

Finnish

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Background

Finnish belongs to the (Baltic-)Finnic subbranch of the Finno-Ugric languages. The closest relatives are Karelian and Estonian. The Finno-Ugric and Samoyed languages form the Uralic language family.

In 2003, the number of Finnish speakers in Finland was 4.8 million, 92% of the population. Abroad, more than 1 million people speak Finnish (or are descendants of Finnish immigrants), especially in Sweden (300 000), the United States (600 000), Canada, and Australia. Finnish is one of the two national languages of Finland (the other is Swedish). Finnish obtained its position as national language in 1863 and ultimately 1902. Finnish has been used in writing since the appearance of the first parts of the Bible translation in the 1540s.

Phonology

Finnish has 8 vowel and 13 consonant phonemes, /i e æ y ø u o a/ and /p t k d s h v j l r m n ŋ/. /b g/ occur only in recent borrowings. /d/ is marginal because it occurs only as a product of morphophonological processes (consonant gradation).

Finnish stress is fixed on the first syllable. The quantity distinction is effectively phonemic. Both vowels and consonants can be phonemically short and long, and they combine with one another with few restrictions in both stressed and unstressed syllables, for example, *tuli* 'fire', *tuuli* 'wind', *tulli* 'customs', *tule* 'come!', *tulee* 'comes', *tuulee* '(the wind) blows'.

There are 16 diphthongs such as /ai æi ei oi ui ou æy ey ie uo yo/. The canonical structure of words is bisyllabic; the monosyllables can be counted in the tens.

Vowel harmony is a constraint on stems and suffixes. The vowels form three groups, the harmony vowels /y ö ä/ (front) and /u o a/ (back) plus the neutral vowels /i e/. The three vowel pairs from the harmony sets are often denoted by morphophonemic symbols /U, O, A/. Vowels from the front and back harmony sets cannot co-occur in native words whose vowels are drawn either from /i e ä y ö/ or /i e u o a/. Suffixes with harmony vowels have one front and one back variant occurring after front and back stems, respectively. Stems with neutral vowels count only as front. Thus (INE = inessive case):

talo-ssa
house-SING.INE
'in (a/the) house'

kylä-ssä
village-SING.INE
'in village'

vene-ssä
boat-SING.INE
'in boat'

Finnish orthography is often commended for being among the most efficient in the world, in the sense that it is almost perfectly phonemic. Each phoneme has its own unique letter, with the sole exception of /tj/ for which /tj/ is written <ng>. The phonemic perfection of Finnish orthography is true with respect to the careful normative pronunciation of the standard language. However, present-day colloquial Finnish has strayed from this ideal due to many contractions and elisions.

Morphology

Finnish is a suffixing language with an elaborate morphology. Nominals (nouns, adjectives, pronouns, and numerals) are inflected for number, case, and possessive. There are two numbers, fourteen cases, and five possessive morphemes, occurring as classes in this morphotactic order. Here are some examples of inflected Finnish nouns.

talo
house-SING.NOM
'house'

talo-t
house-PL.NOM
'houses'

talo-ssa
house-SING.INE
'in (a/the) house'

talo-i-sta-ni
house-PL-EL-POSS.1.SING
'out of my houses'

talo-o-nne
house-SING.ILL-POSS.2.PL
'into your house'

Finite verb forms are inflected for indefinite (called passive in traditional Finnish grammar), tense and mood (belonging to the same morphotactic position because tenses and moods are mutually exclusive), and person. There are two simple tenses, present and past, and two composite ones, perfect and pluperfect. There are four moods: indicative, conditional,

potential, and imperative. There are three grammatical persons in the singular and the plural, plus a fourth-person linking up with the indefinite.

sano-n	say-PRES.INDIC.1.SING	'I say'
sano-i-n	say-PAST.1.SING	'I said'
sano-isi-mme	say-COND.1.SING	'we would say'
sano	say-IMP.2.SING	'say!'
sano-kaa-mme	say-IMP.1.PL	'let us say!'
sano-ta-an	say-INDEF.PRES-4	'one says, people say'

Nonfinite verb forms (i.e., infinitives and participles) are inflected for indefinite, nonfiniteness, number, case, and possessive (INE = inessive case):

sano-a	say-INE.NOM	'to say' (infinitive I in traditional Finnish grammar)
sano-e-ssa-nne	say-INF-INE-POSS.2.PL	'when you are saying' (infinitive II)
sano-v-i-ssa	say-PRES.PART-PL-INE	'in the saying (ones)' (present participle)
sano-tta-e-ssa	say-INDEF-INF-INE	'when one says'

Almost every word form in Finnish, inflected or not, can be cliticized with an element from a set of five clitics with pragmatic functions. The most important one is the question morpheme *-ko*. For example:

talo-ssa-si-ko	house-SING.INE-POSS.2.SING-Q	'in your house?'
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Finnish lexicography as manifested in *Nykysuomen sanakirja* (Dictionary of modern Finnish, 1951–1961) postulates 82 inflectional classes for nominals and 45 for verbs; at the other extreme, a generative description might operate with none but

with a wealth of ordered (morpho)phonological rules. A surface-oriented morphological approach would recognize at least 10 nominal inflectional classes and six verbal ones.

Finnish word structure is characterized by considerable allomorphy both in stems and suffixes and therefore Finnish is not a typical agglutinative language. There are tens of more or less morphologically conditioned alternations. The most profound one is consonant gradation, which concerns both nominals and verbs. The long voiceless stops /pp, tt, kk/ are shortened to [p, t, k], and the short voiceless stops /p, t, k/ are weakened in various ways: /p/ → [m] (after /m/), /p/ → [v] (between vowels), /t/ → [d] (between vowels), /t/ → [ʃ, ʃ, n] (after an identical consonant), /k/ → [ŋ] (after /ŋ/), and /k/ → ∅ (between vowels). These alternations are triggered by suffixation processes.

Syntax

Case marking has an important role in Finnish syntax in marking the arguments of the verb (nominative, genitive, partitive, accusative for grammatical subjects, objects, and predicate complements; and an assortment of local cases for adverbials). Due to extensive case marking, Finnish word order is free and used especially to indicate information structure, for example, subject-last for introducing new referents and leftward topicalization for linking to previous context. There are many highly productive nonfinite constructions. Premodifiers in NPs agree with the head in number and gender; the finite verb agrees with the person and number of the grammatical subject.

See also: Finland; Language Situation; Finnish as an Agglutinative Language; Finnish Lexicography; Phonology; Overview; Syntax of Words; Uralic Languages.

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