



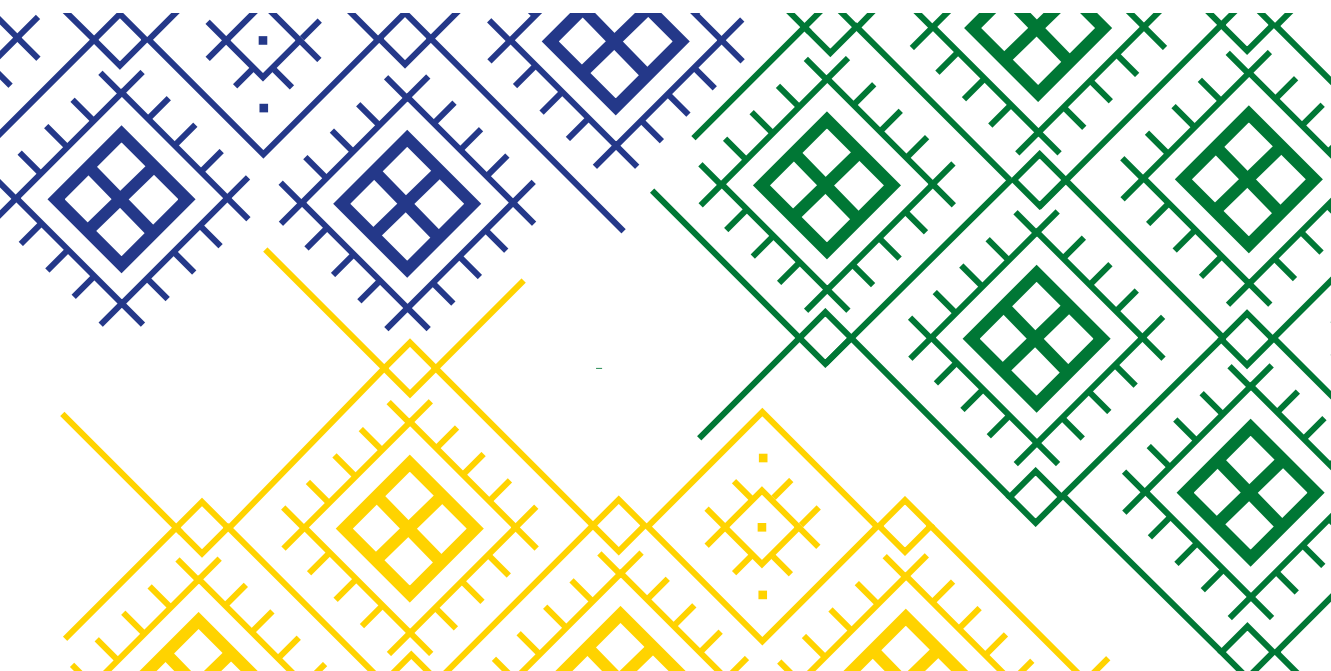
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Indigenous knowledge and languages in interaction –
Amazonian and Arctic approaches

Guest editors

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'Animal' and 'animate' in connection to 'living' and 'spirit' in North Sámi and Finnish

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To collaborate on research with different Indigenous peoples is truly a privilege. In this essay, I share memories from a conceptual-cultural discussion with Apurinã and Tukano Amazonian colleagues,¹ which then brought me to ponder how my Indigenous language—North Sámi—approaches similar concepts and ontologies. In particular, we discussed what terms like 'other-than-human,' 'non-human' or 'more-than-human' would be called in the Indigenous languages we know and use. The Amazonian colleagues Justino Rezende Sarmento, Silvio Sanches Barreto Bará, Rosijane Fernandes Moura Tukano, Francisco Apurinã, and Thiago Mota Cardoso shared that the word for 'non-human' in many Amazonian languages also includes the idea of human (see also Virtanen & Apurinã 2024). They revealed that there is no word that separates other-than-human beings (such as animals, plants, rocks and spirits) into their own category, since they are described collectively with one word, which would probably be best translated into English as the word 'life.' That made me excited, as I thought that also in North Sámi, 'animal' and 'animate' are connected to 'life.' We do not have a single word for animals, plants, lakes, rivers and rocks either which would not include humans, or differ and not relate to the verb 'to live' or the substantive 'life.' 'Animal' and 'animate' in North Sámi (and in Finnish as well, as I quickly after the discussion later recognized) connect to 'life' or 'to live' and are not their own words in the sense of being removed from 'life' or 'living,' as it is in English. Additionally, terms like non-human and more-than-human are not easy to translate into Sámi or Finnish, as there are no existing terms for them. Instead, new terms are searched for and created for both languages (see Kortekallio et al. 2021 on searching for Finnish terms).

