

Johanna Laakso: Is Finno-Ugristics gender-neutral?

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In this paper, I will attempt, on a very general level, to deal with three gender-related areas in Finno-Ugristics: (i) the gendered aspects of ethnicity, nation-building and language endangerment, (ii) gendered ideologies in linguistics, i.e. the ways of seeing language in general as a female being, and (iii) the possibilities of finding gendered aspects in the core area of Finno-Ugristics, that is: the study of language relatedness and historical linguistics. The more obvious aspects are left out: I am not going to speak about literature and culture, where the role of gendered factors should be more than obvious.

Sadly enough, my presentation and the whole symposium have left out a theme that would deserve to be dealt with in more detail: the history of women in Finno-Ugristics (cf. Laitinen (ed.) 1988). This “herstory” probably abounds with similar cases of (at least) indirect discrimination, (overt or hidden) misogyny and unmerited oblivion as in many other disciplines. Perhaps the most recent case still in the personal memories of my generation is Helmi Virtaranta (1919–1999). For decades, she worked as an official or unofficial assistant in her husband’s renowned research and publication projects, but her great work, done selflessly and sometimes even anonymously, beside her work as homemaker and mother, has only recently been duly acknowledged (Torikka 1999). I would like to dedicate this paper to her memory.

1. From society to the ivory tower and back

The symposium “Gender in Finno-Ugric studies” is, to our knowledge, the first one of its kind. There have been no attempts before this to find any meaningful connections between women’s studies or gender studies and Finno-Ugristics as a whole. The most powerful reason for this is, of course, that gender questions have not been perceived as relevant in the framework that is usually termed “Finno-Ugristics”: it is completely possible to research the Uralic languages or the culture of their speakers without even touching upon any mechanisms that could be gender-conditioned, and, above all, the conceptual core area of Finno-Ugristics, that is: the study of linguistic relatedness and language history, seems to be gender-neutral, as its object is something that is shared by all speakers regardless of gender. In this paper, I try to question this neutrality and raise some questions that could merit further discussion in Finno-Ugristics.

Before analysing the possible relationships between Finno-Ugristics and gender, I want to point out another important background factor. Although gender studies can, in principle, be pursued without any non-scholarly aims, just in the interest of pure learning and knowledge, there is, in practice, a strong emancipatory or feminist shade in a great part of gender research. Feminism in its various forms, together with diverse feminism-related social issues, has certainly been the most important reason for the emergence of gender studies as we know them, and many gender researchers gladly confess their commitment to a feminist agenda, seeing there no danger to their objectivity or other principles of research ethics.

Finno-Ugristics, on the other hand, has a much more problematic relationship with its social background. Originally, our discipline was largely (although by far not exclusively!) propelled by great nationalist projects in Hungary, Finland and Estonia,

i.e. finding out the origins of the nation and legitimating its cultural and political independence. However, most Finno-Ugrists since the 1930s work on questions that seem to have no direct relevance to the society as it is or as it should be, leaving the practical conclusions (for instance, in questions of language planning) to more “worldly” authorities or to monolingual mother tongue experts (in accordance with the strong tradition that restricts the scope of linguistics to non-committed, objective description). The idea of Finno-Ugristics being socially or politically relevant was expelled from the realm of serious research at the latest with the rise of the Soviet Union, a purportedly “internationalist” state where most of the Finno-Ugrian peoples lived. Now, it seems that these questions only surface in certain marginal cases as when the hypotheses of the so-called “root-finders” or “critics of Finno-Ugristics” (cf. e.g. Hasselblatt 2002) are used for obscure political goals.

The old nationalist agenda of Finno-Ugristics, thus, is either outdated or does not serve any positive goals any more. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union new cultural or cultural-political movements have emerged that might bring Finno-Ugristics, in the sense of emancipating the endangered minority languages of the Uralic language family and the national cultures connected with them, closer to a positive social activism. I will not discuss now the problems of the “legacy of colonialism” in East and West, nor will I go into the details of the complicated socio-political situation in today’s Russia. In any case, there is a new need for linguistic, sociolinguistic and cultural knowledge and competence, to support and legitimate the new groups and organisations that are working to help the linguistic minorities and to promote multicultural tolerance and peaceful international cooperation, groups that can be defined or have chosen to define themselves as “Finno-Ugrian”. We could say that Finno-Ugristics, originally part of a national project to politically legitimate young or nascent nation-states, is now becoming a potential provider of moral legitimation for national minorities and multiculturalism. Interestingly enough, this problematics is full of gendered aspects: the emancipation of linguistic minorities and the emancipation of women meet and interact in various interesting ways.

