

New Information Subjects in Finnish: an Experimental Study*

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The study presents experimental findings on new information subjects in Finnish. The main answering strategies that emerge in the collected data are discussed in light of recent studies within the cartographic framework (Belletti 2001, 2004, 2005). In null subject languages subject inversion is typically adopted in contexts in which the subject is new information. Conversely, in non null subject languages other strategies emerge, such as *in situ* focalization (e.g. English) and cleft sentences (e.g. French). Finnish is particularly interesting for its nature of partial null subject language (Holmberg et al. 2009). The unavailability of VS structures of the type observed in null subject languages and the presence of XPVS structures can be accounted for assuming that Finnish does not have a referential *pro* and the EPP can be satisfied by other lexical elements.

Keywords: *Finnish, syntax, new information subject, focus, L1 data*

1 Introduction

Null Subject Languages (NSL) such as Italian typically adopt subject-verb inversion, resulting in the VS order, when answering with a full clause to questions concerning the identification of the subject of the clause. In contrast, in Non Null Subject Languages (NNSL) such as e.g. French and English VS structures are excluded and other types of answers are typically adopted: (reduced) clefts and SV structures (*in situ* focalization henceforth), in which the subject is associated with a particular intonation (Belletti 2001, 2004, 2008, Belletti, Bennati & Sorace 2007). (1)-(3) illustrate the equivalent question-answer exchanges in Italian, English and French, respectively.

- (1) a. *Chi ha parlato?*
who has spoke
b. *Ha parlato Pietro*
has spoken Peter
- (2) a. *Who came?*
John came
- (3) a. *Qui a parlé?*
who spoke?
b. *C'est Jean.*
ce is Jean
'It's Jean'

As thoroughly discussed in the literature, the availability of subject-inversion, yielding the order VS, correlates with the null subject nature of the language (Rizzi 1982,

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Burzio 1986 and subsequent literature). The phenomenon is often referred to as *Free Inversion*² (henceforth FI, cf. Belletti 2001, 2004). The recent studies quoted above have proposed that discourse factors are also highly relevant in the distribution of FI/VS in NSLs. This kind of inversion is thus not ‘free’ in the sense that it can occur freely since it is discourse-related; it is typically adopted in contexts as (1) where the subject is interpreted as the subject of new information (Belletti 2001, Belletti 2004b, Belletti, Bennati & Sorace 2007). Belletti (2001, 2004) has proposed that a low vP-peripheral focus position is present in the clause structure, which hosts new information subjects in NSLs (e.g. Italian). As mentioned, recent work on answering strategies (cf. Belletti 2009) has shown that this position is not made use of in the same way in NNSLs, which thus adopt different structures to focalize the new information subject (as in (2)-(3) above). Consequently, a relation exists between the possibility to instantiate FI/VS, with the subject interpreted as new information, and the null subject nature of the language (see also Belletti & Shlonsky 1995, Hulk & Pollock 2001, Kayne 2005, Sheehan 2010 a.o. for discussion on inversion in Romance).

Updating the terminology of the traditional account (e.g. Rizzi 1982) it is assumed that a small *pro* satisfies the relevant EPP property of the relevant high subject position of the clause, thus yielding VS.

