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Funding: [Academy of Finland](#) (postdoctoral researcher's project) 2007–2009

## Dialect syntax. NP constructions in Finland-Swedish varieties.

**Background**

The grammar of languages such as ‘Swedish’, ‘Finnish’ and ‘English’ has traditionally been described from the perspective of standard varieties, that is, prestige varieties closely related to written language. Thus, when ‘Swedish’ is referred to in reference grammars and typological studies, it is generally standard (written) Swedish which is described. This may sometimes be inevitable for practical reasons; accounting for too much variation is not possible, for example, in typological studies where information on a great number of languages needs to be provided. Relying only on standard Swedish, nonetheless, when describing grammatical constructions, gives a limited and biased picture of the grammatical possibilities of Swedish. As shown in numerous dialectological and sociolinguistic studies, variation is the rule rather than the exception in human languages. Despite this, most theoretical models of grammar today still start from the point of view that a language can be described as *one* system with a specific set of grammatical constructions.

In recent years, a number of projects widening the picture of grammar from a dialectological point of view have been carried out in Europe, e.g. the [SAND project](#) on Dutch, the [ASIS project](#) on Italian, the [SADS project](#) on Swiss German and the [FRED project](#) on English. In 2005 two Scandinavian projects were launched, [Scandinavian Dialect Syntax](#) (ScanDiaSyn 2005–2008) and [Nordic center of excellence for microcomparative syntax](#) (NORMS, 2005–2010). Both projects are also included in the larger project [European Dialect Syntax](#) (Edisyn) financed by the European Science Foundation and lead by Sjef Barbiers at the Meertens Institute.

In addition to the two Scandinavian dialect syntax projects, the bilingual Finnish dialect syntax project [Constructional Approaches to Dialect Syntax](#) (ConDiaSyn) has recently been launched. This project is lead by Prof. Jan-Ola Östman (Dept. of Scandinavian Languages and Literature, University of Helsinki), Adjunct Professor Jaakko Leino (Dept. of Finnish Language and literature) and myself. Within ConDiaSyn the common denominator is Construction Grammar (see below). The object of study is grammatical constructions in Finnish and Finland-Swedish dialects. In addition to investigating grammatical constructions in the two languages from a common theoretical perspective, an important goal of the project is to investigate how Finnish and Finland Swedish have influenced each other on the level of dialects. In most studies investigating language contact phenomena in Finland, the focus has been on standard, written or urban language use<sup>1</sup>. The purpose of the ConDiaSyn project is thus to shed light on an area of Finnish and Finland Swedish which remains largely uninvestigated. By uniting researchers working on Finnish and Finland Swedish in a common project we furthermore want to create a research environment which makes it possible to compare Finnish and Finland Swedish in a very explicit and synergetic way.

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<sup>1</sup> For such studies on Finland Swedish, see e.g. Nyström (1993), Saari (1995), Forsskåhl (2005).

## Aim of the project

My project on NP constructions in Finland-Swedish dialects will contribute to the above mentioned projects on dialect syntax in Finland, Scandinavia and Europe. The ultimate goal of my project is thus to participate in investigating a part of grammar which has been largely neglected in linguistic theory: grammatical constructions in dialects (cf. Eklund 2003). In dialectology the focus has traditionally been on phonology, morphology and lexicology. Thus, very little is known about syntactic features of dialects and how these features should be taken into consideration in syntactic theory. This holds true in particular for Finland Swedish (and Swedish more generally); one of the few dialectological descriptions which treat syntactic features of Finland Swedish in a broad and systematic manner is Lundström (1939), who focuses on the Swedish dialects in Nyland. At the moment, important work on the syntax of (primarily) dialects in southern Ostrobothnia is carried out by Prof. em. Ann-Marie Ivars (e.g. 2004, 2005). However, no broader investigations covering the whole area where Swedish is spoken in Finland, have been conducted<sup>2</sup>. My aim is to make a contribution here: I want to describe and compare NP constructions in dialects spoken in different parts of Finland from a broad geographical perspective. In addition to this, I want to relate my research directly to syntactic theory (Construction Grammar), which has not been done to any greater extent in Finland-Swedish research on dialects so far.

Investigating dialects is not only important from a theoretical point of view. It is also important from a societal point of view. As a result of the increasing urbanization and globalization of Finnish society, many traditional dialects, especially in southern Finland, are today facing a serious threat of dialect leveling (due, among other things, to contact with standard varieties). Hence, it is important to map the grammatical system of dialects before it, in the worst case scenario, is too late. At the same time, the increased focus on dialects in syntactic theory, may, in the best case, contribute to improving the position of these dialects also on more a general level.

During 2003–2006 I coordinated the project Swedish in Finland. Syntactic features in a comparative perspective at the [Society for Swedish literature in Finland](#) (SLS). Within the project, which involved four full-time employed researchers (including myself), the focus was on close-up studies on a limited number of features in Finland Swedish (see Wide 2004, 2005, Wide et al. 2007). In my own research I focused on a demonstrative construction in the eastern Nyland dialects. The theoretical goal of my research was to create a methodological approach where dialects, and spoken language more generally, can be investigated from Construction Grammar *and* an Interactional Linguistics point of view (see Wide 2005, 2006, forthcoming a, b, c). In my project on NP constructions in Finland-Swedish dialects I will continue developing the theoretical framework of Construction Grammar and Interactional Linguistics. I will also continue working on grammatical constructions in Finland-Swedish dialects. However, I will broaden my perspective in two fundamental ways: I will investigate NP constructions more generally (not only one type, such as demonstratives) and my investigation will cover different areas of the Swedish-speaking part of Finland (not only one area, such as eastern Nyland).

## Objectives

In my research on NP constructions in Finland Swedish I will focus on the following three types of constructions:

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<sup>2</sup> Finland Swedish is, however, included in Lars-Olof Delsing's overview studies on the structure of the noun phrase in Scandinavian languages (see Delsing 2003).

- a) nouns in the definite form, with and without premodifiers, e.g.:
- de e våår-en uute* ‘it is spring-the outside’ (Lovisa, eastern Nyland)  
*drikkär du mjöltj-en* ‘do you drink milk-the’ (eastern Korsholm, Ostrobothnia)  
*va må de klåkkan ska vara* ‘what is the time-the?’ (Lovisa, eastern Nyland)
- b) constructions with demonstrative pronouns, such as *den* ‘that, it’, *tesin/hisin* ‘this’, *han där* ‘he there’ (fem. *hon där* ‘she there’, neut. *het där* ‘it there’), *den där* ‘that there’ and *den här* ‘that here’
- c) constructions with possessive pronouns and nouns in the genitive case, e.g.<sup>3</sup>:
- Men Falkens foåren kneip han liive åå.* ‘But he killed Falk’s sheep-the’ (Pyttis, eastern Nyland),  
*Dåm bodd däär, föreldrana hansis.* ‘They lived there, his parents-the’ (Karis, western Nyland)

In all of the above mentioned construction types a fair amount of variation can be found in Finland-Swedish dialects. This variation covers both structural and functional variation. Thus, it is necessary to both investigate how the same semantic content is expressed with different types of structures and how the same type of structures covers different semantic and pragmatic contents in different dialects.

As for nouns in the definite and indefinite form, variation can be found, among other things, in the use of nouns in the definite form in generic and partitive contexts, such as the above listed examples *de e våår-en uute* ‘it is spring-the outside’ and *drikkär du mjöltj-en* ‘do you drink milk-the’. In Ostrobothnian dialects nouns in the definite form are used widely, that is, in many different structural and semantic contexts. According to Nikula (1997) the function of the definite form of nouns in the Närpes dialect in southern Ostrobothnia is not connected to the marking of definiteness. Rather, it has the general function of marking referentiality and grammatical gender. In southern Finland dialects, for example, the Nyland dialects, the definite form is also used in wider contexts than in standard Swedish (cf. Lundström 1939:8ff., Brenner 2006). However, this use seems to be restricted to certain types of nouns, such as names of diseases, weather expressions (see above) and temporal expressions, e.g. *Han hadd tjiikhostan, han* ‘He had whooping cough-the, he’ (Ingå, western Nyland), *Han tjöörd på tiiman* ‘He drove in an hour-the’ (Borgå, eastern Nyland)<sup>4</sup>. Investigating the spread and use of nouns in the definite forms systematically in Finland-Swedish dialects is hence highly motivated. What differences and similarities can be found between Ostrobothnia and Southern Finland? How can these differences be described in terms of constructions?

The use of definite and indefinite forms also covers a number of other types of structures which need to be investigated in more detail, for example the combination of pre-posed and post-posed articles. In standard Swedish this combination generally occurs when nouns are preceded by modifiers, e.g. *den röda bil-en* ‘the red car’. When the noun is unmodified only the postposed article is used, e.g. *bil-en* ‘car-the’. However, in the Finland-Swedish dialects various differences to the standard Swedish system can be found. For example, in the eastern Nyland dialects, both the preposed and the postposed article may be used with unmodified nouns in certain types of contexts, e.g. *va må de klåkkan ska vara* ‘what is the time-the?’ (Lovisa). At the same time, the preposed article may be absent in contexts where nouns are modified, e.g. *Dåm stiglar åå me full viinglasen i heendren* ‘They walk away with full wine glasses-the’ (Pyttis). Similar tendencies can also be found in other Finland-Swedish dialects.

<sup>3</sup> Both examples are from Lundström (1939:16).

<sup>4</sup> Both examples are from Lundström (1939:8ff.)

However, no extensive comparative investigations of phenomena such as these have been carried out across Finland-Swedish dialects. Delsing (2003) gives an overview of the situation in all Scandinavian dialects, but his data on Finland Swedish are to a large extent based on older investigations of single dialects or regions (e.g. Vendell 1892, Freudenthal 1878, Hagfors 1891, Hummelstedt 1934, Wessman 1936, Lundström 1939, Huldén 1972). By comparing structures in recordings as well as questionnaires from a large number of dialects from different parts of the Swedish-speaking part of Finland (see section below) I want to provide an updated and more general picture of the structure and function of constructions with nouns in the definite form in Finland-Swedish dialects.

Two contexts in which definite forms occur frequently in Finland-Swedish dialects are structures with demonstrative pronouns and structures with possessive determiners. The above mentioned use of the preposed article *den* i östra Nyland in examples such as *va må de klåkkän ska vara* ‘what is the time-the?’ could alternatively be interpreted as a case of the demonstrative pronoun *den* ‘that, it’ (which is the historical origin of the article *den* ‘the’). When looked upon closer it turns out that the “peculiar” uses of *den* in the eastern Nyland dialects can in fact be analyzed as constructs of a special discourse-focusing construction (Wide 2007a, 2006b, 2007c). How is this construction related to constructions with other demonstrative pronouns in the eastern Nyland dialects and in Finland-Swedish dialects more generally? In Ostrobothnia constructions with the three-gender marked pronoun *hande* ‘lit. he there’ (fem. *honde*, neut. *hede*) are used in wider contexts than the corresponding constructions with the two-gender pronoun *den där* ‘that there’ (neut. *det där*) in standard Swedish. In many dialects in southern Finland, three-gender marked distal pronouns such as *han där* ‘he there’ have been replaced by the standard Swedish form *den där*. What is the relation between constructions with these pronouns, and other demonstrative pronouns such as *tesin/hisin* ‘this’ and *den här* ‘this here’, in different Finland-Swedish dialects? Where do the pronouns occur and what function do they have in the dialects where they occur? My aim is to map the distribution of forms and constructions and study a few constructions in more detail.

The use of the definite form of nouns with possessive determiners in Finland-Swedish dialects has been discussed by, among others, Vangsnes (1998, 1999, 2000). However, Vangsnes theoretical point of departure is Minimalism (Chomsky 1995) and he uses almost conclusively constructed sentences. Furthermore, he discusses only three dialects, one in eastern Nyland (Lapträsk) and two in Ostrobothnia (Malax, Karleby). My aim is to discuss the use of constructions with possessive pronouns in authentic spoken language data from a more general perspective: What forms can be found in different dialects? What is the syntactic distribution of these forms? In addition to this I will relate the constructions with possessive determiners to the other NP constructions I am investigating, that is, the use of the definite form of nouns with and without determiners and the use of various types of demonstrative pronouns.

To summarize, I will investigate NP constructions in Finland-Swedish dialects from a broad perspective. I focus on constructions with nouns in the definite form, demonstrative pronouns and possessive determiners. My aim is to give a broad overview of where different forms occur in Finland-Swedish dialects and how they are used. When I have received some preliminary results of the broad survey, I will select a smaller set of structurally, semantically and pragmatically interesting constructions and investigate them in more detail.

## Theoretical framework and methods

In the Helsinki group of the projects ScanDiaSyn and NORMS, lead by Professor Jan-Ola Östman, and the ConDiaSyn project, the theoretical focus is on Construction Grammar (CxG), primarily as developed and practiced at UC Berkeley in the 1980s and early 1990s (Fillmore 1989). In CxG the basic units of analysis are *constructions*, that is, abstract form–meaning constellations which provide blueprints for licensing well-formed linguistic expressions, *constructs*, in authentic language use (Fried & Östman 2004:18). One of the main tenets of CxG is that the theory should be able to account for all constructions in a language, not only those belonging to the “core” of the grammatical system (Fried & Östman 2004:15). The reason for this is, according to Fillmore (1988:36), that “insights into the mechanics of the grammar as a whole can be brought out most clearly by the work of factoring out the constituent elements of the most complex constructions”.

