Dear or distant? The referents of the standard Finnish pronoun hän ’he, she’
in colloquial speech

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In casual spoken Finnish four pronouns, hän ’he, she’, se, ’it, (he, she)’, tämä ’this’ and tuo ’that’, may be used to refer to people, the most common and the most neutral of them being se. Yet in standard Finnish the third-person pronoun referring to people is hän while se is only used with non-human referents.

This paper examines the use of hän in a regional dialect of the province of Satakunta in south-western Finland. The focus is on the referents: who is likely to be referred to with hän instead of se? Previous research is conflicting: It has been claimed that hän is used of someone dear and respected (Vilppula 1989) and that the referent of hän is often an older member of the speaker’s family (Lappalainen 2010). In contrast, the most recent study argues that in the data from Satakunta the referent of hän is typically someone socially or temporally distant to the speaker (Kurki et al. 2011).

What is the strongest tendency affecting the use of hän? On the basis of a large dataset, I examine who the referents of hän are in the contemporary speech of five small-towns in Satakunta. The data consists of 24 hours of voice-recorded conversations, where 33 speakers produce 677 singular occurrences of hän referring to a person. The referents are classified according to their relation to the speaker, e.g. grandparent, acquaintance, or institutional person.

References:

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