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# COMMON ERRORS WITH PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES BY FINNISH SPEAKERS

# ABSTRACT

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English prepositions cause problems for learners of English. The purpose of this Bachelor's thesis is to investigate the common errors with prepositional phrases made by native Finnish speakers. The aims of the study are (a) to investigate errors with prepositions Finnish learners make in English production, (b) to analyse the cause of the errors, and (c) to discuss possible pedagogical implications.

The study of L1-induced errors that native English speakers hear in the Finnish L2-speakers' language is always of relevance. The knowledge of these errors and their source can be of assistance to those who teach English to Finnish people of all ages. Similarly, the findings may help native English speakers understand the difficulty Finns have using prepositions in English. This can have the effect of improving communication between English and Finnish speakers.

Merilainen (2010) goes on to report that prepositions present a difficult category for Finnish students because Finnish makes use of cases instead of prepositions. "Finnish has a very rich inflectional system with 15 cases. These case endings do not always semantically correspond to English prepositional phrases (PP)." Merilainen continues to suggest: "The students' omission of English prepositions, on the other hand, involves syntactic simplification; the students seem to assume that the basic form of the English word carries the same semantic and grammatical information as its Finnish inflected counterpart, which causes them to regard English prepositions as redundant. The students observed in this study had omitted prepositions in various kinds of syntactic positions. Most commonly, the omission of preposition occurred in connection with verb complementation (example 18: The whole of my life I have dreamed a rich man with dark hair (should be: "dreamed of a rich man," compare the Finnish: haaveillut rikkaasta miehestä ')) and adverbial phrases, such as locative expressions (example 19: "I will go that country (should be: "go to that country", compare the Finnish "menen siihen maahan")

In the theory part of the thesis, a review of earlier studies as well as the positive and negative transfer in light of increased exposure to English will be discussed. Similarly, prepositional verbs and their usage will be presented. Some of the references to be studied are by Odlin, Ellis and Ringbom to mention a few.

The empirical study includes collecting data from within context in English. Specifically, data is from the entrance exam for the Finnish minor subject students for entry into the English department at the Tampere University.

Keywords: prepositional phrases, L1-induced errors, L1-induced syntactic patterns, syntactic simplification

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

## Table of contents

1 Introduction.....	4
2 Literature review .....	7
2.1 Defining the central concepts of language transfer .....	7
2.1.1 Positive transfer and negative transfer .....	7
2.1.2 Lexical transfer and syntactic transfer .....	8
2.2. Overview of the history and present state of transfer research.....	9
2.3. Transfer research in the Finnish context .....	11
3 Materials and Methods.....	13
3.1 Methods .....	13
3.2 Manifestations of transfer featured in the analysis .....	14
3.2.1 Prepositional constructions .....	14
3.3 The nature of the study and its methodological limitations .....	15
4 Results.....	17
4.1 Analysis of use of incorrect prepositions .....	17
5 Discussion of results and conclusion .....	23
6 References.....	25
7 Appendices.....	27
Appendix 1: Cases of transfer in Finnish-speaking students' proficiency test answers.....	27

# 1 Introduction

“Failure is instructive. The person who really thinks, learns quite as much from his failures as from his successes” (John Dewey). The study of learners' errors has been a main area of investigation by linguists in the history of second-language acquisition research (Ellis, 1994: 43). English is not an easy language to master, and choosing which preposition to use in a certain situation is not easy, especially if English is being learnt as a second or third language. Nevertheless, improving one's skills in this area can be achieved if instruction is given on where to look for problems and then feedback is provided on how to solve them.

Each year Tampere University test the Finnish minor subject students for entry into the English department to study English as a minor. Students are tested in areas of grammar, including questions on prepositions.

The purpose of this Bachelor of Arts thesis is to analyse and address the most common errors made, so that Finnish learners of English could improve their skills. In Merilainen's 2010 paper, the commonly occurring deviant syntactic patterns in Finnish students' corpus were studied. Prepositional constructions turned out to be the single most common problem area found. This thesis will therefore focus on the errors that students make when using prepositional phrases, with the aim to determine the cause of such errors.

