

SOME REMARKS ON WORD ORDER AND DEFINITENESS
IN FINNISH AND ENGLISH

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In his study of definiteness in Polish, Aleksander Szwedek argues that there are three possible ways of showing the definite vs. indefinite distinction in Polish:

- a. pronouns;
- b. stress and intonation;
- c. word order. (Szwedek 1974a)

In the light of the little evidence available, it would seem that these devices are operative in Finnish, too, although the primary function of stress appears to be to signal information structure rather than the identifiability of the referent.¹ Of course, information and reference are interlinked since the question of definiteness necessarily involves the question of whether something is "known" or "new": but the two are not co-extensive, and should therefore be kept separate in analysis.²

¹ For a discussion, see Wiik (1977) and Chesterman (1977). To put the matter simply: when familiarity increases, stress decreases. Marked stress, then indicates that the information is "new".

² The following example shows that givenness does not necessarily imply definiteness:

A: John bought a house.

B: No, you are wrong. It was Harry who bought a house.

Obviously, "house" must be old information on the second mention; nevertheless, it is not grammatically definite.

Furthermore, Andrew Chesterman (1977) has argued that, in Finnish, the grammatical devices for expressing definiteness form a hierarchy: function words ("substitute articles") override word order.

Although there are scattered remarks in the literature to the effect that in Finnish stress and word order have some kind of function as markers of the psychological subject, or of what has been previously mentioned, no comprehensive study of definiteness has appeared (see Chesterman 1977 for a survey of the state of the art). This is probably due to the fact that Finnish has no system of articles and that, further, the published literature provides very little information about stress and word order.

However, some recent studies of word order (e.g. Hakulinen 1976, Heinämäki 1976) look promising in that they are amenable to contrastive analysis, and one can only hope that more work along these lines will appear soon. And one can only hope that phoneticians will do their bit, too, so that a large-scale study of definiteness in English and Finnish can be carried out. In the meantime one must confine oneself to rather limited problems in this area of grammar.

In this paper I shall look at the distribution of the subjects of English and Finnish passives. I shall argue that in the Finnish equivalents of the English passive sentence, the nouns which can occur in subject position are restricted to what, in English, are definite nouns. Of course, the restriction that the subject should be definite holds for some English sentence types as well (consider the ungrammaticality of **A book belongs to Henry*); however, since English has a morphologically realized marker of definiteness, one would expect there to be less constraint on placing nouns in subject position in English than there is in Finnish. The constructions discussed in this paper show that this is indeed the case.

Furthermore, it will be seen that since there is less freedom in placing nouns in subject position in Finnish than there is in English, certain kinds of English passive sentences have no formal equivalent in Finnish.³

The general principle governing the definiteness of Finnish nouns in the constructions dealt with in this paper can be roughly formulated as follows: In phonologically unmarked sentences, nouns occurring in subject position (i.e. preverbal position) are interpreted as definite.⁴ (Hereafter this principle will be called the No Initial Indefinite Constraint.)

³ The notion "formal equivalent" is used in the following sense:

Two sentences are formally equivalent if they show identical deep categories and identical transformational derivations.

"Translation equivalence" is related to "formal equivalence" in the following way: "translation equivalence" is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition of "formal equivalence".

⁴ I shall assume that the sentences discussed in this paper have unmarked focus.

Although only two sentence types are discussed in this paper, the above restriction appears to hold for a number of other sentence types, as can be seen from the following sentences:

1. Kirja on pöydällä.
(book is table-on)
The book is on the table.
2. Pöydällä on kirja.
(table-on is book)
There is a book on the table.
3. Talon rakensi Henry.
(house-accusative built Henry)
The house was built by Henry.
4. Henry rakensi talon.
(pronounced: Henry rakensi talon.)
(Henry built house-accusative)
Henry built a house.
5. Henryllä on kirja.
(Henry-on is book)
Henry has a book.
6. Kirja on Henryllä.
(book is Henry-on)
Henry has the book (i.e. he is using it).

