

An overview of generative works on Finnish and Estonian syntax

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This contribution provides an overview of the main works on the syntactic structure of Finnish and Estonian, sketching the main achievements of the research on these languages, characterizing the main topics of the research, and guiding the readers to further topics, sources and authors. The history of generative linguistics and the development of ideas has followed quite different paths in Estonia and Finland, largely due to the divergent political situation. This is sketched in the paper.

Keywords: *Estonian, Finnish, syntax, social networking in academia, politics and academia, Generative Grammar Group*

1 Introduction

The aim of this short paper is to give a brief overview of the main works on Finnish and Estonian syntactic structure, to sketch the development of generative syntactic work on these languages, and to provide a further guide to available sources and authors. For this special issue on Estonian, the main focus is on the work that has shaped the syntactic thinking of Estonian.

Over the years, the academic cultural ties between Estonian and Finnish scholars have been strong, and there is ample evidence of mutual influences in linguistics as well. The social and political settings of the two academic traditions were obviously quite different, though. Therefore, the generative work on Estonian and Finnish has developed in quite different ways, which is useful to know before launching a further study.

Much generative syntactic work on Finnish has been done outside Finland by various individual scholars, for instance, theses at various universities, whereas the most influential Estonian generative work can be found in collective volumes published by larger research teams. Therefore, in order to serve as a springboard for the interested readers who might wish to venture further to less accessible sources, we found it useful to provide the Estonian names of the series, editors, and leading professors.

2 Main reference works on Finnish and Estonian syntax

The major Estonian dissertations (Candidate of Science theses or dissertations, in the bibliography referred to as ‘CSc dissertations’) inspired by generative syntax were written in Soviet Estonia and had to be in Russian in order to be defended. The language of dissertations on Finnish syntax has often been English, partly because it was possible and, partly, because the dissertations were defended in universities that operated in English or had international dissertation committees. Comprehensive works on the structure of Finnish and Estonian are, however, written in Finnish and Estonian, respectively.

The main work on the structure of Finnish is the extensive reference grammar *Iso suomen kielioppi* (henceforth ‘ISK’) published (in Finnish) as a result of a working group established expressly for this purpose (Hakulinen, Vilkuna, Korhonen, Koskinen,

Heinonen & Alho 2004). The first 400 pages of the volume cover phonology and derivational morphology, and the second part, about 700 pages, details the basic sentence structure of Finnish. The final section, about 500 pages, discusses various other syntactic phenomena.

Until 2017, the basic reference work on Estonian syntax was *Eesti Keele Grammatika II* [the Grammar of the Estonian Language], referred to as ‘EKG II’ in sources that are in Estonian. The team of the Estonian Academy of Sciences, the Institute of Language and Literature, consisting of Mati Ereht, Reet Kasik, Helle Metslang, Henno Rajandi, Kristiina Ross, Henn Saari, Kaja Tael, and Silvi Vare published the volume in 1993. In 2017, this extensive reference work was succeeded by *Eesti Keele Süntaks* [The Syntax of Estonian] by Mati Ereht and Helle Metslang as editors, as the third volume in the series of the University of Tartu, *Eesti keele varamu* [The Treasury of Estonian] (923 pages, henceforth referred to as ‘EKS’). Most of the articles are also written by the editors, Mati Ereht and Helle Metslang. In addition, some team members of the University of Tartu, Renate Pajusalu, Tiit Hennoste, and Liina Lindström have contributed one chapter each, and some colleagues from the University of Tartu have co-authored some of the chapters (Helen Plado and Ann Veismann). The reviews and squibs section of the present Special Issue on Estonian provides a more detailed overview of the EKS (Ogren, this volume).

3 The generative underpinnings of the comprehensive works

The character of the comprehensive works on Finnish and Estonian syntax, the ISK, the EKG II and the EKS, is not generative—these are academic reference grammars. However, the senior authors of the reference books started their careers within the generative tradition, debating the details of trees, transformations and movement; they have played an important role in the development of linguistics in Finland and Estonia. The first generative work on Estonian was Harms (1962), which was published outside of Estonia, contained a few dozens of pages on syntax that did not amount to a full-fledged syntax reference book.

After a brief period of interest in Finland on generative grammar in the 1960s and early 1970s, as reflected mainly in Auli Hakulinen’s work, e.g. Hakulinen (1974) on syntactic movement, and Hakulinen & Karttunen (1973) on generic 3rd person subjects, as well as Hakulinen (1975, 1976), there was almost no work done on the topic for close to 15 years.

