

Partitiivin käyttö oppijansuomessa

Prior linguistic knowledge matters

The use of the partitive case in Finnish learner language

MARIANNE SPOELMAN

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This lectio praecursoria takes my dissertation title *Prior linguistic knowledge matters: The use of the partitive case in Finnish learner language* as its starting point, for the very reason that it may provide you, the audience, with initial or additional insights into my research and its terminology. Of course, the title of this dissertation was chosen for a number of carefully considered reasons: not only does it adequately cover the research topic and the object of investigation, but the first part of the title in particular may prompt the reader to think.

Perhaps, however, we should first focus on the second part of the title, as I chose this as my working title nearly five years ago when I first initiated my Ph.D. research project. For this reason, in Finnish my title always remained simply *Partitiivin käyttö oppijankielessä* or *Partitiivin käyttö oppijansuomessa* ('The use of the partitive case in Finnish learner language'). As learner language is the language produced by second or foreign-language learners, Finnish learner language is produced by learners of Finnish, who, in this case, were Estonian, German and Dutch university students of Finnish as a foreign language. The use of the partitive case by groups of learners of Finnish from different L1 backgrounds was chosen as the object of investigation for several pedagogical and theoretical reasons – reasons which, however, cannot be outlined unless the partitive case first receives the introduction it deserves as a special case and as one of the most widely used cases within the Finnish case system.

The partitive is one of the fifteen Finnish cases, and a typical characteristic of Finnic languages such as Finnish and Estonian. An equivalent to the Finnic partitive case

does not exist in Indo-European languages like German and Dutch. What is peculiar about the partitive case is that it developed from the Uralic separative case, expressing a single locative function, into a grammatical case expressing a particularly wide range of functions. In modern Finnish, the partitive is one of several object cases; it can be the existential subject and the predicative (or copula complement). Importantly, it represents a side of the case alternations of the object, the existential subject and the predicative that expresses aspectual unboundedness, quantitative unboundedness and negative polarity. However, none of the three object case alternations are exactly similar to the others; and each case alternation stands out for its own unique reasons. No doubt because these case alternations differ in certain respects, the principles of partitive case-marking are partly morphosyntactic, partly semantic in nature, and because clear-cut grammar rules regarding the use of the partitive case cannot therefore always be formulated, the use of the partitive case often remains a constant struggle for learners of Finnish. When I started learning Finnish as a foreign language myself, the partitive turned out to be just as notoriously troublesome as I had often heard, and its use presented me and my peer students with a great challenge. It was then that my own desire to get to the bottom of the matter of partitive case-marking first emerged. By stating that the use of the partitive case is “the most challenging and at the same time the most intriguing problem which the foreign learner of Finnish syntax has to face”, I believe Denison (1951: 15) certainly struck a chord.

Nevertheless, if there is one thing that is more challenging than, and at the same time just as fascinating as, gaining insight into the complex nature of the principles of Finnish partitive case-marking, it is examining the interaction between languages. This takes us from the Finnish partitive case to the first part of my dissertation title: *Prior linguistic knowledge matters*, and here I will leave it up to the reader to decide whether to interpret the word ‘matters’ as the third-person singular form of the verb ‘to matter’ or as the plural form of the noun ‘matter’. What is peculiar about the interaction between languages is that it is a subject that has always attracted the attention both of scholars and of the general public. As far as the learning of foreign languages is concerned, there is pervading a notion that certain languages are more difficult to learn than others. Consequently, some languages have gained a notorious reputation for being difficult to learn, while, in fact, each language presents its own challenges and no single language can be considered inherently difficult. Finnish, for instance, has a widespread reputation for being a difficult language, while as a target language it is generally not perceived as presenting any particular challenge for speakers of the closely related Estonian language. Thus, the question of whether or not it takes time and effort to learn a language cannot depend solely on the language to be learned, rather it is likely to be influenced by variables such as the amount of the individual learner’s foreign-language exposure and the distance to the learner’s mother tongue (or L1).

