

## Johanna Laakso: Finno-Ugristics in Cyberspace: The Final Frontier?

### 1. The rise and fall of a unified Finno-Ugristics?

Unlike some other disciplines of scientific or scholarly research, Finno-Ugristics has a history short enough to allow for some concise generalisations. Disregarding Tacitus, Ottar from Haalogaland and other occasional travellers, chronists or historians, we may start with the founding fathers in the late 18th and early 19th century. The discoveries of Sajnovics and Gyarmathi and their followers, luckily coinciding with or even anticipating the general rise of comparative-historical linguistics in Europe, formed a basis for a unified Finno-Ugristics, which, in turn, gave both a scholarly legitimization and further stimuli for the existing or developing "national" linguistic, philologic, ethnographic and historical studies in Hungary, Finland and Estonia. These could now be understood as parts of one complex discipline. This development was well in accordance with the central role of historical research in general, from paleontology and geology through historical linguistics and folkloristics (where the so-called Finnish paradigm was deeply influenced by the methods of historical linguistics) to national (pre)history, so vital for all existing or anticipated nation-states.

From a specifically linguistic discovery concerning the historical relationship of certain lesser known languages, Finno-Ugristics thus developed to a cover term for different and diverging fields of study. This cover term has persisted ever since. First, between the two world wars, Finno-Ugristics was a vital means of national self-understanding in the three Finno-Ugric nation-states - although, in reality, the role of Finno-Ugristic research in national culture was fairly marginal and even those in charge of linguistic research and language planning could manage very well without any expertise in the field of related languages, as shown by the great influence of language planners like E. A. Saarimaa in Finland or Johannes Aavik in Estonia, men who were no Finno-Ugrists in the strict sense of the word (not to speak of their early colleague, Ferenc Kazinczy in Hungary). Finno-Ugristics, still understood as the search for national roots, was an unquestionable part or, better still, an ideological foundation of the complex known as "Nationalwissenschaften" (Fi. "kansalliset tieteeet").

After World War II, a large part of the previous "nationalistic" motivation for Finno-Ugristics became ideologically impossible, especially in Sovietised or Soviet-dominated Hungary and Estonia. (Already long before that, Stalinist terror had made it impossible for the Finno-Ugrians of Russia.) However, paradoxically enough, the effect of Soviet ideology and policies was not exclusively negative. As pointed out by Lallukka (2000), the Soviet practice of giving the different nationalities a certain, however nominal and titular, role in educational, cultural and administrative systems, could also help to maintain a sense of a national identity. Likewise, Finno-Ugristic research, alongside other scholarly activities, had to be granted a certain position in a system which, so it was stated, was based on internationalism and an allegedly "scientific" ideology. This is beautifully illustrated by the history of the CIFUs (Congressus Internationalis Fenno-Ugristarum), which were not just scholars' meetings but almost the only occasion where the Finno-Ugrians of the Soviet Union could, however marginally, discuss national questions with their Western colleagues and display their cultural heritage in an international framework that was not devoted to merely illustrating Soviet "internationalism". In this context, Finno-Ugristics was more of an umbrella for various research traditions and national interests than a scientific discipline in its own right.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the concept of Finno-Ugristics lost a great part of its role as a necessary cover for various language- and culture-related activities. The last years of the 20th century saw many new institutions and fora come into

being, from Finno-Ugric international literary or cultural conferences to smaller networks of, say, artists united by the novel idea called Ethnofuturism. Already earlier, the historical connection between Finno-Ugric studies and the national philologies in the three Finno-Ugric states (Hungary, Finland, and Estonia) had been loosened, as linguists investigating their national language were increasingly drawn away from traditional historical linguistics and towards synchronic (structuralist or generativist) approaches.

While it has always been questionable whether research of Hungarian literature should be called "Finno-Ugristics", in recent decades it has become more and more difficult for, say, a typical Finnish linguist investigating modern Finnish to identify herself (yes, a great part of them are women now) with the stereotypical "Finno-Ugrist". Not only do modern scholars of present-day (major) Finno-Ugric languages and literatures feel more attracted to colleagues of similar theoretical interests in the wide world – for example, a Hungarian syntactician may publish in English and exchange ideas with West European and American colleagues, but it is only through international English-language fora that s/he receives information, if any, of research into the syntax of Sámi, Mordvin or Finnish.

