

De-standardisation in progress in Finnish society?

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A SHORT HISTORY OF STANDARD FINNISH

The Finnish written language is some 500 years old. The New Testament was translated into Finnish by the Bishop of Turku, Mikael Agricola (1510–1557) in 1548, and the entire Bible appeared in Finnish in 1642. The oldest book published in Finnish is Mikael Agricola's ABC-book *Abckiria* from 1543. The Old Literary Finnish in these books was strongly based on the western and south-western dialects.

For centuries until 1809, Finland was part of Sweden, and the language for administrative and public purposes was Swedish. Finnish was used as a language of the church and municipalities, and as the spoken language of the majority. During the 19th century, when Finland was under Russian rule (from 1809 to 1917), Finnish gradually developed into a literary and administrative language through a national awakening and a series of decisions made by the Russian Czar. In the process of establishing a cultural language suitable for all branches of society, the literary language was enriched with vocabulary, structures, and expressions of the eastern dialects. New words were created for various scientific and professional fields and practical purposes (see e.g. Hakulinen 1979; Häkkinen 1994, 2005). By 1900, Finnish was used in all domains of Finnish society, including newspapers and publications.

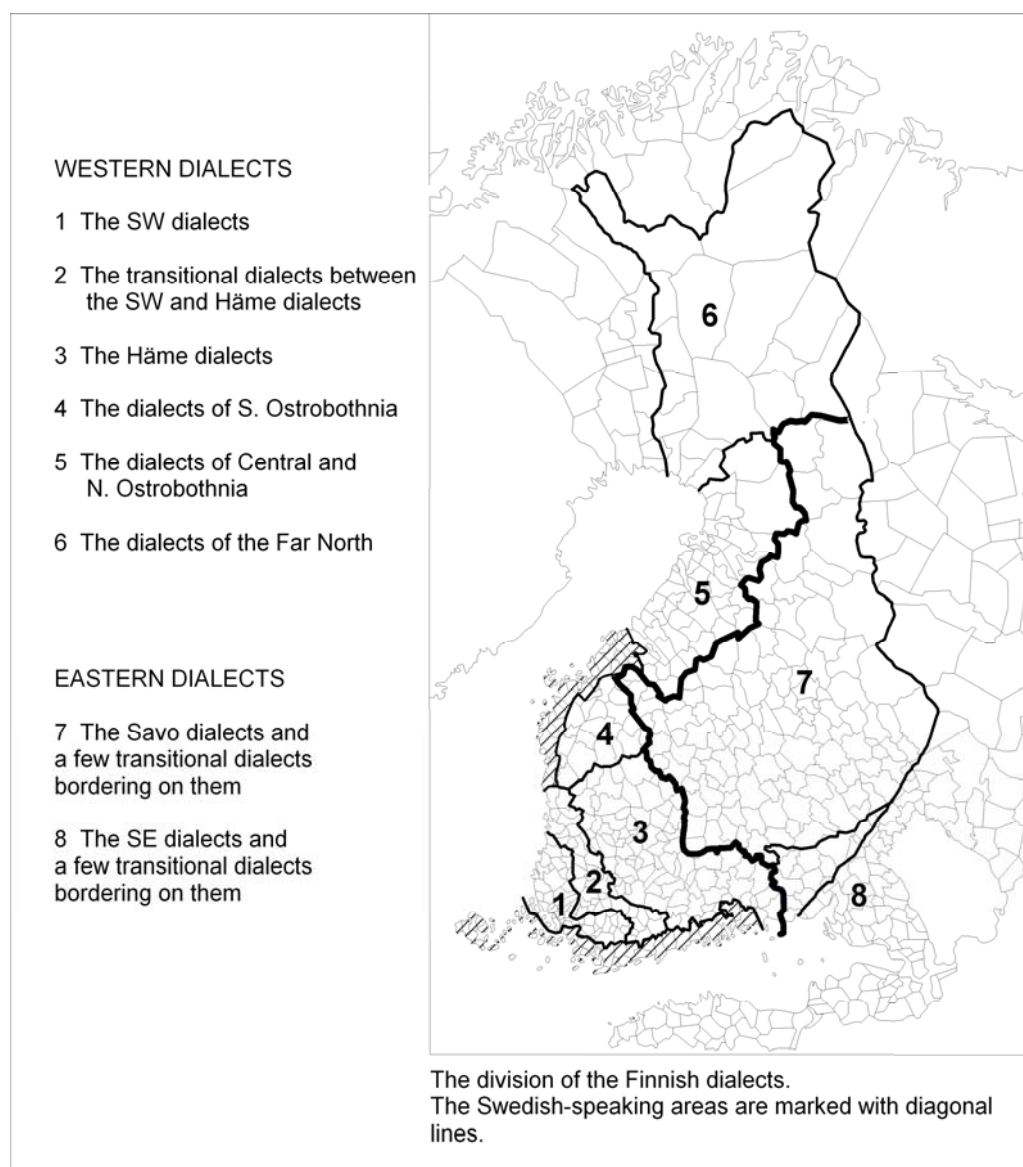
The status of Finnish as an official national language developed strongly during the 19th century and the early 20th century, while the status of Swedish weakened. After independence from the Russian rule in 1917, the language issue was resolved in the Constitution of 1919 and in the Language Act of 1922. The current law laying down the position of Finnish and Swedish as the national languages is the Language Act of 2003.

