

The fourth-person verb forms in Skolt Saami

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1 Introduction

This paper provides a description of a morphosyntactic phenomenon that is little known outside – or even inside – Saami linguistics: what is known as the impersonal, or indefinite, fourth-person verb forms in Skolt Saami.

Within Uralic linguistics, probably the best known feature of Saami verbs is the dual vs. plural opposition, which appears to relate Saami morphosyntax to Khanty, Mansi, Samoyed and ultimately to Proto-Uralic. However, the easternmost Saami vernaculars that have survived to our day do not have dual except for Aanaar (Inari) Saami (and Skolt Saami personal pronouns), but their finite verbs do not always consist of only three persons in two numbers either. Instead, especially Skolt Saami has a seventh type of person category, occasionally labeled as an “impersonal”, “indefinite” or a “fourth” person. In practice, we are dealing with an inflectional category that is very similar to the one in Finnic, most commonly known as the “passive” in Finnish grammatical tradition, or the “impersonal” in Estonian grammar. Moreover, as the Saami forms are not only historically related to those of Finnic, but Finnish is also the majority language that has had the most overwhelming effect on the development of Skolt Saami during the past century, it is instructive to approach Skolt Saami also by comparing it with Finnish as well as other Saami languages under Finnish influence.

From the perspective of verb inflection, the three Saami languages of Finland can be divided in two “western” languages and one “eastern” despite the fact that the major dividing line between Western Saami and Eastern Saami is commonly drawn between North and Aanaar Saami (e.g., Sammallahti 1998: 6–7). However, the traditional view is mostly based on phonological and morphological arguments, whereas recent lexical studies see Aanaar Saami as a relatively western Saami language (Rydving 2012; Tillinger 2014). As regards the main theme of this study, it is noteworthy that especially the Skolt Saami paradigm is analogous to that of Finnish instead of North and Aanaar Saami with identical person–number categories.

Table 1. The indicative present tense forms for ‘go’ in North Saami

Person	SG	DUAL	PL
1	<i>manan</i>	<i>manne</i>	<i>mannat</i>
2	<i>manat</i>	<i>mannabeahhti</i>	<i>mannabehtet</i>
3	<i>manná</i>	<i>mannaba</i>	<i>mannet</i>

Table 2. The indicative present tense forms for ‘go’ in Aanaar

Person	SG	DUAL	PL
1	<i>moonâm</i>	<i>manneen</i>	<i>moonnâp</i>
2	<i>moonah</i>	<i>monâvettee</i>	<i>monâvetted</i>
3	<i>mana</i>	<i>moonnâv</i>	<i>maneh</i>

Table 3. The indicative present tense forms for ‘go’ in Skolt Saami

Person	SG	PL
1	<i>mõõnam</i>	<i>mõõnnâp</i>
2	<i>mõõnak</i>	<i>mõõnnve’ted</i>
3	<i>mâânn</i>	<i>mâ’nne</i>
4	<i>mõõnât</i>	

Table 4. The indicative present tense forms for ‘go’ in Finnish

Person	SG	PL
1	<i>menen</i>	<i>menemme</i>
2	<i>menet</i>	<i>menette</i>
3	<i>menee</i>	<i>menevät</i>
4	<i>mennään</i>	

In general, the fourth person in Skolt Saami is syntactically on a par with the first, second and third persons in singular and plural. Fourth-person forms in other moods are somewhat rare, but the present tense form in *-t* is paralleled by the past tense form *-š*. From a functional perspective, the Skolt Saami fourth person greatly resembles the general Finnic impersonal verb forms traditionally labeled as “passives” or impersonals, and the Finnic impersonals or passives are also actually regarded as the material origins of the Saami forms (E. Itkonen 1957: 4; Korhonen 1967: 346–348).

The fourth person has been well-known among the handful of specialists on Skolt Saami, but next to unknown outside Saami linguistics. The few earlier descriptions have mostly focused on the historical morphology of the verb forms in question, but very little has been said about the ways and reasons the forms are actually used; almost all details of its syntax and semantics have been left undescribed even in the most detailed accounts of Skolt Saami grammar (cf. Moshnikoff et al. 2020: 82; Feist 2015: 200, 234–235; Lehtinen 2018: 11–12, 95–96).

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 2 is a brief introduction to the history of the Skolt Saami fourth person and to earlier research. Section 3 provides a concise description of the phenomenon as a specialized impersonal form, or a non-promotional passive, and its relation to other functionally related expressions in the language. As all speakers of Skolt Saami are bilingual in the majority languages Finnish and Russian, the language is greatly affected by interference from the respective majority languages on both sides of the border. Section 4 presents further observations on the most recent developments of the fourth-person forms that show signs of extending their functions to those of third-person plural forms – and vice versa – as well as using the fourth person as a kind of promotional passive whose only core argument may be in the nominative instead of the accusative.

The study is based on virtually all relevant materials, from the first recordings of Skolt Saami folklore (T. I. Itkonen 1931) to later recordings (Giellagas Corpus) and ultimately the contemporary written language, largely consisting of official translations from Finnish (e.g., SIKOR corpus of about 213,000 words). However, the main result of fieldwork among present-day speakers is that many native speakers regard the fourth-person forms as foreign to their own idiolects or even the language in general (see Sections 3.1 and 4.1). Although fourth-person forms can also be found in Akkala, Kildin and Ter Saami, this study focuses mainly on Skolt Saami, but also takes into account some features of the fourth person in other eastern Saami languages.

2 Background

2.1 Ancient morphological loan from Finnic

The fourth-person forms are commonly regarded as an ancient morphological loan from Finnic, more precisely from the predecessors of present-day Karelian and Finnish. According to E. Itkonen (1957: 4) and Korhonen (1967: 346–348), both present and past tense suffixes have been borrowed from Karelian to Saami at the time when the Finnic impersonal forms had not taken over the functions of the plural third-person forms in Karelian. The impersonal forms appear to have replaced the plural third-person forms in Karelian centuries ago, but in Finnish and Veps the distinction between the two categories has been mostly preserved (Kettunen 1943: 57–61, 427; Nirvi 1947; Laanest 1982: 231).

Another sign of the long history of the fourth person is the fact that is attested in the very first documentation of a Saami language by Stephen Burrough in 1557 (Korhonen 1967: 346). While Burrough’s data comes from an idiom that can be labeled as Kildin or Ter Saami, the easternmost Saami language, the range of this category has extended to the westernmost Eastern Saami, the now extinct Kemi Saami as used by Olaus Sirma in the 17th century (Bergsland 1984: B 35; Sammallahti 1984: 148; 1998a: 84). As it happens, the only Eastern Saami language without a trace of the fourth person is Aanaar Saami, the most Finnicized Saami language spoken today (Valtonen et al. 2022).

