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## **The lexical homonymy of the Finnish language**

Over the centuries, the ethnic language has transformed into the most precise and accurate system of communication between people in a given community. The process of articulation of speech, extraordinarily complex and accurate, guarantees the univocality of the transfer of information from the sender to the receiver. It seems intriguing that almost all known languages (also artificial languages), while expanding their vocabulary, involving intonation or accent in order to obtain the exact unity of the intention of the speaker and the acoustic effect which is reaching the listener (also almost fully reflected in writing), have been at the same time incessantly tolerant of the existence of homonymy.

The evolution of polysemy can be understood and easily justified, as it bases on the creative usage of intelligence, associations, very often on the sense of humour of the users of a language in order to obtain an agreement enriched with ambiguous associations. The case of homonymy is totally different. Here, the words which are completely identical in speech and writing not only have totally different meanings but also cannot stem from one lexical root. The receiver can identify the meaning of a heard or read word only when he looks at its linguistic context. The fact that numerous languages in the world have not successfully eliminated the mechanism of disinformation (at the different level of intensification) of their users, is a case which requires both psycho- and sociolinguistical analysis. A linguist who analyses instances of homonymy in different languages and contrasts the results of his investigations cannot help asking himself a question: Which word-formation processes boost the creation of homonyms? What causes their incorporation into a language? Finally: Why does homonymy continue to exist and spread out?

A linguist who is not backed by historians can only present a hypothesis based on his common sense and try to find its confirmation among homonyms of particular languages.

### **Thesis one**

Homonymy is connected with the process of interaction between separate languages (also dialects) e. g. through the process of borrowing. There are four basic patterns of the appearance of homonyms in an ethnic language:

1. Words in a language X, which are identical in form, but different in meaning, are created spontaneously in the same historical (or other) period in intellectually isolated groups of users of the language X.
2. The language X borrows from the language Y an expression which is identical in form with an already existing expression in order to use a meaning which exists in the language Y, but not in the language X.
3. The language X borrows from the languages Y and Z expressions which are identical in form but have different meanings.
4. The language X borrows homonyms from the language Y. These homonyms are either native for the language Y, or have been borrowed from the language Z.

It is obvious that these four patterns may exist in various configurations and their frequency of occurrence largely depends on the stage of civilisation.

### Thesis two

Before the creation of writing, homonyms appeared accidentally and functioned without being noticed by the users of particular dialects, but when people became aware of the existence of homonymy (probably at the time when dictionaries were compiled), it must have been accepted, and has not only survived until today, but is consciously and purposely multiplied in languages mostly because of the process of borrowing already existing sets of homonyms from other languages.

The instances of homonymy can be observed not only in every modern language (with regard to particular historical periods), but also in the investigated ancient languages. Today, it is extremely hard to prove the thesis of the creation of homonymy, as we do not know the pronunciation of aboriginal and ancient languages at the time when they were formed, our knowledge being limited their later written form existing in limited sources. It seems advisable to examine the process of introduction of borrowings which expands the number of homonyms using the example of the historical development of Finnish, which belongs to the Finno-Ugric family of languages and the lexicon of which was free from the influence of the Indo-European languages of differentiated the neighbouring countries. Finnish tribes at that time were greatly differentiated regionally as far as their vocabulary was concerned (this is also true nowadays in relation to their speech), this being the result of both distinct differences between separate tribes coming from Eurasia and the prolonged dispersion of their small populations over a huge territory at the time of the formation of the Finnish nation.



## Type 1 Process

### The early period of the word-formation processes of Finnish

The whole tribes or even smaller groups of people of Finland and Karelia lived, built their economy and formed their language on the enclaves of land which were fit for settling. They were isolated from other tribes by numerous lakes, rivers, marshes, and impassable forests. The climate of the region was also very harsh. Most of them lived as fishermen, hunters; those who lived in forests were gatherers and hunters; only few Finns were farmers. Using the same language, they created words closely connected with their lifestyle, mostly with their tools. In this way there were formed words which meant different things but had the same pronunciation. Probably in the new environment the creators tended to use old Finno-Ugric roots which were known before the migration. Even nowadays Finns use these words:

|               |   |                                    |
|---------------|---|------------------------------------|
| <b>eno</b>    | I 'huge river'                          | II 'mother's brother'              |
| <b>jänkä</b>  | I 'deep water'                          | II 'block, giant'                  |
| <b>jyrä</b>   | I 'tool for smoothing'                  | II 'brook'                         |
| <b>koi</b>    | I 'moth'                                | II 'dawn'                          |
| <b>kokko</b>  | I 'eagle'                               | II 'bonfire'                       |
| <b>kuu</b>    | I 'moon'                                | II 'lard'                          |
| <b>kuusi</b>  | I 'spruce'                              | II 'six'                           |
| <b>poro</b>   | I 'wild reindeer'                       | II 'ash'                           |
| <b>pura</b>   | I 'chisel'                              | II 'young bull'                    |
| <b>rapa</b>   | I 'scraper'                             | II 'mud'      III 'brewer's draff' |
| <b>sora</b>   | I 'gravel'                              | II 'net'                           |
| <b>turja</b>  | I 'neck'                                | II 'witch'                         |
| <b>viuhka</b> | I 'tool for ploughing with a sharp end' | II 'whistle'                       |

## Type 2 Process

### The period of incorporation of borrowings from close neighbours

Over the centuries, Finnish tribes were dominated politically and culturally by Swedes, and lacked Finnish-speaking nobles, merchants and scholars. They contacted mostly their neighbours, Karelians, the Saami, Estonians, who used languages from the same language family: they also met Germanic tribes in the North and in the West; lands in the East and in the South were settled by the made Balts and Slavs. The analysis of the runic inscriptions shows how many



borrowings were from Germanic languages; the Finnish epic „*Kalevala*” presents us with numerous words of Slavic, mostly Russian, origin. Such borrowings also led to the increase in the number of homonyms of mixed origin:

|                | native expression                                    | borrowed expression                            |
|----------------|--|--|
| <i>aito</i>    | I ‘true’   | II ‘reindeer tracks on snow’ < Sa. ai’ta       |
| <i>ajo</i>     | I ‘ride’   | II ‘treeless plain’ < Sa. <i>aggjo</i>         |
| <i>kalikka</i> | I ‘cudgel’   | II ‘beggar’ < Rus. <i>kaleka, kalika</i>       |
|                | III ‘small loaf of bread, pie’ < Rus. <i>kaliika</i> |  |
| <i>katti</i>   | I ‘grasshopper’                                      | III ‘kitten’ < Swe. <i>katt</i>                |
| <i>harri</i>   | I ‘clotted hair’                                     | II ‘grayling’ < Swe. <i>harr</i>               |
| <i>kaasi</i>   | I ‘bridesmaid’                                       | II ‘wages’ < Swe. <i>gaga</i>                  |
| <i>kaski</i>   | I ‘clearing’   | II ‘helmet’ < Swe. <i>kask</i>                 |
| <i>kelsi</i>   | I ‘skin’   | II ‘keel’ < Swe. <i>kölsvin</i>                |
| <i>siili</i>   | I ‘hedgehog’   | II ‘strainer’ < Swe. <i>sijl</i>               |
| <i>sima</i>    | I ‘mead’   | II ‘part of litosphere’ < Lat. <i>silicium</i> |
| <i>talja</i>   | I ‘animal skin’                                      | II ‘pulley block’ < Swe. <i>talja</i>          |
| <i>turkki</i>  | I ‘fur’  | II ‘Turk, Turkey’ < Swe. <i>turk</i>           |
| <i>vaara</i>   | I ‘wooded mountain’                                  | II ‘danger, threat’ < Swe. <i>fara</i>         |

### Type 3 Process

#### The period of intense linguistic and cultural exchange

The times of mass borrowing from many foreign languages are also relatively recent which is proved by their relatively modern subject matter. These words were usually describing concepts previously unknown in Finnish. Their original pronunciation was usually maintained by those who borrowed them (usually by experts borrowing the achievements of the neighbours), and when they became widespread, the users who did not know the language from which they were borrowed usually changed their pronunciation according to their own rules of phonetics. This process was strengthened by the fact that Finnish did not possess its own written form until the 15th century, and even then was not widely used in writing until the 16th century. As Finns were inclined to alter the borrowed words according to the rules of Finnish phonology, morphology, spelling and semantics, homonyms in Finnish became even more numerous than before:



|               |  |  |
|---------------|--|--|
| <i>akka</i>   | I 'counter current' < Swe. <i>agga</i><br>III 'tripod for a torch' < Rus. <i>babka</i> | II 'old woman' < Sa. <i>a'kka</i>          |
| <i>halli</i>  | I 'sea dog' < Bal. <i>halla</i>  | II 'hall' < Swe. <i>hall</i>               |
| <i>hamina</i> | I 'harbour' < Swe. <i>hamn</i>   | II 'rumble' < Swe. <i>hamla</i>            |
| <i>iili</i>   | I 'gust of wind' < Swe. <i>il</i>  | II 'leech' < Swe. <i>igel</i>              |
| <i>kurkku</i> | I 'throat' < Scand.?   | II 'cucumber' < Swe. <i>gurka</i>          |
| <i>kurtta</i> | I 'reindeer's dewlap' < Sa. <i>gur'te</i>  | II 'skirt, dress' < Rus. <i>kurta</i>      |
| <i>kuutti</i> | I 'boat' < Swe. <i>skuta</i>   | II 'small seal' < Swe. <i>kut</i>          |
| <i>lana</i>   | I 'device for smoothing a field' < Swe. <i>plana</i>                                   | II 'fish-pot' < Swe. <i>lana</i>           |
| <i>palli</i>  | I 'stool' < Swe. <i>pall</i>   | II 'ball' < Swe. <i>boll</i>               |
| <i>sinkka</i> | I 'instrument' < Swe. <i>zincka</i>  | II 'connection, joint' < Swe. <i>sinka</i> |
| <i>tokka</i>  | I 'herd of reindeer' < Sa. <i>doak'ke</i>  | II 'dock' < Swe. <i>docka</i>              |

#### Type 4 Process

##### Modern trends of borrowing homonymy

The analysis of homonymy existing in European languages allows us to state that nowadays the main tendency is to incorporate foreign, already formed and firmly established homonyms. They are borrowed directly or through another language; they are so widespread that they can be perceived as international words. This phenomenon is also known in Finnish:

|               |   |                                     |
|---------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| <i>arkki</i>  | I 'sheet' < Swe. <i>ark</i>   | II 'ark' < Swe. <i>ark</i>          |
| <i>halssi</i> | I 'entrance to the cellar' < Swe. <i>hals</i>                         | II 'tack' < Swe. <i>hals</i>        |
| <i>kata</i>   | I 'tarry pine' < Swe. <i>skata</i>                                    | II 'tress' < Swe. <i>skata</i>      |
| <i>knaapi</i> | I 'armour - bearer' < Swe. <i>knape</i>                               | II 'pikeman' < Swe. <i>knape</i>    |
| <i>krossi</i> | I 'gross or twelve dozens' < Swe. <i>gross</i>                        | II 'heap, pile' < Swe. <i>gross</i> |
| <i>lantti</i> | I 'coin' < Swe. <i>slant</i>  | II 'a float' < Swe. <i>slant</i>    |
| <i>rakki</i>  | I 'mongrel' < Swe. <i>racka</i>                                       | II 'wreckage' < Swe. <i>rack</i>    |
| <i>tokka</i>  | I 'dock' < Swe. <i>docka</i>  | II 'doll' < Swe. <i>docka</i>       |
| <i>boksi</i>  | I 'boxing' < Eng. <i>box</i><br>III 'box-calf' < Eng. <i>box-calf</i> | II 'box' < English <i>box</i>       |
| <i>karsta</i> | I 'carbon deposit (in machines)' < Rus. <i>korosta</i>                | II 'scabies' < Rus. <i>korosta</i>  |



*International words:*

|                  |  |                                    |
|------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| <i>banketti</i>  | I 'banquet'  | II 'protecting dike'               |
| <i>baari</i>     | I 'bar'  | II 'bar (unit of pressure)'        |
| <i>etiketti</i>  | I 'etiquette; formality; ceremonial'               | II 'label; tag'                    |
| <i>filee</i>     | I 'type of lace'                                   | II 'fillet of fish or meat'        |
| <i>friisi</i>    | I 'Frisian'  | II 'castor (excretion in bearers)' |
|                  | III 'frieze, a thin decorative border on the wall' | IV 'vignette'                      |
| <i>gnoomi</i>    | I 'gnome'  | II 'gnome; maxim; aphorism'        |
| <i>golfi</i>     | I 'golf'   | II 'gulf'                          |
| <i>klooni</i>    | I 'maple-tree'                                     | II 'clone'                         |
| <i>kokki</i>     | I 'cook'   | II 'type of bacterium'             |
|                  | III 'garret, attic'                                |                                    |
| <i>krokeetti</i> | I 'croquet'  | II 'croquette'                     |
| <i>markiisi</i>  | I 'marchioness'                                    | II 'awning; markee'                |
| <i>steppi</i>    | I 'steppe'   | II 'step dancing'                  |
| <i>termiitti</i> | I 'termite, white ant'                             | II 'thermit(e)'                    |
| <i>voltti</i>    | I 'volt'   | II 'volte'                         |

