

## Liisa Tainio\*: Gender in Finnish Language Use: Equal, Inequal and/or Queer?

From the lay(wo)man's perspective, the grammar of the Finnish language has been regarded as a precondition for the successful establishment of the equality of the sexes in Finland: the Finnish language has often been described as being exemplary of a 'genderless' language (for discussion see e.g. Laakso 2005, 103-104). Like Finnish, all the other Uralic languages and many others, such as Turkish, have a similar kind of 'genderless grammar' (Braun 2001). However, it seems that it is less common to refer to other languages than Finnish in this respect. This fact has clearly something to do with the prominent ideologies of equality in the Finnish society as well as with administrative efforts to develop (gender) equality in practice.

All in all, Finns have succeeded in creating an atmosphere in the Finnish society where emphasizing gender equality is self-evident and one of the main ideals and values of official public discourse. For example, the Finnish National Curricula (POP 2004; LOP 2003) instructs the teachers to follow the principles of collectivity, responsibility and equality, with a special reference to the equality of the sexes. The teachers are therefore advised to guide the students to respect the rights and the freedom of every individual, in spite of, for example, others' gender, ethnicity, or religion. In this article, I will partly celebrate the success of the work on gender equality in Finland and the possibilities and freedom for Finnish language users in terms of gender marking, enabled by the genderless grammar of Finnish. On the other hand, I will argue that having a language with a genderless grammar does not guarantee the gender-neutral use of the code. Furthermore, Finnish can be used in ways that can be regarded as sexist, unequal, and even misogynist. In addition, even if the work on gender equality in Finland has been vital and has had some success, it is in no way finished. In fact, one could easily claim that in some respects the inequality of the sexes has not diminished but increased during the last years (see e.g. Raevaara 2005).

These tendencies in Finnish society and culture can also be reflected in the language use of Finnish. For this reason, I see one aim of the feminist research of Finnish language (see Appendix) to reveal the covert sexism in Finnish language use and code. However, revealing this covert sexism in Finnish is often done by other users of Finnish than linguists, for instance by ordinary language users who seem to be aware of the sexist tendencies in Finnish society and in language. In the last section of this article, I will discuss examples of a genre of written texts both by ordinary Finnish language users and by professional writers that show the "queerness" of the gender stereotypes also reflected in Finnish language use.

### Is it inconvenient to have a language with a 'genderless' grammar?

By 'genderless grammar' of Finnish, the linguists as well as language users refer to the fact that Finnish does not have a nominal classification in terms of gender and that Finnish only has one personal pronoun not only in the first- and second-person but also in the third-person singular as well as in the plural (Laakso 2005; Engelberg

\* Liisa Tainio, Department of Languages / Finnish language  
P.O.Box 35  
00014 University of Jyväskylä  
Finland  
liisa.tainio@helsinki.fi

2002; Tainio 2006). These features seem to be prominent: the Uralic languages have not adopted the grammatical gender system of their neighboring languages although the contacts may have influenced the language use in other respects. On the contrary, heavy contacts with the Uralic languages have led to a disruption of the gender system in some of those languages that used to have grammatical gender. (Laakso 2005, 105.)