Finnish orthography and pronunciation are closer to each other than those of, for example, the Germanic languages. It means that each sound has a corresponding letter, and each letter relates to a particular sound, with only a few exceptions. Hence, almost throughout the 20th century, the prevalent notion about public standard speech was that the language of the media should be close to written Finnish; a 'speech-should-copy-writing' ideology was strong in Finnish public life.

CURRENT LINGUISTIC TRENDS IN FINNISH-SPEAKING FINLAND

The Finnish dialects are mostly intelligible to all Finnish-speaking people. Standard Finnish is mainly based on the western dialects, even though many eastern dialectal phonological and lexical items have been adopted in the standard language (the border between the main dialects is shown on Map 1).

During the past few decades, Finnish sociolinguistic variation has been studied by many scholars and students in both urban and rural areas (see e.g. Mielikäinen 1982; Paunonen 1995 [1982]; Nuolijärvi 1986, 1994; Juusela 1994; Makkonen and Mantila 1997; Nuolijärvi and Sorjonen 2005). The main phonological and morpho(-phono)logical differences corresponding to standard Finnish between the eastern and western dialects are presented in Table 1 (see e.g. Kettunen 1940). The fifth column shows the common recent variants in the densely populated southern and western areas of Finland, especially in the urban areas.



Map 1: Dialect divisions of Finnish.

The dialectal variants in Table 1 represent especially the former dialectal varieties in the Finnish countryside. During the past few decades the dialects have, to some extent, become more similar in terms of phonological and morphological features. A southern city variety includes more western variants, but there are also some variants adopted from the eastern dialects (or from the standard variety).

Standard spoken Finnish used to be the variety of educated people (Paunonen 1995 [1982]), and it still has a strong position in the public sphere, although various varieties of spoken Finnish are used by everyone even in public situations. In fact, standard Finnish as a whole has very seldom been the first variety of Finnish-speaking Finns, although everybody learns it early on. This has been possible because standard Finnish is based on dialects, and everybody can identify some features of their own dialects in the standard variety.

During the latter half of the 20th century, urbanisation changed the linguistic map of Finland. People moved from the countryside to the cities, especially to the (capital city) Helsinki region and other parts in southern Finland, where phonological and morphological variation increased (Nuolijärvi 1986, 1994). It has been claimed lately that differences between the standard speech variety and other spoken varieties have grown; yet at the same time we are faced with these questions: what is the standard, and how is it possibly changing?

Table 1: The main phonological and morpho(-phono)logical differences corresponding to Standard Finnish between the eastern and western dialects.

Feature	Standard Finnish	Western dialects	Eastern dialects	Southern city variety	Gloss
Opening of diphthongs	nuori	nuari, nuori	nuori	nuori, nuari	young
Forms corresponding to standard d	vuoden, meidän	vuaren (vuoren), meirän	vuojen, mei(j)än	vuoden, mei(j)än	year's, our
Forms corresponding to standard ts	metsä	mettä	mehtä, metsä	metsä	forest
Primary gemination	makaa	makaa, makkaa	makkaa	makaa	lies, rests
Reduction of diphthongs	sauna	sauna	sa:una, saana	sauna	sauna
Past particle active	ollut	ollu	ollu, ollunna	ollu	been
Labialization	tulee	tuloo, tulee	tullee, tulloo	tulee	comes
Epenthetic vowel	kylmä	kylmä, kylmä	kylymä	kylmä	cold
First pers. sg. pronoun	minä	mä(ä), mnä(ä), minä	minä, mie	mä	I
First pers. pl. pronoun	me	me, met	myö	me	we
First pers. pl.	me menemme	me mennään, me menemme, me menemmä	myö männään	me mennään	we go
eA	kauhea	kauhee, kauhia	kauhee, kauhia, kauhii	kauhee	terrible

LINGUISTIC NORMS OF THE FINNISH MEDIA ON THE MOVE?

