

ARE MAIN CLAUSES REALLY ‘MAIN’ CLAUSES? THE CASE OF RELATIVE CLAUSES IN SPOKEN ESTONIAN AND FINNISH

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Abstract. The article concerns relative clause constructions and their main clauses in Estonian and Finnish conversation. The study shows that copula clauses and existential clauses predominate in the corpus data: these two clause types accounted for more than half of the main clauses. Such main clauses serve simply to introduce a referent which is then predicated upon in the relative clause and is likely to be subsequently discussed in the conversation. In addition, relative clauses are also used without any main clauses, headed with just a nominal, a free NP. The article thus shows that the main clauses of relative clauses in Estonian and Finnish conversation tend to be syntactically light. They are also pragmatically light, since it is the relative clause, and not the main clause, which contains the main information in the clause combination. This raises a question about the subordinate status of the relative clause.

Keywords: relative clause, clause type, free NP, main clause, subordination, relativizer

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1. Introduction

Our article concerns the form and function of relative clause constructions and their main clauses in Estonian and Finnish everyday conversation. By a relative clause construction we mean a noun phrase serving as an antecedent and a relative clause which follows it. Below are examples of simple relative clause constructions from our data from both languages, discussed below as examples (6) and (4).¹ (In the

1 See Fox & Thompson 1990a for the use of the term relative clause construction.

examples, the relative clauses are bolded. See Appendix for a list of special symbols used in the examples.)

(1) Estonian

üks kell mis ei helise
 one clock REL NEG ring
 ‘an alarm clock that does not ring’

(2) Finnish SG444

joku semmone firma joka niinku osta-a
 some DEM.ADJ company REL PTCL buy-PRS.3SG
kämp-i-ä.
 housing-PL-PART
 ‘like some company that like buys housing units’

We show that in our corpus data, certain main clause types are over-represented in both languages. Copula clauses and existential clauses predominate in the data; they are used much more frequently as main clauses of relative clauses than they are used in the corpus as a whole (cf. Helasvuo, Laury & Rauma 2022: 512). In addition, relative clauses (henceforth, RCs) are often used without any main clause at all; they are headed by just a nominal, a free NP. Thus, the main clauses of RCs are syntactically light. They are also pragmatically light: the main point that is subsequently discussed in the conversation is expressed in the RC, not the main clause, which serves simply to introduce the referent which is then predicated upon in the RC.

There is considerable variation in how RCs are structured in the world’s languages (Velupillai 2012: 323–331). The syntactic RC construction we are studying here, however, is rather similar in the two languages under study, as one might expect since Estonian and Finnish are closely related. However, some differences between these very similar languages exist. For example, the relativizers used are distinct, and the distribution of main clause types is slightly different. In both languages, the RC can modify either a lexical NP which may occur with a determiner (usually a demonstrative or an indefinite pronoun), or a bare demonstrative pronoun. The RC itself begins with a relative pronoun (relativizer). This type of construction has been listed as a feature of Standard Average European (Haspelmath 2001). In Estonian, the most common relativizers are *kes* ‘who, which’ for animate referents,

mis ‘what, which’ for inanimate referents, and *kus* ‘where’ for spatial referents (for a more detailed description, see Erelt 2017: 738–739). In Finnish, the most common relative pronouns are *joka* ‘which, who’ and *mikä* ‘what, which’. In our conversational data, *joka* is mostly used for human referents, and *mikä* when referring to other kinds of referents. In addition to *joka* and *mikä*, *kuka* and *kun* can also be used as relativizers, albeit quite rarely (for a more detailed description of the choice between possible relativizers see Helasvuo, Laury & Rauma 2022; Hakulinen et al. 2004: § 722–724).

The article is structured as follows. In section 2, we present our data. Section 3 discusses the types of main clauses of our RCs in our corpora: section 3.1 concerns copula and existential main clauses, which turned out to be the most common type of main clauses in both the Estonian and the Finnish corpus. Transitive and intransitive main clauses are discussed in section 3.2, and RCs without any main clauses are discussed in section 3.3. Section 4 focuses on the structure and function of the main clauses of the RCs in our data, and section 5 contains our conclusions.

2. Data and methodology

The Estonian data come from the Spoken Estonian Corpus of the University of Tartu (Hennoste et al. 2009). We used a previously composed sub-corpus (so called “dialogue corpus”; Koit 2010), which consists of everyday conversations (44 conversations; 20 653 words), institutional telephone conversations (893 conversations; 123 099 words), institutional face-to-face conversations (99 conversations; 39 465 words), and road inquiries (20 conversations; 2 936 words), in total 1056 conversations with 186 153 words. This material has been used by the search engine to find all the pronouns *mis* ‘what’ and *kes* ‘who’ in all case forms and adverbs *kus* ‘where’, *kuhu* ‘to where’ and *kust* ‘from where’. Among the clause combinations found, in turn, all the cases in which the listed pronouns function as relativizers and start a RC have been collected. These pronouns and adverbs can also be used to initiate a question and in some other constructions. Altogether, the Estonian data consist of 410 RCs. The same dataset of RCs has already been discussed from different aspects (Pajusalu 2021, 2022).

