

Agreement or crystallization: Patterns of 1st and 2nd person subjects and verbs of cognition in Finnish conversational interaction



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Abstract

Discourse studies indicate a tendency for verbs of cognition to co-occur with 1st person subjects. This article looks more closely into the patterning of verbs of cognition with different kinds of subjects in Finnish conversation. Based on a morphosyntactically coded database of conversational Finnish, I show that there are several recurring patterns with verbs of cognition which can be viewed as “emergent discourse patterns” (cf. Scheibman, 2002) or prefabs (Bybee, 2006). The analysis suggests that crystallization of recurrent patterns does in fact occur; this crystallization, however, shows features that are specific to individual verbs and types of subject (zero vs. pronominal vs. full NP). Also relevant are polarity and tense. It is shown that the components of these prefabs retain associations with other occurrences of the lexical elements of the components. Furthermore, the prefabs are associated with the more general constructions from which they arose. Thus, the patterns in question are based on regular grammatical processes such as agreement, but at the same time, exhibit certain features of crystallization.

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1. Introduction

Discourse studies indicate a general, cross-linguistic tendency for verbs of cognition to co-occur with 1st person subjects. In Scheibman's (2002:63) data representing American English conversation, 1st person subjects appeared most often with verbs of cognition (32% of 1st person singular subjects; see also Tao, 2001, Kärkkäinen, 2003, 2007 for American English; Kaltenböck, 2007 for British English). Tao (1996:25, 26, 124) reports that in Mandarin 1st person subjects are typical of clauses with low transitivity and verbs of cognition or saying. Travis (2007:115–116) found a strong positive correlation between expressed subjects and psychological verbs in 1st person singular forms in Colombian Spanish conversation (see also Torres Cacoullos and Travis, 2011:252 for New Mexican Spanish and Posio, 2011 for Peninsular Spanish spoken discourse). The observed cross-linguistic tendency can be related to the fact that it is much more natural to attribute cognitive states or processes to oneself than to others.

There are also a number of studies indicating that in English, 1st and sometimes also 2nd person subjects form such regular and frequent combinations with certain cognition verbs that they crystallize into fixed units, such as *I think*, *you know*, *I mean* etc. (see e.g. Kärkkäinen, 2003; Östman, 1981). Thompson and Mulac (1991) call these epistemic

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Table 1

Person markers in Finnish (with the verb *tulla* 'come' as an example).

Person	Singular		Translation
	Pronominal marker	Verbal marker	
1	<i>m(in)ä</i>	<i>tule-n</i>	'I come'
2	<i>s(in)ä</i>	<i>tule-t</i>	'you come'
3	<i>hän/se</i>	<i>tule-e</i>	'she/he come'

parentheticals, and Kärkkäinen (2003, 2007) argues that the epistemic phrase together with the associated utterance performs a certain stance-taking action in interaction. Laury and Okamoto (2011) compare the English *I mean* and the Japanese *teyuuka* and propose that although the two constructions differ syntactically and semantically, they have similar pragmaticized uses. They suggest that these constructions function as pragmatic parentheticals. In a study on Estonian interaction, Keevallik (2003) found a close correlation between 1st person subjects and verbs of cognition (such as *teadma* 'know' and *arvata* 'think'). She further suggests that in Estonian the phrase *mai tea ~ ma ei tea* 'I don't know' has features of "a disaligning or disjunctive particle or epistemic adverb" (Keevallik, 2003:98). Helasvuo (2001a) has suggested the possible occurrence of similar crystallization processes in Finnish too.

This article is based on a morphosyntactically coded database of conversational Finnish. The data show that 1st person singular subjects indeed tend to co-occur with verbs of cognition. A closer look at the data reveals, however, that there are only a couple of verbs which make up the majority of such cases (cf. also Torres Cacoullos & Travis, 2011:252 on Colombian Spanish conversation). I will show that the patterns of co-occurrence observed in the data are largely based on the co-occurrence patterns of certain verbs and types of subject. Furthermore, I will show that the elements in the recurrent patterns retain associations with the more general grammatical construction out of which they arose (cf. Bybee, 2010:37).

The article consists of five sections. In Section 2 I give an overview of subject expression in Finnish. In Section 3 I introduce the data and the coding scheme applied. In Section 4 I discuss the correlations found between different verb types and form of subject (zero vs. pronoun), and in Section 5 I look more closely at the patterns found in the data.

2. Patterns of subject expression in Finnish

In Finnish, the predicate verb agrees with the subject in number (singular vs. plural) and person (1st, 2nd, and 3rd; see e.g. Sulkala & Karjalainen, 1992). Only nominative subjects can trigger agreement. In this article, I concentrate on singular forms. Table 1 illustrates the basic pattern.

As Table 1 indicates, person marking can be expressed through both pronominal and verbal markers. In the 1st and 2nd person pronominal markers can be left unexpressed, with the verbal marker alone coding the subject. There is interesting variation, however, in the preferred patternings in different varieties.

Helasvuo and Inaba (2013) show that in the earliest records of written Finnish from the 16th century, pronominal markers are used together with verbal markers for subject expression in the great majority of cases (90% of 1st person singular forms). In the course of the development of the standard written variety, however, there has been a tendency to constrain the proportion of pronominal subjects. The use of pronominal subjects has been debated from time to time among the prescriptivist authorities, and gradually a norm has been formulated restricting the use of pronominal subjects to functions of emphasis or contrast. Arguments against the use of pronominal markers include economy and avoidance of redundancy. (On the development of this norm, see Strellman, 2005.)

Present-day written standard Finnish shows a clear preference for single-marking, i.e. for using the verbal person suffix as the sole marker coding the subject in 1st person (79% of 1st person singular forms, Helasvuo, forthcoming-a). Pronominal markers may co-occur with verbal markers to serve special discourse purposes, such as contrast (cf. Hachohen and Schegloff, 2006 on the expression of subject pronouns in conversational Hebrew).

In present-day conversational Finnish, however, double-marking is the norm in the expression of 1st and 2nd person reference: pronominal markers are used together with verbal markers to code the subject. Single-marking (verbal person markers only) does occur, but its use is fairly limited (only 11% of 1st person singular forms exhibited single-marking; Helasvuo, forthcoming-b and Table 3). It is mainly restricted to certain conversational contexts, such as to the final part of a question-answer adjacency pair (see Duvallon, 2006; Helasvuo, forthcoming-b).

Interestingly enough, present-day colloquial varieties of online discourse align with the written standard rather than conversational spoken language with regard to this grammatical marking. Data on interactions with text messages (Heikkilä, 2006; Helasvuo, forthcoming-a) and chats (Meriläinen, 2011) show a clear preference for single-marking (74–81% of 1st person singular forms had single-marking in the data reported in these studies; cf. Travis, 2007 on genre effects

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