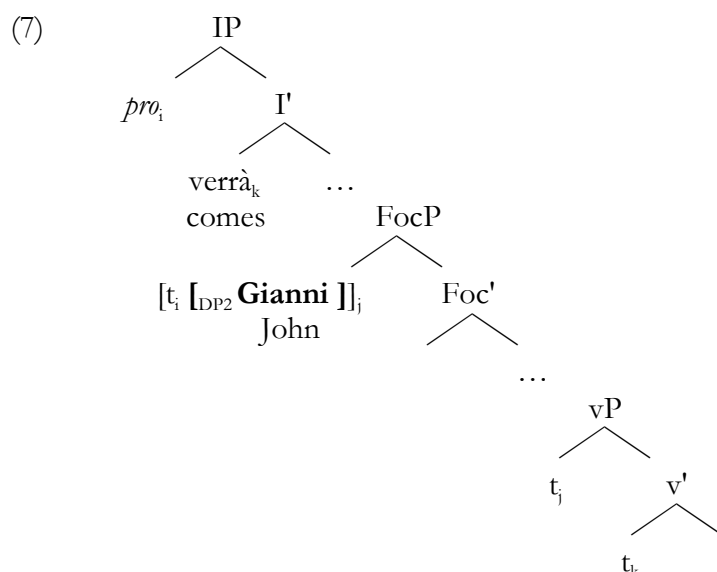
In a crosslinguistic perspective, it has been observed that the strategies adopted in different and unrelated languages³ fall within the alternatives illustrated in (1)-(3) (Belletti 2009). In recent studies (Holmberg et al. 2009, Holmberg & Sheehan 2010) it is proposed that Finnish has a special status with regard to the Null Subject Parameter: it is a Partial Null Subject Language (PNSL), cf. also Huang (2000) for a classification of PNSLs or semi NSLs. It allows 1st and 2nd person null subjects but it does not allow 3rd person null subjects, except in some embedded clauses with the null subject ‘controlled’ by a higher argument; Finnish also does not allow verb-initial impersonal clauses.⁴

The present work presents an experimental study which reports novel findings from an oral elicitation task which tests the use of new information subjects in L1 Finnish. The research questions which are addressed are: (i) What answering strategies are available in Finnish in contexts in which the subject is a new information subject? (ii) Does Finnish make use of the dedicated vP-internal focus position, which in the approach referred to above and adopted here, hosts new information subjects? The main results tell us that in a PNSL like Finnish new information subjects can be generally interpreted as such in preverbal position and no FI/VS is instantiated. However, the possible activation in Finnish of the vP peripheral new information focus position will be discussed in the light of a different word order, XPVS, which has also emerged in the collected data. It will be proposed that the Finnish XPVS order instantiates a different way to satisfy the EPP property of the high subject position of the clause, different from the one characteristically exploited in a NSL (e.g. Italian through small *pro*).

² Free Inversion has different properties from other inversion structures in Romance languages, such as French *Stylistic Inversion* (Kayne & Pollock 1978, 2001) discussed in Belletti (2001, 2004b) in comparison to FI.

³ Belletti (2009) discusses data coming from several typologically different and diachronically unrelated languages such as Italian, English, French, European Portuguese, Romanian, Paduan, Japanese, Norwegian, Malayalam, German, Hungarian, Basque, Gungbe.

⁴ There are some exceptions to this general pattern, as discussed in Holmberg (2005, 2009) and Holmberg & Nikanne (2002). These exceptions are not crucial for the present discussion and will not be discussed here.



In this configuration *pro* and Gianni are generated in the Big DP, *pro* moves to a nominative case position and Gianni is stranded in the vP-peripheral new information focus position. Nominative case-marking of the postverbal subject is a consequence of the doubling computation. According to this proposal, the EPP feature triggers the movement of the part of the Big DP corresponding to *pro*.⁶

2.2 The nature of *pro* and FI/VS

The assumption is, following Belletti (2005) that in the doubling derivation of VS structures in FI/VS *pro* is a silent personal (referential) pronoun sharing features with the postverbal lexical subject by virtue of their relation in the Big DP, rather than an expletive pronoun.

Languages such as Brazilian Portuguese (BP) have progressively lost the null-subject property with referential subjects. BP has also lost (free) subject inversion structures. The analysis summarized assumes that these two properties are correlated and they can be explained under the doubling derivation according to which a referential *pro* is present in the preverbal position, as illustrated above.⁷

⁶ See Holmberg (2005, 2010) for a different refinement of the traditional analysis (Rizzi 1982) on NS couched within the MP in terms of definiteness. The feature [+ referential] of Rizzi is replaced by a [uD]-feature (a definiteness feature that is present in I with which a null subject enters in an Agree relation); languages divide into those that have such feature in I, hence allowing null subjects (a deficient pronoun phi-P in consistent NSLs) and those that do not have this feature (non NSLs or PNSLs).

