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# FINNISH AND ESTONIAN IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION RESEARCH

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## 1. Introduction

All languages are learned as second languages by at least some people, but only a handful have been studied as targets of learning. **Second language** (L2) refers here to any language learned after the first language (L1), either as a foreign language, often studied in a school setting, or in a community using the language, as is the case for many immigrants. The research of second language acquisition (SLA) is overwhelmingly English-based. Conclusions about universal developmental SLA paths and processes are repeatedly drawn on evidence from L2 English alone, or at best, on languages related to English, such as French, German, Dutch, or Scandinavian languages. Other languages, like Arabic, Chinese, or Japanese, feature as L1s but are seldom in the role of L2. Finno-Ugric languages are for several reasons in an excellent position to help to correct this bias.

Until about 1990 it was typically only the odd linguist or an individual married to a speaker of Finnish, Estonian, or Hungarian who studied these languages. Political events and increased mobility in Europe have changed this situation. During the past two decades Finland has changed from a country of emigration into a country of immigration, with a great need for second language education of immigrants. Estonian has become the only official language of Estonia, and the country has to cope with the teaching of Estonian to its Russian population. Similar trends exist in Hungary, but are not discussed in this paper, partly as there are, to the extent the author has been able to find out, fewer studies of the acquisition of Hungarian, and partly as the close linguistic relationship of Finnish and Estonian, one of the key points of the argumentation, does not exist between these two languages and Hungarian. Many of the arguments, however, are also true for Hungarian as well as any other Finno-Ugric language.

To study the development of a particular area of L2, a description of the target area is required: what is there to be learned? To be able to compare the L2 development across languages, the descriptions of the areas to be compared must be written within a coherent theoretical framework. For Finnish and Estonian several thorough and up-to-date descriptions exist, providing the SLA researcher with a good starting point. It may turn out during the course of a SLA study that the description written by and for L1 speakers of the target language is not sufficient or ideally structured when approached from the L2 perspective, but at least it acts as one potential model of the target.

Another advantage which Finnish and Estonian – unlike Arabic, Chinese, or Japanese – share in this context is that both are written in the Latin alphabet. For researchers coming from Western cultures, the Latin alphabet is familiar and thus saves labour, particularly if the researchers are not very familiar with the target language themselves and have to rely on written sources. Nor is the spelling of either Finnish or Estonian very difficult to master, as it is fairly regular in relation to pronunciation. More importantly, from the methodological viewpoint, the Latin alphabet excludes one extra factor affecting learning in the case of those

learners whose L1 uses the same writing system or who have previously learnt another language with the Latin alphabet.

One of the crucial SLA questions is: To what extent is SLA language-specific? Are all languages acquired in more or less the same way? Is there a universal order of acquisition? If the claim for universal applicability of an acquisition order is made, the claim must be tested in many structurally, typologically, and historically different languages. Finnish and Estonian provide a fertile testing ground for such claims. On the other hand, if influence from L1 is assumed, again Estonian and Finnish provide many good areas for testing the claims, as there are both obvious similarities and equally obvious structural differences between the two languages. Furthermore, there is a wealth of information on the interaction of Finnish and Estonian in the contexts where one of them is the L1 and the other one the L2. Most of this knowledge can only be found in various internationally less-known sources such as the Lähivertailuja (“Close Comparisons”) series discussed in more detail below.

Yet another contribution Finnish and Estonian are able to bring to the international SLA arena is the concentration on morphology. A great majority of SLA studies discussing the acquisition of structural features of various L2s deal only with syntax and phonology. Morphology is rarely mentioned, or if in focus, it is often limited to the few morphological phenomena present in English. The theoretical discussion on the morphological L2 development in general, and on the nature and role of cross-linguistic influence in morphology in particular, is quite lacking. What happens when morphologically complex and closely related languages interact in the SLA process?

In addition to addressing the advantages of including the study of Finno-Ugric languages in the general SLA research, the purpose of this article is also to contribute to the discussion of the nature of the cross-linguistic influence between closely-related languages like Estonian and Finnish (see also Martin 2006). I will first briefly chart related areas, particularly contrastive research and cross-linguistic influence, suggesting a framework for their SLA-related study. Then some efforts which have been started to bring Finno-Ugric languages into SLA focus will be discussed, and some important gaps located, with suggestions for promising areas for future studies.