The Finnish data come from the Arkisyn Corpus of Conversational Finnish. The corpus has been compiled at the University of Turku, with data from the Conversation Analysis Archive at the University of Helsinki and The Archive of Finnish and Finno-Ugric Languages at the University of Turku. The corpus contains 278 910 words, and it is morphosyntactically annotated. All the Finnish relativizers *joka*, *mikä*, *kuka*, and *kun* are multifunctional: they are used not only as relativizers, but also for other purposes (see Helasvuo, Laury & Rauma 2022). We have extracted all RCs annotated as starting with the relativizers *joka* and *mikä*. For the more infrequent relativizers *kun* and *kuka*, no such annotation was available, and we have manually extracted all cases where these words were used as relativizers. Altogether, the Finnish data consist of 959 RCs. Six of them are excluded from further analysis in this article because in these cases it was not possible to determine the main clause type. Thus, the total number of RCs included in the analysis of the Finnish data is 953. After each example from the Arkisyn corpus, there is a code identifying the specific conversation included in the corpus (e.g. SG444). In the gloss line, we have used a functional gloss (REL) for the relativizer rather than trying to translate the relativizer. This is because there is no one-to-one translation in English for the relativizers. For example *joka* is often used for human referents but it can be used for non-humans as well.

The data have been further coded for several features which characterize either the relative clause, its syntactic head or the main clause the relative clause is attached to. For the analysis of the data, our research method is Interactional Linguistics, an approach to the study of the organization of language as it is used in interaction, combining insights from functional theories of language and linguistic anthropology with ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis, where everyday social interaction is thought of as being ordered and orderly at all points, constituting a locus of social order (Selting & Couper-Kuhlen 2001; Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2018).

3. Main clauses of relative clauses

In the analysis of the data, the Estonian and Finnish datasets show a striking similarity: among the clauses functioning as main clauses to which the RCs are attached, existential and copula clauses, formed with

the verb *olla* ‘to be’ in both languages, are the most common clause types (for examples, see section 3.1). In our Estonian data, over half of the main clauses of RCs were either copula clauses or existential clauses (181 out of 338, i.e. 54%), and in the Finnish data, these two clause types are even more common as main clauses of RCs (448 out of 735, i.e. 61%, see Table 1).

Table 1. Main clauses of RCs in Estonian and Finnish data.²

		Estonian		Finnish	
		N	%	N	%
<i>Main clause</i>					
‘Be’ verb	Existential	102	25	216	23
	Copula	79	19	232	24
No ‘be’ verb	Transitive	103	25	212	22
	Intransitive	54	13	74	8
	Other	0	0	1	0
Subtotal		338		735	
<i>No main clause</i>					
	Free NP	72	18	218	23
Total		410	100	953	100

Table 1 gives detailed information on the distribution of clause types of the main clauses of RCs in the two datasets. In our Estonian data, 181/410, or 44%, of the RCs had main clauses which were either copula clauses or existential clauses. Both clause types are formed with the verb *olla* ‘to be’ in both languages. In the Finnish dataset, 448/953, or 47%, of the RCs had main clauses of one of these types. If we focus only on RCs which had main clauses and leave RCs with no main clause out of the comparison, copula and existential clauses cover over half of the main clauses of RCs in both datasets (Estonian: 54%; Finnish: 61%; see above).³

2 In Table 1, “no ‘be’ verb” contains cases where the main verb is not a ‘be’ verb.

3 In their study of relative clauses in English conversation, Fox & Thompson (2007) found that copula clauses and existential clauses were also very common main clauses of RCs. See also Fox & Thompson (1990a) for a similar finding.

In what follows, we give examples of each of these main clause types from our data, starting in section 3.1 with copula clauses and existential clauses, followed by a discussion of transitive and intransitive clauses in section 3.2. In section 3.3, we discuss relative clauses which lack main clauses entirely.

3.1. Copular and existential main clauses

In this section, we discuss typical cases of copula clauses and existential clauses functioning as main clauses of RCs in our data. For each type, we first present an example from our Estonian data and then one from our Finnish data. After discussing typical cases in which the main clause merely presents the head noun, while the RC contains the main gist of the utterance, we discuss examples which do not conform to this pattern: in these examples, the main clause characterizes the head noun in some way.

Example (3) is an Estonian RC with a copula clause with *olla* ‘be’ as its main verb. The example comes from a conversation in which a customer is asking for advice about face creams. The salesperson is showing available creams to the customer.

(3) Estonian

M: *see akvatrops on nüüd ka: (2.0)*
 DEM akvatrops be.PRS.3SG PTCL also
 ‘Here is Aquadrops as well.’

ja see on nüüd näiteks selline
 and DEM be.PRS.3SG now for.example DEM.ADJ
 ‘And this is for example this kind (of cream),’

mis mis ee: (0.5) on küll niisutav aga
 REL REL be.PRS.3SG PTCL moisturizing but
 ‘which is moisturizing but’

natuke uut-moodi niisutav kreem
 little new.PART-way.PART moisturizing cream
 ‘somehow a new kind of moisturizing cream’

kui nee-d tavalise-d.
 than DEM-PL usual-PL
 ‘than the usual ones.’

The main clause *see on nüüd näiteks selline* ‘this is for example this kind of’ consists of a demonstrative *see* referring to the cream presented by the speaker, the verb *olla* ‘be’ and a demonstrative adjective accompanied by two particles. This means that there is no information in the main clause about the referent and it just forms a suitable context for adding a relative clause, which conveys the information about the cream. The main clause, thus, is light in terms of meaning, function and structure.

In the next example from our Finnish corpus, the main clause of the RC is also a copula clause formed with a shortened form of the verb *olla* ‘be’. The example comes from a conversation between two men in a kitchen. One of them has commented on how nice the flooring looks. The other speaker explains that the kitchen has just been renovated and goes on to describe the company that did the work.

