The unknown role and practices of translation in the revitalization of an endangered language

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This poster presents an early-stage research project that strives for investigating the ways in which translation is exploited in a revitalization process as a means to sustain a vanishing language. The goal of the research project is to present a description of the role of translation in a unique sociolinguistic situation, in the ongoing revitalization of the Karelian language both in Finland and in Russia.

Karelian belongs to the Finnic subgroup of the Finno-Ugric language family and is an endangered language spoken both in Finland and in Russia. The language is mostly used by the elderly, and its transmission to the next generations has been largely discontinued. Since 1989 there have been many efforts to activate the use of the Karelian language in different domains including social life, media, children’s day care, education, literature, art and church (see e.g. Knuuttila 2011; Pasanen 2010). In many domains and settings, not only in literature, the attempts to reverse language shift depend on translation which serves as an important means of creating contact between the endangered language and the younger generation of speakers and of raising the societal status of the language.

Previous research on revitalization has examined interventions attempting to prevent imminent language death, e.g. language nests (immersion-based preschools) and development of terminologies and grammars (see e.g. Grenoble & Whaley 2006; for Karelian see e.g. Pasanen 2006; Knuuttila 2007). Even though some aspects of translation such as the translation of school text books has been touched on in studies on revitalization (for Aanaar Saami see Olthuis et al. 2013), the role of translation in revitalization is largely an unexplored area. How translation is carried out and utilized in the revitalization of Karelian is the main question in our research project whose data and methods will be presented in this poster.

Keywords: revitalization, translation, endangered languages.