

Partitive-Accusative Alternations in Balto-Finnic Languages

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1. Introduction

The present study looks at the case of direct objects of transitive verbs in the Balto-Finnic languages Estonian and Finnish, comparing the two languages. There are three structural or grammatical cases in Estonian: nominative, genitive and partitive. Finnish, in addition to these three, has a separate accusative case form, but only in the personal pronoun paradigm. All of these cases are used for direct objects, but they all, except the Finnish personal pronoun accusative, also have other uses.

2. Selection of object case

Only clauses with active verbs have been considered in the present study. In all negative clauses the direct object is in the partitive case. In affirmative clauses, if the action is completed and the object is total, that is, the entire object is involved in the action, the case used is the accusative. The term 'accusative' is used as a blanket term for the non-partitive object case. In Estonian, more commonly than in Finnish, the completion of the event is indicated by an adverbial phrase or an oblique, indicating a change in position or state of the object. The total object is usually definite, or at least specific. If the action is not completed, or if it involves only part of the object, the partitive case is used. A partial object must be divisible, i.e. a mass noun or a plural count noun, but if the aspect is irresultative, the partitive object may be a singular count noun. The same applies to the negative clause, in that the object is in the partitive case even with a singular count noun, as the action was not completed, and never will be. However, events which are expected to be completed in the future, do not take the partitive, but are considered as completed events. There is no future tense in Balto-Finnic, and the use of an accusative object with the present tense is one of the ways in which future is indicated. For a more detailed discussion and examples see Kiparsky (1998) or Karlsson (1999).

The accusative is manifested by different case forms, genitive or nominative, depending on the syntactic environment. Plural nouns appear in the nominative case, singular ones in the genitive, except in imperative clauses and some non-finite clauses, where the nominative is used. In Finnish the first, second and third animate pronouns and also the interrogative pronoun 'who' have a separate form in the accusative case, but not the relative pronoun 'who', which is a completely different word in Finnish. Estonian, on the other hand, uses the partitive for all first and second person objects, where a noun object would be in the nominative form, i.e. the plural and in imperative and some non-finite clauses. Hence, the choice of surface case for the accusative object is syntactically conditioned, while the partitive-accusative alternation depends on semantic and pragmatic factors.

Although the criteria for the choice of the object case are stated in grammar books to be the same for Estonian (Mihkla *et al.* 1974:146) and Finnish (Karlsson 1999:84-87), looking at texts in the two languages shows that there are differences.

3. Studies comparing Estonian and Finnish

This study compares the use of the partitive versus accusative case in Estonian and Finnish. The text studied is St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, using one of the latest Estonian translations of the New Testament (1989) and a recent Finnish edition of the Bible (1995), translated in 1992. The translations were independent of each other, in that both were translated from the original Greek.

All objects in affirmative clauses were identified, and the proportion of objects in the different cases was calculated. Negative clauses were left out of any calculations, as their objects are always partitive.

Table 1. Comparison of First Corinthians ch. 1-16 in the Estonian and Finnish Bibles

	Estonian	Finnish
Objects of affirmative sentences - total	320	383
Partitive	229 (71.6%)	179 (46.7%)
Accusative (gen + nom + acc)	91 (28.4%)	204 (53.3%)
Personal pronoun objects - total	34	42
Partitive	30 (88.2%)	22 (52.4%)
Accusative	4 (11.8%)	20 (47.6%)
Other pronoun objects - total	99	111
Partitive	74 (74.7%)	45 (40.5%)
Accusative	25 (25.3%)	66 (59.5%)
Noun objects - total	187	230
Partitive	125 (66.8%)	112 (48.7%)
Accusative	62 (33.2%)	118 (51.3%)

There are more objects in Finnish, showing that in Estonian more alternative constructions were used. The proportion of accusative objects in the total corpus is almost twice as high in Finnish as in Estonian: 53.3% compared to 28.4%. Chi-squared analysis shows the difference to be highly significant ($p < 0.005$).

Because of the accusative case in the pronoun paradigm in Finnish, those pronouns were analyzed separately. These results are shown in the second section of Table 1. Finnish has 47.6% accusative forms, compared to 11.8% in Estonian. The difference in the distribution between partitive and accusative is greater among the pronouns than among the total objects, so this accounts for part of the total difference.

Other pronouns were also analyzed separately, and those results are shown in the next section of Table 1. Again there is a considerable difference in the distribution of cases between the two languages, with 59.5% accusative objects in Finnish and 25.3% in Estonian.

Noun objects (which include proper names) are shown in the last section of Table 1. The difference there is less than among the pronouns, but still present, with 51.3% accusative objects in Finnish and 33.2% in Estonian. This difference is also statistically significant ($p < 0.005$).

