Exploring word order in variation in Finnish dialects: Negation and other small words

Maria Vilkuna

Finnic languages encode negation with a person-inflected auxiliary, making the syntax of negation similar to that of periphrastic tenses, i.e. Aux V. With marginal exceptions, auxiliaries precede the lexical verb, although not always immediately (Vilkuna 2015). A prominent feature of Finnish is the frequent clause-initial position of the negative auxiliary (Savijärvi 1988, Vilkuna 1989: 118–119, 2015, Kaiser 2006). Clause-initial negation is explicit when the negator precedes the subject. This order is generally possible in most Finnic and Saami varieties but exists only as traces in Estonian, where the negator has no person inflection and the main verb are adjacent. The Finnish example (1) illustrates both initial negation (a) and initial auxiliary placement in an affirmative clause. The utterances are similar both structurally and interactionally: the initial auxiliary is separated from the main verb, and the utterance is broadly speaking reactive, in this case an answer to a question.

(1) [Question: Have you been much on logging sites?]

a. no em 'mie / kovim "palijon- ollu . well NEG-1SG I very much be.CNG be-PPTC
   ‘Well, I haven’t been very much’
   [I have been working with reindeer a lot]

b. "mut-\(^1\) olem mie nyt 'sielä "kylliksi ollus 'sieläki .
   but be-1SG I PTL there enough be-PPTC there=too
   ‘but I have been there enough, there too.’ (LA, North Bothnia, Muonio)

Since even utterances like (1a) often begin with particles, negator placement in them is “early” rather than “initial”. This is even more true for another Finnish pattern, where the negator is attracted by certain clause-initial conjunctions and adverbs, resulting in initial combinations such as kun ei [because NEG.3SG]. These may be perceived and pronounced as single phonological words and exhibit idiosyncratic phonological changes. Certain of these combinations have an established status in Standard Finnish, and some contain a conjunction stem that is obsolete as an independent word (jollei and ellei along with jos ei [if NEG.3SG]). The phenomenon is known from the earliest written documents and can be taken as evidence for a long history of early negation in the western Finnic area (Savijärvi 1988). The result, illustrated in (2), is often structurally but not necessarily functionally similar to the pattern in (1). The adjacency of conjunction and negator has been shown to be a largely western phenomenon by Savijärvi (1988), and the variant with post-subject negation in (3) is thus more likely to be found in eastern Finnish.

(2) 'em mä tiädä 'yhtäa /
   ‘I don’t know at all’

   konn- em m- oo 'monee "aikaan känyy "misää / 'kyläs .
   because NEG-1SG I be.CNG many time visit-PPTC anywhere [idiom]
   ‘because I haven’t visited anywhere for a long time.’ (LA, Western Satakunta, Merikarvia)

\(^1\) In the LA corpus, the initial particle is et- ‘so’, but upon listening, mut- ‘but’ is more likely.
In the present talk, I will provide additional evidence for this dialectal cline based on a corpus of dialectal (interview) speech, the LA and SKN corpora available at korp.csc.fi, and aim at a more exact description of the syntactic structures represented in the data as well as an improved picture of their functions in the data. Dealing with the functions of the patterns again raises the much-discussed question of the status of subordination in spoken discourse (cf. e.g. Laury & Seppänen 2008, and Vilkuna 2014 for Finnish dialects). It might seem natural that the reactive nature of the negation initial pattern should be suppressed in a subordinate clause, but this leaves open the question why subordinators should attract the negator in the first place. Most of the words attracting initial negation are traditionally labelled subordinating conjunctions, but the occurrences are not equally subordinating textually.

References


Selected glosses

CNG = connegative (lexical verb with present-tense negation)
PAR = partitive case
PPTC = past participle (lexical verb with past tense negation)
PTL = unspecified discourse particle