TRANSITIVITY AND PARTITIVITY IN ESTONIAN

Natalia Vaiss

Tallinn University & Institute of the Estonian Language

PARTE – Partitivity in European Languages, 25 March 2022, 4PM CET

Transitivity is one of the core areas of linguistics (Kittilä 2010: 346). It is a complex phenomenon that can be investigated from different perspectives, i.e., syntactically (formally), semantically or combining both approaches (ibid.). The number and the marking of arguments are central questions in formal approaches. In functional-semantic approaches, the key issue is the notion of the basic transitive event, which involves a volitional and controlling agent and an affected patient. (ibid.) That is, if the subject is less agentive and/ or if the object is less affected, then the transitivity of the clause is lower. In any approach, scholars regard transitivity as a continuum rather than a transitive-intransitive dichotomy (Hopper & Thompson 1980, Næss 2007).

Based on the occurrence of direct objects, verbs in most languages fall into at least three categories (Dixon & Aikhenvald 2000: 12–13): 1) intransitive (do not occur with direct objects), 2) transitive (generally occur with direct objects), 3) ambitransitive or labile (with or without a direct object, i.e., used both transitively and intransitively; causative alternation is one of the facets of ambitransitivity). The subtypes of these categories may vary from language to language.

This presentation aims to offer an overview of syntactic transitivity types and usage of direct objects in the partitive *versus* the morphological genitive/ nominative (further named as 'accusative') in Estonian. Besides partitive-accusative alternations (DOM), there are at least four main features that characterize transitivity in Estonian. The first one is the regularity of cognate and fake objects (see Kont 1963, Tamm 2012), which is a widespread transitivizing mechanism in Estonian. For instance, one can produce not just the sentence *Ta laulis ilusat laulu* 'S/he sang a beautiful.PART song.PART' but also sentences like (1)–(3).

(1)   Eestlase-d   laul-si-d   end   vaba-ks.
       Estonians-NOM.PL   sing-PST-3PL   self   free-TRANSL
       'Estonians have sung themselves free/ Estonians have become free by singing.'

(2)   Poiss   sai   kukku-da   oma   kukkumise-d.
       boy.NOM   could   fell-INF   own   falling-ACC.PL
       'The boy could fell down as many times as he wanted'

(3)   Issi,   ma   vist   kukku-si-n   pesuresti   kõvera-ks.

daddy I   probably   fall-PST-1SG   laundry_chut.ACC.SG   bent-TRANSL
'Daddy, I think I fell down on the laundry chut, and it bent.'

The second characteristic is the presence of parallel verb frame patterns, with and without a direct object (i.e., **Ta alustab treeninguid/ treeningutega** 'S/he starts training.PART/COMIT', **Ta vaatab merd/ merele** 'S/he looks at the sea.PART/ALL') (see Rätsep 1978, Metslang 2017). The third feature is frequent lability (e.g., **Ta jalutab pargis** 'S/he walks in the park' – **Ta jalutab koera** 'S/he walks the dog.PART') (for lability types in Estonian see Kehayov & Vihman 2014). Finally, objects can be omitted (null objects/ object deletion, or object drop; see Luraghi 2004, Onozuka 2007) with almost any verb but to different extent depending on a verbal type and context (Metslang 2017).

Although these features have been mentioned in previous sources, they have not been combined to present Estonian transitivity as a scalar category. My study examines syntactic transitivity in Estonian as a continuum. More precisely, I propose six groups of verbs based on their transitive behaviour: 1) strictly intransitive verbs (e.g., *tutvuma* 'get acquanted', *loobuma* 'refuse'), 2) generally intransitive verbs used transitively with cognate and fake objects (e.g., *kukkuma* 'fall'), 3) prototypically labile (e.g., *jalutama* 'walk') and polysemic labile verbs (e.g., *lahutama* 'divorce'; 'separate', 'divide'; 'deduct', 'subtract'), 4) transitive verbs used as intransitives with the focus on activity (e.g., *sööma* 'eat': **Tütar sööb oma toas** 'The daughter is eating in her room'), 5) generally transitive verbs used without a direct object in fixed expressions or parallel verb frame patterns (e.g., *alustama* 'start': **Alustasime nullist** 'We started from scratch.ELAT' [a fixed expression with an omitted object], **Ta alustab õpingutega** 'S/he starts studying.COMIT' [an omitted object or a parallel verb frame pattern with the comitative]), and 6) strictly transitive verbs used with omitted objects in highly restricted syntactical patterns (e.g., *põhjustama* 'cause': as the answer to the question *Põhjustab küll* '[*Does this cause a problem?*] Yes, [this] does cause [an omitted object: a problem]').

In my research, which is based on the Estonian National Corpus, special attention is paid to transitive groups of verbs (2–6) and their ability to allow accusative *versus* partitive objects. Along with transitivity types, I offer the following scale of 'partitivity' of Estonian verbs: 1) 'hard' partitive verbs (e.g., *armastama* 'love'), 2) 'soft' or 'weak' partitive verbs with two subgroups (e.g., *lugema* 'read', *veeretama* 'roll') (see Tamm & Vaiss 2019), 3) aspect verbs (e.g., *ehitama* 'build'), and 4) perfective verbs with two subgroups (e.g., *läbi lugema* 'read through', *ostma* 'buy').

