

Ethnic Duty and Other Obligations? Negotiation of Identities of Ingrian Finnish Language Teachers in Russia

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Abstract

This paper is based on an ethnographic research on Finnish language teachers' professional identity conducted in 1996–1998 in two schools in North-West Russia, and later completed in a follow-up study in 2005–2006. The focus of the paper is on how the teachers of Finnish in Russia conceptualise Finnish language and its meaning into their identity and what kind of theoretical discussion these views may invite to the connection between language and identity. The notions of language and identity are discussed in the framework of the dialogical philosophy of language, specifically the potential contribution of dialogism to the contemporary discussion on language and identity.

Key words

Language, identity, ethnicity, Ingrian Finns

1. Introduction

Along with economic and political transition, Russian society is going through a period of self-examination. Not only Russians have been reflecting on cultural and ethnic identity but also many minorities, for example, Tatars, Karelians and Ingrian Finns have begun actively and also publicly to rethink their relationship to the majority population. The emphasis on ethnicity and language has become apparent in, for example, aspirations to improve the status of national minority languages and schools in Russia. However, various national minority languages, for example Finnish, are taught as foreign language at school.

The Finns form a very small minority in the Russian Federation. According to the census of 2002, the number of Finns was some 34 000. However, it is by no means clear who Finns are in Russian society today. The majority of Finns in Russia are descendants of the Finns who moved from Finland (at the time Finland was still part of the Kingdom of Sweden) to Ingria (the present Leningrad Region of the Russian Federation) in the 17th century and are thus called *Ingrian Finns*. Another large group consists of persons and their descendants who have left Finland at various times, for example, after the civil war in the 1920's. The third group consists of so-called American and Canadian Finns and their descendants who moved from

North America to Karelia. These various migration waves raise the question whether it is possible to regard the Finns living in Russia as a single ethnic community or whether they rather form an entity of different ethnic groups. The Finnish-speaking population has decreased in number for decades. In the census of 2002, some 52 000 persons stated that they knew Finnish. Again, knowing the language does not clearly indicate that Finnish is a person's mother tongue.

In this paper, I will analyse how Ingrian Finnish teachers conceptualise the Finnish language and its meaning in relation to their ethnic identity and the kind of theoretical discussion these views may invite in the connection between language and identity. The data come from a larger ethnographic research project on Finnish language teachers' professional identity, conducted in 1996–1998 in two schools in North-West Russia, and later supplemented by a follow-up study in 2005–2006. The study focused on 24 teachers of Finnish from St. Petersburg and Petrozavodsk (Republic of Karelia), of whom 23 were women. The teachers' ages ranged between 20 and 64 and they formed a heterogeneous group in respect of their linguistic, ethnic and educational backgrounds. Eight of the teachers were of Ingrian Finnish origin.

For Ingrian Finnish teachers, Finnish was primarily a minority language although they taught Finnish as a foreign language to Russian-speaking pupils. Thus, these teachers regarded it as their ethnic duty to advance Finnish culture and maintain Finnish language skills in Russia. But is this more than an ethnic duty and has the linguistic and ethnic identity changed among the teachers of Finnish during and after the transition period?

2. Language and identity

The notions of language and identity are discussed in this paper in the framework of the dialogical philosophy of language (e.g. Bakhtin 1981; Voloshinov 1973), specifically the potential contribution of dialogism to the contemporary discussion on language and identity. Identity is an inherently social phenomenon. Although dialogism emphasises the view that identity is social and contextual, it also takes individuality into account - the spatio-temporal position of an individual, his/her unique experiences and views on the world. A person's social and individual identities do not, therefore, stand in contrast but are supplementary to and dependent on each other.

The role of the social world and others is seen as crucial in dialogism and other socio-culturally oriented views. Commitment to and identification with the actions, values and goals of groups (i.e. definitions by others) is therefore important for identity. Consequently, the community with its norms plays an important role in the formation of one's identity as does the society at large - with its authoritative voices and hegemonic discourses. However, discourse

and context do not alone determine the formation of identity but function as resources or as a meaning potential.

Dialogically interpreted, identity is thus multi-voiced, dynamic and process-like. At the same time, it is also linked with its historical and cultural context, thus gaining continuity and stability. Hence, identity is at the same time fragmentary and whole. Instead of one identity we could talk about several identities that have different meanings in dialogical situations (Penuel and Wertsch 1995; Pöyhönen 2003, 2004).

