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OKAY as a content word: Regulating language and constructing centres of norms in Finnish, Finland-Swedish, and Sweden-Swedish academic writing consultation meetings

Sofie Henricson¹ , Anne Mäntynen¹, Marie Nelson² and Marjo Savijärvi³

¹Department of Finnish, Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian Studies, University of Helsinki, Finland, ²Department of Swedish Language and Multilingualism, Stockholm University, Sweden and ³Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland

Corresponding author: Sofie Henricson; Email: sofie.henricson@helsinki.fi

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Abstract

The focus of this article is on OKAY as a resource for regulating language and constructing norm centres in authentic consultation meetings related to academic writing and recorded in Finland and Sweden. It gives an overview of all occurrences of OKAY in the interactional data in question, revealing that the word occurs frequently in academic writing consultations in Finnish, Finland Swedish, and Sweden Swedish. There are similarities in the frequency of its use and the distribution of occurrences between counsellor and student in the Finnish and the Finland-Swedish data, whereas the Sweden-Swedish counselling interactions follow a slightly different pattern. Through the lens of conversation analysis and systemic–functional linguistics, we further demonstrate how the counsellors and the students use the evaluative content word OKAY as a resource for regulating both academic writing and the counselling interaction, and thereby position themselves epistemically and orient towards different centres of norms.

Keywords: academic writing; centres of norms; conversation analysis; epistemic positioning; language regulation; okay as a content word; systemic–functional linguistics; writing consultation

1. Introduction

Interlocutors use different verbal expressions in formal as well as informal interactions, not only to facilitate mutual understanding and smooth communication but also to regulate the interactional situation, including the degree of formality and the participants' roles. One such expression, which is frequently used in many different languages, is the lexical item OKAY¹ (Betz & Sorjonen 2021). It is an informal lexical resource that serves several purposes in Finnish, Finland Swedish, and Sweden Swedish (e.g. SAOL 2015, KS 2021). It may be used as a discourse

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particle, in other words as a kind of function word, or as a content word, and in that case mostly as an evaluative adjective that confirms something as acceptable.

Our focus in this article is on how counsellors and students orient to centres of norms (see Blommaert 2010) in academic writing consultation meetings by zooming in on OKAY as an evaluative content word, used as a joint lexical resource in Finnish, Finland Swedish, and Sweden Swedish. Our analysis focuses on how it is used as a resource for regulating language and constructing norms in writing consultation meetings in these two neighbouring Nordic countries, and on how its use relates to the situational roles and the epistemic positionings (Heritage 2012a, 2012b; Sidnell 2014) of counsellor and student.

The analysis is based on three comparable data sets comprising video-recordings of Finnish, Finland-Swedish, and Sweden-Swedish academic writing consultations, in which counsellor and student discuss an academic text written by the student. These institutional interactions are aimed at improving the text under discussion and enhancing the student's academic literacy skills (see Lillis & Scott 2007). OKAY is frequently used in all three data sets. This enabled us to investigate this particular resource in similar activity contexts (academic writing consultations) in three linguistic settings, of which two (Finnish and Finland Swedish) share a geographical and cultural context and two (Finland Swedish and Sweden Swedish) are varieties of the same language.

Our analysis addresses the following research questions:

1. How frequent is OKAY, as a content word and as a discourse particle, in the three data sets? Are there quantitative differences between the data sets or the individuals participating in the consultation meetings? We analyse these questions in Section 5.1 through a quantitative overview.
2. How is OKAY as a content word used in the consultation meetings as a norm-regulating resource? How do the participants position themselves epistemically, and towards which centres of norms do they orient? These questions are explored in Sections 5.2 and 5.3 by means of conversation analysis.

We have extracted all instances of OKAY in the three data sets, but given that centres of norms and epistemic positioning constitute our departure point, the emphasis in the analysis is on usage as a content word, in practice mainly as an adjective with an evaluative dimension, whereas the discourse particles are only included in the quantitative overview (Section 5.1).

Example (1) illustrates the kind of interactional sequence on which we focus in the analysis, and highlights the two main functions of OKAY in our data, namely as a discourse particle or an adjective. The example is of a case in which the counsellor has directed the student to a blog, and starts as the counsellor refers to a colleague who has confirmed that the terminology of the blog is 'quite/fully okay'. A blog is not among the most common centres of norms in counselling on academic writing, and perhaps this is why the counsellor decided to add an additional normative centre as further authorisation, namely a colleague who apparently confirmed that the blog was an acceptable source for terminological issues.

(1) The terminology is quite quite okay (Finland Swedish)²

- 01 COU: å de har också FÖRNAMN titta på å sagt att
and it.N have.PRS also NAME look.PRF at and say.PRF that
 ‘and also NAME has looked at it and said that’
- 02 [de e] helt okej [att] terminologin °e° helt helt okej
it.N be.PRS quite okay that terminology.DEF.C be.PRS quite quite okay
 ‘it’s quite okay that the terminology is quite quite okay’
- 03 STU: [jä] [okej]
yes okay
 ‘yeah okay’
- 04 COU: å innehållet också så att
and content.DEF.N also so that
 ‘and the content also so’

Example (1) includes three instances of the lexical item OKAY: two occurrences of *okej* as an adjective in line 2 and one occurrence of *okej* as a discourse particle in line 3. As a discourse particle, OKAY can cover a range of discourse-marking functions, implying interactional shifts, for example, or as in line 3, signalling acknowledgement of the previous turn (see e.g. Schegloff & Sacks 1973, Beach 1993, Lindström 2018, Betz & Sorjonen 2021). As such, it serves general discourse-marking functions with less connection to how participants in these consultation meetings orient to centres of norms. As an adjective (line 2), on the other hand, OKAY implies that something is ‘quite/fully acceptable’ (SAOL 2015), and here it is relevant to discuss who the participants position as someone who can judge if something is OKAY, and to which centres of norms the participants orient. Naturally, both counsellors and students also use other evaluative adjectives during these writing consultations, such as *hyvä* (‘good’) in Finnish or *bra* (‘good’) in Swedish, but we focus on OKAY because it is a lexical resource that is used in both Finnish and Swedish.

