

# Free NPs as units in Finnish

Marja-Liisa Helasvuo  
University of Turku

## Abstract

This article focuses on free NPs, i.e. noun phrases that are grammatically not part of any clause but form units of their own. Using the methodology of discourse-functional and interactional linguistics, I analyze the morphosyntactic, prosodic and interactional features of free NPs in conversational Finnish. With its rich morphological marking, Finnish provides an interesting perspective on free NPs: Morphosyntactic features, together with semantics, are crucial in determining the status of an NP as a clausal constituent or a free NP. The prosodic analysis shows that the majority of free NPs show clear prosodic boundaries, signalled for example by speaker change, coherent intonation contour, pause or pitch reset. Free NPs serve various interactional functions, such as making assessments or disambiguating referents. These are functions which operate on something already established in the discourse. Free NPs, however, can also initiate something new for example by making requests or introducing new topics.

## Keywords

Finnish; free NP; Interactional linguistics; prosody; syntax; morphosyntax

## 1. Introduction

The focus in this article is on free NPs as units in Finnish, applying the methodology of discourse-functional and interactional linguistics (see e.g. papers in Selting & Couper-Kuhlen (eds.) 2001; Laury et al. (eds.) 2015). By free NPs I mean noun phrases that are grammatically not part of any clause. They have also been called “unattached” NPs (Ono & Thompson 1994, Tao 1996, Ford et al. 2002) or “detachments” (Barnes 1985, Lagae 2007).

Free NPs are not used much in Modern Standard (written) Finnish, except in certain specific discourse contexts such as titles. They do, however, occur in spoken Finnish and in less formal written texts (Helasvuo 1991, 2001), as well as in the earliest written records of Finnish (from the 16th century; Helasvuo & Inaba 2013). Here I explore the use of free NPs in present-day conversational Finnish, with data from the Arkisyn database of modern conversational Finnish (see section 2 for a more detailed description of the data). Consider example (1). The participants are having dinner in a restaurant, and Päivi has been telling the others about her habit of emphasizing what she says with broad movements of her hands and with certain sound effects. After joint laughter, Päivi starts commenting on someone passing by their table (line 1).

(1) (SaPu 117)

- 1 Päivi: *kato. kato mikä paita.*  
look.IMP.2SG look.IMP.2SG what.NOM shirt  
‘Look. Look what a shirt.’
- 2 Varpu: *jes mitkä tatska-t.*  
PTC what.PL tattoo-PL.NOM  
‘Yes. What (great) tattoos.’
- 3 *ei-k mu-n tartte kuvail-la, (.)*  
NEG.3SG-Q 1SG-GEN need.CONNEG describe-INF  
‘Don’t I have to describe’
- 4 *[tatuoint-i-en kuvio-i-t,]*  
tattoo-PL-GEN pattern-PL-PAR

- ‘the patterns of the tattoos?’
- 5 Päivi: *[onneks mu-l oli nyt nää] piilolinssi-t et mä nä-i.*  
 luckily 1SG-ADE be-PST.3SG now these contact.lens-PL COMP 1SG see-PST.1SG  
 ‘luckily I had [my] contact lenses in so that I could see.’
- 6 ***ERikoine k- (.) erikoine ratkasu.***  
 special.NOM special.NOM solution.NOM  
 ‘a very special, special solution.’
- 7 Varpu: *hehehe nii,*  
 PTC  
 ‘((laughing)) right’

In line 6, Päivi makes an assessment of the tattoos of someone passing by. The assessment is formed as an NP, which is not part of either the preceding or the following clause. It also forms an intonation unit of its own (Chafe 1994; Du Bois et al. 1992). It is thus a free NP. The assessment receives an aligning response in line 7. The free NP in line 6 is in the nominative singular. The previous utterance (line 5) ends with a complement clause, containing the transitive verb *näi* ‘I saw’ but no object. The free NP in line 6, however, does not function as an object of *näi* ‘saw’, as it does not carry the appropriate case marking (in order to function as an object of *näi*, it would have to be in the accusative case) nor does it fit semantically as an argument of the previous clause: the semantics of the free NP *erikoine ratkasu* ‘a special solution’ is such that is not conceivable as an object of seeing through contact lenses.

In the data examined, free NPs are emergent units rather than categorical ones (on emergence, see Hopper 1987; for emerging syntagmatic chains, see Auer 2005). Grammatical constructions, such as free NPs, are responsive to local contingencies and the temporal progression of talk (cf. Pekarek Doehler 2011, Pekarek Doehler et al. 2015). The interpretation of an NP as a free NP or a clausal constituent unfolds in time. This interpretation is guided by morphosyntactic, semantic and prosodic features. In terms of syntactic features, free NPs are independent of any clause and form free constructions, as manifested by morphosyntactic marking (such as case, number). An example is the free NP in (1), which, as noted above, does not fit into the preceding clause due to its case marking and to its semantic incompatibility. With regard to interactional functions, free NPs can serve various functions, such as making an assessment, as in (1). A free NP can also function as a turn increment: according to Ford et al (2002:17), a free NP can serve as an increment after a point of possible completion and extend the prior action instead of starting a new turn. Free NPs used as turn increments are not interpretable as syntactically integrated continuations or syntactic constituents of the immediately prior turn. As turn increments, they look backward in the discourse. Finally, a free NP can also serve to organize the subsequent discourse by introducing a new topic. In conversational data, prosodic cues may be used to mark free NPs as units separate from the previous or following utterance (pitch reset, pausing, change in rhythm etc.; cf. Ford et al 2002:32–33). Here I examine the grammatical, prosodic and interactional features of free NPs as criteria for unithood.

This article is structured as follows: in Section 2 I introduce the data. In Section 3 I discuss the syntactic features of free NPs, while Section 4 deals with the analysis of the prosodic features of free NPs and Section 5 with their interactional functions. Section 6 consists of a concluding discussion.

## 2. Data

The data for this study come from recordings of everyday conversations between family and friends. The data were obtained from the Arkisyn database of modern conversational Finnish (Arkisyn), which is currently being compiled at the University of Turku. From the

conversational data, free NPs from three different recordings have been extracted for closer study. The total number of free NPs in the data is 105.

So-called dislocations have sometimes been discussed as free NPs (see e.g. Ono & Thompson 1994, Helasvuo 2001, Laury & Helasvuo 2016). From a narrowly grammatical perspective they are not grammatically part of the clause, but at the same time, they are not independent of it either. Consider ex. (2).

(2) SaPu 119

Mirva: *ne o iha sairaa hiano-i ne biisi-t.*  
they.NOM be.3SG quite sickly great-PL.PAR they.NOM song-PL.NOM  
'they are quite awesome those songs.'