⁷ The present account does not exclude the possibility of having an expletive rather than a Doubling configuration, as pointed out by an anonymous reviewer. Biberauer (2010) a.o. extensively investigates, within the MP, expletives in NSL and a subset of PNSLs is discussed with regard to the nature of Spec,T. A categorical difference between expletives in NSLs and NNSLs is proposed as well. In the same spirit, Roberts (2010) suggests an alternative analysis to the Rizzian one for null subjects in consistent NSLs based on Holmberg (2005), cf. also Holmberg (2010).

From the above we conclude that having *pro* is a necessary but not sufficient condition for instantiating Verb-Subject structures.⁸ A straightforward consequence is that only NSLs, which can have a silent *pro* in the canonical subject position, allow for the kind of movement involved in free inversion structures and NNSLs typically use other kind of structures in context in which the subject is new information, as exemplified in (2)-(3). As for PNSL the question arises as to whether new information subjects are implemented in the NNSL or in the NSL fashion. In Guesser (2007) the same experimental design first used by Belletti & Leonini (2004) and adapted to Finnish in the present study has been adapted to Brazilian Portuguese, another language classified as a PNSL in Holmberg et al. (2009). The results show that in BP different strategies are adopted to focalize the new information subject: SV, clefts (which include reduced clefts, pseudo-clefts and truncated clefts, see Guesser 2007), while VS structures of the type observed in a NSL like Italian seen above were not observed. This supports the idea that referential *pro* is a necessary condition for instantiating VS structures as proposed by Belletti (see section 2) and adopted in Guesser (2007). The present experimental study aims at testing whether this is true for another PNSL, namely Finnish.

Crucially, if an expletive *pro* were sufficient to allow for FI/VS, we would expect FI/VS also in PNSLs such as Finnish and Brazilian Portuguese (BP) as these languages have an expletive *pro* (cf. Duarte 2000, Figueiredo-Silva (1996); Rodrigues (2002), Ferreira (2004), Guesser (2007), Modesto (2008) for discussion and analysis on null subjects in BP and Holmberg & Nikanne 2002, Holmberg 2005 on overt and null expletives in Finnish). Given the similarities between BP and Finnish (they do not have referential *pro* and both have a null expletive), we expect that similarly to what observed for BP (Guesser 2007) no FI/VS structures are available in Finnish. The results (cf. section 5) will show us that things are rather more complicated.

3 The experimental design: task and participants

The experimental task that was used in the present study was first created by Belletti & Leonini (2004) and then also used by Belletti, Bennati & Sorace (2007) to test the acquisition and use of postverbal subjects in Italian L2. Adaptations of the experimental task in different languages have been done to collect data in L1 Brazilian Portuguese (Guesser 2007), L1 Croatian (Kras 2010) and L1 Finnish (in the present study). Noticeably, the same design and materials were used in all studies.

The experimental task consists of 22 short videos in indoor settings with female and male subjects (see Appendix I for tokens of the task). It aims at creating the ideal discourse-pragmatic conditions for question-answer pairs in which the subject is new information focus. The task was presented individually to the participants through a Power Point presentation, the videos were the same for all the participants and they were not randomized. Using the same experimental design crosslinguistically maintains

⁸ This is also attested by data on languages that have a positive setting for the null subject parameter but do not allow verb-subject structures, e.g. Bantu languages (Nicolis 2005). Also studies in second language acquisition strengthens the dissociation between the availability of *pro* and that of postverbal subjects: Belletti and Leonini (2004) and Belletti, Bennati and Sorace (2007) investigated the use of null subjects and postverbal subjects in contexts in which the subject is new information in Italian L2. In both studies it is shown that a target use of null subjects is not correlated to a target use of postverbal subjects.

comparable, for different groups of speakers, the discourse-pragmatic contexts in which the subject of the clause is focalized as a new information subject.

