

Johanna Laakso (Wien): Introduction: Intensive Experiences in Finno-Ugric Gender Studies

1. IP URSULA: The Background

In addition to teacher and student exchange, Intensive Programmes (IP) have established themselves as an important form of cooperation in our Erasmus network of eight European university departments for Hungarian and/or Finno-Ugric studies (Berlin, Debrecen, Hamburg, Jyväskylä, Padova, Paris, Tartu, Vienna). An IP consists of two weeks of lectures, workshops and discussions around a central theme. IP's are characterized by active student participation which is regularly acknowledged with a generous 10 ECTS credit points at the home university; even more important is the experience of working, presenting and discussing in an international group and the opportunity to make friends and create new networks.

In the early summer of 2008, it was the Vienna Department's turn to host an IP. The theme of the IP, *Gender Aspects in Finno-Ugric Languages and Cultures*, was chosen for two important reasons. First, gender studies form one of the thematic foci of the Vienna Department, which hosted the world's first international conference on Finno-Ugric gender studies in 2002¹. Second, the partner departments of our Erasmus network have a broad range of interests and foci, from linguistics to literature and cultural studies, and the approaches and theoretical and methodological insights of gender studies can be applied across this entire spectrum.

The theme also inspired the official name of our IP (as we were told in the application phase, finding a beautiful and illustrative name for the IP could be crucial for the success of our application): We chose the bear, the totem animal of North Eurasian forest peoples which is often used as a symbol for "Finno-Ugritude" in general, in the neutral Latin language and in the feminine form. However, as *Ursa*, the female bear, already carries misleading connotations with stars and space (being not only the name of a constellation but also the name of the Finnish Society for Astronomy), we chose the diminutive form URSULA, which can also be understood as referring to the role of IP as an event for students and young researchers.

Hosting an IP requires thorough technical planning and much practical organising. In addition to Andrea Seidler, who was responsible for the thematic supervision in literature studies and also helped considerably with her practical experience of Erasmus cooperation, and myself as the official coordinator, three colleagues in Vienna participated in the arrangements of the IP: Heini Lehtonen, Lecturer of Finnish until July 2007, did the greatest part of the technical planning of our successful IP application. Her successor Mikko Kajander took over the budget planning and accounting tasks, while Márta Csire, Lecturer of Hungarian, took care of the practical arrangements for accommodation, meals and transportation. Student participant Andreas Pöschek from Vienna and the two other members of our department's student representation, Bianca Achatz and Christina Tanzer, gave their invaluable help in entertaining the IP guests in Vienna and organising the social programme. Alongside my helpful colleagues and students, I would like to thank the

¹ For programme and abstracts, see the conference website at <http://homepage.univie.ac.at/johanna.laakso/gfu/>

friendly and capable personnel at the Haus International in Stadtschlaining, Burgenland, where most of our IP took place: The idyllic small town near the Hungarian border and the conference hotel with its modern infrastructure offered ideal surroundings for intensive conference work.

The internal communication between the IP participants in the planning phase was supposed to take place by way of an on-line portal based on the Blackboard Vista, the standard e-learning platform of the University of Vienna until 2007. The participation, however, was burdened by technical problems, and the Blackboard Vista system also had a serious drawback: it did not allow for the set-up of a publicly accessible “front page”. For this reason, Andreas Pöschek from the Vienna student group designed and maintained a public website at <http://ursula.finno-ugristik.at/>. This website now offers documentation of the IP: raw versions of most presentations, a more detailed programme and text, video and audio files illustrating the social programme of our IP. And, finally, the edited texts of some selected presentations now appear as a special issue of WEB-FU, to illustrate some possible approaches to the diversity of themes that can be subsumed under the still fairly novel title “Finno-Ugric Gender Studies”.

2. Gender Studies and Women’s Studies: Political Partisanship and Beyond

For decades already, Women’s Studies and/or Gender Studies (in some countries and traditions, these two titles are used more or less synonymously) have been an established and institutionalised approach in numerous areas of research. Departing from the insight that gender as a complex, variable and culturally conditioned social phenomenon means far more than the crude division of humanity into two biological sexes, researchers of several disciplines have opened new avenues of research into the diversity of human behaviour and culture.

