



The functions of subjectless declarative main clauses in spoken Swedish

Camilla Wide *

University of Turku, Scandinavian Languages, 20014 University of Turku, Finland

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Abstract

Swedish is a V2 language in which verb forms do not express number or person. Subject expression is the general pattern. Subjectless clauses do nonetheless occur both in spoken and written Swedish. This paper explores subjectless declarative main clauses in conversational data. The analysis is based on 77 occurrences in eight conversations from two different corpora. The subjectless clauses occur in four types of contexts: comments on the situation or discourse, elaborations, final points or evaluations and brief responses. The analysis shows that speakers use subjectless clauses when they react to something said or done in the situation, but at the same time they avoid contributing (too much) topical substance. The clauses are used in situations where some kind of break occurs and cohesion needs to be marked. In their situated contexts, the clauses have a number of closely-related functions, such as drawing a conclusion based on the preceding discourse, making a point implicitly conveyed explicit, providing additional background parenthetically, aligning with other speakers and providing a minimal response to a request or question. The study thus shows that subjectless clauses are an established conversational practice in Swedish and are used in certain types of communicative situations.

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1. Introduction

In modern Swedish, in which verb forms do not express agreement in number or person, subject expression and V2 word order is the general pattern. Subjectless declarative main clauses do nonetheless occur to some extent in present-day Swedish, as they do in English, which is also a V2 language. The Swedish Academy Grammar (SAG 4:964) points out that (pronominal) subjects in clause-initial position may be omitted in declarative main clauses in spoken and informal written language, if the subjects are redundant in the context (cf. Quirk et al., 1985:895ff.; Biber et al., 1999:157f., 1104f. on English). In written language, occurrences can typically be found in short announcements such as advertisements, signs and headlines (SAG 4:692f.), as well as in diaries, letters and messages of different kinds, e.g. *Sänder en hälsning från ett härligt semesterparadis* 'I am Sending a greeting from a wonderful holiday paradise' (Wendt, 2006:284). The unexpressed subject is often the expletive *det* 'it', as in *Finns så mycket som kan spela in där* '(There) Is so much that can play a role in that' (SAG 4:965). Deictic or anaphoric subjects may also be left unexpressed, as in *Kommer strax* 'Be there in a minute', *Han låter ansiktet svartna ... Går barfota ... Bryr sig inte om ... Har ofta ...* 'He lets his face turn dark ... Walks barefoot ... Does not care about ... Has often ...' (SAG 4:692f.). As Mörnjö (2002) and Lindström and Karlsson (2005) have shown, subjectless clauses also occur in spoken Swedish, as in *Ja, var man festar. ... Börjar alltid med en liten förfest oftast* 'Yes, where do you party? Starts always with a little warm-up mostly' (Mörnsjö, 2002:182).

* Tel.: +358 50 525 8629.

E-mail address: camilla.wide@utu.fi.

However, Mörsjö and Lindström & Karlsson analyze subjectless declarative main clauses as part of the more general V1 pattern in Swedish, in which different constituents in clause-initial position may be left unexpressed, for example *Ø Kan vi göra* ‘(That) Can we do’ (Mörsjö, 2002:58). V1 clauses deviate from the basic XVS word order in Swedish, where X stands for the clausal base or topic constituent that generally has to be filled in declarative main clauses. When a clausal constituent is placed in the topic position, the position of the constituent in the clause that follows the base is empty (Lindström and Karlsson, 2005:98ff.), cf. *Ni får (-) kaffe snart* ‘You will get coffee soon’, *Kaffe får ni (-) snart* ‘Coffee you will get soon’, *Snart får ni kaffe (-)* ‘Soon you will get coffee.’ According to Mörsjö (2002:80), declaratives with an empty clausal base typically develop the discourse either by topic progression or linear thematic progression, e.g. *Och här har vi en bild. Kommer från Karin i Sollentuna* ‘And here we have a picture. Comes from Karin in Sollentuna.’ She, however, also notes that V1 clauses with a missing element “often appear in (quick) answers to questions [...] or comments to a previous utterance” (p. 82). In a similar fashion, Lindström and Karlsson (2005:125) note that “[q]uite often the effect of V1 is as if something was said in a passing, even in a laconic manner [...]”. They conclude that V1 declaratives of different types form a communicative resource which provides a method of “constructing sequential discourse cohesion by, in an explicitly structural sense, building on a prior utterance by the same speaker or another speaker” (p. 125). V1 clauses can therefore be described as event-dependent or appended (p. 101).

Lindström and Karlsson (2005:104) do not assume that there is any functional difference between V1 clauses with or without subjects, and they note as well that “one or other variant may be statistically more typical of certain discourse environments (perhaps conditioned by the subject matter)”. Oh (2005, 2006), who has studied zero anaphora in conversational data in English, however, shows that clauses without subjects tend to be used in certain types of contexts in English, for example when a prior TCU is resumed after a parenthetical insert, when a second saying is expressed due to a lack of response after the first saying, when the sequentiality of events is highlighted in a story and when disalignment is being avoided. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore in what types of communicative situations subjectless clauses occur in Swedish conversations, how they relate to the preceding and following discourse and what functions they have. Like Oh, I focus on conversational data only.

The framework I work within is Interactional Linguistics (see e.g. Couper-Kuhlen and Selting, 2001; Lindström, 2006). My data consist of a collection of 77 occurrences from two different corpora of spoken Swedish. In Section 2, I present an overview of the occurrences in the data. The use and function of subjectless clauses in situated contexts are analyzed in Section 3. The paper ends with a summary and conclusions in Section 4.

2. Data and overview of occurrences

In order to analyze the recurrent pattern of subjectless declarative main clauses in spoken Swedish, I have collected occurrences from conversations in the corpora of the projects *Grammar in Conversation: A Study of Swedish* (GRIS) and *The Language and Music Worlds of High School Students* (GSM). The GRIS corpus includes various types of conversations, e.g. everyday conversations, focus group discussions, TV discussions and different types of institutional conversations. The GSM corpus consists of 25 group discussions with high school students on music styles and attitudes to music based on music samples played to the participants in the situation. The discussions with 2–5 participants are moderated by a researcher, but she keeps a low profile throughout and lets the students discuss in a lively manner. Three randomly chosen discussions from the GSM corpus have been included in the data.¹

The data consist of approximately 4.5 h (278 min) of speech in total. Table 1 shows an overview of the conversations and the number of occurrences found in each. As the figures show, subjectless declarative main clauses do not form a particularly frequent phenomenon in Swedish conversations. The relative frequency per minute varies between 0.13 in the focus group and family discussions and 0.47 in the music program.

Table 2 shows what the subjects of the clauses in the data would be if expressed. Since verbs do not convey number or person in present-day Swedish, this information must be inferred from the context. In 26 cases the subject would, if expressed, be the first person singular pronoun *jag* ‘I’, in two cases the first person plural pronoun *vi* ‘we’, and in two cases the second person singular *du* ‘you’. Third person subjects are the most frequent type of unexpressed subjects in the data. In five of the 46 cases, the subject would be the indefinite pronoun *man* ‘one’, and in 12 cases the expletive pronoun *det* ‘it’.² There are 29 unexpressed third person subjects that fall into ‘other types,’ 21 of which are singular referents.

¹ The first discussions in the Word-file with all the transcriptions were included in the data (one discussion was left out due to problems with the sound file).

² By expletive *det* I refer to cases where the syntactic function of *det* would be to hold the place of the subject e.g. in clauses where a meaningful component (such as an indefinite NP) is postposed (cf. example 1) and in clauses with verbs that take *det* as a formal or “dummy” subject (cf. example 3).

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