From a functional perspective, the fourth person greatly resembles the general Finnic impersonal verb forms traditionally labeled as “passives” in Finnish grammar. From a morphological perspective, the similarity is not that obvious, but close enough for T. I. Itkonen (1942: 55) to have proposed that the origin of the Skolt Saami present-tense fourth-person form *jeä’le-t* [live-4] ‘one lives’ lies in Finnish *ele-tään* [live-PASS] id. and Karelian *ele-täh* [live-3PL] ‘they live; people live’ (Table 5). This view is supported by E. Itkonen (1957: 4) and Korhonen (1967: 346–348) who add that the past-tense fourth-person suffix *-š* probably goes back to the word-final *-h* in the Karelian past-tense suffix *-ttih*; substitution of Finnic *-h* with Saami *-š* appears to be a strategy of phonological-cum-etymological nativization, comparable to words like Skolt Saami *morăș* ‘sorrow’ < Karelian *mureh* ~ Finnish *mure(h)* ~ *murhe*.

Table 5. The indicative present and past-tense fourth-person forms for ‘live’ in Skolt Saami, and their cognates in Finnish and Karelian

		Present	Past
Skolt Saami	4 (4th person)	<i>jeä'let</i>	<i>jie'lleš</i>
Finnish	PASS	<i>eletään</i>	<i>elettiin</i>
Karelian		<i>eletäh</i>	<i>elettih</i>

As already shown by Tables 1–4, Skolt Saami verb inflection resembles that of Finnish much more than those of Aanaar and North Saami, for example. The poorly attested fourth-person forms for conditional (*jeälčes* ‘one would live’) and potential (*jie'lžet* ‘one might live’) moods do not have obvious cognates in Finnic. From a morphological point of view, the most remarkable difference from Finnic is that Skolt Saami has a specialized fourth-person form even for the negative auxiliary (Miestamo & Koponen 2015: 355): *jeä-t mõnnu* [NEG-4 go.CNG2] ‘one doesn’t go; people don’t go’. However, the lexical verb is in a connegative form otherwise used in certain prohibitive constructions (e.g., *jeällap mõnnu* [NEG.IMP.1PL go.CNG2] ‘let’s not go’; whereas in Finnic, special passive (indicative) connegative forms (*mennä* go.PASS.CNG) are used. The functional yet not formal equivalents of Skolt and Finnish negative present tense constructions are seen in Tables 6–7.

Table 6. The negative indicative present tense forms for ‘go’ in Skolt Saami

Person	SG	PL
1	<i>jiõm mõõn</i>	<i>jeä'p mõõn</i>
2	<i>jiõk mõõn</i>	<i>jeä'ped mõõn</i>
3	<i>ij mõõn</i>	<i>jie mõõn</i>
4	<i>jeät mõnnu</i>	

Table 7. The negative indicative present tense forms for ‘go’ in Finnish

Person	SG	PL
1	<i>en mene</i>	<i>emme mene</i>
2	<i>et mene</i>	<i>ette mene</i>
3	<i>ei mene</i>	<i>eivät mene</i>
4	<i>ei mennä</i>	

2.2 History of research

As mentioned above, fourth-person forms have been attested already in the 16th and 17th centuries. The first linguist to have documented these forms appears to have been D. E. D. Europaeus (*lendshit* be.POT.4) in his records of Ter Saami in 1856 (Korhonen 1967: 347). Linguistic description of the fourth person appears to have begun in T. I. Itkonen's (1942: 55) and E. Itkonen's (1957: 4) brief comments on the origins of the forms, but the actual description is limited to seven detached verb forms (from Skolt, Kildin and Ter Saami), translated with Finnish passive verb forms. The first example sentences are given by Korhonen (1967: 346–348), but his eyes are also on historical morphology, the topic of his doctoral dissertation. However, in his subsequent paper on the expression of the indefinite subject in Saami languages, Korhonen (1970: 144) is apparently the first one to view the fourth person in a decidedly semantic context, albeit very briefly. In the first comprehensive grammar sketch of Skolt Saami, Korhonen (1973: 67ff.) is the first one to present the category in question in complete inflectional paradigms on a par with first-, second- and third-person singular and plural. Moreover, this source also presents fourth-person forms for not only present and past indicatives, but also for conditional and potential moods (Korhonen 1973: 67ff.; see also Korhonen 1977: 81 for a brief mention of the phenomenon). These forms are also presented in the inflectional paradigms by Sammallahhti and Mosnikoff (1991: 169–179).

Zajkov (1987: 145–147; [Zaikov] 1996: 141) has discussed the development of the fourth-person forms in Akkala Saami. Sammallahhti (1998b: 29) mentions these forms as one of the two main criteria for distinguishing between Akkala Saami and Skolt Saami proper: in Akkala Saami, according to him, the fourth-person forms have entirely displaced the original third-person plural forms, thus resulting in the loss of the fourth person as an independent category. Although Kildin Saami is better studied than Akkala Saami, only indicative affirmative fourth-person verb forms have been described (see E. Itkonen 1957: 4; Korhonen 1967: 347; Kert 1971: 178, 549–550; Rießler 2022).

The most recent descriptions of the fourth person in Skolt Saami are presented in the grammar by Moshnikoff et al. (2020) and the reference grammars by Feist (2010, 2015), and the phenomenon is also discussed in Lehtinen's (2018) master's thesis on Skolt Saami passive derivatives.

To briefly summarize the semantic characterizations given to the verb forms labeled as fourth person here, the following observations can be made: Most scholars of Skolt Saami have described the forms in question either in Finnish or at

least with reference to the so-called passive in Finnish – either from a synchronic or diachronic perspective. T. I. Itkonen (1942: 55) calls it an impersonal (Finnish *persoonaton*) verb form, E. Itkonen (1957: 4) speaks of an impersonal passive form. The label “fourth person” is adopted from Korhonen (1967: 346–348; 1970: 144) who appears to have adopted it from Harms’ (1962: 57–58 *et passim*) grammar of Estonian, even though the Estonian grammatical tradition refers to Harms’ “fourth person” as an impersonal (*impersonaal* or *umbisikuline tegumood* ‘impersonal voice’) (see also Zajkov 1987: 145). Despite Korhonen’s (1967, 1970) label “fourth person”, he characterizes these forms as verb forms for indefinite agents or subjects. Soon afterwards, Korhonen (1973: 67) stated that in addition to the first, second and third persons in singular and plural, Skolt Saami also has “a seventh personal form” or the “indefinite person” that can most often be translated with the Finnish passive, occasionally also with the third-person plural. Moreover, Bergsland (1984: B 35) refers to Kemi Saami forms as impersonal forms or “the ‘passive’ of the Finnish type”. However, the most influential modern Skolt Saami grammars by Moshnikoff et al. (2020: 80) and Feist (2010: 115; 2015: 200) call the phenomenon “a fourth, indefinite person”, thus following Korhonen’s (1967, 1970) early wordings.

