

COMMUNICATING THE CULTURAL RICHNESS OF FINNISH HILJAISUUS (SILENCE)

“Finnish Silence: Myth or Reality?”

- “The terminology [in a language] may be highly misleading depending on the type of culture that it is applied to.
- “It is understandable that the result is misguided [when the misinterpretation is] from the outside.”
- “Yet, one of the dilemmas in all this is that at the same time the insider [Finn] is also incapable of seeing his or her true nature as a communicator” (Sajavaara & Lehtonen, 1997: 278-79).
- Kari Sajavaara & Jaakko Lehtonen planted the seeds.
 - I asked Sajavaara: “How can we get rid of the word ‘silence’?”
 - His response: “Your job.”
 - My silent response over time: I’ll learn from Finnish students.

Multilingualism is very important but we need:

- Competence to become aware of:
 - * invisible cultural meanings in shared foreign languages.
 - * one’s own taken-for-granted cultural richness.
- Competence to communicate cultural richness to others & to help others do the same.
- Awareness that false friends are like riskisanat (risk words) when trying to communicate multiple cultural meanings.

Michael Berry, Turku School of Economics at the University of Turku
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Hidden Sauna Hiljaisuus The Sauna is Wonderful This is what we have & how we use it



We have these birch tree branches/twigs & we enjoy hitting/beating each other with them in the sauna.

Alternative: A bunch of birch leaves that we use to clean and relax our minds and bodies

Discovery of Hidden Hiljaisuus

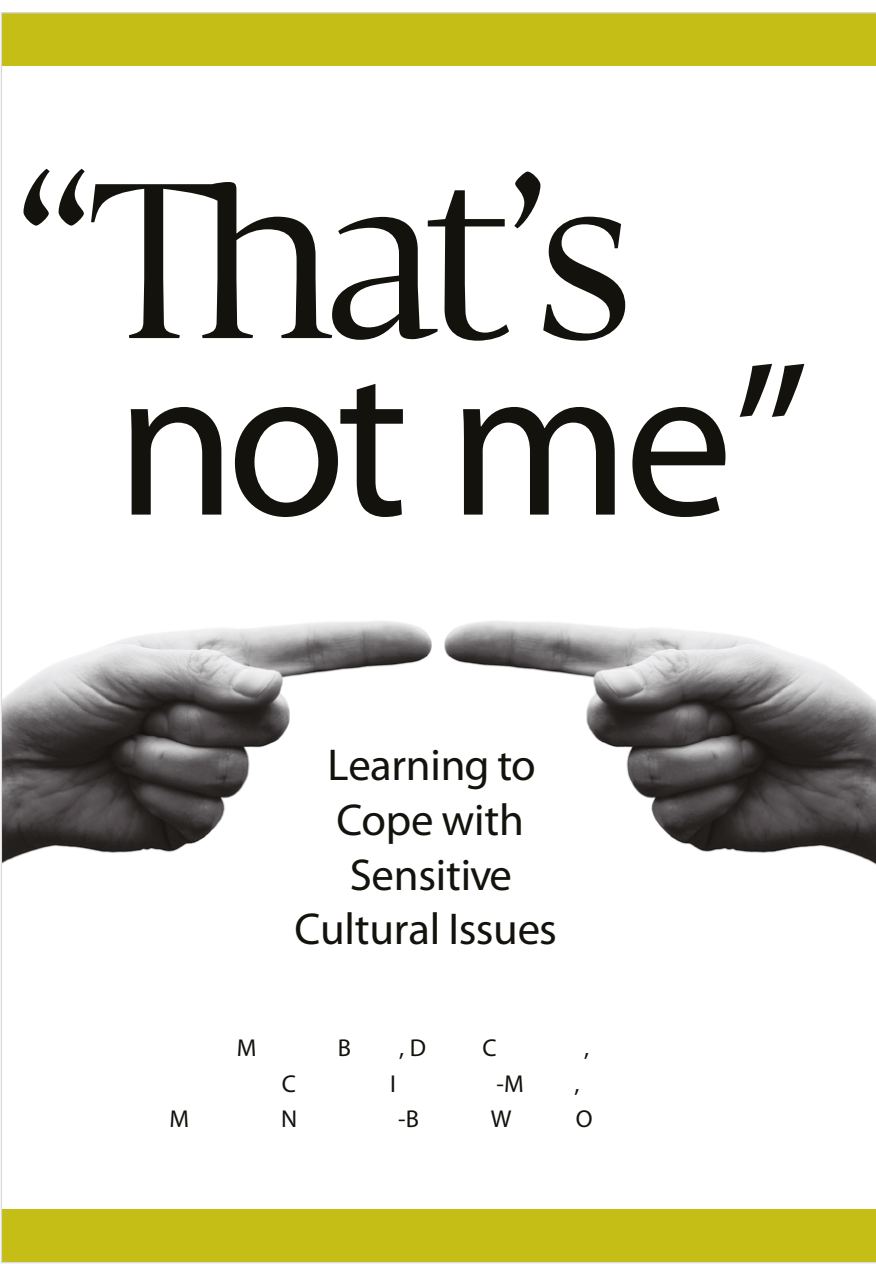
- Every culture has its deep taken-for-granted ways of communicating which seldom, if ever, can be translated directly to people from other cultures.
- This challenge comes in all intercultural contexts.
- Difficult Questions to Answer:
 - * Are we aware of our deep cultural richness? Yes, but only with *outside* help.
 - * Does our deep cultural richness often lead to intercultural communication challenges? Yes, more often than we realize.
 - * Can we rely on ‘proper’ foreign languages to communicate Finnish cultural richness? Sometimes but not often.

