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Language Methodology and Text Design: What Finnish Has Taught Us

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NOTE:
Jacques du Plessis's experience and background is in instructional materials development, and Scott Jarvis is a researcher of the Finnish language. They pooled their resources to produce The Plug-in System--Finnish. The sections in this paper are marked according to the authors' expertise.

INTRODUCTION--Jacques du Plessis
The development of the Plug-in System--Finnish is an ongoing project and the intention is to provide in the needs of anglophone learners from the beginning level up to the high intermediate level. The presentation of this paper will be as follows:

i) Background will be given that influenced the design of the Plug-in System.
ii) The Plug-in System will then be introduced and discussed.
iii) Specific adaptations to the Finnish language will then be addressed.
iv) We will then elaborate on significant aspects about the methodology.
v) Results and the conclusion will then be presented.

BACKGROUND--Jacques du Plessis
Why on earth write another text, when so many have already been developed? Either someone is paying you to do so, or you are convinced that you are about to make a difference. As a language learner I complained about the way in which foreign language materials were structured. In my first grammar text, The English Speaker's ABC to Afrikaans, I opted for a nonlinear text design. As a learner, I preferred the accessibility to the different aspects of language. I separately grouped all the vocabulary, the grammar, etc. This affords the teacher greater freedom in compiling a curriculum. Traditional texts have a prescribed linear pattern, and to a great measure that influences the methodology since the materials developer decides which words will be acquired at what stage in the curriculum. The vocabulary listed in a lesson is often considered as acquired vocabulary from that point on. This vocabulary is then used in the initial stages of familiarization and acquisition in the following lessons. Often such vocabulary is not thoroughly internalized and becomes another unintentional variable the student has to deal with. In the nonlinear design the grammar and vocabulary sections are independent, so that a small set of vocabulary would be sufficient to teach any grammar principle. This text is being used in the Afrikaans programs at BYU and at UCLA. The experience of this materials development project led to the design of the Plug-in System. So far this design has been used to do materials development in Afrikaans, German, Dutch, Swedish, and Finnish. In addition to the nonlinear approach as mentioned above, the following two principles governed the design:

i) One variable was introduced at a time

ii) The required usage of metalanguage was obviated
The design of the grammar section has the following features:

a) The grammar is linearly sequenced with one pronoun paradigm governing the whole linear unit. A similar linear unit is then followed through with the next pronoun paradigm that requires a different verb conjugation.

b) Each time a page is turned, a new grammar principle is introduced.

c) Each new principle is placed in a graphical representation that presents the principle in relationship with all the previously taught principles. This enables the teacher to teach the principle independently, and then to teach/drill the principle in conjunction with the previously taught principles. This helps the teacher to avoid the inadvertent inclusion of previously taught principles in the teaching of a new principle. The concurrent separation yet cohabitation of each grammar skill raises the teacher's consciousness of the separation of grammar skills and to avoid the inadvertent inclusion of such skills. Teaching the grammar with a nucleus of vocabulary helps the teacher avoid the inclusion of unknown words. Yet, that does not exclude the usage of newly learned vocabulary, but the teacher will consciously do so and hopefully be more aware of this being a potential variable. That will help the teacher better control the achievement of the intended objective.

Great emphasis is placed on mastery of each skill, before that skill is drilled as a subskill with other subskills. If mastery is not achieved at each level, the purpose of negotiating one variable at a time will be defeated.

THE SETUP OF THE PLUG-IN SYSTEM--FINNISH

The system has been divided into the following booklets:

- Book 0--Lesson Preparation,
- Book 1--Pronunciation,
- Book 2--Vocabulary,
- Book 3-7--Grammar,
- Book 8--Contextuary and Conversation,
- Book 9--Culture,
- Book 10--Reference and Practice,
- Flexitutor--Software application

Each booklet will now be discussed in further detail:

BOOK 0       LESSON PREPARATION--Scott Jarvis

The first section of The Plug-In System--Finnish is a booklet entitled "Lesson Preparation." It is basically a teacher's instruction booklet for teaching the individual grammar lessons in the text series. Following is a sample of one of the pages of instruction:
Book 3 Lesson 7

Hänellä on minun tuolini. S/he has my chair.

