

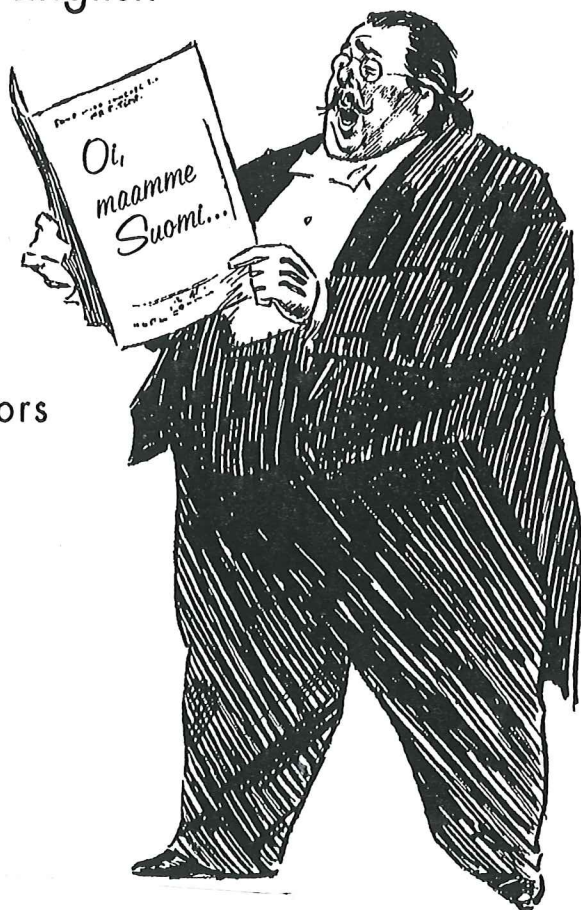
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How to Pronounce

Finnish

an approximate comparison
to standard English

a guide for
choral directors
and singers



HOW TO PRONOUNCE FINNISH

Finnish has a special phonetic advantage. It is spelled more or less as it is pronounced. As long as you try to speak out every written letter, you will most probably be understood.

Prosody

Its prosodic system is also rather straight forward. Main stress (') is always on the first syllable of a word.

Suomi 'suo-mi (Finland) laulakaamme 'lau-la-kaa-me (let us sing).

There is a slight secondary stress (,) on every odd syllable in polysyllabic words.

laulakaamme 'lau-la-,kaam-me ylimmällä 'y-lim-,mäl-lä (upmost)

Compound words have a stress on the first syllable of every beginning word

yhteis laulu 'yh-teis-'lau-lu (singing together) rakkauden tunnustus 'rak-ka-,u-den-'tun-nus-,tus (confession of love)

It can be quite hard to realize this stress pattern in singing as the melodic stress does not always concur with the linguistic one. However, as long as you know what you are aiming at, it makes the result easier to receive.

I started by stating that Finnish is easy to pronounce as it is phonetically spelled. True, but sometimes it is difficult to know what phonetic value the letters in Finnish stand for. The spelling of Mä oksalla ylimmällä or Jouluyönä may cause perplexity even if you try to dress every letter with a sound. Let us try to go through every Finnish letter and see how its sound value could be explained by equivalent sounds in English. As we are speaking of sounds, I am going to use the signs of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

Phonemes

Every language in the world has its own system of sounds and rules for combining them. Every language has also a different amount and set of sounds which can change the meaning of a word. They are called the phonemes of that particular language. There are plenty of sounds which act differently as phonemes between Finnish and English. Let us take an example: seen [si:n] and soon [su:n] have a difference in meaning in English and everyone knows that [i] and [u] are two phonemes of English. In Finnish suun [su:n] and syyn [sy:n] are two words with different meanings (genitive

forms meaning 'a mouth's and 'a cause's), thus [u] and [y] are two phonemes. Now the [u]:s in these two languages may sound very different. The English one sometimes approximates the Finnish [y]. So an Englishman's kuu kalpea may be understood as kyy kalpea ('pale adder' instead of 'pale moon'). On the other hand a Finn can use anything from his own [u] to his [y] and be understood: too soon [tu: su:n] or [ty: sy:n] as there is no [y]-sounding phoneme in English.

On the other hand there is only one sibilant (=s) sound in Finnish. It is usually 'darkish' in quality and to the English ear may sometimes sound more like the 'sh' in English she, shoe or tosh, so Suomi may sound like [juomi] or kiitos like [kiitoʃ]. The Finnish ear tolerates many variations, thus an English speaker can use his [s] provided he tries to avoid voicing the [s] in combinations like kesäilta (summer evening) [kesæilta] not [ke-zæilta], and he will do fine. For a Finn it is more difficult to differentiate between sea [si:] and she [ʃi:] or puss [pus] and push [puʃ] as [s] and [ʃ] in English are definitely two different phonemes.

