Endangered Uralic languages in the (Bermuda) triangle of documentation, theory, and application

Talk at the 4th International Conference on Language Documentation and Conservation hosted by the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, February 27, 2015

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In this presentation, we will survey the current situation of endangered Finno-Ugric/Uralic languages on the basis of the three domains of this conference topic. The relationship between theory, documentation and application can be conceptualised as a triangle in which documentation feeds into theory and theory is realised in application (language education and language policies). In the other direction, theory influences the process of documentation and application produces feedback to theory. Moreover, documentation and application are interconnected: authentic language material should be used in language teaching and language planning, and language documentation today is inevitably influenced by language teaching and language policies.

In the case of the endangered Uralic minority languages, none of these interconnections work properly. We will now present some reasons for this, in the light of just a few exemplary cases, and sketch some possible ways how the Bermuda triangle of vanishing languages, inaccessible information and inefficient practices could be turned into an efficient interaction between linguists and language users.

The Uralic/Finno-Ugric language family [map] comprises three European state languages (Hungarian, Finnish, Estonian, also spoken by minorities and diaspora groups) and several minority languages in Fennoscandia, European Russia and Western Siberia, in a variety of sociopolitical situations and in very different states of endangerment. The languages are relatively well documented; Uralic studies emerged already in the 19th century, alongside Indo-European studies, within the theoretical framework of comparative linguistics and ideologically dominated by romantic nationalist traditions. In a certain way, the romantic nationalist ideas of ethnicity continued their life also in Soviet official nation-building ethnopolitics.

Documentation & Theory: The role of multilingualism in Uralic field linguistics (JL)

As concerns the relationship between theory and documentation, in Uralic studies the monolingual bias of historical linguistics (methodologically conditioned: the method forces us to depart from one reconstructed proto-language at a time) and the nationalist tradition of language policies (focusing on pure and authentic language) have also affected documentation. The existing multilingualism was seen just as a disastrous consequence of colonization and modernization. This example [ITKONEN] of how a good informant is defined comes from the tradition of Finnish field dialectology, but also in the fieldwork among minorities in Russia, the researcher was supposed to determine who is a good informant, that is, a speaker of the most authentic, original and pure language. In this spirit, fieldwork focused on archaic folklore instead of everyday language use, and language samples could even be consciously edited and purged of "foreign" elements.

> "Finding good informants today requires effort. Only rarely can such interview subjects be found who fulfil all criteria of an ideal informant: they can speak about diverse themes naturally, fluently and displaying versatile language skills, use only the authentic old dialect in their speech without a single lapse, consciously analyse their vocabulary and grammar and accordingly give swift and error-free answers to the grammatical questions of the interviewer. (...) While looking for informants, the dialect collector must primarily trust his own judgment, only in the second place the local people's ideas about their neighbours' dialect skills." (Itkonen & al. 1969: 18–19, translation JL)

As a natural consequence of this, we can even now see the "gatekeeper effect" in the revitalization of minority languages. For instance, among the Kildin Sámi in Russia, Elisabeth Scheller claims that the language specialists enjoying some kind of an official status are, in effect, blocking younger people's access to the language.

> "However, there is a group of young people who have a good passive knowledge of Kildin Sámi. Their interest in learning and using the language has grown during recent years. However, their language competence is not usually acknowledged by the rest of the community, and especially, not by the language specialists." (Scheller 2011: 85.)

<u>Documentation affecting theory</u>:
The next step in this vicious circle: if only archaic folklore narratives are documented, this will influence grammar-writing and ultimately even linguistic theory. For instance: the discourse-oriented functions of grammatical categories in Uralic languages were previously not seen and not described, obviously because fieldwork for both theoretical and practical reasons focused on lexical and grammatical material and folklore texts (poetry, mythological and fairy tales, etc.), ignoring discourse and interaction. This can

be seen in how the differentiation of evidentiality from epistemic modality is only recently emerging in the research into the languages of Siberia; perhaps, if we have time for discussion, Elena Skribnik can tell more about this. Another example is the potential mood in the Finnic languages, traditionally described, as in written Standard Finnish, as an expression of uncertainty or probability. As Hannele Forsberg (2000) has shown in her studies on spoken Finnic varieties, the potential mood actually is characterized by its discursive and interpersonal functions.

What to do?
Studies on spoken communication on the one hand, modern sociolinguistic studies of multilingualism and minorities on the other hand (together with movements for emancipation and revitalization of minority languages) are bringing the issues of authenticity and representation into focus. We must accept the fact that multilingualism means intense language contacts and heavy influences both in the lexicon and the grammar of Uralic languages, and we must also accept the modern, more mixed varieties as used by younger speakers.

