On the Semantic Conditions of the Nominative Marking of the Object in the Finnish Language

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0. Introduction

In the Finnish language, the nominative case is primarily used to indicate the subject indeed. But also the object can be marked in the nominative case on certain conditions. In my previous paper (1997), I have argued that the volition of the referent of the subject has something to do with the nominative marking of the object. That is, the object is indicated in the nominative case if and only if the will of the referent of the subject is irrelevant to the meaning of the sentence or the clause in question. When the volition of the referent of the subject is not relevant, the subject cannot act as the primary participant of the sentence or the clause. Instead the object functions as the primary participant. This is the reason the object is marked in the nominative case. However, there seems to be room for argument on this point. The question is whether the lack of the volition of the referent of the subject is the real cause of the nominative marking of the object in the Finnish language. The purpose of this paper is to answer this question. Let us now look more closely at the semantic conditions of the nominative marking of the object\(^1\).

1.

We will begin by comparing the following two sentences. In (1) below, the referent of the semantic subject of the third infinitive illative functions as the actor. The actor, however, did not chop down the birch into billets of his own free will, but was forced to do so. Then, the volition of the referent of the semantic subject of the infinitive is irrelevant to the meaning of the sentence. But the object, whose referent functions as the patient, is still marked in the genitive case\(^2\). That is:

\[
(1) \text{Käskin hänä hakaamaan koivun halojksi.}
\]


I ordered him to chop down the birch into billets.

On the other hand, in the following imperative sentence, the object is indicated in the nominative case, since the volition of the referent of the missing subject is not relevant to the

(1)
meaning of the sentence:

(2) *Hakkaa* koivu haloiksi.

chop down-imp. -2sg. birch-NOM. SG. billet-transl. pl.

Chop down the birch into billets!

The question now arises. Why is the object in (1) marked in the genitive case while that in (2) is marked in the nominative case? One explanation for this may be that the case marking of the object in (1) is influenced by the volition of the referent of the matrix subject. Since the referent of the matrix subject is the controller, its volition is relevant to the meaning of the sentence. However, in the sentence (2), the speaker functions as the controller. The volition of the speaker may be relevant to the meaning of the sentence. Another explanation is that the choice of the case depends on whether or not the subject is overtly expressed in the sentence or the clause in question. That is, the object is marked in the nominative case if and only if the subject is not overtly expressed. If this is the case, the object in (1) cannot be indicated in the nominative case, since both the matrix subject and the semantic subject of the infinitive are overtly expressed. In (2), on the other hand, the object can be marked in the nominative case, since the subject is not overtly expressed.

But this rule does not seem to apply to the following sentence:

(3) *Sinun* täytyy ostaa sanakirja.

you-gen. have to-3sg. pr. buy-1. inf. dictionary-NOM. SG.

You have to buy a dictionary.

In this sentence, though the subject is overtly expressed, the object is indicated in the nominative case. This may be explained by revising the rule. The rule should be as follows: the object is marked in the nominative case if and only if the subject in the nominative case does not co-occur with it in the sentence or the clause in question. Since the subject in (3) is in the genitive case, the object can be marked in the nominative case.

The revised rule, however, does not hold good for the following examples:

(4) *Luulen* valinneeni parhaan vaihtoehdon.

think-1sg. pr. choose-p. p. best-GEN. SG. alternative-GEN. SG.

I think I have chosen the best alternative.

(5) *Hyvän* idean voi saada vaihkapa omenapuun alla.

good-GEN. SG. idea-GEN. SG. can-3sg. pr. get-1. inf. even if apple tree-gen. sg. allsa.

under

One can get a good idea even under an apple tree.

(2)
In (4), the subject of the subordinate clause is indicated by a possessive suffix. Then, if the revised rule is true, the object of the subordinate clause should be marked in the nominative case. But this is not the case. Also in (5), though there is no nominative subject, the object is indicated in the genitive case. Thus, for the real explanation of the nominative marking of the object, one must look at the matter from a different angle.

