The “like” button and Finnish transitivity

Max Wahlström
University of Helsinki

Abstract

This paper examines the linguistic impact of the “like” button in Finnish, focusing on the verb *tykätä* (‘to like’). The introduction of *tykätä* in the sense of ‘to give a like’ tested the original verb’s morphosyntactic limits. In adaptation to the new semantics the partitive case, an object case of Finnish, is occasionally used instead of the expected elative, among other changes. While they are minor phenomena in terms of frequency, these innovative features additionally highlight some of the characteristics of the Finnish transitive construction. This study discusses whether these changes should be considered a result of language contact, concluding that intentionally resorting to polysemy in terminology planning sometimes has quirky linguistic outcomes.

1 Introduction

This paper reports an innovative use of the partitive case instead of the elative. Finnish verbs of liking and loving take either the partitive or the elative case to mark the stimulus, the target of one’s affection. The verb *pitää* ‘to like’ exclusively takes the elative, wheres the verb *digata* ‘to dig, to like’ may take either the partitive or the elative.[1] The verb *tykätä* ‘to like’ exclusively patterned like *pitää* with the elative[1], until in February 2009 the social media platform Facebook added a feature to its site that allowed users to express an unspecified positive reaction to other users’ postings and comments using a dedicated button.[2] This feature appeared as a stylized thumbs-up icon, and, in the Finnish translation, accompanied by the 2SG imperative of the verb *tykätä*. The posting one likes with the verb *tykätä* would now occasionally be marked with the partitive, exemplified in[2]. I illustrate the emergence of this use of the verb *tykätä* with the partitive in the *Suomi24*-online corpus data and discuss other properties of the polysemous use of the verb.

(1) Finnish (own knowledge)
tykkään *sinu-sta*
I.like you-ELA
’I like you.’

[1] The verb *tykätä is* deemed “colloquial” by the authoritative dictionary *Kielitoimiston sanakirja* (KS § *tykätä*), whereas *digata* is described as “slang” (KS § *digata*). Both are transparent loanwords, *tykätä* from Swedish and *digata* from English, yet the latter could probably also be mediated by Swedish.
[2] While popularized by Facebook, it was, however, not their invention, see Pullen (2011).

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(2) Finnish, username *Dino Rex*, 2013-10-17, (Aller Media Oy 2019)

Oon	*muuten*	*tykännyt*	*muutaman*	*kerran*
AUX.PRS.1SG	by_the_way	liked	few	times

siskoni	*kuva-a*
sister.GEN.POSS1SG	photo-PAR

'I have, by the way, liked my sister's photo a few times'

The linguistic consequences of the innovative use of the partitive remain limited: the partitive continues to be used exclusively in the context of 'giving a like' on social media where it is a minor strategy, and the emotion sense of *tykätä* continues to exclusively employ the elative. Yet this phenomenon offers a valuable glimpse into the category of transitivity in Finnish, highlighting its fuzzy boundaries. Additionally, it showcases the linguistic corollaries of an innocuous terminological choice – a rarely reported catalyst for language change.

The data for the surveys in this study all come from the *Suomi24* online corpus (Aller Media Oy 2019). *Suomi24* is a Finnish-language message board with discussions, organized under various topics. The corpus consists of messages from the year 2001 until 2020 and various metadata, including automatically created linguistic annotations. The board achieved peak popularity around 2006, with texts worth of circa 450 million tokens published that year. However, by 2020, its popularity had declined by more than 60 percent in terms of tokens published. Using each year as a subcorpus allows granular diachronic analysis even regarding low-frequency phenomena because of the size of the corpus, circa 4.6 billion tokens.

The corpus is used to study many ongoing linguistic processes but it should not be uncritically employed as a proxy for spoken Finnish: there is great variation in adherence to the norms of Standard Finnish depending on factors such as the type of topic discussed (Niva, Silvennoinen & Wahlström 2024; for further characterization of the corpus, see Lagus et al. 2016). The automated syntactic dependence encoding has a very low level of accuracy regarding the non-Standard Finnish phenomena at the center of this study. Therefore I mostly use queries relying on word forms in this study.

This study is structured as follows: I will discuss the new use of the verb *tykätä* in the context of syntactic transitivity, including testing a minor hypothesis regarding the behavior of the verb *digata* and its derivative *diggailla*. The main analysis introduces corpus surveys that examine the status of the new construction with the partitive. Finally, I will discuss the findings and the prospects for future research.

2 Verbs of liking and transitivity

The basic meaning of the elative case is the expression of source as a local case but it is used with a few bivalent verbs to mark the non-subject as well. In addition to verbs of liking, it marks the topic of conversation with verbs like *puhua* 'to talk' and *keskustella* 'to discuss' and what one 'gets angry' and 'becomes upset' about (verbs *suuttua* and *loukkaantua*, respectively; for a concise overview of the abstract uses of the elative, see Sakuma 2012: 34–37). When coined, the new meaning of the verb *tykätä* 'to give a like' differed semantically from the original sense of liking that has an experiencer and a stimulus: now there was a human agent and the object of giving a like – a posting, photo, or comment – could even be conceived affected, albeit minimally, by the action. Furthermore, the action is punctual, contrasting sharply with the continuous nature of the

original emotion meaning. The new meaning is clearly more transitive (for an influential transitivity scale, see Tsunoda 1985).

Out of the two cases elative and partitive, the latter marks one of the two types of objects in the Finnish transitive construction. In short, according to Huumo (2023: 43), an object marked with the partitive "indicates a) that the object nominal designates an unbounded quantity of mass, b) that the clausal aspect is of a non-culminating kind, and/or that the object nominal is under negation." The partitive object contrasts with the "total" object[3], marked alternatively with the genitive or nominative, depending of additional syntactic criteria, or a dedicated accusative, limited to a subset of pronouns. There are two types of transitive verbs: the ones that show alternation between the partitive and the total object, and the rest, which exclusively take the partitive (see, however, Section 3; for a recent exhaustive account of the choice of the object case, see Larjavaara 2019: 191–380).

Before examining the distribution of elative and partitive case marking in the corpus, I first assess whether the two polysemous uses of the verb *tykätä* differ syntactically in other ways, drawing on existing knowledge of transitivity in Finnish.

2.1 Transitivity tests

Pointed out by Sakuma (2013) regarding the elative-taking verbs, the formal boundaries of the Finnish transitive construction are not clear-cut. For example, the elative complements of certain verbs can be relativized with participles (see also VISK § 530). However, relativization with participles is not possible for all emotion verbs taking the elative. For instance, with the verb *välittää* 'to care about somebody,' the one cared about, marked with the elative, cannot be relativized with the past passive participle. To determine whether the old and new meaning of *tykätä* differ in this respect, let us first observe the behavior of the verbs when relativized with the past passive participle. Examples demonstrate that the stimulus$_1$ or the patient$_2$ of the verbs can both be expressed with the participle:

(3) Finnish, username *Ipa*, 2004-10-3, (Aller Media Oy 2019)

IV Flannelette		*ja*	*IV Organic Terry*	*(tarrattomat*
I.		and	I.	velcro-less
kokoiän	*vaipat)*	*ovat*	*paljon*	*tykättyjä*$_1$
all-ages	diapers	are	much	like.PST.PTCPL
malleja,	*jotka*	*sopii*	*useimmille*	*lapsille.*
models	which	fit	most	children

'IV Flannelette and IV Organic Terry (no-velcro diapers for every age) are much liked options that fit most children'

(4) Finnish (own knowledge)

paljon	*tykätty*$_2$	*ehdokas*	*voitti*
much	like.pst.ptcpl	candidate	won

'a candidate who had received many likes won'

[3] While tempting to call it the default or unmarked object, it is, in fact, less frequent than the partitive object.

It is possible that not all speakers accept or find (3) familiar. Yet the relativization with the past passive participle of the stimulus of *pitää* 'to like,' *pidetty*, is possible even in the literary standard. What is more important, however, is that this is unproblematic with the new meaning, exemplified in (4).

The so-called agent participle,[4] on the other hand, poses more challenges for the emotion verb, consider the following examples:

(5) Finnish (own knowledge)

?hänen	*tykkäämänsä*	*ehdokas*	*voitti*
her/his	like.PTCPL.POSS.3SG	candidate	won

'the candidate they liked won'

(6) Finnish (own knowledge)

hänen	*tykkäämänsä*	*ehdokas*	*voitti*
her/his	like.PTCPL.POSS.3SG	candidate	won

'the candidate they'd given a like won'

It is conceivable that somebody may consider (5) acceptable, but its grammaticality is arguably much more controversial than that of (3).[5] In my opinion, this would not be deemed grammatical for the verb *pitää* 'to like' either.

The third test to determine the formal syntactic differences between the two senses of *tykätä* employs the derivative marker *-l-*, named frequentative due to its key productive sense. The combinatory semantics of the marker *-l-* are however complex: it and the other frequentative markers in Finnish derive a semantically heterogenous group of verbs, many of which are fully lexicalized – that is, teasing apart a frequentative flavor in the meaning is not possible (see VISK § 353–355). The marker *-l-* used either alone or combining with another derivative marker is morphophonologically allowed with many structural verb types, including *tykätä* 'to like' > *tykkäillä*. Yet understandably, the resulting meanings of a marker carrying frequentative and iterative semantics that combines with stative emotion verbs can be quirky or inconceivable, consider for instance *rakastaa* 'to love' – *rakastella* 'to make love.' On the other hand, the meaning 'to give a like' represents punctual action and should therefore be better suited for frequentative modification.

Turns out the verb *tykkäillä*, derived from *tykätä* with the frequentative marker *-l-*, can be used in both in the original sense 'to like' and the innovative 'to give a like.' A quick inspection of the *Suomi24* data reveals that the relatively rare pre-2009 occurrences of *tykkäillä* are used in the sense of liking, yet sometimes with playful, endearing undertones – or euphemistic, as in being clearly "head over heels" with somebody but not daring to use the verb 'to love' quite yet, consider (7).

[4] Not to be confused with agentive participles (see Shagal 2017, 57–60). The "agent participle" (also "MA-participle") relativizes patients. The term is in reference to the agent that is obligatorily included in the construction and expressed with the genitive and/or the possessive suffix.

[5] There is a third participle that could potentially be used to test the verbs. The VA-participle, unlike the resultative past participle, is not temporally marked. The key problem is, however, that the passive form of the VA-participle can be formed from all Finnish verbs because it contributes to a construction expressing necessivity (*on tykättävä* 'must be liked;' Fin. *nesessiivinen verbiliitto*). Also, the independent forms are often lexicalized adjectives and nouns. To examine relativization with the VA-participle a range of additional criteria and preferably a dedicated corpus study is needed.

(7) Finnish, username GothicGirl, 2003-03-09, (Aller Media Oy 2019)

nyt	*me*	*ollaan*	*taas*	*nähty*	*aika*	*paljon*	*ja*
now	we	have	again	met	pretty	much	and

mä	*oonkin*	*ajatellu et*	*voisko*	*se*	*tykkäillä*	*musta…*
I	have	thought that	could	she/he	like.FREQ.INF	I.ELA

'now we've been meeting pretty often, so I've been thinking could they be into me…"

The uses of *tykkäillä* 'to like a posting,' on the other hand, seem genuinely frequentative or iterative, referring to somebody's repeated action or behavior. This use is illustrated in (8).

(8) Finnish, username *kissanhäntä.pystyyn*, 2017-05-10, (Aller Media Oy 2019)

Jassu	*tykkäilee*	*itse*	*omista*	*postauksistaan.*
J.	likes.FREQ.PRS.3SG	herself/himself	own.ELA	postings.ELA.POSS3SG

'Jassu is liking his/her own postings.'

While the uses of *tykkäillä* merit perhaps more qualitative research, the significant increase in its frequency in the corpus (Figure 1) seems indicative of the introduction of the new sense: its frequency is on average five times greater from 2011 on, in comparison with years prior to 2011. The corpus query was based on the truncated verb (*tykkäil-*), meaning that the results include all the inflected forms of the verb but also its nominalizations.

