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SMS-messages – context for traditional and modern proverbs

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Abstract

The article focuses on SMS-messages as short letters in a Finnish daily newspaper, *Salon Seudun Sanomat*. A proverb is often included in the SMS-message. The analysis is based on Charles Briggs's (1988) research on a proverb's performances. Proverbs in a spoken language are in many ways similar to proverbs in the colloquial written form; presentational features are the same. The research is also based on Lev Vygotski's (1967) claim that a language is linked to a thought, and on Gottlob Frege's (2000) principle of context. Thirdly, an utterance should follow Paul Grice's (1975) cooperative principles of quantity, quality, relation, and manner. In what follows the meaning of the proverbs will be analyzed twofold; on the one hand we will analyze the meaning given by the writer, and on the other hand a basic meaning. Proverbs get new forms and flexible. Modern proverbs occur and the traditional ones are transformed. Proverbs are a part of a contemporary Finnish communication and everyday language use, although the context of use has changed over a period of one century.

1 INTRODUCTION

The focus of the article is the use of proverbs in an everyday context, in SMS-messages sent to the editor and readers of a Finnish daily newspaper, *Salon Seudun Sanomat* as short letters. Most of Finnish proverbs contain agrarian terms, although nowadays they are often used in a new context and with a new meaning. As a part of folklore proverbs have been regarded as a part of speech of the elderly people. Anyway, in Finland we deal with a new urban proverb tradition in which proverbs are not passing from generation to generation. In SMS-messages proverbs are used in a new context and the traditional proverbs occur alongside the modern ones.

In this article the expression *traditional proverb* means an utterance that in Finland is commonly accepted to be an old proverb.¹ Otherwise in the text the

¹ Most of the traditional Finnish proverb types are included in three published collections: Nirvi/Hakulinen (1948), Kuusi (1953) and Laukkanen/Hakamies (1978). The concept of proverb in Finland has primarily been advanced to coincide with the types and structures presented in the aforementioned publications.

concept “traditional” is to be understood in the meaning of a typical and a usual, either in the past or in the present times. As the final focus is on meaning, the study is based on utterances in my mother tongue, Finnish.

2 PROVERBS AS A PART OF A FINNISH COLLOQUIAL LANGUAGE

Proverbs in Finnish language belong to everyday use and communication, although the context of proverbs’ use has changed over a period of one century. Until World War II Finnish proverbs had been primarily in oral use, whereas in many Central European language areas proverbs, first and foremost, had been used in literature (Hauser 2012; Schmale 2012). Finnish language is linked to a social capital because of its history. In the use of proverbs, social background has been more important than the individual one.

Finland was incorporated into Sweden during the Crusades of the 12th century and it remained a part of the Kingdom of Sweden until the beginning of the 19th century. In the 16th century, the Swedish King Gustav Vasa established the Lutheran Church as the national church of all Sweden. In Finnish area Finnish was the language used in sermons and all quotations and proverbs from Bible were heard in Finnish.² After Swedish time Finland became an autonomous Grand Duchy of Russia from 1809 to 1917 (some parts of the country even before), enjoying a special position as to the rules and regulations of state, the Lutheran church, popular education, the question of language, own money and so on. The official language of Finland at this time was still Swedish, although the languages of the power elite were Swedish and Russian, in some cases also German and French. The Finnish language and proverbs were used by a minority group and linked to a social power as proverbs in Finnish used to be a part of the language of the underprivileged majority (Granbom-Herranen 2008: 116–117; 2010a: 104.) Differentiating between proverbs in oral tradition and in literature was quite easy in the pre-World War II era in Finland; the written language in Finland was not normally Finnish, illiteracy remained to

² In Finnish tradition proverbs exist that are supposed to belong to literal tradition and in fact, for the majority in Finland, they have been a part of oral tradition (Granbom-Herranen 2008: 34). Although both the Bible and the statutes existed in the written form, they were read for the people in the church during the church service. Proverbs and Bible quotations were used to make the sermon clear and easy to remember. Already before 19th century some collections of proverbs had been published in Finnish but they had not affected the language of ordinary people, as mentioned above. The books are shown to be the source of Finnish proverbs less than have been assumed (Granbom-Herranen 2009a: 9).

be common in Finland as late as until the beginning of the 20th century.³ Written Finnish arose to a language of religion in the 17th century. Then it started to be used by the state and was used both in religious and secular spheres in the 19th century. Later, chiefly in the 20th century, it became mainly used for secular purposes, i. e. in newspapers (Granbom-Herranen 2008: 272).

