

Power structures and researcher's positionality: a critical autobiographical reflection
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This paper is an attempt to reflect critically on my experience of doing fieldwork with Uralic speaking communities in Northern Siberia (2005-2017). While I still consider the research methods I used, including ethical premises, appropriate and fair, I did not question then my own positionality or power structures engrained in my interactions with the community. It is uncommon to focus an academic paper on own mistakes, but I want to take up the challenge set by the symposium organizers and to propose an autobiographical observation about why things happened the way they did and what could have been done better. In the current situation, when travel from Finland to Siberia is next to impossible for me, I cannot amend my blunders by doing, but I can contribute to a discussion of better practices. I admit that they may now sound theoretical, when I consider both the current political isolation and internal resistance to change, unavoidable for every professional with years of experience. However, I believe that changes are possible when a critical mass builds up, at least in what concerns the academic practices.

When I now look back at my fieldwork experience, I clearly discern power imbalance that I actively, even if unconsciously, used to reach my professional goals. In this paper, I want to analyze the covert foundations of the unfair hierarchies and systemic reasons which turned me, together with many other linguists working on indigenous languages of Russia, into their unwitting accomplice.

The power imbalance instantiated in my interactions with the Uralic speaking communities and other local people (since these communities were by no means socially isolated) had deep roots in social injustices of the countries I had been socialized and educated in: first USSR and then Russian Federation. Access to higher education, income levels, access to modern technologies (at least back then), mobility, etc. differ significantly across the country. On the social scale, myself, born and raised in an urban environment in or near the country capital, in a family of intellectuals, was literally on the opposite end of a Uralic community based in a remote rural setting of Siberian Arctic and deprived of most of their cultural heritage by ruthless state policies. I resented the community, but still relied heavily on my unreflected authority for at least two reasons: without it, I would not have been able to achieve my professional objectives, and I would have risked my personal safety.

These professional objectives originated in common practices of the western academia, where research results in form of journal papers mattered tremendously more for a successful carrier than activities aimed at empowering speakers of indigenous languages, e.g. developing training programs for community members or preparing published materials to be used by the communities. The situation has not changed since then: such activities are encouraged in words, but they rarely count for obtaining salaried positions. Fighting against the status quo is clearly not what can be expected from junior researchers whom I was at the time. Connected to the priorities is a somewhat different aspect: generally accepted timeframes of linguistic fieldwork. Scientifically relevant results need to be obtained as quickly as possible and several years of involvement into a particular indigenous community is already regarded as long-term. However, today, when I can count 20 years of working with these languages, I reckon life-long collaboration as the most ethical and meaningful choice. Even if no young scholar can realistically promise it as such, the academic world is fully able to consider this as a default situation and promote it as such. I would not deny that the field of language documentation, which emerged as a response to severe language endangerment all

across the globe, is very successful in collecting the data for future language preservation and revitalization efforts. I wonder, though, why the academic community at large regards the efforts itself as foreign, such that shall be undertaken by someone else, while in practice these could be a core part of our job.

The societal injustice and academic practices can be removed only by a strong societal effort. Without undermining the need for such effort, I would like, however, to also consider smaller steps which can be done differently already today at an individual level. I would try to describe them using a frame of the past conditional: 'what could have been done differently in my particular situation back then'. E.g. if a hierarchical positioning for my own safety was necessary in the context of a remote Arctic village, I could have loosened the stance with my consultants. More vulnerability in private interactions with them would not have exposed me to immediate danger but could make our communication more egalitarian. Another example concerns community collaborators that me and my colleague made a part of our linguistic team. If we had invested our time into finding young and curious members of the community who did not know the language but could turn out more open for new skills and new knowledge, the activities we had launched could have a higher chance to be continued after the end of the documentation project. In reality, we relied on elderly people who mastered the language but could not become fully involved because of their age. Finally, I would have wanted to be told that life-long fieldwork was the default option. I could then have discussed with my consultants their aspirations for 10-20-30-years time and I could have prioritized my professional activities consequently. Long-term planning was in fact something unimaginable for a young scholar raised in a collapsing state of the time, but if we consider today better ways of doing fieldwork, students coming from a western country would not have such limitations.

Summing up, it is vital to discuss the issues I raised in the paper both at the level of academic community and in education provided for those who will work with Finno-Ugric communities in the future. Spelling out the societal hierarchies, researchers' privileges, and external limitations to our good intentions could be one of the first steps towards reversing the power imbalance.