2. Gender and endangered languages

The people who keep endangered languages alive are not just people: they represent a gender, and very often the female one. Many famous “last speakers” have been women, like Klavdia Plotnikova, the last Kamass speaker, or Fëkla Vasil'eva, one of the last excellent informants of Eastern Votian. (However, to be fair, we must not forget that there have been male last speakers as well, such as “Niittahon Jussi”, one of the last Värmland Finns, or Mikkel Sausais, the last speaker of Krevin – if there really were linguistic reasons for A. J. Sjögren in 1846 to prefer him as an informant to the six “old women” who were introduced to Sjögren as well but remained unnamed and unrecorded.)¹ For many endangered languages, the characteristic fluent speaker and the person to transmit the old language to younger generations is the grandmother still living in the old village. Among the Finno-Ugrians of Russia according to the latest Soviet censuses, the percentage of FU language maintenance for women was slightly but clearly higher than for men (Haarmann

¹ Winkler (1997: 114) quotes Sjögren’s original account (here in my translation): “On our arrival [...] we met the parish clerk with 7 Krevins, namely an old man of high stature, with a long face, long nose and high forehead, furthermore 6 women [*Weiber*], partly of medium, partly of small height.” It is difficult to avoid the impression that Mikkel Sausais was chosen because of his sex and his impressive appearance.

1999). Women, female linguists, schoolteachers and other enthusiasts, also abound among the activists and professionals working on the documentation, research, revitalisation and instruction of endangered languages, more on the grassroots level, of course, than on highest academic chairs or in positions of real political power.

While elderly women of many Finno-Ugric nations often assume the role of keepers of old traditions, linguistic and other, so that the traditional concept of a NORM (non-mobile old rural male) as the ideal informant for dialectological studies should in many Finno-Ugric cases be substituted with a NORF, there may be gendered patterns of language maintenance among younger speakers that point to the reverse direction. The phenomenon that young female speakers of minority languages, being socially more mobile and less attracted to the traditional social networks, are more prone to adopt the majority language and more reluctant to use the “old language” in public than men of their age, has been observed not only in Susan Gal’s (1979) famous study on Austrian Hungarians but also by Birger Winsa among the Tornedal Finns or *meänkieli* speakers in Northern Sweden (Winsa 1993: 9). It remains to be shown whether these tendencies are universal enough to be observable in the life of the minorities in the former Soviet Union.

Once again, we meet the paradox of conflicting prejudices and the typical “catch-22” situation (“whatever you do, you do the wrong thing”) so frequent in women’s issues. It has often been claimed that women tend to cluster around the average while men are more amply represented in the extremes (to give a crude example, it has been stated that most geniuses and most idiots are men), even as concerns their linguistic abilities (as stated by Jespersen in his classic essays on women’s language; cf. Baron 1986: 85, L. Hakulinen 1988 [1926]). However, women in reality are often forced into a black-and-white dichotomy and accused of two extremes at the same time. In questions of family values and sexual ethics, we have the notorious “virgin mother” vs. “whore” dichotomy; in questions of language use and correctness, women have been accused both of a lack of creativity and of spoiling the language by introducing new expressions, usages or pronunciations (Baron op.cit. 55ff).