In principle, there is a significant difference whether a verb form is characterized as a personal form, be it a fourth, seventh or an indefinite person, or whether it is called impersonal, the way these forms were originally characterized (T. I. Itkonen 1942; E. Itkonen 1957), and the way its Finnic counterparts are often characterized. However, as the mainstream term “fourth person” is adopted in the present paper, the term in itself must be seen as a term only, and the nature of this category still remains open for competing interpretations.

Although the fourth-person forms in Skolt Saami and the neighboring languages have duly been mentioned by many grammarians and other scholars, the descriptions have remained quite scanty. Even Moshnikoff et al. (2020: 80–107) and Feist (2010: 115–136; 2015: 200–232) are content with providing just a few example sentences without truly analyzing their structure and meaning. This is all the more surprising in light of the fact, laconically remarked by Schlachter (1970: 152–153) in his comment to Korhonen (1970), that the only truly indefinite verb forms in the entire Saami branch of Uralic languages are the fourth-person forms in East Saami. Although indefiniteness can be expressed by many kinds of clauses with personal verb forms, according to him the fourth person is the only truly grammatical category for indefiniteness in Saami languages.

2.3 Skolt Saami conjugation within Saami languages

As already mentioned in the introduction, verb conjugation in Saami languages is most often known for the existence of the dual vs. plural distinction, but in our days this distinction is found only in the languages spoken west of Skolt Saami – the languages with no traces of the fourth person characteristic of the easternmost Saami languages instead. Even though it is in itself interesting that this major isogloss goes along the language border between Aanaar and Skolt Saami, it is even more interesting to note the dividing line can be observed inside the Skolt Saami, as the fourth person has not been attested in the Paččjokk–Peäccam and Njauddâm dialects, which have the dual vs. plural distinction instead. Sammallahti (1998b: 30–31) considers the dual vs. plural distinction one of the most important criteria for drawing the line between the northern (Njauddâm, 1 in Map 1; Paččjokk, 2; Peäccam, 3 and Mue'tkk, 4) and southern (Suõ'nn'jel, 5; Njuõttjäu'rr, 6; Sââ'rvesjäu'rr, 7) dialects of the language. This state of affairs is depicted in Table 8, which also shows the situation in Akkala, Kildin and Ter Saami in the east. The person-number categories of the western type are unanimously regarded as direct descendants of the Proto-Saami conjugation (e.g., Korhonen 1967; Sammallahti 1998b: 212–221).



Fig. 1. Traditional Skolt Saami area. Map by Timo Rantanen.

Table 8. Person categories in the Saami languages, the impersonal fourth person included

South, Ume, Pite, Lule, North and Aanaar Saami	Paččjokk–Peäccam Skolt Saami (as well as the extinct Njauddâm dialect)	Suõ'nn'jel and Njuõttjäu'rr Skolt Saami	Akkala Saami	Kildin and Ter Saami
1SG	1SG	1SG	1SG	1SG
1DUAL	1DUAL			
1PL	1PL	1PL	1PL	1PL
2SG	2SG	2SG	2SG	2SG
2DUAL	2DUAL			
2PL	2PL	2PL	2PL	2PL
3SG	3SG	3SG	3SG	3SG
3DUAL	3DUAL			
3PL	3PL	3PL	3PL	3PL
		4		4

The right-hand columns in Table 8 remind us of the fact that the person categories in Skolt, Kildin and Ter Saami are in principle identical. However, as regards the fate of the fourth person in the intermediate Akkala Saami, it is most interesting to note that even though the impersonal fourth-person in itself has been lost in the language, the loss of the category has not meant the loss of the verb forms as such, but instead, the cognates of the Skolt, Kildin and Ter Saami fourth-person forms have replaced the earlier third-person plural forms (Zajkov 1987: 144ff.; [Zaikov] 1996: 141; Sammallahhti 1998: 29). What is more, this development is fully in accord with the development of the corresponding Finnic forms – the presumed source of the fourth-person forms in Saami – in Karelian (Nirvi 1947). However, while the merging of the third-person plural and the impersonal passive (i.e., the fourth person) appears to have taken place centuries ago in Karelian, the situation in Akkala Saami seems to be relatively new, as suggested by the remnants of the original third-person forms in the pioneering records of the language by Jens Andreas Friis (1867), e.g., *leije* be.3PL, *läjji* be.PST.3PL, *lenče* be.COND.3PL, *jelläk* be.NEG.3PL, *jellemenč* be.NEG.PST.3PL, *je lenče* NEG.3PL be.COND.CNG.¹ In any case, it is notable that the pattern that emerges here is that Akkala Saami and Karelian in the south have developed analogously, whereas Skolt Saami and Finnish in the west

¹ Friis (1867) has also recorded third-person dual forms otherwise unattested in Akkala Saami. These have also been lost and replaced by fourth-person forms.

and Kildin and Ter Saami in the east have preserved the more original paradigms better (Tables 3–4, 9–10; but see Sections 4.1 and 4.2).

Table 9. The indicative present tense forms for ‘go’ in Skolt Saami (table 3 repeated)

Person	SG	PL
1	<i>mõõnam</i>	<i>mõõnnáp</i>
2	<i>mõõnak</i>	<i>mõõnnve’ted</i>
3	<i>máánn</i>	<i>má’nne</i>
4	<i>mõõnát</i>	

Table 10. The indicative present tense forms for ‘go’ in Akkala Saami

Person	SG	PL
1	<i>mõõnam</i>	<i>mõõnnáp</i>
2	<i>mõõnak</i>	<i>mõõnnve’ted</i>
3	<i>máánn</i>	<i>mõõnát</i>

Table 11. The indicative present tense forms for ‘go’ in Finnish (table 4 repeated)

Person	SG	PL
1	<i>menen</i>	<i>menemme</i>
2	<i>menet</i>	<i>menette</i>
3	<i>menee</i>	<i>menevät</i>
PASS	<i>mennään</i>	

Table 12. The indicative present tense forms for ‘go’ in Karelian

Person	SG	PL
1	<i>mänen</i>	<i>mänemmä</i>
2	<i>mänet</i>	<i>mänettä</i>
3	<i>mänöy</i>	<i>männäh</i>

It goes without saying that in the context of multifaceted language contacts among the languages in question – other neighboring Saami languages and Russian included – Table 3 must be understood as a rough generalization of the state of affairs in Skolt Saami. This is the starting point of the more nuanced description of the nature of the fourth person in Skolt Saami in the following sections.

3 The main features of the fourth person in Skolt Saami

This section describes the main features of the fourth person in the language that can be characterized as “classical Skolt Saami” – the Skolt Saami spoken in its traditional territory prior to the Second World War as well as in the resettled areas in Inari, Finland, for some time before the abrupt wholesale language shift to Finnish. For the history of Skolt Saami speaking areas, see Linkola and Sammallahti (1995: 46–55) and Juutinen (2019a: 79–83). The sentences presented here also contain examples of the “classical” use of the fourth-person in our times.