Each video shows a situation in which something happens and one of the actors asks about what happened in the scene. The participant has to orally answer the question in the most spontaneous way. After the question in the video (which is always a test item) one to three questions are presented for each scene. All target questions were on 3rd person subjects due to the way the experiment was designed. The participants were not told about the aim of the experiment and the instructions given to the participants were two: 1) answer in the most spontaneous way, and 2) use a verb when answering. Each subject was tested individually and recorded from the beginning to the end of the test. Time was not a relevant factor for the present experiment but in general the test took about 15 minutes per subject. The answers were transcribed afterwards and only sentences containing a verb were considered. One-word answers or answers without a verb (or of a different class w.r.t. the verb in the question) were excluded⁹. The answers were classified on the basis of word order in: SV(O), (XP)VS, SOV, clefts, reduced clefts and existential clefts (Dal Pozzo 2011), where S is subject, V is verb and (XP) is object with transitive verbs and adverb/adverbial with intransitive verbs.

The test items were 34 and the verbs were classified in transitive (n=20), unergative (n=11) and unaccusative (n=3). The experimental task also included filler questions (n=25).

The participants were 15 adult native speakers of Finnish (mean age 27,1), each participant was tested separately in a different place and their participation was not paid.

4 Results

The preferred answering strategy in the present corpus is overwhelmingly SV(O), as evident from graph 1. Nonetheless, other answers are not excluded. In particular an O/Adv VS order is available, where O/Adv is the topic/known information and S is new information focus, as shown in (8)¹⁰. The clause-initial direct object is generally a pronoun which is co-referent with the DP in the question. Other strategies include clefts, reduced clefts and existential clefts¹¹, as in (9a,b,c), respectively. In this paper we will focus only on the two main answering strategies adopted in Finnish: SV(O) and XPVS.

- (8) a. – *Kuka söi omenan?*¹²
 who.NOM eat.PAST.3SG apple.ACC
 – *Sen söi vaalea nainen.*
 It.ACC eat.PAST.3SG blond.NOM woman.NOM
 b. – *Kuka puhui videossa?*
 who.NOM speak.PAST.3SG video.INE

⁹ Notice that these were very few cases.

¹⁰ Examples are directly drawn from the collected data.

¹¹ Cleft structures open an interesting issue. Along the lines of the cartographic approach (Belletti 2010, Guesser 2011) it seems that in Finnish a vP-peripheral focus position is extensively activated in these structures. The issue is left for future research.

¹² The following abbreviations are used for grammatical cases: ACC=accusative; NOM=nominative; INE=inessive. Following common practice PAST is used to indicate past tense and SG for singular.

- *Videossa puhui se poika*
 Video.INE speak.PAST.3SG that.NOM boy.NOM
 ‘Who spoke in the video? - In the video spoke that boy.’
- (9) a. – *Kuka vastasi?*
 who.NOM answer. PAST.3SG
 – *Se oli tuo tyttö, joka vastasi*
 it.NOM was that girl.NOM who.NOM answer.PAST.3SG
- b. – *Kuka soitti?*
 who.NOM call.PAST.3SG
 – *Se oli Kaisa*
 it.NOM was Kaisa.NOM
- c. – *Kuka on lakaissut?*
 who.NOM has swept
 – *Siinä oli yksi tyttö, joka lakaisti*
 this.INE was one girl.NOM who swept
 ‘There was a girl who swept’

Table 1 provides the total amount of answers classified for verb type and type of answers:

a)

Verb class	SV	VS	O(DP)VS	O(pr)VS	SO(pr)V	Cleft	R. Cleft	Exist. cleft	Tot.
Trans.	82%	0%	2%	8%	0,3%	3,8%	4,2%	0,0%	100%
Unacc.	88%	7%	0%	0%	0%	2,3%	2,3%	0,0%	100%
Unerg.	84,9%	4,6	0%	0%	0%	3,9%	3,9%	2,6%	100%

b)