Due to the interest in non-central and complex constructions emphasis in CxG has been laid on investigating various types of idiomatic constructions, such as the *let alone*-construction in English (Fillmore et al. 1988). Less attention has been paid to spoken language constructions – not to mention dialectal constructions – which are indeed peripheral and complex (Fried & Östman 2004:15). Fillmore (1989:32) stresses the role of interaction and points out that in CxG “numerous grammatical constructions are described as instruments of interaction”. However, interactional features have not been investigated to any greater extent in work within CxG (Fried & Östman 2004:24). Spoken language has, according to Fried & Östman (2005:1753) generally played a fairly modest role within CxG: “the bulk of constructional research has not been particularly concerned with analyzing spoken data beyond noting, occasionally, that a specific syntactic pattern may have different manifestations in spoken language from what it has in ‘standard’ grammar”.

My aim is to make a contribution to some of these less investigated parts of CxG: spoken language, interaction and dialects. In order to do this I will combine CxG with Interactional Linguistics (and later on also Sociolinguistics and Contact Linguistics). In Interactional Linguistics (Schegloff, Ochs & Thompson 1996, Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2001) language is seen as dynamic in nature. Grammatical constructions exist as abstract prototypical schemas or patterns which speakers and listeners orient towards. They are based on speakers’ and listeners’ earlier experiences of situations and contexts but can be negotiated and adapted to new situations. Since grammatical constructs get their final meaning in situated use and interact with other grammatical constructions and contexts, participants in conversations are rather flexible with regard to constructs that do not instantiate all the parts of a construction in an exact manner (cf. Ono & Thompson 1995:222). Allowing for the possibility that not all constructs “hit the target exactly” is problematic from a strictly generative point of view. However, when constraints are seen as soft in the sense of DuBois (1998:80), infrequent exceptions to the constraints can be allowed under special circumstances since patterns consistent across speakers and languages may allow a certain amount of flexibility.

In my investigations I will use primarily qualitative methods. I will start by extracting examples from spoken language corpora (see below). These examples will then be analyzed structurally and semantically from a CxG perspective. In other words, the constituents and their internal relationship, such as the relation between head and complements, will be analyzed by using concepts from CxG. In order to capture communicative functions, a smaller set of constructions will be analyzed from a Conversation Analysis perspective; constructs of the selected constructions will thus be studied sequentially in situated contexts. Finally, the

constructions investigated will be formalized using the CxG notation of boxes-within-boxes (Michaelis & Lambrecht 1996:225ff., Fried & Östman 2004:ff.).

## Data

The primary data I will use in my research are recordings of Finland-Swedish dialects collected at the Society for Swedish literature in Finland (SLS). A large corpus of recordings covering the whole Swedish-speaking area in Finland is currently being collected within the project [Spara det finlandssvenska talet](#) ‘Document the Finland-Swedish Speech’ at SLS. Some 1000 informants in two different age groups (20–30 and 55–75 years of age, respectively) are recorded during 2005–2007. In my research I will have access to these recordings as well as older recordings collected at SLS. Hence, it will be possible to compare the new data with the older data and investigate, for example, dialect leveling and innovations in the use of NP constructions in Finland-Swedish dialects. In addition to the recordings at SLS, I also have access to conversations recorded in other projects and questionnaire data collected within the ScanDiaSyn project. When needed I will use these data and also collect more data myself.

## Results

The aim of my research on a theoretical level is to explore the nature of grammar, in particular the relationship between form and function. By focusing on dialect syntax, interaction and variation I investigate the possibilities and limits of grammar from new perspectives that remain largely uninvestigated not only with respect to Swedish grammar but with respect to grammar in human languages more generally. On the theoretical level, the results of my research will hence contribute to the development of syntactic theory, more specifically Construction Grammar.

On the empirical level, the aim of my project is to map the structure and variation of the noun phrase in Finland-Swedish dialects. The empirical results of my research will form a basis for comparative research of Finland Swedish, Swedish and other Scandinavian languages in the future. In addition to this, the empirical results of my research can be used for analyzing dialect leveling and variation within dialects more generally. Finally, my research will document a part of the linguistic landscape in Finland which is undergoing rapid development and might change fundamentally during the next decades.

The main results of my research will be published in a monograph on NP constructions written in English and submitted to an international publisher, for example, John Benjamins, in 2009. During 2007–2009 I will also present preliminary results of my research and pilot studies in working papers and conference proceedings. In addition to this, I will submit 3–5 articles about theoretical issues concerning Construction Grammar, Interactional Linguistics and Contact Linguistics to referee journals.

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