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## Throwing a Glance at *heittää*: Reflections on Describing and Interpreting Changes of Meaning

### 1. On the Semantics and Etymology of *heittää*

The Finnish verb *heittää* (stem *heittä-*) has cognates throughout the Finnic language group, with a wide range of meanings. In addition to the meaning regarded as primary, ‘throw, fling, send something flying through the air’, there are numerous secondary meanings which Korhonen (1960) in his ground-breaking study divides into two groups, western and eastern. In Western Finnish dialects and also in Estonian and Livonian, *(\*)heittä-* (or the frequentative derivative *(\*)heittele-*) can denote ‘pushing’ or ‘swinging, swaying’. Implicit reflexives (cf. Koivisto 1995), i.e. *(\*)heittä-* or *(\*)heittele-* for ‘throw oneself, fling oneself about, toss and turn’, are also typical of Western Finnic. From these meanings, numerous specialized uses (in SMS 3, divided in 12 semantic subgroups) have evolved, such as ‘exchange, trade ware for ware’, ‘eat or drink something quickly and greedily’, ‘take (somebody) quickly (somewhere), transport, give a lift’, ‘say something, especially a ritualized utterance such as a greeting’ (“throw a good morning”), ‘cause a dizzy feeling’ (*päästä heittää* ‘[I] feel dizzy’, lit. “Ø throws [me] from/by the head”), ‘vary, change, be imprecise’ (*arvio heittää* ‘the estimate[d number] “throws”’, i.e. can vary or err<sup>1</sup>) or even ‘assume [“throw oneself into”] a role, become or pretend to be(come) something’

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1 Korhonen (op.cit. 166) presents Swedish *vinden kastar* ‘the wind changes’ (lit. “the wind throws”) simply as a parallel to similar uses of Fi. *heittää*. In Finland Swedish, however, the wide-spread use of *kasta* in the meaning ‘vary, be imprecise or subject to errors’ (*siffrorna kastar* “the numbers throw”), is generally considered a calque from Finnish (Reuter 1994).

(Estonian *hulluks heitma* ‘sich toll stellen’,<sup>2</sup> Livonian *nīt ētab allōks* ‘die Wiese wird grün’<sup>3</sup>).

In Eastern Finnic, in contrast, we can observe another secondary meaning which has spread “with astonishing force” (Korhonen op.cit. 173: *ihmetystä... herättää uuden merkityksen tavaton leviämisvoima*): ‘drop, strip, let go, abandon, leave, stop, quit’. In Karelian, the use of *heittä-* for ‘stop, quit’ seems very frequent. In fact, one might even claim that the Karelian construction type “throw/quit X-ing” has partly assumed the function of a discontinuative negative phasal adverbial (‘no more’; cf. van der Auwera 1998). For instance, in KKS 5 (s.v. *sanketa*) the example sentence *yhty i sanganet, heitäd uksis synnyndän* “if you get even a little bit fatter, you will throw fitting (= cease to fit) through the doors” has been translated with Finnish *et enää mahdu oovista* ‘you won’t fit through the doors any more’. As Korhonen points out, some uses of *heittää* in the “Eastern” meaning ‘abandon, leave’ appear in Western Finnic as well: there are examples such as Estonian *hinge heitma* ‘die’, lit. “throw/leave the soul” (cf. German *den Geist aufgeben*), already attested in the 18th century.

The use of *heittää* in the Eastern Finnic meaning ‘let go, abandon, leave, stop’ thus seems old. According to Korhonen, it is too old and too widespread in Finnic to be explained with the influence of the Russian verbs *brosit’* ‘throw, fling; leave, abandon, stop, quit’ and *kinut’* ‘throw, fling; leave, abandon, ignore, neglect’, so that Korhonen only mentions the Russian verbs as an “interesting parallel”. However, an influence in the opposite direction might be possible, as the meanings ‘leave, abandon’ seem to be a Russian innovation. The Russian verb *brosat’/brosit’* has obviously acquired the meaning ‘throw’ – shared only with Ukrainian – relatively recently, while other Slavic languages show meanings such as ‘schaben, rasieren’ or ‘streifen’ (Vasmer 1953); consequently, the meaning ‘leave, stop’ must be an even more recent innovation. In the great Russian dialect dictionary SRNG (3), the only example of *brosat’* in a meaning close to those in Eastern Finnic comes from Central Asia (‘leave a passenger (at a station)’), but the AOS gives many examples from Northern Russian dialects in meanings such as ‘throw away, stop using/wearing’ or ‘quit,

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2 Quoted by Korhonen from Wiedemann’s (1893) dictionary.

