

On the Reflexive Suffix and Its Predicative Function in Finnish*

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In the Finnish language a transitive predicate can be converted into an intransitive one by adding a so-called reflexive suffix expressing a reflexive relation. To indicate a reflexive relation, a reflexive pronoun is also available. However, a reflexive predicate is not a perfect equivalent to the corresponding transitive predicate followed by a reflexive pronoun. What is described in a sentence whose object is a reflexive pronoun is both a causal event and a resultant state. On the other hand, the description of a causal relationship is contracted in a sentence containing a reflexive predicate. Moreover, a semantic relation a reflexive predicate has with its subject and its complement varies. Considering various examples reveals that the predicative function of reflexive suffixes is not merely suppressing a causal event but also positively focusing on a resultant state, which is often desirable for an overt or a covert agent, if any.

Keywords: the Finnish language, reflexive suffix, resultative construction, causal event, resultant state

1. Introduction

In the Finnish language suffixes like *-U-*, *-tU*, *-UtU*, *-(V)VntU-* are called reflexive ones¹. When they are attached to a verbal root, it becomes an intransitive verb. The previous studies, Kulonen-Korhonen (1985), Koivisto (1991), Siitonen (1999) and Hakulinen et al. (2004: 330–333) for example, argued that a reflexive suffix expresses reflexive, passive or automative meaning. 'Automative' means that some event occurs or occurred spontaneously. The purpose of this paper is to reconsider the meaning of this suffix and argue about its predicative function in the light of the resultative construction.

By the way, a reflexive suffix can convert a transitive verb into an intransitive one, indeed. But how should transitive verbs and intransitive verbs be defined? Let us begin with the definition of these two types of verbal predicates respectively.

It is not easy to define them, however, because transitivity they have varies gradually. It is not indeed impossible to decide on the basis of its meaning whether a verb is transitive or not, but it would be better to define them according to the morphological marking, since meanings verbs have are transitional in nature. Thus, in this paper we define transitive verbs as verbal predicates taking two (non-oblique) arguments. One of these two arguments functions as a subject and it is usually marked in the nominative case, while the other argument serves as an object, whose case marking can vary among the partitive, the genitive and the nominative case². On the other hand, intransitive verbs can be defined as verbal predicates that have only one (non-oblique) argument. The sole argument of intransitive verbs is usually marked in the

nominative case.

2. Ways to indicate reflexive relations

Two arguments a transitive predicate takes usually refer to different entities from each other. It is possible, however, that both the arguments have the same referent. This makes the sentence in question reflexive.

To indicate a reflexive relation, a reflexive pronoun is available as follows:

- (1) *Hän puke-i itse-nsä hienosti.*
 she-3NOM dress-3SG.PST herself-GEN.SG neatly
 She dressed herself neatly.

On the other hand, a reflexive relation can be expressed by attaching a reflexive suffix to the root of a transitive predicate as in the sentence (2). That is:

- (2) *Hän puke-utu-i hienosti.*
 she-3NOM dress-REFL-3SG.PST neatly
 She was dressed neatly.

What is important to note is that these two sentences are not perfect equivalents, although the predicate of (2), *pukeutua*, to which a reflexive suffix is attached, is the intransitive counterpart of that of (1), *pukea*. In the sentence (1), the subject *hän* and the predicate *pukea* express a causal action, while the object *itsensä* and the complement *hienosti* express a resultant state. In other words, a causal event and a resultant state are described separately in sentences like (1) with a reflexive pronoun as their object. On the other hand, the description of a causal relationship between a causal event and a resultant state is contracted in sentences like (2), whose predicate contains a reflexive suffix. In other words, what is described in sentences containing a reflexive predicate is primarily a resultant state and a causal event triggering the resultant state is not necessarily mentioned overtly.

3. Resultative construction

To show the adequacy of the observation above, let us consider other examples of sentences containing a reflexive predicate. But before doing so, it would be helpful to mention the resultative construction. The sentence (3) serves as an example. That is:

- (3) *Hän maala-si seinä-t vihre-i-ksi.*
 she-3NOM paint-3SG.PST wall-NOM.PL green-PL-TRA
 She painted the walls green.

In this sentence the complement *vihreiksi* describes a resultant state of the referent of the object *seinät*. This means that the object has a predicative relation with the complement. Since the predicate *maalata* is transitive, not only a resultant state but also a causal action is described in this sentence. The referent of the object is the target the designated action 'to paint' is directed

to. What is characteristic of the resultative construction is that both a causal event and a resultant state are overtly and separately expressed in one and the same sentence.

