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The Finnish verb repeat response: Its emergence and its nature as a formulaic expression

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1. Introduction

This paper concerns the emergence and the status of a standard Finnish response format, the verb repeat, as a unit and as a fixed expression. I examine it here in responses given in ordinary everyday conversation to assessments, informings, and questions. In earlier research, it has been suggested that this response format is the result of ellipsis (e.g. Hakulinen and Sorjonen, 2009: 127). I argue that verb repeats do not result from ellipsis, but rather copying, and are manifestations of dialogic resonance (Du Bois, 2014), intersubjectivity and the pervasive dialogism of talk-in-interaction (e.g. Linell, 2009; Linell and Mertzlufft, 2014; Du Bois, 2001, 2014). I also explore the issue of formulaicity of the verb repeat response and suggest that the verb repeat response is a dynamic, emergent unit, and only one of the many formats it may take can be said to approach the status of a fixed expression.

2. Data and methodology

The paper is based on data from the Conversation Analysis Archives (Keskusteluntutkimuksen arkisto) housed in the Department of Finnish, Finno-Ugric and Scandinavian Studies at the University of Helsinki. We examined altogether 482 responsive turns in everyday dialogic and multiparty conversations. In all, 135 of responses involved a repeat of the verb in the prior turn. Out of these, 27 responses involved a repetition of only the verb in the prior turn, while another 27 involved the repetition of the verb plus a particle or particles. The 81 responses that included material other than just the verb and possible particles, for example nominal arguments or adverbials, were left outside the study; these responses raise additional issues not relevant to the verb (+ particle) responses, which accept the argument structure of the prior turn as is. In this paper, then, we focus on the 54 minimal verb repeat responses in our data.

The methodology employed in the paper is interactional linguistics, an approach that combines Conversation Analysis with discourse-functional linguistics (Selting and Couper-Kuhlen, 2001). The theoretical perspective central to my analysis is dialogic syntax (Du Bois, 2001, 2014), an approach that takes language to be fundamentally dialogic, and structurally built for engagement of the current utterance with prior talk (see also e.g. Bakhtin, 1981 [1934]; Linell, 2009). Dialogic syntax examines how earlier utterances are mapped into current utterances and how such dynamic emergence of structure and its resonance with the structure of prior utterances serves the goals of language users (Du Bois, 2014: 360). My approach is also strongly influenced by the closely related theories of emergent grammar (Hopper, 1987, 2011) and on-line syntax (Auer, 2009); these are approaches which consider the structure of utterances as emerging online, in response to various contextual factors, such as actions of other participants in the conversation, including their prior turns at talk, rather than being determined by pre-existing (a priori) rules.

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3. The verb repeat as a responsive construction

In this section of the paper, I will discuss the general features of the Finnish verb repeat response, its various formats, and the contexts in which they are used. What follows is an introduction to the types of verb repeats found in my data, intended as an introduction to the phenomenon for those readers not previously familiar with the Finnish verb repeat response. The formats and their uses will be discussed roughly in the order of frequency in my corpus, with the most common ones first. I will also compare my findings with those of Hakulinen and Sorjonen who have done foundational work on this construction.

The verb repeat response is, of course, a case of repetition. Repetition is used in a range of ways in discourse (see, e.g., Tannen, 2007). In Conversation Analysis and interactional linguistics repetition has previously been studied especially in connection with repair (e.g., Robinson and Kevoe-Feldman, 2010; Rossi, 2015). In that research, one focus of interest has been prosody (e.g. Benjamin and Walker, 2013). In many uses of repetition, the same speaker produces both instances (for example, in reduplication, which can even be considered, or develop into, a grammaticized instance of repetition; on reduplication, see Lindström, 1999). The verb repeat response, of course, differs from most rhetorical uses of repetition, as a defining feature is that another speaker does the repeat.

The use of repetition in answering can be considered a typological feature. In such an approach, languages can be divided into three groups in terms of the response types used (Sadock and Zwicky, 1985; for a summary, see Sorjonen, 2001b: 406–407). Some languages, such as English, can be called yes–no languages, where a positive answer is given with a particle like *yes*, and a negative answer with a particle like *no*. The second type of languages uses what is called an agree/disagree system, in which one particle is used for agreeing with the polarity of the prior statement and another one for disagreeing with it; Japanese is a language of this type. A third type of languages uses a so-called echo system, in which the verb of the question is repeated in an answer with or without added material. Taken the phenomenon discussed in this paper, Finnish would then belong to this group. However, Finnish also uses particles to respond to questions, and therefore in fact exhibits a mixed system, as do other languages that have been analyzed as using an echo system, such as Malay, Breton, Welsh, Russian, Czech and Latvian (Jones, 1999: 22–36).

In the Finnish verb repeat response, the finite verb in the prior turn is used in the next turn, which then counts as a response to the prior. Consider examples (1), (2), and (3) below. Our first example illustrates a verb repeat in a response to an assessment. In this example, only the copula from the prior assessment is repeated.

Excerpt 1 Onpa hyvää
SG 346 Wedding pictures

15   Eeva: **>on-pa   [hyvä-ä<**
                   be.3SG-CLT good-PAR
                   (it/this) is good

16   Kerttu: [(--)

17 →   Sanna: **on**
                   be.3SG
                   (yes it) is .

In this excerpt from a multi-party conversation, the participants are eating a broccoli quiche. Eeva first evaluates the quiche positively, using the third person singular present tense form of the copula *on* 'is' with the emphatic clitic *–pA* and the partitive form of the adjective *hyvä* 'good', slightly in overlap with something Kerttu says, but which is not hearable on the recording. Sanna responds to Eeva's evaluation by using the same verb, *on*, in the same third person singular present tense form as Eeva has just used it.[1] This counts as an agreeing response and essentially the same evaluation: by using the simple verb repeat as a response, its speaker aligns with the prior assessment and asserts ''unproblematic and unconditional agreement'' with it (Hakulinen and Sorjonen, 2009: 132).

This excerpt is a prime example of the emergence of structure online, in interaction and for interaction (Hopper, 2011; Auer, 2009). The form of Sanna's response (line 17) to Eeva's assessment (line 15) has everything to do with the fact that it

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[1] In line 19, Sanna repeats only the finite form of the copula, *on*, not the emphatic clitic *–pA* used by Eeva in line 15. It is my impression that repeating the clitic would make this utterance more than a response, adding an independent stance.