In Section 2 we give some background information on the context and the data, and then in Section 3 we present the theoretical and methodological foundations of our study based on systemic–functional linguistics and conversation analysis. We then discuss relevant previous research on OKAY in Section 4. The analysis in Section 5 begins with a quantitative overview of all instances of OKAY in the three data sets (Section 5.1), meaning all occurrences of OKAY in our data regardless of its grammatical function. We further analyse the distribution of these occurrences as either function words (discourse particles) or content words (mainly adjectives). Then we take a closer look at how both counsellors and students used the content word OKAY as a resource for regulating language and constructing centres of norms in the consultation meetings (Sections 5.2–5.3). We conclude in Section 6 with a summary of our findings and a discussion of our study.

2. Background and data

We explore the use of OKAY in consultations related to academic writing in languages and varieties spoken in close-knit cultures, namely Finnish, Finland

Swedish, and Sweden Swedish. Finnish, a Finno-Ugric language, and Swedish, a North Germanic language, belong to two distinct language families (Uralic and Indo-European, respectively) and hence differ from each other in many respects. Both are official languages in Finland, with equal status, although Swedish is spoken as a first language by a small minority of about five per cent (OSF 2022). Swedish is the main national language in Sweden, and Finnish is one of the official minority languages.

Finland and Sweden are neighbouring Nordic countries with a long shared history. Finland was part of Sweden for more than 600 years (until the beginning of the nineteenth century), and both countries have common approaches to major societal issues such as welfare, equality, and democracy. The academic worlds in Finland and Sweden also derive from a common historical foundation and build on a joint academic tradition, whereby hierarchy is not as prominent as in many other countries, for example. The linguistic and discursive practices at universities in Finland and Sweden could thus be described as two branches of the same tree (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019).

Finnish and Swedish also share many linguistic traits, with regard to the lexicon (Häkkinen 1997) for example, due to historical and current close contact between Finland and Sweden as well as between Finnish and Swedish within Finland. In particular, the Finland-Swedish variety reflects both the Finnish societal context and the long-term contact with the Finnish language. This is observable on the phonetic, lexical, syntactical, and even the gestural level (e.g. Leinonen, Vihanta & Pitkänen 1990, Wide & Lyngfelt 2009, af Hällström-Reijonen 2012, Henricson & Nelson 2021).

Consultation with regard to academic writing is offered to university students in many countries, although the forms and traditions may vary (Lennartson-Hokkanen 2016, Babcock & Thonus 2018, Skogmyr Marian, Henricson & Nelson 2021). Writing counsellors at Swedish and Finnish universities are experienced linguists and university educators. Students who participate in meetings offering writing consultation represent different academic disciplines, including social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities, the subject matter of which may be more or less familiar to the counsellors.

Writing consultation is a form of institutional interaction and as such involves participants with distinct and asymmetrical roles and a clear division between expert and non-expert (see Benwell & Stokoe 2006, Heller 2017, Skogmyr Marian, Henricson & Nelson 2021). The writing counsellor participates as the institutional expert, that is, in academic writing, whereas the student participates in the role of advice-seeking non-expert. Simultaneously, students participate as experts (to be) in their own subject area and the topic of the text, as well as in the on-going writing process. The consultation is institutionally and sequentially characterised by the writing counsellor giving advice and the student receiving it (Henricson & Nelson 2017). Nevertheless, the consultation is largely built up collaboratively, whereby the expertise of both the counsellor and the student are crucial elements of a successful consultation meeting (Lennartson-Hokkanen 2016, Nelson et al. 2019).

Our data consist of video-recordings of consultations related to academic writing in three comparable sets taken during individual meetings held in Finnish, Finland Swedish, and Sweden Swedish.³ During each meeting the counsellor and the student discuss an academic text written by the student, with the aim of improving future versions of the text and enhancing the student's academic literacy skills

(see Lillis & Scott 2007). In all three data sets, the counsellor had typically read the text in advance, and a printout of it supports the discussion. Each consultation meeting is between one student and one counsellor.

The Finnish consultation meetings are obligatory for students, and the text under discussion is a one-page abstract written as part of a maturity test in which they demonstrate their academic literacy skills and their familiarity with the topic of their thesis (for further details, see Mäntynen 2018). These meetings typically consist of relatively short interactions and last between 5 and 15 minutes, although there are some longer discussions too (the longest meeting in the current data set lasted 25 minutes). The Finland-Swedish consultations are offered either as a voluntary service to students or as part of an on-going course in academic writing, whereas all the Sweden-Swedish consultations in our data were voluntary. The discussion in the Finland-Swedish and the Sweden-Swedish consultation meetings concerned academic texts on which the student was currently working, typically focusing on an excerpt of a few pages. These meetings typically lasted between 20 and 64 minutes.

Every consultation meeting is unique, and as in all naturally occurring data there are inevitable differences between each interaction. Our three data sets nevertheless build upon highly comparable institutional interactions in settings and cultures that are very similar, and there is no inherent discrepancy in perceptions of consultation related to academic writing, or in how the lexical item OKAY is conceived, among the three contexts studied (see Sidnell 2009).

The three data sets are part of larger collections of data comprising various interactional recordings and text documents. We chose to base our study on three hours and 20 minutes of video-recorded meetings from each data set, amounting to a total of 10 hours of interactional data. Given the variation in length of the individual meetings, this resulted in 22 Finnish, five Finland-Swedish, and four Sweden-Swedish consultations. We manually excerpted all instances of OKAY from these recordings and the transcriptions, resulting in 566 instances in total.

3. The theoretical and methodological framework

The basic premise in this article is that language is used differently in different situations, different places, and by different users, and that this variation is systematic and analysable. The research is based theoretically on systemic-functional linguistics (SFL; see Halliday 1973, Halliday & Matthiessen 2014) and methodologically on conversation analysis (CA; see Sidnell & Stivers 2013).

