

Copula inversion in Kildin Saami¹

Vsevolod Potseluev, NRU HSE, potseluev.va@yandex.com
Maria Kosheleva, NRU HSE, whereamiactually@gmail.com

Our talk will be devoted to the syntax of the Kildin Saami (< Uralic, Kola Peninsula) Perfect, an analytical verb form formed with the Nonpast form of the auxiliary verb ‘to be’ and the past participle of the main verb (1). The data were gathered by elicitation (translation and judgement tasks) in the village of Lovozero (Murmansk Oblast, Russia) in 2022-2024.

- (1) *soonn* *l’ii* *poorr-ma* *l’iim*
3SG.NOM be.NPST.3SG eat-PTCP.PST soup.ACC.SG
‘He has eaten [the] soup.’

The copula and the verb can be used with an inverse word order with the lexical verb preceding the copula (2). According to (Pregla 2023), a similar inverse word order within the Perfect construction is present in South Saami, a close relative of Kildin Saami. However, these two cases are different: firstly, in South Saami, this order is rather marginal (Pregla 2023: 147), whereas in Kildin Saami it is relatively frequent; secondly, South Saami appears to be an OV language, whereas Kildin Saami is a VO language.

- (2) ^{OK}*mun* *loogg-ma* *l’aa* *kir’j*
1SG.NOM read-PTCP.PST be.NPST.1SG letter.ACC.SG
‘I have read [the] book.’

To explore this phenomenon, we should, firstly, make basic claims about the clausal syntax of Kildin Saami. In Kildin Saami, V-to-T movement is not obligatory according to the adverb placement test. Although the word order in Kildin Saami is generally close to free (driven by information structure), if a speaker finds one of the options in (3) more natural, it is always the sentence with an aspectual adverb preceding the finite non-copular verb.

- (3) *sonn* (^{OK}*tvvjv*) *vvrr-ad* ([?]*tvvjv*) *ooxte šl’axd-edd-e*
3SG.NOM often go-MID.3SG often alone walk-MID-INF
‘He often goes for a walk alone.’

In sentences with periphrastic tenses (including the Perfect) we can observe the opposite: an aspectual adverb generally should follow the copula (4), which means that the final position of the copula is in T⁰.

- (4) *pedar* (**jo*) *l’ii* (^{OK}*jo*) *poorr-ma*
P. already be.NPST.3SG already eat-PTCP.PST
‘Peter has already eaten.’

The most obvious explanation for the word order in (2) would be that the participle is somehow moved to the left of the copula. However, it appears that the movement of the participle in the Perfect construction is not completely free: the verb itself cannot be fronted

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(5a); moreover, the whole vP including both the participle and the direct object cannot be fronted either (5b).

- (5) a. **loogg-ma munn l'aa kir'j*
 b. **loogg-ma kir'j munn l'aa*
 read-PTCP.PST letter.ACC.SG 1SG.NOM be.NPST.1SG
 'I have read [the] book.'

From these examples, we can conclude that the participial clause in the Perfect construction and the participle itself are not plausible targets for A'-movement. Since there is no possible position for A-movement of the participle, we conclude that the inverse word order is the result of an optional head movement merging the verb and the copula together.

An additional argument for this analysis may come from the fact that the verb and the copula in cases like (2) form a cluster and do not freely allow for intervening material (6) unlike in cases of the standard copula-verb word order, where NPs can freely occur between the copula and the verb (7).

- (6) **p'et'a laajj-ma mašn'e l'ii kir'j*
 P. present-PTCP.PST M. be.NPST.3SG letter.ACC.SG
 'Peter gave Mary a book.'
 (7) ^{OK}*munnn l'aa kir'j loogg-ma*
 1SG.NOM be.NPST.1SG letter.ACC.SG read-PTCP.PST
 'I have read [the] book.'

The precise semantic motivation for choosing one option over the other is still to be found. The Kildin Saami Perfect encompasses all the meanings found on the grammaticalization path of perfect forms (Bybee et al. 1994): stative resultative, experiential perfect, past perfective, and inferentive evidential. However, our data shows that the inverse order is more likely to be interpreted as experiential. Moreover, for punctive verbs, it is one of the means to acquire experiential interpretation (8a), which is absent otherwise (8b).

- (8) a. *nid'd' munn vuajjlaht-ma l'aa*
 so 1SG.NOM forget-PTCP.PST be.NPST.1SG
 {Have you ever forgotten your bag?} 'Yes, I have forgotten.'
 b. #*nid'd' munn l'aa vuajjlaht-ma*
 so 1SG.NOM be.NPST.1SG forget-PTCP.PST
 {Have you ever forgotten your bag?} Received: '[It turns out] I have forgotten [it]!'

In our talk, we will elaborate upon the interaction of the inverse word order with the readings of the Perfect construction and delve deeper into its syntax in general.

References

- Bybee, J., Perkins, R., Pagliuca, W. (1994). *The evolution of grammar: tense, aspect, and modality in the languages of the world*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
 Pregla, A. (2023). *Word order variability in OV languages*. [Doctoral Dissertation, Universität Potsdam].