

Society for the Study of Finnish 1876–2026

150 years of language policy, language development and scientific research of Finnish language

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This poster presents an ongoing research project on the history of Kotikielen Seura (Society for the Study of Finnish). The project was started to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Society that takes place in 2026.

One of the ideologies that grew in many places in Europe in the 19th century was nationalism. This led to the birth of many societies, such as the Finnish Literature Society (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura) (founded in 1835), and the Finno-Ugrian Society (Suomalais-Ugrilainen Seura) (founded in 1883). Also in newly independent Estonia, the Mother-Tongue Society (Emakeele Selts) was founded in 1920. The society this project focuses on is the Society for the Study of Finnish (Kotikielen Seura), which was founded in 1876.

The Society for the Study of Finnish was founded in Helsinki, as a club for Finnish-speaking university students interested in developing and researching the Finnish language. At first the club operated under the auspices of the Savo-Karelia student nation, led by its inspector, professor August Ahlqvist.

The Society for the Study of Finnish is still an active society. It has about 460 members at the moment. Its meetings and seminars feature topical lectures on the research of Finnish. At the annual general meeting the Society presents awards to young scholars for excellent scientific articles, made possible by the various funds the Society operates. One of the most important functions of the Society is the publishing of the linguistic journal *Virittäjä*. *Virittäjä* is the oldest and most significant Finnish-language journal that focuses on research into Finnish language. (See also Juusela 2006.)

The poster presents an overview of the history and milestones of the Society. The examination is done from a multidisciplinary perspective, using historical research methods, but always including a linguistic approach.

The Society was particularly active in during its first decades in the 19th century and early 20th century. In the absence of institutions such as the present Institute for the Languages of Finland (Kotimaisten kielten keskus), the Society assumed many of the tasks that are now the responsibility of the Institute, but it also shared functions with universities and other actors. In the early 20th century the Society was considered the authority on many language issues. For example, it drew up guidelines for the (then popular) adoption of Finnish surnames to replace previous Swedish or other non-Finnish ones. It also proposed Finnish names for streets in Helsinki (which were originally only in Swedish). The Society also coined a number of new words, for example, *elokuvat* ‘movies’ (to replace *elävät kuvat* ‘living pictures’), *jäätelö* ‘ice cream’ and *haarukka* ‘fork’. *Haarukka* originates from one of the Society’s early major projects, *Kodin Sanasto* ‘household glossary’ (1896), compiled by Lilli Lilius and Ilmi Bergroth, although, as women, they were not initially allowed to be members the Society. The glossary was created to reduce the use of Swedish-based loanwords in household terminology.

There has been remarkably little historical research on the Society. A noteworthy exception is the history of the Society that Heikki Paunonen’s drafted in 1976 for *Virittäjä* to celebrate the Society’s centenary. Paunonen focuses on the early days of the Society and the period before the 1930s. The new history project takes a fresh approach to the early years of the Society, based on the latest research, and even more importantly, it also covers periods on which there is little (1930s to 1970s) or practically no (1970s to 2020s) research.

References

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<https://journal.fi/virittaja/article/view/36744/8808>

Links

<https://www.kotikielenseura.fi/>

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