3 Example from Kettunen 1938, in simplified orthography.

stop doing'. The example from the Olonets area, *brosajte písaije* 'stop (the act of) writing!', employing the action noun instead of the infinitive, is structurally the exact counterpart of the Olonets Karelian *heitteä -ndU* construction.

Korhonen (1960: 172–174) regards the Western Finnic meaning 'throw, fling' of *heittää* as the original one, since "the act of flinging something is more concrete and more affect-laden than the act of leaving/abandoning something", and the Western type includes more sub-meanings than the Eastern one. To explain the change of meaning in Eastern Finnic, he refers to the Sperberian concept of "attraction": the affect-laden idea of 'throwing, flinging' needed new expressions instead of the conventionalized and "worn-out" *heittää*, and in Eastern Finnic, the newcomers completely ousted the old word, which then survived in the secondary meanings of "leaving", "abandoning" etc.

In Western Finland as well, there are dialects where *heittää* reportedly was never used in the concrete meaning of 'throw'. Instead, Finnish dialects know dozens of more or less expressive verbs for "flinging" (such as *nakata*, *viskata* and *paiskata*, which also appear in Standard Finnish). The concept of "expressive" or "descriptive" verb is notoriously difficult to define (cf. Mikone 2002), but these verbs often seem to carry a shade of emotion (for instance, anger or contempt) combined with a special rashness, speed and strength of movement. For this reason, expressive words for 'flinging' cannot be used in neutral – for instance, official – contexts (\**IAAF:n sääntöjen mukaan keihästä on paiskattava...* 'according to the rules of IAAF, the javelin must be flung...') – unless they really are "neutralized", which implies that the meaning of the original "neutral" verb has developed further, leaving a slot to be filled.

Outside the Finnic group, there seem to be no cognates for *heittää*. The possible cognates in Southern Saami and Udmurt, as mentioned in *SKES* 1 (at least the Udmurt word is both semantically and phonologically problematic), are no more taken into consideration in *SSA* 1, and the (North) Saami *heaitit* 'stop, quit, abandon', as shown by the initial *h-*, is a loanword from Finnic. This makes *heittää* a good candidate for one of the all-Finnic loanword strata, and not surprisingly, Jorma Koivulehto has found a (Pre-)Germanic original.

Koivulehto's etymology, first presented in 1979 (Koivulehto 1999: 182–197), is firmly based on morphophonological analysis: *heittä-* (< Pre-Finnic *\*šejttä-*) must be a causative derivative in TTA, as the sequence of three consonants, *-jtt-*, would be phonotactically impossible in an underived stem. For the remaining stem, *\*šej-*, there is a plausible original in Indo-European *\*sē(i)-* (< *\*seh<sub>1</sub>-*) 'entsenden, werfen, fallen lassen'. In European IE languages, the meaning has developed further to 'throw seed, sow', which means that the Finnic word must have been borrowed very early, before the specialization of the meaning in IE or, at least, before the loss of the original meaning (assuming that the meanings 'throw' and 'sow' have existed side by side for a longer time – which, in the light of evidence from lexicology and grammaticalization studies, is plausible enough). The substitution of (Pre-)Germanic *s* with Pre-Finnic *\*š* (instead of *s*) has parallels in other early loan etymologies, and the use of a causative verb suffix as an adaptation strategy, instead of adapting the loan verb into a small and presumably closed group of (C)Vj- verb stems (*soj-* 'ring, resound', *\*kej-* 'boil', *voj-* 'be able'<sup>4</sup>), seems feasible. Thus, Koivulehto's etymology – although for some reason called "uncertain" in SSA ("*epävarman selityksen mukaan...*") – must be considered well-founded.

## 2. Universal Paths of Semantic Change?

The etymology and semantic developments of *heittä-* in Finnic have, thus, been exhaustively investigated. There seems to be very little to add to the work of Korhonen, Koivulehto and others. At the same time, this impressively expert work is illustrative of the "self-contained" tradition of Finno-Ugric studies: generalizable observations are left to be read between

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4 In addition to the verbs mentioned by Koivulehto, this class of verbs in modern Finnish includes *ui-* 'swim', *pui-* 'thresh' (according to SKES and SSA, a derivative of *puu* 'wood, tree') and *nai-* 'marry; have sexual intercourse' (related to the possibly Uralic but obscure word family for 'woman'). With the exception of the latter two, both of which are (potential) derivatives, all (C)Vj- verbs are intransitive, which also motivates the use of the causative *ttA* suffix in the adaptation of the transitive *\*šejttä-* 'throw'.

the lines, parallel cases in other languages are mentioned anecdotally and somewhat ad hoc (up to our days, this seems to be the standard method of providing evidence for postulated semantic change in etymology), and there are very few attempts to describe semantic change in a way that would facilitate comparison with other languages or other cases of language change.

