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**A Short History of General Linguistics in Estonia:
Slightly Biased towards Fred Karlsson**

Abstract

The paper gives a general overview of the development of general linguistics in Estonia beginning from the second part of the 20th century. Two important events are described in greater detail: the first Estonian conference on theoretical linguistics in 2001 and the publication of Fred Karlsson's book *General Linguistics* in Estonian in 2002.

1. Introduction

In 1997 Fred Karlsson published a paper about general linguistics in Finland (Karlsson 1997). There he provided an overview of the development of linguistics and general linguistics in Finland “from the beginning of times (*kautta aikojen*).” Unfortunately, there is no such survey of linguistics in Estonia as yet, and to be honest, we would have much less to tell. In fact, one can speak about such research and teaching only after 1920 when the newly opened University of Tartu set up professorships of the Estonian language, Finnic languages, and Uralic languages. However, general linguistics was then taught as a minor subject only. The professorship of general linguistics at the University of Tartu was founded only in 1992 after Estonia had regained independence, and the structure of the university was reformed.

Nevertheless, the development of general (theoretical) linguistics in Estonia and Finland reveals some interesting parallels. The real breakthrough in general linguistic research and teaching in Estonia took place in the mid-1960s, at the time when, according to Karlsson (1997), it happened in Finland. Although it did not lead to the founding of the professorship in Estonia as it did in Finland, continuous research activities and teaching in general linguistics started then at the University of Tartu and in Estonia in general. The present paper makes an attempt to briefly

outline this development and examine in some detail two important milestones in this process: the first conference on theoretical linguistics in 2001 and the publication of "General Linguistics" by Fred Karlsson in Estonian in 2002.

2. A short history of general linguistics in Estonia

1965 witnessed the “formal” birth of the Generative Grammar Group (GGG) at the University of Tartu (“formal” meaning that its activities were approved by the university administration; without such approval its own publications etc. would have been impossible). The research group was founded by Huno Rätsep, then Associate Professor of Estonian, now *professor emeritus* and member of the Estonian Academy of Sciences. Since the early 1960’s, Rätsep had taught the general theme “new directions in linguistics”, including different schools of structural linguistics. Now generative grammar became the central topic (but not the only one). Thus, we can say that general (theoretical) linguistics in Estonia was imported from America (USA), as it happened also in Finland (Karlsson 1997: 91). Most of the “first generation” theoretically-oriented professors and researchers in linguistics emerged from the GGG.

During the past 10–15 years, the development of general linguistics, which involves several new directions, has been remarkably intensive. This development is quite natural after the professorship and the Department of General Linguistics at the University of Tartu were established in 1992. It also meant the beginning of teaching general linguistics on the master’s and PhD levels. However, at present systematic, theoretically-oriented research is carried out not only at the Department of General Linguistics but also at other departments and institutions—at the University of Tartu and the University of Tallinn, and at the Institute of the Estonian Language (Tallinn). But we also have to point out that by this time, several important changes had taken place in Estonian general (theoretical) linguistics compared to the situation in the 1960’s and 1970’s.”

First of all, a remarkable change in the general orientation had taken place. As noted, theoretical linguistics in Estonia started as the “import” of structural linguistics and generative grammar. Both of them can be considered formal as opposed to functional approaches.

However, at present at least 90 per cent of Estonian theoretical linguistic research belongs to the functional (including cognitive) type. When, how, and why this change occurred is difficult to explain in a few

words. But to some degree it can be done by providing an overview of the present active approaches.

As the first one—maybe not chronologically but in importance we can point out the cognitive linguistics trend. The ideas of Ronald Langacker and George Lakoff (and others) reached our “linguistic consciousness” in the early 1990s (see e.g. Trigel 2002). It exerted such a strong influence that in 1999 a seminar in cognitive linguistics was started at the Department of General Linguistics. It brought together various people—teachers, researchers and graduate students—from different departments and even from outside the university. In 2001, a collection of papers was compiled and published under the title “Papers in Estonian Cognitive Linguistics” (Trigel 2001). It contains ten papers on cognitive semantics, metaphor, grammaticalization, Estonian core verbs, polysemy, nonverbal communication, etc.

