

Invisible Arguments: Effects of Demotion in Estonian and Finnish

In this talk we investigate the referential properties of the implicit agent in impersonal passives in two closely related languages, Finnish and Estonian. We show that although the demoted agent argument cannot be directly expressed in these languages, it can nevertheless have effects on the referential level and be available for certain kinds of anaphoric reference. In other words, invisibility does not necessarily mean absence. However, as certain striking differences between Finnish and Estonian illustrate, neither are all invisible arguments equally present.

Finnish and Estonian impersonal passives use distinct (non-active) impersonal verbal morphology (Finnish *-taan/-tiin*, Estonian *-takse/-ti*), and have common historical origins (Laakso 2001, Laanest 1975). In fact, in many respects Finnish and Estonian impersonal passives look virtually identical. Some of the many similarities include: (i) both transitive and intransitive verbs can be passivized, (ii) there is no agreement between the internal argument and the impersonal verb, and (iii) the semantic interpretation of the implicit argument involves a human, agentive, generalised referent in both languages (Shore 1986, Nelson 1998, Rajandi 1999). However, as we show here, a closer look reveals that there are striking differences between the two languages in terms of the referential properties of the implicit argument.

Let us begin by pointing out another a shared trait: neither Finnish nor Estonian permits reference to the implicit argument with a singular or plural pronoun (1). Given this data, we follow Koenig & Mauner's (2000) analysis of French impersonals and assume that the Finnish and Estonian impersonal constructions do not introduce a discourse referent, but merely fill an argument position in the predicate. (Subscripts on the verb index the implicit argument.)

- (1) a. President_i tapeti_j. Ta_{i/*j} / Nad_{??i/*j} olevat Tallinnast pärit. (EST)
 president.NOM kill.IMP.PST S/he.NOM / they.NOM be.QTV T.ELA from
*The president_i was killed \emptyset_j . He_{i/*j} / They_{??i/*j} are apparently from Tallinn.*
- b. Presidenti_i murhattiin_j eilen. Hän_{i/*j} / He_{*i/*j} on/ovat kotoisin Helsingistä. (FIN)
 president.NOM murder.IMP.PST yesterday. S/he.NOM/they.NOM is/are originally H.-ELA
*The president_i was murdered \emptyset_j yesterday. He_{i/*j} / They_{*i/*j} are originally from Helsinki.*

A finer-grained look at Finnish and Estonian impersonals reveals that even though the implicit argument is not salient enough to be picked up by a pronoun in a subsequent sentence, in Estonian it can nevertheless participate in certain other referential relations. For example, the Estonian implicit argument can bind the possessive pronoun (2a) and the reflexive and reciprocal pronouns (2b). None of these is possible in Finnish, however (3a-b, Hakulinen & Karlsson 1988).

- (2) a. Dušši all pesti_i oma_i juukseid. (EST)
 Shower.GEN under wash.IMP.PAST self.GEN hair.PAR.PL
'In the shower one washed one's hair.'
- b. Vannis pesti_i ennast_i / üksteist_i. (EST)
 bath-INE wash.IMP.PAST REF.PAR one-another.PAR
'one washed oneself in the bath / they washed one another (each other) in the bath.'
- (3) a. *Suihkussa pestiin hiuksiaan. (FIN)
 Shower.INESS wash.IMP.PAST hair.PAR.3RD-POSSESSIVE
'In the shower one washed one's hair.' (intended meaning)
- b. *Suihkussa pestiin itseään / toisiaan. (FIN)
 Shower.INESS wash.IMP.PAST self.PAR.3RD-POSSESSIVE one-another.PAR.3RD-POSSESSIVE
'one washed oneself in the shower / they washed one another (each other) in the shower.' (intended meaning)

Additional data for the referentially-active status of the Estonian implicit argument comes from agentive adverbials. In Estonian, the identity of the implicit argument can be established in an oblique phrase, albeit with restrictions. An adverbial phrase identifying the agent referent is grammatical in Estonian if the semantics of the agent are compatible with the semantics associated with the impersonal: generalised, unspecific groups are grammatical (e.g. 'by consumers' in 4a, Rajandi 1999:68), but specific, identifiable individuals ('by us') are not. In Finnish, however, impersonals are not felicitous with adverbials referring to the direct agent (4b).

