

## FINNIC ADJECTIVES FOR ‘TALL’

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**Abstract.** In Finnic languages, the height of a tall person is described by the adjectives *pitkä*, *korkea*, *suuri*, *iso* and *tobie*, or their dialectal variants. The first three occur throughout the whole language group, carrying several meanings and serving to characterize many different objects, but in a general case their meanings do not coincide. The Finnic *iso* and the Karelian *tobie* are synonyms of the adjective *suuri*. An analysis of their semantic relations and areal distribution has revealed that their areas in the sense of ‘tall’ (of a person) differ considerably from their general areas. The use of the adjectives *korkea* and *suuri* seems to be influenced by Indo-European contacts. The word *tobie* may be a Russian loanword in which a semantic change has taken place. As all of the words mentioned are multifunctional, the simple adjectives are often specified by being used in a compound construction where the final component has the stem *kasvu-* ‘stature’. This is especially appropriate in the case of the words meaning ‘big’ and referring to either height or adulthood. Such phrases or compounds are more frequent in the eastern part of the Finnic area, but they also occur in Estonian dialects. An analogous form of expression is used in Russian.

**Keywords:** concept ‘tall’, *pitkä*, *suuri*, *korkea*, etymology, onomasio-logical map, Finnic dialects

### 1. Introduction

It is common knowledge that the use of adjectives often depends on the object referred to, e.g. a tall tree is *kõrge puu* in Standard Estonian, but a tall man is *pikk mees*. The present study focuses on the words used to refer to a relatively tall height in persons, analysing their semantic relations and use in the dialects of closely related (Finnic) languages. As with most assessments, ‘tall’ is a relative notion referring not to a measurement, but to a height exceeding the average or expected height of the

object in question. As a result, an object (person included) may, depending on what it is being compared to, be classified as ‘tall’ in one case and as ‘short’ in another.

The adjectives used to describe human height in Finnic languages derive from five prototypes. *Pitkä*, *suuri* and *korkea* are used in multiple functions in all Finnic languages (see Sections 2–4), whereas *iso* and *tobie* occur in narrower areas (see Sections 5–6). The original source material was collected in the late 1970s by Finnic specialists using the questionnaire for the Atlas Linguarum Europae (ALE), with the following eliciting question for ‘tall’ in French: “Que dites-vous de quelqu’un qui est grand de taille? Il est ...” (ALE 1976: 42–43). Finnic dialects are represented in 263 of the 2631 ALE mapping points, i.e. 10% coverage of the atlas net (see ALE 2007: XXXIV–LXVII). Although ALE has no map for ‘tall’, the map added to the present article mainly follows the same grid. Additional material and examples of dialect usage have been drawn from dictionaries and collections of Estonian and Votic dialect vocabulary (EMSUKA). For easier reading, the orthography of the dialect examples has been simplified and unified.