In the life (and death) of endangered languages, women seem to play a similarly black-or-white role. “Good” women are keepers, transmitters, researchers and forefighters of the mother [!] language, that is: incarnations of the same principles of quasi-biological “naturalness” and unconscious, selfless “motherhood” that are manifest in the ideas of a mother tongue. On the other hand, “bad” women are “traitors” who, in their selfish pursuit of easy life and rich husbands, abandon their language, leaving the men back in the dying villages, doomed to unemployment, alcoholism and a bitter bachelorhood... And, actually, even the role of those women who do maintain their old language is similarly ambiguous. They can be regarded not only as noble forefighters but also as representants of primitive backwardness and short-sightedness that is connected with the family and the traditional role of the woman, that is, as speakers of an unfit and inadequate “kitchen language”.²

² *Küchensprache* is an established expression for an allegedly inferior or deficient language variety used by lesser educated people and in the family sphere. This variety may represent a retention of an endangered language; for example, I have heard Austrian Hungarians call their language *konyhanyelv* ‘kitchen language’. On the other hand, in Finland, the word *kyökkisuomi* ‘kitchen Finnish’ was used in the late 19th and early 20th century to denote the deficient Finnish spoken by ladies with their maidservants, ladies who – lacking a sufficient consciousness of the national cause and identifying themselves with the Swedish-speaking upper class – did not bother to find genuine Finnish words for the accessoires of civilised city life (such as »tablecloth», »fork» or »ironing») but used phonologically Finnicized reflexes of the Swedish words instead. Backwardness in questions of language use may thus be either “nationalistic” or “bilingual”, but in any case it is symbolised by the kitchen, woman’s traditional realm.

These two aspects, of course, go back to common denominators that apply outside the Finno-Ugric language family as well. The last fluent speakers are often women simply because women tend to outlive men, particularly in Russia where the last few years have witnessed a tragic decrease in men's life expectancy. The activists working with endangered languages are often women simply because women constitute a disproportionately large part of students in the linguistic and philological disciplines and the overwhelming majority of school teachers are women. (This, in turn, is connected with how power in general escapes women: when academic education in financially or politically "harmless" subjects, being accessible to everyone, does not guarantee financial success or political power any more, men leave them for more "useful" fields.) And young women, as stated already long ago, abandon their "useless" mother tongue simply because it is easier for a woman to acquire social prestige through language shift, by "being something", than in the male-dominated traditional social networks, by "doing something".³

But, one may ask, what is the relevance of these gendered patterns for Finno-Ugristics? After all, problems of social inequality concern other languages and the extralinguistic reality as well, and it is not the primary task of Finno-Ugrists to solve such problems as the unfair division of work and power between the sexes. However, there may be connections between the inequality of languages and the inequality of sexes that might be of importance for Finno-Ugric studies in the same way as, for instance, general linguistics is for Finno-Ugric language studies.

Both kinds of inequality can be, and have been, defended with a kind of folk-scientific biological determinism or vulgar Darwinism: it is "natural" for women to avoid socially dominating roles and devote themselves to the goals of family and reproduction because this is how the male-dominated societies of other big primates work, and it is "natural" for endangered languages to give way to the majority language because the latter is "more fit to survive" or "more able to adapt itself to the changing environment".⁴ Both kinds of inequality also represent an essentialist view that can be challenged, at least to some extent, by a more deconstructional approach: despite their biologically determined basis (biological sex or innate neuro-cognitive abilities), both gender and language are social constructs (to what extent, remains a heatedly debated question). In the same way as research of the Finno-Ugric languages and their connections to the respective societies can both benefit from and contribute to general linguistic studies, the research done in the social behaviour of Finno-Ugric peoples, language included, deserves to be connected with more general aspects, approaches and theories of gender studies.

3. Language, linguistics, and gendered ideologies

Not only is the endangered state of many Finno-Ugric languages connected with gendered aspects. The ideologies related to languages in general often make use of

³ A case in point are the speakers of Tornedal Finnish or *meänkieli* in northernmost Sweden. Winsa (1993: 9, 17–18) pays special attention to the reluctance of young women to use *meänkieli* even if they could speak it "better than many boys", and, on the other hand, the strong role of *meänkieli* in boys' and young men's socialization and traditionally "male" activities such as elk hunting. He concludes that girls, excluded from the covert prestige Tornedal Finnish enjoys in men's networks, rather follow the general (overt) prestige norms.

⁴ For a recent turn in this debate, see the editorial on language extinction by John J. Miller in the Wall Street Journal, March 8, 2002 [incidentally, on the International Women's Day!], and the electronic discussion it provoked on the ENDANGERED-LANGUAGES-LIST (http://cleo.murdoch.edu.au/lists/endangered-languages-l/ell_home.html).

gendered imagery. In European tradition at least, language itself is often portrayed as a female being. The feminine imagery exploited in illustrating attitudes and ideologies ranges from old mothers, goddesses and “the queen liberated” (Paavo Cajander’s [1846–1913] poem *Vapautettu kuningatar*, an allegory of the Finnish language during the national revival) to languages depicted as wives or sweethearts of (male) writers; Fishman (1991) gives examples of bilingual authors termed “literary bigamists” and appearing in cartoons in the company of two women who represent the languages in question. Language, symbolised by a woman, is a mysterious and enchanting creature, directly connected with the unconscious forces of nature. At the same time, language can or must be explored and controlled by (the) man. She must be loved, cherished and honoured, allowed to have her own feminine caprices (*Kielettären oikut*)⁵, but she must also be subjected to rules, she must be helped to bring forth and retain her true beauty and other good qualities, and the man may even use his time-honoured right to choose or abandon her as he pleases.

The “language is a woman” metaphor is not used just because of the central role of women as mothers and keepers of the mother tongue, and not only because the words for ‘language’ happen to be feminines in many European languages (as suggested, somewhat naïvely, by Fishman 1991: 186).⁶ It fits into a more general conceptual framework where the active subject is identified with the man and the object of his activity – or the meeting-point of his activity and the environment – is portrayed as a female beloved, a female genius or »goddess»⁷. This object can be, for instance, art, music⁸ or the *Fatherland* personified by a mother or – as in the case of Finland – a young maiden⁹. This whole scheme, underlying and impregnating Western thought, has, of course, been critically analysed by numerous feminist thinkers for a long time already. What is of interest here is whether the questions of seeing language – or linguistic studies – as a female being have any relevance for Finno-Ugristics in particular. Is it of any importance here that historical linguistics, comparative Finno-Ugristics included, came into being in the golden days of the same conceptual dichotomy and the romantic genius cult, where creative intellectual work was self-evidently understood as something “masculine” and its object as self-evidently “feminine”?

Many feminist thinkers have already questioned the foundations of Western science, rationalism and analytical thought, pointing out that the objectivity of science is an

⁵ The name *Kieletär* ‘Lady Language’, the allegorical figure whose caprices August Ahlqvist used in the 1870s to explain the natural irregularities in language (cf. e.g. Sajavaara 1988: 235), is derived with the feminine suffix *-tAr*, similarly to other names of mythological beings in Finnish folk poetry and the *Kalevala*, for example, *Hongatar* ‘pine tree fairy (?)’, mother of the bear’.

⁶ To be more precise, Latin *lingua* and German *Sprache* with their cognates are feminines, as also, according to Fishman, the Hebrew word for ‘language’. However, Russian *jazyk* and its Slavic cognates are masculine, and Swedish *språk* (with its Scandinavian cognates) is a neuter.

⁷ Gröndahl (forthcoming) points out that the role of women in the Finnish national epic *Kalevala* is minor, marginal or negative, while its less lucky rival, K. A. Gottlund’s *Runola*, more individualistic and less in accordance with the 19th-century ideals of national epics, features numerous female figures: for instance *Saunatar*, goddess of the sauna, or *Muistutar*, goddess of memory. However, these women seem to be passive, allegoric representations of various aspects of nature and culture (or simply personifications of the author’s erotic fantasies), while the active, positive roles are reserved to male figures such as *Runoilija*, the Poet.

⁸ Rieger (1988) presents a detailed account of how the use of female allegoric figures (*Frau Musica*, *Inspiration*, the Muses etc.), as part of the romantic cult of the (male) genius, contributed to the exclusion of flesh-and-blood women from music and musical education.