The first radio programme in Finland was broadcast in 1926, and regular television broadcasts were introduced in 1958. From the 1920s to the 1970s the variety used in the Finnish media programmes was mostly standard spoken Finnish. Radio programmes were oral presentations or formal interviews more often than free discussions. The rules governing the programme activities maintained that the language use by YLE (The Finnish Broadcasting Company) had an influence on common vocabulary and the mode of speaking. Therefore, moderators had to use good standard language. According to these rules, dialects, slang, or careless speech of any kind did not belong to the programmes directed at the whole population (Karttunen 1986).

Today, YLE operates four national television channels (one in Swedish) and six radio channels (two in Swedish), complemented by 25 regional radio programmes (www.yle.fi). According to the company's recent annual report, YLE's share of daily television viewing was 43.7%, and the share of radio listening stood at 52% in 2009. On a weekly basis, factual programmes reached up to 77 percent of the population; hence, YLE's role in Finnish life is remarkable (*YLE Annual report 2009*).

Media linguistic varieties have been widely discussed in public for the past 30 years. Today there are no prescriptive rules or official regulations for media language but unwritten norms about good language in the public domains naturally do exist. Paananen (1996) showed how older listeners typically preferred standard language while younger ones favoured more informal spoken language in various programme types. The regional background of listeners did not make a difference, but attitudes depended on the type of the radio programme and the age of the listener. There is no reason to believe that the situation would have changed remarkably from the 1990s, i.e. the majority of the listeners presumably still prefer to hear news readers and current affairs programme journalists speak standard language. However, we do lack up-to-date studies on attitudes towards the Finnish media speech and the perception of standard(s).

Other approaches to linguistic perceptions shed some light on the issue of potential norm changes. Recent folk-dialectological studies from different parts of Finland indicate, for example, that the capital Helsinki region is more often regarded as a centre of ‘urban slang’ than one of standard language, and the linguistic identity of the residents in the capital region seems ambivalent in terms of slang and standard identity. In the eyes of the population in rural Finland, this region is often negatively stereotyped and the people of the capital are regarded as *arrogant*, *conceited* and *unfriendly*. They, in turn, are well aware of the negative image of their local spoken variety (Mielikäinen and Palander 2002; Palander 2005, 2007; Vaattovaara and Soininen-Stojanov 2006).

Most of the spreading variants, however, diffuse from the capital region (a southern city variety), which raises questions of an apparent ambivalence in terms of different norm pressures or covert attitudes in society.

In his article on dialect and identity (2004) Mantila discusses young people’s written Finnish. It has been indicated that regardless of young people’s geographical origin, their written texts tend to contain colloquialisms and some widely spread dialect features, e.g., incongruence in the 1st person plural form *me mennään* pro *me menemme* ‘we go’, and vowel cluster assimilation *kauhee* pro *kauhea* ‘terrible’ (see Table 1). It seems that these widely spread(ing) features, which no longer attract attention across different spoken varieties, tend to go unnoticed more and more often even in written texts.

Sociolinguistic work carried out during the past forty years offers a perspective on (socio)linguistic change (for a general overview, see Mielikäinen 1982; Mantila 2004; Nuolijärvi and Sorjonen 2005). From the perceptual viewpoint there are many open questions, such as: What ideological forces are associated with ongoing linguistic changes? What are the perceived norms of spoken ‘standard(s)’ and how do these correspond to the traditional dialect division on the one hand, and to the written standard on the other?

In the following we will focus more closely on a phonetic feature showing a possible norm change in progress: the opening of diphthongs. This example shows one possible approach in which ‘dialectological facts’ are treated critically from an angle that allows a potential norm change to be observed.

FROM DIALECT TO SPOKEN STANDARD? THE CASE OF DIPHTHONG OPENING

The present example is derived from a study (Vaattovaara in preparation) which challenges the traditional view of ‘dialectological space’ and hence the traditional approach towards dialectal variation (Britain 2002, 2010; Johnstone 2004, 2010; Vaattovaara 2009). In her research project, *Helsinki as a semiotic landscape in the linguistic ideologies of Finns*, Vaattovaara elicited data from occasional visitors to the Science Center Heureka in Vantaa near Helsinki. The judges (ages ranging from 10 to 69) were asked to comment on short speech samples they heard from headphones. No maps, attitude rating scales or other tools were involved; just a simple question was asked after each sample: *Where can you hear talk like this, or who talks this way?*

The objective of this task was to gather perceptions on a variety of elements of speech in the Helsinki capital region. The samples were 5–8 second extracts from media talk and sociolinguistic interviews, and each of them was designed to elicit talk about the (presupposed) focus feature in the sample. The focus features were morphological, phonological or prosodic features, which were either (1) stereotypically associated with Helsinki speech (e.g. Palander 2005, 2007; Vaattovaara and Soininen-Stojanov 2006), or (2) features regarded as central elements of Helsinki speech by linguists. Some of these focus variables are, in fact, geographically more widely spread and have been studied thoroughly over the years within dialectological and sociolinguistic paradigms. The opening of diphthongs is one of those: it has

been traditionally treated as a western dialect feature (Table 1), but it is also found and has been previously studied in the capital region.

Paunonen (1995 [1982]) has shown how variation in the diphthong opening in Helsinki speech is structured linguistically and socially in data collected in the 1970s (Fig. 1).

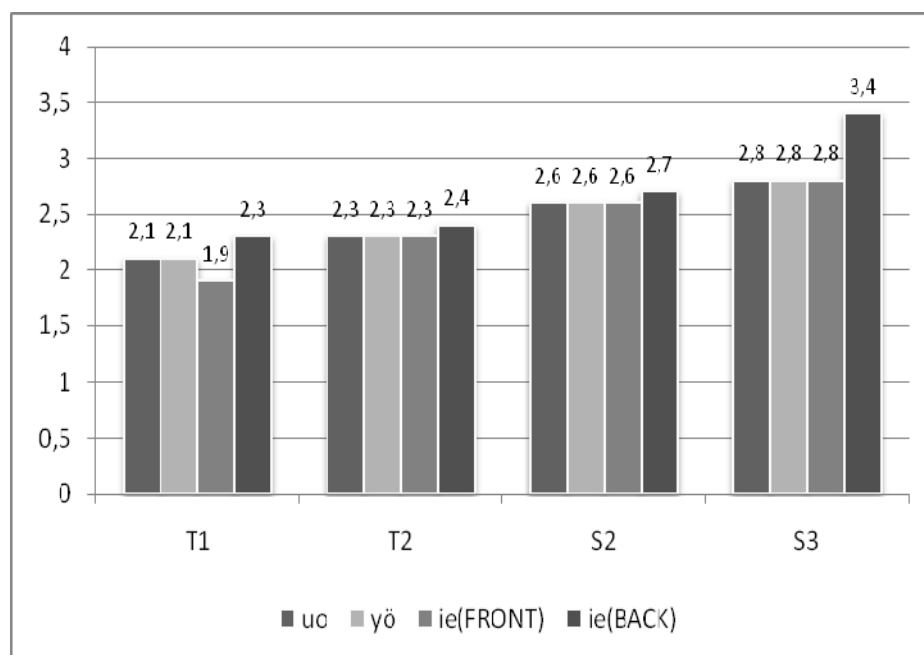


Figure 1: The degree of diphthong opening (0=no opening, 4=strong opening) in Helsinki speech in four social groups. T1=group with high-level academic education; T2=group of white collar workers with lower-level education; S2=educated working class; S1=working class with no professional education (source: Paunonen 1995 [1982]).

As Figure 1 indicates, the opening of diphthongs in the 1970s data is stronger in the speech of the lower socioeconomic groups (S2 and S3) than among the two academic groups (T1 and T2). The differences between these group categories are not great – the degree of opening varies overall between 1.9 to 3.4 within the possible range from 0 to 4 – but the differences are systematic: the lower the social status, the stronger the index of opening of the diphthongs. The prevalence of opening is slightly stronger in the diphthong *ie*, in the cases of back vowel harmony (for example *tiato* ‘knowledge’ versus *tiätää* ‘to know’), following the same social pattern.

Sociolinguistic literature has so far lacked knowledge on the social evaluation of the opening of diphthongs. On the basis of Paunonen’s sociolinguistic study, it was expected that the opening of diphthongs might elicit comments including some kind of reference to working class or lower education, but this was not the case.

