

MICROVARIATION IN INARI SAAMI

1. Introduction

This paper considers some instances of idiolectal microvariation within the verbal morphology of Inari Saami.¹ Inari Saami is one of the three Saami languages spoken in Northern Finland. There remain about 300–400 speakers, who are all bilingual in Inari Saami and Finnish. Most Inari Saami speakers do not read or write Inari Saami, and they have not studied it in school: the language has been maintained orally.²

The changes that will be considered here concern mergers of morphological forms. I consider the speech of three speakers of Inari Saami, and compare their morphological paradigms to paradigms listed in two Inari Saami dictionaries (Itkonen et al. 1986; Sammallahti & Morottaja 1993). Even though such a small sample of speakers has been consulted, I have found that several slightly different paradigms are in use. This kind of inter-speaker variation is perhaps expected for a language like Inari Saami, as a high degree of variation has been noted to be common in endangered languages (Dorian 1973, 1994; Cook 1989; Connell 2002; Elourdui 2003). For example, Dorian (1994) notes that there tends to be great inter-speaker, idiolectal variation within endangered speech communities that cannot be explained by factors such as geography, age, social class, gen-

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² Recently there have been attempts to establish a normative form of the language. Inari Saami has been taught in several schools in the Lake Inari region and textbooks have been created for that purpose.

der or network membership. There is also unusually great variation within the speech of individual speakers (Cook 1989; Dorian 1994). Of course, linguistic variation also occurs in communities where large, non-endangered languages are spoken. However, the consensus seems to be that there is more variation in a language contraction situation, even though this claim is difficult to prove, as pointed out by Cook (1989).

A high degree of variation in a language contraction situation is often explained as a “language death phenomenon; that is, a natural and perhaps inevitable effect of language decay or weakening” (see Elordui and references cited therein). However, Dorian (1994) offers an interesting alternative hypothesis for why endangered languages exhibit so much variation. Dorian studies a dialect of Gaelic, which is spoken in East Sutherland, Scotland. In that speech community, Dorian argues, the abundant variation in individual speakers as well as between speakers can be explained by the absence of a local prestige norm. There are several reasons why there is no prestige norm: the local dialect of Gaelic is considered inferior to other varieties of Gaelic, but those other varieties are too distant to emulate. Also, the speakers are generally illiterate in Gaelic, and so have not been exposed to a written norm.

In this paper, I first present the relevant data from the different Inari Saami speakers. I then argue that the specific changes that have occurred within the different speakers are best explained if language acquisition and phonetic salience are taken into account. Finally, I consider the question of whether the variation evident among the adult speakers can be seen as a consequence of the fact that Inari Saami lacks a written normative form that is well-known by the speakers.

2. Second person dual and plural

According to the paradigms provided in the Inari Saami dictionaries (Itkonen et al. 1986; Sammallahti & Morottaja 1993), as well as in Olthuis’s (2002) Inari Saami grammatical description, the second person dual ending is *-vettee* and the second person plural ending is *-vetted* in the present tense verb paradigm:

- (1) *Tuoi kuáláásvettee onne.*
 you.DU fish.2DU today
 ‘(The two of) you are fishing today.’
- (2) *Tij kuáláásvetted onne.*
 you.PL fish.2PL today
 ‘You (all) are fishing today.’

Two of my informants have merged these two endings into one. Interestingly, they have not merged them in the same way. One speaker, who I will call Speaker A, uses the ending *-vettee* for both dual and plural, and another speaker, Speaker B, uses the ending *-vetted̥* for both. Note that Speaker A has not lost final [d̥] everywhere. In all the infinitive forms cited in this paper, for example, she still has the [d̥] sound.

The table in (3) displays the complete present tense paradigm as elicited from Speaker A, Speaker B, and other informants, including a third informant, Speaker C, whose speech will be discussed below. The Inari Saami letter *â* symbolizes a central, mid or low, unrounded vowel. The letter *á* is a low, back, unrounded vowel.