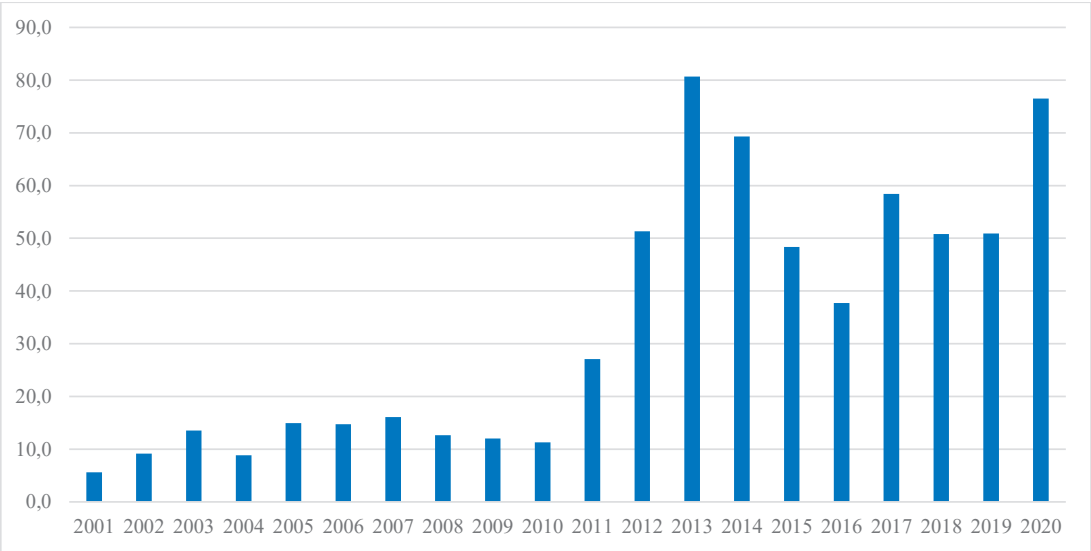

Figure 1. Use of frequentative *tykkäillä* and its derivatives in *Suomi24* (Aller Media Oy 2019) between 2021–2020, occurrences per 100 million tokens, n=1474.

2.2 Excursus: The verb *digata* and the effect of the frequentative on case choice

Before moving on to the analysis of the verb *tykätä* in the corpus, I will present a brief excursus into the verb *digata* 'to dig, to like.' As mentioned in the introduction, it can take both the elative and the partitive, but, additionally, it regularly appears in a form derived

with the frequentative marker *-l-, diggailla* (circa 1 occurrence of the present 3sg to 13 occurrences of the present 3sg of the verb *digata* in the *Suomi24* data). Both verbs seem to have an identical meaning. Hitherto in this paper we have established both a drastic increase of the *tykkäillä* with the frequentative morphology, and, coinciding timewise, the basic observation in this study, the emergence of the partitive as the complement of the verb 'to like' in its new sense of 'giving a like'. Since the verb *digata* and its derivative with frequentative morphology allow both cases, one's exploratory curiosity arises: is frequentative morphology, albeit not frequentative semantically, perhaps associated more strongly with the partitive, the case more closely tied with the transitive construction in Finnish?

To test this, a sample of the two verbs was extracted from the *Suomi24* corpus: all occurrences of the 3sg present indicative of the verb *diggailla*, and a corresponding number of the more frequent 3sg present indicative of *digata*. This number was determined separately for every year found in the corpus. The figures are presented in Table (1).

	diggaa	*diggailee*
Elative	293	209
Partitive	240	349

Table 1. The case of the stimulus with the 3sg indicatives of the verbs *digata* and *diggailla* 'to dig, to like,' n=1091.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between the choice of the partitive or elative case and the verbs. The relation between these variables was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 1091) = 33.7$, $p < .00001$. The sample consisted of 1091 verb phrases, with roughly an equal number of the verb forms *diggaa* and *diggailee*. The effect size was small, phi coefficient = 0.176. These results suggest that the choice of case is significantly associated with the verb, with the partitive being more likely than the elative to be used with the 3sg indicative *diggailee* with the frequentative marker. Additionally, the odds ratio was calculated to be 2.039, meaning that that the odds of partitive occurring with *diggailee* are twice as high as the odds of it occurring with *diggaa*.

