



Evaluation Report

Name of the unit of assessment: Department of Slavonic and Baltic Languages and Literatures

Panel: Foreign Languages and Swedish

Graham Caie, University of Glasgow, Department of English Language, UK, *Chair*
Peter Alberg Jensen, University of Stockholm, Department of Slavic Languages, Sweden

Tove Bull, University of Tromsø, Det humanistiske fakultet, Norway

Bernard Comrie, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Department of Linguistics, Germany

Gunnel Engwall, University of Stockholm, Department of French and Italian, Sweden

Monika Fludernik, University of Freiburg, Englisches Seminar, Germany

Geoffrey Khan, University of Cambridge, Faculty of Oriental Studies, UK

Wolfgang Mieder, Department of German and Russian, University of Vermont, USA

Anders Pettersson, University of Umeå, Institutionen för litteraturvetenskap och nordiska språk, Sweden

1 Scientific quality of the research

Rating (1–7): 7

Supporting Comments:

The Department of Slavonic and Baltic Languages and Literatures is internationally recognised as a major centre of high-quality research across the areas: Russian language, Russian literature, and West and South Slavonic and Baltic languages and cultures. It is moreover the only university in Finland that offers an MA major and opportunities to conduct doctoral research in these languages other than Russian.

Over the period under evaluation the number of research active staff has increased from about 20 to about 32, with a near doubling of the number of senior staff and a substantial increase in the number of doctoral students from about six to over 15. Much of this increase stems from the department's success in attracting outside funding, primarily from the Academy of Finland, also in part from INTAS and the Centre of International Mobility initiative. During the period of evaluation, external funding has risen from just over 320 thousand euros to just over 560 thousand euros, from about 23% of total funding to about 32% -- an unusually high level for a humanities department.



The department's staff published some 56 articles in languages other than Finnish in refereed journals, and about 150 articles in languages other than Finnish in collections of articles. In addition, 16 scientific monographs (one in electronic form) were published, including 9 doctoral theses produced during this period, and 9 scholarly volumes were edited. Several of these publications have appeared in internationally leading journals, such as *Voprosy jazykoznanija* and *Wiener slavistischer Almanach* or with internationally leading publishers, such as Otto Harrassowitz, Mouton de Gruyter, and Routledge. This is an impressive scholarly output. Given the nature of the department's research, it is inevitable that much of its output appears in Russian, other Slavonic, and Baltic languages in journals and with publishers in the corresponding countries – this is the best way of ensuring that such research reaches its intended audience. Some of the department's research is published in the in-house series *Slavica Helsingiensia*, of which 5 volumes have appeared during the period under assessment. We wish to note explicitly that we recommend the continuation of this publication practice, as this publication has a high level of international recognition, as witnessed for instance by the number of major university libraries across the world that subscribe to it and by the fact that its volumes are reviewed in major international journals.

A considerable part of the department's research takes place in organised research projects, seven of which have been financed by the Academy of Finland during the period under evaluation. On the linguistic side, these are the following:

Russian Functional Syntax (2000-2007) is developing a new semantic-based model of Russian syntax, drawing on the inspiration of the leading Western (e.g. Dik, Van Valin) and Russian (Bondarko) functional approaches to syntax; this project houses five doctoral dissertations (plus one at the University of Tartu) and promises a major contribution to our understanding of Russian syntax.

Contacts and Identity in the Balkans, which came to an end formally in 2000, brought together researchers not only from this department but also from Classical Philology and Comparative Religion, and has led, for instance, to an important publication on the development of linguistic Balkanisms, explaining them through extended and extensive mutual contact.

Ethnic, Linguistic and Cultural Making of Northern Russia, which started in 2004, is a multi-disciplinary project that draws on expertise in Slavonic linguistics, Finno-Ugrian linguistics, and archaeology to study the complex history of ethnic and linguistic contact in northern Russia; two doctoral theses are being produced within this project.

Outlines of South Slavonic Historical Phonology is primarily an individual project.

In addition, the department's linguists conduct research at a high international level in a number of other areas, including Russian morphosyntax, language pedagogy, aphasia in Czech, Baltic onomastics, Baltic loanwords in Finnish, and bilingualism



involving Russian speakers in the diaspora. The last-named project involves collaboration with the Central Asian states and Kazakhstan, as well as more broadly with the international community of researchers working on Russian spoken in the former Soviet Union, Germany, the USA, Australia, etc. The department's research framework is sufficiently flexible to allow it both to take advantage of the synergy of coordinated research project and to allow individual researchers with unique skills to develop their programmes.

International contacts are predictably best developed with the countries where Slavonic and Baltic languages are spoken, but also with other European countries and beyond. For instance, the department provides expertise on Czech to the US-based Academy of Aphasia, and is cooperating partner with the University of Leiden on a project *Birchbark Literacy from Medieval Rus', funded by INTAS*.