3.1 An impersonal passive

As already seen above, the verb forms labeled as fourth-person forms have been characterized as “impersonal verb forms”, “impersonal passives”, “a seventh personal form”, “‘passive’ of the Finnish type” or “a fourth, indefinite person”. Although the use of all these labels can be justified, we wish to choose the attribute “impersonal” over “indefinite”. Not unlike in many other grammatical traditions, the latter term has other functions in the realm of (indefinite) pronouns, for example, but the term “impersonal” is not overloaded to the same extent. In any case, the term “impersonal” is to be understood as a label for the inflectional category that does not explicitly refer to first, second or third-person agents, but instead, the identity of the agent(s) is simply left unspecified (or “indefinite”).

Moreover, fourth-person forms can also be characterized as (impersonal) passive forms, as was already done by E. Itkonen (1957: 4) and Bergsland (1984: B 35), and less explicitly by Korhonen (1973: 67) who noted that the Skolt Saami fourth-person forms can usually be translated with the Finnish passive. We acknowledge the fact the label “passive” has been debated among Finnish grammarians who sometimes tend to equate the label with the personal passives characteristic of many Germanic passive constructions in which the expression of the agent is not always fully deleted in the sentence but rather demoted to an oblique position (see, e.g., Shore 1988 and Helasvuo 2006). However, following a less categorical approach represented by scholars such as Givón (2001: 127ff.), Siewierska (2008, 2010) and many other typologists, we do not see obstacles in characterizing most occurrences of the fourth-person forms as (impersonal) passive clauses in which the agent is fully absent.

- 1) *Ķiddtää'lv tōid nue'rrsiōrid siō'rreš.*
 spring.winter.GEN that.PL.ACC string.game.PL.ACC play.PST.4
 'In the early spring that string game (*nue'rrsiōrr*) was played.'
 (Če'vetjäu'rr², Kotus 3319_1az: 55:48)
- 2) *Tōin vōnnsin mi'jjid uiddeeš tā'lvv-si'jdde.*
 that.COM boat.COM 1PL.ACC take.away.PST.4 winter-village.ILL
 'With that boat they took us away to the winter village.'
 (Njeä'llem³ Kotus 12744_1a: 02:09)

In addition to transitive verbs (1–2), this category can be applied to virtually all kinds of verbs, including intransitives (3–4) and the copula (4). However, it is notable that quite like the impersonal verb forms in Finnic languages, the Skolt Saami fourth-person appears to be formed and almost always used with reference to actions and states in which the absent subject arguments (agents and themes) are human (but see Section 4.2):

- 3) *Tā'lvvpäikka mō'nneš suukkâm vōnnsin pā'rğğmannu looppâst*
 winter.place.ILL go.PST.4 row.ACT.boat.COM August.GEN end.LOC
da kie'sspäikka puō'tteš määusat vue'ssmannust.
 and summer.place.ILL come.PST.4 back May.LOC
 'People moved to the winter village by rowboat at the end of August, and returned to the summer village in May.' (SIKOR)
- 4) *To'ben nuō'tteš da le'jješ õõutsââ'jest*
 there fish.with.a.seine.PST.4 and be.PST.4 together
tollpeällsest kaa'fstõõlee'l, bliinid,
 next.to.fire have.a.coffee.break.CVB.INS pancake.PL.ACC
kue'llkääkkaid da mää'rfid pää'stee'l.
 fish.cake.PL.ACC and sausage.PL.ACC bake.CVB.INS
 'People fished with a seine and were together, having coffee at campfire, and making pancakes, fishcakes and sausages.' (KolttaSaamelaiset 2013)

² The Skolt Saami spoken in Če'vetjäu'rr (Finland) is the successor of the dialect spoken in Suõ'nn'jel.

³ Unlike most speakers in Njeä'llem (Finland), this speaker does not speak the Paččjokk–Peäccam dialect but that of Suõ'nn'jel.

In addition to indicative fourth-person forms, grammars (e.g., Korhonen 1973: 67; Moshnikoff et al. 2020: 94–103; Feist 2015: 204) provide examples of analogous forms in the conditional and potential moods. Unlike the indicative fourth-person markers *-t* and *-š*, the conditional fourth-person forms in *-češ* and the potential in *-žet* cannot go materially back to their Finnic equivalents, but forms like *mõõnčeš* [go.COND.4] and *mõõnžet* [go.POT.4] appear to have developed by analogy to the Skolt Saami indicative paradigm. However, such forms are not attested in any of the corpora of spoken or written language (more than 500,000 words), but a couple of examples are provided by the Skolt Saami grammar by Moshnikoff et al. (2020: 101–103), as seen in (5). In other words, the conditional and potential forms must be regarded highly marginal, whether the ultimate reason is the unbalanced nature of the available corpora or the possible artificiality of the forms in question (cf. the introduction of the passive potential forms such as *mentäleen* ~ *mentänee* in the standard Finnish in the end of the 19th century; see Tunkelo 1934).⁴

- 5) *Kue'llšee'llmõ'sše taarbše'žet kuddnallšem sääi'mid*
 fish.catch.NMLZ.ILL need.POT.4 good.kind.ADVL net.PL.ACC
da nuõ'ttid.
 and seine.PL.ACC
 'One needs proper nets and seines for fishing.'
 (Moshnikoff et al. 2020: 101)

As mentioned in Section 2.1, Skolt Saami differs from Finnic in having a special fourth-person form even for the negative verb (Miestamo & Koponen 2015: 355):

- 6) *Päällain siõrât, mutta jeüt nu'tt siõrru ko mä'htt*
 ball.COM play.PRS.4 but NEG.4 so play.CNG as how
te'l siõ'rreš.
 then play.PST.4
 'One (still) plays with a ball, but one doesn't play now the way it was played then.' (Če'vetjäu'rr, Kotus 9832_2az: 30:14)

⁴ The use of the potential mood in a non-subordinate clause in (5) also bears a flavor of Finnish literary influence (cf. Bartens 1980).

- 7) *Ooccmōōžžid* *jeät* *maacctuku.*
 search.NMLZ.PL.ACC NEG.4 return.CNG
 ‘Applications will not be returned.’ (SIKOR)

One of the reasons for the limited description of the fourth person may be the fact that these forms were quite infrequent in spoken language already in the 1970s (Korhonen 1973: 67) and many native speakers do not even recognize such forms anymore (Markus Juutinen, personal fieldwork notes). However, their use is quite common in contemporary written Skolt Saami.⁵ For example, the corpus of about 213,000 word forms of predominantly literary language (SIKOR) contains more than two thousand fourth-person forms, whereas the corpus of 40 hours and 300,000 word forms of spoken Skolt Saami (Giellagas Corpus) contains only about one hundred such forms. Lehtinen (2018: 95–96) reports only 36 fourth-person forms in a corpus of 17 hours of Skolt Saami. The increased use of these forms may be largely explained by direct (translational) or indirect influence from Finnish, the majority language with an overwhelming effect on virtually all writers and translators of Skolt Saami.

