Intragenetic and Areal Influences in the Uralic Language Area

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The Uralic languages are spoken across a vast region from Northern Scandinavia to Siberia. This geographic and sociolinguistic spread provides an exceptional opportunity to investigate how typological features emerge, persist, and diffuse within and across a single genealogical family.

The structure of many Uralic languages appears to be typologically similar: they tend to have agglutinative morphology, right headed NPs, SOV word order, relatively simple syllable structures, word initial stress, front-back vowel harmony, etc. (see e.g. Comrie 1988; Abondolo & Valijärvi 2023). However, for example, the Southern Finnic languages (Estonian, South Estonian, Livonian, Votic) are atypical Uralic languages in several respects: they reveal more fusional morphology, basic SVO word order, innovative means for marking reported evidentiality and presenting commands, complex phonological alternations (Metslang 2009; Laakso 2021). For Estonian, extensive typological changes in prosody and inflection are traditionally explained by the influence of contact languages, especially Middle Old German (Prillop et al. 2020: 30). The formation of fusional traits in Livonian is related to Latvian or older Germanic contacts (Grünthal 2015). The Southern Finnic languages with their cognate and non-cognate contact varieties (Baltic, Slavic, and (historical) Germanic varieties) together form the Central Baltic language area which is characterised by a number of shared features in phonology, morphology and syntax (Norvik et al. 2021). These languages can be seen as a part of the wider Circum-Baltic area whose similar language features and innovations have attracted greater attention since the works by Stolz (1991) and Dahl & Koptjevskaja-Tamm (2001a, b). The most recent volume by Wiemer et al. (2025) focuses on the eastern part of the area. To study typological shift, new comprehensive datasets are used, such as Grambank and UraTyp (see Norvik et al. 2022), while recent databases focusing on some branches of the language family, such as UTDb (Havas et al. 2015) and VolgaTyp (Havas et al. 2023), can serve as a basis for a typologically-oriented comparison of these languages.

This workshop focuses on intragenetic and areal typology (see Daniel 2010; Georg 2023) in the Uralic language family – that is, on the interaction between family-internal typological tendencies (shared structural preferences or trajectories) and contact-induced areal convergence (see e.g., Pajusalu et al. 2018; Shagal 2018; Bradley & Gulyás & Czentnár 2022). Regarding this, the aim of the workshop is to bring together specialists from different Uralic branches – Finnic, Saami, Mordvinic, Mari, Permic, Ugric, and Samoyedic – to jointly explore how internal genealogical relationships intersect with areal convergence processes. We are interested in the full spectrum of data types: phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, prosodic, and discourse-level phenomena. We also encourage reflection on broader methodological and theoretical issues relevant to contact situations (e.g., see Miestamo 2018; Sinnemäki et al. 2024) in genealogically related languages in order to outline challenges when facing the dichotomy between genealogy and areality.

Within Uralic typology, a key challenge lies in separating what is typologically intragenetic – arising from shared structural inheritance and parallel developments – from what is areal or contact-based, reflecting diffusion and convergence. For example, grammatical number systems, negative constructions, person marking (Georg 2023), tense-aspect-modality systems (Bradley & Klumpp & Metslang 2022), word order (Vilkuna 2022), and adpositions (Grünthal 2022) show cross-branch similarities that could stem from both sources. Understanding these dynamics requires a perspective that integrates internal typological shift with consequences of external contacts.

While historical depth inevitably provides the background of such studies, the workshop focuses on synchrony and near-synchrony; the typological profiles of present-day Uralic languages and the mechanisms that maintain or reshape them (Nichols 2021). This includes contemporary processes of convergence, divergence, simplification, and innovation observable through fieldwork data, corpora, and sociolinguistic variation.

The working premise is that intragenetic and areal typology should be understood as complementary rather than competing frameworks. Intragenetic typology accounts for shared structural biases rooted in common grammatical architecture, while areal typology captures the outcomes of spatial proximity, multilingualism, and long-term interaction. Uralic languages, with their intermediate scale of diversity and contact, provide a near-ideal test bed for theorizing this interface.

The workshop will explore questions such as:

- How are structural and typological features, categories, etc. distributed across the neighboring related/unrelated languages?

- What are the most reliable indicators distinguishing shared innovations within Uralic from contact-induced similarities? How do such diagnostics vary across structural domains? Are some feature types more contact-prone than others in Uralic?

- Can we identify typological "core traits" that persist across the family independently of contact history? Which structural similarities among Uralic languages reflect genealogical inheritance versus contact-induced convergence?

- To what extent do areal factors blur genealogical boundaries? How should we model situations where internal and external signals are entangled?

- Which ecological or social factors (geographical proximity, bilingualism, intensity of contact, speaker community size, prestige of the contact language) correlate with typological similarities?

- How do closely related languages and dialects diverge typologically in contact situations?

- How can quantitative techniques be used to measure typological distance, genealogical proximity and/or areal clustering? What are the advantages of network-based over purely hierarchical models?

- How do present-day multilingual communities shape ongoing typological change in Uralic languages? What linguistic features are most susceptible to cross-linguistic replication in such settings?

The workshop welcomes contributions that e.g.

- Use typological datasets to map typological similarities and differences, draw isoglosses.

- Compare typological profiles of Uralic languages or dialects.

- Analyse structural diffusion across Uralic and neighbouring languages (Baltic, Slavic, Germanic, Turkic, Iranian, etc.).

- Apply quantitative typology and computational modelling (e.g., phylogenetic networks, multidimensional scaling, principal component analysis) to Uralic data.

- Theorize feature stability and replicability.

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