

Workshop: Marginal phonemes

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Finnish is extremely rich in marginal phonemes.

Traditionally, there were no voiced obstruents in Finnish, and they do not occur in native Finnish words. The only exception is /d/, which occurs word internally in Standard Finnish (and corresponds to various phonemes or nothing in the dialects). Standard Finnish /d/ occurs only in the weak grade of morphemes with consonant gradation (e.g. /katu/ ‘street.NOM.SG’ : /kadu-n/ ‘street-GEN.SG’), and historically goes back to the [ð] allophone of /t/. Its current standard pronunciation as a plosive is due to the pronunciation of the elite with a Swedish language background.

Additionally, /d/, similarly to /b/ and /g/, also occurs in non-native words, even in word-initial position. Nonetheless, although alveolar consonants (in contrast to almost all other consonants) are allowed word-finally, /d/ never occurs there. In contrast to /d/, /b/ and /g/ also occurs in geminates, and – following the pattern of the similar voiceless plosives – also participate in consonant gradation (/moba-ta?/ ‘mob-INF’ : /mob:a:-n/ ‘mob-PRS.1SG’, /bloga-ta?/ ‘blog-INF’ : /blog:a:-n/ ‘blog-PRS.1SG’). However, Finnish speakers tend to substitute [b] and [g] with [p] and [k], respectively (Jarva 1997).

Similarly to /d/, /ŋ/ also occurs only word-internally due to consonant gradation. It also occurs as an allophone of /n/ before /k/, and the cluster /nk/ alternates with /ŋ:/ in consonant gradation: /helsinki/ [helsiŋki] ‘Helsinki.NOM.SG’ : /helsiŋ:i-n/ ‘Helsinki-GEN.SG’. Strangely enough, geminate [ŋ:] occurs on the surface (although only in an intervocalic position), but short [ŋ] never, even in recent loanwords, occurs only as the first element of clusters (e.g. /piŋvini/ ‘penguin’).

The voiceless labial fricative /f/, similarly to /b/ and /g/, also only occurs in non-native words and also word-initially (/filmi/ ‘film, movie’, /flik:a/ ‘girl’). It also occurs as a geminate, but does not participate in alternations due to consonant gradation: /lef:a/ ‘movie.NOM.SG’ /lef:a-n/ (*/lefa-n/) ‘movie-GEN.SG’. Some speakers tend to substitute word-initial /f/s with /v/ (/fiksu/ ~ /viksu/ ‘clever’) or /p/ (/plik:a/ ‘girl’) or to delete it from clusters (/lik:a/ ‘girl’). Intervocalic /f/ is substituted by the cluster /hv/ in earlier loanwords (/kahvi/ ‘coffee’), or by dialect speakers even in more recent loans (/ohvi/ ‘Off! (Finnish insect repellent brand)’).

Postalveolar sibilants also occur only in foreign words, and many times they are pronounced as alveolars: /ʃak:i/ ~ /sak:i/ ‘chess’ (the latter form also means ‘crowd, gang’). Voiced /ʒ/ is even more rare, and even in foreign words it usually occurs in a cluster with /d/ (/dʒonk:i/ ‘junk’, /maharadʒa/ ‘maharaja’), and only occasionally as a single consonant (/ʒiguli/ ‘Zhiguli (Soviet/Russian car brand)’ – and it can be both devoiced and pronounced as an alveolar.

Finnish also has a marginal phoneme /ʔ/, which only occurs morpheme-finally, is the only consonant which, in addition to the alveolar ones, occurs also word-finally. Even there it is usually assimilated by the following consonant, even across word boundaries, resulting in a geminate. It is realised as a long glottal stop word-finally before words beginning with a vowel. Clause- or utterance-finally, but it also may remain unrealized. (Cf. Hakulinen et al.

2004: §34–36) Many morphophonological alternations can be explained purely as phonological alternations if we consider the presence of /ʔ/.

Nonetheless, the phonemic status of some of these elements are ignored or denied by most of the descriptions of Finnish. Despite the widely known and often cited principle, “once a phoneme – always a phoneme”, descriptions of various languages often ignore or deny the phonemic status of units which are contrastive only in a restricted set of environments.

As the 57th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea will be held 21–24 August 2024 in Helsinki, it gives a great opportunity for bringing together linguists engaged in marginal phonemes. We welcome any abstracts (ca. 300 words) concerning marginal morphemes, occurring or being contrastive only in some subsets of the lexicon (foreign words, onomatopoeia) or in a restricted phonological or morphological context. We invite papers both with descriptive or theoretical orientation, approaching the topic either from a synchronic, historical, dialectological, psycho- or sociolinguistic perspective. We especially welcome studies on less-studied European languages applying specific (fieldwork, corpus linguistic, experimental) etc. methods.

The abstracts should be sent to the organisers Jack Rueter (jack.rueter@helsinki.fi) and László Fejes (fejes.laszlo@nytud.hun-ren.hu). **Deadline:** 10th of November 2024.

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