What could explain the errors found? (The most frequently used explanations of errors are: (1) transfer from L1, (2) overgeneralisation and (3) simplification of constructions and forms. (Abbott, G (1980) "Towards a More Rigorous Analysis of Foreign Language Errors." IRAL 18:2, pp. 121-134)) Investigations of second language acquisition have long recognised the fact that languages that learners already know can have a significant influence on the process of learning a new one. This prior knowledge may be an advantage in the sense that they have an idea of how languages work. On the other hand, knowledge of other languages can lead learners to make incorrect guesses about how

the second language works, depending if the first language is very different from the other, and this may result in errors that first language learners would not make. This traditional ESL line of research sees errors mainly in the light of transfer phenomena from one language to another and therefore concentrates on specific language pairs (such as Finnish-English).

On the other hand, there is a view that not everything, with regard to morphology and syntax, is transferred. The English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) view investigates non-native speakers' errors across different first language backgrounds, and sees errors more from the point of view of language universals, i.e. what kinds of errors seem to be common to "all" non-native speakers world-wide.

Thus one would need to look carefully at the syntactic context (of the errors and non-errors, based on an L1 Inner Circle target version of English), distinguish between object selection within the PP and predicate selection, lexical transfer and general systemic transfer, and also consider for each case whether there is an explanation based on something universal, developmental, or analogy based on a semantically similar construction. Or in other words, while some errors definitely look like mappings from a Finnish case to a semantically or functionally similar English preposition, one should take into account any and all instances where that is not what is happening. Different verbs (and adjectives) require specific prepositions. Presumably there are instances of prepositions being used that do not correspond straightforwardly with something found in Finnish. Then there are prepositions required by particular nouns ("within the PP") in English, but the error a speaker might make then does not necessarily involve a direct mapping from something in Finnish. To consider whether any of this is developmental requires studies on second language acquisition.

The material used in this thesis comprises an English proficiency test completed by 54 Finnish-speaking Finnish minor subject students, who were applying for entry to the English Department.

My thesis is a relevant one because although language transfer is certainly not a novel research area (Ringbom 1987, Sjöholm 1989, 1995, Meriläinen 2010), many of the previous studies

concentrated on primary and secondary school students who are learning English, whereas there are few studies focusing on university students.

Notwithstanding adding to future research, this thesis has some appropriateness for language teaching method. The aftereffects of the examination may support educators and writers of instructive materials to more readily address parts of language where students of English experience issues.

## **2 Literature review**

Leech and Svartik's definition of prepositions has been adopted here. Prepositions help describe where, when, why or how things are. As its name tells us, a preposition is normally 'placed before' a noun phrase or some other element to form a prepositional phrase. For example, "Dad turned left *at* the green light." "Simon told his sister to wait *for* the sign to say walk." (Lewis 1998: 41)

The notion of "error" is defined as a deviation from the norms of standard English (BrE and AmE) as given in grammars. Throughout the study the notions "omission", "addition", and "substitution" are used to denote the main types of "operation" involved in the errors found.

### **2.1 Defining the central concepts of language transfer**

There are different approaches to investigating errors. Early research in language acquisition was dominated by structuralism and Skinner's behaviourist theory. It dealt with first language acquisition and its advocates believed that language was learnt through "habit-formation", which was "brought about by imitation, reinforcement and repetition of behaviour.

During the stages of second language acquisition, learners tend to rely on the structures of their native language (L1) when writing and speaking in the target language (L2) applying rules and norms from L1 to L2. Learners rely on their knowledge as they analyse patterns and try to establish connections between their L1 and the target language (Ringbom 1983: 207). Ringbom argues that this is a way to "cope with a gap of knowledge" (1988: 52) – a problem-solving way to overcome the limitations of L2 proficiency.

#### **2.1.1 Positive transfer and negative transfer**

The varying structures among languages makes the process of thinking of an unfamiliar language within the context of a fully-acquired one problematic, resulting in errors, patterns which deviate from grammatical norms and violate the constraints of the target language (Ellis, 1997). As the description suggests, these errors are often referred to as negative transfer. This occurs because of dissimilarities between their L1 and the L2 language (Odlin 1989: 26). Negative transfer is sometimes used equivalently with the term *interference*. According to Yule (Negative transfer is more common in the early stages of L2 learning and often decreases as the learner develops greater familiarity with the L2 (Yule 2014: 191-192). An example would be when the direct translation of a sentence from L1 results in a grammatically distorted sentence in L2. Another instance where negative transfer is likely to occur is when a Korean native speaker is attempting to learn English, and in Korean, there is no 'v' sound, and in English, many words start with 'v'.

