

The Witch on a Vespa (and the case of the Kinetic Potatoes): Nonsense strategies and translation of Kirsi Kunnas's poem "Mr Pii Poo"

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Abstract

*It has been suggested that in nonsense literature the form sometimes directs the events of the story (Tigges 1988, Lecerle 1994). Translation of a poem may make this even more evident, as with "Mr Pii Poo" (1956, originally "Herra Pii Poo"), a poem by the Finnish author Kirsi Kunnas, born in 1924. "Mr Pii Poo" tells a story of a magician in a conflict between rural and urban elements, a figure who is introduced also as a witch and who could at the same time be interpreted as an alter ego of the poet Kunnas. In this poem, Kirsi Kunnas binds a bizarre bundle of rhymed and free verses around the Finnish word *noita* (a witch) and its multiple uses as a noun, a pronoun, and a case ending. I discuss the nonsense elements of this witty and whimsical poem by describing its translation process from Finnish into English – a piece of work I has done with the help of my nonsensical colleagues. As a collocation, I present a "movable reading" of another poem by Kunnas called "Kattila ja perunat", "The Pan and the Potatoes".*

Keywords: nonsense verse, translation, performance.

1. Introduction

If I ask my students at the University of Helsinki to quickly name any poet who writes for children, or, alternatively, to mention a poetry book written for the young, the most common answer I get for my first question is Kirsi Kunnas, the now already 92-year-old author and translator, and for the second question, her book *Tiitiäisen satupuu* ("The Tittytumpkin's Fairy Tree") published in 1956. Today, *Tiitiäisen satupuu* has established a reputation as a work that released our children's poetry from its tight rhyme patterns and verse constructions. It represented modernism that really started to blow in Finnish-language poetry after the Second World War. *Tiitiäisen satupuu* was also one of the earliest poetry books in Finnish language inspired by Anglo-Saxon nonsense literature. Its way of playing with language and its topsy-turvy logic related it to the work of writers such as Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, and Christian

Morgenstern, poets that Kirsi Kunnas was interested in (Heikkilä-Halttunen 2000: 315-318; Katajamäki 2005/2011: 122).

Kunnas also translated some works of these abovementioned poets into Finnish. This she did mainly after publishing her first own collection for children. In 1972, Kunnas translated Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and two years later *Through the Looking Glass* together with another Finnish poet, Eeva-Liisa Manner. Before Kunnas's own poetry book *Tiitiäisen satupuu*, she had translated English nursery rhymes, several of them with nonsense features, and *The Tall Book of Mother Goose*, an anthology of nursery rhymes, whose Finnish version *Hanhiemon iloinen lipas* came out in 1954. It also included several poems by Kunnas herself. It was while working for that anthology Kunnas got her first impulses to write for children (see e.g. Kirstinä 2014: 192-194). Until then she had been writing mainly modernist poetry for an adult audience, publishing her first collection *Villiomenapuu* ("Wild Apple Tree") in 1947.

Kirsi Kunnas herself describes the 1950s as a turning point in her life. Her youth was shadowed by tuberculosis. In a talk held at an international children's literature symposium in Helsinki in March 2001, she explained how she had been sure that she would die young, a fate that had indeed faced quite many Finnish modernists, authors and artists in the first half of the 20th century. The 80-year-old Kunnas said: "But when I realized I was not dying, my life turned from a shivering, melancholy melody into a happy polka."

Humour, humanity, and skilfully shaped rhymes and compositions have been her distinctive marks ever since. According to an enquiry made by the Finnish broadcasting company in 2014, the most beloved poem by Kirsi Kunnas is "Tunteellinen siili" ("An Affectionate Hedgehog"), which is a lamentation of a hedgehog, thorny in more ways than one, filled with loneliness but also self-pity. Rather than melancholic, most of the poems in *Tiitiäisen satupuu* are, however, jaunty and cheeky, representing the energy of polka as Kunnas's own description suggests. Kunnas even created a fictive figure called Haitula that would caution her about getting too serious and profound about writing and life. The poems about Haitula depict a tiny man who lives and thinks according to his own logic, which often means living in ways that are possible in terms of language but not in reality. In one of Kunnas's poems Haitula is portrayed as "living in an ear, which happens to be a mushroom, a mushroom which happens to be an ear, an ear mushroom" [my translation]. This poem plays with the Finnish word for false morel, *korvasieni*. In Finnish, false morels are called 'ear mushrooms'. Haitula who lives in the brain-like mushroom tends to act and think inverse. He is a person who sews jackets onto buttons, for instance, and perhaps whispers his thoughts in the poet's ear, too.