Verb class	SV	VS	O(DP)VS	O(pr)VS	SO(pr)V	Cleft	R. Cleft	Exist. cleft	Tot.
Trans.	234	0	5	24	1	11	12	0	287
Unacc.	38	3	0	0	0	1	1	0	43
Unerg.	129	7	0	0	0	6	6	0	152

Table 1: Total amount of answers for verb type

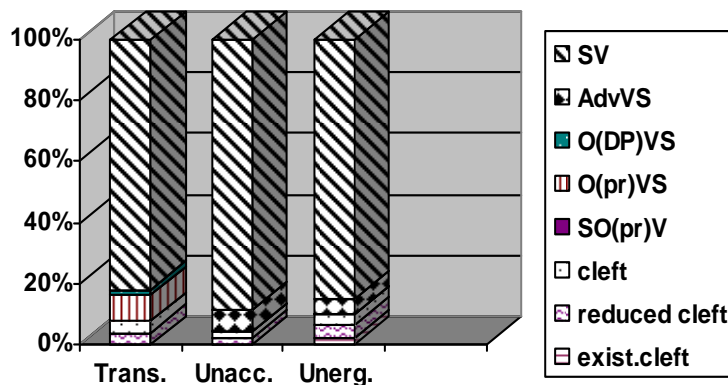


Figure 1: Strategies of subject focalization in Finnish

As expected, FI/VS of the type found in NSL languages are not observed under the same discourse-pragmatic circumstances. The result is consistent with elicited data collected through the same experimental design in BP (Guesser 2007, Dal Pozzo & Guesser 2011) and it supports the assumption that a referential (3rd person) null subject, which neither BP nor Finnish have, is a required condition to instantiate FI/VS structures in addition to adequate (new information) discourse conditions, which were controlled for by the contexts of the elicitation task.

I suggest that the SV(O) order in Finnish is an instance of *in situ focalization*, a subject focalization strategy to which typically NNSLs such as English resort (see references quoted), with the derivation in (12). The subject is in its canonical preverbal subject position¹³ (Spec, FinP according to Holmberg & Nikanne 2002 and as assumed in Kaiser 2006), in which it is focalized as new information.

- (10) [CP [FP **S1** [NegP [TopP [...[TP T [...[Top ...[vP V [**O**]]]]]]]]
FOC *in situ*

Assuming the representation in (11) for SV(O) with S new information, apparently supports the idea that Finnish can be assimilated to NNSLs: the new information subject is focalized in its canonical preverbal position and no FI/VS (nor activation of the dedicated vP-peripheral focus position) emerges. However, SV(O) is not the only strategy that emerges in our data. The second quantitatively relevant strategy consists of the XPVS order, in which we postulate that the low vP-peripheral position dedicated to new information elements is activated, as discussed in the following section.

4.1 XPVS

The XPVS order is attested in 10% (28/287) of the total amount of answers with transitive verbs, resulting in OVS, and in 5,1% with unergative and unaccusative verbs, resulting in AdvVS. At the discourse level, XPVS is possible when XP is a topic in the sense of known/given information and S is new information (cf. Vilkuina 1995, Holmberg & Nikanne 2002).

Turning the discussion to the OVS order, syntactically at least two alternative analyses come to mind: (i) OV is first obtained by topicalization of the object in the low part of the clause and then the OV chunk is fronted into the left periphery, as in (11), and S is in the same preverbal position as in (10); (ii) as consistent NSLs like Italian, the new information subject is in the low vP-peripheral focus position, as in (5) and repeated in (12).¹⁴

¹³ Cardinaletti (1997, 2004) identifies a number of subject positions in the preverbal field which are assumed to be quite uniform across languages. In mapping the IP at least two different positions are identified (Spec, AgrSP for the syntactic subject and Spec, SubjP for the the subject of predication). In the present work we abstract away from the discussion.

