

Ajankohtaiset

## The ”tietäjät” and Their Instruments

Registers in Viena Karelian Communicative Incantations  
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Language not only reflects the world we live and act in – it also shapes it. While this statement is true with our everyday experience and social life, it similarly describes special and culturally defined ways of communicating. I have examined one type of culture specific and heightened interaction: Kalevala-metric communicative incantations: instruments for affecting empirical reality (e.g. Siikala 1992; 2002a). This has led me through voices that now echo in archives, but still carry with them a variation of meanings and ways of being.

I have explored corpora of Kalevala-metric poetry: an oral-poetic system that is anachronistically named after Elias Lönnrot’s epic Kalevala (1835; 1849). It was shared by multiple linguistically related ethnic groups: Finns, Karelians, Ingrians, Estonians, Setos, Votes, and Ingrian-Finns (Frog 2019; Kallio et al. 2017, 140–143; Kuusi et al. 1977, 62). The meter was used in multiple purposes: in ritual purposes, to express personal emotions, and to comment current events, to name a few (Tarkka 2016). One of the prominent genres of the poetic system were incantations: one way in a pre-modern society to cope with hardships of life.

Geographically and temporally, my research locates itself into 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Viena Karelia – an area located approximately in modern day North-Western Russia, between the western coast of the White Sea and the eastern border of Finland. To the 19<sup>th</sup> century inhabitants of the area, life was not often secure. Sustenance depended mainly on fishing, hunting, and itinerant cross-border trading (Pöllä 1995, 218; 2004; Tarkka 2013, 30–33). While threat of illnesses and injuries was present in everyday life, healthcare was not. It was in Viena that many Finnish collectors of Kalevala-metric poetry, such as Elias Lönnrot, directed their travels starting at the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They saw the area as a periphery that would still contain memories of glorious past with its mythic heroes (Siikala 2002b). Eventually, the efforts for building a history for an aspiring nation state would result in 89,000 texts of Kalevala-metric poetry that were published in the anthology *Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot (SKVR)*, or Ancient Poems of the Finnish People, published during fifty decades in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From this collection of verses comes also my research material, approximately 1000 incantation texts.



## Incantations and ritual specialists

The subject of the dissertation, Kalevala-metric incantations, were to a degree used in society among non-specialists, for example relating to protecting cattle from predators. When more drastic measures were needed, to help with an illness or solving out cases of theft, ritual specialists for whom one of the names was *tietäjät*, could be contacted. In Viena Karelia, the *tietäjät* were specialists focusing on healing, restoring and maintaining physical, economic, and social wellbeing of people and households. *Tietäjät* also engaged in magical protection of cattle and worked as *patvaska*, the person responsible for ritual protection of bride and groom in weddings. *Tietäjät* were often also feared for their reputation of being capable of causing magical harm. The *tietäjät* were historically enduring phenomena of specialists acting in Finno-Karelian and Ingrian area – only with the advent of modernization, their significance began to diminish. In Viena, the *tietäjät* preserved their social status until the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Siikala 2002a, 79–80; Stark 2006.) Despite the variation in local forms, the activities of the *tietäjät* shared a common ground in ecstatic rite-techniques, ritual behavior, mastery of incantations, and dependence on personal power required to successfully complete the ritual activities. These shared qualities have led scholars to adopt the concept of *tietäjälaitos*, or *tietäjä* institution. (Frog 2019, 232; Haavio [1967] 2019, 314.)

For a *tietäjä* to be competent, possession of mythic knowledge on the agents and locations of the otherworld was required. The knowledge actualized in heightened state of *luonto*, or a kind of dynamic inner force that allowed affecting things in the world and in turn resistance from being affected by them. In a heightened state of *luonto* that researchers have described as motoric trance, the *tietäjä* could interact with unseen agents in ritual using incantations – both instruments and verbalizations of the events under way. As folklorist Anna-Leena Siikala has stated: incantations were the tools of a *tietäjä*, but his or hers own strength added to their power (Siikala 2002a, 84).

## Incantations re-evaluated

The assumption of early collectors of Kalevala-metric poetry and researchers for quite some time was that incantations of the *tietäjät* were secret knowledge that could not be given away as such without risking the loss of power of the incantation. Indeed, many of the informants interviewed by *runo* collectors refused to give away complete incantations and left some of the verses out. Some even fled the eager collectors when they saw them approaching. Lately, the assumption of secret tradition has been re-evaluated. Folklorist Frog (2019) has proposed that incantations as instruments of *tietäjät* were more likely perceived as objects that could be in possession of one person at a time only, and I have sided with Frog's evaluation.