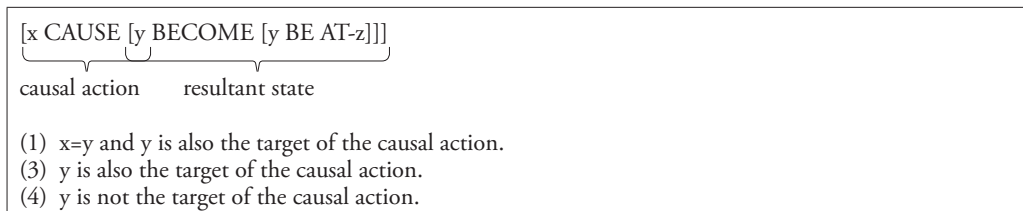
A predicate of the resultative construction is usually transitive. But the predicate of the sentence (4), *kävellä*, is intransitive, although it is followed by two nominals marked in the same case as those of the sentence (3). The sentence (4) is:

- (4) *Hän kävel-i kengä-t kelvottom-i-ksi.*
 she-3NOM walk-3SG.PST shoe-NOM.PL. miserable-PL-TRA
 She walked until she wore her shoes out.

In this sentence the complement *kelvottomiksi* describes a resultant state of the preceding nominal, *kengät*, but this nominal is not the target of the designated action ‘to walk’. In other words, the predicate *kävellä* does not bear a direct semantic relation to the nominal following it, *kengät*. Thus, the nominal *kengät* should be treated as a pseud-object, although it is marked in one of the cases available for an object.

What should not be overlooked is, however, that the action designated by the intransitive predicate *kävellä* can still be interpreted as a causal event. Since she walked a lot, her shoes were worn out. Thus, it can be safely stated that what is described in the sentence (4) is not only a resultant state but also a causal event, too. If this is the case, the sentence (4) can be regarded as an example of the resultative construction.

Since the sentence (1) describes both a causal event and a resultant state separately, the sentence (1) can also be considered to be an example of the resultative construction. The difference between the sentence (1) and the sentences (3) and (4) lies in the fact that the subject and the object of the sentence (1) refer to the same entity. By utilizing the lexical conceptual structure, the difference among the sentences (1), (3) and (4) can be schematized as follows:



On the other hand, the sentence (2) cannot be considered to be an example of the resultative construction. This is because in the sentence (2) a causal event and a resultant state are not described separately.

4. Semantic relation indicated by a reflexive suffix

Semantic relations a predicate with a reflexive suffix has with its subject and its complement vary a lot. While the subject of the reflexive predicate of the sentence (2) can be considered to be an agent, that of the sentence (5) cannot. That is:

- (5) *Kirja käänt-y-y ruotsi-ksi.*
 book-NOM.SG translate-REFL-3SG.PRES Swedish-TRA.SG
 The book is translated into Swedish.

In this sentence, the subject *kirja* serves not as an agent but as a patient, since it refers to an inanimate entity. This means that this sentence describes a resultant state of the referent of the subject.

What is important to note is that the agent of a causal event is not overtly expressed in the sentence (5) and the patient of the causal event seems to be promoted to the syntactic subject. Moreover, there exists an active sentence corresponding to the sentence (5). Then, it seems apparently reasonable to treat sentences like (5) as personal passive sentences.

However, the Finnish language has impersonal passive sentences, too. Then, we should compare sentences like (5) with impersonal passive sentences like (6). That is:

- (6) *Kirja käänne-tä-än ruotsi-ksi.*
 book-NOM.SG translate-PASS-PRES Swedish-TRA.SG
 The book is translated into Swedish.

In impersonal passive sentences the agent of a causal event cannot be expressed overtly, but the existence of a human agent is strongly entailed. In other words, impersonal passive sentences express not only a resultant state but also a causal event.

On the other hand, reflexive predicates do not have such a strong entailment, since the existence of a human agent is not prerequisite for their use. Let us consider the following sentence (7) with a reflexive predicate:

- (7) *Puu kaat-u-i.*
 tree-NOM.SG fall-REFL-3SG.PST
 The tree fell down.

