

DEFINITENESS IN FINNISH

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Definiteness is a particularly thorny corner in Finnish syntax. It has proved notoriously difficult to define and describe explicitly, and has been the subject of great controversy among Finnish linguists for at least 70 years. It also causes well-nigh insuperable language learning problems, both for Finns learning languages which have a clearer expression of definiteness, and for non-Finns struggling with the bewilderingly diffuse realization of this category in Finnish.

What follows is an attempt to outline the present "state of the art" in this area of Finnish, and to compare it with certain features of English and Polish. (The question of genericity, however, will not be discussed here.)

1. THE TERM *SPESES*¹

The general category of definiteness appears in Finnish grammar under the name of *spesies*, a term which was introduced by the Swedish linguist Noreen (1904), who distinguished three categories of *spesies* in Swedish: definite, indefinite, and 'general'. The Finnish Language Commission adopted the term *spesies* in their 1915 report, but they defined the category as having only two members: definite *spesies*, applying to objects which were 'known or previously mentioned'; and indefinite *spesies*, for objects which were 'unknown or not previously mentioned' (38; all translations are my own). It has, of course, since been pointed out that 'known' need not imply 'previously mentioned' but also 'known by virtue of the situation'; and that the terms of the opposition are better thought of as simply 'known' or 'unknown'.

¹ The Finnish spelling will be used throughout.

It was early realized that "in Finnish there is no one way of expressing the category of *spesies* which could be compared e.g. to the articles of many Indo-European languages" (Ahlman 1928:134). Attempts were therefore made to list and describe all the various ways in which the 'known/unknown' opposition could be expressed.² (E. g. Ahlman 1928; Hakulinen 1946; Ikola 1954). These have included the following: nominative vs. partitive case, nominative vs. genitive case, partitive vs. accusative case, word order, number concord between subject and verb, number of verb after subject preceded by a cardinal, agreement between subject and modifier, pronouns used as determiners, intonation, stress, whether or not the noun concerned is psychological subject or psychological predicate, capital vs. lower case initial letters, and various combinations of these factors acting together.

Two central factors were case — particularly the partitive case — and subject-verb concord. The relations between these, existential sentences and *spesies* were the subject of a still controversial debate in *Virittäjä*, the journal of the Finnish Language Society, in the 1950's.³

Eventually a suggestion was made by Siro (1957), which has since been taken up by other linguists (Ikola 1964, Itkonen 1975; Enkvist 1975). Siro argued that *spesies* was not one thing, but two. On the one hand, it concerns whether the noun is thought of as denoting a total or partial amount — this Siro called quantitative *spesies*: if the amount denoted by the noun is considered as total, the quantitative *spesies* is definite; and if partial, indefinite. On the other hand, *spesies* concerns whether the noun has a known or unknown referent — this he called notive *spesies*; and this too may be definite (if the referent is known) or indefinite (referent unknown). What is meant exactly by 'known' is not discussed in detail, but it may be taken to mean 'uniquely identifiable'.

Notive *spesies* corresponds to the system of reference which determines the use of the English articles, and quantitative *spesies* is to some extent related to the count/mass distinction, as will be seen below.

I shall now discuss each *spesies*-type in more detail, and finally consider the relations between them.

2. QUANTITATIVE SPESIES

Quantitative *spesies* (hereafter QS) is expressed primarily by case: the partitive case shows indefinite QS, and the nominative (for subject nouns and predicate complement nouns) or accusative (for object nouns) show definite QS.

² The terms 'express' and 'show' are used very loosely in this paper, which is more a preliminary discussion than a formal analysis.

³ The debate is reviewed and discussed in German by Schlachter (1958).

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| (1) <i>Liha</i> (nom.) <i>oli pöydällä.</i> | ('The meat was on the table.') |
| (2) <i>Lihaa</i> (part.) <i>oli pöydällä.</i> | ('Some meat was on the table.') |
| (3) <i>Söimme lihan</i> (acc.). | ('We ate the meat.') |
| (4) <i>Söimme lihaa</i> (part.). | ('We ate (some) meat.') |

However, it is by no means always possible to express QS in this way. There are a number of conditions which must be fulfilled, of which the first concerns the concept of *divisibility* in Finnish (see e.g. Barrett 1953).

Opinions differ as to whether this term is best described as syntactic or semantic, but it will be treated here as semantic. A noun in Finnish is thought of as being either divisible or non-divisible. Non-divisible nouns are those whose referents are conceived of as individual units, which can be multiplied but not divided: thus *poika* ('boy') can be multiplied (one can think of boys, three boys), but a divided boy, part or parts of a boy, cannot still be conceived of as 'boy' (in non-cannibalistic cultures, at least). Divisible nouns, however, can be divided in this way: *vesi* ('water') is conceptually divisible, since a less-than-total amount of water is still 'water'.