The World War II was a turning point in many ways in Finland. People from Eastern Finland (Karelia) were evacuated and the whole Finnish society had to be reorganized; compulsory public education became more and more comprehensive and children were connected to the social system more tightly than before. Urbanisation was going on and the surroundings changed, while economic life and the trades were changing as well. Oral tradition was not anymore as meaningful and powerful as it used to be during the time of stability. The ever growing literate part of the Finnish nation got more and more opportunities for getting hold of Finnish books, newspapers and magazines. These days, the native Finnish-speaking population in Finland can read and write in Finnish. This has changed the position of proverbs in the Finnish language and might be the explanation for the similarities between the use of proverbs both in spoken language and in written colloquial form. In its entirety, oral and written communication has become more and more similar in many ways (Granbom-Herranen 2011b: 289). Nowadays a significant part of interaction between people takes place in a written form. Today proverbs occur in a colloquial written Finnish as well as in the oral tradition.

Proverbs in spoken language are in many ways the same as the proverbs in the colloquial written form in media language, everyday political rhetoric, mass media or the Internet. As the focus is on the features of such an utterance in everyday life use, it is easy to notice that no fundamental differences exist between oral use and use in colloquial written language. The presentational characteristic does not disappear when such utterances are moved to new surroundings; namely, from speech to colloquial writing. Although proverbs are quite unchangeable, their meanings in both everyday speech and colloquial written language can change even if, on a personal level, they are nearly always connected to the time and place in which the proverb has been learned (Granbom-Herranen 2009b).

³ Even if there were some Finnish speakers who could read and write in the 19th century from the social point of view even the use of the Finnish language has formed a separating barrier between ordinary people and the upper social classes, including the possibility for schooling. Passing from one generation to another, Finnish proverbs have been the speech of the family and neighbourhood (Granbom-Herranen 2010a: 94–95).

3 PROVERB

The meaning and definition of the concept “proverb” has changed due to all the changes that have occurred both in the use of proverbs and in the everyday living context. As mentioned above, significant changes between the 19th and 21st centuries occurred in the environment in which Finnish proverbs were used, as well as in everyday life of the Finnish people. Up to the 1970’s agriculture was the main source of living for Finnish people but in the beginning of 21st century the life style became more urbanised. The urban proverb tradition in Finland has brought up changes to the use of proverbs and the earlier oral tradition has found a place in the colloquial written language and so, for example, the feature “handed down from generation to generation” (Mieder 2004: 3) combined with proverbs is something to be re-evaluated. Nowadays proverbs are not primarily transmitted either orally or from one generation to another, but transmission takes place rather in written form and quite often within one generation only – those who are outside the generation are also outsiders to these proverbs.

Even if the concept of proverb is to be seen as a tool not an end in itself, the concept frames the research. There are major discrepancies between the academic disciplines in the way they see the concept of proverb. There are also said to be as many definitions of proverbs as there are disciplines (Grzybek 1987: 44) or researchers (Mieder 2004: 2–3). In folkloristic the focus is on the proverb use as a part of everyday speech. In linguistic the main focus is on the proverbs in literature (Granbom-Herranen 2011b: 287; Grzybek 2012: 137).

In this article a Finnish proverb is seen as a short, independent statement that is or has been familiar within the frame of a particular time and place. The proverb is understood to be a short, commonly known or used (= familiar to some group) utterance. It is a sentence or a reference to a well-known sentence and it contains an autonomous idea.

4 MATERIAL AND METHODS OF THE ON-GOING STUDY

4.1 Material

I use SMS-messages meant to be short letters⁴ to other readers and the editor of a local daily newspaper *Salon Seudun Sanomat* as research material.

⁴ SMS-message is a unit including normally at the most 160 characters. Some of the SMS-messages sent to editorial are made of two or even three messages.

