

Are we small, and should we be? Reflections on the teaching of the Finno-Ugric languages from the point of view of minority research

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Abstract

The teaching of Finno-Ugric languages as a foreign language often implies departing from an “apologetic” position: these languages are not valuable in themselves but only in relation to some personal or practical motivations. Studying minor languages, even full-scale European state languages such as Hungarian, Finnish or Estonian, is not something that could be expected of anybody; on the contrary, it is believed to require particular commitment or even particular talent, considering that these languages have the reputation (often upheld by native speakers as well) of being extraordinarily difficult to learn.

The market position of “minor” languages in the educational system is thus analogous to the socio-political position of minority languages in society. There is a one-way requirement for everybody to learn the “major” languages, English in particular, in the same way as in a European nation-state everybody is expected to know the state language. Minor or minority languages, in contrast, are not seen as commodities of practical value – or even if commodified, not treated on a par with “major” languages.

The teaching of the Finno-Ugric state languages at foreign universities is often (as far as resources allow, of course) based on the model of major European philologies. However, considering the “minor” state of these languages, we should perhaps seek points of comparison with minority languages and the experiences from minority studies. In my talk, I will elaborate on a few such points:

- *The presence of multilingualism.* Today’s minorities are multilingual, and multilingualism is in practice expected of most educated Europeans today – with the exception of the speakers of English and perhaps some other major languages such as Russian or French. The learning of languages such as Hungarian, Finnish or Estonian takes place in a multilingual space, a typical learner already having experiences from both formal learning of and informal exposure to one or more languages in addition to his/her mother tongue. Moreover, the real-life contexts in which the learners of Finno-Ugric languages are supposed to practice their skills will be multilingual, as English and other major European or regional languages are present in the Finno-Ugric nation states as well.
- *Demarcation vs. border-crossing.* New approaches to language diversity tend to highlight the fluidity of multilingualism, the multiple, interconnected and overlapping identities of multilingual speakers, sometimes even questioning the idea of a language as a clearly delimitable entity. At the same time, however, essentialization and reification of language can play a major role in the

emancipation and revitalization of minority languages. In language teaching and learning, multilingual and interlingual resources can be utilized (for instance, the use of relatedness-based mutual intelligibility as a basis for passive/receptive multilingualism, as in the EUROCOM project). However, language learners will also have to be conscious of language borders and even the demarcation of different language varieties.

- *Grammar awareness and linguistic meta-knowledge.* The communicative-cultural preferences in language teaching, sometimes conspiring with vulgar relativism (simplistic equation of “language” with “culture”), have shifted the focus away from conscious grammar learning. This may render students less able to consciously analyse their language production or to define their learning goals – and, in particular, to make use of the language resources they have already acquired. Overcoming this problem is central both in the teaching of minority/heritage languages and in the teaching of Hungarian, Finnish or Estonian as a foreign language; in both cases, the students typically have experiences of formal language teaching in two or more languages.
- *Heritage-language speakers challenging the concept of “mother tongue”.* Teaching materials, syllabi and curricula for Hungarian, Finnish and Estonian as foreign languages are usually created for language learners who start from zero and only acquire their language knowledge by way of formal education. The other option is to teach these languages (to expatriate minorities and migrants) as mother tongues with teaching material created in the “motherland”, an approach which is now increasingly acknowledged as problematic. Both in the academic teaching groups of Finno-Ugric languages and in the teaching of expatriates and minorities, heritage-language speakers appear who fall between the categories of “native speaker” and “second-language learner”.