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Indefinite pronouns in Kildin Saami: too much variation?  

Introduction: The system of indefinite pronouns in Kildin Saami has been described as consisting of 2 indefinite series: referential indefinite -l’aan’n’č and non-referential indefinite -n’e (see Kert 1971:177, Rießler 2022: 227). However, during the fieldwork I have encountered two more series: -n’ebedd and koe-. Moreover, there is great variation in the use of these pronouns, and the present study seeks to explain it.  

Data: As the fieldwork data suggest, the koe- series (1) corresponds to ‘specific known’ context of Haspelmath (1997), with the Russian koye- series being a clear diachronic source. The -n’ebedd series (2) is used in non-referential contexts, except for under negation.  

1) Tar’r’m menne koe-k’e pudde  
today I.DAT INDEF-who come.PST.3SG  
‘Today someone came to me’  

2) pidd’ men’-n’ibedd porrse  
bring thing-INDEF eat.INF  
‘Bring me something to eat’  

However, the most puzzling part of these data is not the novelty of these two negation markers, but rather the degree of variation across the community. more then a half of the respondents do not use koe-, and also -n’ibedd is frequently used instead of n’e. Therefore, there are two variables: presence or absence of koe- and the use of n’e vs n’ebedd.  

Dialects or sociolinguistic variables? Due to historic reasons, the Kildin Saami community in Lovozero consists of speakers of different dialects. Therefore, most phonological and morphological variation found in Kildin Saami can be explained by dialectal differences (see Egorov 2022 for an overview).  

However, the dialectal differences play no role here, as the speakers of the same dialect may use different indefinite pronoun systems. Instead, the use of koe- and -n’ebedd is conditioned by a speaker’s awareness of ‘literary Saami’, as these forms, being Russian loans, are absent from the speech of local ‘intelligentsia’, who have a puristic attitude towards Kildin Saami.  

1 Saami < Finno-Ugric < Uralic. Mainly spoken in Lovozero, Murmansk region by about 100 people  
2 An anonymous reviewer asked for a more detailed discussion of the theoretical and typological consequences of these data. A relevant discussion will be given during the conference.
Selected references: