

## BOOK REVIEW

Tuukka Karlsson, 2022. *Come Here You Are Needed: Registers in Viena Karelian Communicative Incantations*. PhD Dissertation. Helsinki: University of Helsinki. ISBN 978-951-51-7800-8 (pbk.), ISBN 978-951-51-7801-5 (PDF)

Something rather magical seems to be happening at the University of Helsinki, for new doctoral dissertations concerning charms and charming practices have been popping up like mushrooms lately – and others are on their way.<sup>1</sup> One such dissertation is that by Dr. Tuukka Karlsson, who successfully defended his thesis on Viena Karelian incantations earlier this year. Needless to say, how very delighted I am to share some of my thoughts concerning Tuukka's work.

It is a somewhat rare treat to read a study on charms which uses methodology both qualitative and quantitative. Karlsson's thesis, *Come Here You Are Needed: Registers in Viena Karelian Communicative Incantations*, does exactly this. The work consists of three peer reviewed articles, published in three different journals.<sup>2</sup> While traditionally monographs have been the usual form for a PhD thesis within arts and humanities, recently we have started to see the rise of the article-based thesis. Regardless of the form chosen, a thesis should always include new academic research. With their thesis, the researcher will be able to demonstrate their critical thinking skills, knowledge of their academic field and their use of methodology. It goes without saying that the results of the investigation should be

well argued and academically convincing, as the doctoral thesis serves as a calling card when entering the world of scholarship.

Karlsson's thesis is a splendid example of an article-based thesis which benefits from a well narrowed focus. As is usual, in addition to the published articles, Karlsson has included a summary of his research as an introduction to his thesis. The summary presents the background for the study, the methods used, the data analyzed, the results of the study as well as further ideas how to apply the results in the future.

In his summary, Karlsson briefly describes why he has chosen to use the term *incantation* instead of the household term *charm*. Karlsson mentions that incantations "may be considered a sub-type of charms" (37). According to Karlsson, use of term "incantation is deeply rooted in Finnish research, where it corresponds to the term *loitsu*" (33). He further notes that although "incantations are often referred to as verbal charms in much international scholarship today, verbal charm describes a much broader category that including texts that are written and read". Ultimately, Karlsson explains, his "use of the term is ultimately rooted in its position in Finnish scholarship", but he also considers "it better suited to the material than the more general terms charm and verbal charm" (33).

Talking of terminology is like opening the famous Pandora's box but it is also crucially important, especially in a thesis. *Loitsu* is indeed the term which Finnish researchers use when talking about charms. It derives from the verb *loitsia* which means to charm, to pray, to curse, to insult etc. The verb was already known to Mikael Agricola, who is thought to be the father of the Finnish language. The term *loitsu* was often used by researchers in the titles of various charms, although ordinary people used terms like *sanat* (lit. 'words') or *luku* (the word can be translated as 'a reading', 'a number' or 'a chapter'; the Finnish verb for 'reading' is *lukea*). Charms describing the origin of a phenomenon were called *synty* (lit. 'birth').

Karlsson is correct in stating that in international scholarship the term *charm* is used more than *incantation*. To my knowledge, both terms have been variously used by Finnish scholars while writing about Finnish charms in English.<sup>3</sup> Both words have their

origins in Latin, charm derives from *carmen* ('song', 'incantation'), incantation from the word *incantare*, 'enchant'. Both words include the idea of a speech act, although *charm* can of course also indicate a physical object. It would have been interesting to learn more of the (possible) differences between *charm* and *incantation*, as well as to read further reasoning behind Karlsson's decision to use the term *incantation*.

