

Onomatopoeia in contact languages – similarities and differences between Meänkieli, Swedish, Finnish, Kven and Sami

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Abstract

There has not been much research on change of onomatopoeia in contact languages. The main question is what happens to onomatopoeic phonological structures when two or more languages with different structures meet and influence each other. What sounds onomatopoeic in one language may not do so in another language. A minority language of northern Sweden, Meänkieli, which is closely related to Finnish, spoken in parallel with Swedish since the 14th century, is analysed. Other languages studied are North Sami, spoken in the same area, and Kven, spoken in Norway, and Finnish. The methodology consists of lexicon excerption and phonological analysis.

The results show that Meänkieli uses initial consonant clusters, which are similar to, but not identical with, those of Swedish, in contrast with standard Finnish which uses no initial consonant clusters in onomatopoeic words. However, onomatopoeia in Meänkieli also shows similarities with south-western Finnish dialects in Finland, which use initial consonant clusters.

Introduction and background

Meänkieli is a minority language of Sweden with a long history along the Swedish-Finnish border where the Torne river is separating – or uniting – the two countries. The name Meänkieli (meaning “our language”) was officially established in Sweden in the year 2000.

Finnish, spoken in Finland is a Finno-Ugric language, as well as Meänkieli. Swedish, on the other hand, is a Germanic language. Finnish and Swedish have very different grammars, vocabularies and phonologies. The speakers of Meänkieli in Sweden are now to a large extent bilingual in Swedish and Meänkieli. The contact with Finland was impeded or interrupted when Sweden lost Finland to Russia in 1809. Meänkieli is considered to be a language, not a dialect of Finnish, mainly on linguistic grounds (Valijärvi, Blokland, Kangas, Ackermann-Boström & Kuoppa, 2022), but also on social and political grounds.



Figure 1. Map of the Meänkieli areas in Sweden (left) and Finland (right). The Kven areas in Norway are north and northwest of Sweden.

Onomatopoeia is here defined as speech sounds imitating non-speech sounds, but only conventionalized onomatopoeia is considered, i. e. onomatopoeia which is integrated in the phonology of the language, and not “wild forms” which may occur with an

individual speaker in a specific situation. In this context the question surges of how a language may adapt to phonologies of other languages.

Consonantal structures of Swedish and Standard Finnish

Swedish permits up to three consonants in word beginnings, the first one being an /s/, the second a voiceless stop and the third /l/, /j/, /r/ or /v/. Not all combinations are allowed (Sigurd, 1965). Standard Finnish on the other hand does not have any initial consonant clusters except in some, more recent, loan words (e.g. *kromosomi*), where two consonant clusters can be permitted. In older loan words, often from Swedish, consonants are deleted like in Swedish *strand* (*beach*) which has become *ranta*. In Meänkieli it is more common with initial two-consonant clusters in general, and it is common with two-consonant clusters in onomatopoeic words. However, Meänkieli does not generally have initial three-consonant clusters, except for in some varieties.

Standard Finnish and Finnish dialects

In Finland, Meänkieli is considered a dialect, belonging to the western dialects, more precisely the Norrbothnian dialects. Swedish and Finnish dialects have been spoken in parallel for many hundreds of years in Finland, and the same goes for Swedish and Meänkieli in Sweden.

Standard Finnish, was created in the 19th century and it is mainly a written language (and spoken as “general spoken language” in news casts etc.). Koponen (2014) writes that a thousand years ago, both Finnish and Swedish were different from what they are now and both languages existed mainly as spoken dialects. Unlike Swedish, Finnish originally could not have two (or three) consonants at the beginning of a word. When a word was borrowed into Finnish, all initial consonants other than

the last were generally dropped. Through the influence of Swedish, initial consonant groups (*klasi* (glass), *trappu* (stairs) etc.) gradually gained entry into the Western Finnish dialects and also into the written language. During the 19th century, however, a large part of them were thinned out again, in an effort to make the written language more like Eastern Finnish. In short, there has been influences between Finnish and Swedish in Finland for many years. And there has been influences from Swedish to Meänkieli in Sweden for many years. Still today, spoken Finnish consists of many different dialects.

Kven and Sami

Kven, closely related to Meänkieli, has initial consonant structures similar to Meänkieli. In North Sami up to three initial consonant clusters are possible, often an /s/ being the initial consonant (Svonni, 1993).

Research on onomatopoeia in language contact and language change

To our knowledge there has been very little, or none, research on onomatopoeia in language contact induced language change. Heikkonen (2014) studied onomatopoeia and sound symbolism in North Uralic languages focusing on terminology and etymologies.

Research questions

1. To what extent does Meänkieli have initial consonant clusters in onomatopoeic words?
2. What are the similarities between Meänkieli and Standard Finnish, Finnish dialects, Kven and North Sami for initial consonant clusters in onomatopoeic words?
3. How has Swedish in Finland and Swedish in Sweden influenced initial consonant clusters in Meänkieli?

