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 (רָעְנִׁש). 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.”

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 neighbouring 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
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. How Finns wrote research scientists, decades before I discovered Helsinki’s first course in English writing for Pronoun gender? Absolutely none here, where 92 was the opposite: long paragraphs of long prepositions non-existent. A famously long word in English is antidisestablishmentarianism, but in Finnish one meets useampimerkityksisten tietosuojakäytätääntöjen 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”: hääyöaie?

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 qualified me for its medical school, but with zero degree (biology/chemistry) at Duke University I shelved plans to teach English, conversely, means I constantly overhear it. The rules of English syllable-stress may in mere decades migrate (con tri bute to con tri bute) and can even hop around for emphasis (She wed at thirteen?). English, conversely, 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 guide-book subtitled “for Finnish scientists writing in English”. The author of this book, The Words Between² was Peggy Pertunen (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, 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 (con tri bute to con tri bute) and can even hop around for emphasis (She wed at thirteen?). England has regional dialects, America regional accents, and Finland has both, but also kirjakielten and puhekielien, 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-
Recently, a professor friend sent me his student’s lengthy *hyytenseeto* 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’ “England English”.

Fluent English speakers in southern Finland – most everyone under 60 – hear one word from me, like *kitos* (= 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.

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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.

References


5. Gustavii B. How to prepare a scientific paper including their four or five articles in international medical journals, and it underpins a frighteningly formal public thesis defence. The *hyytenseeto* then goes forth into the world as an e-thesis. Some literature sections of the *hyytenseeto* can shrink into review articles.