

# MY 'SHORT HAPPY LIFE' IN FINNO-UGRIC STUDIES

THOMAS A. SEBEOK

Indiana University Bloomington, IN, U.S.A.  
and  
Institute for Advanced Study (Collegium Budapest)  
Budapest, Hungary

My twenty years or so in Finno-Ugric (FU) studies, as reflected in my list of publications, began in 1942 and, except for a few oddments, appear to have come to an end in 1962. In later years, I did issue, responding to special requests – seldom for original work but rather for scattered reminiscences about this portion of my early academic life – some pertinent reports. Thus, in a pedagogical vein rather than intending to contribute to scholarship, I wrote in 1969 on “The Study of Finnish in the United States,” and in 1992(c) on “Uralic Studies and English for Hungarians at Indiana University.” More generally, in my retirement address to my colleagues at a festive convention on March 22, 1991, informally looking over my half-century academic career, I included a synoptic account of my “Finno-Ugric years” at Indiana University (1992b).

In the Fall of 1993, I was a visiting professor at the University of Helsinki, also lecturing at the Universities of Tampere, Turku, and Vaasa, as well as to various Finnish learned societies, including the Suomen Kirjallisuuden Seura. After my talk to this group one afternoon, a lady approached me from the audience introducing herself as having come from Ioshkar-Ola, the capital of the Mari (Cheremis) Republic in Russia, and as being a native speaker of the Cheremis language. Since, from the second half of the 1940s into the early 1960s, I had conducted an intensive study of this language and culture, then finally publishing two additional books on Cheremis subjects as recently as the 1970s (1974, 1078), she allowed that my name was well-known among her people. However, because I had published nothing more about them lately, the conclusion had been reached in Mari-land that I must have died two decades before. Determined to prove the contrary to her people, she, Dr. Lidia Tojdebekova (whom I have met with several times since), insisted on taping a lengthy “live” interview with me for transmission to and deposit in Ioshkar-Ola’s archives.

Any narrative of my activities as an Finno-Ugric practitioner has necessarily two aspects: a private one and a public one. The latter is bound to be the more interesting, but makes little sense without the former to illuminate it. So I will begin with some personal background.

In my beginning years at the University of Chicago I had every intention of becoming a biologist, viz., a geneticist. Not to belabor my academic trajectory here, the outbreak of World War II in 1939 inexorably impelled me toward linguistics instead. My eminent professor, Leonard Bloomfield, advised me to build upon my native knowledge of Hungarian but to expand upon that base by learning as much as possible about Finnish and the other accessible languages of the family to which both of the aforementioned belonged. This was sensible advice, except for what soon loomed an insuperable quandary: none of the Finno-Ugric languages were taught, programmatically or otherwise, at Chicago or, as far as I could ascertain, anywhere else in the Americas. Not long before Professor Bloomfield left Chicago for Yale, he somehow found the time to read with me and critique a just-published *Outline of Hungarian Grammar*, but it soon became obvious that, were I to expand my glottal horizons in the directions he counseled, I had to fall back on my own resources and devices. The theoretically obvious option of continuing my studies somewhere in Europe was blocked by the inaccessibility of all regions, even Swedish Lapland, where Finno-Ugric populations were indigenous.

In 1941 I too left Chicago for the East Coast, to continue my formal studies at Princeton University, supplemented by semiformal but demanding studies with Roman Jakobson at Columbia University and vicinity. I was also appointed civilian chief of the War Department's Hungarian and Finnish desks at one of its New York City offices, and was, moreover, busily engaged in other kinds of war work. However, before the war ended in 1945, I was able to publish, besides more than a dozen papers on Finno-Ugric topics, two hefty pedagogically oriented books plus a monograph constituting my doctoral dissertation. My first book, which ran to about 500 printed pages, was titled *Spoken Hungarian* (1945a), and was enhanced by twenty-five 12-inch vinylite recordings, as well as a separate *Guide's Manual*. My second book, of about the same size, was titled *Spoken Finnish* (1947a); comparable recordings accompanied it. On the bilingual recordings for my Hungarian book, the English voice was that of the American linguist, Henry Lee Smith, Jr. (d. 1972), the Hungarian my own; to the contrary, on those to go with my Finnish book, while I spoke the English parts the native voice was that of His Excellency, the Ambassador of Finland to Washington, Mr. Jutila.