Method and materials

Lexica of Swedish, Standard Finnish, Finnish dialects, Meänkieli, Kven and North Sami were manually searched for onomatopoeic words with initial consonant clusters. The search was quite unproblematic since beginnings of words are easy to search for in electronic dictionaries. The model used is that of Abelin (1999). The dictionaries are of different sizes so both absolute and relative frequencies will be presented. The study is thus on initial consonant clusters and the onomatopoeias connected with these. Of course, there are many alternative forms in the languages, and there are slight differences in meaning between the languages, but the focus has been on initial consonant clusters for onomatopoeic words, which is a rather uncomplicated category.

The following four online dictionaries were searched: *Meänkieli-ruotti sanakirja* (33 000 lexical entries), *Stora Finsk-svenska ordboken* (109 000 lexical entries), *Kven-norsk ordbok* (7 500 lexical entries), and *Nordsamisk-Norsk ordbok* (33 000 lexical entries). The dictionaries were searched for onomatopoeic words beginning with consonant clusters. Onomatopoeia in Swedish consonant clusters was studied in Abelin (1999), based on *Svenska Akademiens Ordlista* (135 000 lexical entries). Furthermore, a small dictionary of a variety of Meänkieli – Jellivaaransuomi (Winsa, 1992) – was excerpted.

Orthography in Finnish, Meänkieli, Kven and North Sami is quite phonematic, so only a few explanations of the pronunciations of the consonant letters are given here: The voiceless stops, represented by <p>, <t>, <k> in writing are non-aspirated in Finnish, Meänkieli and Kven. The <r> is often a dental trill.

Results

Meänkieli is similar to Swedish in using initial consonant clusters for onomatopoeia, and this differs much from standard Finnish. However, onomatopoeic meanings connected with consonant clusters are not identical to the use in Swedish but points to an independent development in Meänkieli. There are similar onomatopoeias in Meänkieli and Kven which we don't see in standard Finnish.

In tables 1, 2 and 3 examples of differences in initial consonant clusters and vocabularies are presented.

Figure 2 shows the percentages of onomatopoeic words with initial consonant clusters in the dictionaries of Swedish, Meänkieli, Kven and standard Finnish.

Table 1 exemplifies that where Swedish uses two- or three consonant clusters, Meänkieli uses two-consonant clusters, while standard Finnish uses single initial consonants.

In Table 2 we can see that Meänkieli and Kven are quite similar in terms of initial consonant clusters. This can be compared with Finnish in Table 1. None of the initial consonant clusters in Table 2 were found to be onomatopoeic in the North Sami dictionary.

For the entire dictionaries of Swedish, Meänkieli, Standard Finnish and Kven the percent onomatopoeic words with initial consonant clusters are: Meänkieli 4,4% (80 words), Swedish 3,8% (106 words), Kven 3,07% (18 words), and standard Finnish 0,3% (8 words), see Figure 2.

As stated above, the dictionaries are of different sizes, and the criteria for including different types of word may differ.

Table 1. Examples of onomatopoeic words in Swedish, Meänkieli, Standard Finnish, and English.

Swedish	Meänkieli	Standard Finnish	English
spruta	pruiskuta	ruiskuttaa	spray
klappa	klaputtaa	taputtaa	clap
knastra	prätistä	rätinä	crackle
skrapa	kravata	raaputa	scratch
kraxa	kraakua	kurjuu	croak
prassla	krapista	rapista	rustle
pladdra	klipistä	lörpötellä	babble
plaska	klutsuta	loiskia	splash
knacka	knakata	koputtaa	knock
knaka	kripsahtaa	narista	crack
knäppa	kräpsyttää	napsahtaa	snap
smattra	kropista	räätistä	clatter
smälla	plittoa	paukkua	bang
knattra	prätistä	päristä	rattle
blaska	frääkätä	roiskua	splash
skväтта	pläiskiä	räiskiä	splash
plumsa	klopsuttaa	roiskua	splash

Table 2. Examples of onomatopoeic words in Meänkieli and Kven.

Meänkieli	Kven
pruiskuta	truiskuta
klaputtaa	klaputa
kripsahtaa	naskuut
kraapasta	kraapasta
kraakua	kraakkuut
kravata	kravata
klopsuttaa	klopsuttaa
pläiskiä	truiskuta

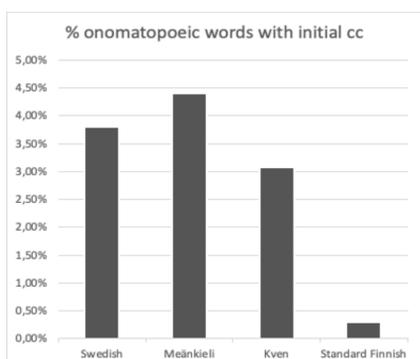


Figure 2. Number of onomatopoeic words in relation to total number of words with initial consonant clusters, in the four dictionaries.