That 'the tree fell down because someone had cut it' is a possible interpretation of this sentence, indeed. But it is an equally possible interpretation that 'the tree fell down because of a strong storm'. In the same way, it is probable that the agent of the sentence (5) is a human being, indeed. But a computer is a possible candidate for the agent. This means that who or what is the agent of a causal event is irrelevant to sentences containing a reflexive predicate. If this is the case, it will be difficult to say that sentences like (5) are passive sentences corresponding active ones.

What is important to note is, however, that the causal event itself is not entirely irrelevant to sentences containing a reflexive predicate. What is overtly expressed in these sentences is only a resultant state and these sentences cannot be regarded as examples of the resultative construction. But a causal event is prerequisite for a resultant state described in these sentences.

To show that this is a reasonable statement, let us consider the following example:

- (8) *Lompakko pala-utu-i vanha-lla omistaja-lla*
 wallet-NOM.SG return-REFL-3SG.PST old-ALL.SG owner-ALL.SG
pitkä-n aja-n jälkeen
 long-GEN.SG time-GEN.SG after
 After a long time the wallet was returned to the former owner.

It should be noted that a reflexive suffix is attached to the root of an intransitive predicate in this sentence³. The predicate of this sentence is *palautua*, which is derived from an intransitive predicate *palata* by adding a reflexive suffix. This amounts to say that the reflexive suffix in (8) can no longer be interpreted to be reflexive, since the root to which it is added is a one-place predicate. It is important to note, however, what is described in this sentence is not a mere resultant state. Let us compare the sentence (8) with the following sentence (9). That is:

- (9) *Lompakko pala-si vanha-lla omistaja-lla.*
 wallet-NOM.SG return-3SG.PST old-ALL.SG. owner-ALL.SG
 The wallet was returned to the former owner.

Both predicates of (8) and (9) are intransitive but the meaning of the former sentence is not identical to that of the latter one. The difference in the meaning lies in the fact that the referent of the subject in (8) is more deeply involved in the described situation. In other words, what is described in (8) is not a mere resultant state. It is implicitly entailed that the resultant state was intended and achieved through a covert causal action.

Thus, we can safely state that sentences, whose predicate has a reflexive suffix, express not only a resultant state but also a covert causal event. However, who or what is the agent of a covert causal event is irrelevant to these sentences. The difference between these sentences and examples of the resultative construction is that a causal event can be overtly expressed only in the resultative construction.

Let us now turn to the following sentence (10). The semantic relation between the predicate and its complement is not straightforward in this sentence. That is:

- (10) *Kärppä pure-utu-i saalii-nsa kurkku-un.*
 ermine-NOM.SG bite-REFL-3SG.PST prey-GEN.SG-3PX throat-ILL.SG
 The ermine bit firmly on the throat of a prey. (Koivisto 1995: 41)

When a verb is reflexive, an agent and a patient should refer to an identical entity. But this is not true of this sentence. In this sentence the subject *kärppä* is animate and ‘to bite firmly on the throat of a prey’ can be regarded as a volitional action of the referent of the subject. However, what the ermine bit is not the ermine itself but a prey. Then, the question is why the reflexive verb *purentua* is employed in this sentence.

As a matter of fact, what is described in this sentence is not a resultant state of a prey which was bitten by the ermine. That the ermine clung to the throat of a prey as a consequence of ‘biting’ by the ‘ermine’ itself is described. In other words, this sentence describes a resultant state of the referent of the subject after it ‘had bitten on the throat of a prey’. This may be the reason the reflexive verb is available in this sentence. Although the target of the causal action is

not the referent of the subject, a resultant state of the same entity is described in this sentence.

Since the root of the predicate of the sentence (10) is transitive, the agent of the causal action is evident. But the causal action itself is not directly expressed in this sentence. It is only entailed covertly. Moreover, it is not a resultant state of the target of the causal action that is relevant to this sentence. On the other hand, what is described in the resultative construction is a causal action triggered by the referent of an agent and a resultant state of the target of the causal action, whether or not the referent of the target is identical to that of the agent. Then, the sentence (10) cannot be regarded as an example of the resultative construction, either.

