
Hyvää Päivää Suomi Documentation

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Contents

1	About Finnish	3
2	Vocabulary and word structure	5
2.1	Vocabulary	5
2.2	Pronunciation	6
2.3	Consonants	6
2.4	Vowels	6
2.5	Diphthongs	7
2.6	Segmenting words	7
3	Word structure	9
3.1	Syllables	9
3.2	Breaking words into syllables	9
3.3	Open and closed syllables	10
3.4	To think about	10
4	Word order and basic noun cases	11
4.1	Word order	11
4.2	Parts of speech	11
4.3	The Finnish cases: Nominative, genitive, and partitive	12
4.4	Sentence structure	12
4.5	The Partitive	13
4.6	More rules	13
4.7	Complexities	14
5	Verbs	15
5.1	Forms and stems	15
5.2	Personal endings	16
5.3	Verbs in sentences	16
5.4	Tenses	16
5.5	Negation	17
5.6	Moods	17
5.7	Passive	17
6	Word endings (noun cases) and word changes (declension)	19
6.1	The noun case endings	19
6.2	Reminder: syllable formation	20

6.3	Consonant gradation	20
6.4	Stems from basic forms	21
6.5	Forming new words with endings	22
6.6	Plural	23
6.7	Overall diagram	23
6.8	Notes	23
7	Study material and references	25
7.1	Before learning Finnish	25
7.2	For reference	25
8	Speak simply - hints for Finnish speakers	27
8.1	Talk about unimportant things	27
8.2	Write efficiently	27
8.3	A multi-lingual message idea	28
8.4	Ask people about what they are learning	28
8.5	Don't give up	28
8.6	Use Finnish words	28
8.7	Try to separate words well	28
8.8	Try to articulate words well, especially the ends	28
8.9	Consider your puhekieli	29
8.10	Listen to bad Finnish	29
8.11	It's easier to read and write	29
8.12	Don't hide Finnish text	29
8.13	Make domain-specific cheatsheets	29
8.14	Use children as teachers	29

Finnish is a fascinating language. It is very different from anything you have learned, but also very logical. Knowing this logic makes learning Finnish much easier, but unfortunately usually you don't learn the logic until you are well into courses (if ever). This turns what should be an enjoyable exploration of a new language into a frustrating process which many people end up giving up on.

This course is designed to make learning Finnish fun.

This isn't a real Finnish course, it is a pre-Finnish course. It is designed for people who know English well enough, and are at a high risk of dropping out of Finnish courses (most likely, because it is not strictly needed for their jobs). The goal of this course is to make you appreciate and enjoy learning Finnish, which despite what people may believe is very possible.

This course is written by someone who is learning Finnish, but by no means knows it. This isn't designed to be technically correct, but easy and fun to understand. Do not trust anything in here, but learn it and remember once you start your own courses.

Note: Current status: There is a first draft of many sections, but they need revising, fact checking, and made consistent.

Contents:

CHAPTER 1

About Finnish

Finnish is not an Indo-European language. For us, that means that it shares almost no structure with any other language that most people know or have learned. So, when learning it, one has to do a whole lot more work: it isn't just substituting words for other words, but decomposing the meaning and re-creating the meaning from the start in a different grammatical form. There are also types of grammatical operations which don't exist other places, which have to be learned. These are described below.

On the plus side, Finnish is a relatively new language in some sense. It has been spoken for thousands of years, and had its first writing system developed around 500 years ago. However, in the last 200 years, it has been standardized. As you will learn, Finnish has many different dialects, none of which is the "standard" Finnish that you learn in courses. During the standardization process, they took parts from the various dialects and (in the usual Finnish way) made a standard language that was *logical* and *systematic*. This is actually a great help in learning it: there actually are some rules that make things make sense.

The downside to this is the standard Finnish (Kirjakieli=standard Finnish, "book language") is not what anyone speaks. It is only used in somewhat official contexts: formal TV programs, children's shows, official speeches, language courses, etc. So, even after studying Finnish for a long time, you may try but be unable to understand what you hear in your day to day life. It can be good to browse the puhekieli(=spoke Finnish, "spoken language") to stay aware of some of the spoken words, even before you get to it in your courses which unfortunately usually comes very late.

Finnish is a very synthetic language, not an analytic language like English. This means that words change, inflect, and combine very much. In Finnish, this is basically how *all* words are formed. In English, it is easy to tell what a word is: everything that is separated by spaces can be directly found in a dictionary and has a definition. In Finnish, most words are not used in their standard form, but instead various derivatives which you will learn about in a later chapter.

Because of this, it takes some effort to be able to separate the words (things separated by spaces) into the basic components that you learn about. When listening, this is even harder because of the way that Finnish flows together. Recommendation: when studying Finnish, put lines between the base words and suffixes. This will help you to mentally break things down into the components.

People also use this to make fun of Finnish: "oh, there are so many words": *ex1*, *ex2*, *ex3*, and so on. But this is missing the point: Finnish is synthetic, and the concept of these being different words isn't quite right. They are a base modified by different stems, the equivalent of different words in other languages. You can't evaluate Finnish by the criteria of other languages. Instead, you will learn how to break these down into their component pieces to understand them (and really, all these examples are highly pathological).

The grammar of Finnish is very different. If you know English, and are learning something like Spanish, it is relatively straightforward: you can substitute one word for another, and do some various small changes. In Finnish, entire sentences need to be reordered to convey the right thought. This means that it can be much harder to get started. This can mean that real-time production of Finnish requires a lot of practice and intuition.

Because Finnish comes from a different language family, all of the basic vocabulary is different. When learning a “normal” language, words may be quite different, but very quickly you start seeing patterns and connections to some language you know. That’s not the case in Finnish: you have to learn all-new basic words, medium-advanced words, *and* advanced words. The only place where you get consistent relief is modern technological words - but even that isn’t everywhere, because often it is a literal translation to Finnish (e.g. “workstation” = “työasema” = “work station”)

Finnish has a fewer sounds than many other languages: many of the letters in the Latin alphabet aren’t used for native Finnish words. Instead, you get more richness in the usage of fewer letters when they are turned into syllables. For example, “tuli” is “fire”, and “tuuli” is “wind”. In English, letters don’t necessarily mean anything about the pronunciation, but in Finnish pronunciation is essential. Jokes: [ex4](#).

