

## Is Finnish an archaic language?

(Jaakko Häkkinen, 11th December 2011)

By “archaic” I mean having only few changes and remaining close to the original form. I concentrate on the word shape: how well the structure, syllables and sounds have preserved.

Especially compared to the Germanic languages, Finnish has been considered a “refrigerator language”, which preserves the words it has borrowed in their original form. For example a Proto-Germanic word *\*kuningaz* ‘king’ is still *kuningas*, while in the Germanic languages the word has changed a lot: in Swedish *kung*, in English *king*, in German *König*. The situation is similar even older, almost Proto-Indo-European level loanwords: a Northwest-Indo-European word *\*h<sub>2</sub>azgV-* (V = some vowel) is in Finnish *kaski* ‘burn-clearing’ (initial laryngeal preserved as *k*), when in English the word is *ash*; still in Proto-Nordic *aska* meant ‘burned area’. An example of the extent of the Scandinavian changes is a Proto-Germanic word *\*ahwiō* which is in Swedish *ö* ‘island’.

Nevertheless, compared to the Baltic languages Finnish has gone through several changes. For example Finnish *halla* ‘frost’ and its cognate in Saami, *suoldni*, go regularly back to Proto-Finno-Saamic or West-Uralic *\*šalna*. This is an ancient loanword from Baltic *\*šalna*, and in Modern Lithuanian the word is still *šalnà*.

We can say that the Germanic lineage leading to Icelandic has preserved relatively unchanged only for the last 1 000 years; the Finnic lineage leading to Finnish has preserved relatively unchanged for the last 2 000 years; the Baltic lineage leading to Lithuanian has preserved relatively unchanged for the last 3 000–3 500 years. But this is not the whole picture: it is also important to know when the period of rapid changing took place. Germanic language has changed rapidly after the Proto-Germanic stage, especially during the first millennium AD, while it has not changed so rapidly during the preceding millennia from Proto-Indo-European to Proto-Germanic (about 3500 BC–500 BC). Finnic language changed rapidly at the first millennium BC, but it has changed relatively slowly for the last two millennia. It is not only due to archaicness but also to non-contemporaneous periods of rapid change why Finnish has preserved the Germanic loanwords so well.

Archaicness varies also within Finnish. For example in the Southern Ostrobothnian dialect they still say *laulamahan* ‘(to) singing’, just like they said in Late Proto-Finnic two millennia ago. In Modern Finnish and in most dialects the word shape is worn to three-syllabic (*laulamaan*, *laulahman*, *laulamah* etc.), and in Estonian even to two-syllabic (*laulma*). Thus we can conclude that syllable-structurally the Southern Ostrobothnian dialect is very archaic.

Among the Finnic languages Vepsian has preserved the consonants well: Late Proto-Finnic *\*sidedek* : *\*siteyēt* ‘tying, bond’ (: plural) is *sideg* : *sideged*, while in Finnish it is *side* : *sitet*. On the other hand, even Vepsian has gone through some considerable changes: Late Proto-Finnic *\*jalka* ‘foot’ is *djoug*, while in Finnish it is still *jalka*. Therefore Vepsian seems to have been changed more, even though in genitive it has preserved the original velar spirant as *g*: *\*jalyan* > Vepsian *djougan* vs. Finnish *jalan*. Estonian is even more worn (*jalg* : *jala*).

When we take a look at the more distantly related languages, the Saami vowels have gone through great changes, but consonants have preserved better than in Finnic. Therefore the original Proto-Uralic bisyllabic words have remained bisyllabic in Saami, while they are worn to monosyllabic in Finnic:

Proto-Uralic *\*mexi-* ‘to sell’ > Skolt Saami *miōkka-d* ~ Finnish *myö-dä*, *myy-dä*

Proto-Uralic *\*jäñi* ‘ice’ > North Saami *jiegŋa* ~ Finnish *jää*

We can say that Finnic and Saami are best preserved and most archaic Uralic branches concerning the sounds and the word structure, but they have changed, too: in Finnic consonants have changed a lot and vowels less, in Saami vowels have changed a lot and consonants less.