

NEWS IN BRIEF

REVIEW, COMMENTS AND PERSPECTIVES WITH REGARD TO RENATA SÕUKAND'S DOCTORAL DISSERTATION *HERBAL LANDSCAPE*

Renata Sõukand's dissertation is composed of six articles based on the concept of herbal landscape, on the role of folk medicine in Estonia during a long period of time, and on the use of plants as insect repellents.

During the period 2004–2010, Renata collected a great amount of information on plants used in popular medicine adopting ecosemiotic and ethnobotanic methods across descriptive, comparative, quantitative and theoretical approaches.

The thesis has been developed in four main directions:

- a. To present an overview of plant collection;
- b. To integrate the ethnobotanical framework adopting an ecosemiotic approach;
- c. To adapt the notion of perceived herbal landscape to the folklore data;
- d. To verify how there could be an improvement in the ethnobotanical research with the approaches proposed by Renata.

The herbal landscape is a very attractive concept that opens new perspectives in terms of folklore development not only in Estonia but across Europe as well. Renata Sõukand has demonstrated great competency in different sectors of the herbal landscape from bibliographic research to data set handling. The cultural heritage of Estonian herbal landscape has been underlined and discussed in details and reinforced by a rich bibliographic review.

How to conserve the human and social capital of herbal landscape and how to improve this cultural richness appears as a goal for the author. The presentation of different case studies, juxtaposed to a semiotic approach, is a fine example of integration between epistemological and empirical vision of the complexity. The herbal landscape seems an occasion to demonstrate the changes occurring in the last years in Estonian society, changes that can be found across all of Europe.

The relationship between medical plants and the concept of biodiversity could be a relevant topic to be questioned as often biodiversity is considered as a natural element far from human context, when in reality biodiversity means diversity of meaningful information of human surroundings.

Medical plants appear along the different papers that composed Renata Sõukand's thesis as an integrated resource involving beliefs, traditions, religious and medical properties.

The utilization of an ecosemiotic approach opens new perspectives also to other related fields like food products and local tradition, biodiversity perception and education. For these reasons I consider relevant the epistemological and cultural contribution that Renata Sõukand has offered in this PhD thesis and a clear example of application of ecosemiotic principles to the "real world".

Conserving biodiversity means not only preventing environmental degradation and species extinction but also means maintaining active knowledge and the related semi-

otic mechanisms. Biodiversity, as implicitly demonstrated by Sõukand's thesis is not an external natural element separated by human context but is a strictly interacting component of everyday living.

Extending the approach presented in Sõukand's thesis to other components of human context like the sound-scape or the heritage-scape seems a very promising innovative approach to guarantee human wellbeing on the local, regional and continental scale.

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THESIS DEFENCE: ANNELI BARAN

POSSIBILITIES FOR STUDYING SEMANTICS IN PHRASEOLOGY

On the 15th of March 2011, Anneli Baran defended her PhD thesis *Fraseologismide semantika uurimisvõimalused [Possibilities for Studying Semantics in Phraseology]* at the University of Tartu. The opponent could point out that Baran had taken on a challenging task when she, as a philologist and folklorist, had searched for new approaches to semantics in phraseology. One aim of Baran's dissertation is to prove how the psycholinguistic and cultural approach increases explanatory capacity in linguistics when semantics of phraseologisms are concerned. Beside the theoretical discussion about the possibilities for studying semantics in phraseology she bases her own conclusions on experience with Estonian phraseology during the construction of the database and also on results of queries among Estonian schoolchildren. She has also discussed experiments to use data from the Internet.

Baran seizes the problem of the lack of reciprocal discussion between phraseologists and psycholinguists interested in relevant questions of phraseology. She shows the history and mainstreams of different scholarly approaches in studying semantics in phraseology, the development of defining concepts by some predominant researchers, key persons' personal correcting movements (e.g. Raymond Gibbs). Baran analyzes the key concepts considered to be crucial for understanding semantics of phraseologisms. She debates approaches that are too narrow. For that she uses her own results reported in the articles and finds support from other research outcomes.