		SPEAKER A	SPEAKER B
Sg 1	kuáláástam	kuáláástam	kuáláástam
2	kuáláástah	kuáláástah	kuáláástah
3	kuáláást	kuáláást	kuáláást
Du 1	kuáláásteen	kuáláástáán	kuáláástáán
2	kuáláástvettee	kuáláástvettee	kuáláástvetted̥
3	kuáláástava	kuáláástava	kuáláástava
Pl 1	kuáláástep	kuáláástâp	kuáláástâp
2	kuáláástvetted̥	kuáláástvettee	kuáláástvetted̥
3	kuáláásteh	kuáláásteh	kuáláásteh

(3) *kuálástid̥* ‘to fish’

The table in (3) reveals that there are some similarities between Speakers A and B which are not shared by the other speakers; for example, *kuáláástep* ~ *kuáláástâp*. This is not surprising, because A and B are siblings and have lived together since childhood. It is, however, surprising that the two siblings differ in the second person endings, although they grew up in the same household, so their primary linguistic data (PLD) must have been very similar. The fact that A and B are siblings makes this a particularly interesting case, since this means that we can be reasonably certain of two things. First, in the PLD, both the ending *-vettee* and the ending *-vetted̥* existed, so both probably existed in the language of their parents, and it is therefore very likely that their parents distinguished between second person dual and plural. Second, we cannot attribute the change to the absence of either form in the PLD. This is clear because if something in the PLD would have caused a change, then A and B should have the same ending for dual and plural, but they do not: one has *-vettee* and the other *-vetted̥*.

Below are further examples of the second person dual and plural forms of verbs other than *kuáláástiđ* ‘to fish’.

		SPEAKER A	SPEAKER B
Du 2	lávluvettee	lávluvettee	lávluvettedđ
Pl 2	lávluvettedđ	lávluvettee	lávluvettedđ

(4) *lávluđ* ‘to sing’

		SPEAKER A	SPEAKER B
Du 2	sárnuvettee	sárnuvettee	sárnuvettedđ
Pl 2	sárnuvettedđ	sárnuvettee	sárnuvettedđ

(5) *sárnuđ* ‘to speak’

		SPEAKER A	SPEAKER B
Du 2	tubdâvettee	tubdâvettee	tubdâvettedđ
Pl 2	tubdâvettedđ	tubdâvettee	tubdâvettedđ

(6) *tubdâđ* ‘to know; to feel’

Examples (7–9) show the verb *tubdâđ* used in a second person dual context. Example (7) is spoken by Speaker A:

- (7) *Tun já enni tubdâvettee sunnuu.*
 you.SG and mother know them.DU.ACC
 ‘You and your mother know (the two of) them.’

Example (8) is spoken by Speaker B:

- (8) *Tun já enni tubdâvettedđ sunnuu.*
 you.SG and mother know them.DU.ACC
 ‘You and your mother know (the two of) them.’

Example (9) is elicited from a third speaker, Speaker C:

- (9) *Tun já enni tubdâvettee sunnuu.*
 you.SG and mother know them.DU.ACC
 ‘You and mother know (the two of) them.’

Examples (10–12) show the verb *tubdâđ* used in a second person plural context. First Speaker A:

- (10) *Tij tubdâvettee ustevâd.*
 you.PL know friend.2.POSS
 ‘You (all) know your friend.’

Example (11) is from Speaker B:

- (11) *Tij tubdâvetted ustevâd.*
 you.PL know friend.2.POSS
 ‘You (all) know your friend.’

Finally, example (12) is spoken by Speaker C:

- (12) *Tij tubdâvetted ustevâd.*
 you.PL know friend.2.POSS
 ‘You (all) know your friend.’

In sentences (7–9) above, it is clear from the subject NP that the subject has a dual referent. Similarly, the subject NP in (10–12) is a plural pronoun, and so the subject referent is plural. However, examples (7–12) show that Speaker A consistently uses the ending *-vettee* and Speaker B consistently uses the ending *-vetted*, regardless of whether the sentence has a dual or plural subject referent. Nevertheless, Speaker A and Speaker B both recognize that other speakers use the ending that they do not use. However, neither of them recognizes a difference in meaning between the two endings. That is, they recognize that both endings are in use, but they do not recognize the dual/plural distinction that other speakers make for second person in the present tense.