OBJECTIVE: Learn the possessive pronouns and their corresponding possessive suffixes which are added to the possessed noun (but not its modifying adjective). The possessive suffix is not a case, and will always be added after a case suffix.

DIRECTIONS:
• Drill vocab list #5.
• Do oral examples substituting the possessive pronoun and suffix with other possessive pronouns and suffixes. Have the students discover the principle by your substitution examples in Finnish. Say the sentences in Finnish; let the students tell you what they mean.
• Students explain the principle to each other.
• Students drill each other with the full vocab list (present tense only).
• Teacher gives present tense example; student replies with past tense equivalent.
• Student 1 asks a question; student 2 responds positively; student 2 asks a question; student 1 responds positively.
• Student 1 asks a question; student 2 responds negatively; student 2 asks a question; student 1 responds negatively.
• Work on exercise sheet.

Teacher Suggestions:

The contents of this page reveal the procedure suggested in teaching a new grammar skill.

BOOK 1 PRONUNCIATION—Scott Jarvis
Pronunciation is the very first topic dealt with in the Plug-In System. Lessons in this book are arranged in such a way that the learners will first learn the individual vowel sounds and combinations within the language. Subsequently they will practice articulating consonant-vowel combinations as well as any potential syllable structure in the language. This is
designed to retrain their articulatory habits in order for them to acquire native-like pronunciation. This section also contains lessons and exercises in Finnish consonant gradation (liaison or softening of stop consonants within the word with the addition of certain suffixes). Finally, the pronunciation section has lists of common place and person names for the students to practice. Accompanying these lists is a group of common tongue-twisters and a list of some of the most difficult words for an English speaker to pronounce.

**BOOK 2 VOCABULARY--Scott Jarvis**
The vocabulary booklet is arranged by topic, e.g. colors, toiletries, the body, etc. This tends to increase the student's ability to retain vocabulary, and offers him/her a better conversational capacity. At the front of the booklet are several useful and common phrases for the student to memorize. These phrases provide for the immediate 'how-do-you-do' conversational requirements that s/he may rely on until the grammar skills necessary to produce spontaneous sentences have been acquired.

**BOOKS 3-7 GRAMMAR--Jacques du Plessis**
The first grammar booklet (book 3) uses the third person singular pronoun exclusively. Pictures are frequently used to help illustrate the use of the cases. Booklet 4 uses the first and second person singular pronouns. Booklet 5 uses the first and second person plural pronouns. Booklet 6 uses the third person plural pronoun. Booklet 7 concentrates on imperatives and the passive voice. Since there is no progressive interdependency with the inclusion of new vocabulary, the teacher has many options in the order in which the lessons may be taught. Some possible options may include the total completion of each booklet in numerical order, or the first four or five lessons of each booklet could be done in the initial stages, without restricting the order in of the pronoun presentation. A central thought in the design is to expose a new variable so that the student's preceding experience and knowledge will be helpful in the acquisition of the new principle. The penultimate objective of each lesson is the mastery of the principle as a unique variable and then as a subskill used with the other variables taught up to that point. The final objective would be to apply the principle in context so that the function and not only the form will be emphasized.

**BOOK 8 CONVERSATION AND CONTEXTUARY--Jacques du Plessis**
This booklet is not in its final form, but the idea is well established. The CONTEXTUARY provides words in context with three main sections. The first section is a list of interjections and handy sayings. The second and largest section contains words that were collected by means of error analyses. This collection of words focuses on words that are frequently misused in Finnish. The last section contains a listing of idioms and sayings. The CONVERSATION section of the booklet contains a collection of pictures, each representing the chronological development of a story. The stories are done in both English and Finnish. The stories are told in English first and then in Finnish. This helps the learners to better concentrate on proficiency, since they know what they want to say and by having the necessary vocabulary in each picture to accomplish the task.

**BOOK 9 CULTURE--Jacques du Plessis**
The following listing represents some of the topics covered in the culture booklet which is written in English: fairy tales from Finnish mythology, the ethnic groups in the country, Finnish geography, Finnish songs and recipes, etiquette and traditions, food, religion, values and perceptions, history, etc.