The situation was similar for Estonian (i.e., there were two “waves” of interest); however, there were surprisingly many works inspired by generative approaches in the Soviet Estonia of the 70s and 80s. The list of these works can be found on in “Publikatsioonid” (n.d.). Despite the general ban on gatherings that were likely to lead to discussions, the State University of Tartu could officially allow the establishment of a working group on structural linguistics in 1965. This group became known as the Generative Grammar Group, the so-called GGG (“Ajalugu” n.d.). The linguists who made up the GGG count as the leading figures of Estonian linguistics: Mati Hint, Tiit-Rein Viitso, Ereht, Metslang, Ülle Viks, Huno Rätsep, Haldur Öim, Reet Kasik, Ellen Uuspõld, etc. (see a list of the members in “Töörühm” n.d.). Various sources mention around 20 scholars who gathered around the activities at the Chair of Estonian language; several of them came from other areas than linguistics, such as mathematics or literature (“Ajalugu” n.d.).

The group sought contacts outside and inside of the Soviet Union. In 1967, it was possible to organize a pan-Soviet generative linguistics event at Kääriku [the ski resort of Estonia]. Rätsep mentions contacts with the Universities of Gothenburg, Berlin, Zagreb, Praha, and also scholars such as Ilse Lehiste from Ohio State University, and the Hungarian-born Ferenc Kiefer from Sweden, who smuggled the manuscripts of GGG further to the Western publishers (Rätsep 1990: 6). The articles referred to up-to-date generative works, and via Lehiste, the group learned much about Fillmore’s Case Grammar. Ferenc Kiefer also took current literature to Tartu—and brought back manuscripts from Estonia. In this way, the group was able to publish in Western volumes, such in Kiefer (1973) and Kiefer & Ruwet (1973) (“Artiklid ja uurimused” n.d.). Ferenc Kiefer remembers establishing the contacts as follows.

One of my colleagues from Stockholm, Hans Karlgren, was a statistical linguist, and he was also editor of a journal, Statistical Methods in Linguistics (SMIL). (The journal was active for around 20 years, and then expired slowly.) Anyway, Karlgren got acquainted with Tuldava [a linguist from Soviet Estonia in Stockholm—AT] quite early in the 70s. Karlgren repeatedly came up with the idea of visiting Tuldava in Tallinn. I was not particularly interested in Tuldava, but I was quite interested in visiting Estonia. Meanwhile, some colleagues from Moscow brought the activities of the Tartu group to my attention. So that’s how the trip [from Sweden] to Estonia started. We spent a day in Tallinn, which basically meant a city tour and statistical linguistics for us. We made our trip from Tallinn to Tartu in a car and in the vigilant company of Tuldava + a comrade in a dark suit. We were not allowed to stay overnight, but we could meet the members of the “generative grammar group” (Huno Rätsep, Haldur Õim, Mati Ereht), who gave an enthusiastic overview of their research. They gave me their publications—mostly written in Estonian—and upon my suggestions to write in English, they answered that their work “is meant for the Estonian nation”. Their volumes contained English abstracts, so I could figure out what the research was about. They also showed me some manuscripts that were in English. I realized that the works of the Tartu group were valuable for the Western public as well. I collected their manuscripts, which subsequently formed the basis for an extensive article on the Estonian generative linguistics for *Trends in Soviet Theoretical Linguistics*. Their study was welcomed with serious interest in the linguistic world. [Ferenc Kiefer, ‘Re: Szovjet generativ grammatika csoport’, email in 2018]¹

The GGG was most active between 1965 and 1973 (“Ajalugu” n.d.). After 1973, it became gradually more difficult to publish according to Rätsep, and the attempts of Kiefer to publish a volume on the Western works foundered after obtaining the permissions failed (Rätsep 1990: 6). In Estonia, the group still published ten volumes in the series of *Keel ja struktuur* [Language and structure], seven volumes titled *Keele modelleerimise probleeme* [Problems of language modelling] (Valge 2015: 5) (“Kogumikud”

¹ “It was possible for foreigners to visit Tartu, but Tartu was not the place where they were allowed to stay overnight (what if they go and have a good look at the Military Raadi Airfield)—[so the foreigners] were carted off to Viljandi or back to Tallinn” (Helle Metslang, p.c. and email June 10, 2018).

n.d.), and volumes in English or Estonian called books of abstracts (“Teesikogumikud” n.d.).