4. Objects of infinitive verbs

Clauses with an infinitive verb were analyzed separately in addition to being included in the total corpus. There are two active infinitives in Estonian. The first infinitive (*-ma*) is actually in the illative case (indicating movement into) and occurs also in the other internal local cases as well as translative (the end result of a change) and abessive. The object of the abessive infinitive is in the partitive case like the object of a negative verb, and means ‘without doing something’. The first infinitive commonly follows verbs with a sense of direction, and occurs after ‘begin’ and ‘must’, as well as a few other verbs and some adjectives. The second infinitive has a basic suffix (*-da*), which undergoes assimilation in different phonological environments. It follows a number of modal and other verbs.

Before coming to the results from the text, it is useful to look at some examples of the use of objects with infinitive verbs in Estonian.

- (1)^{E1} *Ma lähen teda tapma.*
 1SG go-PRES 3SG-PART kill-1st-INF
 ‘I go to kill him.’

In (1) the object is partitive. The action has not taken place, and possibly will not take place. (The verb ‘go’ has a directional sense only, which does not extend to future action.) In (2) the action is more likely to be resultative, so the accusative is used, although the partitive is also possible. The particle or resultative adverb *ära* which means ‘away’, emphasizes the expected resultative outcome.

- (2)^E *Ma pean tema ära tapma*
 1SG must-PRES 3SG-ACC away kill-1st-INF
 ‘I must kill him.’

Example (3) shows a number of modal verbs taking the second infinitive:

- (3)^E *Ma võin / võisin/ võiksin / tahan / saan teda (ära) tappa.*
 1SG may-PRES / PAST /COND / want / can 3SG-PART (away) kill-2nd-INF
 ‘I may / could / could / want to / can kill him.’

In this case, the partitive object is the more natural one. An accusative object is possible, but then *ära* is needed. With the partitive, it is mostly omitted. The choice of object case is not dependent on the fact that the governing verb is an infinitive, nor on the form of the infinitive, but depends on the possibility that the action may not be completed.

In Finnish there are four infinitives, each of which occurs in several cases. The whole system is complex (Karlsson 1999:182). In the analysis they have been lumped together.

¹ E = Estonian; F = Finnish

Table 2. Objects of infinitive verbs

Estonian	Partitive	Accusative (gen+nom+acc)	% Accusative
1st inf.	6	2	25%
2nd inf	32	8	20%
Finnish			
Infinitive	51	26	34%

The results from the texts are shown in Table 2. Comparing these with the total corpus in Table 1, the proportion of accusative objects of infinitive verb forms is only slightly less than in the total corpus in Estonian, 20-25% instead of 28%. The difference is more marked in Finnish, 34% compared with 53% in the total corpus. Even so, the Finnish text has a greater proportion of accusative objects than Estonian, maintaining the general difference between the two languages.

5. Comparison of corresponding clauses in Estonian and Finnish

All the individual clauses with accusative objects in Finnish were compared with the corresponding Estonian clauses. The translations did not correspond word for word in many instances, but sometimes it was possible to rephrase the Estonian clause, using a cognate verb or one with the same meaning, and in such instances the case that would be used in Estonian was taken into account. In 4.4% of instances it was not possible to use a comparable construction in Estonian. In 60.3% of instances both languages used or would have used the accusative, but in 24.0% of cases, where there was an accusative in Finnish, there was a partitive in Estonian, and in a further 11.3%, where the actual constructions were not comparable, I would have used the partitive with the cognate verb or one with the same meaning. Hence, in about one-third of the total instances, there was a discrepancy in the case used for the object, with accusative for Finnish and partitive for Estonian. Five of these 72 instances involved the first and second person plural pronouns, which only appear in the partitive as direct objects.

Some of the Estonian clauses indicate an activity in progress, as in the next example:

(4)F	<i>tämän</i>	<i>sanon</i>	<i>teidän</i>	<i>parastanne</i>	<i>ajatellen</i>
	this-ACC	say-1SG-PRES	2PL-GEN	best-PART-2PL-POSS	thinking
E	<i>seda</i>	<i>ma ütlen</i>	<i>teie</i>	<i>endi</i>	<i>kasuks</i> (7-35) ²
	this-PART	I say-1SG	2PL-GEN	own-GEN	good-TRANSL
	'I am saying this for your own good' (NIV)				

With the present tense and an 'accusative' object, as in the Finnish example, the implication is that the activity will be completed in the future.

² The numbers refer to chapter and verse of the First Letter to the Corinthians

Some of the clauses involve habitual action, as shown below.