In (2), the left-dislocated NP *ne biisit* ('those songs') is not part of the preceding clause in a strict sense. However, it is not totally free of it either: the preceding clause contains a coreferential pronoun *ne*, and the dislocated NP appears right after the clause. Prosodically, it is linked to the clause. The same data used for the present study also included seven left dislocations and eight right dislocations; these have been excluded from the data set.

The free NPs were further analyzed in terms of morphosyntactic and semantic features, referential properties and prosodic features.<sup>1</sup> The free NPs were coded for the case marking of the NP. I also analyzed the interactional functions of the free NPs in their sequential contexts, such as making an assessment or request (see Section 5).

A smaller subset of the data (N = 45) was analyzed with respect to prosodic features. Both auditory and acoustic prosodic analyses were conducted to determine whether there were prosodic boundaries related to the free NPs. The data were first analyzed auditorily, after which an acoustic analysis was carried out with the Praat software package (Boersma & Weenink 2013). The data were coded (i) for the intonation contour of the unit containing the free NP (falling, rising, or level); (ii) for the occurrence of a pause or (iii) speaker change after the free NP; and (iv) if the same speaker continued, for the occurrence of a pitch reset.

We will now turn to the analysis of the data. First we will discuss the morphosyntactic features (Section 3), then prosodic analysis (Section 4) and finally the interactional functions (Section 5) of the free NPs.

### 3. Morphosyntactic features of free NPs

Finnish is a language with a rich morphology. It has extensive inflection on both verbal and nominal categories. Each member of the clause is inflected in a form identifying its function in the clause, and even uninflected forms (e.g. particles) show their syntactic function in the clause through the absence of inflection. Together with other morphological processes, such as verbal agreement morphology, case is used to indicate whether an NP is or is not part of a clause. Most nominal modifiers and determiners precede their heads and agree with them in case and number, thus marking the NP as a unit of its own. We could say that morphosyntactic features, together with semantics, are crucial in determining the status of an NP as a clausal constituent or a free NP. In this section, I first give an overview of the morphosyntactic features of the free NPs in the data (Table 1), followed by a more detailed discussion of the findings.

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Case of free NP	Number				Total	
	Singular		Plural		N	%
	N	%	N	%		
Nominative	67	79.8	12	57.1	79	75.2
Partitive	12	14.3	7	33.3	19	18.1
Elative	0	0	2	9.5	2	1.9
Nominative + locative	5	6.0	0	0	5	4.8
<b>Total</b>	84	≈ 100	21	≈ 100	105	100
<b>% of total</b>		80.0		20.0		100

**Table 1.** Case and number of the free NP.

As we see in Table 1, the majority of free NPs are in the nominative (75.2% or 79/105; cf. (1) above). In the light of previous research, this is not surprising: it has been shown that in conversational data, the nominative is by far the most common case for NPs (Helasvuo 1997). In the Finnish case system, the nominative is the base form; unlike other case forms, it has no case suffix. Nominative NPs can serve various syntactic functions: they function as subjects, but in a transitive clause without a nominative subject the object sometimes takes the nominative. As Helasvuo (2001) has suggested, the nominative is a true subject marking case only in the case of personal pronouns. In addition to these clause core functions, a nominative can also serve as a free NP. The second largest group consists of partitive NPs (18.1% or 19/105; see (3) below). In the Finnish case system, the partitive belongs to the so-called “grammatical cases” marking the grammatical relations of the clause core, such as direct objects. It is, *inter alia*, used to express partial or indefinite quantity (cf. examples 3 and 7 below; for the uses of the partitive case, see Huumo 2013, Huumo & Helasvuo 2015). Finally, there are two free NPs in the elative (a case indicating movement away from something) and five that are formed by a nominative NP combined with a locative phrase (either an NP in one of the locative cases or an adpositional phrase). In the last-mentioned group, the locative phrase serves to predicate something about the referent of the nominative NP (see (4) below).

Table 1 also shows that the majority of free NPs (84/105 or 80.0%) are in the singular. In order to interpret these findings we need to compare them to the overall frequencies. Thus, the percentage of singular free NPs needs to be compared to the overall percentage of singular NPs out of all NPs. In the Arkisyn database as a whole, this percentage is 84.8% (69365 singular nouns out of a total of 81778 nouns). The percentage of singular NPs is thus somewhat higher in the data-set as a whole than it is in the subset of free NPs. Among partitive free NPs, plurals are fairly common (7/19 or 33.3%; see example 2). Compared to partitive NPs in the Arkisyn database in general, plurals are more common among free NPs: 27.8% of the partitive NPs in the database as a whole are in the plural.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note, however, that the raw numbers for partitive free NPs are too low to allow for any definitive conclusions. The current data indicate that in terms of morphological features (case, number), free NPs follow fairly closely the overall tendencies observed in the larger database.

It is also worth pointing out that out of the 15 cases in Finnish, only a few are used in free NPs. Of the eight different locative cases, only inessive and illative were found in the free NPs in the present data, neither were any of the three marginal cases, comitative, instructive and abessive. Of the grammatical cases, the accusative and the genitive were not found in the data. However, it cannot be ruled out that some of these cases could be used in free NPs; they just did not appear in our data.

<sup>2</sup> Search carried out in February 2017.

The following example (3) illustrates the syntactic independence of free NPs. Alina is talking about her day at work; she has a summer job selling ice-cream at a kiosk. Prior to this excerpt, Alina has told a story about what had happened to her at the kiosk the previous day: in talking about the weather and its effect on sales, she had accidentally attributed the good rate of sale to the fact that “the ice-cream is shining” when she was obviously trying to say that ice-cream sales go up when the sun is shining. The story has been received with joint laughter, and Alina continues:

(3) SaPu 119

- 1 Alina: *mä ajattel-i et jos sä ol-isi ol-lus siin.*  
 1SG.NOM think-PST.1SG COMP if 2SG.NOM be-COND.2SG be-PCP there  
 ‘I thought if you had been there’
- 2 Netta: *hei mä ol-isi kual-lu.*  
 hey 1SG be-COND.1SG die-PCP  
 ‘hey, I would have died’
- 3 Alina: *tai sää ni huh huh. ha ha .hhh*  
 or 2SG so PTC PTC  
 ‘or you like oh boy. ((laughter))’
- 4 (1.5)
- 5 Alina: *tomss-i PERusmok-i-i.*  
 DEM.ADJ-PL.PAR basic-mistake-PL-PAR  
 ‘those kinds of basic mistakes.’
- 6 (5.0)
- 7 Mirva: *on-k-s tei-l kamera?*  
 be-Q-CL 2PL-ADE camera  
 ‘Do you have a camera?’

