

Impersonals in Finno-Ugric

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Abstract

In this talk I provide a classification of impersonals in Hungarian, Surgut Khanty, Udmurt, Komi-Permyak, Meadow Mari, and Finnish. Although impersonals in some Finno-Ugric languages have formerly been discussed (cf. Helasvuo & Vilkuna 2008 for Finnish), comparative studies (such as Stipa 1962, Schiefer 1981) are still marginal. The data used in the present study consists of elicited examples provided by native speakers and a corpora of parallel translations (PM).

The term impersonal covers a set of different encoding strategies such as special verbal morphology, non-canonical subject marking, or certain impersonal constructions. Impersonality as a comparative concept can be defined in terms of deviations from the prototypical subject properties. Following Keenan's (1976) definition, a subject is prototypical if it is a) a referential argument, b) a definite NP, c) topical, d) animate, and e) agentive (Malchukov & Ogawa 2011). We can thus consider a given construction impersonal if its subject lacks one or more of the above properties, or is absent. Malchukov and Ogawa (2011) divide impersonals into three main groups: those sensitive to 1) reference and definiteness (R-impersonals), 2) agentivity and animacy (A-impersonals) 3) topicality (T-impersonals) of the subject.

The domain of R-impersonals contains several constructions. These are the 3rd person plural impersonals (1), generic (pro)noun constructions, impersonal passives (2), as well as so-called weather verbs (3).

(1) Surgut Khanty

Wiči pə təyə jaŋqilə-ʌ-ət.
always sure here walk-PRS-3PL
'They come often to this place.'

(2) Meadow Mari

Ústembake pogə-mo.
table.ILL put-PTCP.PASS
'The table is set.'

(3) Finnish

Tuule-e.
the_wind_blows-3SG
'The wind is blowing.'

The group of A-impersonals is even more heterogeneous. However, all the constructions belonging to this type have a subject with a referent that is either inanimate or non-volitional. Non-volitional entities are often encoded by non-canonical cases, i. e. by dative, genitive or obliques, while the verb bears a specific marker, like reflexive or causative (4)–(5).

(4) Komi-Permyak

Menam onmöšši-ś-öma.
I.GEN fall_asleep-REFL-PTCP.PASS
'I (unintentionally) felt asleep.'

(5) Udmurt
Olga-jez beryk-t-e.
Olga-ACC turn-CAUS-3SG
'Olga has nausea.'

The aim of this study is to answer the following questions: i) are there any similarities among the languages used in the sample, and ii) do Finno-Ugric impersonals share any specific feature from a cross-linguistic perspective?

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