

PREFACE

When the ETAG project “The Grammar of Discourse Particles in Uralic” (PRG 927 and 1290) started out at the University of Tartu in 2020, it soon became clear that one of the particles this project would be occupied with is the notorious and widely distributed particle *no ~ nu* and other variants, such as, for instance, Estonian *noh*, *noo*, Seto *nuu*, *nuuh*, and *nuq*, or Hungarian *na*. This particle has fascinated other researchers as well, which shows most prominently in a volume edited by Peter Auer and Yael Maschler in 2016 on a “family of discourse markers” referred to as NU/NĀ. The Uralic languages covered in that volume are only two, Finnish and Estonian, but not Hungarian, and not to mention any of the minor Uralic languages. This was in stark contrast to the fact that all Uralic languages within the project’s remit do show the particle, and often not only one but two or even more variants. Russian, as the major contact language of most Uralic languages, plays an important role in this scenario, but also Uralic languages outside the Russian contact zone, like Livonian and Hungarian, show a duality of forms. Thus, the desire grew to capture the Uralic story of *no ~ nu*, inspired by the named volume while also supplementing it. However, soon diversity rose in the project team due to the availability of different sorts of data, different interests and capacities, and it became clear that the outcome can hardly be another rigorously organized cross-linguistic volume built on conversational data and conversation analysis, but rather a heterogeneous collection of articles with different sorts of data and approaches.

Among the seven studies assembled in the present thematic issue of ESUKA/JEFUL, the article on Udmurt by IULIIA ZUBOVA and TIMOFEY ARKHANGELSKIY stands out in two ways. First, it is the only study that, in addition to corpus data, also makes use of experimental data, namely an acceptability judgment test produced in Estonia among Udmurt diaspora speakers from different dialect areas. Second, it is the only study in which *nu* is compared to another discourse particle, *ja*. The articles on Ižva-Komi by EDA-RIIN TUULING, on Livonian by MARILI TOMINGAS, and on Hungarian by CSILLA DÉR are based on recordings

of semi-structured interviews and spontaneous conversations, the Hungarian study also on spoken press data. In contrast, the three articles on Siberian Uralic languages are based on narrative data, which shows frequent constructed speech, and in the case of the Surgut Khanty study by ZSÓFIA SCHÖN, also some proper conversations. The Selkup study by DENYS TEPTIUK exemplifies most clearly how narrative data can be used for the study of discourse particles. The Kamas study by GERSON KLUMPP differs again from the rest of the contributions in that it compares the use of *no* ~ *nu* in Heritage Kamas to the use of *nu* in the Russian speech documented from the same speakers.

Unlike Auer & Maschler (2016), which has focused primarily on conversational data, this special issue demonstrates that traditional storytelling also provides a productive setting for investigating discourse particles. Narrative discourse reveals functions that become visible only when larger units of discourse organization are taken into account. Across the narrative corpora, *nu* ~ *no* contributes not only to local coherence but also to the structuring of the narrative itself, marking episode boundaries, shifts between the main narrative and metanarrative commentary, and transitions between different discourse planes. Traditional storytelling is far from being purely “monologic”. The frequent occurrence of represented speech creates environments in which *nu* ~ *no* displays interactional functions closely resembling those found in spontaneous conversation, including prompting interlocutors to act non/verbally, or granting permission. The inclusion of narrative data also strengthens the comparative perspective of the Thematic Issue. Despite differences in language structure and storytelling traditions, the narrative corpora reveal similar discourse-organizational uses of *nu* ~ *no* across several Uralic languages.

