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Finnish particles *mm*, *jaa* and *joo* as responses to a proposal in negotiation activity

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Abstract

Negotiation activity, as a form of social interaction, is founded on a proposal sequence. A proposal projects an acceptance or a rejection as the possible next action, and response particles occurring in this position may be heard accordingly. In some languages, response tokens have been identified as weak agreements, and in some cases they may even function as pre-rejections. This study examines Finnish response particles as a resource in negotiation. Using conversation analysis, we analyse the particles *mm*, *jaa* and *joo* which form whole turn-constructional units as responses to proposals. Our data come from psychological interaction tests and encompass 119 sequences with a proposal and an accompanying particle response. The study shows that, despite sharing some functions on a general level, the particles are not interchangeable as far as accepting and committing oneself to a proposal are concerned. Indeed, they constitute a continuum with *mm* at one end as the least encouraging response particle and *joo* at the other end as the most encouraging. However, even the most encouraging particle *joo* is not sufficient to accomplish acceptance of the proposal on its own, but an explicit acceptance or further development of the proposal is needed after the *joo*.

Keywords: Conversation analysis; Negotiation; Response particle; Proposal; Agreeing; Finnish

1. Introduction

In this study, we address social interaction in settings where families produce inkblot-interpretation proposals in a psychological interaction test, i.e. they interpret Rorschach cards together. The essential task in the interaction test is to find as many joint interpretations of the Rorschach inkblots as possible (Loveland, 1967). As such, the data are well suited for a study on negotiation in interaction, as the deliberate goal of a negotiation is to reach an agreement or a compromise between participants (e.g. Arminen, 2005:168). As a form of social action, negotiation is an activity which is founded on a proposal sequence. A proposal sets up an acceptance or a rejection as the sequentially possible next item, hence whatever follows the proposal may be examined by the proposer from the perspective of how it displays or implicates acceptance or rejection (Davidson, 1984). This is something that the family members in the test draw on, as the goal of the test entails inkblot-interpretation proposals and their acceptance or rejection. It is, therefore, a question of a type of negotiation even though there is not much at stake for the participants compared to e.g. the negotiation of the price of a house. Moreover, the participants do not necessarily have opposing interests as they may have in many institutional negotiations (see Arminen, 2005).

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As a frequent means to respond to a proposal is to use a response particle, it is not surprising that response particles in this significant sequential position have been addressed in the field of conversation analysis in different languages. For example, in English proposal sequences *hm*, *uh huh* and *yeah* have been identified as ''weak agreements'', which the proposer may take as being possibly rejection-implicative (Davidson, 1984). In similar vein, in Dutch *ja* and *oh* after a proposal have been called ''weak acceptance forms'' and the proposer does not treat them as tokens of acceptance. A mere *ja* may even be taken as the beginning of a final rejection. (Houtkoop, 1987:76, 81.) The Swedish affirmative response tokens *ja*, *aa*, *mm* and *jo*, on the other hand, have been found not to be rejection-implicative. Rather, they claim an understanding of the action engaged in within the prior turn and, when the preceding proposal is syntactically interrogative, they project the granting or acceptance of the proposal (Lindström, 1999:118). Nonetheless, on their own these response tokens are insufficient to accept a deferred action proposal and complete a claim of alignment with that action (Lindström, 1999:104).

In the present study, we contribute to the research on response particles by analysing the Finnish particles *mm*, *jaa* and *joo* which form whole turn-constructional units in response to an inkblot-interpretation proposal. The Finnish particles *joo* and *niin* have earlier been studied as responses to directives that ask ''the recipient to carry out some non-verbal action, that is, to perform an action other than providing information'' (Sorjonen, 2001a:93). Those directives, in most cases, correspond to the 'proposals for remote actions' studied in Dutch (Houtkoop, 1987:62) and the 'deferred action first pair parts' studied in Swedish (Lindström, 1999:106). The inkblot-interpretation proposals in our study, however, are different actions in that they do not advocate any future actions on the part of the recipient. They only advocate the recipient's agreement on and commitment to the content of the proposal. In this regard, the inkblot-interpretation proposals resemble proposals in workplace meetings that express the proposer's intentions as contingent on the recipient's approval (see Stevanovic, 2012a). Furthermore, a mundane counterpart of the proposals examined here could be a proposal concerning the colour of the new family car. Indeed, such a proposal is about figuring out whether something suits the recipient, or is convenient for him or her, and whether the recipient supports the content of the proposal. The proposals in this study also have features of assessments which claim knowledge as to what the speaker is assessing and which prefer agreement as a next action (see Pomerantz, 1984a; Heritage, 1984b:269; Tainio, 1996).

In the paper, we shall show that the particles *mm*, *jaa* and *joo* used as responses to a proposal in negotiation talk are an essential means of participating in the negotiation and that, despite sharing certain functions, each particle has its own typical functions (cf. e.g. Lindström, 1999:139 in which no analytical distinction between separate particles has been made). It will be argued that, as responses to proposals, the particles constitute a continuum with the particle *mm* at one end as the least encouraging response particle and the particle *joo* at the other end as the most encouraging. The particle *jaa* is shown to lie somewhere in between, as it does not project acceptance or rejection of the proposal. Instead, it implicates incompleteness of decision-making. Furthermore, we shall show that, like the similar particles in English, Dutch and Swedish, none of the Finnish particles under examination is sufficient on its own to claim acceptance of the proposed inkblot interpretation and to proceed further in the interaction test.

2. Earlier research on Finnish response particles

Finnish response particles have been examined through conversation analytic research from different perspectives since the 1980s. The research has focused, for example, on response particles as a means of back-channelling and feedback (Hakulinen and Sorjonen, 1986; Hakulinen, 1989; Sorjonen, 1988), as a way of confirming or reconfirming after a repeat (Sorjonen, 1996), as responses to *yes–no* questions (Sorjonen, 1997, 2001a,b), as responses to directives, affiliation-relevant utterances and informings (Sorjonen, 2001a), and as devices for displaying commitment in disagreements (Kangasharju, 1998).

Finnish response particles can be roughly divided into two main groups according to whether they receive the prior talk as somehow new information (Group 1, Table 1) or not (Group 2, Table 1) (Sorjonen, 1999; Hakulinen et al., 2004:§ 798). Although fundamental and important, this division is not sufficient to convey the multiple interactional meanings of the particles. Rather, the various meanings of the response particles are to be understood in the different sequential and

Table 1
Classification of Finnish response particles.

Group 1: Receive the prior talk as new information	Group 2: Register the prior talk; different functions
ai[a] ***(jaa)***, ***aha***, ***ahaa***, ***jaa***, ***jaha***, *jaaha*, *jahaa*, *mhy*, ***vai ni(in)***, *no*	***joo***, ***juu***, ***niin***, ***mm***, *(ei)*, *kyllä*, *just*, *juuri*, *aivan*

Adapted from Hakulinen et al. (2004):§ 798.

[a] **Bolded**: Particles found in the data.