



Study with *Sisu*: Your One-Stop Guide to Learning Finnish

by *Michelle Baumgartner*

Born somewhere between the snow forests of the Ural Mountains and the bend of the mighty Volga, the Finnish language has thrived against great odds.

It has been spoken by [Nobel laureates](#), telecommunications engineers at [Nokia](#), and Linus Torvalds, the [inventor of a renowned computer operating system](#).

Elias Lönnrot, the writer of the saga that [influenced Tolkien's Middle Earth](#), came from Finland — as did Eero Saarinen, the designer who inspired the [tulip-style chairs](#) in *Star Trek*. So did composer Jean Sibelius, whose tone poem [Finlandia](#) is considered Finland's national hymn...with a tune that echoes in Christian churches around the world.

About the Finnish Language

Despite how Finnish flourishes today, it had to overcome years of suppression and stigmas, even in its native land. For centuries, Finland was annexed and occupied by forces from both Sweden and Russia — two powers who were locked into geopolitical and religious conflict with each other.

Finland was a Swedish territory for nearly seven hundred years, starting in 1120. During the time of Swedish control, the Finnish language took a back seat to three other languages: Swedish was used for government and administrative purposes; Latin dominated the churches; Middle Saxon (also called Middle Low German) was the language of commerce. Because of the political situation, Finnish

speakers were relegated to a secondary status in society, unable to use their native language in any official capacity.

For centuries, Finnish was not taught or used in written form. This all changed in the mid-16th century when [Mikael Agricola](#), the Lutheran Bishop of Turku, decided to translate the New Testament into Finnish to make it more accessible for his fellow Finns. Agricola realized that he needed to standardize Finnish writing and spelling, in order to make his translation project work.

Agricola's efforts led to the development of the modern Finnish language. To this day, Finns commemorate the April 9 anniversary of Agricola's 1557 death, which has been declared the [national day of the Finnish language](#). (Coincidentally, it's also the birthday of Elias Lönnrot, who wrote the best-known Finnish epic poem.)

Finnish faced further challenges in the early 18th century, when it was occupied by Russia during the latter country's [Great Northern War](#) with Sweden, as well as the Russo-Swedish War of 1741-1743. Just as under Swedish rule, a foreign language — in this case, Russian — dominated the upper social strata of Finland. Even so, the Russian government did not obstruct the efforts of [Johan Vilhelm Snellman](#) and the Fennoman movement to make Finnish an official language in its native land.

Throughout the 19th century, Finland was subject to further incursions and violence from neighboring countries. From 1809 through 1917, Finland functioned semi-autonomously as the [Grand Duchy of Finland](#). Although the Grand Duchy's government had some freedom of self-determination in the beginning, and saw steady economic growth, Russian control grew stricter and more dominant over time.

In 1917, when the Russian Empire fell, Finland [declared its independence](#). Finns still [celebrate their independence](#) each year on December 6. Now, Finnish is the predominant language in Finland — in government, education, and everyday life.

Language Family, Related Languages, and Dialects

Unlike languages such as English, [Swedish](#), [Norwegian](#), French, [Pashto](#), [Persian](#), German, Greek, or Russian, Finnish is **not** an Indo-European language.

Finnish — called [suomi](#) by its native speakers — is a Uralic language, like [Hungarian](#) and Estonian. It's one of two official languages spoken in Finland, used every day by 90% of the Finnish population. By way of contrast, Swedish — Finland's other official language — is only spoken by about 5% of the population.

Mirroring this, Finnish is a minority language in Sweden, as well as a recognized minority language in [Karelia](#) and Russia. Finnish is also an official language of the European Union and the [Nordic Council](#), and is sometimes used in the Finnish part of Sápmi (the indigenous name for Lapland), the traditional home of the [Sámi \(Saami\) people](#).

The Finnish language counts 5.8 million speakers, of which 5.4 million reside in Finland.

Finnish itself is divided primarily into Western and Eastern dialects. According to *Kotimaisten kielten keskus* (The Institute for the Languages of Finland), there are [eight major dialect groups](#) in Finland, which are each further subdivided into a handful of smaller groups.

Some of these dialect groupings, especially in border areas of the country, are interpreted variously by linguists. For example: [Ingrian, a severely endangered language](#) in Finland's southeast region, is sometimes considered a dialect of Finnish. Many sociolinguists, however, classify Ingrian as an [independent Uralic language](#) that's related to Finnish. Sometimes, the distinction is made between Ingrian (as a separate language) and Ingrian Finnish (as a dialect of Finnish).

Similarly, Karelian is a separate language from Finnish, although it's very closely related to Finnish — more so than any other language. Still, it should not be confused with the Karelian Finnish dialects. Since there are strong ties between language and identity, understanding the perceptions of local speakers can go a long way in establishing a respectful rapport with them.

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