

Nominated actions and their targeted agents in Finnish conversational directives



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Abstract

In this paper, we explore how future actions are nominated as well as how agents (performers) of future actions are targeted in Finnish conversational directive sequences. The question of agency is particularly worth exploring in Finnish, where subjects need not always be expressed and where special constructions, e.g. with zero-person forms, exist for leaving personal reference open. When used in directive action sequences, the zero-person construction has consequences for the degree of certainty with which the action is nominated, because a modal verb of necessity or desirability is typically involved. Modal constructions in first-position turns have the property that they can be interpreted either as directives, i.e. as having consequences for the behavior of the interlocutor, or as epistemic judgments. Recipients of modal-construction turns with zero-person forms thus have the option of treating the prior turn as a directive by nominating themselves as agents, or as an epistemic judgment by co-evaluating the necessity/desirability of the nominated action. Zero-person forms and modal constructions in both initiating and responsive positions serve as resources for Finnish speakers to locally negotiate the distribution of deontic rights and agency.

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1. Introduction

Conversational directives can be thought of as typically verbally encoded actions that attempt to exert social control over another (Ervin-Tripp, 1982) in an effort to get the “world to match the words”, to quote Searle (1976) and more recently, Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2012) and Stevanovic (2013a). Included are such well-known social actions as requesting, proposing, suggesting, advising and the like, all of which have in common that through them speakers promote the performance of a putatively desirable or necessary action, in the immediate or remote future, in a way that has consequences for the co-participant’s behavior.

The future action that the producer of a conversational directive is promoting can be construed grammatically as something that is desirable or necessary in a taken-for-granted fashion, e.g. with imperative formatting as in *bring out some knives*, or as something that is asserted to be desirable or necessary, e.g. with a declarative *That plant needs watering*. Alternatively, it can be construed as only potentially desirable or necessary, e.g. with interrogative formatting as in *why not start at six*. To refer to this dimension, we will speak of a future action being nominated with varying degrees of certainty as to its necessity or desirability.

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In addition to nominating a specific action involving the other such as bringing water, watering a plant or starting at six, directive speakers may also nominate the intended agent of this future action, i.e. make more or less explicit who is to perform it (e.g. *you bring out some knives*, *you need to water that plant*, or *why don't we start at six*). The person who is singled out to perform the future action, in these examples via an explicit “you” or “we”, is what we will refer to as the *nominated agent*. If the performer is not explicitly mentioned but conventionally understood, as is ‘you’ in *bring out some knives*, we speak of the *understood agent*. If there is no named or conventionally understood agent, as in *why not start at six*, the agent of the promoted action will be said to be *implied*, on the assumption that who is meant will be inferable from the context. In this paper we wish to explore how future actions are targeted grammatically in directive sequences, and what these choices accomplish sequentially and interactionally. We will show that if the necessity/desirability of a nominated action is construed as certain and the targeted agent is explicitly nominated, speakers display strong deontic rights.¹ By contrast, if the necessity/desirability of a nominated action is presented as uncertain and a future agent is merely implied, this opens up an arena for the negotiation of deontic rights and agency.

The question of explicit/understood vs. implied agency is particularly worth exploring in Finnish, where in contrast to English, subjects need not be expressed and where special constructions exist for leaving personal reference open (Hakulinen, 1987; Helasvuo and Laitinen, 2006; VISK §1347, 1654). Foremost among these are the so-called “zero-person” or “missing person” constructions (Laitinen, 2006), in which the verb is inflected for 3rd person singular but the subject (or oblique argument) of the clause is non-overt and unspecified, although understood to be human. These constructions translate variously as “you”, “one”, “anyone” or “they” in English. Their referent may be either generic or specific. When used in directive action sequences, such constructions leave unnamed the intended agent of the targeted action.

When implementing directive actions, Finnish speakers thus have the option of using explicit person marking for referring to the targeted agent or instead, of leaving the targeted agent implicit. As implicit forms are addressed to the co-participant, they may be understood pragmatically to be promoting a ‘you’-action or an inclusive ‘we’-action. Often it is the way the recipient responds that makes explicit who the agent of the nominated action is understood to be and consequently what the prior action is taken to be. If the recipient responds with 1st person singular form they will be understood to be taking the prior turn as a request and to be committing to being the performer of the nominated action. If, on the other hand, the recipient responds with an inclusive 1st person plural form of the verb (or equivalent), they will be understood to be taking the prior turn as a proposal and to be committing both themselves and their interlocutor to performing the nominated action jointly.

If the speaker uses a zero-person construction, it may also be *prima facie* unclear whether they are promoting an action to be performed by the co-participant or by some third party. In the latter case, the action can be understood either deontically as a directive or epistemically as an informing or assertion concerning the degree to which the nominated action is considered to be necessary or desirable. This is because zero persons in Finnish typically occur with modal constructions involving possibility, necessity and/or desirability (Laitinen, 1995). Modal constructions such as *it is necessary for you to do X* or *it would be good for you to do X* have the property that they can be interpreted either as directives, i.e. as having consequences for the behavior of the interlocutor, or epistemically. If they are interpreted epistemically, instead of expressing the speaker’s will, they will be taken to express the speaker’s judgment of the desirability or necessity of the nominated action (see Lyons, 1977:787–849; Laitinen, 1992:154–159; see also Stevanovic, 2011; Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2012). An evaluation of the nominated action in response to a turn consisting of a modal construction and zero-person form displays an interpretation of the first turn as an epistemic judgment rather than a directive request or proposal.

It is these choices (zero person vs. explicit person marking, modal vs. non-modal construction) and their consequences that we wish to explore in this paper. Our database is a collection of directive action sequences including approximately 50 with zero-person constructions, primarily in mundane telephone conversations, culled from the Finnish Conversational Data Archive at the University of Helsinki. We will proceed by first discussing representative directive sequences involving nominated agents where the agent of the nominated action is explicitly named in both the first-position turn as well as in the responding turn. We will then compare these to cases where there is a zero-person form with a modal verb in the first-position turn but an explicitly named agent in the response. Lastly we will discuss cases where there are zero-person forms with modal verbs in both turns of the directive sequence.

2. Directive sequences with nominated agents in first and second positions

Let us first examine cases where the design of a turn and its response, specifically the person-marked forms used, make quite clear who the nominated agent is and consequently what kind of directive action is underway. In the following telephone call, Ella is speaking with the sales representative of a vocational school for crafts and design whose students

¹ By ‘deontic rights’ we refer to “the latent potential that a participant has in a specific domain of action in relation to his co-participants” (Stevanovic, 2013a:24).

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