

Kaius Sinnemäki

“**The thing that makes** language so fascinating is that it’s related to everything. It’s related to our humanity in crucial ways: what we are as humans and what we do. Language can also be approached from the perspective of many fields of research, and this multidisciplinary nature, bringing different disciplines together, is what interests me as a scientist. I want to create a better understanding of language, how it works, how people use it and how it changes”, says Kaius Sinnemäki, associate professor in quantitative and comparative linguistics.

Sinnemäki received the 2021 Prize for the Humanities from the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters. The prize is awarded to a scholar of humanistic sciences in the beginning of their career who has already earned international renown. Awarded since 2011, the Prize for the Humanities is worth 15,000 euros.

Sinnemäki is currently leading a research project on how highly different languages change and adapt to various social environments.

“Language is essentially related to how we humans get along with each other, how we form groups and exclude certain people from them, how we show hospitality or animosity towards each other. Naturally, different animal species do these things as well, but language enables subtle communication that is not as closely tied to a place or a specific situation”, says Sinnemäki.

Where there is a need to understand a wide variety of things, there is a need for humanism. Traditional humanities, such as the study of history, culture and language, help us understand how things develop, how they have been understood at different times and how we understand them today. Sinnemäki believes there is a real need for humanism today, just as there always has been.

“How do we understand the history of Finland, for example? Or how do we understand the history of, say, Russia, or Ukraine? How is national identity built through different narratives? We are now

”Language is related to everything”



seeing the kind of narrative that Putin and his administration are creating to justify their war. We can approach it from a number of humanistic angles to assess to what extent it is true, for example.”

The desire to understand people, things and meanings first drew Sinnemäki to a career in science. The first moment of realization about the study of language came in the final year of upper secondary school, and more followed when he started studying linguistics.

“The realization was related to how essential language is for humanity. I remember that in the final years of comprehensive school, few pupils enjoyed analysing the grammar of sentences, but I

liked it. I found it fascinating, because it was so logical, just like problem solving.”

Sinnemäki’s research is also theoretical and methodological by nature.

“For a researcher like me who compares different languages with each other, it might be a good idea to do some field research as well. It has crossed my mind and I’ve even made preparations for it, but I haven’t yet gone ahead with it. Perhaps one of the reasons is that there is no one language that interests me above all others. I like all the languages in the world. I’m studying the diversity of the world’s languages, and I can have dozens or hundreds of languages under my loop. I don’t really have a favourite language.”

Sinnemäki mentions two current and particularly interesting areas of research in the field of linguistics.

“One of them is plain language, its research and all the related applications. The other is related to what Professor Arto Mustajoki has written about understanding and misunderstanding. It presents some really interesting perspectives on language and understanding – for example, the common misinterpretations that we make on a daily basis interest not only scientists, but also ordinary people.”

People typically assume that others understand them better than they really do. This creates a lot of misunderstandings and conflicts.

“Perhaps we have a slightly egotistical assumption all too often that I am the centre of the universe and obviously everyone understands me. We’re not necessarily ready to acknowledge that damn – they don’t understand me after all. Then we

have to make a choice: do we embark on a path of dialogue to build a common understanding or do we simply demand that others understand us? Such a framework of interpretation gives us tools for dealing with, for example, the flood of disinformation or social media discussions where emotions can quickly spiral out of control”, says Sinnemäki.

In a worst-case scenario, we hunker down in the foxholes of our opinions, which will just increase the tension between groups of people and nations in the future.

“The alternative is to be willing to cooperate. But there are signs indicating that polarization will continue to grow at least in the next few years, although predicting this is difficult. If we were living in an information society 20 years ago and we’re now in a disinformation society, where will we be in 20 years’ time? Will the word ‘information’ be forgotten altogether?” Sinnemäki wonders.

Photo: Mika Federley