**The sources of the loan-words**

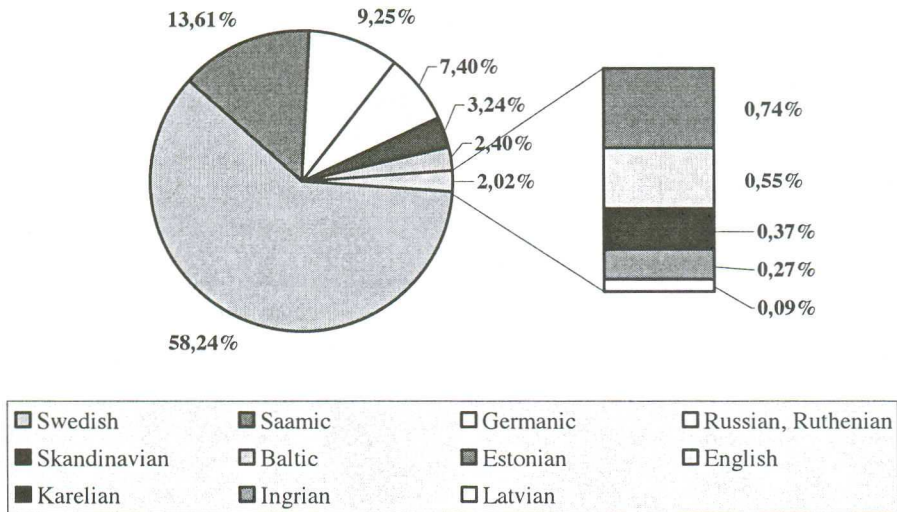
The analysis of the homonymic resources of a ethnical language may contribute in establishing the sources of the loan-words present in the language. The etymological analysis of the gathered material proved that the language, which have the biggest influence during the development of the homonymic resources, about 60%, was Swedish.

| O.n | Etymology          | Number of units | Part in the homonymy (%) |
|-----|--------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| 1.  | Swedish            | 629             | 58,24                    |
| 2.  | Saamic             | 147             | 13,61                    |
| 3.  | Germanic           | 100             | 9,25                     |
| 4.  | Russian, Ruthenian | 80              | 7,40                     |
| 5.  | Skandinavian       | 35              | 3,24                     |
| 6.  | Baltic             | 26              | 2,40                     |
| 7.  | Estonian           | 8               | 0,74                     |



|     |          |   |      |
|-----|----------|---|------|
| 8.  | English  | 6 | 0,55 |
| 9.  | Karelian | 4 | 0,37 |
| 10. | Ingrian  | 3 | 0,27 |
| 11. | Latvian  | 1 | 0,09 |

**Table 1.** The directions of the flow of the lexical units to Finnish compared to the language's homonymic resources (from the source of the direct infiltration)



**Fig. 1.** The directions of the flow of the lexical units to Finnish compared to the language's homonymic resources (from the source of the direct infiltration)

The Swedish has always been recognized as a language of the higher social status, which depends on the centuries long tradition of the Swedish political and historical dominancy. Swedish is both the „donor language” and the agent in the process of importancy of the words which are the source of the homonymy. The second biggest donor-language is Saamic (14%), Germanic and Russian as well as old-Russian 7,5%. The results are presented in the table 1 and figure 1.

The flow of the lexical units takes also place in the opposite direction: from the Finnish homonymic resources to the other languages. Classification of the lexems in the Finnish homonymy proves that Finnish is as well the donor as the acceptor of the loan-words. The analysis proves that biggest number (2,5%) of the Finnish homonyms is present in the Saamic languages and dialects (see table 2 and figure 2):

