

# Beyond Minimal Reference: The Role of Long Noun Phrases in Spoken Estonian

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**Background:** In the study of reference, noun phrases (NPs) as means for referring to the various entities in the discourse world carry a central role. By definition, an NP is understood as a construction with a noun as its central component (Thompson & Ono 2005: 1). However, the categorial status of NPs has been questioned by many researchers who focus on natural conversational language data (see Thompson & Ono 2005).

Studies of referential devices have often set their focus on minimal reference, such as demonstratives and pronouns (e.g., Laury 2005; Kibrik 2011). Longer NP constructions, which can incorporate various attributes, determiners, and/or subordinate clauses, have gained less research attention.

In the context of Estonian reference studies, the overall system of referential devices has been rather thoroughly described (Pajusalu 2009; Hint 2021), but the focus has always been on the more common NPs, especially on minimal referential devices. The ‘maximum’ length of NPs in Estonian and the internal structure of longer NPs, such as *ilus suvine päev* ‘beautiful summer day’, *see rõõmsa näoga mees* ‘this man with a happy face’, and *koer, kes aias haugub* ‘the dog who is barking in the garden’, has not been discussed in previous research.

This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on the structure and referential patterns of long NPs in Estonian. First, the study gives a quantitative overview of the use of long NPs in spoken Estonian. The internal structure of long NPs will be described. Second, the study seeks to detect the pragmatic functions of such long NPs in spoken Estonian.

**Method:** The data comes from two spoken narrative elicitation tasks: i) narratives based on the Pear Film (Chafe 1980) (16 participants) and ii) narratives based on Picture Sequences (20 participants) (see Hint 2021 for more detail). Altogether, 1293 NPs from Pear Stories dataset and 1330 NPs from Picture Sequence dataset were annotated and included in the analysis. As the category of NP is not binary, but rather a continuum with fuzzy boundaries (Suomalainen, Vatanen & Laury 2020: 11), the annotation process was built on the functional properties of the unit, rather than on structural constraints of the unit.

**Results and discussion:** In both datasets, most NPs consist of one or two words. NPs containing 3 or more words are considerably less frequent. In Pear Stories 16% and in Picture Narratives 12.8% of NPs consist of 3 words. NPs with the length of 4 words and more are used much less. However, the longest NP reaches 13 words in Picture narratives and 15 words in Pear Stories data. While the results enforce the general trend toward shorter NPs, it is clear that longer NPs do have a certain function in spoken data. In the presentation, the functions of such NPs are discussed more thoroughly.

It is discussed that the complexity of NPs is restricted by the speaker's need to be explicit on one hand, and the listener's ability to process detailed information, on the other. The study raises questions about the upper limits of NP length and the linguistic mechanisms that allow for such elaboration. It also discusses the implications for understanding the syntactic and pragmatic aspects of reference in spoken language.

## References

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