3Pl and non-finite impersonal constructions: A functional approach

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Introduction

Aims

- To compare Hungarian third person plural (3Pl) and non-finite (NF) impersonals with the corresponding constructions in Finno-Ugric languages.
- To create a complex model for the description, since former accounts (cf. Stipa 1962) on the topic have often neglected pragmatic concerns.

Research question

- Which constructions correspond to the Hungarian 3Pl and NF impersonals in Surgut Khanty, Mari, Udmurt and Finnish?
- Can any differences be revealed in the usage of these constructions? What is the motivation for these differences?
- Can the pro-drop parameter explain the variance?
  - Pro-drop parameter: languages with pronominal pro-drop generally use 3Pl impersonals, while in languages where the pro-drop is not accepted, impersonal generic pronouns and nouns are used (Siewierska 2011).

Target languages

	Hungarian	Surgut Khanty	Udmurt	Mari	Finnish
Number of cases	18-23	9	17	12	15
Basic sentence pattern	Nom-Acc	Nom-Acc	Nom-Acc	Nom-Acc	Nom-Acc
Differential object marking	-	+	+/-	+/-	+
Unmarked objects	(+) (nouns with Px)	+	+ (if the noun is indefinite)	+ (if the noun is indefinite)	(+) (in „passive", imperative, necessive constructions)
Nominal predicates (without a copula)	+	+	+	+	-
Pro-drop in the 3rd person is possible	+	+	+	+	(+) (3Sg)

Table 1. Morphosyntactic features of the target languages

Theoretical background

Malchukov and Ogawa (2011) following Keenan (1976) assume that the subject is non-prototypical e.g. impersonal if it is not a topical, a referential, an agentive, an animate, or a definite argument.

In Hungarian, the grammatical subject (S) corresponds to the semantic agent (A) and to the most prominent part of the event, e.g. the trajector (Tr) from the perspective of the speaker (Tolcsvai Nagy 2013). This explanation seems to be applicable to the description of other FU languages.
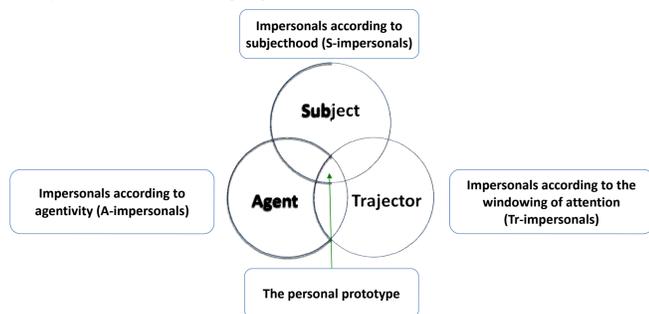
Materials & Methods

Process of data collection:
Sample sentences were compiled based on former literature (for instance, Csúcs 1990, Kenesei et al. 1998, Bartens 2000, Bereczki 2002, Csepregi 2011).

Further data were collected with the help of five questionnaires which targeted different impersonal constructions. Four questionnaires contained a translation test, where the source sentences were provided both in Hungarian and Russian. These questionnaires were answered by three to ten native informants per language, and for each language the translations were double-checked. Additionally, a native consultant provided commentaries (probable contexts, restrictions of usage, etc.) on each translation. The fifth questionnaire was acceptability judgment test to get a better understanding of the pragmatics of impersonals.

Moreover, a corpus-based study has also been carried out, where I used the parallel translations of a Russian novel (PM 2010). These texts are not annotated; the source language of the translations is Russian, and each text contains ca. 12 500 words, so the whole size of the corpus is ca. 70 000 tokens.

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Results

Three different types usage types of the 3Pl impersonals have been noticed cross-linguistically (Siewierska 2011: 62–65): a) generic use, b) episodic use, and c) specific use. All the three uses of 3Pl impersonals exist in Hungarian and in the target languages, except for Finnish. Examples (1a-1e) show a typical case of generic usage.

(1a) *Beszél-nek   mostanában   mindenfélé-t.*   (Hungarian)
speak-3PL   nowadays   everything-ACC

(1b) *qŷťǝm   pŷr   ʌat-nǝ   pā   ūr-ǝn   ńawǝm-ʌ-ǝt.*   (Khanty, OS)
stay-PTC.PST   behind   time-LOC   other   way-LOC   speak-PRS-3PL

(1c) *Berlo   dyre   olomar   no   vera-lo.*   (Udmurt, YS)
present   time:INE   something   also   speak-3pl

(1d) *Kazǝtse   žapǝšte   ala-mom-at   ojl-at.*   (Mari, TE)
present   time:INE   something-ACC   speak-3pl

(1e) *Nykyään   puhu-taan   kaikenlais-ta.*   (Finnish, HL)
nowadays   speak-PASS.PRS   everything-PART

'Nowadays they speak about everything.'

Examples (2a-2e) show an instance of episodic (existential) usage:

(2a) *Oroszország-ban   sok   hal-at   esz-nek.*   (Hungarian)
Russia-INE   much   fish-ACC   eat-3PL

(2b) *Rūť   mǝɣ-nē   üryem   quʌ   ʌi-ʌ-ǝt.*   (Khanty, LK)
Russian   contry-LOC   much   fish   eat-PRS-3PL

(2c) *Rośśi-yn   tros   čoryg   ši-jo.*   (Udmurt, OI)
Russia-INE   much   fish   eat-3PL

(2d) *Rossija-šte   šuko   kol-ǝm   kočk-ǝt.*   (Mari, AS)
Russia-INE   much   fish-ACC   eat-3PL

(2e) *Venäjä-llä   syö-dään   paljon   kala-a.*   (Finnish, SL)
Russia-ADE   eat-PASS.PRS   much   fish-PART

'In Russia, they eat a lot of fish.'