|                |   |   |
|----------------|---|---|
| <i>haukku</i>  | 1. 'bark (of dogs)'   | 2. 'abuse' (> Sa. <i>haw'kot</i> )                          |
| <i>kaasu</i>   | 1. 'fog; mist; vapours'                                     | 2. 'mirage; fata morgana' (> Sa. <i>gasat, kasad</i> 'fog') |
| <i>kahva</i>   | 'handle; handgrip' (> Sa. dial. <i>skskal</i> 'handle')     |   |
| <i>kakara</i>  | 1. 'block; clod'  | 2. 'dung (of horse)' (> Sa. <i>kk __c</i> )                 |
| <i>kampela</i> | 'flatfish' (> Sa. <i>kk __at</i> )                          |   |
| <i>kara</i>    | 'water ouzel' (> Sa. <i>guoi'k-gguoi</i> 'water ouzel')     |   |
| <i>kilo</i>    | 'sour' (> Sa. <i>gil'lasit</i> )                            |   |
| <i>kohtu</i>   | 'uterus' (> Sa. <i>goatto</i> )                             |   |
| <i>komi</i>    | I 'big box' (> Sa. <i>goabmâ</i> )                          |   |
| <i>korea</i>   | 'elegant, smart, refined' (> Sa. <i>goarrâd</i> )           |   |
| <i>kuume</i>   | 1. 'fever, temperature'                                     | 2. 'excitement, fervour, enthusiasm' (> Sa. <i>gumes</i> )  |
| <i>lääjä</i>   | 'pile; heap' (> Sa. <i>læggje</i> )                         |   |
| <i>lämsä</i>   | I 'lariat, noose, loop; belt' (= Sa. <i>law'že</i> 'reins') |   |
|                | II 'valve'  | III 'half-open (door) ' (> Sa. <i>læm'se</i> )              |
| <i>pilkka</i>  | 'sneer, scoff, gibe' (> Sa. <i>bil'ke</i> 'sneer')          |   |
| <i>raita</i>   | 'willow' (> Sa. <i>rai'da</i> )                             |   |
| <i>potkea</i>  | I 'to cast a net' (> Sa. <i>p?ǎ'iked</i> 'to cast a net')   | II 'to kick' (> Sa. dial. <i>poatkat</i> 'to kick')         |

In Russian a very small number, only 0,5%, of the Finnish set, got assimilated. It is easy then to name them:

|                 |  |  |
|-----------------|--|--|
| <i>formu</i> // | 1. 'willow herb'   | 2. 'filipendula' (> Rus. dial. <i>górma, formá</i>         |
| <i>vormu</i>    |  | 'filipendula')   |
| <i>kare</i>     | 1. 'seawind'   | 2. 'breath; light air' (> Rus. dial. <i>kárega</i> 'wave') |
| <i>kaski</i>    | 1. 'clearing of land'  | 2. dialectal 'yang birch (-tree)' (> Rus. <i>káska</i> )   |
| <i>lainata</i>  | 'to swallow' (> Rus. <i>lánatb</i> 'to toy with one's food') |  |

The situation is very similar in Swedish:

|               |  |
|---------------|--|
| <i>kaasa</i>  | 'bridesmaid' (> Swe. dial.)                            |
| <i>kappa</i>  | 'nave; hub' (? > Swe. <i>kappe, hjulkappa</i> )        |
| <i>kolkka</i> | 'coin, order; rand; outskirts' (> Swe. <i>kolkka</i> ) |





*kiire* 1. 'hurry' 2. 'hasty, hurried' (> Swe. dial.)

*pupu* children's speech, jocular: 'rabbit; hare' (> Swe. dial. *pupu* 'hare')

In Karelian only 3 words of the Finnish origin can be found:

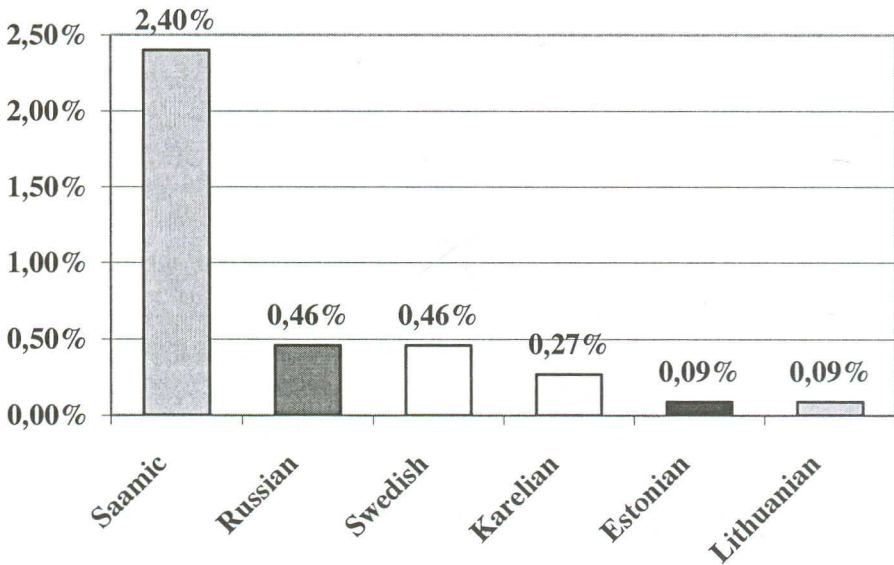
*jakku* 'short bench; stool' (> Kar. *jakku*)