(4) Finnish: SG444

<i>se</i>	<i>o</i>	<i>joku</i>	<i>semmone</i>	<i>firma</i>
DEM	be.PRS.3SG	some	DEM.ADJ	company

‘it’s like some company’

<i>joka</i>	<i>niinku</i>	<i>osta-a</i>	<i>kämpp-i-ä.</i>
REL	PTCL	buy-PRS.3SG	housing-PL-PART

‘that like buys housing units’

<i>sit</i>	<i>ne</i>	<i>remppa-a,</i>
then	3PL	remodel-PRS.3SG

‘then they remodel’

<i>sit</i>	<i>ne</i>	<i>my-y</i>	<i>°vähä.° (0.2)</i>	<i>voito-lla,</i>	<i>nii-t</i>
then	3PL	sell-PRS.3SG	little	profit-ADE	DEM.PL-PART

°(eteenpäi)°.
forward
‘then they sell them a bit. at a profit to someone else’

The main clause introduces the referent as *joku semmone firma* ‘like some company’, a fairly generic description. The two indefinite determiners are both non-recognitionals, expressing that the speaker is not quite sure about the particular identity of the firm or does not care about it. According to Vilkuna, *joku* is used with referents that are non-specific (1992: 80). Vilkuna (1992) notes that *semmone(n)* orients to class, while Helasvuo (1988: 93–95) characterizes it as an approximator

or hedge, used in situations where there is uncertainty about membership in a category. The *joka*-relative clause then describes the kind of work the company does, now characterizing it in more detail. Thus, the main clause introduces the referent serving as the head of the RC as non-specific and generic, and more particular information comes in the RC that follows.

The main clauses of RCs in both our corpora are also often existential clauses. These are clauses where the main verb is *olla* and where an initial local case lexical NP or pronoun can express either a location (ex. 5) or a possessor (ex. 6).

The next example from the Estonian corpus comes from a conversation in a travel agency. The travel agent explains that there is a guide at the trip destination who will meet the travellers. The main clause is an existential clause where the initial demonstrative *seal* ‘there’ mentions a location.

(5) Estonian

<i>seal</i>	<i>on</i>	<i>koha</i>	<i>peal</i>	<i>giid</i>	<i>kes</i>	<i>vastu</i>
there	be.PRS.3SG	place.GEN	on	guide	REL	against
<i>võta-b</i>						
take-PRS.3SG						
‘There is a guide on site who will meet (you)’						

The main clause is initiated by *seal on* ‘there is’, followed by a post-positional locative phrase *koha peal* ‘on site’. The RC is headed by an NP which presents a member of a class ‘guide’. The main function of the whole complex sentence is to ensure that the travellers will be taken care of. This information comes in the RC.

The next example presents a clause where the initial adessive case pronoun *mul* ‘I’ expresses a possessor. The turn comes from the very beginning of a conversation in a clock repair shop. The client is presenting an alarm clock which needs to be repaired because it is not ringing.

(6) Estonian

<i>mu-l</i>	<i>on</i>	<i>siin</i>	<i>üks</i>	<i>'kell</i>	<i>mis</i>	<i>ei</i>	<i>'helise</i>
1SG-ADE	be.PRS.3SG	here	one	clock	REL	NEG	ring
‘I have here an alarm clock which does not ring.’							

The clock is seen by both participants, which means that despite no previous verbal mention of the clock, it is focal in the context (see Monzoni & Laury 2015). The NP has an indefinite determiner *üks*, which is a rather frequent kind of head NP of RCs in our Estonian data and is functioning as a mention of a category (Pajusalu 2021). The RC presents the reason of the visit to the repair shop. Thus, in both Estonian examples of RC attached to existential clause, the main point of the turn comes in RC: ‘you will be taken care of’ and ‘the clock needs to be repaired’.

Example (7) has a Finnish RC with a locational existential main clause with *olla* ‘to be’ as its main verb. A group of young men are discussing an electronic device they had seen at a department store earlier in the day.

(7) Finnish: SG121

<i>siin</i>	<i>ol-i</i>	<i>semmone,</i>	<i>se</i> (.)	<i>kamerapuol,</i>	
DEM.ADV	be-PST.3SG	DEM.ADJ	DEM	camera.system	
‘It had (lit. there was) this kind of camera system’					
(.)	<i>mikä</i>	<i>ol-i</i>	<i>myös</i>	<i>huamattavast</i>	<i>parempi</i>
	REL	be-PST.3SG	also	significantly	better
‘which also was significantly better’					
<i>ku</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>mi-tä</i>	<i>myö</i>	<i>eile</i>	<i>käyt(et-t-ii,)</i>
than	DEM	REL-PART	1PL	yesterday	use-PASS-PST
‘than the one we used yesterday’.					

In example (7), there is an existential main clause *siin oli semmone, se kamerapuol* ‘there was this kind of camera system’ serving to introduce a referent (‘this kind of camera system’) which is then predicated upon in the RC. Within the RC, there is yet another RC embedded in a comparative structure *parempi ku se mitä myö eile käyt(ettii)* ‘better than the one we used yesterday’. While the head noun being introduced is first preceded with *semmonen*, which may here be motivated by a word search (Vilkuna 1992: 132; Helasvuo, Laakso & Sorjonen 2004), it is then followed by the determiner *se*, which marks the referent as one that the speaker assumes recipients can identify (Laury 1997); the participants had seen the device together. The relative clauses again contain the more relevant information about the superior quality of the camera system, which is then compared to some other device the participants had also seen.