Highlighting the importance of spoken interaction could help speakers and language activists realize and acknowledge the central role of everyday multilingualism. Conversely, documentation of what happens in today's multilingual interactions could help researchers understand and perhaps even reconstruct the mechanisms of prehistoric multilingualism.

Theory & Application: Textbooks for the teaching of heritage languages (ES)

The first teaching materials were compiled for three major Uralic languages, and they were not driven by linguistic ambition nor by systematic documentation of the language; actually, many of them were written before modern linguistic expertise in the languages at issue was available at all, and their authors could only rely on their knowledge of the grammar of Latin or of dominant languages like German or Russian.

What concerns Uralic endangered minorities, the teaching of heritage languages appears quite late and is fueled by either religion (meaning Christianization) or ideology. Note that the situation in the West and in the East, in Russia, differs drastically.

In the Nordic countries, Sámi-language elementary teaching was introduced and supported at least to some extent by the Lutheran state churches, but these projects were often intertwined with assimilationist policies, especially in connection with Romantic Nationalism from the 19th century on. The "dark century," 1870 to 1970 (see

e.g. http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/saami-languages-present-and-future) had detrimental effects which can still be felt on both the languages themselves and on their status and their speakers. From the 1970s on, new language efforts begin: revitalization, the new concept of “language nests”, language planning, political autonomy and much more. These efforts have been successful in many ways: in achieving recognition for the Saami languages, in developing the languages themselves, and in maintaining the total numbers of Saami speakers.

In Russia, the first attempts belong to Orthodox Christian missionaries (e.g. Udmurt ABC-book from 1847, Saami from 1859 or Khanty from 1904). But the major campaign against the illiteracy was started after the revolution in 1917: in the framework of communist ideology all minority languages of the former Soviet Union were provided with orthographies (on Latin base) and textbooks (e.g. Forsyth 1994: 284-6). The national education in minority languages was introduced in the end of 1920s; it was focused on literacy development for native speakers, all textbooks and reading materials were translated from selected Russian ideologically correct sources - with sporadic addition of some authentic folk tales. Less than a decade later this policy ended, Cyrillic alphabet was re-introduced; in the 1950s the net of small national schools was replaced by large boarding schools with Russian as a language of teaching.

After several decades of assimilation policy and practical bans on using minority languages in public life, the majority of school children today are latent speakers or just ‘understanders’ (Basham & Fathman 2008: 580) with Russian as dominant language. But in those very few schools where minority languages are still taught as a subject, the textbooks used are recycled from the 1930s, i.e. focussed on teaching the written language to fluent speakers without paying sufficient attention to the structure of the language at issue.

We all know that that the ”old school linguistics” is quite slow in accepting new concepts and categories. In addition, in case of primary description of endangered languages used as a basis for teaching materials, we often have to deal with effects of transferring the concepts and categories of leading traditions into such a description. A famous example of this kind are definite articles in Church Slavonic, presented after the Greek grammar tradition in the work of Lavrenty Zyzanij (1596); more recent example from 1973 are definite articles and future tense in the Ob-Ugric language Mansi (as described by an author I don’t want to name here) under the influence of Hungarian and Russian tradition. Articles did not make it into the Mansi textbooks, but the future tense did.

So the teaching of Uralic minority languages is confronted with two major problems: a) the methods and b) the contents of teaching, the latter demanding better understanding of linguistic theory.