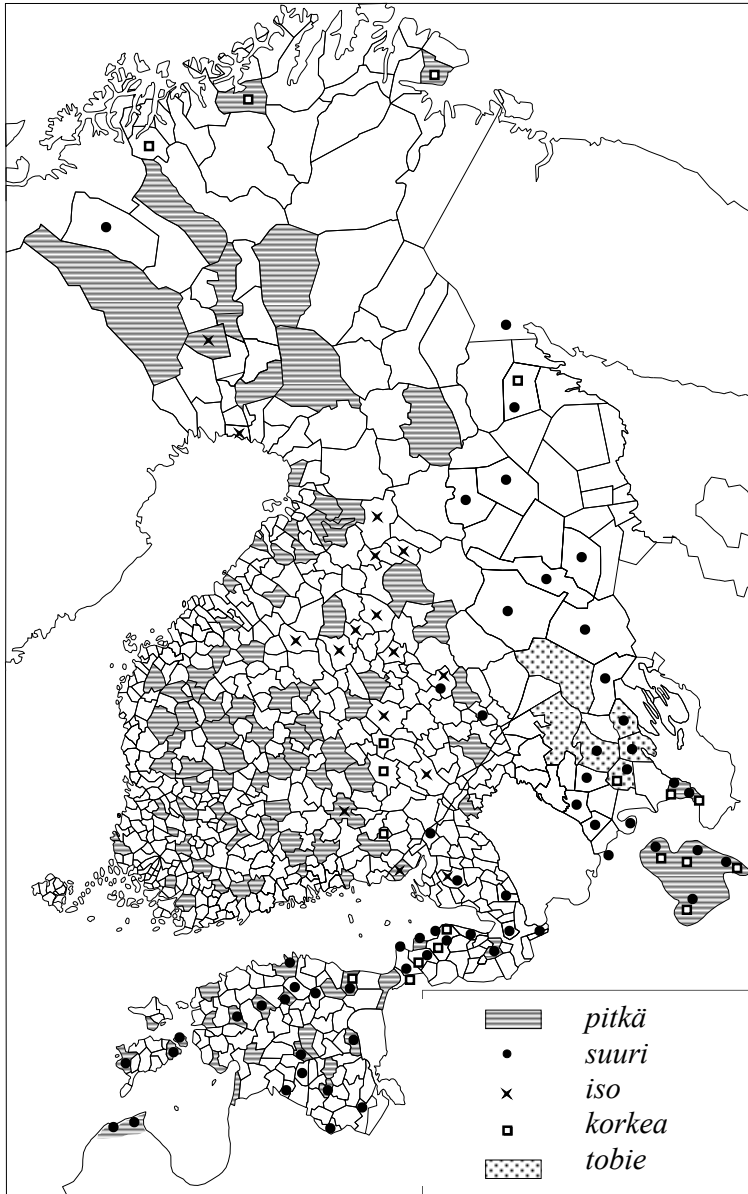
## 2. *pitkä*

Nouns with the stem *pitk-* originate from the Uralic derivative *\*piδ-kä* (< the Proto-Uralic stem *\*piδε-*), which is an ancestor of several Ugric and Samoyed words for ‘high’, ‘tall’ etc. (SKES 580–581, SSA 2: 377, Rédei 1988: 377–378). The most frequent phonetic variants occurring in Finnic dialects are as follows: the Finnish and Ingrian *pitkä*, Karelian *pitkä*, *pitk(ä)*, Vepsian *pitk*, Votic *pittšä*, *pittša*, *pittše*, *pitš*, Estonian *pikk*, *pikk*, *pitk* and Livonian *pitka*. In Finnish dialects, the word is one of the 100 most frequent, while in Estonian and Votic dialects its rank of frequency is 166 and 137, respectively (CED, Jussila et al. 1992). Adjectives with a *pitk-* stem denote a relatively great distance or duration. In the case of length in space, the words apply to very different objects, including various linear objects

(e.g. roads, pegs, ropes and ladders), rows of similar objects (e.g. trains, lines (of people) and fences), clothes and details of such (e.g. coats, skirts, sleeves and trouser legs), living beings and body parts (e.g. snakes, tails, necks, ears, limbs, hair, beards and nails) etc. (EKSS 4: 253–254, KKS 4: 318–319, NS 4: 356, PS 2: 485, VKS 4: 260–261).

The tall height of a person is referred to by *pitk*-adjectives in Finnish, Karelian, Vepsian, Estonian and Livonian. This is the common form of expression, dominant in North Estonian, Livonian, Vepsian and most of the Finnish dialects (see Map 1). As for southern Estonia, *pikk* is, in this context, characteristic of the Tartu dialect area only. Although the ALE collection contains no word of the *pitk*-stem representing Karelian or Votic dialects, a few examples can be found in dictionaries. An example from Olonets Karelian is *pitkū mužikku* ‘tall man’ (KKS 4: 318, Makarov 1990: 269). Also, Karelian has a compound with the final component *-kazvoine* (< *kazvu* ‘stature’ + adjective suffix), e.g. the Olonets *pitkūkazvoine briha* ‘tall young man’, and the Border-Karelian dialect *heän oli vielä poikañi vallon ... a hüvim pitkäkašvuñi* ‘he was still a boy, but of very tall stature’ (KKS 4: 320). Such compounds or phrases can be found in other languages as well, e.g. the Finnish *pitkäkasvuinen*, Estonian *pikakasvuline* ~ *pikka kasvu* and Livonian *pitkā ka'zzōks* (EMSUKA, NS 4: 357).

The Estonian word *pikk* is often used to refer to a tall and lean person, e.g. *pikäd mehed on peeniksed ja lõnkjad* ‘tall men are lean and loose-limbed’. *Pikk ja peenike* ‘tall and lean’ are often used as a pair. The same association is expressed in such similes as *pikk nagu kõrend* (~ *osi*, ~ *piitsavars*, ~ *piibuork*) ‘tall like a pole (~ horsetail, ~ whip handle, ~ pipe cleaner)’. Analogous examples are found in cognate languages: the Finnish *pitkä ja laiha* ‘tall and lean’ (NS 4: 356), and the Karelian [this person] *om pitkä kui sablas* ‘is tall like a pole’, and *oliham pitkä akka ..., hoikkañi še akka šemmoñi* ‘she was a tall woman ..., such a slim woman’ (KKS 4: 318). People’s statures are compared by using the normal comparative and superlative forms, e.g. *Kuka on pisin?* ‘Who’s the tallest?’, *Näytät pitemmältä kuin*



**Map 1.** 'tall' (of a person) in Finnic dialects.

*hän* ‘You look taller than him’ (PS 2: 485), the North-Estonian *peimes oli pitkem kut ruut* ‘the groom was taller than the bride’, and *isä olli üks pikemist meestest* ‘Father was one of the tallest men’ (EMSUKA).

### 3. *korkea*

Such Finnic words as the Finnish *korkea* and its variants<sup>1</sup>, the Ingrian *korkia*, Karelian *korkie*, *korkei*, *korged*, Vepsian *korged*, Votic *kõrgkõa*, Estonian *kõrge* and Livonian *kuordā*, are believed to be of genuine Finnic origin, while their Sami counterparts are regarded as Finnish loanwords (SKES 219, SSA 1: 403). In Estonian and Finnish dialects, the frequency is lower (the frequency rank is 635 in Estonian dialects, 738 in the Votic language, and 545 in Finnic dialects) than that of *pitk*-words (CED, Jussila et al. 1992). In all those languages, these adjectives generally mean ‘high’, with the following major sub-meanings: 1) extending above a horizontal level (of buildings, plants, surface forms etc.), 2) important (person, official, meeting etc.), 3) high-level (e.g. culture, education and research), 4) valuable, 5) of high degree (e.g. fever, blood pressure and old age), and 6) high (of voice or sound). Of these six meanings, the first, referring to great vertical extent, is the basic one, while the rest have traditionally been regarded as secondary or figurative senses (EKSS 2: 648–649, EMS 4 (17): 282–284, KKS 2: 327–8, NS 2: 490–491, PS 3: 180, SMS 8: 137–139, VKS 2: 356). In this sense, these adjectives apply to very many objects, whether natural or artificial, animate or inanimate, e.g. hills, trees, nettles, waves, houses, chimneys, fences, shelves, tubs, heels, foreheads and horses.

In some Finnish, Karelian, Vepsian, Ingrian and Votic dialects, an adjective with the stem *kork-* is used to refer to tall

1 The areal distribution of the phonetic variants of the word *korkea* in Finnish dialects has been mapped for the Finnish dialect atlas (see Kettunen 1981, map 191).

stature. For example: the Finnish *se oli vankka ukko, ei se oekein korkea ollu* ‘this was a strong man, not too tall’, and *min oon nin korkea jotta min yltyin kattoon* ‘I am so tall that I can reach the ceiling’ (SMS 8: 137), the Olonec Karelian *oliš ku kazvole korgiembaine* ‘if only [he] was a little taller’ (Makarov 1990: 153), the West Votic *tõin poika on kõrkõa* ‘the other son is tall’, and the East Votic *kõrkõa starikka* ‘tall old man’ (VKS 2: 356). The Votic noun *kõrkõuz, kõrkuuz* ‘height’ derives from the same stem: *sill on minu kõrkuuz* ‘he is of my stature (= he is as tall as me)’. One example has survived from Livonian usage, *pää jo kuordõ ku sinaa* ‘a head taller than you’, and one example from the Estonian North-Eastern Coastal dialect: *kõрге mies* ‘tall man’ (EMSUKA). In parallel, the phrase *kõrkõata kasvoa*, meaning ‘of a tall stature’, is used, e.g. the Votic *kõrkõa pojo, kõrkõata kasvoa* ‘tall young man, of tall stature’ (EMSUKA). In Karelian dialects, there is a compound word with the final component *-kašvuñi*: *korkiekašvuñi, korgiekazvoñi* ‘of a tall stature’ (KKS 2: 327), cf. Fin. *korkeakasvuinen* id. (NS 2: 491).

According to the collectors of Finnic material for ALE, the use of variants of the adjective *korkea* in the sense ‘of a tall stature’ is secondary in most dialects, preference being given to other words. However, this seems to be the main form of expression in Votic, and it is used in the Kukkuzi dialect, as well as in the Eastern and Western dialects (VKS 2: 356). In the eastern Finnic area, the use of *korkea* in this sense may have been influenced by Russian, where the adjective *vysokij* means both ‘high’ and ‘tall’, while the latter has the synonymous phrase *vysokogo rosta* ‘of tall stature’. In the Finnish dialects spoken in the Norwegian and Swedish territories, *korkea* has probably received semantic influences from Scandinavian languages, cf. the Norwegian *høy* ‘high’, *en høy mann* ‘a tall man’, and the Swedish *hög* ‘high’, *hög(växt)* ‘tall, of tall stature’.

#### 4. *suuri*

An adjective with the stem *suur-* also occurs in all Finnic languages: the Finnish and Ingrian *suuri*, Karelian *suuri*, *suuri*, *šuu(ř)i* or *šuuři*<sup>2</sup>, Vepsian *su(u)ř*, Votic *suur(i)*, Estonian *suur* or *suur* and Livonian *suur*. Their origin probably lies in an Old Germanic loanword deriving from the Proto-Germanic *\*stūra-* (EEW SKES 1136–1137, SSA 3: 225). According to the Corpus of Estonian Dialects, *suur* is one of the 50 most frequent words in most dialect areas (the average rank is 49), while in Votic it ranks 43rd, and in the frequency dictionary of Finnish dialects *suuri* is 89th (Jussila et al. 1992). The main senses of this adjective are: 1) big (of great bulk), large, capacious, 2) big, numerous, 3) strong, intensive, 4) very important, essential, and 5) long (of interval). Dictionaries usually start explaining the word with the semantic group ‘big, large, capacious’, where the adjective may describe practically any big object: buildings, vehicles, machines, various objects and details, mountains, roads, forests, bodies of water, cities, countries, celestial bodies, plants, animals, human beings, body parts of living beings etc. (EKSS 5: 407–409, Kettunen 1986: 125, KKS 5: 581–583, NS 5: 379–381, PS 3: 180, VKS 5: 308–310).

The height of objects, humans included, belongs to the same semantic group. Although in general the adjectives *suuri*, *korkea* and *pitkä* are not synonymous, their semantic fields may partly coincide. For example, the Estonian phrases *suur tamm*, *pikk tamm* and *kõrge tamm* mean more or less the same thing: ‘a big and tall oak’. In the phrases *suur ruum* ‘large room’, *pikk ruum* ‘long room’ and *kõrge ruum* ‘high room’, the adjectives emphasize quite different characteristics of the room. The same applies to the word pairs *pikad püksid* ‘long-legged trousers’ and *suured püksid* ‘oversized trousers’. If a person is described as *suur*, the reference is often made to more than just height, i.e. the person is tall and of great bulk, e.g. the Karelian *akka suur* *kui merenemä* ‘big woman

2 A map of the areal distribution of the phonetic variants of the word *suuri* in Karelian dialects can be found in the atlas of Karelian dialects (see Bubrih et al., Map 111).

like a “sea-mother” (of a very sizeable object)’. Often tall stature and great physical strength are mentioned together, e.g. the Finnish *suuri ja vahva mies* ‘big and strong man’ (PS 3: 180), and the Estonian *suured tugevad mehed* ‘big strong men’ (EKSS 5: 407). Similar semantic relations hold for other Finnic languages.

All Finnic languages offer examples of the use of an adjective with the stem *suur-* as a reference to tall stature: the Karelian *oli tšoarilla poika, šuuri ja kaunis* ‘the Czar had a son, tall and handsome’, and *tämä mužik on šuuri* ‘this man is tall’ (KKS 5: 581–582), and the Estonian *suur kui kõrend* ‘tall like a pole’ (EMSUKA). In parallel with the simple adjective, compound words and phrases are used, the final component of which derives from the noun *kasv(u)*, e.g. the Estonian *suure kasvuga, suurt kasvu* (EMSUKA), Vepsian *suurt kasvuu* (Zajceva and Mullonen 1972: 527), Finnish *suurikasvuinen* (NS 5: 381), and Karelian *oli yksi šuurikašvoñi mieš* ‘[he] was a tall man’, and *hejjän lapset ollah kai suurikazvozet* ‘their children are said to be tall too’ (KKS 5: 583). The compound helps specify the meaning of the polysemantic adjective.

In the geographical area where Finnic languages are spoken, *suuri* is less widespread than *pitkä* in the above meaning in general, but several dialects prefer words with the stem *suur-*. This use seems to be most characteristic in the Ingrian and Livonian languages, in most of the South Estonian and Karelian dialects and in some East-Finnish ones. The use of a word meaning ‘big’ to describe a tall person may reflect semantic influences of Indo-European language contacts, cf. the Russian *boľšoj čelovek* (Daľ: <http://vidahl.agava.ru>) and German *ein großer Mensch* (Agricola et al. 1972: 283).

## 5. *iso*

The adjective *iso* denotes the concept ‘big’ in Finnish (more often in Western dialects) and the Finnish-like Votic dialect of Kukkuži. This is a derivative of the noun *isä* (< *isoi*) ‘father’, which has counterparts with the same stem in most of



the Uralic languages (SKES 109–110, SSA 1: 228–229, Rédei 1988: 78). Both synonyms *iso* and *suuri* are old words in literary Finnish, occurring in Mikael Agrikola’s prayer book *Rucouskirja* of 1544 (Jussila 1998: 69 and 254). In the frequency dictionary of Finnish dialects, *iso* ranks 79th, which is slightly higher than *suuri*, but the difference is not significant (Jussila et al. 1992).

Semantically, *iso* does not differ much from *suuri*. In its primary sense of ‘big, of great bulk’, *iso* is used to describe very many different objects: mountains, houses, rooms, windows, gardens, trees, stones, balls, cars, lakes, oversized articles of clothing, animals, human beings (also ‘adults’) etc. (PS 1: 297, SMS 4: 864 ff.). There is no difference between *iso* and *suuri* as references to the tall stature of a person, e.g.: *seha’ ol’ pitäjä’ isommija miehijä ja vankempija* ‘this was one of the biggest and strongest men of the parish’, and *meilä on kaikista [lapsista] issoin tuo Marjetta* ‘Marjetta is the biggest of all our children’ (SMS 4: 865). In parallel with the simple adjective, such compound words as *iso(n)kasvuinen*, *isonkasvantoinen* and *iso(n)kokoinen* are used (SMS 4: 871 and 874). In general, *iso* occurs more frequently in western Finnish dialects (Jussila et al. 1992: 5 and 185, SSA 1: 228). However, a tall person is mainly described as *iso* in the eastern dialect area, most frequently in Savo dialects (see Map), whereas in the western dialects, according to ALE materials, this sense of the word has been recorded from only two mapping points representing the Finnish dialect of Tornio spoken in northern Sweden.

