Tail constructions as first mentions in Finnish – Smuggling new referents into the conversation

There is a group of linguistic structures typical to spoken language, where a constituent that usually would be an argument of the clause occurs outside the clause boundaries. The extra element is placed either before the canonical clause structure, or after it, as in (1).

(1) I saw her₁ yesterday, your friend Mary₁.

The paper examines the latter type, which I call tail construction², in spoken contemporary Finnish. These constructions are often seen as a way of self-repair: adding the lexical NP as afterthought and disambiguating or clarifying the referent when the speaker notices that a pronoun is not enough (Geluykens 1987: 122). However, they also have many other discourse functions. Some of the tail constructions may well result from repairs or word-search troubles, but some surely are deliberate choices. As Biber et al. (1999: 1072) say, tails allow the speaker “to cope with planning pressure and the same time to convey some fairly complex messages”.

Tail constructions are argued to be a very common feature in languages, maybe even universal (Dik 1978: 140). Yet there are significant differences between languages in how they are defined and used, and how frequent they are. In English, the information status of the tail element must be discourse-old and topical (Ward et al. 2002), and thus, the tail is always highly salient. In French, however, tail constructions sometimes present new referents: in Ashby’s (1988: 213) data, as many as 24 % of “dislocated” subject-NPs are not mentioned before. All of them are, however, inferred from the context.

In the paper, I will show that also in Finnish it is possible to introduce new referents with a tail construction. I also present that in Finnish the variations of the construction with different third person pronouns (se ‘it [he, she]’, tämä ‘this [he, she]’, and tuo ‘that [he, she]’) have different pragmatic functions.

All three demonstratives are used as a first mention pronoun in a tail construction: examples (2–4) are from contexts where the referent has not been mentioned in the conversation before.

(2) mitäs sen elämän kuuluu sen Aneten sitte.
   ‘Well what’s going on in her₁ life, Anette’s? ’

(3) ja tämä on sitä (sukua) tämä Raimo.
   ‘and he₁ is (part) of it (the family), Raimo₁.’

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² These structures are often called dislocations, implicating that the noun phrase (in bold in the example) has been moved from the place it “belongs” and has been replaced with a pronoun (in italics). Because the term has been widely criticized, I prefer terms tail and tail construction, following Timmis (2009) and McCarthy and Carter (1997).
(4) *toi hoitaa sitä toi Kerttu nyt.*

'She, is taking care of her, Kerttu, for now.'

Especially tail construction variants with the demonstrative pronoun *tuo* ‘that’ are often used when the referent is not salient and will not be mentioned again. With a tail construction the speaker may avoid presenting a referent as new for various reasons. In the paper, I suggest that treating a new referent as an old one is a way to a “smuggle” it into the conversation, and sometimes, to mark it not salient enough to be presented properly.

The data of the study are 24 hours of contemporary conversations with 33 different speakers of various ages, recorded in South-Western part of Finland in 2009–2012 during the research project Satakunta in Speech in the University of Turku. As a part of a larger study (Author 2017), I have collected from the data all third-person singular pronoun references to people not participating the conversation. Of course, references to people are not the only context where tails are used. In this paper, the data provide a set of comparable references, and future studies will find out whether references to other kinds of targets function the same way. In the data used here, 123 (4.5%), of the total 2755 pronoun references occur in a clause that is followed by a tail element.

References