Finnish dialects

In *Suomen Murteiden Sanakirja* (The dictionary of Finnish dialects) many of

the Meänkieli onomatopoeic words were found, all of them in the south-western, southern or north-western parts of Finland. There are also many other non-onomatopoeic western dialectal Finnish words which begin with initial two-consonant clusters.

In *Suomen Murteiden Sanakirja* places in Sweden are specified as places for Finnish dialects. However, we have ignored those examples as examples of Finnish dialects, since they refer to Meänkieli, and in that dictionary we have only looked at examples from Finland. A large part of the dialectal onomatopoeic words with initial consonant clusters are from the south-western part, where Swedish has long been spoken. There are also many other two- or three-consonant cluster words, quite a few of them are loan words from Swedish. There is one three consonant clusters which does not exist in Swedish, namely *skl-*.

All the Finnish dialectal words presented in Table 3 come from the south-western, southern or sometimes north-western areas of Finland, areas where Swedish is spoken. Of course, there is a lot of variation.

Some characteristics of Jellivaaran-suomi

Even though we did not find great differences in onomatopoeia between the Meänkieli of Torne valley variety and the Jellivaaransuomi variety, spoken around the town of Gällivare in Sweden, some characteristics must be mentioned. Jellivaaransuomi can sometimes have up to three initial consonants with the first one being an /s/. This is similar to the consonant structure of Swedish, but the

/s/ is added in a unique manner, which is shown by the following examples, e.g. *spricka* from Swedish *bricka* (tray), *strappu* from Swedish *trappa* (stairs) and *trallari* from Swedish *rallare* (railway worker). Could this be an influence from Swedish or North Sami (which also can have up to three initial consonant clusters (Svonni, 1993) or could it be cases of hypercorrection? However, a similar phenomenon is also found in Helsinki slang “Stadin slangi” where we find additions of initial consonants.

Table 3. Examples of onomatopoeic words in Meänkieli, with the addition from different Finnish dialects. Cf. Table 1.

Finnish dialects	Meänkieli	Standard Finnish	English
	pruiskuta	ruiskuttaa	spray
klaputtaa	klaputtaa	taputtaa	clap
	prätistä	rätinä	crackle
krapata, skrapata	Kravata	raaputa	scratch
kraakua	kraakua	kurjuu	croak
krapista	krapista	rapista	rustle
klipistä	klipistä	lörpötellä	babble
klutsuttaa	klutsuta	loiskia	splash
knakata	knakata	koputtaa	knock
kripsahtaa	kripsahtaa	narista	crack
kräpsyttää	kräpsyttää	napsahtaa	snap
kropista	kropista	räätiä	clatter
plittuuna	plittoa	paukkua	bang
	prätistä	päristä	rattle
fräkätä	frääkätä	roiskua	splash
	pläiskiä	räiskiä	splash
klopsuttaa	klopsuttaa	roiskua	splash

Discussion

Could it be that Meänkieli has retained clusters from earlier stages, which have since disappeared in Standard Finnish? And has Meänkieli been influenced by Swedish several times? Many of the word forms of Meänkieli are almost identical to those in some of the Finnish dialects. The results suggest that the onomatopoeic words are quite robust in Meänkieli and have not changed much from their dialectal, mostly south-western, origins, areas where also Swedish has been spoken for a long time. However, it is very possible that Meänkieli in Sweden has continued to be influenced

by Swedish, and North Sami. This could also be the explanation of the initial consonant structures of Jellivaaransuomi.

Jellivaaransuomi shows that Meänkieli could continue to be influenced by surrounding languages. Another factor could be that Jellivaaransuomi is spoken further away from the Finnish border.

Conclusions

First, Meänkieli has a large number of onomatopoeic initial consonant clusters, which are similar to Swedish. Secondly, Meänkieli differs from standard Finnish in this respect, but it is quite similar to some Finnish dialects and to Kven. At

this stage it is too early to answer the third research question and say whether onomatopoeic initial consonant clusters in Meänkieli are remnants from older Swedish influences on older Finnish dialects, or influences from Swedish in Sweden, or possibly from North Sami. Our original idea was that Meänkieli has been influenced only by Swedish in Sweden, but everything seems to point to Meänkieli having preserved onomatopoeic words and clusters from western Finnish dialects, where the dialects were influenced by Swedish very long ago. Meänkieli has also been influenced by Swedish in Sweden, where Meänkieli has been spoken since the 14th century. However, due to the political situation of isolation in Sweden, Meänkieli has also developed along its own path.

Meänkieli is classified as a northern Finnish dialect in Finland, but in the case of onomatopoeia it is clear that Meänkieli has many similarities with south-western Finnish dialects.

It is well known that onomatopoeia differs from language to language, to a large extent depending on the phonology and phonotactics of each language. The general question which remains to be solved is: can onomatopoeia in one language be influenced by onomatopoeia in another language? That is, can the speakers of one language adapt to onomatopoeia of another language? We would like to answer yes to this question, but it is clear that more research is needed on onomatopoeia in languages in contact.

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