For instance, in a componential or feature analysis of semantics (cf. e.g. Bakró-Nagy 1982, Pajunen 1988), the Western Finnic meanings of ‘swinging, swaying, shaking’ for *heittäi* could simply be described as loss of a semantic component, ‘change of place’ (what is shaken or swayed does not move to another place) and/or ‘loss of contact, letting go of the object’ (what is shaken stays in your hand). This decrease of semantic content is probably what Korhonen (1960) aims at when speaking about “diminutivity” (a notoriously vague, yet over-exploited concept in the research of Finno-Ugric word formation). Or we could try to fit the changes in the semantics of *heittäi* into the cognitive framework of semantic change as proposed by Blank (1999), operating with the general tendency of words with an abstract reference to develop by way of metaphoric abstraction (‘throw away, let go, release’ > ‘cease to possess/control/perform, abandon, stop, quit’).

For the young Mikko Korhonen in his paper of 1960, the theoretical framework allowing for generalizable conclusions and cross-language comparison was the German tradition of language philosophy and lexical semantics, as cultivated in Finland by Lauri Hakulinen and others. Although there are obvious connections between these traditions and the latter-day success story of grammaticalization studies (as well as with cognitive linguistics), one fundamental difference becomes obvious when regarding the history of *heittäi* in Finnic: Where the Sperberian tradition sees a system-conditioned pull chain (affective meanings attracting new expressions), the grammaticalization framework presumes a push chain dependent of individual lexemes, with verbs such as ‘throw’ gradually losing semantic substance and becoming more and more abstract (from ‘let go and send flying through the air’ to ‘let go, cease to control, quit’), which allows them to be ousted by more concrete, expressive words.

This lexical approach would simultaneously mean that certain words are more prone to be grammaticalized, and the study of

grammaticalization as a universal phenomenon could even boil down to identifying such typical input words. This, in fact, comes close to what Heine and Kuteva (2002) attempt in their reference work on grammaticalization. While demonstrating that there indeed seem to be universal paths of semantic abstraction, their work also vividly illustrates the sad fact that one reference book can never capture the whole diversity of possible semantic developments. The source meaning THROW does figure in the book, but only as the source for the perfect aspect in the Diyari language (op.cit. 297–298). On the other hand, the egressive aspect (“stop doing”) figures among the targets of grammaticalization, but the only source mentioned is the verb for ‘leave, abandon, exit’ (op.cit. 190; Heine and Kuteva do not go further into the etymological background of Portuguese *deixar* ‘stop (doing)’ (< ‘leave’), which seems to belong, by way of *deicere*, to the Latin word family for ‘throw’...). Obviously, as Heine and Kuteva (l.cit., and in many other places in the book) state, “this grammaticalization appears to be an instance of a more general process whereby process verbs are grammaticalized to auxiliaries denoting tense or aspect functions”.

The verb *heittää* (with cognates) stands on a bifurcating path, perhaps typical of verbs which denote (causing) a change of state. On one hand, they can be grammaticalized to markers of *Aktionsart* or aspect. On the other hand, they easily lend themselves to idiomaticization – in (colloquial) Finnish, *heittää* also appears in opaque idioms such as *heittää huulta* ‘talk, joke, chat’ (= “throw a lip”), *heittää lipat* ‘fall to the ground, stumble’ (= “throw visors”) – which leads to almost complete semantic emptiness and interchangeability with other verbs.<sup>5</sup> This connection between (system-conditioned?) grammaticalization and (lexically conditioned?) idiomaticization has also been pointed out by Nenonen (2002: 130). In her corpus of verb-based idioms in Finnish youth literature, *heittää* is the 14th verb in the order of type frequency, less frequently used than verbs such as

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5 Cf. Niemi (2006: 229–230) on *vetää* ‘pull’ in Finnish. In some of his examples, such as *vetää keikkaa* ‘play (“pull”) a gig’, *vetää läppää* ‘talk’ (“pull flap”), *vetää laatat* ‘vomit’ (“pull floor tiles”), *heittää (keikkaa / läppää / laatat)* would be equally possible.

*olla* 'be', *mennä* 'go' or *tehdä* 'do, make' but yet used in more idioms than, for example, *lyödä* 'hit', *nähdä* 'see' or *sanoa* 'say' (op.cit. 57).