According to the SFL approach, language variation is systematic and, which is more to the point, language as a system is tightly bound up with its function. This relation between language system and language use is constant and dialectic in nature (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014, Shore 2020:19). The core idea is that grammar is an organised system offering (paradigmatic and syntagmatic) alternatives from which language users can choose, depending on what they want to do with the language (Shore 2020:19; also Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019). Linguistic choices are then made and guided by the situational context, which in turn is shaped by the linguistic choices. Hence, the relation between language and context is always dialectic and constantly changing.

The situational context or context of situation (*register*) in SFL comprises three aspects (often called variables): *field* (what is happening), *tenor* (the roles and relationships among participants), and *mode* (how language is used). These aspects affect the linguistic choices made by language users in a particular situation (see e.g. Halliday & Matthiessen 2014).

In our data, the field as a contextual dimension (what is happening, what is the content) typically involved evaluating and consulting, and the type of contents being discussed include academic writing and genres (generally), as well as the use of Finnish or Swedish in the different academic genres (specifically). The field may change during the meeting, such as when the conversation moves from evaluation to small talk, which then affects the participants' situational roles.

The aspect of tenor (who is involved) concerns the participants' situational roles, both social such as teacher–student and expert–non-expert, as well as linguistically constituted such as speaker–listener, information seeker–responder, and including degrees of formality. It is worth noting that students may be construed situationally as experts in their own fields and writing processes, whereas the writing counsellors temporarily become non-experts in that respect.

The third aspect of the context of situation, namely the mode, describes the way language is used and its role in each context. For example, our data set comprises spoken language, but the texts under discussion also constitute a significant part of the linguistic material in the situation (see Svinhufvud & Vehviläinen 2013). It is also noteworthy that the writing consultations in the data are dyadic and dialogical. They were not totally unplanned but rather guided by a pre-set agenda, and for the counsellors in particular they were routine meetings.

We adopt a discourse-analytical view on norms and language regulation in writing consultations (see Hynninen 2018, Mäntynen 2018). From this perspective, norms are construed in discursive and linguistic practices. Although there are known institutional and social norms *per se*, which are typically represented and mediated by experts and professionals in a particular field such as Finnish language studies, norms are also construed and reinvented situationally (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2019). In writing consultations, for example, the counsellor acts as a normative centre by mediating the norms for academic writing in Finnish or Swedish, and in addition to that, other norms and normative centres such as disciplines and disciplinary instructions may become relevant during the discussion (Mäntynen 2018; see also Blommaert 2010:40–41, 99). Blommaert (2010:139) discusses networks of multiple centres of norms through the concept of polycentricity, which 'represents an image of a world in which power and authority are shared by various concrete actors – centres – from whom normative guidelines can be expected and are being adopted'. Indeed, as we will show in the analysis, neither the counsellors nor the students in our data oriented towards the counsellor as the only centre of normative power 'from whom normative guidelines' (Blommaert 2010:139) are expected: they considered a variety of norm centres.

How knowledge is negotiated and distributed is a strong concern in most institutional interactions (Heller 2017). Indeed, epistemic issues have been an active topic in CA research, approached through analyses of how participants position themselves and each other with regard to knowledge (e.g. Stivers et al. 2011; Heritage 2012a, 2012b). Different domains of expertise and knowledge are made

relevant in various ways in the context of writing consultation. This is illustrated when the student looks to the counsellor as the one who can evaluate if something is OKAY in the text, hence discussing a domain (the genre of academic writing) in which the counsellor has more knowledge (see Park 2012). On the other hand, the counsellor might ask the student if the writing process has been OKAY, a domain in which the student has first-hand experience. The participants also refer some topics and questions to other normative centres, such as the supervisor of the text (see Thonus 2001). These consultation meetings thus constitute an interactional setting in which many different norm centres and epistemic positionings become relevant. In the analysis we focus on OKAY as a content word, and on the centres of norms to which the participants oriented as those with the knowledge and the authority to evaluate something as OKAY.

4. Previous research on OKAY

OKAY, originally deriving from the English OK, is a frequently used lexical item in many languages including Finnish and Swedish, and it has a variety of functions (see Betz & Sorjonen 2021). It is frequently used in both Finnish and Swedish as a discourse particle (e.g. VISK §792, Lindström 2008:81), sometimes constituting a turn of its own (VISK §795, Lindström 2008:81), and sometimes in combination with other particles, or as part of a longer turn. OKAY can also function as an adjective meaning ‘quite/fully acceptable’ (SAOL 2015), in which contexts its use is predicative (SAG 2: Chapter 4 §37), as in *de e alltså grammatiskt helt okej så här också* (‘it’s like grammatically quite okay also like this’). Its usage in both Finnish and Swedish is colloquial rather than as a standard language resource (SAOL 2015, KS 2021). An example from our Finland-Swedish meetings shows that the counsellor’s point of view mirrors the official language-regulating documents (see SAOL 2015, KS 2021), with the turn *okej hör ju också till vardagsspråk men här beskriver du ju en vardagssituation så de e väl okej* (‘okay of course also belongs to colloquial language but here you describe a colloquial situation so it’s probably okay’). The counsellor’s turn further indicates that the student is also aware of the informal character of OKAY (the adverb *ju* signalling that the other participant is already aware of what is being communicated; see SAOL 2015).

The research on OKAY goes back to 1839, when it was first detected in a newspaper as an adjectival abbreviation (o. k.), meaning ‘all correct’ (see Betz & Sorjonen 2021 for a comprehensive overview of its origins). The variety of its functions, as well as variations in the form in which the lexical item is realised in talk (e.g. *oakie-doke* in English) have increased over the years (Betz & Sorjonen 2021:5). Although its adjectival function is suggested to have been ‘its most common use throughout its documented history’ (Betz & Sorjonen 2021:4), there is evidence that OKAY was used for discourse-marking functions as early as in the nineteenth century (Betz & Sorjonen 2021:5). Interactional research conducted in recent decades (e.g. Schegloff & Sacks 1973, Beach 1993, Guthrie 1997, Lindström 2018, Betz et al. 2021) also illustrates the rich prevalence of OKAY in a broad range of discourse-marking functions across languages. As indicated in the quantitative

overview presented in this paper, and as found in all our three data sets, its use as a content word in contemporary Finnish and Swedish is far less frequent.⁴

Some previous studies have provided quantitative information about the use of OKAY in spoken interaction (e.g. Deppermann & Mondada 2021:43–51). Of interest in the current study is Guthrie's research on *okay* and *mmhmm* in American academic advisory sessions (Guthrie 1997) reporting that, in the majority of all instances, OKAY was used by students. Another study of particular relevance is Sharp's dissertation on English loan words in spoken Swedish (Sharp 2001), showing that OKAY is a common feature: it was clearly the most frequently used English loan word in her data (Sharp 2001:81, 88–93) comprising conversations among Swedish businesspeople and young adults, appearing above all in discourse-marking functions, but also as an adjective.