In the next example from our Finnish corpus, the main clause of the RC is a possessive existential clause. It is taken from a conversation where several music experts are identifying musicians in a donated collection of photographs.

(8) Finnish: SG435

Kalevi-ll on s- s- semmonen kuva,
 Kalevi-ADE be.PRS.3SG DEM.ADJ picture
 ‘Kalevi has a picture’

jonka Sibelius anto kaiki-lle
 REL.ACC Sibelius give.PST.3SG all-ALL
 ‘which Sibelius gave to everyone’

jotka, käv-i kutsu-ma-ssa Sibelius-ta
 REL.PL go-PST.3SG invite-INF-INE Sibelius-PART
 ‘who came to invite Sibelius (to be)’

Suome Säveltäj-i-en kunnia-jüsene-ks.
 Finland.GEN composer-PL-GEN honor-member-TRSL
 ‘an honorary member of the Society of Finnish Composers’

In example (8), the head NP of the relative clause, here the complement of the possessive, *kuva* ‘picture’ has *semmonen* as a determiner; in other words, the picture is being introduced as a member of a class (see also Erringer 1996; cf. also example (2)). The information that is relevant to the conversation comes in the RC which follows: the photograph was one that Sibelius gave to the delegation that had invited him to an honorary position. The example contains another RC initiated with *jotka*, embedded in the first RC, which has a transitive main clause, *Sibelius anto kaiki-lle* ‘Sibelius gave to everyone’. We discuss transitive main clauses below.

In examples (3) through (8), the main clause is structured as a simple copula clause or existential clause with *olla* ‘be’ as the main verb, and it functions to merely introduce the new referent, often as non-specific or generic. The main clause is thus light in terms of structure, meaning and function. That is, it simply presents the antecedent by using a copula to predicate its existence (as in examples (3) and (4) *see on/se o* ‘it is’), location somewhere (as in examples (5) and (7) *seal on/siin oli* ‘there is/was), or its possession (as in examples (6) and (8) *mul on* ‘I have’, *Kalevill on* ‘Kalevi has’). The determiners on the antecedent, such as

semmonne ‘such’ may project that some quality may be predicated on the referent in the RC that follows. The RC then says something about that referent which is relevant to the interaction. However, our data also contain copula clauses and existential clauses which serve to characterize the referent or construct reference in some other way. Consider examples (9) and (10) below. In Example (9) from our Estonian data, the salesman is explaining to the clients the characteristics of a washing machine they are all looking at.

- (9) Estonian
- | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------|--------------------|---------------|--------------|
| <i>see</i> | <i>on</i> | <i>niuke</i> | <i>ainukene</i> | <i>'masin</i> | <i>siin,</i> |
| DEM | be.PRS.3SG | DEM.ADJ | only | machine | DEM.ADV |
| ‘This is the only machine here’ | | | | | |
| <i>mis</i> | <i>'kiir-pesu-prog</i> | <i>rammi</i> | <i>võimalda-b.</i> | | |
| REL | fast-wash.GEN-program.PART | | enable-PRS.3SG | | |
| ‘that has an express wash program.’ | | | | | |

The main clause presents the referent ‘washing machine’ with the demonstrative adjective *niuke* ‘a kind of’. The NP also includes the adjective *ainukene* ‘the only one’ and a postpositional demonstrative adverb *siin* ‘here’, which together express the meaning that this kind of washing machine is the only one in the shop which has the characteristic expressed in the RC (having an express wash). Thus, in this example the noun phrase is rather complex, but the main content of the turn is, however, still expressed in the RC.

In example (10), the main clause is a characterizing copula clause where the referent of the complement NP *ainoo kuva* ‘the only picture’ is further characterized with a RC.

- (10) Finnish: SG123
- | | | | | | |
|---|----------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| <i>se</i> | <i>ol-i</i> | <i>ainoo</i> | <i>kuva</i> | <i>mi-tä</i> | <i>mu-l</i> |
| 3SG | be-PST.3SG | only | picture | REL-PART | 1SG-ADE |
| <i>ol-i</i> | <i>su-sta,</i> | | | | |
| be-PST.3SG | 2SG-ELA | | | | |
| ‘it was the only picture that I had of you’ | | | | | |

In the main clause, the complement *ainoo kuva* ‘the only picture’ is specific and characterizes the referent, and the RC is an inseparable part of the characterization, explaining in what sense the picture is the only

one; it is the only one the speaker had of the addressee. The RC *mitä mul oli susta* ‘that I had of you’ restricts this formulation to the ones that the speaker had. Restricting the reference of the head noun is one of the most commonly noted characteristic of RCs (see e.g. Keenan & Comrie 1977: 63–64; Andrews 2007: 206; Comrie & Kuteva 2013). This function can also be observed in our data.⁴

The next section concerns the transitive and intransitive clauses in our data.

3.2. Transitive and intransitive main clauses

As Table 1 shows, both in the Estonian and in the Finnish corpus, another large group of main clauses consists of transitive clauses, as 25% of the main clauses in the Estonian data and 22% in the Finnish data are transitive. In both datasets, there are also intransitive main clauses (Est. 13%, Fi. 8%).

The next Estonian example comes from a telephone conversation between a client and an information giving person. The main clause is transitive and the head of the RC is the object of the main clause. The client is looking for the telephone number of someone who could take garbage away.

