

ON THE JUBILEE OF HELLE METSLANG



Helle Metslang, Professor of Modern Estonian at the University of Tartu, celebrated her 60th birthday on July 29, 2010. As a graduate of the 1974 class of Estonian philology at the University of Tartu she belongs to the generation of the generative grammar group (GGG). Throughout her career as a linguist she has followed a principle of the GGG to describe the Estonian language in accordance with the most recent trends in theoretical linguistics.

However, Helle Metslang grew into a researcher at the Institute of Language and Literature where she worked for more than twenty years, mostly as a researcher and a senior researcher of the grammar group. In 1995–2000 she worked as a Lecturer in Estonian at the University of Helsinki; in 2004–2007 she was

a visiting professor at the University of Helsinki; in 2000 she was elected Professor of the Estonian Language at Tallinn University, and in 2001 she worked as a dean. However, in 2007 Helle Metslang became Professor of Modern Estonian at the University of Tartu, and since 2008 she has also acted as Head of the Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics. As is appropriate for a professor of Estonian, she is a member of several councils (incl. the Estonian Language Board), editorial boards, and many domestic and international scholarly societies and associations; she has also acted as a research expert for several organizations. Helle Metslang is the editor-in-chief of the yearbook of the Estonian Association for Applied Linguistics, and she has been the chairperson of the board of the Mother Tongue Society since 2006. Despite the impressive number of positions and responsibilities she continues to be a prolific and innovative researcher.

Helle Metslang's main research interests have been Estonian morphosyntax and syntax, language change, contrastive and typological studies. However, she began her career as a scholar by studying the language of runo folk songs with a focus on the analysis of parallelism. Her candidate dissertation "Some Syntactic Aspects in the Verse Parallelism of Estonian Runo Songs" (1978) deals with the problem how the transfer of paradigmatic equivalence into syntagmatics is manifested in the syntactic surface structure and information structure of parallelism. This study corresponds in all respects to a contemporary doctoral thesis. The end of the 1970s and the

1980s were spent on the preparatory research for the scholarly grammar of Estonian and the writing of the grammar. Helle Metslang is one of the two principal authors of the syntax part of the scholarly grammar of Estonian (*Eesti keele grammatika I–II*, Tallinn 1993–1995 (EKG)), which won the national research prize. She wrote the sections on pragmatic meanings of the sentence, syntactic processes, quantifier phrase, and parts of the sentence (co-authored by Mati Ereht). After completing the grammar Helle Metslang began to write her doctoral thesis on the temporal system of the Estonian language. The article-based thesis "Temporal Relations in the Predicate and the Grammatical System of Estonian and Finnish" was completed and successfully defended at the University of Oulu in 1994. The main objective of the thesis was to provide a description of the temporal system of Estonian comparing it with that of Finnish; an additional goal was to carry out a typological comparison of the entire grammatical system of Estonian and Finnish. It is an excellent study, which is proved by the fact that it won two major prizes in 1995 – the thesis prize of the Finnish research societies Suomalais-Ugrilainen Seura and Kotikie-len Seura and the 1995 research prize of the Republic of Estonian in the humanities.

Time (*tempus*) and the closely related aspect and modality (often denoted by the acronym TAM) have always taken centre stage among the research interests of Helle Metslang, from the synchronic and diachronic, contrastive, areal-typological, and typological perspectives. Helle Metslang proceeds from the *tempus* theory of Hans Reichenbach and Roman Jakobson, making a distinction between absolute time and relative time. Accordingly, she describes various verb constructions that occur as the predicate – in addition to compound tenses, also the meanings of periphrastic forms and catenative verbs. The treatment of isomorphism and its role in the development of the temporal system is especially interesting. According to Helle

Metslang, isomorphism describes the situation where temporal single-planeness is expressed by a simple form, but temporal biplaneness is expressed by an analytic form. The author claims that the Estonian perfect is still an isomorphic form although in the framework of temporal biplaneness one can focus either a past event or a present state. However, it is likely that in the future the perfect indicative may express only the past meaning, that is, the perfect will have a non-isomorphic character. In Finnish this development has proceeded much further than in Estonian. Helle Metslang shows that in Estonian the quotative and the conditional past have, in fact, a single-plane character although formally they typically still reveal biplaneness.