2. Mr Pii Poo

In my article, I wish to shed light on the features of literary nonsense emblematic of Kirsi Kunnas's Finnish-language poetry, such as enumeration, ambiguity, play on words and sound symbolism, by commenting on two of her poems: "Herra Pii Poo" ("Mr Pii Poo") and "Kattila ja perunat" ("The Pan and the Potatoes") both published in *Tiitiäisen satupuu* in 1956. The former will be presented from a translatorial perspective: by reflecting on the process of translating the poem into English, I will illuminate her way of using nonsense as a device to create ambiguity and humour in her poem. The second, which has already been published in an English translation in an anthology *Contemporary Finnish Poetry* (1991) by Herbert Lomas, will be analysed with special regard to its nonsense-generating use of onomatopoeia and rhythm.

The poem I first focus on in this article describes the incident of Herra Pii Poo, Mr Pii Poo, a magician, characterized also as a witch. (In Finnish and Finland, witches can be either men

or women. It is probably also worth mentioning that the word *Poo*, pronounced [po:], has no specific meaning in Finnish, and probably no link to the English word either – although Kunnas was probably aware of that one too.) The poem “Herra Pii Poo” (“Mr Pii Poo”) comprises of rhymed verses with a free form, and includes a laconic sentence in prose form here and there. I translated this poem for the symposium *Blöf – Nonsense in Translation and Beyond* held in Krakow in May 2016, with help of some colleagues and friends, including Michael Heyman, Björn Sundmark, and Iiro Kuuranne, the first two also attending the same symposium. The following translation is in part still very much a raw version and will hopefully be improved one day. To make it possible to discuss Mr Pii Poo's case in a context of nonsense literature and translation, I present it here in its current form:

MR PII POO

Mr Pii Poo
was a magician.
He shouted ‘hii hoo’,
stamped the earth
and conjured:
 spinach
 a cabbage
 a regal partridge
 sausage
 a savage
 and also a sandwich

so Mr Pii Poo
was a man-witch.

Once
Mr Pii Poo
walked down the Espa.
He shouted ‘hii hoo’,
stamped the earth,
and then with a Vespa
he drove.

This was Mr Pii Poo’s great mistake.

You see,
the power of a witch
does not work with machines
nor with engines
nor with switches
nor with screws
nor with gears
nor with pedals

all in all:
a machine has the rhythm of a machine.

Well,
Mr Pii Poo
drove to the station.
He said: 'hii hoo!'
stamped the Vespa
and was run over by a train.

I'm dead,
Pii Poo shouted,
too soon!
'Hii hoo!' he said
and died later instead.

(Kirsi Kunnas, 1956; transl. Sirke Happonen, 2016)

Mr Pii Poo, the protagonist of this poem, drives a Vespa, an Italian moped popular also in Finland in the 1950s. That Mr Pii Poo lives in Helsinki is implicated with the word *Espa*, i.e. *Esplanade*, which refers to a well-known boulevard in the centre of the city.

When translating, my principle was to keep rhymes in the lines where the original poem was rhymed too. The lines that include the most interesting nonsense elements seemed also to pose the greatest challenge for translation. This concerns especially the list that itemizes the things the magician conjures up. In Finnish the words are all in plural: *rusinoita*, *mansikoita*, *omenoita*, *perunoita*, *porkkanoita*, *prinsessoita*, *makkaroina*, that is “raisins, strawberries, apples, potatoes, carrots, princesses, sausages”. Here I decided to leave the literal meaning and also the plural form, and aim at retaining the rhythm and rhyming instead. In the English translation the magician conjures up “spinach, a cabbage, a regal partridge, sausage, a savage, and also a sandwich”. It seemed vital to me that the things the magician conjures up – after stamping the earth – would stay organic, and most of them also edible. In the original Finnish version, the princesses stand out in the list, representing fairy-tale figures and all in all humans among vegetables, berries, and meat products. Later in the poem, they form a contrast to the modern and urban environment that Mr Pii Poo enters. In the English translation “a savage” stands for the strange and archaic component in the list, a kind of equivalent to the *prinsessoita* of the original. The “regal partridge” still features some royal touch in the English poem, though. (And as you might have noticed, I have diminished the number of the elements from seven to six. That simply sounds to me better in English, at least so far.)