The reverse – and often deplored (cf. e.g. Alhoniemi 1996: 446, Grünthal & Laakso (forthcoming)) – side of this new direction of interests is that many modern linguists or "national philologists" in Finland, Estonia and Hungary have only acquired very little knowledge of the methods of historical linguistics and are thus unable to make any comparative use of whatever they have learnt of the related languages (this is typically very little, often just one obligatory elementary course of Finnish, Estonian or Hungarian, taken and forgotten in the first student years). With German and Russian losing their international status in favour of the omnipresent English, even fewer linguists will have access to the central sources of Finno-Ugric studies, and the international linguistic community will run the risk of recycling erroneous, misinterpreted or outdated handbook information about the lesser known Finno-Ugric languages, instead of consulting the primary sources.

## 2. Finno-Ugrists of all countries, unite?

Above, I have sketched the historical cycle of Finno-Ugristics in the "Finno-Ugric countries", as it seems: from relatively marginal studies of certain exotic languages to the focus of national cultural and scholarly interests and, again, back to a more marginal status. Meanwhile, very little has changed from the perspective of the "wide world". In Paris, Tokyo or New York, Finno-Ugristics is just one discipline studying an exotic language family, and there are, in principle, very few reasons to consider Estonian more important than Kildin Sámi. The foci of instruction and research are determined by local traditions and resources and may include anything from Siberian shamanism to Postmodernism in Hungarian literature, or local specialities such as the flourishing tradition of Sibiology, especially Khanty studies, in Germany. In addition to their linguistic role, the Finno-Ugric departments are expected to convey practical language knowledge to people whose interest in Hungarian, Finnish or Estonian is often of a practical or personal character, as well as information of all possible aspects of the literature, culture and history (cf. e.g. Hasselblatt 1989, Patri 1995) of the country in question. In fact, the situation worldwide is very similar to that in Finland 150 years ago, when M. A. Castrén, the first Professor of Finnish, was alone in charge of a vast field of studies, from Norwegian Lapland to Siberia and from linguistics to ethnology.

While Finno-Ugristics in Hungary, Finland and Estonia is, perhaps, losing its national role, its connections with the national language and cultural studies and thus also

some of its financial and recruitment basis, this looming cloud may still have a silver lining. Finno-Ugrists of the world are now fighting on the same side. They represent a small, exotic discipline, the likes of which are increasingly regarded as a luxury, “orchids” to be cut as soon as there arises a need to economize academic instruction and research. In Europe and in this world of globalization, even the three major Finno-Ugric languages are relatively small and subject to increasing foreign influences, not unlike their smaller sisters. On the other hand, growing consciousness of linguistic human rights, new minority policies and novel technologies may open new perspectives for all minor(ity) languages alike. And, finally, Finno-Ugrists by definition represent a geographically, historically and methodologically extremely wide area, from the viewpoint of which the traditional material-oriented basic research and interdisciplinary studies are more natural and more urgently needed than, say, investigations of theta role assignment in constructed South Estonian sentences. Traditional Finno-Ugristics thus deserves to be re-discovered.

Together with the weakening of the “national” connections, new motivation is arising for a new intra- and interdisciplinary unity. At the same time, coinciding with post-Soviet political developments and the general globalisation, a new means of both scholarly and commercial communication, the Internet, grows and covers more and more of the Finno-Ugri(sti)c world. True, many of its most spectacular advantages remain to be discovered by Finno-Ugrists. Just as most of us mainly use the computer for text processing, as a more efficient kind of typewriter, the Internet is most often used for e-mail correspondence and for browsing WWW pages for certain, sometimes marginal kinds of information – that is, the Internet is a more effective substitute for traditional mail on one hand, for telephone directories, catalogues and encyclopedias on the other. However, even if the real revolution of scholarly communication has not reach the Finno-Ugrists yet, the last decades have at least made e-mail indispensable for most of us and thus brought us crucially closer to each other. The emergence of a more and more closely-knit international and inter-institutional Finno-Ugristic community is technically possible now. In what follows, I will try to sketch the advantages and risks, the pathways and obstacles involved.

