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**Flexibility of the nominal components in Estonian VP-idioms and
support verb constructions**

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Multi-word expressions are a frequent phenomenon having some specific properties with the result that they do not fit into the grammatical formalisms based on the properties of „ordinary” lexical items. Generally, MWEs are regarded to be more or less frozen expressions, i.e. to be morphologically and syntactically less flexible than productively combining phrases with the same syntactic structure. This fixedness is supposed to depend on the degree of idiomaticity/opaquity or semantic decomposability (Nunberg et al 1994, Riehemann 2001).

This poster about morphological and syntactic flexibility/fixedness will focus on a certain syntactic subtype of MWEs, namely those consisting of a verb and its (syntactic) object. From the semantic point of view the analysed constructions fall into the classes of VP-idioms and support verb constructions. In both cases the syntactic object does not denote the semantic object of the action; in a support verb construction the object noun denotes the action and the verb carries only grammatical meaning, in a VP-idiom, according to the traditional viewpoint, the VP as a whole carries the idiomatic meaning.

The analysed language is Estonian, an agglutinating language with free word order. What makes this topic interesting, is a typological peculiarity of Estonian – the syntactic object in Estonian can be coded using three different cases – nominative, genitive and partitive (there is no such case as accusative in Estonian). The case form of an object in a sentence depends on the properties of the entity denoted by the object (quantitatively bounded vs unbounded) and the aspectual properties of the clause. Aspect does not exist as a verbal grammatical category in Estonian; the aspectual opposition of perfective vs imperfective is manifested in the clause as a whole and can be expressed grammatically by nominative/genitive versus partitive forms of the direct object (1 vs 2):

(1) *Mees ehitas suvila*

Man built summer-house-GEN

A man built a summer-house (perfective)

(2) *Mees ehitas suvilat*

Man built summer-house-PART

A man was building a summer-house (imperfective)

The nominative/genitive forms of the direct object are often referred to as 'total object'. The total object is only used if the object denotes definite quantity (i.e. quantitatively bounded object) and the clause expresses a perfective activity. It is only in the affirmative clause that the total object can alternate with the partial object (which is in the partitive case) whereas the negative clause can only feature a partial object. The total object predominantly occurs in the genitive, but is in the nominative if the object is in the plural or the verb is in the imperative mood.

As in support verb constructions and VP-idioms, the syntactic object does not denote the real object of the action denoted by the verb, it is interesting to investigate whether and to what extent these constructions allow object case alternation.

It has been proposed by Nunberg et al (1994) and systematically shown by Riehemann (2001) that at least in English there exists a connection between semantic compositionality and syntactic flexibility. So one would suggest, that also in Estonian, the support verb constructions should be more flexible than decomposable idioms and those, in turn, more flexible than non-decomposable idioms. Flexibility, in Estonian, subsumes also object case alternations and this is a

short investigation into Estonian support verb constructions, decomposable and non-decomposable VP-idioms in that respect.

As for support verb constructions, although the syntactic object is not the semantic object, the object case alternation follows the pattern described above: the total object is possible only in perfective affirmative clauses and only if the action nominal can be understood as a count noun, if the action nominal can be understood as a mass noun, then only partial object is possible, cf (3) vs (4) vs (5)

(3) *tegi hüppe*

did jump-GEN

'jumped (once)'

(4) *ei teinud hüpet*

not did jump-PART

'did not jump'

(5) *tegi tööd*

did work-PART

'worked'

Among VP-idioms, the picture is less clear and there is a lot of variation in that respect. One could try to explain the possibility of object case variation using the concept of decomposability and opacity. One subclass of non-decomposable and also opaque idioms would be cranberry collocations, i.e. expressions containing a word that is used only as a component of this expression. In Estonian, a cranberry collocation mostly contains a „fossile” word-form, i.e. a case form of a noun that otherwise is not actively present in the language any more. For example, an idiomatic expression *lokku lööma* 'to rant' contains a wordform *lokku* which originates as a partitive case form of the noun *lokk*. In the present-day Estonian, this noun is no more used and the expression *lokku lööma* is completely frozen.

As for decomposability, one can say that the instances of object case alternation in Estonian non-decomposable idioms do not entirely agree with the assumption that non-decomposable idioms allow less syntactic variation. For example the idiomatic expressions *hinge heitma* (lit. fling soul-PART), *otsi andma* (lit. give end-PL.PART) and *vedru välja viskama* (lit. throw spring-PART out) all mean 'to die', a one-place predicate and are thus semantically non-compositional expressions. But all these expressions allow object case variation, e.g. *andis otsad* (lit. gave end-PL.NOM). 'To die' denotes perfective activity and perhaps the need for expressing the perfective aspect and/or the rule that the object in the perfective clause has to be the total one, i.e. in nominative or genitive case overrides other possible constraints.

Another VP-idiom *hinge vaakuma* 'to be about to die', lit. 'to caw soul' does not allow object case variation – but this is possibly due to the fact that this idiom denotes imperfective situation. So, the preliminary results seem to imply that the need to code perfective/imperfective aspect overrides constraints possibly imposed by non-decomposability, but perhaps not those imposed by opacity.

The poster is partly based on a previous paper by Muischnek and Kaalep (2010).

References

- Muischnek, Kadri and Kaalep, Heiki-Jaan (2010). The variability of multi-word verbal expressions in Estonian. *Language Resources & Evaluation Special Issue on Multiword expression: hard going or plain sailing*, 44(1-2), pp115– 135.
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