5. Concluding remarks

All the observations stated above make clear the following. What is common to all the sentences whose predicate has a reflexive suffix is that they cannot be considered to be examples of the resultative construction. This does not mean that the sentences in question cannot express a resultant state. Rather, the sentences in question cannot overtly express anything but a resultant state of the referent of the subject. If this is the case, the predicative function of the reflexive suffix is not merely suppressing a causal event but also positively focusing on a resultant state, which is often desirable for an overt or a covert agent, if any. On the other hand, there are some differences among the sentences in question. These differences can be schematized as follows:

$[\cancel{x}\text{-CAUSE } [y \text{ BECOME } [y \text{ BE AT-z}]]]$ <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; margin-top: 5px;"> <div style="text-align: left;"> <p>(entailed) causal action</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p>resultant state</p> </div> </div>
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- (2) $x=y$ and y is the target of the entailed causal action.
- (5) $x \neq y$ and x is underspecified.
- (7) $x \neq y$ and x is underspecified.
- (8) $x \neq y$ and x is underspecified.
- (10) $x=y$ but y is not the target of the entailed causal action.

By the way, reflexive predicates are intransitive by definition, indeed. But, according to Koontz-Garboden (2009), reflexive predicates are potentially transitive, since they contain a causative predicate in their lexical conceptual structure. That is:

(11) $[x=y \text{ CAUSE } [y \text{ BECOME } [y \text{ BE AT-z}]]]$

In this lexical conceptual structure, the existence of a causer (x) of a causative predicate (CAUSE) is entailed, even if it is not overtly expressed and it refers to the same entity as a subject argument (y) of a subordinate predicate (BECOME), which serves as a causee of the causative predicate at the same time. On the other hand, Levin & Rappaport-Hovav (1995) argues that a causer of a causative predicate is totally suppressed. That is:

(12) $[x \text{ CAUSE } [y \text{ BECOME } [y \text{ BE AT-z}]]]$

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Therefore, according to this hypothesis, reflexive predicates are substantially intransitive.

From what has been said above, it follows that both hypotheses fail to capture the characteristics of reflexive predicates. First of all, the causer (x) of a causal event is not necessarily identical to the subject argument (y) of a reflexive predicate, as is the case in the sentences (5), (7) and (8). On the other hand, the causer (x) of the causal event of the sentence (10) is the same as the subject argument (y) of the reflexive predicate, indeed. But this subject argument is not the causee of the causal event. Although the existence of some causal event is prerequisite for all reflexive predicates, semantic relations between a causal event and a resultant state are not always straightforward and vary from each other. The subject of a reflexive predicate is by default the causer of an entailed causal event at the same time, indeed. But it is also possible that the causer of an entailed causal event is underspecified and should be inferred from the context in which the reflexive predicate in question is embedded. Thus, it is reasonable to say that the truth lies halfway between two hypotheses mentioned above. In any way, reflexive predicates not merely express a resultant state caused by a causal event but also focus on it to emphasize that the resultant state has been achieved through some activities at last.

Notes

- * This research was supported by a grant-in-aid for challenging exploratory research: 2014–2016, No. 26580072, from the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture, Government of Japan.
- 1 According to Hakulinen et al (2004: 336–342), there are some differences among the so-called reflexive suffixes. First of all, each suffix conveys a slightly different meaning. The suffix *-UtiU-* usually expresses reflexive meaning, while the meaning conveyed by the suffixes *-U-*, *-tiU-*, *-(V)VntU-* is rather automative. This difference can be shown by some verbal roots two reflexive predicates can be derived from. For example, both *pelasta-u-a* ‘to be saved’ and *pelasta-utu-a* ‘to save oneself’ are derived predicates having the same root. Also, the suffix *-UtiU-* and the suffix *-(V)VntU-* are often interchangeable with each other. But there is some slight difference in meaning between them. Moreover, predicates containing a reflexive suffix are not necessarily reflexive, as are exemplified by *suutt-u-a* ‘to get angry’ and *loukka-antu-a* ‘to get injured’. These predicates are rather inchoative in their meaning.
 - 2 According to the traditional grammar, the cases available to indicate the object are the partitive, the nominative and the accusative case. As regards nominals other than personal pronouns, however, the accusative case is identical in form with the genitive case in the singular and the nominative case in the plural. Then, in this paper, I do not regard the so-called accusative case as one of the morphological cases available for the object.
 - 3 The suffixes *-UtiU-* and *-(V)VntU-* can be exceptionally attached to the root of an intransitive verb. In such a case, the suffix in question indicate that the designated action is thoroughly carried out. For example, the verb *kulke-utu-a* ‘to end up in’ is derived from the intransitive verb *kulkea* ‘to go’.

Abbreviations

ALL—allative	GEN—genitive	ILL—illative	NOM—nominative	PASS—passive
PL—plural	PRES—present	PST—past	PX—possessive suffix	REFL—reflexive
SG—singular	TRA—translative			

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