I recommend reading an important earlier article *The Compilation of the Database of Estonian Phrases* (2004) which has Baran as one of the authors (published in journal *Folklore* 25). The article and orientation to the database of Estonian phrases give a better comprehension in reading her theoretical discussion. In her dissertation Baran opens the central constructs of phraseology: permanence, iconographic/symbolic/metaphoric quality, motivation and idiomaticity in the light of psycholinguistic research. Linguistic "motivation" has been the most central term after Russian linguist V. V. Vinogradov's (1947) criteria for the classification of phraseological items, where phraseologisms without motivation are most idiomatic. It is quite natural that Baran also starts from the motivation-related problems concerning phraseologisms. She finds a new clue for motivation research from Dmitrij Dobrovolskij's studies with Elisabeth

Piirainen (e.g. 1996, 2009) and with Anatoli Baranov (2008), in which the observation of two types of motivation – iconic or metaphoric and symbolic or cultural – does not exclude the units with a smooth transmission.

It is also necessary to go deeply into Baran's six articles in order to understand her convinced attitude towards cultural preconditions for use of phrases and phraseological competence.

In her first article in which she deals with the length of sayings, she writes about the archival material: "Phraseological fixed expressions/idioms reflect historical facts, biblical themes, folk culture and folk wisdom, superstition and facts from various areas of life involved in fostering material values. The collected material of short forms tends to be characteristically laconic." She gives interesting examples of diachronic changes in Estonian phrases. For example, she writes about the association of *valge hobune* 'a white horse' with *vale* or *valetamine* 'a lie', or 'lying'. By these examples she points out how the structure of a saying, i.e. its components and the overall meaning of the phrase, are closely interrelated.

In Baran's second article she displays more about the religious background of Estonian phrases by going through the history of translation loans of German phrases. She makes a remark that it is impossible to prove which Estonian phrases entered the tradition due to the influence of religious literature and which phrases were actually adopted by the church from Estonian phraseology. "The first texts recorded in Estonian language were not created by ethnic Estonians, but were created for them, in order to provide guidance," comments Baran.

The third article concentrates on the role of phraseologisms in the language used by Estonian youth; in the fourth we become acquainted with the slurs containing names of animals in Estonian phraseology and the fifth article studies the use of Estonian hyperbolic phrases on the Internet. Baran finds the material of hyperboles as an excellent opportunity to study creativity in verbal expression.

Baran's last article can be considered the key text of the dissertation. She finds the question of semantic ambiguity of phraseologisms the most fascinating phenomenon for a researcher in the field. She arranged an inquiry among students of two upper secondary schools in Estonia, 147 students, aged 16–18. For a questionnaire she had to screen 35 expressions from the 170,000 texts. First and foremost, the questionnaire aimed at ascertaining whether the fixed linguistic expressions have a place in the vocabulary (lexicon related knowledge) of today's school-leavers, and how the use of such expressions has altered. Thus, Baran purposefully did not present the expressions in any context. As a result she found many psycholinguistically interesting things.

She noticed a trend to explicate the phrase with another expression. But as a phraseologist Baran considers the so-called wrong answers as the most interesting ones. There were answers showing that an expression was understood only in its direct meaning. For Baran these answers were important evidence to be able to see the ratio of the phraseological meaning and direct meaning. She knew that the discrepancy, non-compatibility and contradiction of these two meanings condition the (semantic) idiomaticity of the expression. Now she noticed that when there is no knowledge of the idiomaticity, the salient meaning is the direct one.

The most fruitful answers in Baran's point of view were those with altered meaning of the expression. She presents fourteen expressions with a number of similar answers where a semantic change had taken place. These were the phrases with a slightly

deviant variation from the conventional meaning and their interpretation was based on the salient direct meaning or associating connections.

In Baran's dissertation the construct of salience turned out to be crucial for her pointing out the possibilities for studying semantics in phraseology. Salient features have obviously gained their always accessible status in our memory through frequent use and special contexts. "This concept is of relevance in the research concerning the understanding of phraseological units as reproduction units," writes Baran in the last chapter of the theoretical part of her dissertation.

For Baran the idea that the subject matter of phraseology is a continuum of varied units rather than homogeneous ones seems to open new ways to broaden the opportunities to make phraseological research. She criticizes, with good reason, scholars persisting in artificial classifications and shows the importance of cultural knowledge behind the interpretation process. "Figurative expressions cannot be treated as bare texts owned and used by all language users in the same way," writes Baran.