Learners can benefit from similarities between the target language and their L1. The more similar the two languages are, the easier that learners can successfully apply rules and patterns from their L1 even to the target language. This is *positive transfer*. (Ringbom 2007: 6). Thus positive transfer facilitates learning, while negative transfer impedes learning.

Research on language transfer has traditionally focused more on *negative transfer* and the analysis of errors caused by influence from the learners' L1 (Ringbom 2007: 30). The focus of the analyses has shifted in more recent studies on transfer where researchers appear to have adopted a broader perspective to effects of language transfer (Meriläinen 2010: 12–16).

### **2.1.2 Lexical transfer and syntactic transfer**

Considered is the syntactic context (of the errors and non-errors, based on an L1 Inner Circle target version of English), as well as distinguishing between object selection within the PP and predicate selection, lexical transfer and general systemic transfer, and also considered for each case whether



there is an explanation based on something universal, developmental, or analogy based on a semantically similar construction.

The role of prepositions is largely grammatical in contrast to lexical words which carry the main semantic content. In addition, prepositions make up a closed word-class. It is of interest to find out what problems are most frequent, bearing in mind that English prepositions are generally regarded as a problem area in language learning (Svartvik *et al.* (1973)). Due to the contrast between free prepositions and prepositions more closely attached to adjectives and verbs as well as nouns, the errors relating to prepositions may include: PPs in complementation, PPs as adverbials and PPs as postmodifiers in NPs. The first type deals with both adjective and verb complementation. Some errors are clearly lexical/idiomatic.

## **2.2. Overview of the history and present state of transfer research**

Early research in language transfer can be traced back to the 1940s and 1950s, during which the field of linguistics was heavily influenced by Behaviourism, which viewed learning simply as a habit formation process. Transfer from the native language was, thus, considered as a form of influence of L1 habits on L2 learning. Fries (1945), one of the foremost behaviourists, argued that L1 interference is a major problem for those who are learning a second language. He further argued that comparisons between a learner's native language and the target language are essential for both L2 theory and pedagogy. Lado (1957) proposed what has been known as the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) as a way of explaining the role that L1 plays in L2 learning. According to this hypothesis, L2 learners' productive and receptive skills are influenced by their L1 patterns and that similarities and differences between L1 and L2 are important predictors of ease and difficulty of L2 learning (Odlin 1989: 17, Gass et al 2013: 86– 88, Thomas 2013: 31).

During the 1960s, Chomsky's Universal Grammar supplanted Contrastive Analysis as the primary theoretical framework for language transfer. Chomsky (1965) argued that children are born

with a specific and innate capacity to learn language. Thus, their acquisition is not much affected by outside factors as it is governed by a series of universal and innate mechanisms. The adoption of Universal Grammar marked a significant shift away from behaviourism towards a view that emphasised language learning as a rule-governed, innate process (Meriläinen 2010: 9, Thomas 2013: 32, Ellis 1997: 52, Odlin 1989: 22–24).

The 1970s saw the emergence of Larry Selinker's (1972) theory of *interlanguage*. The Chomsky revolution had just happened and everyone was affected by it, including Selinker. He was a student of Lado and Fries. He wondered though, how could he transfer his English patterns to someone else's French – there must be a third system. In his approach Selinker attempted to combine elements from Contrastive Analysis and Universal Grammar that had both been proved too limited on their own (Meriläinen 2010: 10). Selinker noted that in a given situation, when one attempts to express meaning in another language, meaningful performance situations, the answers produced by a learner are different from those a native speaker would produce had they attempted to convey the same meaning. This comparison suggests the existence of a separate linguistic system. Selinker argued that there is a dormant psychological framework in the human brain that is activated when one attempts to learn a second language, although learners do not merely rely on their L1 knowledge when acquiring a second language, but they actually construct a linguistic system of their own which is different both from their L1 and the target language (Selinker 1972: 209–231). Selinker called this developing system with interacting elements from both the learner's first language and the target language *interlanguage* (Ellis 1997: 33–34).

The primary theoretical shift was that language transfer came to be understood as a cognitive process. Transfer was no longer a learner habit or a “developmental goof” in second language acquisition but an active mental process that learners used to resolve difficulties they encountered in L2 acquisition and communication (Meriläinen 2010: 23).

### 2.3. Transfer research in the Finnish context

The greater the difference between two languages, the more the negative effect. Thus, language acquisition ease can be predicted by the amount of similarities and differences between L1 and L2. One of the characteristics of Finnish transfer research has been the plenitude of comparative studies on Finnish- and Swedish-speaking learners. Most of the studies indicate that speakers of Swedish have a favourable position in acquiring English in contrast with Finnish-speakers. Ringbom (1987) cites a number of studies and notes that Swedish-speaking learners by and large surpass speakers of Finnish. Swedish-speakers have a better command of English in nearly all areas of language competence, ranging from vocabulary to grammar and pronunciation. According to Ringbom, Swedish-speakers' superiority can be explained by structural and formal similarities between Swedish and English which facilitate L2 acquisition. As the language distance between Finnish and English is significantly greater than the distance between Swedish and English, Finnish-speaking learners are not able to benefit from the relatedness between their L1 and English as speakers of Swedish do (ibid).

Finnish learners are claimed to have particular problems with several features of English. Finns are argued to struggle with prepositions (Sjöholm 1989: 103–113), articles (Ringbom 1987: 93–94), and listening comprehension (Ringbom 1987: 80–89).

In any case, the role of English has become more intensive in the Finnish society over the years, meaning that students encounter English in numerous contexts even outside of the classroom. The more integral role of English should influence learners' language capability. Ringbom (2007) compared national test results from various decades where 15-year-olds were tested on their level of English in reading and listening comprehension, grammar, and composition writing. According to him, there is a diachronic improvement in the results measuring students' language abilities (ibid 42). Ringbom suggests that "the general internationalisation of Finland, together with the prevalence of English in youth culture, the Internet and other readily available activities outside class, just as the

modernisation of English teaching in the schools are significant reasons behind this improvement” (ibid).

Changes in teaching and the status of English in Finland have influenced students’ command of English considerably. Language teaching develops constantly, and English is today more present in the Finnish society than in the earlier decades. Consequently, contemporary studies on second language acquisition and language transfer are needed.

### 3 Materials and Methods

This section introduces, and contains a discussion of, the methodological approach and research design best suited to examine the research questions set out in section 2. The material consists of student responses in the entrance exam for admittance to study in the English Department at Tampere University.

The data used in the analysis was collected during autumn 2019. The university that contributed to my study was Tampere University. The students were Finnish-speaking. The size of the group is given below.

<b>Name and location of the University</b>	<b>Number of student responses collected</b>	<b>Primary language used in teaching</b>
Tampere University	53	Finnish

*Table 1: Distribution of student responses*

The data collection process involved establishing contact and enquiring at the English department of Tampere University as to whether there was a proficiency test of incoming students of English, and if it would be possible to examine previous tests and utilise the students' answers as data in my thesis. The procedure of working with the material can be summarised as follows: identification of errors against an answer key, entering data into a data analysis program and sorting data according to proliferation of error occurrences; the data analysis of errors and their causes.

It must be noted that data gathering did not occur without problems, and the material has its flaws. The findings I have made are of 53 and if I had had a greater sample it would make my findings even more credible.

#### 3.1 Methods

One way of analysing language transfer is to compare the learners' native language with the target language and the forms they produce in the target language (Meriläinen 2010: 16, Jarvis 2000a: 250–252). In this thesis, the same approach was used.

This thesis investigates language transfer in Finnish first-year university students' English test responses, focusing on lexical and syntactic features.

Indications of language transfer are studied by contrasting the students' written English to the norms of standard English and to the characteristics of their L1.

### **3.2 Manifestations of transfer featured in the analysis**

This thesis focuses on prepositional constructions, and is chosen in light of the fact that there are clear differences between Finnish and English in the use of them. Hence, it is conceivable to study to what degree prepositions are influenced by language transfer in Finnish-speaking students' responses. The features are discussed below with examples from Meriläinen (2010) and my own material.

