

Castrén, Matthias Alexander (1813–1852)

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Matthias Alexander Castrén (1813–1852) was the founder of scholarly Uralic (Finno-Ugric and Samoyed) studies and an early pioneer of linguistic field work and ethnolinguistics.

Castrén was born in Finland in southern Lapland and went to school in Oulu. He studied classical and Oriental languages at the University of Helsinki and obtained his Cand. Phil. degree in 1836. He was a good friend of the central characters of the national awakening movement in Finland, Johan Ludvig Runeberg, Elias Lönnrot, and Zacharias Topelius, and this affected his course of life. But the person who influenced him the most was A. J. Sjögren (1794–1855), an academician in the Imperial Academy in St. Petersburg. Sjögren had himself made long field trips during most of the 1820s to the western Finno-Ugric populations in Russia, and he inspired Castrén to extend the explorations eastward. Sjögren also was instrumental in arranging funding from the Academy.

Castrén had already done fieldwork in 1838–1839 in Lapland and Karelia, mainly to collect mythology and folklore. In 1841–1844 he conducted his first long field trip, to western and central Russia. Castrén studied Yurak Samoyed (Nenets) in Arkhangel'sk and then continued along the Pechora to the Komis (Zyrians). His grammar of Komi (Komi-Zyrian) (*Elementa grammatices Syrjaenae*) was published in 1844. Castrén crossed the Urals and ended up in Obdorsk, where his health started to falter and he was diagnosed with tuberculosis of the lungs. During this long trip he became convinced that Finnish and Samoyed were related. In 1845 his basic grammar of Mari, Low (Cheremis) appeared.

Castrén's decisive journey lasted from 1845 to 1849 and covered an area extending over Siberia beyond the Yenissei and Ob' from the coastal tundra of the Arctic Sea all the way to the Altay and Sayan mountains, even transgressing the Chinese border. In addition to extensive archeological and ethnographic material, he collected data on all Samoyed languages, including Kamassian (Kamas), of which he found the last 150 speakers east of Krasnoyarsk, Khanty (Ostyak), the isolated and highly complex Ket (Yenissei-Ostyak) language and the related Kott language, two dialects of Turkic, Buryat Mongolian (Buriat, Mongolia), and Evenki (Tungus). All in all, Castrén traveled more than 50 000 km.

Castrén's first comparative study (1839) treated nominal inflection in Finnish, Estonian, and Sámi.

He formulated a program for further studies in the field. Castrén rejects the old speculations concerning the biblical origin of Finnish and proceeds to a concrete comparison of morphological categories. He deals with morphophonological alternations like vowel harmony and consonant gradation (see Finnish) as well as number and case inflection. He was the first to demonstrate that the stop alternations in Finnish, Estonian, and Sámi depend in part upon the structure of the following syllable (open or closed).

Castrén's most important contribution is his comparative grammar of the Samoyed languages. This 600-page posthumous work contains descriptions of all the five Samoyed languages investigated by Castrén, especially their sounds and morphological properties, and provides outlines of the development of the languages and their hypothesized common source. This work constitutes the foundation of comparative Uralic studies.

Castrén's study (1850) of pronominal suffixes in Finno-Ugric, Samoyed, Turkic, Mongolian, and Tungusic languages attempts to show that these languages are related and form the Altaic language family. However, posterity has not accepted this hypothesis.

In 1851, Castrén was appointed the first professor of Finnish at the University of Helsinki, but after only one year in office he died of complications related to his tuberculosis. Even upon his deathbed he struggled with his comparative Samoyed grammar, which (along with many of his other writings) was published posthumously by the academician Anton Schiefner in St. Petersburg (Castrén, 1853–1862).

See also: Anthropological Linguistics: Overview; Finnish; Uralic Languages.

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