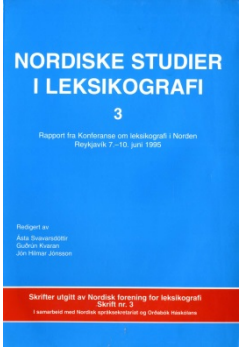


NORDISKE STUDIER I LEKSIKOGRAFI

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Leena Savolainen

Finnish Sign Language – Finnish dictionary: defining the head signs

Största delen av de teckenspråkiga ordböckerna har hittills snarare varit teckenlistor än egentliga ordböcker. Inom Finlands Dövas Förbund pågår för närvarande ett ordboksprojekt vars mål är att utarbeta en ordbok över det finländska teckenspråket med stöd i lingvistisk forskning. I denna artikel ger jag först en allmän presentation av själva projektet och dess målsättningar och arbetsmetoder. Därefter beskriver jag hur vi arbetar när vi lemmatiserar uppslagstecknen. Under det att arbetet har framskridit har vi kunnat konstatera att de lingvistiska fenomen och problem som vi stöter på med vissa undantag är desamma som författare till ordböcker över talade språk konfronteras med.

1 Finnish Sign Language dictionary project

The Finnish Sign Language – Finnish dictionary project was started in 1988 by the Finnish Association of the Deaf. At the moment the dictionary project team has six employees. Four are deaf, with Finnish Sign Language (FinSL) as their first language. Two are hearing, with Finnish as their first language; one of these is employed by the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland. The dictionary is planned to be published by the end of 1997.

In addition to the team of full-time employees there is a larger working group supporting the project. This group has both deaf and hearing members. The deaf are of different ages and from various parts of Finland, and both deaf and hearing represent various fields of sign language work and/or linguistic study. The group comes together twice a month on average to discuss the material we have produced.

Traditionally, sign language dictionaries have been more like lists of signs than like actual dictionaries. Each sign has been given only one spoken language equivalent (gloss), and the signs are represented by drawings or photographs, which are then listed according to the alphabetical order of the spoken language glosses. *Viittomakielen kuvasanakirja* (Pictorial Dictionary of Sign Language; 1973) — the dictionary currently in use in Finland — is an example of these traditional dictionaries.

A new kind of sign language dictionary is now being assembled by the dictionary project of the Finnish Association of the Deaf. In this dictionary FinSL is recognized as an independent language of equal status to the Finnish language, and the signs are arranged according to their structural components, not according to their spoken language equivalents. Comparable dictionaries have been made of e.g. the Thai, Australian and British Sign Languages.

The new FinSL dictionary will contain approximately 1 200 entries. Each entry includes:

- A head sign, which is represented by a picture with additional arrows showing movement
- The Finnish equivalents of the sign
- Translations of an average of four signed sentence examples into Finnish
- Grammatical information and other notes on the sign

In preparing an entry the following procedure is followed:

1. There is a list of glossed signs, which has been approved by the larger working group. The deaf team-members produce about four examples of sentences, with each sign used in different contexts. The sign along with its examples is videotaped.
2. The hearing members establish the Finnish equivalents of each sign and translate the signed examples into Finnish.
3. The deaf and hearing members together check the Finnish equivalents and translations, and also add grammatical information and other notes on the sign.
4. The larger working group verifies the accuracy of the entries and gives feedback to the project team.
5. Entries are then corrected as necessary.
6. The entries are videotaped again in their final form. The Finnish equivalents of the head signs, translations of the signed examples into Finnish and grammatical information and other notes on the sign are all checked once again.
7. For the illustrations the citation forms of the signs will all be videotaped from different angles. Suitable frames will be transferred (grabbed) to computer disc, and the pictures will receive their final finishing with arrows showing the movement in the signs.

In the next section I turn to describing the procedure we follow when defining the head signs. In other words I go into details of stage (1) of the procedure described above.

2 Defining the head signs

A preliminary list of about 1 200 signs was compiled in order to provide some basis for the more final decisions on which signs would be included in the dictionary and what exactly the forms of those signs would be. This list groups the signs under different headings, such as nature, home, question signs, numerals and time. The signs are noted in terms of Finnish-language glosses. Notes on the articulation of the signs are often added. The notes use partly a transcription system (Rissanen 1985:68–69) and partly explanations in Finnish. The 1 200 signs chosen for the book are basic signs of everyday vocabulary.

The 1 200 signs are discussed one at a time in the larger working group. During these discussions some signs are added to the list and some are dropped. The list supports the work, but it is not something we have to stick to.

With almost every sign we find individual variation between signers, or we get many variants from one signer. This variation can be dialectic, idiolectic or variation in FinSL which is commonly known by every deaf person in Finland. I would not like to call this commonly known FinSL a “standard FinSL”. The lexicon used differs from generation to generation, the difference being the biggest between the youngest and oldest generation of signers. Furthermore, nobody has ever standardized FinSL. It is not written. It has not been a subject of instruction at schools for the deaf (children were even totally forbidden to use it at schools for several decades in the current century). FinSL is a minority language which is only just beginning to gain appreciation.

The dictionary will omit regional dialectic and idiolectic variation. Our aim is to include only FinSL signs that are used or at least understood by all deaf people in Finland. Despite this, we know that the language used in the Helsinki area by fairly young people (25–35 years old) will be over-represented as our deaf team-members use mainly that particular form of the language.