Finally, I believe that in many cases Finnish is hard to learn because of the way it is taught. In many cases, it is thought as a “total immersion” method. This works in many languages, where there is enough similarity that you can pick up *something*, and then work your way to the rest. But Finnish is so different there is not really anything to pick up on unless you start as if you are a child learning your first language. Even living in this country for a few years doesn’t necessarily let you see the patterns without some help. Why is this? Every language is built on some basic components, and you recognize these components and work up to a larger understanding. In Finnish, the components are so different that it takes a lot of time to build up to them. Even in modern “machine learning” techniques, some sort of basic features are programmed in and used to infer the rest: you don’t learn patterns with absolutely no context. Unfortunately Finnish is so different that there’s hardly any context to start with, and most people with jobs which don’t require Finnish don’t get the type of immersion they need.

The very purpose of this course is to solve this problem: to teach you the basic components of Finnish, so that you can understand what you are seeing. This will make learning Finnish much more enjoyable, and also give you a greater chance of picking up some over time.

Vocabulary and word structure

2.1 Vocabulary

The Finnish vocabulary is very unique (unless you know Estonian or a few other languages). It is also in the same family as Hungarian, though a Hungarian once told me “English and Russian are about as close as Hungarian and Finnish”. So, you should be able to see the magnitude of the problem here.

However, there are some patterns when assimilating foreign words. The following can help you to match some of these up. Modern loanwords are usually constructed with an *i* on the end. One example is *pankki* = “bank”. *b* converted to *p*, the *k* doubled and an *i* was added.

Foreign	Finnish	
b	p	
c	k or s	
f		
g		(one place in Finnish in <i>ng</i>)
q	k	
w	v	
x	ks	
z	ts	

As you can see, there are a lot of sounds from the English alphabet that don’t exist in Finnish. This takes out a lot of the richness of pronunciation, and means that you have to train your ear to pay attention to other things. On the other hand, you get the new letters *ä* and *ö* (*å* is Swedish only and has no native Finnish words), but these are **different** from *a* and *o* so you must train your ear and mind to think of them as a distinct entity. If you can not, you can’t understand or be understood.

Coming from English, where letters can have many different sounds, this has taken a little bit of time to get used to. Just always keep this in mind and break words into syllables (next chapter), and you will be able to read anything. When learning words, always learn the component syllables, not the letters. This will also help in processing and remembering all of the double letters!

2.2 Pronunciation

In Finnish, one letter has one sound. The exception is *ng* produces a new sound (and I'm sure a few more that I don't know about, but that's very rare). Pronunciation is reported to be somewhat as in Spanish, but you will quickly learn it.

However, we must note that not all pronunciation is as is written in standard Finnish! Since dialects are used in all parts of Finland, what is said in practice does not match what is written. However, these dialects always(?) follow the language standards, and there is some way that they can be written that could match how it is pronounced.

Now, let's discuss more about specific letters. The next chapter will discuss syllables, for now we will just discuss consonants and vowels.

2.3 Consonants

Consonants are just constants, and usually occur only in groups of one (that is, if there are two consonants in a row, they are usually in different syllables and each stands alone). It can take some thought to pronounce them in the Finnish way.

If there are two consonants in a row, it must be said differently than a single one. This is because one goes to the previous syllable, and one to the following. This sounds like a longer consonant, but also changes the flow of the word. Don't forget!

Certain consonants have specific ways to be pronounced. For example, *p*, *t*, *k* are all non-aspirated: they don't sound like a letter, just a way of starting or ending the vowel sound strongly. (?) (TODO: more here)

2.4 Vowels

Finnish is known for having lots of vowels. *Lots* of them. And pronouncing them well is quite important. There are some important concepts related to vowels.

First is *vowel harmony*. There are front vowels (*ä*, *ö*, *y* vocalized from the front of the mouth), back vowels (*a*, *o*, *u* vocalized from the back, deeper sounds), and neutral (*e*, *i*). A single word never combines both front and back, but neutral can be with any. (note: compound words, though not separated by a space, count as different words for this rule). The front and back vowels match up:

Back	Front
a	ä
o	ö
u	y

When learning Finnish, every morphological ending comes in pairs, for example *-sta* and *-stä*. When you see and are learning these, don't worry: you can always read backwards from the end of the word find the first front or back vowel, and just use that. So, you only really need to learn one thing, not two. When there is only neutral vowels, use front.

This analogy is also important when doing vowel conjugation and similar things. In general, however *o* acts, *ö* acts the same. Same for *u* and *y*. *a* and *ä* is similar but has some exceptions. So, when doing grammar, it can be useful to consider front and back to be variations of the same letter, but *not* when pronouncing.

If there are two vowels in a row, then they become a long vowel. These must be pronounced longer than a single one, and are a distinctly different component of assembling words!

2.5 Diphthongs

Finnish vowels combine into diphthongs. Diphthongs are vowels that combine into one continuous sound that glides between them. Finnish diphthongs are not unlimited, they are only the following:

	_a	_o	_u	_e	_i	_ä	_ö	_y
a_	-		au		ai	-	-	-
o_		-	ou		oi	-	-	-
u_		uo	-		ui	-	-	-
e_			eu	-	ei			*
i_			ui	ie	-			*
ä_	-	-	-		äi	-		äy
ö_	-	-	-		öi		-	öy
y_	-	-	-		yi		yö	-

(The ones marked with an * are reported as sometimes diphthongs, but very rarely. Also, uo, ie, and yö are opening diphthongs that occur in initial syllables only - they have special changes when becoming plural, but these feel quite natural once you learn them.)

Diphthongs must respect vowel harmony: note that you can never have one that combines a front vowel with a back vowel.

Diphthongs are important when breaking words into syllables. If two vowels are together but not a diphthong, then it's there is a syllable break between them (and this happens often). This becomes important for the next chapter.

The diphthongs ending with _i are important. The letter i is used as a plural marker. Note that every other vowel can be made into a diphthong with i. This foreshadows the importance of this letter in the future.

The diphthongs aren't that hard: the most common ones are clear, and you will pick it up naturally quickly.

2.6 Segmenting words

When Finnish is spoken, everything flows together so that it can be difficult to detect the word boundaries in spoken text. However, when speaking, the emphasis is always on the first syllable. The biggest emphasis is generally on the first syllable of each sentence, with other major emphasis on the first syllable of each word. Thus, you can listen for each emphasis to try to segment the words and sentences. It takes time and practice (in addition to knowing the words).