This appears similar to the English count/mass distinction, but there is a difference: plural nouns in Finnish are also divisible. *Pojat* ('boys') can be divided conceptually into individual units, individual boys. (Plural invariable nouns, such as *kasvot* ('face') are, however, conceptually non-divisible.) Thus in Finnish the major distinction is not between count and mass, but between singular count (non-divisible) on one hand, and plural count and mass (both divisible) on the other. The Finnish distinction neatly describes the distribution of (*an*) (for indefinite non-divisibles) vs. *some* or the zero article (for indefinite divisibles) in English.

The *first condition* for the expression of QS is thus that the noun must be conceptually divisible: logically enough, only divisible nouns can be considered capable of denoting a total or partial quantity at all.

The *second condition* is that the noun must be functioning either as subject, predicate complement or object in its clause, since only these positions allow the nominative or accusative cases.

The third and fourth conditions relate to the expression of the QS of the object noun only, and concern the complex nature of the partitive case, which has a veritable multitude of functions,⁴ only one of which is to show indefinite QS. It is also used to express irresultative (imperfective) aspect:⁵ if the verb is 'inherently irresultative' (e.g. if it is a verb of perception or emotion), or if it is used in an irresultative sense, the direct object must be in the partitive, as illustrated by the following examples.

⁴ See e.g. Donison (1957), Ikola (1972), Itkonen (1975).

⁵ Finnish can also show irresultative aspect overtly in the (non-stative) verb, although it rarely needs to; and in such cases the direct object also takes the partitive.

(5) *Rakastan sinua* (part.). ('I love you.' — Inherently irresultative.)

(6) *Mies ampui linnun* (acc.). ('The man shot the bird.' — Resultative sense: the bird was shot dead.)

(7) *Mies ampui lintua* (part.). ('The man shot and wounded the bird', or '...shot at...' or '...was shooting...'. — Irresultative sense: several equivalents are possible, depending on how the irresultativeness is interpreted.)

This rule for the partitive takes precedence over the expression of QS. The *third condition* for the expression of QS is therefore that the verb must be resultative or used in a resultative sense. Sentences with a verb that could be interpreted irresultatively and a divisible object in the partitive are thus ambiguous: example (4) above could either have the interpretation given there — 'resultative action plus indefinite QS' — or the interpretation 'irresultative action plus ambiguous or unexpressed QS', in which case the verb might be rendered 'we were eating'.

Yet another function of the partitive is to mark the direct object in negative sentences.⁶ This rule for the partitive overrides both QS expression and the irresultative rule, so that the *fourth condition*, for the expression of the QS of object nouns, is that the sentence must be (semantically) non-negative.

The fifth and last condition concerns a restriction on the use of the partitive for (unquantified) subject nouns: the subject can only be in the partitive if the verb is existential,⁷ in which case the verb is invariably singular, regardless of the number of the subject. But given an existential verb, negation alone is enough to produce a partitive subject, regardless of the QS. The *fifth condition*, therefore, is that for QS to be expressed in the subject noun the verb must be both existential and non-negative.⁸

Conditions 2 - 5 are restrictions on when QS may be realized by case. It should be pointed out, however, that QS may also be expressed overtly by quantifiers such as *muutama* ('a few') etc., in which case these conditions need not hold.

Despite the apparent diversity of these functions of the partitive they do seem to have something in common. The idea of partialness or incompleteness can be related to nouns (indefinite QS) and to verbs (irresultative aspect)⁹; and

⁶ These include sentences that may be syntactically non-negative, yet express doubt or expect a negative answer, etc.

⁷ See Moreau (1972) for a discussion of why this should be so.

⁸ It would, however, be more accurate to say that in order to allow a QS contrast to be expressed in the subject the verb must be potentially existential, because if a divisible subject is in the nominative — showing definite QS — the verb may lose its existential force. See examples (1) and (2) above: (1) would hardly be classed as an existential sentence. Opinions differ on precisely how the Finnish existential sentence should be defined; see Schlaechter (1958).

⁹ This does not apply only to Finnish, of course. Dahl and Karlson (1975) compare the functions of the Finnish partitive with those of the Russian genitive: both cases can

negation is surely the very essence of incompleteness, since the action of the verb then never occurs at all, and the object is as far as possible from being totally involved. Several linguists have attempted to formulate this common element. Ikola (1972) speaks of whether or not the action expressed by the verb has "caused in the situation a change of such a kind that the action could not be continued" (9); if there is no such change, the object is in the partitive. Similarly, Dahl and Karlsson (1975) suggest that the decisive factor is whether or not there is a crucial change in the state of the referent of the object. And at the end of his thesis Dension (1957: 262) concludes that the essence of the partitive is "the implication of indefiniteness and incompleteness".