In the excerpt given in (3), Alina considers possible alternative scenarios of what might have happened had her friends been present to witness her mistake (lines 1–3), and after a considerable pause (1.5 seconds), she ends up with an assessment (line 5). This assessment takes the form of a free NP, which has a demonstrative adjective functioning as the modifier of the head noun *perusmokia* ‘basic mistakes’. The modifier agrees with the head in case (partitive) and number (plural). Because of its form (case marking, number) and its semantics, it is clear that the NP cannot be part of the preceding clause. After the free NP (line 5), there is a long pause (5.0), after which Mirva opens up a new topic by posing a question (line 7).

The free NP (example 3, line 5) thus serves to make an assessment about the incident Alina has just described. With the plural marking of the NP, however, Alina indicates that the assessment is not only about the mistake she has just told the co-participants about, but about something else as well. Before the sequence given in (3), Netta has just contributed to the conversation with two stories. Similarly to (3), Netta’s stories are about awkward incidents at work caused by verbal slips. The free NP in (3) serves to make an assessment about Alina’s incident but the plural marking of the free NP indicates that the assessment could be understood as relating more generally to the stories by Netta before.

Another option for such an assessment would be to use a copula clause, which in Finnish are formed with a subject, a copula verb (*olla* ‘be’) and a predicate nominal. Using a copula clause the speaker would thus need to choose a referring expression that would function as the subject of the copula clause. In ex. 3, what the assessment is about, however, is quite vague and elusive: in some sense, it is the events described in the previous stories, but Alina may just be assessing what she herself has done as belonging to the category of basic mistakes.

Unlike for example a copula clause, the free NP provides a grammatical resource for making an assessment without having to refer to what is being assessed.

In example (4) we have a free NP combined with a locative phrase. The participants in this conversation are preparing to go to a rock festival the following day. Before the sequence given in (4), the participants have been talking about how to dress for the event. Before the recording, the participants have been out shopping for new clothes.

(4) SaPu 119

- 1 Anni: *toi o oikee hyvä.*  
DEM.NOM be.3SG really good.NOM  
'that's really great.'
- 2 (Alina): ((laughter))
- 3 (0.3)
- 4 Alina: [*KIITTI.*]  
thanks  
'thanks.'
- 5 Netta: [*sii-he joku paita pääl.*]  
it-ILL some.NOM shirt.NOM top-ADE/ALL  
'(you can put) some shirt on top of it.'
- 6 (0.4)
- 7 Anni: *on.*  
be.3SG  
'it is.'
- 8 Netta: *sitte ku tule-e kylmä.*  
then when become-3SG cold.NOM  
'when it gets cold.'

In (4), Anni is complimenting Alina on her new outfit (line 1). After Alina's response (line 4; the laughter in line 2 may also be by Alina), Anni reinforces her compliment by repeating the finite verb of the complimenting clause (line 7). Overlapping with Alina's response, Netta offers a piece of advice (line 5), which she further specifies (line 8). The advice given in line 5 is formulated with a nominative NP (*joku paita* 'some shirt') combined with two locative phrases (*siihe* 'to it' and *pääl* 'on top'). The demonstrative *siihe* 'to it' is coreferential with the demonstrative *toi*, roughly translatable as 'that' (line 1). There is no clausal construction in the context that this NP + locative phrase construction could be part of. The construction contains no verbal element, but in its absence, the locative phrases serve to predicate something about the nominative NP: there could be a shirt on top of it, but it is not specified how (most likely Netta herself would put it on, but this is not explicated in the linguistic form). The locative phrases both indicate direction towards something, but referentially they are quite vague. Helasvuo (2001:123–125) has suggested that in constructions like the one in (4), the case-marking functions similarly to a predicate which takes the free NP as its argument (cf. Siro 1964 on case endings as "quasipredicates").

In their article on free NPs (unattached NPs) in English, Ono and Thompson (1994) discuss a similar example: here the free NP + locative phrase construction is a directive *no kids on the balcony*, where the adpositional phrase *on the balcony* serves to give a spatial orientation concerning the referent of the NP *kids*. In the absence of a predicate verb, the exact relationship between the NP and the adpositional phrase is left to be inferred: whether kids are not allowed to go out on the balcony, or whether they should not linger there. The construction may also be used simply to state a fact: 'there are no kids on the balcony'. In a sense, this construction has been crystallized and functions as a prohibitive directive. At the same time, however, the

free NP + locative phrase is a fully productive construction type, which can be used as a template to produce new constructions (e.g. *no smoking on premises, no drinking on the job*). In other terms, it functions like a prefab (cf. Erman & Warren 2000). Voronov (forthcoming) provides another example from Russian: *doloj tiraniyu* [away tyranny-ACC] ‘away (with) tyranny’, where *doloj* is a locative adverb and the free NP is in the accusative, marking ‘tyranny’ as the goal of the action while the action itself (doing away with something) is not explicated. It is interesting to note that the Finnish data contain no free NPs in the accusative case,<sup>3</sup> although the construction is perfectly acceptable in other languages. In German, for example, a request can be made using a free NP in the accusative case: *einen Kaffee, bitte* ‘one coffee (ACC), please’ (cf. Voronov forthcoming).

Summing up: in a language like Finnish, with rich morphological marking, morpho-syntactic features together with the semantic content turn out to be crucial in distinguishing whether an NP is part of a clause or a free NP. In addition to case marking, free NPs express number (singular vs. plural). Free NP constructions are grammatically quite frugal or minimal, and leave a great deal to be inferred: a free NP may be used to characterize a referent without having to refer explicitly to the referent being characterized (cf. ex. 3; on the interactional functions of free NPs, see Section 5). Free NP + locative phrase constructions may be used to predicate a location somewhere, or movement towards somewhere or from somewhere, without having to explicate the kind of movement implicated. In (4), for example, it is predicated that a shirt will go on top of the outfit, but the precise manner in which this will occur is not explicated. Thus, free NPs as a grammatical resource are characterized by their frugal or minimal grammar, and it is precisely this feature that can be exploited for interactional purposes. They also exhibit interesting prosodic characteristics, which we will turn to next.

#### 4. Prosodic features of free NPs

Ford et al (2002:32–33) note that prosodic cues may be used to mark free NPs as separate units. They mention pitch reset, pausing and changes in rhythm as possible cues. In the present study, prosodic features of free NPs were studied in order to determine whether they support the analysis of free NPs as independent units. Features taken into account included pauses, speaker change, changes in voice quality and volume, pitch reset and intonation contour. We may note that speaker change is not a prosodic feature as such but a speaker change always entails a prosodic change. All of these features contribute to prosodic chunking in conversational interaction (cf. Aho 2010 on prosodic chunking in spoken Finnish and in Swedish spoken in Finland; for prosodic boundaries and chunking see Cruttenden 1986, Bruce 2005).