Word structure

This chapter is about internal structure of Finnish words, in particular the syllable structure. In Finnish, many of the different word changes are connected to this structure, and understanding the structure makes doing word derivations much easier.

3.1 Syllables

Words are constructed of syllables. A syllable has a single vowel or diphthong in the center, and possibly a consonant sound before and after. In Finnish, this is (practically) always a single consonant, never several that combine into new sounds. In this work, we let *k* stand for consonants and *v* for vowels. Thus, in Finnish, all syllables can fit this pattern: *v*, *k_v*, *v_k*, or *k_{v_k}*.

In Finnish, the most common patterns are *k_v* and *k_{v_k}*. The others exist, but less frequently. (As a particular extreme case, it's possible to have a multi-syllable word with no consonants at all!)

In Finnish, there are almost never three consonants in a row. It does happen sometimes in special places, but these are fixed circumstances and not something that you see in new formations.

3.2 Breaking words into syllables

In Finnish, a syllable (practically) *always* begins on a consonant that proceeds a vowel. Thus, to find syllables, look for all vowels. See which of these have consonants right before them. Place syllable separators before those consonants. Thus, we get this: *k_{v_k} · k_v · k_v*. However, there are some patterns which are not allowed for syllables.

- A syllable can only have one vowel (*a*, *ä*, etc) in it, or a long vowel consisting of two of same vowel (*aa*, *ää*, etc), or a diphthong (*au*, *öi*, etc). If you have two vowels that don't form a diphthong (*ia*, *oe*, etc. - see previous section), then you need a syllable break between those vowels.
- A syllable can't have a single consonant. Ending consonants get joined to the syllable before (but this is included in the rule above actually)...

Some examples of words segmented into syllables:

- suo·mi
- pu·hut·te·ko
- e·lä·mä
- työ (one syllable)
- kes·kus·tel·la
- ter·ve·tu·lo·a

As you can see, many Finnish words are k_v with occasional k_vk thrown in.

3.3 Open and closed syllables

There is a very important difference between k_v and k_vk

- k_v is an open syllable - open, meaning that the end is *not* closed by a consonant.
- k_vk is a closed syllable.

Words flow more naturally when it is all open syllables, and a lot of the word changes we will learn about later are best understood by this.

Words sound best when there is a constant flow of $k_v \cdot k_v \cdot k_v \cdot \dots$, and too many closed syllables ($k_vk \cdot k_v \cdot k_vk \cdot k_v$) make speaking flow worse.

3.4 To think about

If you add a $-k_v$ suffix on to the end of a word, it will never affect the last syllable of the previous word (it will stay open or closed, whatever it was before). But if you add $-v_k$ to the end, it might. If you add a $-kk_v$ to the end of a word, the last syllable of the word has to end in a vowel (and it will become closed.)

Most of the primary word endings in Finnish are $-k$ or $-kk_v$ (closing previous syllables), and some other important ones are $-k_v$ (no effect).

If you add a $-k_v$ suffix on to the end of a word, it will never affect the last syllable of the previous word (it will stay open or closed, whatever it was before). But if you add v_k or kk_v to the end of a word, it will:

- $k_v \cdot k_vk + -k_v = k_v \cdot k_vk \cdot k_v$ (no change)
- $k_v \cdot k_vk + -v_k = k_v \cdot k_v \cdot k_vk$ (opens second syllable)
- $k_v \cdot k_v + -k \cdot k_v = k_v \cdot k_vk \cdot v_k$ (closes second syllable)
- $k_v \cdot k_vk + -k \cdot k_v = k_v \cdot k_vkk \cdot k_v$ which is NOT allowed (two consonants) - this is why we have word changes.

Don't worry about this for now, this lesson is beyond what you need to know right now - but expect it to come back in a few chapters.

Word order and basic noun cases

Much to learn you still have.

- *Yoda*

Yoda can speak his sentences different orders, and we still understand. The same is true for Finnish. Along with flexible word order comes some noun cases (endings/conjugations) which help mark the part of speech of words: the nominative, genitive(accusative), and partitive. Word order and the basic noun cases are the subject of this chapter.

We aren't yet going to study how to actually convert words into these noun cases, so in this chapter we will just discuss how word order relates to these cases, and the basic structure of Finnish sentences. We are doing this now because it is easy and fun, and helps to set the stage for what comes next. In future chapters, you will learn how to actually apply the genitive and partitive to different words.

4.1 Word order

Yoda can change word order and we still understand it. "The pen is on the table" is correct, but "on the table is the pen" sounds wrong, but we can still understand it. "The cat ate the apple" is correct, but "the apple ate the cat" means something else and is clearly wrong.

These word order matters in the second, since the `cat` and the `apple` are identically grammatically (both our direct nouns). However, the `pen` is a different grammatically from `on the table`. Because they are marked differently, the order can be changed without too much confusion.

Since Finnish has flexible word order, there must be something to convey the difference between the `cat` and the `apple` in the first sentence. In Finnish, the answer is that they are put into different grammatical cases, the nominative and genitive(accusative).

4.2 Parts of speech

First, a diversion to grammar of English. Hopefully you remember at least the idea that sentences are made of "subject - verb - object" basic components. If you can break sentences down into these components, you can easily figure out

what cases to use most of the time. You should think about this at least a little bit, because Finnish isn't a one-to-one mapping to English.

- In the sentence I ate the apple, I is the *subject* - the thing that performs an action. ate is the *verb* - the action. the apple is the *direct object*: it has an action done to it. The verb to eat intrinsically can be applied to a direct object.
- In the sentence I ate in the kitchen, I is the *subject*, ate is the *verb*, and in the kitchen is an *indirect object*. You are not acting on the kitchen, it is just some sort of modifier which describes how the action happens.

In the first of these, the verb to eat is used as a transitive verb and in the second, it is used intransitively. *Transitive* means the verb takes direct object. *Intransitive* means that the verb does not take a direct object. This distinction, and the difference between *subject* and *object*, end up being critical to understand the Finnish *nominative* and *genitive*.

More examples:

- I search for you: intransitive
- I search you: transitive, searching your body for something. Check [wiktionary](#) to see these definitions: you see the definitions tagged by transitive or intransitive use. You see the same things when you search the definition of Finnish verbs.