Moreover, the list of the things the magician conjures up also follows a certain nonsensical idea. In order to talk about this let us look more closely at the beginning of the original poem:

Herra Pii Poo
oli taikuri.
Hän huusi: hii hoo!
ja maata polkaisi
ja taikoi:
 rusinoita
 mansikoita
 omenoita
 perunoita
 porkkanoita
 prinsessoita

makkaroita,

siis
herra Pii Poo
oli noita.

As a poem, "Mr Pii Poo" is not the clearest or most telling example of Kirsi Kunnas's texts that use strategies of literary nonsense. Sakari Katajamäki, a Finnish scholar of nonsense and literature has analysed Kunnas's poem "Piirespaares-maan kuningas" ("The King of Piirespaares-Land", also published in the collection *Tiitiäisen satupuu*) in the light of ideas of major nonsense theorists such as Elizabeth Sewell and Wim Tigges. According to Katajamäki, the poem "Piirespaares-maan kuningas" features many key elements of literary nonsense. Sewell (1952) and Tigges (1988) have stated: playful absurdity, use of verbal games and game-like quality, opposition to sentimentality and lack of emotion, topsy-turvydom, and concretisation of metaphors (Katajamäki 2005/2011). It is however typical of Kunnas that she throughout her poetry every now and then uses nonsensical qualities, also in poems that are not as overtly nonsensical as "Piirespaares-maan kuningas", "Metsähiisi", or the poems about the figure Haitula are. With poems such as "Mr Pii Poo" it becomes relevant to refer to Tigges's words about nonsense as a device:

it may legitimately be stated that we are dealing with nonsensical "devices", or that a novel, a short story or a poem, has a greater or lesser nonsensical quality. In this respect nonsense is like "satire" in its usage, since the latter term too can refer to a genre (the Roman verse satire) as well as to a quality.

(Tigges 1988: 49)

Considering the definition of Tigges, "Mr Pii Poo" is a poem with lesser nonsensical quality. What I would like now to draw attention to is how nonsense in "Mr Pii Poo" is mostly hidden but interestingly illuminated in the process of translation.

Most of the nonsensical play in the poem "Mr Pii Poo" is built in and around the Finnish word *noita*. *Noita* means "a witch", a noun that characterises Mr Pii Poo as well as his qualification as *taikuri*, a magician. But *noita* is significant in several other ways, too. In the original version the words of the list end with *-noita*, *-koita*, *-soita*, *-roita*, the nouns being in a partitive case as the verb *taikoa*, "to conjure up", suggests. The partitive plural implies an indefinite number of things and it is often used in Finnish when talking about food. The most common morphological ending in the verse in question is, tellingly, *-noita*. The original play on the recurrent element leads to the conclusion that Mr Pii Poo is, indeed, a witch, a mechanism partly reflected in the English translation with the rhymes "spinach, a cabbage... and also a sandwich", followed by a statement: "... so Mr Pii Poo was a man-witch".

In nonsense literature the form may direct the events of the story, as several theorists have claimed (see e.g. Tigges 1988: 69 and Katajamäki 2016: 33). Here, one good reason for Mr Pii Poo, the magician, for being a man-witch, *noita*, is the fact that many of these elements that he conjures up in a sense include the witch in the ending of the nouns. In English, it is only the sandwich that works in that way. In addition, in the original Finnish poem, there is even a third meaning for the word *noita*. *Noita* is a pronoun in a partitive case, meaning "those". This "those" refers to the list mentioned. Seen in this way, Mr Pii Poo is "those" (them): *perunoita*, *porkkanoita*, *omenoita* – potatoes, carrots, apples. This *noita*, witch, consists both lexically and semantically of the elements he has conjured up.

Kunnas's play with the word *noita*, "witch", offers an interesting point of comparison with Kevin Shortleeve's notion of nonsense as something that "harbours a world of superstitious tradition", of something that "only outwardly opposes to the supernatural" and

the mythical (Shortsleeve 2015: 28-29; see also Heyman 2017: 7). In Kunnas's poem, magic and witchcraft infiltrates almost everything, it is the starting point for the story, it is in the syntax merged into the words themselves. And yet, it is dependent on the verbal game Kunnas plays throughout her poem.