Nevertheless, some minor tendencies show traces of gender asymmetry in Finnish grammar and lexicon. For instance, there are only feminine derivational suffixes (*kirjailija* ['writer'] – *kirjailijatar* ['female writer']; *nuori* ['young'] – *nuorikko* ['young wife']); no masculine derivational suffixes exist (Laakso 2005, 110-118). Some nouns are the generic masculine forms, that is, even if they have masculine gender markings they are supposed to refer to both males and females (Laakso 2005, 120; Engelberg 1998). One of the most common examples of this is the word *virkamies* 'civil servant'. This is a compound word with the ending *-mies* which means literally 'man, male'. It has been shown that although the 'meaning' of such nouns is said to be gender-neutral, the words having the ending *-mies* (such as *puuhamies* [active organizer], *lehtimies* [journalist], *tiedemies* [scientist]) are more often interpreted as referring to males than to females (Engelberg 1998; see also Aarela 1984). The language planning activists in Finland have suggested that such terms should be replaced with thoroughly gender-neutral terms (for example, *lehtimies* → *journalisti*; *virkamies* → *virkahenkilö*; *tiedemies* → *tutkija*, *tieteentekijä*) (Tiililä 1994, Kallio 2002, Tainio 2005). Language planners in some other languages have chosen another strategy: for example, in German or in Spanish, language planners have attempted to get corresponding feminine terms in language use alongside with the masculine ones, in order to make women more visible in language use and, consequently, also in the society (Pauwels 1998). The Finnish language users' community has shown similar tendencies, and for example, the compound word *tiedenainen* ['female scientist'; *-nainen* 'woman, female'] has been successfully adopted and is currently used (see, f. ex. Husu & Tainio 2004). All in all, the compound words in Finnish with the ending *-nainen* ['female'] are fewer and they always refer to women only: they are never treated as 'gender neutral' terms like most of those with the ending *-mies* ['man, male'] (Karppinen 2002, Tainio 2005).

From the Indo-European point of view, the personal pronoun system in Finnish seems extraordinary: in the third-person singular the personal pronoun *hän* is the same for both sexes. However, probably the close contacts with Indo-European languages have aroused interest in transporting a new personal pronoun in Finnish. For example, the Finnish linguist Matti Sadeniemi reported in 1945 that there have been some suggestions about introducing the pronoun *hen* in Finnish (Sadeniemi 1945, see also Varteva 1998 and Laakso 2005, 103). This new, artificial third-person pronoun would refer to a female person and the current pronoun *hän* would then be reserved for male person reference. On the contrary, in many Indo-European linguistic communities the language users seem to seek for change for their own practices of gendered language use. Jane Hill and Bruce Mannheim (1992, 387-390) report on the continuous debate on finding linguistic alternatives especially for the generic masculine pronouns in English; since the middle of the nineteenth century 65 neologisms have been coined for a neuter singular pronoun. (See also Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003, 254-257; Laakso 2005, 103.) These efforts by language users have sometimes been labelled as examples of 'pronoun envy' (Livia 2001, 3-4).

Although 60 years have passed since Sadeniemi (1945) considered it to be self-evident that the reform of transporting a new female third-person pronoun in Finnish

cannot be successful, there are new reformers. On his home page the writer and a poet Leevi Lehto has published extracts of his on-going work on the translation of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. His translation has two personal pronouns in the third-person singular, *hän* and *hen*. This new, artificial pronoun, *hen*, is used as a feminine personal pronoun. He comments on his decision in the following way:

*"[hen:istä] kunnia taitaa alun perin kuulua Tauno Yliruusille. Sovelsin sitä aikanaan John Ashberyn Vuokaaviossa ja sain reippaasti pyyhkeitä – tiedän, että se on joillekin ollut voittamaton lisäeste teoksen lukemiselle. Silti olen varma, että Joyce olisi hyväksynyt ratkaisuni [...] laskin Saarikoskelta 61 kohtaa, joissa 'hän'-muoto hämärtää alkutekstin viittaussuhteen, usein fataalisti. Neuvon vain lukemaan eteenpäin: huomaatte, että 'hen' lakkaa sattumasta."*

*["the honor of inventing hen belongs probably to Tauno Yliruusi [a Finnish writer]. I applied that invention in my translation of John Ashberry's Flow Chart and I was criticized a lot – I know that the use of the feminine pronoun was too much for some readers. Nevertheless, I am sure that Joyce would have accepted my decision. [...] I counted 61 extracts from Saarikoski's [Finnish writer and translator] translation [of Ulysses] where the pronoun "hän" did make the reference unclear, often in a fatal way. I just advise you to read forward: you will notice that you get used to "hen"."]*

(See <http://www.leevilehto.net/default.asp?a=5&b=2&c=3&d=1>; cited 22.3.2006; this and all other translations of the examples in this article are mine if not mentioned otherwise.)

