

**The so-called indefinite fourth person verb forms in Skolt Saami:
morphology and syntax, past and present**

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Unlike the westernmost Saami languages, the Skolt Saami verb inflection contains a category labeled as the fourth person, a set of forms that can be characterized as indefinite or impersonal verb forms. In general, the fourth person is morphologically and syntactically on a par with the first, second and third persons in singular and plural:

	‘eat’	
	Present	Past
1SG	<i>pooram</i>	<i>po'rrem</i>
2SG	<i>poorak</i>	<i>po'rrič</i>
3SG	<i>påárr</i>	<i>poori</i>
1PL	<i>poorrâp</i>	<i>poorim</i>
2PL	<i>poorrve'ted</i>	<i>poorid</i>
3PL	<i>på'rre</i>	<i>po'rre</i>
4	<i>poorât</i>	<i>po'rreš</i>

In addition to the indicative present and past tenses, fourth person forms also exist for the conditional (*poorčeš*) and potential (*pooržet*) moods. From a functional perspective, the Skolt Saami fourth person greatly resembles the all-Finnic impersonal verb forms traditionally labeled as “passives” or impersonals. In fact, the Finnic impersonals are also regarded as the material origins of the Saami forms; cf., e.g., Skolt Saami *jeä'let* [live.4] ‘people live; one lives’ and Karelian *eletäh id.* (Itkonen 1942: 55).

In spite of the terminological differences, the syntactic behavior of Saami and Finnic impersonals are quite similar. They are not “passive” in the sense of detransitivization, as the patient of the transitive verb is not usually promoted to nominative subject but remains an accusative object instead. However, as the agent – usually explicit for other persons (1) – is omitted entirely, the semantic functions of the fourth person verb forms (2) are quite similar to those of the derived middle verbs in *-jed* (3):

- (1) *Sij po'rre leei'b.* (*poorrâd* ‘eat’)
3PL.NOM eat.PST.3PL bread.ACC
‘They ate the bread.’
- (2) *Leei'b po'rreš.* (*poorrâd* ‘eat’)
bread.ACC eat.PST.4
‘The bread was eaten.’
- (3) *Lei'bb pârri.* (*pârrijed* ‘be eaten’)
bread.NOM be eaten.PST.3SG
‘The bread was eaten.’

As noted by Sammallahti (1998: 28), the cognates of the Skolt Saami fourth person forms also occur in the adjacent Akkala Saami in which they have acquired the function of the third person plural. However, similar observations can be made among the easternmost speakers of Skolt Saami. The situation can be partly explained by influence from Karelian and Russian, but in our presentation we wish to propose that the development also has a remarkable language-internal motivation. For many verbs, the third person plural forms are homonymous, and especially the fourth-person past tense forms in *-š* (5) seem to be used in order to avoid ambiguity seen in (4):

(4) *Sij mainste šõõňâst.*
 3PL talk.PRS.3PL/talk.PST.3PL weather.LOC
 ‘They talk/talked about the weather.’

(5) *Sij mainsteš šõõňâst.*
 3PL talk.PST.4 weather.LOC
 ‘They talked about the weather.’

On the other hand, the use of the fourth person varies among the westernmost speakers as well. The majority of the Skolt Saami speakers are bilingual in Finnish and Saami, and interference from the dominating majority language has resulted in multifaceted variation in argument marking. As for the fourth person, the accusative object (2) occasionally alternates with the core argument in the nominative (2’), which in turn has resulted in even closer syntactic resemblance with the impersonal clauses with middle verbs (3):

(2) *Leei'b po'rreš.*
 bread.ACC eat.PST.4
 ‘The bread was eaten.’

(2') *(*Leei'bb po'rreš.*
 bread.NOM eat.PST.4
 ‘The bread was eaten.’

(3) *Lei'bb pãrrji.*
 bread.NOM be eaten.PST.4
 ‘The bread was eaten.’

In our presentation, we will attempt to provide a revised and comprehensive description of the role of the so-called fourth person in present-day Skolt Saami as well as its relation to comparable categories in the neighboring contact languages.

References

- Itkonen, T. I. 1942. Karjalaiset ja Kuolan-Lappi. *Kalevalaseuran vuosikirja* 22: 40–55.
 Sammallahti, Pekka. 1998. *The Saami languages. An introduction*. Kárášjohka: Davvi Girji.