It is also important to note that while earlier descriptions of the fourth person have not paid attention to its geographical distribution within Skolt Saami, it has been attested in the most vital southern dialects (Suõ’nn’jel and Njuõttjäu’rr) only, but not in the northernmost dialects of the language (see Table 8 in Section 2.3).

3.2 A non-promotional impersonal passive

In addition to being an impersonal passive without overt agents, the fourth person also differs from the best-known Western European passives by being non-promotional. This means that unlike in promotional passives which prototypically promote the patient argument from object to subject position, the Skolt Saami impersonal passive excludes – instead of simply demoting – the nominative-marked agent argument. However, the accusative-marked patient argument remains an accusative object and is thus not promoted to nominative subject. The main rule is that fourth-person forms are non-promotional impersonals without subjects, and

⁵ A reviewer of this paper has pointed out that fourth-person forms are quite common in contemporary spoken Kildin Saami.

with accusative objects just like in other persons (see also Examples 1, 2, 5 and 7 above):

- 8) *Tõ'st mi'jjid pi'jješ au'tte.*
that.LOC 1PL.ACC put.PST.4 car.ILL
'There we were put in a car.' ("There one put us in a car.")
(Če'vetjäu'rr, Kotus 17462_1c: 08:52)
- 9) *Kå'skkvue'žžid ko'skkēš di kå'skk-kue'lid.*
dry.meat.PL.ACC dry.PST.4 and dry-fish.PL.ACC
'Meat and fish were dried.' (Če'vetjäu'rr, Kotus 11722_1a: 19:38)

As the only evident syntactic difference to the first, second and third-person clauses is the absence of subject, this is indeed the explanation for the fact that the non-promotional impersonal passive can also be applied to intransitive and copula verbs as seen above in (3–4) and (6). As pointed out by Givón (2001: 127), many formalist grammarians have preferred to limit the concept of passive to promotional passives, but this view is “an unfortunate by-product of nonfunctional, non-typological approaches to syntax” (see also Siewierska & Bakker 2013). Indeed, it appears that it is useful and informative to interpret all of the above examples of the fourth person as instances of non-promotional impersonal passive clauses. Reasons for this will become more evident in the following sections that show examples of recent innovations in which the fourth-person forms are used in a way that must be regarded as non-impersonal and non-passive instead (Section 4.3), as well as in sentences that must rather be described as promotional passive clauses (Section 4.4).

4 Related phenomena and recent developments

In the following, we present further observations on the most recent developments of the fourth-person forms and especially their relationship to third-person plural forms, both as passive and active predicates. The space does not allow us to extend the discussion to derived passive verbs that are clearly in the realm of derivation and not inflection, both as regards their morphology and their syntax. For the most common passive verbs in *-je-* and *-ðõvvâ-* (e.g., *kåddjed* ‘be killed’ ← *kådded* ‘kill’; *valmštõõvvâd* ‘be prepared’ ← *valmšted* ‘prepare’), see Feist (2015: 119) and especially Lehtinen (2018).

4.1 Third-person plural as impersonal

It is well known that languages around the globe commonly use third-person plural forms for impersonal predicates, and Uralic is not an exception (e.g., Siewierska 2008:11ff.; 2010; Siewierska & Papastathi 2011; F. Gulyás 2016; Klumpp & Skribnik 2022). Not unlike all other Saami languages, even Skolt Saami – in spite of the existence of the special fourth-person forms – employs its third-person plural forms (Moshnikoff et al. 2020: 82) for seemingly identical functions (10–12). Occasionally, the two alternatives seem to be in free variation even in a single sentence (11–12):

- 10) *Pue'rmõs puõccid* *kue'dde* *ja*
good.SUP reindeer.PL.ACC leave.PST.3PL⁶ and
hue'nmõõzzid *ko'dde*.
bad.SUP.PL.ACC kill.PST.3PL
‘The best reindeer were left alive, and the weakest were killed.’
(Če'vetjäu'rr, Kotus 631_1a: 03:23)

- 11) *Nä'de* *kue'zzid* *káčča* *di* *poorât* *di* *mâŋŋa*
then guest.PL.ACC invite.PRS.3PL and eat.PRS.4 and then

⁶ As the perspective adopted in this article is partly historical-morphological, we approach the fourth-person as well as the third-person plural forms from this perspective, and gloss them consistently as 4 and 3PL according to their most original, canonical functions, even when the former are used as personal third-person forms and the latter as impersonals.

õs vuäddje. Nu'bb peei'v siõrât
 PTC sleep.INCH.PRS.3PL second day.GEN play.PRS.4
di nue'r-nue'r siõ'rre.
 and string-string.ACC play.PST.3PL

‘And then they invite guests and eat and after that they go to sleep. The other day they play and played the string game.’
 (Če'vetjäu'rr, Kotus 11723_1a: 03:19)

- 12) *No tie'tteš=han kâ'l, mutta ko*
 well know.PST.4=DPT DPT but as
jiâ ni huõllâm te'l.
 NEG.3PL even care.ACT.PST.PTCP then

‘Well, one surely knew [that there were doctors], but one just didn't care about them at that time.’ (Če'vetjäu'rr, Kotus 11722_1a: 18:38)

In fact, even in the southern dialects with fourth-person forms, the use of the third-person plural forms has increased at the expense of the special passive form. Although the fourth-person forms are commonly used in literary texts that are mostly created – written and often translated – by the most language-conscious educated members of the community, many laymen regard these forms as foreign or entirely unknown, and do not consider themselves as users of such forms (Markus Juutinen, personal fieldwork notes). From this perspective it is all the more interesting that impersonal use of the third-person plural is nevertheless quite uncommon in the written language.

In light of the fact that the fourth-person forms are traditionally known in the southern dialects of Suõ'nn'jel and Njuõttjäu'rr only, it is quite understandable that in the northernmost dialects of Paččjokk and Peäccam as well as in the extinct dialect of Njauddâm the same functions are usually covered by the third-person plural forms. The only formal difference to ordinary active clauses is the absence of the nominative subject.

