

Finnish impersonal passives might be neither passive nor impersonal

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1 Introduction

- [1] **Voice:** semantic thematic roles ↔ syntactic argument positions
- [2] **Person:** referential features of arguments
- (3) Context: we are Syntax II students and we meet regularly in room 202.
- a. Jim can find us in room 202. *Active (referential)*
- b. One can find us in room 202 (*by Jim). *(Active) (R-)Impersonal*
- c. We can be found in room 202 (by Jim). *Passive*
- [4] An oversimplified cross-linguistic characterization:
- | Construction | Agent / initiator | <u>Theme</u> case | Verbal morphology |
|--------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Active | Referential | Usually ACC | — |
| Impersonal | Non-referential | Usually ACC | Sometimes special |
| Passive | Suppressed (non-subj) | Usually NOM | Sometimes special |
- [5] **This talk:** Finnish verbs can take a special morpheme *-ta-/-tä-/-ti-¹*, glossed as **IMPRS**; it is usually called the **impersonal passive** in literature (Shore, 1988; Blevins, 2003; Helasvuo, 2006, among others).

- (6) a. Hei-dät löyde-tä-än puistosta.
3PL-ACC find-IMPRS.PRES-DSA park.ELA
'They are found in the park.'
- b. Kissa löyde-tä-än puistosta.
cat.Ø find-IMPRS.PRES-DSA park.ELA
'The cat is found in the park.'

¹The frontness of the vowel is based on vowel harmony. In Finnish, /i/ and /e/ are neutral vowels.

- [7] The verb exhibits no subject φ -agreement.
- [8] Henceforth non-agreeing impersonal constructions (**NA-IMPRS**).
- [9] **Case marking:** pronoun theme gets ACC, lexical DPs unmarked.
- [10] Contrasts with the typical accusative morphological marking *-n* for lexical DP objects of ordinary transitive verbs:

- (11) Me löydä-mme kissa-n.
1PL.NOM find.PRES-1PL cat-n
'We (will²) find the cat.'

Puzzle 1: In terms of voice, is NA-IMPRS syntactically passive?

- [12] **Distribution:** verbs marked with *-ta-/-tä-/-ti-* can also co-occur with 1PL.

- (13) Me löyde-tä-än kissa.
1PL.NOM find-IMPRS.PRES-DSA cat.Ø
We (will) find the cat.

- [14] The subject has to be referentially first-person plural (e.g. *ystäväni ja minä* 'my friend and I'), but it does not have to be the 1PL pronoun.
- [15] Henceforth non-agreeing 1PL construction (**NA-1PL**).
- [16] Crucially, (13) has an identical interpretation as (11) and has **no impersonal interpretation**.

Puzzle 2: In terms of person, is *-ta-/-tä-/-ti-* inherently impersonal?

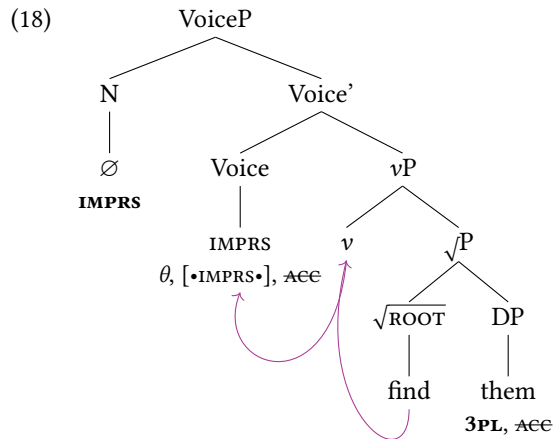
- [17] Summary of constructions mentioned:

Construction	e.g.	verbal morphology	subject restrictions	theme case marker (lexical DP)	theme case marker (pronouns)	interpretations
Ordinary	(11)	stem + subj. agr.	N/A	-n	-t (ACC)	ordinary active
NA-IMPRS	(6)	stem + IMPRS+ DSA	NIP	Ø	-t (ACC)	impersonal / passive
NA-1PL	(13)	stem + IMPRS+ DSA	ref. 1PL	Ø	-t (ACC)	ordinary active

²Finnish does not have a distinct morphological future tense, so the interpretation of a present-tensed sentence can be present or future depending on the context.

My proposal: **Impersonal passive verbs (marked with *-ta/-tä/-ti-*) are not inherently passive or impersonal!**

- (a) both **NA-IMPRS** and **NA-1PL** are **active**;
- (b) the IMPRS morpheme *-ta/-tä/-ti-* is generated in **Voice** head;
- (c) this Voice head **selects** either a null impersonal pronoun (**NIP**) or a 1PL specifier, and **assigns ACC** to its object; derivation of (6a) up to VoiceP shown in (18);



(derivation of NA-1PL is identical except Voice selects [**•1PL•**] at spec)

- (d) an ordinary transitive interpretation arises when the verb combines with a 1PL specifier, while the impersonal interpretation arises when it combines with NIP as its specifier;
- (e) the NIP is a **bare N** with no ϕ -features.

2 IMPRS is not syntactically passive

[19] To show that NA-IMPRS NA-1PL constructions are not passive, I demonstrate:

- the agent in Spec,VoiceP is not suppressed;
- the theme is in the syntactic object position.

2.1 The agent in Spec,VoiceP is not suppressed

[20] Evidence that a syntactically active subject is present can be drawn from:

- test on unaccusative verbs;
- tests on binding and control.

[21] First, most unaccusative verbs³ and copula verb *olla* ‘to be’ in Finnish can take the IMPRS morphology, as shown in (22).

(22) Adopted from Shore (1988, 159:14):

Suome-ssa ol-ti-in niin toti-sia.
Finland-INE be-**IMPRS**.PST-DSA so serious-PAR.PL
‘In Finland, we/they/people were so serious.’

[23] Passives are incompatible with unaccusative verbs as they require the **suppression of the initiator**, which unaccusative verbs simply do not have (Legate et al., 2020).

[24] Second, we observe that **subject binding with reflexives and control are possible** for NA-IMPRS and NA-1PL constructions with this verbal morphology.

(25) NA-IMPRS constructions:

a. Binding with reflexives:

Yliopisto-ssa Ø_i laite-ta-an ruoka-a_j itse-lle_{i,*j}
university-INE NIP cook-IMPRS-DSA food-PAR self-ALA
‘In the university, one cooks food for themselves.’

b. Control:

%Kissa_j Ø_i halu-ta-an PRO_{i,*j} löytää
cat.Ø NIP want-IMPRS-DSA PRO find.INF
‘Someone / one wants to find the cat.’

[26] In (25a), we see that the impersonal initiator is coindexed with the reflexive *itse* ‘self’. Similarly, the impersonal initiator in (25b) controls the PRO subject for the infinite verb.

[27] Binding and control are also attested for the NA-1PL constructions.

[28] Therefore, **a silent subject is likely present** in these constructions, unlike in passive constructions where such relations are absent.

³Except certain weather verbs, psych verbs, and modals, see Manninen and Nelson (2004) for more discussions.

2.2 The theme is a syntactic object

[29] The internal argument of a transitive verb usually gets ACC.

[30] Consistent with the (theme pronoun) in (6a), repeated here:

(6) a. Hei-dät löyde-tä-än puistosta.
 3PL-ACC find-IMPRS.PRES-DSA park.ELA

‘They are found in the park.’

b. Kissa löyde-tä-än puistosta.
 cat.Ø find-IMPRS.PRES-DSA park.ELA

‘The cat is found in the park.’

[31] **Problem:** unclear which case the (lexical DP theme) in (6b) got—usual accusative is marked with *-n* as shown in (11), repeated here.

(11) Me löydä-mme kissa-n.
 1PL.NOM find.PRES-1PL cat-n

‘We (will) find the cat.’

[32] **Strategy:** test whether the theme arguments are objects through **negation**.

[33] In Finnish, negation and atelicity trigger **partitive cases in object DPs** that are assigned structural cases (Baker, 2015), as illustrated in (34).

(34) Satu ei luke-nut kirja-a.
 Satu.Ø not.3SG read-PST.PTCP book-PAR

‘Satu did not read the book.’

