Negotiating names in Finnish conversations

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Abstract

This article aims to describe and analyse how people in a conversation identify the entities they are referring to. Three main points will be covered. 1) Firstly, how to identify when a name is not remembered or known, or a name does not exist or one does not want to express the name. 2) Secondly, how to negotiate about the referent or about the name if it is not known or evident. 3) Thirdly, what kind of differences there are between a free conversation and an interview conversation in analysing the use of proper names. As a whole, a conversation material offers excellent data to examine the vague border of different categories of names as well as names and appellatives. The research material consists of two different Finnish conversations: one from Helsinki (younger people and an interviewer) and the other from the countryside (older people, no interviewer).

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Conversations as research material

The distinction between proper names and appellatives is very well known: while appellatives are classifying expressions, proper names are used for identification. The identifying function is the most central criterion for (defining) proper names. Nevertheless, as we all know from experience, the borderline between proper names and appellatives is not always clear but instead rather vague. How names are recognised always depends on the context. Many proper nouns can be used in a classifying way (e.g. *He's a little Einstein*), whereas many appellatival expressions can be used for identification (e.g. *I'll meet you in front of the church at five*). (Ainiala, Saarelma & Sjöblom 2012: 13-16).

In order to examine the borderline between proper names and appellatives and the various ways for identification in more detail, we will use conversations as our data. Our material consists of two different conversations:

In conversation 1, five men from Southern Finland, 60 to 70 year old farmers or former farmers, discuss the daily issues in their lively environment and also reminisce about the past. It can be described as a rather free conversation. Perhaps only the awareness of the presence of a tape recorder might restrict the conversationalists' freedom. The conversation was recorded in 1995.

Conversation 2 is an interview with four 15 year old schoolchildren from Helsinki, and an interviewer. They are discussing Helsinki and more specifically their home environment, especially their neighbourhood in Helsinki, and their daily life. This conversation with an interviewer is more restricted than the conversation with the elderly men and can be described as a half-structured and a focus-group interview. The interview was conducted in 2007.

We have used merely a rough transcription in our examples. The English translations follow the content of the original Finnish ones, word-for-word. Accordingly, the translations are not proper English, but their purpose is to show how the conversationalists express their ideas.

Research theories and methods

The theories and methods behind our study come from three directions. First, we are interested in the questions aroused by general name theory and name philosophy: what is a name and what makes a name a proper name? (See e.g. Gardiner 1940: 32-34, Dalberg 1985: 129-130, Willems 2000, Smith 2011, Coates 2011.)

Secondly, we have a cognitive linguistic point of view to names and naming. We hold proper names as equal symbolic units with other words of language. They have a form and a meaning, but their meaning, however, is cognitively somewhat different from that of appellatives. At any rate, the border between proper names and appellatives in real material is vague: people choose the expressions that best serve their aims, expressions which function so that all those present could get the closest common idea of what they mean. Language is not just a subjective cognitive phenomenon but also a social and functional action. (See e.g. Sjöblom 2006, 2011.)

Thirdly, socio-onomastics acknowledges the fact that social and situational variation exists and searches for the reasons for this. This is essential for our study. What kind of variation – both social and situational – exists there, and what are the roles of different variables in various contexts? (More about socio-onomastics, see Ainiala 2008, 2010.)

Research questions

We have three main questions. In the first one, we ask how people identify an entity when its name is not remembered, or the name is not known, or one does not want to express the name, or a name does not exist. In most of these cases, the borderline between proper name and appellative becomes a matter of interest. If one does not know or remember the name or if the name does not even exist and one still has to identify the referent, it has to be identified in that particular situation amongst the participants. Sometimes, for some reason, the speakers might not want to express the name: it might be indiscreet or improper or it maybe has been given by authorities and not approved by the language community. What devices and practices there are to identify the referent?

Upon comparison with Emanuel Schegloff's (1972) ideas of place formulations, we can say that besides proper names, speakers also use other means of language for identifying single referents: Geographical expressions, such as postal addresses or latitude-longitude specifications, may specify a place. Entities can also be identified by relating them to people; one can use proper names for help (*Eddy's firm*) or merely identify with appellatives (such as *home* which always has an identifying function related to the person speaking or being spoken about). We may also identify places in relation to landmarks (*behind the big oak*, *by the corner of the theatre*, *there opposite McDonald's*). Finally, pronouns are used for identifying, as in our material ***this*** *is very brisk*, meaning 'this person'.

Our second research question can be seen as kind of a continuation to the first one. How do we negotiate about the referent or about the name if it is not known or evident? Even here, the various ways of identifying are substantial.

And finally, we will look at the differences between our two conversations and ask what possibilities the different kinds of conversations offer onomastic research.