At present, this result remains predominantly descriptive of the distribution of these constructions in the data. One possible avenue to explore is whether the association between the partitive and frequentative morphology is due to their closer relationship with transitivity in Finnish: verbs with true frequentative and iterative semantics more often take the partitive than the elative. This may favor the partitive in the presence of the frequentative marker. A potentially confounding factor is that the verbs are commonly associated with the Helsinki sociolect, Helsinki Slang (Fin. stadin slangi). Perceived elements of Helsinki Slang are often socially indexical and frequently negotiated regarding authenticity and ownership. Similarly, the choice of case for the verb *digata* sparks strong emotions, with the partitive viewed more often as the authentic and original case (see, e.g., Aristoteleen kantapää 2017). Any similar polarization along social or regional lines regarding *digata* or *diggailla* may contribute to the observed distribution.

3 Partitive with the verb *tykätä*

In this chapter, I present the results of two surveys that illustrate different facets of the innovative use of the partitive with the verb *tykätä*. The first survey seeks to establish the presence of the phenomenon and to illustrate that it is tied to the introduction of the "liking" functionality on Facebook, consider (9).

(9) Finnish, username *pölijää*, 2014-01-21, (Aller Media Oy 2019)

Sitte ihmiset	*tykkää*	*sitä*	*kuvaa*	*ja*	*kommentoi*
Then people	like	that.PAR	photo.PAR	and	comment

tyyliin	*ootpa*	*kaunis*
in_the_style_of	you're	beautiful

'And then people like the photo and comment like "you sure are beautiful"'

The noun *kuva* 'photo' in (9) represents one of the most common collocations of *tykätä* 'give a like' along with the noun *sivu* 'site, page.' For the survey the occurrences of the partitive of *kuva* (sg *kuvaa* & pl *kuvia*) and *sivu* (sg *sivua* & pl *sivuja*) were searched in the right context of the verb *tykätä* with maximum three intervening tokens. The results were then manually verified to represent the construction. This yielded 32 occurrences, and their distribution across the subcorpora organized per year is shown in Figure 2.

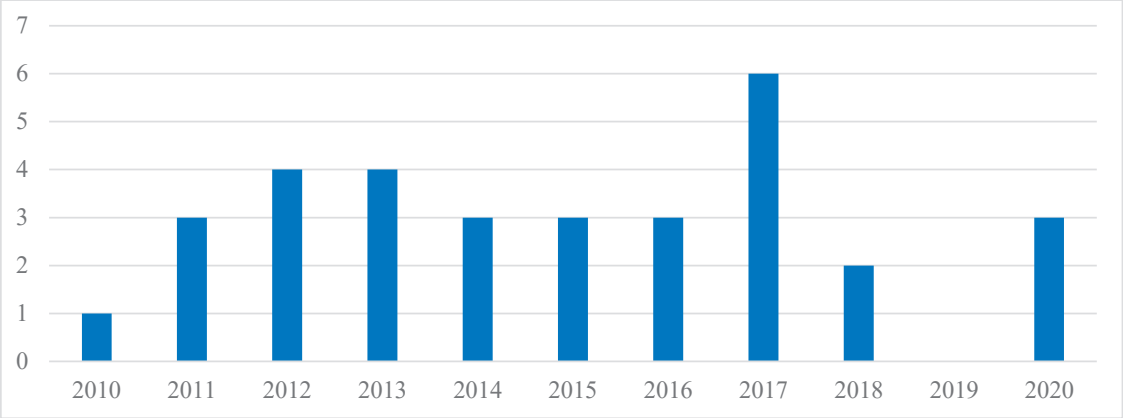

Figure 2. Partitive of the nouns *kuva* 'photo' and *sivu* 'site, page' as the complement of the verb *tykätä*, searched in the right context of the verb with max. three intervening tokens, n=32.