- This poster offers two pragmatic examples of how students became aware of Finnish cultural richness and developed some competence to communicate their cultural richness via semantic alternatives rather than dictionary translation.
- Discovery with and without Exchange Students.

1. Finnish Student Discovery with Exchange Students Looking in the Mirror Together

Chapter 2 in “That’s not me” introduces examples of Finnish-American-French discovery about self and others. The focus is on the rather common relationship between native language, invisible cultural meanings and intercultural (mis)communication. This approach does not deny diversity within a culture.

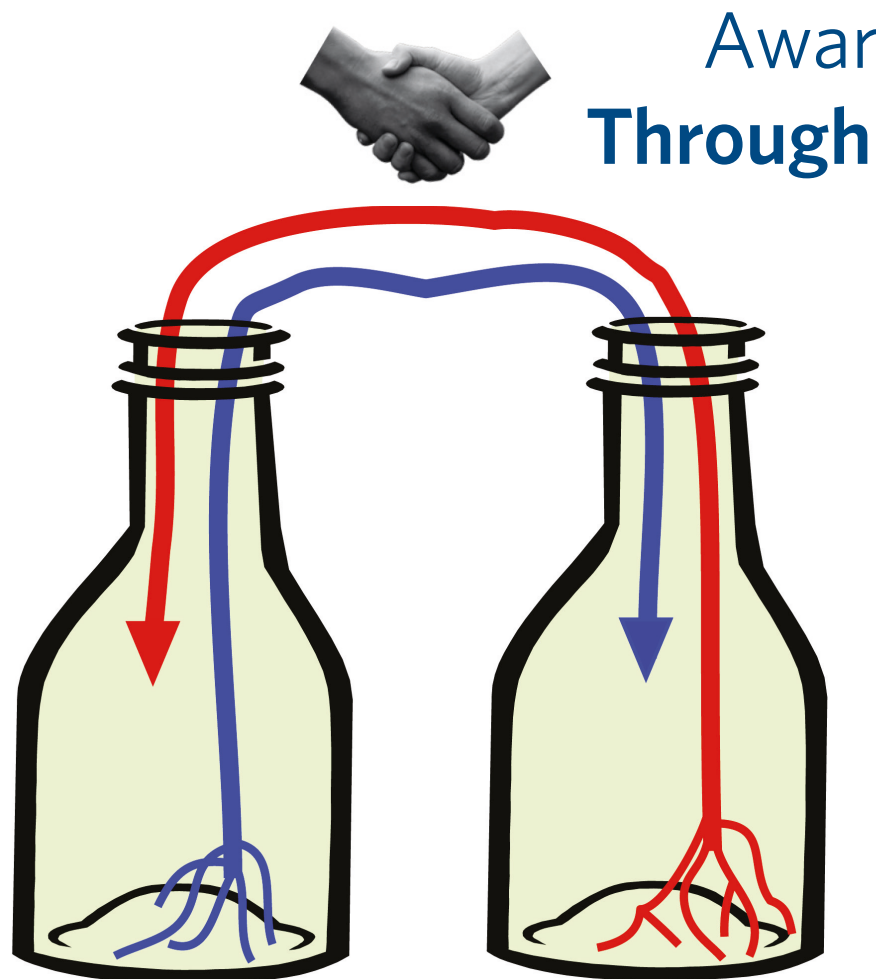
PDF download at www.utu.fi/unit-for-languages > Development Projects