What has to be noticed here is both of the sentences (2) and (3), whose object is marked in the nominative case, are modal expressions. In a modal expression an attitude on the part of the speaker towards the factual content is described. Then, also in (2) and (3), not only the obligation of the referent of the subject but also the expectation of the speaker is conveyed. In these sentences, the referent of the subject and that of the object function as the actor and the patient respectively. The speaker keenly anticipates that a new state will be brought about by forcing the actor to act toward or upon the patient. In other words, what is mainly described in these sentences is a new state of the patient brought about by the forcing rather than the forcing itself.

Here, we should recall that the object of the impersonal passive sentence is also marked in the nominative case. For example:

(6) Koivu hahattiin haloiksi.
    birch-NOM. SG. chop down-pass. p. billet-transl. pl.

The birch was chopped down into billets.

In the impersonal passive sentence, the subject is not overtly expressed, while the object, the referent of which functions as the patient, is overtly expressed. Since the referent of the subject, which serves as the actor, is unspecified, its volition is not relevant to the meaning conveyed in the sentence. What the actor has done or will do to the patient is also irrelevant to the meaning. It is what has been done or will be done to the patient that is relevant to the meaning. In other words, what is described in the impersonal passive sentence is not an action but a new state of the patient brought about by the action. It follows from this that the impersonal passive sentence and the sentences (2) and (3) above share the same property. That is, what is mainly described is a new state of the patient brought about by the action of the actor. Then, in these sentences the object acts as the primary participant. This is the reason why in these sentences the object is marked in the nominative case.

On the other hand, the main theme of the sentence (1) is not a new state of the patient. In this sentence, that the controller forces the actor to act toward or upon the patient is described. Then, the primary participant of this sentence is not the object but the matrix subject. Since the nominative is the case for the primary participant, the object of this
sentence, which is not the primary participant, cannot be indicated in the nominative case. As a controlling person, the referent of the matrix subject may indeed expect that a new state will be brought about to the patient. But this sentence is not a modal expression. What is described in this sentence is a factual event that is carried over from the controller through the actor to the patient. The expectation of the controller is secondary to the meaning of the sentence.

There is good evidence in favor of this argument. The object of this type of sentence can be marked in the nominative case only when the matrix subject does not appear in the sentence. Take the following for example:

(7) Kotona käsketään aina panemaan ovi lukkoon.
    in the home order-pass. pr. always put-3. inf. illat. door-NOM. SG. under lock
    In the home the door should be always locked. (Vilkuna 1996:270)

Here, the matrix subject is not overtly expressed and the object is indicated in the nominative case. One may notice here that (7) is the impersonal passive sentence. As mentioned above, in the impersonal passive sentence, the object acts as the primary participant. It follows from this that the object in (7) is marked in the nominative case merely because (7) is in the passive voice. The object of this type of sentence cannot act as the primary participant as long as the matrix subject is overtly expressed. For example:

(8) Zinaida Gilels käskee ensimmäiseksi riisua villapuseron.
    Z. -nom. sg. G. -nom. sg. order-3sg. pr. first take off-1. inf. wool blouse
    -GEN. SG.

Zinaida Gilels orders to take off the wool blouse first. (SK87:46-26)\textsuperscript{11}

In this sentence, though the semantic subject of the infinitive is not overtly expressed, the matrix subject is. Then, the primary participant of this sentence is the matrix subject. And, the object, which is not the primary participant, is marked in the genitive case. All these things make it clear that in this type of sentence the matrix subject acts as the primary participant in principle. Thus, one can safely state that the main theme of this type of sentence is not what has been done or will be done to the referent of the object but what the referent of the matrix subject has done or will do.

Let us, for the moment, consider another type of sentence. The predicate of this type of sentence is a so-called curative verb, which is derived from a verb by attaching the suffix -ttA or -UttA to the stem of it\textsuperscript{11}. For example:

(9) Matti etsitti meillä neulaa lattialta
    M. -nom. sg. have a thing looked for-3sg. p. we-adess. needle-part. sg. floor-ablat.sg.
taskulampulla.
flashlight-adess. sg.
Matti had a needle looked for by us from the floor by flashlight. (Kytömäki 1978: 142)

In this sentence, there are three argument-like elements. One is the nominative argument, the referent of which is the controller. It functions as the subject of the sentence. Another is in the adessive case, whose referent is the actor. And, the other, which serves as the object, refers to the patient. Judging from what is described in this sentence, we can say the subject acts as the primary participant. And, the subject is really marked in the nominative case. The adessive element cannot be the primary participant, since it can be left unspecified.

Take the following for example:

(10) **Kuningas vartioitti vankiaan ankarasti.**
    king-nom. sg. have a person watched-3sg. p. prisoner-part. sg. rigorously

The king had his prisoner watched rigorously. (Kytömäki 1989:65)

On the other hand, there is a possibility that the object is the primary participant of the sentence. This is because, in this type of sentence, the object of the action must always be accomplished, as Kytömäki (1989) pointed out. Then, the following sentence is not acceptable:

(11) **Leikhaustan tuhan parturilla, mutta parturi ei leikkaa.**
    have a thing cut-1sg. pr. hair-gen. sg. barber-adess. sg. but barber-nom. sg. not cut-3sg. pr.

I have my hair cut by the barber but the barber does not cut. (Kytömäki 1989:64)

However, the object cannot be regarded as the primary participant of this type of sentence. The object can be indicated in the nominative case only when the subject is not overtly expressed. For example:

(12) **Pyramidi rakennutettiin orjilla.**
    pyramid-NOM. SG. have a thing built-pass. p. slave-adess. pl.

The pyramid was built by commanding slaves.

In (12), the object is marked in the nominative case simply because the sentence is in the passive voice. The object of this type of sentence cannot be marked in the nominative case as long as the subject appears in the same sentence. It follows from this that the subject is in principle the primary participant of this type of sentence. What is mainly described is that the controller arranges that a new state of the patient should be brought about by the action of the actor. Therefore, a new state of the patient itself is not the main theme of this type.
of sentence.

From what has been said above one general point becomes clear. The object can be marked in the nominative case only when the state of the referent of the object is mainly talked about in the sentence or the clause in question. Otherwise it is the subject that is marked in the nominative case, since the subject serves as the primary participant. The same observation applies even to the sentences like (4) and (5), repeated below as (13) and (14) respectively:

(13) *Luulen valinneeni parhaan vaihtoehdon.*

I think I have chosen the best alternative. (=4)

(14) *Hyvän ideaan voi saada vaihkapa omenapuun alla.*

One can get a good idea even under an apple tree. (=5)

In (13), judging from the meaning, the state of the referent of the object is not the main theme of the subordinate clause. The object is not the primary participant of the subordinate clause and cannot be marked in the nominative case. Instead the subject functions as the primary participant. The subject of the subordinate clause is indeed missing, but the possessive suffix -ni attached to the past participle shows that the subject of the subordinate clause refers to the same entity as the matrix subject. Then, the possessive suffix can be treated as a substitute for the subject of the subordinate clause.

The sentence (14) is more problematic. The subject of the sentence is missing, since its referent is the generic person. And, there is no substitute for the subject. The object is nevertheless marked in the genitive case. One may notice that the predicate of the sentence is an auxiliary verb. This does not mean that the sentence is a modal expression in a narrow sense. The attitude on the part of the speaker towards the factual content is not described in this sentence. Since the auxiliary verb concerns the ability of the referent of the missing subject, we can say that the factual content of this sentence is described from the viewpoint of the subject. Then, it is the subject that acts as the primary participant of the sentence, though it is not overtly expressed. This is the reason the object of the sentence is not indicated in the nominative case.

2.

Let us now attempt to extend the observation into the following types of sentence. In the Finnish language, an infinitive can be used as an adjunct. To refer to such an infinitive I will use the term ‘free infinitive'\(^4\). The following serves as an example:

(15) *Teoriassa se tapahtuu ymppäämällä*

munasoluun tai siittiöön sairaan geenin
egg cell-illat. sg. or sperm-illat. sg. ill-gen. sg. gene-gen. sg.
tilalle normaali.
place-allat. sg. normal-NOM. SG.