In the present study, the prosodic analysis was based on an auditory analysis, supplemented by an acoustic analysis carried out with the Praat software (Boersma & Weenink 2010). The acoustic analysis was sometimes unreliable due to overlap or background noise. To ensure the reliability of the prosodic analysis, these cases had to be excluded from it. As prosodic analysis is very time-consuming, it was applied to only a subset of the data (N = 45). The free NPs were chosen so that they formed a representative sample of the morphosyntactic features discussed in section 3 and the different interactional functions identified in section 5.

The analysis shows that in the vast majority of cases there was a clear prosodic boundary either before or after the free NP, marked by speaker change, coherent intonation contour of the free NP (falling, rising or level)<sup>4</sup>, pause either before or after the free NP, pitch

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<sup>3</sup> This applies not only to the data studied here but also to those dealt with in Helasvuo (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Intonation contour refers to the auditory shape of a prosodic unit based on intonation and terminal junctures (Cruttenden 1986: 45–46, Chafe 1987; for Finnish: Aho 2010). It has been customary in studies of spoken Finnish (in both traditional dialectological and more modern interactional studies) to distinguish between three major terminal contours: falling, rising and

reset, and/or change in voice quality in the free NP. Only pauses longer than micropause (0.3 seconds or longer) were considered. When analyzing the data, these features were coded independent from each other. This means that a given free NP could exhibit multiple features. Table 2 summarizes the findings concerning prosodic boundary markers.

Boundary marker	N (of 45)	% of cases
Coherent intonation contour of the free NP	45	100
• <i>Falling intonation contour</i>	31	
• <i>Rising intonation contour</i>	7	
• <i>Level intonation contour</i>	7	
Speaker change	41	91
• <i>Before the free NP</i>	26	
• <i>After the free NP</i>	34	
• <i>Both before and after</i>	19	
Pause	30	67
• <i>Before the free NP</i>	17	
• <i>After the free NP</i>	24	
• <i>Both before and after</i>	11	
Pitch reset	7	16
Change in voice quality	1	2

**Table 2.** Prosodic boundary markers associated with free NPs.

Table 2 shows that all free NPs are uttered under a coherent intonation contour, encompassing the free NP either alone or together with certain particles or conjunctions (cf. example 5, line 14). Among the different intonation contours, falling contours were most common (31 cases). There were 7 cases with level intonation and 7 with rising intonation. In the literature, level intonation has been defined as a marker of continuation (see e.g. Chafe 1988:10). Thus, level intonation may be used to indicate that there is more to come. At the same time, however, it marks the boundary of a prosodic unit (intonation unit) in Finnish (Helasvuo 2001:137). Speaker change is a common boundary marker for free NPs (41 cases in total, cf. examples 2, 4, 5 and 6). In 26 cases speaker change occurred preceding the free NP, and in 34 cases following it. In 19 cases, these overlapped, i.e., speaker change occurred both before and after.<sup>5</sup> Also common is pausing in connection with the free NP: 17 cases involved a pause before the free NP, 24 cases had one after it. In 11 cases these markers occurred simultaneously, i.e., a pause occurred both before and after the free NP. There were only a couple of cases with pitch reset, and only one with a change in voice quality. Many cases involved multiple boundary markers: for example speaker change combined with pausing, as in (2) and in (5) below.

Example (5) illustrates prosodic boundaries. It is from the same conversation as in (4) where the participants are discussing an upcoming rock festival. During this excerpt Netta is going over the program listing the different bands that will be playing at the festival the next day.

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level (see e.g. Seppänen 1997: 22–23). Level terminal contour has been noted to indicate continuation. Even though it may signal continuation, it nevertheless indicates a boundary of a prosodic unit.

<sup>5</sup> In other words, the numbers for ‘before’ not only include cases where there was a speaker change only before the free NP but also cases where there was a speaker change both before and after the free NP. Likewise for pauses.

(5) SaPu 119

- 1 Netta: *mitäköhä menee sit joskus pual seiska' 'aikaa,*  
what-PAR-Q-CLT go-3SG then sometime half seven-GEN time-ILL  
'what's on then around six thirty'
- 2 *thö\_Sikstinain\_Ais.*  
NAME.NOM  
'The 69Eyes (name of a Finnish rock band).'
- 3 (0.5)
- 4 Alina: *öäh.*  
PTC  
'yuck'.
- 5 Netta: *Hanoi\_Roks.*  
NAME.NOM  
'Hanoi Rocks (name of a Finnish rock band).'
- 6 Anni: *nii.*  
PTC  
'Yeah.'
- 7 Mirva: *=miks noi o-*  
why DEM be  
'Why are those –'
- 8 Netta: *=See Äm Äks,*  
NAME.NOM  
'CMX (name of a Finnish rock band).'
- 9 (0.4)
- 10 Mirva: *°haluu-ks Anni men kattoo See Äm Äksä?°*  
want.2SG/3SG-Q-CLT NAME go.INF watch-INF NAME.ACC  
'Does Anni want to go to see CMX?' [Or: Do you Anni want to go to see CMX?']
- 11 Anni: *[no ei] välttämätt op pakko.*  
PTC NEG necessarily be.CONNEG compulsory  
'Not necessarily.'
- 12 Netta: *[°Arkki,°]*  
NAME.NOM  
'The Ark. (name of a Swedish rock band)'
- 13 Mirva: *mikä?*  
what.NOM  
'What?'
- 14 Netta: *Arkki ja,*  
NAME.NOM and  
'The Ark and,'
- 15 Alina: *yäk. siis mää oli niim pettynyv viime vuan siihe Arkkii.*  
PTC PTC 1SG be-1SG so disappoint-PCP last year DEM-ILLNAME-ILL  
'Yuck. I was so disappointed at the Ark last year.'

In example (5), Netta is reading out loud the names of the different performers playing the next day. The names are produced as free NPs (lines 2, 5, 8, 12 and 14), each one forming an intonation unit of its own, except for the last one, *Arkki ja* 'The Ark and' (line 14); here the free NP is combined with the conjunction *ja* 'and', which together form an intonation unit. The free NPs form a list, and each member of the list is followed by either a pause (as in lines 3 and 9),

a response particle (lines 6 and 15), or both (lines 3–4). The free NPs are followed by speaker change. Each free NP is thus followed by several markers for prosodic boundaries.

