

Finnish and Scandinavian: Language contact and UG

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Finnish has been in close contact with Swedish for perhaps 1000 years, and with Germanic for much longer. A number of syntactic properties of Modern Finnish can be ascribed to this language contact: SVO order, finite instead of non-finite complement clauses and relative clauses, the tense system, etc.; one can make a fairly long list of such properties. One can make a much longer list, though, of properties which Finnish does not share with Swedish /Germanic; Question and focus-marking, negation, impersonals, the locative case system, aspect marking, non-V2, etc. etc. One question is whether one can detect any patterns in this variation, and if so, whether this reveal anything interesting about the grammars of the languages, and/or about UG, and/or about mechanisms of language contact and change?

If we focus on clausal syntax, and if we partition the clause into the three domains [CP [IP [VP]]], where the VP-domain includes aspect as well as argument structure, then a rough impression is that the IP-domain is where Finnish looks most like Scandinavian (with some striking exceptions, like negation), not so much with Swedish, though, as with Icelandic/Old Norse. The properties they share include: oblique subjects, a null expletive, a null generic pronoun, a multiple subject construction, and a pure expletive pronoun. What connects these properties is that they all involve satisfaction of the EPP-property by something other than a nominative subject. The topic-prominence said to be characteristic of Finnish is another property dependent on this, which is not shared with any modern Scandinavian language. What I will discuss is the nature of this cluster of properties, in order to work out what exactly is the role of language contact and what is the role of UG, in this connection.