⁹ The concept *patria* is rendered in Finnish, following the all-European model, almost without exception with *isänmaa* ‘father’s land’, whereby the genitive form plays a significant role (**isämaa*, with ‘father’ in the nominative case, is never used). The country, always female in poetic allegory, is defined not as ‘father’ but as ‘father’s possession’.

illusion and claiming that the preference for abstract reifications, hierarchies and strict dichotomies in scientific thought actually reflects the functioning of a prototypical male mind (going back to women's and men's different developmental psychology, societal and parenting backgrounds etc.). The objectifiability and knowability of the external reality – linked as it is with the assumption of a strict dichotomy between “self” and “world” – could belong to such androcentric tacit assumptions as well. Keller (1988: 180 [1985]) makes an important point in stating that such assumptions enable scientists to construct theoretical models of huge explanatory power without reflecting the underlying philosophical questions at all. (This, actually, leads us to one of the core questions of linguistics, especially historical linguistics and the explanation of language change.) But what is the relevance of this feminist critique to empirical linguistics?

In its most radical form as represented by (most notably French) Postmodernist or antirationalist thinkers, the feminist critique of Western thought becomes a theoretical construction that is immune to any empirical counterarguments – to quote the words of Chodorow (1990: 124–125) on Lacanian feminism. What these feminists have to say on “texts”, “discourses” and “narratives” (replacing “reality”) or the role of “language” in constructing the gendered subjectivity of women and men (“the master’s house”) seems to have precious little to do with the empirical matter that an average Finno-Ugrist works with. I cannot help sympathising, to a certain extent, with Esa Itkonen’s (1998a: e.g. 86–91, 111–116, 141–153) scathing criticism of Julia Kristeva, one of the gallion figures of feminist philosophy, as a linguist, or his more general argumentation against postmodern relativism or deconstructionalism in linguistics. The same arguments that are used against postmodern or “emancipatory” views of linguistics can be employed against any hypotheses presupposing direct dependences between language and society, be they Marxistic, gender-linguistic, ecolinguistic (cf. the criticism of Mühlhäusler 2000) or whatever: the ways in which language functions and changes are both too universal and too intricate to show simple one-to-one correspondences to any empirically observable social structures. Actually, this has already become clear in feminist or gender linguistics after the first-generation generalisations on »women’s language« have been shown to be questionable, over-simplified or simply false (Cameron 1997).

It is very hard to say whether and how Finno-Ugric language history written by women (or people free from gender-related prejudices) in any sensible way could have been different from the present-day mainstream (true, there are female historical linguists now, but the great outlines of historical Finno-Ugristics were drawn before their time). I can think of methodological aspects that could be targeted by feminist criticism, but only at the cost of deep misunderstandings concerning their character. One could, for example, criticise the *Stammbaum* model of language families as merely a reflection of patriarchy and patrilineal models of relatedness (only one parent counts)¹⁰, but this criticism would share the crucial shortcoming of e.g. Raukko & Östman (1995), that is, the ignorance of the nature of the comparative method (already duly criticised by Esa Itkonen 1998b and de Smit 2001, among others).

¹⁰ However, the metaphors used in describing the relatedness of languages are almost exclusively feminine: historical linguists speak of *mother*, *daughter* or *sister* languages.

However, it might be useful to ask ourselves whether the traditional way of idealising and reifying language as a passive object of our intellectual pursuit, instead of regarding it as (semi)conscious activity of human beings with a free will, is not merely a methodological necessity but an ontological illusion. Without questioning the method itself, we might question the boundaries of its applicability (which, in itself, is nothing new). To the extent that language and its development are determined not by innate, universal or unconscious laws but by the activities of conscious, social beings, there opens a possibility, tiny as it may seem, for finding gendered aspects in the core area of Finno-Ugristics, that is, in questions of language history and relatedness.

4. Gender and Finno-Ugrianness?

If we accept the idea of linguistic relativism, that is, if we are willing to admit that there is something fundamental in the grammar of a language – say, the principles of person marking or how space and time are conceptualized – that is determined not only by general structural principles but also by the culture the speakers are living in, then there is, at least in principle, a possibility that gender as a social construct may have a fundamental effect on language as a social construct, or even vice versa. In the extreme case, the structure of the Finno-Ugric languages might still bear traces of ancient, gendered cultural or social traits – there could be something like a “gendered Finno-Ugrianness”, something with relevance to both gender studies and the hard core of Finno-Ugristics: historical-comparative linguistics. But even if such traces exist, how could we find them?

