

Issues in Saami historical linguistics: from fieldwork to reconstruction of phylogenetic tree

In the present talk, I will touch on three interrelated topics in the history of Saami languages that are not only relevant to diachronic studies as such, but also propose some insights for the practice of linguistic fieldwork.

The first case study is a description of the nominal inflection of Kildin Saami. This language has a relatively rich system of inflectional classes of nouns, which are only partially predictable from the phonological form of stems. A complete description of this system became possible only by approaching the problem diachronically, i.e. by providing a systematic survey of the Kildin Saami reflexes of different Proto-Saami stems. This case study emphasizes the importance of historically oriented questionnaires in the early stages of linguistic fieldwork.

The plenty of phonologically unpredictable inflectional classes arose in Kildin Saami after the apocope of final syllables. Similar but often not identical processes occurred in the other Eastern Saami languages. Setting the exact rules of these apocopes in each language is the aim of the second case study. I will show that these phonological changes have an areal nature and do not support the topology of the Saami phylogenetic tree proposed by Sammallahti (1998).

The last part of the talk will outline general issues in the genealogical classification of Saami languages. I will review the features traditionally proposed as classificatory parameters and show that many of them have an areal nature and are not suitable for building a genealogical tree. I try to propose some criteria for estimating the relevance of certain innovations for a tree-like classification. I will also review computational methods currently used in dialectology and phylogenetics as alternatives to traditional classifications based on common innovations.