

# *Ovi ei tahdo aueta—* **'the Door Won't Open'**

**Many Faces of the Finnish Verb 'tahtoa' and its Usage**

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# The Verb

- Finnish verb *tahtoa*, 'to want', can also in some contexts be used to convey tendency, or the meaning of something happening with great difficulty
- The verb shares its first, volitive, function but not the others with its near synonym *haluta*
- There's also a third near synonym *mieliä* whose usage was marginal already at the dawn of literary Finnish in the 16th century

# The Language

- Finnish belongs to the Finno-Ugric branch of Uralic Languages
  - there it belongs to its own Finnic branch with its closest relatives, amongst others Estonian and Karelian
  - both Karelian and Estonian have a cognate for *tahto* with similar usage
- The language and its family have been influenced by neighboring Indo-European languages throughout their history

# The Language

- Finnish started to be written in the 16th century during the protestant reformation carried out in the Swedish Realm
- Up until the mid to late 19th century most of the texts written and published in Finnish were spiritual or educational
- Many early texts are translations of mostly Swedish—and at times German—originals

# Prior Research: negative polarity

- Silva Kiuru (1977) has noted that certain Finnish verbs have negative polarity, that is, they are more often than not used in either syntactically or semantically negative context
- She has created a criteria for telling apart volitive usage of the verb *tahtoa* from the non-volitive use (Kiuru 1977: 109–111)

# Prior Research: negative polarity

1) *Tahtoa* cannot have a volitive meaning when the subject in the sentence is not referring to a human entity:

(a) *Lapset eivät tahtoneet nousta vedestä*

Children NEG-3PL want-PST-3PL rise water-ELA

'The children didn't want to/would not get out of the water.'

(b) *Verkot eivät tahtoneet nousta vedestä*

Net-PL NEG-3PL want-PST-3PL rise-INF water-ELA

'I had a hard time getting the nets out of the water.'

# Prior Research: negative polarity

2) The infinitive following the verb *tahtoa* needs to denote something worth pursuing—and something that can be pursued—with a (human) will:

(a) *En tahtonut epäonnistua.*

NEG-1SG want-PST-1SG fail-INF

'I didn't want to fail.'

(b) *En tahtonut onnistua.*

NEG-1SG want-PST succeed-INF

'I wouldn't succeed.'

# Prior Research: negative polarity

3) Adding clitics *-kin* and *-kään* prevents the non-volitive interpretation and add emphasis to the volitive meaning:

(a) *En tahdo kuulla, mitä te puhutte.*

NEG-1SG want-PRS hear-INF what-PTV 2PL-NOM speak-PRS-2PL

'I have hard time hearing what you are speaking about.'

or

'I don't want to hear what you are speaking about.'

# Prior Research: negative polarity

3) Adding clitics *-kin* and *-kään* prevents the non-volitive interpretation and add emphasis to the volitive meaning:

(b) *En tahdokaan kuulla, mitä te puhutte.*

NEG-1SG want-PRS-CL hear-INF what-PTV 2PL-NOM speak-PRS-2PL

'I don't even want to hear what you are speaking about.'

# Prior Research: negative polarity

4) Always, when *tahtoa* is in potential mood and often also when it is in conditional mood, only the volitive interpretation is permissible:

(a) *En tahdo millään muistaa koko juttua.*

NEG-1SG want-IND any-ADESS-CL remember-INF whole-NOM thing-PTV.

'I have a hard time remembering the whole thing.'

(b) *En tahtoisikaan millään muistaa koko juttua.*

NEG-1SG want-COND any-ADESS-CL remember-INF whole-NOM thing-PTV.

'I wouldn't like to remember the whole thing in any way.'

# Prior research: Early Literary Finnish

- Osmo Ikola (1949) has discovered that *tahtoa* is used as an auxiliary in a future construction both in the earliest partial Bible translation from the year 1548 and that of the whole Bible in 1642
- There are multiple future constructions used, either constructions with different auxiliaries or just plain present tense forms
- *Tahtoa* is used as an auxiliary usually in those contexts, where the subject in the sentence denotes someone with a will and the described activity can be affected with will (Ikola 1949: 212, 223)

# Prior research: Early Literary Finnish

- Ikola (1949) concludes that this is due to German and Swedish influence
- Still up until 17<sup>th</sup> century the verb *wollen* could be used as an auxiliary in some future constructions (Diewald & Wischer 2013: 203)
- Both modern English and modern Danish make use of a etymologically related auxiliary, *will* and *ville* respectively, in their future constructions (Hilpert 2008)

# Parallel development in Estonian

- The Estonian cognate *tahtma* can be used to express (Habicht et al. 2010: 146):
  - Volition
  - Intention
  - Participant-internal possibility\*
  - Necessity
  - Epistemic modality
  - Postmodal meanings (avertive/proximative and habituality)
- Habicht, Penjam, and Tragel (2010: 142) have proposed a model of grammaticalization, where more abstract usage flows from the more basic volition/desire

# What's new?

- Nature of the earliest texts (e.g. translations of Bible and the Swedish law) written in Finnish doesn't seem to lend itself for non-volitive uses of the verb *tahtoa*
- The purpose of those texts often is to describe things either as they are or as they ought to be

# What's new?

- In the subcorpus consisting of educational texts printed on the ends of almanacs from 1705 to 1809 has multiple attestations of *tahtoa* many of its different uses
- The tendency conveying usage of *tahtoa* surfaces, among others, in a context where fast growth of weeds is being discussed

# What's new?

- The following text discusses how after cutting the cumin the weeds tend to strengthen again

(a) – – *tahtowat pahat ruohot saada jälleens endisen woimans* – – (Alm1752-B4a)

want-3PL bad-NOM-PL grass-NOM-PL get-INF again former-GEN-SG power-GEN-SG-PX

'– – the weeds will/tend to get back their former power– –"

- Here the weeds can be imagined to possess, at least a metaphorical—if not actual, will that goes against the pursuits of people

# What's new?

- In the following passage eating habits of young animals not accustomed to a new type of food

(b) *Jos Härjät eli nuoret eläimet – – tahdoisit alusa*

if OX-NOM-PL or young-NOM-PL animal-NOM-PL want-COND-3PL beginning-ELA

'If oxen, or young animals – – would/wanted to

*hitaimin syödä tätä ruocaa – – (Alm1761-B3a)*

slow-COMP(?) eat-IND-PRS this-PTV-SG food-PTV-SG

eat this food slower(?) in the beginning – –'

# What's new?

(b) *Jos Härjät eli nuoret eläimet – – tahdoisit alusa*

if OX-NOM-PL or young-NOM-PL animal-NOM-PL want-COND-3PL beginning-ELA

'If oxen, or young animals – – would/wanted to

*hitaimin syödä tätä ruocaa – – (Alm1761-B3a)*

slow-COMP(?) eat-IND-PRS this-PTV-SG food-PTV-SG

eat this food slower(?) in the beginning – –'

- It is not unambiguous, if the usage here is volitive or tendential, as the will of the animals can only be inferred from their behavior as they are unable to speak

# What's yet to come?

- There's still a wealth of text to be analyzed
- When the Finnish text is a translation and the original is readily available, comparisons between the versions can be made
- The aim is to paint as full a picture of all the many faces of the verb, as possible

# Literature

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