The newspaper was established in 1919 and since then has been published in Finnish. The daily circulation of the newspaper was about 22 000 and there were about 56 000 readers in year 2009 (Kirjonen 2010). In SMS-messages the agrarian traditions are mingled with information technological Finland. The dichotomy is the clearest in the new city areas like Salo, where until 2011 almost everybody and everything has been in a constant interaction with production of mobile technology or farming.



Fig. 1: The page 2 of *Salon Seudun Sanomat* 10. 9. 2011.⁵

⁵ Translations: * *Annetaan kaikkien kukkien kukkia* [Let all the flowers bloom]; I'll do that. Anyhow, I am willing to give work for this caretaker. – *Annetaan kaikkien kukkien kukkia* [Let all the flowers bloom]; * *Ei savua ilman tulta* [No smoke without fire]; Don't let your kids buy hooded jackets. Under cover of them they can do all kind of wicked things and you cannot even see if they are girls or boys. – *Ei savua ilman tulta* [No smoke without fire]; * *Ahneella on paskanen loppu* [The salary/end of the greedy ones will be dirt]; It is not a wonder that we have mould on flats when the heating is not put on. The temperature inside is 16 grades, outside is raining and windows are misty inside. *Mikä se ahneen palkka oli?* [What is the salary of greedy ones] – Soon the place is unsuitable for living.

The SMS-messages are sent in the years 2006–2010 by people living in the Salo surroundings. Proverbs are transmitted in the form of cell phone SMS, they are written as short letters to the editor and they are meant to be published in the opinion-column. The SMS-messages are available since the column was first published, they are in electronic form and the research material includes all the messages sent to the editors, both published and unpublished. The basic SMS-material includes about 60 000 SMS-messages. The pre-study has shown out that about 50 proverbs are to be found within SMS-messages sent in the period of one month, this means that the final material will include some 2000–3000 SMS-messages. In the first years the column of SMS-messages was published six days a week, most of the years seven days in a week. The published column contains some 25 SMS-messages per day, which is approximately a fourth of the messages received by the editors. In one week approximately 5–20 of the published SMS-messages include proverbial utterances or references to a proverb.

The examples of traditional proverbs are from the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society in Helsinki, the material consisting of life stories from everyday life in Finland before World War II (PE85).⁶ The examples of modern proverbs come from newspaper material from the beginning of the 21st century (SSS).⁷ All examples used in the research are translations, equivalents have not been used.

4.2 Method

Proverbs in modern context are approached both from theoretical and empirical perspectives using mixed methods even the weight is in the qualitative research. The central research method is a content analysis which is understood as a cluster of methods connected with conclusions based on theoretical analyzes (Granbom-Herranen 2010b). The content analysis is commonly used with existing text material as texts in newspapers (Grönfors 1982). The content analysis differs from discourse analysis that also concentrates on the communication in written form but the contact between the sender and receiver of a message is in importance (Jussila/Montonen/Nurmi 1992). The SMS-messages in the column do not form that kind of a direct dialog or communicativeness that is required by discourse analysis.

⁶ *Perinne elämässäni – kilpakirjoitus* 1985. [Tradition in my life] in The Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society in Helsinki, Finland.

⁷ *Salon Seudun Sanomat*, a Finnish daily newspaper.

Regarding the use of proverbs, the research is based on folklorist Charles Briggs's (1988) ideas on proverb performances. The significance of an utterance has some basic starting points: firstly, language is not understood only as an instrument of communication but as linked to a thought (Vygotski 1967), secondly, we used Gottlob Frege's (2000) principle of context and thirdly, in order to be understood and interpreted, an utterance should follow Paul Grice's (1975) *cooperative principles*. In what follows the meaning of the proverbs will be analyzed twofold; on the one hand we will analyze the meaning given by the writer, and on the other hand a basic meaning.⁸

Ethical issues of the project concern mostly the archiving and further use of the collected proverb materials. The privacy of informants is secured by using pseudonyms when presenting the materials, thus, the material remain anonymous. Only editorial staff knows senders' phone numbers, so the filing of material has been done by the newspaper.⁹ The proverbs published in the newspaper are already public.

5 PROVERB PERFORMANCES

To use a proverb is a small performance which has a target bound with the performance, event and used words (Briggs 1988). The keyword is "performance" that includes both the verbal expressions and the behaviour by which the message comes over. The proverb performance often aims at an authentic and one-off event. Performer and the audience are to share some common knowledge about the past in order to be able to connect the message with the on-going activity but it is to be accepted that there are always listeners and readers who are not capable to understand and/or interpret proverbs (Granbom-Herranen 2008: 184, Ferretti et al. 2007).