### 3. Why bother?

In the 1980s and 1990s, and partly up to our days, there has been a deeply rooted aversion in considerable parts of the Finno-Ugristic community towards modern technology. There are some senior but still active colleagues who practically never touch a computer (while others, during the computer revolution in typesetting, chose the hard way and learnt to do the necessary computer jobs themselves, including the camera-ready layouts complete with special characters), and there are many more who are completely satisfied with mastering the basics of text-processing and e-mail. Some defend their I-hate-computers-attitude by blaming arrogant computer gurus, and it may be that this enemy image has a counterpart in the real world; at least, the computer specialists of the 1980's showed very little sympathy to the classical problems of text processing and typography which, for most Finno-Ugrists, were the only reason for using computers.

But it is not simply that “typing” is the job of assistants and secretaries and fingering with machinery should be left to professionals in overalls. It is also that there is enough hype, shallow infotainment and flim-flam in the Internet to discredit it in the eyes of an earnest scholar. The complete freedom of publication on websites such as the Geocities has given rise to dozens of WWW pages filled with more or less questionable ideas about, say, the origins of languages and peoples, and an Internet search with the keyword “Finno-Ugric” or “Indo-European” will return many links to

ideologically burdened, unreliable or simply weird pages. Even solid and serious websites, such as the LINGUIST list's (<http://www.linguistlist.org/>) pages of language resources or the <http://yourdictionary.com/> website with its useful links to Uralic and other online dictionaries, obviously have no means to exclude the products of enthusiastic dilettantes (such as the "Ural-Altaic comparative dictionary"). With normal search engines or the few existing link collections (well-meaning but technically often fairly amateurish, as the link page maintained by the present author: <http://www.helsinki.fi/~jolaakso/fqrlinks.html>) at her/his disposal, an average Finno-Ugrist will find many marginally interesting but only a few really useful WWW pages. The real problem, of course, is that there is too little to be found. In a discipline like Finno-Ugristics, where studies published a hundred years ago may still be relevant for present-day research, it is still completely possible (and not even particularly difficult) to do research and publish without one single reference to online sources. Before the critical mass of basic research, grammars, handbooks and the like, plus a necessary minimum of materials (texts), is available on the Web, there will be no methodological revolution in the everyday work of the average Finno-Ugrist. What we would need is thus a massive digitalization of earlier important works and material collections as well as a way to ensure future publication of central sources online. The tables of contents and, possibly, short abstracts now presented online by important publishers such as the Finno-Ugric Society (<http://www.helsinki.fi/jarj/sus/>) or Societas Uralo-Altaica (<http://www.s-u-a.de/>) are not enough, nor are the numerous and ever-increasing homepages of diverse Finno-Ugric cultural societies, media and organisations. (True, these pages may provide invaluable actual information on cultural events – the best example probably being the "Finno-Ugric Information Centre", <http://www.suri.ee/> – or material for linguistic research, such as literary and other texts, e.g. newspapers, in many Finno-Ugric languages.)

#### 4. The more difficult side of easy publishing

So far, the traditional paper form has certain superior qualities as a user interface. Although not accessible everywhere, it is extremely robust and portable. It allows for the use of all kinds of graphics and special characters. It is also very resistant to physical defects and independent of software or hardware standards (or the existence of hardware, for that matter). Some of these good qualities may be emulated in Web publishing, using virtual paper techniques such as the PDF format or, at least, printing the source on paper – but only at the cost of the advantages of the electronic format, such as searchability.

A case in point is the reproduction of the special characters, so vital in the research of most Finno-Ugric languages. Although there is now a project of including all FU diacritics and special characters in the UNICODE standard (Everson, Ruppel & Trosterud 1999), it will take many years before UNICODE character sets are really available to all Internet users in all hardware and software environments. Meanwhile, Finno-Ugristic projects use their own individual transcriptions or platform-dependent tailored fonts; in the best case, the fonts can be downloaded from the server, together with instructions for Karelianising or Sámi-fying the browser (see, e.g., <http://www.onego.ru/win/pages/karjalanet/encoding.html>) – provided that the user is competent enough or willing to do that, or that s/he is authorised to fiddle with the preferences of the computer at her/his disposal...