Several members of the group obtained a degree of Candidate of Sciences with dissertations on syntax, e.g. Uuspõld (1966) on adverbial non-finite structures, Metslang (Niinemäe) (1978) on the syntax of Estonian runo songs, or Valge (1981) on coordination. While several group members ventured out of classical syntactic topics but stayed within the topic of language modelling (e.g., Viks 1978), there were also instances where other scholars defended a dissertation on Estonian syntactic phenomena, such as Rajandi (1969) on impersonals, published as Rajandi (1999). One of the comprehensive works was a monograph on the inventory of Estonian argument frames by Rätsep (1978).

Many activities that later led to the first extensive reference book on Estonian syntax continued in Tallinn at the Academy of Sciences, where a number of former GGG members found a job (Erelt 2017). Their research was published in a series titled *Ars Grammatica* in the 80ies (Erelt 2015: 7). However, after regaining sovereignty, the interests of the Estonian syntacticians gradually turned towards typology, cognitive linguistics or Construction Grammar as in Finland, or to previously uncharted territories, such as child language. These trends are well reflected in the dissertations that were oriented towards language structure and supervised by Erelt, Õim, Ehala and Metslang at the start of the 21st century (Lindström 2005, Tragel 2003, Sakhai 2011, Argus 2008, respectively).

A website is dedicated to GGG (“Tutvustus” n.d.), which provides a detailed overview of the activities and facts (in Estonian). Multiple web pages under this link give a glimpse of the changes in the Soviet science politics, the timeline of the articles that set the tone in the new socio-academic environment, and snapshots of the social life in the linguistic academia of the time of the GGG. In addition to a gallery of quaint photos of those times, the collection of links reveals an additional interesting fact for potential historians of the GGG and for those who would like to know more about the work of those times: all the publications related to GGG are collected in the home of Mati Hint, in a house in the Estonian archipelago.

4 Modern works

Since the first wave of generative syntax in the 1960s and 1970s, the following PhD dissertations have been completed on Finnish syntax (granting university and topic provided): Vainikka (1989; Massachusetts/Amherst; several topics), Nikanne (1990; Helsinki; syntax/semantics of case), Korhonen (1993; Helsinki; conjunctions), Koskinen (1998; Toronto; non-finite constructions), Nelson (1998; Edinburgh; case), Manninen (1999; Edinburgh; adverbs), Thomas (2003; Westminster; partitive case), Huhmarniemi (2012; Helsinki, *wh*-movement), Palomäki (2016; Georgia, the -HAN particle) and Lohiniva (2018; Geneva; the -KIN particle).

Also of note is the Ph.D. dissertation of Vilkuna (1989; U. Helsinki) on Finnish word order, although not from a generative perspective, as well as Pylkkänen (2008; MIT) in which Finnish causatives are discussed. Furthermore, notable MA theses on Finnish syntax include van Steenberghe (1987; Groningen; binding), Oraviita (1992; Tromsø; empty categories) and Toivonen (1995; Brandeis; infinitives). The only other book-length treatments of Finnish syntax are two edited volumes, Holmberg & Nikanne (1993) and Nelson & Manninen (2003). A special issue on Finnic was edited by

Svenonius and Dahl in Nordlyd in 2003. Furthermore, the Biberauer et al. (2010) volume deals extensively with the mixed null subject situation in Finnish (see Holmberg 2010). In Finland, the volumes by Brattico (2008) and Reime (2017) make the argument for generative linguistics applied to Finnish.

By far the most common topic covered in all the works on Finnic syntax (or morphology), using any theoretical framework, is case marking. ISK (see pages 1171–1214) summarizes the syntax and semantics of Finnish case. Recently, the Estonian works on case have increased, but impersonals are also an evergreen topic since the 60s. The Finnic case paradigms are indeed impressive. Finnish, for instance, has 12 productively used nominal cases, along with three cases that are not fully productive. Of the 12 productive cases, six are locative cases, also used in various possessive constructions and as ‘quirky subjects’ (Finnic has no separate dative case with the exception of Livonian). Two of the cases can be seen as ‘small clause’ cases (essive and translative), typically involving adjectives or change of state; little syntactic work has been conducted on the translative (see Fong 2003), but for some recent work on the essive, see Hynönen (2017) and Metslang and Lindström (2017) on the Finnish and the Estonian essive, respectively. The Estonian morphological case table includes 14 cases, but there is much discussion about the syntactic nature of them and about which of them should be included in the list of cases.