With regard to the distance between the language to be learned (also called the target language) and the learner’s L1, there is a widespread assumption that the learning of languages that are typologically similar and genetically related to the learner’s mother tongue takes considerably less time and effort than the learning of non-related languages, all other variables being equal. The influence of the learner’s L1 on the

language to be learned is generally referred to as L1 influence, one of the most extensively investigated phenomena in the Second-Language Acquisition field. Because of the extremely complex interaction between languages, the myriad of other variables involved in foreign-language learning and the methodological challenges that subsequently arise, scholars remain unable to agree on the precise role of the L1 in foreign-language learning. By investigating the use of the partitive case in the written Finnish of students from a closely related L1 background (Estonian) and non-related L1 backgrounds (German and Dutch), the purpose of my research project was to gain additional insight into the wider question of L1 influence. Learners of Finnish from a closely related L1 background (i.e. Estonian) and non-related L1 backgrounds (i.e. German and Dutch) can usefully be likened to the situation of three musicians – a trumpet player, a pianist and an organist – who all take up the trombone while continuing to have the trumpet, piano and organ as their respective main instruments (based on Ringbom's analogy of tennis/squash versus football; Ringbom 1987: 130).

The first part of my dissertation title, *Prior linguistic knowledge matters*, refers both to the phenomenon of L1 influence and to the use of prior linguistic knowledge, not only of the first language in foreign-language learning but also from within the target language itself. However, my study was designed as an attempt to be more than just another study of the phenomenon of L1 influence. Firstly, the study of L1 influence has tended to focus primarily on English as the target language. This may not come as a surprise when taking into account that English is, after all, one of the most commonly taught languages in the world. By shifting the focus to a target language such as Finnish, typologically different and morphologically rich, I hoped and expected to gain valuable and novel insights into the ways in which L1 influence can manifest itself in foreign-language learning. Here I took Annekatriin Kaivapalu's (2005) work as an outstanding example. Her overall conclusion, that the influence of L1 inflectional morphology is considerably stronger and more positive than previously assumed, implies that L1 influence can be both negative and positive in nature. As the focus is often primarily on errors and negative L1 influence, the positive side of L1 influence had not been extensively assessed in earlier studies, though Håkan Ringbom's (2007) work on Finnish and Swedish-speaking learners of Finnish naturally represents an outstanding exception to the rule.

Positive L1 influence can only successfully be investigated when considering groups of learners from different L1 backgrounds or when the target-language phenomenon to be investigated simulates a continuum ranging from L1–L2 similarity toward difference. By taking the use of the Finnish partitive case as the target phenomenon of my own investigation, a research design that also met this second condition naturally emerged. The use of the partitive case is essentially the same in Finnish and Estonian, though there are certain, mostly subtle differences between the use of partitive objects and existential subjects in both languages. Moreover, Estonian lacks an equivalent to the Finnish nominative-partitive predicative case alternation; thus the occurrence of partitive case-marked predicatives is very limited in Estonian.

To extrapolate my musical analogy: just as a trumpeter learning to play the trombone will discover that he can continue to produce sound using an embouchure but must learn to use the trombone's larger mouthpiece, as well as how the three valves of

the trumpet correspond to the slide positions of the trombone, Estonian learners can rely heavily on their L1 knowledge, which will likely provide them with an advantage over German and Dutch learners – our pianist and organist, who have to learn an entirely new technique and can only build upon their aptitude and general musicianship. That being said, it is to be expected that the slight discrepancies between the use of the partitive case in Finnish and Estonian will, over time, present Estonian learners with certain idiosyncratic challenges. For instance, in initially assuming the existence of L1–L2 similarities that do not actually exist, this can lead to specific error patterns. The schematic representation of the emergence of L1 influence, which I base on Jarvis and Pavlenko’s valuable book (2010) on CLI and cognition and on Ringbom’s (2007: 5) similarity–difference continuum also demonstrates that, on the learner’s continuous quest to facilitate and get along with the target language, positive L1 influence emerges where assumed L1–L2 similarities overlap with actual, objective similarities; in turn, negative L1 influence occurs where these similarities partially or entirely conflict with those similarities that actually exist.

