

Case in the Finnish infinitive system

Jaakko Leino

Research Institute for the Languages of Finland

jaakko.leino@iki.fi

Finnish, as Uralic languages in general, is rich in morphology. This is manifest in both nominal and verbal inflection: verbs are inflected in two voices, four moods, four tenses, two numbers, and three persons, plus a number of non-finite forms, while nouns are inflected in two numbers and fifteen cases. An intriguing center of this morphological complexity is the Finnish non-finite verb inflection system which combines aspects of verb and noun inflection.

Given that Finnish has, morphologically speaking, three to five different infinitives (e.g. Hakulinen et al. 2004: 487 list three, while e.g. Hakulinen & Karlsson 1979: 87 speak of “four or even five) and fifteen cases, there could theoretically be $5 \times 15 = 75$ different infinitive forms. The number would be further doubled if infinitives were inflected for number. However, each of the morphologically different infinitives has a defective case inflection paradigm: the 1st or *A* infinitive only has a basic (or “nominative”) and a translative form, the 2nd or *E* infinitive only has an inessive and an instructive form, etc. In all, we only encounter 15 of the potential 75 combinations of the different infinitive markers and case endings.

As e.g. Siro (1964) has pointed out, together the defective paradigms of these different forms are in a complementary distribution: there are no more than three cases (two of which are questionable to begin with) covered by more than one of the five infinitives, and in each of these cases, the possible syntactic contexts of the “overlapping” case forms are complementary—to the extent, Siro suggests, that Finnish syntactically has only one infinitive. (For a more detailed discussion, see Leino 2003: 99–111).

The alleged complementary distribution, and the whole Finnish infinitive system, is held together by a number of conventional infinitive constructions, specialized expression types which serve as usage contexts for specific infinitive forms. For example, the 2nd or *E* infinitive inessive is predominantly used in the *temporal construction* which expresses simultaneous activity (1a), and the 3rd or *MA* infinitive adessive in a construction which expresses means of carrying out the action expressed by the main predicate (1c):

- (1) a. Kalle ajatteli Liisaa syödessään.
Kalle-NOM think-PST-3SG Liisa-PAR eat-INF2-INE-PX3SG
'Kalle thought about Liisa when he ate.'
- c. Nälkä lähtee syömällä.
hunger-NOM leave-3SG eat-INF3-ADE
'Eating takes hunger away.'

Specific expression types or constructions like these are crucial in distinguishing seemingly overlapping case forms of infinitives from one another and pointing out their complementary distribution. In addition, they are also crucial in the sense that the whole notion of “infinitive” cannot be properly accounted for, and distinguished from the notion of “deverbal noun”, without making reference to such constructions.

The overall system of Finnish infinitives has been approach surprisingly scarcely given how much research has been carried out on specific non-finite constructions. Especially the role of case inflection as an organizing factor in the five infinitive system calls for further study.

The present paper approaches the Finnish infinitive primarily through case inflection. The aim of the paper is to evaluate the hypothesis that case inflection is the ultimate organizing factor of the Finnish infinitive morphology complex. This hypothesis, which associates with Siro’s hypothesis that Finnish has only one syntactic infinitive, will be compared to the competing, and more traditional, hypothesis according to which Finnish has four or five different infinitives, each of which has a defective case inflection independent of each of the other infinitives.

As a more general contribution, the paper exemplifies a situation in which seemingly independent morphological categories turn out to be intertwined and interdependent. The fact that the Finnish infinitive marking morphology and case marking morphology support each other and organize each other may have implications which are significant not only for Finnish and related languages but also for morphological theory and typology.

References

- Hakulinen, Auli – Karlsson, Fred 1979. *Nykysuomen lauseoppia*. SKS, Helsinki.
- Hakulinen, Auli & Maria Vilkuna & Riitta Korhonen & Vesa Koivisto & Tarja Riitta Heinonen & Irja Alho 2004. *Iso suomen kielioppi*. SKS, Helsinki.
- Leino, Jaakko 2003. *Antaa sen muuttua. Suomen kielen permissiivirakenne ja sen kehitys*. SKS, Helsinki.
- Siro, Paavo 1964. Infinitiivin asema suomen kieliopissa. *Sananjalka* 6: 20–26.