

Combining clauses in interaction. The *voi olla että* '(it) may be that' utterance in Finnish

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Abstract

This study focusses on the Finnish utterance type that consists of *voi olla* '(it) may be' and a span of talk initiated by *et(tä)* 'that', that follows it. The analysis demonstrates that in an initiating turn, the utterance initiated by the *voi olla että* '(it) may be that' expresses a lack of knowledge of a state of affairs and usually provides for an expansion on the topic. By contrast, in a responding turn, the displayed lack of knowledge is often related to producing a hedged affirmative answer. Moreover, the study argues that the relative prominence of the two parts of the utterance differ according to its sequential position. In an initiating turn, the talk following *voi olla* is more prominent. This reflects the function of the turn as initiating something new, which is presented in the talk after *et(tä)*. However, in a responding turn, *voi olla* gains more prominence than the talk following it, because the stance that *voi olla* expresses embodies an alignment with the co-participant's prior action. The data used for this study are drawn from audio and videotaped interactions between friends and relatives, as well as customer-service encounters. The methodology for the study is conversation analysis.

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1. Introduction

This article analyses the clause combination of *voi olla* '(it) may be' and a span of talk initiated by *et(tä)* 'that' during naturally occurring social interaction in Finnish. The first part of this utterance type, the subjectless expression *voi olla* (lit. 'may be'), offers an epistemic evaluation such that the proposition to be presented in the second, *et(tä)* 'that'-initiated part is possibly true. Example 1 illustrates a usage of this utterance type by a speaker during an evening gathering of four friends. The utterance initiated by the *voi olla että* '(it) may be that' (henceforth abbreviated as a VOE-utterance) is used to respond to a polar question that requests information. One of the speakers, Anna, holds a bowl of sweets in her lap and the sweets are in the shapes of famous politicians' faces. In line 1, another speaker, Tommi, asks for a sweet that is shaped like the face of a specific politician (the transcription and glossing symbols are provided in [Appendix A](#)).

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Example 1. Sg123A. A face-to-face conversation.

- 1 Tommi: onks siel huonoi Väyrysen n#aamoi#.
 are there bad faces of Väyrynen.
- 2 Anna: fēhheheh< .hh ↑siis sun e_hdoton suosik°ki°._f
 fēhheheh< .hh your absolute favorite then._f ((points at Tommi))
- 3 Anna: → >voi [ol-la et< tuol ↑alla oj jotai.]
 can.3SG be-INF that there under are some
 >(it) may [b_e that< there are some ↑underneath.]
- 4 Tommi: [he he heh he he he]
- ((10 lines omitted; Anna examines the bowl of sweets))
- 5 Anna: ↑oli niit ku mä tul- tää on Väyrynen.
 there ↑were some when I ca- this is Väyrynen.
- 6 Tommi: a(h)nna mulle.
 g(h)ive it to me. ((extends his hand toward Anna))

Tommi's request for information (line 1) makes an answer a relevant next action from Anna, but she first laughs and subsequently offers an assessment of the politician as one that is Tommi's favourite (line 2). After this, due to the non-contiguity between the request for information and the answer, answering with a simple 'yes' or 'no' would be less clearly tied to the request for information. For example, a 'no' could be understood as withdrawing from the assessment that Anna just offered. Yet a more elaborate answer, such as a partly repetitive 'there are' or 'there are not', would be possible due to their lexical similarities with the request for information and the tie that is created as a consequence. However, these types of answers would indicate knowledge about the state of affairs. A VOE-utterance (line 3) is therefore a useful resource, since *voi olla* '(it) may be' explicates Anna's uncertainty and the talk that is initiated by *et* 'that' offers the opportunity to tie the turn to the request for information on line 1 (for example, see the repetition of the polar question's copula verb in *tuol alla oj jotai* 'there are some underneath' on line 3).

A traditional grammatical description could claim that a VOE-utterance, such as *voi olla et tuol alla oj jotai* '(it) may be that there are some underneath' (Example 1), consists of a main clause *voi olla*, '(it) may be', and a subject complement clause that is initiated by *et(tä)* 'that' (cf. [Vilkuna, 2000: 66–67](#); [Hakulinen et al., 2004: §1146](#)). However, it should be noted that as a construction, a VOE-utterance is grammatically rather specialised. For example, there is no parallel expression without the modal verb, *(*se*) *on että* '(it) is that' ([Hakulinen et al., 2004: §1571](#)). Furthermore, different tenses (e.g. *on voinut olla että* '(it) may have been that') seem to occur only rarely. Grammatical specialisation aside, what is referred to as the main clause of the VOE-utterance, *voi olla* '(it) may be', consists of the modal verb *voida*, 'can; may', in the third-person singular form and the infinitive verb form *olla*, 'to be'.¹ When the complementizer *et(tä)* 'that' occurs after the main clause of *voi olla*, it projects more talk to come ([Laury and Seppänen, 2008: 160–164](#)), and the form of this talk is flexible. In other words, the talk after *et(tä)* may consist of a non-finite phrase, a clause of variable length, or it may be a more extended span of talk.² In a VOE-utterance, *voi olla* '(it) may be' and the complementizer *et(tä)* 'that' are produced within the same prosodic unit, and the pitch contour falls only at the end of the talk that is initiated by *et(tä)* (see Example 1). Finally, it should be noted that in my data, a complement clause that

¹ The modal verb *voida*, like the English verb *may*, has the epistemic interpretation of 'to be possible' and a deontic interpretation of 'to be allowed', depending on the context of use. In addition, it can have the dynamic interpretation of 'to be able; can' ([Hakulinen et al., 2004: §1566](#)). However, when the non-finite verb form *olla* co-occurs with the verb *voida* in the third-person singular without an animate subject, it typically expresses an epistemic evaluation that the state of affairs is conceivable or probable, as in *voi olla, että tämä ei lopu tähän*, '(it) may be that this is not over yet', which was an example offered by a dictionary ([Kielitoimiston sanakirja](#), s.v. *voida*).

² In my data, the speaker always continues after an *et(tä)* 'that'. Thus *voi olla et(tä)* '(it) may be that' does not constitute the speaker's turn, as for example the affective utterance *niin virkkuna että* 'so lively that' may do ([Seppänen and Herlin, 2009](#)). On the turn-final particle *että* in Finnish, see [Koivisto, 2012, 2014](#).

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