Incantations were for a quite long time perceived as word formulae, which needed to be recited correctly in order to be effective (Hautala 1960). Furthermore, they were categorized in various classes based on their text-internal features: for example, praying incantations, where a Christian actor was invoked, or banishment incantations, where a disease demon was exorcised. Additionally, incantations of origin of a given phenomenon were recognized as a category. (Hästesko 1918.) Roughly put, these kind of incantations have become known as non-communicative, referring to the fact that no communication with the otherworld



was required, or mechanical, as the effect of them was seen to derive from the mechanical recitation.

I have directed my interest in the concept of communicative incantations – a more recent category than the former non-communicative and mechanical. As the name suggests, communicative incantations describe incantations that aim for direct communication with non-human actors. This means that the performer addresses mythic unseen agents, such as Virgin Mary or Ukko. The performer of an incantation can then issue for example commands and requests in order to reach the desired goal. Due to their principles, these kind of incantations require comprehensive mythic knowledge: knowledge on the topography and denizens of the otherworld. They were thus instruments of specialists. (Siikala 2002a.)

### Communicative incantations: Instruments of the *tietäjät*?

In my thesis, I have investigated the said assumption of connection of communicative incantations and *tietäjät*, and the instruments of the *tietäjät*, the communicative incantations (Karlsson 2022). I studied an appendix of the *Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot* that contains a list of the *tietäjät* and *runo* singers of Viena Karelia. I examined, if individuals mentioned as *tietäjät* were in possession of communicative and origin incantations – two types regularly connected with specialists. The first steps were achieved by categorizing the individuals mentioned in the appendix to those who were socially recognized as a specialist, and those who were not mentioned as a *tietäjä* or worker of magic. Possession of communicative or origin incantations was then examined. In brief, it seems that communicative incantations were not particularly strongly connected with them, whereas with origin incantations, which reveal the mythic origins of various phenomena, the connection was notably stronger. The result indicates that the former assumption of communicative incantations is not wrong, but requires some re-evaluation: based on the data, communicative incantations were known in rather high degree among non-specialists, too. These findings further show the difficulties with categorizations made in research and implied on vernacular conceptions. The social category of *tietäjät* in Viena was likely not as clearly cut as approached in research, and factors affecting deductions are plenty. However, the methodology combining quantitative analysis with close reading offers potential for applications with other type of materials and areal coverages.

### Registers in communicative incantations

The other part of my research has focused on the incantations themselves (Karlsson 2021a; 2021b). My data consisted of approximately 1000 communicative incantations from Viena. Here, my hypothesis was following: the communicative aspect of some of the incantations is well known. However, is there differences in the way a *tietäjä* communicates with the non-human actors? In other words, does the performer address a positive agent differently than negative? My hypotheses was that this could be the case, and I focused first on examining directives – modal verbs e.g. requesting or commanding, and suffixes attached to them that index some form of moderation in standard language. It seemed that also incantations contained so-called moderative suffixes: particles that indicate moderation in standard language. When the research progressed, it became evident that the use of these suffixes did not solely index moderation towards positively evaluated agents, but for example, the meter affected the employment of them with greater likelihood. However, a phenomenon



called justification seemed to work as moderative device. Justification describes the way a performer issues a reason for their request or command. When studying larger datasets, the role of justification got more support. To explore the phenomenon, I performed a categorization of discursive units for approximately 500 communicative incantations found in the dataset. After this, further limiting of the data resulted in approximately 150 incantations with justificative segments in them. An analysis of the corpus revealed that justification worked differently with different addressees and situations. A negatively aligned opponent of the *tietäjä* received different justification with the performer's directives than a positively aligned, non-human helper of the *tietäjä*. Additionally ambivalently aligned agents whose status was clearly neither positive nor negative received a type of justification of their own. I have proposed that the different forms of justification and situations of use therefore index different registers. I have used the concept of register to describe patterned forms of speech, which can connect utterances to social groups and attributes. I therefore argue that the *tietäjät* treated different addresses of unseen agents as different social situations, which in turn required different registers.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been my aim to re-evaluate and test some earlier assumptions made in research on Kalevala-metric incantations, and simultaneously to take first steps into some new directions. I hope the work I have conducted adds on its behalf fragments of understanding to the ever-ongoing process of increasing the knowledge on aspects of human culture.

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