3. Understanding the variation

How do we explain the changes that have happened? Two speakers have merged the dual and plural forms of the second person, present tense verb forms, but they have not extended the same form: descriptively, one speaker has lost the final [đ] in the plural, while the other speaker has added an [đ] in the dual. In this section, I will discuss two possible explanations for how these changes took place. The first one concerns a general loss of dual/plural distinctions, and I will argue against this possibility. The second explanation refers to acquisition and phonetic salience, and this is the explanation that I will adopt.

3.1. Weakening of the dual/plural distinction

Initially, the data presented in section 2 might lead to the hypothesis that the dual/plural distinction in general is disappearing in Inari Saami, at least for some speakers. In fact, this may seem like an obvious hypothesis, as a loss of morphological distinctions is common in endangered languages. Loss of morphology is often cited as a typical, and perhaps natural, side-effect of language loss, or loss of fluency among the native speakers (Dorian 1978; Dressler 1988; Campbell & Muntzel 1989; Sasse 1992a, 1992b; Janse 2003). Loss of morphology is often talked about as a language death phenomenon, alongside rampant variation, which was mentioned in the introduction.

It might thus seem likely that some speakers, at least Speakers A and B, are merging all the dual/plural endings. More specifically, one might expect that for Speaker A, all the dual endings are taking over the plurals, and for Speaker B, one would expect that the plural endings are taking over the duals. Neither of these assumptions is correct. In this section, I will present several facts which indicate that the dual/plural distinction is still alive and well in the speech of my informants.

The examples in section 2 all pertained to second person dual and plural in the present tense paradigm. Consider now first and third person:

		SPEAKER A	SPEAKER B
Du 1	tobdeen	tobdeen	tobdeen
Pl 1	tubdâp	tubdâp	tubdâp
		SPEAKER A	SPEAKER B
Du 3	tubdâv	tubdâv	tubdâv
Pl 3	tobdeh	tobdeh	tobdeh

(13) *tubdâd* ‘to know; to feel’

We see in (13) that the informants make a distinction between dual and plural in first and third person. If we compare it to the data in section 2, we might expect Speaker A to use *tobdeen* for both dual and plural, and Speaker B to use *tubdâp* for both dual and plural, but this is not what we find. Parallel to other speakers, Speakers A and B make a dual/plural distinction in first and third person present tense. It is thus clear that there is no general weakening of the dual/plural distinction in the present tense.

If we consider other tenses and moods, we find no indication that the second person dual/plural distinction is disappearing. Table (14) shows the second person forms of *kuálástiđ* ‘to fish’ in the past tense:

		SPEAKER A	SPEAKER B
Du 2	kuáláástáid	kuáláástáid	kuáláástáid
Pl 2	kuáláástijd	kuáláástijd	kuáláástijd

(14) *kuálástiđ* ‘to fish’, past tense

The forms in (14) demonstrate that the distinction between second person dual and plural is kept in the past tense. The mergers discussed in section 2 are not the only dual/plural mergers found in the Inari Saami verb paradigms. There are other mergers in paradigms of specific stems that are due to morpho-phonological changes. For example, in verbs of the *čokkáđ* ‘sit’ type, some speakers have the same form for first person dual and plural in the past tense: *čokkáin* (Sammallahti & Morottaja 1996: 141). However, although there are some sporadic mergers, there is no general tendency to lose the dual/plural distinction.

So far, the discussion has focused on mergers in form, but it is also possible that the distinction in function, or **meaning** could be merged. Perhaps the *-vettee/-vetteđ* mergers serve as an indication that speakers no longer obligatorily mark the distinction between dual and plural. Among my informants, only Speaker A occasionally fails to keep a strict distinction between the two, although she recognizes the difference and knows all the relevant forms. An exception is of course the second person in the present tense paradigm. As discussed above, Speaker A does not recognize the dual/plural distinction there.