[35] Subjects are **not** marked with partitive under negation.

[36] **Prediction:** if the sentence is a true passive (in which case the theme is the subject), the theme would remain non-partitive under negation.

[37] **Observation:** the theme argument *auto* ‘car’ is in the unmarked nominative case under a negative unaccusative verb in (38a), whereas **it becomes partitive** in the construction where the verb takes the IMPRS morphology in (38b).

(38) a. Auto ei ruostunut
 car.Ø not.3SG rust.PST.PTCP

‘The car didn’t rust.’

b. Auto-a ei ote-ta
 car-PAR not take-IMPRS

‘One is not taking the car / let’s not take the car’⁴.

[39] This is consistent with the claim that the themes in NA-IMPRS constructions are objects.

[40] As for the difference in morphological marking on the themes between (6b) and (11), I will provisionally say it’s an allomorphy of the same abstract ACC case.

Current progress:

- IMPRS is syntactically **active** because:
 - the agent in Spec,VoiceP is not suppressed, as unaccusative verbs can combine with this morpheme; a construction whose transitive / unergative verb has this morphology can still exhibit subject control and binding;
 - the theme is a syntactic object, as it follows partitive negation, which only objects do.

This accounts for NA-1PL **lacking** the impersonal passive-like interpretation, since verbs with IMPRS morphology are simply active.

Remaining puzzle:

- Why does object lexical DPs sometimes get *-n* morphological marker, and sometimes doesn’t?

Next up:

- Where is the *-ta/-tä/-ti-* IMPRS morpheme generated?
- How do we know the null subject in NA-IMPRS is impersonal?

3 The IMPRS morpheme is generated in Voice

[41] To show that the IMPRS morpheme is generated in Voice, I demonstrate:

- IMPRS is higher than CAUS and inner aspect;
- IMPRS is lower than T.

⁴This hortative interpretation is derived from the NA-1PL construction with the 1PL pronoun subsequently dropped.

3.1 IMPRS is higher than CAUS and inner aspect

- [42] The **Mirror Principle** (Muysken, 1981; Baker, 1985) is (roughly) the observation that morphological ordering is the reverse of syntactic structural depth.
- [43] IMPRS *-ta-/-tā-/-ti-* in Finnish can co-occur with the causative or applicative morpheme *-ttaa/-ttää*, as well as the middle voice, reflexive, or anticausative morpheme *-u-/-y-*.
- [44] It can also co-occur with inner aspect morphemes like the frequentative *-ella/-ellä/-skella/-skellä/-skennella/-skennellä*.
- [45] These aforementioned morphemes are generated **below Voice**.
- [46] **Observation:** the IMPRS morpheme always appears **after** the aforementioned morphemes.

- (47) Examples of the ordering of **IMPRS** and **CAUS-head or inner aspect morphemes**:

<i>itke-ä</i> cry-IMP 'to cry'	<i>itke-tä-än</i> cry-IMPRS-DSA	<i>itke-ttä-ä</i> cry-CAUS-IMP 'to make (someone) cry'	<i>itke-tä-tä-än</i> cry-CAUS-IMPRS-DSA
<i>oppi-a</i> learn-IMP 'to learn'	<i>oppi-tä-än</i> learn-IMPRS-DSA	<i>oppi-skell-a</i> learn-FREQ-IMP 'to study'	<i>oppi-skell-a-än</i> learn-FREQ-IMPRS-DSA
<i>löytä-ä</i> find-IMP 'to find'	<i>löyde-tä-än</i> find-IMPRS-DSA	<i>löyt-y-ä</i> find-REFL-IMP 'to be found'	<i>löyd-y-tä-än</i> find-REFL-IMPRS-DSA

- [48] Later in linear order → structurally higher by Mirror Principle.

3.2 IMPRS is (probably) lower than T

- [49] Subject agreement affixes usually show up on T.
- [50] **Problem:** IMPRS-marked verbs do not exhibit overt subject agreement.
- [51] **Strategy:** Negation! (again)
- [52] In Finnish, negation is situated at a projection higher than T, and the presence of negation renders the T-node φ -defective (Brattico and Huhmarniemi, 2006,

for more detail).