**BOOK 10 WORD INFLECTION & GRAMMAR REFERENCE--Scott Jarvis**
This book provides lists of various inflections for the most common (800+) words in Finnish. The frequency of the words was determined by a study at the University of Oulu.
This book is designed specifically for drilling and internalizing the inflections of Finnish, but can also be used as a reference book.

**EXERCISE FORMAT--Scott Jarvis**
The exercise format is organized to allow the students to practice writing the sentences they have been saying. Its layout provides a concise format for practicing the exercises in the grammar books while substituting words, changing tenses, adding negation, forming questions, etc. We have chosen to laminate this format so that it can be used over and over with a felt-tip (transparency) pen. The format allows the student to write an infinite number of practice sentences.

**SOFTWARE--FLEXITUTOR**
Flexitutor is a shell that reads DOS text files. This program was used to create a computer-assisted language learning application. Files have been created to drill various aspects of grammar and vocabulary.

**SPECIFIC ISSUES OF ADAPTATION TO FINNISH--Scott Jarvis**
The structure of the Finnish language poses some specific pedagogical challenges. Aside from developing and defining a general methodology of second language instruction, we were also faced with the challenge of extending our approach to cover specific obstacles concerning Finnish. Some of these issues are as follows:

**Consonant Gradation--Scott Jarvis**
Consonant gradation in Finnish is the alteration of a voiceless stop consonant to a "softer" articulation of voicing. This happens to words which have a lkl, lpl, or ltl in the final syllable of the stem word, which is followed by certain suffixes which "close" the final syllable. By closing the syllable, we mean that a suffix is added which causes the final syllable of the stem word to end with a consonant rather than a vowel. By way of example, the ltl in the Finnish word *katu* 'street' will become a ldl with the addition of the accusative suffix -n (i.e., *katu* + -n = *kadun*).

The alteration of the lkl, lpl, and ltl to softened articulations is not always a simple and straight-forward operation. The metaphysical principles behind consonant gradation are very complex and rule governed. A list of the most prevalent alterations is as follows:

Even by knowing the complete array of consonant alterations that can occur does not guarantee that the learner will have a proficient knowledge of when they will occur. Of course, most Finns do not even have a conscious understanding of the metaphysics behind such phonetic changes, but they do have an accurate productive ability of gradating words in a very complex but uniform manner. They have been exposed to all the conditions related to consonant gradation, and they have had ample practice re-producing such forms, so that the principles behind consonant gradation have become internalized and automatic for them. On several occasions, I have asked Finns to add certain suffixes to words that do not actually exist in the language. Without fail, they have gradated the words uniformly and according to the underlying metaphysical principles of Finnish phonology. The fact that they can apply such principles accurately to words they have never heard before proves that they have a productive competence of Finnish phonology. This is the very thing we hope to instill in second-language learners of Finnish.

In order to instill a productive phonological competence of Finnish in second-language learners, we felt that it would be most effective to expose them to a series of learning
activities which would allow them to acquire a productive competence of consonant gradation similar to that of a native speaker. These learning exercises would, of course, focus on the principles of phonological change in the language while eliminating all other variables (e.g., meaning of words, grammatical functions, etc.). In order to eliminate outside variables, we simply chose to complete the consonant gradation learning activities before any other variables (aside from mere pronunciation) have even been presented. In addition, although all the words in the gradation exercises are formed in accordance to the phonological constraints of Finnish, many of the words have no actual meaning. The learners are told this, and are therefore better able to concentrate on the immediate principle.

The first principle of gradation presented to the learners is the series of conditions in which consonant gradation will occur. These conditions depend on the structure of the head word as well as the suffix. The learners are given a brief explanation followed by a considerable list of words and suffixes to practice their knowledge. Answers to the exercises are given on the reverse side of the page. The following pages show the specific consonant alterations which occur in the language. They are accompanied with an ample array of exercises in which the learners will combine words with most of the suffixes in the language. They will gain a feel for which words will undergo gradation, and which suffixes cause gradation. This feel for correctness is the main goal and highest achievement within second-language acquisition.