One question of course is whether we are willing to find traces of gendered patterns, especially other than those of our own society. Already more than twenty years ago, Wolfe and Stanley (1981, referred to in Baron 1986: 47–54) challenged certain Indo-European etymologies and the interlinked assumptions of a patriarchal Proto-Indo-European society (as outlined in Benveniste’s [1973] famous work), suggesting a feminist and “matriarchal” reinterpretation. A similar case where etymologists have been reluctant to link words denoting women with concepts of power or other semantic spheres traditionally conceived of as non-feminine could be the etymology of Hungarian *nagy* ‘big, great’. Mészáros (1988) connects *nagy* to other Uralic words denoting ‘woman’, with the Hungarian use of *-nagy* in compound nouns denoting certain important persons as well as the related Ob-Ugric words for ‘fire’, ‘goddess, female mythological being’ or ‘lady, woman of rank’ bridging the semantic gap, but her etymology, very carefully formulated as a tentative “suggestion”, has obviously failed to provoke any wider discussion on the principles of etymology. Knowing little about the social structure and ideologies of a prehistorical society (or only what can be, in a more or less circular way, be deduced from linguistic facts), we may either project our own prejudices on the reconstructed proto-language and its speaker community, or interpret the vagueness of our knowledge as a general unstructuredness of pre-modern societies (cf. Anthony 2001: 11–12); this applies for possible gendered structures as well.

The methods of inner or comparative reconstruction, departing as they do from a homogeneous idealisation, are in principle incompatible with all kinds of variation so inevitable in real languages, whether dialectal, sociolectal or gendered. Another, perhaps even more serious obstacle to reconstructing, say, Proto-Finno-Ugric women’s or men’s language (or finding out whether there ever was one) is the sad fact that the relationship between linguistic categorisation and extralinguistic reality,

no matter how real it is, is often both unpredictable and diachronically unstable. The same criticism that has been presented against, for example, locating the Finno-Ugric primeval homeland on the basis of certain words for plants or fish, applies here as well: words and constructions may change their meaning, reference and use in numerous unpredictable ways. The mere presence (or abundance) of a phenomenon (as testified to by the existence or frequency of the corresponding expression) tells us nothing about its role and function in the society in question.¹¹

For instance, we can try to find gendered statistical skewings in the historical layers of Finno-Ugric vocabularies. Kulonen (1999) has pointed out that many Finnish words for women (such as ‘mother’, ‘sister’ and ‘daughter’, maybe even ‘woman’) are Indo-European loanwords while their male counterparts – ‘father’, ‘brother’, ‘son’, ‘man’ – seem to be of Finno-Ugric or unknown origin.¹² However, even if this indicates that Indo-European women played an important role in the contacts between the ancestors of the Finns and their southwestern neighbours, there is nothing about these words that could tell us whether these women were socially active and esteemed or merely (as Anttila 1993: 239 puts it) “central trade items”.

Likewise, knowing that the lack of grammatical gender in the present-day Uralic languages does not prevent the evolution and use of gendered or sexist linguistic patterns (nor sexism and gender discrimination in a modern Uralic-language-speaking society), we have no compelling reason to believe that the lack of grammatical gender in Uralic allows us to reconstruct a more profound equality of the sexes in the Proto-Uralic-speaking society than, for example, with their Proto-Indo-European neighbours. (In fact, the lack of grammatical gender could be structurally and typologically conditioned feature; it is sometimes mentioned in holistic typologies as simply a characteristic of agglutinative languages – Plank 1998: 212.)

True, there is some extralinguistic support for this tempting assumption. It is generally assumed, on the basis of archaeology¹³ or studies on Indo-European religion and cultural history¹⁴, that the society of the Proto-Indo-Europeans was patriarchal and dominated by a male warrior hierarchy. In contrast, the society of Northern hunter-gatherers was perhaps more egalitarian and less warlike (one thinks of Jordanes’ *finni mitissimi* and numerous other more recent accounts of the peaceful character of many latter-day Finno-Ugric peoples). The latter assumption, however, remains controversial. On the one hand, we have the famous accounts of women in the Far North, *terra feminarum*,¹⁵ hunting and skiing shoulder to shoulder with their

¹¹ A good parallel is the cult of Virgin Mary that seems to flourish especially in those countries where women’s role in society is a strictly subordinated one. It has been pointed out more than once (e.g. Leacock 1987: 26) that the abundance of this female imagery might mislead future archaeologists to reconstruct a matriarchal society with a strong cult of a mother goddess...