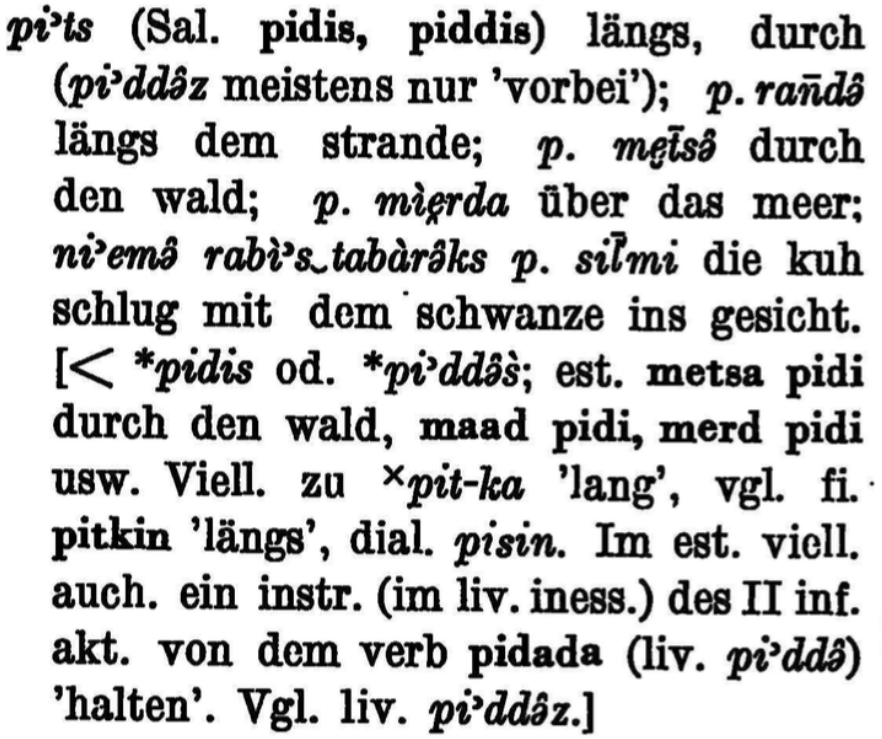
In case of Mansi there appeared a new textbook for national schools and self-learners; I wrote it together with the community educator and native speaker K. Afanasyeva (Skribnik & Afanasyeva 2007), using special teaching methods and the theoretic knowledge of the grammar, lexicon and culture, in order to help heritage language learners to start communication. The metalanguage is Russian. Its revised first part is available online on the homepage of the Euro-BABEL project "OUL" (http://www.babel.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/). It is based on construction grammar and presents the complex morphology of the language not in huge paradigms to be learned by heart, but piecemeal, tied to its use in the core constructions that, in turn, are tied to communicative purposes. The vocabulary is introduced the same way, as constructions are lexeme-specific. The textbook introduces and explains categories like evidentials/miratives and specific non-finite principles of clause-combining; it also presents information structuring in discourse through complex strategies of topicalization and so on.

This textbook is now used in the pedagogical high school in Khanty-Mansiisk where teachers for Mansi primary schools are taught. The book seems to be quite popular among the students as all 50 copies I presented to the library are reported to be already stolen. The second revised edition is planned in 2015, a similar textbook is in work for the sister language Khanty. We hope that this is the beginning of a new tendency.

Application & Documentation: Language diversity in linguistics and in education (MNB)

As all researchers of endangered languages know all too well, these languages tend to turn invisible and inaccessible. This is sometimes also connected with the poor state of documentation. The Uralic languages are basically well documented, but the materials, often poorly available, have been published in unaccessible metalanguages and transcriptions. The fieldworkers traditionally took it for granted that these languages were doomed to die out and that their work would only be to create a virtual museum for the language. In any case, they intended their work to be used by scholars only. As an illustration, two entries from dictionaries of Livonian, an almost-extinct minority language in Latvia, are given. Livonian as it was spoken in the last traditional speaker communities between the two world wars was documented in Lauri Kettunen's dictionary which appeared in 1938, in German, the leading language of science of those

times, and in the Finno-Ugric transcription, with lots of exotic diacritics. As you can see, the dictionary entry does include some examples of syntactic use but also focuses on the etymology and cognates of the word.



pi'ts **(Sal. pidis, piddis) längs, durch (*pi'ddə̂z* meistens nur 'vorbei'); *p. rānd̂ə*** **längs dem strande; *p. mę̄tsə̂*** **durch den wald; *p. mìę̯rda*** **über das meer; *ni'emə̂ rabì's tabàrə̂ks p. sil̄mi*** **die kuh schlug mit dem schwanze ins gesicht. [< **pidis*** **od. **pi'ddə̂s̀*****; est. metsa pidi durch den wald, maad pidi, merd pidi usw. Viell. zu ×*pit-ka*** **'lang', vgl. fi. pitkin 'längs', dial. *pisin*. Im est. viell. auch. ein instr. (im liv. iness.) des II inf. akt. von dem verb pidada (liv. *pi'ddə̂*) 'halten'. Vgl. liv. *pi'ddə̂z*.]**

Today's Livonian activists, including young people who have studied the language and want to revitalize it, use a modern orthography based on the model of Latvian (actually, a fairly similar orthography was used already in Kettunen's times but he chose not to use it), and the metalanguages in the new online dictionary (Viitso & Ernštreits 2013) are the two most important ones for today's speakers: Latvian and Estonian. The entry gives a lot of examples of different uses and collocations but no etymological references.

