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A Few Notes on Conversational Patterns in Finland

Abstract

7 Finnish informants were queried in a semi-expert interview on communication strategies. Apart from addressing and telephone greetings, informants were asked on small talk, giving arguments, making and turning down an offer, and ending a conversation. From this the conclusion can be drawn the basic principle in Finnish conversations is “Keep it short and simple”. Finns seem to keep turns in conversation short, they even seem to keep the whole conversation as short as possible. The choice of strategies seems rather driven by formal than by semantic motives.

Sommaire

7 Finlandais ont été interrogés dans le cadre d’un « semi-expert interview on communicative strategies » (SICS). Outre l’adresse et la salutation au téléphone, les personnes interrogées ont été interrogées sur le Small Talk, l’argumentation, la prononciation et la déclamation d’une offre et sur la fin d’une conversation. On peut en conclure que le principe principal d’une communication finnoise est le suivant : « Reste bref et simple ». Les Finlandais semblent préférer les conversations les plus courtes que possible. Le choix des stratégies dépend plutôt de motifs formelles que de motifs sémantiques.

Zusammenfassung

7 finnische Informanten wurden mittels eines “semi-expert interview on communication strategies” befragt. Neben Anrede und Telefongrußformel wurden die Informanten zu Small Talk, Argumentieren, Aussprechen und Ablehnen von Angeboten und Beenden eines Gesprächs befragt. Daraus kann die Schlussfolgerung gezogen werden, dass das Grundprinzip finnischer Gespräch ist: “Halte es knapp und einfach”. Finnen scheinen Gesprächsanteile und sogar das ganze Gespräch so knapp wie möglich zu halten. Die Wahl von Kommunikationsstrategien erfolgt eher aus formalen denn aus semantischen Motiven heraus.

1. Background

A first cross-cultural pragmatic description of Europe was composed by Grzega (2006: 193-254). It was predominantly based on existing literature and also included some remarks on communicative patterns in Finland. With 2008 being the European Year of Intercultural Dialog, with the virtual lack of broad cross-cultural contrasts on a common data-eliciting basis¹, and with the low number of empirical studies on Finnish speech acts², this is a good occasion to continue to fill this gap in the studies of language use. This study is part of a larger Euro-pragmatic project that shall elucidate contrasts and similarities in the communicative behavior of Europeans. The communicative aspects that we will deal with are addressing, answering the phone, small talk, giving arguments, making and turning down an offer, and ending a conversation.

¹ The Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) included “only” 6 languages (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) (among these only 3 European languages, viz. British English, Danish, German).

² We only find the following studies published in English: on requesting behavior the contributions by Yli-Jokipii (1996) and Peterson (2004), on answering Yes/No questions the contributions the studies by Sorjonen (1999, 2001), on complimenting the study by Yläne-McEwen (1993), on face attack in public speeches the contribution by Muikku-Werner (1994), on classroom directives the study by Dalton-Puffer and Nikula (2006), on family and peer conversations the contributions by Tulviste, De Geer and their partners [Tulviste et al. 2002, De Geer et al. 2002, Tulviste/Mizera/De Geer 2004].

As an alternative to the common ways of collecting empirical data for speech-act analysis, the *discourse completion task* (DCT) and the *metapragmatic judgement task* (MPJT) (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989 and Hinkel 1997), the *JELiX* editors have designed an alternative data-eliciting method that also requires fewer informants than in a DCT or MPJT: the semi-expert interview on communicative strategies (SICS). Such an interview has informants not note down their own personal communicative behavior and judgement, but what they see as typical linguistic behavior in their nation. Informants are regarded as semi-experts due to their experience within, and observation of, the community. This is particularly true of people dealing with language professionally (such as students of language, linguists, journalists); they are therefore preferred as informants. Whereas a DCT introduces a situation and asks for the informant's typical behavior, the SICS presents typical situations and asks for possible and impossible linguistic formulas in the informant's nation. The informant can both choose from a list of communicative strategies and/or give additional strategies. This way a SICS is more like a MPJT, but the informants are forced to reflect on a more abstracting and generalizing level.