Proverbs are suitable to use in short performances for example because of their form (shortness, rhythm). A successful proverb performance is able to sum up the whole performance and it can function as a full stop. In everyday use the speaker does not plan how to use proverb (when, where, in what form, and to whom). Evidently, this happens in the same way as in a colloquial written

⁸ The intended meaning is get with PSW-based model, developed in my previous research (Granbom-Herranen 2008, 2010a) and which is based on the use of metaphor in possible world semantics by Hintikka/Sandu (1994). The basic meaning is given with the assumed standard proverbial interpretation (Norrick 1985, Silverman-Weinreich 1994, Prahlad 1996).

⁹ The short opinions are published with pseudonyms but the newspaper is to be aware of the sending mobile number which has to be a registered one, not a prepaid connection.

language. When making a pause in the discourse, the use of a proverb as a violating element brings in some new aspects. In any case, the use of a proverb or a proverb itself adds a value to the speech event. There are no fundamental differences between the oral use and the colloquial written language as the focus is on the proverb use in everyday life. Following Briggs's definition of the proverb performance, all the following features of proverbs can be found both in oral use and colloquial texts: the proverb is a fixed part of the event; there is an owner of the proverb; there is a verb that frames it; it aims at being associated with the situation; there is an expected basic meaning behind the proverb; the use of the proverb is meaningful in a particular context and it is used in order to be assertive (Briggs 1985: 798–802). The presentational feature does not disappear when the proverbs are used in new surroundings, from speech to colloquial written language.

The following examples deal actually with one proverb which occurs both as a traditional proverb and a modern one. The first example tells about the time about 80 years ago, the two other ones are from present.

- (1) When talking about the neighbours my parents pointed out that all people, both richer than we and more in needy than we, duller by nature or more communicative, all they were in some way good people. They wanted to find out something valuable of the blameworthy person. Just as a throwaway remark and by using some proper proverb they often ended with the saying:
 - *Tuumoo kahesti, ennen kun tuomihet* [Think twice before you judge], or
 - *Huonokii mehtä vastaa niin ku ite huuvat* [Even a bad forest answers as you shout towards] (PE85, man, born 1914)
- (2) Anyway, I have got along with the townspeople very well. *Kummottos mettä huutta, simmot se vasta*. [The way you shout towards a forest, that is the way it answers] – a local resident (SSS, sent 19. 8. 2006)
- (3) It was nice when we got a new school there every teacher has own laptop and many other fine things. Art was bought with 9000 euros. Now we have to save money. – *sitä saa mitä tilaa* [you get what you order] (SSS, sent 18. 8. 2006)

6 HOW TO RECOGNIZE A PROVERB?

As the time for a common, universal and multipurpose definition of the proverb has passed and each researcher makes own definitions (Mieder 1993: 18), it comes to the question, how to recognize a proverb. In this study one of the starting points is that the use of proverbs is a part of communicative speech that is supposed to follow Paul Grice's cooperative principles of quantity, quality, relation, and manner (Grice 1975: 45–46). All these principles can be violated either consciously or subconsciously. The use of them violates one

or more of above mentioned categories. The way we recognize the proverb in speech or a text is problematic in a similar manner than recognizing a metaphor. Their meaning is based on differences from the ongoing discourse and they conflict with one or more Grice's cooperative principle (Granbom-Herranen 2011a: 49). One difficulty is that Grice's categories are not exclusionary ones. This will be discussed in the final research report.

Quantity

To say too much or too little is violence according to Grice's *category of quantity* which states that your contribution should be as informative as required for the current purpose, but that it should not be more informative than is required. It is related to how much information is provided.

