Testing the relationship between syntax and prosody in Estonian finite verb placement

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The paper will present a study aimed at testing the hypothesis that the finite verb placement in Estonian main clauses may correlate with the accentuation of the verb, with implications for the understanding of the syntax-prosody interface.

Estonian main clauses are generally verb-second (Tael 1988, Lindström 2017), but there are certain exceptions to the V2 rule. Previously, two such exceptions have received attention in the literature, both of which have been associated with prosodic factors. In the first case, the fronting of a non-subject constituent may optionally not induce the subject-verb inversion, provided the subject is a prosodically light pronoun (Tael 1988, Vihman and Walkden 2017, Sahkai and Tamm ms.). The second exception consists in the clause-final position of the finite verb, which has been associated with the accentuation (Remmel 1963) or focussing (Tael 1988, Lindström 2017) of the verb.

The present study will examine a third exception, which has previously received little attention. In the examined case, the finite verb follows non-fronted sentence adverbials but precedes any arguments or adjuncts. A quote from Remmel (1963:321) suggests that this verb position may likewise have been attributed to a prosodic motivation: „an accented main clause predicate occurs generally at the end of the clause or at least later than its usual position.“ A preliminary corpus study of written Estonian suggests that the examined verb position may indeed correlate with the accentuation of the verb. The study examined 97 main clauses including the non-fronted adverb tavaliselt ’usually’ followed by a finite third person verb (1), and compared them with an equal number of corpus sentences where the adverb followed a second position-verb (2). The study found that in 83% of the adverb-verb sentences, the verb would receive the nuclear accent, assuming that the verb receives the nuclear accent when it is included in the focus without an accentable internal argument (cf. e. g. Gussenhoven 1992). In the verb-adverb dataset, in contrast, this condition was fulfilled only in 9% of the sentences.

(1) Politseinik tavaliselt esitleb ennast.
   policeman.nom usually introduce.3sg self.par
   ’A policeman usually introduces himself.’

(2) Filmimine kestab tavaliselt umbes nädala.
   shooting.nom last.3sg usually about week.gen
   ’The shooting period usually lasts for about a week.’

The present study aims to verify the potential correlation between the placement and the accentuation of the verb with a production task where speakers are asked to read aloud minimal pairs of sentences that differ in the respective order of the verb and the sentence adverb. The sentences additionally contain a non-pronominal internal argument of the verb, which can be interpreted either as new or given, i.e. either as being part of focus or not. The study will test the hypothesis that in the adverb-verb condition, the verb has a higher chance of showing higher values for the parameters that have been found to signal sentence stress in Estonian: f0 peak height, f0 range, duration and intensity (Mihkla and Sahkai 2016).
References


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