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The clause and its role as an interactional unit in Finnish conversations – perspectives on tightness and looseness

Dividing conversation into clauses has been – and still is – a rather problematic issue within linguistics. Conversations consist of turns, and a turn has traditionally been seen as a dialogic entity rather than a syntactic one (but see Sacks & Schegloff & Jefferson 1974: 721). However, the relation between grammar and interaction has quite successfully been researched within interactional linguistics, and some attention has also been paid to the clause as an interactional unit (see e.g. Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2001; Laury, Etelämäki & Couper-Kuhlen 2014).

In the presentation, we will take a comparative look at the syntactic structures of everyday conversations and institutional interaction in Finnish. Based on our data, we will discuss the possibilities and challenges of understanding conversation and its turns through syntactic units, more precisely the clause. We will do this by asking what kind of turns there are in Finnish everyday and institutional conversations, and in which position the clause stands in our data. We will also take a look at the tightness and looseness of the clause (see Ewing 2005; Englebretson 2008) as a potentially relevant unit of interaction: in what way can the clause be seen as a tight, fixed element in our data, and in which instances it, on the other hand, is flexible and loose as a unit of interaction?

The data we are using consist of everyday and institutional conversations. Our interest with the data is to find out how many of the turns actually are of clausal form, and how many are something else (e.g. particles, NPs). We will also pay attention to what the most typical turns for the conversational practices in question are. However, the project of fitting together the clause – traditionally seen as a syntactic unit – and a turn – traditionally seen as a conversational unit – turns out not to be an unproblematic task.

Literature

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