#### **3.2.1 Prepositional constructions**

English prepositions have been argued to be problematic for Finnish-speakers (Sjöholm 1995, Ringbom 2009: 67–71). The difficulty of acquiring prepositions has been linked to the fact that Finnish has few prepositions (and postpositions) relative to languages such as English that are highly dependent upon them. Instead of prepositions, Finnish utilises a rather complex case system. The system comprises of 15 cases which signal specific meaning relations between words. Cases are formed by placing suitable endings to the roots of the words (Meriläinen 2010: 165, Hakulinen et al. (2005: 108, 1174–1212). Finnish cases are explained in table 3 (from Karlsson 2008: 25–26).

<b>Case</b>	<b>Endings</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Example</b>
Nominative	–	basic form	auto, 'car'

Genitive	-n, -den, -tten	possession	auton, ‘of a/the car’
Accusative	-n, -t, –	object ending	hänet, ‘him, her’
Partitive	-a, -ä, -ta, -tä	indefinite/quantity	maitoa, ‘(some) milk’
Inessive	-ssa, -ssä	inside	autossa, ‘in a/the car’
Elative	-sta, -stä	out of	autosta. ‘out of a/the car; from a/the car’
Illative	-Vn, -hVn, -seen, siin	into	autoon ‘(in)to a/the car’, <i>Porvooseen</i> ‘to Porvoo
Adessive	-lla, -llä	on; instrument	pöydällä ‘on a/the table’
Ablative	-lta, -ltä	off/from	pöydältä ‘off a/the table; from a/the table’
Allative	-lle	onto	pöydälle ‘(on)to a/the table’
Essive	-na, -nä	state	opettajana ‘as a/the teacher’
Translative	-ksi	change of state	opettajaksi ‘(become) a teacher’
Comitative	-ine	accompanying	vaimoineni ‘with my wife’
Instructive	-n	( <i>idiomatic</i> )	jalan ‘on foot’

Table 3: The Finnish case system

In Meriläinen (2010), Finnish-speakers’ use of prepositions was influenced by the Finnish case system. A portion of the English prepositions have “close translation equivalents” in Finnish cases, which resulted in students using certain prepositions as though they corresponded directly to Finnish case system (Meriläinen 2010: 164). Unidiomatic use of prepositions concerned especially four locative cases: *inessive* (talo**SSA**, *in* a house), *illative* (talo**OON**, (*in*)*to* a house), *elative* (talo**STA**, *from/about* a house), and *adessive* (maa**LLA**, *on* the countryside) (ibid. 165, 176–180).

In addition, Finnish-speaking students oftentimes omitted prepositions in Meriläinen (2010). This can be ascribed to the way that prepositions do not exist as a classification in Finnish, which can bring about negative transfer as in example below:

Registration cannot be accepted if customer does not agree our delivery terms.

### 3.3 The nature of the study and its methodological limitations

As for my results and generalisability, it needs to be said the number of subjects in the study is small. Due to the limited number of subjects in the thesis my results cannot provide plausible generalisations or be applied directly to the larger population. These factors may affect the results.

Regardless of whether the outcomes can't be applied legitimately to the wider population, the thesis can function as a case study and provide insights into language transfer in first-year students' responses. Should my analysis give results that are not the same as past studies, it would be advantageous to expand the study and test whether the outcomes are comparable in a larger scope.

Moreover, this thesis focusses on a learner group that has received little consideration in earlier studies. As first-year university students have not been studied broadly previously, there is not a substantial collection of material accessible for analysis. One of the points of the study is to fill the gap in research by utilising a collection of valid material. The measure of material is small inferable from the limited scope of a Bachelor's thesis and the difficulties experienced in data gathering. Along these lines, the results presented here ought to be taken to be representative of a limited sample.