In this essay, I approach some of the equivalent words of North Sámi and Finnish as a non-linguist, a thinker-out-loud, and a researcher-writer who occasionally gets excited about language. I also thank Jelena Porsanger for the joint discussions. I also use both the Giellatekno dictionary (Trosterud 2013–2022), the Etymological Database of Sámi Languages (Álgu-tietokanta) and the Etymological Dictionary of Finnish (Suomen etymologinen sanakirja), all of which are available as digital databases. I focus especially on the terms 'animal' and 'animate' and their relatedness to 'life' and 'spirit.' 'Spirit' comes

¹ The discussion on May 24, 2024, in a final seminar of TFK-Project funded by the Finnish Education Agency, which enabled a staff and student exchange project between the University of Helsinki, the Federal University of Amazonas, and Federal University of Pará.

into discussion through one old term on natural objects, which happens to be related to blessing in North Sámi.

According to linguist Minerva Piha (2020), the Sámi language(s) and the Sámi people came to the areas of present-day Southern and Lake Finland from the Ladoga region at the beginning of the Common Era. The Sámi and Finnish languages both have a common origin (Finno-Ugric languages) and have borrowed from each other, currently following the borders of the Nordic countries. They have borrowed words from the dominant language cultures surrounding Sámi, but also the other way round, Finnish and Nordic languages have borrowed words from the Sámi languages. Perspectives on these exchanges are being variously refined and emphasized in multiple slightly different ways in the latest studies by linguists, but in any case, all the Nordic languages including Sámi languages are connected with each other in different ways (see, e.g., Saarikivi 2011). For this reason, in this essay I will discuss not only North Sámi as an Indigenous language but also Finnish in parallel—first, because they are both my mother (and father) tongues, and secondly, because it is inspiring to show their similarity. Since I am not a linguist, I feel free to make wild, virtual interpretations and I can let my imagination flow (see also Guttorm 2020). Learning Sámi as an adult helps to recognize the obvious in Sámi and to think through it, for example, in terms of the already widely used North Sámi and Finnish terms for ‘animism,’ which is translated simply into *animisma* (North Sámi) and *animismi* (Finnish), even though in that translation the Sámi and Finnish wisdom related to the roots words ‘animate’ and ‘animal’ go lost.

Sámi and many other Indigenous languages are often said to be verb languages (see, e.g., Gross 2014, 83–99). Things are spoken of and about in different forms of verbs, and nouns are often based on verbs. That is why I will start with the verb *eallit*, ‘to live.’ In the etymology of the Sámi language, the word *eallit* has many other meanings in addition to the meaning of ‘to live’: to be subject to bending (e.g., iron on a sled); to cope, to manage (without hunger), to be able; to visit somewhere (though I have not come across the latter meaning myself during my ten years of knowing Sámi). In Finnish ‘to live’ is *elää*, which also have multiple meanings and uses.

The verb *eallit*, ‘to live,’ has given rise to many verb derivatives over time, which are now considered adjectives or nouns. *Ealli* means almost exclusively ‘animal’ in Modern Sámi, but it is based on the verb *eallit* and can be directly translated to both ‘living’ and ‘alive,’ as also Ingold (2000) and Sammallahti (1993) state, according to Helander-Renvall (2010, 48). This is also the case in Finnish, as all the different variations throughout the known history² for the words *elävä* (‘living’, ‘alive’, also about both ‘animal’ and ‘human being’, in Finnish) and *eläjä* (‘a living being’) have been based on the verb *elää* (‘to live’): *elin*, *eliö* and *eläin*. In both Finnish and Saami, animals (*eläin* in Finnish and *ealli* in North Sámi) do not include plants (*šaddu* in North Sámi and *kasvi* in Finnish), a concept that in both languages is based on the verb *šaddat*, ‘to grow.’ Today, the etymological dictionary of Finnish (Suomen etymologinen sanakirja) distinguishes an animal from a plant by defining the former exactly as organisms whose “characteristics include, among others, use of organic food, lack of cell walls and usually the ability to move actively.”