Originally, Gender Studies were closely connected to feminism and the pursuit of equality between women and men, and first-generation works in Women’s Studies often had overtly “emancipatory” goals. Research “made women visible” (for instance, investigating the history of science or culture could show that there really were female astronomers, sculptors or composers already centuries ago) and shed more light on gendered forms of behaviour (for instance, showing how typically “feminine” features of language use are conditioned by traditional role expectations and the socially disadvantaged position of women). Theoretical debates largely concentrated on the relationship between women’s and men’s roles: dominance (does everything boil down to questions of power, are “female” features simply a way to cope with a disadvantaged position?) or difference (do women and men live in two different subcultures?)?

As long as there is inequality between sexes (measured, for instance, by gendered wage gaps, a low percentage of women on the highest levels of decision-making and a high percentage of women among victims of violence), the original emancipatory goals will remain important. However, more recent research has often ended up questioning the simplistic points of departure in first-generation Women’s Studies and deconstructing what was naïvely regarded as “feminine” or “masculine” *en bloc*. The focus has shifted to the reality of variable, simultaneous and overlapping identities and roles, both “female” and “male”, and also to the grey zones between or

outside heteronormative gender categories (for instance, homo-, bi- and transsexual identities, in what is now generally called *queer studies* or *queer theory*).

In particular, gender researchers have realised that the relationships between gender and other categories in human behaviour can seldom if ever be described as strict and predictable one-to-one correspondences. Although, for example, language use is conditioned by gender in numerous interesting and subtle ways, there is no distinct “women’s (or men’s) language” or “women’s (or men’s) literature”. Gendered categories can be partly connected to and partly independent of sex or gender, the grammatical gender in many languages being an excellent example. Grammatical gender *can* be neutralized, for instance in the generic use of masculine forms for human beings in general (in this respect, opinions and experiences of different speakers of different gender languages often differ greatly²), and yet it is an undeniable and empirically proven fact that grammatically gendered forms in the mind of speakers are often connected with biological sex or social gender.

3. Gender Studies and Finno-Ugric Studies: Apples and Oranges?

In the countries where Finno-Ugric languages are spoken, Women’s or Gender Studies began establishing themselves in or after the 1980’s. Many universities in Hungary, Finland and Estonia now have centres, departments and/or curricula for gender studies. However, the greatest part of gender studies is connected either with non-philological fields of study (in particular, sociology and history) or with linguistic and literary studies pertaining to other languages (for instance, some of the most active Hungarian gender philologists and linguists work in English or American studies), and most gender researchers are clearly oriented towards the Western European and North American, especially English-speaking scholarly world. There are very few contacts between gender researchers in the “Finno-Ugric countries” (with the exception of Finland and Estonia), and gender studies as pursued in these countries have had very little to do with Finno-Ugric studies.

What, then, can Finno-Ugric Studies have in common with Gender Studies? First of all, there is a fundamental similarity in the socio-political motivation of these disciplines. Although many Finno-Ugrists throughout two centuries have not been “ethnic Finno-Ugrians” (from the Danish classics of historical linguistics Rasmus Rask and Vilhelm Thomsen, with their important contributions to Finnic and Saami studies, to 20th-century Germans such as Wolfgang Steinitz, Swedes such as Björn Collinder, and many more), and although Women’s Studies can be practiced by women and men alike, with or without a feminist agenda, there is still a legacy of emancipatory goals in both disciplines. Without the national awakening of Hungarians, Finns and Estonians in the 19th and early 20th century, Finno-Ugric studies in their modern form and with all their national institutions and resources would be

² In the German language, most generic human-referent nouns are grammatically masculine, but in German-speaking countries today, it is generally considered politically correct to avoid the use of simple masculine generics. Thus, women are made visible by using explicitly feminine forms (or both feminine and masculine forms, as in *alle Wählerinnen und Wähler* ‘all voters(f.) and voters(m.)’), whenever there is the slightest chance that the expression should or might refer to women. However, there are still speakers who resent these practices. Austria has recently seen a situation in which, of two female governors simultaneously in office, one used the title *Landeshauptfrau*, the other insisted on being called *Frau Landeshauptmann*.

inconceivable, and without the political movements for women's rights, no Women's Studies in their present form would have come into being. This means an ideological heritage that obliges and challenges to continuous, critical self-reflection.