- [53] The **negation agrees with the nominative subject** and obtains person and number features while the verb does not, as shown in the contrast between (54a) and (54b).

- (54) a. He **tule-vat** isä-ni maa-lle.
3PL.NOM come-3PL father-GEN.PX.1SG land-ILL
'They are coming to my father's land.'
- b. He **ei-vät tule** isä-ni maa-lle.
3PL.NOM not-3PL come father-GEN.PX.1SG land-ILL
'They are not coming to my father's land.'

- [55] **Observation:** a similar contrast between the affirmative and negative sentences containing the IMPRS-marked verb in (56).

- (56) a. Me **ote-ta-an** auto.
1PL.NOM take-IMPRS-DSA car.Ø
'We are taking the car.'
- b. Me **ei ote-ta** auto-a.
1PL.NOM not take-IMPRS car-PAR
'We are not taking the car.'

- [57] In the affirmative sentence (56a), we see an **extra morpheme** after the verb stem and the IMPRS marker, whereas we do not in the negative sentence in (56b).
- [58] The marker is not overtly moved to the negation morpheme itself unlike in (56b), but this also occurs when ordinary active verbs with 3SG agreement are negated, as shown in the contrast in (59).

- (59) a. Hän **tule-e**, hän juo
3SG come-3SG, 3SG drinks.3SG
'He/she/they(sg) come(s), He/she/they(sg) drinks'
- b. Hän **ei tule**, hän **ei juo**
3SG not come, 3SG not drink
'He/she/they(sg) doesn't come, He/she/they(sg) doesn't drink'

- [60] Provisionally analyze the *-an/-än* DSA morpheme as the default subject agreement marker when no φ -agreement happens.

- [61] Since the IMPRS morpheme surfaces before this morpheme, we conjecture that it is generated below T.

Current progress:

- IMPRS is syntactically **active**;
- IMPRS is generated in Voice because:
 - the IMPRS morpheme occurs after CAUS and inner aspect;
 - the IMPRS morpheme occurs before what looks like a subject agreement morpheme;
 - by Mirror principle, the IMPRS morpheme is structurally below T and above CAUS, which makes it likely to be at Voice.

Remaining puzzle:

- Why does object lexical DPs sometimes get *-n* morphological marker, and sometimes doesn't?
- What is DSA if there is no evidence for subject φ -agreement?
- Why does the morpheme in Voice select only 1PL or the NIP as specifiers?

Next up:

- How do we know the null subject in NA-IMPRS is impersonal?

4 The NIP is suspiciously impersonal

- [62] To show that the syntactic and semantic properties of the null subject (NIP) in NA-IMPRS constructions are consistent with the hypothesis that it is an impersonal pronoun, I demonstrate:

- NIP is syntactically a bare N;
- bare N NIP is typologically consistent with the properties of Finnish and attested in neighboring languages;
- NIP can consistently give rise to generic readings;
- NIP implicates a human initiator.

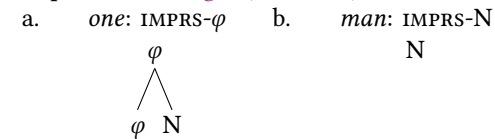
4.1 NIP is syntactically a bare N

- [63] Evidence supporting that NIP is a bare N can be drawn from:
- inability to occur in (accusative) object positions;
 - inability to bind reflexive pronouns with φ -suffixes.

- [64] **Fenger (2018)** argues for (at least) two kinds of impersonal pronouns:

- those that are φ Ps, which have φ -features and can receive non-nominative cases (e.g. English *one*);
- those that are bare Ns (e.g. German *man*).

- (65) Adopted from **Fenger (2018, 293)**:



- [66] **Case:** φ layer required to receive non-nominative cases → bare Ns cannot be syntactic objects.

- [67] Consistent with Finnish NIP only permitted in subject positions.

- [68] **Reflexive binding:** recall that the NIP in Finnish can be the antecedent of the reflexive pronoun *itse* 'self', as shown in (25a) repeated below.

- (25a) a. Yliopisto-ssa $\varnothing_i$ laite-ta-an ruoka-a *itse-lle*_{i,*j}
 university-INE NIP cook-IMPRS-DSA food-PAR self-ALA
 'In the university, one cooks food for themselves.'