- (4) a. neid tooteid hinnatakse tarbijate (/ *meie) poolt. (EST)
 these products.PAR evaluate.IMP.PRS consumer.GEN.PL (/ we.GEN)
 ‘these products are evaluated by consumers (*by us)’
- b. # Nämä tuotteet arvioidaan kuluttajien / meidän toimesta. (FIN)
 These products.PL evaluate.IMP.PRS consumer.GEN.PL / our.GEN
 ‘these products are evaluated by consumers/by us’ (intended meaning)

Given these data, should one conclude that the implicit argument in Finnish is ‘truly invisible’, in comparison to Estonian? Using corpus data, we show that this would be an oversimplification. Corpus data show that even in Finnish, the implicit argument can have an impact on the discourse-pragmatic level, in that it can influence the referential forms subsequently used for entities that *are* overtly expressed in the sentence.

In Finnish, the gender-neutral pronoun *hän* ‘s/he’ is usually used to refer to the overt argument in an impersonal construction (5a). However, in some cases, the demonstrative *tämä* ‘this’ is used instead (5b). The proximal demonstrative *tämä* can also be used anaphorically for human referents that are not highly salient at that point in the discourse (e.g. Halmari 1994). This suggests that in (5b), the referent of *tämä*, Eeva’s father, is not highly salient. This kind of data is especially striking in light of claims that the promoted constituent in an English passive is highly topical (Davison 1984); the Finnish data patterns suggest that the discourse properties of the Finnish impersonal passive construction differ from those of English-type promotional passives.

- (5) a. **Olsson** pidätettiin, kun **hän** oli palaamassa tilapäiseen asuntoonsa San Josessa. [pronoun]
O.NOM arrest.IMP.PST, when **he.NOM** was returning temporary.ILT apartment.ILT S. J.-INESS
 ‘*Olsson was arrested, when he was returning to his temporary apartment in San Jose.*’
 (www.helsinginsanomat.fi/uutisarkisto/19990607/ulko/990607ul13.html)
- b. Myöhemmin **isää** höykytettiin siitä, että **tämä** osti Eevalle kaiken maailman kirjoja. [demonstrative]
 later **father.PART** give-a-hard-time.IMP.PST it.ELA, that **this.NOM** bought E.-ALL all.GEN
 world.GEN books.PART (www.karjalohja.fi/kirjailijat/joenp.htm)
 ‘*Later father was given a hard time because he bought all kinds of books for Eeva.*’

Corpus data such as the examples above reveal that factors such as the semantic-pragmatic nature of the implicit argument (specific/unknown/universal, etc.) and the information status of the overt argument play a role in the choice of the subsequent referential form. In sum, the patterns of use of the demonstrative *tämä* indicate that the ‘invisible’ implicit argument of the Finnish impersonal can indirectly influence the discourse salience of the overt argument.

Conclusion: In this paper, by means of a detailed analysis of Finnish and Estonian impersonals, we argue that although the implicit argument is not overtly present in the surface realization of the sentence in either language, there are in fact gradations in how demoted it is. Finnish presents a case where the implicit argument cannot participate in any direct coreferential relationships and shows up only very indirectly, influencing which referring expressions are used to refer to the overt argument. In contrast, in Estonian the implicit argument is, despite its invisibility, able to antecede reflexives, reciprocals and possessive pronouns, and the impersonal referent can be re-established in an agentive phrase.

These findings, in addition to shedding light on the referential properties of invisible arguments, also have important implications for our understanding of the notion of ‘agent demotion’ in voice phenomena. They show that even in two closely related constructions with very similar semantics, namely the Finnish and Estonian impersonal passives, agent demotion does not pattern as a monolithic phenomenon, since we observe different effects of demotion in the two languages.

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