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Prototypes and change in real time - hd in Helsinki Finnish

Abstract:

Finnic languages have consonant gradation in which certain consonants have paradigmatic changes in their quantity or quality. In standard Finnish d is the weak grade alternative of t (for example in mahtua ‘to fit’ - mahdun ‘I fit’). This, however, is a result of orthography: d rarely appears in Finnish rural dialects, where either r, ð or l is used (mahrun, in Western dialects) or no phoneme appears (mah-∅-un, in Eastern dialects). In Helsinki however the d (mahdun) has been the most used variant for historical reasons, but in recent years the loss of d (mahun) has become increasingly frequent especially following an h.

We use the Longitudinal Corpus of Finnish Spoken in Helsinki (Helpuhe 2014) which covers the language with 20-year increments from 1970s to the present day to analyze how the change from hd to h (mahdun > mahun) happens in the community. We argue that the change does not spread uniformly in all cases where the morphophonological conditions apply. Instead, it takes over commonly used central words and spreads to the neighboring ones so that the criteria are not only morphophonological but include also semantics and frequency. The pattern is thus similar to Lakoff’s (1987) and Croft’s (2001) ideas of prototypes that further generate specific constructs.

It has been noted in earlier studies of Finnish (e.g. Rapola 1966, Nuolijärvi 1986, Paunonen 1995) that the ∅ is almost exclusive in certain numerals (yhde- ‘one’, kahde- ‘two’, yhdeksän ‘nine’, kahdeksan ‘eight’) in Helsinki (and moreover in Finland). The phenomenon itself is then well-known, but we view the change from a more cognitive angle. Our study supplements the earlier findings as it follows the gradual change from a prototype towards the periphery. The change appears to happen next in several central verbs (tehdä ‘to do’, nähä ‘to see’, lähde- ‘to go’), adjectives (mahdollinen ‘possible’) and nouns (kohda- ‘place’) and moves towards cases where the d typically has not been lost. For instance, when these words occur as a part of a place name the change doesn’t happen. We analyze whether the change follows this pattern in the community as a whole and in idiolects over time.

References:


