

Impersonal and passive modal constructions in Aanaar Saami

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This presentation seeks to shed light on the usage of impersonal constructions with modal verbs in Aanaar Saami, and in particular, to determine the extent that impersonals are used in a passive sense, as opposed to the usage of passive verbs with modals or passivized modals. A related question concerns what cases are used to express the patient (if present) in impersonal modal constructions. The focus is on modern literary Aanaar Saami, using the SIKOR corpus. The results indicate that impersonals are much more common than true passives, and do quite often get used in a passive sense, but with the patient in the accusative.

A common feature in many Uralic languages is the extensive usage of impersonal, monopersonal and so-called zero-person constructions with modal verbs. In Saami, these phenomena are relatively restricted (Koskinen 1993: 55, 69; 1998: 12), but generic impersonal constructions without an overt subject present nonetheless appear to be quite common with some modals in at least North and Aanaar Saami (Koskinen 1998: 77, 132-133; Koukkari 2024). One of the functions of a zero-person construction with modal verbs in Finnish is to replace the impersonal passive (ISK § 1355, § 1364). The Finnish impersonal passive is often not considered a true passive, as the patient does not behave like a prototypical subject (Kelomäki 2019: 129-131), despite often appearing in the nominative case. The same applies to impersonals: the patient is often in the nominative, but is nonetheless best treated as the syntactic object (Vainikka & Brattico 2011). Saami languages, by contrast, have passive verbs with which the patient does act as a true subject, and which can be regularly derived from the corresponding active ones (e.g. Aanaar Saami *ettâđ* ‘say’ > *ettuđ* ‘be said’). In Saami impersonals, the patient is usually treated as a regular object in the accusative case (Mettovaara 2023: 102, 108-109), but at least in some modal constructions, the nominative is also attested (Korhonen 1962: 235-241).

There are thus three potential ways of expressing the passive with modal verbs: an impersonal construction as in Finnish, an active modal verb with a passivized main verb, and a passivized modal verb. All of these strategies are attested in North Saami, although passivized modal verbs are rare (Koskinen 1998: 45-46, 77, etc.).

The research presented here shows that true passives are quite rare with modal verbs in Aanaar Saami, and passivized modal verbs appear to be wholly absent. While it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between a passive sense and a generic impersonal one (cf. ISK § 1363-1364),

impersonal constructions do seem to take over the uses of the passive in Aanaar Saami similarly to the Finnish system. The patient in such impersonal constructions is most commonly treated as a regular object and appears in the accusative case. It appearing in the nominative is rare and mostly occurs in texts translated from Finnish; this agrees with results presented by Mettovaara (2023: 108-109), who attributes such usage to Finnish interference.

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