- 13) *Pällsiõr kuõi'tnalla siõ'rre.*
 ball.game.ACC in.two.ways play.PRS.3PL

‘The ball game is played in two ways.’ (Paččjokk, T. I. Itkonen 1931: 141)

- 14) *De go ä'lǧǧe siõrrád, de kuõi'tpeälla*
 then when begin.PRS.3PL play.INF then two.GEN.side.ILL
ä'lǧǧe lee'd õõut vee'rd oummu.
 must.PRS.3PL be.INF one.ILL amount person.PL
 'When one begins to play there have to be the same number of people on
 both sides.' (Paččjokk, T. I. Itkonen 1931: 139)

It goes without saying that in many contexts it may be impossible to discern impersonal clauses from clauses where the absence of an overt subject could be explained as an instance of pro-drop. As noted by Dryer (2013), in many languages such as Finnish, first- and second-person pronouns may be often absent, whereas third-person pronouns are normally obligatory. Although verbal morphology and the entire syntax of Skolt Saami are quite analogous to those of Finnish, it is interesting to note that while the person and number marking in Skolt Saami finite verbs make it easy to omit the pronoun subject, according to Feist (2010: 252) this is not very common and even less so in the first- and second-person clauses. Somewhat surprisingly, Feist states that third-person pronouns are omitted more often than other personal pronouns. However, as he does not differentiate between the singular and plural forms and does not focus his attention to impersonal expressions either, it is possible that many of the clauses that he considers instances of pro-drop could have been analyzed as impersonal passives instead.

While this paper does not attempt to reconstruct full verb paradigms of earlier phases of Skolt Saami dialects, it appears quite natural to think that the predecessors of the northern dialects have also possessed specialized fourth-person forms. The absence of these forms can be partly explained with reference to the long-standing contacts between Sea Saami dialects of North Saami and Njauddâm Skolt Saami in particular (Juutinen 2019b). Similar circumstances and especially resulting lexical influence from North Saami to Skolt Saami are also known for the Paččjokk area (Juutinen 2022). On the other hand, it is notable that the fourth person is also absent in the westernmost living Eastern Saami language, Aanaar Saami, but then again, much more important evidence is recorded in the extinct Kemi Saami written by Olaus Sirma in the 17th century: Sammallahti (1984: 148; 1998a: 84) considers Sirma's verb forms such as *pieiatte* [put.PRS.4] 'is put' and *sarnäte* [speak.PRS.4]

‘is spoken’ as a sign of the archaic nature of the westernmost Kemi Saami.⁷ As these forms can be compared to present-day Skolt Saami *píjját* and *säärnat* id., such forms must have existed in the northernmost dialects as well.

The use of third-person plural forms for impersonal predicates is not only universally common, but it is also remarkable that this is also the strategy employed by Russian, the majority language with the most long-standing influence on the easternmost Saami languages such as Skolt and Kildin Saami, which nevertheless have been able to maintain the fourth person as an independent morphosyntactic means to code impersonal passive sentences. However, as third-person plural forms are used for similar functions also in most, if not all, western Saami languages (Korhonen 1970), it is conceivable that these forms have always have at least some impersonal use in the easternmost Saami languages as well.

4.2 Impersonal as third-person plural

Not only are third-person plural verb forms used in subjectless impersonal clauses, but the fourth-person impersonal forms are used in contexts where they actually are not impersonal predicates. Instead, they seem to have become new third-person plural forms; cf. the use of Finnish *mennään* go.PASS as a new first-person plural form in *me mennään* ‘we go’.

To be sure, in a situation where third-person forms are being used like fourth-person forms, and vice versa, the first logical interpretation would be that the distinction between the two has been lost, and we are witnessing more or less free variation, which will presumably level out sooner or later. However, these developments have taken place in different parts of the language community. As mentioned above, the use of third-person forms in impersonal clauses is most common in the northernmost dialects without attested fourth-person forms. Perhaps not surprisingly, the opposite development is most common in the southernmost dialects.

As mentioned in Section 2, one of Sammallahti’s (1998b: 29) main criteria for distinguishing between Akkala Saami and Skolt Saami proper is that in the former, the impersonal forms have entirely displaced the original third-person plural forms, resulting in the loss of the fourth person as an independent category. However,

⁷ As the attested Kemi Saami forms were written by a native speaker, it appears probable that the present fourth-person in *-te* has a more original marker than *-t* of all other languages with this category.

Sammallahti also notes that a partly analogous development can be observed in the southernmost Sââ'rvesjäu'rr dialect of Skolt Saami – the one with closest contacts with Akkala Saami. In Sââ'rvesjäu'rr Skolt Saami, it is possible to come across sentences such as (15) where the fourth-person form *jie'lleš* actually functions as a third-person form that has an overt nominative subject, the personal pronoun *sij* 'they'.

- 15) *Sij čáhčča to'b jie'lleš.*
 3PL at.autumn there live.PST.4
 'They (relatives) lived there in autumn.' (Yona, Kert & Zajkov 1988: 61⁸)

Quite obviously, this kind of use of fourth-person forms is due to the influence from the neighboring Akkala Saami where the fourth-person forms have entirely replaced the original third-person plural forms. More precisely, this may have happened after 1937–1938, when the Sââ'rvesjäu'rr Skolt Saami and a majority of the Akkala Saami were forced to move to Yona kolkhoz located between their old winter villages (Linkola & Sammallahti 1995: 53; Kert & Zajkov 1988: 3–4). The use of the fourth person as third-person forms in Sââ'rvesjäu'rr Skolt Saami appears quite new also because of the fact that unlike in Akkala Saami, the fourth person has not fully replaced the old third-person plural, which is still used for the negation verb.⁹ In (16), *le'jješ* [be.PST.4] occurs in a context clearly atypical for impersonals, namely having an inanimate subject referring to iron ovens.

- 16) *ru'vddkiuggân le'jješ – – to'b lie ru'vddkiuggân.*
 iron.oven.PL be.PST.4 there be.PRS.3PL iron.oven.PL
 'There were iron ovens – – there are iron ovens.'
 (Yona, Kert & Zajkov 1988: 51)

⁸ Although Kert and Zajkov (1988) have labeled their texts as Akkala and Ter Saami, data about their informants reveals that part of them represent Skolt Saami dialects of Sââ'rvesjäu'rr and even Njuõttjäu'rr.

⁹ On the other hand, *jeät* [NEG.4] is also absent in Korhonen's (1973: 95–97) grammar sketch in spite of its presence in Korhonen's (1967: 91) historical and dialectological description of the Saami conjugation. See also Zajkov (1987: 157–159) for similar variation in Akkala Saami.

- 17) *Päärnaid di ää'kk̃ j̃ie lue'st*
 child.PL.ACC and old_woman.ACC NEG.3PL leave.CNG
ni koozz.
 NPM where.ILL
 'The children and the old woman are not allowed to go anywhere.'
 (Yona, Kert & Zajkov 1988: 75)

However, our understanding of the history of Sââ'rvesjäu'rr Skolt Saami remains limited, as the dialect was not properly documented before 1960s, and the only published materials consist of the texts published by Zajkov (1987) and Kert and Zajkov (1988).