The first of Karlsson's articles, 'Register features in Kalevala-metric incantations', presents a case study the aim of which is to "reach for a more nuanced view of registers operating within a ritual genre" (2021a: 40). Karlsson begins his investigation with the hypothesis that differently evaluated non-human agents are addressed in different registers, that is, that the supporting agents of a ritual specialist would be addressed differently than hostile actors. While this may sound like a given, Karlsson pays special attention to directive verbs, particle use, the optative mood and justification (verses directed at an agent, which give a reason for the speaker's request) present in the texts. The data analysed is taken from the published edition of roughly 87 000 Kalevala-metric texts, *Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot*, or 'Ancient Poems of the Finnish People'. Karlsson narrows his study by a particular text-type category. Thus, he sets out to investigate a text known as the Origin of Fire. The resulting data constitutes of 46 texts, the earliest of which was documented in 1829 and the latest in 1915. The texts range in length from 22 to 216 lines, totaling up to 3449 lines in the analysis. Incantations which deal with origins "include a presentation of the mythic origins of fire or other phenomena, thus presenting a vernacular incantation ideology that knowledge of the origins of a phenomenon yields control over it" (2021a: 43). These incantations were mostly used for healing purposes.

Karlsson states that he handles "genre and register as complementary concepts" (2021a: 42). He treats genre as "a set of prototypical features, which guide both the production and reception of texts of a socially recognizable type in situated performances" (2021a, 42). The concept of register has here been adapted from linguistic anthropology. According to Karlsson, a "linguistic register is similar

to a genre in that it is constituted of a variety of usable linguistic signs and grammatical forms that index social identities ... or situations of interaction” (2021a: 45). Karlsson reviews all the verbs and the use of particles quantitatively. His purpose is to consider possible differences in their usage between requests and commands. He then performs an analysis of characterization of addressees which aims at defining agents as either sympathetic or hostile to the speaker. According to Karlsson, his “analysis provides a point of departure for further discussion about oral poetry’s registers within an incantation genre” (2021a: 51). After careful scrutiny, Karlsson concludes that the “results show that, in this data, the performers seem to conceive different register usages as social situations in ritual action. These situations are related to agents, which are addressed in incantations, and the evaluations of these agents as either positive or negative” (2021a: 52).

The second article, ‘Discursive Registers in Finno-Karelian Communicative Incantations’, continues from where the first article ended. In his first article, Karlsson considered the use of moderative suffixes in incantations and their possible role as indexes of moderation in directive discourse segments. He found that “suffixes were unlikely to play a significant role in indexing moderation towards positively evaluated non-human actors, and suffixal variation could be more feasibly accounted for as motivated by poetic meter” (2021b: 325) – an outcome which I personally found very interesting indeed and which gives food for thought when thinking of other traditions as well! However, according to Karlsson, “discursive justification was observed to be connected in some cases with positively but not negatively evaluated agents, which led to the hypothesis of justification as a moderative device” (2021b: 325).

Thus, the second study explores the question of how discursive justification functions as a moderative instrument by examining the usage of justification in addressing different types of actors. The data are again taken from the *Ancient Poems of the Finnish People*. In addition, Karlsson has delimited his analysis to incantations in which directive utterances are present. Thus, the analysis consists of 515 incantation texts. The regional focus is on the parishes of Viena

Karelia. Karlsson has decided to exclude the parish of Vuokkiniemi from his analysis for two reasons: the parish of Vuokkiniemi boasts more incantation texts than all the other parishes combined and it has been subject to comprehensive evaluation rather recently.<sup>4</sup> While the justification seems reasonable, it is nevertheless a shame, since the exclusion may have an adverse effect on the results, and also because the previous work done in the area does not include similar considerations which Karlsson presents.

For his analysis, Karlsson coded the data on the basis of the categories contained within the discursive units. In short, the analysis revealed that “discursive justification occurs in different forms in relation to differently aligned agents” (2022: 64). What is (perhaps) surprising is the fact that justification also occurred with directives used with negatively evaluated agents. In these cases, however, “the justifications focused on the benefit to the negative actor, not to the performer or patient” (2022: 64).