The decision to choose *hen* as a feminine pronoun is quite staggering; it is almost impossible for today's educated Finns, who, practically without exception, know English, to read it without noticing the similarity to the English word *hen* and the implications on using it to refer to a woman. In addition, as a feminist linguist, I would like to ask why Lehto and the other male inventors and supporters of the new personal pronoun system should reserve the standard form *hän* to be used to refer to males? (See also NYT - Helsingin Sanomat 48/2005, 24.) Furthermore, Lehto does not discuss the generic or unspecified reference in the third-person singular; obviously the pronoun in the generic cases continues to be *hän*. This practice clearly marginalizes women and treats them as humans whose gender should be marked. Even when using the current code of Finnish with the gender-neutral third-person pronoun, there seems to be an asymmetry that makes men more visible in texts than women. Some writers seem to favour the noun *mies* instead of the anaphoric personal pronoun *hän* when referring to a male person. The next example of this is from a major daily newspaper:

*Mies itse kouluttautui nykyiseen ammattiinsa 47-vuotiaana. – – Valmetin hissitehtaalla Tampereella kului 11 vuotta, ja sitten käsistään kätevä mies sai päähänsä hakeutua muurarikurssille. – – Yövarustuksessaan naamareineen ja letkuineen mies on kuin jatkosodan aikainen hävittäjäalentäjä.– – Mies on vankistanut taitojaan myös jäsentenkorjauskurssilla Hoikan opistossa.*

*[(The) man was trained in ((his)) new profession ((when he was))<sup>1</sup> 47 years old. – – After spending 11 years in the elevator factory of Valmet in Tampere, this handy man alighted on an idea to participate in the course on masonry. – – With*

<sup>1</sup> The counterparts of the words in double brackets are not marked as masculine in the Finnish version of a text. In Finnish this information is available in ways that do not refer to the sex/gender of the referent.

*((his)) nightly outfit with a mask and tubes, the man seems like a fighter pilot during the World War II. – – Man has also strengthened ((his)) skills in courses on physiotherapy in the institute at Hoikka. ]*

(Aamulehti 12.2.1997; cited in Karppinen 2002.)

The above text seems to have only one main character, and therefore it is not necessary to refer to the only human actor in the text with the noun *mies*: the pronoun *hän* would have been transparent enough. The writer then seems to have other reasons for this textual choice. Even if the reason is a stylistical one, for example, using *mies* to avoid the repetition of the pronoun *hän*, it leads to the fact that the sex/gender of the main character is highlighted. This practice of substituting the third-person pronoun singular with the noun *mies* ['man, male'] is, if not frequent, recurrently used in genres such as media texts. Thus far, I have only found one instance where the pronoun *hän*, referring to a female referent, is substituted by the noun *nainen* ['woman']. This example comes from the largest daily newspaper in Finland:

*TYTÖT TARVITSEVAT OMAN TILAN (otsikko)*

*“Voi, eiväthän tytöt ole keskustassa! Tytöt ovat lähiössä”, huudahtaa ympäristöpsykologi Liisa Horelli.*

*Naisen huomio on osuva.*

*[GIRLS NEED A SPACE OF THEIR OWN (title)*

*“Oh no, girls are not in the center of the city! They are in the suburbs”, exclaims environmental psychologist Liisa Horelli.*

*Woman’s comment is apt.]*

(Helsingin Sanomat 29.8.2004.)

In Finnish, the use of the anaphorical pronoun *hän* in this context would have been a typical choice, a non-marked option. However, this text is about gender issues. Furthermore, the use of the noun *nainen* instead of *hän* marks the gender as being highly relevant. In the light of this example, also the practice of repeating *mies* instead of using the pronoun *hän* marks the sex/gender prominent from the recipient’s point of view.