Of particular relevance to our study is Pillet-Shore's (2003) research on OKAY in the context of assessment in teacher–parent meetings, in which the participants discuss students' school performance. The analyses reveal that it activates two different metrics, namely binary (*okay* vs. *not-okay*) or differentiated, more fine-graded metrics. In the former, assessing a student's performance as OKAY implies that OKAY is the better of two alternatives, hence there is no problem. When fine-graded metrics are activated, in turn, OKAY is interpreted on a broader scale of alternative assessments (such as *bad* and *excellent*), and hence it is not as obviously the best alternative. The participants in Pillet-Shore's study seemed to know which of these metrics were relevant in the on-going interaction, and they could also interactionally negotiate about the metrics to which they were oriented. Fine-graded metrics are activated in sequences that involve other evaluative terms or assessments in immediate proximity in the local sequential context. If that is not the case, OKAY is understood as the better alternative of the binary metrics (Pillet-Shore 2003).

5. Analysis

We start the analysis with some quantitative observations of all occurrences of OKAY (Section 5.1). Thereafter we focus on how OKAY is used to regulate language and orient to different norm centres in the consultation meetings under study (Sections 5.2–5.3), at this point limiting the scope to OKAY as a content word.

5.1 The distribution of OKAY

Compared to previous quantitative overviews of the frequency of OKAY in interaction (e.g. Deppermann & Mondada 2021:43–51), its usage in our data sets is relatively frequent. This indicates that the institutional context of writing consultation is a setting that favours its use. This hypothesis is supported in previous observations suggesting that institutional interaction is a favourable setting for OKAY as a transition marker (Betz & Sorjonen 2021:13). Our data were collected in 2014–2015, and the high prevalence of OKAY in relation to previous findings could also reflect its increasing use in Finnish and Swedish spoken language. In the case of Finnish, longitudinal data show increasing instances of OKAY over time (Koivisto & Sorjonen 2021:209). Although, to our knowledge, there has been no similar longitudinal overview of OKAY in Swedish interactions,

Table 1. All instances of OKAY in the three data sets

	STU	OKAY/min	COU	OKAY/min	Total	OKAY/min
Finnish	229	1.2	32	0.2	261	1.3
Finland Swedish	178	0.9	44	0.2	222	1.1
Sweden Swedish	38	0.2	45	0.2	83	0.4

Sharp's (2001:81) corpus study on English in Swedish informal and business interactions lists OKAY as the most frequent English loan word.

When we excerpted the data we included all grammatical functions of OKAY, namely as a discourse particle, an adjective, an adverb, or a noun, and all the variants we found, including *okei*, *ookoo*, and *ookoosti* in the Finnish data, *okej*, *OK*, and *oukidouk* in the Finland-Swedish data, and *okej* in the Sweden-Swedish data.⁵ Our collection thus also differs from those used in many previous studies on OKAY in interaction, most of which focus entirely on OKAY as a discourse particle (see e.g. Betz et al. 2021). As we will show later in this section (Table 2), however, the high frequency is not attributable to the inclusion of all grammatical functions of OKAY, as the non-particles only amount to a very small proportion of all occurrences in our data.

Table 1 shows all occurrences in our OKAY collection as well as their distribution across the three data sets and between student (STU) and counsellor (COU) turns. As mentioned in Section 2, each data set (Finnish, Finland-Swedish, Sweden-Swedish) covers the same length of time, i.e. three hours and 20 minutes.

As Table 1 shows, OKAY is clearly more frequent in the Finnish (261 instances) and Finland-Swedish (222 instances) than in the Sweden-Swedish writing consultations (83 instances). Its overall distribution in the Finnish and Finland-Swedish data indicates that it is a resource favoured by students, a result that accords with Guthrie's observation (1997) based on American academic advising sessions. The distribution between students and counsellors is more even in the Sweden-Swedish data.

Table 1 shows the overall distribution of OKAY across all 31 consultation meetings. Its distribution was studied with a focus on discernibility, which means that we did not use statistical significance testing. Our quantitative analyses show considerable individual variation within the three data sets. In the Finnish data, its occurrence in student turns ranges from two instances in nine minutes (0.2/min) to 35 instances in 10 minutes (3.5/min). The number of student OKAYs also varies widely in the Finland-Swedish data, from one instance in 37 minutes (0.03/min) to 91 instances in 40 minutes (2.3/min), and the equivalent figures in the Sweden-Swedish data are two instances in 64 minutes (0.03/min) and 21 instances in 53 minutes (0.4/min). The counsellors in the Finnish data utter between zero and seven OKAYs during the meetings, and as many as 15 of the 22 Finnish consultations include none or just a single occurrence. There is wider individual variation among the students in the Finland-Swedish data, whereas the counsellors utter between eight OKAYs in 61 minutes (0.1/min) and 12 in 33 minutes (0.4/min). The range for the counsellors in the Sweden-Swedish data is between six instances in 64 minutes (0.1/min) and 23

Table 2. The distribution of OKAY as a content word in the three data sets

	OKAY as a content word/in total (STU)	OKAY as a content word/in total (COU)	Total
Finnish	3/229 (1%)	7/32 (22%)	10/261 (4%)
Finland Swedish	2/178 (1%)	15/44 (34%)	17/222 (8%)
Sweden Swedish	3/38 (8%)	3/45 (7%)	6/83 (7%)

instances in 63 minutes (0.4/min). The distribution between counsellor and student is more even in the overall Sweden-Swedish data, as well as regards variation between the consultation meetings. Among the four Sweden-Swedish meetings, two feature more counsellor OKAYs and two have more student OKAYs.