Thus, the prosodic analysis shows that free NPs usually show clear prosodic boundaries. Multiple boundary markers were also present in many cases. I will discuss possible interdependences between the prosodic boundary markers and the interactional functions in the next section.

## 5. Interactional functions of free NPs

The interactional functions of free NPs have been discussed in some previous studies. Ono and Thompson (1994) focused on unattached NPs at a specific turn constructional environment, namely at the ends of turns. Based on their data from American English conversation, they found that at the ends of turns, unattached NPs tend to be used to assess, evaluate, summarize, label and classify. Ford et al. (2002) discuss turn increments in American English conversation. They note that increments which are extensions of the preceding turn function as constituents of the clause in that turn, and as such continue the action of that turn, while increments which are free constituents – either unattached NPs or other free constituents – initiate an action of their own and serve to display an assessment and stance towards a referent mentioned in the prior turn. (Ford et al. 2002: 18, 30.)<sup>6</sup> All of these interactional functions occur in the Finnish data as well, along with many others.

Table 3 gives a rough overview of the various interactional functions performed by the free NPs in the present data. It is important to note that, unlike coding for example for the case of the free NP (cf. Table 1), coding for interactional function can yield varying results depending on the analyst. The main point in Table 3 is to show the variety of interactional functions free NPs serves and to indicate which functions are most frequent.

Function	N	%
<i>Backward-looking</i>		
• Characterizing	23	21.9
• Categorizing	33	31.4
• Confirming	5	4.8
• Offering a candidate understanding	15	14.3
<i>Forward-looking</i>		
• Making a request	9	8.6
• Predicating on a theme	6	5.7
• Introducing a new topic	7	6.7
• Vocative	2	1.9
<i>Idiom</i>	5	4.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 3.** Interactional functions of free NPs.

Table 3 shows that free NPs are most often used to categorize referents (cf. Ono & Thompson 1994 on classifying free NPs in American English). They are also often used in characterizing functions, for instance by making positive or negative assessments about referents in the conversation (see also Helasvuo 2001:117–123). This is a function identified by Ford et al. (2002:18) as an interactional function of free NPs in turn increments in American English. It is

<sup>6</sup> Ford et al. (2002:25–30) do not include right-dislocations in their discussion of free NP extensions (unattached NP extensions in their terminology; cf. our discussion on ex. 2).

also fairly common to use free NPs to offer candidate understandings, i.e. interpretations co-participants may offer of what a speaker has just said (see Antaki 2012:531, Heritage 1984:319). Free NPs may also be used to confirm or disambiguate referents (cf. Tao 1996:93 on free NPs which reinforce a referent in Mandarin). All of these functions look backward in the discourse, relating to something in the previous interaction. There are certain functions, however, which serve to initiate something new in the interaction, and are thus forward-looking. These include making requests, predicating something on a theme, or introducing a new topic (cf. Tao 1996:85). Interestingly, introducing a new topic was identified as the most common function of free NPs in Tao’s Mandarin data (see Tao 1996:84); in the Finnish data, in contrast, it was not particularly common, as can be seen in Table 3. Free NPs can also be used as vocatives, but as can be seen in Table 3, however, this use is not particularly common in Finnish.

The analysis presented in Table 3 can be compared to the findings of Ono and Thompson (1994) regarding free NPs (or “unattached NPs”, in Ono and Thompson’s terminology) in American English conversational interaction. They identified two major functions of free NPs: referential and predicating (Ono & Thompson 1994:403). Under “predicating” free NPs they include functions such as assessing, characterizing, classifying (similar to our “characterizing” and “categorizing” function; cf. Table 3 above). Referential free NPs function in the “negotiation of referents which will be tracked in the ensuing discourse”. This characterization could be linked to our functions “confirming”, “offering a candidate understanding” and “introducing a new topic”, maybe perhaps also “making a request”. Ono and Thompson (1994:407) further note that it is the predicating free NPs that predominate in the data, as 80% of the free NPs in their data served predicating functions. This tendency can be seen in the Finnish data also, though but not to such great extent: if the functions of “characterizing”, “categorizing”, and “predicating on a theme” are combined and classified as “predicating free NPs”, this amounts to 59% (62/105) of the data.

Ono and Thompson (1994) further found in their American English data a prosodic skewing related to the interactional functions of the free NPs. The majority of free NPs (70%) identified as serving predicating functions had final intonation contours (Ono & Thompson 1994:410). Assuming that their final intonation corresponds to our falling intonation contour, it can be noted that in the Finnish data, predicating free NPs (i.e. “characterizing”, “categorizing” and “predicating on a theme”) had falling intonation contour slightly more often (73% of the time) than in the American English data studied by Ono and Thompson (1994). Free NPs that served to make requests often carried a rising intonation contour, but this was not always the case.

Example (6) illustrates a free NP which serves a characterizing function by making an assessment. The participants have been discussing recipes for home-made cherry liqueur. Just prior to the sequence shown in (6), one of the participants, Varpu, has been talking about two different recipes she has been experimenting with. In one of them the cherry pits have to be crushed, in the other they are just left as they are.

(6) SaPu 117

- 1 Päivi:     *se*            *on-ki*            *erikois-t*        *niinku ajatel*  
 DEM.NOM be.3SG-CLI strange-PAR like    think.INF  
 ‘it sure is funny to think’
- 2            *et*        *mi-tä*        *siä*    *kirsika-n*    *siemene-s* *sit* *muka*  
 COMP what-PAR there cherry-GEN seed-INE then as.if  
 ‘what there in the cherry pit’
- 3            *[voi*        *ol-la*    *sellas-t*            *mi-l*        *om*    *merkitys-t]*  
 can.3SG be-INF DEM.ADJ-PAR REL-ADE be.3SG meaning-PAR

- 4 Varpu: 'there could be that means something'  
 [↑*nii-i mitä siin voi ol* ]  
 PTC what-PAR there can.3SG be.INF  
 'yeah, what could there be?'
- 5 Päivi: *jonku mau-n kannalt*  
 some.GEN taste-GEN with.respect.to  
 'in terms of taste'
- 6 *[luuli-s et se maistu-u]*  
 think-COND.3SG COMP DEM taste-3SG  
 '(you) would think it [would] taste'
- 7 Varpu: *[nii sanom muu-ta ]*  
 PTC say.IMP.2SG other-PAR  
 'yeah, that's right.'
- 8 Päivi: *vaam paha-lt ei kirsika-lt ainakaa,*  
 just bad-ABL NEG.3SG cherry-ABL at.all  
 'just bad, not like cherry at all.'
- 9 Varpu: *joku semnen kitkerä maku.*  
 some.NOM DEM.ADJ.NOM bitter.NOM taste.NOM  
 'some bitter taste.'
- 10 Päivi: *nii-i. (0.5) maistu-u sit enemmän viina-lt.*  
 PTC taste-3SG then more booze-ABL  
 'Yeah. It tastes more of booze.'
- 11 Varpu: *hehehe se-pä.*  
 DEM-CLT  
 '((Laughter)) That's it.'
- 12 Päivi: *se-pä. viina om paha-m makus-ta.*  
 DEM-CLT booze be+3SG bad-GEN taste.ADJ-PAR  
 'That's it. Booze tastes bad.'