(11) Estonian

<i>ma</i>	<i>paku-ks</i>	<i>võibolla</i>	<i>'veel</i>	<i>selle</i>
1SG	offer-COND	maybe	more	DEM.GEN
<i>'tänavapuhasuse</i>		<i>'ka</i>		
street.GEN-cleaning.GEN		also		
'I would give you a “streetcleaning” [phone number],’				
<i>kus</i>	<i>on</i>	<i>märke</i>	<i>'prügi'-vedu.</i>	
REL	be.PRS.3SG	comment	garbage.GEN-transport	
'where (there) is a comment “garbage transport”’				

4 However, restricting the reference of the head noun is not the only function of relative RCs. Many authors on a number of languages have also pointed out that the distinction between restrictive and non-restrictive RCs is often difficult to make or even not relevant for some languages. For discussion and references, see Helasvuo, Laury & Rauma (2022).

In example (11), the head NP has a definite determiner *see* ‘this’, which often projects a RC to follow. The RC concerns the reason for the call and conveys the most important characteristic (*prügivedu* ‘garbage transport’) of the company whose phone number she is going to give. In the Estonian data, this kind of transitive main clauses are rather frequent because there are many information-seeking phone conversations in the corpus.

In the following example from our Finnish corpus, the main clause is transitive. The speaker is telling about his attempt to visit the Vienna opera house when he was a young student, and his conversation with the director of the opera which led to a positive outcome.

(12) Finnish: SG435

mä sa-i-n semmose-n (.) passi-n,
 1SG get-PST-1SG DEM.ADJ-ACC pass-ACC
 ‘I got this kind of pass’

mi-llä mä pääs-i-n ooppera-harjotuks-i-i
 REL-ADE 1SG be.allowed-PST-1SG opera-rehearsal-PL-PART
seura-a koska tahansa.
 follow-INF when ever
 ‘that allowed me to follow opera rehearsals at any time (I liked)’

The main clause verb is *sain* ‘get-PST-1SG’ and its object is *semmosen passin* ‘the/a kind of pass’. The RC then contains the main information: the pass entitled the speaker to attend any rehearsal at the opera. This is the high point of this narrative and the main information from the point of view of the speaker. For a student interested in the opera, it is a highly positive outcome of a random visit to the opera house to receive such a pass. The nature of the pass, the most important part of the story, is expressed in the RC.

We have seen that in our corpora, the RCs whose main clauses are transitive also commonly carry the main information, while the main clause functions to present the head noun. There is a great variety of verbs used in the transitive main clauses of RCs in our data; in all, in the Estonian data, there were a total of 34 different verbs used in transitive main clauses of RCs, while there were 90 different verbs that were used in the Finnish corpus in such main clauses. However, of all the verbs used in transitive clauses in the two corpora, the most frequently

used transitive verbs covered a large segment of all the uses. In the Estonian corpus, there were in all 108 transitive clauses, and the most commonly used nine verbs were used 55 times in all, covering more than half of the uses of transitive verbs. In the Finnish corpus, the ten most frequently used verbs were used in 91 of the 212 transitive clauses; that is, in not quite half of the transitive clauses, one of only 10 verbs appeared. The most frequently used transitive verbs in main clauses of RCs in the Estonian corpus were *ütelda* ‘say’ (13 uses); *tahta* ‘want’ (8); *saada* ‘get; receive’ (8); *võtta* ‘take’ (6); *vaadata* ‘look’ (6); *pakkuda* ‘offer’ (4); *paluda* ‘ask’ (4); *panna* ‘put’ (3); *anda* ‘give’ (3). The most frequently used transitive verbs in the Finnish corpus were *tehdä* ‘make’ (20 uses); *saada* ‘get; receive’ (16); *ottaa* ‘take’ (10) and *nähdä* ‘see’ (9). The rest were *ostaa* ‘buy’, *haluta* ‘want’, *laittaa* ‘put’, *sanoa* ‘say’, *antaa* ‘give’, and *syödä* ‘eat’. These ten transitive verbs are also among the most commonly used transitive verbs in the Finnish corpus as a whole,⁵ and as frequently used words, have rather general meanings. They express notions such as coming to be, coming into the possession or to awareness of someone; we might say that they are relatively low-content verbs that are suitable for introducing referents. Like the existential and copula clauses, they tend to be used for presenting referents in our data, as in examples (12) and (18) with the main clause verbs *saada* ‘get; receive’ and *nähdä* ‘see’.⁶

The next example from our Estonian corpus has a RC with an intransitive main clause. It comes from a conversation between a client and an information giving person. The client wants to know when there will be a bus which would be in the harbour in time.

- (13) Estonian
- | | | | | | | |
|---|----------------|--------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|
| <i>'mis</i> | <i>e</i> | <i>'kell</i> | <i>'lähe-b</i> | <i>selline</i> | <i>'buss</i> | |
| what | | time | go-PRS.3SG | DEM.ADJ | bus | |
| ‘at what time does a bus leave,’ | | | | | | |
| <i>mis</i> | <i>jõua-ks</i> | <i>e</i> | <i>Soome</i> | <i>mine-va</i> | <i>'laeva</i> | <i>'peale</i> |
| REL | reach-COND | | Finland.ILL | go-PTCP.GEN | ship.GEN | on |
| ‘which could reach a ship going to Finland’ | | | | | | |

5 Arkisyn corpus, search conducted October 12, 2019.

6 Diessel & Tomasello (2000) show that the earliest RCs in child language acquisition have presentational main clauses. They seem to be basic in that sense.