¹⁴ At first sight another alternative consists of assuming a structure parallel to V2 languages, as in (i):

- (i) [CP O₁ V₂ [TP S₃ [t₁ t₂ t₃]]]

This is, however, immediately falsified by examples such as (13), where the subject is preceded by auxiliary verb and main verb, and other sentential material.

- (11) [[CP [OV1] [FP S [...t1...]]]
 (12) [CP ... [TP ... [TopP ... [FocP **Foc** [TopP ... vP]]]]]

The analysis in (11) is soon ruled out by word order facts. As a matter of fact, sentences such as (13a-b) show us the impossibility of such a representation for XPVS orders.

- (13) a. *Tämän kirjan on (varmaan) kirjoittanut Graham Greene*
 O Aux (Adv) V S
 this book has (surely) written Graham Greene
 ‘Graham Greene has surely written this book’
 b. *Tätä kirjaa ei ole kirjoittanut Graham Greene*
 O Neg Aux V S
 this book not has written Graham Greene
 ‘Graham Greene hasn’t written this book’
 c. *Onko tämän kirjan kirjoittanut Graham Greene?*
 has-Q this book written Graham Greene?
 ‘Has Graham Greene written this book?’

Postulating movement of the OV chunk to a topic position in the clausal domain with the subject in the preverbal position would exclude having Aux or Neg Aux between O and V. These are nevertheless grammatical sentences¹⁵, (14) illustrates the basic (neutral) word order.

- (14) a. *Graham Greene on (varmaan) kirjoittanut tämän kirjan.*
 Graham Greene has (surely) written this book
 b. *Graham Greene ei ole kirjoittanut tätä kirjaa.*
 Graham Greene not has written this book
 ‘Graham Greene hasn’t written this book’

A better way to account for these structures comes from the alternative analysis outlined in (ii) above, which assumes that the vP-peripheral focus position is activated. I suggest that this position is where the new information subject is located in XPVS structures. As said earlier, Finnish does not have a referential *pro* which could satisfy the EPP. If we assume that the EPP can also be satisfied by other lexical elements (see Holmberg 2010), in the Finnish XPVS structure it is the XP element that satisfies the EPP¹⁶. This is reminiscent of Holmberg & Nikanne’s (2002) proposal of Finnish as a topic prominent language. Consequently, the orders in (13) can be derived by assuming movement of the object to the preverbal EPP position. Fronting of the object in the left-periphery is also correlated to discourse factors: in (13a-b) the object can be interpreted as known/given or contrastive/corrective (depending on the intonation).

Hence, we can formulate the following:

¹⁵ I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising the issue and suggesting a possible way to account for the facts exemplified in (13).

¹⁶ XPVS structures also recall the Locative Inversion structures typical of e.g. English (Collins 1997). Locative Inversion typically occurs with intransitive verbs which take a locative argument, as represented in (i) for English and in (ii) for the equivalent in Finnish:

- (i) In the corner sat a man
 (ii) Nurkassa istui mies
 corner.in sat man

- (15) Subject-Verb inversion:
- a. Consistent NSLs do have a referential *pro*, which is a condition to satisfy the EPP and to allow FI/VS structures.
 - b. In absence of a referential *pro* (e.g. PNSLs), the EPP can be satisfied by another constituent (resulting in XPVS in the case of Finnish).

Notice that (15) is intended under the discourse contexts in which the subject is new information, as discussed earlier. Notice also that this is a tentative generalization and a more extensive discussion based on data from different PNSLs is left for future research¹⁷.