## **2. Contrastive research and cross-linguistic influence**

The study of second language acquisition as an independent academic discipline dates back to the early 1970's (see e.g. Mitchell and Myles 29-51). People have, of course, always learnt each others' languages in informal contexts, and languages have been taught and practices for doing so transferred from one generation to the next as long as there has been any kind of educational institutions. These practices, however, have mostly remained outside scientific scrutiny until the 1950's, when behaviorism in psychology and structuralism in linguistics produced the idea of contrasting linguistic structures to produce knowledge to aid language teaching. This work served as a starting point for the current SLA studies, even if the focus was on the languages, not yet on the learning processes.

The change of focus in the early 1970's labeled contrastive studies and error analysis, which compares the learner products with the target language forms, as old-fashioned. This was mainly due to the introduction of the concept 'learner language (interlanguage)' (cf. Selinker). In this framework the learner language was seen as an independent and developing

linguistic system, rather than as erroneous form of the target language. True enough, comparisons are not explanations per se, nor does pointing out errors alone serve as charting of the learning processes. Nevertheless, both types of efforts are necessary for establishing hypotheses for testing theoretical SLA models, be they language-specific or universal.

Contrastive research describes and compares the structural features and other properties of languages. It does not need to make assumptions of **cross-linguistic influence** but comparative descriptions are necessary for identifying potential domains of cross-linguistic influence, hereafter called 'transfer'. The term **transfer** has many meanings and uses (see e.g. Dechert et al.), and some researchers use 'cross-linguistic influence' to avoid unwanted connotations to solely negative transfer or 'interference'. Here 'transfer', however, is used in a neutral meaning, simply as a short alternative for 'cross-linguistic influence.' Other related areas to study are code-switching and borrowing, which are also often considered independent fields (for drawing the borderlines see e.g. Poplack et al. and Lauttamus). In the cognitive and psycholinguistic view, however, transfer, code-switching, and borrowing have something in common: two or more languages must meet in one's mind. Thus these areas can also be seen as a continuum, with the focus area depending on the researcher's theoretical framework and aims of the study. A contrastive description serves as a starting point for all these areas.

Apart from the strictest adherents to some branches of Universal Grammar, who believe that L2 acquisitions is like L1 acquisition, based on the same Language Acquisition Device, with no influence from already known languages, most SLA researchers assume that L1 affects SLA. Even when L1 influence is not at all the focus of the study, it is considered good practice to list the L1s of the research participants. Usually, however, L1 transfer is mentioned as a potential factor when the learning paths and products are studied.

What exactly is involved in L1 transfer? Many studies use it as an explanation for what learners do, without further specification. Below, the concept of transfer is divided into subcategories, not so much for purely theoretical reasons, but with the purpose of providing a framework for the discussion of how the existing but to some extent rather ephemeral contrastive knowledge of Finnish and Estonian could be better brought into the general discussion of cross-linguistic influence.

First of all, it is often forgotten that transfer phenomena can occur both in L2 production and in L2 reception. We use our L1 knowledge (and other languages we know) in trying to decipher L2 messages. Receptive transfer is not visible or audible to observers and can only be indirectly noticed via misunderstandings. Productive and receptive transfer are likely to have different developmental sequences, as reception usually precedes production in SLA. A theoretical discussion of this issue can found in Ringbom. In Ringbom's work Finnish figures as L1 in L2 English development, while transfer in the reception of Finnish L2 has not been studied.

Both productive and receptive transfer can entail products and processes. Product transfer refers to using items (sounds, structures, words, idioms etc.) of L1 in L2 production. It is the type of transfer usually meant when discussing cross-linguistic influence in SLA, as products are concrete entities, either in speech or in writing, and can be easily observed and analyzed. Not only L1 pronunciation (sounds, prosodic features), words (loans, calques), or grammatical items (affixes, conjunctions, or whole constructions) can be subject to transfer, but also pragmatic and social usages. A good example of the latter is the various translations of *Have a nice day!* in Finnish. The need to say something in contexts where earlier nothing was said was

transferred. Similarly, also schemas and frames are transferred as a part of cultural influences. An example of this could be the way performers are introduced in American TV programs, with a certain order of information coupled with a particular intonation pattern: -- and now (a long pause) NN. This is now common on Finnish TV, too, as well as at school parties etc.

