

Round-table: Finno-Ugric Studies meeting the People: how to convey information about our discipline?

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In the three Finno-Ugric nation states and, at least to some extent, in the Uralic-speaking titular republics and regions of Russia, a basic knowledge about the Uralic languages (their existence, their historical relatedness and geographic spread) is fairly firmly entrenched among the general public. It is an acknowledged part of the national identity and present in the official school curricula. However, these ideas are often based on outdated knowledge and intertwined with romantic and/or ultra-relativist but scientifically untenable ideas about the national past, the national "mentality", the "Finno-Ugric world-view", etc. Outside Finland, Estonia, and Hungary, knowledge about the Finno-Ugric languages is sparse and often covered in a mesh of myths and stereotypical beliefs (à la "the most difficult language of the world", "a vast number of cases", or "so-and-so many words for snow"). Even less is known about the academic study of the Finno-Ugric languages, which is often understood as either national root-seeking or – as linguistics in general – simply in terms of learning and knowing languages, or, in connection with language endangerment, in relation to the vulgar Darwinist "extinction narrative".

Against this background of ignorance or misconceptions, what is the responsibility of Finno-Ugric studies, and what are the challenges which academic research should tackle? To this roundtable discussion, an international group of experts will be invited to discuss a number of questions, such as:

- What can/should we expect a layperson to know about our field? (What could/should we do to help them reach this level of knowledge?)
- Why is it important to spread information? (Political decision-making; better understanding of linguistic diversity in general...?)
- What does a speaker/a student of a certain Finno-Ugric language need to know about the Finno-Ugric background of the said language?
- How does the ignorance about the implications of Finno-Ugric relatedness relate to the ignorance about (historical) linguistics or language diversity in general?
- What could be done in order to spread more adequate knowledge about language relatedness, its implications and the current state of the art? How can we popularize academic research without trivializing it?
- Do we need a more concentrated effort to raise our profile, also with respect to the recruitment of students? How does popularization of research fit in with our increasing workload in our other academic duties?
- Should we take the "societal impact" (now writ large in the evaluation of research projects or academic institutions at least in Finland) of our research more seriously? How can we measure it?
- What are the dangers of misguided or amateurish popularization? (Relativistic ideas of "Finno-Ugric mentality" etc. reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices, or even fuelling ultra-nationalist or xenophobic ideas of the national past? "Fun facts" or factoids distorting the image of our discipline, i.e. the understanding of what Finno-Ugric studies are about?)
- How does Russia's war on Ukraine affect the popularization and the image of Finno-Ugric studies? (More knowledge about the history of Russian colonialism, vs. the war news portraying the indigenous minorities of Russia mainly in the role of victims?) How should we as an academic community react to this?