Our primary aim in this paper is to discuss OKAY as a content word and as a resource for regulating language and academic writing in consultation meetings.⁶ In our qualitative analysis (Sections 5.2–5.3), therefore, we consider OKAY as a predicative adjective (*e de okej för dej* ‘is it okay with you’, Sweden-Swedish example), an adverb (*toi on ihan ookoosti kirjotettu* ‘that’s written quite okay’, Finnish example) or a noun (*men nu vill man ju ha ett OK från handledaren* ‘but one PRT wants an OK from the supervisor’, Finland-Swedish example). By means of this demarcation we zoom in on a smaller set in the total collection of OKAYs in the three data sets, resulting in a sub-collection of 33 instances. Of these cases, the predicative adjective is clearly the most common grammatical function in all three data sets. Table 2 shows the occurrences and distributions of OKAY as a content word. As in Table 1, the total length of each data set is three hours and 20 minutes.

As Table 2 shows, when used as a content word, OKAY is above all the counsellor’s resource in the Finnish and the Finland-Swedish data, which differs from the overall distribution of OKAY between students and counsellors in these two data sets (see Table 1). The distribution is more even in the Sweden-Swedish data, with three occurrences each in the student and counsellor turns. The small size of this sub-collection (33/566, i.e. 6%) indicates that in our data the distribution of OKAY as a content word and a discourse particle is in line with Sharp’s (2001: 88–94) study on Swedish, in which its discourse-marking functions are more prominent than its adjectival use.

We will now (in Sections 5.2–5.3) look more closely into how the instances of OKAY as a content word in our data are used in consultation meetings focusing on academic writing and conducted in Finnish, Finland Swedish, and Sweden Swedish.

5.2 The writing counsellor as a normative centre

First, we focus on instances in which OKAY is used in the interaction as a resource for regulating academic writing in ways that construe the counsellor as a centre of norms for academic writing. It is quite predictable that, given their institutional role as university experts, the counsellors are positioned as knowing participants. Hence the analyses in this section concern examples wherein the aspect of tenor shows an alignment between the social roles and the linguistically constituted roles of counsellor and student.

By means of conversation analysis, we show how the social role of the counsellor as an expert is situationally construed, and how the counsellor is positioned as a source of knowledge and normative power, in other words a normative centre, in interactional contexts when something is evaluated as OKAY. Our data reveal two types of case in which this becomes evident. The first type includes instances when the counsellors themselves use OKAY, in most cases in contexts in which they evaluate something as OKAY, in other words give a positive evaluation or acceptance. The second type consists of cases in which the student positions the counsellor as a normative centre by asking if something is OKAY when seeking information or acceptance, for example. Given the contextual aspects of counselling on academic writing, asking if something is OKAY constructs a normative frame in which the counsellor, to whom the student orients as the one who knows the answer, is positioned as a source of knowledge with insight into norms and regulations.

Example (2) illustrates the first type, whereby the counsellor self-positions as a normative centre by giving advice on how the text could be more convincing, and evaluating the current version as ‘grammatically quite/fully okay’. The field characterising what is happening in this example is typical in writing consultations, namely evaluating and consulting. Before the example starts, the counsellor had advised the student to begin a sentence with a different word order, and the student accepted this suggestion. Example (2) begins when the counsellor justifies this advice.

(2) Grammatically quite okay (Finland Swedish)

- 01 COU: ja: nå jag tyckte att
yes PRT I think.PST that
 ‘yeah well I thought that’
- 02 de sku bli: ännu mera (.) starkare den här
it.N shall.PST become.INF even more strong.COMP it.C here
 ‘it would be even more (.) s:strong this’
- 03 argumentationen (.) för varför de här e (.) viktigt att undersöka
reasoning.DEF.C for why it.N here be.PRS important to study.INF
 ‘reasoning (.) about why this is (.) important to study’
- 04 (0.4)
- 05 STU: jä
yes
 ‘yeah’
- 06 COU: å (0.3) de e alltså (.) grammatiskt helt okej så här också
and it.N be.PRS PRT grammatically quite okay so here also
 ‘and (0.3) it’s like (.) grammatically quite okay also like this’
- 07 °men jag tänkte att° om du (1.2) om du vill ha ännu mera
but I think.PST that if you if you want.PRS have.INF even more
 ‘°but I thought that° if you (1.2) if you want even more’
- 08 liksom °de här så (.) så°
like it.N this so so
 ‘like °this so (.) so°’

The counsellor explains to the student that another word order would make the reasoning more convincing (lines 1–3), but then points out that there is nothing explicitly wrong with the current version either (line 6). Modifying the adjective ‘okay’ with ‘grammatically’ narrows down the assessment of the text as being OKAY to the sub-norm of grammatical correctness. In this regard, the counsellor thus orients to OKAY on a binary scale (i.e. okay–not okay, Pillet-Shore 2003), hence the student is given the opportunity to leave the text as it is because it does not include linguistic errors that require correction. This evaluation of the text as ‘grammatically okay’ is nevertheless rendered open to different interpretations by the adverb *helt* ‘quite’, which is a frequently used modifier in Finland Swedish. In fact, it is fairly common in the Finland-Swedish collection for the adjective phrase with OKAY as its head to be modified by *helt* ‘quite’ (this holds for about half of all the Finland-Swedish examples), an ambivalent adverb that could mean ‘totally’ or ‘not totally’, and thus potentially either mitigating or intensifying the evaluation of something as OKAY.

Example (2) illustrates another common feature, namely after expressing what is ‘(grammatically quite) okay’, the counsellor adds an adversative conjunction, in this case ‘but’ (line 7), followed by a specification of how what is now OKAY could become even better. By both preceding (lines 1–3) and following up (lines 7–8) the assessment of the text formulation as ‘grammatically quite okay’, which *per se* could be interpreted on a binary scale as a formulation that needs no further adjustment, the counsellor simultaneously activates more fine-graded metrics (see Pillet-Shore 2003) in which the student is offered the means to make what is OKAY even better.