Process transfer refers here to the use of L1 processes in L2. Like product transfer, process transfer can be detected at all levels of L2 use. The processes are usually cognitive, affecting the way we cope with the L2, but are not normally visible by observing the L2 products, as we can come to acceptable L2 productions via different productive paths. Morphological forms can be produced by memorizing them, by rules, or by using analogical processing, and the end result can be exactly the same. A good, and somewhat researched example is whether complex morphological forms are decomposed in processing or treated as monomorphemic (see e.g. Portin, where Finnish, Hungarian and Chinese serve as L1s, with Swedish as L2). According to Portin, monomorphemic processing typical of Chinese is transferred to Swedish, making the processing of inflected forms different from that of native speakers of Swedish. Another example is Ylinen who looks into the processing of phonological duration with Finnish as L2, Russian as L1.

Process transfer could also be found on the interactional level, for instance in how participants of a conversation observe the cues for turn-taking, how repetitions are structured, etc. These are usually studied from the product angle, but involve also underlying processes. The problem of studying such issues, however, is methodology. Cognitive processes involving sound and word-level phenomena, such as duration or morphemes, are hard enough to study, and I am not aware of any studies involving Finnish or Estonian in the area of transfer of interactional processes. Yet another way to look at transfer is to study the transfer process itself: how does transfer happen? This issue, however, is not discussed further here.

The study of product transfer relies on linguistic descriptions and methodology. Studies of process transfer require psycholinguistic models and methods. To make a long and complex story extremely simplified, two main branches are available, leading to two different ways of hypothesising the transfer processes. The more established one is the view that there are permanent memory traces of linguistic materials, organized in some more or less specified way, with some type of retrieval system. The question then is, whether the L1 and L2 share these storages and retrieval mechanisms or not. The second approach involves the models currently challenging this view, by postulating an ever-changing network, which activates and deactivates constantly. The frequency of encounters with the linguistic items in question determines the activation levels and the emergence of linguistic knowledge. In this view it is more natural to see the two languages as a part of one network. With such vastly different models of the workings of language in the mind, anyone studying the process transfer needs to take a stand on the theoretical issues as well.

Estonian and Finnish offer a multitude of interesting opportunities for the study of both product transfer and process transfer, either as L1s, with L2 being a typologically different language, or as L2s for learners with a variety of L1s. Particularly fruitful are also studies where Finns are learning Estonian or vice versa. The learning of a closely related language is a generally surprisingly neglected area within SLA, and Estonian and Finnish have the further advantage that they offer a rich morphological system for the transfer studies. To date, however, the studies in the area have often been void of any theoretical discussion or general framework. Even such a simplistic theoretical categorization as sketched above would help the readers of these studies to see the connections beyond the actual data set and make the work

more accessible to the larger SLA community. A much more detailed general framework for such studies can be found in Ringbom, with slightly different terminology, as his focus is mainly on the perception of similarities. He also provides an overview of studies of cross-linguistic influence with Finnish as L1. A methodological framework for transfer studies has been set out in Jarvis. Below, the existing studies and projects involving cross-linguistic influence to and from Finnish and Estonian are discussed, with the aims of showing what is already there and identifying important gaps.

### 3. Resources and lacunae

Estonian and Finnish are learned and taught as L2s in many contexts. In addition to the informal learning of Finnish by Estonians via Finnish television broadcasts in the Soviet era, many Estonians learn Finnish while working in Finland. Finns travel to Estonia frequently and acquire some of the **language**;  $\rightarrow$  some also take evening courses. University students [**where? In both Finland and Estonia?**] studying the Finnish language are usually required to take courses in Estonian and vice versa. This has provided many opportunities for university lecturers in both countries to observe the learning process and the transfer issues related to it. These observations and research efforts have been reported in teachers' meetings and published as a series of 17 conference proceedings called *Lähivertailuja* (Close Comparisons). The volumes in the series have been published by many universities over the past 25 years, making it very difficult to obtain the information thus collected. For the purposes of this **article**, the volumes were analyzed as to the type of studies published. <sup>+</sup> (**The author is most grateful to the students of Professor Annekatrin Kaivapalu at the University of Tallinn for their help in doing this work.**)

Many carefully conducted case studies and valuable observations from classrooms and other contexts of second language use have been documented in the Close **Comparison Comparisons** series. **This research These data**, however, **are is** quite fragmentary in nature, both theoretically and **methodically methodologically**. The theoretical starting points have not always been spelled out, or are only indirectly presented in the choice of terminology. There is also great variation as to the methods and extent of data collection. Making overall conclusions or comparisons **of these data and research results** concerning the L1 influence of Finnish or Estonian on the L2 learning of these languages is thus not easy. It is possible, however, to present some general observations to provide suggestions for further studies.

The most frequent type of study is a contrastive description of a grammatical or lexical area. Particularly morphology has been well covered, but also parts of syntax, phonology, and pragmatics are present. The choice of the topics of the descriptions has often been influenced by teaching **needs**, but material is usually not presented in any SLA framework. The studies related to learning are mostly observations or test results from teaching situations and student productions. They contain a considerable amount of **data**, but few have been very rigorously conducted. The most common methodological choice is error analysis. The focus is on the products; cognitive processes or receptive skills are not discussed. Nearly all learners are university students in language departments. Spontaneous acquisition or **younger, or less** educated or less linguistically knowledgeable learners are not studied, nor are there longitudinal projects.

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<sup>+</sup> ~~The students of Professor Annekatrin Kaivapalu at the University of Tallinn were most helpful in doing this work. Many thanks to them!~~

Outside the series there are two studies with higher linguistic ambitions involving transfer issues between Estonian and Finnish. The most recent one is by Remes 2009, which is who did a contrastive study of Finnish and Estonian morphology, based on natural morphology and markedness theory. It provides not only a synchronic comparison but also shows the influence of historical developments. It does not involve learning or transfer issues as such, but is motivated by a long teaching experience in both languages and provides an excellent source for future SLA studies. Kaivapalu 2005 is did a study of Estonian and Russian school-aged learners acquiring Finnish nominal inflection. Its design is based on Jarvis 2000, with careful comparisons of the inflection test results of the two L1 groups and two levels of language skills. The results show clear cross-linguistic influence from L1 in morphology – in opposition to some claims that no transfer is possible in morphology. The work also contributes to the knowledge on of how transfer changes as the general proficiency improves. The work of Hassinen (2002) on the bilingual L1 acquisition of Estonian and Finnish also touches on transfer issues in L1 context with young children, but has no SLA aspect.

The perusal of the existing research on L1 influence in SLA of Estonian and Finnish brings up certain areas as promising for contributions to the general SLA literature. Morphology in general is an important one. The concentration on English, which has a notoriously poor morphology, has left complex morphology nearly untouched. The developmental issues in morphology are somewhat discussed in the works reviewed above, but there is almost nothing on the interplay between syntax and morphology, which is exactly what many learners perceive as difficult in Finnish and Estonian. The linguist can afford to study these two areas separately, but the learner has to cope with both simultaneously (as well as all other areas, such as pronunciation, semantics, etc.), which is why SLA should also address the issue in a more coherent way. Studies in this area could produce completely new ideas and views for the general complexity theories which are currently much discussed in SLA studies (see e.g. the special issue of *Modern Language Journal* 92/2, 2008).

Phonology is another area of potential international interest in Finnish and Estonian. A fair amount of knowledge now exists, particularly on particularly the duration of sounds in these languages, and new methods, such as various brain imaging techniques, make increasingly detailed studies possible. So far no one has looked into the L1 transfer in L2 reception and production with Estonian and Finnish as the pair of languages involved. Also, there are uncharted areas with regard to syntax provides uncharted areas. Word order, for example, is a potential area of interest, as it differs between the languages in many subtle ways. For transfer in lexical acquisition, there are possibilities in Finnish-Estonian contexts, particularly in the area of reception, which Ringbom 2006 calls for as Ringbom suggests. With speakers of other L1s learning these languages, a very interesting area to study would be the early vocabulary acquisition, as the word structures are often quite different from those of L1. The rich derivational systems of Estonian and Finnish also offer new possibilities.

Much of the research concentrates on written one-time products of groups of students. Oral L2 skills are neglected, even if otherwise there is a strong tradition of studying spoken language, particularly dialects and linguistic variation in general. Conversational analysis, which is fairly strong in Finland, could also offer new views approaches also for the study of transfer issues. Longitudinal studies are also quite rare. The learning process is seldom followed for any length of time, at best two groups at different proficiency levels are compared in a pseudo-longitudinal design. Any kind of learning processes, let alone cognitive processes, are rarely discussed, for the focus is on products. The view of language is mainly monological; interactional or dialogical frameworks do not appear.