During the period under evaluation, the department has produced nine doctoral theses, all but one in the field of Russian literature. We return in section 3.2 to the virtual absence of linguistic theses during this period, for now noting only that this seems clearly to be a temporary gap.

On the side of Russian literature the projects are the following:

Modernism and Postmodernism in Russian Literature and Culture (1995-2002, still active in part) has been serving as a framework for a great variety of scholarly initiatives, among them 16 doctoral dissertations (12 in Helsinki, 7 of them during 1999-2004), a large number of articles, and two international conferences, one of them within the period of assessment. The external funding (by the Academy of Finland, HU, Centre for International Mobility & others) was of decisive importance for the financing of the doctoral dissertations.

Narration and History: Turn of the Century in Russian Culture (2002-2005) has innovatively united the efforts of literary scholars and leading young Russian historians and hosts three doctoral dissertations (two of them connected also with the previous project). An international conference was held 2003 (the corresponding volume with some 30 articles will appear shortly in Moscow).

St. Petersburg / Leningrad: History – Narration – Present (2004-2007, also supported by the Academy of Finland) includes one professor, two postdoctoral scholars, and three doctoral students. A big international conference is planned for 2007.

An important part and effect of the projects has been the further development of an extensive international network of prominent scholars. One of the gains is evident from a spectacular number of invited lectures (on average some 20 per year during 1999-2004; in the department's recent application for the status of Centre of Excellence 45 scholars were listed as permanent foreign partners). Significantly, opponents at doctoral disputations more often than not are renowned international experts. Special mention should be made of the department's biennial seminars with



the departments of Russian Literature and of Semiotics at Tartu and with colleagues from Tallinn University. The growing difficulties with financing international activity in Estonia have made the conscious efforts on Helsinki's part to sustain the legacy from Tartu invaluable and highly appreciated throughout the scholarly community.

Two dissertations on major 20th Century poets, Tsvetaeva (1996) and Brodsky (2003) have been defended (the latter submitted among 'best publications'), and two others on the same poets are in progress. This is most unusual for a single department and makes the present one also a centre of studies in modern Russian poetry.

The 1999 assessment report noted a fact which is even more valid today: "In general, it is typical of the Department of Slavonic and Baltic Languages that there is excellent cooperation and synergy between experienced scholars and younger researchers". During the period under assessment the doctoral students have taken an active part in conferences and accompanying publications. The department has actively used several doctoral schools — a Nordic one (which came to a close in 2000), the Finnish Doctoral school (from 1998 onwards), and the Alexander Doctoral School in Russian and East European Studies (from 1997 onwards). Interviewed by the panel, the doctoral students' representatives expressed great satisfaction with the research conditions offered by the department.

As mentioned above, the department displays a rare cooperative ability in combining the collective projects with individual pursuits. The literary section too provides evidence for this in the shape of more traditional historical studies, e.g. of Russo-Finnish literary connections and Russian émigré writers in the Baltic area; even these works are of high quality and important as a concrete tribute to the society that hosts the department's manifold endeavours. Last but not least, the staff includes an internationally leading expert on Russian children's literature.

Research and academic activity at the Department of Slavonic and Baltic Languages and Literatures is flourishing. During the last ten years the department has made impressive progress. This development was apparent already by the 1999 assessment, but has accelerated further since then. The department is now firmly established as one of Europe's leading centres for studies in its fields, and in certain respects, like its research cooperation with scholarly communities in the nearby target areas, it stands out as unique.

2 Interaction between research and society

As Finland's leading academic institution in Slavonic and Baltic studies, the department's researchers have been active in relations with Finnish society in the publication of textbooks, in popularisation, especially of Russian, and as experts.

On the linguistic side, academic textbooks in Finnish include an introduction to Russian language and linguistics and a work on literary traditions and standard languages



among the Slavs. A new Finnish-Russian dictionary has been prepared by lecturers at the department. A basic Russian language textbook which was published in Finnish in 2001 will soon also appear in an English translation, while a TV course has been re-run several times by the Finnish Broadcasting Company. On the literary side, a 'History of Russian culture' has been published along with a textbook on Russian Formalism and an introduction to semiotics. Given the research output mentioned above, this additional output by the same group of authors is a great achievement.

Ten members of the department have written articles, reviews, and comments in newspapers, while more than 15 have given TV interviews. This work includes presenting and commenting on Russian literature and rock music and a radio series on Russian writers.

Among the many expert tasks undertaken by members of the department we would note in particular one member's participation as an adviser to the EU delegation that negotiated peace in Serbia in 1999. Other expert service includes editorial service and refereeing for journals not only in Finland and in countries where Slavonic and Baltic languages are spoken, but also as far afield as the USA and South Africa.

We would note that even the department's seemingly basic research can turn out to have societal relevance, for example when a publication on Baltic loanwords in Finnish is shown to throw new light on linguistic aspects of Finnish ethnogenesis, a topic of understandably perennial interest to Finnish society.