Feminist researchers have recurrently argued that in language, the standard use and the norm of the human being is male. *Man* refers to a human being, whereas *woman* refers to a human being with gender (Penelope 1991; Engelberg 2001; Braun 2001). Moreover, concerning Finnish language use, it is possible to argue that the norm of the human being seems to be male in respect to the personal pronoun *hän*. However, we can argue that in Finnish, in all cases where the anaphoric reference to a person contains gender marking, the sex/gender of the referent is highlighted – either accidentally or on purpose.

### **Genderless language in use: covert gender categorization**

In Finnish it is possible to refer to an unspecified person or a group of persons without using linguistic forms that mark the gender of the person(s). The Finnish

personal pronoun system was discussed above, but there are also other grammatical options to refer to persons without marking their gender. For instance, it is common to use the passive voice which always refers to human (or sometimes metaphorically human) agency in Finnish. In fact, this has lead researchers to argue that the Finnish passive voice is not at all a genuine passive voice (Shore 1986; ISK 2004, §1321-1322). Another option for referring to persons without marking their gender is to use the 'zero person formula' which refers generically to a person; the verb in this formula is in the third-person singular form (see Laitinen 1995; Vilkuna 2000; ISK 2004, §1347-1365). However, these options can also be used in contexts that either encourage us to interpret or even to define to see the unspecified person(s) as being gendered. Usually this gender is specified as being male, sometimes as female. (See Tainio 2006; Laakso 2005; Engelberg 2001.) I now introduce some examples that demonstrate this tendency in Finnish language use.

At first I will analyze extracts from a newspaper article sent as a letter to the editor. This article deals with the presupposed 'silent Finn' problem, discussing the possibilities to develop the rhetorical as well as the small talk skills of young people and the teaching of rhetoric in Finnish schools. The references in these texts following the sentences in the passive voice are ambiguous; the question is whether they concern all Finns or only some. In the extract, I have italicized the verbs in the passive voice (I have translated them with the generic subject *one*).

*PUHETAITO ON KESKEISINTÄ KIELENTAITOA (otsikko)*

– – *Opittiin ajattelemaan sananparren tapaan, ettei oikea mies puhu paitsi kun kysytään. Naisten puheista ei ollut niin väliä, ja niinpä he ovat nytkin sanallisesti miehiä vahvempia. – – Kotona opittiin että "puhumatta paras", ja koulussa vaikeneminen oli kultaa. Topeliuksen Maamme-kirjasta luettiin, miten suomalaisen arkkityyppi Matti on jörö ja harvapuheinen. – – Suomalainen kykenee keskusteluun ja väittelyyn tavallisesti muutaman oluen jälkeen, ja silloinkin vastapuoli on vaiennettava huutamalla kovempaa tai antamatta suunvuoroa. – –*

*RHETORICS IS THE CORE OF THE LANGUAGE USE (title)*

– – *One learned to think along the lines of proverbs, that a real man talks only when one asks him a question. Women's talk did not matter, and that is why they are currently verbally even stronger than men. – – At home one learned that "it is best to be quiet", and at school silence was golden. In the book "Our country" by Topelius one learned that the archetype of a Finn is Matti [male name] who is taciturn and untalkative. – – A Finn is able to discuss and argue usually only after a couple of beers, and even then the opposite opinion is silenced by shouting or preventing the other participants from taking a turn. – –*

(Helsingin Sanomat, 24.10.2003.)

Although verbs in the passive voice could be interpreted in this context as referring both to male and female actors, when the reader continues further, the context changes the interpretation of the targets. The significant question is the identity of the reference of *a Finn* in the last sentence. However, this (male) writer is very concerned about showing approval for certain Finns' rhetorical skills. Yet all the examples of good speakers the writer later on provides in his text are males: Paavo Lipponen, Matti Vanhanen, Esko Aho (Finnish politicians) and the presidents Kekkonen and de Gaulle. Women are present in the text, but they are viewed in the

extract above and in three other sentences in the text (not shown here) as the ones who are able to talk and discuss. In this context, the reference of a *Finn* provided in the last sentence of the extract becomes problematic: if women are able to communicate, certainly they do not have to drink beer before they can discuss. Consequently, according to this text, a woman cannot belong to the category of the 'archetype of a Finn', but does she not even belong to the category of 'Finn'?