To illustrate how definiteness and word order are related in English and Finnish, two constructions will be discussed here: the simple passive (*Henry was seen*) and the agentive passive (*Henry was seen by Mary*).

It is possible to interpret initial nouns as indefinite, but those sentences are clearly contrastive. Consider the following:

Talon rakensi HENRY.

(house-accusative built Henry)

"It was Henry who built a house/the house".

I shall also assume that the sentences with indefinite subjects discussed in this paper are used to introduce a discourse topic, i.e. that they establish a "first mention" of the referent involved. I find this specification absolutely necessary, as it seems to me that much of the muddle that one finds in discussions of the problem of definiteness is simply caused by the failure to distinguish between sentences that are not alike.

Furthermore, the discussion will be restricted to referring expressions, as non-referring expressions exhibit a number of syntactic peculiarities that would unnecessarily complicate my presentation.

THE SIMPLE PASSIVE

In Finnish sentences corresponding to the English passive, the verb is marked for voice by a specific ending. I shall indicate this by the label "passive" (it is worth noting that "passive" can be added to both transitive and intransitive verbs). With the exception of personal pronouns, the underlying object surfacing in subject position is a nominative, or perhaps one should say that it is "unmarked" (in Finnish surface objects are usually accusatives). The following sentences show the correspondence:

7. Henry was seen.
8. Henrynähtiin.
(Henry saw-passive)

The English passive presents no problems for Finnish word order so long as the object is definite:

9. The bottle was broken.
(Answers the question: "What happened to the bottle?")
10. Pullo rikottiin.
(bottle broke-passive)

It seems to me that (10) is a natural translation of (9). It also seems that there is no natural context where (10) would be a translation of *A bottle was broken*.⁵ How, then, is one to render *A bottle was broken*? One's immediate reaction is to move the noun into complement position, which, as can be seen from sentence (5) above, is not subject to the No Initial Indefinite Constraint. However, the result of doing this is not quite satisfactory, either. Consider the following sentence:

11. Rikottiin pullo.
(broke-passive bottle)

The noun is certainly indefinite (i.e. it can be translated "a bottle"); but the sentence sounds odd.⁶ Sentence (11) is only natural if it is colloquial for "We broke a bottle"; but that, of course, is not the intended meaning.

In order to discover the equivalent of *A bottle was broken* I shall place the sentence in context and then determine what kind of Finnish sentence would occur in that context. Consider the following situation: A asks, "What happened?" and B answers, "A bottle was broken". It would seem that the following are good candidates for translation equivalents:

⁵ I assume, of course, that these sentences have unmarked stress. See note 4 above.

⁶ For conditions under which verb-initial sentences occur in Finnish, see Hakulinen (1976 : 8 ff.).

12. Siellä rikottiin pullo.
(there broke-passive bottle)
13. Joku rikkoi pullon.
(somebody broke bottle-accusative)⁷

Obviously, (13) is not formally equivalent to the English sentence. Sentence (12) shows the passive verb, and the indefinite noun is where one would expect to find it, but the subject slot is filled with a locative.⁸ Unlike some other languages, Finnish has not developed a system of formal subjects; nevertheless, it seems to require that in these constructions, empty subject slots should be filled with something or other. In English, indefinite nouns can freely occur in subject position. In Finnish something else must be placed there. The following sentences will illustrate the difference:

14. A lot of money is needed for this project.
15. Tähän projektiin tarvitaan paljon rahaa.
(this project-illative need-passive a lot of money)
16. A letter was sent to Henry.
17. Henrylle lähetettiin kirje.
(Henry-to sent-passive letter)
18. A school is being built near my house.
19. Taloni lähelle rakennetaan koulua.
(house-my near build-passive school)

Occasionally one comes across English sentences that allow (at least) two translations, one of which appears to contradict the No Initial Indefinite principle. The reason for this is that, in Finnish, promoting an element to subject can mean two things: either the promoted element is old information or that it is definite. Consider the following sentences:

20. Money is needed for this project.
21. Tähän projektiin tarvitaan rahaa.
22. Rahaa tarvitaan tähän projektiin.
(money need-passive this project-illative)

⁷ Paul Neubauer pointed out that (13) violates the No Initial Indefinite Constraint, but that the violation is accounted for by the specification that function words override word order. Of course, I only intended the Indefinite Constraint to handle the equivalents of English passive sentences, but it will be interesting to study how widely it is applicable in Finnish.