There is a multitude of SLA models, theories and frameworks to draw on. Construction Grammar based studies of the developmental sequences are under way, and in general cognitive approaches to language, such as Conceptual **Semantics**, are used as a way to analyze the learner language and the L1 influence. New methods abound, waiting for SLA researchers of Estonian and Finnish to use them to tackle their material in modern ways. It is not possible in a short article to discuss these in detail, or even to make specific suggestions, but **the** opportunities are endless. For instance, the wealth of existing contrastive descriptions makes it relatively easy **to deviee devise** tests for proving or falsifying hypotheses about transfer. In general, methods used by psycholinguists could be employed much more than has been the case so far. Neurolinguistic methods require equipment, but even that is now readily available in several universities in the Nordic-Baltic region. Computer simulations offer new ways of researching, e.g., **the** complexity issues and input frequency effects in SLA. Those interested in interactional issues can tap into the methodologies of discourse studies and conversational analysis. For those involved in **teaching**, action research may be a workable option

Several new research efforts have been launched in the early 2000's which could contribute to the goals presented above. The one focusing on the very area discussed in this article is VIRSU (<<http://www.joensuu.fi/suomi/virsu/>>). It **is was** originally **developed as** a cooperation network for teachers and researchers of Estonian or Finnish as a foreign language, mainly involving the same people who **have** initiated and produced the Close Comparison series mentioned above. Later it expanded its range of languages, and its aim is now to create connections between all linguists working with any of the Finno-Ugric target (foreign or second) languages or the language situations in the countries where Finno-Ugric languages are spoken. The aim of this project is to establish conditions for cooperation between researchers and doctoral students and to support their work by means of advisory pools. The VIRSU network is coordinated by **Professor Pirkko Muikku-Werner** at the University of Joensuu **in Finland**.

The developmental paths of Finnish as L2 are **searched researched/examined** in the project *The linguistic basis of the Common European Framework levels: Combining second language acquisition and language testing research* (CEFLING, see <<http://www.jyu.fi/hum/laitokset/kielet/cefling>>). Transfer is not **in focus in the focus of** this **project**, but as the data **contains contain** writing samples written by speakers of many L1s, those with Finno-Ugric L1s could easily be studied separately. The CEFLING corpus is **Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES) coded codings (?)** (see <<http://childes.psy.cmu.edu>>), making **it such data** accessible to other researchers using this tool. The advantage of the CEFLING corpus is that the samples have been independently rated for functional proficiency levels by at least three independent raters, using a Common European Framework for Languages scale (see <[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/CADRE\\_EN.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/CADRE_EN.asp)>).

Other corpora which offer opportunities for research into product transfer are the *International Corpus of Learner Finnish* (see <<http://www oulu.fi/hutk/sutvi/oppijankieli/index.html>>) at the University of **Oulu**, which includes written samples **of from** university students studying Finnish as a foreign language in many different countries, including those with Finno-Ugric L1s. At the University of Turku there is a corpus which concentrates on advanced learners of Finnish as a second language. **All Data regarding all level levels** and all skills are available at the National Proficiency Examination Corpus (see <http://www.fsd.uta.fi/aineistot/luettelo/FSD2324/meF2324.htm>). The



Corpus of Estonian Interlanguage (see <http://evkk.tlu.ee>) has error-coded samples of Estonian L2 learners, mainly with Russian as L1. There are also corpora of texts from learners of Estonian as L2 at ~~the~~ Tartu University.

#### 4. Conclusion

The study of Estonian and Finnish as L2s can shed light on many focal SLA research questions. It can be employed to test theory-based hypotheses which claim to be universal: these languages are structurally so different from Indo-European languages that any theory is much strengthened if it can be shown to hold true also for these languages. The pedagogical need for knowledge about the properties of Finnish and Estonian as target languages, as well as the illumination of the processes involved in acquiring these languages as second languages, concurs with the lack of testing the SLA theories which claim universal applicability. In this paper the transfer issues ~~are in~~ **were the focus**, but of course Finno-Ugric languages offer challenges to any branch of SLA study, whether L1 influence is assumed or not.

The number of people speaking Finno-Ugric languages is comparatively **small**, and consequently research resources are also limited. It is important to allocate these resources to serve the people themselves, as has mainly been done in the past. With increasing mobility and globalization, however, these languages have become targets of learning. Furthermore, the internationalization requirements of research institutions encourage scholars to look for topics which are of wider importance. The knowledge already accumulated and locally published must connect with the theories and research challenges currently discussed in the worldwide community of linguists. The field of SLA in general and the study of cross-linguistic influence in particular always involve more than one language. For the reason sketched above, this is a research field where it is feasible for the Finno-Ugric linguists to make a valuable contribution. This **requires**, however, concentration on topics for which Finno-Ugric languages offer novel approaches.

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