Thus, the assumption put forth by Belletti (see references quoted above) can be further developed in the following way:

- (16) Only full Null Subject Languages allow for FI/VS in contexts of (new information) subject focalization. Non Null Subject Languages typically adopt different strategies such as *in situ* focalization (English) and cleft strategies (French, Brazilian Portuguese). Partial Null Subject Languages such as Finnish can have a “mixed pattern” consisting of *in situ* focalization and focalization of the new information subject in the vP-peripheral postverbal position through a different way to satisfy the EPP.

In conclusion, this section examined two possible ways to account for new information subjects in Finnish: *in situ* focalization and activation of the dedicated focus position in the vP periphery. Most importantly, postulating *in situ* focalization (similar to NNSLs such as English) for SV(O) structures is not in contraposition with an activation of the vP-peripheral focus position in XPVS structures. Moreover, this position dedicated to new information elements seems to be active also in the cleft structures that emerged in the data (see fn. (12)). Hence, PNSLs such as Finnish (and BP) seem to have a wider set of possible strategies to adopt, than NSLs and NNSLs, under the discussed discourse contexts.

5 Final remarks

The present study aimed at investigating within the cartographic framework whether Finnish, which is assumed to be a partial null subject language, allows for the subject-

¹⁷ An open question arises from sentences such as (i) and (ii): FI seems to be excluded in Finnish also with first and second person, which can always have a silent subject pronoun. The equivalent sentences are pragmatically appropriate in the same contexts in Italian.

- (i) a. Kuka puhui?
 who spoke?
- b. #Puhuin minä
 spoke I
- (ii) a. Kuka siellä (on)?
 who there (is)
- b. #Olen minä
 is I
 'It's me'

verb inversion analyzed as *free inversion*, which typically involves a low vP-peripheral focus position, in contexts in which the subject is a new information subject. Moreover, it investigated which other word orders might be exploited in the contexts discussed.

The research is based on the observations coming from previous theoretical and empirical research that propose that a positive setting of the null subject parameter is necessary to instantiate *free inversion* in NSLs such as Italian in contexts in which the subject is a new information subject. Even though Finnish is almost fully a null subject language it does not allow for VS structures of the kind observed in NSLs (examples (1) and (5)). It was observed how the data from Finnish compares with the results from the Brazilian Portuguese adaptation of the experiment. In BP, which is also considered a PNSL (Holmberg et al. 2009), the typical strategies in the contexts of the experimental task consist of Subject-Verb structures and clefts of various type (cleft, reduced clefts and truncated clefts, Guessier 2007). The unavailability of FI/VS in Finnish and BP is a direct consequence of the absence of referential null subjects in these languages. If an expletive *pro* were sufficient then instances of FI of the type observed in NSLs such as Italian could have been observed in the collected data.

The empirical data are novel and they have been collected using the same methodology as previous studies on the topic. The data show that the preferred answering strategy in Finnish is SV(O), which also represents the canonical word order. Hence, Finnish does not show instances of subject focalization through a FI strategy of the kind observed in NSL such as Italian in contexts in which the subject is new information focus (Belletti 2001, 2004, 2009). However, even though FI/VS of the NSLs type is excluded, it is proposed that the observed XPVS strategy involves the activation of the vP-peripheral focus position dedicated to new information subjects. Since Finnish does not have a referential *pro* that could satisfy the EPP, it is assumed that also other lexical elements can satisfy the EPP in a language like Finnish, yielding the XPVS structure found in the data. Hence, in Finnish a postverbal subject is possible only when there is an overt element in the preverbal sentence-initial position, namely an object for transitive verbs, an adverb/adverbial for intransitive verbs.

Appendix: The experimental task

Scene 1: The phone rings. The young woman answers and talks with a friend of hers. A young man enters the room and asks who has called.

Question: Who has called? (*target item*)

Kohtaus 1:


Katso video ja vastaa videossa esiintyvään kysymykseen ja sitten seuraaviin kysymyksiin:



Further questions:

- 1) Who has answered? (*target item*)
- 2) What she was doing when the phone rang? (*filler item*)

Kohtaus 1:
vastaa seuraaviin kysymyksiin:



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