My next example also comes from the same newspaper and section. The topic of the reader's letter is the freedom of an artist. The (male) writer of the text, who himself is an artist, discusses the problems of the moral norms of the society and the ethics of artists as members of the society. After expressing his ideas about moral and ethical concerns in art, he continues as follows:

*Totuuden etsintä on luontevaa aloittaa omasta itsestä, sillä aito taidehan on tekijänsä näköistä, omakohtaista ja omista lähtökohdista nousevaa.*

*Mutta aika usein syvällisen itsekaivelun tuloksena näyttää taiteilijan kädestä löytyvän hänen omat munansa.*

*[Seeking the truth should start from the artist's own personality, because genuine art resembles the artist himself; it is original and has its roots in the artist's own ideas.*

*But quite often, as a result of a profound self-reflection, it seems that in the hands of the artist there are his own balls.]*

(Helsingin Sanomat, 31.10.2005.)

After writing about artists in general, using linguistic forms that refer both to female and male artists, the writer ends up specifying the gender of the artists as being male. Even if the comment cited above can be interpreted as being critical towards certain (male?) artists, the writer later defines what is the most significant characteristics in real art: "Taiteessa pitää olla munaa." ["Art should have balls."]. Even if we might extend the male metaphor to think that female artists can also create art that 'has balls' certainly the metaphor does not stretch far enough to have the women holding their 'balls' in their hands. Consequently, is the prototypical Finnish artist a male?

I will cite one more example of the textual strategies in Finnish that enable the language users to specify the gender of the unspecified referent. This example is again taken from an article in a newspaper:

*Aron mielestä sosiologit itsessään ovat aika värittömiä ihmisiä, lähinnä puhuvia päitä. Ennen heillä oli maripaita, nyt parta tai silmälasit ja raidallinen pikkutakki.*

*[According to Aro, sociologists are quite colourless people, like talking heads. Earlier they wore Marimekko-shirts, now they have a beard or wear spectacles and a striped jacket of a business suit.]*

(Helsingin Sanomat, 10.5.1999.)

Having a beard is viewed as one of the most unambiguous gender markings in our society, although women often have much more hair, including facial hair, than they are expected to have according to the stereotypical images (see also Aarnipuu 2005). However, after reading the later sentence of the example it becomes clear that the author refers to sociologists as an all-male group.

So far, the examples about specifying the gender of generic or unspecified person(s) have been those where the gender has been specified as male. Although it is clear that the majority of the people in Finnish society celebrate the fact that there are competent female politicians, artists and sociologists in Finland, these kind of (unintentional?) slips support the ideology that the relevant actors in these fields and perhaps even in the society in general still are male. Furthermore, when there are slips towards specifying the gender of the unspecified or generic referent or actor as female, the contexts seem to be quite different. I will offer you two examples of this phenomenon. Since the specification of the generic to female is much more infrequent, my examples are older and come from translated texts (the original texts are in English). The first example is an extract from a self-help book for parents. Here the author of the book speaks to the parents by using the second-person plural form (italics are mine).

*PUHUMAAN OPPIMINEN. Lapsi tuntee synnynnäistä kiinnostusta ihmisääneen. Hänellä on luontainen taipumus keskittyä kuuntelemaan puhetta. Nyt voitte rakentaa tälle pohjalle.*

*Antakaa lapsen huomata mitä tunnette sopeuttamalla sananne ilmeisiinne. Tämänikäistä lasta ei pidä kiusoitella. Jos suljette lapsen syleilyynne ja sanotte: "Kuka on äidin suuri sottapytty?", ette tee kielen ymmärtämistä lapselle helpommaksi, koska ilmeenne sanovat: "Olet äidin pieni kultainen tyttö!"*

*[LEARNING TO TALK<sup>2</sup>. Children are genetically engineered to be interested in human voice. Children find it natural to concentrate on listening when people talk. This is a fact you can build on.*

*Let the child notice what you feel by matching your words with your facial expressions. Do not tease a child who is this young. If you take the child in your arms and say: "Who's mommy's big little pig?" you do not make the understanding of the language very easy for your child because your facial expressions will be expressing the opposite: "You're mommy's darling little girl!"*

(Leach, Penelope 1980. Lapsi, hoito ja kehitys [Baby and child]. Translated into Finnish by Antti Nuutila. WSOY, Helsinki.)