In a special study I was invited to prepare at the time for the *Modern Language Journal* (1945b), I described the pedagogical and other uses to which the materials on which these twin manuals were based had been put to train a large numbers of armed personnel as well as, after the war, Foreign Service Officers of the U.S. Department of State. The books eventually became available for civilian uses in a somewhat different, commercial version and both may still be in print.

During my residency in Princeton I frequently commuted to meet with Jakobson and to attend various lectures and colloquia he offered at several institu-

tions in New York, including a semester he spent leading an advanced evening seminar at Columbia devoted entirely to the typology of case systems. Since case constitutes a pivotal grammatical category in several Finno-Ugric languages, he asked me to prepare detailed accounts of relevant materials for a series of class presentations and discerning discussions. In this way, the idea for a dissertation topic came to me, namely, to conduct an inquiry into the shape of the case system in the Finno-Ugric protolanguage as reconstructed by a comparison of the case systems of extant daughter languages.

Jakobson urged me to establish contact with John Lotz, who was at the time Director of the Hungarian Institute (1936–1957) at the University of Stockholm. I wrote to Lotz immediately and he responded promptly. Massive correspondence and thoroughgoing exchange of ideas between us ensued, in spite of wartime delays and interruptions. "Lotz asked to see my dissertation, then offered to publish a portion of it, edited by himself. I accepted his assistance with gratitude, but asked to see my proofs. These never reached me, however, for, as we learned afterward, the ship bringing them [from Sweden] was torpedoed. The monograph was therefore published in the raw [1946] and I received my authors' copies only some two years after the war" (1989:235).

In the spring of 1945 I received a Ph. D. from Princeton University's Department of Oriental Languages and Civilizations, with probably the first dissertation on a Finno-Ugric topic awarded to anyone by any North American institution; and, the following year, I joined the peacetime faculty of Indiana University. Even before the war in the Pacific drew to a close, I proposed to Herman B. Wells, this institution's "visionary and international-minded President, that we immediately commence building, solidly and with an eye to permanence, upon the resources that had serendipitously accumulated here during those years. He strongly supported all such endeavors, which ultimately flowered into an amazing diversity of research, teaching, and publication schemes" (1992b: 115), among which I shall concentrate here only on developments that bear directly on Finno-Ugric studies.

By now it was amply clear to me that no one, anywhere in this country, could receive anything approaching adequate professional training in the full extent and depth of Finno-Ugric studies. I therefore resolved to proceed along two tracks simultaneously, one *personal*, the other *institutional*.

To realize my *personal* goal, I initiated conversations with the American-Scandinavian Foundation, and presented a coherent plan which would enable me to visit Sweden and Finland for three or four months in 1947 in order to:

- (1) Spend as much time as was necessary to get a feel for the shape of the field, over-all, from John Lotz, who, by dint of his assignment to the University of Stockholm since 1936, was at its sole neutral epicenter throughout the war years;

- (2) Get acquainted with as many Finno-Ugric specialists in the Nordic countries, or, as it turned out in practice, mostly in Finland;

(3) Conduct a summer's worth of all-out but as yet preliminary field-work among one of the Finno-Ugric groups of the region (I chose to settle in a Lapp speech community in Outakoski, on the Finnish shore of the Teno River across from Norway); and to

(4) Determine, in consultation with Lotz and others, to which of the extant dozen or so Finno-Ugric language-and-culture configurations I could most productively devote my own research energies in the decade or more ahead. For various reasons, I settled on the Cheremis (Mari), pursuing my intensive studies initially with Paavo Siro in Helsinki, thereafter moving on for some months to what turned out to be a remarkable one-on-one learning experience with the controversial but surely greatest living specialist of those times, Ödön Beke, in Budapest. (See further below.)

The American-Scandinavian Foundation approved all the facets of my application, enabling me to obtain some of the training post-doctorally that I was unable to get in my graduate years. This, however, was the lesser, personal part of my strategy, which would have been relatively worthless without the institutional part of the scheme.

To prepare the ground locally, I first submitted an internal proposal to President Wells, calling for the creation of a curricular Program in Uralic and Altaic Studies. This entity, which was rapidly approved by the board of trustees, grew organically out of my wartime duties and experiences.