## 4 Results

In this section the results of my analysis are presented that concerned language transfer in first-year Finnish university students' English test on prepositions. Figures for frequency and dispersion are given first and then discussed with examples. A full list of instances of language transfer is given in Appendix 1. Before proceeding into the analysis, it needs to be mentioned that the absolute number of understudy answers was 53. The errors produced by the students can be divided into three categories. The first category consists of excerpts where the respondent placed an incorrect preposition in the prepositional structure. The second category presents excerpts where the respondents omitted the preposition. The third category is comprised of excerpts where a preposition was placed in the sentence although there should not be one. In each individual excerpt, an assessment has been made as to whether the error has occurred due to language transfer or whether there is an explanation based on something universal, developmental, or analogy based on a semantically similar construction. This assessment is based on comparing the English expression with its Finnish equivalent. The analysis will not present all the excerpts, but focusses on the recurrent errors (top 10 errors) produced.

### 4.1 Analysis of use of incorrect prepositions

Meriläinen (2010) found that Finnish students of English both omitted prepositions and chose wrong prepositions. A distribution of deviant prepositions is given:

<b>Incorrect preposition</b>	<b>Meriläinen (2010)</b>
Nominative	- (0%)
Genitive	2 (1.2%)
Accusative	- (0%)
Partitive	- (0%)
Inessive	32 (18.4%)
Elicative	36 (20.7%)
Illative	29 (16.7%)

Adessive	20 (11.5%)
Ablative	3 (1.7%)
Allative	33 (19.0%)
Translative	5 (2.9%)
Essive	10 (5.8%)
Adpositions	4 (2.3%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>174 (100%)</b>

*Table 1: Distribution of deviant prepositions in Meriläinen (2010)*

Meriläinen indicated that Finnish-speakers use English prepositions in a manner that reflects Finnish case-endings (Meriläinen 2010: 164). A comparable propensity was seen in first-year university students' responses. Students' choice of preposition was influenced by case-endings particularly when it comes to elative, allative, inessive and also to a certain extent in illative. Because those four cases provide most difficult cases for native Finns to find the correct English equivalent, and that is the main reason, as I understand, that L2 English speakers that have Finnish as a mother tongue make these mistakes. This conclusion was drawn by looking carefully at the syntactic context (of the errors and non-errors, based on an L1 Inner Circle target version of English), distinguishing between object selection within the PP and predicate selection, lexical transfer and general systemic transfer, and also considering for each case whether there is an explanation based on something universal, developmental, or analogy based on a semantically similar construction. In cases of omission of a preposition, perhaps students are thinking "You think of the case and translate it into English and you just skip the preposition."

The data (top 10 errors from the entrance exam):

I wonder if I could ask a favour *from* you? (pro *of*, cf. Fi. *Voisinko pyytää sinulta palveluksen?*  
idiomatic prepositional verb ABLATIVE ACU)

Because of *sinulta*. The semantic intent on *sinulta* is from you because *lta* means from. That's why most of the students think it should be from you. And, of course, they haven't used this expression and so they stick to their mother tongue in this instance. Could I ask a favour ... It's an interference from this Finnish idiom. This 'of' is not obvious if you think *sinulta*, so they say 'ask from' which is of course a translation. The key issue is the verb *pyytää* takes ablative in this case. The Finnish thinking is the semantic content, *sinulta* and *pyytää* + ablative and that's why this wrong construction in English will occur on very many occasions.

We don't want the same problems as before, so we'll go *by/to/with/on* the car. (pro *in*, cf. Fi. *Joten mennään autolla*. / *Me menemme autoon/autolla*. ADDESSIVE ILL)

They would like to say *on* the car because that's what they think, but it should be *in* the car.

*Mennä + lla*, *mennä* + adessive.

Don't ask your father for any advice *of/to/in/--/about/if* the question *about* money. (pro *on*, of cf. Fi. *Ala pyydä isaltasi apua rahakysymyksessä* ELAT PART INESS/ *raha-asioissa*. INESS idiomatic prepositional verb *pyytää* + ELAT PART INESSIVE + *apua* takes ILLATIVE)

Should be 'on the question of money'. We see INESSIVE *kysymyksissä*, and that's why they tend to use 'in' and some have thought of another preposition but haven't landed on the correct one. Then 'about' but should be 'of'. The verb *apua* takes ILLATIVE that's why they tend to translate 'don't ask your father for any advice'. The verb is *apua* or *auta*. This verb *auta* or give help it takes inessive and that is why they tend to have 'in' whereas it should be 'on'. I think for a Finn, this might be the toughest, because there are very few prepositions, and a Finn does not have them in Finnish. In Finnish you just use the case. It's the same, in Swedish, there are more cases, not as many as in Finnish. Swedish has prepositions. It makes them think that you use the case that you

have in Finnish and translate it to a preposition that is familiar to the student, and tend to use ‘in’ even if it should be ‘on’.