In theory it happens by grafting a normal gene in place of an ill one into an egg cell or a sperm. (SK87:6-1637)

In this sentence, the third infinitive adessive functions as a free infinitive. What should be noticed here is that the object of this free infinitive is marked in the nominative case. Then, what is the reason of the nominative marking of the object? Since the subject of the infinitive, which refers to the generic person, is not overtly expressed, it is indeed possible for the object of the infinitive to act as the primary participant of the infinitival clause. But, in (14) mentioned above, the missing subject, whose referent is the generic person, acts as the primary participant of the sentence.

The point to observe is that the factual content of the infinitival clause is the prerequisite for that of the matrix clause. This means that what is relevant to the meaning of the whole sentence is the state of the referent of the object brought about by the action of the generic person rather than the action itself. In other words, the resultant state of the referent of the object is the main theme of the infinitival clause. This is why, in (15), the object of the infinitive is indicated in the nominative case.

On the other hand, in the following sentence, the object of the infinitive is marked in the genitive case. That is:

(16) Luomalla itse tällaisen fuision ihminen
create-3. inf. adess. oneself like this-GEN. SG. fusion-GEN. SG. man-nom. sg.
voisi ottaa vallankumouksellen askeleen.
can-cond. -3sg. pr. take-1. inf. revolutionary-gen. sg. step-gen. sg.

By creating himself the fusion like this, man can take a revolutionary step.
(SK87:10-563)

Also in this sentence, the factual content of the infinitival clause is the prerequisite for that of the matrix clause. Nevertheless the object of the infinitive is not indicated in the nominative case. The important point to note is that the third infinitive adessive in this sentence is not a free infinitive. The referent of the subject of the infinitive, which is not overtly expressed, is not the generic person but the same as that of the matrix subject. It follows from this that the subject of the infinitive acts as the primary participant of the
ininitival clause whenever the matrix subject serves as the primary participant of the matrix clause. Then, when the matrix subject is the primary participant, the object of the infinitive cannot be the primary participant. And, it cannot be marked in the nominative case. To put it another way, the case marking of the object of this type of infinitive depends on whether or not the matrix subject acts as the primary participant. Then, when the matrix subject is not the primary participant, the object of the infinitive is indicated in the nominative case. For example:

(17) *Liikenneongelma voitaisiin ratkaista nykyaihaistamalla*

traffic problem-nom. sg. can-cond. -pass. pr solve-1. inf. modernize-3. inf. adess.

rautatie.

railway-NOM. SG.

The traffic problem can be solved by modernizing the railway. (SK87:5-2249)

As the matrix clause of this sentence is in the passive voice, the main theme of the matrix clause is the resultant state. The missing subject of the matrix predicate cannot act as the primary participant. Since the missing subject of the infinitive has the same referent as that of the matrix predicate, it cannot be the primary participant, either. Instead the object of the infinitive is the primary participant of the infinitival clause. Then, in (17) above, the object is marked in the nominative case.

The object of the infinitive is indicated in the nominative case also in the following examples:

(18) *Päättöksenne jättää asia pöydälle on herättänyt*

decision-nom. sg. leave-1. inf. matter-NOM. SG. table-allat. sg. has aroused

ristiriitaisia reaktioita.

conflicting-part. pl. reaction-part. pl.

Your decision to leave the matter on the table has aroused conflicting reactions.

(Vilkuna 1996:291)

(19) *Maanomistaja laati suunnitelman kaataa metsä.*

land owner-nom. sg. work out-3sg. p. plan-gen. sg. hew-1. inf. timber-NOM. SG.

The land owner worked out a plan to hew the timber.

In both of the sentences, the infinitive serves as a modifier of the preceding noun. It is interesting to note that in (19) the preceding noun is marked in the genitive case. The object of the infinitive modifying it is nevertheless indicated in the nominative case. In this type of sentence, the subject of the infinitive is missing. Both in (18) and in (19), the referent of the missing subject of the infinitive can be identified indeed. The referents are the second
person singular and the land owner respectively. Being not overtly expressed, however, the subject of the infinitive cannot act as the primary participant, unless there is a sufficient reason. In the Finnish language, the number of nouns which can be modified by an infinitive is limited. In addition to päättös 'decision' and suunnitelma 'plan', they are, for example, aikomus 'intention', halu 'desire', heino 'means', käsly 'orders', oikeus 'right' and velvolisuu 'obligation'. Every noun is an abstract noun. An infinitival clause modifying it conveys the details of its content. Then, in this type of sentence, the whole course of the described event including the resultant state is relevant to the meaning of the infinitival clause. It follows from this that the primary participant of the infinitival clause should not be the missing subject but the object. This is why the object of the infinitive is marked in the nominative case in this type of sentence.