The specific usage of the 3Pl impersonals is anchored to the contextual situation. Examples (3a-3d) are taken from the corpus of parallel texts (PM 2010), where Surgut Khanty is not included.
In the Finnish sentence (3d), there is a rare instance of the usage of 3Pl impersonals:

(One day some candies were brought to the shop, and the little boy, Roman was very happy about the good news):

(3a) *Ma hozták a szövetkezeti boltba, na, én meg elvettem.*   (Hungarian, PM 2010: 257)

(3b) *Tunne kooperatíve vaizy no mon bašti.*   (Udmurt, PM 2010: 257)

(3c) *Tače kooperatívaš kondenǝt, nu, majat nalanam.*   (Mari, PM 2010: 257)

(3d) *Toivat tänään kooperatiiviin, no, ja minä otin.*   (Finnish, PM 2010: 257)

'They brought it today to the shop, and then, I took it.'

On the basis of the parallel translations (PM 2010), the Hungarian 3Pl impersonals have the following counterparts in the target languages:
a) Udmurt: 3Pl impersonal   > personal 3Pl   > generic noun   > non-finite verb form
b) Mari: 3Pl impersonal   > personal 3Pl   > generic noun   > non-finite verb form
c) Finnish: impersonal passive   > personal 3Pl   > 3Pl impersonal   > personal 3Pl

Results on textual frequency are summarized in Table 2.

	Hungarian	Udmurt	Mari	Finnish
Generic use	13	10	10	1
Episodic use	16	11	11	1
Specific use	1	1	1	1
Total (3Pl impersonals)	**30**	**22**	**22**	**3**
% of all 3Pl verb forms	**21,4%**	**16,2%**	**16,2%**	**0,05%**

Table 2. 3Pl impersonals in the PM texts (2010)

In the 3Pl impersonal constructions, the grammatical subject is expressed by verbal person markers, and it triggers verbal agreement. Semantically, this participant is generally an agentive, voluntary actor. This participant of the action is not in the focus of attention, so it is not a trajector. Therefore 3Pl impersonals are A-impersonals.

The Hungarian non-finite impersonal construction (consisting of a gerund and a copular verb) has a formal counterpart in Surgut Khanty, but it is very rare. In Udmurt and Mari participle constructions are used to describe similar events, while in Finnish the past passive participle for the same function:

(4a) *A   szoba /szobá-ban   ki   van   takarít-va.*   (Hungarian)
the   room room-INE   out   be.PRS.3SG   clean_up-GER

(4b) *qōt   lōqi   noq   raŋij-i.*
house   inner_corner   up   wipe-PST.PASS.3SG
Tēm   qōt   lōqi-nǝ   noq   raŋij-min.   (Khanty, LK)
this   house   inner_corner-LOC   fel   wipe-GER

(4c) *Visjet /ta   visjet-yn   uťalt-emyn.*   (Udmurt, ER)
room this   room-INE   clean_up-PST.PTCP

(4d) *Pölem-ǝm   /tide   pölem-ǝšte   erǝktǝ-me.*   (Mari, IK)
room-ACC   this   room-INE   clean_up-PST.PTCP

(4e) *Huone   /tässä   huonee-ssa   on   siivo-ttu.*   (Finnish, SH)
room   this:INE   room-INE   be.PRS.3SG   clean_up-PST.PTCP

'The room is cleaned up. In the room, there has been cleaning up.'

These constructions share several features with canonic passives, since the grammatical subject refers to the Patient, while the Agent is fully demoted. Despite of this, these constructions are clearly agentless impersonals (or impersonal passives, transimpersonals), as it can be seen both from case marking and the speaker's intentions. In Hungarian, Khanty and Finnish only a human Agent can be involved, while in Udmurt and Mari any animate can refer to the demoted agent. Even meteorological verbs can be used in these constructions in Udmurt, which suggest the non-animate nature of the demoted Agent. In non-finite impersonals usually the goal of the depicted event is in the focus of attention, so the can be treated Tr-impersonals.

Conclusion

The Hungarian 3Pl impersonals have formal counterparts in all target languages but they are used in different way. Personal passives and 3Pl impersonals both correspond to the Hungarian constructions in Khanty, and the personal passive correspond to the gerund constructions as well. The Finnish impersonal passives are used as counterparts of Hungarian 3Pl and NF impersonals. The most similarities in the usage of the constructions can be seen between Udmurt and Mari. The questionnaires did not show any instances of the usage of generic nouns corresponding to the Hungarian data, so the pro-drop parameter cannot explain the variation among these impersonals. I assume that Hungarian impersonals are closer to the corresponding forms in Udmurt and Mari, because there is no canonical passive in these languages, therefore both the 3Pl and the NF impersonals have quite separate meanings. While in Finnish and Khanty, the use of a personal passive can cause the gradual disappearance of 3Pl impersonals and the impersonal readings of the non-finite constructions.