- (4) Grandpa-41. Cars cannot be paid with the study grant. So those who have a car get money from parents. Everybody does not have the possibility to get the generous support from parents – *pappa betala* [dad pays] (SSS, sent 2. 9. 2006)

The proverb is *pappa betalar* [dad pays (for everything), *isä maksaa* in Finnish]. Also in Finnish speech the proverb always occurs in Swedish, the Finnish translation is never used. This SMS-message refers to the discourse considering study grant that the state gives in Finland. The proverb refers to Finland-Swedish population and to its material status as well as to economic life, both closely linked to the history of Finland. Among Swedish-speaking Finns the standard of living has been, and in many cases still is, higher than among Finnish-speaking Finns.¹⁰

Quality

The *category of quality* tells us to not say anything we believe to be false and to not say anything for which we lack adequate evidence. The most important thing is to try to remain honest when talking. For example a lie or an irony mean violating against this category.

- (5) Man! That is just red-blooded desire of a normal man. Keep an eye on your wife. She plays away, *ehkä kaipa* "*vihreää ruohoa*" *aidan toisella puolella* [might hunger for "greener grass" on the other side of the fence]. – betrayed woman (SSS, sent 8. 9. 2006)

¹⁰ Swedish was the official language until the independence. However, in 1863 it became possible to use also Finnish in official matters focusing on Finland. Only every tenth of ordinary people were Swedish speaker before the World War II (Granbom-Herranen 2010a: 105).

Actually, not a person hungers for grass as cows, horses and other animals do. The sentence is referring to the proverb *Ruoho on vihreämpää aidan toisella puolen* [The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence] and the writer says something that is not true to awake the reader to see the main point of her message. She knows it because her husband (if we trust that the pseudonym tells the truth) has betrayed her with somebody who wanted a new or a better company.

Relevance

Relevance, sometimes called relation, is to be understood as relevance of the utterance in relation what is going on or what has been said. The *category of relevance* requires the speech act to be relevant; however, the difficulty is that relevance is an invariable concept.

- (6) ***Moni kakku päältä kaunis***. [Many cakes look good]. Cars rust away under the plastic cover. How is it possible to know the conditions of body in modern plastic cars? – Sepi (SSS, sent 23. 12. 2006)

The cited proverb refers to the traditional Finnish proverb *Moni kakku päältä kaunis, vaan on sillkoa sisältä* [Many a cake looks good but the inside is just rubbish]. When starting the message with a sentence like this, the reader might ask what cakes actually have to do with cars. The proverb in the message was sent when the quality of the used cars was topical. The context clarifies the connection. The meaning of the sentence still remains unclear, if the reader does not know that the proverb continues with *but*, which stresses the opposite quality of the object.

Manner

To give hints one after another and talk without saying directly do violence against Grice's *category of manner*. The category guides us to avoid the obscurity and ambiguity in an expression, as well as to be brief and orderly. The manner is related to the well-aimed speech.

- (7) The victims ought to be demanded to be present at a court session on pain of the penalty payment. The victims are nothing less than escaping. – ***Silmä silmästä*** [An eye for an eye] (SSS, sent 2. 9. 2006)

Proverb *Silmä silmästä ja hammas hampaasta* [An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth] in Finnish it is known as the Code of Hammurabi and it is also to be found in Bible, both in The Old and New Testaments in various texts.

Actually, it does not become clear, if the threat in proverb is directed towards the accused person or the victim.

7 FINNISH PROVERBS TODAY: WHAT HAS HAPPENED?

In this chapter I present some of the preliminary findings considering what is going on with proverbs in SMS-messages. This is not an exclusionary classification, as mentioned above; the research is still going on.

Traditional proverbs are looking for new forms.

- (8) What a clumsy policeman who tried to make a turn in his car and ended in a ditch. This is really human. – *kaikille sattuu, jotka jotain viel yrittävät tehdä* [accidents will happen to all who still try to do something] (SSS, sent 5. 9. 2006)

The expression *kaikille sattuu, jotka jotain viel yrittävät tehdä* [accidents will happen to all who still try to do something] refers to the proverb *Tekevälle sattuu* [Accidents will happen to him/her who works]. Anyhow, the one used in the text is not a fixed form but a situation-related application that follows the idea of stylistic changes of proverbs in use (Naciscione 2012).

Traditional and/or modern proverbs are combined.

- (9) The sense of proportion is lost. Week after week people fuss about SMS-messages and stones are thrown! – Pseudonym: *Heittäjätkö pulmusia?* [The throwers are snow buntings?] (SSS, sent 28. 3. 2008)

The traditional proverb in this SMS-message is from the Bible: *Se, joka on synnitön, heittäköön ensimmäisen kiven* [The one without sin shall throw the first stone] and here it is combined with a well-known phrase in Finnish *Puhdas kuin pulmunen* [Clean as a snow bunting].¹¹ The phrase in itself refers to the image of the bird (white and clean), not to the reality (black and white).