(The term "Uralic" is a well-established linguistic concept, which comprehends all of the Finno-Ugric languages plus several languages spoken in Siberia, together called Samoyedic; on the other hand, "Altaic" is a much looser areal concept. This logical incongruity notwithstanding, these two concepts are sometimes combined mainly for institutional convenience, as they were, by mutual agreement with Lotz, at both Columbia University and ourselves.)

Now armed with the authority of the Chairmanship of this new academic unit, I turned for assistance to The Rockefeller Foundation.

Fortunately, as I had reported elsewhere (1992b:7),

I had befriended an exceptionally farsighted officer..., Mr. Stevens, who most bountifully financed the launching of a sound academic program in this arcane field, then and again today uniquely featured at Indiana University, with a multi-year donation which enabled me to invite a series of senior visiting professors from Scandinavia and Finland to help give it a durable shape.

The first of these visiting scholars, Björn Collinder was a Swede, and two who succeeded him, Asbjörn Nesheim and Knut Bergsland (both Lapp specialists) were Norwegians; the rest were prominent Finns: Paavo Rivila, Lauri Posti, Aimo Turunen, Osmo Ikola, and Valentin Kiparsky (a Slavist). Most of them taught in our Program for about a year, usually taking a vigorous role in building

up basic resources, mainly our library holdings. The Rockefeller Foundation and the University both provided liberal funding for stockpiling books and other research materials, which enabled me to purchase large private libraries and special collections on sale, notably, in Finland. To cite just a single example, rich materials from the heritage of Professor Yrjö Wichmann were transferred here wholesale. There were so many books available at the time that Wichmann's Hungarian widow, Julia, having wearied of preparing catalogues, preferred to sell them to me by weight – so many kilos of printed matter for a price she chose to set.

To veer from the main story-line, I should mention here that in 1960 I inaugurated and became the editor for nine years of a unique *Uralic and Altaic Series*. By 1969, when I retired as the editor, one hundred numbered volumes had appeared, with Vol. 67 alone consisting of 21 separate tomes. Contributors of Hungarian provenance – living and dead – included, *inter alia*, Péter Hajdú, Kálmán Keresztes, Béla Kálmán, Károly Rédei, Gyula Décsy, János Gulya, Stephen Erdély, Ioannes Sylvester Pannonius, Vilmos Diószegi, János Eckman, János Zsilka, Edith Vértes, László Szabó, Ferenc Kiefer, Stephen Foltinyi, György Lakó, Lajos Tamás, Erzsébet Beöthy, László Arany, Joannes Sajnovics, Sámuel Gyarmany, Denis Sinor, Klára Magdics, Albert Molnár of Szenc, besides John Lotz and myself. Among the Finnish contributors were: Alexander Castrén, Lauri Hakulinen, Valter Tauli, Meri Lehtinen, Toivo Vuorela, Paavo Ravila, Elli Köngäs, and Jaako Ahokas. And among the Estonian contributors were: Ants Oras, Felix Oinas, Alo Raun, Ilse Lehist, Paul Ariste, and George Kurman. There were also Russian, Ukrainian, Latvian, German, Swedish, French, Turkish, Mongolian, and Chinese authors, to say nothing of the dozen or more native Americans. The series enjoyed an immense domestic and world-wide popularity, with scores of volumes going out of print or achieving multiple editions. A long time afterwards, when I spent some time in Ulan Bator, I found these many volumes in the library of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences; but I was truly astonished, although not displeased, to be widely introduced by my hosts as the editor of the series!

Returning to Paavo Ravila: he was an admirable linguistic technician, a warm human being, and a visionary organizer, who returned to Finland eventually to serve as the Chancellor of the University of Helsinki. While he was at Indiana University, I proposed to him the establishment of a permanent, rotating Chair for Finnish Studies within the frame of our Uralic and Altaic Program. Indeed, such a Chair was created, even financed on Ravila's initiative largely by the Finnish government, but these fruitful arrangements were some years afterwards abrogated because of destructive internal political machinations of a later administration.

The visiting professors – especially the Finns, who generously shared with me facets of their vast collective scholarly expertise as well as their individual friendship – contributed to my education in varying degree. Via this unconventional route – since (to paraphrase the Russian proverb) the mountain could not come to Mahomet, a throng of Mahomets graciously came to the mountain, such hav-

ing been the only practical avenue open to me in those times – I gradually secured my footing in the Finno-Ugric field at large. At the same time, however, I was busy forging a particular specialty on and of my own, to wit, in studies of the language and culture of a particular Finno-Ugric population situated mainly in the Mari Republic of the Soviet Union, better known to Western scholarship as the Cheremis. In this endeavor – having been coached as to the basics by my Finnish tutor, Siro, and thereafter guided far beyond by my Hungarian mentor Beke (see above) – I henceforth came to increasingly rely on the services of a native speaker, Ivan Jevsky.