This survey reveals that while the construction is established, it is a low-frequency item in this corpus. All occurrences represent the verb *tykätä* in the sense of 'to give a like.' The observations are too few to draw diachronic conclusions, except that the construction first appears in 2010. The query also revealed that many observations occurred as part of a specific construction where *tykätä* appears as the infinitival complement of the verb *käydä* 'to visit briefly,' as in (10).

(9) Finnish, username *Kaunis N*, 2014-02-05, (Aller Media Oy 2019)

Minäkin	*löysin*	*hyvän*	*miehen*	*Facebookin*	*kautta,*	*yks*
I_too	found	good	man	Facebook	POSTP	one

kaverin	*kaveri,*	*kävin*	*tykkäämässä*	*sen*	*kuvaa*
friend.GEN	friend	I.went	like.INF	his	photo.PAR

'I, too, found a good man via Facebook, a friend-of-a-friend, I went and liked his photo'

This more specific and thus less frequent context makes it easier to examine the choice of the partitive and the elative regardless of a particular lexeme as the object in the corpus. Interestingly, this construction, again, seems to be entirely limited to the sense of 'to give a like'. This is reflected also in the fact that the first occurrence of the construction is in 2010, as with the previous survey. The frequencies of the two cases are illustrated in Figure 3, normalized regarding the size of each subcorpora.

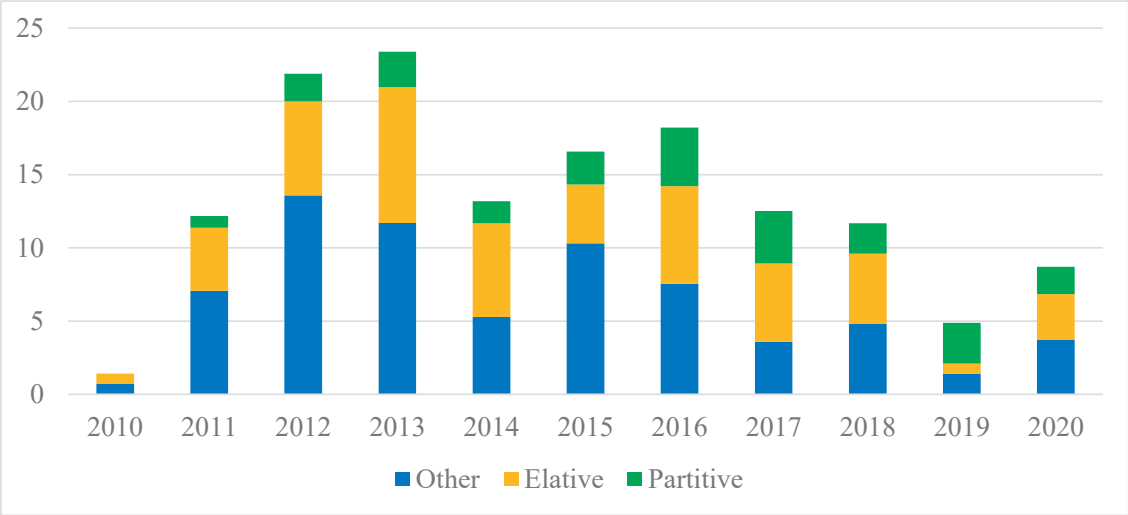

Figure 3. Normalized (per year, per 100 million tokens) frequencies of the construction *käydä tykkäämässä* in the sense of 'to give a like' with the elative or partitive object or no elative or partitive object, n=325.

A part of the same data as in Figure 3 is presented in Figure 4, this time showing the relative proportions of the two cases for each year. Observations become rarer towards the end of the 11-year period due to smaller subcorpora and less frequent use of the construction. Therefore, the last four years are grouped into two, with 25 observations for 2017–2018 and 13 for 2019–2020. The relative proportions of the cases indicate that the use of the partitive does not seem to be in decline, at least within this construction.

