Systematising the diphthongs of Finnish by using their static and dynamic characteristics

In many languages, diphthongs are a part of the sound system. Normally, there are only a few of those items, which are most often defined as tautosyllabic combinations of two vowels. While the monophthongs (vowels, sonorants, obstruents) usually are being treated very systematically in grammars, diphthongs tend to come in a bare enumeration, which may or may not be implicitly structured, or in some kind of low-level-systematisation.

Finnish is known for having an extensive inventory and a complex system of diphthongs, which constitutes a challenge for an adequate representation, e. g. when writing a descriptive grammar or when developing a “diphthongological” theory. From a typological point of view, a closer look at the descriptions of Finnish as provided by grammatical sketches (e. g. Branch 1987) and reference grammars (e.g. Fromm 1982, Sulkala / Karjalainen 1997, Karlsson 1999), shows surprisingly wide differences and even contradictions in the way the diphthongs are analysed and presented.

Relying on the diphthong description tool as introduced by Geyer (2011), my contribution will show a systematisation of the Finnish diphthongs, which takes both the static and the dynamic characteristics of diphthongs into account. By static characteristics, I mean features like “front” or “closed”, i.e. constant features which also monophthongs can display. Dynamic characteristics, however, are features of change which exclusively can occur in diphthongs, e.g. “rounding” or “falling”. By choosing the phonologically relevant static and, especially, dynamic features, a well organised and compact system can be reconstructed. Besides that, the features I will propose for the systematisation prove to be crucial ones in terms of reflecting main traits of Finnish phonology in general, namely the vowel harmonies (harmony of place and harmony of lip rounding). Furthermore, the systematisation provides an explanatory hint for the instability of the rising diphthongs /ie, yö, uo/, which, if followed by /i/, change to regular falling diphthongs /ei, öi, oi/.

References