2. Data Collection

A sample of the SICS is available in the introductory article to this special issue of *JELiX* (Grzega/Schöner 2008). The questionnaire was distributed to linguistic semi-experts in Finland³. We got back 7 questionnaires (by 5 women and 2 men, between 24 and 62 years old). This is definitely not a large number. However, due to the fact that the questionnaire does not ask for people's personal behavior, but for what they, as linguistically experienced people, can view as typical in their speech community, we can already cautiously draw a first picture of Finnish speech-act realizations.

3. Results

3.1. Section A: Starting a Conversation

Like most other Europeans, Finns have an informal and a formal address pronoun (a T-form and a V-form according to Brown and Gilman's 1960 nomenclature). They differentiate between *sinä* (also *sä* in colloquial speech)/*se* and *te*. The form *sinä* (or more colloquial *sä*) is the pronoun of the 2nd sg., *se* is a pronoun of the 3rd sg. ('it'), *te* is the form of the 2nd pl. Two informants also mentioned *hän*, actually a pronoun for the third person singular ('he, she'), as a possible formal address pronoun in some dialects. How are these pronouns distributed?

- (1) All informants agreed that children would use the T-form to address their parents and elder relatives.
- (2) All informants agreed that colleagues would use T among each other.
- (3) In exchanges between employers and employees both T and V seem common.
- (4) Teachers always use T to address their students. And this is frequently done reciprocally, i.e. students also address their teacher with T. However, one informant claimed that V is also common.
- (5) When addressing administration officials, people use V.
- (6) Both T and V are used, but T is slightly more dominant also in the other situations asked for in the questionnaire, i.e.
 - business partners among each other
 - clerks to customers in a store
 - customers to clerks in a store

³ We would like to thank Helena Kangasharju for her support in distributing the SICS.

- people to strangers in the street

In a way, you use T with all people you meet on a daily basis. In general, however, according to Yli-Vakkuri (2005), it is more common to avoid direct reference to an addressee; instead, many Finns use a “4th person”, or stress on the topic of conversations, e.g. a Hamburger waitress’s question *Syödäänkö täällä vai tuleeeko tää mukaan?* ‘[Will the food be] eaten here or [will it be] taken away?’.

Concerning telephone openings⁴ in private contexts, saying one’s last name or first plus last name and the pattern “At [family name], [first name] speaking” are common. In business contexts the only required element seems one’s own name, but using the company’s name in addition to that is also very typical. To a certain degree an additional phrase of the type “How can I help you?” is used, too. The choice of the formula will depend, e.g, on a company’s rules and on the position of the person answering the phone.

3.2. Section B: Keeping Up a Conversation

Section B of the SICS focussed on small talk. Small talk can be understood as all phases of a talk that are not the greeting, the closing and leave-taking phase and the proper motive for the conversation (cf. also Malinowski 1923, Laver 1975, Ventola 1979). In what situations is small talk common, or even required, in Finland? There seem to be no clear-cut rules that the community has agreed on. It is only agreed that small talk is never required. This confirms Yli-Vakkuri’s observation (2005: 201): “Finns are seldom the first to speak in unfamiliar company”; however, “there is a clear distinction between the Eastern Finnish spontaneous and the Western Finnish reserved speech culture”. With the reverse question, in what situations it is not common to start small talk (but to remain silent), there wasn’t any common answer either.

Regarding the things to talk about in small talk, all informants agreed that the weather is a common small talk topic. The following topics were considered as adequate for small talk by at least 5 of the informants: (recent) political events, general complaint about politics/politicians, American TV programs. A typical taboo topic for small talk is money—at least according to 5 of the informants.

The distribution of small talk in business and private conversations is a little unclear. For 6 informants small talk is at least not more prominent in private talk than in business talk.

3.3. Section C: Being Nice in a Conversation

According to 6 informants, Finns typically present their opinion on a topic by firstly saying their opinion and secondly giving reasons related to the issue itself. Five informants said you just say your opinion without any further elaboration on that.⁵

In the next question, the informants were queried if invitations or offers made by someone can reasonably be interpreted as honest or as a simple politeness phrase (e.g. as an “ostensible invitation” [Isaacs/Clark 1990]). The informants’ estimation didn’t lead to a clear picture: 6 claimed that you can reasonably interpret this as an honest offer, 5 said that it is more typically just a politeness phrase.

