

Utility of Finnish Vocabulary of Indo-European Origin for Learning Finnish

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Abstract

Latin and Greek are the major donor languages to most European languages including Finnish, which does not belong to the Indo-European but Uralic language family. The present study conducted a vocabulary survey to examine the utility of frequently used Finnish vocabulary of foreign origins and their English equivalents for learning Finnish as a foreign language. The Oxford 3000 list was used as the primary reference of high-frequency English words and their Finnish equivalents. Approximately 190 loanwords of Latin or Greek origin are included in the most frequently used 3,000 Finnish words and approximately 80 loanwords can be used with a similar pronunciation in English and French. Therefore, the present study concluded that knowledge of high-frequency Finnish vocabulary of Greek or Latin origin could assist speakers of English and French in learning Finnish.

Keywords: Finnish; English; French; similarity; Latin.



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1. Introduction

1.1. Indo-European Vocabulary in Finnish

Finnish belongs to the Uralic language family, which retains linguistic similarities with Estonian (Crystal, 2010). In particular, basic words, such as *pää* (head), *puu* (tree), and *kuu* (moon), are significantly different from their counterparts in other European languages (Karlsson, 2008). The origins of Finnish and Estonian are not directly related to the Indo-European language family, which encompasses most European languages.

However, Finnish borrowed many Indo-European vocabulary items from Swedish since the Swedish conquest in the 12th century. For instance, the Finnish noun *suklaa* (chocolate) was borrowed from Swedish *choklad* (chocolate). Similarly, *kruunu* (crown) is a loanword based on Swedish *krona* [kru:nɑ] and ultimately originates from Latin *corona* (crown). The linguistic dependence on Swedish continued until the end of Swedish rule in 1809 (Meinander, 2014). The majority of academic and religious terms in Finnish are loanwords of Latin or Greek origin because the Finns, whose majority is native speakers of Finnish, had converted into Christianity, and Classical Latin and Greek have been the primary source of academic vocabularies in European languages (Leonhardt, 2016).

1.2. Loan Translation in Finnish

Finnish has created many words by loan translation. Many Finnish words are compounds of two other words. For example, *lentoasema* (airport) is a compound of *lento* (flight) and *asema* (station), and *lentokone* (airplane) includes *lento* (flight) and *kone* (machine). The structure of these Finnish words is similar to their German equivalents *Flughafen* (airport) and *Flugzeug* (airplane), which comprises *Flug* (flight) (Clark and Thyen, 2013). In addition, *sanakirja* (dictionary) is comprised of *sana* (word) and *kirja* (book). However, loanwords of Indo-European origin, such as *hotelli* (hotel), *kuppi* (cup), *metri* (meter), *novelli* (novel), and *paperi* (paper), are included in everyday vocabulary. Moreover, several loanwords of Arabic origin, such as *kahvi* (coffee) and *sohva* (sofa) are also used in daily communication. The labiodental fricative [f] in most loanwords was modified to [hv] in Finnish.

1.3. Various Benefits of Vocabulary Learning

Linguistic purism contributes to the strengthening of identity among speakers of the same language beyond differences in dialects or language varieties. However, it often decreases morphological similarity between the vocabularies of different languages and prevents understanding texts written even in a similar alphabet. In particular, foreign language learners need to overcome such difficulties caused by linguistic purism and discover the degrees of cross-linguistic similarity that are retained. Since Finnish still retains significant numbers of loanwords of Latin or Greek origin, speakers of English, French, and other Indo-European languages could focus on the morphological similarities between Finnish and their first language(s). The advantage of utilizing vocabulary similarity is not limited to learning vocabulary: it would also encourage learners to deepen their understanding of cultural elements shared between different countries. Through learning a similar vocabulary in another language, learners might become aware that learning a foreign language can be an expansion of cultural knowledge and can increase tolerance toward different values, opinions and viewpoints. The Council of Europe has promoted the value of foreign language learning as expansion of cultural knowledge and proposed concrete criteria for measurement such as the European Language Portfolio (Newby, 2012). Such evaluation criteria, including cultural elements, enable language learners to realize the various values of language learning and understand the close links among the languages, cultures, and traditions of foreign ethnic groups.