According to Sámi scholar Jelena Porsanger (in a conversation between her and me 5/24/2024), *ealli* has the skill of maintaining life. *Ealli* thus gets by and sticks to life.

² See https://kaino.kotus.fi/ses/?p=qs-article&etym_id=ETYM_99ad44d1fd1face9ce6bf52c225e2c0e&list_id=1&keyword=eläin&word=eläin

According to her, an *ealli* is an animal that has blood. Even though one normally calls a bird *loddi* and a fish *guolli*, the word *ealli* can also be used in general terms as a collective noun to name a group of animals regarding to their ecological habitat, like *meahcce-ealli* ('forest animal'), *duottar-ealli* ('tundra animal') or *mearra-ealli* ('sea animal'). Also, in Finnish the word *elävä* ('living', 'alive') is still used in conjunctions, e.g. *merenelävä* (a living being, therefore an animal, of the sea) or *ulkomaanelävä* (a living being of a foreign country, which therefore refers to a foreign person)³.

When I asked Jelena whether a person could also be called *ealli*, being 'alive' or 'living,' Porsanger was of the opinion that it might be inappropriate to call someone *ealli*. Also, in Finnish the word *eläimellinen* (animal-like or brutish or subhuman) has been or is still used to refer to some people, repeating and reconstructing the animal–human dichotomy. *Ealli*, 'alive' or 'living' can though be connected to the word person to specify that a person is alive, *ealli olmmoš*, as opposite to a dead one, but it is seldom used, as there are other ways to say this. *Eallilan olmmoš* is a person, who has lived long, an aged person. Also, *eallin*, 'life,' is a derivative from the verb *eallit*, more precisely an active essive: *eallimin*, which means 'as alive' or 'in life' and has contracted into the word *eallin*. So, both *eläin/ealli* ('animal') and *elämä/eallin* ('life') in both Finnish and Sámi are based on the verb *eläa/eallit* ('to live') and mean 'living' or '(as) a living being.' Overall, the verbs *eallit* (North Sámi) and correspondingly *eläa* (Finnish) have many verb, adjective and noun derivatives in both languages. Here I will not go deeper in these here, but mention that for example in the reindeer husbandry research project EALÁT the word *eallit* has been studied in more depth:

"The term «ealát» is from the language of the indigenous Sámi people of Fennoscandia, and means «good pasture». This word is related to the term «eallu», which means «herd» and the origin of these terms derives from the word «eallin», or «life». In other words, pastures are the foundation for the reindeer herd, and reindeer herds are the foundation for the lives of reindeer herding peoples." (Oskal 2009, 5.)

The word 'animate' in both North Sámi and Finnish is based on the verb 'to live' and includes all living beings: *ealas* ('animate' in North Sámi) and *elollinen* ('animate,' literally translated 'having a life'). In North Sámi also, the word *heakkalaš* is used for 'animate,' literally translated 'having a spirit or a breath.' In Finnish, the word *eliö*, 'organism,' is a derivative from the verb *eläa*, 'to live.' In both Sámi and Finnish languages, all living beings, 'organisms,' can also be called 'a piece of nature': *luondugáhppálat* in North Sámi or *luontokappale* in Finnish, or just *gáhppálat* ('a piece') in North Sámi.

In North Sámi, 'organisms' can also be called *sivdnáduš* (literally and traditionally translated as 'blessing' or 'creation', 'creature', even 'all the Creation work', see Sjöberg 2018, 92, 152). *Sivdnáduš* is based on the verb *sivdnidit* ('to create,' used especially about God, and 'to bless') and/but it currently means a 'natural object,' 'animate' and 'nature,' according to both the Álgu database (Álgu-tietokanta) and the Giellatekno dictionary (Trosterud 2013–2022). The meaning of *sivdnáduš* has therefore almost totally detached from the verbal root of the word. Also, the word *sivdniduvvon* ('blessed'), a passive form of the verb *sivdnidit*, can be used. Both *sivdnáduš* and *sivdniduvvon* are less frequently heard in everyday use today, but as can be seen from the dictionary definition, at least *sivdnáduš* has almost completely lost its Christian context – and content, too.