¹² To put it more precisely, there are at least four important IE loanwords for women in the Finnic languages. Fi. *äiti* ‘mother’ is a Germanic loanword, *morsian* ‘bride’ and probably also *sisar* ‘sister’ and *tytär* ‘daughter’ (with their Finnic cognates) are of Baltic origin. Besides, the etymologically somewhat obscure but probably interconnected Uralic word families represented by Fi. *nainen* ‘woman’ and *neiti* ‘maiden’ have been connected with the Indo-European root **g^wneh₂-*. Of their male counterparts, *isä* ‘father’ and *poika* ‘son’ are of Finno-Ugric origin; *veli* ‘brother’ and *sulhanen* ‘bridegroom’ seem to defy the efforts of etymologists (despite some suggestions; the latter could be a native derivative as well), for *mies* ‘man’, a Germanic etymology has been suggested. For more references see SSA.

¹³ For instance, in the possibly (Late) Proto-Indo-European Yamnaya culture the kurgan tomb type was »reserved for just a few important people, usually males» (Anthony 2001: 18).

¹⁴ The dominating deities in the Indo-European pantheon seem to have been male, and those early Indo-European peoples who worshipped mighty goddesses had obviously borrowed them from neighbouring cultures (Francfort 2001: 154–155).

¹⁵ The northern »Women’s land», mentioned by Adam of Bremen in the 11th century, has also been interpreted as a folk etymology associating the name of the Northern Finnish province *Kainuu* / *Kvenland* with the Germanic word for ‘woman’ (reflected by e.g. Swedish *kvinna*, English *queen*).

men (as in the famous illustration of Olaus Magnus), and feminist anthropologists (Leacock 1987) have emphasized the egalitarian character of pre-agricultural societies and the flexibility of the gender roles. On the other hand, Haarmann (1999: 153–154, with numerous source references) firmly believes that the gender roles are universally determined and that there was no clear difference between women's roles in hunter and farmer societies: in both of these, women were restricted to the domestic sphere, and hunting and the handling of weapons in pre-agricultural societies was clearly men's work, as reflected by the taboos regulating the relationship between hunters and women. The picture of the Proto-Uralic or early Finno-Ugric woman remains unclear: was she a humble hut-dweller subject to strict taboos restricting women's actions, or a fearless huntress actively participating in all aspects of the life of her speaker community?

5. Conclusions and afterthoughts

Given these two caveats – the undeniable but highly complex and unpredictable relationship between language and society, and the relative inability of the comparative method (as well as all theoretical models of autonomous linguistic description) to cope with variation and the coexistence of different (sub)systems – there might be two kinds of meaningful connections between gender research and the conceptual core area of Finno-Ugristics, i.e. historical-comparative linguistics.

The first line of thought runs within the core area of linguistics but across language boundaries. Knowing that many present-day Uralic languages have been shaped by intensive and often relatively well-investigated language contacts involving bilingualism and probably mixed marriages, we could look for possible traces of gendered patterns in language contact. If early Finno-Ugrians and their neighbours had systematic mechanisms of exogamy or trade of female slaves, could there be a tiny possibility to distinguish the “maternal” and “paternal” lineage in language? This has already been proposed in the few famous cases of genuinely mixed – two-source – languages such as Copper Island Aleut or Michif, where the two sources of the language (and their speakers) were clearly gendered, with “the first mothers”, female speakers of a morphologically highly complex non-European language, providing a clearly delimitable and dominating part of the grammar, i.e. most of the morphology. (For a recent overview of these two languages as representative of the “mixed-marriage language type”, see Croft 2000: 214–221.)