Discovery of ‘positive hiljaisuus’ One example

- A talkative Finn tells exchange students: Finnish silence is only negative.
- The teacher asks him to describe a ‘harkitsevainen’ Finn: *a harkitsevainen person listens and thinks but also talks.*
 - The teacher then asks if an ‘ujo’(shy) person could be ‘harkitsevainen’: yes but not always.
 - He explained that he had ignored his respect for being harkitsevainen: listening, thinking, respecting others, etc.
 - He wanted Finns to be more talkative and had been trapped by a ‘too silent/too shy’negative semantic frame of reference.

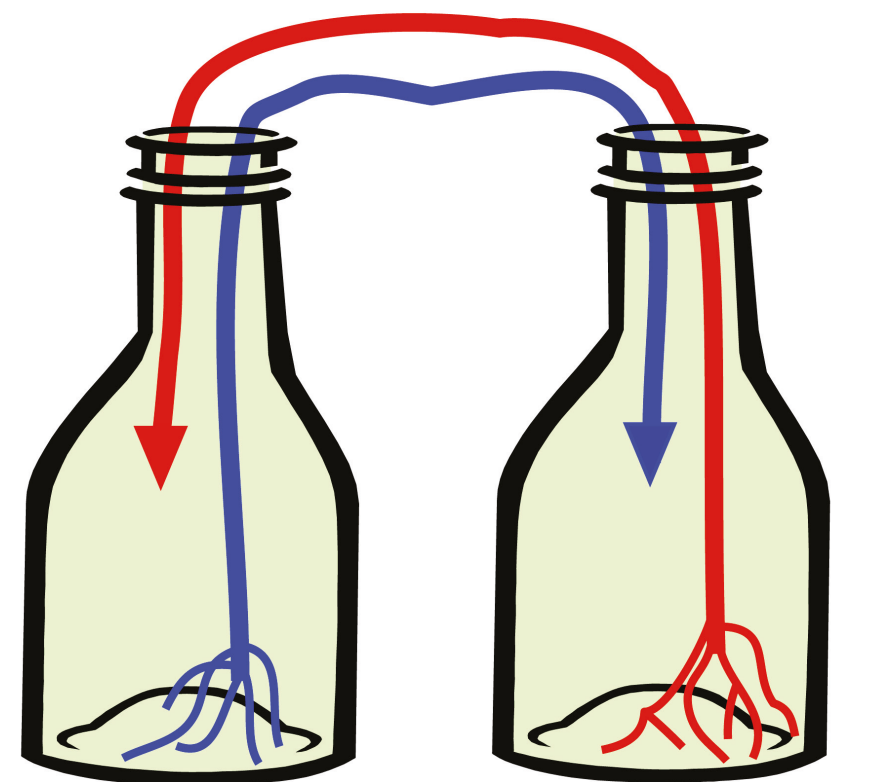
Awareness Discovery of Self as a Cultural Being Through Cultural Bottlenecks to Meaningful Dialogue



Finnish
Movement from taken-for-granted roots deep in one’s cultural experience through the bottlenecks

Finnish student sum up

- I won’t just say we are silent, don’t talk enough.
- Now we understand:
 - How American and French ‘openness to verbalize togetherness’ had closed the door to understanding our ‘comfort with quietness’.
 - How our comfort with quietness had closed the door to understanding the positive sides of their verbal openness.