The main clause is intransitive and rather vague in its meaning. The main content comes in the relative clause which says that the important thing about the bus is whether one could make it to the ship or not.

Example (14) comes from our Finnish corpus. The participants are discussing a certain classical singer who had to flee from St. Petersburg during the revolution in 1917.

(14) Finnish: SG435

se tul-i aivan (.) köyhä-nä
 DEM come-PST.3SG quite poor-ESS
 ‘She came here very poor,’

täällä sitte se ol-i konservatorio-n
 DEM.ADV then DEM be-PST.3SG conservatory-GEN
opettaja-na että,
 teacher-ESS COMP
 ‘Then she was working here as a teacher in the conservatory,’

kaikki r- raha-t jä-i sinne, niin kun (.)
 all money-PL leave-PST.3SG DEM.ADV PTCL like
 ‘All (her) money was left behind there like’

useimm-i-lta näi-ltä jotka (.) paken-i.
 most-PL-ABL DEM.PL-ABL REL.PL flee-PST.3SG
 ‘with so many of these who fled.’

In example (14), the main clause of the RC is intransitive (*kaikki rahat jäi sinne niin kun useimmilta näiltä* ‘All her money was left behind there like with so many of these’). The head NP *useimmilta näiltä* ‘(with) many of these’ is modified by a RC (*jotka pakeni* ‘who fled’) which restricts the reference of the head. In this example, the main clause is informative and expresses what could be called the main point, explaining why the person being discussed was poor, and the RC gives the category of the head noun *näiltä* ‘these’, which may already be clear from the preceding discussion.

We have seen that transitive and intransitive main clauses may be relatively low in content, serving only to introduce the referent of the head NP, but they can also provide more information about the referent.

3.3. Relative clauses with no main clause

In both datasets, it is also common for relative clauses to have no main clause, with only a free NP as its head (e.g., Ono & Thompson 1994; Tao 1996; Helasvuo 2001). Example (15) involves a free NP as a head of a RC from our Estonian data. The example comes from a conversation in a travel agency, in which the travel agent is listing sites to be visited during a trip to Northern Finland.

(15) Estonian

nii=et 'Paja küla eksole kõik= see 'Lapimaa
 so_that Paja village PTCL all DEM Lapimaa
 ‘So that Paja village, right, all this Lapland’

mi-da vaada-takse või= ütle-me see 'Jõuluvanamaa .hh
 REL-PART look-IPS or say-1PL DEM Jõuluvanamaa
 ‘which is visited or let’s say the Santa Claus land’

ja siis 'Santapark eks
 and then Santapark PTCL
 ‘and then Santapark, right’

The RC is headed by the NP *kõik see Lapimaa* ‘all this Lapland’, which is one of the sites listed. These kinds of lists are one of the typical contexts for a free NP (Helasvuo 2001). The RC is explaining the relevance of the NP, as this is the area which will be traveled through.

Example (16) has a free NP head with a relative clause from our Finnish data.

(16) Finnish: SG108

1 Taru: *.hh mut se on niinku Norjassa sama juttu melkee (.) ja Tanskas,*
 ‘but it’s almost the same thing in Norway and Denmark’

2 *kaikki inho-o ruotsalai£s(h)-i-a,*
 everybody hate-PRS.3SG Swede-PL.PART
 ‘everybody hates the Swedes’

3 *£mhee [is(h)oveli siinä keske-llä joka niinku*
 big.brother there middle-ADE REL PTCL
 ‘big brother in the middle who’

4 Niina: *[£hehhehee .hh£*

5 Taru: *jotenki* [.hhh
 ‘somehow’

6 Niina: *jon* *vähä: (.)* *tyranni/soi-nu* *tois-i-a.*
 be.PRS.3SG somewhat tyrannize-PTCP other-PL-PART
 ‘has somehow tyrannized others.’

In example (16), Taru first makes a generalization about Norway and Denmark, claiming that in these countries, *kaikki inhoo ruotsalaisia* ‘everybody hates the Swedes’ (lines 1–2). She then produces a free NP *isoveli* ‘big brother’ in the nominative case which is then further characterized with a RC co-constructed by Taru (lines 3 and 5) and Niina (line 6). The case marking (nominative) and the number (singular) show that the free NP cannot be part of the previous clause (line 2). The RC describes the actions of Swedes (or Sweden), and together with the head *isoveli* ‘big brother’ they serve to give a reason for the sentiment allegedly shared by Norwegians and Danes along with Finns.

4. Main clauses or framing devices?

We have suggested that it is typical that the main clauses of the RCs in our Estonian and Finnish conversational data serve to present or otherwise formulate the referent of the head NP of the RC (cf. Fox & Thompson 1990b), and that the main information, or the gist of the utterance, comes in the RC. In that sense, the main clauses carry a framing function in the clause combination. In this section, we present longer segments of conversation in order to show how the information in the RC is what later is treated as relevant in the conversation. We present two examples, one from each language, to illustrate this aspect of the clause combinations in our data.

The next example is from our Estonian data. It is the very beginning of a phone call to make an appointment with a doctor for an old person. After starting routine on lines 1–3 the caller H produces a possessive clause *mul on üks vanur* (‘I have an old person’; l. 4). She continues on line 5 with a RC.

(17) Estonian

1 V: £ *silmakabinet=hh*. £
 ‘Eye Cabinet.’

2 H: £ *.hh `tere päevast. (0.5) andke andeks*
 ‘Hello. Excuse me’

3 *mu-l on selline `küsimus. .hh e*
 1SG-ADE be.PRS.3SG DEM.ADJ question
 ‘I have a question.’