4.3 The Finnish cases: Nominative, genitive, and partitive

The *nominative* is the basic form of words in Finnish, what you will be able to look up in a dictionary, and you use when discussing words. **Nominative is used in the subject of the sentence**

The *genitive* is formed by adding *-n* to the end of the words. (Not directly - there are various rules to adding *-n*, which you will learn about in the next chapter. But not all words ending in *-n* are genitive.). **Genitive is used for direct objects of sentences.**

The *partitive* is formed by adding *-a* or *-ta* (usually) to the end of the word (again, with various rules you will learn later). **The partitive can be used for either the subject, direct object, or indirect object.**

There are a lot of other noun cases, *-sta*, *-lle*, etc. These are all used for **indirect objects**, and if you see a word in one of these cases, it is never a direct object.

So, there it is. Finnish has a flexible word order, and the nominative and genitive are directly allow that.

4.4 Sentence structure

Finnish has flexible word order, but that doesn't mean it doesn't matter. Instead, the word order can mean either emphasis or be a part of the meaning (really, consider that these are the same things).

In the simple case, the word order can imply an emphasis:

- Minä syön omenan: "I(nominative,subject) eat apple(genitive,direct object)". This is the typical order.
- Omenan minä syön: "apple(genitive,direct object) I(nominative,subject) eat". This emphasizes that the apple is being eaten, the fact that I am doing it is less important.

It can also have a more direct meaning. For example, in *Suomen Mestari 1*, you get an example like this:

- Kynä on pyöällä (The pen is on the table). This implies that a pen (which is already known), and it is on the table.
- Pyöällä on kynä (On table is pen. This is called an "existential clause", which means that you are introducing a previously unknown pen.

Note that these last examples are sentences have a subject and indirect object, not subject and direct object - but the point still holds. Also, see how the emphasis can become a part of the meaning.

In the *Suomen mestari* series of books, you frequently see lessons which introduce a certain type of sentence. This is some combination of word order and noun cases. These are more profound than they first appear: it's not just joining some words you know into a sentence, but trying to teach you that a certain combination of word order and noun cases conveys a specific meaning. Unfortunately, they only write in Finnish, you don't pick up this type of meaning when you are just taking the course.

4.5 The Partitive

We haven't yet discussed the partitive. Above, we said that it can be used for either the subject or direct object, so how does that work?

The partitive can take different meanings. The name itself has "part" in it, so they all somehow relate to a part of a whole. Below are the most common uses. The most important ones (take precedence) are first:

- Negation: Anything which is in the negative or you are saying does not exist is always in the partitive. (Remember: if something doesn't exist, there is no whole. You are saying that no *part* of any possibilities exist)
- Some verbs and phrases just intrinsically take partitive. The verb *rakastaa* (to love: *rakastan sinua*: "I love you(partitive)). Wishing is always in the partitive: *hyvää päivää* (wishing someone "good day"). (Clever people will realize this is the source of this site's name.)
- Numbers: *kaksi omenaa* ("two apples(partitive)"). Actually quite similar in use to English plural with numbers: *yksi omena* ("one apple(nominative)"), *kaksi omenaa* ("two apples(partitive)"), *nolla omenaa* ("zero apples(partitive)"), etc.
- Part of something, mass (uncountable) nouns. You are not referring to all of something specific ("all the water in a cup"), but part of something ("water, some of that within the world").
- It can roughly be seen as the genitive/nominative represents the definite articles like *the*, and the partitive can be used for indefinite articles like *a*, *some*, etc.

This is not a complete list - others mostly fit in the concepts above, there are better sources for that information, and you will learn them as time goes on.

In many cases, multiple options will be grammatically correct. It is best to stop and think, what what are the different options. Are any of them wrong for your meaning? Then, if multiple of them could be correct, which gets you closest to the actual meaning you want. At this stage, the difference between "the" and "a" becomes relevant.

4.6 More rules

If a verb is *transitive*, then the verb *may* have a direct object always. If a verb is *intransitive*, the verb can't have a direct object, so can't be used with the genitive.

- Transitive verbs: *syödä* (to eat: you eat something)
- Intransitive verbs: *TODO*.
- Both: *eat(syödä)*

The other noun cases ("locative cases", -*Vn*, -*ss*, -*sta*, -*lle*, -*lla*, -*lta*) are always *indirect objects* only, *never* a direct object.

Furthermore, the different noun cases are important. Some verbs are *always* used with a particular noun case. Perhaps more precisely: some verbs have a meaning which *only* come with a certain noun case (e.g. -*sta*). Some verbs have different meanings depending on what noun cases are used. For example, in English, "I reached the house" means a

different thing from TODO”. The verb `pitää` is a good example of this. On the wiktionary page, you see meanings that differ depending if what comes after it is in elative (`-ssa`), partitive (`-a, ta`), genitive (`-n`), infinitive, etc. The verb `päästä` is another. The different definitions are matched to different cases: illative is `-Vn`, elative is `-sta`, one form is with the infinitive of a verb, and so on.

Not every sentence follows the “subject - verb - object” form. For example, `sinä olet kaunis` (you(nominative) are beautiful(nominative)), “you” and “beautiful” are compliments (refer to the same thing). The second word `kaunis` is nominative here because `you` is indivisible. This all goes down to more details about sentence structure. We aren’t going deep into this topic in this work, but just realize that the different noun cases matter and relate to sentence structure and meaning.

“Forced clauses” (“I have to X”) are a different pattern. They are written `Minun täytyy opiskella` (“I(genitive) have to study(Infinitive)”). Note that what is the subject in English (I) is genitive here. This is an example of an alternative sentence structure, and you need to remember it either by “subject genitive” or “some twisted structure where subject and object are reversed.”

Don’t worry! You learn all of these very slowly, and you can make sense of it *if you know what you are looking for* (which you know now). And this is no different from other languages which have the same variations in meaning, except they are marked by different words, prepositions, etc. You have to accept that Finnish is synthetic, and uses word endings instead of separate words.

4.7 Complexities

But this isn’t the whole story: actually, the case for direct objects is called the *accusative*, but it is identical to the genitive for the most part - except for the personal pronouns `I=minä`, etc. But for simplicity, most places just call it the genitive and then have an exception for the personal pronouns. (There is an analogy in English: the personal pronouns “I”, “he”, “she”, “we”, ... have a different form in a direct object: “me”, “him”, “her”, “us”). In fact, this is quite direct analogy for this use of a direct object marker in English.

All of these cases can be in either singular or plural. You learn this later.

In the next chapter, you will learn how to actually make these noun cases for real words.