³ I thank Anni Jääskeläinen for commenting this text and reminding me of these words!

In the Sámi language, earlier there was no distinction between nature and culture; the word *luondu*, ‘nature’, was not used to refer to the environment but to the nature of a person or animal, that is, their character (see, e. g. Joks et al. 2020; Guttorm 2021). Actually, that is the case also for Finnish – *luonto*, ‘nature’, has been and still is widely used in the meaning of the nature of persons and things, and in some dialects, even more than in the meaning of the environment outside the habitat that man has shaped for himself (Suomen murteiden sanakirja/Dictionary of Finnish Dialects)⁴. All places and lands – and living beings – have their own special character, as Elina Helander-Renvall (2010, 46) writes. In a previous article (Guttorm 2021), I introduced some words of the variety used for different landscapes and terrains, although the word *luondu* (‘nature’) is already in use in modern Sámi. When the word *sivdnidit* (‘to bless’) is identified and understood as Christian-influenced and thus been used only after missionaries’ visits and Christianization, it leads to me to the question of what words for ‘natural objects’ or ‘organisms’ or life including all living beings were used before, before Christianity and before ‘nature’ was distinguished from everyday life, in North Sámi. Was the term *heakkalaš* (‘animate,’ or literally translated ‘having a spirit or a breath’) used already then? Who indeed knows? This could be further re-researched with traditional scholars and knowledge holders.

In the Sámi language, the word for ‘spirit’ has two words: *vuoigŋa* and *heagga*. The verb *vuoigŋat* means ‘to breathe,’ and many words related to resting begin with *vuoigŋa*. According to the Ålgu-database *heagga* means both spirit, life, body⁵, and even uterus, as *vuoigŋa* means spirit, spirit being, and also stance and mood. *Heagga* is the closest equivalent to the Finnish word *henki*, which means ‘spirit’ or ‘breath,’ but also a ‘human being’ (with a breath) or ‘person’, as for example, how many persons were present or can fit in a certain space. According to linguist Anneli Räikkälä (1996), it originally meant the airflow caused by breathing but also spiritual life, God and the divine aspect of man. I would say that ‘spirit’ no longer refers solely to God (of Christianity) or the divine aspect of man, but it can also refer to spirits other than Christian spirits. According to the etymological dictionary of Finnish, *henki* means ‘breath,’ ‘respiration’ or ‘breathing air,’ ‘life,’ ‘soul,’ even ‘a spirit being’ or ‘ghost,’ and currently also ‘a person.’ The Finnish words *henkinen* and *hengellinen* distinguish currently quite clearly between ‘mental’ and ‘spiritual,’ as do the North Sámi concepts *heakkalaš* and *vuoigŋalaš*. While the Finnish concept of ‘spiritual’ (*hengellinen*) has been traditionally associated specifically with Christian spirituality, the Sámi word *vuoigŋalaš* does not distinguish between Christian or non-Christian spirituality and it also can mean ‘mental’ (Sjöberg 2018).

According to Räikkälä (1996, 1), the word for ‘person,’ *henkilö* (derived from the word *henki*, ‘spirit’), was “coined by Wolmari Kilpinen in the mid-19th century to correspond to the Swedish [and English]⁶ word person.” In North Sámi, when talking about ‘persons,’ the word *persovdna* (‘person’), borrowed from Germanic languages, is currently widely used. In Finland, the ambiguous word *henki* is still used for ‘person’ (*henki/henkilö*) and also as a derivate in ‘personal’ and ‘personnel’ (*henkilökunta*). When Elina Helander-Renvall (2010) presents the Sámi worldview from an animist perspective, she refers to a poem by

⁴ https://kaino.kotus.fi/sms/?p=qs-article&sms_id=SMS_4cecd3761d1fe29abd503fa0101f1830&list_id=1&keyword=luonto&word=luonto

⁵ For ‘body’ we have in both Finnish and North Sámi at least two different words, in which the flesh is either more or less present. In this essay I do not continue this path either but suggest reading Finnish feminist scholars like Sara Heinämaa (e.g. 1996).