Another example in which the object of the infinitive is indicated in the nominative case is as follows:

(20) Tarkoitukseni on puhua asia selväksi Elsan kanssa.

intention-nom. sg. is talk-1. inf. matter-NOM. SG. clear-transl. sg. El. -gen. with

My intention is to talk the matter over with Elsa. (Vilkuna 1996:279)

Here, the infinitival clause serves as the subject of the whole sentence\(^5\). The subject of the infinitive itself is missing. Though its referent is discernible in this sentence, it cannot act as the primary participant of the infinitival clause. This is because in this type of sentence the content of the infinitival clause is predicated. What is relevant to the meaning of the infinitival clause is the whole course of the described event including the resultant state rather than the action of the referent of the missing subject of the infinitive. Then, the object of the infinitive serves as the primary participant of the infinitival clause and is marked in the nominative case.

Also in the following sentence, the object of the infinitive is indicated in the nominative case. That is:

(21) Minua ilahduttaa nähdä Elsa taas terveenä.

I-part. delight-3sg. pr. see-1. inf. El. -NOM. SG. again healthy-ess. sg.

I am delighted to see Elsa is in good health again.

The infinitival clause of this sentence, like that of (20) above, functions as the subject of the whole sentence. Since it expresses the source of the feeling described by the matrix predicate, the resultant state of the referent of the object is more relevant to the meaning than the action of the referent of the missing subject of the infinitive. This is why the object of the infinitive is marked in the nominative case.
3. Concluding remarks

We can now propose an answer to the question that we posed at the beginning of this paper. The view that the lack of the volition of the referent of the subject is the cause of the nominative marking of the object is unsatisfactory. From what has been said above, it should be concluded that in the Finnish language the object is marked in the nominative case if and only if information about the state of the referent of the object is crucial to the interpretation of the meaning of the sentence or the clause in question.

In the Finnish language, some argument other than the subject and the object can also be indicated in the nominative case. The following are a few random examples:

(22) *Pihalla on kissa.*
    yard-adess. sg. is cat-NOM. SG.
    There is a cat in the yard.

(23) *Minulla on sanakirja.*
    I-adess. is dictionary-NOM. SG.
    I have a dictionary.

(24) *Minun on jano.*
    I-gen. is thirst-NOM. SG.
    I am thirsty.

What is described in each of the sentences is a state. And, the referent of the argument in question plays an essential role in the described state. In other words, the argument in question acts as the primary participant. This is the reason the argument in question is marked in the nominative case. Thus, given that the nominative marking of the object depends on whether information about the state of the referent of the object is decisive to the interpretation of the meaning of the sentence or the clause in question, we can explain the nominative marking of arguments in the Finnish language consistently.

Notes

1) On the nominative marking of the object, see, in particular, Hakulinen & Karlsson(1975), Maling(1993), Taraldsen(1986), Timberlake(1975) and Wiik(1972).

2) The traditional grammar says that *koivun* in (1) is in the accusative singular case. The so-called accusative singular case is, however, identical in form with the genitive singular case. Only the personal pronouns have a distinct accusative form. Then, in this paper, I will not distinguish the accusative singular case from the genitive singular case.
3) The imperative in the third person takes the object in the genitive case. For example:

(i) *Tehköt *toiset työ-n.
    do-imp. -3pl. other-nom. pl. work-GEN. SG.

I hope others do the work.

What should be noticed here is that the subject in the third person is overtly expressed. Moreover, the imperative in the third person is primarily used for expressing wishes. It is a modal expression indeed, but the speaker does not so keenly anticipate that a new state will be brought about. This is why the object of the imperative in the third person is not indicated in the nominative case.

4) 'SK87' shows that the example is drawn from the corpus of the Department of General Linguistics, Helsinki University. This corpus is made up of the texts of all the issues in 1987 of the weekly magazine *Suomen kuvalehti*. The numbers after 'SK87' indicate the number of the issue the example is drawn from and the sentence number in the issue.