Departing from the ideological heritage, both disciplines also suffer from a certain heterogeneity. Sociopsychological mechanisms of gender-conditioned behaviour are a well-defined field of study, and so is language relatedness, that is, historical-comparative linguistics. However, due to both scholarly and political reasons, both Gender Studies and Finno-Ugristics have spread outside their "hard cores", so that one can do feminist philosophy of science or speak, at least in institutional terms, about "Finno-Ugric literatures". This calls for a more flexible view on how disciplines of research are defined. Of course, gravity or electricity have nothing to do with human gender, and there are of course no "Finno-Ugric literatures" in the sense of Finnish, Hungarian and Mari literatures having more in common with each other than with the literary traditions of Sweden, Slovakia and Tatarstan, respectively. Yet, considering gender aspects may contribute to our understanding of how scientists deal with gravity or electricity (cf., e.g., Keller 1985, Keller & Longino 1996), and understanding the feeling of "otherness", being separated from the rest of Europe by an allegedly insurmountable language barrier, may add an important dimension to the research of Finnish or Hungarian literature.

Finally, both Gender Studies and Finno-Ugric Studies can be seen not as fixed disciplines but as interdisciplinary approaches to each other (cf. Laakso 2005). In this sense, gender aspects may bring new insights into the research of Finno-Ugric languages and literatures (see, for instance, Hasselblatt 2003, Laakso 2003, and the bibliography of feminist Fennistics in Tainio 2006). To mention just one example: lacking grammatical gender, the Finno-Ugric languages are a particularly challenging object for the study of covert gender in language. If agent nouns or third-person pronouns are inherently gender-neutral, gender-fair language use should not be a problem. Yet, the existing inequality of genders is reflected in the structure of the vocabulary and even in the use of lexically gendered expressions for occupations and professions (for instance, Finnish compounds with *-mies* 'man' or *-emäntä* 'hostess', cf. Engelberg 2002; recently, the Finnish Board for Language Planning issued a recommendation for gender-fair language use, explicitly advising to avoid lexically gendered occupational terms³).

4. IP URSULA: The Results

Organizing a two-week international programme implies numerous challenges, some of which we only realized after launching the preparations. The participant group was extremely heterogeneous, to such an extent that finding a common language was a real challenge – International Bad English surfaced as the most tolerable compromise, but native and non-native varieties of German and Hungarian, spiced with occasional Finnish and Estonian, were also used. Most of those who participated with their own presentations were students, but on very different levels and with very different previous experiences and different understanding of the role and scope of

³ The recommendation, with reference to the recommendation of the Council of Europe "On the Elimination of Sexism from Language", can be found (in Finnish) at <http://www.kotus.fi/index.phtml?s=2456>.

gender studies. In addition to the students, many teachers contributed to the programme. In this collection of papers, the teacher participants are represented by Péter Balogh (Lecturer of Hungarian at the University Paris III), Holger Fischer (Vice-President of the University of Hamburg, Secretary of the Centre for Hungarology) and Tuuli Lähdesmäki (researcher and coordinator of the Hungarology programme at the University of Jyväskylä).

Needless to say, the papers published here are a cross-cut which illustrates an extreme diversity of themes, from linguistics to visual arts. Most authors had very little previous experience in gender studies, and for many of them, really challenging questions of the theory of gender studies were not the primary goal. Rather, most presentations at this IP could be classified to the first stage of gender research: “making women visible”, bringing gender differences into the focus of research and showing that even in the traditional fields of Finno-Ugric linguistic and literary studies, there are still many unexplored areas.

Literature

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