

The Rise of Literary Finnish

1 Beginnings of literacy in Finland

The literary tradition of the Finnish language is not particularly long, and this is so for particular reasons. Speech always exists prior to writing, and no written documents were actually needed as long as the mode of living of the ancestors of modern Finns was fishing, hunting, modest agriculture and cattle herding. Everything that was worth speaking or remembering could be stored mentally, in other words, memorized. Folk poetry of ancient Finns was rich, but for a long time, it was not written down.

Finland acquired its first national boundary in 1323, as it officially became a part of Sweden, (in practice it had been for some time already). Through the Middle Ages, the possibilities to develop Finnish vernacular into a real cultural language were strictly limited, as Swedish was the language of administration, law and society. Until the end of the Middle Ages, there was actually neither chance nor range of use for literary Finnish. Only proper names of local persons and places could be given in Finnish in documents written in Latin, Swedish or German.

More Finns became literate as the Roman Catholic Church was established in Sweden and Finland in the Middle Ages, but even then there was no reason to use Finnish in reading or writing. The Church provided the first official education system, and the principal subject of cathedral schools was Latin, written as well as spoken, in terms of grammar, rhetoric and logic. All this was needed for ecclesiastic practices and study of theology.

The Church brought with it a variety of new literary skills including manuscript writing and collecting repositories of administrative records. And yet, everything was made to serve its own purposes. The idea of public education was not then of current interest. The basic concepts of Christianity were taught to ordinary people in their own languages through reading by heart the most important catechetical texts, e.g. the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Confession of Faith. There were probably also other translations, transmitted in oral versions, as people wanted to listen to legends about saints and miracles, but there are no written documents preserved in Finnish to prove the existence of those translations.

In the Middle Ages, all the languages of the world were not considered equal with each other. Some languages were highly esteemed or held as sacred.

These were Hebrew and Greek which were the original languages of the *Holy Scriptures*, and Latin, as it was the current *lingua franca* of the Roman Catholic Church and most European scholars. Other languages were seen as their deteriorated variants or blends, spoiled by common people and barbarians.

2 The Lutheran Reformation – a new chance for Finnish vernacular

2.1 Towards the equality of languages

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, the situation changed fundamentally in Finland due to the Lutheran Reformation. The crucial idea of the Reformation was that the word of God should be accessible to every individual in his or her own language. This was to be achieved in different ways: the most important liturgical texts, e.g. the *Holy Mass* in its entirety, had to be rendered into vernaculars, to enable worship services to be held in people's own languages. The manuals had to be translated, as the funerals, weddings and other religious acts had to be performed in vernaculars. This could not be done simply through learning by heart, as the liturgical context implied well-established patterns of expression. A literal language was badly needed for making notes and translations. As the texts were sacred, they could not be modified deliberately, and had to be always repeated in the same way. If a literary language did not exist, it had to be created. And last but not least, to achieve the ultimate goal of the Reformation, the people had to be taught to read alone.

As the Reformation started spreading in Finland, the Swedish-speaking minority in towns and along the coastline had the opportunity to use the Swedish translations of Olaus Petri and his colleagues, but for the Finnish-speaking majority, Swedish was as opaque as Latin. Therefore, it was essential to set out a totally new and challenging effort: the translation of the *Bible* and various liturgical texts into a language with no literate background at all. The task was not easy. Nobody really knew how to spell Finnish. As there was no standard variant of Finnish yet, neither written nor spoken, the first thing was to decide, which one of several dialects should be taken as a basis. It was not self-evident either, who would be capable and multilingual enough to execute the work. Officially, the task was assigned to Michael Agricola, a young clergyman and clerk who was occupied as a chancellor of Bishop Martin Skytte in Turku.

2.2 Michael Agricola, the reformator of Finland

Michael Agricola was born in the parish of Pernaja, a region on the south coast of Finland, inhabited by a Swedish-speaking population. It is quite possible that his first language was Swedish. There were, however, some Finnish-speaking people in Pernaja, too, and a few young men of the same neighborhood who were fellow students of Michael Agricola are known to have been bilingual. It is clear that Agricola mastered both languages from childhood. As he became literate in Swedish and Latin, it was also easier to him to open the way for literary Finnish.

In 1536, Agricola was sent to Wittenberg, together with his childhood friend, Martin Teit, to learn more about the Reformation and the translation methods

of Martin Luther. He finished his Master's degree in 1539 and returned to Finland. He was subsequently appointed as headmaster of the most prestigious school in the diocese of Finland, the Cathedral School of Turku. It is possible that he started translating the *New Testament* before he left for Wittenberg and we do know that work was going on whilst he was staying there, as he sent a letter to the King Gustav Vasa and asked for financial help to maintain his translation work.