Comparison of sounds

So, comparing the sounds of Finnish to those of English is not an easy task and at their best these instructions and clues are only approximations, but let us have a go, anyway. Here come the vowels:

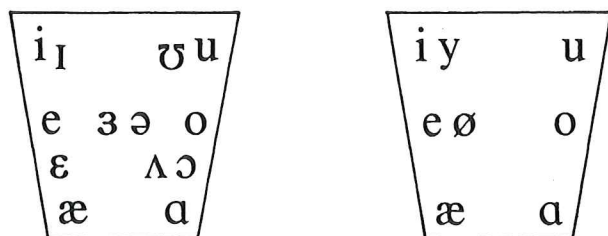


Fig. 1. The vowel systems of English and Finnish

VOWELS

The Finnish vowel-system has eight different vowel phonemes, which however, can appear either short muna (egg), muuna (as another, as something else) or as part of a diphthong muina (as others, as some other things) or in a combination over a syllabic boundary minua (me). In other words Finnish uses its vowels a lot and it is important always to try to pronounce them to their full value. There is no equivalence to the unstressed 'neutralized' vowel [ə] as in the English an elephant [ən eləfənt]. The Finns pronounce this word as [elefantti].

Here are the eight Finnish vowels with some explanations:

i = [i] ilta (evening) [ilta], villi (wild) [villi]

ii = [i:] iibis (ibis) [i:bi:s], viileä (cool) [vi:leä]

as in: easy [i:zi], veal [vi:t], sea [si:], bee [bi:] NOTE the short and long phonemes are both pronounced alike, hence never as in it is (it iz) fill [fil]

e = [e] et (you don't) [et], setä (uncle) [setä], sade (rain) [sade], se (it) [se]

ee = [e:] eespäin (forward) [e:späin], sees (serene) [se:s], pakenee (he/she runs away) [pakene:]

as in: the beginning of the diphthong say [sei]. For the long one there is no real equivalence, you can try a prolonged he sa-ays? [hi: se:z] with an unvoiced s for the Finnish sees.

NOTE try not to diphthongize the Finnish long [e:] for the diphthong may change the meaning: sees (serene), seis (stop).

ä = [æ] älä (don't!) [ælä], käsi (hand) [käsi] kesä (summer) [kesä]

ää = [æ:] ääni (voice) [æ:ni], häät (wedding) [hæ:t], sää (weather) [sæ:]

as in: at [æt], hat [hæt], baa baa (what the little lamb says) [bæ:bæ:]

If you try to push your tongue as 'front' as possible you will get the Finnish [æ] all right.

a = [ɑ] ala (start!) [ɑla] sana (word) [sɑnɑ] ja (and) [ja]

aa = [ɑ:] aamen [ɑ:men], taas (again) [tɑ:s], maa (earth, ground) [mɑ:]

as in: arm [ɑ:m], bath [bɑ:θ], car [kɑ:]

For the short one you can try but [bʌt] or mother [mʌðə] with opening the mouth a bit too much. The Finnish [ɑ] is pronounced very far back in the mouth, but the singing voice prefers a little clearer sound, so as long as you keep your [ɑ]:s and [æ]:s apart, you'll do fine.

o = [o] on (is) [on] koti (home) [koti] olo (feeling) [olo]

oo = [o:] oodi (ode) [o:di], soolo (solo) [so:lo], takoo (he/she forges) [tako:]

as in: home [houm], the [o] in on or hot is usually a bit too 'open' for the Finnish ear. It may even be mixed up with the [ɑ], e.g. koti pronounced [kɔti] may be understood as Kati (Kate, the name) [kati] or olo [ɔlo] as ala (start!) [ɑla]. Diphthongization may also lead to misinterpretation: e.g. sooda (soda) souda (row!, a boat) The long one is close to all [o:l] or before [bɪfo:]

u = [u] uni (dream) [uni], tuli (fire) [tuli], sielu (soul) [sielu]

u = [u:] uuni (oven) [u:ni] tuuli (wind) [tu:li], suu (mouth) [su:]

as in: soon [su:n] but **much** further back in the mouth. The short one is like a carefully pronounced [u] in put.