Speaker A sometimes uses the plural forms in dual contexts. Sentences (15–17) are examples of her speech:

(15) *Mij kyevtis tánssáp mii usteváin.*
 we.PL two dance.1PL our.PL friend.COMITATIVE
 ‘The two of us dance with our friend.’

(16) *Tun já enni halidijd vuojjâđ jávrist.*
 you.SG and mother wanted.2PLSWIM.INFINITIVE lake.LOCATIVE
 ‘You and mother want to swim in the lake.’

(17) *Pärni já almai tobdeh mii.*
 child and man know.3PL us.PL
 ‘You and the man know us.’

Although she often replaces dual forms with plurals, Speaker A recognizes this as being ‘wrong’ or ‘sloppy’. She sometimes corrects herself immediately after she has replaced a dual with a plural. When specifically asked, she can always explain which form is the correct dual and which is the correct plural form. I have no explanation for why Speaker A sometimes uses the plural form in dual contexts: perhaps this is a consequence of influence from Finnish, which does not have dual verb forms.

Speaker A’s ‘sloppiness’ cannot be appealed to as an explanation for the *-vettee/-vetted̄* merger of section 2. Recall that Speaker A has generalized the former dual form *-vettee* to cover both dual and plural. This is the opposite of the pattern of (15–17), where the plural has taken over the dual. So Speaker A’s tendency to blur the distinction between dual and plural does not explain the fact that she has replaced the second person plural form with the dual. Also, Speaker A consistently uses the *-vettee* form for both dual and plural; unlike her ‘plural-for-dual’ strategy discussed here, it is not the case that she only occasionally extends *-vettee* to cover the plural.

In sum, there is no evidence to suggest that the *-vettee/-vetted̄* mergers presented in section 2 are due to the fact that the dual/plural distinction in Inari Saami is generally unstable or disappearing.

3.2. Phonetic salience

Following Ohala (1981), Lightfoot (1999), Hróarsdóttir (2003), Hale (2006), and others, I take it to be important to consider language acquisition to account for language change. I propose that the morphological *-vettee/-vetted̄* variation presented in section 2 is due to reanalysis in the acquisition process. That is, when Speaker A and Speaker B were acquiring their language, they ‘misanalyzed’ or ‘misparsed’ some of the input. Note that although a term such as ‘misanalyze’ may be interpreted as having a negative connotation, the child is of course just analyzing the input. ‘Misanalyze’ here simply means positing a grammar different from the parents’ grammar.

The end result of these instances of misanalysis is two grammars that are not identical to each other, nor are they identical to the input grammar. In table (18) below, I summarize the morphological differences that are the focus here:

	PLD	SPEAKER A	SPEAKER B
2nd dual	<i>-vettee</i>	<i>-vettee</i>	<i>-vetted̄</i>
2nd plural	<i>-vetted̄</i>	<i>-vettee</i>	<i>-vetted̄</i>

(18)

An [d̥] in final unstressed position is not phonetically salient and is thus difficult to perceive in the flow of normal speech. The [d̥] is a voiced interdental fricative. However, in casual Inari Saami speech, the [d̥] in coda position is often weakened to a sound that sounds more like a glide than a fricative.³ It is thus easy to understand how the change which resulted in Speaker A's language could happen: Speaker A simply did not perceive the final, unstressed [d̥] in the ending *-vetted̥*, and she posited the ending *-vettee* in her mental lexicon for second person plural as well as second person dual. Later, when realizing that some speakers have the final [d̥], she assumed it was a dialectal variant of the ending without [d̥]. As far as Speaker A is concerned, *-vetted̥* and *-vettee* are in free variation within the speech community, and she uses *-vettee*.