If we consider this witch being what he or she has made up, the poem by Kunnas is a cautionary tale, too. In the course of the poem, the witch, the magician, will be defeated by technology and traffic, ran over by a train together with his Vespa. The second half of the poem introduces another list, which is a monotonous enumeration of constituent parts of a vehicle, the moped. After Pii Poo has conjured up his Vespa the problems begin. The poem shows clearly how the power of a witch does not conform with machines, "nor with engines, nor with switches, nor with screws, nor with gears, nor with pedals".

Kirsi Kunnas has remarked on how she hated the increasing technology in life especially during the 1950s, and how she was frightened about the traffic and the growing number of vehicles (Kirstinä 2014: 201). Mr Pii Poo who represents a creator set against the power of machines ending up in a miserable state, embodies a possible alter ego of the poet Kunnas. In the course of the story conveyed by the poem, this witch moves with his moped quite far from the world and the context he is used to, such as elements he is told to be conjuring up in the first lines that introduce his character to the reader. Most of the things he conjures up (and, consists of) are not only organic but rural, except the princesses which appear in the Finnish version. They are important to the first list, since they link the magician-witch with the land of fairy tales, a setting that is quite far from his new environment, the Espa (Esplanade), the traffic, and the city.

However, the new list, which features the elements of the moped Mr Pii Poo cannot control, includes neither rural elements nor fairy-tale figures; it also sounds different and has a different rhythm. The words in the previous, "organic list" all included the diphthong *oi* in them, a sound commonly considered beautiful and melodious in the Finnish language. The vowels of the mechanical list are by contrast narrower, all words ending with sharp illative cases finishing with *-iin*. Here I gave up the rhyming in my translation and emphasized the literal meaning, since these are factual parts of a Vespa, the vehicle, quite a limited vocabulary to work with. All in all: Mr Pii Poo stamps the Vespa, not the earth. This time he has created something he has no control over.

The accident of Mr Pii Poo comes with a surprise: it constitutes a sudden twist in the narration, a device Kunnas uses in her other poems, too (see e.g. Katajamäki 2005/2011: 125). It is sketched with an emotional distance characteristic of nonsense literature (Sewell 1952: 131; Tigges 1988: 52-55; Katajamäki 2016: 31):

I'm dead,
Pii Poo shouted,
too soon!
Hii hoo, he said,
and died later instead.

We are surprised, perhaps even shocked by Pii Poo's sudden accident. His fate and especially his comment on it is not something a reader would expect in a story like this, which has remained so far a cheerful children's poem about a magician. When reading aloud this poem, the most common response at this turning point I get is laughter, though. Additionally, at least with the original version the reader soon starts to think about the time Mr Pii Poo actually dies. When exactly is that? It becomes more important to know when he passes away than to mourn over his death. Is it a second after he utters those words, or many years after? It is left open for the reader to decide whether Pii Poo manages to cancel his death with his "hii

hoo”, his magic. Or is he just talking about his death too soon? Or (thinking he is) dying too soon? With death – or even better, with the announcement of death – the poem seems to return to the land of nonsense again. Following the rhyme and the multiple options given by language, it is possible to simply die “later”. Illustrator Maija Karma has not sealed the end of the poem either (Figure 1). She is only portraying Mr Pii Poo's pink hat, on the rails, wrinkled and crumpled, almost falling out of the bottom of the page.