⁴ The classical studies on phone conversations that many other studies relate to are the ones by Schegloff (1979) and Hopper (1992).

⁵ For a study of argumentative strategies vs. non-argumentative structures in dyadic computer chat debates cf. Laurinen/Marttunen (2007). The result of the study is that most students embedded short collaborative semi-oral utterances in their written arguments to provoke and scaffold the debate.

3.4. Section D: Getting Around Very Uncomfortable Topics

The next question in the SICS asked for the kinds of linguistic means that are used to say “no” in a polite way if people want to turn down an offer or an invitation. Mostly, the informants commented their selection of strategies with the labels “very frequently”, “frequently, often, usually” (or unmarked), “sometimes” and “rarely”. If we convert these labels into points from 4 to 1 and multiply them with the corresponding number of ticks, then we get the following picture (p. = points):

points	persons having ticked at least “sometimes”	number and type of strategy listed in the SICS
23	7	(2) a vague excuse like “No, I don’t have time.” or “No, I have something else to do.”
18	6	(3) a phrase like “(I don’t know yet) I’ll let you know”, though you will surely not contact the person again
18	6	(4) a phrase like “I will have to think about it”, though you won’t surely contact the person again
17	6	(5) a concrete brief and true excuse (if there is one)
12	5	(7) a concrete long and true excuse (if there is one)

No other pattern was categorized as at least “sometimes” by at least 5 informants. So a vague excuse is clearly the dominant, common, normal way to turn down an offer.

Item #10 consisted of the question of what kinds of linguistic (and non-linguistic) means are used to say “no” in a polite way if people disagree with somebody else’s opinion. If we convert the labels “very frequently”, “frequently, often, usually” (or unmarked), “sometimes” and “rarely” into points from 4 to 1 again and multiply them with the respective number of ticks, then we get the following results:

points	persons having ticked at least “sometimes”	number and type of strategy listed in the SICS
24	7	(1) a direct “No”
18	6	(6) a phrase like “Yes, I see what you mean, but I think that ...”
17	6	(3) a phrase like “(No), I disagree.”, “(No), I have a different opinion.”
17	6	(8) people just say nothing at all and remain silent
16	7	(9) people just shake their heads
15	5	(11) people just make a disapproving look

No other pattern was categorized as at least “sometimes” by at least 5 informants. The preference of the quite direct answers do not confirm Yli-Vakkuri’s (2005: 201) claim that Finns “seldom start arguing or disagreeing with other’s opinion; rather, they acquiesce, remain silent or change the subject”.

3.5. Section E: Ending a Conversation

As there are no useable cross-cultural studies on ending a conversation, the SICS

questionnaire particularly raised the question “what do people say to show that they want to end a conversation?”. If we convert the labels “very frequently”, “frequently, often, usually” (or unmarked), “sometimes” and “rarely” into points from 4 to 1 again and multiply them with the respective number of ticks, then we get the following results:

points	persons having ticked at least “sometimes”	number and type of strategy listed in the SICS
23	7	(3) a phrase like “I have to go now, I have something else to do”
21	7	(4) a phrase like “It’s already late now”
20	7	(7) say what they have to do now (if there really is something)
17	5	(5) a phrase like “I don’t want to bother you any longer”
14	6	(8) invent a reason

No other pattern was categorized as at least “sometimes” by at least 5 informants.

The SICS also asked for an interlocutor’s reaction to the initiation of this last phase of a conversation. The more typical and more unmarked behavior—according to 5 informants—is that people normally let you go.

4. Summary

In sum, we can state that the basic principle in Finnish conversations is “Keep it short and simple”. People seem to keep turns in conversation short, they even seem to keep the whole conversation short. The choice of strategies as categorized by Brown and Levinson (1987) seems rather driven by formal than by semantic motives. In Grice’s (1975) terms, manner seems to be the most prominent maxim.

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