5) For further details of the curative verb, see, for example, Kytömäki (1978, 1989) and Pennanen (1986).

6) The point to observe is that there are two adessives in the sentence (9). One of them, *meillä*, functions as the actor and the other, *taskulampulla*, is the instrument. This shows that the actor and the instrument are marked in the same morphological case in this type of sentence. Because of this, in some cases it is difficult to tell whether the adessive in question is the actor or the instrument.

7) On the low frequency of the adessive element, see, for example, Chiba (1998). In this paper, Chiba calls the type of sentence whose predicate is a curative verb the causative construction. He argues that the facts of the Finnish causative construction conflict with the typological facts, since the adessive element denoting a causee is often left unspecified in the Finnish language. The term ‘causative construction’, however, may be misleading when applied to this type of sentence. Compare the following two sentences:

(i) *Me etsimme neulaa lattialta taskulampulla.*
    We looked for a needle from the floor by flashlight. (Kytömäki 1978:142)

(ii) *Me etsitimme neulaa lattialta.*
    we-nom. have a thing looked-for-1pl. p. needle-part. sg. floor-ablat. sg.
    taskulampulla.
    flashlight-adess. sg.
    We had a needle looked for from the floor by flashlight.

These two sentences are different from each other only in their predicate. While the actor in (i) is the first person plural, the actor in (ii) is not the first person plural but somebody unspecified, since the predicate in (ii) is a curative verb. It follows from this that the sentence whose predicate is a curative verb conveys that the actor is some other person than the referent of the subject. What is important to note is that the referent of the actor need not be specific in this type of sentence. Consider the following two sentences:

(iii) *Kapteeni haetti luitnantilla ratsunsan.*
    captain-nom. sg. have a thing fetched-3sg. p. lieutenant-adess. sg. horse-gen. sg.
The captain had his horse fetched by the lieutenant. (Pennanen 1986:166)

(iv) Kapteeni haetuti luutnantilla

Captain-nom. sg. command a person to have a thing fetched-3sg. p. lieutenant

-ratsunsa.

-adess. sg. horse-gen. sg.

The captain commanded the lieutenant to have his horse fetched. (Pennanen 1986:166)

In both of the sentences the predicate is a curative verb. What should be noticed here is that the actor in the sentence (iv) is not the lieutenant marked in the adessive case. It is some other unspecified person who fetched the captain’s horse. All these things make it clear that the actor does not play so important a role in the sentence whose predicate is a curative verb. We may say that the actor is not an argument of a curative verb and a curative verb is bivalent. Thus, we had better not call this type of sentence the causative construction.

8) ‘Free infinitive’ corresponds to *irrallinen infinitiivi* in Karlsson (1979). For further details of the case-marking of the object of a free infinitive, see, in particular, Karlsson (1979) and also Sakuma (1998).

9) On the case marking of the object of an infinitive modifying the preceding noun, see, for example, Vilkuna (1996:288-291).

10) On the contrary, in the following sentence, the object of the infinitive modifying the preceding noun in the genitive case is marked not in the nominative case but in the genitive case. That is:

(i) Maanomistaja antoi yrittäjälle luvan kaataa


metsän.

timber-GEN. SG.

The land owner gave the enterpriser permission to hew the timber.

This is because a single predicate *lupasi* can substitute for *antoi luvan* in this sentence. This means that the infinitive can be interpreted as the complement of the complex predicate *antoi luvan*. Since this sentence is neither in the passive voice nor in the imperative mood, the object is marked in the genitive case.

11) On the case marking of the object of an infinitive functioning as the sentential subject, see, for example, Vilkuna (1996:279-280).

**Abbreviations**

pr. -present  p. -past  pass. -impersonal passive
imp. -imperative  cond. -conditional  p. p. -past participle
1. inf. -first infinitive  3. inf. -third infinitive
sg. (SG.) -singular  pl. -plural  nom. (NOM.) -nominative
gen. (GEN.) -genitive  part. -partitive  ess. -essive
transl. -translatible  iness. -inessive  illat. -illative
adess. -adessive  allat. -allative  ablat. -ablative
References