4 *mu-l= on:=ee üks `vanur*
 1SG-ADE be.PRS.3SG one old.person
 ‘I have an old person’

5 *kelle-le teh-ti silmakae operatsi`oon. £ (0.5)*
 REL-ALL do-IPS.PST cataract.GEN operation
 ‘to whom a cataract operation has been done.’

6 V: £ *mhmh* £

7 H: £ *.h ee ja: ja ta taha-ks panna `järjekorda teise-le*
 and 3SG want-COND put.INF line.ILL other-ALL
`silma-le
 eye-ALL
 ‘and she wants to get in line for an operation of the other eye.’

The RC *kellele tehti silmakae operatsioon* ‘to whom the cataract operation has been done’ (line 5) gives the most important information about the person which is the reason for the call; she has had a cataract operation. Being attached to a rather general indefinite NP *üks `vanur* ‘an old person’, presented in the possessive existential main clause in line 4, the RC gives the context for the request of getting the old person in line for the operation. Thus, the RC is not performing itself the request but, however, gives the information without which it would not be possible to perform the request.

In the next example from our Finnish corpus, two friends are discussing mutual acquaintances who study at the same university as they do.

(18a) Finnish: SG123

1 Salla: *mä nä-i-n si-tä yh-tä tyttö-ö*
 1SG see-PST-1SG DEM-PART one-PART girl-PART
kuka alott-i
 REL begin-PST.3SG
 ‘I saw that one girl who started’

2 *sillon sama-a aika-a meidän kanssa, (.)*
 then same-ILL time-ILL 1PL.GEN with
tutor-ryhmä-ssä? .hh
 tutor-group-INE
 ‘at the same time with us in the tutorial group?’

3 Pekka *NODS

4 Salla: >*semmonen*< *ke-l ol-i sillon pien [vauva,]*
 DEM.ADJ REL-ADE be-PST.3SG then small baby
 ‘the one who had then a small baby’

5 Pekka: *[aijaa?]*
 ‘Oh yeah?’

6 Salla: *semmoi tumma-tukkanen sellai kiva-n-näkönen,*
 DEM.ADJ dark-haired DEM.ADJ good-GEN-looking
 ‘Like dark-haired, kind of good-looking’

7 Pekka: *o-is-ko se ollu se Petra <Pouta.>*
 be-COND-Q DEM be.PTCP DEM Petra Pouta
 ‘could it have been that Petra Pouta’

8 (0.4)

Salla introduces a person whom she had recently met with the NP *sitä yhtä tyttöä* ‘that one girl’, which is functioning as the object of a transitive clause with the main verb *näin* ‘I saw’ (line 1). The NP has two determiners, both the partitive singular form of the determiner *se*, which expresses that the speaker expects the addressee to be able to identify the referent (Laury 1997; Etelämäki 2005), combined with the partitive singular form of the determiner *yks*, which marks the referent as specific to the speaker but not to the addressee (on *yks*, see Vilkuna 1992; on this combination of determiners, see Laury 2021). Thus the determiners of the head noun of the RC which follows (lines 1–2) mark the referent identifiable to the addressee but at this point, specific only

to the speaker: in this way, she can simultaneously express that she expects her addressee, Pekka, to be able to identify the referent, but that at this point, he would not know which specific girl Salla has seen. Salla then goes on to give further information in the RC which follows: the girl started in the same tutorial group as Salla and Pekka (lines 1–2). In the next RC, headed only by the demonstrative adjective *semmonen*, she adds the crucial information: the girl had a baby (line 4). Not all students have babies at the beginning of their studies, and this detail is received by Pekka in line 5 as new information with the particle *aijaa* (Koivisto 2016). After further descriptions of the girl’s looks and character, Pekka is able to guess a name (line 7). In the next segment, immediately following example (18a), both Pekka and Salla provide further descriptions (see example 18b below).

(18b) Finnish: SG123

9 Salla: *voi olla, >semmoi siis<*
 ‘could be, like I mean,’

10 Pekka: *joo*
 ‘Yeah’

11 Salla: *kuka, (.) ku- (0.5) viel niinku mik- eiku kuka se (-),*
 ‘who, wh- still like wha- I mean who it (-),’

12 Pekka: *semmonen aika ilose#n.: olone#.*
 ‘like a pretty happy type (of person).’

13 Salla: *nii semmoi piän (0.2) sellai tumma-tukkanen,*
 PTCL DEM.ADJ small DEM.ADJ dark-haired
 ‘yeah like short like dark-haired’

14 Pekka: *joo*
 PTCL
 ‘Yeah’

15 Salla: *.hhh sellai mikä ol-i niinku ensin*
 DEM.ADJ REL be-PST.3SG PTCL first
saa-nul lapse-n,
 get-PTCP child-ACC
 ‘And like who had like first had a baby’

16 *ja sit men-ny naimis-i-i,*
 and then go-PTCP marriage-PL-ILL
 ‘And then gotten married’