⁸ Björn Hammarberg pointed out to me that "siellä/there" is not really a locative because it does not answer the question "Where?". I find the suggestion that Finnish has formal subjects intriguing. Definitely, the question deserves closer scrutiny.

Rahaa/money in (22) violates the No Initial Indefinite principle, as there is no need to translate it as "the money". It is placed in subject position because it represents old information in the sentence (the sentence answers the question "Why is money needed?"). Therefore, (22) does not establish a counter-example to the No Initial Indefinite principle, because the application of the principle was restricted to nouns that introduce a discourse topic, i.e. to nouns that represent new information (see Note 4 above). The interrelationship between thematization and definiteness is an interesting one, but this question will not be pursued here.

THE AGENTIVE PASSIVE

There is no one-to-one formal equivalent of the English agentive passive in Finnish. There are a number of ways of translating the English construction into Finnish (see Itkonen-Kaila 1974 and Karttunen 1977 for a discussion); but it seems to me that the construction that comes closest to being a formal equivalent is the following:⁹

23. The house was built by Henry.
 24. Talon rakensi Henry.
 (house-accusative built Henry)

In sentence (24), the object is simply placed in subject position, and the Actor NP occurs in complement position. The object is in the accusative form. The verb is not modified in any way. In other words, the fact that the first noun is the object is signalled by its case form. I shall call this construction the reversal-of-roles construction.¹⁰

⁹ Heinämäki (1976: 99), too, appears to regard this construction as equivalent to the English passive. Referring to a comparable type in Czech (the Latin translation of it is "Discipulum instruit magister"), Mathesius (1975: 107) calls "extreme" the view that this construction is a passive.

For the purposes of my discussion, sentences that show Object-Subject reversal are called "passive" regardless of whether or not the verb is marked for voice. This is also the working definition of "passive" adopted by E. J. W. Barber ("Voice — Beyond the Passive", *Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*, Berkeley, California: the Berkeley Linguistics Society, 1975: 16–24) and Alexandre Kimenyi ("Subjectivization Rules in Kinyarwanda", *Proceedings of the Second Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*, Berkeley, California, 1976: 258–268).

¹⁰ Object-Subject reversal seems to be a rather common phenomenon in language. Viljo Kohonen has studied the conditions under which it occurred in Old English ("A Note on Factors Affecting the Position of Accusative Objects and Complements in *Aelfric's Catholic Homilies I*" in Enkvist, N. E. and Kohonen, V. (eds), 1976: 175–196. Perhaps not surprisingly, he notes that information structure is one of the conditioning

I am not claiming that this sentence type covers all the functions of the English passive. All I am claiming is that reversal of roles is often used to translate English agentive passives.

If the underlying object in the English sentence is definite, Finnish seems to allow the reversal-of-roles operation quite freely. Consider the following:

25. The girl was seen by the men.
 26. Tytön näkivät miehet.
 (girl-accusative saw men)
 27. The signs were made by the painters.
 28. Kilvet tekivät maalarit.
 (signs-plural made painters-plural)

If the actor and the object are identical in form, which they are in (27), reversal of roles is only allowed if it is not possible to interpret the first noun as actor. Contrast the following:

29. Tytön näkivät miehet.
 (girl-accusative saw men)
 30. The girl was seen by the men.
 31. Tytöt näkivät miehet.
 (girls saw men; the endings are identical)
 32. The girls were seen by the men.

Sentence (31) can only mean "The girls saw the men", not "The girls were seen by the men". Compare (28) with (31). In (28) the passive reading is imposed on the sentence for pragmatic reasons. Signs do not paint; therefore, the first noun must be an object rather than an actor.