Karlsson’s third article, ‘Connection of Viena Karelian ritual specialists to communicative and origin incantations’ shifts the focus from the registers associated with the Finno-Karelian ritual specialists (*tietäjät*) to the testing of the established view that certain discursive practices index the persona of a *tietäjä*. According to Karlsson, in Finnish Folklore Studies, communicative incantations have regularly been assumed to be tools of the *tietäjä*, an assumption which Karlsson sets out to probe, again with the aid of the *Ancient Poems of the Finnish People*.<sup>5</sup> As before, Karlsson makes a difference between communicative and non-communicative incantations. Communicative incantations aim to be in direct contact with the otherworld (and were considered to be tools of a *tietäjä*), whereas non-communicative incantations were considered to be common knowledge and could be used by anyone. These mechanical incantations were not intended to establish a connection with the otherworld but instead relied on the correct recitation of the charm. In addition, Karlsson stresses that communicative incantations include a directive utterance that requests or commands the assumed addressee.

In addition to communicative incantations, Karlsson has decided to include another type of incantations in his study, namely the

origin incantations (*syntyloitsut*). These were charms that were likewise considered to be a part of a *tietäjä*'s tool kit. They include an etiological narrative in which an illness or a harm first appears in the world. This was thought to be the most fundamental type of knowledge. Both incantation types that Karlsson has decided to include in his analysis have long been connected with the *tietäjä* institution within Folklore Studies. According to Karlsson, while there is nothing inherently wrong with this view, it has never been tested empirically.

Karlsson thus reviewed incantations identified with named informants and assessed whether they qualified as communicative or origin incantations and then whether the named informant was identified as a *tietäjä*. Karlsson has a very approachable way of describing the steps of his analysis and explaining the possible problems therein. For example, some informants were considered to be *tietäjä*, but they did not give any incantations to the collectors at all. According to Karlsson, examining the original manuscripts and collectors' notes could have possibly help to shed light on why this was the case but this was not possible due to the tight schedule of his research. This is a shame, and something that Karlsson will hopefully study more in the future.

After a detailed analysis, Karlsson comes to the conclusion that the connection between the *tietäjät* and communicative incantations is not quantitatively very strong compared to non-specialists. On the other hand, with origin incantations, the correlation is surprisingly strong. While Karlsson freely admits the challenges in his method, and the fact that the case is both historically and culturally specific, he nonetheless hopes that the method could be used more widely for instance in research on European verbal magic and users of magic. While it is impossible to know whether his method is readily applicable in such studies, it is nevertheless always a commendable endeavour to question the received wisdom and critically examine views that have been taken for granted.

Karlsson has made the conscious decision to leave out the international scholarship on charms, and decided to concentrate instead on the Finnish research tradition. This is a pity, for new avenues

of thought are always opened up with comparative research. It would have been interesting to see, for instance, whether Karlsson sees any parallels between his division of certain charm units (p. 57) and those made by scholars such as Lea Olsan and Francisco Alonso-Almeida.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, other traditions also include ritual specialists and it would have been interesting to see whether the social expectations of competence, as well as responsibility and conditions of practice, are mirrored in the international comparanda. In his discussion, Karlsson suggests that instances of incantation use in epic texts would be an intriguing direction for future inquiry. Such studies, however, have been conducted (concerning different charming traditions) - as an example one could mention John Carey's work on charms in medieval Irish tales, as well as Maria Eliferova's article on charms within non-charm texts.<sup>7</sup>

With this kind of a thesis format, a certain amount of repetition is unavoidable. After reading Karlsson articles, the reader will surely know the exact location of Viena Karelia as well as the common features of Kalevala-metric poetry. This is of course understandable, as the each of the articles stands as an individual study. Karlsson's summary would have benefited from extra editorial care. For some reason, many of the charms he uses as examples are missing lines, either in the original Finnish (as is the case with charms on pages 39, 40, 41, 42, 44, 51, 58, 59, 60) or in translation (page 19). This does not appear to be due to a technical fault, however, for some charms are printed *in toto*. In addition, there are some typos, such as on page 20, where "a lake of ice" has turned into "a like of ice" and the translation "bring hoarfrost, bring ice" has diminished into "bring frost, bring ice". For a nitpicky reader, the way in which full stops and parentheses are sequenced rather sporadically when referring to authorities used, can be somewhat infuriating. These are of course minor matters, and make no difference in the big picture. It should be mentioned as well that none of Karlsson's published articles suffer from such nuisances, and with a little bit of additional proofreading the summary would have reached the level and fluency of the three pieces.

