

Why do we choose the nominative in Finnish?

The topic of our study is the Finnish nominative as a morphological, syntactic and semantic category. Morphologically, it is usually described as a non-marked form of nouns. Syntactically, it is the case of the basic subject (1a), and in semantically appropriate circumstances, the form of the object (1b) and the nominal predicate (1c):

1a) Kissa syö.
cat.nom eat.sg3
‘The cat eats / is eating.’

1b) Ruoki kissa!
feed.imp.sg2 cat.nom
‘Feed the cat!’

1c) Kissa on nälkäinen.
cat.nom be.sg3 hungry.nom
‘The cat is hungry.’

In the comprehensive grammar of Finnish (VISK, § 1230), the semantics of the nominative is described as follows: “In addition to expressing definiteness, the nominative does not have any special meanings. It is only possible to list different usages of expressions in the nominative: – –” (translation is ours). Existing knowledge about the nominative comes from rich literature where the nominative is contrasted with other grammatical cases (the accusative, genitive, and partitive) or is viewed through a certain syntactic function (e.g., the subject, nominal predicate; e.g. Helasvuo 2001; Huumo 2006, 2007). However, no corpus-based studies concentrating on the Finnish nominative in particular exist so far, and for example the recent book on the Finnish cases (Jaakola & Onikki-Rantajääskö (ed.) 2023) does not have a chapter on the nominative.

We have conducted a qualitative corpus-based study on the meaning and functions of the Finnish nominative in the framework of cognitive linguistics, starting from morphology and lexical meanings, and proceeding to syntactic functions, syntactic clause types, and constructional semantics (e.g. Talmy 2000, Luraghi 2012, Langacker 2013). On the basis of corpus data from both spoken everyday conversations and written standard language, we discuss the following questions (for the sources of the data, see below; on the method, see Luodonpää-Manni & Ojutkangas 2020):

Is the nominative a truly unmarked case in Finnish? What is the distribution of the nominative across its syntactic functions? What kinds of entities are conceptualized as requiring an expression in the nominative, and in what kinds of processes do these entities participate? How does the nominative

participate in building the meaning of the construction, and how does the construction build the meaning of the nominative?

The starting point for our study is that the nominative is a full member of the Finnish nominal paradigm, and an inflected form among other case forms. As such it reflects the language users' conceptualization and the choices related to it in a way parallel to any other case form. The goal of our study is to describe these choices, and along with them, the meaning of the nominative.

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