Hill Mari necessity constructions and their subjects

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A frequent challenge in description of modality is to identify the principles according to which the speaker chooses between several quasi-synonymous modals. One possible direction of research in this case is to search for fine-grained semantic differences between modals. These differences may consist in the range of modality types available for specific modals. Additional semantic oppositions in the domain of modality are *weak* vs. *strong* necessity and *inherent* vs. *learned* possibility. For classifications of modality types, as well as these two additional oppositions see e.g. van der Auwera and Plungian (1998).

However, constructional properties can also be involved in the choice between modals. In this talk I show that in Hill Mari (<Uralic) the choice between necessity-marking constructions is conditioned by the presence or absence of an overt subject in the clause.

The Hill Mari necessity constructions are listed in the first column of Table 1. According to Mordashova & Zakirova's (2023) description (mostly based on elicitation), all three constructions can express root necessity, except that (NP_{DAT}) + V-*mə̑la* is marginal in deontic contexts. Besides, NP_{NOM} + V-*šašlə̑k* + COP can marginally express epistemic necessity.

In this study I investigate the choice between these constructions using corpus data from two closely related varieties of Hill Mari: Kuznetsovo (http://hillmari-exp.tilda.ws/corpus, 63522 tokens) and Mikryakovo (private collection, 22705 tokens). I supplement these data by elicited examples (2016-2019, from both Kuznetsovo and Mikryakovo).

Table 1 shows counts for the types of uses of the three constructions in Kuznetsovo corpus.

Construction	Occurrences in Kuznetsovo corpus				
	part.-internal	part.-external	deontic	epistemic	total
(NP_{DAT}) + V_{INF} + *keleš*	1	110	11	0	122
(NP_{DAT}) + V-*mə̑la*	0	220	6	0	226
NP_{NOM} + V-*šašlə̑k* + COP	1	37	24	2	64

Table 1. Necessity constructions expressing different modalily types: corpus counts

The data in Table 1 show at least one tendency: the construction NP_{NOM} + V-*šašlə̑k* + COP is more frequent in deontic contexts than the other two (cf. the same observation in Mordashova & Zakirova 2023). However, it remains unclear how speakers choose between the three constructions, since all three constructions are compatible with deontic and other participant-external readings and participant-internal contexts are too rare to conclude anything about them.

A possible further step is to control for modal semantics, restricting the sample to identical modal contexts. This way one will be able to see 1) whether several constructions are still found in these contexts, 2) how the choice between constructions is conditioned.

Here, I restrict the data to two types of texts found in the corpus: 1) descriptions of children's games, 2) referential experiments, where one participant gives instructions ("put this object on the table"), while the other participant asks for additional instructions. The resulting subcorpus features 37 occurrences of V-*mə̑la*, 25 occurrences of V-*šašlə̑k* and 6 occurrences of *keleš*. Table 2 provides data on the presence / absence of the subject in the modal constructions.

	Omitted subject	Overt or indexed subject	Total
(NP_{DAT}) + V_{INF} + *keleš*	6	0	6
(NP_{DAT}) + V-*mə̑la*	36	1	37
NP_{NOM} + V-*šašlə̑k* + COP	0	12 (overt) + 13 (indexed)	25

Table 2. Subjects in necessity constructions: subcorpus of game rules and experiments.

The data in Table 2 shows that the choice between the V-*šašlâk* construction, on the one hand, and V-*mâla* and V_{INF} + *keleš*, on the other, is conditioned by the presence of an overt or indexed subject in the clause. In all examples with V-*šašlâk* the subject is either overt (1) or indexed on the copula. On the other hand, the majority of examples with V-*mâla* and V_{INF} + *keleš* have an unexpressed generic human subject (2) – although in elicitation V-*mâla* is compatible with referential dative subjects (Alhoniemi 1993, Mordashova & Zakirova 2023).

(1) *edem-əm* *čuč-eš* *značit* *tə* *edem* *ti* *plošʹadkâ* *gəc*
person-ACC hit-NPST.3sg it_means that person this playground EL
*karang-**šašlâk*** *âl-eš*
leave-PTCP.DEB be-NPST.3SG
'If [the ball] hits a person, this person must leave the playground' (Kuznetsovo corpus).

(2) *a-t* *čuč* *gənʹə,* *tə-škə* *kârgâž-**mâla*** *granʹicä* *ves* *mongâr-âškâ*
NEG.NPST-2SG hit if that-ILL run-DEB border other side-ILL
'If you miss, you must run there to the other side of the line' (Kuznetsovo corpus).

Note that (1) and (2) are almost a minimal pair: they show similar rules ("if one makes a mistake, one must stop"). The difference between them is as follows: (1) has an overt subject *tə edem* 'that person', and (2) is a generic sentence with an impersonal *you* in the first part.

The V-*mâla* and V_{INF} + *keleš* constructions can be classified as largely impersonal, since they tend to occur with generic human subjects (Malchukov & Ogawa 2011).The second part of my talk is dedicated to another impersonal use of the V-*mâla* construction, where V-*mâla* is used with non-agentive predicates. The resulting reading is that of circumstantial possibility:

(3) *ti* *instrument* *dono* *šušâr-gâ-**mâla***
that tool with wound-INCH-DEB
'One can accidentally injure oneself using this tool'.

The use of V-*mâla* in (3) is also impersonal in the sense of Malchukov & Ogawa (2011) since it has a generic human subject. However, as is possible with impersonals, it can be used in reference to a speech-act participant, e.g. addressee in (4). Note that with non-agentive verbs V-*mâla* cannot have a dative subject here.

(4) *tə-škə* *i-t* *ke,* *ato* *(*tələt)* *kenvac-**mâla***
that-ILL PROH-2SG go otherwise (*you.DAT) fall-DEB
'Don't go there, or you will fall'.

My conclusion on V-*mâla* is as follows: in both necessity and possibility uses, the construction with V-*mâla* often behaves as an impersonal one. It can, however, acquire a referential subject, either from discourse (in the possibility use), or by adding an overt dative-marked NP (in the necessity use). In competition with V-*šašlâk*, V-*mâla* is strongly preferred with generic human subjects, whereas V-*šašlâk* is used with referential subjects.

References

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