Above all, I acknowledged in my research that the complex and dynamic nature of the learner’s use of prior linguistic knowledge in foreign-language learning undoubtedly calls for a unified, comprehensive and rigid framework of investigation. Therefore, I took the opportunity to adopt (and slightly adapt) Jarvis’ (2000, 2010) excellent framework for identifying L1 influence in order systematically to detect, compare and address the use of prior linguistic knowledge in the use of the partitive case by Estonian, German and Dutch learners, manifested either as the effects of L1 influence or of influence from within the target language. My main research question was essentially three-fold and was formulated as follows:

- Are general patterns concerning the use, overuse and underuse of the partitive as the case of the object, subject and predicative extracted from the Estonian learner corpus similar or different from those extracted from the German and Dutch learner corpora?
- How can potential similarities and differences be accounted for in terms of the use of prior linguistic knowledge of the L1 and the target language?
- Are the general patterns of use, overuse and underuse of the partitive as the case of the object, subject and predicative extracted from the learner corpora affected by L2 proficiency, and if so, how can this be characterised and accounted for?

My research materials were selected from the Estonian, German and Dutch sub-corpora of the International Corpus of Learner Finnish, a large collection of Finnish texts written by students of Finnish as a foreign language from universities all over the world. Using these materials, it was possible to investigate systematically the use of partitive objects, subjects and predicatives. Such a systematic analysis of learner corpus data is termed learner-corpus research or a learner-corpus study. The research materials were aligned to European standard levels of proficiency. A1 hereby represents the

lowest level of L2 proficiency and C2 the highest level of L2 proficiency that can potentially be reached. My materials ranged from A2 all the way up to C2, but the upper proficiency levels C1 and C2 accounted only for a relatively small percentage of the data.

Within the combined frequency-error analyses I conducted, several instances of positive and negative L1 influence were revealed in the Estonian learners' use of partitive objects, subjects and predicatives. Negative L1 influence was hereby found to decrease generally and substantially with increased L2 proficiency. To précis the findings reported in my dissertation, the Estonian learner corpus did not only show significantly fewer partitive errors than the remaining learner corpora, but also some specific error patterns that were found to be due to specific L1–L2 differences. Furthermore, over-generalisation of the grammar rules for partitive case-marking was particularly prevalent in the lower proficiency components of the German and Dutch learner corpora, but almost entirely absent from the Estonian learner corpus. On the whole, the learner-corpus study thus revealed conspicuous differences between the Estonian learners on the one hand and the German and Dutch learners of Finnish on the other. The findings reported in my dissertation not only indicate that prior linguistic knowledge matters but also *how* it matters: the presence of L1–L2 similarities likely provided the Estonian learners of Finnish with the opportunity to rely on their L1 knowledge (which, indeed, they initially did), while the absence of L1–L2 similarities caused particularly the German and Dutch beginners to build upon their limited knowledge of the target language and to resort to simplification when needed. Naturally, reliance on L1 knowledge and on one's limited knowledge from within the target language both serve the common purpose of facilitating the use of the target language. Accordingly, these findings also paved the way for drawing implications regarding language teaching. As regards the teaching of the use of the partitive case to learners of Finnish from different L1 backgrounds, the study suggests that Estonian learners of Finnish as a foreign language would particularly benefit from emphasising the (subtle) L1–L2 differences regarding the use of the partitive case, while learners from L1 backgrounds not related to the target language would probably be assisted by being provided with additional insights into the overall picture of the Finnish partitive case, i.e. the exact morpho-syntactic and semantic characteristics of the case alternations and the similarities and differences between them. Learners could then use insights into these general principles as stepping stones to build upon, and matters that initially seem to be stumbling blocks could, after all, even prove to be helpful. Ultimately, it is rather a case of putting the partitive into use than of entirely and rapidly getting to the bottom of it. Just as learning to play a new musical instrument takes time and cannot be achieved without practice and rehearsal, learners will learn how to use the partitive case by using and practicing it, as well as by testing their assumptions and taking them further.

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Kirjoittajan yhteystiedot (address):
etunimi.sukunimi@oulu.fi / etunimi_sukunimi@hotmail.com