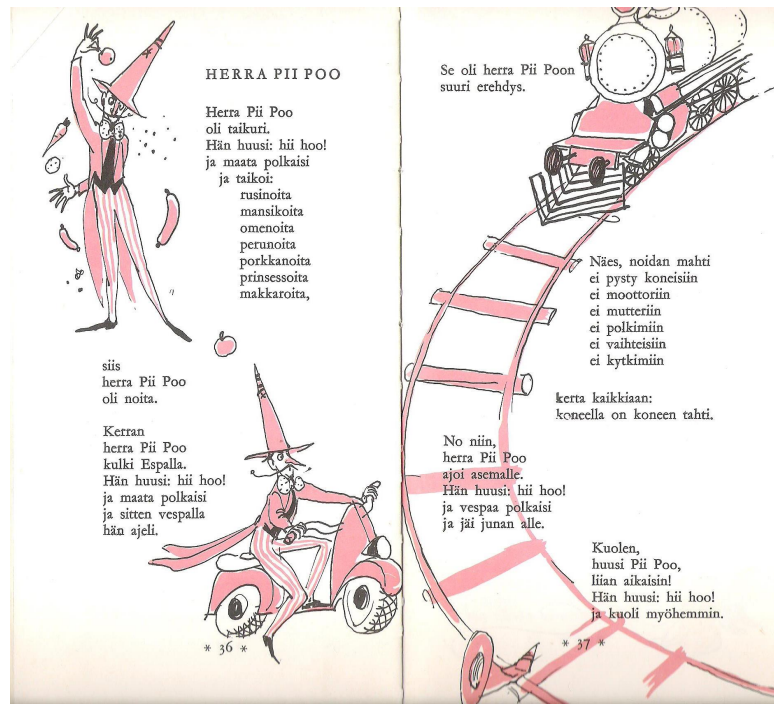


Figure 1. "Herra Pii Poo", Kirsi Kunnas's poem illustrated by Maija Karma. Source: Kirsi Kunnas, *Tiitiäisen satupuu*, 1956.

3. The Case of the Kinetic Potatoes

Modern life is uncontrollable also in another fun poem by Kirsi Kunnas in the collection *Tiitiäisen satupuu* (“The Tittyumpkin's Fairy Tree”), which I would still like to point at briefly. In “Kattila ja perunat” (“The Pan and the Potatoes”), Kunnas portrays the increasing tempo of life and the society as a boiling kettle with potatoes in it – at least this is the most common interpretation of the poem, strengthened by Kunnas’s own view of her text. The first stanza expresses the thoughts of a kettle, hot and full of steam, and in the second stanza we hear the sound of the potatoes and experience their "angle" on the event.

“The Pan and the Potatoes” has been translated into English by Herbert Lomas among a few other children's poems by Kunnas in *Contemporary Finnish Poetry* in 1991. (To avoid confusion it is perhaps worth mentioning that Lomas has chosen to use the word 'pan' in his translation. I am in turn referring to a 'kettle' which is closer to Kunnas's original expression as well as Maija Karma's illustration of the poem.) It is not possible to provide Lomas’s lively translation here, but it is available online (see the list references). In the context of this article I will, however, comment on the original Finnish poem, its onomatopoeic language, its fleeting moments with nonsense, and especially Kunnas’s way to gradually but rapidly increase the tempo, or the illusion of it, in her text. In the Krakow symposium, I performed “Kattila ja perunat” with movement. To understand my point, or rather to try it on, I kindly suggest that

the readers of this article stand up and start performing the following (Finnish) poem aloud while jogging or jumping. It is best to begin with a rather calm pace but to start accelerating during the second stanza that describes the potatoes; both recitation and movement should get bigger, wilder, and faster so that with the last lines the reader is totally exhausted and cannot possibly continue any more.

KATTILA JA PERUNAT (“The Pan (Kettle) and the Potatoes”)

Oi, olen aivan höyrypäinen,
ihan kiehun ja sihsen
kuin sähköinen,
sanoi kattila
ja nosti hattua
 pshiih
ihan kiehun ja kihisen
ja puhisen, pihisen
syljen, sihsen
sähisen, kähisen
ja kiukusta rähisen,
sanoi kattila
ja nosti hattua
 pshiih

Voi tätä hoppua hoppua hoppua
huusivat perunat, voi tätä hoppua
ei tule loppua loppua loppua
polkata täytyy polkkaa, polkata polkkaa
kiireistä aikaa, tulta on kengissä
laukata täytyy laukkaa, laukata laukkaa
ei ole tolkkua millään, ei ole tolkun tolkkua
kolkata täytyy kolkkaa, kolkata kolkkaa
hyvä jos pysymme hengissä, hengissä, hengissä
voi tätä hoppua hoppua hoppua
ei tule loppua.

The first stanza divides into two parts, both ending with the sounds *pshiih* that the kettle makes when it raises its “hat”, the lid. The second, long stanza that begins *Voi tätä hoppua hoppua hoppua* downright cries out for a gradual acceleration while the poem is being read aloud. The beginning of the verse means literally “Oh, what a hurry, oh, what a hurry”, but the original line is also loaded with phonetic repetition and a generous use of the sound 'p' that recurs in the following next lines, such as *loppua loppua loppua* (= "end, end, end"). The abundance of the double consonant *pp* calls into mind the sound of potatoes hitting the walls of the kettle, gradually starting a polka, a dance mentioned in the text: *polkata täytyy polkkaa, polkata polkkaa*. A direct translation of this would be “we have to [dance the] polka, polka the polka”. Then the movement gets wilder and begins to gallop, *laukata (laukata täytyy laukkaa, laukata laukkaa* = "we have to gallop, gallop the gallop"), changing the soundtrack on the fly from the dominance of *p* to the rule of *k*.