In (6), the participants are considering what difference it would make to the taste of the cherry liqueur if the cherry pits were crushed (lines 1–5). In lines 6 and 8, Päivi makes an assessment concerning the taste. She refers to the liqueur by the demonstrative *se* (line 6). Varpu responds to the assessment in line 9, with a free NP *joku semnen kitkerä maku* 'some sort of bitter taste'. The free NP may characterize the liqueur or the special flavor the pit brings to it, but this is left open. The free NP is in the base form, the nominative, and therefore does not fit in with the preceding syntactic construction (*se maistuu vaam pahalt ei kirsikalta ainakaa* 'it would just taste bad, not like cherry at all', lines 6 and 8) where the characterizing phrase is in the ablative case as required by the verb *maistuu* 'taste' (l. 6). Päivi responds to this with the particle *niiin*, which expresses agreement with Varpu's assessment, followed by an elaboration (Sorjonen 2001:181–185), where Päivi recycles parts of her own previous utterance in lines 6 and 8. It is interesting to note that while the free NP (l. 9) leaves it open whether it is the liqueur or the special flavor of the pit that is being assessed, the following assessment (l. 10), despite its clausal form (finite verb *maistuu* 'tastes') does not have an expressed subject, thus leaving the question open of what it is that 'tastes'. In recycling parts of her own utterance (l. 6 and 8), Päivi does not recycle the subject *se* 'it', referring to the pit. From the content of the recycled clause we can infer that Päivi is no longer talking about the taste of the pit, but about the drink itself. In line 11, Varpu gives an aligning response by laughing and saying *sepä*; this is the nominative form of the demonstrative *se*, 'it', combined with a clitic particle, roughly translatable as 'that's it'. Päivi recycles the demonstrative and adds a further assessment, building on her earlier assessment about the taste in line 10. While in line 10 the co-participant

has to infer from the content of the utterance that it is the drink Päivi is assessing, in line 12 this is made explicit. In sum, example (6) contains an assessment sequence of which the free NP (1. 9) is part. In this it differs from examples (1) and (3); these also contain free NPs serving to make an assessment, but the assessments (example 1 line 6, and example 3 line 5) are not responding to a previous assessment, nor are they followed by further ones.

In the data, characterizing free NPs often include a characterizing adjectival modifier, such as *kitkerä* ‘bitter’ in ex. (6), but not necessarily: the characterization may be embedded in the lexical semantics of the head (cf. ex. 3).

The largest group in the data, with 33 cases, consists of categorizing free NPs. Under categorizing I have included free NPs which label or name a referent, as in (5), where the speaker was listing the bands performing at the rock festival. Example (7) illustrates another kind of categorizing free NP. Netta is telling the others about an incident that happened while she was babysitting two children.

(7) SaPu 119

- 1 Netta: *mä niinku puhu-i-m popkorne-i-sta? nii-l laps-i-lle,*  
 1SG PTC speak-PST-1SG popcorn-PL-ELA DEM.PL-ALL kid-PL-ALL  
 ‘I was talking about popcorn to those kids,’
- 2 *mä ol-i, se ol-i aika väsynyp päivä taas?*  
 1SG be-PST.3SG DEM be-PST.3SG quite tired day again  
 ‘I was-, it was again a pretty tired day’
- 3 *sit mää vaa niinku selit-i vaik kui kaua*  
 then 1SG just PTC explain-PST.1SG just how long  
 ‘then I just like explained on and on,’
- 4 *Enii ne kokporni-t o iha sairaa hyvi-i*  
 PTC DEM.PL NONCE.WORD-PL be.3SG just sick.GEN good-PL.PAR  
 ‘Those *kokpornis*<sup>7</sup> are just awesome.’
- 5 *et joo ne o niinko kokporne-j-a£,*  
 COMP PTC DEM.PL be.3SG PTC NONCE.WORD-PL-PAR  
 ‘(I mean,) yeah they are *kokpornis*,’
- 6 *sit ne ol-i mi-tä, (0.8)*  
 then DEM.PL be-PST.3SG what-PAR  
 ‘Then they were like, What?’
- 7 *Enii siis ↑POPkorne-j-a.£.hhh*  
 PTC PTC popcorn-PL-PAR  
 ‘So (I mean) popcorn.’
- 8 All: *((laughter))*
- 9 Alina: *no hei mä ol-i asiakkaan mä e-n tiä,*  
 PTC PTC 1SG be-PST.1SG customer-GEN 1SG NEG-1SG know.CONNEG  
 ‘But hey, I was (with) a customer, I don’t know,’
- 10 *mä ehkä joilleki varmaa tei-st kerro-i-n-ki jo,*  
 1SG maybe some.PL-ALL certainly 2PL-ELA tell-PST-1SG-CLT already  
 ‘I maybe already told about this to some of you’

In (7), Netta is describing a personal experience. She uses reported speech in her narration: in lines 4–5 she reports what she said to the children, and then in line 6 how the children had responded to her (*mitä* ‘what’). Line 7 reports her own response to the children. The free NP in

<sup>7</sup> *Kokporni* is a spoonerism based on *popkorni* ‘popcorn’. *Kokporni* does not have any obscene meaning in Finnish.

the response, *POPkorneja* (line 7) is preceded by two particles *nii siis* which mark the response as a self-repair. According to Laakso and Sorjonen (2010), the particle *siis* when used as a repair initiator projects that the speaker is about to specify or explain something. In the free NP utterance in line 7, Netta is explaining to her puzzled recipients what she had meant by *kokporneja* (lines 4 and 5).

Example (8) illustrates free NPs which provide confirmation. Here the participants are in a restaurant, and the waitperson has come to take orders. Before this excerpt, Jatta has already ordered ice-cream.