- [69] The reflexive pronoun *itse* can take optional personal possessive suffixes that has φ -features agreeing with that hosted by its antecedent, as shown in (71a).

- [70] **Observation:** when its antecedent is the NIP, the reflexive is unable to take any possessive suffix, contrasted in (71b) and (71c).

- (71) a. Referential subjects can bind reflexives with personal suffixes:
 Yliopisto-ssa *te*_i laita-tte ruoka-a *itse-lle-nne*_i
 university-INE 2PL.NOM cook-2PL food-PAR self-ALA-PX.2PL
 'In the university, you (plural) cook food for yourselves.'
- b. Impersonal subject can bind reflexive without personal suffix:
 Yliopisto-ssa $\varnothing_i$ ruoka-a laite-ta-an *itse-lle*_i
 university-INE NIP food-PAR cook-IMPRS-DSA self-ALA_i
 'In the university, one cooks food for themselves.'
- c. Impersonal subject cannot bind reflexive with any personal suffix:
 *Yliopisto-ssa $\varnothing_i$ ruoka-a laite-ta-an *itse-lle-en*_i
 university-INE NIP food-PAR cook-IMPRS-DSA self-ALA-PX.3SG
Intended: 'In the university, one cooks food for themselves.'

- [72] Consistent with the claim that NIP lacks φ -features.
- [73] In partial pro-drop languages like Finnish, the impersonal pronoun could be null (Holmberg, 2010).
- [74] A similar null impersonal subject that is only a bare N is attested in Estonian (Siewierska, 2011) and Lithuanian (Šereikaitė, 2022).

4.2 NIP gives rise to generic, human readings

- [75] Like most impersonal pronouns cross-linguistically, the NIP can be used generically like in (76).
- (76) Italia-ssa syö-dä-än pasta-a.
Italy-INE eat-IMPRS-DSA pasta-PAR
In Italy, one / people eat(s) pasta (in general).
- [77] In addition, the referent of the NIP must be humans:
- (78) Ikkuna-a hajote-tti-in.
window-PAR break-IMPRS.PST-DSA
Available: Someone broke the window (but we don't know who).
Unavailable: The window is broken (but nobody broke it deliberately / it is broken by the strong wind).
- [79] These are cross-linguistically robust characteristics of impersonal pronouns.

Current progress:

- IMPRS is syntactically **active**;
- IMPRS is generated in Voice;
- NIP is a bare N impersonal pronoun.

This accounts for NA-IMPRS **having** the impersonal passive-like interpretation, since the NIP is an impersonal pronoun.

Remaining puzzle:

- Why does object lexical DPs sometimes get *-n* morphological marker, and sometimes doesn't?
- What is DSA if there is no evidence for subject φ -agreement?
- Why does the morpheme in Voice select only 1PL or the NIP as specifiers?
- What is the connection between NIP and 1PL? Speaker-inclusive?

5 Conclusion

- [80] The IMPRS morphology (*-ta/-tä/-ti-*) that is canonically called the 'impersonal passive' is **inherently neither passive nor impersonal**.
- [81] **Voice** wise, the morpheme is generated in an **active**, ACC-assigning Voice head that selects 1PL or NIP subjects.
- [82] **Person** wise, the impersonal interpretation only arises when the verbal morphology **combines** with a null impersonal pronoun (NIP) as its specifier.
- [83] It is the **interaction between the voice system and the person features in the subject** that produces the distinct interpretations of the NA-IMPRS and the NA-1PL constructions, rather than the verbal morphology alone.

6 Abbreviations

1 = first person, 2 = second person, 3 = third person, ACC = accusative, ALA = allative, CAUS = causative, DSA = default subject agreement, ELA = elative, FREQ = frequentative, GEN = genitive, ILL = illative, IMPRS = impersonal, INE = inessive, INF = infinitive, NIP = null impersonal pronoun, NOM = nominative, PAR = partitive, PL = plural, PRES = present, PST = past, PTCP = participle, PX = personal suffix, REFL = reflexive, ROOT = verb root, SG = singular.