⁶ My insertion.

the Sámi polymath and shaman Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (1994), who writes: “we have lived here from generation to generation [...] when they come they will find this land, us, and *we are* stones, plants, animals, fish, water, wind, earth, sky” (author’s emphasis). Based on this, Helander-Renvall (2010, 47–48) concludes that deities, stars, planets, animals, spirits and diseases have the ability to manifest as persons. I am wondering, if Helander-Renvall was writing in Sámi or Finnish, would she perhaps use the term *heagga/henki*? Helander-Renvall (2010, 47–48) also states that although humans and non-humans are seen as reciprocal actors, they are clearly two different categories in the Sámi worldview.

In conclusion, both ‘animal’ and ‘animate’ in North Sámi and Finnish have their basis in ‘life’ or ‘to live,’ as in many Amazonian languages. In both North Sámi and Finnish, ‘animate’ (*ealas* in North Sámi and *elollinen* in Finnish, the latter literally translated as ‘having a life’) derives from either the substantive ‘life’ or the verb ‘to live.’ Also, ‘animal’ (*eläin* in Finnish and *ealli* in North Sámi) is based on the word ‘to live’/‘life,’ and it means a living being—just like a human being also lives. The difference concerning both these words is that in Sámi the noun still has its verbal component, but in Finnish the noun is clearly a noun, being also based on a noun. In addition, *eliö* (‘organism’) in Finnish derives from the verb *elää* (‘to live’); in North Sámi the nearest term for ‘organism’ would be *sivdnádus* (literally translated as ‘blessing’) or *luondugáhppalat* (literally ‘piece of nature’). These words could be used when discussing the widely used terms ‘non-human,’ ‘other-than-human’ and ‘more-than-human,’ indicating that in both North Sámi and Finnish, both ‘animate’ and ‘organism’ are based on ‘life’ or ‘to live’ and thus also include both people, animals and plants. In Finnish also *elävä* (‘living,’ ‘alive’) could be used as such including both humans, animals, plants and everything we understand as alive. Such a beautiful, a bit dialectal word, but useful as such.

As an expansion I could add that in Finnish, in geological and biological understanding, even though not necessarily in people’s own personal understandings, *elollinen luonto* ‘animate’ does not include water, air, rocks and celestial bodies, which are seen as *eloton luonto* (‘inanimate nature,’ literally translated as ‘lifeless nature’). So, while English ‘animate’ seems in some sense to be connected to the ability to move, feel and know, in Finnish ‘inanimate’ is seen as ‘lifeless.’ In these kinds of categorizations, spirits are then seen just as supernatural or unearthly beings. But as noted above, ‘spirits’ still live in the designation of individual human beings: *heagga* (North Sámi) and *henki* (Finnish), meaning both ‘spirit’ or ‘breath’ and ‘a person.’ However, Swedish and other Anglo-American languages have influenced even in the Indigenous North Sámi language, as the word *persovdna* (‘person’) is taking over *heagga* (‘person,’ literally translated as ‘spirit’). In North Sámi, however, *sivdnádus* (‘organism’ in dictionaries, like seen above, but literally and traditionally translated also as ‘blessing’ or ‘creation,’ ‘creature,’ and even ‘all the Creation work’) though can be seen to include the whole planet Earth as its content.

By going to the roots of the everyday words in Indigenous North Sámi, but also in Finnish, we can recognize the deep spirituality and understanding of connectedness to ‘Life’ as such. Let us acknowledge that and respect the Life and Creation in everything, both human and other-than-human living beings and Creatures. Another outcome would be to try to hold on to the connections which multiple Sámi and Finnish concepts have to or with Earth and Life. As ‘animism’ is currently rendered as *animisma* (North Sámi) or *animismi* (in Finnish), the connection to the root words ‘animal’ and ‘animate’ get lost in those direct translations, like we saw above. I think we should be more careful when translating theories and isms into these land- and life-based languages. As ‘animal’ and ‘animate’ in (North) Sámi and Finnish languages are connected to life and having a spirit, maybe ‘animism’

could as well. Could ‘animism’ be translated, for example, as *elollisuusoppi* or *eläväisyysoppi* (‘theory or science of having-a-life’) or *hengellisyysoppi* (‘theory or science of having-a-spirit/breath’)? In North Sámi these words could be something like *ealasvuohtaohppu* or *vuoijnjalašvuohtaohppu*.

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