**Vocabulary--Scott Jarvis**
Vocabulary is an enormous obstacle for most learners of Finnish as a second language. Because of the genetically unrelatedness of Finnish to nearly all of the other European languages, most of the lexical items in Finnish are completely foreign and unrecognizable to second-language learners of Finnish. Not only is the vocabulary very unfamiliar, but recognizing the words a learner does know within various inflections can, at times, be completely frustrating.

Possibly all texts and methods in the past have concentrated on teaching the learner the dictionary form of a word first, and then giving the learner a set of rules to show how to get to the stem or root of the word from the dictionary form (the stem and the dictionary form are often drastically different). Once the learner can identify the root word, s/he is able to form a remaining dozen or so inflections by agglutination (simple adding of suffixes). This two-step method of identifying or producing the inflections from the dictionary form has often been very confusing, and has resulted in serious inflection errors by the students.

We chose to deal with this problem by teaching the stem word first. The stem is usually the most identifiable form of a word within any given inflection. From the stem the learner may identify and produce all of the inflections, including the dictionary form of the word. This simplified one-step operation reduces confusing variables, and offers a more uniform and systematic approach to learning words and inflections. It also better illustrates the actual underlying relations of the various forms and inflections of the word.

**Morphological Proficiency--Scott Jarvis**
In addition to learning of the existence of all sixteen nominal cases and all the various tenses, moods, and infinitives of Finnish verbs, the learner is faced with the challenge of learning to form each inflection depending on the phonetic structure of the stem word. For instance, the singular partitive inflection of the word *talo* 'house' is *taloa*, but the same inflection with the word *perhe* 'family' is *perhetti*. In the first example, the singular partitive inflection was formed by adding an -a to the base word, but the second example required a -ttä ending to form the singular partitive.
Forming this and other inflections is often much more difficult than the examples above. Existing Finnish grammar texts usually divide Finnish nominals into somewhere between fifteen and twenty-five different categories based on the phonetic structure of the words. Accompanying these structural categories are lists of rules for forming the various cases and inflections. According to this method, a student must learn up to twenty-five rules for forming the singular partitive according to the phonetic structure of the word. Have him/her learn the rules for the plural partitive, and we're up to a possible 50 rules for partitive inflections alone. Realizing that Finnish has 15 other cases implies that the student may have to memorize upwards around 800 rules just for the formation of nominals alone! And we haven't even begun to consider verbs!!

Well, it's actually much simpler than that. There are several shortcuts, and many rules can apply to several circumstances. But it should be quite clear that many learners are initially overwhelmed with rules and exceptions to the point that they believe the language to be utterly impossible to learn--"I mean, who memorize that many rules anyway?" Quite right, and who needs them when it comes right down to it? We have yet to meet a Finn who consciously knows more than two or three of them. And yet, the Finns are perfectly fluent in their language.

In order to help students acquire the ability to produce any inflection without hesitation or undue contemplation, we devised a system with the objective of helping the student realize the patterns of inflection subconsciously. Subconscious or internalized competence is the key to fluency. We compiled a booklet containing the most common (800+) words in the language (University of Oulu research). The book is divided into three sections--namely verbs, nouns, and adjectives. Each section is organized in a parallel manner showing the stem words on the left side of the pages, and the inflections in columns directly to the right of the stems. The words are grouped together in accordance with their phonetic structure, and thus, in accordance with their manner of inflection.

After the teacher says the stem form of the word, the learners will respond with the inflected form of the word. In this way, the learners are devising conscious and subconscious rules of formation, they are gaining a feel for what sounds correct, they are learning to rely on examples rather than abstract rules, and they are internalizing the inflections of several of the most frequently used words in Finnish. In order to assure that the learners have actually acquired accurate conscious and subconscious rules of formation, this exercise is followed by an exercise in which the stem words appear in the same order as before, but the inflected forms are not given. Now, the learners are forced to produce the inflected forms from their own understanding of the language. Again, a third exercise is given the learners to check their mastery of the inflectional principles. In this exercise, the stem words are presented only in their order of frequency, and not in any order of inflectional correspondence. Mastery of this exercise proves the learners to be fluent and spontaneous in inflection formation.