Or would you prefer to go *by* foot. (pro *on*, cf. Fi. *Vai haluaisitko mieluummin mennä jalan? / kävellen / jalan*. INSTRUCTIVE)

This is *instruktiivi*, which means ‘with’, and that’s why they think that it’s ‘by foot’ but the proper is ‘on foot’. Because of all those others ‘by taxi, by train,’ so of course the student thinks ‘by foot’, because in most of the cases you have ‘by’. If the interference would be *jalloin*, then you would think that the native Finn would say ‘go with foot’. It’s not used very much these days, this *instruktiivi*. No one would say ‘*jalan kanssa*’, so they take it from the English but they don’t realise that it’s an idiom and they haven’t learned it yet.

Can anyone explain to me how this wheel is supposed to fit *in/into/to* this axle? (pro */--/on* , cf. Fi. *Voisiko joku selittää minulle miten tämän pyörän pitäisi mahtua/sopia **tahan** akseliin?* ILLATIVE)

This is Illative in Finnish *akseliin*.

I know. I read that myself *on/from* the paper. (pro *in*, cf. Fi. *Luin sen itse lehdestä*. *lukea* + ELATIVE)

*Lukea* takes ELATIVE. *Lähden Helsingistä*. That’s elative. So if you have *lukea* it takes ellative. That’s why they tend to translate ‘from’ the paper. The semantic content of this *lehdestä* is ‘from the paper’ so put it like that even if it should be ‘in the paper’.

They think that *-sta* means from so it should be that if they don’t know. Interference from the Finnish language.

They were walking quite slowly *to/into/--* that direction. (pro *in*, cf. Fi. *He kavelivat aika hitaasti siihen suuntaan*. ILLATIVE)

Please answer the following questions. Do not think *of/--/* them too long: (pro on/about, cf. Fi. *Vastaan seuraaviin kysymyksiin. Ala mieti vastauksiasi kovin kauaa*. ILL PARTITIVE)

The partitive *kovin kauaa* and then they think there is no preposition and may drop or skip the preposition or take another one. Many times when they have partitive they think there is no need for a preposition. This is typical if you have a partitive structure in Finnish then you think there is no need for a preposition.

we are interested in your spontaneous reactions *on/of/about/towards/from* them. (pro *to*, cf. Fi. *vaan vastaa mahdollisimman spontaanisti kysymyksiin*. ILLATIVE)

My supervisor said "If you look at those errors, you will notice that the second and the fourth one follow from the grammatical requirements of the noun in the containing preposition phrases, and the first and the third follow from the subcategorization requirements of a verb. I was suggesting that the latter type of error might be more frequent, but you would need to check this against actual data, and figure out whether there is any substance to such a claim (hypothesis)."

I propose that the subcategorization requirements of different verbs is indeed one of the keys to understanding why native Finns tend to figure out a preposition from the semantic content.

Some practical examples:

*pyytää+lta=pyytä+ablative-semantic content "from"*

*lukea+sta=lukea+elative-semantic content also "from"*

*kysyä apua rahakysymyksessä / raha asioista* (again an idiomatic prepositional verb)

*kysyä apua+ssa=kysyä apua+ inessive-semantic content "in"*

*kysyä apua+sta=kysyä apua+elative-semantic content "about" or "from"*

*mennä+lla=mennä+adessive-semantic content "on"*

OR *mennä-n=mennä jalan/jaloin-instruktive/comitative-semantic content "with"*

Or when there is a construction with partitive, a Finn many times tends to leave out the preposition because its semantic content is not so obvious at all.

Swedish-speaking students (may) experience fewer difficulties with prepositions than their Finnish speakers. This is expected as Swedish prepositions are similar to the ones used in English although there are some differences. This, however, is beyond the scope of the study.