*julma* 'hull of birch bark' (> ? Kar. *julmo, julmu*)

*kuiiri* 'curlew jack; lapwing' (> ? Kar.).

| O.n | Language   | Number of units | Part in the homonymy (%) |
|-----|------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| 1.  | Saamic     | 26              | 2,40                     |
| 2.  | Russian    | 5               | 0,46                     |
| 3.  | Swedish    | 5               | 0,46                     |
| 4.  | Karelian   | 3               | 0,27                     |
| 5.  | Estonian   | 1               | 0,09                     |
| 6.  | Lithuanian | 1               | 0,09                     |

**Table 2.** The directions of the flow of the lexical units from Finnish to the other lexical systems



**Fig. 2.** The directions of the flow of the lexical units from Finnish to the other lexical systems



The group of the semantic-lexical parallelisms, words of the same background, may be questionable:

|               |  |  |
|---------------|--|--|
| <i>läppä</i>  | 'tabula; valve' (= Sa. <i>læppe</i> 'valve, valvule')                                |  |
| <i>laukka</i> | 1. 'gallop'  | 2. 'to outvie one another in doing' (= Sa. <i>law'ke</i> )       |
| <i>kärki</i>  | 'bee-eater' (= Mor. <i>keřgata</i> )   |  |
| <i>kärnä</i>  | 'smeel of burning' (= Sa. <i>gær'dne</i> )   |  |
| <i>kurppa</i> | 'woodcock' (Mari <i>kêrmêzak</i> )   |  |
| <i>kuore</i>  | 'European smelt' (? = Samoyed <i>kór, kuor, kkó</i> 'fish of the family Salmonidae') |  |
| <i>kulli</i>  | 1. 'penis'   | 2. 'rupture, hernia' 3. 'hog' (parallel in Udmurt <i>kul'i</i> ) |
| <i>kangas</i> | 'treeless sands overgrown with heather' (= ? Mari <i>kaŋga</i> 'thin; dry earth')    |  |
| <i>juuri</i>  | 'root' (= Mor. <i>jur</i> 'korzeń')  |  |
| <i>jalka</i>  | 'mistress, konkubine' (? = Mor. <i>jalga</i> 'friend, lady friend')                  |  |
| <i>puola</i>  | 'cowberry' (= Komi <i>pul</i> 'cowberry')  |  |
| <i>turpa</i>  | I 1. 'muzzle; snout' 2. 'mug, phiz' (= Mor. <i>turva, torva</i> 'mouth')             |  |
|               | II 'chub' (= Mor. 'mouth')   |  |

To settle the directions of the flow of the loan-words, the direct influence of a given language and identification of the agent-language in the process of importancy is a very complicated goal. The foregoing results were appeared on the basis of the present lexical material and the dictionary data. Although the diversity of the lexicographic interpretations, the methods of the semantic classification of the lexical units and the criteria of the lexeme classification the objectivity is not easy to achieve.

The above examples seem to adequately justify both theses that were stated at the beginning. The presented homonyms are only a small part of all the body of the Finnish homonyms; they were selected as they best illustrate the discussed linguistic processes, which does not mean that the material which has not been included contradicts them. There is simply nothing at all that would testify to the fact that homonyms in Finnish were created on purpose. Even the examples which are of purely Finnish etymology were created when the Finnish language was born, and even now dictionaries inform of the dialect from which they originate.

The above attempt to prove the unintentional character of homonymy comes from a slightly defiant wish of the author to advance a thesis holding that the proportion of homonyms of foreign origin in a given acceptance of cultural achievements of other nations.



### Abbreviations

**Bal.** = Baltic languages

**Dial.** = dialectal

**Eng.** = English

**Kar.** = Karelian

**Lat.** = Latin

**Mor.** = Mordvin languages

**O.n.** = ordinal number

**Rus.** = Russian

**Sa.** = Saami languages

**Swe.** = Swedish

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