Overall, Karlsson must be applauded for his technical analysis throughout his work. I am in awe of Karlsson's skills in coding and applying this method to the Viena Karelian charms and Folklore Studies. The analysis is meticulous, but also explained in a way that a person with more limited ICT-skills can follow Karlsson's argumentation with ease. The sheer amount of data included in the analysis is extremely impressive. It is also a delight to see how Karlsson's research has developed in each article based on the results that he has reached. It is with great excitement that I wait to see how the results of Karlsson's analysis can be used more extensively in the future.

As all of Karlsson's articles have been peer-reviewed, they can be found in the aforementioned journals (the third article in Folklore will be out in December 2022). For the summary of the thesis, the interested reader should visit the following site: <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/338206>. Unfortunately, this way the reader will miss the haunting images of the front and back cover of the hardcopy of the thesis. Luckily, such a hardcopy can be found in the library of the Finnish Literature Society.

As previously stated, a PhD dissertation is one's calling card into the field of academia. It can be said with certainty that the academic community will be utterly charmed and calling Karlsson in unison: Come here, you are needed. And I, for one, am very much looking forward to Karlsson's future academic endeavors.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the work of Siria Korhonen, Karolina Kouvola and Aleks Moine.

<sup>2</sup> Karlsson, Tuukka 2021a. Register features in Kalevala-metric incantations, In: *Language & Communication* 78: 40-53; Karlsson, Tuukka 2021b. Discursive registers in Finno-Karelian communicative incantations. In: *Signs and Society* 9 (3): 324-342; and Karlsson, Tuukka 2022. Connection of Viena Karelian ritual specialists to communicative and origin incantations. In: *Folklore* 133 (4), in press.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the works of Henni Ilomäki, Laura Stark, Lotte Tarkka, Maarit Viljakainen and Frog.



<sup>4</sup> Tarkka, Lotte 2005. *Rajarahvaan laulu. Tutkimus Vuokkiniemen kalevalamittaisesta runokulttuurista 1821-1921*. Helsinki: SKS, and Tarkka, Lotte 2013. *Songs of the Border People: Genre, Reflexivity, and Performance in Karelian Oral Poetry*. FF Communications 305. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica.

<sup>5</sup> *Tietäjä*'s main areas of expertise included liminal rites, the magical protection of cattle and people, and causing magical harm. The most prominent task of a *tietäjä* was usually that of healing.

<sup>6</sup> Olsan, Lea 1992. Latin Charms of Medieval England: Verbal Healing in a Christian Oral Tradition. In: *Oral Tradition* 7/1: 116-142; Alonso-Almeida, Francisco 2008. The Middle English Metrical Charm: Register, Genre and Text Type Variables. In: *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 109(1): 9-38.

<sup>7</sup> Carey, John 2019. Charms in Medieval Irish Tales: Tradition, Adaptation, Invention. In: Tuomi, Ilona, John Carey, Barbara Hillers and Ciarán Ó Gealbháin (eds.), *Charms, Charmers and Charming in Ireland: From the Medieval to the Modern*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, pp. 17-38, and Eliferova, Maria 2019. Charms within Non-Charms Texts: Shifts in Pragmatics. In: Pócs, Éva (ed.), *Charms and Charming: Studies on Magic in Everyday Life*. Ljubljana: Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, pp. 251-258.

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## BIO

**Ilona Tuomi** is a graduate of the University of Helsinki, where she studied theology and folklore, specialising in comparative religion. She later moved to the Department of Early and Medieval Irish at the University College Cork, where she conducted research on the manuscript contexts and ritual performance of Old Irish charms. In 2019 Tuomi co-edited the volume *Charms, Charmers and Charming in Ireland: From the Medieval to the Modern* (edited by Ilona Tuomi, John Carey, Barbara Hillers ja Ciarán Ó Gealbháin; Cardiff: University of Wales Press). Currently she is working as a researcher for the Wilderness Heritage Museum Foundation of Finland in a project centring on the intangible cultural heritage of Southern Karelia.