Nevertheless, as Dahl and Karlsson point out, there are problems with the *spesies* of quantified nouns which have yet to be solved (and which will not be touched on here). Also, the fact that more than one distinct interpretation is often possible for sentences containing a partitive object suggests that, for contrastive purposes at least, the three major functions of the case are best described separately. (See e. g. the ambiguity of (4) discussed under the third condition, above.)

3. NOTIVE SPESIES

Notive *species* (NS) is defined in terms of whether or not the noun has a known referent.

It has been said that there is a link between NS and stress (e. g. Hakulinen 1946; Siro 1964; see also Szwedek 1975). Yet it may be argued that this link is, at best, an indirect one. Sentence stress indicates the information structure of the clause (cf. Halliday 1970), and it is reasonable to expect that nouns with unknown referents should normally be new information, and hence stressed. But the sentence stress of new information by no means invariably falls on nouns with unknown referents; indeed, it need not fall on a noun at all. If it does fall on a noun, it indicates no more than that the noun in question represents new information. Of course, if the referent of a noun is 'known' (notively definite) because it has already been mentioned, then this noun is unlikely to be stressed as new information, since by definition it is in fact 'given', not new.¹⁰ On the other hand, a noun that is 'known' because of the

show imperfective aspect, and both are affected by negation. Szwedek (1975:172 ff) argues that the perfective/imperfective aspectual contrast in Polish can be shown by word order, which in turn can also be used to show whether a noun is coreferential or not. Coreferentiality, however, would be treated under notive *spesies* in Finnish; but see section 4 below.

¹⁰ It should be noted, however, that 'new information' is not an ambiguous term; see Dahl (1976).

situation, not because of a previous mention, can readily be made new information and stressed since it has not been 'given'. Unknown referents tend to be stressed not because they are unknown referents, but because they are normally new information. The relation between NS and stress therefore seems to be more a question of logical deduction than of syntax, and it is misleading to describe stress as 'expressing' NS. Rather: stress expresses information structure, information structure is (partly) determined by previous context, and previous context is one factor which can make the referent of a noun 'known'.

Notive *spesies* in Finnish need not be overtly expressed at all; some nouns, simply by virtue of their meaning, already have unique — and hence known — referents, and their definite NS needs no further expression. These nouns include proper nouns; nouns normally considered to have, automatically, referents made unique by the context or situation, such as *aurinko* ('the sun') etc; and possessed nouns, with a possessive suffix and/or a genitive modifier, such as *isäni* ('my father'), *talon* (gen.) *isäntä* ('the master of the house').

Overt syntactic expression is primarily of two kinds. The first involves word order, and it can be usefully described in terms of the thematic structure of the sentence, provided that *theme* and *rheme* are defined formally, with reference to word order alone. The following sentences illustrate the point.

- (8) *Mies oli keittiössä.* ('The man was in the kitchen.')
- (9) *Keittiössä oli mies.* ('In the kitchen was a man.')

In (8) *mies* ('man') must be interpreted as being notively definite since it appears in the theme. In (9) the reverse is the case: *mies* has indefinite NS, appearing in the rheme.

The second syntactic means of expressing NS is the use of certain function words, in particular the pronouns *se* ('it'; the plural form is *ne*) and *joku* ('someone'). Their use — especially that of *se* — is frequent in colloquial speech. (Compare *ten* and *jakiś* in Polish.) Hence the difference between (10) and (11).

- (10) *Se mies oli keittiössä.* ('The man was in the kitchen.')
- (11) *Joku mies oli keittiössä.* ('A man was in the kitchen.')

Szwedek (1975:121 ff) argues that there are certain cases where the use of the Polish pronouns is essential, a fact which confirms their status as 'substitute articles'. In

- (12) *Kiedy wszedłem zobaczyłem, że jakiś mężczyzna stoi przy oknie.* ('When I entered I saw that a man was standing by the window.')

jakiś is apparently essential if a non-coreferential interpretation is wanted, since otherwise the thematic position of *mężczyzna* ('man') would produce a reading with a known referent. Precisely the same is true of Finnish:

- (12a) *Kun tulin sisään näin, että joku mies seiso iikkunan luona.*

If *joku* is omitted, and if the same word order is preserved, *mies* ('man') can no longer have indefinite NS.

The case is the same if a notively definite interpretation is required for a noun in the rheme: the pronoun is essential.

- (13) ?*Kun tulin sisään näin, että iikkunan luona seiso se mies.*

True, this sentence sounds rather strange; and it is interesting that the corresponding Polish is also odd, if just acceptable:

- (13a) ?*Kiedy wszedłem zobaczyłem, że przy oknie stoi ten mężczyzna.*

The English, too, is slightly unnatural:

- (13b) ?*When I entered I saw that by the window was standing the man.*

(This is somewhat improved if *there* is added: ... *there was standing* ...)