In Estonian, as in Finnish (Huumo 2010, Luraghi & Kittilä 2014, Larjavaara 2019), a partitive direct object occurs in the following cases: 1) negation (e.g., **Ta ei lõpetanud ülesannet** 'S/he did not finish the task.PART'), 2) indefinitness of an object or its quantity (e.g., **Ta ostis juustu** 'S/he bought (some) cheese.PART'), 3) imperfective aspect (e.g., **Ta värvis põrandat** 'S/he colored the floor.PART'), 4) a partitive verb (e.g., **Tüdruk aitas sõpra** 'The girl helped her friend.PART'), and also 4) some special cases in Estonian grammar (e.g., personal pronouns (the 1st and 2nd

person), a neutral aspect, an object of an infinitive form etc.) (see Metslang 2017). In addition, a partitive direct object may 1) reflect a distinction in meaning (e.g., ***Vargad röövisid meest*** 'A man.PART was robbed by thieves' versus ***Terroristid röövisid mehe*** 'A man.ACC was kidnapped by terrorists'), 2) be a part of an idiomatic phrase (e.g., ***Autojuht pani pidurit*** 'The driver hit the brakes.PART'), 3) depend on the lexical nature of an object phrase (e.g., ***Hotell aktsepteeris minu krediitkaarti*** 'The hotel accepted my credit card.PART' versus ***Komisjon aktsepteeris ettepanekut/ ettepaneku*** 'The commission was accepting the proposal.PART/ The commission accepted the proposal.ACC') (Vaiss 2020).

Partitive objecthood is an integral part of the Estonian transitivity. Partitive objects are more frequent in Estonian than the accusative ones because of the multiply functions of the partitive. Semantically, the use of partitive objects refers to reduced transitivity, as they are usually less affected by the action as compared to accusative objects.

Bibliography

Dixon, Robert M. W. & Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald 2000. Introduction. – Changing Valency: Case Studies in Transitivity. Ed. by R. M. W. Dixon, Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 9–29.

Hopper, Paul J. & Sandra A. Thompson 1980. Transitivity in grammar and discourse. – Language 62 (2), 251–299.

Huumo, Tuomas 2010. Nominal aspect, quantity, and time: The case of the Finnish object. – Journal of Linguistics 46 (1), 83–125.

Kehayov, Petar & Virve-Anneli Vihman 2014. The lure of lability: A synchronic and diachronic investigation of the labile pattern in Estonian. – Linguistics 52 (4), 1061–1105.

Kittilä, Seppo 2010. Transitivity typology. – The Oxford Handbook of Linguistic Typology. Ed. by J.J. Song. Oxford University Press, 346–367.

Kont, Karl 1963. Käändsõnaline objekt läänemeresoome keeltes. (= Keele ja Kirjanduse Instituudi uurimused IX.) Tallinn.

Larjavaaara, Matti 2019. Partitiivin valinta. Suomalaisen Seura. Helsinki.

Letuchiy 2013 = Александр Б. Летучий 2013. Типология лабильных глаголов. Москва: Языки славянской культуры.

Luraghi, Silvia 2004. Null objects in Latin and Greek and the relevance of linguistic typology for language reconstruction. – Proceedings of the Fifteenth Annual UCLA Indo-European Conference. Ed. by Karlene Jones-Bley, Martin E. Huld, Angela D. Volpe, Mirriam R. Dexter. (= Journal of Indo-European Monograph Series 49.) Washington: Institute for the Study of Man, 235–256.

Luraghi, Silvia & Seppo Kittilä 2014. Typology and diachrony of partitive case markers. – Partitive cases and related categories. Ed. by Silvia Luraghi, Tuomas Huumo. (= Empirical Approaches to Language Typology 54.) De Gruyter Mouton, 17–62.

Metslang, Helle 2017. Sihitis. – Eesti keelesüntaks. Toim. MatiErelt, Helle Metslang. (= Eesti keelevaramu III.) Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 258–277.

Næss, Åshild 2007. Prototypical Transitivity. (= Typological Studies in Language 72.) Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Onozuka, Hiromi 2007. Remarks on causative verbs and object deletion in English. – Language Sciences 29 (4), 538–553.

Rätsep, Huno 1978. Eesti keele lihtlausete tüübid. Tallinn: Valgus.

Tamm, Anne 2012. Scalar Verb Classes: Scalarity, Thematic Roles, and Arguments in the Estonian Aspectual Lexicon. Firenze: Firenze University Press.

Tamm, Anne & Natalia Vaiss 2019. Setting the boundaries: Partitive verbs in Estonian verb classifications. – Eesti Rakenduslingvistika Ühinguaastaraamat, 15, 159–181.

Vaiss, Natalia 2020. Kogesin *vapustust* või *vapustuse*? Sihilised verbid valikute ees. – Eesti Rakenduslingvistika Ühinguaastaraamat, 16, 241–261.

Vaiss, Natalia 2021. Verbide transitiivsuse kontiinumist eesti keeles. – Emakeele Seltsi aastaraamat 66, 344–386.