The judges heard three samples with 1–3 occurrences of the opening of diphthongs:

Voice 1: Young male, strong opening of diphthongs *ie > iä* and *yö > yä* (*se tiäs miten yöllä on helpompi syädä salaa* ‘he knew how it is easier to eat at night without anyone seeing’)

Voice 4: Middle-aged male, weaker opening of the diphthong *ie > iä* (*se tiädettii et se tiä on paljo pitempi* ‘we knew that this would be a much longer road to go’)

Voice 10: Older woman, weak opening of the diphthong *uo > ua* (*ne rehentelee valtavasti tualla* ‘over there they usually hang out showing off’)

Whenever these voices were discussed in social terms, the speaker was often considered as a person having power of some kind: ‘well educated’, ‘someone in a high position, has power’, ‘more educated, maybe a politician’, ‘self-confident’, ‘somebody intellectual’, ‘a journalist or such’, ‘a politician, but relaxed’, ‘a government official’, ‘someone ambitious’ etc. Interestingly, none of the social placements referred to working class, but many considered the voice to be a radio voice, belonging to a journalist or a politician.

While in social terms all three voices elicited very similar comments, there were differences in geographical terms. Relatively many informants judged both the male voices (samples 1 and 4) to be from the Urban South or Helsinki, but voice 10 (an older woman with weak opening of the diphthongs) was never regarded as coming from this region. The stereotypical ‘urban southerner’ is obviously more likely to be a (young) male than an older woman, i.e. the age of the speaker presumably played a role in this task (see also Plichta and Preston 2005). It is essential to mention here that many judges had no idea where the voices were from. Furthermore, there was a lot of evidence that the opening of diphthongs (especially when the opening was strong) was easily confused with the *reduction* of diphthongs (*saana ~ sàuna* ‘sauna’), which is an *Eastern* dialect feature. It is not possible to discuss the details here, but according to this preliminary investigation, the opening of diphthongs would seem to be a relatively neutral feature for people in geographical terms – it is not associated with any of the old regional stereotypes (Mielikäinen and Palander 2002), which may give room for more general social connotations. Interestingly, the associations related to the opening of diphthongs – which in this data seem to be connected to (political or media-related) power – also represent in practice a distancing from the written standard (i.e. speech-should-copy-writing ideology).

There are several possible explanations why the social evaluations gathered in the 2009 data do not match the variation pattern of the 1970s data (Paunonen 1995 [1982]). First, it is possible that the judges who made inferences about social aspects of opening of the diphthong did not actually hear the opening, i.e. they could have been reacting to some other element in the stimulus sample than the diphthong opening when they regarded the speaker as ‘an intellectual’, ‘a politician’, etc. This, however, is not the strongest explanation, because the judges often repeated the word with the opened diphthong while they were figuring out their answer, i.e. there is quite a lot of evidence in the data that people can hear the non-standard diphthongs.

A better explanation is that the variation pattern of the diphthongs discovered back in the 1970s has no social value. Bearing in mind that essentialist correlation does not mean causation (e.g. Cameron 1997 [1990]; Eckert 2008), it is possible that the opening of the diphthong has never indexed working class identity. It is also possible that the association (the ‘first order indexicality’, see Silverstein 2003; Agha 2003) of this feature has changed since the 1970s. Since we lack a tradition of attitude surveys and measurements, we do not know how the opening of diphthongs was perceived 40 years ago. Nevertheless, from more recent conversation analytic studies we have learned that this feature used to be, for example, part of the Prime Minister’s very standard-like public speech style (e.g. Nuolijärvi and Tiittula 2000, 2001), and it can be heard constantly on different radio channels.

The present perceptual data give reason to believe that the opening of diphthongs is currently regarded as part of a public speech style, without being particularly associated with regional dialects or stereotypes, but rather with (media) power and a spoken standard or stylistic practice of some kind.

CONCLUSION

The perceptual landscape of Finnish has not triggered much interest among sociolinguists until recently, but it is evident that global changes of the media culture on both commercial

and public channels have had an impact on the perceptual landscape of Finnish. Various registers and varieties are currently available to all through the (new) media in a way that might surprise us on the basis of earlier dialectological and sociolinguistic studies. The opening of diphthong variables discussed above is only one example of the phenomena which seem to be in a process of change in terms of standard perceptions. On the whole, we seem to be heading towards de-standardisation. In the future we will need to put more emphasis in the Finnish context both on the study of language variation in the media and the perceptual climate.

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