Even if the father also feels that he has been taken into account during the first sentences, the citations of a caretaker's talk reveals that the ideal reader (Kress 1985) of the instruction is the mother.

Moreover, in my last example of this section the ideal reader is specified by reconstructing a certain standpoint for the reader. This extract comes from the self-help book for people who are seeking a partner. On the cover of the book, the author advises both men and women who feel lonely to read this book and to take its advice seriously. But also in this exemplar sequence, the concrete advice seems to be gender-specific. For the purposes of later discussion, I have italicized the second-person singular forms in the text.

*Kohteliaisuuksien lausuminen on eri asia kuin imartelu. Kohteliaisuus on aito ja vilpittön toteamus. Imartelu on liioittelua, joka ei ole totuudenmukaista. Jos esimerkiksi sanot miehelle, että hän tanssii paremmin kuin John Travolta, hän*

<sup>2</sup> The translations into English here and in the next example are mine; unfortunately I could not find the original English editions.

*voi pitää sitä naurettavana liioitteluna, eikä henkilökohtaisena kohteliaisuutena. Jos mies sanoo naiselle, että tämä on kauniimpi kuin Miss Universum, nainen tuskin ottaa miestä tosissaan, mutta jos hän sanoo, että olisi valinnut sinut, jos olisi saanut olla tuomaristossa, teho on taatusti parempi.*

*[Making compliments is something else than flattering someone. A compliment is a genuine and sincere remark. Flattery is exaggeration, and not truthful. For instance, if you say to a man that he dances better than John Travolta, he may feel that your compliment is a ridiculous overstatement and not a personal polite remark. If a man says to a woman that she is more beautiful than Miss Universe, the woman hardly takes him seriously. But if he says that he would have chosen you, if only he had been in the jury, the effect is certainly better. ]*

(Papillon, Marie 1996: Valloita vapaasti: opas parisuhdetta etsivälle [Seduce skillfully: a self-help book for those who seek a partner]. Translated into Finnish by Eija Hirvonen. Gummerus, Helsinki.)

In the example above, the writer addresses her advice directly to 'you' (the Finnish verbs are in the second-person singular form). Especially in Finnish, the use of the generic second-person singular can be interpreted as speaking directly to the reader. The generic 'you' is a practice that has earlier been common at least in some dialects (especially those in the neighbourhood of Russian) but today its use has been increased and during the last decades it has also been transported into the written language (Seppänen 2000; ISK 2004, §1365). However, language users have been considered it as a loan from English, and some language users protest heavily against the use of generic 'you'. It has even been named as an 'imperialistic you', the naming referring to the opinions of those that see the generic *you* as forcing the recipient to share the writer's experience from the writer's point of view (Ojajärvi 2000). In the extract above, the one who should share the experience with the (female) writer is clearly a female reader herself. Furthermore, the advice addressed to the men is given in the third-person singular form, not as direct instruction. Consequently, the pronouns and the verb forms chosen above show that the ideal reader and the one receiving the advice of the text are female.