1.4. Objective

The objective of this study is to propose an effective method of learning Finnish vocabulary of Latin or Greek origin. The method is primarily oriented to English and French speakers who are interested in learning basic Finnish. However, the findings of this study will also benefit speakers of Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese because these languages also include many words of Latin and Greek origins. The primary reference for Latin vocabulary is *The Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Morwood, 2005).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Purism Observed in Icelandic and French

Loanword adoption does not merely signify an adoption of foreign vocabulary due to necessity or cultural influence, but is often considered a deterioration of a language that affects the identity of its speakers. According to Ragnarsdóttir (1996), the Icelandic language continues excluding as much foreign origin vocabulary as possible. Iceland gained independence from Denmark in 1944, and its history as a sovereign country is much shorter than that of other European countries. In addition, the number of Icelandic speakers is limited as compared to those of other European languages. The high degree of linguistic purity in Icelandic vocabulary appears to symbolize the Icelanders' resulting desire for linguistic independence from other European languages. Of the estimated population of 339,747 in Iceland in 2017, approximately 94% of the total inhabitants are Icelanders, who mostly speak Icelandic as their first language (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018).

To keep linguistic purity, Icelandic speakers favor loan translation over loanwords. For example, *bókasafn* (library) is a compound from *bóka* (books) and *safn* (museum), and *orðabók* (dictionary) is a compound from *orða* (words) and *bók* (book) (Helmisdóttir, 2017). The use of a loan translation is not unique to Icelandic. German has similar compounds such as *Wörterbuch* (dictionary), which includes *Wörter* (words) and *Buch* (book) (Clark and Thyen, 2013). The effects of linguistic purism can be observed in *safn* (museum), which stems from the original Icelandic word *safna* (to collect); by contrast, its German equivalent is *Museum*, which originates from Classical Greek.

French is another European language which tends toward loanwords and loan translation. For instance, computer-related terms, such as *ordinateur* (computer), *télécharger* (to download), and *logiciel* (software), have been replaced with their equivalent in English. The degree of linguistic purism in Canadian French is higher than that in European French, and thus relies more heavily on loan translation. For instance, “shopping” used in France corresponds to *magasinage* in Canadian French, which was derived from *magasin* (shop, store) (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013). “Cracker” can be used in European French, but *craquelin* is more frequently used in Canadian French.

2.2. Benefits of Loanwords of the Same Origin for Language Learning

According to Lightbown and Spada (2006), semantically similar foreign vocabulary with a partially different pronunciation requires explicit demonstration to learners (e.g., the English word *castle* and *château*, the French word for “castle”), and students often are not conscious of the morphological or semantic similarities between their L1 and L2. Nation and Webb (2011) suggest the utility of focusing on English words that share the same origin in teaching English vocabulary. They exemplify *visible*, *revise*, *visual*, *vision*, and *supervise*. These words originate from *videre* (to see) in Latin (Stevenson and Waite, 2011). Through focusing on words of the same origin, learners will understand semantic associations among them. Ellis and Beaton (1993) examine the difference in learnability of foreign words of the same etymology (“cognate words”) and non-cognate words for the purpose of facilitating English vocabulary instruction. The participants in their research more rapidly learned cognates that were similar to their equivalents in their first language.

In addition to Finnish, Turkish vocabulary includes many loanwords. To analyze the percentages of Arabic, Persian, and French loanwords in Turkish, Moore and Uni (2015) selected 3,270 of the most frequently used Turkish words, which corresponded to the 3,000 most frequently used English words, according to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Moore and Uni (2015) found 816 Arabic-origin loanwords (approximately 25% of the selected vocabulary [p. 202]), with loanwords from Persian and French origins at approximately 6% and 7%, indicating that Arabic was the largest donor language to Turkish. For example, the Turkish *üniversite* (university) is a loanword based on the French *université* (university), which originates from the Latin *universitas* (university).

3. Methodology

In this study, the primary reference for high-frequency English words was the Oxford 3000TM, a list of approximately 3,000 basic words used to define entry words in the Oxford Dictionary. The author of this study counted Finnish words of Latin or Greek origin in the scope of the Finnish equivalents of the English word list. The selected Finnish words were then sorted according to their origins. The first category was vocabulary of Latin origin. The second was that of Greek origin.