Finnish verbs are relatively simple. There are few truly irregular verbs, and they follow the same general rules you have already learned (vowel harmony, consonant gradation, other changes). The difficult, as usual, is that there are many word changes within the words and fewer helper verbs. So, as usual, it's hard because it's different.

5.1 Forms and stems

There are only six types of Finnish verbs (and only about 3 that are truly irregular). Just like other words, there is a base form which always ends in *-a* (or *-ä*, but this is completely understandable by vowel harmony, so we only say the back vowel forms on this page).

The first thing to do when using verbs is to convert the base form into the stem. Let's use *pakata* as an example. This involves removing the ending (*-ta*) first (\rightarrow *paka-*). Then, apply the new stem ending (*-a*) (\rightarrow *pakaa-*). This process can result in consonant gradation to happen. In our example, the double vowel opens up the last syllable. (\rightarrow *pakkaa-*). Then, you apply additional endings, which can result in *more* consonant gradation changes. In this example, according to the rules of consonant gradation, a double vowel means a syllable is always open. When you add endings, it may close the syllable if it is required by the rules.

It's worth saying this about **consonant gradation** again: there are two places it can happen, once when converting from base form to the stem (reverse), and once when adding the endings (forward). Usually both don't happen in the same word. Both indecently follow the normal rules almost exactly.

These are the verb types:

Type	Extension	Stem	Example	Example stem	Stem cons. grad.	Notes
1	-a	-	puhua	puhu-	per-ending	
2	-da	-	syöda	syö-	none	
3	-lla, -nna, -rra, -sta	-le-, -ne-, -re, -se	pestä	pese-		Add e.
4	-Vta,	-Va-	haluta	halua-	reverse	V=vowel, add a.
5	-ita	-itse-	tarvita	tarvitse-	reverse	
6	-eta	-ene--	paeta	-pakene-	reverse	

Examples of consonant gradation in the stems:

- type 3: na·kel·la → nak·ke·le- (the change results in syllable opening)
- type 4: ta·va·ta → ta·paa- (note middle syllable acts closed)
- type 5:
- type 6: e·de·tä → e·te·ne- (note middle syllable acts closed)

5.2 Personal endings

As in many languages, there are six personal endings (singular, plural) × (1st, 2nd, 3rd person):

type	pronoun	ending	last syllable?	Note
1 singular	(minä)	-n	closes	
2 singular	(sinä)	-t	closes	
3 singular	hän	-V	opens	-V= same as last vowel
1 plural	(me)	-mme	closes	
2 plural	(te)	-tte	closes	
3 plural	he	-vat	opens	

The “last syllable?” column tells you if it closes or opens the last syllable in the stem (and makes weak consonant gradation or strong). Note that this is completely understandable from the rules applied to the endings.

First and second person pronouns are optional (just like in some other languages). Third person pronouns are required. If third person singular pronoun is missing, this is the “zeroth-person” construction.

5.3 Verbs in sentences

We’ve already gon over this in word order, but remember the basic parts of Finnish: sentences have a subject (who acts), verb (the action), and object. The verb matches the subject (singular/plural and person).

5.4 Tenses

There are four main tenses:

- Present: basic
- Imperfect (past): Basic past tense. Events concluded in past.

- Perfect (past):
- Future: There is no *grammatical* future tense in Finnish. To express future, you use the present with extra words, for example “Tomorrow I go to school”.

Tense	usage	example (en)	form	negative form
present		I do		ei VERB
imperfect	past, finished	I did	-i-	ei VERB-nut
perfect	past, ongoing effect	I have done	on VERB-nut	ei ole VERB-nut
pluperfect	past, ongoing effect, before imperfect	I had done	oli VERB-nut	ei ollut VERB-nut

In Finnish, “pluperfect” is “pluskvamperfekti”.

These tenses are quite similar to English. Note that the verb *olla* (to be) is used for the perfect and pluperfect tenses, a lot like have/had in English. The *-nut/-nyt* (vowel harmony) endings is similar to *-ed* in English.

So, while there seems to be a lot here, concepts are relatively few:

- Forming stems from infinitive (basic rules)
- Forming imperfect (*-i* with isolated special cases)
- Forming past participle (*-nut/-nyt*, plural form *-neet*) (basic rules, some small differences per verb type).
- Using the *olla* (to be) helper verb when needed.

5.5 Negation

This was already introduced in the section above. In Finnish, negation is via the *ei* helper verb, which is a proper verb with full conjugation. To negate in present tense, you use helper verb + weak form of the stem (minä form without *-n*). For example:

- *minä puhun* = I speak
- *minä en puhu* = I don't speak

5.6 Moods

Finnish has stem morphology for conditional (could, would, should) and potential (may, might) moods. Conditional is most common. It is simply adding *-isi-* after the stem.

At this point, it's not worth going into details.

TODO: strong or weak forms?

5.7 Passive

The Finnish equivalent of “(it) is eaten” or “(it) was eaten” is the passive. Again, this is pretty similar to English.

These are made with

- Present: *-taan/-tään* in the present form (various rules, either coming from infinitive or weak stem).

- Imperfect: -tiin
- Perfect: on VERB-ttu
- Pluperfect: oli VERB-ttu

Again, at this point it's not worth going into details.

Word endings (noun cases) and word changes (declension)

Most of you have probably heard that “Finnish doesn’t have prepositions”. Actually, that’s not entirely true, but it is true in spirit. As we discussed, Finnish is a synthetic language, and instead of using prepositions (modifier words), it directly attaches suffixes to the words they modify. So instead of saying *in the house*, one would say *talo-ssa* with equivalent meaning. When they are added to the words, there are two main parts:

- First, you have to know what suffixes to use. This is hard, because there isn’t a one-to-one mapping of usage to other languages. However, prepositions are *always* hard in other languages because there never are one-to-one maps, so this is normal.
- Second, suffixes aren’t directly attached, there can be changes in the base word. This may seem difficult at first, and it does take some getting used to. However, as in most things in Finnish, it ends up being quite logical.

Mentally, there are two main things you need to be able to do quickly:

- First, you have to be able to apply endings to words. This is both knowing what to use, and how to do the word changes.
- Second, and maybe not as obvious, is being able to look at a word and discover the base and extension(s). This is hardly ever mentioned, but actually does require some practice. To read Finnish easily, this needs to be automatic. When reading a new word, you should read from beginning to end and end to beginning at the same time.