## 5 Discussion of results and conclusion

This thesis analysed syntactic transfer in Finnish university students' English proficiency test answers. Its aim was to investigate how language transfer influences first-year students' written English, and which forms transfer takes in their expressions. The material used in the analysis included 53 proficiency test answers.

The analysis showed that transfer took many forms and influenced morphology and syntax. In examining the errors, it is noticed that the second and the fourth one follow from the grammatical requirements of the noun in the containing preposition phrases, and the first and the third follow from the subcategorization requirements of a verb. It is suggested that the latter type of error might be more frequent, but this needs to be checked against actual data, and determine the substance to such a claim (hypothesis).

Language transfer occurred in first-year students' responses as did in Meriläinen (2010), particularly on the level of morphology and syntax. The finding supports the claim that language proficiency and language transfer are intertwined. The results suggest that greater language proficiency means, in general, less language transfer. Similarly, it appears that Finnish-speakers' L1 causes considerable negative transfer. The high frequency of negative transfer can be attributed to the lack of similarities between Finnish and English in lexicon and syntax, which results in unidiomatic constructions.

To continue with syntactic transfer, the general observation was that syntactic transfer was more common in first-year students' compositions than in Meriläinen (2010). The syntactic analysis focused on prepositions. Syntactic transfer was marked with prepositions. First-year students' choices of prepositions were influenced by the Finnish case system, which caused students to overgeneralise the use of prepositions, particularly *in* and *to*, to untypical contexts. First-year students likewise omitted prepositions as prepositions do not exist in Finnish.

Negative transfer appears most persistent with English prepositions. Students should be made aware of the fact there is not always a one-to-one correspondence between Finnish and English: the

direct translation of Finnish expressions into English is rarely the best of strategies. The semantic differences between prepositions and cases should likewise be considered: students may have learned that *in* corresponds to the Finnish inessive (-*ssa*, -*ssä*, 'inside'), but this is not always the case.

Language distance affected transfer considerably: speakers of Swedish appear to benefit from the linguistic proximity although similarities caused even negative transfer with English word forms. It would be worthwhile to expand the study and estimate whether the results apply to a larger population. At present the results are suggestions, and more research would be needed to verify the results.



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## 7 Appendices

### Appendix 1: Cases of transfer in Finnish-speaking students' proficiency test answers

#### Prepositions:

I wonder if I could ask a favour *from* you? (pro *of*, cf. Fi. *Voisinko pyytää **sinulta** palveluksen?*  
idiomatic prepositional verb ABLATIVE ACU)

We don't want the same problems as before, so we'll go *by/to/with/on* the car. (pro *in*, cf. Fi. *Joten mennään **autolla***. / *Me menemme **autoon/autolla***. ADDESSIVE ILL)

Don't ask your father for any advice *of/to/in/--/about/if* the question *about* money. (pro *on*, *of* cf. Fi. *Älä pyydä **isaltasi apua rahakysymyksessä*** ELAT PART INESS/ *raha-asioissa*. INESS idiomatic prepositional verb *pyytää* + ELAT PART INESSIVE + *apua* takes ILLATIVE)

Or would you prefer to go *by* foot. (pro *on*, cf. Fi. *Vai haluaisitko mieluummin mennä **jalan?*** / *kävellen / **jalan***. INSTRUCTIVE)

Can anyone explain to me how this wheel is supposed to fit *in/into/to* this axle? (pro *--/on* , cf. Fi. *Voisiko joku selittää minulle miten tämän pyörän pitäisi mahtua/**sopia **tahan** akseliin?*** ILLATIVE)

I know. I read that myself *on/from* the paper. (pro *in*, cf. Fi. *Luin sen itse **lehdestä***. *lukea* + ELATIVE)

They were walking quite slowly *to/into/--* that direction. (pro *in*, cf. Fi. *He kavelivat aika hitaasti siihen suuntaan*. ILLATIVE)

Please answer the following questions. Do not think *of/--/* them too long: (pro *on/about*, cf. Fi. *Vastaa seuraaviin kysymyksiin*. *Ala mieti vastauksiasi kovin kauaa*. ILL PARTITIVE)

we are interested in your spontaneous reactions *on/of/about/towards/from* them. (pro *to*, cf. Fi. *vaan vastaa mahdollisimman spontaanisti kysymyksiin*. ILLATIVE)