7 References

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8 Appendix

8.1 A competing impersonal form in Finnish

- [84] We recall that Finnish is a **partial pro-dropping language**: only first and second person subjects can be omitted without antecedents.
- [85] However, verbs with the ordinary 3sg agreement morphology and null subject can sometimes give a generic impersonal reading, as shown in (86). They are conventionally called the ‘**zero construction**’ (Siewierska, 2011).
- (86) a. Holmberg (2021, 116:3b)
 Kesä-llä herää aikaisin.
 summer-ADE wake.3SG early
 One wakes up early in summer.
- b. Laitinen (1995)
 Tässä istuu mukavasti.
 here sit.3SG comfortably.
 One can sit comfortably here.
- [87] One might be wondering whether these constructions also implicitly have the same NIP as their subjects. It doesn't seem to be the case, since these implicit subjects can be antecedents of reflexives with ϕ -featured suffixes.

- [88] We still need to investigate the distribution and interpretive differences between the NA-IMPRS constructions and the zero constructions!

8.2 What is the morphology of ACC in Finnish?

- [89] One of the remaining puzzle is why object lexical DPs sometimes get *-n* markers and sometimes remain unmarked.

8.2.1 Treating unmarked objects as nominative

- [90] Numerous studies have assumed that *-n* is the accusative marker and $\emptyset$ is the nominative marker (e.g. Manninen and Nelson, 2004; Bjarnadóttir and de Smit, 2013; Little, 2024).
- [91] One of the proposals is that the contrast we saw is an instance of **split ergativity**. Manninen and Nelson (2004) claimed that personal pronouns in Finnish uses the ERG-ABS alignment system and the *-t* marking we see in personal pronouns are absolutive markers.
- [92] Helasvuo (2001) made an even bigger claim that the plural nominative and accusative *-t* markers are both absolutive markers.
- [93] Unlikely scenario: since Finnish predicative clauses use the unmarked form for all personal pronouns, if this form is the ergative form, then the predicative clauses all have ergative subjects whenever the subject is a pronoun. This is typologically quite unlikely.
- [94] Another proposal is that the nominative object occurs due to differential object marking (DOM) for pronouns (Baker, 2015; Little, 2024).
- [95] Such pronominal differential object marking only seems to happen in certain clause types: impersonals, imperatives, certain infinites, or whenever there is no φ -agreement between subject and verb or possessor and possessee. In other clauses, there is no such differential object marking.
- [96] If there is DOM for pronouns, then we need to be able to explain why such DOM only occurs in certain clauses.
- [97] Diachronically: Bjarnadóttir and de Smit (2013), who adopted the assumption that the unmarked object is nominative, made a remark that nominative objects occur in Saami, a subfamily in the Finno-Ugric family that does not contain Finnish, to a much lesser extent than in Finnic (which contains Finnish). In

North Saami, one of the languages in the Saami subfamily, even the imperative uses an accusative, i.e. *-n*-marked object.

8.2.2 Treating unmarked objects as a special kind of accusative

- [98] Some other studies assume that both *-n* and $\emptyset$ can be accusative markers sometimes (Bielecki, 2009, 2012; Vainikka and Brattico, 2011).
- [99] As mentioned in section 8.2.1, the unmarked object only surfaces in constructions such as impersonals, imperatives, certain infinites, or whenever there is no φ -agreement between subject and verb or possessor and possessee in infinitives or deverbal nouns.
- [100] Based on this fact, (Vainikka and Brattico, 2011) claimed that the morphological surfacing of the accusative case depends on φ -agreement. If φ -agreement is present on the verb, then the object R-expression gets the *-n* marker; otherwise, it gets $\emptyset$.
- [101] The biggest problem with this theory is that it does not explain why the *-n* marker can still be present on adjuncts in sentences that have no φ -agreement, such as the ones in (102).

- (102) a. Lue kirja kerra-n!
read.IMP book.ACC($\emptyset$) once-ACC
Read the book once!
- b. Muista matka vuode-n!
remember.IMP trip.ACC($\emptyset$) year-ACC
Remember the trip for a year! (Sakuma, 2000, 25)