NOTE try to begin directly with the vowel so that your unia (dreams) will not be understood as junia (trains). The sound is [u], not [ju].

y = [y] yksi (one) [yksi], syksy (autumn) [syksy]

yy = [y:] tyyni (calm) [ty:ni], syy (cause) [sy:]

as in: French: tu [ty], sure [sy:R]

English has no direct equivalence of this sound. Try to pronounce sea with the lips in the u-position and the result should sound something like syy. As already stated the English u, soon, at least in some dialects closely resembles the Finnish y, so that another attempt could be made by trying to produce a very forward u. Phonetically the y has approximately the same tongue position as i, and the lip position as in u.

ö = [ø] öljy (oil) [øljy], pöllö (owl) [pøllø]

öö = [ø:] eläköön (hurra, actually: let him/her live) [elækø:n].

as in: French: feu (fø)

English has no equivalence for this sound either. Try to pronounce earn or turn or fur with lips slightly rounded and the hump of the tongue a little forward in the mouth and the result should be an [ø]. As a matter of fact many Finns mistake the English [ɜ] sound to be an [ø] and are perfectly understood producing [tø:n] instead of [tʃ:n].

DIPHTHONGS

Both English and Finnish have diphthongs. A diphthong is usually defined to be a long vowel which changes quality during its pronunciation. In English the change is not always quite complete; i is mostly pronounced something like [aə] instead of [ai]. The Finnish diphthongs — eighteen in number — could on the contrary be interpreted as a unity of two vowels both of them pronounced (almost) to their full value; aina (always) [ainɑ]. There is never a syllable boundary within a diphthong. In Finnish, however, it is not always easy to know which adjoining vowels form a diphthong, which do not. Usually two syllables have two notes, a diphthong one and the syllable boundary is indicated in the way the words are divided between notes. I shall say a few more things about the singing of diphthongs later. You can read the possibilities of forming diphthongs of the Finnish vowels in the following figure:

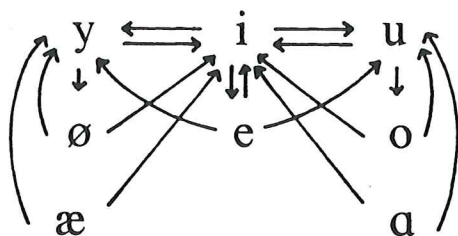


Fig. 2. The Finnish system of diphthongs is restricted by the rules of vowel harmony. A front vowel (excepting [i] and [e]) cannot appear in the same word with a back vowel

The 'closing' ones

01. **öi** = [øi] öinen (nightly) [øinen]
02. **äi** = [æi] äiti (mother) [æiti]
03. **ei** = [ei] eilen (yesterday) [eilen]
04. **ai** = [ai] aina (always) [ainɑ]
05. **oi** = [oi] soi (sound!, resound!) [soi]
06. **öy** = [øy] höyhen (feather) [høyhen]
07. **äy** = [æy] täytyy (one must) [tæyty:]
08. **ou** = [ou] outo (strange) [outo]
09. **au** = [au] auto (car) [auto]
10. **ey** = [ey] leyhyä (flutter) [leyhyä] NOTE ley-hy-ä, yä is not a diphthong
11. **eu** = [eu] Eurooppa (Europe) [euro:ppɑ]

Those formed by moving the tongue forwards or backwards

12. **ui** = [ui] huilu (flute) [huilu]
13. **iu** = [iu] viulu (violin) [viulu]

Those formed by unrounding or rounding the lips only

14. **yi** = [yi] hyinen (freezing cold) [hyinen]
15. **iy** = [iy] Kiisaari (geographical name) [kiysɑ:ri] — very rare

Places of articulation

Manners of articulation	Labials		Dentals			Retro-fleks	Palatals		Velars	Uvulars	Glottals
	Bi-labials	Denti-labials	Inter-dentals	Post-dentals	Alveolars		Alveolo-palatals	Palatals			
Plosives	p ^h b				t ^h d				k ^h g		
• Spirants		f v	θ ð					j			h
• Sibilants					s z		ʃ ʒ				
Affricatives							tʃ dʒ				
Nasals	m				n				ŋ		
• Laterals					l (ɫ)						
• Trills					ɹ						
Semivowels	(w)								w		

Fig. 3. The system of consonants between English and Finnish

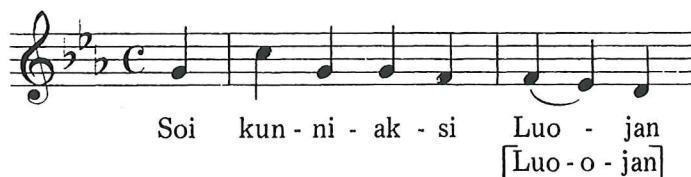
The 'opening' ones

16. **yö** = [yø] työ (work) [tyø]

17. **ie** = [ie] tie (road) [tie]

18. **uo** = [uo] tuo (that) [tuo]

As a rule diphthongs present no difficulties in singing. They are usually sung on one note just as the long vowels and **the more open one** is always sung longer. This is important to remember whenever there is a melisma (several notes for a vowel or diphthong): e.g.