In addition to the perfect and the related constructions, the thesis provides a comprehensive treatment of future constructions and the progressive construction. Estonian-language managers discouraged the use of the *saama*-future for a long time because its German background despite the fact that it is a peripheral phenomenon. Helle Metslang showed convincingly that the reason why the *saama*-future did not spread was not its German background but the fact that it was adopted as a readymade construction, grammaticalized from the very beginning, ignoring its natural intermediate stages. At the same time the author shows that the *saama*-construction is needed because it enables us to show the imperfectivity of an action in the future. Helle Metslang was also the first linguist who paid attention to the use of the verb *hakkama* 'begin' as a future auxiliary. Estonian does not have the category of the progressive as yet, but Metslang has shown that the construction *olema + Vmas* is clearly developing in that direction.

In her thesis Metslang compares the Estonian temporal constructions with the Finnish ones and shows that the Finnish constructions have developed further with regard to grammaticalization.

Helle Metslang has also dealt with the category of time in several more recent articles, from the perspective of

language history by using the opportunities of the corpus material, as well as from the perspective of Finno-Ugric linguistics and general typology. Her article "On the Use of the Estonian Past Tense Forms during the Last Century" (— Estonian: Typological Studies II, Tartu 1997) describes 20<sup>th</sup>-century changes in the system of Estonian past tenses. The article shows a clear preference for the imperfect over the perfect, which started in the 1930s and became increasingly common during the following decades. The development of the future in Estonian and other Finno-Ugric languages against the background of other European languages is discussed in the article "The Developments of the Futures in the Finno-Ugric Languages" (— Estonian: Typological Studies I, Tartu 1996; Estonian-language version KK 1997). Helle Metslang and Hannu Tommola wrote a typological overview of the Estonian tense system "Zum Tempussystem des Estnischen" (— Tense Systems in European Languages II, Tübingen 1995).

Tense is closely related to aspect. Helle Metslang could not ignore the aspect when studying the compound tenses, future constructions, and the progressive construction; the latter represents the aspect rather than the tense. More recently we have jointly described the manifestations of a category that is close to the progressive — prospective. Helle Metslang has also been interested in the nominal means of expressing the aspect. The study "Määratud ja määramata objekt" (Tallinn 1979; Definite and indefinite object) refined the aspectual character of the total and the partial object in Estonian and laid the groundwork for the corresponding chapter of EKG. More recently, Helle Metslang has studied the use of the Estonian prefixed adverb as an aspectual marker in "Eesti prefiksaaladverbist *ära* soome keele taustal" (— Lähivertailuja 9, Helsinki 1997; About the Estonian prefixed adverb *ära* against the background of Finnish), and "On the Development of the Estonian Aspect" (— Circum-Baltic Languages 2, Amsterdam 2001); she showed its devel-

opment and fluctuation in use in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While for a long time Estonian linguists were of the opinion that the use of *ära* as a perfective particle is an unnecessary German influence, then Helle Metslang has held that the weakness of the object position in Estonian, the tendency towards analyticity, and the fact that the perfective particle has more functions in the sentence than indicating perfectiveness account for the high frequency of *ära* in contemporary Estonian.

