

Finnish “impersonal passive verbs” might be neither passive nor impersonal

Xuehuai He, xuehuai.he@yale.edu

Background. Voice describes the relation between (semantic) thematic roles and (syntactic) argument positions, and person describes the referential features of arguments. The passive voice is mainly characterized by the syntactic absence of a base-generated agentive subject, and an impersonal is characterized by the agent/initiator argument lacking in referentiality. In principle, specifying that the agent lacks referentiality presupposes the syntactic presence of the agent, and so impersonal constructions are assumed to be active. However, in Finnish, a special verbal morpheme *-ta/-tä/-ti-*, glossed as IMPRS, has been called the **impersonal passive** in literature (Shore, 1988; Blevins, 2003; Helasvuo, 2006, among others), shown in (1).

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>(1) a. Hei-dät löyde-tä-än puistosta.
 (3PL-ACC) find-IMPRS.PRES-DSA park.ELA
 ‘They are found in the park.’</p> <p>b. Kissa löyde-tä-än puistosta.
 (cat.Ø) find-IMPRS.PRES-DSA park.ELA
 ‘The cat is found in the park.’</p> | <p>(2) Me löydä-mme kissa-n.
 1PL.NOM find.PRES-1PL (cat-n)
 ‘We (will) find the cat.’</p> <p>(3) Me löyde-tä-än kissa.
 1PL.NOM find-IMPRS.PRES-DSA (cat.Ø)
 We (will) find the cat.</p> |
|---|---|

We will henceforth call (1) alike non-agreeing impersonal constructions, **NA-IMPRS**. There are no overt agents, verbs show no subject ϕ -agreement, and the lexical DP theme in (1b) is morphologically unmarked. This contrasts with the typical accusative morphological marking *-n* for lexical DP objects of ordinary transitive verbs shown in (2). However, the personal pronoun theme in (1a) is marked the usual object case ACC. Adding that Finnish has no *by*-phrase that can be used to diagnose passives (e.g. “the pear was eaten **by her**”), these facts give conflicting signals on whether NA-IMPRS is syntactically passive in terms of voice.

Further complicating this is that verbs marked with *-ta/-tä/-ti-* can also co-occur with a 1PL subject, as shown in (3). The subject here 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 itself. We henceforth call (3) alike the non-agreeing 1PL construction (**NA-1PL**). Crucially, (3) has an identical interpretation as (2) and has no impersonal or passive interpretation. Hence, in terms of person, is *-ta/-tä/-ti-* really inherently impersonal?

This paper argues that “impersonal passive” verbs (marked with *-ta/-tä/-ti-*) are not inherently passive or impersonal. **Voice** wise, the morpheme is generated in an **active**, ACC-assigning Voice head that selects 1PL or ϕ -less impersonal (henceforth **NIP**) subjects that cannot undergo subject agreement. **Person** wise, the impersonal interpretation only arises when the verbal morphology combines with NIP as its specifier. Furthermore, the Finnish impersonal pronoun paradigm is consistent with that of Germanic (Fenger, 2018) and their nullness consistent with that of other partial pro-drop languages (Holmberg, 2010).

IMPRS is not syntactically passive. To show NA-IMPRS & NA-1PL constructions are not passive, we demonstrate (1) the agent in Spec,VoiceP is not suppressed; (2) the theme is in the syntactic object position.

Evidence that a syntactically active subject is present can be drawn from unaccusative verbs, binding and control. Most unaccusatives and the copula *olla* ‘to be’ in Finnish can take the IMPRS morphology. 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). Second, subject binding with reflexives and control are possible for NA-IMPRS and NA-1PL constructions with this verbal morphology. Therefore, a silent subject is likely present in these constructions, unlike in passive constructions where such relations are absent.

The theme arguments in these constructions are syntactic objects due to their following partitive negation in Finnish, which only objects do. In Finnish, negation and atelicity trigger partitive cases in object DPs that are assigned structural cases (Baker, 2015). However, subjects are not marked with partitive under negation. Therefore, if the sentence is a true passive (in which case the theme is the subject), the theme would remain non-partitive under negation. We observe the theme argument *auto* ‘car’ is in the unmarked nominative case under a negative unaccusative verb in (4a), whereas it becomes partitive in the construction where the

verb takes the IMPRS morphology in (4b). This is consistent with the claim that the themes in NA-IMPRS constructions are objects. As for the difference in morphological marking on the themes between (1b) and (2), we follow Vainikka and Brattico (2011) and see it as an allomorphy of the same abstract ACC case. The surface word order of (1b) with fronted themes is explained by A'-movement that will not be detailed here.

- (4) a. *Auto ei ruostunut* b. *(Auto-a) ei ote-ta*
 car-Ø not.3SG rust.PST.PTCP car-PAR not take-IMPRS
 'The car didn't rust.' 'One is not taking the car.'

This accounts for NA-1PL **lacking** the impersonal-like interpretation, since verbs with IMPRS morphology are simply active. We will later argue that the source of the impersonal interpretation is the NIP.

IMPRS is generated in Voice. We demonstrate following Mirror Principle (Muysken, 1981; Baker, 1985) that (1) IMPRS is higher than CAUS and inner aspect; (2) IMPRS is lower than T. IMPRS *-ta/-tä/-ti-* in Finnish can co-occur with the causative or applicative morpheme *-taa/-ttä-*, the middle voice, reflexive, or anticausative morpheme *-u/-y-*, and inner aspect morphemes like the frequentative *-ella/-ellä/-skella/-skellä/-skennella/-skennellä*. These aforementioned morphemes are generated below Voice, and the IMPRS morpheme always appears after the aforementioned morphemes (e.g. *itke-te-tä-än* cry-CAUS-IMPRS-DSA). Tests on negation also diagnoses that IMPRS is generated lower than T. Since the negation marker in Finnish obtains the subject agreement marker (Brattico and Huhmarniemi, 2006, for more detail) while the verb does not, as shown in the contrast between (5a) and (5b). A similar contrast between the affirmative and negative sentences containing the IMPRS-marked verb in (6). We provisionally analyze the *-an/-än* DSA morpheme as the default subject agreement marker when no ϕ -agreement happens. IMPRS always surfaces before this morpheme.