3 Overall evaluation: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges

3.1 Strengths

The department has been very successful in obtaining research funding both nationally and internationally; this has been particularly valuable in funding doctoral students. The department is moreover ambitious to extend the range of international funding. The doctoral students are, in comparison with those in the other language departments, very satisfied with research funding, research supervision, library resources, and opportunities for travel to conferences and for other research purposes.

The singular cooperative spirit has an important share in the continuing research results of the department, not only with regard to the doctoral students. In language departments, single teachers of "minor" languages often regard themselves as overburdened and marginalised. Here, on the contrary, several teachers of other languages than Russian expressed (when interviewed by the panel) their gratitude towards the department for creative organisational thinking that enables them to carry out research work along with their teaching. No doubt the spirit in question



is also an important factor behind the department's extensive network; the international scholarly community has responded most positively to the department's collaborative efforts.

The department is unique in Finland in the range of Slavonic and Baltic languages that it offers, both in teaching at the MA level and in research.

One of the strengths of Slavonic research in Helsinki is the excellent set of library resources. In particular, the University Library houses the best collection of Russian books outside Russia. The proximity of Russia, including in particular the excellent library and other resources of St. Petersburg, is an added strength. These were explicitly noted as outstanding strengths by the doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers – the library resources were even praised by those from Russia!

3.2 Weaknesses

During the period under evaluation, no theses were produced in Russian linguistics, and only one partially linguistic thesis on other Slavonic languages, despite the historical strengths of the department in Russian and Slavonic linguistics and the fact that eight theses in Russian literature were produced during this period. In the course of our site visit it was pointed out that a major factor was that the professor of Russian language was vice-rector for six years, which substantially diminished his ability to supervise theses. At present, nine theses are in progress in Russian linguistics and four in the linguistics of other Slavonic languages. We thus cannot but note that there has been a five-year gap in the production of linguistic dissertations, but that this problem has clearly been overcome.

An absence of research on 19th century Russian literature is apparent in the bibliography and was commented upon by a member of the staff at the meeting with the panel. In this respect the department reflects a general problem in 'Western' Slavonic studies – the almost exclusive set on Modernism and avant-garde since the 1960s in the wake of the rediscovery of Russian Formalism. The lack of studies in 19th century literature might deserve attention, since interest in the classical writers among scholars and students and in the general readership is growing rather than diminishing.

3.3 Opportunities and challenges

Helsinki has the privilege of holding one of the world's finest libraries and also of nearness to Russian libraries and archives. This could speak for a strengthening of historical studies. Literature under Soviet rule has not been a topic yet (apart from monographs on single texts by two individual writers). At the same time the proximity of Finland to the USSR meant that people in Finland experienced 'Sovietisation' at close quarters. Could these facts not motivate an approach to studies



in Russian literature and culture under the Soviets? What we suggest could amount to supplementing the current project 'Understanding Russianness' with a take on 'understanding Soviet(Russian)ness'.

Geographic closeness to Russia per se, with concomitant close commercial and other relations, and the level of interest in Russia within Finnish society provides a continuing opportunity for the department's Russian language and literature sections, as does the ability to attract the best doctoral students not only from within Finland but also from Russia through Centre of International Mobility scholarships.

However, the closeness to Russia can also be all-consuming. With regard to Russian literature, the department's manifold contacts with leading Russian scholars (in Russia and abroad) have been hailed above, but one might, at least theoretically, detect a certain risk of merging with a predominantly Russian context. In order to keep a distance from the Russian scene, in both literature and science, the current scholarly network could eventually be supplemented with orientation towards and interaction with non-Russian pursuits. In its linguistic research, the department does have some international research collaboration with countries other than those where Slavonic and Baltic languages are spoken, but such cooperation could also be more extensive.

The availability of the Russian electronic corpus Integrum, consisting of some 300 million documents, is a unique resource that has already enabled the department to conduct high-quality research on linguistic phenomena that are insufficiently frequent to appear often enough even in the largest previously available corpora. This has already led to the publication of an article in *Russian Linguistics*, internationally the leading journal in this field.

A challenge for junior staff working on other Slavonic and on Baltic languages is the virtual lack of academic posts in this field in Finland – the only regular professorship is that of the department's incumbent, who is far from retiring age.

4 Panel's recommendations for the future

4.1 Research - both single disciplinary and interdisciplinary research

The department could develop further international cooperation with countries other than those where Slavonic and Baltic languages are spoken, and could develop further research on 19th century and Soviet Russia.

4.2 Development of research environment and infrastructure

[No further comments]



4.3 Research active staff

[No further comments]

4.4 The role of doctoral/post-doctoral training in research

The department could consider the possibility of pooling expertise in more general areas (linguistic theory, literary theory, professionalism) with the other language departments. We emphasise that the department would have much to contribute in these areas.

4.5 Other issues

[No further comments]