In the line *ei ole tolkun tolkkua* the poem gets incidentally self-reflective, commenting on the lack of sense in the process. The direct translation of this line would be: “there is no sense, no sense in the sense”, referring either to the nonsensical situation of the potatoes from a point

of view of a potato, or the senselessness of the whole idea and the progress of the poem, staging the concept of self-reflection as one of the elements of nonsense (Tigges 1988: 21). In the flow of the poem, in its dramaturgy of acceleration, this is however just a part of the crescendo that will soon be cumulated in the next line *kolkata täytyy kolkkaa, kolkata kolkkaa*. The verb *kolkata* works as a phonetic variation to the previous play with the words *tolkkua, tolkun tolkkua*, and rhymes fully with the earlier line *polkata täytyy polkkaa, polkata polkkaa* (“we have to [dance the] polka, polka the polka”).

The meaning of the line *kolkata täytyy kolkkaa, kolkata kolkkaa* is furthermore quite nonsensical. The words *kolkata* and *kolkka* do exist in the Finnish language, the verb *kolkata* signifies either knocking somebody unconscious or dead, or alternatively just the sound of clanking, as when e.g. wheels of the train clank against the tracks. However, the combination of the verb *kolkata* and the noun *kolkka* does not convey a comprehensive meaning. *Kolkka* signifies either a remote corner or a kind of mallet. If we put our souls into being potatoes, it is rather difficult to imagine what we “have to” be doing at that point. Knocking a remote corner unconscious or clanking a mallet? Structurally, in turn, as a rhyme for the earlier line *polkata täytyy polkkaa, polkata polkkaa*, the line *kolkata täytyy kolkkaa, kolkata kolkkaa* is almost hypercorrect, as if it were derived from this earlier line.

In the dance of the potatoes in the kettle, for this singular line, the verbal game starts to lead the movement and the course of the events, a nonsense feature suddenly entering the poem. But the way Kunnas shortly but effectively uses nonsensical devices in this poem does not lead the readers astray, it only confuses them a little. This may actually make the audience to even better understand the potatoes and the possible metaphoric dimensions of their situation which is clearly getting crazy.

The two last lines hear *voi tätä hoppua hoppua hoppua / ei tule loppua*. They connect the end of the second stanza with its beginning, the first two lines where the same words *hoppua* and *loppua* were also used. Semantically, the potatoes are told to be hopping and jumping on forever, or at least this is their view of what is happening. The very last line means “there is no end”. Well, in the poem, there is. Additionally, Kunnas has placed a full stop, the only one in the poem, to mark this final moment. If we interpret the hectic rhythm of the potatoes as a modern human experiencing an ever-growing pace of life in a ruthless society, this end might be interpreted as death. But as with “Mr Pii Poo”, timing this death proves to be impossible. The verbal game Kunnas applies in the end of the potato poem, which is an open end for the potatoes, delightfully exemplifies her tendency to apply nonsensical devices in order to both confuse and entertain her readers.

Phonetically, the word *hoppua* (=hurry) links with its rhyme, the word *loppua* (=end). (Note that in the original these words stand in partitive case, the nominatives are *hoppu* and *loppu*.) In the logic of the verbal game implied earlier in the poem, such as the succession of the rhyming verbs *polkata* and *kolkata* as well as the nouns *polkka* and *kolkka*, the nouns *hoppu* and *loppu* stand very close to each other. It is as if *hoppu* would lead to *loppu*, that is, a hurry would lead to an end.

But there are other possibilities, too. Kunnas herself sees here an opportunity for an ecstatic finale (see Kirstinä 2014). This interpretation becomes even more noteworthy if the poem “Kattila ja perunat” is performed. Read aloud and especially with synchronous, accelerating movement such as hopping and jumping, the text of the poem may well finish but the heart of the performer continues to pound. I personally, as a child and even now, enjoy the intensifying of the tempo, the enormous crescendo Kunnas's poem seems to suggest. It is marvellous to get out of breath with a poem. And in this sense and context, the kinesis of the potatoes may as well lead to a heightened sense of life, a feeling of energy, and a view of the end as a climax for the whole poem.

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