2.3 A splendid start of a new literary language

Even if Agricola started his translation efforts with the *New Testament*, it was not the first book he had published in Finnish. This was a modest *ABC book* of 24 pages that appeared most probably in 1543. However, there is no complete copy of the first edition left to confirm the year of printing, only some fragments of it. The next year, in 1544, Agricola published a nearly 900-page prayer book, and thereafter, at last, he was able to finalise and publish his masterpiece, the *New Testament* in 1548.

In addition to the standard Latin version *Vulgata* Agricola had several translations of the *Bible* as his sources: Luther's German translations, Erasmus' new edition of the Latin *New Testament*, Erasmus' revised edition of the Greek text and of course, the Swedish *New Testament* and *Bible*. Agricola consulted and compared parallel texts all the time. As for the Finnish language pattern, he decided to choose the southwestern dialect spoken round Turku to be the standard, and the motivation was, according to his own words, that Turku was the capital of the diocese of Finland and it was like a mother to the whole country. In fact, he also picked words and word forms from other dialects and explained his solution in the preface of the *New Testament*. He had done it in the hour of need: as he was not able to translate every detail by himself, he had to ask for help of his colleagues and friends with various linguistic backgrounds. In a community like Turku, Wiborg, Stockholm, or Wittenberg, it was easy and quite natural to come into contact with different ways of speaking and writing. Towns and cities were and still are meeting places of various dialects and languages, and this makes every urban dialect more or less heterogeneous.

Agricola had ambitions to translate the *Bible* in its entirety, but this was too much for him. The times were hard, there was famine in Finland and a war broke out between Sweden and Russia, once again. Agricola was part of a peace delegation which was sent by the king to Moscow for peace negotiations, and as the delegation was returning to Finland, Agricola died en route in 1557. A complete translation of the *Bible* in Finnish did not appear earlier than 1642, as a translation committee under the leadership of Aeschillus Petraeus, a Swedish-born dean of the congregation of Turku and professor of theology of the Academia Aboensis, after some fruitless attempts finally managed to publish the whole text in Finnish.

Taken all together, Agricola was very successful with his pioneer work. In a ten year period he managed to publish nine books altogether, among them a *Handbook*, a *Psalter*, a *Missal* and some parts of the *Old Testament*. As a matter of fact, his works fulfilled the requirements of religious literature in Finnish to the extent that it took more than 20 years before the next Finnish book was published.

This was *The Holy Mass* of Paulus Juusten in 1575. It is most likely that Agricola did not translate alone all those texts he published, but the names and the shares of his fellow translators remained obscure. It is known, however, that his younger colleague Paulus Juusten let his pupils translate all the psalms as they did their translation exercises at the Cathedral School of Turku. All the books of Agricola were printed in Stockholm, since there was no printing office in Finland at that time. The types chosen for the work represented a special kind of Gothic style, the *Wittenberg schwabach*, which was a kind of Lutheran trademark in Germany and in the Nordic countries.

3 Competitors and independent translators

3.1 Manuscripts came first

Agricola was very successful in his literary works, but he was not alone. At the very time the liturgical language shift from Latin to Finnish began in Finland – most probably in 1537 – Agricola was not even in Turku, but in Wittenberg. There must therefore have been other reformers and translators to deliver the necessary texts in Finnish; but those texts, as useful they might have been in practice, got never printed. As there was no printing office in Finland, it was a complicated and expensive process to print translations abroad. Therefore, a considerable part of the oldest translations remained manuscripts only, and fortunately enough, some of them have been preserved.

Most of the oldest manuscripts written in Finnish have been registered and described by Olav D. Schalin in his book *Kulthistoriska studier till belysande av reformationens genomförande i Finland*. However, very few of these manuscripts have been subjected to a thorough linguistic examination. Instead, particular emphasis has been laid on printed literature. Only one text, consisting of 12 folios – 24 pages –, has been analysed and published by Aarni Penttilä.

These ignored manuscripts contain a variety of dialectal properties that are not typical of South Western dialect, which was the language model of Agricola's translations, but they show elements and dialectal variants peculiar to Eastern dialects.