- (5)F ...*ja ne, jotka toimittavat uhrit, saavat altarille*
 and those, who perform-3PL-PRES sacrifice-ACC-PL, get altar-ALL
tuoduista osuutensa (9-13)
 bring-PST-PRT-ELA-PL share-GEN-SG-3POSS
- E ...*et need, kes pühi toiminguid toimetavad,*
 that those, who sacred-PART-PL act-PART-PL perform-3PL-PRES
saavad oma osa altari pealt
 get their share-GEN-SG altar-GEN-SG from-ABL
 ‘and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar’ (NIV)

In both cases the repeated performance of sacrifices is described. Kiparsky (1998:293) mentions that verbs denoting repeated actions in Finnish do not necessarily take a partitive object. Another factor here is that in the Finnish sentence (5), with the accusative case, the object must be considered definite, i.e. ‘the sacrifices’, while in Estonian the sentence refers to nonspecific ‘sacred acts’. The original Greek has a definite article here, so the Finnish follows that more closely. In other clauses also the difference in case appears due to the different interpretation of the totality or definiteness of the object.

There were also some examples of infinitive expressions, where there was doubt about the outcome of the action, as in the following:

- (6)F ...*juoksijat saavuttaakse katoavan seppeleen*
 runners achieve-1st-INF-TRANSL disappearing-ACC-SG garland-ACC-SG
- E *nemad ju selleks, et saada närtsivat pärga (9-25)*
 they really this-TRANSL to get withering-PART-SG garland-PART-SG
 ‘they do it to get a crown that will not last’ (NIV)

The inherent aspect of the verb ‘to get’ or ‘achieve’ is achievement, and the infinitive *saavuttaakse* is in the translative form, so the Finnish accusative seems reasonable. However, the infinitive construction implies some doubt about the result. The accusative is actually possible here in the Estonian also. Often several factors are involved in the choice of case. In many instances there is a preference for the use of a particular case with certain verbs, related to their inherent aspectual character. There was only one example where a partitive object in Finnish corresponded to an accusative object in Estonian, and there a partitive could easily have been substituted.

6. Boundedness

Various linguists have tried to link the two features, aspect and totality of object, into a single concept. Tenny (1994:4,11) writes of ‘delimitedness’ and ‘measuring-out events’, which emphasize aspect more. Sands (2000:62-63) refers to ‘exhaustiveness’, i.e. that there is no more of the object left to be affected. The term ‘boundedness’ is most widely used (Kiparsky 1998:267, Ackerman and Moore 2001:83, Heinämäki 1983:155 among others).

6.1 Aspect

Grammar books list verbs which are inherently irresultative and preferentially take a partitive object (Karlsson 1999: 86, Mihkila *et al.* 1974:148-149), but the accusative is sometimes possible. For example, the Finnish verb *rakastaa* ‘to love’ typically takes a partitive object, shown as follows:

- (7)F *Rakastan sinua.* (Sands 2000: 46)
 I love 2SG-PART
 ‘I love you’

However, in the sentence shown in the next example, the accusative is used.

- (8)F *Rakastan sinut kuoliaaksi.* (Sands 2000: 47)
 I love 2SG-ACC dead-TRANSL
 ‘I love you to death.’

Kuoliaaksi is in the translative case, which indicates a change in the state of the object, so the object is in the accusative case.

Verbs which are inherently resultative and hence tend to govern the accusative case, can govern the partitive, if the activity is iterative or still in progress, or if the object is incomplete and nonspecific. The following sentences illustrate this point, using the verb *tapma* ‘to kill’ again:

- (9)E *Ma tapsin sääse.*
 1SG kill-PAST-1SG mosquito-SG-ACC
 ‘I killed the mosquito.’

A partitive object can be used with *tapma* ‘to kill’, if it is progressive, or the object is partial as in (10):

- (10)E *Ma tapsin sääski.*
 1SG kill-PAST-1SG mosquito-PL-PART
 ‘I was killing (some) mosquitoes.’ *‘I killed the mosquitoes.’

It is even possible to have the present tense with a singular partitive: ‘I am killing a mosquito’, if it is taking some time.

In many instances Finnish and Estonian verbs are similar in the case that they take, but there are some notable differences. One of these is the verb ‘to see’. In Estonian the verb *nägema* takes a partitive object, but the Finnish *nähdä* takes an object in the accusative case.

- (11)F *Minä näin hänet / *häntä.*
 1SG-NOM saw 3SG-ACC / 3SG-PART
- E *Mina nägin *tema / teda.*
 1SG-NOM saw 3SG-ACC / 3SG-PART
 ‘I saw him.’