3. Finnish as an indicator of ethnicity? Generations of Ingrian Finnish teachers

3.1 First generation – authentic Ingrian Finns?

It is customary to divide Ingrian Finns into three generations. Those belonging to the *first generation* (Kyntäjä 1997; 1999) or *Ingrian generation* (Miettinen 2004) were born in Ingria in the 1930's or before Finnish-speaking culture was wiped out. These elderly people are descendants of Finnish-speaking parents and have lived in Finnish village communities: they went to Finnish schools and practised the Lutheran religion. The ethnic identity of the first generation Ingrians is Finnish. Their mother tongue is Finnish and they have learned Russian only later - very often under duress.

The sufferings of the Ingrian people unite the members of the first generation. They experienced the first persecutions by Stalin in 1929 when about 20 000 Finns were transported to Siberia. The oppression of Ingrian Finns continued in the 1930's. In 1937, all social activities in Finnish were banned and more than 300 Finnish schools were Russified and all Finnish newspapers suppressed. The activities of Finnish churches and the practice of the Lutheran creed were banned in 1938. In the 1930's, about 50 000 Finns were transported from Ingria, mostly to Siberia and Central-Asia. In spite of oppression and forced transportations, the first generation has retained their command of Finnish and their Lutheran faith.

The sufferings of the first generation have left their mark on the entire Ingrian Finnish population. Miettinen (2004) points out that this *tale of suffering* is the fourth pillar of the Ingrian Finnish ethnic identity, the others being the Finnish language, fatherland, and Lutheran faith. The history of the Ingrian Finns is depicted as a history of suffering, and suffering is also central in individual stories. The Ingrian Finnish teachers who participated in my study also referred to forced transportations and the breaking up of families. These episodes were, however, mentioned in a laconic manner and considered a thing of the past. It is, therefore, difficult to evaluate the importance of these tales of suffering to the formation of ethnic or linguistic identity. One could, however, assume that the past, often tragic, experiences

of the teachers play a role when they consider their present identities. What is not willingly talked about is still, nevertheless, present:

I was in Siberia, we were sent there. Father was sent to the front and we with mother to Siberia. I still had a sister, she was younger than me. I was born in 1938 and she in 1940. And so we lived, I don't know, ten thousand kilometres away in Yakutia and the devil knows where else (gives a laugh). There I lived for fourteen years. My sister died on the way. Well, that's history, many people died on the way. Sad. [St. Petersburg, male, born in 1933 (former officer), interview, translated from Finnish, original in Russian]

3.2 Second generation – lost somewhere in-between?

The *second generation* Ingrian Finns, such as the teacher in the example above, were born or raised during the diaspora in Siberia or Central-Asia to where they had been transported. Although the language of the second generation has usually changed into Russian, the feelings of a Finnish childhood, sufferings and diaspora continue to linger on (see also Miettinen 2004). Perhaps this is why the second generation is also called the *lost generation*. The majority in the second generation experienced the evacuation of the population to Finland in the war years 1943–1944, and, after the war, the return to the Soviet Union - in most cases, straight to Siberia. The youngest members of this generation were born in the Soviet Karelia and Estonia, where their parents moved after returning from banishment.

The childhood memories of the second generation are characterised by the terror and feelings of oppression of the Stalin era. As a result of Russification policy and fear, some families gave up using Finnish and tried to integrate their children into the Soviet society. People had to be able to speak Russian in the prison camps and districts they had been transported to (Savijärvi 2003). On the other hand, some families lived a double life even in the transportation areas: Finnish was spoken at home, Finnish literature was read, Lutheran religion practiced and Finnish traditions observed. Finnish or the Ingrian dialect might be spoken even outside home if the family was “just an ordinary one”, that is, not very high up on the social scale:

I was a year and half old when after Stalin's death my mother and father left Irkutsk for Petrozavodsk. They could not go home, to Taksova, but were promised work and some sort of accommodation in Karelia.

My mother told me that during the journey, on the train, people were wondering about the language that this child spoke so fluently and nobody understood a word. Of course, Finnish was totally amazing and strange to these passengers, but my

parents did not want to forget it, they spoke Ingrian with each other even at a time when nobody appreciated it and it was even dangerous. But my father and mother were just ordinary people, not in any responsible position, that is why they were allowed to speak at home the language that was dear to them and their own, although both spoke Russian fluently: it had been taught at school. [Petrozavodsk, female, born in 1952, professional autobiography, translated from Finnish]

It was during the school years, at the latest, when the members of the second generation came into contact with the Russian majority, and Finnish gradually gave way. At the same time, they also became aware of the conflicting values of home and school.