But are there really differences between fathering and mothering that could lead to systematic differences between father-to-child and mother-to-child transmission of language? And could these possibly different mechanisms of language transmission apply for languages that, despite strong foreign influences, do not generally count as mixed languages? Can we get beyond the rather obvious traditional conclusion that the borrowing of words for body parts or relatives, as in the famous cases of Baltic loanwords in Finnic, presupposes “ethnically mixed family liaisons with bilingual raising of the children” (Haarmann 1999: 155, my translation), and find concrete gendered mechanisms of language transmission in a contact situation, mechanisms with explanatory or predictive force?

The second direction for further investigations is less interesting from the viewpoint of history *wie es eigentlich geschehen* or other non-linguistic disciplines, but it might be

Grünthal (1997: 219–220) gives an alternative explanation: in societies such as the Estonian islands until the 20th century, where men could spend most of their time fishing on the sea and women took care of practically all work on the land, farming included, an occasional traveller could very well get the impression of a country inhabited almost exclusively by women.

philosophically more promising. One of the greatest contributions of gender research to linguistics (together and along the same lines with sociolinguistic and other speaker-related approaches to language) has been the questioning and deconstructing of strict dichotomies, crossing and breaking the boundaries of categories and breaking the illusion of objectivity, for instance by showing that the ordinary/institutional distinction is “a linguistic version of th[e] ideological distinction” between public and private (McIlhenny 1997: 111) – which, in turn, is culture-related and questionable (Yanagisako & Collier 1990: 134–139). Gendered structures in language do not necessarily exist within the categories of autonomous linguistic description, and recognising this fact may contribute to a more realistic reappraisal of the basic assumptions in linguistic inquiry, including the methods of historical linguistics.

Laitinen (1989) in her seminal paper uses the different morphosyntactic realisations of the semantic role of the EXPERIENCER to illustrate the possibilities of “women’s hidden grammar”. The experiencer may be a grammatical subject (*I love him, I am cold*) as well as an object (Fi. *Minua pelottaa* ‘I’m afraid’, lit. “Me frightens”), an oblique (e.g. external possessor as in Fi. *Minulla on kylmä* ‘I’m cold’, lit. “On.me is cold”, “I have cold”), or there is only a zero (“zero person”) to represent the experiencer (Fi. *Pelottaa!*). However, we cannot deny that experiencing, feeling and being part of processes like, for example, birth or birth-giving constitute an important part of human life and play a central role in our conceptualisation of the world. In a similar way, gendered phenomena may be scattered across the formal categories of grammar. This does not mean that they are less interesting or less meaningful than features typically clustered around a grammatical category (e.g. subjecthood, agentivity, animacy, transitivity) – especially if there are no cross-linguistically valid or meaningful atomic prototypes of linguistic categorisation, as suggested recently by Croft (2001).

And there is an even more relevant conclusion to draw: if factors central for the life and change of language can be realised cross-categorically, this means less credibility for autonomous, minimalist descriptions of language structure and change, and more empirical support for “connectionist” approaches. Seen from the perspective of the extralinguistic reality that is necessarily gendered, the uniform language system of linguistic idealisations, whether synchronic or historical, is revealed to be an abstraction without historical existence – as opposed to the real language systems that exist or existed in the brains of flesh-and-blood women and men.

It may be that this insight has very few practical consequences for historical linguistics, Finno-Ugric or other: questions of the Ob-Ugric vowel system, for example, must be solved with methods that have very little to do with gender research. However, when explaining language change or evaluating different theories on how languages live and function (for example, when evaluating competing etymologies, as in the recent debate on (Finnish) etymological research, descriptive word stock and Indo-European loanwords), the gendered aspects must be taken into account: although they may seem elusive, they may be as real and as fateful as, for example, the physiology of the articulatory organs is for phonetics.

There is thus a clearly and unmistakably negative answer to the question posited in the title of this paper. Finno-Ugristics is not gender-neutral; even though most of its methods are gender-neutral, and most of its most impressive results seem to have nothing to do with gendered questions, I hope to have shown that practically all subfields of Finno-Ugric language studies are imbued with gendered aspects. Not only culture, literature and history, where the role of gender is self-evident – gender

affects all the ways language functions in society, and inasmuch linguistic research and theories must be related to living speakers and their interaction, gendered questions cannot be passed by in silence even in the conceptual core area of Finno-Ugristics: historical-comparative linguistics and research on linguistic relatedness.

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