Places of articulation

Manners of articulation	Labials		Inter-dentals	Dentals		Alveolars	Retro-fleks	Palatals		Velars	Uvu-lars	Glottals
	Bi-labials	Denti-labials		Post-dentals	Alveolo-palatals			Palatals				
Plosives	p			t	d					k		
• Spirants		v							j			h
• Sibilants					s							
Affricatives												
Nasals	m				n					ŋ		
• Laterals					l							
• Trills					r							
Semivowels												

CONSONANTS

There are fewer consonant sounds in Finnish than in English. Although there are a few methodical differences in the two systems, there are no consonant sounds in Finnish which would not have an equivalence in English, so you need not learn any new sounds, just perhaps try to produce some in a slightly different manner. Let us have a look at the two systems.

In phonetics we try to establish the place where a consonant is formed in the mouth, i.e. **the place of articulation** and also the manner in which the characteristic sound is achieved, i.e. **the manner of articulation**. You can compare the places and manners in the above figure. Let us get acquainted with the Finnish way of articulating the various sounds grouped by their manner of articulation.

Plosives

In English the difference between poise [p^hɔiz] and boys [bɔiz] is mainly made by releasing the [p] with a gush of air and the [b] more softly and voicing it more or less through. The same applies to town [t^haun] and down [daun] and to cot [k^hɒt] and got [gɒt]. Finnish has no [b] or [g] sounds (excepting some recent loan words) and it separates its [t]:s and [d]:s in a different manner, so it does not need this gush of air, which is called **aspiration** in phonetics. Finnish plosives sound something like a voiceless [p] or [g] (◌ is the phonetic sign for loss of voice). Consequently when you pronounce the Finnish words pois (away), Tauno (a male name) or koti (home) try to sound like [p^hɔis], [d^hauno] and [g^hɔdi] instead of [p^hɔiz] [t^haunə] and [k^hɒtɪ].

The Finns pronounce their [t] almost in the same place as the English pronounce their th-sound (phonetically [θ] in e.g. thing [θɪŋ]). Just push the tongue more firmly against the teeth for tili (account), tiili (brick), te (you), tuoli (chair), äiti (mother) etc.. The [d] on the contrary is pronounced at the place of the English [t] (or [d]). Try teidän (yours), taidan (I can), tiedon (genit. form 'of knowledge').

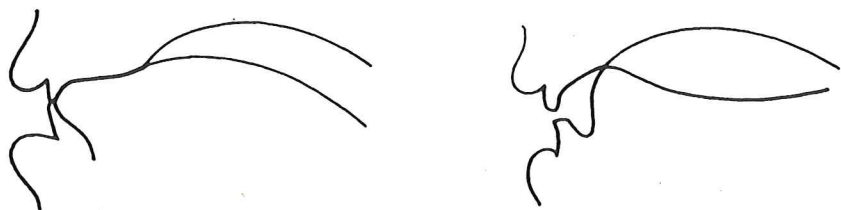


Fig. 4. The tongue positions for the English and Finnish [t] -sounds

Fricatives

Compared to English, Finnish has few fricative sounds. Its three spirants [v], [j], and [h] hardly cause difficulties for an English speaker. The Finns pronounce their fricatives fairly softly but by singing it is better to give them a little force, so you cannot go wrong using your habitual [v] and [j] in Vielä niitä honkia humisee or Juokse porosein, but remember to pronounce the [h] as in who [hu] not as [hju] in humisee (it sighs) and your [j] without [dʒ], hence something like 'yuokse' not 'džuokse'.

I have already mentioned the only Finnish sibilant = [s]. It is usually pronounced by curling the tip of the tongue towards the gum and thus it is easily 'coloured' by the surrounding vowels. That is why Suomi sounds like [juomi] and kiitos like [kiitoʃ]. There is no sh-sound nor a voiced [z] in Finnish, so avoid consciously producing them. Just use your habitual unvoiced [s] and you will do well.