The remaining four grammatical cases form the bulk of the work on Finnish case. The two main challenges involve case marking of the object NP: (a) the aspectually conditioned accusative/partitive variation (see e.g. Vainikka 1993, de Hoop 1996, Kiparsky 2001, Nikanne 2006, Brattico 2009, Acton 2014) and (b) the three realizations of the accusative object; see Vainikka & Brattico (2014) on the long distance nature of this process, and Anttila & Kim (2011, 2017) for an Optimality Theoretic approach to case and the adverbial accusative; cf. also Kim et al. (2001), Poole (2015).

What are the trends in Estonian syntax since the early wave of generative syntax in the 1960s and 1970s? Although crossing the borders of the Soviet Union, even to the Eastern bloc, was subject to permissions, a considerable number of Estonian scholars were allowed to the GLOW conference in Budapest in 1988. This resulted in a renewed impetus to clarify phenomena of Estonian such as non-configurationality, which was equally puzzling for scholars of Hungarian and Finnish (e.g. É. Kiss 1995, Vilku 1995). The Estonian Information Structure has been addressed in articles in the late 80-ies and early 90s, e.g., by Tael (1988a, 1998b, 1990), also in response to generative frameworks (Help 1991). The beginning of the 90ies meant the possibility of obtaining a degree outside of Estonia, which resulted a. o. in Ehala’s dissertation on Estonian language change (Ehala 1996; Cambridge), as well as various articles discussing the applicability of generative syntactic framework to Estonian and published in English afterwards (e.g., Ehala 1998).

Satu Manninen and Diane Nelson published an edited volume on generative approaches to Finnic and Saamic (see above) that included Ehala’s article on phonology (Ehala 2003) and Hiietam and Börjars’ article discussing the evidence for assuming the definite article in Estonian (Hiietam & Börjars 2003). The proceedings of Scandinavian Conferences of Linguistics contain occasional articles on aspects of Estonian as well (e.g., Rutkowski 2001 on noun phrases). When Peter Svenonius and Anne Dahl published a special issue of the Proceedings of the 19th Scandinavian Conference of Linguistics in Tromsø in 2003, they included the syntactic work of PhD students from Europe such as Vihman (Edinburgh) on impersonals and Hiietam (Manchester) on third person

pronouns in comparison with Finnish (Kaiser & Hiietam 2003) alongside work on Finnish and Saamic.

The start of the 21st century saw the dissertations of Hiietam (2003) and Vihman (2004), which preceded perhaps the first generatively intended dissertation of the post-GGG generation that addresses Estonian (Tamm 2004), which analyzes the Estonian DOM in terms of Lexical Functional Grammar. Later, more LFG related Estonian syntactic work was presented at the LFG conferences: Torn (2006) on obliques, Tamm (2006) on case, Tamm (2008) on raising and control (control and EQUI in LFG, respectively), and Sahkai & Tamm (2018) on contrastive topics as a key to the Estonian SOV/SVO dispute and the V2 phenomena.

Recent theoretical interest in Estonian continues to focus on the venerable topic of Estonian C/case (Cann & Miljan 2012, Huhmarniemi & Miljan 2016, Miljan et al. 2017, Norris 2015, 2016, 2018a, b, c, this volume, den Dikken & Dékány, this volume).

The workshops of the Congresses of Finno-Ugric Studies (CIFU) in 2010 (Hungary, “Finno-Ugric syntax and universal grammar” n.d.) and 2015 (Finland, Mantila et al. 2015) featured Uralic syntactic workshops that included Estonian and Finnish (see also the blog entry Vainikka 2015). The two languages were also discussed at two workshops in Budapest. One of them focused on the papers of the volume *Uralic Syntax* with Cambridge University Press (2016) (FinnoUgricSyntax n.d.), and the other workshop, *Syntax of the Uralic Languages* (2017) (SOUL 2017 n.d.) included a sub-workshop with a talk by Metslang on evidentiality in the Estonian corpora and a poster on Contrastive Topics in Estonian (Metslang 2017, Sahkai & Tamm 2018). Various issues of the journal *Finno-Ugric Languages and Linguistics* (FULL) publish work on Estonian and Finnish syntax (“About the journal” n.d.).

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