Finnish
Movement from taken-for-granted roots deep in one’s cultural experience through the bottlenecks

American student sum up:

- We thought that Finns are silent to hide feelings but maybe we sometimes talk to hide our feelings.
- Our remedy to connect people via small talk might interfere with a Finnish respect for shared privacy and having meaningful conversation.

Communication via bottlenecks

- When Finnish and exchange students became teacher-learners of each other, semantic alternatives for hiljaisuus came to the surface via questions about the ‘how’ and ‘why’ in Finnish social ways of communicating: ‘silence’ & ‘shy’ aside.
- Getting through our Finnish bottlenecks can lead to discovery of ways to help others interpret our message better via their own bottlenecks.
- This isn’t easy, because others won’t hear or see our positive active silence.
- Nevertheless, as we look in the mirror together, questions and answers with examples on both sides can take us forward to understand each other’s cultural richness.

French student sum up:

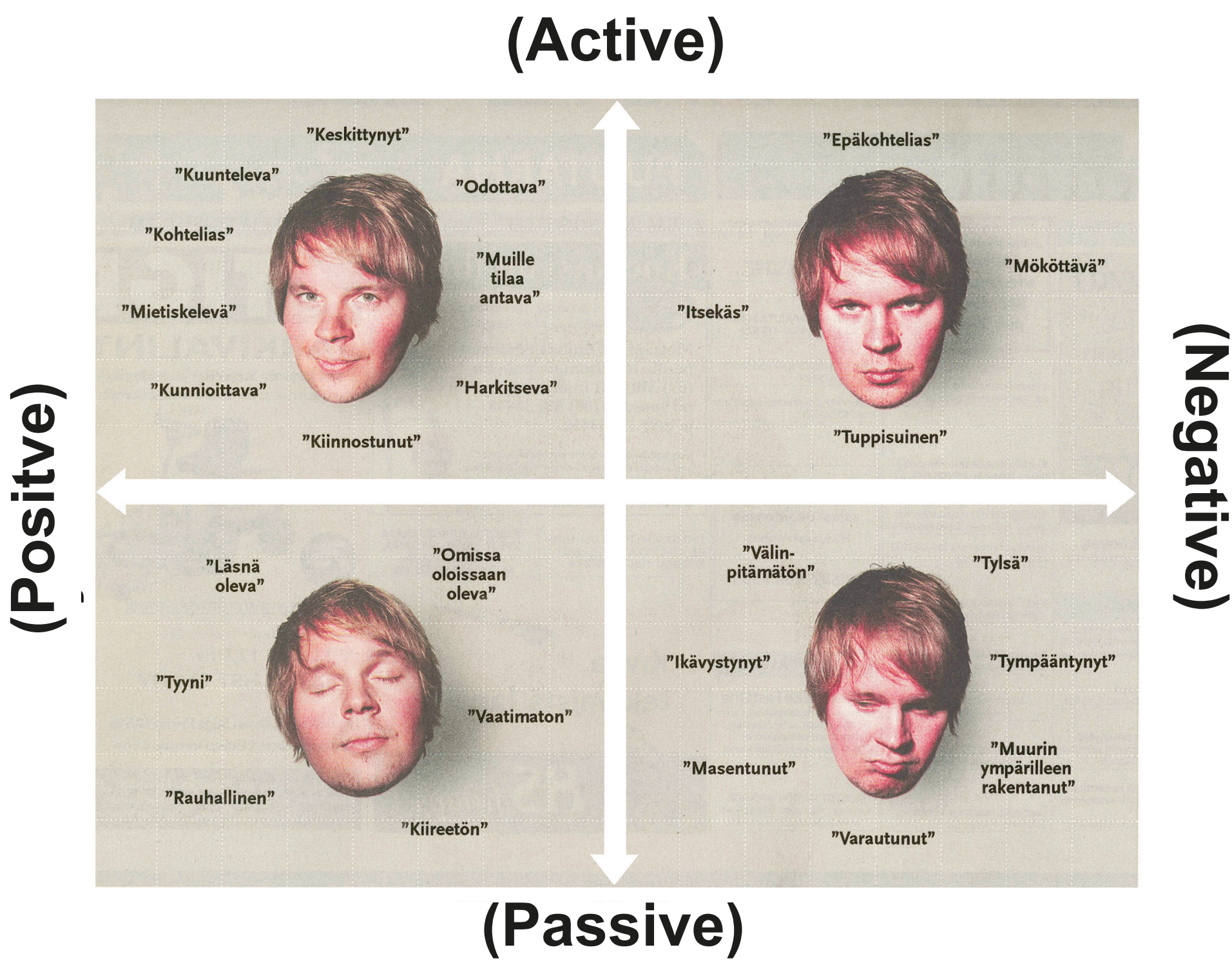
- Now we begin to understand that you show interest by listening and we should have explained that we show interest by interrupting.
- We feel very good about how we can rely on what you say, because you don’t even need to use the word ‘promise’.