The speed and low price of Internet publishing, however, seem tempting to those who must find and allocate the resources for scientific and scholarly publishing. Finno-Ugristic publication activities are seldom, if ever, financially affordable, and transferring them to the Web might, perhaps, not just save money and the life of some



trees but also liberate the financial resources of universities and other organisations for more creative uses. However, this would require a re-thinking of the whole field of Finno-Ugristic publishing. If the central Finno-Ugristic sources were available on-line, finding no paper copies of *Ural-Altaische Jahrbücher* or *Virittäjä* in the libraries of Nairobi would not be a problem. But what would the publishers do, if even the libraries of Helsinki, Tartu and Budapest cancelled their orders?

If the publishers cannot afford to make their materials instantly available to all Internet users around the world, they will have to restrict the users' access with troublesome electronic licence control or payment procedures. These, as well as other mechanisms of payment, are usually developed for other, more commercial interests. For example, the ELEKTRA project coordinated by the Helsinki University Library (<http://elektra.helsinki.fi/>) has made numerous Finnish scholarly publications electronically available for licensed users in Finnish universities. In the course of the project, copyright lawyers have worked hard to establish the criteria for compensation. The result is that individual authors whose papers are accessed through ELEKTRA may – if they consider it worthwhile – cash in a couple of euros per year (after filling in piles of questionnaires and sending in their personal data, paradoxically enough, by traditional paper mail). At the same time, nobody seems to realize that Finno-Ugristic papers normally are not written for money: scholarly writing is done for academic merit or simply *aus Liebe zur Kunst*. What matters is that the publisher can go on publishing – an activity that in our sector has always been based on the support of the state and non-profit organisations.

Thus, the main problem of the Finno-Ugristic publishing activities “going Internet” is how to support the publishers and protect the ownership of the ideas while disseminating them. Digitalization makes infinite copying possible, and computer form is easy to use not only for browsing and searching texts but also for extremely simple and even automatised cut-and-paste copying of smaller or larger chunks of text. There are some colleagues who earnestly fear that Web publishing will lead to the acceleration of electronic plagiarism. However, the small circles of Finno-Ugrists are not a very probable arena for such activities. It does not seem probable, either, that the easiness of publication would endanger the general quality of scholarly fora, as the quality control methods of traditional publications are not dependent on the form. It is only in extending the borders of the traditional text publishing that real problems will appear.

As pointed out in the recent electronic discussion (Whalen 2001 and further discussion on the LINGUIST list), the most spectacular assets of Web publishing, that is, the possibility of including audio and video files, make the relationship of the publication and its subject much more intimate than in traditional paper publishing. Instead of transcribing texts of endangered languages, for example, we can directly disseminate samples of living speech – but it becomes extremely difficult to preserve the traditional scholarly neutrality or protect the anonymity and privacy of recorded speakers. Instead of writing about culture, we can just transmit it – but, simultaneously, we will run the risk of objectifying the people involved (“hey, look at that funny Samoyed!”), musealising their culture and hurting their feelings about, say, religion or ethnic identity. Instead of analysing, we can simply reproduce – but will the values of scientific research be abandoned, in search of entertaining and media-sexy contents?

## **5. The real challenge - networking people**

In the discussion about the role of the Internet in Finno-Ugristics, it is vital that enough attention be paid to the special characteristics of this complex discipline, as described above. To repeat and conclude: Finno-Ugristics is very strongly attached