- 17 *ja sit sitä kauheest naurettiin siin tutorryhmäs sillee et, £heh heh£*
 ‘And then people used to laugh about it in the tutorial group like hahaha’
- 18 *.hh [näin se käy].*
 ‘that’s how it goes’
- 19 Pekka: *[joo nii: olikii] se on se Petra # [se on,]#*
 ‘Yeah that’s how it was it’s that Petra she is’
- 20 Salla: *[niinku] nyt mä näin sen ja:*
 ‘like I saw her now and,’
- 21 *sit si-l ol-i jo toinen pien*
 then DEM-ADE be-PST.3SG already another small
vauva, ja se eka
 baby and DEM first
 ‘Then she had already another little baby and the first one’
- 22 Pekka: *[mm]*
 PTCL
- 23 Salla: *[ol-i] kasva-nu, se ol-i sellai*
 be-PST.3SG grow-PTCP DEM be-PST.3SG DEM.ADJ
jo [niinku],
 already like
 ‘had grown s/he was like already like,’
- 24 Pekka: *[hmy hmy hmy]*
- 25 Salla: *sellai leikki-ikänen <tyyppi.>*
 DEM.ADJ play-age type
 ‘like a pre-school age kid’

In line 15, Salla uses a relative clause headed only with the demonstrative adjective *sellanen* ‘such’, bringing up the fact that the girl had a baby before she was married, a source of some hilarity between the other students. The baby, first introduced in the RC in line 4, comes up the third time in lines 21, 23 and 25. Thus, in this conversational segment, it is the information introduced in the RCs in lines 4 and 15 that turns out to be crucial for the identification of the referent by name (cf. Pekka’s response particle in line 5 and his candidate understanding in line 7 and the confirmation of the name in line 19). The content of the RC is crucial for the identification of the referent and becomes relevant

in the conversation which follows, while the main clauses only serve to introduce the referent.

5. Summary and conclusions

We have shown that the majority of the main clauses of relative clause constructions in our Estonian and Finnish corpora are light in terms of structure, meaning, and function. They are structured as copula clauses or existential clauses with the low-content verb *olla* ‘to be’ and serve mostly to introduce the referent or to build reference in some other way. Furthermore, quite a few relative clauses do not have a main clause at all, but instead, are attached to a free NP. The main information relevant to the subsequent conversation most commonly comes in the relative clause which follows. We suggest that in this sense, the main clauses are not really *main* clauses but rather formulas for introducing the referent which is then expanded on in the relative clause. While subordination has often been equated with background information which is not in the speaker’s main focus (e.g., Rutherford 1970; van Dijk 1977; Halliday 1985; but see Schleppegrell 1992), our finding is that at least in Estonian and Finnish everyday conversation, the speaker’s main focus is more likely to be in the relative clause, not the main clause. This is consistent with what was observed by Thompson (2002) for complement clauses in English conversation, where the ‘main’ clauses were formulaic and could be considered ‘epistemic fragments’, while the content important to the conversation came in the complement clause.

However, in our Estonian and Finnish data, some of the main clauses are transitive; in fact, in the Estonian data, transitive clauses are the most numerous clause type in the data, if copula clauses and existential clauses are counted separately. This difference may be a consequence of the type of data included in the two corpora. In these transitive clauses, the main verbs are basic verbs and therefore semantically bleached. While they cannot be characterized as light, the main information may still come in the relative clause.

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Corpus of Spoken Estonian. Compiled at the University of Tartu. <https://www.cl.ut.ee/suuline1/suulisekorpus/index.php?lang=en>

Abbreviations

1 – first person, 2 – second person, 3 – third person, ABL – ablative, ACC – accusative, ADE – adessive, ADJ – adjective, ADV – adverb, ALL – allative, COND – conditional, COMP – complementizer, DEM – demonstrative, ELA – elative, ESS – essive, GEN – genitive, ILL – illative, IPS – impersonal, INE – inessive, INF – infinitive, NEG – negative auxiliary, PART – partitive, PASS – passive, Q – question particle, PL – plural, PRS – present, PST – past, PTCL – particle, PTCP – participle, REL – relativizer, SG – singular, TRSL – translative.

In examples from the Estonian data the following special symbols are used:

` stressed word, : stretched sound, = no gap/pause, £ £ smiley voice.

In examples from the Finnish data, the following special symbols are used:

, continuing intonation, . final intonation, ? rising intonation, : stretched sound, .hhh audible inbreath, >xx< accelerated tempo, <xx> decelerated tempo, (.) pause, £ smiley voice, ° quiet voice, # creaky voice.

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Kokkuvõte. Ritva Laury, Renate Pajusalu, Marja-Liisa Helasvuo: **Kas pealause on tõesti „pea”lause? Relatiivlauseid eesti ja soome suulises keeles.** Artikkel tegeleb relatiivlause konstruktsioonide pealausetega eesti ja soome suulistes vestlustes. Uurimus näitab, et predikatiivlauseid ja eksistentsiaal-lauseid on suulises kõnes kõige tavalisemad, nendesse lausetüüpidesse kuulus üle poole meie materjali pealausest. Sellised pealauseid ainult esitlevad referenti, mille kohta just relatiivlause annab olulist informatsiooni. Relatiivlause konstruktsiooniga vestlusesse toodud referent on hiljem tihti edasise vestluse oluline teema. Lisaks kasutatakse relatiivlauseid tihti ilma pealausega, nii et nad laiendavad vaba nimisõnafaasi. Artikkel näitab seega, et eesti ja soome vestluste relatiivlause pealauseid on süntaktiliselt kerged. Nad on kerged ka pragmaatiliselt, kuna just relatiivlause, mitte aga pealause, annab põhilise informatsiooni. Siit tekib küsimus relatiivlause kui kõrvallause staatusest ja selle alistatusest.

Märksõnad: relatiivlause, lausetüüp, vaba NP, pealause, alistus, relativeerija