After returning from the areas they had been transported to, most Ingrian Finns moved to the Soviet Estonia. Those moving to an Estonian-speaking area had again to adjust themselves to a new culture and learn a new language. A small minority of the second generation Ingrians is thus trilingual. Kyntäjä (1997) divides the second generation Ingrian Finns roughly into speakers of Russian and speakers of Estonian, on the basis of the culture they have assimilated into. She describes their identification with Ingrian Finnishness as superficial and their knowledge of the Finnish language and culture as slight, even though Finnish traditions had been cherished at home. The second generation Ingrian Finns are often uncertain about their ethnic identity, unlike those of the first generation. In adulthood, their ethnic identity has mainly been formed by marriage. Those who married Russians assimilated to Russians, and their children were raised as Russians as well. Anna and Igor, teachers of Finnish, define their ethnic identity as follows:¹

SARI: Do you regard yourself as an Ingrian or a Russian?

ANNA: (sighs)

SARI: How do you feel about it?

ANNA: More of an Ingrian because in my family my mother is Ingrian and my father is Russian but in the family Granny was always the most important person. The stories about the history of her family were always so interesting that I sort of became more interested in Granny's family than in my father's family,

¹ I use the terms Ingrian Finn, Ingrian and Russian Finn synonymously in the same way as the teachers participating in the study. Similarly, the terms Finnish, Ingrian Finnish, and the Ingrian dialect are used synonymously if the teachers have not distinguished between them in a spoken or written text.

for example. [...] And there's also the fact that Granny was with me, and because she lived in the country, that's an old Finnish place also in the Hatchina district, and I went to school there, primary school, and I was always with Granny there. That really left its mark on my life. So, I'm more of an Ingrian (laughs) but I'm also very proud of being a Russian. [St. Petersburg, female, born in 1955, interview, translated from Finnish]

IGOR: Well, first of all I regard myself in many respects as a Finn because my mother is Finnish. Mother is Ingrian and she was born here in Ingria [...] Of course I have a lot of Finnish characteristics, well, my father is Ukrainian. During the Soviet era, everything got mixed, there were lots of mixed marriages. [...] I of course regard myself as Russian because this environment has made me a Russian, hasn't it? I have, after all, lived among Russians, among Mordvians in Mordvia, among Yakutians, well all of that is of course Russia. Everyone speaks Russian in one way or another, and so the whole environment, all that culture that I have assimilated has no doubt been Russian. Not Finnish. Sometimes I say that Finland hasn't, after all, fed me. It doesn't matter how poor or hungry we were during the war and a long time after the war, in any case we were living here. Naturally I consider myself Russian but what can you do about your genes. I have two daughters but of course they regard themselves even more as Russians. [...] and I chose myself a nationality when I became sixteen. They said to me "what will you be, Ukrainian, you have a Ukrainian father, don't you, or Finnish, your mother is Finnish?" I had been sent to Siberia as a member of a Finnish family, and already at the age of sixteen I understood what that meant - deportation and all that. I said that "I will become a Ukrainian". So I became a Ukrainian, and that's what it says in my passport. But circumstances forced me to make that choice, times were different then. [Teacher of Finnish, St. Petersburg, male, born in 1933 (former officer), interview, translated from Finnish, originally Russian]

It is noteworthy in Anna's and Igor's definitions that their relationship to Finnishness and Russianness is negotiable and linked with time, place, and the social context (Pavlenko 2004, see also Burck 2004). Sometimes it is even possible to *choose* an identity, as Igor has done, or one can identify

oneself with one ethnic group more closely than with another, as Anna has done, without forsaking the other.

3.3 Third generation - from diaspora back to the roots?

Ingrian Finns of the *third generation* were born after the 1950's in various parts of the Soviet Union. This generation has most often grown up in a bicultural family in which one of the parents or grandparents is Finnish. In some classifications (e.g., Miettinen 2004), the members of the second and the third generation belong to the same *diaspora generation* who were born somewhere else than the historical Ingria.

All the Ingrian Finnish teachers who participated in my study were born and raised in diaspora, and at least one of their parents or grandparents came from the historical Ingria. The teachers born in the 1930's and 1940's were still Finnish-speaking, but for some of them Russian was already the stronger language although they had heard Finnish spoken at home. Those born in the 1970's had learned Finnish at the university, and for them, Finnish is practically a foreign language. In general, an Ingrian youngster speaking Finnish is a rarity in today's Ingria (Savijärvi 2003).