3.2 Stockholm, the supreme capital of Finnish reformation

What is especially interesting and must be emphasized with reference to the Finnish Reformation is that the first worship services in Finnish were obviously not performed in Turku or anywhere in Finland but in Stockholm, where the first Finnish preacher was appointed as early as 1533. There was a considerable number of Finnish workers, servants, handicraftsmen, sailors, clerks and other Finnish-speaking people in the capital of the Sweden, and as the vernaculars were to be taken into use in liturgical practices by the order of the city council of Stockholm, Finnish had to be introduced as well, in addition to Swedish.

Some old manuscripts written in Finnish exist in the archives of the Finnish congregation of Stockholm, and in the near future, our aim is to compare

these manuscripts with Agricola's translations and other manuscripts dating back to the Reformation era.

There are some interesting text fragments in the printed literature, too, e.g. the *Lord's Prayer* in Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia*, which is clearly independent of Agricola's translations. It is not known where Münster got his Finnish material from, but there is a decisive piece of evidence to show that neither Agricola nor any other writer of the same age known by the name could be the source: in Münster's *Cosmographia* the Finnish word for 'human being' is *ihminen*, which does not occur in any other text of the same era, but there are several other variants (*inhiminen*, *inheminen*, *inehminen* etc.) of the same word. The modern form of the word, *ihminen*, only comes into use towards the end of the 16th century.

3.3 First services in Finnish

As a rule, the oldest manuscripts or fragments of Finnish contain texts which were needed for religious services, to officiate at a ceremony, first of all the Holy Mass. As mentioned earlier, the *Missal* of Michael Agricola was printed in 1549, but the cult reform and the introduction of vernacular had actually taken place more than ten years earlier. While awaiting some printed means, Finnish clergymen used manuscripts which could have been translations made by themselves or copied or adapted from other translations. On account of this, there are several versions of "same" texts to be compared. As almost all texts were translations, they can and must be compared with potential source texts, too. Among the manuscripts, there are also texts which are not present in Agricola's printed books. In most cases they exist in several manuscript versions.

In the Middle Ages, music and especially singing was an essential part of worship. As a consequence of the Lutheran Reformation, the spoken and written word was given major significance, and music lost some of its importance. This state of affairs can be clearly perceived if we review the contents of Agricola's literary production. He did not even try to write or to compile a hymnal. Among his translations, there are very few texts that can be regarded as song texts, and even if there are some, the translated text seems to suit badly to the very melody which was traditionally connected to the text concerned. Judging from appearance, most of the song texts cannot even be identified as song texts but as common liturgical prose. One feels tempted to say that Agricola was totally unmusical.

An important fact that we must take into account when estimating Agricola's achievements is that there was no possibility for music printing in Stockholm in those times. A staff with four or five lines could be printed, but the notes could be made by hand only, for each copy of the publication separately. As far as Agricola's *Missal* was concerned, they were not made at all by the publisher, but the users of the book must complete the work by adding the notes by themselves, if they were able to do so.

The original manuscripts of the Reformation period, contrary to the printed works, are rich in musical notations. A most splendid piece is a manuscript called *Codex Westh*. The name refers to a clergyman by the name Mathias Westh.

He was the owner and possibly the author of the manuscript. There are his initials and his autograph in the manuscript, and he has dated the document 1546. Among other interesting parts, the manuscript contains a complete Mass order with full musical notation. As Michael Agricola's memorial year was celebrated in 2007 and the solemn mass was officiated in accordance with Agricola's missal, the music was actually taken from *Codex Westh*, because there is hardly any indication of the musical part in Agricola's own production.

We do not know much of Mathias Westh as a person. He was appointed chaplain in Rauma, not far away from Turku, at the time he marked his name and the year in the manuscript. Currently, there is a new theory that he could have been the first Finnish preacher of the Finnish congregation of Stockholm before he came to Rauma. An intriguing task for future research is to discover whether there is some linguistic evidence to connect the manuscripts of Stockholm with *Codex Westh*. So far, some lexical similarities absent in Agricola's works have been pointed out.

4 New prospects of research

As the oldest manuscripts in Finnish have thus far been almost totally neglected in the sphere of linguistic research, the possibilities to exploit this information potential have also been overlooked. As there is much information which is not understandable to the linguist, multidisciplinary co-operation could be the best solution. Therefore, a promising line for future research work would be to combine linguistic research with musicology, theology, history, and archaeology. To some extent, this approach was taken in 2007, when the memorial year of Michael Agricola was celebrated. In 2010, a representative collection of established liturgical music settings of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, which are set to Finnish texts, was published as a musicological and philological collaboration. From personal experience it can be stated that this multidisciplinary approach deserves further elaboration. Shared research opens prospects to a shared past more effectively than a series of sporadic pictures, each constructed in splendid isolation.

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