(8) SaPu 117

- 1 Waitperson: *sit o viel suklaa kinuski ja mansikka-kastikke-i-ta*  
 then be.3SG still chocolate caramel and strawberry.sauce-PL-PAR  
 ‘then there are still chocolate, caramel and strawberry sauces’
- 2 *ni halua-t-ko jonku siihen.*  
 PTC want-2SG-Q some.ACC DEM-ILL  
 ‘would you like some for it?’
- 3 Jatta: *no# öö kinuski,*  
 PTC caramel  
 ‘Well, caramel.’
- 4 Waitperson: *kinuski,*  
 caramel  
 ‘Caramel.’
- 5 (1.0)
- 6 Waitperson: *mm,*  
 PTC  
 ‘Mhm.’
- 7 Päivi: *>mä kuuntel-i vähä huonosti<sen lohikeittojutun,*  
 1SG listen-PST.1SG a.little badly DEM-ACC salmon-soup-thing-ACC  
 ‘I didn’t listen to the salmon soup thing carefully [lit. I listened to the salmon soup thing a little badly]’

In (8), the waitperson asks about possible side orders to the ice-cream (lines 1–2). Jatta chooses one from the presented list of three (line 3), and the waitperson confirms the order with a free NP (line 4). After a 1.0 pause, she turns to the other members of the party to take their orders.

Free NPs provide a grammatical resource for candidate understandings. In the classic interpretation, a candidate understanding can be used to check what an earlier speaker had intended by his/her turn, and invite the earlier speaker to confirm or disconfirm the adequacy of the proposed understanding (Heritage 1984:319). In other words, the producer of the candidate understanding seeks confirmation whether his/her understanding of the previous turn is adequate. This is illustrated in (9):

(9) SaPu 119

- 1 Alina: *me teh-tii nii-l armeija-herätys yks aamu?*  
 1PL do-PASS.PST DEM.PL-ALL army-wake-up one morning  
 We did a army-style wake-up for them one morning.
- 2 Anni: *ja jumppa.*  
 and gymnastics  
 ‘and gymnastics.’
- 3 Alina: *nii? sej jälkee?*  
 PTC DEM-GEN after

- 4 Mirva: 'Yeah, after that.'  
*armeija-jumppa vai,*  
 army-gymnastics or  
 'army gymnastics or?'
- 5 Anni: *ei.*  
 NEG  
 'No.'
- 6 Alina: *no ol-i se vähä semne, sit joku Kasper oli-*  
 PTC be-PST.3SG DEM little DEM-ADJ then some NAME be-PST.3SG  
 'Well, it was a bit like (that), then this Kasper was-'

In (9), Alina and Anni are co-telling a story about what they did when they were working as counselors for a youth camp. Alina starts with a transitive clause (line 1), which Anni extends with a coordinated NP object. Alina accepts the extension with *nii?* (line 3) but specifies that the two – the wake-up and the gymnastics – weren't simultaneous events but separate ones. Mirva offers a candidate understanding (line 4), targeted at Anni's line 2: how should *jumppa* 'gymnastics' be understood? Does the modifier *armeija-* 'army(-style)' used to modify *herätys* 'wake-up' (line 1) apply to it as well? Anni responds to the candidate understanding negatively (line 5), but in line 6, Alina gives a more non-committal response which launches a lengthy sequence explaining how things were done at the camp.

Free NPs may also serve to make requests. Couper-Kuhlen (2014) discusses requests as examples of directive-commissive actions. According to Couper-Kuhlen (2014:631–632), a request frames a future action or activity to be performed by the recipient in the interest of the speaker. All the cases analyzed as requests in the data are requests for material actions. Requests differ from offers, which also belong to directive-commissive actions, in that an offer frames the action as one to be performed by the speaker him/herself for the benefit of the recipient. In requests, the beneficiary is the speaker her/himself. Couper-Kuhlen (2014:638) identifies several grammatical formats used in her English data to perform directive-commissive actions, but none of the formats contain free NPs. In their study of requests at a Finnish convenience store, Sorjonen and Raevaara (2014) identify both the verbal (clausal) request format and the phrasal format; the latter takes the form of a free NP. Example (10) illustrates requests. The participants have come home from shopping for clothes, and are now discussing their purchases:

(10) SaPu 119

- 1 Anni: *on-k-s toi-ki Ginast,*  
 be.3SG-Q-CLT DEM-CLT NAME-ELA  
 'Is that one also from Gina ((name of clothing store))?'
- 2 Alina: *joo.*  
 PTC  
 'Yeah.'
- 3 (2.0)
- 4 Alina: *>sakse-t?<*  
 scissors-PL  
 'Scissors?'
- 5 Mirva: *°mää-ki leikka eka oma.° (4.0)*  
 1SG-CLT cut.1SG first own  
 'I'm going to cut my own (tag) first.'

In (10), Alina is sorting out her shopping. In line 2, she responds to Anni’s question, and then requests a pair of scissors using a free NP (l. 4). Mirva first gives an account for not complying to the request immediately, but then hands the requested scissors to Alina.

Free NPs may also be used to introduce new topics. Example (11) is from a series of stories about various incidents the participants have experienced at work (see examples 3 and 7; the excerpt given in example 7 comes right after the excerpt in example 11). In (11), Netta is talking about her babysitting experiences. At the start of the sequence in (11), Netta is finishing a story about the dogs belonging the family she has been babysitting for. This story involves confusion over words: she often got confused about the dogs’ names, Pipsa and Peppi, calling them “Pepsi and Pippa” instead (lines 1–3). This reminds Mirva of another story about Netta’s babysitting experiences, also involving a mix-up over words. In the analysis of (11), we first focus on the free NP in line 4, which introduces a topic, and then move on to the free NPs in lines 1 and 3, illustrating free NPs used as vocatives:

(11) SaPu 119

- 1 Netta: *joo, sit mä huus-i ain, Pepsi ja Pippa,*  
 PTC then I scream-PST.1SG always NAME.NOM and NAME.NOM  
 ‘yeah, then I always called, “Pepsi and Pippa”’
- 2 *hehe se oli kauheet ku (ne oli) Pipsa ja Peppi,*  
 it be-PST.3SG horrible-PAR when DEM be-PST.3SG NAME and NAME  
 ‘huh huh it was awful as they were Pipsa and Peppi’
- 3 *[£Pepsi ja Pippa£]*  
 NAME.NOM and NAME.NOM  
 ‘“Pepsi and Pippa”’
- 4 Mirva: *[<ja kokporni.>]*  
 and NONCE.WORD.NOM  
 ‘and *kokporni*’
- 5 Netta: *eih .hhh*  
 NEG  
 ‘Oh no!’
- 6 Netta: *niin nii joo he he he,.*  
 PTC PTC PTC  
 ‘Oh that one.’
- 7 Alina: *mitä?*  
 what-PAR  
 ‘What?’
- 8 Netta: *ku me puhu-ttii,*  
 when we talk-PASS.PST  
 ‘When we were talking,’
- 9 *mä niinku puhu-i-m popkorne-i-sta? niil lapsille,*  
 I like talk-PST-1SG popcorn-PL-ELA those-ALL kid-PL-ALL  
 ‘I talked to those kids about popcorn,’

In line 4 of (11), Mirva is initiating a new topic with the help of a free NP. It is related to the previous story, as it ties in with the same time and place (babysitting in a certain family). The free NP serves to introduce a new topic, but at the same time it initiates a pre-sequence to a new story in a series of stories about funny incidents at work. The free NP *kokporni* is a spoonerism based on the word *popcorn*. After a somewhat reluctant response by Netta, whose story it is (lines 5–6) and a response by Alina who registers as an unknowing recipient (see Terasaki 2004 [1976], Heritage 2012), Netta starts the story in line 8. In this example, the free NP by Mirva is

forward-looking: it indicates that there is more to come in the interaction. The free NP invites Netta to provide yet another story, but since Mirva is a knowing recipient here, she could provide the story herself if Netta refused.