Overall, (2) illustrates a common pattern in our data, namely how the counsellor self-oriens as the knowing participant and a normative centre in stating what is OKAY in the text, thus assuming the role of the epistemic authority within the institutional context as well as in the specific local sequential context. The student aligns with this orientation, self-positioning as a listener and the receiver of this evaluation.

Example (3), from the Sweden-Swedish data, shows another sequence during which the counsellor uses OKAY as an adjective when evaluating the student’s written text, thereby acting as and becoming a centre of norms in the interaction. Earlier in the interaction the counsellor addressed the issue of the unjustified use of capital letters in the student’s text. The student describes this as ‘cut-and-paste errors’ (line 3). Overlapping with the student, the counsellor claims to understand ‘cut-and-paste errors’ and utters the discourse particle ‘okay’ (line 5), after which the student continues and gives a further explanation as to why the incorrect use of capital letters ‘has not been corrected’ (line 7). The counsellor evaluates this as ‘good’ and also emphasises their belief that the student knows how to use capital letters, ‘because in other parts’ of the text ‘it looks okay’ (lines 9, 11).

(3) It looks okay (Sweden Swedish)

01 COU: det vet jag inte om du har tänkt nåt (0.2)
it.N know.PRS I NEG if you have.PRS think.PRF something.N
 ‘I don’t know if you have thought something (0.2)’

02 [med]
with
 ‘with that’

- 03 STU: [nej] det e nog oftast klipp-å-klistra-fel
 NEG it.N be.PRS PRT often.SUP cut-and-paste-error.PL
 ‘no it’s PRT normally cut-and-paste errors’
- 04 STU: el[ler att] jag har liksom
 or that I have.PRS PRT
 ‘or that I have PRT’
- 05 COU: [a: okej]
 yes okay
 ‘yeah: okay’
- 06 COU: m[m]
- 07 STU: [bytt] runt å så [har det inte] rätta[ts]
 change.PRF around and so have.PRS it.N NEG correct.PRF.PASS
 ‘moved around and then it has not been corrected’
- 08 COU: [ja] [ja]
 yes yes
 ‘yeah yeah’
- 09 COU: bra för jag tror att du vet det an[nars därför att]
 good because I think.PRS that you know.PRS it.N otherwise because that
 ‘good because I think that you know that otherwise because’
- 10 STU: [ja:]
 yes
 ‘yeah’
- 11 COU: **på övriga ställen så ser det okej ut**
 in other part.PL.DEF PRT look.PRS it.N okay v.PRT
 ‘in other parts it looks okay’

The sequence starts (lines 1 and 2) with an indirect and thereby polite question from the counsellor, formulated with further mitigating devices such as a claim of insufficient knowledge, ‘I don’t know’, combined with a time shift, from the present tense ‘know’ to the perfect ‘have thought’. Indirect questions, claims of insufficient knowledge and other mitigating devices are frequently used by counsellors and supervisors in Sweden-Swedish consultation meetings, and have been discussed in previous studies (Henricson & Nelson 2017, Skogmyr Marian, Henricson & Nelson 2021). The counsellor’s assessment ‘it looks okay’ in line 11 closes the sequence and gives another example of how the counsellor acts as a centre of normative power. No further comments or negotiation follow, and here the participants seem to interpret the assessment on a binary *okay-not okay* scale, whereby no need for revision is activated (see Pillet-Shore 2003).

Example (3) further shows how the counsellor uses OKAY to express acceptance of the student’s text and thus acts as a normative centre with normative power. In addition to the mitigation in line 1, it highlights how the counsellor more or less steps into domains of which the student has first-hand knowledge to provide an account on behalf of the student and indicate that the discussed shortcoming is redundant: ‘because I think that you know that’ (line 9). This conspicuous use of

mitigating devices occurs among Sweden-Swedish supervisors in particular (Nelson & Henricson 2016, Henricson & Nelson 2017).

All three data sets also include cases in which the counsellor's institutional role is situationally constructed as a centre of norms on the initiative of the student, who asks if something is OKAY when discussing their own text or writing process. The question in (4), asked by a student in the Finnish data, constitutes an example of this.

(4) Do you think that they were OKAY (Finnish)

01 STU: sitä mä mietin ku .hh ku mä tilansäästösyistä nyt
DEM.PAR I think.PRS.SG1 when when I spacesavingreason.ELA PRT
 'I think/thought about that when I in order to save space'

02 käyttin näit lyhen[teitä ni
use.PST.SG1 DEM.PL.PAR abbreviation.PL.PAR PRT
 'used these abbreviations so'

03 COU: [mm:

04 STU: **oliks** **nää** **sun** **mielestä** **niinku.hh** **ookoo** **vai**
be.PST.SG3.CLI DEM.PL you.GEN opinion.ELA PRT okay PRT
 'do you think that they were okay or'

In (4), the student formulates a question concerning whether the abbreviations in their text are *ookoo* 'okay', thereby highlighting the asymmetric participation roles in that the counsellor is expected to determine the acceptability of the formatting in the current textual context (i.e. the genre of an abstract). In this example, the student uses the variant *ookoo*, which is the Finnish pronunciation of the letters *o* and *k*.⁷

The student initiates the turn, describing the cognitive process they have undergone (or are undergoing currently, as the Finnish form *mietin* is identical in the present and the past tense). Thereafter the student accounts for using abbreviations and then proceeds to the question, thereby constructing the counsellor as the norm centre while simultaneously displaying expertise in the matter: this student has already thought about the issue and has good reasons for using the abbreviations ('to save space', line 1). The student asks the counsellor's opinion using a polar question, thus restricting the counsellor's response to evaluating whether the abbreviations are okay or not. In this case, the OKAY evaluation is clearly used according to binary metrics (see Pillet-Shore 2003).

