

## Refining sound interpretation in Finnish ideophones

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**Problem** In the non-ideophonic, or prosaic, domain of Finnish, phonemic contrast holds as expected: a difference in sound signals a difference in meaning, as illustrated in (1).

- (1) Minimal pairs: Finnish  
a. *rapea* ‘crisp’ vs. *rupea* ‘start’  
b. *ripeä* ‘brisk’ vs. *rypeä* ‘to wallow’

It has been stated (e.g., Mikone 2001, Jääskeläinen 2013, among others), that such phonemic contrast is neutralized in the iconic domain where ideophones are accepted in a variety of forms:

- (2) *rip-isee*, *rup-isee*, *ryp-isee*, *rüp-isee*, *röp-isee* ‘scrapes, scratches’

**Question** How to explain the contrast in the phonology of the prosaic vs. iconic domains?

**Proposal** We argue that the phonemic contrast is, in fact, also upheld in the iconic domain. The contrast is found once sound symbolic meaning of individual sounds is taken into account. The multitude of similar forms results in fine-grained interpretations of the basic overarching meaning. We looked at a large subset of ideophonic stems that are selected by the suffix *-isee*, and posit the following sound symbolic meanings for the vowels:

- i** small, cute
- u** in some way more, bigger, deeper...
- y** mildly disparaging, deprecating
- æ** implies discord, anger (note: orthographically **ä**)
- ø** unpleasant in some way, derogatory (note: orthographically **ö**)

Thus, the sample data in (2) is now refined in interpretations as follows in (3):

- (3) *rip-isee* ‘scritch-scratches lightly’ (e.g. mouse feet)  
*rup-isee* ‘scratches in a rumbly way’ (e.g. rat feet, empty stomach, fart)  
*ryp-isee* ‘rattles unpleasantly’ (e.g. dumb dog eating dry kibble)  
*rüp-isee* ‘scratches so it hurts the ears’ (e.g. unliked neighbour’s lawn mower)  
*röp-isee* ‘scrapes in an ugly way (e.g. cheap and hence malfunctioning motorcycle motor)

We find further notable phonological deviations in *-isee* suffixed ideophones: **o** and **a** seem to alternate; if a non-ideophone blocks a form with one, the other is used. However, overall **o** appears less often. The interpretation of both is neutral, but in the few cases where both forms exist, **o** is interpreted as stronger. Moreover, we also find vowel interactions with consonants which are also iconic in nature (not addressed here due to lack of space).

**Consequences** In line with Inkelas (2014), we argue that the co-phonology approach best captures the Finnish contrast between prosaic versus iconic strategies. Specifically, domain particular sound contrasts emerge in the ideophonic entries selected by the suffix *-isee*, while such contrast are absent elsewhere.

**Selected references** Inkelas, S. 2014. *The interplay of morphology and phonology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Jääskeläinen, A. 2013. *Todisteena äänen kuva. Suomen kielen imitatiivikonstruktiot*. Ph.D. dissertation. Helsinki: Helsingin yliopiston suomen kielen, suomalais-ugrilaisten ja pohjoismaisten kielten ja kirjallisuksien laitos. Mikone, E. 2001. Ideophones in the Balto-Finnic languages. In Voeltz, K.F. Erhard, Kilian-Hatz, Christa (eds.) *Ideophones*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 223-233.