The name is not remembered

It is usual that in a conversation one does not remember a name that he or she definitely knows. The first example can be described as a basic case of a situation where the name is not remembered.

Ex. 1. (Conversation 2: schoolchildren)

Emma: No täst tää katu, mikä tää katu nyt onkaan...
      Well here this street, whatever this street now is…
Aleksi: Hesari siis varmaan.
      Hesari that is probably.
Ronja: Siis Hesari.

       Yeah, Hesari.
Emma: Niin ni, mä en ite kulkis täs illalla.
       Yeah so, I would not myself walk here in the evening.

The speaker, Emma, does not remember the name of the particular street. She is using a demonstrative pronoun *tää katu* ('this street'); the pronoun defines a particular place and indicates that the speaker wants to identify it. In turn, *mikä - - onkaan* ('whatever this is') shows that the speaker does not remember the name of the street but she would like to identify the street by its name. Aleksi quickly gives a suggestion and an answer, *Hesari,* which is a slang variant of an official street name *Helsinginkatu* 'Helsinki street'. Ronja repeats and confirms the name. Emma accepts the name and manages to go on with her story.

This is a common way of getting through a situation where someone does not remember the name. At the same, this is also an example of how we negotiate about the name (cf. the second research question). Since the name is remembered by Aleksi and Ronja, and all the participants agree to the name, the negotiation runs quickly and smoothly.

However, we are aware of the fact that displaying uncertainty (like Emma here) could be interpreted as an interactive resource (Goodwin 1987: 115-118). If this would be the case here (i.e. the name is remembered but not expressed), it actually does not change the core issue in our point: what happens if the name is not expressed by the speaker?

The name is not known or it does not even exist

Our second example is from a situation in which the speakers do not know the name, although the referent definitely has one. The elderly men try to get a consensus about the referent: the person who brings the daily mail by car and who elsewhere in the conversation turns out to be a very quick, precise and hardworking woman.

Ex. 2. (Conversation 1: elderly men)

Tauno: Joo se o reipas se mikä,
       Yes, this is brisk, this what,
       - (Aulis & Martti comment on Tauno's statement in a few following sequences)
Tauno: Ketäs näät on siin joskus ai-, nii o se päiväposti kuka, kukas se o siin, onks se nain-?
       *Who are these that there sometimes dri-, well, is **the daily mail who**, who is it there, is the wom-?*
Aulis: Se o hyvi tutunäköne ihmine mutta en miekää nimee tiiä.
       It (= she) is a very familiar looking person but I don't know the name either.
Tauno: Nii.
       Yeah.
Martti: Mie en tiiä kenenkää nimmee.
       I don't know anybody's name.
Aulis: Ja se ajjaa ja melkei tuota siin kaheksa ajois tullee tämä päiväposti.
       *And it (= she) drives and almost about at eight comes **this daily mail**.*

Just before this extract, the men have been speaking about the delivery of mail, what time the post comes and what aspects affect the delivery time (such as the weather or the person delivering the mail). In the first line Tauno wants to bring a person he considers a good postwoman to the conversation. He has already expressed his desire to discuss this person a bit before by saying: *Yes, this is brisk, this what –*. The other men have shown that they know which person he is referring to and, in this fragment, they find out and agree that they do not know her name.

Tauno asks the other men *who is the daily mail who* and continues describing this person by the word *woman*, but Aulis interrupts by saying *It is a very familiar looking person but I don't know the name either.* (Note that in colloquial Finnish, it is very common to use the pronoun *se* 'it' for people as well.) Tauno shows his understanding (*Yeah*) and Martti joins in by saying *I don't know anybody's name*, referring to all those who deliver mail.

An interesting thing is how the men use the expression *the/this daily mail* as a kind of proper name referring to a person. It gets an identifying function in this conversation and it is also used in the conversation after these sequences. This is an example of a kind of situation where new names may emerge. If the conversationalists want to individualise a being (a person, a place or a thing), they will describe it so that all participants can understand which entity is being discussed. This may gradually lead to the development of a new proper name or a new appellative, or it could remain just a one-time expression. (Sjöblom 2011: 70-71.)

In example 2, the speakers knew that the referent has a name even though they did not know it. Sometimes we need to speak about individual referents which do not have a name at all. In example 3, for instance, the particular place where the speaker Aleksi lived has no name.

Ex. 3. (Conversation 2: school children)

Aleksi: Mä muistan ku mä asuin tos Porvoonkadul, just tossa kouluu vastapäätä.
          I remember when I lived right there on Porvoonkatu, right there opposite the school.

Just as in the case in which the participants do not know the name of the entity, the case in which everyone knows that the entity has no name can sometimes result in identifying it with a shorter appellatival expression or even with a name. If Aleksi was to speak about this place more often – with his friends, for example – a proper name might arise. Using a proper name is more economical than speaking about the referent with a long description.