Jevsky had fortuitously landed in the United States in February 1952. It soon became possible for me to secure the necessary funding for importing him to and supporting him in Bloomington, and formally to embark upon what became known as the Cheremis Project (under circumstances described elsewhere, e.g., in 1956:7). The attendant intensive research, which concluded in 1963, was funded by a substantial grant from Indiana University, with additional aid, to name only some of the major contributors, from the Department of State, Department of the Air Force, Office of Education, the Arctic, Desert, Tropic Information Center of the Research Studies Institute, located at Maxwell Air Force Base, the National Science Foundation, the American Philosophical Society, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Social Science Research Council, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and the Newberry Library. I enumerate these in some detail to attest that in the decades whereof I write many U.S. funding agencies – federal, state, and private – were concerned with the national development of not just Finno-Ugric studies in general but such specialized branches of it as Cheremis studies.

A deserter from the Red Army to a German camp from which he was in due course “liberated” by advancing American forces, a semi-literate barber by trade, Jevsky was the first member of his culture and the first speaker of his language ever to have come to this continent; beside his native Cheremis, Jevsky spoke only some Tatar and a little Russian. Although by and large he cooperated with my team of assistants and students cheerfully enough, he complained with some regularity that “work with the head is almost unbearably fatiguing as opposed to work with hand.” He seemed relieved finally to be allowed to revert to his tonorial slog at the conclusion of our dedicated undertaking.

Some half dozen students participated in the Cheremis project, three of them (one a Finn, Eeva K. Minn) earning their doctorates with dissertations on relevant topics. In 1952 I launched and edited a mini-series, *Studies in Cheremis*, in which eleven volumes by members of the faculty or advanced graduate students at Indiana University appeared before the series petered out twenty-six years afterwards (for a list, see 1978:5). I should also mention that in the course of some half dozen professional trips to the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s, I man-

aged to purchase hundreds of books published in the Mari Republic, anything from grade school textbooks to technical training manuals to novels and poetry to transcribed folklore texts of various genres. I eventually donated this unique stockpile to the Indiana University Libraries, along with my entire Finno-Ugric collection, which included not only hundreds of grammars, dictionaries, and the like, but complete bound runs of practically every journal series, both Hungarian and Finnish, in the field, plus many items from Soviet times and well before.

It would be erroneous to conclude from the foregoing account that Finno-Ugric studies constituted my exclusive academic preoccupation during the twenty years covered here. In addition to a host of articles having to do with the Cheremis and other FU groups and their languages I wrote, as early as 1951, several papers eventuating from parallel investigations of a language spoken by the Aymará, a large community of Indians in Bolivia. Among the latter I compiled a sizeable collection of materials for a modern dictionary (1951). And as far back as the mid-1940s I had conducted extensive field work, under the auspices of the Cranbrook Academy, among the Winnebago, a Siouan population in the Green Bay area of Wisconsin (see, e.g., 1947b).

By the mid-1950s, I was also, and remained for more than a decade to come, thickly involved in collaborative work, under the auspices of the Social Science Research Council, with several colleagues in psychology and linguistics (1954) – but this is not the place to recount these attendant experiences. Furthermore during the 1950s and 1960s I became engaged in problems of stylistics, along with Lotz, Jakobson, I. A. Richards, and a host of others, including several prominent psychologists (1960). This aspect of my work is particularly relevant here because it served as one bridge – although I was not explicitly aware of it being so at the time – between my fading efforts in the Finno-Ugric field on the one hand and my fumbling entry into the domain of general semiotics on the other. Let me briefly describe one such Janus-like project, which resulted in a major – although, for FU studies, a highly unconventional – book: the *Concordance and Thesaurus of Cheremis Poetic Language*, which became simultaneously the eighth in the Studies in Cheremis series (1961).