However, the following expression was found in the Finnish text, with the object in the partitive:

- (12)F *nälkää* *näkeville* (13-3)
 hunger-PART PRES-PRT-ALL-PL
 ‘to those who see hunger’ (i.e. ‘those who hunger’)

In this instance an activity is being described. It would appear that Finnish considers ‘seeing’ an achievement while Estonian regards it as a stative verb. Van Valin (1996:287) considers ‘seeing’ a state, while Vendler (1967:103) points out that it has some features of an achievement. An alternative explanation for the Estonian partitive is that the object seen is not affected by the action of seeing, although Denison (1957:176) stated that the object of *nähdä* ‘to see’ changes from the unperceived to the perceived state, and therefore requires the accusative in Finnish. Other verbs of perception, such as *kuulla* ‘to hear’, can also take an accusative object in Finnish (Heinämäki 1983:165).

In Finnish verbs of cognition like *tuntea* ‘to know’ and *uskoa* ‘to believe’ take an accusative object (Heinämäki 1983:165), so it appears that Finnish considers them also achievements rather than states. In Estonian they are treated as states and take a partitive object. The following examples are from the texts.

- (13)F ...*vaikka* *tuntisin* *kaikki* *salaisuudet*
 if know-1SG-COND all-ACC secret-ACC-PL

- E ...*ja* *ma* *teaksin* *kõiki* *saladusi* (13-2)
 and I know-1SG-COND all-PART-PL secret-PART-PL
 ‘and (if I) can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge’ (NIV)

- (14)F ...*ja* *osittain* *sen* *myös* *uskon*
 and partly it-ACC also believe-1SG-PRES

- E ...*ja* *osalt* *ma* *usungi* *seda* (11-18)
 and partly I believe-1SG-PRES-also it-PART
 ‘to some extent I believe it’ (NIV)

6.2 Degree of affectedness

Many of the verbs occurred in the texts with either object case. The whole predicate needs to be considered in order to understand the aspect of the event, as resultative particles or adverbs must be taken into account, as well as adjuncts in the illative, allative (movement on to) and particularly translative case, all of which would indicate that the object has undergone a change in its position or state. It is not possible to have a completely affected object unless the action is completed and the object is total. On the other hand, the total object of a completed action need not be affected at all. Reading is an example. A book is not affected by reading, yet, if one reads a book through, the object ‘book’ is in the accusative case. In some situations the degree of affectedness appears to play a role in the determination of object case. Let us consider the verb ‘hit’, which takes the partitive case in both languages:

(15)E *Tema* *lõi* *poissi.*
 3rdSG hit-PAST-3SG boy-SG-PART
 ‘He hit the boy.’

(16)E *Tema* *lõi* *poisi* *maha.*
 He hit boy-SG-ACC down
 ‘He knocked the boy down.’

Inherently, ‘hitting’ is an achievement and the object is total, so an accusative object might be expected, but while hitting does affect the object to some extent, it does not necessarily alter the position or state of the object, unless the person is knocked down or killed, in which case, indeed, an accusative object is used, as shown in example (16). This would suggest that total affectedness is a consideration, albeit not an absolute requirement for accusative case. However, Sands (2000:47) has another explanation. She suggests that *lyödä* ‘to hit’ is an iterative verb, and therefore takes the partitive case. However, as pointed out above, the case of the object of iterative actions is not always the partitive.

7. Conclusions

The choice between accusative and partitive case for direct objects depends largely on semantic and pragmatic factors.

In Finnish the accusative is used more frequently than in Estonian. This is particularly evident with personal pronouns, due to the presence in Finnish of a specific accusative form for personal pronouns, and the fact that in Estonian first and second plural pronoun objects appear only in the partitive case, and for the first and second singular pronouns there is a similar tendency, which is obligatory in imperative clauses.

Other pronouns also show this difference in choice of object case. In Estonian there is a tendency to use the partitive case for demonstrative and relative pronouns, especially when they refer to abstract entities, and are objects of verbs of communication or mental activity.

The difference is still present for nouns and proper names. Although the criteria for the use of the accusative case are the same for the two languages, it appears that the interpretation of the criteria differs. In Finnish a number of verbs, especially those of perception and cognition, are interpreted as being achievements, while in Estonian they are treated as states. There also seems to be a difference in the handling of iterative or habitual events, in that in Finnish the object is more often accusative than in Estonian.

The choice of object case is related to transitivity. Transitivity can be regarded as a cline, ranging from high to low. Hopper and Thompson (1980) detail the factors involved, and those factors are evident here also. Those events showing high transitivity, as evidenced by completed action, totality of object, individuation of the object and a high degree of affectedness of the object, have an accusative object. Events showing a lower transitivity, i.e. progressive action, or negated action, or a partial object which is not affected by the action, have a partitive object. There are a number of events which fall between these two extremes, such as dubious action, expressed by modals followed by infinitives, iterative action, and variable affectedness of object, which form a grey area in the middle, where either case may be acceptable. This grey area and the cut-off point for the use of the accusative appears to be situated lower on the cline for Finnish than Estonian.

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