Fourth-person forms are also attested as third-person forms also among those Skolt Saami speakers of Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) who did not live collectively with Akkala Saami. Another concentration for the Soviet Skolt Saami was in Pâ'jj-Tuállâm, where both the Njuõttjäu'rr and (to lesser extent) Mue'tk̃k̃ dialects were spoken. Here, the use of the fourth person instead of original third-person forms appears more recent than in the Sââ'rvesjäu'rr dialect, as these innovations are very rare in the oldest records of the Njuõttjäu'rr dialect (e.g., T. I. Itkonen 1931).¹⁰ Moreover, there is much idiolectal variation among those Skolt Saami who have lived in Pâ'jj-Tuállâm.

Due to the paucity of language material from a handful of informants, it is difficult to present clear patterns of variation among the speakers of the Njuõttjäu'rr dialect. However, it is interesting to note that some speakers use fourth-person forms in third-person functions (with overt subjects) in the past tense only, but the original third-person plural forms have been retained in the present tense. For some speakers, the old and new forms occur in free variation, as seen in the following examples from Pâ'jj-Tuállâm:

¹⁰ The only such sentence attested from the old Njuõttjäu'rr dialect is (i):

(i) *Oummu ää'rat to'ben,*
 person.PL be.PRS.4 there
ju'rddeš, što j̃ie m̃aka kaaun mi'jjid.
 think.PST.4 that NEG.3PL as.it.were find.CNG 1PL.ACC
 'People are there and think that [the villains] won't find them.' (T. I. Itkonen 1931: 232)

- 18) *Kue'ss puä'tte* (01:45) vs. *kue'ss puð'tteš* (01:40)
 guest.PL come.PRS.3PL guest.PL come.PST.4
 'Guests come.' 'Guests came.' (Kotus 12423_2az)

- sij ko'lle* (02:10) vs. *sij ku'lleš* (03:45)
 3PL hear.PRS.3PL 3PL hear.PST.4
 'They hear.' 'They heard.' (Kotus 12423_1az)

- sij puä'tte* (23:15) vs. *sij puð'tteš* – *puð'tte* (23:54–24:00)
 3PL come.PRS.3PL 3PL come.PST.4 come.PST.3PL
 'They come.' 'They came.' (Kotus 12423_1az)

Another speaker has adopted a somewhat different system, in which the original third-person plural forms are used for the copula and negation verb:

- 19) *Ruðšš le'jje occanj.*
 Russian be.PST.3PL few
 'There were few Russians.' (Pâ'jj-Tuállam, Kotus 16620_1a 11:47)

- 20) *A jâlsteš sij, puârast sij ð'nne leehmid.*
 but live.PST.4 3PL well 3PL keep.PST.3PL cow.PL.ACC
 'They were living, they were good at keeping cows.'
 (Pâ'jj-Tuállam, Kotus 16620_1a 05:18)

Of course, the fourth-person form (*sij*)*jâlsteš* 'they lived' above is not an indefinite, impersonal form anymore. Although Sammallahti (1998b: 29) considers this feature as a criterion for distinguishing between Akkala Saami and Skolt Saami, the above examples show that the phenomenon is not foreign to Skolt Saami either.

While the use of third-person plural instead of the impersonal fourth person can be easily understood in light of typological unmarkedness as well as possible interference from Russian¹¹, the opposite development calls for explanation. Why

¹¹ For impersonal functions of third-person plural forms in Russian, see, e.g., Siewierska and Papastathi (2011) and the following examples:

(ii) *Они покупают хлеб в магазине.*
 3PL buy.IPFV.3PL bread.ACC in store.PREP

would a specialized category of impersonals replace a fully functional third-person plural? As examples above suggest, the Skolt Saami third-person plural forms are not as functional as one might expect. As certain classes of Skolt Saami verbs have homonymous third-person plural forms in the present and past tense, it appears some speakers use third-person forms for lexical verbs without such homonymy (e.g., *â'nne* keep.PRS.3PL vs. *õ'nne* keep.PST.3PL), but for verbs with ambiguous third-person plurals in common, classical Skolt Saami, fourth-person forms have replaced the old third-person forms and thus restored unambiguous tense-marking (for verb classes in Skolt Saami, see Moshnikoff et al. 2020: 306–340 and Koponen et al. 2022). While it is true that *õ'nne* [keep.PST.3PL] in (20) has the unambiguous meaning ‘they kept’, but the corresponding forms for verbs like *jälsted* ‘live’ and members of many inflectional classes are potentially ambiguous: Although most Skolt Saami idioms seem to contain the expected form *jälste* [live.PST.3PL] with which *jälsteš* [live.PST.4] above could be replaced, the former is not only the past tense form, but homonymous with the corresponding present tense form (PRS.3PL). In other words, the use of *jälsteš* can be seen as a less ambiguous and more informative choice, especially when accompanied by the subject *sij* ‘they’. The past tense form *õ'nne* [keep.PST.3PL], in turn, does not need to be replaced by *õ'nneš* [keep.PST.4], as the distinction between the past (*õ'nne*) and present (*â'nne*) third-person plural forms has been retained. According to our preliminary observations, fourth-person forms are used in third-person plural functions predominantly in contexts where use of original forms would result in unwanted ambiguity are regards tense.

4.3 From non-promotional to promotional?

The above sections have described the Skolt Saami fourth person in what seems to be its original nature as regards argument marking: It is a non-promotional impersonal passive, where the agent is not expressed at all, and patient-marking is non-promotional, which in Skolt Saami means that fourth-person verb forms take

‘They buy bread in the grocery store.’ (constructed example)

(iii) *Хлеб покупают в магазине.*
bread.ACC buy.IPFV.3PL in store.PREP

‘Bread is bought in the grocery store.’ (constructed example)

accusative objects just like the finite verb forms in first, second and third person. However, as seen in the previous section, the fourth person has also acquired non-passive third-person functions among the easternmost Skolt Saami dialects spoken in Russia. Moreover, it is possible to observe another kind of deviation from what has been characterized as non-promotional impersonal passive above. To be specific, in contemporary literary texts written – and most often translated – by bilinguals in Finnish, the patient argument is occasionally in the unmarked nominative case instead of the accusative:

- 21) a) *Veä'kk̃ ti'lljet pâi jie'ttnââmrest 112.*
 help.NOM order.PRS.4 always emergency.number.LOC 112
 'Help is always available via the emergency number 112.'
 ("Help is ordered always from the emergency number 112.") (SIKOR)

- b) *Apu tilataan aina hätänumerosta 112.*
 help.NOM order.PRS.PASS always emergency.number.ELA 112
 (translation into Finnish)

- 22) a) *Vaalin vaalšet ouddooumaž*
 election.COM choose.PRS.4 trustee.NOM
po'dde 1.1.2015-31.12.2017.
 period.ILL 1.1.2015-31.12.2017
 'The [Skolt Saami] Trustee for the period 1.1.2015–31.12.2017 will be elected through an election.' (YLE 2017a)

- b) *Vaaleilla valitaan luottamusmies*
 election.PL.ADE choose.PRS.PASS trustee.NOM
kaudelle 1.1.2015-31.12.2017.
 period.ALL 1.1.2015-31.12.2017
 (translation into Finnish)

- 23) a) *Če'vetjääu'rest riäššât veâl vaalsaggstõõllmõš*
 Če'vetjäu'rr.LOC organize.PRS.4 yet election.discuss.NMLZ.NOM
peeiv ouddâl saa'mi ouddoummuvaalid,
 day.GEN before Saami.PL.GEN trustee.election.PL.ACC
sue'vet 4.10.
 Saturday.GEN 4.10.