As a part of the Cheremis project over-all, I had assembled a rather large corpus of about 1,200 folksong texts, which I began to analyze off and on throughout 1958–59, while I was in residence at the Department of Anthropology of the University of Arizona and a Fellow of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. Then for 1960–61 I was unexpectedly appointed a Fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, with absolutely no restrictions as to my activities there. In consequence of this total freedom, my year's stay at the Center had a momentous, if unforeseen, effect on the remainder of my scholarly career. While on the one hand I saw this as a singular opportunity to strike out in a wholly novel research direction – to examine how animals communicate – I also felt bound to finish up, albeit in an innovative way, the

analysis of the corpus of folksong texts I had been working on for the past few years.

As to the latter, I was fortunate to be accompanied to the center by one of my "postdocs," the late V. J. Zeps, supported by two consecutive grants I obtained for him from the National Science Foundation for "Computer Research in Psycholinguistics." Zeps was a member of my team, which had worked with Ivan Jevsky, but his true talents and inspired enthusiasms lay in computational linguistics, these at the dawn of the era – almost forty years ago – when such predilections and preoccupations became the rage. Zeps was a quintessential hacker *au pied de la lettre*, who conceived and implemented our programs. Based on an empirical exploration of large quantities of Cheremis verse and other such devices in the light of considerations of problems of poetic language in the widest sense, this investigation was, for its time, a pioneering effort in the automatic compilation of concordances and related scholarly tools with a then-state-of-the-art IBM 650 electronic data processing system, equipped with four magnetic tape units, three index accumulators, and a host of separate peripheral equipment. While the over-all design of and prose passages in the resulting book (finished on New Year's Eve in 1960) were mine, Zeps accomplished most of the computational work, thus becoming its junior author. Perhaps not surprisingly, this particular work of ours was greeted with complete silence by all Finno-Ugric media – who, after all, would have been competent to review it?

Over a decade, I faithfully attended international congresses of Finno-Ugric studies, for instance, in Helsinki (1965), Tallinn (1970), and Budapest (1975); in due course I was even elected to represent the United States on the world-wide body that was responsible for organizing them. At each of these conventions I gave a paper on some traditional topic, most often on a Cheremis theme. However, at the Budapest congress I decided to tackle a seemingly unfamiliar subject. In my presentation I argued that since human beings communicate amongst each other by both verbal and non-verbal means – indeed, according to some scholars (notably John Lotz), most messages by far are transmitted non-verbally – it would be instructive to scrutinize the non-verbal behavior of each extant Finno-Ugric population and to juxtapose this with their corresponding verbal behavior as well as to compare every system with every other. There was of course nothing radical about this research proposal, which was implemented with rich multiple inflections by ancient orators and actors (Hamlet: "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action"); which in "the systematic use of gesture speech" so assiduously explored Garrick Mallery among North American Indian tribes in the 1880s; which David Efron, the Argentinian Ph.D. of Franz Boas, famously carried out in the 1930s in his exemplary comparison of facial expressions and body movements among Italian and Jewish immigrants in New York City; and by countless others (1991: 27–32). Notwithstanding a highly respectable pedigree for probes of this sort, the reception for my Budapest overtures of over two dec-



ades ago was so uncompromisingly frosty that I knew, for me, a change of venue became henceforth mandatory.

My paramount preoccupation at the Center for Advanced Study started out with a youthfully naive premise. As I have noted elsewhere, I always considered myself a biologist *manqué* – a student who, frustrated by World War II, had missed his true vocation. So, having been told by Ralph Tyler, the Center's Director, to spend my time during my residence doing what I liked, I mistakenly imagined that I could, in a single year, "catch up" with developments in the life sciences over the past twenty years. Soon I was so overburdened that I had strictly to confine my readings to a narrow segment of biology. The wedge of this pie I settled on was ethology, the biological study of behavior, which led me straight to a review of the literature on animal communication.

Readings in this domain led me to formulate the following hypothesis: the attentive, empirically founded, study of communication systems in the other animals will clarify fundamental questions about the evolution of language in hominids. By way of a series of publications since then (periodically collected, e.g., in 1972, 1980, 1990), I satisfied myself that this hypothesis has been *falsified*. Nonetheless, this literature, supplemented by my own observations of animals in the wild and in captivity led me, through multifarious fascinating detours and occasional blind alleys, to develop what I regard as my principal contribution to general semiotics, the field which I (and now many others) call Biosemiotics (1992a). That, however, is a convoluted story that would carry us far beyond – in Ernest Hemingway's evocative 1936 attribution to Francis Macomber – my "short happy life."

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