### 3. Further Considerations

The question remains: can anything significant be added to previous etymological and dialectological research on *heittää*? Even if the semantics and etymology of *heittää* can neatly be fitted into a framework of more general tendencies and mechanisms of semantic change, there is always the possibility of individual, lexeme-specific and/or language-specific factors interfering. For instance, Livonian *eitō* has acquired the meaning 'lay the foundation (of a house, homestead), settle down' by way of calquing the meanings of Latvian *mest* and/or through secondary association with Estonian *ehitada* 'build' (Kettunen 1938). As for the development of the Eastern Finnic meaning 'leave, abandon, stop', it is possible that the resemblance with the largely synonymous *jättää* 'leave, abandon' and with the antonym *ottaa* 'take, receive' (frequently collocated, as in *ota tai jätä ~ heitä* 'take it or leave it') has played a role – although mechanisms of this kind are difficult to capture with the means of traditional etymological research. In many respects, traditional historical lexicology still represents some insights of fundamental importance to the history of a (certain) language *wie es eigentlich geschehen*, and these insights are probably too valuable to be offered to seemingly "general" ideas of describing language – cf. the constructive but very critical standpoint of Joseph (2004).

To return to the origin of *heittää*: it seems plausible that this verb is a Proto-Finnic replacement for the loss of a grammaticalized or semantically specialized earlier verb. (The earlier verb for 'throw' may have been *\*lō-*, surviving in Finnic in various specific meanings: 'warp<sup>6</sup> [= arrange threads in a loom, set the loom ready for weaving], create', 'shovel, throw with a hayfork', 'shed (one's skin)', 'miscarry, give birth prematurely'; the original meaning 'throw' is also assumed in SSA.) As an alternative to Koivulehto's etymology, we might also hypothesize a descriptive (expressive) word gradually neutralized for the basic meaning of 'throw' – in the same way as

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6 Note that *warp* is etymologically related to German *werfen* 'throw'.

*paiskata*, *viskata*, *nakata* or other expressive verbs in some Finnish dialects (Korhonen 1960) or *viskama* in Standard Estonian are taking over the concrete and neutral core meaning of \**heittä-* (cf. Est. *odaviskamine* ‘javelin-throwing’ with Fi. *keihäänheitto*). Considering this and the tendency of the new etymological dictionary *SSA* to (implicitly) operate with monosyllabic “descriptive roots” (for the heated debate on this “descriptive root theory” in etymology, see e.g. Koponen 1999, 2001, Koivulehto 2001), it is slightly surprising that *SSA* fails to note the possible connection – even if only through secondary association – between *heittää* and *heilua* ‘sway’ or perhaps even *heikko* ‘weak’ (?< \*‘swaying, staggering’)... However, observations on grammaticalization might provide further arguments for Koivulehto’s loan etymology of *heittää*.

In many cases of grammaticalization, semantic abstraction or generalization of meaning in Finnic, the lexeme in question is a loanword. Good examples are the Finnish postposition *kanssa* ‘with, in the company of’, with cognates including the Estonian comitative case suffix *-ga*, which goes back to the Germanic loanword *kansa* ‘people, company/companion’, and the Finnish suffix *-lainen* ‘of an X kind, like X’, from *laji* ‘sort, type, species’ (from Swedish *slag*; cf. Laitinen & Lehtinen 1997), as well as the wide-spread use of Karelian *roitakseh* / *rod’izuda* (from Russian *rodit’sja* ‘be born’) to express change of state in general (for instance, *kučeral rod’the riälg* ‘the driver became hungry’, “to.the.driver was.born hunger”; Sarhimaa 1988: 113 – in Sarhimaa’s corpus of Karelian unipersonal sentences with a human oblique “experiencer”, *roitakseh* is the most frequent change-of-state copula). The question arises whether loanwords are more prone to be grammaticalized – perhaps they, lacking the derivational and associational networks or the possible “expressive” shades of old inherited words, lend themselves more easily to novel uses?

We might postulate a more general path of semantic development, leading from expressive verbs by way of “neutral” process verbs to grammatical verbs, markers of aspect or *Aktionsart*. While the neutralization process of an expressive verb may take time, loan words are on the “fast lane”, according to the hypothesis sketched above: they are immediately usable in the neutral function, which makes them better input for the grammaticalization process. Testing this hypothesis will be a task for future empirical research. In this paper, I have merely attempted to



show that even in a lexicological and etymological detail question as intensively investigated as the history of *heittää*, there is still a lot to do for future linguists – as a modest reminder, should the esteemed jubilarian, as a linguist and a teacher of future linguists, ever be in need of encouragement in his important work.

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