

On Ülo Sirk and His Work

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In April 2005, Ülo Sirk celebrated his 70th birthday by bringing to the Department of Asian and African Languages of the Institute of Oriental Studies the manuscript of his new monograph, *Avstronezijskie jazyki: Vvedenie v sravnitel'no-istoričeskoe issledovanie* (*Austronesian languages: An introduction to historical comparative studies*).¹ This was an epochal event, since nothing of this kind, ambitiously summarizing and reviewing the basic data of the large Austronesian family to such a large extent, had ever appeared before. However, much preceded the appearance of this work, so much that we can only sketch it here.

Ülo² was born on 4 April 1935 in the town of Haapsalu located on the west coast of Estonia. His father Henn Sirk graduated from the University of Tartu with the specialities “Estonian language” and “World literature” and after that worked as a secondary school teacher, first in Haapsalu, and later in Tallinn and Valga. Ülo’s mother Linda Sirk (née Reimann) was a pharmacist, but after her marriage in 1933 she gave up work and devoted herself to housekeeping. Henn and Linda had three sons, of whom Ülo was the eldest.

World War II had a great impact on Estonia. In 1940 the country was annexed by the Soviet Union, then in 1941 Hitler’s army invaded and held power for three years, until Estonia returned under Soviet authority. In 1942, after the death of the director of the famous Gustav Adolf Gymnasium (in Tallinn), Henn Sirk was appointed as the new director. But later he fell out of favour with the authorities, and the family was deported to a small town named Valga, situated on the border of Estonia and Latvia. It was here that Ülo finished high school in 1953, and from where he left to Tartu, the second largest city of Estonia, in order to enter university.

As home of the oldest Estonian university, Tartu was effectively the intellectual center of Estonia. Ten years later it became a leading centre of humanities in the Soviet Union, thanks to the rise of the Tartu-Moscow semiotic school, established by Yuri Lotman, one of the most famous Russian semioticians and culturologists, who sought haven at the university as a lecturer already in 1954. However, Sirk did not intend to become a philologist or linguist; instead, he entered the Faculty of Geology, from which he graduated in 1958. It is a truism that knowledge is never wasted. To this day Ülo retains a deep interest in the natural sciences, and his considerable knowledge of geology, botany and related disciplines is reflected in many of his papers.

As we know, Ülo did not become a geologist. Instead, the fates decreed that he should make his first steps towards linguistics already in the University. At that time in Tartu there was a circle of Orientalists organized by Pent Nurmekund, a remarkable polyglot scholar who

¹ Actually, this was only the first version of the monograph, and it took much time before it finally reached the publisher. At the time this small essay is written, the book is still in press.

² The name *Ülo* also sometimes appears as *Yulo* or *Julo* in literature using direct transliteration from Russian.

is said to have translated from about eighty languages (this is possibly an exaggeration which hints at his remarkable gifts). Sirk took part in sessions of Nurmerkund's circle and became interested in Indonesia and Oceania. He developed some mastery in Indonesian and translated several Indonesian short stories into Estonian (this at the distance of about ten thousands kilometers or six thousands miles from Java!). Moreover, in his last year at the Faculty of Geology, Sirk was already teaching Indonesian in the Oriental circle, and Nurmerkund himself took lessons from Ülo. Eventually these activities led to the decision to major in the field of Indonesian linguistics. Having graduated, Sirk moved to Moscow, where he was accepted for doctoral research in the Institute of Asia (earlier and later the Institute of Oriental Studies) of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

At the beginning of the 1960s the linguistic department was one of the largest departments of the Institute, and was actively opening up "new" languages. It was also the home of a handful of Austronesianists, among them Avenir Teselkin and Natalia Alieva, authors of the first brief grammatical sketch of Indonesian (1960), and somewhat later Lina Shkarban, who wrote (together with Manuel Cruz) the first grammatical description in Russian of Tagalog. It was in this prestigious department that Ülo defended his dissertation in 1965, and in which he has remained as a research fellow, right up to the present day.

Ülo's research started in grammar and typology. His dissertation addressed Indonesian phrases introduced by the relative marker *yang*. The word *yang* cannot always be easily translated, but, if it gets a translational equivalent, it is often rendered by relative pronouns such as *which* and *who*. So in grammars *yang* was usually (and sometimes still is) ranked among pronouns or determiners. Sirk distinguished between two main functions of *yang*-phrases, viz. the attributive function (as in *tamu yang belum sampai* 'the guest who has not yet arrived') and the pro-substantive function (cf. *yang belum sampai* 'the one who has not yet arrived'). Furthermore, he showed that *yang* is a function word which subordinates the following constituent (as distinct from relative pronouns) and also participates in the formal expression of the information structure. These conclusions may be considered trivial from the point of view of a modern grammarian specializing in Malay/Indonesian, but it should be borne in mind that Sirk's detailed investigation was one of those that made these conclusions trivial. We should recall that in the 1960s the information structure was not getting as much attention as it currently does, and that less was known about how it is reflected in languages that differ considerably from the "Standard Average European" languages.

Being engaged in the project of a new Indonesian grammar (published in 1972³), Sirk wrote sections on word classes, pronouns, adverbs, function words, complex sentences, and some others. Many of his conclusions remain important up to now. Consider, for example, the issue of part-of-speech distinction, which was a particular challenge for scholars of Malay/Indonesian of those years.⁴ Sirk suggested a number of tests, based primarily on the co-occurrence with certain function and auxiliary words, which provided a relatively strict classification of Indonesian words.