5.3 Other normative centres

OKAY is used in a few examples in our collection when the social roles of expert and non-expert are not confirmed situationally, but the student is constructed as a normative centre in the counselling interaction. As the student becomes the expert participant, the interactionally and linguistically constituted roles temporarily alter the given social roles of the counsellor as expert and the student as non-expert (see *tenor* in Section 3). Such cases concern the writing process of which the student has first-hand experience, or something that is otherwise within a domain of which the

student has more knowledge, such as discipline-specific issues concerning which the counsellor does not have the same insight as the student.

Example (5) from the Finnish data represents a context in which the writing counsellor has pointed out that the student's text is repetitive. The student starts to account for this: the original thesis was written in a language other than Finnish, which is also one of the student's home languages, and according to the student has also affected their writing in Finnish.

(5) And it is quite okay (Finnish)

- 01 STU: KIElen kiele on tosi paljon semmost
 LANGUAGE.GEN language.INE is very much DEM.PAR
 'in LANGUAGE'S language there is very much such'
- 02 niinku.hh sama asia sanotaan monel eri tava[lla
 PRT same thing say.PASS many.ADE different way.ADE
 'like the same thing is said in many different ways'
- 03 COU: [okei
 okay
 'okay'
- 04 STU: ja se on ihan ookoo [.hh nii ni sit ku mä teen sitä
 and it be.PRS PRT okay PRT PRT then when I do.PRS.SG1 it.PAR
 'and it is quite okay so then when I do it'
- 05 COU: [nii nii
 PRT PRT
 'yeah yeah'
- 06 STU: suomeks
 Finnish.TRANSL
 'in Finnish'

The student explains (lines 1–2) that it is typical to say the same thing in different ways in the language under discussion, in other words to repeat the same thing. The counsellor responds with *okei* 'okay' (line 3), thus indicating that they take the position of a participant responding to being informed (see Koivisto & Sorjonen 2021). This instance is a rare example of an OKAY response by a Finnish counsellor. The few cases in the Finnish data typically occur in sequences such as this one, in which the participant roles are temporarily altered and the student is oriented to as the knowing participant, the centre of norms. The discussion in (5) concerns the student's area of expertise, in that the topic concerns skills in a language other than the one in focus in the counselling interaction, and because they are discussing mechanisms concerning the writing process, to which the student has primary access.

Our data also contain examples of participants using OKAY in a way that makes normative centres other than the current meeting participants (the counsellor and the student) relevant in the counselling interaction. Previous studies (e.g. Mäntynen 2018) have shown that it is common to bring in other normative centres to consultations on academic writing, such as vocabularies, grammar books, and

writing manuals. In our data, most of these examples are in the fields of evaluating or advising.

As illustrated in (6), the supervisor of the thesis in question also acts as a normative centre in institutional interactions such as these, to which Thonus (2001) refers as a ‘silent participant’. Here this happens when the student in a Finland-Swedish interaction raises an issue with which they have been struggling in their writing, namely finding accurate terminology in Swedish.

(6) It’s quite okay (Finland Swedish)

01 STU: men att (.) jag ha nog mejla min handledare nu
but that I have.PRS PRT email.PRF I.GEN supervisor now
 ‘but like (.) I have emailed my supervisor now’

02 att om hon sku kunna (0.4) [kolla] vissa översättningar
that if she shall.PST can.INF check.INF some translation.PL
 ‘that if she could (0.4) check some translations’

03 COU: [mm]
mm

04 STU: som jag gjort att de e helt okej
that I do.PRF that it.N be.PRS quite okay
 ‘that I’ve done that it’s quite okay’

05 COU: ja (0.2) men de låter som (.) hoppas hon svarar
yes but it.N sound.PRS like hope.PRS she answer.PRS
 ‘yeah (0.2) but it sounds like (.) I hope she’ll answer’

The student had just said that at times it was very difficult to find accurate Swedish translations for English terms, thus pinpointing a domain in which the student lacks sufficient knowledge. As the example starts, the same student tells the counsellor how this problem was solved outside the context of the current counselling interaction, namely by checking the terminology with their supervisor to make sure ‘it’s quite okay’. Hence, the student here presents the supervisor as someone who can assess the terminology on a binary scale, whereby it is either okay and the text can be left as it is regarding the terminology, or it is not okay, meaning that the application of the terminology requires further work (see Pillet-Shore 2003).

With this turn (lines 1–2, 4), the student situationally self-positions as someone who can offer solutions to challenges during the writing process, and further brings in a person who is not present in the meeting as a normative centre – simultaneously avoiding orienting towards the currently present writing counsellor as a knowing participant within this specific domain. This shift towards an external norm centre is supported by the counsellor’s taking the role of listener, backed up in their response as a counsellor who is an expert on academic writing but not in the field of study or the terminology used within it. In starting to evaluate the idea of consulting an expert who is outside of the situational context of the consultation meeting, but involved in the overall writing process (line 5), the counsellor nonetheless and to a certain degree also self-positions as an expert situationally, in this case as the one to evaluate a proposal made by the student.

6. Summary and discussion

Combining a broader discourse-analytic perspective (SFL) with a micro-analysis of interactional data (CA), we have given an overview of the frequency and quantitative distribution of OKAY in consultation meetings in the context of academic writing in Finnish, Finland Swedish, and Sweden Swedish (Section 5.1). We have also provided a more detailed analysis of how OKAY as a content word is used for regulating academic writing and academic interaction in this specific interactional setting (Sections 5.2–5.3). Our analysis shows that the use of OKAY varies considerably among individuals, and also highlights differences and similarities in data collected in comparable institutional settings in three similar but nonetheless distinct cultural and linguistic contexts.

It seems from previous research (e.g. Betz & Sorjonen 2021:13) and our quantitative results that OKAY is a frequently used resource in this interactional setting, although the number of occurrences varies among the three data sets: it is used more often in the Finnish and Finland-Swedish consultations than in the Sweden-Swedish consultations. Its relatively frequent use as a lexical resource facilitates informal and relaxed interaction, and further indicates the relatively informal, albeit institutional, interactional setting of consultation meetings on academic writing in Finland and Sweden. In our data, OKAY is used mostly as a discourse particle.