The change of Speaker B is less straightforward. If final unstressed [d̥] is difficult to perceive, how come it was added in the dual morpheme? The key to understanding this change also relies on the fact that final unstressed [d̥] is difficult to perceive. Speaker B learns the ending *-vetted̥* for second person plural, and then he hears *-vettee* for second person dual. Knowing that final [d̥] is difficult to perceive, he hypercorrects and posits a sound that is not there: he assumes that the speaker has said *-vetted̥* and posits that as the lexical entry for second person plural as well. See Ohala (1981) for extensive argumentation that the listener (the acquirer) is often a source of language change in the fashion outlined above.

4. Conclusion

This paper has presented data on Inari Saami verb morphology which reveal variation between speakers. Two of the informants diverge from the standard cited paradigms, and they also differ from each other in which forms they use. The account provided here for how the relevant changes have taken place relies on an acquisition-based view of historical change. The reason why the sound in question has undergone changes is that it is not phonetically salient and therefore difficult to perceive. Since the sound is easily misperceived, it is not surprising that it has been misanalyzed in the acquisition process.

This line of reasoning raises the question of why random variation, specifically idiolectal variation, is not even more common than it seems to be. A large literature on sociolinguistics tells us that variation is generally not random; instead, a given linguistic variable tends to correlate with some socially deter-

³ Some anecdotal evidence: I played recordings of short passages of Inari Saami speech to an audience of linguists at the LAGB Spring Meeting in 2003. The purpose of this exercise was to find out how some of the sounds are perceived Laponically naive linguists. Many of the linguists transcribed [d] in coda position as [j].

mined variable. This does not seem to be the case here, as the two people who display the *-vettee/-vetted* merger grew up in the same family. Moreover, they still live together and they have similar lifestyles. They are of different gender, but I have found no evidence in the community that one of the two morphemes is tied to either gender.

Another question arises when this case study is considered in the larger context of the general study of endangered languages. As mentioned in the introduction, many researchers have noted that variation tends to be rampant in language contraction situations. Assuming that the generalization is indeed correct, why should it be? Why should variation be more common among speakers of endangered languages than among speakers of stable languages? Simply explaining the generalization as a “language death phenomenon” seems more like attaching a label to a phenomenon than an explanation.

Dorian’s (1994) hypothesis about why there is so much variation in the Gaelic communities of East Sutherland offers an interesting insight here. As mentioned in the first section of this paper, Dorian proposes that the high degree of variation can be explained by the absence of a prestige norm, and the fact that the speakers tend to be illiterate in Gaelic. Applying Dorian’s insight to the topic of this paper, we can explain the fact that extensive idiolectal variation prevails into adulthood by appealing to the lack of exposure to a prescribed standard version of the language.

The kind of variation evident in Inari Saami morphology could, and probably does, arise in any speech community, whether or not the language spoken is endangered. What makes the Inari Saami situation different from some other speech communities is that the speakers were not taught to read and write Inari Saami as children. The speakers whose speech diverges from the full, older paradigms have not been exposed to any consistent normative version of their language. The Inari Saami speakers’ schooling and training in reading and writing were done completely in Finnish. If the full paradigms had been presented to the speakers as the norm that they should follow in writing, they may have adopted those forms into their speech as well. If not, I think it is reasonable to assume that they would at least recognize that some speakers use *-vettee* for dual only, and *-vetted* for plural only. Now, they recognize that both forms are in use, but they do not recognize that some speakers use them to mark a distinction in number.

Interesting primary data from speakers of endangered languages are sometimes dismissed and taken to be flawed, because the information provided is suspected to simply reflect a language death phenomenon (however it is defined). It is true that specific potentially complicating issues are likely to arise in language contraction communities. For example, the speakers are often bilingual, and the language under investigation may have lesser status within the commu-

nity. However, variation tends to be quite freely tolerated and unstigmatized in endangered language communities (Connell 2002). Variation is extensive at least partly because ‘misacquired’ idiosyncratic forms (such as the ones discussed in this paper) will be maintained and used to a greater extent than in other speech communities. Assuming that this reasoning holds true, endangered languages constitute a particularly rich resource for researchers interested in the role of language acquisition in language change.

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