- (5) a. He **tule-vat** isä-ni maa-lle. (6) a. Me ote-ta-**an** auto.
 3PL.NOM come-3PL father-GEN.PX.1SG land-ILL 1PL.NOM take-IMPRS-DSA car-Ø
 'They are coming to my father's land.' 'We are taking the car.'
 b. He ei-**vät** **tule** isä-ni maa-lle. b. Me **ei** ote-ta auto-a.
 3PL.NOM not-3PL come father-GEN.PX.1SG land-ILL 1PL.NOM not take-IMPRS car-PAR
 'They are not coming to my father's land.' 'We are not taking the car.'

NIP is a typical bare N impersonal pronoun. We argue that the implicit null syntactic agentive subject NIP in NA-IMPRS constructions is the source of impersonal readings. 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*), and those that are bare Ns (e.g. German *man*). The NIP first cannot occur in non-NOM positions; moreover, when binding with the reflexive *itse*, which can normally optionally take a personal ϕ -suffix, the NIP prohibits such suffixes. We claim NIP lacks ϕ -features and is a bare N, hence lacking in lexical and referential content. Semantically, NIP admits both generic and arbitrary readings and implicate a human initiator. Such null impersonal bare N subjects are also attested in other partial pro-drop languages like Lithuanian (Štreikaitė, 2022). In addition, Fenger (2018) predicted for Germanic that if a language has a bare-N-typed impersonal pronoun, then it must also have a ϕ P-like impersonal pronoun that only allows generic but not arbitrary readings. We note that Finnish is consistent with this prediction, as another null generic pronoun fits the role; as Finnish is partial pro-drop, a silent 3-person subject implies genericity: *Kesä-llä herää aikaisin* [summer-ADE wake.3SG early] 'One wakes up early in summer' (Holmberg, 2021). The null subject with 3SG agreement here can bind reflexives with ϕ -suffixes and only allows generic readings. Finally, languages with bare N NIPs often have bare N impersonal constructions related to 1PL ones, as seen in French, BP, Swedish, etc. (Egerland, 2003, and others). The 1PL readings are commonly analyzed as having an additional silent 1PL *pro* syntactic subject (Costa, 2012). NA-1PL constructions in Finnish instead use an overt 1PL-featured syntactic subject but is otherwise syntactically identical.

Conclusions. 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. Finnish therefore does not make an exception of having an impersonal morphology that coincides with passive, and its impersonal pronoun paradigm corroborates existing typological generalizations.

References

- Baker, Mark. 1985. The mirror principle and morphosyntactic explanation. *Linguistic inquiry* 16 (3): 373–415.
- Baker, Mark C. 2015. *Case : Its principles and its parameters*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Blevins, James P. 2003. Passives and impersonals. *Journal of Linguistics* 39 (3): 473–520. doi:10.1017/S0022226703002081.
- Brattico, Pauli, and Saara Huhmarniemi. 2006. Finnish negation, the EPP feature and the valuation theory of morphosyntax. *Nordic Journal of Linguistics* 29 (1): 5–44. doi:10.1017/S033258650600148X.
- Costa, João. 2012. A gente: revisitando o estatuto pronominal e a concordância. In *Por amor à Linguística: miscelânea de estudos linguísticos dedicados a Maria Denilda Moura*, ed. R. Lima, 101–122. Editora da Universidade Federal de Alagoas (Edufal). ISBN 978-85-7177-717-0.
- Egerland, Verner. 2003. Impersonal pronouns in scandinavian and romance. *Working Papers in Scandinavian Syntax* 71: 75–102.
- Fenger, Paula. 2018. How impersonal does one get? *The Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics* 21 (3): 291–325. doi:10.1007/s10828-018-9101-0.
- Helasvuo, Marja-Liisa. 2006. Passive — personal or impersonal?: A Finnish perspective. In *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory*, eds. Marja-Liisa Helasvuo and Lyle Campbell, Vol. 277, 233–255. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. doi:10.1075/cilt.277.16hel. ISBN 978-90-272-4792-6 978-90-272-9321-3.
- Holmberg, Anders. 2010. Null subject parameters. *Parametric variation: Null subjects in minimalist theory* 88: 124.
- Holmberg, Anders. 2021. Null subjects and null possessors in Finnish. *SPRÅKETS FUNKTION*.
- Legate, Julie Anne, Faruk Akkuş, Milena Šereikaitė, and Don Ringe. 2020. On passives of passives. *Language* 96 (4): 771–818.
- Marcotulio, Leonardo, Juliana Vianna, and Célia Lopes. 2013. Agreement patterns with a gente in Portuguese. *Journal of Portuguese Linguistics* 12 (2). doi:10.5334/jpl.70.
- Muysken, Pieter C. 1981. Quechua word structure. In *Binding and Filtering*, ed. F. Heny. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Šereikaitė, Milena. 2022. Impersonals, passives, and impersonal pronouns: Lessons from Lithuanian. *Syntax* 25 (2): 188–241. doi:10.1111/synt.12224.
- Shore, Susanna. 1988. On the so-called Finnish passive. *WORD* 39 (3): 151–176. doi:10.1080/00437956.1988.11435787.
- Vainikka, A., and Pauli Brattico. 2011. The Finnish Accusative.