pids -- Līvõkīel-ēstikīel-leţkīel sõnārõntõz

pi'ds *prp* mööda, pihta, piki ▫ pa

- **pi'ds mīerda** merd mööda ▫ pa jūru; **pi'ds mǭdõ** maad mööda ▫ pa zemi; **pi'ds mõtsõ** mööda metsa ▫ pa mežu; **pi'ds kivīdi ja kāndidi** mööda kive ja kände ▫ pa akmeņiem un celmiem; **pi'ds suormidi ra'bbõ** näppude pihta lüüa ▫ sist pa pirkstiem; **pi'ds randõ** piki randa ▫ pa jūrmalu; **pi'ds riekkõ** piki teed ▫ pa ceļu; **pi'ds sūrdõ sildõ** mööda suurt silda ▫ pa lielo tiltu; **pi'ds tagīztutkāmt andõ** taguotsa pihta anda ▫ sadot pa dibenu; **pi'ds postõ** posti teel ▫ pa pastu KK77b
- **Nī'emõd a'ilõbõd pi'ds päkīdi.** Lehmad jooksevad mööda tatte. ▫ Govis skrien pa bekām. **Ta sai oksāks pi'ds siļmi.** Ta sai oksaga silmade pihta. ▫ Viņš dabūja ar zaru pa acīm. 79/2

In today's European education systems and school curricula, endangered languages are usually not regularly represented. This does not concern only the teaching of heritage languages to their potential speakers but also the presence of the knowledge about endangered and minority languages in majority and mainstream curricula. The teaching materials in European public schools often completely ignore the notions of linguistic diversity, minority languages, language endangerment or extinction, language maintenance and revitalization and the like. And where minorities receive some attention in teaching or other school-related activities, the focus is on history, traditional culture, on the past and the extinction of the minorities, as in this example from the ELDIA case study on Karelian in Russia (Karjalainen &al. 2013). This is how an informant described what her child had learnt at school:

> *a konzu hyö mendih yhten kerran matkah en en musta Karjalas sie avtobusas ajajes sanottih što vot täs ennen elettih karjalaizet myö jo elimmö meidy jo ei ole elämäs sit lapsi tuli ja sanou elettihgo karjalaizet vai oletgo sinä vie karjalaine elävy karjalaine vot nenga on meil dielo školas se on itkusilmis voibi kuunnella nengomii midä meile školas on.*

> ‘When they once made a trip, I don't remember, in Karelia, during the bus ride it was said that once the Karelians lived here. We once lived… [as if] we do not exist any more. Then my child came and asked, are there any Karelians left, are you still Karelian, a living Karelian? This is the situation at school. With tears in [your] eyes, you can listen what it is like at school.’

In recent years, there have been many new projects on documenting endangered Uralic languages, supported and funded by various European institutions (such as the DoBeS, the Volkswagen Foundation in Germany or the Kone Foundation in Finland, etc.) and often based on international cooperation. This new wave of documentational linguistics (see e.g. Rießler & Wilbur 2007, Siegl 2013, the project of Comrie, Shluinsky & Khanina at http://elar.soas.ac.uk/deposit/0302 or the documentation of the Ob-BABEL project at http://www.babel.gwi.uni-muenchen.de) often emphasizes the agency and inclusion of the speakers themselves: the idea that not only the academic research community but the speaker community itself should profit from the archived and annotated material is explicitly expressed, in accordance to generally acknowledged principles of research ethics and good fieldwork practice:

> The main goal of KSDP [the Kola Saami documentation project] is documentation and archiving in order to make the data available to and useful for community based language development initiatives, as well as for further research. (Rießler & Wilbur 2007: 64)

However, we still know very little about the real impact of these projects on the speaker communities. Moreover, these projects typically have no explicit educational goals, they are not (often even cannot be, for political reasons) connected to the local education system, nor do they reach out to general audiences outside the speaker communities and their areas.

In the last few years, the INNET project, funded by the 7th Framework Programme of the European Union, was launched in order to fill the gaps in school curricula and offer school children more information about linguistic diversity and language endangerment. This part of our talk should have been presented by Marianne Bakró-Nagy who couldn’t make it to Hawaii; I will try to sum up some of the most important aspects of this project, and if you have any more specific questions, I’ll be happy to give you her contact address. You will also find more information and links to various resources on the website of the project.