**Syntactic Functions--Scott Jarvis**

Whereas the English language marks function with word order, Finnish marks function with inflection. For instance, in the sentence "John saw Mary," the function of John as the subject is determined by its position at the head of the sentence. If the position of the words John and Mary were exchanged, the meaning would change drastically. In contrast, the same sentence in Finnish "John näki Maryn" would not change in meaning with the rearrangement of the words to "Maryn näki John." Finnish syntactic function is determined by inflectional markers, and only emphasis is shifted with the rearrangement of lexical items. Second-language learners of Finnish must learn to substitute their competence of function marking by word order with a corresponding competence of inflection.
However, it is not enough to simply replace the English system of functional marking with the Finnish inflectional system. English marks certain functions which are not even intrinsically perceived in Finnish (e.g., definite and indefinite articles, gender within the pronoun system, progressive tenses, future indicative perfect tense—"I will have gone," etc.). These functions must simply be ignored or reduced to comply with Finnish ways of perception.

Likewise, Finnish has several inflections and constructions which mark functions and perceptions non-existent in the English language. Possibly the clearest example of this is the partitive/accusative distinction in Finnish. These inflections are applied to direct objects to show contrasts in the quantitative definiteness of the object, completion of the action, endurance of the action, and the resultative nature of the action on the direct object. The foreign learner of Finnish must learn to perceive the world in a different light.

In order to deal with the challenges of the acquisition of new perceptual functions, we arranged the new principles in such a way as to enhance clearness of meaning, and to maximally reduce confusion caused by a multiplicity of variables. We provided several graphics to represent the functions and meanings of the new inflections, and listed brief forms of explanation at the bottom of the page in each new lesson. Wherever possible we included accompanying sentences which were nearly parallel in meaning, but which were already familiar in structure and function. The teacher is given a list of objectives for each lesson, and is instructed to lead the students to self-discovery of the principle through a series of questions dealing with the meaning and structure of the new principle.

THE METHODOLOGICAL CONCEPT—Scott Jarvis

Thus far, we have emphasized the importance of internalizing the grammatical patterns of a language in order to acquire true linguistic proficiency. Practicing syntactic patterns of sentence structure over and over until they become automatic will produce native-like fluency. This may sound somewhat like the behaviorist claims of Skinner during the 1950's, when he proposed that language proficiency is nothing more than a series of phonological habits triggered by some type of stimulus. In essence, he claimed that speakers could only produce sounds and phrases which they had heard before, and which were inter-related to some type of situational stimulus. Thus, a speaker's linguistic repertoire would be finite—limited to past communicative experience.

Chomsky was more than successful in refuting Skinner's claims of the finite nature of language. He showed, first of all, that speakers of all languages continually produce sentences and phrases which have never before been uttered. In addition, the productive capacity of all languages is completely infinite. There is a limited number of vocabulary items in any language, but the potential to combine, modify, and coordinate vocabulary items in any language is absolutely infinite.

Now, let's return to our position of language proficiency. No doubt, the productive capacity of language for a native speaker is infinite. In order for learners of a second language to become fluent at that language, they must acquire the ability to produce language spontaneously within this infinite productive capacity. Spontaneity can be achieved by internalizing and automatizing the elements of the language which are finite, and then by learning to re-combine, re-modify, and re-coordinate these finite elements. Looking at this by analogy, we can show that when a person has acquired a natural ability for driving a particular model of a standard (stick-shift) car, that person will have little trouble driving any standard automobile. We can say that this person has acquired proficiency at driving an infinite number of standard automobiles of any model or make by simply developing a finite series of habits related to a particular series of functions.
In relation to the preceding analogy, we could say that the finite series of habits used in driving a standard car (e.g. stepping on the clutch, shifting the gear, pressing the gas pedal, turning on the lights, etc.) are analogous to the surface sentence structure or word order of any affirmative question in the language. In the same way that the gear lever, clutch, gas pedal, and control panel of the car may differ considerably in size, shape, or order, the words of the affirmative question may vary. Regardless of the variance, however, there is a one-to-one relationship between the ordering or inflection of the words and their function, just the same as there is a one-to-one relationship between the instruments in the car and their function. By learning to manipulate function with recognizable instruments, a learner is able to become proficient and spontaneous. Practicing specific sentence structures over and over while substituting words within the sentence will produce native-like proficiency in spontaneity and in the understanding of syntactic functions.