Traditional proverbs are to be found in new connections.

- (10) Why send Finnish troops to other countries, if a minister finds it better to stay in a hotel only because of the burning tyres – *oma koti kullaa* [own home is worth of gold]. (SSS, sent 23. 1. 2007)

¹¹ *Plectrophenax nivalis*.

This message is a comment on a situation when a Finnish minister was in a war zone and stayed in a hotel. It is unclear here what the ‘home’ is – Finland or the hotel.

Modern proverbs are created by using traditional proverbs.

- (11) In this town we have many recycle points for collecting paper, so that it should not be thrown to the garbage cans at houses – *Jotakin tolkkua* [You ought to have some common sense] (SSS, sent 30. 1. 2008)

Jotakin tolkkua points actually at two traditional proverbs, *Tolkku se on kerjätessäkin* [Temperance in all things – even when begging] and *Kohtuus kaikessa* [Moderation in everything]. The modern version would be *Kohtuus kaikessa, pullo päivässä* [Moderation in everything, just a bottle a day].

Traditional proverbs are transformed, sometimes as parodies of the old tradition.

- (12) Ungrateful, did you know that *kissa kiittämättä elää, viisas koirakin oppii kiittämään* [a cat lives without thanking, a wise dog learns to thank]. We should learn from a dog! The one who gives a present gets a good feeling. – Yeah (SSS, sent 15. 1. 2008)

He or she got an answer:

- (13) Ungrateful. *Kissa elää kiitoksella, koira päään silityksellä* [A cat lives with thanking, a dog with someone stroking its head]! – Yeah, yeah (SSS, sent 24. 1. 2008)

This example comes quite near the stylistic changes mentioned in the example 8. Anyhow, the assumption of the parody is based on the way the text is playing with language.

8 CONCLUSIONS

Traditional proverbs, references to traditional proverbs, modern proverbs and biblical quotations are used in modern colloquial written Finnish as well as in everyday speech. In colloquial language a proverb lives as long as it is referred to; looking for proverbs in speech and texts like speech means to consider the proverbs, the shortened proverbs, or references and allusions to some proverb. This might take place within a group or between some of them. Proverbs, both traditional and modern ones, still have their place in urban surroundings and new technology. In Finnish the SMS-messages in newspapers form a context for traditional and modern proverbs in written colloquial language.

In a life story we read that in the beginning of 20th century the proverb *ah-neella on paskanen loppu* [a greedy person gets a dirty end] was used in the following way:

- (14) The greediness was disapproved. A saying was that *ahneudella on paskanen loppu* [a greedy person gets a dirty end]. My grandmother and mother were somehow religious and their opinion was that dirty tricks don't give a blessing to the life (PE85 man, born 1923)

As in the beginning of 21st century it is used as:

- (15) Finland is not any more a republic. It is a price-increase-factory and a political making-excuses-theatre. Try to imagine where this takes us. – *Ahneella on* ... [A greedy person gets...] (SSS, sent 1. 9. 2006)

Traditional proverbs are searching for new forms, as rhetorical changes have become more and more visible. They are combined with other proverbs or phrases, creating sometimes a new fixed form of two utterances. In some cases they occur in quite extraordinary connections, if we look at the basic meaning. Modern proverbs are created by using traditional proverbs, and the traditional ones are transformed. All this arises principal questions how much the proverbs are allowed to change? Proverbs are in life as long as they are referred to but what is the point when the utterance is not a proverb anymore? This is just one case, though it can be seen everywhere in the globalizing world: what can be expected to survive when environment changes but the content of speech stays unchanged? These are questions to be referred to over the on-going research.

In Finnish, the written colloquial language has taken its place alongside the spoken one. There are some discrepancies as well as similarities between proverbs in everyday life, proverbs in media, and proverbs in literature. Nevertheless, despite many changes in life and everyday practices, it is clear without hesitation that Finnish proverbs live also in contemporary Finnish language and they have their place as a part of a contemporary Finnish communication. They are not relics of the ancient time.

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