Glossary: The *base form* is the nominative: what you look up in a dictionary. The *stem* is a modification (*inflection*) of the base form to which extensions can be attached. Our main concern now is *locative cases* of nouns.

6.1 The noun case endings

There are different types of endings that can be applied to nouns: the basic noun cases, particles that have some sort of emphasis, and many other types. We are mainly focused on the noun cases right now.

Below, you can see the table of the basic endings. There are more, and we aren’t going to try to explain them right now — you’ll learn them in real courses. For now, we are just looking at the overall patterns.

	Name	ending	meaning	how used
Basic				
	Nominative	-	basic form	(this is the base form)
	Genitive	-n	possessive or object	closed (weak)
	Partitive	-a, -ta, -tta	part	(attached to base form)
Locative				
	Illative	-Vn	to inside	open (strong)
	Inessive	-ssa	inside	closed (weak)
	Elicative	-sta	from inside	closed (weak)
	Allative	-lle	to	closed (weak)
	Adessive	-lla	on, by	closed (weak)
	Ablative	-lta	from	closed (weak)
Other				
	...			
Plural				
	Nominative plural	-t	basic form plural	closed (weak)
	Plural	-i- + other ending	plural	depends on other ending

We see three main categories: The nominative is the base form of a word. and the partitive uses the base form (which is usually strong). The Illative uses the strong form of the word. Most most others use the weak form. The main point of this chapter is learning how to apply these endings to words, and the strong/weak question is the most important thing for that.

There are more endings which we aren't discussing now, but just realize they exist and fit in the same pattern as above:

- Possessive suffixes: *-ni* (my), *-si* (yours), *-mme* (our), *-nne* (yours, plural), *-nsa* (his, hers, their, singular or plural). These take the ... form. TODO
- Enclitic Particles: *-ko*, *-han*, *-pa*. These convey some mood or emphasis in speaking. TODO
- ... and more. TODO

Remember vowel harmony! In a word without (a, o, or u), we get the changes (a→ä, o→ö, and u→y) in *all* suffixes. It is so predictable it's not even worth writing both forms, so I don't.

6.2 Reminder: syllable formation

Let's review something from a few chapters ago: syllable formation.

Summary: Syllables start at every consonant before a vowel, and between vowels that don't form a diphthong. So a word might be segmented this way: *kvk · kv · kv*.

A syllable *kv* is open, and a syllable *kvk* is closed. If a single *k* is added to an open syllable, it becomes closed: *kv + -k → kvk*. Same with *kv + -kkv → kvk · kv*.

A long vowel (the same vowel letter twice in a row) also effectively makes a syllable open regardless of what is at the end. So *-kaan* is open, but *-kan* and *-kain* (diphthong) are not. TODO: diphthongs too?

6.3 Consonant gradation

Finnish has a concept called *consonant gradation*. It is almost exactly what it says: the consonant changes between two grades, strong and weak. Strong consists of something harder (e.g. *p*), and the weak consists of something softer (e.g. *p → v*) of somewhat similar sounds.

As with everything in languages, there's no single reason for this. But you can consider it as somehow making the language flow better: when a syllable is open at the end of the word, it can take more emphasis at the beginning. But when it becomes closed, it takes something softer to make it flow better.

The following are the basic consonant gradation patterns in Finnish (there are a few more, but they are infrequent enough so you'll learn them as you need them.)

Strong (open)	weak (closed)
k	_ (is removed)
p	v
t	d
kk	k
pp	p
tt	t
nk	ng
mp	mm
nt	nn
lt	ll
rt	rr

So, for example, we have $ka \cdot tu + -t \rightarrow ka \cdot dut$, and $tuk \cdot ki + -n \rightarrow tu \cdot kin$.

The patterns *st*, *sp*, *sk*, and *tk* never change.

Many students consider consonant gradation as annoying. However, they are simple if thought of in terms of open and closed syllables. **In fact, it is best to not think of these as being word changes: imagine that words exist as a quantum superposition of both forms occurring at the same time.** You see one particular form written down depending on if it is observed in an open syllable or closed syllable, and you mentally write down whatever is needed in each case.

Primarily, consonant gradation happens in the last syllable of the word, depending on what ending is applied: if it's a closing ending (*-t*, *-n*, *-ssa*, etc) you get the weak form, and otherwise the strong form.

Secondarily, it can happen before the last syllable, but only when there are changes that have effects that open or close a syllable. So, you make a change at the end which happens to open or close the second to last syllable (you'll see these in the next section).

A syllable that has a long vowel (two of the same in a row) in it is always open: imagine that the long sound insulates the front from the back of the syllable. This leads to words where consonant gradation *should* apply, but is always in the strong form.

You have to be able to do both forward consonant gradation (a syllable closes) and reverse consonant gradation (a syllable opens).

6.4 Stems from basic forms

If you have a word like *pu · he · lin* (phone), you can't just add an ending like *-n* to it because it would break the syllable pattern (two consonants at the end of a syllable). So, before you can add endings, every word is converted to some form that ends in a vowel.

The **base form** is the nominative, and the **inflectional stem** is the form which most endings are added to. The inflectional stem can be observed in both strong and weak forms. The inflectional stem is the same as the base form when it's already suitable for adding stems (such as when it ends in a vowel).

A word like *talo* (building) is directly able to take any ending: the base form is the same as the stem.

6.4.1 Examples of stem changes

Note: Below are various examples below for your information not memorization. For now just look at the general patterns. You will learn these as you go through your regular lessons, and as you do it will make a lot more sense. For now, *just* focus on the stem changes and what it does with consonant gradation.

-i → -e (ovi → ove-). Why? Because -i- is for plural, so basically everything gets changed to -e- for singular, *except* some modern loanwords.

-as → -aa (vie·ras → vie·raa-). A similar thing can happen with -is. This unconditionally opens the last syllable (because of the long vowel) causes reverse consonant gradation (a·su·kas → a·suk·kaa-) in *all* forms: it doesn't matter what stem is attached, unlike the normal case where the stem affects the gradation.

-nen → -se- (nai·nen → nai·se-). You can try to rationalize this by imagining the n becomes s and the last n removed. This is a very common pattern.

-in → -ime- (pu·he·lin → pu·he·li·me-). In this case n becomes m which makes you somehow think of consonant gradation, and e is added.