My studies of Finnish self-help books for relationships have revealed the same tendency: although the data of my study consisted only of the books that were advertised to be addressed both to men and women, for all those that have difficulties in their relationships, the ideal reader and the addressor of the concrete advice was predominantly a female reader (Tainio 2001, 2006; see also Cameron 1996, Crawford 1995). According to my earlier studies and the examples above, the division of labor between the sexes at least in certain contexts of Finnish society – and language use – seems to follow the age-old lines: women are those who take care of relationships, children and family, whereas men are those who act in public, in politics and culture. Although this indeed is not the case in Finland, these kinds of 'slips of the tongue' further encourage traditional thinking about the different competences of the sexes. From the viewpoint of both women and men, these kinds of minor slips of the tongue (or pen) might, in the long run, end up creating a barrier against the equality of the sexes.

### **Challenging gender categorization**

In spite of the above-mentioned and demonstrated tendencies in the implementation of the gender ideologies prevailing in the Finnish society, there are also other kinds of tendencies that lead to opposite directions. For instance, the 'genderless grammar' makes it possible to refer to persons without specifying or even mentioning the



gender/sex of the referents. This means that official texts are to be written in gender-neutral ways, and it is not allowed, for example, to advertise a job in ways that encourage or define the applicants as being only men or only women (see Laaksonen 2002). However, Finnish society is no exception among Western cultures: gendered ideologies about the characteristics, obligations and privileges of the sexes constantly affect the everyday life of the Finnish people.

It is therefore no wonder that people have invented strategies and spaces where they can challenge the restrictive norms of gender, for instance, by playing 'queerly' with them. Among the young people, one of the most popular spaces for that is the world of the Internet. Sirpa Leppänen (2006) has studied the strategies that young Finnish people adopt to create themselves new identities through writing publicly but at the same time anonymously and safely in cyberspace. For example, writing fan-fiction is a popular hobby, especially among girls and young women (their average ages are between 12-17). Writing fan-fiction means writing on the Internet in certain web sites about TV series, films, novels and other fiction. The fan-fiction writers usually rewrite and develop the characters and the plots of the source fiction. They can, for instance, write a new scene in a Harry Potter novel, or they can write themselves into the life of a TV series. It is quite common that these rewritings also break some of the norms and expectations of the gendered and sexualized aspects of the fictitious world and of the characters in it. For instance, the writers may rewrite the script to place themselves in the bed of a hero in a TV series and imagine the verbal and non-verbal dialogue between them, or they can create a text where Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter have a passionate homosexual love-scene (see Leppänen 2006, or the web sites for fan fiction, for example, <http://fanfiction.net> or <http://iufu.hypeboards.com/>). Fan fiction sites can be seen as spaces where the writers can actively rearticulate and shape the media discourses that often are stereotypically arranged according to the traditional arrangement of the sexes. Leppänen (2006) sees it as being significant for writers to have the opportunity to use "the discursive spaces of fan fiction to modify, question, parody, critique and radically subvert the ways gender and sexuality are represented in cult texts". Through these texts, the writers can play with and also rehearse non-canonical attitudes and positions in the gender ideologies of a society.

Artists and writers in Finland, as well as elsewhere, have also challenged gender-ideologies in their work. Anna Livia (2001) has analysed English and French writers' texts aiming to explore the problem, named from the male point of view, as the 'pronoun envy' problem. She introduces a wide range of written texts from different genres, published between 1868 and 1999, that problematize and, in their context, try to solve the problems of the traditional functioning of the gender system of English or French. The writers use, for example, androgynous first names and gender-neutral forms of reference. (Livia 2001.)

Although in Finnish we do not have the 'pronoun envy' problem, the prevailing cultural cues that lead to interpreting language use in gendered ways are challenged in the texts of professional writers by applying the opportunities proffered by gender-neutral grammar and lexicon. As an example of this, I will introduce the beginning of Johanna Sinisalo's fantasy novel *Ennen päivänlaskua ei voi* (2000; translated by Herbert Lomas as *Not before sundown* (Sinisalo 2003a) and as *Troll: a love story* (Sinisalo 2003b)).

