

Modal verbs in Siberian Seto within Balto-Finnic system

¹My talk will be focused on the modal system in Siberian Seto and its distinctions from closely related languages, particularly in usage of the modal verbs in domains of Necessity and Possibility (see van der Auwera and Plungian 1998).

Setos are a minor ethnic group in south-eastern Estonia and north-western Russia. At the beginning of the XX century a large group of Setos resettled and were given land in Siberia in the course of the Stolypin reform. The status of the Seto language is controversial, and some researchers describe it as a sub-dialect of Estonian. I will omit this question here and refer to it as a language.

The data for this research was collected at the field work at Khaidak village in Krasnoyarsk Krai in 2019, where apparently the last large community of Setos lives.

The core of the modal system in Balto-Finnic languages is formed by modal verbs which, according to (Kehayov and Torn-Leesik 2009:366) may follow personal pattern with the NOM-subject or impersonal. Among modal verbs three occur in all the languages, namely (forms in the Standard Finnish) “voida” and “saada” expressing Possibility and “pitää” expressing Necessity. The other verbs mentioned in the article were not found in our data on Siberian Seto and are not discussed here.

Siberian Seto shares general features of the related languages. However, the semantic distribution of the modals is different, which is reflected in the table below (taken and altered from the above-mentioned work: 372):

Language	Voida	Pitää	Saada
Siberian Seto	3	3	4
Estonian	4	4	5
Finnish	4	4	5
Ingrian	3(+?)	4	4
Livonian	4	4	5
Votic	4	4	3
Veps	4	4	2
Karelian	4	4	4

Our data shows that “Pitää” never has epistemic meaning and is substituted with modal particles. “Voida” has lost its participant-internal meaning, though such usage was possible a century ago as the text of the Gospel shows (however, it is not clear, whether this was valid to all Seto dialects).

“Saada” and “Pitää” have grammatical restrictions on their usage. “Pitää” is replaced with semantically the same construction “olema vaja” in Preterite or if negated (though the Preterite form “pidi-si” is still used by some older speakers). “Saada” is used almost exclusively in negated form.

The modal system in Siberian Seto can be characterized as typical for Balto-Finnic languages. However, the loss of some semantic functions of the modal verbs and their grammatically restricted usage may prove, that the system is changing. The isolation of the language may contribute to its peculiar development.

References:

1. Kehayov P., Tom Leesik R. 2009. Modal Verbs in Balto-Finnic. In “Modals in the Languages of Europe”. pp.363–401

¹ The research was supported by Russian Foundation for Basic Research. Grant № 18-012-00802 “Integrated grammatical and socio-linguistic study of the language of Russian Seto”

2. Van der Auwera J., Plungian V. 1998. Modality's Semantic Map. *Linguistic Typology*, 1998, 2.1, 79-124.