2. Student Discovery without Exchange Students 2008

Creation of a Semantic Exercise to Cope with Cultural Bottlenecks

- A semantic discovery approach for communicating hiljaisuus came during an American Culture course in which there were only Finnish students and no discussions about silence with exchange students.
- New approach: Think in Finnish about everyday meanings of hiljaisuus and list words/phrases in Finnish related to positive active silence; positive relaxing silence; negative active silence; and negative passive silence.
- Key point: students could now move back to Finnish meanings when communicating in English.

Suomen Hiljaisuus (Finnish Quietude)



The HS picture summarizes a TSE learning experience

- The picture was published in HS Sunnuntai 17.5.2009.
- The four ‘categories’ overlap like lines drawn in water.
- After creating a list in Finnish, students created a list of words & phrases that they could connect to their Finnish list.

Words/phrases created by Finnish students

Positive Active Silence:

willing to wait, listening carefully, being focused on something, showing interest, communicating without words, polite, in one’s own thoughts, respect and give private space to others, thinking (hard), calm.

Positive Relaxing Silence:

being in harmony with oneself/others when in nature, in sauna, observing or feeling something wonderful, feeling peaceful, enjoyable, calm, relaxed, communicating non-verbally with others.

Negative Active Silence:

can’t tell anyone, sulking, selfish, not talk enough, rude, impolite, disrespectful.

Negative Passive Silence:

dull, bored, indifferent, depressed, apathetic, too reserved, difficult to handle, not letting anyone close, exhausted.

Semantic Meaning Sum Up

- The results led to creation of Appendix 5 in the 2nd edition of “That’s Not Me”, which led to the HS picture.
- The HS picture can now be used in educational contexts to open eyes & create discussions.
- Being too silent/shy can definitely carry negative meanings.
- In contrast, positive relaxing silence is a natural way to be, and positive active silence integrates comfort with moving back and forth between quietness and talking.
- Moving beyond ‘proper’ dictionary translation to semantic alternatives and examples for others offers opportunity.
- This semantic approach is important regardless of the foreign language. The TSE Language Unit is moving forward in French, German, Russian and Spanish. The lower the linguistic level, the greater the challenge.

Student discovery

- * Before this course, I thought Americans were weird to be bothered by silence.
- * During the last day of my American school year a teacher asked me: “Why didn’t you like the classes?”
- * I tried to explain that I really enjoyed those classes but he didn’t understand.
- * Back then I didn’t have tools to understand how to express the positive sides of active silence hidden from the teacher.
- * Hopefully next time I’ll be able to explain myself better so there won’t be any hard feeling.