Let us call the restriction on the use of the reversal-of-roles construction the No Sidetracking Constraint. The constraint can be formulated as follows:

Roles can be reversed to translate the English passive if the resulting construction does not sidetrack the listener into taking the object for the actor.

factors: initial accusative objects are clearly connected with givenness. Unfortunately, Kohonen does not discuss the definiteness of the promoted objects. Thus, it is impossible to say whether the No Initial Indefinite Constraint holds for Reversal-of-Roles constructions in OE. However, there is evidence that the constraint is rather general. For example, Alexandre Kimenyi notes that in Kinyarwanda only definite objects can be promoted to subject. There are similar observations in the literature elsewhere. For a discussion, see Kimenyi (op. cit.).

The reversal-of-roles construction is also constrained by the No Initial Indefinite Principle. In English, of course, both definite and indefinite nouns may occur in subject position.

That the Finnish reversal-of-roles construction is in fact equivalent to the English agentive passive with definite subject only can be seen from the following example:

33. A: What was the program?
 B: Well, a sonata was played by Henry and...
34. A: Mitä ohjelmaa siellä oli?
 B: *Sonaatin soitti Henry ja...
 (sonata-accusative played Henry)

Although the Finnish sentence is fully acceptable in isolation, it cannot be used in the above context, the reason being that it suggests a previous mention of the sonata in question. It would appear that the Finnish sentence (34B) is odd in the above context exactly in the way the sentence "The sonata was played by Henry" would be in (33B). I conclude that the translation equivalent of the Finnish Subject-Object reversal construction "Sonaatin soitti Henry" (sonata-accusative played Henry) is "The sonata was played by Henry" rather than "A sonata was played by Henry".

The question that immediately arises is how Finnish would communicate the information contained in "A sonata was played by John". In other words, how would Finnish indicate, (a) that the underlying object is the topic of the discourse, and (b) that the underlying object is indefinite? It would appear that Finnish has to resort to the following device: first, some sentence or other is used to introduce the topic, and then another sentence is used to comment on it. The following example will illustrate what I believe is going on here:

35. Minkäläistä ohjelmaa siellä oli?
 ("What was the program?")
 Siellä oli sonaatti, jonka soitti Henry.
 (there was sonata, which-accusative played H.)
 or
 Siellä oli sonaatti. Sen soitti Henry.
 (there was sonata. It-accusative played Henry)

That is, there appears to be no formal equivalent of the English agentive passive if the underlying object is indefinite and if it is also the topic of the discourse. Some roundabout way of giving the information included in the English sentence must be used instead.

SUMMARY

Comparison of the English passive and its formal equivalents in Finnish shows that there is a general requirement in Finnish to the effect that the subjects of such sentences should be definite. In equivalents of agentless passives, elements such as locatives, datives, etc. are promoted to subject in those cases in which the underlying object is indefinite and so cannot be fronted. The same generalization holds for agentive passives.

An interesting problem is posed by English agentive passives with no locative. If the underlying object is indefinite, it cannot be fronted. In these cases, the English passive has no formal equivalent in Finnish. Instead, some roundabout way must be used to convey the information contained in the English sentence. One device is to split the information in two: the first sentence introduces a topic and the second comments on it. (In English the article makes it possible to indicate that an initial noun is not necessarily definite: therefore, English allows one to introduce a topic and thematize it simultaneously.)

The differences in subjectivization between English and Finnish may or may not have pedagogical implications, depending on whether or not Finnish learners actually have difficulty working out the way information is organized in English. Preliminary results of research carried out on the English of Finnish schoolchildren suggest they do have problems with their subjectivization, and that their strategies are those of Finnish rather than English.¹¹

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¹¹ For instance, in their early stages learners produce sentences such as *There was nice* and *In summer is hot* (pro *It was nice there, It is hot in summer*). Later, when the use of the formal subject is fairly well established, learners tend to overgeneralize; for instance, they produce passives like *It is needed money* (pro *Money is needed*).

A report on these findings will appear in *Jyväskylä Contrastive Studies*.

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