At this seminar, participants also discussed some other themes and directions outside of cognitive linguistics proper. Thus, a question arose as to what directions and approaches are current in Estonian linguistics at present. In June 2001, a two-day conference “Theoretical Linguistics in Estonia” was organized at the University of Tartu. The conference generated considerable interest; participants came from all the centres and institutions in Estonia where theoretically oriented research is carried out, they covered all active directions, and the conference room was full on both days. Most of the presentations were published in the volume “Theoretical Linguistics in Estonia” (in Estonian, though; see Pajusalu & al. 2002). The easiest way to provide an overview, even a concise one, of the present directions in theoretical linguistics in Estonia would be to comment briefly on the papers in this volume. We will not comment on or refer to each paper separately; it would take too much space. Instead we will try to bring forth the main directions and trends represented by these papers. Some papers can be attributed to different trends at the same time.

The papers by Haldur Õim and Martin Ehala (University of Tallinn) are devoted to the general discussion of linguistic theory, its development and methodology. Ehala’s main concern is the ontological status of linguistic categories.

The “formal side” was represented, at least conventionally, by two papers—one about semantics in formal theories of language (Lumme Erilt) and the other about optimality theory (Karl Pajusalu), both from the University of Tartu.

At least four papers represent the cognitive linguistic trend—an overview (Ilona Tragel), grammaticalization (Helle Metslang, Tallinn University), cognitive salience in the analysis of user's lexicon (Urmas Sutrop, the Institute of Estonian Language in Tallinn). Another paper from the Institute of Estonian Language, one of the main tasks of which is to produce large dictionaries for Estonian, deals with the theoretical basis of lexicons according to Pustejovsky's generative lexicon theory (Margit Langemets).

One paper focuses on language typology (Mati Ereht, University of Tartu), but this topic has a much wider background. When Mati Ereht became Professor of the Estonian Language at the University of Tartu he started the series "Estonian: Typological Studies" of which five volumes have appeared so far. It added a new dimension to general linguistics in Estonia.

Another relatively new direction is the so-called critical text analysis, which approaches language as texts in concrete uses (Reet Kasik, University of Tartu) and follows the ideas of M. A. K. Halliday. In practical research it mainly deals with the analysis of newspaper texts. Now this group has organized its one-day conferences and published three volumes of conference papers.

One large group falls into the category "pragmatics and conversation (or interaction)". Here we can find papers on the relationship between grammar and conversation (Leelo Keevallik, Uppsala University and the University of Tartu), speech ethnography (Renate Pajusalu, Tartu University), the role of context in conversation (Piibi-Kai Kivik, Tartu University), code switching (Anna Verschik, Tallinn University), a discussion of politeness models based on the study of different languages (Krista Vogelberg, Tartu University), nonverbal communication (Silvi Tenjes, Tartu University).

The study of spoken language (Estonian) in the framework of conversation analysis (Tiit Hennoste, Tartu University) can be singled out as a separate theme. Among other things, it has important implications for language technology: first, building a corpus of spoken Estonian annotated according to a system of conversation acts specifically worked out for this corpus and, second, providing a basis for building a human-computer dialogue system which uses Estonian as its means of communication.

There are two papers in the volume, where the authors explicitly characterize their approaches to language as functional, although in different directions: Krista Kerge (Tallinn University) deals with applied

linguistics (language teaching) in Halliday's tradition and Irina Külmoja (Tartu University, Department of Russian and Slavic Linguistics) represents the Russian functionalist approach.

Lastly, two papers deal with the problems of historical linguistics — the possible mechanisms and processes in the background of the development and establishment of the present state where we have thousands of different languages in the world, the processes of convergence and divergence (Ago Künnap, Tartu University and Mart Rannut, Tallinn University).

In sum, it can be said that the listed papers provide quite a representative picture of the present state of general linguistics and its developments in Estonia over the past 10–15 years. In particular, one should notice that while this research started at the University of Tartu, at present it constitutes a natural component of linguistic work practically in all research institutions involved in language studies. For example, the theoretical linguistic basis constitutes a necessary part of any PhD dissertation in any branch of linguistics.

3. Teaching general linguistics

Teaching general linguistics, especially on the graduate level, constitutes the basis of success in research. Here we can make only some remarks on the teaching system and its results in general and then comment in greater detail on one aspect of teaching, which is closely related to the general theme of the present volume.