In most languages represented in this volume, the particle occurs in two phonetic variants, namely *no* and *nu*. While the origin of *nu* is rather transparent as a borrowing, either from Russian in the languages in contact with Russian, or from Latvian in Livonian, the presence of *no* is a puzzle. On the one hand, at the westernmost periphery, that is, in the Finnic branch, *no* is considered to be an original word. Its earliest attestations in Finnish date back to the 16th century (Sorjonen & Vepsäläinen 2016: 243–244), and it seems reasonably safe to assume that it has the same origin in the other Finnic languages as well. On the other hand, in the data examined in this special issue, *no* is also attested

in languages spoken thousands of kilometers to the east, such as Komi and Kamas. The hypothesis that *no* could have originated as a Russian dialectal variant does not find support in any major dictionaries of Russian dialects. In the absence of early recordings for most Uralic languages, it is difficult to find out when this variant appeared, but it is possible that *no* is an inherited Uralic particle rather than one confined to the Finnic branch. With the exception of Hungarian, all the languages examined in this special issue are spoken by people who are (at least) bilingual. The presence of another major language in addition to their native language in their everyday lives undoubtedly has a significant effect on the functioning of discourse particles, including the one under investigation. As noted for Kamas and Komi in this volume, and also for Ingrian by Markus (2024), the effect is bidirectional. Not only does the major language influence the minor with respect to the functioning of *no ~ nu*, but at least the phonetic realization of the particle in the major language is also influenced. These effects deserve further investigation.

Irrespective of the phonetic realization, the set of functions displayed by the particle *no ~ nu* is quite similar across Uralic, and it is also similar to those attested for other languages of Europe, as analyzed in the volume edited by Auer & Maschler (2016). The papers assembled in this Thematic Issue suggest that the functions of *nu ~ no* are best understood at multiple levels of discourse organization. While the particle manages interaction in conversation, in narratives it serves as a resource for guiding listeners through the unfolding structure of the text, illustrating the continuity between conversational and narrative discourse. Some interactional functions, such as urging or marking transitions, seem to be universal for *no ~ nu* and attested in all examined languages; some uses are clearly more restricted. Such are the clause-final occurrences in Livonian – also described for Estonian by Keevalik (2016) and for Seto by Todesk (2025) – that express emphatic reinforcing, and also the stand-alone *no* in Komi functioning as an affirmative response. This function, however, is also reported for Meadow Mari *nu* by Ěrcikova (2015: 124).

The present volume on *no ~ nu* in Uralic is, of course, not extensive. It covers seven languages from five branches: the South Samoyed languages Selkup and Kamas, the Ob-Ugric language Surgut Khanty, Hungarian, the Permic languages Ižva Komi and Udmurt, and the Finnic language Livonian. Branches not covered by the volume are Saami,

Mordvin, and Mari. Among the branches of Uralic, the Finnic branch is the one in which the discourse particle *no ~ nu* has received the most diverse and detailed description so far, cf. the observations on Finnish by Sorjonen & Vepsäläinen (2016), on Estonian by Hennoste (2000) and Keevalik (2016), on Seto by Todesk (2025) and on Ingrian by Markus (2024). The study on Courland Livonian by MARILI TOMINGAS thus adds to a considerable body of studies on *no ~ nu* in Finnic languages. The study on Hungarian *na ~ no* by CSILLA DÉR connects to previous descriptions; however, this is the first study on the topic in English. The studies on Izva-Komi by EDA-RIIN TUULING and on Udmurt by IULIJA ZUBOVA and TIMOFEY ARKHANGELSKIY could start from existing short descriptions in grammars and dictionaries, while the three studies on Siberian Uralic languages by ZSÓFIA SCHÖN (Surgut Khanty), DENYS TEPTIUK (Selkup), and GERSON KLUMPP (Kamas) are the first description of the particle *no ~ nu* in these languages. The lack of robust descriptions in these languages explains why the present volume does not concentrate on certain environments such as replies to questions or clause-internal uses, but rather offers a complete picture. Pinpointing the distribution of the particle in the language in question was a mandatory part of the research. The volume by Auer & Maschler (2016) was a valuable guide in developing criteria of investigation and description. Some of the contributions in our issue follow them more closely; others refer to them less intensively. The ordering of articles in the volume follows the geographical distribution of represented languages from east to west.

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