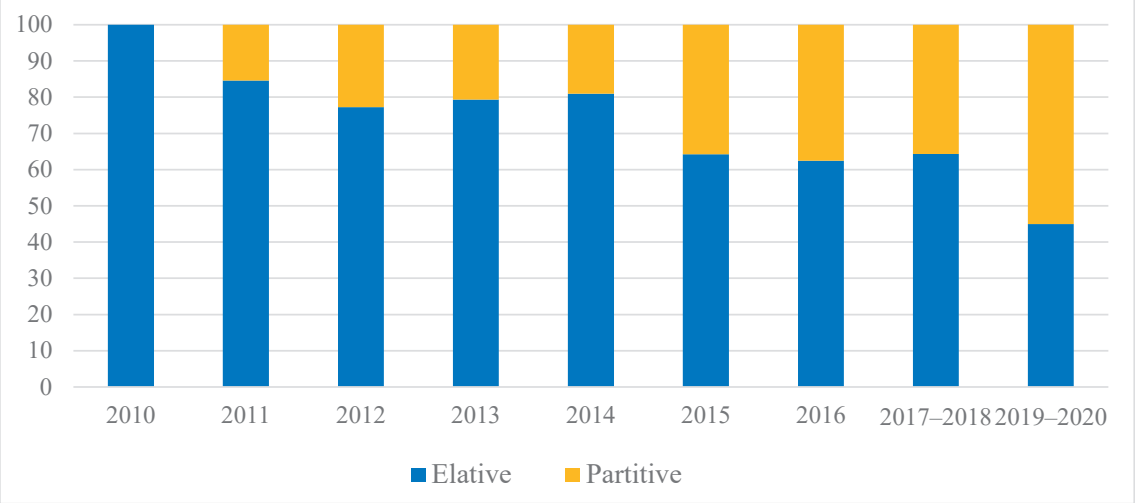

Figure 4. The relative proportions of the elative and the partitive per year in the construction *käydä tykkäämässä* – final four years combined into two sets due to a low number of absolute occurrences, n=163.

Perhaps the most interesting observation regarding this survey is however that there were at least three clear-cut examples of objects marked with a case other than the partitive or the elative. These are marked with what is commonly referred to as the total object – a morphological genitive, or, in the case of a subjectless phrase, a nominative (a subset of pronouns has a distinct morphological accusative case as well, used in the same contexts), consider (10).

(10) Finnish, username *EI SAA LOPETTAA*, 2013-12-18, (Aller Media Oy 2019)

Käykää	*tykkäämässä*	*tää*	*sivu*	*facebookissa*
go.IMP.2PL	like.INF	this.NOM	page.NOM	Facebook.INE

jo[sic!]	*ootte*	*samaa*	*mieltä!*
?if	you're	same	opinion

'Go and like this page on Facebook if you are of the same opinion!'

With so few occurrences, it is possible they were all produced by non-native Finnish speakers, as the choice of the object case is generally thought hard to acquire (see, e.g., Dal Pozzo 2023: 23). As discussed in Section 2, verbs in the core of the Finnish transitive construction alternate between the total object and the partitive. Crucially, no verb of liking or loving takes the total object in Finnish, even if they may be used with the partitive. Nevertheless, the choice of case in (10) is not inconceivable, especially if the act of liking can be thought of as transforming or affecting the page.

4 Discussion and conclusions

In this paper I have illustrated some of the linguistic consequences of the introduction of the ”like” button and naming this in Finnish using the verb *tykätä* ‘to like.’ The magnitude of the changes has been small in terms of, for instance, frequency, yet they are illustrative of both the adaptability of the linguistic system but also the continuum of transitivity related phenomena in Finnish. A plethora of tangential questions have been left out of this short paper, with the hope that some of these will be picked up in the future by scholars. In what follows I sum up and discuss the key implications of the observations.

4.1 Liking a posting and transitivity

The introduction of the verb *tykätä* in the sense of ‘to give a like’ tested the limits of its morphosyntactic distribution. As a verb of liking, *tykätä* shares characteristics with verbs closer to the core of the transitive construction in Finnish. Its stimuli can be relativized with the passive participle, which is not possible for all bivalent verbs taking the elative. The new meaning ‘give a like’ optionally taking the partitive, allowing relativization with the agent participle, and occurring in its frequentative derivative *tykkäillä* are all examples of syntactic adaptation. The semantically more transitive event type led to a more transitive morphosyntactic distribution. The construction *käydä tykkäämässä*, used exclusively in the sense of ‘to give a like,’ likely reflects similar adaptation: the motion verb *käydä* (‘to visit briefly’) has temporally bounded yet not punctual, semantics, a characteristic of semantic transitivity (see, e.g., Kittilä 2002, 62–68).

