

# Lingua Franca and Beyond

## Tower of Babel – speaking different languages and still striving to communicate

### SECTION EDITOR



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The story in the Bible goes: “a united human race in the generations following the Great Flood, speaking a single language and migrating westward, comes to the land of Shinar (שִׁנְאָר). There they agree to build a city and a tower tall enough to reach heaven. God, observing their city and tower, confounds their speech so that they can no longer understand each other, and scatters them around the world.”<sup>1</sup>

Is it true or not? Most likely not; there are many hypotheses about the origin of languages and no definitive answer. We need to agree upon one thing though – a language spoken by a certain group of people reflects their mentality or possibly the other way around: their mentality shapes their language.

I have always been fascinated by linguistic variety and interference. One of the phenomena that particularly caught my attention was Finnish – why and how is it so different from the languages spoken in neighbour countries?

However, before getting to my Finnish point, I owe a short explanation. I am a passive (☹) member of the European Association of Science Editors, and in a lengthy email discussion about the proper use of “fewer” or “less”, I saw Carol’s comment “always remembering growing up in a Florida tourist town with, this year, ‘less tourists or more’. ...” and her signature:

*Carol*



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Well, I thought, I need to ask her if she would like to contribute to our “Lingua Franca” section and have her take us through her English–Finnish adventure. Fortunately, Carol agreed and here we are!

Just a few words about Carol: as already said, she is an American from Florida, who moved to Finland in 1985, ran and walked the Helsinki City Marathon at age 47 in 5.25 hours, loves fast Finnish ballroom dancing, and for almost 20 years in the USA she wrote fiction, wrote about deafness and created the first ostomy-surgery PR material. As Carol says: “I showed the comical side (*cul de sac*, marsupial us), back when many tended toward suicide.” The rest you will read in her superb and very entertaining text, and please do remember that “The main point of this tale is the huge chasm between Finnish and English and its reflection in the Finnish character”.

### Reference

1. The Tower of Babel. Wikipedia. [cited 2020 June 7]. Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tower\\_of\\_Babel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tower_of_Babel)

**Maria Koltowska-Häggström**

# An American lucky to be among Finns

In 1985, I began creating the University of Helsinki's first course in English writing for research scientists, decades before I discovered this great tip: Aim for short words in short sentences in short paragraphs.<sup>1</sup> How Finns wrote was the opposite: long paragraphs of long sentences with lengthy agglutinated words with complex case endings (16 cases each for singular and plural; prepositions non-existent). A famously long word in English is *antidisestablishmentarianism*, but in Finnish one meets *useampimerkityksisten tietosuojakäytäntöjen avulla* (to show Finnish word order and absence of prepositions. It means more than many meanings of multi-use data-security practices... with the aid of). Recognisable cognates of Indo-European words are few – though some words grow an *i*, like *grilli* (grill) or *filmi* (film); *pankki* is also recognisable (bank). Articles? None. Pronoun gender? Absolutely none here, where women voted in 1906!

One notorious novelty involves a Finnish farmer asking his farmhand *Kokko* to gather a whole pile of hay, and the boy asks “Whole pile?” This gives us “*Kokko, kokoo koko koko. Koko kokoko?*” Every initial syllable invariably has heavy stress, and all double letters lengthen. Good luck! Or how about this seven-vowel (yes, including “y” here), three-word union meaning “wedding-night intention”: *häyyöiaie?*

Half my students were, from Day One, physicians. I, too, had chosen to study medicine, hoping in part to fulfil my grandfather's abandoned goal. As a medical student, he heard his US president vow to free the slaves, and thus he joined Lincoln's army. Badly injured, he left school, became an insurance agent, and, as an old man, fathered four girls. My pre-med bachelor's degree (biology/chemistry) at Duke University qualified me for its medical school, but with zero funding, I instead worked in one of its research labs, handling drug-resistant tuberculosis. After Oak Ridge National Laboratory and “sacrificing” a thousand mice, I switched to writing, my second love. I'd written my first story at 7 and a novelette at 13 in typing class, so I breezed through an MA in rhetoric, and in my PhD thesis (University of Maryland), I analysed “The Image of the Physician in Literature.” By age 50, I had produced eight novels and a handful of articles.