to its traditions, including the existing and persistently relevant paper publications and the institutional mechanisms of paper publishing. At the same time, Finno-Ugristics as a financially marginal low-volume field of study does not automatically belong to the avantgarde of technical development: new information technologies come to us only in the second stage, as morsels falling from the rich man's table, and not necessarily in a form that would be optimal for our purposes. Thirdly, due to the in-built historicity of all philological disciplines as well as our small volume and slow pace of new research and innovations, there is less need than in more "voluminous" disciplines to replace outdated sources with more up-to-date ones or to manage an overwhelming wealth of data and materials with the help of new information technologies. However, there are two aspects of Finno-Ugristics that are extremely relevant for the discussion pertaining to the role of the Internet. Firstly, Finno-Ugristics is by nature an international discipline, requiring close contacts between researchers around the world. Secondly, Finno-Ugristics is a discipline of small resources, where everything that is done deserves to be done well, as it may very well be the only time anyone deals with, say, some special questions of Selkup phonology or Livonian folklore. In this world of economising (in the universities of the Western world) or growing pressure against minorities and peripheries (as it seems to be the case not only in this globalising world in general but also, in particular, in Putin's Russia), we cannot afford to waste our resources on inventing the wheel twice.

Whatever is done in the field of Finno-Ugristics, the Internet and new media, it must be done constantly bearing in mind the special characteristics of Finno-Ugric studies, not just slavishly copying what is done by our neighbours. As the resources are very restricted, we must carefully consider what is most vital for our own needs. I suggest that this question be approached in terms of "interfaces".

Internet-based solutions for the interface between Finno-Ugristics and the non-Finno-Ugric world (laymen as well as general linguists, researchers of "other" literatures and cultures etc.) could include introductory materials, FAQ collections, dictionaries, language courses and the like. This interface may partly overlap with the second one, viz. the interface between Finno-Ugrists and their "sources", that is: the Finno-Ugric languages and cultures. Here, we might consider massive digitalization projects to bring the most important materials, grammars, text collections and dictionaries online, as well as creating databanks for Finno-Ugric texts, spoken language samples etc.

There are already many projects of this kind existing or under construction, such as the *Databank for Endangered Finno-Ugrian Languages* (<http://www.helsinki.fi/~mesalo/deful.html>; Suihkonen 1998) or the *Uralic Etymological Database* project ([http://www.uni-koblenz.de/~uedb/uedb\\_aktuell/index.html](http://www.uni-koblenz.de/~uedb/uedb_aktuell/index.html)). It is perhaps symptomatic that the best unified portal with links to useful Finno-Ugric language databanks does not exist in Hungary or in Finland (at least in the latter country, there seems to be too much rivalry between institutions and too much ambition in formal, technical or copyright-juridical questions) but in Estonia, where the KeeleWeb portal (<http://ee.www.ee/>) provides easy searches to Estonian dictionaries, archives of personal and place names etc. Even more symptomatic is that all Finno-Ugric Internet projects are highly individual: they are run by small groups of researchers and based on idiosyncratic, tailored technical solutions. This represents a logical continuation of the research traditions: Finno-Ugristics has traditionally been a discipline of lonely gentleman hunters, who consider it their holy right to pick whatever questions and use whatever methods they want.

It is precisely here that I see the most critical interface: the one between Finno-Ugrists and other Finno-Ugrists. Internet-based technical solutions could help us fol-

low the developments and trends in research and react to what is being done by our colleagues in far-away countries. They could help us found virtual discussion fora and flexible research teams, so that even more of us could experience the “magic of team work”, receive feedback and encouragement from colleagues working on related questions. They could help us share our knowledge and the results of our research so that we all might use our creative energy in an optimal way, without repeating the routine procedures that somebody else has already gone through; thus, they could essentially compensate the small volume and dwindling resources of Finno-Ugristics. They could enlarge our perspectives and bring researchers of Finno-Ugric languages and cultures together, giving them historical and contrastive backgrounds for their work.

It may be impossible to apply these lofty thoughts in practice. A more efficient means of communication will not necessarily bridge the gap between different cultures and ways of thinking; it may not bring people together across language barriers or insurmountable technical obstacles. At a virtual coffee table for collegial discussions, nobody can guarantee a friendly, collegial atmosphere, or the absence of aggressive dilettantes with weird ideas on such ideologically loaded questions as the ethnic origins of nations. However, I consider this the most important challenge for the new means of communication: the rebirth of a unified Finno-Ugristics in a new sense is now, at least theoretically, possible.

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