-us → -uske- (vas·taus → vas·tau·kse-). A k appears out of nowhere, which is actually reverse consonant gradation so it sort of makes sense. An e also is added.

-e → -ee- (ha·me → ha·mee-), which also causes reverse consonant gradation like the -as case because it unconditionally opens the last syllable (because of the long vowel). For example kaa·de → kaa·tee-.

There are lots of different words that end in -i. Most of them become -e- in the stem, but new loanwords stay as -i- (new loanwords generally don't obey old patterns). There are also "old Finnish words" that have a different category: partitive is different (pieni + partitive → pientä). So, when understanding -i words, classify them into three categories: very old Finnish words, Finnish words, and modern loanwords. You will learn this during your studies of Finnish.

These are just some examples, and show you what to expect. We don't come close to explaining how to use all the different cases, use a proper class for that!

There are *many* different types of stem changes, but most fit into some major categories. KOTUS (the Finnish language standards body) classifies them into about 50 different types, but there is a lot of effective duplication based on exact letters and forward/reverse consonant gradation: however, in effect, many of these differences can be understood based on the rules described above, so the effective amount you have to learn is a lot smaller. Wiktionary has a [list of Kotus types](#), but I don't think the list is that accurate or useful: however, wiktionary is good if you know a word and want to know it's inflection, or vice versa. Also, be aware that there is not universal agreement on the numbering of the types.

6.5 Forming new words with endings

After the above is known, it's fairly easy to form the endings.

Partitive adds -a to base words that ends in one vowel, -ta to words that end in one consonant or a long vowel, and -tta to a word that ends in -e. Why the special e? It used to be a different type of sound, so is treated specially. You notice that e is special very often. Some words have a partitive form derived from something else.

The illative adds -Vn to stems that end in a single vowel (V represents a doubling of the previous vowel), -hVn to a stem that ends in two vowels. All of these cause the strong form to appear.

Most of the other stems are just added, and consonant gradation is applied if needed.

When learning a new ending, the two important things to learn are: is it applied to the base form or stem, and does it close the last syllable (strong or weak)?

6.6 Plural

To form plural words, the basic rule is to add an $-i-$ to the stem, then whatever other ending. It seems more complicated because of some rules, but they are actually quite standard.

There can be vowel changes in partitive: For example $vi v \rightarrow vjv$ ($v=a$ vowel). These vowel changes add another level of complexity, but are mostly mechanical.

Double vowels become a diphthong: $vv + -i- \rightarrow vi$ (vv =same vowel twice).

Diphthongs mutate: $ie + -i- \rightarrow ei$. $uo + -i- \rightarrow oi$. $yö + -i- \rightarrow öi$.

Even though this plural may add a diphthong (vi), it always acts as a single vowel so consonant gradation can still happen depending on the endings (TODO: is this correct?).

There are lots of other complexities, but you can understand them based on what is in this chapter plus a few more rules.

6.7 Overall diagram

Note: Insert diagram here:

Base form. \rightarrow Partitive can form from base

(inflect)

Inflectional stem. (Quantum superposition strong/weak forms) \rightarrow nominative plural, all other forms.

(add $-i-$)

Plural inflectional stem (strong/weak). \rightarrow All other forms.

6.8 Notes

Don't be afraid! It's probably impossible for this to make sense right now, but think/come back to this as you start studying Finnish and suddenly all the word changes will start making a lot of sense.

Remember, it is best to not think of consonant gradation as a real change of the word. The word stem exists in both formats simultaneously, and you happen to observe it in strong or weak form depending on if it is closed or open.

The genitive is seen as the prototype "stem in weak form" (if you know genitive, you know everything). So, you will often be told "take the genitive and remove $-n$ to make other forms". This just means "we use the inflectional stem in weak form". You see the same thing in other cases: $-vat$ removed from verbs to represent verb stem in strong case, or $-n$ removed from verbs to represent verb stem in the weak case. Think of the stems!

Really, for singular, if you know the nominative (base) and genitive ($-n$), you know 90% of how to make all words. If you know nominative, genitive ($-n$), partitive ($-a$, $-ta$, $-tta$), and illative ($-vn$), you know how to use 99.99% or 100% of all forms of all words. A similar thing can be said for plural. So, the amount you actually have to know is much smaller than you might expect. Also, the rules of this chapter can handle 98% of all the changes.

There are different complexities, but can still be understood in this framework. For example, $-ton$ looks like it's doesn't close the syllable, but actually it does. This is because of historical reasons: originally the suffix was $-ttojn$, which would close the word. So, in this case, you don't remember $-ton$ stems, you remember " $-ton$ closes the stem".

There are other changes, such as *uku* to *uvu* and *yky* to *yvy*. These are much more rare, but you will learn about them later.

There are also occasional vowel changes, because you can't have too many vowels in a row. For example, *i* becomes *j* between other vowels. So, you get more complex things like *aika* + *-n* → *aikan* → *aian* → *ajan*.

In addition to the complexity of remembering all of these, it can also just make general awareness of the language harder. It can be easy to remember *maito* + *-n* → *maidon*, but if you are just quickly reading and you see *maidon*, it looks like a much different word from *maito*! It takes a lot of internalizing to make all of the connections.

It also takes some practice to resolve ambiguity: In a word, would *t* become *d* (consonant gradation), or *tt* (reverse consonant gradation)? It takes practice and experience to keep all the word changes between all the different endings straight. *k* is especially annoying: it disappears in the weak form, so words can look especially different. When there is reverse consonant gradation, it can seem to appear out of nowhere!

Study material and references

7.1 Before learning Finnish

Before starting to learn Finnish, I recommend these two steps:

- Learn a bit of grammar. This site is designed to do that, but it does not take a very rigorous approach and is mainly to get you interested and to know what to look for. If you have enough time and like a highly logical way of learning, I recommend the book *Finnish: an essential grammar*. It is not short, but the beginning is easy to read. I recommend you start reading it until you get bored, and resume when you have time or need more details once you are in the course.
- Learn some vocabulary. Starting a Finnish course is much easier if you already know basic vocabulary. I recommend you get some app that teaches vocabulary and use it in downtime. A lot of people use the app *Memrise*, and there are lots of lists of Finnish words on there. You can start with the most popular lists there, but beware: as you have learned on this site, there are many different forms to Finnish words, and the app doesn't capture all of the different subtleties of them. Still, it is an essential tool.

If you can do the two things above, your first Finnish course will be much more enjoyable.