Modality is covered by studies of speech acts, moods, and a number of particles. Actually, speech acts include also some non-modal speech acts. The monograph "Küsilause eesti keeles" (Tallinn 1981; The interrogative sentence in Estonian) by Helle Metslang is the first comprehensive study of the types of the Estonian interrogative sentence. After a longer break she has once again focused on the interrogative sentence, dealing with the development of the formal types of general questions during the previous century (Isepäine üldküsilause. — ESA 55 2010; The self-willed general question). While one can sometimes hear people complain that the interrogative sentence with the particle, especially general questions with the sentence-initial *kas*-particle, tends to decrease in comparison with questions without a marker, then Helle Metslang shows on the basis of the corpus material that this is not the case. The former German and the present English influence has not decreased the use of the particle questions. In addition to the monograph on the interrogative sentence, during the preparatory work of EKG Helle Metslang carried out a study of the exclamatory sentence (Eesti hüüdlausest afektiivse süntaksi taustal. — KK 1990; Concerning the exclamatory sentence in Estonian against the background of affective syntax). More recently, command as a modal speech act function has been added to questions and exclamations (e.g. M. Erelt, H. Metslang, Grammar and Pragmatics: Changes in the Paradigm of the Estonian Imperative. — LU 2004). Various possibilities of express-

ing commands were discussed in the article "Imperative and Related Matters in Everyday Estonian" (— LU 2004). As for moods, Metslang has studied the Estonian conditional in comparison with the Finnish conditional, e.g. "Is the Estonian and Finnish Conditional Actually a Conditional?" (— Estonian: Typological Studies III, Tartu 1997). Also, several collective articles dealt with evidential moods — the oblique and the concessive mood (e.g. M. Erelt, K. Pajusalu, H. Metslang, Tense and Evidentiality in Estonian. — Belgian Journal of Linguistics 20 2006).

Grammaticalization has been very important topic both for Metslang's thesis, as well as for her following studies. Metslang was among the first Estonian linguists to adopt the notion of grammaticalization in Estonian linguistics both in the synchronic sense and as a diachronic process. She has studied the emergence and development of the meanings of several grammatical devices over the past century and also for a longer period of time. At this she has dealt with the relation between language-internal grammaticalization and changes because of the impact of contact languages (German and Russian). She represents those linguists who think that, rather than being brutal violence against the language, in many cases an outside influence tends to amplify language-internal development trends (our joint article "Oma või võõras" — KK 1998; Our own or foreign?).

When comparing grammaticalization processes and their results in Estonian and Finnish, Helle Metslang has shown that Estonian reveals a much higher degree of lexicality than Finnish, which has more synthetic and analytic grammatical devices and grammatical meanings. Comparison of the grammatical systems of Estonian and Finnish, the study of the contact languages of Estonian, and the long-time teaching experience at the University of Helsinki have apparently made Helle Metslang deal with those areas of Estonian that cause difficulty to foreign learners. She

has made several presentations about linguistic complexity and acted as the leader of the research team that prepared the handbook "Keelehärm: eesti keele probleemseid piirkondi" (Tallinn 2003; Language Frustration. Some Problematic Areas of Estonian) as part of the Phare Estonian teaching project of the European Union. Helle Metslang wrote the syntax section of the handbook.

While Helle Metslang has constantly discussed the relation of Estonian to Finnish and German at least since her thesis, then more recently she has focused on the relation of Estonian to SAE languages or the languages of the European linguistic area. As for its structure, Estonian lies in the periphery of SAE, but it is gradually adopting features that are characteristic of languages belonging to the centre of SAE (Estonian Grammar between Finnic and SAE: Some Comparisons (— Sprachtypologie und Universalienforschung, Language Typology and Universals. STUF 62 1/2, Berlin 2009)). The topic is also related to an international project with the participation of Helle Metslang the aim of which is to create a typological database of the Uralic languages.

Helle Metslang is a prolific and innovative researcher who is well known and highly appreciated not only in Estonia and Finland but also elsewhere. Despite her remarkable teaching and administrative load, her life and work in several places, and extensive work-related travel, Helle Metslang has been able to make an important contribution to Estonian linguistics. I'm sure that the future holds much more in store. I wish my highly esteemed colleague every success in her pursuits!

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