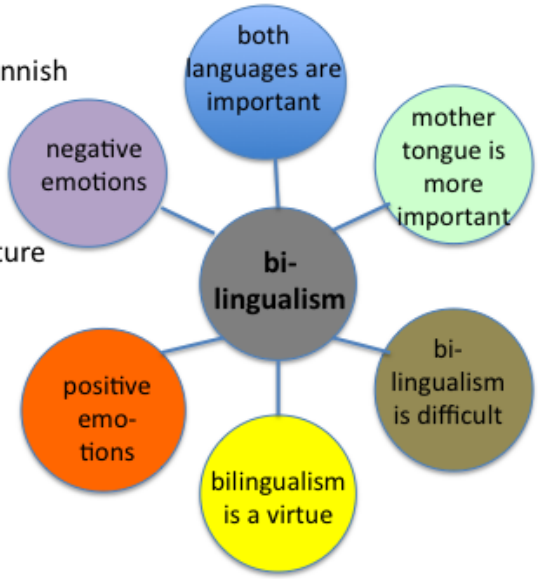
The INNET consortium consisted of four research institutions in the Netherlands, Germany, Poland and Hungary, and its main goals were to inform young people about linguistic diversity, to foster positive attitudes towards language diversity as a treasure,

and to convey research results to the general audience; this included encouraging the use of language archives. The Hungarian team specifically was in charge of the information concerning minorities in Hungary, Roma minorities (the Roma being numerically the most important minority in today's Hungary) and the Finno-Ugric minorities.
The Hungarian team planned and collected materials which can be used in various kinds of classes: Hungarian or English language, civics, cultural studies or geography, possibly also in the teaching of history, ethics or music.

An example of how attitudes towards endangered languages can be tackled in teaching: after discussing the situation of the Saami language in Finland and the different attitudes that people can have towards bilingualism, students are shown different statements which they can place into the circles representing these attitudes or emotions. For instance: "only elderly people speak both Saami and Finnish" might belong to "negative emotions", or maybe it also represents the idea that "bilingualism is difficult".

How can you categorize the following statements? Place them into the circles!

- We shall become more accomplished if we speak both Saami and Finnish
- Only elderly people speak both Saami and Finnish
- To speak Saami is essential if we want to be members of the Saami culture
- I prefer Finnish-language TV programs to Saami-language ones
- The Saami language will disappear as here everybody speaks Finnish
- Students living in Lapland should learn the Saami language
- Finnish is more useful in everyday life
- If we want to maintain our Saami mother tongue, it will be important that we marry Saami speakers



In addition to the teaching materials, a Book of knowledge with further background information for teachers and students was composed. The book, together with an interactive map of endangered languages, can be perused on the website *languagesindanger.eu.*

What to do?

The connection between language documentation and the practical application of language materials, for instance, in teaching, is still very poorly developed. One of the main reasons could be that linguists working on the documentation of endangered languages seldom have institutional connections to the education system, let alone the decision-makers in charge of the contents of school curricula. We know that language-political decisions are often made by people who are uninformed (or misinformed) about language diversity, multilingualism or minority languages. Providing information in usable and attractive forms (as in the INNET project) won't be enough if the information is not used.

Conclusions

To sum up: the triangle of documentation, theory and application turned out to provide a nice framework for illustrating many relevant problems of endangered Uralic languages. Where the connections between these three do not work properly, we get a Bermuda triangle into which both endangered languages and the well-meaning attempts to revitalize them may disappear.

We have shown some examples of malfunction between theory and documentation (theory directing linguistic fieldwork so that certain important aspects are overlooked, which in turn can affect theoretical linguistics), theory and application (how language textbooks do not pay sufficient attention to the structure of the language at issue), and documentation and application (how authentic material and data are published or archived in a way that does not benefit the speakers of the language themselves or other relevant audiences). In many cases, the problem lies in the collaboration between different institutions and professionals. In contexts such as the former Soviet Union or

today's Russia, heavy bureaucracy and ideological aspects (the glorification of Russian as the national and interethnic language and a general mistrust towards multilingualism) make this cooperation particularly difficult, but in Western countries as well, even in the Nordic countries otherwise so famous for their developed democracy, collaboration between theoretical linguistics, field linguistics and language practitioners (for instance, in the education system) has not been free of problems. Although all the dual interdependencies shown in this figure are basically well known and acknowledged by people working in these fields, it might be that seeing the whole big picture might help us develop even more efficient ways of strengthening these cooperations.

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