Example (11) also illustrates free NPs used as vocatives: in line 1, Netta reports on how she called the dogs with the false names: *Pepsi ja Pippa*. The original names are given in line 2, and in line 3, Netta repeats the false names in a sing-song voice imitating calling out the dogs.

In sum: free NPs serve various interactional functions. Some functions look backward in the discourse, relating to something in the previous interaction. Most commonly free NPs function to categorize or characterize referents. These are all functions that have been identified in the previous literature for different languages (see e.g. Ono & Thompson 1994; Helasvuo 2001:117–123; Ford et al. 2002:18). In addition, free NPs may serve to provide candidate understandings. They may also be used to confirm or disambiguate referents (cf. Tao 1996:93 on free NPs reinforcing a referent in Mandarin). There are also free NPs which are forward-looking: they serve to initiate something new in the interaction. They are used to make requests, predicate something about a theme (cf. ex. 4 above), or introduce a new topic (cf. Tao 1996:85).

## 6. Conclusions

We started out with a syntactic definition of free NPs: free NPs are syntactically not attached to any clause but rather form units of their own. With its rich morphological marking, Finnish provides a basis for such an approach: syntactic function is morphosyntactically encoded, allowing us to identify an NP as syntactically unattached on the basis of its morphological form and the syntagmatic relations it does or does not have. It is important to note, however, that for many languages the analysis of NPs as forming units unattached to clausal syntax cannot be based on morphological form or morphosyntactic function because these are either not marked or are marked ambiguously. Contrasting the findings on the Finnish data with for example with Mandarin (Tao 1996), with almost no morphology, or with English (Ono & Thompson 1994), with very little, is therefore illuminating. Tao (1996:79) bases his analysis of NPs as integrated vs. detached (i.e. free) on predicates: detached NPs cannot be integrated into a clause structure as core arguments of a predicate. In Mandarin, detached NPs are much more common than in Finnish, for example; this is because Mandarin is a topic-prominent language, where a topic, typically an NP, is fronted, followed by a comment (Tao 1996:80). In a similar vein, Ono and Thompson (1994:402) identify free NPs (in their terminology, unattached NPs) based on syntactic cues: unattached NPs are not in a grammatical relation with any predicate. In Finnish, by contrast, the cues are morphosyntactic and semantic and thus rely on the morphological form of the free NP, its syntagmatic relations with its sequential environment and the semantic content.

The analysis of the data shows that in most cases the free NP forms the syntactic unit all by itself, but that sometimes it may be combined with particles or connectives (in example 7, *nii siis POPkorneja* ‘so (I mean) popcorn’; in example 9, *armeijajumppa vai* ‘army gymnastics or’). Free NPs may also combine with locative phrases which serve to provide orientation, as in (4), (*siihe joku paita pääl* ‘(you can put) some shirt on top of it’, lit. ‘there some shirt on top’), with a free NP and a locative adverb; but the orientation may also be given in the form of a lexical NP or a combination of a locative adverb and a lexical NP (e.g. *solmu sin toiseem päähä* [knot+NOM there.to other end+ILL] ‘a knot there at the other end’).

The prosodic analysis demonstrates that free NPs usually show clear prosodic boundaries (cf. ex. 5). Of the 45 free NPs analyzed for prosody, the majority showed a clear prosodic boundary, signalled by speaker change, pause, pitch reset and/or change in voice quality. Of these markers, a change in voice quality was the least common. Many cases involved multiple boundary markers (e.g. speaker change and pause). Prosodic boundary markers help

to make free NPs stand out as units, but do not provide independent evidence for the analysis of an NP as a free vs. constituent of a clause.

Free NPs serve various interactional functions. In certain contexts, they are used to characterize a referent or a proposition for example by making assessments (e.g. example 3 *tomssi perusmokii* ‘those kinds of basic mistakes’). Compared to another grammatical resource for making assessments, that of copula clauses, the free NP provides a grammatical resource for making an assessment without having to refer to what is being assessed (examples 1, 3 and 6). Free NPs may also serve to make a confirmation (example 8 *valkoviiniä* ‘white wine’) or provide a candidate understanding (example 9). These are all functions which look backward in the interaction: they operate on something already established in the discourse, for instance by manipulating already established referents or predicating about them. Free NPs, however, can also initiate something new, as in example 11, where the free NP opens up a new topic and at the same time serves to preface a story. Free NPs may also project future actions by making a request (example 10 *sakset* ‘scissors’).

While most of the previous literature mentions free NPs in a discussion of certain interactional tasks, such as increments (Ford et al. 2002), Tao (1996) provides an in-depth discussion of free NPs in his data from Mandarin conversation. In the Mandarin data, the most common function of free NPs was introducing a new topic (see Tao 1996:84). In the Finnish data, in contrast, this function was not very common: fewer than 7% of free NPs were used to introduce new topics (see Table 3). Ono and Thompson (1994) discuss free NPs in American English conversational data and identify two main functions for them: referring and predicating. They note that in their data the majority of free NPs (80%) serve predicating functions. The Finnish data shows a similar tendency but to a lesser extent: 59% of the Finnish free NPs had functions that could be described as “predicating”.

Free NPs are an interesting type of linguistic unit which can be characterized using morphosyntactic, prosodic and interactional features. The analysis of free NPs in Finnish has shown how the morphosyntactic features together with semantics are crucial in determining the status of an NP as a free NP. Prosodic features assist but they do not determine what is a free NP. The comparison to literature on free NPs in other languages shows, however, that the weight of the different defining features may vary depending on the language: the most important defining features of free NPs in a language characterized by rich morphosyntactic marking, such as Finnish, are very different from those of a language such as Mandarin with hardly any morphosyntax (Tao 1996).

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