

The Language of Poverty in Contemporary Finnish Literature: a stylistic study

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Abstract

My study examines, from a stylistic point of view, contemporary Finnish novels with poverty as their central subject. By examining the stylistic choices of individual works, a broader understanding is formed of how the subject of poverty is treated and commented on in contemporary Finnish literature published between 1998 and 2023.

The objective of the study is to use the methods of functional stylistics to form an understanding of the stylistic choices that the novels' depiction of poverty is built on, to examine the impressions and effects these choices create and to analyse how they guide the reader to view the internal and external worlds of the underprivileged main characters.

A literary historical perspective is connected to the research question: the question of how the language of poverty in contemporary literature relates to the legacy of earlier Finnish poverty literature. The answer is sought by comparing the stylistic devices of contemporary works and the impressions they create with those of earlier poverty literature. For this comparative approach, Finnish literary classics depicting poverty and published from the 19th century to the 1970s are selected.

Additionally, one of the research questions is related to the continuity of cultural Finnish speech patterns and themes associated with poverty in contemporary novels. Within this question, the research opens fresh interdisciplinary perspectives and discusses the language of poverty with folkloristics and other applicable interdisciplinary poverty and class studies.

The research material features a spectrum of various types of poverty. Thus, the study does not set criteria for, e.g., the level of earnings of the depicted characters, but relies on a relative definition of poverty, where poverty is the inability to live in a way that is customary for society, generally resulting from a lack of resources (Townsend 1979).

The broader societal goal of the study is to raise debate about the language that is used to describe and talk about modern day poverty – and how style affects how messages can be understood.