Recent typological literature has discussed the usefulness of transitivity as a comparative concept. While all languages seem to have a major construction type that includes many bivalent verbs with high transitivity, these may not be the same verbs, or a different proportion of verbs adhere to this construction (for Major Biactant Construction, see Lazard 2015, 114–115; on transitivity prominence, see Haspelmath 2015). This study illustrates how a recently coined polysemous meaning drives a verb closer to the core of the transitive construction. Yet conversely, one could also marvel at the continued use of the elative: the aspectual characteristics of *tykätä* ‘to give a like’ greatly differ from all other verbs taking the elative, making this elative, in fact, entirely unique among other abstract elative complements that typically express a stimulus, topic, or the like.

4.2 Technology, terminology, and language change

Like this study, Basile (2024), too, finds a quirky linguistic consequence for Finnish of the introduction of new technology. The existential verb *löytyä* ‘to be found’ is rarely used in other than third person. Yet, in reference to one’s online credentials such as usernames and profiles, first person is sometimes found: *löydyn myös Facebookista* ‘I am also found on FB / You can also find me on FB’ (Basile 2024: 161–162). Intuitively it is easy to side with the author’s analysis: “These constructions seem to pragmatically imply the permanent presence of speakers on the Internet.” Before, we – that is, our data or records – could permanently “exist” in a similar manner only perhaps in physical archives, listings, or the like.

Another example of technology-driven innovation I noticed years ago but have not seen reported before is the Finnish word *siili* 'heatsink,' originally meaning 'hedgehog,' its spines resembling heatsink protrusions. In the case of coining *siili* 'heatsink,' what happened was not a mere choice of the lexeme: the new term is inflected differently, following another inflectional paradigm, like the word *tiili* 'brick, tile.' It seems that this use is not widely known outside the field of electronics but can be observed among both experts and amateurs.[6] Resorting to another inflectional paradigm to introduce or highlight a semantic or categorial distinction happens regularly in Finnish: common nouns taken as personal names often select another inflection than the common noun: *tuuli:tuulen* 'wind' (nom+gen) versus *Tuuli:Tuulin*.

A few key questions remain: Should the phenomena described in this study be considered language contact? Is naming the "like" button in Finnish calquing? It is commonly known that language contact can bring significant changes regarding phenomena adjacent to those discussed here. Also, no one-to-one correspondence between categories or features in the donor and recipient languages is expected, as borrowed features adapt within the recipient's system (for one such example regarding transitivity, see Grossman 2019). While not necessarily incorrect, the language contact framework may not be the most fruitful approach here. In this case, English likely served as inspiration or instruction for Finnish translators, but the changes in Finnish do not show a direct link to the "donor." The choice of the verb *tykätä* to name the functionality employs semantic extension, resulting in a polysemous meaning. This type of terminology planning is fairly trivial, save, perhaps, for lexicologists, and becomes interesting only when the terminological choice includes or inadvertently induces further modifications.

[6] I conducted a contingency table analysis to examine the association between the variants siilet, the non-standard nominative plural of siili (all occurrences included; n=119) vs. siilit, the expected nominative plural (a sample of 1,000 out of 1,340 total) and the meaning 'heatsink' vs. the other meanings of the word in the Suomi24 corpus.

	siilit	siilet
other	955	88
heatsink	45	31

A chi-square test of independence revealed a significant association, $\chi 2(1, N = 1119) = 74.65$, $p < .001$. The effect size, measured using the Phi coefficient, was $\phi = 0.26$, a moderate association between the variables. The odds ratio for *siilet* is 7.48, indicating that the odds of *siilet* being used in reference to a heatsink are approximately 7.5 times higher than the odds of *siilet* being associated with the category "other."

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Contact details

Max Wahlström
University of Helsinki
Faculty of Arts
Department of Languages
max.wahlström@helsinki.fi