4. Results

In total, 191 words of Greek or Latin origin were included in this study’s list of basic Finnish vocabulary equivalent to the most frequently used 3,000 English words. This number of loanwords was almost equal to 6.3% of the total number of words in basic Finnish vocabulary. The total number of Latin loanwords was 137 (e.g.,

dokumentti “document” and *presidentti* “president”), and that of Greek loanwords was 54 (e.g., *biologia* “biology” and *filosofia* “philosophy”).

4.1. Finnish Words Ending in *-i*

Table 1 presents Finnish words with an *-i* ending, along with their English equivalents. For instance, Finnish *kurssi* (course) and English *course* both stem from Latin *cursus* (Morwood, 2005). Similarly, Finnish *ministeri* (minister) and its English equivalent originate from Latin *minister* (Morwood, 2005), and the origin of Finnish *instrumentti* (instrument) is *instrumentum* in Classical Latin (Morwood, 2005).

Table-1. Examples of Similar Words in Finnish and English (1)

<i>agentti</i> (agent)	<i>ambulanssi</i> (ambulance)	<i>dokumentti</i> (document)	<i>elementti</i> (element)
<i>etiketti</i> (etiquette)	<i>instituutti</i> (institute)	<i>instrumentti</i> (instrument)	<i>konferenssi</i> (conference)
<i>konsepti</i> (concept)	<i>konsertti</i> (concert)	<i>kurssi</i> (course)	<i>ministeri</i> (minister)
<i>moottori</i> (motor)	<i>moraali</i> (moral)	<i>paketti</i> (packet)	<i>parlamentti</i> (parliament)
<i>presidentti</i> (president)	<i>professori</i> (professor)	<i>sektori</i> (sector)	<i>tabletti</i> (tablet)

Table 2 presents the French and English equivalents to the Finnish words in the previous table. A majority of these French words retain orthographic similarity despite minor difference. This correspondence would suggest that French-speaking learners of Finnish and Finnish-speaking learners of French can utilize this morphological similarity when learning their target language. After they have become accustomed to such similarity in forms, they will focus on phonetic differences between Finnish and French words of the same origin.

Table-2. Examples of Similar Words in French and English (1)

<i>agent</i> (agent)	<i>ambulance</i> (ambulance)	<i>document</i> (document)	<i>élément</i> (element)
<i>étiquette</i> (etiquette)	<i>institut</i> (institute)	<i>instrument</i> (instrument)	<i>conférence</i> (conference)
<i>concept</i> (concept)	<i>concert</i> (concert)	<i>cours</i> (course)	<i>ministre</i> (minister)
<i>moteur</i> (motor)	<i>morale</i> (moral)	<i>paquet</i> (packet)	<i>parlement</i> (parliament)
<i>président</i> (president)	<i>professeur</i> (professor)	<i>secteur</i> (sector)	<i>tablette</i> (tablet)

4.2. Finnish Words Ending in *-a*

The Finnish words in Table 3 end with the vowel *a*, and they derive from Classical Greek. Although these are influenced by Finnish phonology, they remain similar to their Latin forms. The English and French equivalents retain similarity and most frequently end with *-y* and *-ie*, respectively, originating from the *-ia* ending in Latin. For example, the final vowel of the Latin *philosophia* (philosophy) changes to *-y* in English (Morwood, 2005). The listed Finnish words ending with *-iikka* respectively correspond to English and French words with the *-ics* and *-ique* endings.

Table-3. Examples of Similar Words in Finnish and English (2)

<i>biologia</i> (biology)	<i>energia</i> (energy)	<i>filosofia</i> (philosophy)	<i>fysiikka</i> (physics)
<i>harmonia</i> (harmony)	<i>kategoria</i> (category)	<i>komedia</i> (comedy)	<i>logiikka</i> (logic)
<i>politiikka</i> (politics)	<i>strategia</i> (strategy)	<i>teknologia</i> (technology)	<i>teoria</i> (theory)

Table 4 presents the French and English equivalents to the Finnish words in the previous table. All the listed French words end with a mute *e* which was originally *a* in Classical Latin. The meaning of this type of vocabulary is mostly abstract, but many of these words are frequently used in basic communication in English and French. For example, the Latin *harmonia* (harmony) becomes *harmonie* (harmony) in French (Morwood, 2005). This regular correspondence between Finnish and French helps Finnish-speaking learners of French, who have the fundamental English vocabulary knowledge.

Table-4. Examples of Similar Words in French and English (2)

<i>biologie</i> (biology)	<i>énergie</i> (energy)	<i>philosophie</i> (philosophy)	<i>physique</i> (physics)
<i>harmonie</i> (harmony)	<i>catégorie</i> (category)	<i>comédie</i> (comedy)	<i>logique</i> (logic)
<i>politique</i> (politics)	<i>stratégie</i> (strategy)	<i>technologie</i> (technology)	<i>théorie</i> (theory)

4.3. Finnish Words Ending in the Suffix *-nen*

Table 5 presents Finnish words that include the suffix *-nen*, along with their English equivalents. This Finnish suffix forms adjectives. The English suffix *-ive* corresponds to the Finnish suffix *-iivinen*, and the English suffix *-ical* corresponds to the ending *-inen* in Finnish.

Table-5. Finnish Words Corresponding to English Words with Suffixes *-ive* and *-ical*

<i>aktiivinen</i> (active)	<i>negatiivinen</i> (negative)	<i>positiivinen</i> (positive)	<i>objektiivinen</i> (objective)
<i>fyysinen</i> (physical)	<i>klassinen</i> (classical)	<i>kriittinen</i> (critical)	<i>looginen</i> (logical)

Table 6 presents the French and English equivalents to the Finnish words in the previous table. The English suffix *-ive* corresponds to the French suffix *-if*, and the English suffix *-ical* corresponds to the suffix *-ique* in French. It is relatively easy for French-speaking learners to create possible Finnish equivalents by regularly replacing the French suffixes *-if* and *-ique* with Finnish suffix *-inen*.

Table-6. French Words Corresponding to English Words with Suffixes *-ive* and *-ical*

actif (active)	négatif (negative)	positif (positive)	objectif (objective)
physique (physical)	classique (classical)	critique (critical)	logique (logical)

4.4. Finnish Words Ending in *-io*

Table 7 presents Finnish words that end with *-io*, along with their English equivalents. The Finnish suffix *-io* retains its original Latin form; however, the Latin *innovatio* (innovation) was changed to *innovaatio* in Finnish to indicate a long [a] sound clearly. Similarly, the Latin *commissio* (commission) becomes *komissio* in Finnish, which mostly retains the original pronunciation and meaning. When English speakers do not feel confident in their own communication skill in Finnish due to a lack of vocabulary, they could try to create ersatz Finnish words with the suffix *-io*. Finnish interlocutors may guess and manage to identify what the invented Latin-based vocabulary would mean.

Table-7. Finnish Words Corresponding to English Words with Suffixes *-tion* and *-sion*

innovaatio (innovation)	inspiraatio (inspiration)	instituutio (institution)	komissio (commission)
kommunikaatio (communication)	meditaatio (meditation)	motivaatio (motivation)	organisaatio (organization)

Table 8 presents the French and English equivalents of the Finnish words in the previous table. The listed French and English words include the suffixes *-tion* and *-sion*. The spellings of these French words are almost identical to their English equivalents as very limited phonetic change has occurred since their adoption from Classical Latin. This regularity would assist Finnish-speaking learners of French, who already know the listed English words with these suffixes.

Table-8. French Words Corresponding to English Words with Suffixes *-tion* and *-sion*

innovation (innovation)	inspiration (inspiration)	institution (institution)	commission (commission)
communication (communication)	méditation (meditation)	motivation (motivation)	organisation (organization)

5. Conclusion

This study examined the benefits of basic Finnish words of Latin and Greek origins, constructing an equivalent of the Oxford 3000™ list. As a result, 191 Finnish words originating from Latin or Greek were observed in the approximately 3,000 high-frequency Finnish words. The majority of these 191 words remain linguistically similar to their English and French equivalents. This is one of the primary benefits of the shared loanwords. These findings indicate that the selected Finnish loanwords could encourage English and French speakers to learn high-frequency Finnish words. Similarly, Finnish-speaking learners of English and French could use the same strategy.

As discussed above, loanword adoption is closely associated with the identity of language speakers. The significant endeavor of Icelandic and French speakers for linguistic independence of their languages reminds other language speakers of the importance of their first language(s). If learners create a portfolio to record their learning of loanwords in foreign languages, it would help them enhance their awareness of the cultural and historical aspects that affected the loanword adoption.

Future studies should develop a practical presentation method of Finnish vocabulary for learners to increase their awareness of the benefits of their first-language knowledge of loanwords originating from Latin or Greek.

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