Sinisalo's novel begins with a chapter titled Enkeli ['Angel']. The narrators in the novel use the first-person perspective throughout the story; later on it is revealed that the main character's nick name is Enkeli and that the titles of the chapters refer to the identity of the first-person narrator of the chapter in question. In Finland, the cultural

cues of the gender of an angel refer, to my mind, more to a female than a male. In the beginning of the first chapter, Enkeli (Angel) is having a conversation in a restaurant with a male character, Martens. They have had a love affair and to Enkeli's disappointment, Martens tells him that he is not interested in continuing the relationship. On the way home, Enkeli finds a young male creature that turns out to be a troll; Enkeli takes it home and starts to look after it. In order to be able to do this, Enkeli has to ask advice from another ex-boyfriend, a veterinarian. During the phone call, the veterinarian calls Enkeli 'Sweet Angel, golden-haired cherub' and as 'Angel, my fairy queen' (Sinisalo 2003a, 22-23; in Finnish 'Suloinen Enkelini, kultatukkainen kerubini' (2000, 21) and 'Enkeli keijuseni' (2000, 23)). However, not until the page 27 in the original Finnish edition, does it become explicit that the main character Enkeli is a man.

In my view, Johanna Sinisalo deliberately plays with the stereotypical gender assumptions of the readers and therefore allows them to experience a gender surprise that makes her fictional world even more tempting for the reader. It seems that in the original Finnish version, the writer has been cautiously apprising the reader's possibility to experience this potential surprise. However, on the cover of the Finnish book, the publisher describes the novel in the following way: 'Nuori valokuvaaja Mikael löytää kotitalonsa pihalta jotakin - - ' ['Mikael, a young photographer, finds something in his courtyard - - '] where the first name Mikael (but only the first name, mentioned once) reveals the sex of the main character – at least for those readers who read the publisher's description on the back cover. Also the translator of the novel, Herbert Lomas, has used English in ways that carefully follow the gender-neutral references of the original Finnish version. However, on the back covers of both English editions, the text clearly reveals the sex of the main character: 'Mikael, a young gay photographer, finds a small, man-like creature in the courtyard of his apartment' (Sinisalo 2003a; *Mikael* or *he/his/him* mentioned ten times); and 'Angel, a young photographer, comes home from a night of carousing to find a group of drunken teenagers in the courtyard of his apartment building' (Sinisalo 2003b: *he/his/him* mentioned three times). Nevertheless, both the original Finnish version and the English translations seem to show that it is possible and even rewarding to apply the possibilities of gender-neutral language use to highlight the stereotypical gender assumptions and cues in the society.

From the feminist point of view, one of the most successful strategies, albeit painfully slow, is to challenge the predominant gender norms by questioning them in everyday language use, in everyday conversations and texts. In some of the studies of Finnish, the researchers have pinpointed some successful moments in naturally occurring interactions. They have shown how participants in conversations can take up and question the prevalent ideologies that see the sexes as being unequal (see f. ex. Hakulinen 1993, Tainio 2001). What is also important is that those who succeed in getting their words said and written in public contexts are aware of the hidden pitfalls of the 'gender neutral' Finnish language so as to be able to avoid them.

## To conclude

This article is an attempt to illustrate and suggest some possible lines and topics for future feminist linguistic work on the Uralic languages. What is evident is that merely studying the Finnish language is not enough. I agree with Johanna Laakso (2005, 161) who sees that "Finno-Ugristic gender studies can show us how covert gender works in an overtly genderless language". Nevertheless, more work needs to be done. It is also important to notice that the basis of these kinds of studies lies in the

ground work that has been done previously. Therefore, for the purposes of future research, I include a bibliography of the published work on “Feminist Fennistics”, as a conclusion for this paper and as an inspiration for future research (see Appendix). The following bibliography may not be entirely complete, but it is the most comprehensive to date<sup>3</sup>. I would be extremely grateful for all the additions to this bibliography. (Send to: liisa.tainio@helsinki.fi)

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<sup>3</sup> MA-theses on Finnish language are not included. Note also, that many of the references could have been mentioned under several titles. I have tried to include in the bibliography only the studies that clearly explore Finnish language from the point of view of linguistic studies.

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## Appendix.:

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