## 6. *tobie*

The adjective *tobie* and its variants are used in the Eastern Finnic languages: the Karelian *topie*, *tobju*, *tobj*, *tobd’*, *tobd’e*, and diminutive *tobjahko*, and the Central Vepsian *tobj*, *tobjg’*, *tobn’* (KKS 6: 146, Zajceva and Mullonen 1972: 571). In Karelian and Vepsian, those adjectives mean ‘big’. The general meaning is divided into semantic subgroups analogously with words having the stem *suur-*, and the primary position is similarly occupied

by ‘of great bulk’ (KKS 6: 146). Thus the word may describe a big fish, room, forest, horse, potato, stone, tree etc. In the Lude dialect, the middle finger is called *tobd’* (or *tobj*) *sořm* (Kujola 1944: 434). In the Central Vepsian dialect, the word is also used to refer to higher age or adulthood, e.g. *siņa tēg’ itoi jo tobñ* ‘you have come of age now’, and *ükś lapś om peñ, a toiñe tobġem* ‘one child is little, the other is older’. The Vepsian dictionary has several entry words with that stem, e.g. the Central Vepsian *tobmad* ‘great part (of something)’, and *tobñeta, tobjeta* ‘make bigger, enlarge’ and ‘grow’, and the South Vepsian *tobmin* ‘elder, governor over somebody’, *tobmoota* ‘to act as an elder, to order the others about’, and *tobmuz* ‘elder power’ (Zajceva and Mul-lonen 1972: 571).

The shape and areal distribution of the word suggests a combination of a stem borrowed from Russian and a genuine adjectival suffix. The Russian noun *doba* refers to concepts having to do with time, such as ‘time, moment and period’. In Russian dialects, the stem has also been used to express age, e.g. *v moju dobu* ‘in my age’, and *On budet v tvoju dobu* ‘he will be your age’ (Dař: <http://vidahl.agava.ru>, SRNG 8: 73). The Russian adjectives *sdobnyj, udobnyj, nadobnyj, podobnyj, dobryj* etc. derive from the same stem (Vasmer 1, 519–520). As revealed by the above analysis, the Finnic form of expression uses similar words for spatial and temporal length. Similar expressions also apply to the concepts ‘(child) of sufficient age or adult’ and ‘of tall stature’. Hence, it is quite likely that a loanword characterizing a time interval and age has, analogously with other adjectives of similar use, begun to be used in reference to spatial measures as well.

Examples of the stem being used in describing the tall stature of a person can mainly be found in South Karelian dialects, e.g. the Proper Karelian *tobie rišt’ikansa* ‘a person of a tall stature’, and *akk on pikkarane, ukko tobie* ‘the woman is small, the man is tall’ (KKS 6: 146). In the Olonets Karelian, the noun *tobjevus*, of the same stem, has been used in the sense of ‘stature’ (e.g. *tütär juo on muaman tobjevus* ‘the daughter is already as tall as her mother’), while the verb form means ‘grow (up) tall’ (e.g. *aigu tulow dai tobjevuw* ‘the time will come and [he] will grow

up tall') (Makarov 1990: 382). There is a compound word in the Lude dialect, *tobd'kazvoine* 'of big stature' (Kujola 1944: 434). In the ALE collection, *tobie* represents only the main dialects of the Lude Karelian dialect area: Halijärvi, Koikari and Pyhäjärvi, while in Halijärvi this is the primary word for 'tall', but secondary to the parallel variant *suuri* in the neighbouring dialects. For the present Map, the words collected for ALE have been supplemented with examples picked from the above-mentioned dictionaries.