‘An election debate will be held in Če’vetjäu’rr as late as one day before the Skolt Saami Trustee election, on Saturday 4th of October.’ (YLE 2017b)

- b) *Sevettijärvellä järjestetään vielä vaaliväittely*
 Sevettijärvi.ADE organize.PRS.PASS yet election.debate.NOM
päivää ennen kolttien luottamusmiesvaaleja,
 day.PART before Skolt.Saami.PL.GEN trustee.election.PL.PART
lauantaina 4.10.
 Saturday.ESS 4.10.
 (translation into Finnish)

- 24) a) *Cistt vuei'tet u'vdded õ'hte vuõittja,*
 prize.NOM can.PRS.4 give.INF one.ILL winner.ILL
le'be tõt vuei'tet jue'kked
 or that.NOM can.PRS.4 divide.INF
kuei't vuõi'ti kōõsk.
 two.GEN winner.GEN between
 ‘The prize can be awarded to one winner, or it can be divided between two winners.’ (SIKOR)

- b) *Palkinto voidaan antaa yhdelle voittajalle*
 prize.NOM can.PRS.PASS give.INF one.ALL winner.ALL
tai se voidaan jakaa
 or that.NOM can.PRS.PASS divide.INF
kahden voittajan kesken.
 two.GEN winner.GEN between
 (translation into Finnish)

Although the criteria for choosing between the nominative-, genitive- and partitive-marking for subjects and objects are notoriously complex in Finnish (see, e.g., T. Itkonen 1979), it seems obvious that the nominative-marked patients of ordering (help), choosing (a trustee), organizing (a debate) and awarding (a prize) are in the nominative because the nominative would be used in the corresponding impersonal passive clauses in Finnish. However, while in Finnish the nominative can be considered an expected case for the object in such clauses, in Skolt Saami the

expected objects would be the accusatives *vie'kk̃* [help.ACC], *ouddoummu* [trustee.ACC], *vaalsaggstõõllmõõžž* [election.discuss.NMLZ.ACC], *ciist* [prize.ACC] and *tõn* [that.ACC] instead of the nominatives *veä'kk̃*, *ouddooumaž*, *vaalsaggstõõllmõš*, *cistt* and *tõt* seen above.

What is most interesting here is that although nominatives such as these can almost always be explained by interference from Finnish, a nominative argument of a Skolt Saami transitive verb is, in principle, always the subject of a clause. Therefore, in the context of the Skolt Saami grammar itself, the nominative arguments seen in (21–24) may be better analyzed as nominative subjects instead of nominative objects. In other words, in sentences like these fourth-person forms no longer function as non-promotional passives but instead, the patient looks like having been promoted to subject position; on the other hand, this analysis would entail that the verb no longer agrees with the subject in the way it has traditionally agreed. While nominative subjects in Skolt Saami impersonals are still rather exceptional deviations from the norm, it seems that the phenomenon is gradually gaining foothold. If continued, this kind of development could lead to a wholesale reanalysis of the alignment system. Alternatively, of course, it would be possible to regard nominative arguments like these as objects, but as the nominative is not otherwise a (traditional) case for objects in Skolt Saami, it would be somewhat awkward to think that this were the case only in sentences with passive functions and no overt subjects whatsoever. On the other hand, one of the future tasks in the field of Skolt Saami syntax is to provide an up-to-date picture of the gradual restructuring of the entire grammar as a result of all-embracing Finnish influence akin to that in the neighboring Aanaar Saami, as already described by Mettovaara (forthcoming).

At the same time it must be remembered that while the phenomenon seen here appears to be limited to the Skolt Saami written and spoken in Finland, the use of (originally) fourth-person forms as third-person plural predicates of active clauses (Section 4.2) is limited to the Skolt Saami spoken in Russia, certainly without similar interference from Finnish. As a consequence, there appear to be no dialects, idiolects or concrete, attested sentences in which fourth-person forms would have both agents and patients marked in the nominative.

5 Conclusion

The preceding sections have aimed to provide a concise description of the so-called fourth-person verb forms in Skolt Saami. They can be functionally defined as an impersonal, non-promotional passive, a set of verb forms that make up the seventh “person form” within Skolt Saami inflection, morphologically and syntactically on a par with the first-, second- and third-person singulars and plurals. Special attention has been directed to the multifaceted relationships of the fourth-person and the third-person plural forms, as data from various dialects and the closest sister languages of Skolt Saami show that impersonal verb forms may acquire functions as personal verb forms, and vice versa, not unlike what has happened in Finnic languages.

Although the fourth person in Skolt Saami is hopefully better known now, observations on its past and present also provide new, interesting perspectives to future studies on the interplay between impersonal and personal verb forms (Sections 4.1 and 4.2). Moreover, it appears obvious that the future of the language itself will be dependent on the interrelations of Skolt Saami between Finnish and Russian. In a sense, these majority languages have been actively pulling the Skolt Saami language in two quite opposite directions for over a century, and the future of Skolt Saami is most likely that of Finnish–Saami bilinguals. From this point of view, it remains to be seen how the complex argument marking in Finnish will affect the originally straightforward argument marking in Skolt Saami, for example (cf. Section 4.3).

All in all, it appears that although Skolt Saami and other easternmost Saami languages are not the key languages in reconstructing the Proto-Saami conjugation, for example, they do offer important perspectives on the study of specialized impersonal verb forms and on contact linguistics in general. Although they lack the dual, the most emblematic inflectional category in Saami, languages like Skolt Saami may have something else interesting to offer: the Finnish “passive” and Estonian “impersonal” have attracted the attention of scholars working on passives or Uralic grammars in general for a long time, but similar – although not identical – phenomena can be found in Saami, too. It is to be hoped that the findings of the present paper prove that individual Saami languages must be understood and described on their own premises and are in that way able to provide us with important and novel information about phenomena that are foreign to even their better-known sister languages.

Nonstandard abbreviations used in glosses

4	fourth person
ALL	allative
CNG	connegative
DPT	discourse particle
ESS	essive
ILL	illative
NPM	negative polarity marker
PART	partitive
POT	potential
SUP	superlative

Data sources

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