

Polypersonal agreement vs. impersonal constructions in Aanaar Saami modal verbs

This presentation aims to give an overview of the central modal verbs in Aanaar Saami, a topic which has heretofore received relatively little attention. The focus is on the syntactic use of these verbs: specifically, how they are used in impersonal constructions, as opposed to constructions where they agree in person and number with a subject. The study is based on the most common modal verbs, based on the SIKOR corpus of modern literary Aanaar Saami. To the extent that it is relevant for the study of their syntax, the semantics of the verbs will also be described, using a rough framework of epistemic, dynamic and deontic as well as participant-internal and participant-external modality. The results indicate that, despite the language as a whole having been more strongly influenced by Finnish, the syntax of modal verbs in Aanaar Saami very closely resembles that of North Saami.

Previous research on this topic is quite limited. The most common verb for expressing necessity, namely *kolgâđ*, has been the topic of a few studies (Laitinen 1988; as part of a broader study of this verb and its cognates in different Saami varieties Korhonen 1962). There are also brief normative descriptions comparing its (prescribed) use to that of the similar *ferttiđ* (M. Morottaja 2007: 57; P. Morottaja 2024). Other Aanaar Saami modal verbs have been mentioned in passing in various studies (e.g. Bartens 1972: 55; M. Morottaja 2007: 51; Seurujärvi 2014). Much more extensive studies, however, are available for the neighboring and closely related North Saami (Maggä 1982, Koskinen 1998), which thus offers a natural point of comparison.

A well-known feature of many Uralic languages is the common use of impersonal constructions with modals. Moreover, modal verbs indicating necessity often lack polypersonal agreement entirely, and if an agent or theme argument is present, it will formally resemble an adverbial rather than a prototypical subject (Koskinen 1993: 55; 66-69). In Saami languages, however, this feature is mostly absent, with modal verbs instead agreeing with a nominative subject in person and number like regular lexical verbs (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, the typical Uralic pattern is also attested in some varieties of at least North and Skolt Saami for some verbs, with different cases (most often locative) being used for the agent/theme (Koskinen 1998: 47; Moshnikoff et al. 2009: 129-130). In Aanaar Saami in particular, the genitive has been found in this function (Bartens 1972: 55; Seipiharju 2022: 44). This has been attributed to Finnish interference, as Aanaar Saami has been strongly influenced by Finnish, especially in recent decades (Mettovaara & Ylikoski 2023: 333).

The research presented here shows that the syntax of modal verbs in literary Aanaar Saami strongly resembles that of North Saami. Influence from Finnish appears to be minimal, with the genitive agent being very rare in texts. In turn, the use of the locative to express the agent, as found in neighboring Saami varieties, appears to be entirely absent. Whenever an overt agent or theme is present, the verb is overwhelmingly most likely to show regular polypersonal agreement. Nonetheless, some modal verbs do commonly appear in impersonal constructions where the agent/theme argument is omitted and no grammatical subject is present. This appears to depend greatly on the semantics of the verb; for *kolgâđ*, which mostly indicates participant-external necessity, such constructions are extremely common, while for verbs indicating participant-internal ability (*mättiđ*, *pastedđ*), they are very rare.

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