As a lexical resource, OKAY is part of both the counsellors' and the students' register in this institutional context, but there are differences between the three data sets. In the Sweden-Swedish context the occurrences are quite evenly distributed between the counsellors and the students whereas, overall, OKAY is used more by students than by counsellors in the Finnish and Finland-Swedish contexts. This result aligns with Guthrie's (1997) findings on American sessions offering academic advice. The distribution between instances of OKAY uttered by Finnish- and Finland-Swedish-speaking counsellors and students appears to depend on its function: as a content word it is primarily part of the writing counsellor's register, whereas as a discourse particle it is primarily a resource used by students.

In light of our insights from bigger data sets analysing writing consultations in Sweden and Finland, we consider the data used for the present study to be representative of this interactional genre. OKAY is a relatively frequently used lexical item, and sifting through a total of ten hours of interactional data gave us a solid set of cases to consider. However, there are minor differences in the institutional settings of the three data sets, and individual patterns in the use of OKAY, so we cannot make definitive conclusions about the interactional patterns we found. Therefore, the similarities and differences between the use of OKAY in Finnish, Finland Swedish, and Sweden Swedish implied in this study in the context of writing consultations should be verified in larger data collections.

In the qualitative analysis we looked more closely at how OKAY as a content word is used as a resource by counsellors and students, and specifically how this relates both to the participants' situational and linguistically constituted roles and epistemic positionings, and the interactional construction of different normative centres. The writing consultation meetings that we studied were institutional interactions. Hence, the tenor departed from pre-set social roles whereby the

counsellor participates as an advice-giving expert and the student as an advice-seeking non-expert, and the field often incorporates evaluating and consulting. In this institutional setting it is not surprising that both the counsellor and the student construct the writing counsellor as a normative centre, such as the counsellor evaluating something that the student has written as OKAY, or the student asking the counsellor whether a formulation is OKAY. In using OKAY in this manner, the participants confirm and situationally construe the pre-set social roles of these consultation meetings.

These pre-set social roles might change temporarily if, for example, the discussion concerns issues into which the student has primary insight, such as the subject of the thesis or the writing process and its challenges. In sequential contexts such as these, OKAY is used as a resource for constructing the student as a centre of norms, in a similar fashion as for the writing counsellors: either the student evaluates something as OKAY or the counsellor asks whether the student finds something to be OKAY. The main difference between how OKAY is used for constructing either the counsellor as a norm centre and thus confirming the pre-set participation roles, or the student as a norm centre and thus situationally altering the pre-set roles, lies in the topic. With regard to academic writing or on-going academic interaction, for example, the counsellor is often construed as the centre of norms, whereas the student is construed as the normative centre for their own writing process and subject-specific questions. Our data show that, in addition to the two participants in the writing consultation, other centres of norms are brought into the interaction, including the supervisor of the thesis, specific vocabularies, as well as both disciplinary and linguistic instructions.

The different kinds of norm centres made relevant in the consultation meetings analysed in this study illustrate Blommaert's (2010:40) observation of the polycentric nature of interactional regimes. We have approached this polycentric aspect of counselling interactions by focusing on how OKAY is used as a content word in negotiations between students and counsellors, activating the assessment of either binary or fine-graded metrics (Pillet-Shore 2003). A multitude of norm centres are in operation in counselling interaction on the subject of academic writing (Mäntynen 2018), and this activates the need for epistemic positioning and negotiation about norms and norm centres in language regulation.

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Notes

1 We use capital letters when we make general reference to the lexical item OKAY across or within languages, and italics (e.g. *okej*, *ookoo*) when we discuss the realisation of OKAY in specific interactional contexts (cf. similar praxis in Betz & Sorjonen 2021:1).

2 Transcription symbols and glossing conventions in the examples:

[overlap onset
]	end of overlap
(0.3)	pause length in tenths of seconds
(.)	micropause of less than (0.2) seconds
ja:	prolongation of sound

j-	cut-off
∞	lower volume than surrounding talk
ja	said with laughter
ja+a	legato pronunciation
.hh	audible inbreath
((comment))	meta comment
(---)	unintelligible talk
PRT	particle
CAPITALS	anonymised word
<i>Italics</i>	idiomatic English translations of Swedish talk

We use the Leipzig glossing system for examples from the interactional data. More idiomatic English translations are given under the glossing lines. The following abbreviations are used: ADE = adessive, C = common gender, CLI = clitic, COMP = comparative, DEF = definite suffix, DEM = demonstrative, ELA = elative, GEN = genitive, INE = inessive, INF = infinitive, N = neuter gender, NEG = negation, PAR = partitive, PASS = passive, PL = plural, PRF = perfect, PRS = present tense, PRT = particle, PST = past tense, SG = singular, SUP = superlative, TRANSL = translative, V.PRT = verb particle.

3 The data on Finnish consultation meetings were collected at the University of Helsinki in 2014–2015 as part of a research project on language policy and L1 writing practices in Finnish academia. The Sweden-Swedish and the Finland-Swedish data were collected at Stockholm University and the University of Turku, respectively, in 2014–2015, within the research programme *Interaction and variation in pluricentric languages – Communicative patterns in Sweden Swedish and Finland Swedish* (funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond 2013–2020, grant M12-0137:1). In all the data collection and management we followed the guidelines for ethical research, including voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality.

4 There are many conversation-analytical studies on OKAY as a discourse particle, but as the current study focuses on OKAY in other functions, we do not give a detailed account of this research here. Instead, we refer readers to an anthology on OKAY in several languages (Betz et al. 2021) for an updated comprehensive overview and some recent studies.

5 The form variants are given in accordance with the orthographic conventions of Swedish/Finnish, which in practice means that Finnish *okei* and (Finland-/Sweden-) Swedish *okej* sound similar, as do Finnish *ookoo* and Finland-Swedish *OK*.

6 Overall, distinguishing between OKAY as a content word or a discourse particle was fairly clear-cut, based on the sequential and turn-internal context in which the lexical item occurs (see e.g. Shourup's (1999) criteria for discourse particles).

7 *Ookoo* is prevalent in the Finnish data set in the adjectival cases, although it is not used when OKAY appears as a discourse particle.

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