Fig. 5. An apical (tip) and a laminal (blade) tongue position for [s]-sounds

Nasals

The nasal sounds [m] [n] and [ŋ] are pronounced quite alike in both English and Finnish. The only difference really is in the Finnish long [ŋŋ], e.g. tanko (rod) [taŋko], tango (tango) [taŋŋo] NOT [tæŋgou] as in English.

The r and l -sounds

The English (British) [r] is usually either a short 'tap' as in very or a fricative sound as in really, array. In Finnish the [r]:s are usually rolled with the tip as in Scottish. The short [r] in Finnish veri (blood) [veri] sounds actually quite like the English very [veri] if you try to make the 'tap' short and crisp. Try e.g. poro (reindeer), portti (gate), porkkana (carrot) just as they are spelled. The long one in pairs like paras (best) parras (brick), purut (sawdust) purrut (bitten), you really have to produce by rolling the tip of the tongue against the gum. Should it feel too difficult you can quite well use a fricative sound as in array, hurray and be accepted, actually many Finns use it also.

The [l] sound in Finnish is pronounced with the tip against the gum and thus has a rather 'darkish' colour. English (British) has two variants of [l], one 'clear' in colour, pronounced mostly with the blade of the tongue against the gum and the other one quite 'dark' where the tongue has the shape something like [u]. The former appears at the beginning and the latter at the end of a syllable or with a consonant. In a word like little [lɪtʃ] they both appear. The [l]-sound is not difficult and you will be understood using your habitual 'clear' [l] in every position. The only difficulty arises if your own language just has one liquid sound, in which case you just have to try and carefully produce the [r]:s and [l]:s as they are spelled.

LENGHT

Length in Finnish is a factor which is always important for the meaning of the word. Every sound is either short or long phonologically. (As you remember a phoneme is a phonological unit, i.e. a sound which can change the meaning of a word in a given language, like sin-tin.) In English there is also a difference of length and meaning between some sounds like sin [sɪn] — seen [si:n] but then also the quality of the sound changes [ɪ] vs. [i]. In Finnish it is purely the perceived 'length' as in sinä [sɪnæ] — siinä [si:næ]. Length is always indicated with two letters as in asia (a matter) Aasia (Asia) — pelin (of a game, genit.) peliiin (to the game, illat.) — kuka (who) kukka (flower) — tuli (fire) tuuli (wind) tulli (costoms). As you see also the length of a consonant can change the meaning.

Now comes one remarkable thing:

The length in Finnish could perhaps in some ways be compared with the **tone** (= the melody of a word) which also changes the meaning in some languages like Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese etc. However, there is one difference concerning especially singing. In a Chinese song the melody is always set to the text so that it does not interfere with the melodic pattern of the word. You actually cannot translate a Western Opera into Chinese because the melody would never fit the requirements of the word's tone. In Finnish, although the length is equally important as the tone, you can sing a short sound with a long note and vice versa and be understood. This is possible because; **firstly** there is a great redundancy, i.e. you can understand the word correctly by the context; **secondly** there are actually fairly few real minimal pairs like the above mentioned ones where the length would be the only differentiating factor; and **thirdly** there seems to be a subtle change in the general energy or intensity in a long sound compared to a short one. thus si-nä si-nä. Long consonants are always geminated

thus: ku-ka kuk-ka, ve-li vel-li. In practice, I think both in vowels and consonants, if you actually think of singing **two** sounds instead of one, it helps. As a rule you need not bother about the phonological length in singing very much, it will mostly take care of itself along with the music. A Finn will understand you correctly if the words are otherwise clearly produced. I have used up so much space for this phenomenon merely because it is a very special feature in Finnish.

THE IMPERATIVE

There is one more phonetic finesse for which even writing does not give a clue. that is the imperative mood which in some verbs looks like the present mood but is produced slightly differently. An example from the first verse of the Finnish National Anthem: soi sana kultainen, which can either mean: 'rings the golden word' [soi sana kultainen] or: 'resound, thou golden word' [soissana kultainen]. It is supposed to be the latter, imperative, but the Finns make mistakes themselves. You need not unduely worry about this phenomenon either. One must understand Finnish very well to be able to recognize the imperatives. Just pronounce every letter as clearly as you can and the Finns will love you and start talking Finnish to you thinking that you master the language to perfection.



soi, sa - na kul - tai - nen!
[sois sana]



Tu - le, tu - le kul - ta - ni, jou - du jo!
[Tulettulek kultani, jouduj jo]



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