Needing to find his own place among Russian Austronesianists, Ülo Sirk turned to a language which was far less known than Indonesian, namely to Bugis (Dutch: Boeginese),⁵ a language spoken predominantly in the island of Sulawesi and differing structurally in many respects from Malay/Indonesian in many respects. Ülo recalls (2000) that his study of Bugis began after reading the dissertation of the prominent Dutch scholar Jacobus Noorduynd (1955),

³ Another edition of this grammar appeared in Indonesian in 1991.

⁴ See, for example, Teeuw 1962 and Asmah Hj. Omar 1968.

⁵ Hereafter we use the variant "Bugis", which seems to be more common in literature than the equivalent term "Buginese" used by Ülo.

which contained a large text in transcription and an interesting chapter on grammar.⁶ Sound though Noorduyn's work was, it was evident that there was much to explore in this language.

Bugis is one of the largest languages of Indonesia: the number of its native speakers is about 3.5 to 4 millions. Even more importantly, it has a long written history, which makes it an especially desirable object for research. At first, most Bugis texts available to Ülo were those published in the 19th century in the native Bugis *lontara* script. Despite this, Ülo presented a concise but very substantial grammar of Bugis (1975). This was a new step in this field, since before Ülo's monograph few grammatical descriptions of this important language had existed (Noorduyn 1991). Unsurprisingly, Sirk's grammar was soon translated into French (1979) and later published in English (1983).

Having completed his grammar, Ülo did not stop working on Bugis. Several times he attempted to visit Indonesia (once even trying to accompany Soviet geologists), but the main obstacle was political: in the Soviet Union all citizens once living in the territory occupied by the enemy during World War II were under semi-official restrictions. Despite the fact that Ülo was only nine years old when the German occupation ended, these restrictions applied also to him. Only in the post-Soviet time was Ülo free to go abroad, and in 1995 he finally got the opportunity to visit Sulawesi. Here he compiled data on the "form of existence" of the Bugis language of written tradition, listening to the manner of reading of these traditional texts by native connoisseurs. In 1996, he published a new grammar of Bugis, like the former restricted to the language of literature, but particularly rich in detail and analysis, as would be expected from the leading specialist in the traditional literature of Bugis. His work on this subject continues to today, as is seen from Sirk's publications on the language of the epic Bugis poetic cycle *La Galigo*.

However, Ülo has not restricted himself to Malay/Indonesian and Bugis. He has happily tried to unpack the details and clues found in many other languages, as, for example, in his thorough (but as yet unpublished) work on Old Javanese sandhi. His room in Moscow is full of grammars and dictionaries of languages of the whole Pacific area, and anyone who borrows a book from his library can see in what careful detail it has been examined by Ülo.⁷

Naturally, in parallel to his studies of Bugis and Indonesian, Ülo also was immersed in comparative Austronesian linguistics. Thus, while studying relative constructions in Indonesian, he did not restrict himself simply to this language, as is reflected by a paper discussing relative constructions in a number of languages of western Indonesia (1965). His first historical-comparative paper was written as early as in 1967 – this was more methodological, attempting general conceptions of language classification and reconstruction in line with the state of the field at that time. Many later papers by Ülo expose typological, areal and comparative approaches, often in combination. These studies touch upon a great range of topics, including, to mention just few, the grammatical functions of the Malay proclitic *se-* (with the basic meaning 'one') and its cognates in other Western Indonesian languages (1970), the typological classification of Western Austronesian languages based on features of the verbal system (1968), and the problem of contact impacts on some verbal characteristics of non-Austronesian languages in Eastern Indonesia (1969). Sirk also wrote an article on the structure of noun phrases in Indonesian (1971) and a survey of reduplication in Western Indonesian languages (1980). In an article (1983) reviewing comparative Austronesian linguistics, he revisits Dempwolff's (1934-1938) work, analyzing its

⁶ Noteworthy, subsequently both scholars maintained correspondence till Noorduyn's last disease in 1994.

⁷ Note that much of the Western linguistic literature is not easily accessible from Moscow. Naturally, in the 1960s, Sirk made the largest amount of orders for books from abroad among all customers at the Lenin Library (now the Russian State Library).

problematics as well as reviewing the explorations of Robert Blust and emphasizing the importance of language subgroups in the Western Austronesian area for the whole historical landscape of Austronesia. Some reference works by Sirk are surveys in the collective work on linguistic comparison (1982) and in the Russian linguistic encyclopaedia (1990). At the conference on linguistic reconstruction and the ancient Oriental history in 1984, Ülo expounded on the issue of the homeland of Proto-Austronesian, and a number of articles on the origins of Austronesian verb morphology contain sophisticated analyses of plausible ways to reconstruct the historical formation of Proto-Austronesian.

As an expert with unique knowledge of his areas of study, Sirk has taught Indonesian and Austronesian linguistics and ethnology in several Moscow institutes including, the Institute for Asian and African Studies of Moscow State University, the Russian State University for Humanities, and the Institute of Practical Orientalistics. He took part in academic and cultural encounters known as “Malay-Indonesian Readings” set up on initiative of Boris Parnickel and other Moscow scholars. Parnickel invited him to give talks at the Readings and, being for some time on the editorial board of the journal *Narody Azii i Afriki (Asian and African Peoples)*, to publish reviews.

Ülo is always ready to provide support and new information to his colleagues and to review their writings in detail. The authors of the present sketch themselves owe much to him, for the first of them is proud to have Ülo’s student; indeed, to have been introduced to Austronesian linguistics by him, while the second author received from him friendly and helpful critical comments over many years. We were, then, certainly happy to prepare this volume, with hope that it will stimulate Ülo to fresh discussions and yet further achievements.

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NB: This bibliography does not contain reviews, articles in encyclopaedias and abstracts.

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