7.2 For reference

- [Wiktionary](#) is the open source dictionary (companion of Wikipedia). The English site has definitions from all languages in English. It is a remarkably good reference on many Finnish words, and includes conjugation tables for all words and conjugation tables for verbs. When using any dictionary, remember that you may need to put some thought into splitting a word into its parts or removing endings (though wiktionary search is good at finding all forms anyway).
- *Finnish: An Essential Grammar*, by Fred Karlsson. This is a reference book, not a text book, but has very good explanations for self-study. The first chapters are easy to read with no prior knowledge, and lay the same groundwork as in this site (though more formally).
- [Finnish for busy people](#): Online grammar reference.

Speak simply - hints for Finnish speakers

People *can and do* learn Finnish all the time, but many people end up not for years and years. Certainly the high penetration of English is part of that. This page gives some hints on how Finnish speakers can help Finnish learners, because after all immersion and daily usage is key to learning any language. These mainly apply to technical fields where English is the defacto language.

Finnish has many dialects, and the form we learn in classes isn't even what most people speak. So, a bit of help can help us to learn much better.

8.1 Talk about unimportant things

It's easy to speak Finnish - you just don't speak. But that doesn't help learning.

I have said "if it's not important, I can understand Finnish well. If it's important, I usually can't understand much." What this basically means that, if something is important, you end up switching to English because we have stuff to get done. Try to talk about unimportant things.

But at the same time, once Finns start talking, they are very talkative and once the speaking barrier has been passed, it goes straight to deep topics. As an artificial example, once someone starts talking they don't just mention the nice weather, they begin a comparative analysis of long-term trends and their causes. Going too deep, too quickly, makes it harder to understand and follow - which isn't helpful, either.

8.2 Write efficiently

Reading a few sentences to get some information may be doable. Reading paragraphs when the main point is hidden somewhere in there take a longer time, and thus people are less likely to do it, even if they want to.

Try to have the main point first and easy to find, followed by supporting information. Can the main point/request/purpose of the message even be clear in the first sentence, other critical information the first paragraph, followed by supporting information? This will probably be good for everyone anyway.

8.3 A multi-lingual message idea

If you do multi-lingual messages and you know most people want to read both languages, could you be clever about it? For example, first “main point” paragraph in Finnish - learners can try to read it. Then, more details in English below. Reading either language is enough to get the main point, and you can scan the other. It provides a challenge for people learning Finnish, and saves you some time in writing everything twice.

8.4 Ask people about what they are learning

Ask people about what they are learning in classes, so you know what level they are at and what types of topics they know about. That way you know how far to go and what the general progression is. Our textbooks tend to go in themes for each chapter, if you're talking about something that we haven't covered yet, we'll have no idea how to listen or speak. Same for different word forms, etc.

Suomen Mestari is the most often used book these days (for adults), and this is roughly how it goes. One book is roughly half a year for a non-intensive course: * (to be added later)

8.5 Don't give up

Don't give up when speaking Finnish to people... they may be slow responding, but that's OK. Since you're talking about unimportant things, you can take some time.

8.6 Use Finnish words

Have to think about a word in English? Say the Finnish one first, help the person learn it. Maybe even just say the Finnish one and leave it at that, let the person learn it. Maybe even try intentionally using Finnish words. This is easiest with nouns but you could try others, too.

8.7 Try to separate words well

Finnish flows well, but this means that it can be hard to tell the words apart. Don't make it unnatural, but don't try to be as fast as you can. Can you make the separation of the words a bit easier to tell? We tell them not just by spaces, but also by emphasis of the first syllable of each word.

8.8 Try to articulate words well, especially the ends

In Finnish, you have to be able to understand words from both the beginning and *end* (because the ends have the forms). But often times the ends vanish, change, or otherwise are hard to pick up in spoken language. When that happens, us learners aren't able to pick up what is said - and possibly can't understand the whole sentence. If you optimize the ends of words (as spoken Finnish does), we can't figure out what you are trying to say.

8.9 Consider your puhekieli

It takes a long time for people to begin learning any spoken language - so if you are talking to beginners, they won't have mental preparation to understand what you are saying. Of course it can be hard to speak kirjekieli, so try to find a proper balance. You can expect we should learn the simplest puhekieli, but maybe try to simplify some of the more advanced forms. But of course add more as time goes on.

8.10 Listen to bad Finnish

Unlike some languages, there is less existing culture of hearing bad Finnish on a daily basis. So if someone tries to say something, but says it only slightly wrong, the listener may have no idea what it was. This is frustrating, but more importantly switches the conversation to English. Be happy with bad Finnish and try to listen to it.

I don't know if it's even possible to find bad Finnish to practice. . .

8.11 It's easier to read and write

When mailing/messaging people, do use more simple Finnish even if they might not know right away. It's good practice. When in a big conversation with multiple people, mention them by name so that they know that they should pay attention to understanding it. When writing, all the same things on this page apply (especially the spelling of the word endings out fully part).

8.12 Don't hide Finnish text

This isn't really a day-to-day speaking thing, but still somewhat relevant. Finland has a strong bilingual culture, but emphasis is hiding the other language (put another way, making sure that language A speakers never have to see language B). But that's the opposite of what you should do with English/Finnish translations: you should not be worried if the untranslated articles appear in Finnish too. Put another way, consider the Aalto University websites. When in English mode, anything that isn't translated just disappears. It would be better to have it appear in Finnish still - it's easy to skip over if you don't want it, but if you are learning it gives you exposure. Plus you know that something exists.

8.13 Make domain-specific cheatsheets

In many languages, advanced and technical terms are similar. Not necessarily in Finnish, yet these advanced terms are needed for work and stuff - and not taught in any basic courses. My idea is that domains can make specific cheatsheets of common terms so that people there can learn what is relevant to them. If anyone wants to use Hyvää Päivää to host this, let me know.

8.14 Use children as teachers

In the short term, our time is so limited and we talk at such a level that we will usually end up with English. However, there are plenty of children who don't know English so well yet and are happy with any kind of interaction. Maybe invite your friends learning Finnish to events with your children?

Upcoming chapters:

- Common suffixes/forms
- Spoken Finnish/dialects

This is written by Richard Darst, and licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#). This is an open-source project and suggestions and direct contributions are very welcome. I (Richard) don't claim to be an expert in Finnish, and would like other viewpoints. I would especially like people with a more in-depth knowledge of Finnish to fact check things.