More research should also be done to really find out the role of the context in understanding a figurative unit. Thus, folkloristics, cognitive science and social psychology prove to be necessary contributors to linguistics in order to get an overall impression of these questions. Baran has already taken part in the international discussion with her presentations in conferences and with these six articles. I hope she will use her recent theoretical apparatus and continue presenting evidence for her integrative approach.

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PRESIDENT'S FOLKLORE AWARDS AND ARCHIVAL YEAR OF 2010

On March 14, the Day of Mother Tongue, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, the President of the Republic of Estonia, presented awards to the best folklore collectors of 2010. During the festive gathering in the Estonian Literary Museum, prizes were also handed over to those contributing to the Estonian Folklore Archives and the best collectors of kindergarten lore.

Prize-winners – Maire Sala, Anni Oraveer and Ellen Randoja – received the President's Folklore Award for their thematic collections donated to the archives in 2010.

Maire Sala's collection of burial customs and graveyard culture, gathered and put together during 1997–2010, comprises systemised black-and-white and original colour photographs (1,228) with relevant data, recordings of beliefs and customs, rhyme-books, original documents and copies thereof, and other manuscripts (900 pages), small printed matter (1,304 song sheets), newspaper clippings, film strips, etc. The material from Viljandi County of Estonia (cemeteries and churches in Halliste and Karksi areas) forms the largest part of the collection. Maire Sala lives and works in the vicinity, in Karksi-Nuia, where she runs a funeral home. It is her dearly cherished mission to record and preserve the tradition and artefacts associated with Estonian burial culture, and she has compiled a book *To Eternity: Estonian Burial Traditions and*

Prize-winners Ellen Randoja, Anni Oraveer, Maire Sala, and President Toomas Hendrik Ilves. Photo by Alar Madisson 2011.



Today, Design of Graves and the History of Graveyards in Viljandi County. The exhibition, *Estonian Funerals. Burial and Graveyard Tradition in Estonia*, put together by Maire Sala, was displayed in the Estonian National Museum in 2010.

During the years 2007–2010, Anni Oraveer has sent 712 pages of written data and approximately 20 hours of sound recordings to the archives, containing the tradition and oral history of the Estonian Blind community: jokes, stories, anecdotes, family tradition, feasts-related customs, songs and instrumental music, personal and biographical data. Another part of her collection includes dialectal stories based on the folk tradition of Seto people, equipped with comments for the archive. Anni Oraveer was born in 1942 in the Seto area; she does not see and uses the computer-based speech programme meant for the visually impaired, and sends her contributions to the archive either by e-mail or on discs. Anni Oraveer has also published a number of books in Estonian, e.g. *Hedgehog and Rabbit* and *Action and Consequence* (also published in Braille), and in the Seto dialect, *Seto rahvas murrõh ja rõõmuh* [The Joys and Sorrows of the Seto People].

Ellen Randoja's contribution comprises 188 pages of written oral history, from her grandparents, born in the 19th century, her parents and other relatives and neighbours, heard as a child when growing up in the northern part of Tartu County: folk songs and tales (fairy-tales, narrated history concerning manors, jokes, etc.), stories from the times of World War II and the post-war kolkhoz era (colourful narrations of local people, soldier songs, jokes and mock songs, anecdotes). Ellen Randoja has written of owls in folklore, within a vivid personal and life history related context. Ellen Randoja was born in 1929 and lives in Palamuse.

The total amount of contributions to the Estonian Folklore Archives in 2010 entailed 8,000 pages of written material, including 36 songbooks, 340 hours of sound recordings, approx. 170 hours of videos and more than 3,200 photographs.

The ash cloud from the Icelandic volcano and the impact of this on the life of people all over the world inspired the employees of the Estonian Folklore Archives to create an institutional Facebook account on April 20, to increase the efficacy of relevant folklore collection – every day, the account presents to the public one of the archival records associated with the volcanic rupture and gives an overview of what is taking place in the archives. As similar collection campaigns were also initiated by a number of media channels, it was mainly the folklorists who responded to the appeal of the Estonian Folklore Archives – showing that troubles and accidents are immediately reflected in folklore, circulating as comical and jocular anecdotes and other short forms.

Astrid Tuisk