## 7. Conclusion

In all Finnic languages, the adjectives *pitkä*, *suuri* and *korkea*, or their variants with the same stem, refer to a relatively large spatial or temporal measure, but in most cases their uses differ. The description of a tall person by using some variant of the adjective *pitkä* is the most widespread practice. Relevant examples can be drawn from all Finnic languages, but in the Finnish, Vepsian, North Estonian and Livonian dialects this is the primary way to express stature. Variants of *suuri* also occur in the same sense across the whole Finnic area, although the occurrence is rare in the Western Estonian and Finnish dialects. The use of adjectives with the stem *kork-* seems surprising at first sight. The word has been used to refer to tall stature in Votic, the Finnish enclaves in northern Norway and Sweden, in a couple of south-eastern Finnish dialects, the Hevaha dialect of Ingrian and in the Estonian Coastal dialect. The use of the adjectives *korkea* and *suuri* seems to have been influenced by Indo-European contacts (cf. the Russian *vyšokij* 'high, tall', Norwegian *en høy mann* 'tall man', Swedish *hög* 'high', *hög(växt)* 'tall, of tall stature', German *groß*, and Russian *bolšoj*). Sometimes several adjectives are used in the same sentence, e.g. the Estonian (Otepää) *sie on siis kõrge mies kui on õige pitk ja suur* 'a man is called *kõrge* if he is tall and big' (EMS 4 (17): 283), and the South Estonian *olli ka suur' pik'k miiss* 'a truly big tall man he was' (EMSUKA).

Variants of the Finnish *iso* and the Karelian-Vepsian *tobie* denote the concept 'big'. The adjective *iso* is used for a tall

person in the Tornio dialect of Finnish and in the area running diagonally through Finland from Lake Oulujärvi to the Karelian Isthmus, most frequently in Savo dialects. Such a distribution, covering mainly the eastern dialects, differs considerably from the generally western distribution of the word. Possibly the eastern dialects sometimes use *iso* in place of the more usual *suuri* in order to emphasize certain semantic differences. Variants of *to-bie* are only used in this sense in South Karelian dialects. It may be a Russian loanword (cf. Rus. *do-ba*) whose function of describing time and age has extended to cover spatial measures as well.

The polysemy of the adjectives discussed may cause misinterpretation, especially in the case of *suur(i)* and *iso*. It is not always clear without additional information whether an adjective refers to a person's tall stature, sturdy build or adulthood. The quality 'tall' is specified with compound constructions, whose first component is an adjective of height and the final one derives from the noun *kasv(u)*. Although all of the adjectives discussed here participate in such compound words or phrases, most of the available examples involve the word *suur(i)*. This form of expression is the most productive in Karelian and South Estonian dialects.

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- SRNG = *Slovar' russkih narodnyh govorov* 8. Leningrad: Nauka, 1972.
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- VKS = *Vadja keele sõnaraamat*. Tallinn, 1990–2011.

**Kokkuvõte. Vilja Oja: Mõistet ‘pikk’ väljendavad adjektiivid läänemeresoome keeltes.** Läänemeresoome keeltes kirjeldatakse inimese pikka kasvu adjektiividega *pitkä*, *korkea*, *suuri*, *iso* või *tobie* ja nende murdevariantidega. Esimesed kolm on levinud kogu keelerühma ula-

tuses mitmes tähenduses ja sobivad väga paljude erinevate objektide iseloomustamiseks, kuid üldiselt nende tähendused ei kattu. Soome *iso* ja karjala *tobie* on adjektiivi *suuri* sünonüümid. Murdesõnade semantilisi suhteid ja levikut analüüsisid selgus, et nende levik tähenduses 'pikk' (inimesest) erineb suuresti üldlevilast. Adjektiivide *korkea* ja *suuri* kasutus näib olevat mõjustatud kontaktidest indoeuroopa keeltega. Sõna *tobie* võib olla vene laen, kus võrreldes originaaliga on toimunud semantiline muutus. Et kõik kõnealused sõnad on multifunktsionaalsed, on mõiste konkretiseerimiseks lihtadjektiivide baasil moodustatud *kasvu*-tüvelise järelkomponendiga liitkonstruktsioone. Eriti vajavad täpsustust üldmõistet 'suur' väljendavad sõnad, millega kirjeldatakse nii inimese kasvu kui täisealisust. Selliseid ühendeid või liitsõnu kohtab sagedamini läänemeresoome idapoolses osas, ent ka eesti murretes. Analoogilist väljendusviisi kasutatakse vene keeles.

**Märksõnad:** mõiste 'pikk', *suuri*, *korkea*, *tobie* etümoloogia, onomasioloogiline kaart, läänemeresoome murded