During our degree-studies, I taught writing in universities and colleges for 7 years. I then accompanied my botanist husband Dan on three herbarium visits to Finland; the fourth trip was

his Fulbright-scholar year. Loving Finland, we both decided to stay. When, however, our third course in Finnish introduced case endings also for *verbs*, Dan (who had excelled in years of school Latin) threw up his hands and went home to California. Unlike Dan's department, my language centre was full of English speakers. Having neither kids nor siblings, I decided to hold on to my Dream-of-a-Lifetime Job. I refused to leave; I demurred.

Flash forward almost 10 years to 1995, when, as he neared 50, a physicist named Jyrki (which is, amazingly, pronounced YEAR-key) started studying English with me, and one might say he never ceased! In return, however, he enlightens me constantly on inter-language differences. Our home language, by his choice and my necessity, is English, and I also listen constantly to English broadcasts to preserve my English ear.

Back to 1985, when I unexpectedly yet permanently left a nation of 300 million people for one of 5 million. What flew into my hands was a just-published, heavy-in-every-respect guidebook subtitled “for Finnish scientists writing in English”. The author of this book, *The Words Between*<sup>2</sup> was Peggy Perttunen (1916–2016), an English botanist who had tutored a tall, shy Finnish entomologist. She soon found herself in Finland – for the first time – as his wedding-cake-bearing new bride. Within one week, the Peggy who had 2 years earlier been a rooftop warplane-spotter became an author's editor at the nearby University Hospital. Her immigrant-to-Finland tale thus far outdoes mine.

Finland's excellent education system, coupled with what I suspect is high intelligence, means that Finns' written English can surprise Indo-European speakers. I shelved plans to teach grammar the way I taught it to US university undergraduates. Peggy – once overheard saying “Carol is American, but she's very nice!” – showed me what Finnish linguistic interference was: lines like “Every ninth patient died”, “Darwin published her major book in 1859”, and “The other eye was affected but not the other eye”. Journal editors abroad, accustomed to everyone's errors in preposition and article choice, would surely be perplexed by such lines.

I tell students and editing clients, endearingly embarrassed by making errors, that the fault is not really theirs. Finnish is an isolated, conservative, still completely logical language, persisting despite Swedish conquerors' attempts to disallow and suppress it. English, conversely,



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Photo: Carolyn (Carol) Brimley Norris in 2017

sprouted like a field of weeds on an oft-invaded island forced to develop continuously evolving constructions. Written Finnish first appeared in Mikael Agricola's *abc-book* of 1543, but waited 320 years to become Finland's official language, 7 years before the first-ever Finnish novel, which has its own annual day of honour.

My first students here asked about British versus US English spelling, since in Finnish, each letter represents one phoneme. And how can our preposition choices (living/playing *in/on* the street) also differ? Finns are also stunned that English syllable-stress may in mere decades migrate (*contribute* to *contribute*) and can even hop around for emphasis (She wed at *thirteen?*). England has regional dialects, America regional accents, and Finland has both, but also *kirjakieli* and *puhekieli*, its *book-* and *spoken-* Finnish. Before 2000, Finnish courses for foreigners ignored the spoken Finnish as low. I never learned it; I constantly overhear it. The rules of Finnish demand from foreigners only prodigious memories. Ancient rules hold always! *Aina!*

Peggy edited for the university medical faculty until age 86; I fondly remember her in a large, overstuffed chair, on her lap the manuscript PhD thesis of the paediatrician who perched on one chair-arm, as I perched on the other. Peggy raised children and taught her clients informally. My original university writing course has continued happily – without one semester's break – for 35 years. Teaching for the Language Centre also included oral English courses for medical, dental, and veterinary undergraduates. When Finns began attending more meetings abroad, I added a medical-faculty conference-

presentation course. Finns were submitting articles mainly to Nordic journals, but soon had articles appearing in the UK and USA. Their findings proved important; what their texts needed was a clearer, more concise and powerful style.

Peggy had long championed active voice and end-focus, explaining that the bulky, boring English passive<sup>3</sup> differs from the Finnish passive, which is a single word, frequent but innocuous, like replacing *minä tein sen* (= I did it) with *tehtiin* (= it was done). With similar modesty, Finns conceal exciting ideas or findings in each sentence's dead centre. Both habits – along with silence and eye-contact avoidance – may exemplify the national character. Shyness is, however, not meekness; in 1939–1940, Finnish courage, *sisu*, empowered troops to beat back a large eastern invader, although outnumbered 10 to 1.