The relationship of the members of the third generation to Finnishness or the fate of the Ingrian people is not personal but mostly based on their grandparents' stories. Also, their knowledge of Finnish tends to be nonexistent, as Finnish has not been preserved as a language spoken at home. Particularly in those families in which Finnishness has not been discussed, the identification of young people with Ingrian Finns has been weak. Their images of Ingria are based on book learning, if on anything at all (Miettinen 2004). However, some studies indicate that young Ingrian Finns can be very much aware of their ethnic identity. Particularly those who are thinking about moving to Finland may identify themselves strongly as Ingrian Finns. (Räsänen 1999.)

For the first generation Ingrian Finns, in particular, the command of Finnish is an indication of so-called *authentic* Finnishness, while being a speaker of Russian indicates that you are a Russian. Those members of the third generation who started their Finnish studies as adults want to show that they identify themselves ethnically with Ingrian Finns. Thus, it is an *ethnic duty* to speak Finnish. From their point of view, also conversion to the Lutheran creed is an indication of Finnish identity. According to Miettinen (2004), Evangelical Lutheranism is still a strong *symbolic* indication of being an Ingrian Finnish identity. The practice of religion is, however, more characteristic of the members of the first Ingrian generation than of those born later in diaspora who have become secularised over the decades - partly as a result of the anti-religious attitudes in the Soviet Union. Religion did not become an issue among the teachers participating in this study, except when celebrating religious holidays such as Christmas came up.

4. Finnish language –cultural capital or ballast?

The relationships and memberships of the Finnish teachers in the school community were defined, among other things, by ethnicity and language. For example, Ingrian Finnish teachers were often considered a special group because their *cultural capital* and generally good command of Finnish distinguished them from Russian teachers. Ingrian Finnish teachers were valued members of the working community, and they were in demand as teachers especially when schools specialising in Finnish were set up in St. Petersburg. In this case, the decisive factor was the ethnic background and linguistic proficiency. Because of scarcity of teachers, they were not required to have pedagogic or philological qualifications, either. Ingrian Finnish teachers were also popular with students' parents for they were thought to be more skilled - the cream of teachers of Finnish.

However, an ethnic background has not always been an asset. The Ingrian Finnish teachers could clearly remember what it meant to belong to a minority in the Soviet Union and how the Finnish language was valued or even tolerated during the Soviet period in schools.

Older generation Ingrian Finns told about their relatives who had been "enemies of two states". In the Soviet Union, they had been second class citizens, while in Finland they had been forgotten or kept silent about, for political reasons. With regard to Post-Soviet Russia and today's Finland, the teachers considered themselves as members of a minority that was defined by majority criteria. In Russia, they were Finns, while in Finland they were regarded as Russians.

Thus, the cultural capital could also be a *cultural ballast*. Their ethnic background distinguished the Ingrian teachers from the other teachers of Finnish at school, for they were considered to have an ethnic duty to advance Finnish culture and to maintain the knowledge of Finnish in Russia. Also, the teachers themselves regarded it as their important duty to continue the tradition and to further the Finnish language. On the other hand, another indication of the cultural ballast was that the *authenticity* of the Ingrian Finns' ethnicity could be in doubt, especially if their command of the language was not at the same level as that of an imaginary native speaker of Finnish. Thus, language and ethnicity were intertwined.

During the past ten years, the pedagogical community of Finnish language teachers has become more homogeneous in respect to their relationship to language and profession. Most of the teachers are now ethnically Russians who have learned Finnish as a foreign language at school, and who have formal teacher education in language pedagogy. For new generation teachers it is more a professional interest than an ethnic duty to further the cause of Finnish culture in Russia.

5. Discussion

The Ingrian Finnish teachers' relationship with Finnish varied. To some, it was the mother tongue while to others, it was a second or foreign language learned as an adult. Also, their experiences of how Finnish was positioned in the Soviet or Russian society differed and brought about various emotional relationships. Therefore, dualistic view of language as either "national" or "foreign" can be questioned. The dialogical framework also reveals how the teachers' beliefs about language are embedded in a complex occupational, social and cultural context. However, by seeing this context mostly in terms of *discursive practices*, it avoids simplistic world-views or conclusions about peoples' lives. In addition, the framework recognises the ideological and value-laden nature of discourses, and the spatio-temporal context in which the meanings are manifested. I am also following Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) who argue that linguistic and ethnic identities are more often negotiated in multilingual situations where dualistic views and the boundaries of languages begin to blur - both in beliefs as well as practices.

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