The teaching system at Estonian universities has undergone several reforms. The present system includes three years of studies on the undergraduate bachelor's level, two years on the master's level and four years on the PhD level. On the master's and PhD levels, it has been possible to study general linguistics at the University of Tartu since 1992 and on the bachelor's level since 2005. Teaching has been quite successful. Since 1992 six students have completed a PhD. At present the University of Tartu has eleven PhD students in general linguistics.

Maybe the most important thing here to note is that in July 2005, the Doctoral School of Linguistics and Language Technology started work at the University of Tartu. It is an international enterprise combining the efforts of Estonian and foreign partners. The close connection between general linguistics and language technology is surprisingly similar to the

situation at the University of Helsinki, where the professorship of language technology is at the Department of General Linguistics.

We would now like to comment in greater detail on one aspect of the teaching process: the teaching materials, specifically the problem of handbooks. Of course, there are many internationally well-known textbooks and handbooks. However, they pose at least three problems. First, our university library was able to obtain only some copies of such books. When you have more than two hundred students who take the introductory course in general linguistics, it is an absurd situation. Second, most of the handbooks were clearly intended for students with a different (more formal or generativist) background than we wanted our students to be. And third—all the books we could use were in English. Thus, the inevitable problem we faced was to find a good handbook in Estonian, published here in a sufficient number of copies. The easiest and fastest way was to translate some of the existing handbooks into Estonian. And here our choice fell on “Yleinen kielitiede” (General linguistics) by Fred Karlsson. This book had already served students of linguistic disciplines in Finland for about ten years, so its suitability had been proved by practice. On the other hand, a new improved edition was published in 1998, and therefore the book was not outdated either. Thus there is ground enough to comment in short on some aspects of the translation.

4. Translating "General Linguistics" by Karlsson: some problems and solutions

Translation is always an interpretation. Maybe it is not hard to translate scientific texts in physics or chemistry, where there are no different traditions of presenting facts in different cultures. Linguistics, however, has always its own culture specific conventions, which are partly determined by the mother tongue and partly by historical traditions. In our case, translating general linguistics from Finnish to Estonian, both determiners are as weak as possible: the mother tongues of Finns and Estonians are close to each other as they belong to the same subgroup of languages—Finnic languages. There is no language with its own linguistic literature that is closer to Estonian than Finnish. Traditions of linguistics in Estonia and Finland, while they are not totally identical, are rather similar.

The idea of translating “General Linguistics” by Fred Karlsson into Estonian occurred for the first time to Jüri Valge, who asked Renate Pajusalu to be the other translator. It was in the beginning of 1990s when

they together contacted Fred Karlsson to ask for permission and cooperation. Karlsson kindly granted the permission and at the same time an important decision were made—the Estonian version has to be as understandable for the Estonian reader as possible. The translators could and should adapt the text. The (too) long period of translation witnessed many meetings, on the one hand between the translators (i.e. Jyri Valge, Renate Pajusalu and Ilona Tragel, who joined the team in the late 1990's and agreed to be the editor of the Estonian version) and between the translators and Fred Karlsson, on the other hand. Most of the meetings focused on various translation problems.

As the subject of the book is general linguistics, there were only a few places where different facts were needed for the Estonian version. However, in some cases they were necessary. For example, in chapter 1.6. (History of Linguistics) the Finnish linguists Setälä and Sjögren (Karlsson 1998: 40) were replaced by the Estonians Saareste and Ariste (Karlsson 2002: 59–60). Moreover, material in Estonian was added to the lists of “further reading.

However, the most difficult issue in the translation process was finding good examples. The main principle was to retain all the examples in other languages and to translate the examples in Finnish into Estonian. There were only some examples in Finnish that were not even translated, for example, the one in (1) where there were Estonian and Finnish words in the original text already, and only the order of appearance in the sentence was changed.

- (1) **Finnish:** “Merkitys ‘3’ koodataan suomeksi sanalla *kolme*, viroksi *kolm*, kielten lähisukulaisuus selittää samanlaisuuden.” (Karlsson 1998: 8)
 ‘Meaning ‘3’ is encoded in Finnish by the word *kolme*, in Estonian (by the word) *kolm*; the genetic closeness explains the similarity.’

