian, or we stare only at the “bad-bad” mistakes occurring in the form of frequent slips into Russian words and grammatical forms. The features of language-usage receive the analyst’s prior attention, whilst the speaker with his or her needs and resources remains in dark anonymity. And yet, the speakers and nothing else are the most important prerequisite for the survival of any language, to the rise of language change and its successful spread! Only a language spoken by older generations to the younger ones can remain vital. Only a language which is used creatively can face the challenges of the changing world, and fulfill the communication needs of its speakers.

The results of my 1999 study testify to a fine ability of the present-day Karelians to make good use of all their codes and to make the foreign their own, one way or another. I am convinced in that by paying due respect to the linguistic flexibility of Karelians, and by approaching the linguistic diversity in present-day Karelian speech communities more hermeneutically and more from the viewpoint of the people themselves we would not only increase general linguistic knowledge but possibly we would also contribute the Karelians’ continuing to use their national language well beyond the turn of the third millennium.

At this point I want to emphasise, once more, that in the light of my data, the mere use of any of the Russian-influenced varieties is not evidence of linguistic impoverishment or attrition of the speakers’ skills in Karelian: in spite of the fact that they mix Russian lexical and grammatical items with Karelian items, the majority of my informants also showed amazingly good command of monolingual Karelian at least at some point of the interview. Thus, the coexistence of several parallel codes in speakers’ repertoires can well be interpreted as an indication of linguistic richness which the bilingual Karelians are maintaining and successfully employing in occasions when they want to speak Karelian instead of speaking Russian. Consequently, I claim that a Russian-influenced variety of Karelian is not, after all, a pathetic drunken sailor who has to be put back on the right track, but rather a youngster, fit as a fiddle, and well suited to contribute to the survival of Karelian alongside the more traditional forms of the language. Naturally, it goes without saying that I am not suggesting that the sailor in point should be made the sole captain of the ship but rather calling for taking the naïve-speaker-reality into account as well.

The entire discussion above brings us to my final point which is that when talking about the linguistic emancipation of minority nationals and the standardisation and revitalisation of their languages, it is more than appropriate to also dedicate a few deep thoughts to the fact that many of the so far non-standardised languages are generally spoken in forms that reflect heavy interference from the local majority language or languages. This appears to me especially relevant with regard to the linguistic and human rights of the Finnic minorities in Russia: if the so-called pure forms of the national languages are heavily advocated at the expense of the ways that many people, maybe even the majority, actually speak, there is an apparent danger that only an avantgarde, say, people belonging to the educated and thus better-off urban circles, is emancipated, while the majority of the speakers remain as deprived of their linguistic rights as they have been.

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