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Using gradient acceptability judgments to investigate syntactic constructions

Fredrik Heinat & Satu Manninen

In this talk, we discuss four constructions that are used in present-day Finnish. In what we call the ‘personal’ passive, exemplified in (1a) below, the finite verb *olla* ‘be’ agrees in person and number with the preverbal XP, and the lexical verb *ostaa* ‘buy’ is in the participle. The predicative adjective construction in (1b) looks otherwise exactly the same, except that this time even the participle agrees in number with the preverbal XP. In what we call the ‘impersonal’ passive, exemplified in (1c) below, the finite verb is in the third person singular (default) form and the lexical verb is in the participle. In (1d), we have a sentence which is a cross between the impersonal passive and predicative adjective constructions: the finite verb is in the third person singular form, while the participle agrees in number with the preverbal XP. Prescriptively, this construction should not actually even exist, yet it is not particularly difficult to find examples of it (in informal language). (1a-d) are all authentic examples from the web:

1a. Valkoinen ja harmaa pellavahuivi ovat ostettu seppälästä.
white.nom and grey.nom linenscarf.nom be.3pl buy.pcp seppälä.elat
‘Both the white and the grey linen scarf have been bought in Seppälä’

1b. Kaikki lukot ja korvakoukut koruissani ovat ostetut
all clasps.nom and hooks.nom trinkets.iness be.3pl buy.pcp.pl
ympäri maailmaa.
around world.part
‘All the clasps and hooks in my trinkets are bought all over the world’

1c. Korut on ostettu useampi vuosi sitten Sokokselta.
Trinkets.nom be.3sg buy.pcp more year.nom ago Sokos.ablat
‘The trinkets have been bought some years ago in Sokos’

1d. Dvd:t on ostetut Suomesta kaupasta.
Dvds.nom be.3sg buy.pcp.pl Finland.elat shop.elat
‘The dvd-films are bought from a shop in Finland’

In our talk, we present an experiment (and preliminary results) where we use the methodology of magnitude estimation. The goal of the experiment is to elicit gradient acceptability judgments on sentences of the type exemplified above. We discuss results from a small group of informants from all over Finland, all assessing the acceptability of 30 sentences (including the fillers). Although the sentences could be varied in a number of ways (for example, replacing the plural preverbal XP by a pronoun, or replacing the auxiliary *olla* ‘be’ by the negative auxiliary *ei* ‘not’ seems to affect the acceptability judgments) we have, for the time being, limited ourselves to examining just the pattern exemplified in (1a-d) above (ie, plural preverbal XP followed by a form of the verb *olla* ‘be’).