My course materials grew from paper handouts into an 85-page book.<sup>4</sup> One of its exercises requires reducing a 200-word Finnish Methods section by half, putting its 14 passive-voice verbs into the active without “we”, and flipping over clauses to achieve end-focus. With the tool of inanimate agent (the test served, data provided) Finns learn to enjoy doing this.

At exactly the right moment, my second mentor, Björn Gustavii, MD, PhD, of Sweden (1932–2019), saw his delightful Lund University science-writing guide soar to its 2003 publication by Cambridge University Press.<sup>5</sup> (It had first been published by Studentlittertur in 2000.) Equally invaluable was Björn's first-ever guide<sup>6</sup> to the compilation PhD thesis that Finnish and Swedish scientists prefer. For a dozen years, I tweaked Björn's English, and he factually enriched my unpublished course book ... without our ever meeting. Overloaded emails, but alas, no overstuffed chair.

Occasionally I consult with professors for whom I author-edit, but daily I edit post-course manuscripts for my students. These become journal articles for their compilation PhD theses. Later, I am the sole editor of their up-to-100-page thesis summary or analysis, the *yhteenveto* (= together drawing). This produces a bound book including their four or five articles in international medical journals, and it underpins a frighteningly formal public thesis defence. The *yhteenveto* then goes forth into the world as an e-thesis. Some literature sections of the *yhteenveto* can shrink into review articles.

Finns scoff at their thrice-won title “The World's Happiest People”, another saying being “If people on the street smile at you, they're either crazy, drunk, or American.”

Recently, a professor friend sent me his student's lengthy *yhteenveto* in surgery that presented a unique problem: it was in Finnish, but to be accessible worldwide it had to be in English. Those 100 pages therefore passed through Google Translate; the professor did his best with the result, and I did more. Google – though steadily improving – finds Finno-Ugric languages (which include Estonian and Hungarian) still a challenge. One recipient of my annual letter (no social media for me!) asked Google to translate it into Finnish. Its back-translation into English had me falling about, laughing.

Despite my limitations, the immigration office issued me a passport in 2005 on the basis of Finland's 4-hour language exam – its sole requirement for citizenship. After 20 years here, I had achieved the minimal score of 3/6! Finland's other official language is Swedish. Unlike Canada, where French-speakers are 21% of the population, Swedish speakers here account for only 5%. (Sweden and then Russia owned Finland, making us only 103 years old.) English, however, wins the prestige prize, and America has been a role model, though American English only after the 1980s, when US TV swamped schools' “English English”.

Fluent English speakers in southern Finland – most everyone under 60 – hear one word from me, like *kiitos* (= thank you), and usually ask me to speak English. This is no insult; no Finn has ever criticised my attempts. Some Finns yearn to practice spoken English, explaining, “Good Finnish is so hard to speak, why try?” They do feel guilty pride in their language's difficulty. *Selkосуоми* (= clear Finnish), mercifully on offer, I grasp easily. Whereas I studied Cuban Spanish at 15 and French in college, foreign languages start here at 7, usually English. Then comes Swedish, and many tackle a few more. Language learning actually begins in utero, thanks to undubbed TV and films, a wise Nordic practice (true also of the Netherlands). Post-utero, a baby's early words worldwide are variations on “mama” and “papa”, natural mouth movements. Our clever babies instead manage *äiti* (eye-tea) and *isä* (ee-seh).

My chief advice is therefore “Never translate lines from Finnish into English, and before sending manuscripts to journals or to me, read them aloud to yourself, trusting your lifetime-trained ear.”

How fortunate I am to teach English writing skills and to author-edit for my own students,

whether they are age 25 or now retired (as I hope I shall never be). Then, editing shows me what I should currently teach, like punctuation, still, and avoidance of naïve, unintended plagiarism. Increasingly, students come from abroad, now comprising about one-fifth of my classes, their differing issues quickly recognisable. Persians and Nepalese are particularly good non-Indo-European writers; Estonians from across our narrow strait write just like Finns.

Finns scoff at their thrice-won title “The World's Happiest People”, another saying being “If people on the street smile at you, they're either crazy, drunk, or American”. But before COVID-19 made us all learn to teach remotely, I was able, on each final day of class, to hug all of my smiling medics – a privilege of *lil ole ladies*. Finns' efficiency, honesty, and high respect for learning – and for teachers – will surely survive time and viruses. Luckily for me.

## References

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*Carol's book Academic Writing in English is updated annually. Write to Carol to receive 30 pages of keys to exercises in the book.*