These three languages, therefore, seem to dislike this conflict between the interpretation determined by the 'definite pronoun-cum-article' and the rhematic position. A different word order would be preferred in each case to resolve the conflict.

However, for both Finnish and Polish it may be suggested that these two syntactic means of expressing NS are not of equal strength, as it were: in both languages thematically determined NS can be overruled by function words.

The normal thematic determination can also be overruled if the noun in question has been situationally or contextually determined. Thus in

- (14) *Ovella oli Pauli.* ('At the door was Pauli.')

the noun *Pauli* must, by virtue of its status as a proper noun, have a known referent, despite its position in the rheme.

Yet the normal situational/contextual determination may in turn be overruled by function words; or, more accurately, the presence of function words may preclude the situational/contextual determination which would otherwise normally hold. In

- (15) *Joku Pauli oli ovella.* ('some Pauli (or other) was at the door', or 'Someone who says his name is Pauli...')

the noun *Pauli* must have indefinite NS, despite its proper noun status and also despite its thematic position.

The three main ways in which NS can be expressed in Finnish, therefore, appear to constitute a hierarchy: if there are function words (substitute articles) they express it; if there are none, it may be 'covertly' expressed by the situation or context; and if the NS is still unexpressed, it is revealed by the word order alone.

The influence of case and QS on NS is discussed below.

4. THE RELATIONS BETWEEN NOTIVE AND QUANTITATIVE SPECIES

Although *species* has been considered so far in terms of its two types, it is difficult to represent them as being entirely distinct, of equivalent status, and independent of each other. There are many cases where the NS is expressed only indirectly, via the context or situation. Further, there are cases where the definiteness or indefiniteness of one of the *species*-types seems to be incompatible with the indefiniteness or definiteness of the other type, for a given noun.

For example, if the QS of a given noun is indefinite, it is difficult to see how the NS of this noun could be definite: indefinite QS surely precludes the possibility of a known referent for the partitive noun, although such a noun may of course be modified by a noun with a known referent. It has been argued (e. g. in Siro 1964) that in the sentence

(16) *Tämän sarjan (gen.) osia (part.) on sitojalla.*

(‘Some parts of this series are at the binder’s.’)

osia (‘parts’) has indefinite QS (since it is partitive), yet definite NS because of the preceding genitive modifier and because of its thematic position. But this seems a strange view: we still do not know which parts are concerned; these referents are not known, not identifiable, although we know which class they belong to. *Osia* must surely have indefinite NS here.

It thus seems that indefinite QS entails indefinite NS. Similarly, it can be argued that definite QS entails definite NS. In examples (1) and (3) above, if the amount of meat is understood — and stated — to be total, the knowledge of this surely implies a known referent: hence the *the* in English. The same may apply to divisible plural nouns in the nominative or accusative.

However, it is fair to point out that opinion is still divided on this latter claim. There are problem sentences such as

(17) *Koivussa on isot lehdet (nom. pl.).* (‘On the birch (there) are big leaves.’)

where the subject noun can be analysed either (a) as divisible and showing definite QS (and indefinite NS: rhematic position), or (b) as conceptually non-divisible, a *plurale tantum*, in which case QS does not apply. Itkonen (1975:24) argues for analysis (b) on various semantic and formal¹¹ grounds; and the description of *species* can certainly be simplified if his approach is adopted, since it then becomes possible to say that definite and indefinite QS entail definite and indefinite NS, respectively,¹² and that the methods

¹¹ E.g. the subject will not take *kaikki* (‘all’), which Itkonen suggests as one formal test for ‘divisible and quantitatively definite’ as opposed to non-divisible nouns.

¹² And in this case a third analysis of the subject noun in (17) becomes possible: divisible with definite QS and therefore also definite NS. There is little agreement on this point.

for expressing NS discussed above in section 3 only need apply for nouns which cannot show QS.

From the point of view of the contrastive analysis of definiteness, moreover, the description can be streamlined further if QS is omitted altogether, as ultimately corresponding more to the quantifier system than to the articles in English. The QS-determined NS can then simply be represented as *case-determined* NS, which dominates all the other methods discussed above. The hierarchy proposed in section 3 then receives an additional step at the top: if the relevant conditions of section 2 hold, NS is expressed by case; if this does not apply, NS is expressed by function words; if there are no function words NS may be expressed indirectly, by the situation or context; and if the NS is still unexpressed it is revealed by word order alone.

We thus appear to have come back full circle, to one category of *species*, with various means of expression, corresponding to the article system in English.

It will have become evident however, that many problems concerning definiteness in Finnish still remain open, and many require a more detailed discussion and a more formalized representation than that given here.

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