Estonian: “Tähendus ‘3’ kodeeritakse eesti keeles sõnaga *kolm*, soome keeles sõnaga *kolme*, sarnasuse põhjuseks on keelte lähisugulus.” (Karlsson 2002: 23)
 ‘Meaning ‘3’ is encoded in Estonian (by the word) *kolm*, in Finnish by the word *kolme*; the similarity can be explained by genetic closeness.’

Most Finnish examples were translated, though, sometimes with slight changes. However, some examples were replaced for various reasons. We will now describe the main types of replacements.

Some of the changes were caused by **cultural differences** between Estonia and Finland. In (2) there was originally a word meaning a specific

dessert that is not known in Estonia. In the Estonian version it was replaced by the word meaning ‘porridge’.

- (2) **Finnish:** “Perussymbolit *mämmi* ja *tuokkonen* ovat motivoimattomia, mutta niistä muodostettu yhdyssana *mämmituokkonen* on sikäli motivoitu, että...” (Karlsson 1998: 14)

‘The basic symbols *mämmi* ‘dessert’ and *tuokkonen* ‘cone’ are arbitrary, but the compound word *mämmituokkonen* ‘cone for this *mämmi*-dessert’ is non-arbitrary to an extent...’

Estonian: “Põhisümbolid *puder* ja *pada* ei ole motiveeritud, kuid nendest moodustatud liitsõna *pudrupada* on sedavõrd motiveeritud...” (Karlsson 2002: 29)

‘The basic symbols *puder* ‘porridge’ and *pada* ‘pot’ are arbitrary, but the compound word *pudrupada* ‘pot of porridge’ is non-arbitrary to an extent...’

One of the cultural differences between the Estonian and Finnish language communities lies in the foreign languages that people usually know. In Finland, Swedish is one of the official languages and every student of linguistics can understand Swedish, at least to some extent. The language situation is quite different in Estonia. Students usually know Russian as the second or third language. This fact caused some replacements in examples, for instance, in chapter 4.5.3.

From the linguistic point of view, the most essential substitutions are those caused by **structural differences** between Estonian and Finnish. There were many changes in chapters 2 and 3 (phonetics and phonology). For example, the translators had to take into consideration the fact that in Estonian there is one more vowel (õ), and so the whole system of vowels is different.

Let us take a brief look at chapter 5, which deals with syntax. One of the differences between the syntactic structures of Estonian and Finnish is the lack of the grammatical subject in the genitive case in Estonian while it is possible in some constructions in Finnish (3a). Some of the structural differences are valid only for spoken Finnish, for example, there are many instances of non-congruence of the subject in the plural and the verb (3b). This is why the Estonian version of chapter 5.3.2. has fewer examples: two of the six sentences (listed in 3) representing different types of non-prototypical grammatical subjects cannot be translated into Estonian by retaining subjects of this type.

- (3) a. *Möttösen täytyi lähteä.*
 Möttönen-GEN must-IMPERF.3.SG leave-INF
 ‘Möttönen had to leave’
- b. *Naiset tilasi olutta.*
 Woman-PL order-IMPERF.3.SG beer-PART
 ‘The women ordered beer’

These were just some examples of changes in translation, which have a plausible reason. Nevertheless, there are some examples which were not translated, but substituted for some reason that no one can remember. One of them is in (4).

- (4) **Finnish:** “Ruumissa oli puukko.” (Karlsson 1998: 20)
 ‘There was a knife in the dead body.’

Estonian: ”Tees oli auk.” (Karlsson 2002: 36)
 ‘There was a pothole in the road.’

The translators and the editor tried to avoid including interpretations of linguistic data which are not supported by Estonian linguists, in order to prevent occasions of citing the Estonian version as an authority of Estonian linguistics. However, sometimes it was not possible. Chapter 5.3.2. includes the sentence *Eesti keeles ei ole kaudobjekti*. ‘There is no indirect object in Estonian’, which has already been cited in at least one presentation where the author tried to show that this category can actually be postulated in Estonian. However, we hope that in the future Fred Karlsson will not be treated as a classical Estonian grammarian, but in the way he deserves to be treated—a highly influential theoretical linguist. And, as we hope we have shown, he has been very helpful in establishing general linguistics, research and teaching, in Estonia.

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