One does not want to express the name

On occasion, an entity has a name and participants also know it, but for some reason they do not want to say the name out loud. This may happen for example due to an affinity between the conversationalists: they are integrating themselves to a certain group or culture which has its own jargon and want to separate themselves from other groups. To avoid pronouncing a name and to choose another name can also be a result of stylistic or situational boundaries, or it can be a question of taboos or beliefs. There can be semantic reasons for avoidance, as well. (Alford 1988: 105-117, Sjöblom 2011: 69.)

Example 4 describes a situation in which the youngsters separate themselves from authorities by refusing to use the official place name.

Ex. 4. (Conversation 2: school children)

Int: Onks sillä Eläintarhan sillä skeittipaikalla esimerkiks mitään muuta nimeä vai millä silleen niinku kutsut sitä?
          Has the skating place at Eläintarha for example any other name or how do you like to call it?
Aleksi: Me vaan sanotaan, Eltsuun mennään skeittaa.
          We just say, we go to Eltsu to skate.
Int: Joo.
          Yeah.

Aleksi: Oli sil joku outo nimi mitä se yritti se valmistaja, mut ei kukaan ees muista sitä varmaan.
It had some weird name that the manufacturer tried to, but no one even remembers that probably.

The interviewer wants to know how the youngsters call a place which must be important to them because of its use as a skating place. Aleksi does not want to express the name even though he is likely to remember it, inferring from the word *probably* in the last line: *no one even remembers that probably*. The skate boarding community has apparently not accepted *Micropolis*, the official name of the skate park given by the manufacturer, as a part of their onomasticon and own language. They rather call it by a self-made name, *Eltsu*. It is a slang variant of an official name *Eläintarha* which refers to a neighbourhood (or park or sports field) where the skating place is located (Paunonen 2000 s.v. *Eltsu*).

This example does not exactly describe nor illuminate the borderline between proper names and appellatives, but rather shows how names are not necessarily used even if they are known. Instead, people use other (unofficial) names or other ways of identifying the referent.

Negotiating names

We have found out that in a conversation, the speakers negotiate and try to get a mutual understanding of what is being spoken about. They also negotiate for the expression: do they use a proper name and what is the name, or do they use another identifying expression. At an end they somehow mark that they have reached a mutual understanding, such as in the example 5 below.

Ex. 5 (Conversation 1: elderly men)

Tauno: Olik se siu kaveriis kuule se mikä – tää tää tää – Torvise tyttö. Eikse olt siu kaveriis?
Wasn't it your friend, listen, the one who – this this this – Torvinen's girl. Wasn't it (= she) your friend?

Minna: Eei. En mie ees tunne ketää Torvisen tyttöö.
No-o. I don't even know any Torvinen's girl.

Martti: No tää – ehh, Askon – tunnetha sie vissii ni, opiskellee semmosel alal että ulkomaille lähetystöihi ja muuta –
Well this – ehh, Asko's – you know surely so, studies in such a field that abroad to embassies and other –

Aulis: Onks se se
Is it that

Tauno: Torvise, mikä tuota metsää koitti –
Torvinen's, who well the forest tried to –

Aulis: Ai tää? Nii sen tyttö.
Oh this one? Yes, its (= his) girl.

Tauno: Ni, sen tyttö
Yes, its girl.

Aulis: Jaa.
Oh, yes.

Keijo: Joo, joo.
Yes, yes.

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The primary section is much longer, and Tauno and Martti define who are they talking about in several ways. In this shortened section, it is possible to see how Aulis and Keijo also show that they know the referent (*Oh yes, Yes yes*). Minna does not react at the end, which either means that she does not recognise the person with the aid of the men's descriptions or that she does not include herself into the conversation or is not interested.

Comparison of the two data

There are some differences in the two sets of material. In conversation 1, the old men talk about referents, and names usually are not the subject of the conversation except when there is confusion or uncertainty of a name. In these cases, a name would specify the referent. Names in conversation 1 are just a part of the symbolic units that build the speakers' mutual mental world.

In conversation 2, there is a great deal of metalinguistic talk about names. The informants or speakers interpret the names they are talking about. They express their opinions and observations of names and their use.

Our research material has brought up some interesting ideas for future studies. First, people use several ways to identify entities, proper names are equal to other symbolic units and they can be chosen as well as some other expressions. Secondly, the most important thing in a conversation is to convey meanings and collaborate to get a mutual understanding. The border between proper names and appellatives is not essential in a conversation, however it is vague. Appellatives can take the function of a proper name and vice versa. And finally, conversation material has turned out to be an interesting new starting point as well when exploring philosophical questions on name, such as what is a proper name and what makes an expression a name. We will look into these issues in greater detail in the future.

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