There may be a number of ways to apply this methodology to second language learners. In our own applications, we have developed language-specific texts centered around this methodology—one of which is the Plug-In System—Finnish, whose structure and organization has thus far been described.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION--Scott Jarvis
We have now evaluated and tested learners of the Plug-In System—Finnish for nearly five months. We have compiled lists of statistical information relating to learner competence and error analysis. We have not yet, however, completed the evaluating process, and our arrangement of statistical data is still somewhat vague, so we felt that it would be most appropriate at this time to list some general observations which we can state with real accuracy.

The most substantial evidence, so far, for the success of the system has been the oral proficiency of the students. The Missionary Training Center of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has been concurrently teaching two groups of missionaries preparing to go to Finland. One group is learning from a traditional grammar book, and the other from the Plug-In System—Finnish. The Plug-In students are generally quite proficient at generating sentences during speech interaction. The traditional learners often can only produce spontaneously such phrases as they have memorized. Their generative proficiency is often very inhibited, and when they do produce generative sentences and phrases, it is usually only after an extended period of silent deliberation and sentence forming in accordance with the long array of structural rules they have tried to memorize.

Error analysis shows that the two groups make errors of a completely different nature. The Plug-In students often make overgeneralizations in their formation of inflections and ordering of sentence structure. They often decline and conjugate words according to the most common and most productive forms of the individual inflections. In contrast, the traditional learners often confuse formation rules of one inflection with another. By far, the most acceptable errors are the former. Although the Plug-In learners often inflect words in a way that a native never would, the function of the word is still recognized. For instance, if a foreigner learning English were to err while forming the past tense of the word tell by using a productive morphological representation so that s/he were to say telled rather than the correct form told, the function of the word would still be retained and recognized. On the other hand, if the learner were to confuse past tense formation rules with progressive verb formation rules so as to say telling rather than told, the function of the word would be confused.

It has been somewhat difficult to abstract necessary information from our evaluations of the different learners because of the difference in the understandability of the errors which the learners make. We cannot simply tally one mark for every error made. Errors have a
graded degree of severity within the realm of proficient communication. Besides simple accuracy of inflection, pronunciation, and sentence formation, we must also evaluate the learners understanding and representation of grammatical function. Therefore, we give separate attention to three basic areas of proficiency: (1) Use of the appropriate words and morphemes, (2) accuracy of pronunciation and/or spelling (depending on the method of evaluation), and (3) representation of grammatical function by means of inflection and sentence structure.

The second major area of success we have had with the Plug-In System has been the learner's proficiency at accurately translating and understanding written Finnish material which is given to them after three and a half weeks of intense language training. They have been far more successful at recognizing the meanings and functions of individual words and inflections within the text. They can recognize the individual building blocks of each word. Traditional learners, on the other hand, are often not able to identify even words which they already know; they don't recognize words in the shroud of their inflectional variations. A teacher will generally spend several minutes on each paragraph of text while translating, pointing out inflections, and reviewing formation and function rules with the learners. Plug-In students rarely have this problem.

Self-correction is a very important factor of language learning. When they realize they have said something incorrectly, Plug-In students are more often able to correct their own errors, while traditional learners often require a review of rules by the teacher. Because of the increased awareness of Plug-In students, they are able to cover more material in less time. They have more time to communicate in the language and learn new vocabulary items. They experience less frustration in the learning process—they seem less inhibited by the fear of breaking grammar rules and making errors. I was once teaching the traditional text to a group of students who expressed their frustration and claimed that they were "unable to learn such an impossible language." On the same day, I walked over to the classroom of the Plug-In group to speak with the teacher. When I walked in the classroom the students seemed more confident, and two of the Plug-In students asked me, "Why do they say that Finnish is a hard language?"

From the conversationalist point of view, perhaps the greatest benefit of the Plug-In method is that it reduces the need for conscious analysis of language during conversation. Learners who acquire a feel for correctness in language use, rather than relying on memorized rules of use and formation, are better able to focus on topics of conversation as well as non-verbal, situational elements of interaction. They listen more closely to the speaker, and are more able to pick up on colloquial and idiomatic uses of the language.