3 Studying the sign more closely

To begin with I should mention that at this stage of the procedure we concentrate almost totally on FinSL in all discussions. The deaf people have lived in an atmosphere where FinSL was thought to be some kind of representation of Finnish and not an independent language in its own right. By concentrating solely on FinSL, we seek to minimize the influence of the Finnish language on the FinSL material produced. Only after an entry is videotaped do we begin to look for Finnish equivalents for the sign.

The deaf members of the larger working group make up sentences in which the sign is used in different contexts and — if the sign can be inflected — also in its different inflected forms. On this basis we discuss at least the following: What is the semantics of the sign? Is there a case of homonymy or polysemy connected to the sign? Which inflected forms of the sign really are inflections and which are actually derivative forms? Which category or categories of part of speech does the sign belong to? Which variations of the base form of the sign are dialectical, which idiolectical, and which are variants of the commonly known FinSL? In the following paragraphs I discuss each of these questions in turn.

To get a general picture of the meaning of the sign we list several different sentential contexts in which the sign can be used. During this listing we also look for cases of homonymy and polysemy, thus trying to draw a line between them.

Picture 1 gives an example of a case of **homonymy**. The sign in picture 1 can mean either ‘congregation, parish, parishioner, parishioners’ or ‘United States of America, America, American’. The latter sign is a loan from the American Sign Language and it happens to be of exactly the same form as the former FinSL sign the origin of which we do not know. In general in such cases the signs will be given two separate entries. But in this particular case the sign meaning ‘America’ etc. will be excluded, as we shall not include proper names in our dictionary.



- I) 'congregation, parish, parishioner, parishioners'
- II) 'United States of America, America, American'

Picture 1. *The picture is taken from the Pictorial Dictionary of Sign Language (p. 9).*

Picture 2 shows an example of **polysemy**. The sign in the picture has the meanings: 'a cross', 'a chemist shop', 'an ambulance' and 'Switzerland'. All these meanings will be put under one entry in the dictionary.



- 1. 'a cross, cross-shaped'
- 2. 'chemist shop, chemist, chemist's, pharmacy'
- 3. 'ambulance'
- 4. 'Switzerland, Swiss'

Picture 2. *The picture is taken from the Pictorial Dictionary of Sign Language (p. 268).*

These two cases — one of homonymy, the other of polysemy — are quite clear ones. Usually we do not know, for instance, what the etymology of a particular sign is. Thus we cannot use, as often as we would like to, etymology as a criterion for drawing the line between cases of homonymy and those of polysemy, not to mention the line between inflection and derivation.

Solving matters concerning **inflection** and **derivation** are often more troublesome than those of homonymy and polysemy. Some verb signs in particular can be very complicated, as there may be a group of base forms which all have something in common both in form and meaning. All of these base forms may then have their own inflectional paradigms and derivative forms. Unfortunately we do not have enough time to study these verbs thoroughly. However, we do our best to get them in a sensible order in the dictionary.

In the above list of questions the **part of speech** was also mentioned. Actually nobody has yet defined what the parts of speech of FinSL might be. It seems to share some categories with other languages known by project members (e.g. Finnish, Swedish, French, Chinese). Yet some signs behave in such a way that it is hard to say whether they can be classified in terms of part of speech similar to those of these other languages.

FinSL has, for instance, a class of nouns and verbs which share the same citation form. We put nouns and verbs of this kind in the same entry. This type of base form is very common in English, for example *loan*, *rule*, *part* and *dream*, just to mention a few.

The last stage in the procedure for defining the head signs is to establish the precise base form for the sign. The deaf members of the larger working group give the base form by intuition. But, as was mentioned above, there is a lot of variation in the base forms offered.

In the signs chosen for the dictionary the variation can be either phonemic¹ or allophonic. If there is allophonic variation in the sign, we decide on one allophone and use it in the citation form. If a sign has, for instance, two possible handshapes, and the meaning of the variants is exactly the same, we include both variants of the citation form in the entry. But note that we accept only variation in single phoneme, not variation in two or more phonemes.

Signs of the type I have been discussing in this article are sometimes called **non-polymorphemic signs** (see e.g. Engberg-Pedersen 1993). There exists also another type: **polymorphemic signs**. In a nonpolymorphemic sign the citation form consists of one morpheme (two or more in compound signs). In a polymorphemic sign the phonemes (or with some phonemes even different parts of the phoneme) have a meaning of their own, thus being morphemes. The problem with these polymorphemic signs for a lexicographer is that they do not have a base form, just a root. In the dictionary project we have not yet decided how to deal with this problem, and I will not discuss the matter further here.

4 In conclusion

Finnish Sign Language (FinSL) is still very little studied. When compiling the dictionary we cannot make much use of the Pictorial Dictionary of Sign Language — the FinSL dictionary currently in use — because it is more like a list of signs than like an actual dictionary, and it is not constructed on the kind of linguistic basis which we are working with now. This situation forces us to do a lot of basic research on FinSL during the process of compiling the dictionary. From a linguistic point of view, compiling a sign language dictionary is in many ways similar to compiling a spoken language dictionary. The lexicographic phenomena we are dealing with in FinSL are, with few exceptions, the same as those one faces while working with a spoken language.

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¹The possible phoneme types in sign languages are: handshape, palm orientation, finger orientation, location (of the hands), movement of the hands, mouth movement, facial expression, head movement and body movement.

Other literature

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